EXP Is Golden

The Queen of Destruction's Multiplayer Mayhem

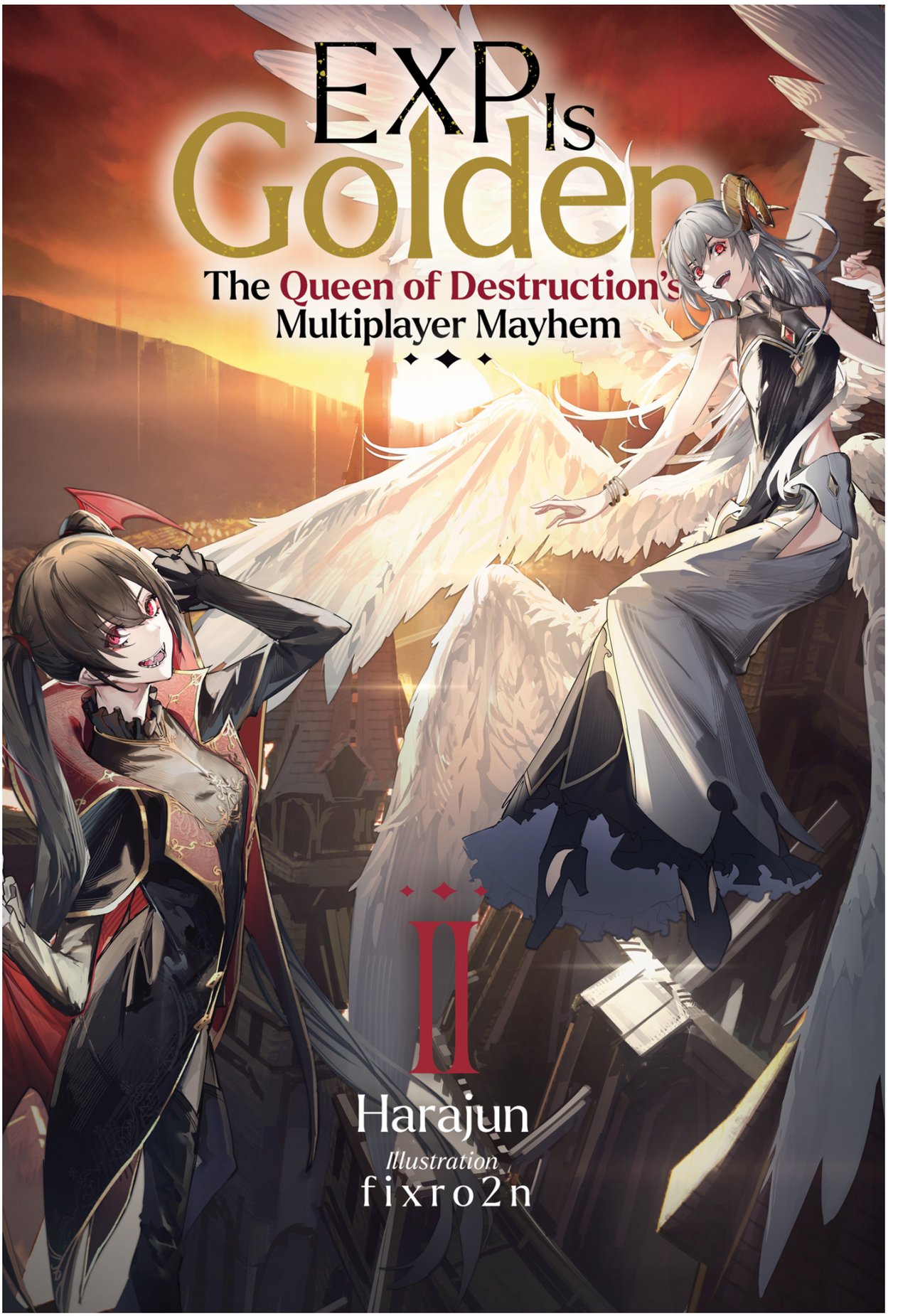


II

Harajun

Illustration

fixro2n


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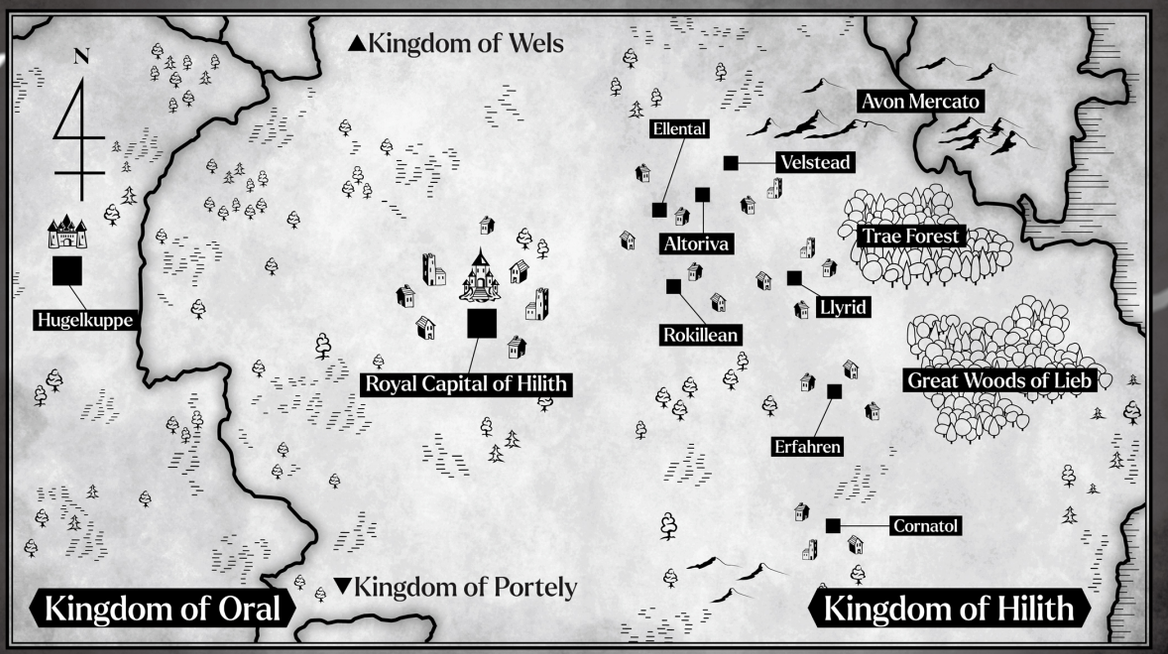

DARK IMPLOSION!
There was no way she would lose again.
Leah fully opened her eyes, focusing on the knights before her. She concentrated her focus through the *Evil Eye*.


<Should I try?>
<...Maybe. But if I let them see you, we'll have to eliminate all four of them.>
<That's the plan anyway, isn't it?>
<Fine, come on out.>

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Map



Map of the Kingdom of Hilith

Prologue

The Grand Army of Hilith that gathered to defeat the newly born harbinger had left their camp at dawn to continue their march toward the east. They had been on the road for eight days and soon spotted the walls of Rokillean off in the distance. Thanks to their early departure, they had arrived relatively early in the day.

The summons had come suddenly. Approximately nine days earlier, the kingdom's government had announced the formation of a new expeditionary army. The government sent out notices that required not only conscription-aged men, but youths who were ordinarily below the kingdom's conscription age and older reservists who had already served out their time. The expeditionary army's destination remained a mystery, but clearly the kingdom's leadership felt that they needed to bolster the ranks of the army ahead of its journey.

It was only after the army had been hurriedly assembled and was about to practically be shoved out the gates of the capital that a member of the royal guard briefed the officers on their mission. The briefing, which was only attended by senior officers of centurion rank or higher, revealed that this was not an expeditionary force, but a grand army gathered for a specific purpose—to kill a newly born enemy of humanity.

Their quarry was a newly spawned Harbinger of Destruction that made its home in the Great Woods of Lieb near the city of Erfahren. It had sinister plans and was a being of evil, according to the Bishop of the Holy Church of Hilith. Although the information they had was from a highly reliable source, unfortunately for the army's officers, there simply wasn't very much of it.

All of the army's officers, including its commander, felt a pang of dread as they were informed of their objective. Harbingers of Destruction weren't an opponent humans should be fighting. They were more like natural disasters, forces so powerful that simply *surviving* was a feat in and of itself. Even the angels from the Celestial Citadel that appeared every so often, the mere

underlings of a greater power, took at least ten fully trained soldiers to have a shot at killing one.

To kill a harbinger itself… That was *impossible*, no matter how many soldiers they gathered. The kingdom's leadership had to know it as well as the assembled officers. Why had they gathered this army to make such a futile attempt?

The royal guard that had briefed the officers had explained that the kingdom's leadership felt that a newly born harbinger wasn't nearly as powerful as the ones inhabiting the other continents. Which was why they decided to bet on the possibility that they still had a chance at slaying it.

"The mere possibility… Such a vague hope…" The commander sighed. The royal guard shook his head. "I understand how you feel, however…it's not something we can simply ignore. Compared to the possibility of having to deal with the harbinger for generations, taking the risk here and gambling that we can slay it is the only option."

"Yes, I understand that. I understand, but…" The general shook his head and trailed off.

"General, the grand army is assembled and ready to depart. It's too late to second-guess this decision." The royal guard had a point. If they were already committed, then the only path forward was to steel themselves and push on ahead. The general and his officers couldn't afford to show any weakness in front of their men.

The army found no problems or obstacles in its way as it advanced through the kingdom's main roads, making steady progress as the days passed without incident. Because they needed to get to Erfahren as quickly as possible, the army had taken the shortest route toward it, which meant passing by a few frontier cities that lay near monster-held territory. Ordinarily, this many people passing near monster territory provoked a response from the nearby monsters, who would emerge from their lands to see what the mass of humans were there to do.

Yet there was no sign of that happening during this march. It was as though the monsters were declaring that they had more important things to tend to. All that greeted them from the monster realms they passed by was an ominous silence. The

general couldn't help but consider it a bad omen.

"No, I suppose I should be grateful we're making good progress," the general said to himself. "The only thing I should be thinking about is getting to Erfahren and completing the mission."

At that moment, a stir of panicked activity appeared toward the front of the column. By now, the first units should have made it to the city of Rokillean. After that, the next stop would be at a frontier city by Llyrid. Beyond that lay the city of Erfahren, then finally the Great Woods of Lieb.

Because Rokillean was far from any monster realms and a major transportation hub within the kingdom, the city wasn't surrounded by a wall, which minimized any disruptions to commerce and allowed the city room to grow. The city itself sprawled out in all its splendor atop a small hill. Rokillean rivaled the capital in terms of size and surpassed the capital in activity.

It was understandable that some of the soldiers who were seeing it for the first time would be abuzz with excitement... The thought was cut short as the general noticed the centurion who was supposed to be in command of the forward units running toward him. A messenger would have sufficed if all he wanted to do was report their arrival.

"What is the meaning of this?!" the general said sternly to the centurion.

The centurion saluted crisply and reported, "We are about to reach Rokillean, sir! However, up in the sky..."

The general, who had spent most of the day atop his mount gazing downward at the column of men in front of him, looked up at the sky. It seemed like dark storm clouds were bearing down upon Rokillean from the east. No, those weren't clouds. The silhouette was wrong, as though the darkness was created by a collection of something much more sinister than clouds.

"What in the blazes...?" the general said as he strained to get a better look.

The centurion shook his head in response. "I don't know, sir. What I do know, sir, is that it would be best if we moved the army into Rokillean as quickly as possible."

If those were monsters related to the harbinger, then the problem went beyond simply the safety of Rokillean. It would be the problem that the grand army had specifically been sent to deal

with. Of course, any connection between the monsters and the harbinger meant that the harbinger had already emerged from the Great Woods—meaning their chances of successfully defeating it was now close to zero.

Nonetheless, the general nodded to the centurion. “Agreed. Order all units to make haste and head into the city.”

The usual hustle and bustle of the city was absent, and Rokillean was eerily quiet as the city held its breath. Once inside the city, it was obvious that it wasn’t a storm approaching the city. Instead, it was an army of hornets carrying ants.

The hornets were large enough that, even from this distance, it was possible to make out their shapes in the sky. They were far larger than any hornet the general had ever seen. It seemed the swarm of hornets were hovering in the air, maintaining a certain distance to the city, as though they were waiting for something.

The general issued orders as his forces entered the city. “First, notify His Lordship that the army has arrived. Then, make sure you send out a carrier pigeon with a report for the chancellor. Make sure the report includes the fact that we’ve encountered the enemy—giant hornets carrying giant ants. Then ask His Lordship for further instructions.”

The hornets were hovering to the east of the city—meaning they stood between the army and the road toward Llyrid. The general doubted that the hornets would let his forces pass underneath unmolested. While he had requested further orders from the chancellor in his report, the general knew there was a strong likelihood that the conditions on the ground wouldn’t wait for the chancellor’s orders.

The soldiers looked unnerved at the swarm of giant hornets, but this was an army assembled to fight a harbinger. Since the minions of a harbinger the Kingdom of Hilith had fought for decades were the angels from the Celestial Citadel, these soldiers were trained to fight enemies flying above them and knew how to organize into small units. While the teenagers in the army hadn’t received that training, there were enough veteran reservists coming back out of retirement that, together, they could at least provide useful support as secondary fighters.

“Most of those angels just charge into the fray without any

coordination. Our soldiers are trained to work together to deal with them. While we're facing hornets and ants… Either way, we'll likely be fighting them in a melee like the angels. With our numbers, we should be able to beat them back," the general explained. He then ordered the reservists and young conscripts to remain in the city and provide support while deploying an attack formation made up entirely of active duty soldiers on the eastern side of the city. The soldiers were specifically warned not to provoke the enemy and to avoid going too far outside of the city.

The centurions immediately got to work implementing the general's orders, and he watched before the messenger he had sent to the governing lord's estate returned with a message: The lord wanted to meet with him. The general left command of the army to his second-in-command before heading to the estate…

Everything is fine… We can do this…

"I appreciate you coming to see me. Take a seat," the governing lord said. When the general had arrived at the governor's estate and identified himself, he had immediately been shown the drawing room. The general had taken off his helmet, but was still in armor as he sat down on the proffered sofa. He still had his sword upon his person. The situation was far too out of the ordinary for standard rules of decorum to apply.

"Leave us. If we need anything, I'll summon you using the bell. Until then, don't let anyone approach this room," the governor said. He then posted the knights protecting him outside of the drawing room's door and dismissed all of the servants. This, too, was an unusual situation. While the general commanded an army, it was unusual for a soldier—no matter highly ranked—to meet tête-à-tête with a noble of the governor's stature.

The governor sat back in his chair and turned to the general. "I believe you've seen the insects filling the sky to the east, General. Do you suppose those are related to the harbinger? Feel free to speak your mind. The chancellor has already informed me about the harbinger and your army's purpose."

The general's tension eased slightly at that piece of information. It would have been difficult to explain the situation and the monsters while avoiding the subject of the harbinger. The general paused for a moment before he spoke, "I am afraid I

cannot say for certain, my lord. I sent a report to His Excellency, the chancellor, and I am currently awaiting further instructions."

The governor nodded gravely. "I see... I appreciate you coming into the city. Were I in your position, I would be sorely tempted to pass through Rokillean and head toward Erfahren as quickly as possible."

"No, my lord," the general answered with a faint bow of his head. "Given the circumstances, it is our duty to do what we can..."

"Forgive me..." The governor said with a sigh. He then bowed his head in apology. "Rokillean should be welcoming you and your soldiers and plying you with hospitality after your long journey, and yet, all we can do at the moment is cower in the face of these insects."

"No apology is necessary, my lord. The sentiment means a great deal..." The general began before he was cut off by a loud booming series of knocks on the door. The gauntleted fist of the knight outside served as a door knocker, making the knocks reverberate through the room.

Given that the governor had given strict orders not to be disturbed, something must have happened outside for the knight to disobey those orders. The general traded glances with the governor.

"What is it? Why—" The governor began but was interrupted by an ominous rumble, like that of distant thunder, and vibrations ran through the room. The sound and vibrations continued, each successive noise piling more and more anxiety onto the hearts of who heard it.

"What in the blazes is this?! Report!" the governor shouted. "Begging your pardon! General! The hornets have started their attack!" the messenger burst in with great urgency. The general furrowed his brow. The hornets and ants were responsible for the noise and vibrations? Just what could they be doing to create such a racket?

"My lord, I beg your pardon. But I must see to my troops," the general said, standing from the sofa.

"I leave it in your hands! I've ordered my knights in the city to coordinate with your forces! Use them as you see fit!" the governor said.

"Thank you, my lord! If you'll excuse me!" the general said as he

strode to the exit.

Once outside of the estate, the noises seemed to saturate the air around him. He saw smoke rising in the eastern sky. He tried to make his way in that direction, but the fleeing residents of the city blocked his way.

As he pushed his way through the fleeing mass of civilians, he soon found that there were people other than the city's residents trying to flee. They were young conscripts from his army. They had been deployed inside the eastern part of the city to provide support to the army outside.

A part of him wanted to castigate the conscripts for abandoning their posts and fleeing in a blind panic, but none of the younger conscripts had received any training. Just over a week ago, they would have been among the fleeing crowds.

"You! What's happened?!" the general grabbed the nearest conscript and asked.

"A-Ants, sir! The ants started to throw rocks…" the panicked teen managed to stammer out.

The general furrowed his brow. "Ants?! The ones the hornets were carrying?!"

The conscript nodded and blurted out, "Y-Yes, those ants! The black rocks the ants threw…suddenly burst and…!"

Yes, the hornets had been carrying ants. But the general had dismissed it as meaningless, assuming the ants had simply been prizes the hornets had taken after attacking an ant colony. He hadn't thought that the hornets and ants might be working together.

The group in the air hadn't been just hornets carrying ants. No, it was an army of ants being carried by hornets so that they could attack the city from the air.

"Impossible…" the general murmured. How was that possible? It wasn't possible without some being that controlled and coordinated both the ants and hornets. What could possibly have managed that…?

"No… Is this… Is this what the harbinger…is doing…?" the general said, frozen in shock. The thundering noises continued, growing louder as they approached from the east. The general shook himself out of his shocked daze and with his messenger in

tow, hurried toward the east.

"General! There's a belfry here! We should be able to see the situation more clearly from it," the messenger said, breaking the general out of his spiraling anxiety as he struggled to get through the fleeing masses.

Yes, the messenger had a point. It would be useful if he got a clear picture of the overall situation before he rendezvoused with the main force.

Once atop the belfry, the general first tried to find the main body of his army. Once he had an idea of the overall situation, he would be able to figure out the best option for the army to take—at least, that *had* been the plan.

But it turned out there was no need to do any of that. The land to the east outside of the city had been thoroughly plowed. An enormous stretch of land, so large that it disrupted the general's sense of scale, looked as though it was a freshly plowed field waiting for crops to be planted. There was no sign of the army.

No, that wasn't land outside of the city. It had once been part of the city itself. The entire eastern quarter of the city had been plowed under by the enemy horde's assault.

And the horde continued to expand the freshly plowed fields. The hornets were arrayed in a straight line, each carrying an ant. The ants simultaneously fired a black projectile from their abdomens. Even from a distance it was clear they were launched at a significant velocity. When those projectiles made contact with the houses, buildings, and other parts of the city, they exploded with a thunderous roar and scattered flames and debris.

Nothing remained standing in the hornets' wake. They so thoroughly saturated the city below with their exploding boulders that the general wondered what could possibly be motivating them.

There was no way that any of the city's residents could survive that onslaught. But the same wasn't true of members of the army. The best trained parts of the army could withstand a bombardment that would level houses in a single blow. Even as he watched, there were soldiers who pushed their way out of the heaps of debris.

But the moment they stood up, blood sprayed from their heads

and they fell into a motionless heap. While he was too far away to see what exactly had happened to them, it was clear to the general that those soldiers were dead.

Even surviving the explosive rocks raining down upon them didn't change the outcome for the soldiers. The moment they stood up, they were immediately finished off by some unseen attacker.

The general knew. It was impossible to protect the city's residents from this assault. That this city would be utterly and thoroughly destroyed. That they had failed in their mission to slay the harbinger.

Not only had they failed to defeat the harbinger, they hadn't been able to offer the least bit of resistance against the vanguard of its armies. What would happen to the Kingdom of Hilith now that it had lost Rokillean, the beating heart of its trade and transportation? The army that had conscripted reservists and youths with bright futures ahead of them was gone. There was no longer any way for the kingdom to offer organized resistance against the harbinger.

"No, there's no need to think that far into the future… If this horde of bugs head toward the capital… Even if the nobles might survive, the people of the capital—"

Chapter 1: A Successful Little Picnic

The second official event for the VRMMORPG *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* was a “Large-Scale Offense/Defense Campaign.” Players chose whether to side with the civilized races (aka “humanity”) or the monsters and take part in invasions and sieges all around the continent.

Leah had chosen to help the monster side in this event. “Help” was perhaps a bit of an understatement. If anything, she was one of the driving forces behind the monstrous invasion of the civilized kingdoms. The forces under her command had already wiped two human cities off the map.

The city of Erfahren near Leah’s home base in the Great Woods of Lieb had been destroyed by an army of monstrous ants. Meanwhile, the World Tree under her command had sent countless treants flooding out of the Trae Forest to swallow the hapless city of Llyrid located nearby.

At present, Leah planned to continue her blitzkrieg, reducing the trade city of Rokillean that sat at the center of the Kingdom of Hilith’s road network to rubble before taking her army to the capital itself. Her goal for the event was to conquer the capital and turn its ruins into a dungeon brimming with the monsters under her control.

While it was certainly an ambitious goal, and one that seemed almost blasphemous to attempt as a player, there was nothing wrong with the goal itself. After all, Leah was taking part in the event at the express request of the game’s developers.

Leah nodded with satisfaction as she looked down at the plowed-up land that had once been the city of Rokillean. Once she was satisfied that the city had been reduced to a barren wasteland, she temporarily withdrew the hornets and artillery ants responsible for the city’s destruction. Exchanging places with them was the cleaning crew made up of pairs of hornets with sniper ants meant to mop up the remaining forces.

The sniper ants made clean work of the survivors, killing them

cleanly with headshots, but surprisingly, there were some soldiers who could even shrug off the headshots. That was true of all of the knights who were lucky enough to be equipped with a full set of proper armor. Their helmets probably helped.

"It sure looked like there were a lot more soldiers here for some reason. I wonder if they were reinforcements from the capital. Evidently if you go to the capital, you can find soldiers who can survive carpet-bombing and even sniper fire," Leah mused to herself. She then pursed her lips in thought. "But why reinforcements? I only destroyed Erfahren yesterday. They couldn't have gotten here that quickly, could they? I wonder why the army was out this far."

The surviving soldiers and knights looked at the carnage around them with shock. But they quickly turned their gazes upward with hatred burning in their eyes.

"If they survived all that, I guess they're a little too much for the ants," Leah said as she looked at the survivors. Currently, the only forces Leah had near Rokillean were her aerial units. There would have been no other way to get from Erfahren to Rokillean in a single day.

While Leah could have gone in to finish the last few survivors, she still had some forces she wanted to try out in battle. The metal skeletons she created using the *The Great Work* skill from the alchemy skill tree, the adamantite army.

Leah intended to head straight toward the royal capital from here, ignoring all of the minor cities along the way, but since she intended to turn the capital into abandoned city ruins, she couldn't just carpet-bomb the city into oblivion. It was time to give the air force a rest.

"Go on home. Thanks for your hard work," Leah said, before she sent a friend chat message to Sugaru—the queen that had birthed all of the ants—to have her summon them back to the woods. Once that was completed, Leah gazed down at the forces remaining on the ground.

"Let's see... I guess three platoons should be enough," she said to herself, hovering overhead, then summoning three platoons of the adamantite army one platoon at a time.

Since Leah was concealed using the *Camouflage* spell from the *Light Magic* tree, to the survivors, it seemed as though the

adamantite army platoons had appeared out of thin air. There wasn't any special meaning to doing it this way, but it was probably quite striking from a visual standpoint. Leah figured it was worth pulling out all the stops and making things as fancy as possible.

With nothing to hold them aloft, gravity soon pulled the platoons of adamantite soldiers toward the ground. They crashed into the ground in a spectacular display of dust, sticking out of the ground as though they had grown out of it. Once they had shaken off the effects of their fall, they crawled out of the earth and immediately attacked the surviving soldiers.

The first thing that surprised Leah was the fact that the soldiers managed to avoid the slashing attacks from the adamanknights. The players who had been competing inside the Great Woods would have been killed instantly by that blow, but somehow the soldiers managed to dodge them. An adamanknight tried, but failed to avoid a counterattack from a soldier and ended up taking the blow on their armor. Since the adamanknight's armor was tougher than the soldier's sword, the adamanknight avoided any damage, but if the opponent had been properly equipped, the adamanknight probably would have lost the contest.

The ranks of the surviving soldiers slowly thinned out as the adamanknights used their superior attribute scores to overcome the superior skill of the soldiers with brute force. Leah felt like it was a terrible waste for such well-trained soldiers to die because they weren't given proper equipment.

Knights, on the other hand, with proper, high-quality equipment, held their own against the adamantite soldiers. An adamanleader was *just* strong enough to be even one-on-one. They were far more powerful than any humans Leah had encountered so far. As equals with the adamanleaders, it meant they were also the same strength that Mister Plates had been when she had participated in the First Official Event.

Three platoons meant there were only three adamanleaders to deploy, and they each took on a knight of their own, while the adamanknights and adamanscouts with assistance from the adamanmages somehow managed to hold off the others with the use of combined arms.

These knights were extremely powerful, but there only

appeared to be a few of them. It was possible—likely, even—that they were also knights in game system terms as well. If that were the case, Leah would have to hunt down and kill their liege lord in order to properly kill the knights.

A knight in game system terms meant a character who was a retainer to a liege lord using the *Retainer* system. Retainer characters respawned after a certain amount of time. Unlike players, these retainers also lacked any penalties for dying such as experience point loss.

While that immortality came at the cost of not being able to obtain experience points on their own, the experience points gained by the retainer's actions all went to the liege lord. When viewed from the broad perspective of an organization, it was a system that didn't have any obvious disadvantages.

Of course, in exchange, the skill required a large number of other prerequisite skills to be unlocked first. Most of those skills also tended to be difficult ones to make effective use of in the early game. Then there was the fact that killing the liege lord killed their entire retinue as well.

The *Retainer* skill and the associated system was also how Leah commanded her army of monsters.

The knights weren't searching for their liege lord and were completely focused on their fight with the adamantite soldiers, which probably meant that they were certain their liege lord wouldn't die. Since she also didn't notice any unnatural attempts to shield one of their number from attacks, it also seemed unlikely that the liege lord was masquerading as one of the knights. It probably meant the liege lord wasn't in or around the city.

As Leah pondered over the knights and their liege lord and flew around the ruins of the city searching for more survivors to kill, the adamantite platoons finished off the rest of the soldiers. With the balance of power firmly on their side, they quickly disposed of the remaining knights. When she returned to the summoning site, she found the bodies of multiple soldiers and knights laid out on the ground.

"Since I can't carry the adamantite soldiers... I guess I'll just need to leave them here," Leah said to herself. "I suppose I can head on ahead myself and summon them again when I reach the

capital. *Flight* is such a useful ability," Leah mused as she retrieved her map from her inventory. It was a valuable, rare item she had obtained by negotiating with the dev team.

It seemed the royal capital was due west of Rokillean. She could fly westward and once she got closer, she could look for the main road from the sky and follow it toward the capital. She had no idea how long that would take on foot, but it wasn't a particularly long journey through the air.

The wind felt great against her face...well, not really. She was inside Mister Plates, so Leah didn't feel the slightest breeze despite soaring through the air. She did have to admit the view was nice, since everything she saw was from a vantage point high up in the air.

As Leah watched the ground pass by beneath her, she caught sight of a bird out of the corner of her eye. While it was far lower in terms of altitude than she was, she saw it approaching from quite a distance away in front of her. Leah and the bird crossed each other's paths before the bird continued flying away in the opposite direction.

It was a small bird, probably a pigeon. A thought then came to her. Could that have been a carrier pigeon trained to carry messages from one place to another? There wasn't a deep reason for thinking this way. She had simply gone from the word "pigeon" and associated it with carrier pigeons.

If it actually was a carrier pigeon, where was it headed? There were only mounds of rubble waiting in the direction it was flying. However, it was highly unlikely that the person who had sent the pigeon knew that the cities had all been destroyed. That meant before the city had been reduced to rubble, someone had been trying to contact one of the cities using a carrier pigeon.

Leah's curiosity got the better of her and she decided to try catching the pigeon. She did a U-turn in midair and caught up to the pigeon, reaching out and gently closing Mister Plates's gauntlet around the pigeon. Unfortunately, Leah misjudged her grasp and crushed it into a bloody pulp. Perhaps it would have been better to summon one of her followers and have them catch it instead. Someone like Mr. Ominous, the forest owl Riley had caught for her to tame.

Leah carefully opened her hand and checked the bloody remains of the pigeon. There was something attached to its leg. *Ah ha, so it was a carrier pigeon after all.* Leah wanted to spend time reading the letter, but she also didn't want to waste any more time. That was when Leah came upon a brilliant idea. She summoned Mr. Ominous and sent him off to the capital.

Once back on the ground, Leah got out of Mister Plates in the shade of a tree and gently took the cylinder off the pigeon's leg, careful to avoid getting any of the blood onto it. There was something that looked like a rag stuffed inside. When taken out and spread out, it was significantly larger than Leah was expecting.

She then read the message scrawled onto the sheet. The contents caught Leah by surprise, but also helped make sense of the situation. Evidently, the excessive number of soldiers in that city had been sent to kill Leah. The letter mentioned "slaying the harbinger" and noted that it was inside the Great Woods of Lieb. Based on the context, it seemed pretty clear that this harbinger referred to Leah herself.

The context in this case was the system message that had been sent out when Leah had become the Queen of Destruction. The message described a Queen of Destruction as a "Harbinger of Destruction." There must have been an NPC in the kingdom's leadership who received that system message.

This particular message had been sent by the chancellor of the Kingdom of Hilith. Most people couldn't simply walk up and have a chat with the chancellor. Whoever heard the system message had to be someone important enough in the kingdom to warrant the chancellor's attention.

The "general" the letter was addressed to probably meant the commander of that army. Leah now knew why there had been such a large army in Rokillean. The letter instructed the general to prioritize slaying the harbinger, even if it meant letting Rokillean be destroyed. The chancellor's wishes were for Rokillean to be destroyed and the harbinger to be slain. While the army hadn't been able to kill Leah, Rokillean had been completely destroyed, so the army had accomplished half its objectives. Hopefully it was enough to make the chancellor happy.

Still, I didn't quite expect them to send an entire army to kill me…

Leah wasn't sure how they knew she lived in the Great Woods of Lieb, but it seemed the Kingdom of Hilith wanted badly to get rid of her. This kingdom had earned a sharp counterpunch from Leah for that action. While Leah hadn't actually suffered any harm, the kingdom had still done its very best to harm her. Leah figured that the moment the kingdom had sent an army after her, she was entitled to respond with force.

While she hadn't put much thought into the pigeon or the letter, this was a good opportunity to not only test out a new skill but also make the most efficient use of her time. Leah climbed back into Mister Plates and activated a skill. "*Castling: Ominous.*"

Leah felt a brief moment of weightlessness before she found herself high up in the air. She had just swapped places with Ominous the owl. She hurriedly activated *Flight* and avoided a plunge toward the ground.

"I see, so that's how it works. I guess it's a good idea to check where the target of the *Castling* is with *Summon Vision* before actually using the skill. But in that case, why not just use *Summon Summoner*? I know it's probably supposed to be a skill to use in an emergency, but it's not like I'm going to be in a situation like that," Leah mused to herself as she directed Ominous to head back to the woods. If that was too much of a trek, Ominous was free to do what he wanted and Leah would summon him later.

Leah had intended to search for a spur of the main road to follow to the capital, but there was no need to actually search for the main road—it just showed up on the ground below. As the center of the kingdom, the capital had multiple branches of the kingdom's main roads stretching out into multiple directions.

Leah had no idea if the road she followed was the one that came from Rokillean. The main roads of the kingdom were rarely laid out straight across the terrain, instead twisting and turning along their path. It was probably inevitable, given that the road needed to avoid things like forests, hills, and wide river crossings.

Either way, the main road would take her to the capital. It was time to conquer the capital and turn it into a city of death.

Chapter 2: Wayne Arrives at the Capital

<<You are eligible to be revived for one hour, would you like to respawn now?>>
<<There is no experience point penalty during the official event.>>
<<We cannot find your respawn location. You are unable to respawn, as you have no other existing respawn points. You will now be respawned at a random starting spawn point.>>

Wayne sighed. He had been forced to respawn several times after initially getting turned to road kill by the giant swarm of ants in Erfahren. This was because all of the cities he found himself in after respawning were also facing invasions that were taking part across the continent as part of the official event. Wayne participated in all of the defensive battles in each city and died each time, requiring him to respawn.

After respawning for the umpteenth time, Wayne found himself walking in search of any sign of civilization. Eventually he saw a city appear on the horizon—a massive city that featured an impressive castle and surrounded by a giant wall. It was probably the royal capital, the safest location in the kingdom, far from the events unfolding elsewhere.

Still, Wayne decided that the capital had to be his next destination. During the event, there were supposed to be teleportation services between neighboring cities. His only option at the moment was to start at the capital, then steadily teleport his way back toward the frontier.

When Wayne arrived at the capital's gate, he encountered an unusually cheerful guard manning it. It was as though the guard was grateful to be assigned to that particular post, diligently and politely dealing with the people coming to the city.

Following the cheerful guard's directions, Wayne first made his

way to the Mercenary Guild where he planned to talk to any players he encountered there.

The walk to the guild building was more entertaining than Wayne had expected. As befitting a royal capital, the city was filled with beautiful architecture. It was a rare experience for him to just enjoy walking along a city's streets and take in the scenery.

The Mercenary Guild building in the capital was just as impressive as the rest of the city. It had none of the sleepy, backwater vibe of Erfahren's guild building. The guild here was attached to an eatery, and Wayne smelled the pleasant scent of cooked food wafting out from the building and swallowed. "May as well get something to eat."

Wayne headed toward the eatery just as a knight dressed in full suit of elaborate armor noisily marched into the building. It struck Wayne as unusual, even in the capital, for someone of that stature to walk into the Mercenary Guild. There had to be something afoot.

Although he couldn't decipher the whole conversation from his location, Wayne could hear enough of the exchange between the receptionist and the knight to make out the bare details. The knight was evidently looking to gather some mercenaries for some task. The priority, evidently, was to find anyone who might be a "Vault Holder."

"Sorry to say, guv, we haven't seen a single one of them Vault Holders since yesterday. It's like they all up and left. It's a little spooky, since usually they pop in at random hours during the day," the receptionist told the knight with a sigh.

It seemed the knight was looking for players. The players who typically made the capital their base of operations had probably all headed out to the frontier cities to take part in the event. While Wayne had come to the guild to try to find a player to talk to, it seemed that he, too, was out of luck.

Wayne wandered over to the eatery's counter and ordered a hot snack, retrieving the money for the payment out of his inventory.

"Huh. So you're a Vault Holder, eh?" the cashier asked.

Wayne nodded as he handed over the coins. "Yeah, that's right. I was hoping to run into some other Vault Holders, but it seems like they're not around today."

The knight, evidently overhearing the conversation, came over to speak to Wayne. “Pardon me, but are you a Vault Holder mercenary?”

Wayne was caught off guard by the sudden approach and managed a staggered nod. “Oh, yes. I am.”

The knight continued with the questions. “Is it true that Vault Holders can communicate with each other, no matter how far apart they may be?”

Perhaps he was alluding to friend chat, but that only worked between players who were on one another’s friends lists. It was also possible to contact a large number of players by using the dedicated social media functions, so Wayne gave a noncommittal nod. “Well, yes, I suppose it’s possible…”

The knight brightened. “I see! I understand that this is a sudden request, but would you mind accompanying me to the palace? Time is of the essence!”

Wayne was well aware of his own abilities and limitations. The battle royale event had made his position abundantly clear. There were those far above him in power, and above them towered even *more* powerful players.

So it was a surprise to him that he had been invited into the palace. Wayne was still trying to wrap his mind around the situation, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the proceedings.

He quietly followed the knight into the palace, and simply continued to follow as they climbed higher and strode deeper into the palace. While the hallways were large and ornate, the layout of the palace was far from straightforward, and Wayne was certain he’d get lost if he were told to find his way out by himself. As they progressed deeper, Wayne was painfully aware of the looks being directed his way. They were clearly in an area where, ordinarily, mere mercenaries weren’t allowed to be.

When they arrived at a particularly heavily constructed door, the knight knocked loudly. “Pardon me, milord! I have brought a gentleman who is a Vault Holder, as requested!”

Someone inside gave the knight permission to enter, and the knight stepped inside. Wayne followed suit. “Pardon me…”

“Ah, thank you for coming!” the room’s occupant said, before gesturing Wayne toward a comfortable-looking sofa.

Wayne sat down as instructed, when the man who greeted him began to speak. “First, let me thank you for coming. I am Douglas O’Connell, and I have the honor of serving as His Majesty’s chancellor.”

The chancellor. One of the most important people in the entire kingdom. Not someone a random mercenary should be meeting without warning. Why had he summoned Wayne—or rather, why had he been looking for a player?

Wayne took a deep breath before he spoke. “Ahem, my name is Wayne. I have no family name. I work as a mercenary. I’m honored to make your acquaintance, sir.”

“I suppose you are wondering why you have been summoned here, Master Wayne?” The chancellor said.

Wayne could only nod. “Yes.”

The chancellor cleared his throat and said gravely, “As we speak, monsters are attacking cities across the kingdom. We have been busy trying to deal with those attacks. I, myself, have not slept since yesterday.”

Wayne certainly wasn’t expecting the chancellor to play up the fact that he hadn’t slept. As an office worker himself, he occasionally pulled the same card in conversation with other VR office workers, but he had no idea that the same social conventions existed in game. He suddenly found the chancellor a lot more relatable.

“But we knew something of this sort was coming as early as ten days ago,” the chancellor continued in his grave tone of voice. Wayne wasn’t sure what he was talking about. The event had only started yesterday. Had the devs planted the seeds for the event ten days ago?

“Ten days ago, the bishop of our kingdom’s faith, the Holy Church of Hilith, revealed that he had received a divine revelation,” the chancellor said.

“A revelation?” Wayne asked, puzzled. His initial reaction was to dismiss it, but this was, after all, a fantasy setting of swords and sorcery. There was nothing that said divine revelations weren’t real.

The chancellor nodded. “Yes. Revelations are mysterious messages from God that bishops or other high-ranking clergy receive and often tell of events that will have an impact on the fate

of the world itself."

So, they were basically like system messages. Since Wayne hadn't seen any messages like that himself, he supposed it might be a system that was used to notify NPCs of upcoming events.

"According to this revelation, a new enemy of humanity had been born," the chancellor said gravely. An enemy of humanity? The term didn't mean much to Wayne, and he evidently showed that confusion on his face, so the chancellor took time to give a detailed explanation.

According to the chancellor, the enemies of humanity were six unique monsters that existed all around the world, and each was strong enough to devastate an entire continent on their own. Since civilized races could do nothing against them, they were simply known as Harbingers of Destruction.

While the harbingers included an archdevil and the sire of all vampires, the only one that the Kingdom of Hilith had faced before was the Archangel. Even then, the Archangel hadn't appeared directly, only sending angelic minions to attack large cities such as the capital at random. But now, there was a seventh Harbinger of Destruction.

"And the harbinger's birth is likely the cause of this monstrous invasion," the chancellor concluded.

It made sense. So the revelation from ten days ago was part of the prep work for the event. This seventh harbinger was the mastermind behind the event, and the revelation must have been an announcement that notified the NPCs that the event was going to start.

"The invasion only truly started yesterday," the chancellor said and Wayne nodded. The inn he had been using as a home base had been destroyed and after being sent all over the map he had finally made his way to the capital.

Wayne explained how things had played out from his perspective and the chancellor nodded with a pained expression. "I see. So you were at Erfahren, Master Wayne... I see... Then, this will not come as a surprise. The revelation said that the seventh harbinger was born near Erfahren, in the Great Woods of Lieb."

The information *did* come as a shock. At the same time, things began to make more sense. The shock of watching the ants flood out from the Great Woods of Lieb and swarm the city of Erfahren

was immense. They weren't the sort of monsters that should be appearing from a field dungeon that had been known as the Great Wood of Mentorship, which was filled with beginners and low-level characters.

Ordinarily, hunters only encountered weak ants and goblins in the woods and, once they had killed a certain number, they all respawned. This was why lately the dungeon had become popular among new players as a sort of tutorial dungeon for learning when to turn back after spending time in a dungeon.

In addition, Wayne had spread the rumor that Leah, the winner of the battle royale tournament, had made her fortune at this very forest. As a result, there were also occasional appearances of top-tier players and some players who were trying to find Leah. But aside from those exceptions, Lieb was a frontier map that seemed suited for casual, laid-back play. It wasn't a place for an army of deadly ants intent on murder and destruction to spawn...

The army of ants had quickly overrun the city of Erfahren and slaughtered everyone there, player and NPC alike. Like Wayne, the players based in Erfahren had been scattered around the kingdom.

"It goes without saying, but the city of Erfahren fell in mere moments. At the same time, the city of Llyrid, located a short distance away, was destroyed when it was swallowed by plant monsters and wiped off the map," the chancellor said, shaking his head gravely. "Given that the attacks happened simultaneously, and that the cities were attacked by different types of monsters, we don't believe the attacks were related...but I can't help but feel there's some connection there."

Wayne understood what the chancellor was saying. Every type of monster must have come flooding across the border because of the event, but there was something at the root of all of this destruction—a trigger, so to speak. It had to be a boss monster of some sort, and it made sense that this would be the newly spawned harbinger.

The chancellor let out a slow breath before he continued, "Then one day after those attacks...that is, today, the city of Rokillean...a city far away from the frontiers and the lynchpin of our kingdom's commerce, was attacked by a horde of giant hornets. Each of the hornets were carrying ants, and the mysterious attacks from those

ants laid waste to the entire city."

It had to be *those* ants, the ones that fired cannon rounds. The hornets must have been carrying them and had the ants bombard the city from the sky. Being attacked by a giant army of flying enemies must have been a bolt out of the blue for the NPCs, given that the kingdom had no means of manned flight.

"I believe they are the same ants we encountered in Erfahren," Wayne said after a pained pause.

The chancellor nodded. "As I suspected… If the ant monsters that attacked Erfahren are the harbinger's minions, that would prove that the harbinger has already advanced as far as Rokillean…"

"Is Rokillean close to the capital? If it fell today, it couldn't have been too long ago, could it?" Wayne asked after a moment's thought.

The chancellor shook his head. "No, the city itself is about eight days away on foot for an individual, nine days if it's an army on the march. Even with a messenger switching horses on the way, it would still take at least two days to get from Rokillean to here."

Wayne furrowed his brow and asked, "Then, the information about the city's fall came by carrier pigeon…?"

"No. We did send a pigeon, but at the time we weren't aware the city had fallen, and we haven't received a reply. We learned of the city's fate from a different source." The chancellor shook his head sadly and sighed. "About nine days ago, we assembled an army with the objective of slaying the harbinger and sent them eastward…"

Nine days ago. That meant the army was assembled right after the bishop had shared his revelation. The kingdom's leadership must have been desperate to have moved that quickly. It spoke volumes of just how seriously the NPCs of the world took the threat of a harbinger. The chancellor continued wearily, "We know that the army has been destroyed, along with the city of Rokillean."

"But, how?" Wayne couldn't help but blurt out in surprise.

"I believe you Vault Holders may know this, but those of us of noble rank can have retainers in our service," the chancellor said.

Wayne nodded. "Yes, I have heard of such things."

The chancellor continued, "Then I can dispense with the details.

When retainers are killed, they are revived at the place they last woke from their slumber... Am I clear so far?"

"Yes," Wayne said. He had seen something about the system in the official FAQ.

The chancellor let out a slow breath. "I sent three knights that are my retainers to accompany the army. I train my retainers to keep an eye on one another when they are deployed, and I made certain to choose three knights who were fully trained in that program. I then gave them a month's supply of a special potion."

The chancellor paused for a moment, then continued. "The potion has a powerful effect of warding off sleep. The knights I sent with the army, no matter how many days they would have been marching, would not have slept. All so that they would awaken here in the capital if they were killed on assignment."

Wayne found himself at a loss for words. It seemed like such an extreme step to take... But, no, it made sense. This was their world, this was their home on the line, their lives, their kingdom.

"My knights just resurrected a few moments ago and reported to me. The fact that Rokillean had fallen, and that it was likely an attack by the harbinger," the chancellor said sternly.

There weren't many sources of information that would be more reliable than that. Had this been between players, they would have been able to share that information over friend chat and social media; but for NPCs who couldn't use those methods, this was probably the closest equivalent to instant, long-range communication.

But that left two questions in Wayne's mind: If the resurrected knights had brought information on Rokillean's demise, why did the chancellor need to find a player? Why had he summoned Wayne to the palace?

The chancellor quickly answered those questions as well. "Master Wayne... What I need... What I would like you to do is gather as many of your allies as you can here in the capital. There is a strong possibility that the harbinger's next target is this very city. And likely, the harbinger itself will be coming."

The news was like a splash of cold water on Wayne's face. "Wha—?! Why...! How do you know?!"

"Well..." The chancellor turned to a knight who brought over a large map, the same knight who had brought Wayne to the palace.

The map, which appeared to be made of parchment or vellum, was spread open on the low table and the chancellor pointed at a spot on the map. “This. This is the Great Woods of Lieb. And then this is the city of Erfahren.” The chancellor continued to point out locations on the map. “Here is where Rokillean used to be. Since the monsters that attacked Erfahren and Rokillean are of the same type, it’s safe to conclude that they are from the same faction, and they are under the command of the harbinger. As you can see from this map, the harbinger is advancing almost perfectly westward.”

This was the first time Wayne had seen a map of the kingdom, but the chancellor was right. Furthermore, the next major city to the west would be the capital. It was easy enough to see what the chancellor was getting at.

“Now, as for the possibility that the harbinger is with this army… My knights didn’t die when the city of Rokillean was destroyed. They survived the city’s destruction, only to be killed afterward. The city had been destroyed by the combined force of hornet and ant monsters, but that only destroyed the city itself. Sadly, that also included most of the city’s denizens and less experienced soldiers. The veterans in the army and the knights survived that initial attack,” the chancellor said. “Whoever was commanding the enemy force seemed to conclude that the insects weren’t enough to defeat the surrounding soldiers or knights, so they immediately withdrew the hornets… The problem is what happened *after*. A group of undead suddenly appeared above the knights and plummeted to the ground. The undead that had rained down from the sky were so powerful that even the knights that survived the destruction of the city weren’t able to do much against them.”

Wayne was aware of the rumors that powerful undead knights would appear in the Great Woods of Lieb. If the ants and the harbinger were from Lieb, then that undead had to belong to the same faction. When Wayne made note of this fact to the chancellor, the older man nodded. “I see. Then it seems safe to conclude they’re minions of the harbinger.”

Wayne was now comfortable enough to add a comment of his own. “But that alone is probably not enough to prove the harbinger itself was there.”

“Mm. But give it a little more thought. Undead don’t just appear

out of thin air. It might make sense if they spawned out of the ground, but they appeared in midair. What could possibly cause that to happen?" The chancellor asked and Wayne had to agree. The circumstances surrounding the appearance of the undead was definitely strange.

The chancellor continued on, "Rather than accepting that at face value, it makes far more sense to assume that some being that managed to become invisible was somehow lurking in the air and summoned the new monsters into the sky. As further proof, there are monsters that can hide themselves in plain sight. We also know there are monsters that can summon large groups of undead. It wouldn't be surprising for a harbinger to combine all of those abilities into a single being."

While the chancellor's theory sounded a bit implausible as well, when examining each of the points in detail, it seemed to make more logical sense than any other explanation. And the logic that a harbinger would possess all of those abilities made a great deal of sense as well.

"Based on the fact that the harbinger withdrew the hornets, we can't be sure they'll attack the capital with that swarm. But that's also because the harbinger has the ability to summon undead that can defeat even our knights. However, what we *can* say for certain is that the harbinger has been heading straight westward since leaving Lieb," the chancellor said as he traced the route of the harbinger's forces on the map.

Wayne nodded. "So you want to use the pla—err, Vault Holder contact network to gather as many forces as possible in the capital, yes?"

The chancellor nodded gravely. "That's right."

Wayne thought for a moment. How could he gather the most powerful players here to the capital? The possibility of rejecting the chancellor's request hadn't occurred to him in the slightest. Wayne thought about the multiple cities he'd seen in ruins before his arrival here in the capital. If only he had been stronger, he might have been able to save those cities.

He was still as powerless as he had been when he fought in those cities, but at least now he had the possibility of gathering more power to defend the capital.

Wayne nodded with a grim determination. "Very well. I can't

guarantee we'll get a large group, but I'll do what I can."

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[Event Boss] Thread: Everyone gather in Hilith! [Confirmed]

001: Wayne

Pretty sure one of the event bosses is about to attack the capital of Hilith. Info comes from the chancellor NPC.
Need as many people as possible to come to the capital.

002: Monkey Dive Sasuke

You for real? It's only the second day.

003: Tough and Doesn't Peel

If there's meant to be several of them showing up, I suppose one can show up on day two, but...

004: Amatain

>>001 How'd you get in with a big wig NPC like the kingdom's chancellor?

005: Wayne

>>004 When I went to the merc guild, there was a knight looking for players. I was the only one there, so he took me to the palace.
At the palace I was introduced to the chancellor who told me there's a really big chance that a boss monster called a "harbinger" is about to attack the capital.

006: Monkey Dive Sasuke

LOL. Fake news. We're done here.

007: Anonymous Elf

The chancellor is the one who told you about this “harbinger”?

008: Wayne
>>007 Yeah. Evidently there’s Six Great Cataclysms in the world they call harbingers and the event boss for this event is the seventh. It was born in a dungeon on the east side of the kingdom called the Great Woods of Lieb about ten days ago. It started invading when the event started yesterday and it’s heading straight to the west. It took out Erfahren on the first day, and a city called Rokillean this morning. Capital’s next. Probably later today.

009: Mentai-list
There’s a thread on that. It’s true that Erfahren fell really quickly. Also true that Rokillean was wiped out in the blink of an eye. I dunno if the capital is the next city since no one’s published a map, but it sounds pretty plausible to me.

010: Anonymous Elf
To add some extra info, the whole “harbinger” thing is real too. I’m in a country called Bawtree and a big wig in the church was giving a speech about it in the capital. He said it was in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Hilith, so the location matches up.

011: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
So is this for real? Or a hoax by some guy who’s just trolling the forums?

012: Wayne
I swear I’m not trolling. There’s no time. Plz you guys gotta get here ASAP.

013: Orinkii
>>009 I saw that thread. Things in Erfahren seem really bad. Erfahren was famous among Hilith players because it had a lowbie friendly dungeon. The ants evidently came flooding out of it and destroyed the city in a matter of hours.
The comments were originally stuff like “Let’s goooo!” but quickly ended up with stuff like “OMG” and “We’re screwed.” Then the thread went silent for a few hours before some people started posting “Where TF am I?”

014: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Hold up. Dungeon? Pretty sure this game didn’t have any systems like that.

015: Mentai-list
Lowbie dungeon? You mean the Great Woods of Lieb? The devs never said it officially, but based on meta-testing, it was probably silently added to the game as a way to help lowbies.
It’s super well-balanced and it seems like they’ve got multiple AIs dedicated to running the thing. The paths into the dungeon are hard to tell at first, but they’re definitely made to be easier to walk on.

016: Amatain
Can you move that sort of discussion elsewhere?
>>012 I understand it’s a big deal if it’s true, but there’s no way to get there if you’re not in the country, is there?

017: Country Pop
>>001 Even if you’re for real, it’s just a possibility, right? Even if we got there, what are we supposed to do in the capital after? It’ll take

ages to get back to the frontier.

018: Wayne
I’m begging you guys. We really need you. If the harbinger comes, Hilith’s gone.

019: Wayne
Anyone. Plz!

020: Gealgamesh
HEEEY!
WHY! DIDN’T! You ask me?! Thought we were friends!

021: Amatain:
>>020: Gealgamesh? What are you doing here?

022: Orinkii
>>021 Who?

023: Mentai-list
>>022 Top tank player ATM.
Heard something about winning on day one. There’s a thread on it, yea?

024: Gealgamesh
>>021 I’m here cuz Wayne’s my buddy.
>>023 Yep, that’s right.
While we tanked the enemy, the attackers took out the enemy commanders and ended it.

025: Country Pop
LOL. There’s a whole week left in the event man, what are you gonna do now?

026: Gealgamesh
>>025 Gonna go save the Kingdom of Hilith OFC.

027: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Wow, got ourselves a real mensch here!

028: Wayne
Sorry, Gil. Didn’t think about asking you. You coming?

029: Wayne
>>028 We’re friends, aren’t we? OFC I’m coming.

030: Youichi
Sounds like fun. I’m in.

031: Amatain
Whoa, that Youichi the nurse?

032: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
LOL. Always has the best lines.

033: Anonymous Elf
Yea, but look like a freak. LOL

034: Mentai-list
And he fights like a freak too! (compliment rly!)

035: Country Pop
Huh, seems we’ve got a bunch of top players on this thread. Y’all were in the championship round at the battle royale, yeah?
>>001 Though I’ve never heard of you, tho, sorry.

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036 Wayne
I’m no one special.
Lost badly on the first day, had my inn destroyed and respawned. Then had the city I respawned in destroyed and ended up respawning near the capital

and I just happened to be the only player there.
I can’t do anything by myself. Plz, help me out.

037: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Was gonna ask what city got wiped on day one, but it’s that city you guys mentioned earlier, rite?

038: Gealgamesh
Now, OFC I’m gonna help, but how am I gonna get to the capital of Hilith?
I haven’t used my teleport for the day, but I’m not in Hilith. One teleport’s not enough to get to the capital...

039: Gealgamesh
Whoa. I can totally get there. I just checked the teleport service and the capital’s on the list.
It wasn’t there yesterday. I wonder what’s up with that?

040: Anonymous Elf
If it wasn’t on the list yesterday but is today, it probably means there’s cities on the list that were there but missing now.
Those cities must have been destroyed and the capital moved up on the list of closest cities, I’d bet.

041: Gealgamesh
Wait, that means the closest city in Hilith from where I am is the capital?

042: Wayne
The chancellor told me that at least five cities in Hilith have already been destroyed.

043: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Guess the apocalypse came early?

044: Youichi
So that settles how Gealgamesh gets there. What about the rest of us?

045: Mentai-list
>>044 I read a meta-test thread yesterday and it seems that whatever the player is holding when teleported is counted as part of the player. They succeeded in teleporting to and from a location by piggybacking on one player on the way there, and reversing roles on the way back. So we get people with high STR or VIT to carry a large number of people to a city, then switch to a different “mule” at the next city... With enough repetitions we should be able to get to Hilith.

046: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Sounds like we’re gonna need a lotta ppl for that LOL. Also, won’t have that many tanks left if they’re the first ones doing the muling...

047: Gealgamesh
I got all the tank you need right here.

048: Country Pop
You really are the man!

049: Anonymous Elf
Gonna go round up people from other threads.

050: Mentai-list
Oh, and lemme mention this since some people don’t seem to have noticed. No matter how far you travel

on this, you can get back to your home base if you die. Remember there’s no death penalty ATM.
So even if the event boss doesn’t show up, the only thing you’ll waste is your daily teleport.
Think we’ll get more people if we add that bit of info.

051: Anonymous Elf
>>050 Thanks! I totally missed that! LOL

052: Wayne
Thank you everyone. I really don’t know what else to say.

053: Amatain
If you’re gonna thank anyone, make sure you thank your friend. His post changed the feel of this whole thread.

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“It seems we’ll be able to gather a decent force…” Wayne said tiredly as he looked up from his forum screen. He had broadcast his pleas for help on the event forum—borrowing the chancellor’s drawing room for that purpose—and finally had some news to relay.

“Ah, you have my gratitude…” the chancellor said with a nod. “How many do you believe will be coming?”

Wayne paused to check over the thread. “Ahem… It looks like twenty…no, at least thirty will be able to make it. They’re all far more powerful than I am.”

“Impressive…” The chancellor furrowed his brow and fell into a contemplative silence. A few moments later, he looked up at Wayne and spoke again. “You’ll have to forgive me, but I need you to wait here for a time, Master Wayne.”

“Hm? Yes, of course,” Wayne replied. “But ahem, what about the pla…err, my allies who arrive in the city?”

“Mm, a fair point… Lawson! You deal with the arriving

mercenaries. Once you have brought them to the palace…" The chancellor paused for a moment to think, then continued, "…show them into the courtyard. Master Wayne, would you mind moving to the courtyard as well? Lawson will show you the way. I will join you as soon as I have spoken with His Majesty."

Wayne followed in silence as Lawson guided him through the complex warren of hallways out into the courtyard.

"Ahem… Ser Lawson, was it? Did the Lord…chancellor leave to go speak to His Majesty?"

Lawson, the knight, paused in mid-stride and spoke up without saying turning. "I believe the sight of you, Master Wayne, striving to do everything you could to help the kingdom made His Lordship rethink his own actions. When an outsider with no obligation to this kingdom is putting in such an effort, surely we could do more in this hour of need. I believe *that* is what drove His Lordship to speak to His Majesty."

"I see… Thank you for informing me," Wayne said to Lawson with a nod. Lawson's demeanor implied he knew more than he was willing to reveal at the moment, but Wayne was aware there would be a time and a place for further revelations.

After a brief silence, Lawson finally turned to Wayne and asked, "Master Wayne, when will your comrades be arriving?"

Wayne took a moment to glance back at his feed. "Ahem, one has already arrived, and the others should be arriving soon. Should I tell them to gather in front of the palace for the time being?"

"I would certainly appreciate it if you could do that," Lawson replied with a nod. "I will wait by the palace gates and guide them to the courtyard."

"All right. Thank you," Wayne said before updating the forum thread, informing the participating players to gather at the palace gate. He then sent a friend chat message to Gil.

<Come to the palace gate. A knight in fancy armor named Lawson will show you in.>

<The palace gate. Got it.> The reply came quickly.

<Hey, Gil, um… Thanks,> Wayne said a moment later.

<You can thank me when we've beaten the boss, yeah?> Gealgamesh replied.

Wayne nodded to himself. <That's fair. I'll do that.>

"Wow, you really did get us into the palace... Sorry man, I still wasn't entirely convinced," Amatain said apologetically on arrival.

"Pretty sure we can get more people if we spread the word right now," Orinkii commented as he glanced around the courtyard.

"But there's a deadline, right? We're not really sure when the attack's gonna come, so it's pretty iffy if they'll get here in time to aid in the defense," Country Pop said in response to Orinkii.

"Even if we add that warning, I think it's worth making the post," said Tough but Doesn't Peel.

Wayne looked at the assembled group. They were all top-class players that even a relatively casual player like himself recognized. It had been one thing to see them reply on the thread; it was another to see them here in the flesh.

While she hadn't commented in the thread, Sonote Atataka, a leading healer was here as well. She was a rare, dedicated healer, known for being the player who had discovered how to unlock healing spells in the game. She was hardly the only one. One player after another was shown into the courtyard. It seemed there were well over thirty of them now.

"Everyone, thank you so much for coming..." Wayne said to the assembled players.

"I mean, we couldn't risk letting a whole kingdom go down in flames. I was ready to be pissed if you were trolling us, but it looks like you were telling the truth on the forums," said a ninja dressed entirely in black spandex. Wayne remembered seeing him at the battle royale final.

"I trusted the post from the start," said a gentleman in a nurse's outfit. It was Youichi the Nurse. "Besides, I'm told you're friends with Gealgamesh." Evidently, Youichi and Monkey Dive Sasuke, the spandex ninja, had started working together ever since they lost to the same opponent in the battle royale tournament.

"There was something familiar about your name, Wayne...you were the one who mentioned that the champion from the battle royale, Miss Leah, hung around the Great Woods of Lieb, right?" Youichi asked.

"Have you been able to reach her? She'd make things a bit easier if she were here," Amatain said with a light sigh.

Wayne glanced at the ground and let out a breath. “I…don’t know about Leah. It’s not like we were friends. She’s a PKer and…probably off soloing somewhere.”

The only reason she had approached Wayne in the first place was to PK him, but that was far too embarrassing to tell the others.

“I see… Well, we’ll have to do without her, then,” Youichi said with a stoic nod.

“Remarkable… To see so many of you here…” the chancellor said as he entered the courtyard. “We certainly owe Master Wayne a great debt…” Lord O’Connell was followed by a group of knights carrying a large object. Although covered by cloth, it was clearly some sort of round object.

“Now, as I told Master Wayne, this is the situation…” The chancellor gave the same explanation to the players assembled in the courtyard that he’d given Wayne earlier.

“I see, that does make it likely that they’ll appear here in the capital,” Amatain answered on behalf of the assembled players.

“Yes…” And so Lord O’Connell, chancellor of the Kingdom of Hilith, began to describe the last, great hope that the civilized kingdoms had in the face of the harbinger menace…

Chapter 3: The Bitter Taste of Tears and Crow

<<You are eligible to be revived for one hour, would you like to respawn now?>>
<<There is no experience point penalty during the official event.>>

Leah opened her eyes and found herself sitting upon a throne inside the dimly lit cavern. The cavern itself was silent without a single living thing around her.

The lair was empty because Leah, their ruler, had died.

She hadn't anticipated that she would die. This was the first time since the game had launched that she had died. It was a learning opportunity. While she hadn't been able to accomplish what she had set out to do, the experience allowed her to test and answer some lingering questions about the game.

Leah sat silently in the gloom. Evidently when Leah died, her retinue died as well. She knew that they would respawn in an hour, but that also meant she would be alone in the lair for another hour. Since Leah's death had killed Sugaru, there wasn't a single ant in the massive cave, but they would return in an hour.

No, that wasn't quite right. The only one that would respawn in an hour was Sugaru, not the ants themselves. If the respawn timer for the ants only started to count down when Sugaru respawned, it would take two hours for the ants to respawn. That would be a pretty long silence. The same was true about the undead under Sieg's command.

Leah let out a quiet breath through her nose. She also needed to check on what sort of progress Kelli and the others had made. Since the plan was to avoid revealing the four mountain cats to the world in this event, she had sent them to explore the lands around the volcanic zone. It would be useful to see where the four of them

would respawn. Clearly, it wouldn't be the lair.

"No...everything seems to have worked out for the best. Yeah. I know I got a *little* too cocky. I'm glad it happened during the event. After all, there's no EXP penalty right now. There's no telling what would have happened to me or to Mister World Tree if I'd lost ten percent of my EXP at this stage. I got lucky. Yup, I definitely got lucky." Leah heard the tremor in her voice as she tried to convince herself of this fact. "I should start keeping a ten percent EXP cushion in case something like this happens again. Glad I learned that now. Risk hedging is the first rule of investing, after all. I mean, it's not like I'm an investor by trade. It's understandable, things like this happen... I just need to make s-sure..."

Leah felt the words catch in her throat. A sob welled up from the back of her throat. "Sniff... Sob..."

The dam broke, and all of her emotions came flooding out. The sheer frustration. Leah felt her stomach twist into knots as it built, and tears continued to flow down her cheeks, sobs cutting off any attempts to form words.



Leah wasn't sure if she could pull herself together in the hour remaining until her retinue respawned. She wanted to at least wash her face before she had to face them again. Leah knew the intensity of her crying would have left its mark on her features if this had been real life, but currently had no way of checking, as there weren't any mirrors in the room.

No, it was better this way. If she saw her own expression right now, she was sure the sight of her frustration and grief would have burned itself indelibly into her memory.

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After swapping places with Ominous the owl, Leah had continued her solo advance and had finally arrived at the capital. As she looked down at the city, she was struck by both the sheer size of the walls surrounding the city and the beauty of the architecture within. Turning such a beautiful city into a ruin was an offense against aesthetics itself. Leah could barely contain her excitement.

As she considered where to deploy her adamantite army, Mister Plates suddenly reacted, drawing one of the Sharps and deflected an incoming missile with a clank. Her armor had managed to deflect an arrow that had been fired directly at her.

Leah was hovering over the capital, concealed by the *Camouflage* spell. It shouldn't have been possible to spot Leah in her current state. Just how had the archer targeted her and how had they managed to get off a shot in her direction?

When she looked at the ground below, she noticed a large number of people clustered outside the city walls. All of them were gazing up in her direction. While most were only looking vaguely at her direction, some of them were clearly gazing directly at her. Someone in the group had detected her. The others were all looking off into the direction the spotter was facing.

The group wasn't particularly large; it wasn't much larger than the group she'd defeated in the battle royale tournament. Even if this was a group of players, all she needed to do was dutifully convert them into additional experience points for herself.

Still, she needed to remember *why* she was here. The goal, after all, was to claim the capital for herself.

Leah ignored the group outside the walls and summoned her adamantite army into the air in front of her, sending them tumbling down toward the capital below. This mass summoning skill was one she had acquired in the *Summon* skill tree, as she unlocked new skills in that tree. It allowed her to mass summon retainers at the expense of a cooldown period that locked out all of the other *Summon* skills. It wasn't like she would need to use any more summoning skills for the day.

Leah ordered the adamantite army to do as little damage to the buildings in the city as possible. Aware of the possibility they might run into powerful knights, like they had in Rokillean, Leah issued strict orders for the adamantite army to engage enemies as a unit.

With her preparations for the city itself finished, Leah turned her attention to the group outside the walls. They were dressed in a motley assortment of varied outfits, which suggested they were a hastily assembled group of mercenaries. They looked like players to Leah, but if they were, it was hard to understand why they'd be in a peaceful city such as the capital during the event.

Although she hadn't been able to identify why they could see her, it was clear that someone in the group *had* detected her. So she dropped *Camouflage* to conserve MP and descended in front of the players. Strangely, no one had fired an arrow at her since that initial shot. It was a slight inconvenience as it prevented Leah from identifying the archer.

The group of players arrayed before her felt like an exact copy of the group she had curb-stomped at the last battle royale event. One thing that stood out for her was the lack of heavily armored individuals. There simply weren't many tanks in this group, but it was insignificant enough that she dismissed it as chance.

"You must be the 'harbinger.' I wasn't expecting something like you to show up at the capital on day two of the event… Were the devs planning to just destroy this country?" one player commented as she looked over in their direction.

"Huh, it's really here… But glad I took the gamble and showed up here! If we beat the harbinger, we'll definitely be the MVPs for this event!" another commented.

Another player chimed in, "I mean, there's really no reason for

an NPC to lie, and considering it's during a major event, I think the odds were pretty good we'd find *something*. That's pretty much how we managed to gather this many top-tier players here."

"I saw it dropping a huge pile of undead into the city, so I think it's pretty clear this thing's the boss leading the undead invading the continent this time around," another voice added, prompting a concerned comment from another. "Think the city's going to be okay?"

"Lawson and the other knights should be able to handle it. All we can do now is trust them," said one of the players reassuringly.

"Man, this thing's huge. What do you think it is?" one of the frontliners asked.

"Undead, probably. A dullahan, maybe?" The players continued to chat as all, but ten of them backed away, leaving the frontliners. It was an irrelevant little detail. Leah certainly wasn't paying much attention. Regardless of whether they were going to use arrows or magic, they weren't going to do anything to her, so long as she wore Mister Plates. She could take her time killing them after she disposed of the ten frontliners in front of her.

"It hurts that we weren't able to get in touch with the battle royale winner, Miss Leah, but I guess we'll have to make do. I mean, we've gotten enough EXP to be able to beat back an assault from a whole army of Miss Leahs, and we should be able to handle an event boss," one of the frontliners said, prompting a twitch of Leah's eyebrow.

They could handle a *whole army* of Leahs? Was he serious? Then it was time to give them a nasty little dose of reality.

Mister Plates, sensing Leah's intentions, approached the leading frontliner with the *Fleet of Foot* skill and unleashed a *Slash* while drawing a sword. The only one who had avoided this attack to this point had been Sieg. Besides, Mister Plates had undergone two *Rebirths* since the battle royale tournament and was now sporting much more powerful stats.

Even if the frontliner blocked the attack, it would split the shield in half. "Whoooooooa?! That was close! I would've died if I hadn't seen that before!" yelled the armored man as he dodged the attack.

What the...?!

Leah wasn't sure if *she* would be able to avoid that combination

of skills if she was seeing it for the first time. It was a simple combination of a straight approach and a slash attack and, as long as the target knew it was coming, it should be possible to avoid it. But this frontliner had mentioned he'd seen that combination before. Where had he seen it?

"It's the skill the battle royale winner used! Everyone should assume this boss can use all the skills players have access to!" he said, indicating that he had seen the combination of skills in the previous event.

It was true, she had used that combination several times in the last battle royale. She'd had Mister Plates use it often because it was a useful combination. As a result, Mister Plates had grown accustomed to using it out of habit. It seemed the players were under the impression it was a single skill instead of a combination of two skills. In that case, all she had to do was use a different attack after using *Fleet of Foot* so that they can't dodge it.

Leah quickly informed Mister Plates of this fact via friend chat. Soon after, Mister Plates turned to another swordsman and used *Fleet of Foot* to close the distance before unleashing a standard horizontal slash without activating any skills.

It seemed this was more difficult to avoid, and the swordsman only managed to wedge his shield into the path of the strike which sliced through the shield and took the swordsman's shield arm. Leah had imagined the blade would have cut through the shield like a hot knife through butter, but while it managed to cut through the shield, it only did so with a great deal of resistance; the shield warped rather than cleanly splitting in two. Evidently, it wasn't made of plain iron.

"Gil!" cried one of the players.

The wounded swordsman waved them off. "I'm fine! I'm not dead! Damn... That mana-iron shield cost me a ton of coin...and it barely stopped a single blow!"

Because Mister Plates hadn't been able to cleanly cleave the shield in half, it had failed to land a killing blow on the swordsman, only managing to maim him by lopping off his left arm.

Something wasn't quite right in this battle. She certainly felt more sluggish now than when she had faced off against the adamantite army in the mock battle. It was true that she and Mister Plates were still moving more effectively than they had in

the last event, but it certainly didn't feel like the improvement was proportional to the stat boosts since their *Rebirths*.

"Leave it to me! *Mid-Heal Regeneration*." One of the rearguards lobbed some spells toward the front line. It appeared that the swordsman right in front of Leah was the target, and she saw light envelope the swordsman's wounds. While the severed shield arm didn't regenerate, it was probably safe to assume that the spells had healed all the physical damage from the wound.

Healing Magic! I hadn't realized it'd been discovered!

Since support skills like *Healing Magic* were meant to be used while collaborating with other players, there wasn't much benefit in concealing information about them. Leah likely would have been able to unlock those skills for herself if she had bothered to keep up with the game's social media and community functions.

She had been arrogant. Leah had assumed that because she had the most experience points, she would also be the one who knew the most about skills. Even without the benefit of hindsight, it should have been obvious that *wasn't* the case. After all, there were a large number of melee attack skills that Leah had deliberately not taken. There had to be players who had messed around with combinations of skills that Leah had chosen to pass up. She wasn't the only one who was playing and enjoying this game.

I think it's long overdue that I did more experimentation with skills. I should focus on that when the event's over. Before that, I should grab all the publicly available information on social media and the forums, then…

"*Lightning*!" The voice interrupted her train of thought and Leah's line of sight wobbled from an impact. Even if she was facing a group of vastly inferior opponents, she was still in the middle of battle. This was hardly an ideal time to be making plans for her next theorycrafting session.

She'd just been hit by an attack spell. Mister Plates had taken damage from the spell. That in itself wasn't a problem. The amount of damage was well within the range that natural regeneration should cover.

No, the problem wasn't the amount of damage inflicted. It was the fact that the spell inflicted *any* damage on Mister Plates in the first place. Based on her own testing, the only one who had been

able to actually damage Mister Plates had been an adamanmage, equipped with a staff made of wood from the World Tree.

Considering the strength of the adamanknights, the adamanmages were also powerful spellcasters in their own right. The fact that the spell had caused damage meant that a player was rivaling the firepower of an adamanmage equipped with the highest quality spellcasting equipment. There was an enemy who was capable of dealing damage to her. Then the priority had to be to eliminate that potential threat.

Mister Plates turned to face the player who had just cast the spell and was about to close the distance with *Fleet of Foot*...but an instant before the skill could fire, Leah and Mister Plates were plunged into darkness.

What the heck?! I can't see!

A cheer went up from a player. "There! Gotcha! I've blinded it! Go get 'em!"

While Leah didn't know what skill had caused the sudden blindness, she knew that her alarms were going off in her head. Cocooned in darkness, Leah reacted by casting a spell, *Hell's Flames*. While she hadn't wanted the players to hear her voice, having to speak was far preferable to losing.

Area of Effect spells generally only triggered when the caster had visual confirmation of the target area. But there was an exception to this rule: when the caster served as the center of the area of effect.

"Nrgh! The flames!" A player shouted in pain.

"Who the hell cast that spell?! That wasn't part of the plan!" Another said angrily.

"It wasn't any of us! It did it! The harbinger cast the spell using itself as the target!" A female player's voice cut in.

"Seriously?! That's ridiculous!" A frustrated player said with a frustrated huff.

The spell should have gotten rid of the flies buzzing around her. Yet, Leah's vision was still obscured by darkness. Since she had no idea if it was a spell, a skill, or some sort of item, there was nothing she could do about it.

"E-Everyone okay?! *Mass Minor Heal*!" Leah heard the healer say, followed by a chorus of thanks coming from all around her. That meant that the players around her were still alive. That should've

been impossible. Leah's *Hell's Flames* was powerful enough to melt ingots of adamantite. She'd unleashed the spell knowing that it would do substantial damage to Mister Plates. Players with equipment so weak that a single blow from a Sharp cleaved them in two couldn't—shouldn't—be left standing in its wake.

Wait, why is Mister Plates not that badly damaged…?

While Mister Plates had taken damage from the spell, it was a lot less damage than she had expected.

A player's voice quickly explained what had happened. "Glad the debuff field is working. It was a pain in the ass to set up, but it's working well."

"Hey! Careful what you say in front of the harbinger! An event boss like this probably has a high-end AI controlling it! Don't give it info it can use to adapt!" came a sharply worded warning from another player.

A debuff field…?!

The player mentioned it had been a hassle to get ready. It meant the players had been prepared to activate that debuff field and use this particular location as the battlefield. Leah had walked right into a trap.

Leah had let her ego cloud her judgment. She'd assumed there was no one who could match her. She'd arrogantly hoped she might run into an enemy that might force her to intervene directly in the battle. Everything that was going wrong for her stemmed from her own arrogance.

She'd been drawn into a battlefield with a debuff field and forced to fight in a much weaker state than usual. Her enemy was able to heal the damage from her attacks while she'd been blinded by them and was now lashing out.

Leah felt a fresh surge of anger at her own folly. There weren't any excuses she could bring up to avoid blaming her own arrogance. Not that she was in a forgiving mood toward her opponents either. Her competitive streak fed her motivation. She wasn't going to lose, not to these players, not to her arrogance.

If she couldn't see, she'd just let the Sharps do the hard work of killing the enemy. They weren't dependent on Leah's sense of sight.

"It should still be blind! The spell it just cast should still be on cooldown! Now's the time!" urged a player.

Another voice quickly spoke up. “I got this! *Fear*!”

<<Successfully resisted the effect.>>

Yet at that very instant, Mister Plates stopped moving. Leah couldn’t get Mister Plates to move, even when switching to manual control.

The heck’s going on?! Mister Plates should be immune to Enchantment *spells! So why…?!*

“The harbinger’s frozen! The *Fear* spell worked!” The voice who had cast the *Fear* spell said excitedly.

“To break through an event boss’s resistances even with a debuff field…just how much min-maxing did you do?!” an incredulous player’s voice came in response.

The caster shot back, “It’s because of the blindness! Being in a darkened state adds a penalty to the resistance check for *Fear*! But forget that! The *Fear* consumed the soul-binding stones I had! This thing’s clearly undead!”

That was news to Leah. She hadn’t known *Fear* became more effective when an opponent couldn’t see. Still, that was an understandable oversight on her part. Up to this point, Leah hadn’t been in any well-lit areas when she was playing. She had essentially been casting *Fear* in a state of perpetual darkness.

The other new piece of information was the existence of an item called a soul-binding stone. While Leah didn’t know what exactly the stones were, the name suggested they had a similar effect to the *Soul Bind* skill in the *Necromancy* tree. While *Soul Bind* allowed a necromancer to store souls on their own person, the stones are evidently a consumable item that can be used in place of the bound souls.

Mister Plates wasn’t undead, but was something akin to a homunculus or golem. Both types required consuming a bound soul for *Enchantment Magic* to work, which must have been why the spell consumed those stones. Since *Enchantment* spells didn’t work on them and they never cast spells of their own, Leah hadn’t invested any experience points in boosting the MND scores for Mister Plates and the Sharps. Combined with the penalties from the debuff field, it wasn’t a surprise that they’d fail to resist the effects of a *Fear* spell.

The Sharps weren't responding to her commands either. They, too, were cowering from the effects of the *Fear* spell.

"Now's our chance! Everyone, focus your fire on the boss!" a player shouted. Spells rained down on Leah from every direction, but each spell was only inflicting a small amount of damage on Mister Plates. With the amount of damage the players were doing, Leah could just hunker down inside Mister Plates until the *Fear* effect wore off without risk of injury, but her pride ruled that out as a valid option.

She was determined to kill the opposing players. She'd sworn to herself that she would do it.

There was no point in staying inside a Mister Plates that was blind and immobilized. Given that all of the attacks raining down on her were spells of one kind or another, it seemed safe to assume there weren't any players around her. She wasn't going to be able to catch any players in the blast radius even if she kept targeting herself.

She was in no position to indulge in luxuries like avoiding being seen by the players. The only option she had left was to unleash everything in her arsenal at the enemy. To do that, she needed to look at the players with her own eyes and target them directly with her high-end spells.

"*White Out*," Leah uttered the words, calmly activating the spell. *White Out* was a *Light Magic* spell that could briefly blind everyone in the surrounding area.

"Whoa! The heck is that?!" The players reacted with surprise as the blinding burst of light temporarily robbed them of their vision.

"Light?! I can't see a thing!"

Leah used the opportunity to climb out of Mister Plates. She opened the hatch at the back and quickly scampered out of the armor, grabbing hold of Mister Plates's shoulder and clambering atop the unmoving armor. Leah spread the wings on her lower back and propped a leg against the hatch to maintain her balance as she looked down at the players.

"Something just came out of the armor!" a player shouted.

"So there's someone lurking inside, huh?" another voice chimed in.

"Stay calm! Everyone knows bosses have multiple forms!" a third player said. The players had already mostly recovered from

the blindness from *White Out*. The spell's effects were unnaturally short; the debuff field was clearly causing some damage.

Leah had hoped to take out some players before they recovered from the temporary blindness, but the moment she stepped out of Mister Plates, she found herself unable to see normally. The sunlight felt unnaturally bright. She couldn't even see her surroundings without squinting her eyes.

Wait, was this the first time Leah had been outside during the day in her own body? Even though the sun had passed its zenith, Leah was still being bathed in direct sunlight. Leah had assumed Poor Eyesight was the only penalty she suffered in terms of eyesight; it only just occurred to her that the penalties from Poor Eyesight and Albinism might have a synergistic effect and amplify each other's effects.

"Wait, is that…" The players seemed to recover first as they began to comment on Leah's appearance.

"Looks like an angel to me. So an angel was behind the swarm of undead attacking the continent?"

The observations continued. "Ah, an angel… That's the only word I can think of that explains that beauty… It goes beyond just aesthetics… It's like a primal force of nature."

"Yeah, it's on such another level, I can't even bring myself to feel any jealousy…" another player said.

"Um, isn't this a problem? If it's an angel, then… It's not going to work as…" A more pragmatic voice cut in.

Then came the enchanter's voice from earlier. "It may look like an angel, but it's definitely undead! That's probably an undead form of angel!"

Leah found the exchanges between the players grating. The only reason they had the mental bandwidth to chat was because Leah hadn't made a move. That was about to end.

The sunlight was still painfully bright, but hearing the players jabbering at one another gave her time to adjust to the glare. She could see enough to at least know which direction the enemy was coming from.

The enemy's frontliners were positioned closer than she had expected. They must have closed the distance because they were sure their target was blind and immobilized.

I'll make you regret that.

Leah's Poor Eyesight meant that, when fighting as herself, the farthest she could expect to hit any opponent was at best at medium range. The added limitations from the sunlight wouldn't let her target her spells in a way that gave her any meaningful chance of success. The only option left was to close the distance and use her far greater physical stats to overwhelm the enemy.

She would have liked to immobilize her enemies using *Enchantment* spells, but they required aiming as much as any other spell, and she had no idea how the spells would influence Mister Plates or the Sharps if she just blanketed the area with enchantments.

Leah nimbly leaped off of Mister Plates and aimed a crescent kick at the neck of the nearest melee player she could find. No matter how badly her stats were affected by the debuff field, so long as her opponents retained a humanoid shape, her muscle memory would guide her to attack the right spots.

In fact, even in her current debuffed state, Leah still struggled with the gap between her ordinary body and the physical attributes of her in-game avatar. Given her years of training IRL, any level of physical enhancement beyond an average person felt harder to control than her actual body. If she'd known she would be in this situation, Leah would have spent more time getting accustomed to the physical capabilities of her character's body. This was an unanticipated side effect of massively boosting physical stats using experience points in a short amount of time.

Leah had intended to simply knock out her opponent using her kick. Though Leah felt awkward and ungainly in executing the attack, it was more than enough to knock her target's head clean off his shoulders.

That was to be expected given the sheer gap in physical attribute scores. This was, after all, a game world. An order of magnitude or two difference in STR and VIT scores translated into an insurmountable gap in ability when it came to melee combat.

The headless player crumpled in place. Leah grabbed the dead player by the arm, then threw him in the direction of the rear guard players hurling magic at her. Tossed at the enemy with the force of Leah's brute strength, the corpse cartwheeled in the air like a giant throwing star. After hurtling off into a distance that was too far for Leah to see clearly, the body disappeared, dissolving

into motes of light. The player must have respawned.

Once the corpse disappeared, Leah closed her eyes for a moment and drew in a deep breath. Her eyelids felt like they were on fire, and a dull ache radiated from her eyes. She couldn't keep her eyes open for long, even when squinting.

The players were clearly unsettled by Leah's display and spoke up. "That thing's way nastier than it looks!"

Another player added, "I figured it was magic focused. Guess not!"

A third shouted in exasperation, "Really?! An angel that uses brute force to turn people into minced meat?!"

"Did it already recover from the *Fear* spell?!" a player who seemed to have realized the obvious asked.

"The transformation must have removed all its status effects! Frontliners, get closer! We can't let it move any farther!" came the shouted instructions from someone who Leah assumed was a leader of this group of players. Killing him would cripple their ability to coordinate against her.

Leah closed the distance, using that oddly familiar voice as a guide, and cracked open her eyelids to get a glimpse. She dropped her center of gravity and opened her hand, pointing her palm toward the target, and unleashed a strike at the player's torso.

She had intended to knock him backward, but the player's body was much softer than she anticipated and her hand ended up going straight through his torso. Having her arm buried elbow deep inside the player's torso was enough to slow Leah's next movements for a split second.

The players pounced on that brief opening.

Though she couldn't tell who had fired it, Leah sensed a projectile quickly approaching the side of her head. Leah turned her body and held out the player's corpse impaled on her arm like a shield and blocked the projectile from hitting her.

The enchanter's voice rang out. "*Fear!*"

`<<Successfully resisted the effect.>>`

The *Fear* spell had been well-timed, but it was useless. *Enchantment* spells didn't work on the Queen of Destruction.

"Tch, didn't work!" the enchanter's voice said.

“It took out the commander!” Another player commented, “If only it hadn’t blocked the squid ink bomb! But now we know! *Fear* works if you can combine blindness with the debuff field!”

The players continued to discuss among one another, with the enchanter chiming in again, “No, when I hit it the first time, it used six soul-bind stones, but I’ve only got four stones left! It’s possible I simply didn’t have enough for it to work!”

Their speculation was completely off, but Leah had no reason to correct their misunderstanding. The six soul-bind stones consumed earlier were probably the ones that hit Mister Plates and the five Sharps. It seemed each stone could be used in place of a single soul.

“*Lightning Shower*.” Leah thanked the enchanter for this information by squinting at the direction she heard the enchanter’s voice from and delivered a wide area attack spell as a gift.

Since spells required a clear visual confirmation on a target to hit, Leah had trouble hitting targets beyond her ability to see clearly, but Area of Effect spells made it possible to make up for that lack of pinpoint accuracy. The only trade-off was that area-affecting spells required more MP to cast, but now was hardly a time to worry about MP costs.

“Guh…!” Came the enchanter’s pained cry. Leah hadn’t quite been able to see the whole distance in the direction of the voice and had to target the spell at a shorter distance than she had wanted. It seemed she hadn’t been able to get him with a direct hit, but it was clear that she’d managed to clip him with the outer edge of her spell’s damage radius.

“It took out Mentai-list!” A surprised cry came from the players. “Even debuffed, it’s still strong enough to take out a caster with a single shot…”

“That thing’s not magic *or* melee focused! It’s stupidly good at both! Rear guard, fall back!” a player shouted.

“*Mass Minor Heal!*” The healer’s voice rang out, casting a mass healing spell at the players who had survived getting caught in Leah’s attack spell. But that was a mistake.

To this point, Leah had only heard a single player calling out healing spells. That meant there was only a single healer for the entire group. Which meant…

“*Snowstorm! Prominence! Earthquake! Hurricane!*” Leah uttered the spell names. Her goal was to kill all of the players by overwhelming them with a barrage of spells before the healer’s mass heal spell’s cooldown was finished.

Leah cast the spells with herself at the center, knowing she would take some damage in the process. This was because she wanted to fire them off as quickly as possible. Leah increasingly felt an uncomfortable stinging all along her skin. Probably the penalties from Albinism adding up due to sun exposure. She had no time to waste.

So long as no heals were cast between her spells triggering, that barrage should have finished off any players that were nearby. Besides, she hadn’t taken much damage from the players. With the frontliners handled, the rear guard were now free to bombard her with spells, but those spells weren’t going to match Leah’s own self-inflicted damage. She could survive that onslaught.

Leah noticed that the healer had, in fact, cast some healing spells between her attack spells. But the mass healing spell should still be on cooldown. Even if she managed to heal her allies, that meant maybe one or two of them surviving near Leah. That wouldn’t be enough to pose a threat to her.

At the same time, Leah wondered how long the player on her arm would stay there. She hadn’t bothered to do anything to the corpse because it had been a useful shield and because she had switched primarily to attacking with magic. Why hadn’t the impaled player respawned? Either way, it was time to get rid of him…

Leah’s thoughts on the matter were interrupted when she felt someone wrap an arm around her waist. It was the swordsman she’d first maimed by destroying his shield, shield arm and all, the one the others had called Gil. He was one of the few tanks in this raid party. Had he survived because as a tank he had more LP than the others? No, that couldn’t be it. Even in her weakened state, Leah’s spells were far too powerful for that to happen.

Wait, had all the heals cast by the healer during Leah’s spell barrage been directed at him? Why would the caster focus everything on healing this one player?

“Now! Break it!” the player clinging to her waist shouted.

It was too far away for Leah to see clearly, but it looked like part of the rear guard were doing something in the distance. A moment later, Leah heard a crystal of some sort shatter before her body suddenly felt heavier.

She knew what it was. It was the debuff field. Why had it suddenly grown so powerful?

Leah also felt the strength drain out of her body. She struggled to stay upright. The man clinging to her waist went limp and slid down to her ankles. He was probably dead.

No, this wasn't just a debuff field. It wasn't just applying penalties to ability scores—it was also draining LP. And unlike earlier, this time the field wasn't differentiating between friend and foe. That's what had killed the player named Gil.

Suddenly, the corpse impaled on her arm felt like a massive burden on her arm. Leah sank onto one knee. This was why he hadn't respawned.

She needed to get out of this debuff field and she needed to do it now. It seemed that it wasn't causing damage as much as it was reducing maximum LP. But this was the sort of LP debuff where the characters took damage proportional to the reduction in their maximum LP. That must have been the direct cause of Gil's death. He simply hadn't had enough LP to cover the reduction and instantly died as a result of the debuff.

Leah herself had taken a great deal of self-inflicted damage from her own spells. Furthermore, she was now under the effect of an extremely powerful debuff field. Her LP was already in the danger zone and she only had a few points of it left. Then there was the damage from the "light burns" that the sun would soon inflict on her skin.

This was *bad*.

The corpse of the tank at her feet also made sure she couldn't easily move away.

Why wear heavy armor like this anyway? But I guess I can get away by using Castling…

No, she couldn't. She'd already wasted it frivolously before she'd come here. That skill had a cooldown time of twenty-four hours.

Nor could she escape using *Summon Summoner*. Her *Summon* skills were still locked out.

All of her past actions were coming back to haunt her. It was all

the result of letting herself get carried away, recklessly acting without any consideration of potential consequences.

As much as it hurt to admit, the only option left was to fly and get away. Once she was airborne, she could end it by carpet-bombing the enemy from above. She lifted off from the ground using *Flight* and used the last of her waning strength to shake the corpse off her arm…

It was at that moment that she locked eyes with the corpse. She knew that face… His voice had been strangely familiar as well… This was…

Leah froze as she felt a sharp predator's gaze upon her. She reflexively turned to face that gaze. Suddenly, there was an arrow right in front of her.

Oh, that's right, the archer that shot at me—

The arrow struck her right between the eyes. It was a headshot. A critical hit.

`<<You are eligible to be revived for one hour, would you like to respawn now?>>`



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“Yes, and so…” The chancellor glanced back at the knights that had carried the object into the room. The knight removed the cloth covering the object, revealing a giant, egg-shaped crystal with a faintly eerie rainbow hue. A murmur spread through the players assembled in the courtyard.

“Given that outsiders such as yourselves are placing so much at risk for our kingdom, we can hardly sit back and wait to see the outcome. It is only just that we do everything in our power as well,” the chancellor said before approaching the crystal egg. He ran his fingers along the surface and continued, “This is an ancient object revered in our kingdom as an artifact. It is also one of the kingdom’s crowning possessions. His Majesty has authorized its use.”

The players began to buzz among themselves, “An ancient treasure…?!”

The player next to the first nodded excitedly. “Yeah, he called it an artifact!”

The excitement was palpable among the assembled players as another voice observed, “Whoa, it’s a new class of item!”

“Are you certain, my lord?” Amatain asked on behalf of the gathering.

The chancellor looked toward the players and nodded slowly. “This artifact places a weakening curse on all creatures within a specified area. Up to ten individuals can be excluded from the field. The artifact has a duration of one hour.”

It was an item that inflicted a debuff—that is, weakening effects on the enemy. The players were keenly aware from the grave tones of the NPCs that a harbinger was a monster on a *completely* different power level from what they had encountered before. This artifact must be an event item meant to be used against boss monsters of that level.

The chancellor continued to explain, “The wasting curse takes effect in stages. When the artifact is first activated the effects of the curse are very weak. But so long as the opponent is kept inside the artifact’s influence, the wasting effect steadily grows stronger.”

He paused for a breath before resuming, “Moreover, if the

crystal is shattered while the curse is active, for the next ten seconds all of the power left within the artifact will be released at once. The strength of the wasting curse expands in proportion to the energy left in the artifact. This effect, however, does not distinguish friend from foe, and even those who were excluded from the artifact's initial influence. When this effect is activated, it will reduce the abilities of all caught in its field by up to half. This includes their vitality. This means that if a creature has suffered damage, it could instantaneously kill them."

It was an extraordinarily powerful item. One worthy of being a kingdom's national treasure. The artifact almost sounded like it had a will of its own. An obsessive, cursed wrath that would stop at nothing to extinguish the enemy.

Wayne pondered the implications for a moment before he asked, "Why bring this out now? If the grand army had taken this with them, they might have been able to survive…"

The chancellor nodded gravely. "Unfortunately, this relic has specific conditions for activation. It can only be used in specific locations. This city is one of those locations."

Wayne nodded. "I understand, but you said this was the kingdom's treasured item, if we destroy it…"

Even if the kingdom was in danger, destroying the artifact seemed like an extreme step to take.

"It is how it must be, Master Wayne. This artifact, once activated, will lose the light that powers it and can never be used again," the chancellor said with a resigned smile.

Wayne remained unconvinced and asked, "But you still have angels attacking you at random, yes? Shouldn't you save it for when the boss of those angels comes to attack you?"

The chancellor shook his head. "The fact of the matter is, this artifact doesn't have much effect upon those cursed angels."

Wayne furrowed his brow in confusion. "Why would that be?"

"You are aware there are weaknesses and strengths between types of magic and creatures, yes? It is similar to that. This artifact is called the *Fey King's Heart* and, according to tradition, was created by the Fey King who ruled over these lands on the eve of his death to protect the people who lived in these lands. The blasted angels, unfortunately, are of a similar nature to the Fey King and have resistance to the Fey King's powers," explained the

chancellor.

"I see, that makes sense…" Wayne said with a nod of understanding.

The chancellor took the opportunity to continue his explanation. "As I mentioned before, there are six locations on this continent where the artifact can be activated; they are the royal capitals of each of the Six Kingdoms. It is evident that the royal families of those Six Kingdoms are the rightful heirs to the legacy of the Fey King."

If what the chancellor said was true, that probably meant that, in the case of a harbinger's attack, the royal capitals of each kingdom had special event items for that sort of boss event. Perhaps it was intended to make sure that the kingdoms themselves wouldn't be destroyed and radically alter the situation on the continent. The reason the special items were impossible to use outside the capitals was probably a balance adjustment to make sure that an NPC wouldn't suddenly go out and kill raid bosses before players could get to it.

"Then the… Ahem, it might work on this harbinger because it's undead?" Wayne asked.

The chancellor confirmed his suspicions. "Exactly. The Fey King's power is most effective against creatures that sit in opposition to him. While we aren't certain what the exact opposite of the Fey King actually *is*, it's clearly a creature affiliated with the demonic and the darkness."

"Thank you for explaining your reasoning, my lord. We will make good use of this artifact." Amatain answered for the group before he bowed his head to the chancellor. The other players followed suit.

The chancellor nodded. "We leave our fate in your hands."

Amatain then turned to Wayne. "Now that we've settled that, Wayne, it's time to figure out the plan. You're our leader on this one."

All of the players turned to look at Wayne, who could only respond with confusion at being named the leader. "Wait, what?" Wayne was probably the weakest of the players present. Why would *he* be the leader?

Gealgamesh slapped Wayne on the shoulder. "C'mon, Wayne, you're the one who put the work into gathering all of us! We're

here to lend you a hand; you're the main character here. You got this, boss."

Amatain nodded in agreement. "Gealgamesh is right. It's your efforts that brought us here. Which is why you're the one who should be the leader of this raiding party."

Wayne frowned and shook his head. "But the only reason you guys came is because Gil…"

Amatain responded simply, "That might be true, but Gealgamesh wasn't the one who called for and made the effort to gather everyone."

The others here were the epitome of top-tier players, and they had all gathered here, trusting Wayne's words.

And it wasn't just the players here in the courtyard. There had to have been a number of tank build players who had served as mules to bring everyone to Hilith. They had pitched in even if there was no direct benefit for them.

This wasn't about character strength anymore. It was about justifying the faith they had all placed in him. He had to come up with a battle plan, even if he wasn't entirely sure in himself. No, that was the wrong way to look at it. He needed to be confident that he *could* do it. After all, he had once put together the clues and cornered Leah for her behavior. If he backed down now, he'd make a fool of Leah for being impressed at his detective skills… Not that he felt anything in particular regarding Leah anymore, of course…

"All right, let's get started." Now fully committed, Wayne said with a nod as he looked over the assembled group.

"So right now, this is what we know about the harbinger." Wayne began listing off data points, "First, it controls ants, hornets, and undead. Second, it can fly. Third, it can turn itself invisible. We also know that it's heading westward—which means it'll be coming from the east."

Gealgamesh nodded next to him. "Good summary. Though, there's a couple items on that list that are already a bit of a problem…"

Amatain voiced his agreement. "True. If the harbinger's heading to the capital alone under invisibility, we won't be able to spot it approaching."

Wayne sighed before he was interrupted by a man in a nurse's outfit. "May I interject?"

Wayne nodded. "Of course, Master Youichi."

"Just Youichi is fine." Youichi shook his head and continued, "I have a skill called *True Sight*. When activated, this skill allows me to visualize and see the LP of the characters around me. While it doesn't give me specific numbers, it does give me a rough idea based on light and color. The brightness of the light is the percentage of health left and the color is maximum LP."

A man dressed as a ninja chimed in, "I've got that skill too."

"I see," Wayne said while thoughtfully stroking his chin. "Then we'll have Youichi and Monkey Dive Sasuke deal with detecting the enemy."

Sasuke broke in. "Just call me Sasuke. Why use my full name there? Relax, don't be so formal."

Wayne nodded and continued, "We'll leave it to Youichi and Sasuke. We can figure out a plan if it ends up bringing its bees later. Let's nail down what to do if it shows up on its own. Since there's a good chance it'll be invisible, you two will have to detect it when it approaches. The next thing we need to figure out is how to get it into the artifact's effect radius... We need to lure it into the debuff field."

Amatain nodded in agreement. "That's true. We need to already have it ready by the time the harbinger shows up. I found this out when I touched it just now, but the artifacts teach you how to activate it when you touch them. That goes for all artifacts by the way, not just this one. Anyway, according to the artifact, the target you specify when you activate it is a location, not a person or an object. Another thing to note is that the burst debuff that comes from destroying it is most powerful when it has about half an hour of run time left."

"Thank you, Amatain. So that means the best-case scenario is that we manage to draw the harbinger to the target area, have the backliners activate the artifact, then get the harbinger's LP down to the kill line within half an hour and kill it by destroying the artifact. To make it possible—" Wayne explained his plan with input from the top-tier players, adding the needed details based on their experiences in the game. While they had come up with the plan on the fly, by the time they were finished, they had a solid

foundation.

The players then decided to go over the plan. Youichi began, “First, I’ll taunt it with an arrow while telling the rest of you where it is.”

Amatain nodded. “The key in all this is going to be keeping the thing in the debuff field and preventing it from moving.”

Gealgamesh grinned and nodded. “Yep. It’s a big responsibility. Leave it to me.”

Wayne then added, “Also, if possible, we should do as much LP damage to it as possible before that time comes.”

Mentai-list, an *Enchantment Magic* user chimed in, “Chances that my *Fear* will work are about fifty-fifty, but if it’s undead, so long as I’ve got soul-bind stones, the spell *should* work. The only thing would be the resistance…”

“Someone can distract it while Sasuke hits it with a squid ink bomb and blinds it. That should improve your chances,” Youichi stated.

Gealgamesh looked skeptically at the handheld bomb. “Wait, are you seriously saying you can blind a target with this, even if you hit them in the back of the head? How’s that supposed to work?”

Sasuke shrugged and put away the bomb. “How should I know? That’s just how the item is. You’ll have to ask the alchemist that made it for more info. I had to leave him at one of the towns along the way because he wouldn’t be able to keep up in the fight.”

The plan was more or less set. Now, all that was left was to execute.

“You know…this plan basically is predicated on the entire front line dying…” one of the players quipped.

Amatain shook his head. “No, I think this is the only real option. Fortunately, the EXP penalty’s turned off for this event. Could be so that players can use the artifact and sacrifice a few bodies to win.”

Another frontliner added, “Remember, we need to slow down the harbinger as much as possible. So even if you die, don’t respawn. Just leave your corpse there and get in the harbinger’s way.”

“For the last bit, I’ll hold it down even if it means wrapping myself around it, but that means if there’s a question of healing priority, the heals are going to have to come to me. I’m the

hardest to kill, so that should at least balance things out," Gealgamesh said as he looked toward the group.

"Very well. I will make sure to do that, Mister Gealgamesh." The healer nodded politely.

"Wait, can't you just call me Gil?" He responded and thinned his lips.

The healer shook her head apologetically and said, "I'm sorry, but calling a man by a nickname is just a little..."

"Okay everyone, let's get into position. We're pretty much out of time here. It might show up at any minute," Wayne said to the group. The group responded with a loud "Roger!" in unison.

Gealgamesh pondered the healer's words for a moment. "Wait... Did she just let me down easy?"

This was how the raid boss battle, the fight to kill the harbinger, started. The raiding party would be the first in the continent's history to succeed in killing a harbinger.

Chapter 4: Golden Experience Points

Leah consciously made an effort to inhale slowly then spend several seconds exhaling. The effort paid off as she started to calm down from the sobs that had wracked her body. The resentment and roiling anger hadn't gone away, tears of frustration welling up again as she thought about the day's events. Still, her body was no longer on the verge of collapsing into a fit of sobbing and tears so intense that it left her weeping in silence.

Her tear ducts had always been overly sensitive, shedding tears whenever she felt strong emotions, even those that came without any accompanying sadness or pain. Leah, ashamed of how easily she was moved to tears, worked to minimize the intensity of emotions she felt on a day-to-day basis in her real life.

How long had it been since she'd wept like this? The last time she could remember was… Yes, *that* incident. The day her older sister suddenly left her behind and vanished—no, that didn't matter anymore.

The more important thing was to figure out what to do to the players that killed her. She couldn't simply let them get away with killing her.

"V-Va…nrrnmph…! Wayne, that was his name… I figured he'd been blasted to bits with Erfahren, but…" Leah said to herself with a light tremor, suppressing a potential sob. "He's a player. If he'd been flattened along with Erfahren, he would've just respawned somewhere. I guess that just happened to be near the capital."

Leah knew her death wasn't Wayne's fault. No, her arrogance had been the cause of her downfall. Yet, it wasn't solely arrogance that led to her defeat.

There had been an enormous gap in stats and abilities between Leah and the assembled players. The players had made up for that gap with numbers, items, and a well-crafted battle plan. While Leah wasn't exactly happy about the fact a debuffing field had hit her seemingly out of nowhere, she had no intention of complaining about it. She'd been the fool who had walked right into that trap.

On reflection, everything the players had done, from their skill use to their teamwork, were focused on setting up for the big moment in the end. They had not only come up with a good battle plan, but they had executed it nearly flawlessly. Impressive was the only word Leah could use to describe their play.

Since the players had no information about Leah's stats or skills, luck had played a role in how effective the tactics and items had been, but the players had ushered that luck to the battle through their actions. Their faith in their plan and their abilities had coaxed lady luck onto their side. All of the players at that battle had put everything on the line to accomplish a single goal, regardless of their power.

"Amrph—" Another sob threatened to escape her throat. No, it was fine. She was calm, she wasn't crying.

"I guess I should start with *Healing Magic*. Can't do much else until that's taken care of," Leah said with a self-deprecating chuckle. She needed the healing spells to get rid of the havoc the ugly cry had inflicted on her features.

Healing Magic wound up being easy to unlock once Leah read up on the prerequisites. Taking a skill called *Unarmed Combat* which improved a character's ability to fight without a weapon combined with *Pharmacology* and *Dissection* unlocked a skill called *Treatment*. The rest of the process was painless—once *Treatment* was unlocked, a sufficiently high INT score was all that was needed to obtain *Healing Magic*. According to the help guide, the potency of *Healing Magic* was determined by the caster's INT score.

"I wonder which of the two works better on puffy eyes," Leah murmured to herself. While she didn't have a mirror to check her own condition, she went to the washroom and used *Water Magic* to wash her face.

The towels in the washroom had been crafted by specialist engineer ants. There were only five people who made use of the washroom, but there were two towels hanging near the washbasin. One was solely there for Leah's use while the Kelli's crew shared the other. When Leah asked why she couldn't just share one towel with them, Kelli had vehemently argued against it, citing the impropriety of using the same towel as the pack's leader.

Leah knew that Kelli had done so out of respect for her, but Kelli's dogged refusal to share a towel felt more like a rejection of Leah herself than she would have liked to admit.

Leah sighed as she wiped her face. "I hope Kelli and the others are all right. It's my fault they had to go through this…"

Ever since Leah had decided she would be participating in the event on the monster side and leading armies of monsters against the Six Kingdoms, she had intended to keep Kelli and the others away from the invasion itself. But since they would have had precious little to do waiting here at the lair, she had sent the four of them along with Hakuma and Ginka to explore to the south in search of the volcanic region shown on the map. She'd given the group instructions to avoid the fighting or, if that was impossible, to side with the ones who looked the most civilized, if they encountered one of the invading forces en route. Diaz had been watching over the pups while the larger wolves were absent.

With the large stockpile of greater philosopher's stones in her collection, Leah had made sure Kelli and the others also had a chance to use the stones. Of the senior leadership of Leah's retinue, Sugaru was now the only one who had yet to take advantage of a philosopher's stone. That was a simple matter of practicality—the amount of experience necessary had been far too large, forcing Leah to shelve Sugaru's *Rebirth* until a later date.

An interesting discovery was that there didn't seem to be evolved or greater versions of beastmen races; instead, the philosopher's stones would transform them into a different race of beastman of a similar, more powerful animal.

In the case of the Mountain Cats, that had resulted in Kelli becoming lionfolk, Riley into leopardfolk, Lemmy into tigerfolk, and Marion into snow leopardfolk. The game world had relatively precise divisions between types of beastman, but at the same time, the *Rebirths* didn't result in much in the way of physical changes for the girls. Leah had expected things like hair color to change, but at most, the only changes had been minor changes to the shape of their ears and tails. The changes in physical appearance were roughly equal to the differences between elves and high elves.

Hakuma and Ginka had been reborn as Skoll and Hati. Leah suspected that, with a little more effort, they could become Fenrils;

so the wolves had each used a stone the next day, but it seemed they were missing some prerequisites that made *Rebirth* into that new monster type possible.

This limitation was true of the others. Because they hadn't fulfilled some unpublished criteria, they hadn't been able to evolve past a certain point. Then there were Leah and the World Tree where it was unlikely there were any further races to expand into.

"I wonder how the invasions are going in other regions. The threads on the event related forums say..." Leah checked the screen and sighed. "Well, guess that's to be expected... Tons of threads about defeating the harbinger... Nrgh... Oh, well... I guess I'll check later."

After returning to the queen's chamber from the washroom, Leah sat down on her throne to contemplate. Leah's experience point total was probably at or near the top when compared to the playerbase as a whole. So long as she knew the prerequisites, she could easily unlock any skill she wanted.

Yet, that hadn't been how she had started the game. In those early days, the focus had been to make the most of her precious few experience points to most efficiently acquire combat abilities and other skills. That was one of the most enjoyable parts of the early game.

Leah had even taken Albinism and Poor Eyesight, with all their accompanying disadvantages, to maximize her starting experience points. Those two traits had played a part in her defeat today. Those two traits had given her an extra 50 EXP.

Just 50 EXP. The traits that continued to harm Leah, even with all of her power as Queen and Harbinger of Destruction, had only brought her 50 points. But she knew she would have never gotten to this stage without those 50 points.

She wouldn't have had enough experience points to obtain the *Retainer* skill without that bump to her starting EXP. The deluge of experience points that had flooded in since had numbed Leah to the importance of small amounts of EXP, but after today's humbling reminder, Leah knew that those 50 points were at the root of her existence here on the server.

In this game world, everyone and everything was out there seeking experience points. This was because EXP was the currency

that allowed people to buy their dreams. Leah had let the giant pool of EXP she had amassed get to her head.

Human greed was a terrifying, bottomless pit. This was particularly true when monetary gains were involved—people were willing to discard reason and morals in the pursuit of riches. That was something Leah had seen more often in the real world than she cared to recall.

The prospect of vast wealth was enough to draw the most rational people astray. In this world, experience points were a form of wealth as tantalizing as gold itself.

Leah had started with an extra 50 EXP, a tiny grain of gold compared to her hoard. She had let herself forget her roots—no matter how vast her fortune, the most important thing was for her to remain in control. The EXP was not an end in itself; it was a tool to achieve other things.

She needed to avoid letting gold and experience points dictate her actions. Perhaps it was fortunate that she was given a chance to stop and reflect.

"Heh, I guess I'm lucky," Leah said as she stood up from her throne and stretched.

"Now, that isn't to say I'm not going to spend the experience points I got for destroying those three cities! If I'm going to fight directly, I should do everything I can to skew the odds in my favor," Leah said to herself with a firm nod.

"I've been a Queen of Destruction, but I haven't taken any of the new skills like *Evil Eye*... Come to think of it, the last time I took everything from a *Rebirth* was when I acquired all the high elf skills. There's a bunch of Queen of Destruction skills left on the table."

Leah stroked her chin as she looked at the available skills and her current EXP pool. "Oh, that reminds me... I need to make sure I've always got at least ten percent of my EXP total in the bank for emergencies. I don't intend to die again, but the first rule of investing is to hedge against risk."

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Wayne respawned in a break room at the royal palace he had used to log out from before the battle. He looked over and saw

Gealgamesh wake up in the bed next to him.

Gealgamesh scratched at his cheek. “I didn’t get a good look at the end, but we won, right?”

“Yeah…” Wayne said, then added with a sigh, “I think so.”

A friend chat message quickly provided confirmation. <We’ve defeated the event boss. Once you’ve respawned, come to the fortress wall.>

“Oh, I just got a message from Youichi,” Wayne said, brightening. “The boss is dead.”

“Yep,” Gil added with a grin. “Just heard from Sasuke. We got ’em!”

The two leaped out of bed and hurriedly made their way to the walls. As they ran through the streets, they took a moment to appreciate the beauty of the city they had managed to protect.

Gealgamesh had declined Wayne’s attempt to thank him before the battle. After all, that should wait until they’d won. This was clearly the time to say it. “Gil! Thanks for everything!”

Gealgamesh grinned in response. “All good! We’re friends, aren’t we?!”

While they had managed to protect the city, the enemy had still done a fair amount of damage. There were signs of battle scattered around the city, and it seemed there were NPCs who had died in the fighting. It hurt to look at the damage, but that could have been the entire city; they’d done the best that they could.

Wayne himself wouldn’t have been able to do anything on his own. The city itself was still standing because players had come together to defend it. Casting a pall on the win because they hadn’t managed to stop all of the enemy attacks would be an insult to all their efforts.

As the two approached the walls, they noticed large lumps of metal just lying on the ground… Where had *those* come from?

The surviving players were assembled outside the wall, a distressingly small group compared to the thirty that had started out. With Wayne and Gealgamesh added to their number, there were only about ten players left in the capital.

Those that had respawned elsewhere had at least gotten some experience points out of it, based on the amount Wayne saw after a quick check.

Wayne immediately bowed his head to the others. “Everyone, thank you so much for your help!”

“Don’t mention it,” Youichi said with a nod, “It was a fulfilling battle to take part in. Thank you for inviting me.”

Sasuke nodded in agreement. “Yeah, that’s true. Was the most fun I’d had in a while.”

Youichi and Sasuke had been invaluable in their efforts. Sasuke sometimes had a bit of a prickly attitude, but he had done his part in the fight and his actions spoke to his kindness as a player, whatever his words might say. Adding both of them to his friends list was, to Wayne, one of the most valuable rewards from this whole experience.

“That was a close one…” Anonymous Elf said. “I know our plan included the frontliners going down against the boss, but I wasn’t expecting the boss to kill so much of the back line… Area of Effect spells causing instant death was completely unexpected.”

Wayne nodded his agreement. “Your help was invaluable, Miss Anonymous Elf. Speaking of backliners, I wish we could have kept Mentai-list alive…”

The Anonymous Elf gave a faint shrug of her shoulders. “He logged out at an inn before the fight, so he should be along shortly… See? Right on cue.”

“Hey there, talking about me?” Wayne turned toward the voice and came face-to-face with the respawned Mentai-list. Seems he had decided he would stay in the royal capital.

Wayne, Gealgamesh, and Mentai-list were the only players who had respawned in the capital. That was because even coming to the capital’s aid held some risk for the players. There was no guarantee that the event boss would actually show up, and if they changed their respawn point to the capital, they ran the risk of being stranded in the capital for the rest of the event. Most of the players had opted not to change their respawn locations to avoid that fate.

“Oh, so what happened with the loot?” Gealgamesh asked.

“About that…” Anonymous Elf began, then sighed. “The moment we killed the boss, the armor that was standing there and all the swords it had fell to pieces… All we have left are lumps of metal.”

“Really?” Gealgamesh asked in disbelief.

“The boss’s body vanished right after,” Anonymous Elf added.

“So I guess the metal lumps are the loot…?” Gealgamesh asked.

“Yeah, and as far as I can tell, there’s those same lumps scattered around town. I think the undead dropped them when they died,” Wayne said, recalling the metal dotting parts of the city.

“If there’s a bunch of it lying around in the city, they might not fetch a lot of money…” Gealgamesh said with a sigh.

This was embarrassing. Wayne wasn’t going to be able to properly reward them for their help.

Anonymous Elf noted Wayne’s expression and spoke up. “It seems you’re thinking of something, but don’t worry about giving us any sort of extra reward. The biggest gift for us was being able to fight the event boss. If anything, I’d like to give *you* something. That, and we got plenty of EXP for killing that thing.”

“Yep, true.” Gealgamesh nodded. “Even though I was dead at the end, I got a fair amount of EXP. If that thing awarded this much EXP to thirty players, you have to wonder just how much EXP *it* had.”

“Well, given that we couldn’t have beaten it without the artifact from the kingdom, I’d guess that’s all part of the event reward,” Mentai-list observed. “If there’s some sort of event MVP award or something, I’m sure we’ll be part of that list. That’s true of you too, Wayne.”

“You think so…?” Wayne said hesitantly. “Thanks, Mentai-list.”

“So, the undead in the city vanished, right?” Gealgamesh asked.

“Yeah, right after the boss died. The only thing left are these chunks of metal,” Sasuke answered, picking up one of the metal pieces and rubbing it. Since Sasuke ordinarily played a dodge-based tank, he probably would have preferred to join the front line for the battle, but had chosen to stand back and focus on support with his throwing skills.

“The undead that attacked the other cities just dropped bones and stuff… You think the things directly commanded by the boss are configured differently?” Gealgamesh pondered aloud.

“I wonder what the boss actually was,” Anonymous Elf said. “It looked like an angel, but it’s not one, right?”

“I suspect it’s some sort of undead angel or something,” Mentai-list responded. “The debuff field that wasn’t supposed to work on angels worked on it, and when I used *Enchantment* spells,

it ate my soul-binding stones. Those stones only get consumed when casting spells on creatures that are usually immune to *Enchantment* spells. Which means undead, homunculus, or golem."

Wayne pursed his lips in thought. "Pretty sure it's undead or homunculus, but there's nothing that's decidedly arguing for one or the other."

"Eh, why not just call it undead, since it was using an undead minion?" Sasuke asked.

"Sasuke, are you just tired of thinking about it?" Youichi countered.

"Well, I mean, who cares now that it's done? It's dead," Sasuke noted rather blandly. That was true. At least the Seven Great Cataclysms had gone back to being the Six Great Cataclysms.

"I mean, we did defeat that thing, but it would have been nice to know what it was," Mentai-list noted. "That way, we could have made an announcement about it."

"The event isn't over yet," Youichi pointed out. "If it was undead, it might still respawn and show up later in the event."

"Urgh, no thanks. Once was enough." Sasuke blanched.

Youichi voiced his agreement. "Yeah, and we no longer have the artifact. If we're meant to fight it again, we need players to sharpen their skills overall."

If the time ever came to fight a boss once more, Wayne wanted to be able to truly fight alongside these players.

"Then I guess we're done here? As for the loot, well, sell it as you see fit. Don't worry about distributing the proceeds. Pretty sure everyone else is concerned with the rest of the event," Gealgamesh noted.

"Yes, I think we're done. Good job, everyone. Feel free to call on me again if something happens. I'm not sure I'll be able to make it, but I'll try to. I feel like you've got more things similar to this in your future, Wayne," Anonymous Elf said.

"Yep, agreed. He's got a bit of a cursed streak going on," Gealgamesh said with a grin.

"Then I guess it's time for us to respawn in Orleau," Youichi said to Sasuke.

"See ya guys," Sasuke said with a wave.

Anonymous Elf, Youichi, and Sasuke waved before respawning back to their own home bases. The Anonymous Elf called the

Kingdom of Bortely home, while Youichi and Sasuke played in a kingdom called Orleau. Wayne had heard Orleau was, on the whole, more challenging in terms of monsters in the area. The fact that they were able to get by as a two-man party in that environment was impressive.

"That's all of them, I guess. So, what's next, boss?" Gealgamesh asked Wayne.

"Stop it with the 'boss' thing. That's done with," Wayne said with a weak chuckle.

Mentai-list threw in his lot with Gealgamesh. "No, I think Wayne should be the party leader. You've got some leadership qualities, I think."

"Huh, you're coming with us, Mentai-list?" Gealgamesh asked with a furrowed brow.

Mentai-list frowned. "Is that a problem? That was the whole reason I set my respawn point to this city."

"No, of course you're welcome," Wayne said with a smile. "Welcome to the party, Mentai-list."

Wayne suddenly found himself in a three-man party with two of the best players in the game.

"Mentai-list, you've used your daily allotment, right? What about you, Wayne?" Gealgamesh spoke up before Wayne could get too lost in his thoughts.

"Daily allotment? Oh, the teleportation service. I haven't used it yet, so I still have it. Let's head back to the Mercenary Guild— The heck is that…?" Wayne said as he looked up to find the eastern sky falling into an unnatural darkness.

***

"So this is the *Evil Eye*, hm? Gonna need to get used to it, so I don't get dizzy," Leah said as she tried out the newly acquired core skill of the *Evil Eye* skill tree. The skill tree had been unlocked when she became a Queen of Destruction, but she was just now getting around to testing it.

Evil Eye was a toggleable skill and remained active until turned off. It reduced Leah's maximum MP and that lost MP wasn't recovered until she deactivated the skill.

The *Evil Eye* skill's basic feature was that it allowed the user to

see the flow of mana around them. Mana was represented as Mana Points (MP) for characters and, like LP, recovered naturally over time. This was because in this world, mana was present in the air. All of the characters who had MP as a stat somehow absorbed the mana in the air into their bodies and converted it into the more purified MP for use.

With *Evil Eye* active, Leah could not only see a character's MP, but also the mana floating in the air, making the whole world look like it was engulfed in a light pink mist.

When it came to detecting magical energy, Leah didn't need to rely on reflections of visible light. Instead, she could sense mana directly. In this dim cave, the magical mist appeared to glow softly, almost like it was casting its own light.

However, where the mana was sparse—like the rocky walls—the mist thinned, making those areas appear more transparent. Thanks to this, even in total darkness, Leah could make out her surroundings indirectly.

"It's like an inverted black-and-white filter, I suppose," Leah mused to herself, "though it doesn't quite capture everything, especially since I still can't see colors or brightness."

The *Evil Eye* ability was only able to detect mana within its range, so her vision depended entirely on its reach. Currently, it extended far enough to comfortably engage in long-range attacks. For combat, this was more than enough.

But what truly thrilled Leah was that her *Evil Eye* didn't rely on visible light at all, as she'd already realized.

"In other words...even if I close my eyes, I can still see." Leah grinned, her voice tinged with satisfaction. "Fighting with my eyes shut? Now *that's* a flex."

With that, she could finally put her eyesight problems behind her. As long as the skill was called *Evil Eye*, it should technically fulfill the visual requirement for spellcasting.

"Hmm..." Leah mused to herself. "I haven't tried it yet, but maybe this means I could even target an enemy spell directly with my own magic."

Usually, intercepting a spell requires predicting its path and firing a counterspell to intersect it. But with spatial-triggered magic, it might be possible to use the *Evil Eye* to target and neutralize an enemy's spell mid-flight.

A wicked grin spread across her face. “Heh… This is going to be fun. Finally, my era has begun.”

In the skill tree, *Evil Eye* led to further abilities like *Enhanced Evil Eye* and *Spell Fusion*.

The former was straightforward enough: it extended her mana-vision range and allowed her to adjust the transparency of specific targets.

“So, if I want, I can make my own hands or wings partially transparent…” Leah pondered aloud. “That could be handy if they’re in the way, and it would make my ‘eyes-closed vision’ a bit less murky.”

The *Spell Fusion* skill, however, was on a whole different level—and much pricier. It allowed her to bind spell activation to her *Evil Eye*, meaning she could cast spells just by glaring at her target.

“Basically, no more vocal incantations, huh?” Leah muttered with a gleam in her eye. “All I have to do is lock on with my *Evil Eye*, focus, and *bam*, instant spellcasting.”

However, it did come with a catch. “It still needs a clear line of sight to work,” she sighed. “So, no casting with my eyes closed. Seriously, I’m not shooting lasers here—why does line of sight even matter?”

She’d even tried a test run with a healing spell while her eyes were closed, but it had stubbornly refused to activate.

“Still, compared to chanting or waving my arms around, just opening my eyes is way easier.”

Leah chuckled to herself. “Opening my eyes just to cast a spell… Sounds kinda cool, actually.”

With that, she’d effectively handled her vision limitations. Next up on her list was dealing with sunlight.

“Right, sunlight…” Leah tapped her chin thoughtfully. “If I was fine in the shade earlier, then keeping *Veil of Darkness* up constantly might just do the trick.”

One of the basic *Dark Magic* spells she unlocked after becoming a Queen of Destruction, *Veil of Darkness*, dimmed the surrounding light. While it didn’t plunge everything into pitch-blackness, it created a shadowy atmosphere that was easier on her sensitive skin.

“Yeah, something like that should be enough to block sunlight.” She nodded. “And it’s not like *Evil Eye*, which permanently eats into

my MP. This just drains a little bit as long as it's active... But if I overuse it, I'll need to watch my reserves."

Leah let out a satisfied sigh. "All right, that just about neutralizes all my weaknesses. Now, let's see what other Queen of Destruction perks I can grab..."

One of the benefits of her transformation was the addition of wings. Unlocking the *Flight* skill had made aerial movement possible, but she noticed there were a few other skills that had recently become available.

"Oho! *Wing Strike*, huh? Sounds like I can launch a flurry of feathers or something. Very stylish," she murmured, her eyes sparkling.

Yet when she unlocked it and read the description, her excitement turned to a deadpan stare. "Oh. So it's just...hitting things with my wings. That's...not exactly what I had in mind. Aren't wings supposed to be delicate?" She shrugged. "Well, whatever."

In reality, birds like swans were known to break bones with their wings, so it wasn't entirely unrealistic. And with Leah's wingspan exceeding three meters, it gave her a pretty impressive reach.

"Huh, this isn't just a one-off skill—it's part of a whole skill tree. And the next one is...*Feather Bullet*! Oh, *now* we're talking!"

The skill had unlocked from the *Wing Strike* branch, though it likely needed some other prerequisites, possibly related to *Throwing*.

She had picked that skill purely for playing fetch with the wolf pups and hadn't really put it to serious use.

"Nnngh... Wh-What's this weird feeling...?" Leah grimaced as a familiar tingling sensation spread across her back.

"Ah. Yep. I knew it. More wings."

Now, four pure white wings sprouted from her back.

"So, if I unlock *Feather Gatling* next, will I get even more wings?" She hadn't intended to go further just yet, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she went ahead and unlocked it.

"Huh... No change? What gives?" she grumbled, disappointed.

At this point, she figured she might as well keep going. The next skill in line was *Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum.*

Its effect was impressive: by releasing feathers into the air, she

could gain complete sensory awareness of everything within the area and boost the effectiveness of her own skills within that range.

"Now that's useful... But, uh, the name is a bit...unfortunate," she muttered with a blush. "*Maiden's Sanctum*? Really? Whatever, I'm taking it."

This time, the tingling sensation accompanied yet another pair of wings sprouting forth.

"So let's see... Close-range combat wings, long-range attack wings, and magic-support wings. This is getting ridiculous," she muttered with a wry grin.

After a few experimental flaps and some shadow boxing, Leah confirmed that all her wings could strike just as effectively. Satisfied, she turned her gaze to the horizon.

"All right, time for round two."

With a single powerful beat of her wings, she launched into the air. To her surprise, her speed had more than tripled. At this rate, she'd reach the capital in no time.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Leah's friend chat started lighting up with a flurry of messages.

Diaz's voice came first. <Your Majesty!>

Sugaru's followed shortly after. <Boss!>

<Ah, good to hear your voices again,> Leah responded, her lips curling into a grin. <I'm almost at the capital. You all doing okay?>

<That should be our line! Never mind that, Your Majesty, where are you at the moment?!> Diaz's voice came with more urgency and more determination than usual.

<I'm about to reach the capital,> Leah noted rather casually.

<You just died an hour ago, and now you're rushing right back in?! Respectfully, what in the hells is going on?!> Diaz asked urgently.

<That's exactly why, you see,> Leah replied, a hint of mischief in her tone. <The ones who took me down might have left already, but I made up my mind—I'm going to seize the capital this time.>

<If that's your decision, we have no choice but to follow. Just let us know when you're ready, Your Majesty. The adamantite army is at your command.>

<I'll call for them soon enough—and make sure Sieg's ready

too. I'll need him to manage the city once we've taken it.>

<What preparations do you need to make, exactly...?>

<Nothing major.> Leah waved off the concern. <But hey, how's Kelli holding up?>

<I'm here, Boss,> came Kelli's reluctant reply.

<Come on, don't be like that,> Leah coaxed. <I know you're still mad, but it really couldn't be helped. Where are you now?>

<We're near the town of Cornatol, south of the Great Woods of Lieb...>

<Great. Hold position there for a bit. Keep an eye on how the humans are defending against the monsters. You can even lend a hand if you're feeling generous, but *only* on the humans' side.>

<Understood, but...>

<Don't worry. Once I've taken the capital, I'll come see you in person. And about Sugaru and the World Tree...>

Leah gave out rapid instructions for regrouping in the towns and forests under her control, wrapping up the conversation swiftly.

As the final messages from her subordinates faded, the skyline ahead revealed the approaching walls of the capital.

In the end, it only took Leah about thirty minutes to reach the capital after leaving Lieb behind. As she approached the city, she gradually reduced her speed and activated *Veil of Darkness*.

To slow herself down, she spread all her wings wide, using air resistance to brake. Leah couldn't see it herself, but she was certain the maneuver must have looked pretty damn cool.

"Hmm... Only three of you, huh?" she muttered to herself as she surveyed the area.

Outside the walls where she'd fought earlier, there were only a few figures scattered about. The only ones resembling mercenaries were three people—and one of them was Wayne. The tank called Gil was there too, along with a third person she didn't recognize.

All three were staring up at her with dumbfounded expressions. Next to them was a strange hunk of metal.

For a moment, Leah wondered if they were preparing for some kind of ritual, but then it clicked.

That mess was probably what's left of Mr. Plates.

Judging by the way it looked, it didn't seem like they had done anything to him—it was more like he'd just fallen apart on his own. Maybe that's just what happened when certain living-type monsters died.

Leah drifted down toward the trio.

"Th-The harbinger..." Wayne stammered, voice trembling.

"Wait, wait, wait... I thought we beat her!" Gil gasped, his voice cracking with panic.

"Is it just me, or...did she power up? She's got more wings now..." a third player muttered, swallowing hard.

"Could it be...?" Wayne murmured, eyes narrowing.

"What did you say, Wayne?" Gealgamesh asked, glancing at him with a frown.

"That event... It wasn't actually a Harbinger Extermination Event," Wayne continued, his voice low and grave. "It might've been a Harbinger Awakening Event."

"So you're saying the Hilith's screwed no matter what?" asked the other player, his eyes wide with horror.

"Maybe... She wasn't the event boss; this whole event was just her introduction as a new boss," Wayne finished, voice barely a whisper.

Leah couldn't help but smirk. Just as she had suspected during their previous encounter, these players clearly mistook her for some sort of NPC event boss.

Fine by me. If that's how they want to see it, I'm more than happy to play the part. Besides, pretending to be an NPC in front of Wayne? Feels less like a cruel coincidence and more like fate...

Wayne's theories were often wildly off the mark, but every so often, he hit the nail on the head.

Awakening Event? He wasn't entirely wrong.

"Are you three the only ones left?" Leah asked, her voice ringing out. "Where are the others?"

Since these players had already heard her voice before, there was no harm in speaking. As soon as Leah addressed them, the trio's panic was palpable.


Mentai-list
Gealgamesh

“D-Damn it, what do we do?” Gil hissed, casting a wary glance toward Leah.

“This is a losing battle, but if we can gather some intel, we might still salvage something from this,” Wayne replied, his tone grim.

“Yeah, you’re right… I should’ve stocked up on soul-binding stones,” muttered the third player with a sigh.

That’s the one who used Enchantment Magic *against me earlier,* Leah realized, though she couldn’t quite remember his name.

“*Lustrous Maiden’s Sanctum,*” Leah intoned, calling forth her skill.

All six wings spread wide, releasing a flurry of white feathers that floated gently to the ground.

She hadn’t tested its range yet, but it seemed to cover about as far as her regular vision—roughly midrange. If this meant she could perceive everything within that radius, the utility was immeasurable.

The white feathers danced and swirled through the air, creating a mesmerizing scene.

If only they were black feathers, she thought with a hint of amusement. *It might’ve given off a more ominous vibe, unnerving them. But with white feathers, it just looks…well, magical.*

“No arrows this time, huh?” Leah called down, a smirk tugging at her lips.

Not that they’d make a difference. No matter where they came from, the moment they entered the *Lustrous Maiden’s Sanctum*, she’d sense them. And if she could sense them, her boosted AGI would allow her to pluck the arrows out of the air with ease.

“Are there no knights or soldiers left in this city? I can wait, if you want to call for reinforcements,” she taunted, her voice dripping with mock patience.

Honestly, she was itching to crush a force even larger than before.

“Hey, what about Lawson and the others…?” Gil asked, glancing anxiously toward the city gates.

“They should’ve all respawned by now,” Wayne replied with a slight nod. “If we can hold out, maybe they’ll get back here in time.”

“No, we won’t have to wait,” the player whose name she couldn’t remember interrupted, his gaze shifting toward the city

gates. “They’re already on their way.”

Hearing that, Leah turned her senses in that direction. Several mana signatures were indeed approaching. There were quite a few—enough to form a proper knight company. And they each carried a respectable amount of mana too.

“About forty of them? More than last time. Good,” Leah said with a grin. “Let’s begin our rematch.”

It was the perfect opportunity to test her new skill. She decided to start with *Feather Gatling*.

According to the skill’s description, the damage output scaled with DEX. Leah’s DEX wasn’t her highest stat, but it was still above average compared to most players or NPCs. If it proved effective, she could always allocate more experience points to boost it.

As soon as she called out the activation command, her wings unfurled, firing a barrage of white bullets at the approaching knights.

The attack didn’t have enough punch to pierce their armor, but it was more than capable of sending them flying with the sheer force of impact. A few unlucky ones even got hit in the gaps of their armor and dropped dead on the spot.

“Whoa! She didn’t have this move before!” Gil exclaimed, his voice a mix of surprise and dread.

“It must be a new ability from those extra wings!” the third player shouted as he shielded his face from the hail of feathers.

Leah made sure to direct the barrage away from Wayne. Killing him outright would’ve been too easy. Instead, she focused on the knights. Gil might survive, but the *Enchantment Magic* user would likely die.

She hadn’t forgotten the sting of humiliation from their previous encounter.

As payback, Leah was determined to hit them with the most merciless attacks she could muster.

Her goal wasn’t necessarily to fight better; it was to maximize the effective use of experience points. She had more than enough tricks up her sleeve now.

There was no way she would lose again.

While keeping the knights on the defensive with *Feather Gatling*, Leah cracked one eye open. The surroundings had grown noticeably darker. Perfect—there was no need to let her eyes

adjust to the environment.

Leah fully opened her eyes, focusing on the knights before her. Though her regular vision and the enhanced sight from her *Evil Eye* overlapped, making it a bit hard to see clearly, she only needed the *Evil Eye* to set her coordinates. That was good enough.

She concentrated her focus through the *Evil Eye*, and using it as a key, she activated her magic.

Suddenly, the knights were swallowed by darkness. Trapped inside, they were forcibly pushed together, like they were caught in some invisible press, shrinking smaller and smaller until they were completely crushed out of existence along with the shadows.

This was the effect of *Dark Implosion*, a spell Leah had silently cast.

She hadn't had a chance to use it before, so this was her first time trying it out. And as she realized the sheer destructive force it unleashed, she couldn't help but be relieved that she hadn't used it during the earlier suicide attack.

Though the spell's area of effect felt much narrower compared to her other AoE magic, the destructive force packed into that small space was enough to leave Leah almost speechless.

But...*wow*, this was good.

"What... What the hell...?"

"She cast that...without a word...? No, it was her eyes..."

My eyes? Leah wondered. She could check her wings herself, but her eyes were another matter. Maybe they were affected somehow too? Might need to find a mirror soon, after all.

Not taking any chances, Leah launched a few more area spells through her *Evil Eye* at the surviving knights. It might've been overkill, but given what had happened earlier, she figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

After clearing out the knights, she closed her eyes again and turned toward Wayne's group.

"You're not gonna attack? Maybe try clinging on to me like before? Oh, and don't hesitate to try that *Enchantment Magic* again, if you dare."

But even with her provocation, Wayne and his companions stayed frozen. They just stared at the spot where the knights had vanished, their faces blank with shock.

"If you're not attacking, then...how about we chat for a bit?"

Leah continued in a casual tone, “So, back during that fight… That weird field effect. Someone mentioned a debuffing field, right? What was that all about? Do you still have it? Not gonna use it this time?”

She couldn’t help but be curious. If that debuff could be mass-produced, or worse, if it was something every kingdom had in stock, she’d have to be way more careful moving forward.

Wayne, snapping out of his daze, glared at her before answering.

“You really think I’d tell you?”

Of course not, Leah thought with a wry smile. Threats were meaningless against players who could just respawn. But she could always check social media for info later. Even if it was meant to be a secret, with so many players involved, somebody was bound to spill the beans.

Asking was more of a role-playing conceit. It fit her part as the embittered “Harbinger NPC” cornered by the heroes.

“If you won’t talk, then I guess we’re done here. I’ll just finish you off and take over the capital.”

“Guh…!”

Oh? Leah noted the reaction.

It seemed they were especially averse to the idea of the capital being attacked. Understandable, since NPCs couldn’t respawn once dead.

“Why… Why are you targeting the capital?!” Wayne asked, anger tinging his voice.

“Oh, so now we’re continuing the chat, huh? You won’t answer my questions, but you expect answers in return?” Leah said with a dismissive sniff. “That’s pretty ungentlemanly, don’t you think? But…whatever.”

Still keeping her eyes closed, Leah looked up at the city walls. Her *Evil Eye* painted her vision in pink hues, showing the beautiful architecture standing tall just like it had in the daylight.

“Because it’s beautiful. When I looked down at it from above, it was so stunning I just couldn’t resist. That’s why I’ve decided to take this pretty city and turn it into a home for my undead.”

It was as much a declaration of war as it was a statement of intent. These kinds of proclamations felt much more satisfying when announced before achieving the goal.

After all, it's about delivering on your promises, right?

"Well, are we done here?" she asked with a bored tone.

She decided to wrap up the role-playing there.

"All right then, goodbye for now. And don't worry—I'll come for the rest of your friends soon enough," Leah said with a vicious little smirk. "Since it looks like you guys can just revive after getting killed, go ahead and tell them to wait for me."

Opening her eyes, Leah locked onto Wayne and his party. The cooldown on *Dark Implosion* had finished, and she cast it again.

Just like the knights before, the three were swallowed by darkness, shrinking down until they were crumpled out of existence.

For a brief moment, Leah felt a bit of satisfaction.

That little conversation had been nothing more than a stalling tactic to let her spell cooldown finish. Honestly, not suspecting that she was just buying time against an enemy capable of such devastating magic was pretty careless.

After finishing off Wayne and the other high-ranking knights, Leah ascended into the sky once more, summoning another wave of the adamantite army and Sieg himself into the center of the city.

The first thing she needed to do was clear: find and secure the respawn points like inns or other safe zones.

"The players I just fought...they should've been killed during our last battle," Leah muttered to herself. "And yet, they were already here when I returned. Which means they must've respawned somewhere inside the capital."

She frowned, contemplating her next move. "I need to bring this capital down, destroy the kingdom, and farm even more experience points. After all, players can just keep teaming up to attack me. In the end, if I get taken down, the whole front collapses."

She paused, a slight grin forming on her lips. "Cooperative play, huh... Not something I've ever tried."

At least, not in this game.

"I mean...it's not like I have—no, not like I've ever had that many friends," she muttered, her voice dropping to a whisper.

She paused, quickly shaking off the thought. "Not that I'm

jealous or anything. Definitely not."

But still... Purely from a practical standpoint, it might be useful to have at least one player ally. Someone to help spread the risk, maybe.

"Isn't there some player out there who sides with the monsters?" she wondered aloud. "The problem is, those types don't really hang out on social media much."

What she needed was a player who took genuine pleasure in ravaging human cities. And, even better, someone who could appreciate the fun of role-playing as an NPC event boss—a prankster with a wicked sense of humor.

"Yeah, right. Like someone like that's gonna just appear out of nowhere... Maybe there's one in another country. But for now, I'll finish up here."

She switched to a telepathic command. <Adamantite army and skeleton knights! Ignore the knights or soldiers trying to flee on horseback. Let them run if they want.>

"Now then... Where's the nearest inn...?" she mused, scanning the streets.

The city was teeming with skeleton knights she had unleashed. Given the capital's vast size, her adamantite army alone wouldn't be enough. Fortunately, Sieg had summoned an overwhelming number of skeleton knights, far exceeding the usual cap imposed by the *Summon* skill. He must have used some skill to increase their numbers on the spot.

"One good thing I've learned..." Leah muttered, "is that my subordinates, like the ant soldiers and skeleton knights, respawn about an hour after I die."

It wasn't exactly a cooldown period, but rather seemed tied to some other mechanism. Perhaps it was a "resurrection window"? During that time, they couldn't auto-respawn since they might be revived by other means.

In the midst of the chaos, people's true nature came to light.

A chubby merchant frantically tried to pull his companion along, urging them to flee. Meanwhile, what looked like soldiers were ruthlessly shoving through the crowd, pushing others aside in their desperation to escape.

But one thing was clear: Everyone was running away from the skeletal onslaught.

“Anyone who’s running is just another ordinary citizen,” Leah observed, hovering above. “And those who aren’t…”

…are either knights, or players who refuse to die so easily.

“There you are, Wayne… Found you,” she said with a sly smile.

From her vantage point, anyone moving against the flow of the panicking crowd stood out like a sore thumb. Wayne, accompanied by Gil, was pushing through the sea of people, trying to coordinate with the knights to fend off the adamantite army and the undead.

“So, *that’s* the direction they came from…” Leah noted, eyes narrowing. “Which means there must be an inn or respawn point back there.”

She tilted her head, puzzled. “But this looks like the nobles’ district… How could they afford to stay somewhere this fancy?”

Not knowing the exact location of the respawn point was troublesome. She couldn’t very well go around leveling every single building. After all, she wanted to preserve the beautiful architecture of this city.

“To do that, I need to kill them while controlling every potential Safe Zone in this capital,” Leah decided.

She would need more forces to accomplish that.

Both Leah and Sieg had tools for temporarily bolstering their numbers with expendable units. The spells *Necromantic Circle* and *Conscription* came to mind.

“Let the heavy hitters handle the fighting, and we’ll have the weaker undead clear out the interiors,” Leah instructed herself.

Activating *Necromantic Circle*, Leah converted the newly deceased townspeople into zombies, while directing a squad of the adamantite army to pursue Wayne and his party. The undead exposed to sunlight vanished instantly, but the capital’s towering walls cast enough shadow to cover most of the city.

“Well, I’ll just have to leave that to them for now,” Leah muttered, turning her gaze toward the heart of the capital.

“I’ve got to deal with the nobles, and I need to stop the knights from respawning. Otherwise, they’ll just keep coming.”

Surprisingly, there were far fewer knights guarding the royal palace than Leah had anticipated. Judging by the state of things, it seemed that most of the knights had headed out into the city.

<Your Majesty.>

“Huh?” Leah responded, slightly caught off guard.

Landing in front of the palace gate, she saw both Diaz and Sieg waiting for her.

Sieg’s presence made sense—she had summoned him. But Diaz? That was a different story. Only Leah, as his master, could summon him, so why was he here?

Descending to the gate, Leah called out, her confusion evident.

“What’s Diaz doing here? Don’t tell me…you *ran* all the way here?”

That couldn’t be right. It had only been about an hour since Diaz had respawned.

Unless he could fly like Leah, there was no way he could have sprinted from the Great Woods of Lieb to the capital in just an hour.

<He hitched a ride on a skeleton leader that I summoned, Your Majesty…> Sieg explained through the friend chat.

Diaz, standing proudly beside him, added, <In other words, I temporarily became part of the skeleton leader’s equipment and was transported along with it when it was summoned.>

Leah blinked, momentarily stunned. “Wait, what? That’s…allowed?”

“No way,” she muttered under her breath. “That’s definitely a bug. This is totally gonna get patched in the next update… ‘Adjusted unintended behavior due to unexpected interactions,’ or something like that.”

Her minion NPCs were generally obedient, but with their advanced AI, they could even respond flexibly to vague commands. They behaved almost like real people.

In fact, some of the more strong-willed ones, like Diaz, often twisted ambiguous orders to suit their own interpretations.

And this was clearly one of those instances.

Diaz, sounding almost self-satisfied, said, <As Your Majesty’s loyal guard, I had to use whatever means necessary to reach your side as swiftly as possible…>

Leah let out a sigh, rubbing her forehead. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I figured… Well, you’re already here, so there’s no point in arguing. We’re about to storm the palace. Let’s go—just the three of us.”

The palace gate was sealed shut, but with a single, powerful slash from Diaz, it crumbled into neat, cube-like chunks. Strictly speaking, it must've taken multiple precise cuts to break it down so cleanly, so calling it a single slash was a bit of an exaggeration.

Diaz turned to Leah, his voice filled with awe. <By the way, Your Majesty...>

"What is it now?" Leah asked, glancing at him.

<You've become even more radiant than before.> Diaz finished, still sounding enraptured.

Now that he mentioned it, this was indeed the first time they'd seen each other since she had upgraded her skills.

"Pretty cool, right? I've gotta admit, even I'm pleased with how it turned out," Leah said with a grin.

Diaz tilted his head. <But, Your Majesty, what has happened with your eyes? You've kept them closed this entire time.>

"Heh, well... I've gained the ability to sense everything around me with my eyes closed. Now I only open them when it's absolutely necessary."

Keeping her eyes closed most of the time really gave her the air of a seasoned warrior—it suited her new powers perfectly, she thought.

As they continued their light banter, the trio ventured deeper into the royal palace, cutting down any knights or maids who dared to stand in their way.

Whenever Leah activated her *Necromancy* spell on the fallen bodies, knights turned into weak undead creatures without their original souls. For convenience, she labeled these low-tier minions as *Lesser Zombies*, while the maids proved to be a different story—thanks to Leah's *Necromantic Barrier* and the combined *Miasma* effects of Diaz and Sieg, they transformed into considerably stronger undead.

"Having maids and clerks around is turning out to be pretty useful," Leah muttered with a smirk.

Leah observed that the type of undead created did not change significantly based on the original body. Both knights and maids were reborn as zombies. However, due to their inherently high intelligence, the maids and clerks retained much of their grace from life, walking behind Leah with poised steps. If not for their pallid complexions, they could almost pass for the living.

“This corridor is like a labyrinth… How many times have we had to double back?” Leah grumbled, her irritation growing.

The winding hallways forced them to retrace their steps repeatedly. With so few windows, Leah could not gauge the time outside, but judging by the complete absence of light, night had surely fallen. This worked to her advantage, as her forces thrived under the cover of darkness.

An idea struck her, and she turned to her zombie maids. “Acquire *Fire Magic*, all of you.”

The maids responded at once, casting fire spells to ignite the candelabras lining the walls. One by one, flames flared to life, illuminating the passageways with an eerie, flickering glow. Leah paused to admire the surreal beauty of it, even amid their invasion.

“This is actually quite nice,” Leah mused. “I wonder if we could set something like this up in our dungeon.”

<It is certainly possible, Your Majesty, but considering the poor ventilation in our cave, lighting fires may render it difficult to breathe.> Diaz replied through friend chat.

Leah nodded slowly. “Good point… Besides, most of us do not even need light anymore. I can navigate with my eyes closed.”

She dismissed the idea and let her mind wander to another possibility. “Perhaps we should expand upward, like an anthill, and construct something akin to a palace?”

<That is something you should discuss with Sugaru, Your Majesty,> Sieg advised. <It is beyond our expertise.>

Before Leah could respond, another message came through the chat.

<Your Majesty, if I may interject…> Diaz added.

Leah narrowed her eyes, focusing. “Yes, I sense it too.” The corridor ahead had widened considerably, leading to a set of heavy, ornate doors. Beyond those doors likely lay the audience chamber.

“I wonder,” Leah mused aloud, “do ordinary visitors have to navigate this convoluted hallway as well, or is there some hidden shortcut?”

Leah turned to her maids and gave them orders to fan out and search the surrounding rooms, ensuring that no one was hiding. She instructed them to form squads of no fewer than five

members, and to avoid engaging opponents they could not handle. If they encountered any threats beyond their capability, they were to retreat immediately.

The zombie maids fanned out with a practiced and precise efficiency. Leah watched them intently; securing the palace was essential before they could proceed to their next objective.

Leah deployed her feathers in a defensive pattern around herself and grinned. "*Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum* activated. Now, let's see what's behind this door!"

"Now! Fire!" someone shouted.

The moment the doors swung open, a barrage of offensive spells came flying toward them.

Some of them appeared to be *Holy Magic*, likely because the attackers mistook them for undead creatures. Well, two of them technically were, but Leah was not.

With her *Evil Eye*, Leah precisely identified the *Holy Magic* spells and nullified them with her own. *Holy Magic* was an exception—it wasn't affected by *Miasma*, and dealt 1.5 times the normal damage against undead. Diaz and Sieg could likely endure it, but there was no point in letting the attacks hit if they didn't have to. To be safe, Leah used a stronger counterspell, which incidentally swept away the rest of the incoming magic with its shock wave.

Meanwhile, other types of spells were significantly weakened by the *Miasma* emitted by Diaz and Sieg, so whatever damage got through was negligible.

Leah diligently patched up any damage they sustained using *Heal*. The spell could only target a single person, had a short range, and provided modest healing. However, its low MP consumption and extremely short cooldown made it efficient.

Recovery Magic, by contrast, restored more HP and had a wider range but consumed more MP and had a longer cooldown. It also conflicted with other spell cooldowns, making it rather cumbersome in tight situations.

Leah bided her time until the enemy's magical assault began to ease.

Some knights attempted to sneak closer along the walls during the chaos, but within the range of Leah's *Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum*, there was no hiding from her. Each time one appeared,

she blasted them away with *Feather Gatling*.

“Huh, no wonder some of my attacks were hitting harder than usual,” Leah mused to herself. “Turns out it’s thanks to the *Lustrous Maiden’s Sanctum*.”

Within the barrier’s range, her attacks received a bonus in power.

Once the enemy’s magic barrage ceased, the knights switched tactics, charging forward with their shields raised.

“Ah, so they plan to stagger us with magic and then finish the job with a charge, huh?” Leah remarked. “Not a bad strategy.”

However, the death knights weren’t about to allow it. They cut down or kicked away any knight who dared to charge, ensuring no one reached Leah.

Some mages continued to fire spells whenever their cooldowns reset, which prolonged the skirmish slightly. But once the knights were slain, their charge ended swiftly. The fight was over in no time.

“Well now,” Leah called out, surveying the aftermath, “have you had enough?”

Magical attacks had completely stopped—likely because the enemies had run out of MP—and all the knights, except for a few mages and noble guards, lay dead. Leah decided it was time to speak.

“You… You’re the *harbinger* who attacked the capital, aren’t you?”

The one who spoke was a rotund, middle-aged man. However, the determination in his eyes made it clear he was no mere overweight noble.

“When asking someone’s name, shouldn’t you start by introducing yourself first?” Leah shot back. “A little courtesy goes a long way, don’t you think?”

“You have the gall to speak of manners?” the man retorted, his voice booming. “If you’re going to barge into someone’s home, the least you could do is make an appointment first!”

Leah chuckled. “Touché. Yes, it is as you say—I’m probably what you call a *harbinger*. But that’s not a name I came up with myself.”

“‘Harbinger’ is merely a label we’ve assigned you,” the man insisted. “You are the monster born in the Great Woods of Lieb about ten days ago, aren’t you?”

“Chancellor!” a nearby noble shouted, panic creeping into his voice. “Now is not the time for idle chatter—!”

“If this creature isn’t the harbinger, then it means there’s another harbinger lurking somewhere!” the chancellor barked back. “Now, shut up and let me handle this!”

So, this dignified gentleman is the chancellor, Leah noted. Thanks to the outbursts of the other nobles, she could easily discern his position and the reason behind his questions.

“Out of respect for our gracious noble friend, I’ll answer,” Leah said with a teasing tone. “Ten days ago, you say? Yes, that sounds about right. I suppose you could say that’s when the ‘monster’ before you came into existence.”

Of course, technically, that was when she had reincarnated as the Demon Lord.

“But weren’t you slain by mercenaries not long ago?” the chancellor pressed.

That was…not exactly a fond memory.

Leah’s faint smile remained, but her posture shifted ever so slightly. The discomfort was subtle, manifesting mainly in her wings, which were still difficult to control as a new part of her reincarnated body.

“Yes…that’s true,” Leah admitted.

The chancellor blanched. “Then how did you come back to life?”

Leah gave him a sly grin. “As if I’d tell you that.”

The chancellor appeared ready to push further, but the nobles erupted into panicked murmurs once more.

“Your Excellency! Could this creature be the servant of something even more powerful?” one of the nobles asked.

Another of those in the room speculated, “Perhaps it’s an agent of the Archangel…?”

“But it’s far more terrifying than anything described in the records!” a third said with a nervous shake of their head.

The information kept pouring out without Leah having to do anything. Perhaps it would be wiser for her to stay quiet during negotiations. After all, during her previous conversation with Wayne, the more she spoke, the more she had revealed.

Reflecting on that encounter, Leah couldn’t help but wonder if Wayne had seen her as just another blundering noble like these men. A fresh wave of irritation welled up inside her, different from

her earlier frustrations.

Still, words like “angel” and “archangel” had piqued her curiosity.

She hadn’t dwelled on the social media threads for her own mental health. The quick glance she had taken at the threads earlier read, “Congratulations on defeating the harbinger!”

Even though it had only been ten days since Leah—or rather, the Queen of Destruction—had appeared, both NPCs and players had already universally adopted the term *harbinger*. Clearly, she wasn’t the first. There were others like her.

One of them was likely this so-called “Archangel.”

“Well, since you’ve been so generous with your information,” Leah said with a mischievous smile, “I might as well indulge you a little. Yes, you’re absolutely correct. I’m the Archangel. Go on, worship me.”

“Lies,” the chancellor shot back immediately. “You’re far too crafty for that.”

Her bluff was instantly called out. She should have known better than to try.

“Oh?” Leah asked, feigning curiosity. “And why do you think that?”

The chancellor didn’t answer her directly. Instead, he pulled out a short staff that gleamed with iridescent colors from within his robes and aimed it at Leah.

“This is my answer! Activating *Fey King’s Vein*!”

The moment itself passed with little fanfare. In the past, Leah might not have even noticed it.

But now, with her *Evil Eye* active and the *Lustrous Maiden’s Sanctum* firmly locking onto the chancellor, Leah could see exactly what was happening.

“This is the same debuff field as before?” Leah muttered, furrowing her brow. “No, it’s not a field this time. I’m the only target. A single-target debuff item, huh? Sounds like a real pain to use.”

Yet, the effect was undeniably real. For some reason, even with both her *Evil Eye* and *Lustrous Maiden’s Sanctum* active, there was a stretch between the chancellor’s short staff and herself that Leah simply couldn’t perceive. It was as if an invisible, undetectable zone had formed. This wasn’t just a simple debuff; it was more like

her powers were being completely nullified.

Letting this go unchecked would be dangerous. Leah considered using *Charm* to seize the staff, but just as the thought crossed her mind, the situation changed dramatically.

<The Fey King...?!> Diaz's voice resonated in her mind, tinged with disbelief.

<Did you truly say Fey King?!> Sieg's deep voice rumbled with a mixture of shock and rising fury.

Their words were only audible to Leah. Confused, she watched as the chancellor desperately pointed his staff at her, his hands trembling.

"With the power of this *Fey King's Vein*, I've weakened you!" the chancellor declared, his voice almost triumphant. "This proves that you are no angel! This item is an ancient relic, bestowed upon humanity by the Fey King himself! It carries a curse that strips away the strength of evil beings like you!" His voice grew louder, carried away by his own fervor. "I even used this very relic to slay you before, under the protection of the Fey King—"

Leah exhaled quietly. The chancellor, emboldened by his apparent success, had turned into a long-winded expositor. She couldn't judge him too harshly; she knew that rush of excitement all too well.

When victory seems certain, humans often make careless mistakes—or worse, do things they really shouldn't.

The chancellor's current rant was exactly one of those mistakes.

<This is an unforgivable insult!> Diaz's voice boomed, his rage now fully unleashed. <Such blasphemy cannot stand!>

<You wretched fool, prepare yourself!> Sieg growled, his voice thick with menace as miasma poured off him like a dark fog.

"Hey, uh, are you two okay?" Leah asked, concern slipping into her tone as she glanced at the pair who were seething with righteous fury.

And then, suddenly, it happened.

<<Your Retainers have met the conditions for Rebirth. By paying 1,000 experience points, you can allow them to undergo Rebirth. Would you like to proceed?>>

The system message appeared calmly in front of Leah's eyes, causing her to blink in surprise.

<<Your Retainers have met the conditions for Rebirth. By paying 1,000 experience points, you can allow them to undergo Rebirth. Would you like to proceed?>>

"Wait…*what*? That's pretty steep," Leah muttered, her eyes widening slightly.

It was a hefty price, but it wasn't as if she couldn't afford it. Leah was cautious by nature and always kept a buffer of experience points for emergencies.

But that wasn't the real issue here.

"'Retainers'… That must refer to those two," Leah murmured, glancing at Diaz and Sieg, who were still brimming with anger beside her.

These two had been unable to achieve *Rebirth*, even after being injected with philosopher's stones. If that restriction was finally lifted, then this was her chance to help them.

A flicker of anxiety crossed her mind at the thought of depleting her emergency reserve of experience points. "I guess that puts me back to square one," she sighed, running a hand through her hair. But with a full week of in-game time left before the event ended, she could earn it back. Sure, it might delay Sugaru's *Rebirth*, but she could apologize to her later.

"All right, let's do it," Leah decided, her expression firm as she authorized the *Rebirth*.

<<Commencing Rebirth.>>
<<Commencing Rebirth.>>

As the system message appeared, Diaz's and Sieg's forms began to radiate motes of light. Before long, both were fully enveloped in a glow so bright their silhouettes vanished entirely.

That was, at least, what was likely happening. Leah, who was observing through her *Evil Eye* with her eyes closed, saw only a

flood of pink light, making it nearly impossible to discern what was actually occurring. However, there was one thing that only Leah seemed to notice: the two of them were ravenously absorbing mana from their surroundings.

I see, so the energy for Rebirth *is drawn from the ambient mana,* Leah mused.

In an instant, the process concluded, and the change was complete.

Leah opened her eyes and observed her newly reborn retainers.

<<The Death Lord, “Diaz the Wretched,” has been reborn as the Undead King, “Diaz the Wrathful.”>>
<<The Death Lord, “Sieg,” has been reborn as the Undead King, “Sieg the Mournful.”>>

The two now stood before her, transformed into figures worthy of being called kings.

No longer were they skeletal figures with skin barely stretched over bone. Now, they had regained impressive physiques, likely resembling their forms in life. Though their complexions remained deathly pale, the transformation was undeniable.

Diaz now sported a dignified mustache, with his white hair slicked back in a refined manner. However, the fierce flames of wrath burning in his eyes completely undermined his otherwise composed appearance.

Sieg, on the other hand, had long black hair tied back in a ponytail and a chiseled face that gave him the air of a young lion. Yet, the sorrowful gleam in his eyes hinted at a painful past.

Leah blinked, then couldn’t help but chuckle. “Wow, you two have really leveled up in the looks department, huh?” she teased with a grin.

<<A Designated Disaster-Class Entity, “Undead King,” has been born.>>
<<Message broadcast canceled. The “Undead King” is already under the control of an existing faction.>>
<<A Designated Disaster-Class Entity, “Undead King,”

has been born.>>
<<Message broadcast canceled. The “Undead King” is already under the control of an existing faction.>>


Sieg the Mournful
Diaz the Wrathful

Leah tilted her head as realization dawned on her. “Ah, so it’s the same pattern that happened with me,” she murmured to herself. “I see…”

It seemed that if a creature was already under the control of an existing faction, those ominous system-wide announcements wouldn’t be broadcast. This meant that the messages were only triggered when a new faction arose that could threaten humanity.

“Oh, so *that’s* what they mean by a harbinger,” Leah said thoughtfully.

This revelation carried significant implications.

She would need to confirm later how many harbingers humanity was currently aware of. But if new Harbinger-class entities were being born under the influence of existing harbingers, then it was likely humanity remained unaware of such developments.

“This world is proving to be far more dangerous than I’d anticipated,” Leah muttered under her breath.

With a sigh, she straightened up. “Looks like I can’t afford to let my guard down… Though considering game balance, I doubt there are too many of them on this continent. But with players around, who knows how long that will remain true?”

<Your Majesty, we beg your pardon, but please leave this to us,> Diaz said, bowing his head slightly.

<Yes, allow us to handle this matter,> Sieg added, his tone calm but resolute.

It seemed the two had finally calmed down.

But Leah couldn’t quite understand what exactly they wanted to take care of. Was there something to do, besides simply killing their enemies?

“Um, sure, go ahead… But what are you planning to do?” Leah asked, raising an eyebrow.

<There are a few questions I wish to ask of these…vermin,> Diaz responded, his voice low and ominous.

“Huh? But they can’t speak, can they?” Leah replied, tilting her head. She didn’t mind acting as an interpreter, but she was curious to hear what questions Diaz had in mind.

“Ah, ahem! Ahhh… There. Now they should be able to hear us,” Sieg suddenly spoke up, his deep voice echoing through the room.

For a moment, Leah thought it might have been friend chat, but it was clearly his *actual* voice. It seemed that, thanks to the *Rebirth*, Sieg had regained the ability to speak.

“Ohh! Hmm… I see, I can speak once more,” Diaz said with a pleased expression. “This will make things much quicker.”

Confirming his regained voice, Diaz strode forward with heavy steps. Without hesitation, he grabbed the chancellor by the collar with one hand and twisted his arm with the other, snapping it with a sickening crunch.

The so-called *Fey King’s Vein* fell to the ground with a clatter, the impact causing it to shatter.

“Gah—!” Leah couldn’t suppress a groan of discomfort.

She recognized this sensation all too well. It was something she would never forget.

It seemed that the powerful debuff effect had been tied to the item itself, and was deactivated upon its destruction. However, unlike before, it wasn’t severe enough to bring her to her knees.

“Right… So, it’s crucial to destroy items like that before they can activate…or rather, prevent them from being used in the first place,” Leah muttered, still catching her breath.

“Your Majesty!” Diaz roared, his grip tightening as if ready to crush the chancellor. “You vile scoundrel!”

Leah hesitated. It didn’t seem fair to blame the chancellor for this situation, but it didn’t feel right to scold Diaz either.

“Ah…it’s gone,” Leah noted as the oppressive feeling faded. She let out a sigh of relief. “So, there’s a time limit on the effect, huh? Good to confirm that. If they’re using items like this so freely, it must mean they can be mass-produced,” she speculated. “Diaz, could you ask the chancellor if he has any more of these?”

If these items were designed to be disposable, it would make sense to carry spares.

Leah noticed that the reduction in her maximum LP hadn’t recovered. The *Healing* spell she had used was insufficient, so she switched to *Restoration Magic* for more thorough healing.

“Speak, now!” Diaz commanded, roughly searching the chancellor’s robes for any hidden items.

The sight of the dashing, silver-haired Diaz rifling through the garments of a pudgy old noble was…quite the scene.

“Hmm… I’m not sure if there’s still much demand for this… It’s

not really my area of expertise," Leah muttered to herself, shrugging.

"You truly carry nothing else?" Diaz pressed, his tone sharp.

It appeared that the chancellor did not have any more of those items. His face was ashen, drenched in cold sweat, likely due to the pain from his mangled arm.

"Maybe it's not something that can be mass-produced after all... Well, if he doesn't have more, there's no helping it," Leah said, waving her hand dismissively. "But Diaz, I think the chancellor is too exhausted to talk any more. Why not let him go and question the ones cowering over there? They might be more willing to talk."

"Then, allow me to handle that," Sieg offered, turning toward the nobles who were now trembling on the ground.

However, Diaz refused to release his grip on the chancellor.

Leah sighed. "Fine, fine... *Healing*."

Stepping closer, Leah cast *Healing* on the chancellor to stabilize him.

The *Restoration Magic* used by that healer player she had encountered could regenerate severed limbs entirely, but this spell only managed to stop the bleeding. It wouldn't regrow the arm that Diaz had torn off.

It seemed that *Healing* was more of a skill than actual magic—something more akin to *Tanning* or other such crafts.

"Gah! Wh-Why would you...heal me...?" the chancellor groaned, his voice weak with pain.

Leah shrugged casually. "Because you seem like the one most likely to talk. My retainers, Diaz and Sieg, have some questions for you," she replied, a slight smile playing at her lips.

As she spoke, Leah refocused on her *Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum*. By now, the mages she had left unattended should have recovered enough MP to at least cast a single spell.

"Go ahead, Diaz. Ask what you wish," Leah instructed, giving him a nod.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I am sorry to trouble you," Diaz said with a polite bow before turning to the chancellor. "Now then, you mentioned something about the 'Fey King' earlier, did you not?"

"Ggh... To the likes of you, with your accursed, unholy existence, that name must be truly detestable..." the chancellor spat, his voice trembling.

“Silence!” Diaz barked, his voice resonating with authority.

These guys are terrible at conversation… Leah thought with a sigh.

“All right, enough of this,” she said. “*Charm*.”

Growing tired of the constant bickering, Leah decided to put the chancellor under a *Charm* spell to speed things up. She had never tried charming a sentient human before, so she wasn’t entirely sure if he’d be coherent enough to speak while under its influence. But anything had to be better than the insults he kept throwing around.

“Now, go ahead and ask your questions. Chancellor, answer Diaz’s questions,” Leah commanded firmly.

“My apologies for the continued interruptions,” Diaz said, inclining his head briefly. “Tell me, what is the meaning of this talk about the Fey King? And what exactly is that item?”

“That… That relic…was left behind by the Fey King, who once ruled these lands,” the chancellor stammered, his eyes glazed over. “Its effect…”

“I don’t care about the effect! Explain what you mean by it being a relic left by the Fey King!” Diaz demanded, his tone growing harsher.

Leah leaned in slightly, intrigued. The mention of artifacts and “relics left behind” piqued her curiosity, especially if they were as significant as the chancellor claimed.

“The Fey King…upon his passing…left rare relics, known as secret artifacts, for his descendants. Their purpose was…to protect against harbingers and other threats,” the chancellor explained haltingly.

So, these relics are essentially counters against threats that the nation’s military can’t handle… Leah mused. She couldn’t tell if the Fey King was just flavor text added by the game developers to ensure nations wouldn’t fall too easily, or if there really was some historical figure behind it.

When Leah had chosen her *Rebirth* path, it came down to two options: Demon Lord or Fey King. However, even if she had chosen the Fey King route, she doubted she would have known how to create items like these. Perhaps it was an ability unlocked only after actually becoming the Fey King.

“Allow me to disabuse you of your delusions,” Diaz suddenly

interjected, his voice dropping to a quiet intensity.

Leah blinked in surprise. Diaz's eyes were glowing a fierce red, just as they had right after his *Rebirth*. It seemed something in the conversation had triggered his wrath.

"To begin with, the Fey King had no heirs. As far as I know, they were all slaughtered...in a betrayal," Diaz said, his voice heavy with bitterness.

Leah listened carefully. Diaz had once been the leader of the knights of the only unified nation on the continent. She had heard that the royal family he served had been assassinated. It was likely that this royal line had some connection to the Fey King, or perhaps even included the Fey King himself.

"Perhaps some of the royal family managed to survive, but given how much time has passed, their bloodline has likely died out by now. The nations that rose to power afterward were those founded by the rebels. This so-called Kingdom of Hilith is one such nation," Diaz declared, his voice filled with disdain.

The chancellor's expression remained unchanged. Of course, that was to be expected—he was still under *Charm*—but Leah couldn't help but wonder what kind of face he would have made if he were able to process what he was hearing.

"And you honestly expect us to believe that the Fey King would leave behind blessings for the likes of you?! Don't make me laugh!" Diaz shouted, his voice thundering through the room.

Leah winced and covered her ears. She wished Diaz wouldn't explode like that without warning.

"To think you would dare to use the legacy of the revered Fey King to harm Lady Leah—no, to harm Her Majesty, the Queen of Destruction! How much blasphemy will satisfy you, wretch?!" Diaz roared, his fury boiling over.

Finally, the pieces began to fit together in Leah's mind.

It seemed that the Fey King was the ruler Diaz and Sieg had once sworn loyalty to. The unified nation they had served was led by the Fey King, but it had been shattered by betrayal. Somehow, though it was unclear exactly how, a force had managed to defeat the Fey King—someone who was, by all accounts, far more powerful than Leah herself. During that betrayal, the knights like Diaz and Sieg, along with the remaining royal family, were likely assassinated.

All that remained were the Fey King's relics, which had somehow survived.

From Diaz's perspective, it was already enraging enough that the descendants of those traitors would use the legacy of his former liege. But to use it to try to kill the one he currently served—Leah, the Queen of Destruction—was beyond unforgivable.

It was no wonder Diaz was furious.

"So, from what I gather, the message about meeting the conditions for *Rebirth* had something to do with this, huh? It's triggered by strong emotions like anger...or perhaps sorrow? Some sort of hidden parameter must have crossed a threshold," Leah mused. "At least I've figured out a lot now! All that's left is to learn how many of those items are still out there and what their exact effects are."

She was somewhat relieved to know that these items didn't seem to be mass-producible.

"The Fey King's relic... This one I possessed was the last one kept in the castle. The others were taken by His Majesty...to secure them during his planned escape to another nation," the chancellor admitted, his tone flat and monotone under the influence of *Charm*.

"Escape?" Leah repeated, momentarily caught off guard.

She hadn't anticipated that revelation.

In other words, all the nobles left behind here, as well as the knights, were simply decoys.

Now that she thought about it, this room was clearly designed to be a throne room, and yet there was no king to be seen. They had been so caught up in the initial onslaught of magical attacks that she had completely overlooked the obvious.

"Well, I suppose I couldn't have predicted this...or maybe I could have, if I hadn't been so careless today," Leah muttered, sighing to herself. "I should probably reflect on that."

"By the way, when exactly was this escape supposed to take place?" Leah asked, tilting her head.

"When I advised it," the chancellor replied, his voice still robotic. "The moment the first harbinger appeared in the capital. I sought permission to use the kingdom's most treasured artifact—the Fey King's Heart. Once permission was granted, they were to gather essential items and flee immediately."

Judging by the effect of the Fey King's Vein, which was only a single-target debuff, that so-called Fey King's Heart must have been the same item those players used, Leah surmised.

The fact that the king would lend a national treasure to players was surprising, but if he had intended to use the entire capital as a decoy, then it made sense, in a twisted way.

However, if they had already fled at that point, there was no way to track them down now—not without even knowing which direction they'd gone.

"So, do you happen to know which country they sought asylum in?" Leah asked.

"It was left to the king's discretion. The remaining nobles might reveal it under torture," the chancellor answered haltingly.

"And you didn't send word of my defeat?" Leah inquired, her curiosity piqued.

"The king did not disclose where he was fleeing to. Once the situation had stabilized, the plan was to send messengers to all allied nations," the chancellor explained.

Leah couldn't help but be impressed. This chancellor truly was an exceptionally capable man.

Were there others like him in neighboring countries? If so, Leah realized she would have to be more strategic with her future conquests. This was a kind of strength that didn't show up in skills or stats—something far more terrifying.

"All right, then. One last question: What exactly are the effects of that 'Vessel' item, and the so-called 'Heart'?" Leah asked, pressing for details.

Though he stuttered, the chancellor meticulously described the items' effects. As Leah had suspected, they were terrifyingly powerful.

And as a cruel twist of fate, they also carried a hidden effect that targeted the Queen of Destruction—Leah's chosen class. The chancellor seemed blissfully unaware of that particular detail.

"You fool," Diaz growled, his voice shaking with rage. "A curse meant to weaken its target... It was a curse meant for *you*, for your kind. And yet, you dared to wield it against Her Majesty...!"

Leah sighed internally as she noticed Diaz's anger reaching a boiling point again. It seemed his temper had become much shorter since his *Rebirth*, at least when it came to matters related

to the Fey King. It was manageable for now, but it could become a hassle if it persisted in other situations.

“Have you finished, Your Majesty? Apologies, but I’ve already disposed of them,” Sieg reported as he approached.

Behind him lay the corpses of the nobles he’d been questioning. Leah wasn’t surprised; she had sensed their life forces flickering out one by one during the conversation. “Diaz.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Diaz responded immediately.

With a simple command, Diaz ended the chancellor’s life, snapping his neck with ruthless efficiency.

An exceptionally formidable foe, indeed.

“Well, I suppose that concludes our mission,” Leah said with a hint of disappointment in her tone. “It’s not quite the satisfying victory I’d hoped for, but…I’ll have to chalk this up as a lesson learned for next time.”

After securing the rest of the palace, Leah left the cleanup to Sieg and the zombies. Since the zombies were the former inhabitants of this place, managing it would be second nature to them.

Diaz was tasked with increasing the number of undead throughout the capital. If the number of resisting citizens was dwindling, it meant there were more potential recruits to be turned.

With the castle fully under her control, Leah’s next task was to finish securing the city.

Reports from the Adamants confirmed that they had already seized most of the noble residences, as well as any inns and lodgings that could harbor enemies.

Leah, however, wasn’t confident in navigating the labyrinthine halls of the castle, so she opted to fly out from a balcony attached to a side chamber instead.

As she glanced back, she saw Diaz leaping off the balcony as well and couldn’t help but sigh. She’d have preferred he avoid creating more holes in the garden, but it was what it was.

From the air, Leah looked down upon the capital, which had fallen into an eerie silence. It seemed that most of the fighting was already over. The adamantite army’s reports of the city’s subjugation appeared to be accurate.

This meant that any remaining combat was concentrated in just a few areas where her enemies were still resisting. Wayne and his group were likely among them.

Whether by luck or misfortune, Wayne, Gil, and their companion specializing in *Mental Magic* had managed to stick together. Accompanying them were two knights.

“Strange… I thought we’d already taken care of most of the nobles, so why are there still knights standing?” Leah wondered aloud.

“Wayne, look over there!” Gil shouted.

“Damn it, it’s the harbinger!” Wayne cursed, his eyes widening.

It seemed they had noticed Leah’s presence. Despite the sun having fully set and darkness cloaking the city, they had still managed to spot her.

“You’re not even bothering with stealth skills… Feeling that confident? With that pale skin, you practically glow in the dark,” Wayne taunted.

He’s not wrong… I probably stand out like a sore thumb, even with just a sliver of light, Leah mused.

“Glad you’re still in such high spirits,” Leah replied, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “You’ve already revived, huh? That was fast. Anyway, most of the capital’s residents have been turned into undead. Are those two knights with you allies of yours?” she asked, gesturing toward them.

“Damn it! So that’s why Lawson and the others suddenly dropped dead?!” Wayne spat, anger flaring.

“Whoever that is, I don’t know them,” Leah said with a shrug. “I’ve already dealt with most of the nobles here. Seeing those knights still around means I must have missed a few. I’ve got my forces sweeping the city to make sure.”

The knights said nothing, their eyes locked on Leah as she hovered in the air.

“And you’re not reacting at all,” Leah observed. “So your master isn’t here, huh? What’s the story? Were you sent from another city? Why would knights come here alone, without their master?”

The knights kept their silence, but Leah noticed a slight twitch.

This feels familiar, Leah thought, recalling a similar situation during the fall of Rokillean. The knights there had survived,

despite the city's destruction. It seemed likely their master had been elsewhere. It felt like it had happened ages ago, but it was only earlier today.

"Rokillean..." she murmured.

The knights visibly stiffened, exchanging uneasy glances.

"Well, well..." Leah smirked.

It seemed their reaction was purely by chance, but now Leah was certain their master was somehow connected to Rokillean.

"So, is your master still hiding in Rokillean, among the ruins?" she pressed.

This time, they didn't react much. It seemed they were aware of the city's fall.

Leah had assumed that if their master survived, they'd flee to the capital. But with most nobles dealt with, that theory no longer fit. If he was still in Rokillean, what did that mean?

"Hiding in the rubble, pretending to be dead? Would a noble really go that far?" Leah wondered aloud.

Sounds absurd, but considering how crafty that chancellor was...NPCs can't be underestimated, she thought.

Fixing her gaze on the knights, Leah studied their expressions. She wasn't the best at reading people, but if they were acting, they should consider a career in theater.

"Well, looks like I've been sloppy both here and in Rokillean. Today just isn't my day," Leah muttered with a sigh.

She then aimed a spell toward the group, targeting the area between Wayne and the knights.

"I've got some business to take care of," Leah said with a cold smile. "But as for you... Wherever you end up, we'll cross paths again. Even if you resurrect, I'll just kill you over and over. Every single time."

After dispatching Wayne and his group, Leah returned to the palace.

She descended from the sky, landing softly on the balcony, and made her way toward Sieg, who was organizing the undead forces in the throne room.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty. How did it go outside?" Sieg asked, bowing his head respectfully.

"I'd say the cleanup's mostly done," Leah replied nonchalantly.

“At this point, it’s probably just us left in the capital.”

She was confident about that because the palace was now available to set as her home base.

However, Leah had no intention of doing that. The palace was meant to serve as the final level of the Capital Dungeon, with an undead boss awaiting any would-be intruders.

An idea struck her, and she pulled out all the philosopher’s stones from her inventory.

“If you need them, use these to strengthen our forces,” she instructed. “If you’re short on experience points, let me know, and I’ll authorize it.”

“This is far too generous, Your Majesty. I am truly grateful,” Sieg said, his eyes widening in awe.

If by some slim chance Sieg and Diaz were defeated here, today’s efforts would go up in smoke. Leah knew it was unlikely, but she also knew better than anyone that the unexpected could always happen.

“Don’t hesitate to use these items. Focus on boosting our forces efficiently. For now, make sure the palace is secure enough that no one can get inside,” Leah said firmly.

“As you command,” Sieg replied, dropping to one knee with a deep bow.

“It’s kind of surreal to have a handsome guy kneeling before me like this. Feels like I’ve wandered into a different kind of game,” Leah muttered with a wry smile.

The advancements in VR technology had definitely paved the way for some...*interesting* game genres.

“By the way, I need to head out for a bit. I’m leaving the rest to you,” Leah said, turning on her heel.

“Where are you going, if I may ask?” Sieg looked up curiously.

“To Rokillean,” Leah replied. “The area the artillery ants bombarded this morning. Looks like I missed a few things, so I’m going to check it out.”

“You’re not planning to go alone, are you?” Sieg asked, concerned.

“But there’s no one here who can fly with me,” Leah said with a sigh.

“In that case, at least take Mister Plates’s armor,” Sieg suggested, his tone resolute.

Leah paused, remembering she could summon Mister Plates and the Sharps. By equipping their armor, she could fly there herself.

“Good idea. I’ll do that,” Leah agreed. “All right, I’m off. Take care.”

Sieg bowed once more as Leah turned away to summon Mister Plates and the Sharps.

“Sorry about earlier,” Leah said quietly. “We’ll make sure to deal with whoever threw that squid ink orb at you, Mister Plates. I’ve already taken care of the ones who made you afraid, but I’m sure we’ll cross paths with them again. Let’s go.”

As Leah reached the skies above Rokillean, she noticed a flicker of flames rising from the ground through Mister Plates’s perspective. It almost looked like a distant campfire.

Acting quickly, she closed her eyes and activated her *Evil Eye*. In the soft, pink-tinged vision that filled her mind, she could see faint shapes that looked like humans gathered near the source of the flames.

“A battle in the middle of these ruins? How curious,” Leah murmured to herself. “Some people really do have odd hobbies.”

As she descended closer, it initially appeared that the two sides were evenly matched.

The conflict seemed to involve four humanlike figures commanding skeletons against a high-ranking man leading knights and mercenaries.

However, the battle was gradually turning against the skeleton side.

Leah wasn’t thrilled by the prospect of the humans winning, but what truly caught her eye was how neither side seemed concerned about casualties. It struck her as odd. If these combatants were someone’s retainers, fighting under the assumption they could be resurrected, revealing her presence could be risky.

Before long, the tide of battle fully shifted. The mercenaries began to overwhelm the skeletons, making victory for the human side all but certain. To put the final nail in the coffin, the human commander drew a bow, notched an arrow, and aimed.

If that arrow struck the skeleton leader, it would be the end of

the fight. The final, decisive blow.

The skeleton commander stood frozen, fixated on the approaching arrow. Leah found herself wondering what the commander must be thinking in that moment, staring down death.

And then, without warning, Leah was hit by a wave of unpleasant memories. Old, painful scenes flashed through her mind, leaving her momentarily unsteady.

"Even if it's not really my problem, just standing by and watching someone get shot to death with an arrow isn't exactly good for my mental health," Leah muttered to herself.

As she said this, she had Mister Plates casually drop the arrow he had just caught between his armored fingers.

On a hill in the distance, Leah spotted three figures who appeared to be human.

In front of them, mercenaries who had been fighting crimson skeletons suddenly stopped to look in her direction. The skeletons, too, ceased their attacks, turning their attention toward her.

Well, it was only natural. When a giant suit of armor drops from the sky, it's bound to draw some attention.

The archer who had fired the arrow was likely the man standing in the center of the hill. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be a noble. It looked like Leah had found her target right after arriving.

Upon closer inspection, she recognized the knights flanking him—the same ones she had encountered in the capital. There was no doubt about it.

Leah decided to step out of Mister Plates's armor.

"Hey there! Long time no see, you two." Leah called out. "Glad to see you made it back home in one piece! And as for you over there—"

"Whoa! What is *that*?! A robot?! It's huge! So cool!"

Leah was momentarily taken aback. The excited outburst came from the leader of the skeleton faction—the very person who had been targeted by the arrow Mister Plates intercepted.

Based on their clothing, Leah had assumed the person was male, but the voice was distinctly that of a young woman.

While Leah was momentarily unsure of how to respond, a

woman standing beside the skeleton commander quickly interjected.

“L-Lady Azalea, shouldn’t you thank them first? After all, they did save your life,” the woman suggested.

“No, Azalea, it looks like they’re having an important conversation. We shouldn’t interrupt them—”

“Actually, we should probably step back for now—”

The conversation quickly devolved into confusion, making it even harder for Leah to get a word in.

Seriously? They were about to die just moments ago, and yet they’re this carefree? Leah thought, bewildered.

“Oh! Right, thank you for saving us! And, uh, sorry for interrupting! We’ll just step back a bit,” said the skeleton commander, who seemed to be called Azalea, with a sheepish laugh.

With that, the four of them retreated, followed by the three crimson skeletons they commanded.

The mercenaries, who had been fighting the skeletons, did not pursue. Instead, they kept their wary eyes on Leah.

“Now, where was I… Oh, right,” Leah said, turning her attention back to the knights. “So, that dusty-looking guy over there—is he your master?” she asked, pointing.

The knights tensed but remained silent. Perhaps they hadn’t heard her clearly from this distance. Either way, it would be easier to talk if she got closer.

Deciding it would be simpler, Leah flew out of Mister Plates’s armor and headed toward the hill.

“All right, now that I’m closer, let’s talk properly,” Leah said as she landed before them. “I’m not sure if you heard me earlier, so I’ll repeat myself. Nice to see you again. I’m glad you made it—”

“We heard you clearly, Harbinger!” one of the knights snapped, their voice full of contempt.

“Oh, did you now?” Leah replied with a grin. “So, just to confirm… That dusty fellow over there is your master, correct?”

Now that she was closer, Leah could see the so-called noble was covered in dirt and grime. Although her *Evil Eye* could detect shapes clearly within its range, it couldn’t perceive details like colors or dirt.

“Are you the harbinger who attacked this city?” the noble

demanded, his voice trembling.

"What's this? You refuse to answer my questions, but you expect me to answer yours? Just what kind of education does this country provide?" Leah said with a mocking smile.

Though, to be fair, Wayne was the same way—and he's not even from this country, she thought.

"Well, I suppose I can answer that just to humor you. Yes, I'm the so-called harbinger. This isn't the first time I've had to confirm it, but it's not like I ever went around calling myself that," Leah replied with a shrug.

"So it was you who destroyed this city…!" the noble shouted.

"Sure, but let's correct that a bit. Not just this city—this *country*. I've already taken the capital. Given that the knights beside you are here, I'm guessing you already knew that."

Considering that those knights had arrived in Rokillean before Leah, it seemed likely that, much like players, they couldn't respawn in areas controlled by enemy forces. That was probably why they had respawned in this city, which had served as their base before the capital fell.

It was hard to believe they could respawn here despite the city's destruction, but maybe their respawn point was underground. That might also explain how the lord survived.

Either way, it was clear that Leah's previous assault on Rokillean had been sloppy. It was time to correct that mistake.

"All right, enough chatting," Leah said, her tone sharp. "I'm looking for the lord of this place. If that's you, I don't mind talking a bit longer."

"I am the lord!" the man shouted. "Because of you, the innocent citizens of this city…!"

Leah had never encountered anyone truly "innocent," so she couldn't quite understand his outrage. But, for the sake of argument, let's assume the people here *were* innocent. Maybe they really hadn't done anything wrong.

But if that's the case…

"Well, there were plenty of soldiers stationed here, weren't there?" Leah said mockingly. "According to the chancellor in the capital, they were headed to the Great Woods of Lieb to hunt me down. They set out over ten days ago; meaning my execution was decided long before I did anything. So, let me ask—what exactly

had I done at that point?"

Of course, Leah had made up the part about the chancellor's intel, but that hardly mattered.

By the nobleman's logic, the country had sent its army to kill her simply based on the assumption she was a harbinger.

"That's because…you… You're an enemy of humanity!" he shouted, his voice cracking.

"So, it's like exterminating a hornet's nest before it can cause any trouble, right? But I'm no ordinary hornet. You're not getting rid of me that easily," Leah retorted with a smirk.

"What you're saying is completely contradictory," Leah continued. "If I truly am an enemy of humanity, then everything I've done is perfectly justified, wouldn't you agree? In fact, I'd say I'm doing a pretty good job at it. So, what's the problem?"

Leah wasn't serious; she knew how someone whose city had been destroyed would feel. However, her taunting only left the noble seething in silence, glaring at her with hatred.

"Ugh…you're really boring," Leah said with a sigh. "Enough. Goodbye."

Leah activated *Feather Gatling* and riddled the nobleman with projectiles, leaving him a lifeless husk.

As if their strings had been cut, the knights and mercenaries around him crumpled to the ground. It seemed he really was their master, though none had tried to protect him. Leah had said she would chat but had never promised not to attack.

Now, Rokillean was truly annihilated.

Her next target would have been the exiled king, but she had no idea where he fled.

More importantly, if the chancellor's intel was true, the king possessed anti-Demon Queen artifacts, and five other nations also had similar items. Searching for him under these conditions would be too dangerous.

And right now, Leah had more immediate concerns.

The group behind her was far more pressing. The girl who referred to Leah's armor as a "robot" was clearly a player, and the way the woman beside her called her "Master," combined with the crimson skeletons following her, suggested she had the *Retainer* skill.

A player other than Leah wielding such a skill was a serious

threat to her current advantage. Leah wanted to interrogate her thoroughly.

But from what she observed, the girl seemed to be at odds with the civilized races.

This was the first time Leah had encountered a player she might actually be able to speak with on friendly terms.

“Well then, my apologies for keeping you waiting,” Leah said with a polite smile.

“No, no! Not at all!” came the enthusiastic reply.

The girl who had spoken was eagerly touching Mister Plates all over. From what Leah could tell using her *Evil Eye*, the girl had quite a substantial amount of MP. While it wasn’t as high as someone specialized in *Mental Magic*, it was still impressive.

Meanwhile, the three women who were trying to restrain her had even greater MP levels.

If these three women were indeed the retainers of this tomboyish player, then it would mean she had the equivalent combat power of at least three top-tier players under her command.

“So…you’re really interested in Mister Plates, huh?” Leah asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Is his name Mist Ur-Plates? That’s what this robot is called?” the girl asked excitedly.

“Uh, no, no… That’s not it. I think you’re a bit confused,” Leah said with a sigh, realizing the misunderstanding.

She then explained to the girl that Mister Plates was actually a *Living Armor*-type monster.

“Now that you’re satisfied with that explanation, let’s move on to introductions,” Leah continued. “My name is Leah. As you can see, I’m a player using a nonhuman avatar. For this event, I’m participating on the side that’s invading human cities. And you are?”

“Oh! My apologies! I’m Blanc!” the girl replied energetically. “I started out as a skeleton player! I named myself that because, you know, my bones were all white! And believe it or not, I’ve already destroyed two cities myself!”

A skeleton, huh? Leah thought. She definitely didn’t look like one. But the girl didn’t seem like the type to lie easily—or at least, not about something so obvious.

“You definitely don’t look like a skeleton,” Leah said, tilting her head. “So, I’m guessing you went through some kind of rebirth into a different race?”

“Oh, right! Yes, about that—let me explain!” Blanc said eagerly.

Chapter 5: Blanc New Game

A young woman lay upon a cutting edge medical VR bed in a small, featureless room devoid of color. She was dressed plainly, wearing only a gown that resembled surgical scrubs.

She wasn't much of a gamer typically, but when an unexpected stretch of free time fell into her lap, she decided to take a chance on the VR gaming world. The fact that her medical VR machine doubled as a gaming setup tipped the scales in favor of giving it a try.

"Hm... Since I'm diving into a whole new world, why not go all out and be someone completely different?" she mused aloud. If she was going to live a life in another world, she wanted to make it a fresh start, as far removed from her ordinary self as possible.

With that in mind, she opted against using the full-body scan feature for her avatar and dove into character creation instead. "Let's see... Skeleton... Hmm, I wonder what that's about? It sounds kind of cute. All right, let's go with this for my race— Wait, what? It's literally bones!"

Being new to games, she'd figured that "skeleton" was probably some kind of term she just wasn't familiar with. She didn't realize it meant being reduced to a walking skeleton! But still, this was a rare opportunity. Even if it was a spur-of-the-moment choice, she wasn't going to back down now. Sure, the look was unconventional —okay, downright bizarre—but wasn't that what she wanted? A version of herself completely out of the ordinary?

"All right then, Skeleton it is!" she declared with a grin.

With her race decided, the next step was skill selection. Not that she had much of a clue about what made a good skill build.

"What kind of skills work for a skeleton...? I have no idea..." she muttered, scrolling through the options. Her eyes lit up when she saw something intriguing. "Oh, magic! I've always wanted to try using magic. Yeah, let's go with that," she decided with a small nod. "I mean, if I don't know what's good, I might as well pick what sounds fun."

After browsing the list, she selected one spell from each of the

classic elemental types. She skipped over anything ambiguous, frowning at the descriptions. “*Enchantment Magic*? No clue what that is… *Dissociation*? What’s that even supposed to mean?” Shaking her head, she moved on.

Her finger hovered over the confirmation button before she noticed something else. “Looks like I’ve still got some EXP left…” she remarked, then paused, her face brightening. “Oh, wait! Skeletons get a bonus 100 EXP for picking that race! Lucky!” she exclaimed with a grin. “All right, let’s dump the rest into stats. Magic is INT-based, right? Then I’ll throw it all into INT. No point letting it go to waste.”

With her character stats and skills set, it was time to pick a name. She leaned back, tapping her chin in thought. “Let’s see… Hmm, how about *Blanc*?” she said, her tone thoughtful. A small smile played across her lips as she added, “It’s got that ‘white and bright’ vibe. You know, like bleached bones.” And with that, Blanc selected a “cave environment” in the monster realms and logged in.

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When the tutorial ended, Blanc spawned in a dim, damp cave surrounded by rocky walls. While it seemed dim, the reality was it was completely pitch-black. The only reason she could see anything at all was due to her race’s unique trait, *Night Vision*.

“Well, I should probably find my way out of here first,” Blanc said, looking around. Unfortunately, she had no idea where the exit was, so she simply picked a direction at random and started walking.

Having never walked through a natural cave before—not even during her VR rehabilitation sessions—she found herself tripping over rocks and uneven ground as she moved.

“Finally, I’ve reached…some kind of room…” she muttered as she stumbled to her feet and looked up. Her voice trailed off as her gaze landed on something—her first encounter with a living creature in the game.

What she saw was an ant. A Shiba Inu-sized ant.

“Eep!” she squeaked, her voice trembling.

Worse, there wasn’t just *one* ant. Three of them stood facing

her, their antennae twitching erratically in her direction.

“Aaaaaaaaah!” Blanc screamed reflexively.

Her shriek seemed to provoke the ants, or perhaps they interpreted the noise as an attack. Either way, the trio rushed toward her. “Wait, wait— OW!” she yelped as one of the ants clamped its jaws onto her bony leg. The massive mandibles, proportionate to the critter’s size, made quick work of biting into her thin skeletal limb.

Losing her balance, Blanc toppled to the ground, “Oof! That hurt— Huh?” She barely had time to process her fall before noticing another ant positioning itself near her. It curled its body and turned its rear toward her—or rather, its abdomen, she realized with a sinking feeling. Bugs didn’t really have “butts,” after all.

“Wha— Wait!” Blanc sputtered. A sharp chemical smell filled the air as the ant’s venom gland at the tip of its abdomen unleashed a spray of caustic liquid. The fluid splattered across Blanc’s upper body, sending up noxious smoke as it began eating away at her skeletal frame.

And then, the system’s voice chimed in.

```
<<You may be resurrected within an hour. Would you
like to respawn immediately?>>
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“What the… Oh, I died, didn’t I?” Blanc muttered as the realization sank in. She slumped back, more exasperated than panicked. “I mean, sure, getting my legs gnawed off and acid sprayed on my head is just a bit much for a first encounter! Are the developers all sadists? That sensation was way too real!” She paused, rubbing what passed for her temples on her skeletal frame. “At least the pain wasn’t unbearable, but still, the rest of it… Talk about nightmare fuel! Is this game supposed to be this hardcore?”

Her initial panic over the ant’s aggressive attack had faded, replaced by frustration as she reflected on the fight. If she’d just done this instead—or maybe that—she might not have died.

“Well,” she sighed, “sitting here isn’t going to make the ant revive me. I guess I’ll respawn at the starting area? Wasn’t there some penalty for dying, though?”

Before confirming the respawn, Blanc opened the help menu and skimmed through the death penalty section. Her bony finger hovered over a line of text as she read aloud, “So you lose ten percent of your total experience points if you respawn through the system.”

“A ten percent cut? That’s brutal!” she exclaimed, then caught herself. “Oh, wait. There’s no penalty if your spent EXP is below a certain threshold? Let’s see… Looks like the limit’s two hundred.” She let out a relieved chuckle. “Lucky break for skeletons, but goblins? Die once and you’re worse off than when you started. Yikes!”

She shook her head, a dry laugh escaping her. “A tightrope balancing act, huh? Guess skeleton supremacy wins again. Okay, respawn it is!”

A wave of dizziness hit Blanc as she confirmed her choice. When the sensation passed, she found herself back in the cavern where she had first woken up.

“This time,” she murmured, clenching her skeletal fists, “I’m playing it safe.”

To make a long story short, Blanc continued dying and respawning. Through this repeated cycle of trial and error, she gradually learned how to use magic effectively and steadily made her way deeper into the cave.

Magic in the game had a system known as a cooldown timer, which imposed restrictions on consecutive usage. Blanc had confirmed the details of this mechanic on the game’s official social media page.

For example, if she cast *Flare Arrow* followed by *Ice Bullet*, and both spells had a cast time of five seconds, then *Flare Arrow* could only be cast again ten seconds after it was first used.

Blanc had picked up five attack spells of differing elements, allowing her to cast up to five times in quick succession. In other words, she could handle up to five enemies surrounding her if the situation called for it.

But then, after she respawned with renewed determination—only for something strange to happen.

`<<Your respawn point is located within another`

character’s player housing. Respawn failed. No alternative respawn points exist. You will be respawned randomly at an initial spawn point.>>

“Huh? Wh-What?” Blanc muttered, her mind reeling as the word “respawn” began to lose all meaning—a classic case of semantic saturation. The situation didn’t wait for her to sort through her confusion. She had already accepted the respawn and, with no other options available, her vision blurred as the respawn process began.

As Blanc’s vision cleared, she glanced around and realized she was in an unfamiliar location. It was unmistakably a cave, but it was far larger than the respawn cave she had grown more familiar with than her own reflection.

“Where am I?” she murmured to herself.

Granted, she had never really known *where* the original cave was actually located, but this was clearly a different location. The texture and color of the rocky walls were completely unlike the ones she had seen before.

“And what’s this about my respawn point being someone else’s property?” she muttered, frowning. Up until just a little while ago, respawning had been working without a hitch.

“So… What? While I was reading the official socials for a few minutes, someone came along and, I don’t know, bought the land—including the cave?” she said with a confused tilt of her head. Another thought occurred to her soon after: “Wait, can you even buy land in this game? Maybe I should get myself a place someday too, once I feel more…bone fide. But, uh, being a skeleton and all, would a house even make sense? Maybe I should aim for a grave instead…”

She shrugged off the thought. “Well, no use crying over spilled calcium. Not like I can go back anyway.”

What mattered now was figuring out her new surroundings and delving into this unfamiliar cave.

“All right, let’s stay sharp. Better get ready to fire off *Flare Arrow* at a moment’s notice. Let’s see… What’s next after the ants?”

Steeling herself, Blanc tightened her focus and began

cautiously exploring the cavern.

As Blanc pressed forward, the atmosphere of the cave shifted dramatically.

The rough, natural stone walls gave way to structured masonry, the kind of neatly stacked stone that could only be the work of intelligent hands.

“Looks like I’ve wandered into a ruin,” Blanc muttered, her gaze scanning the new surroundings. “Well, at least it’s not another ant nest. But…what kind of wildlife hangs out in ruins?”

At this point in the game, enemies weren’t limited to wildlife motifs, but the ants had left such a strong impression that Blanc unconsciously assumed all foes would be based on real-world creatures.

That assumption lasted until she saw what awaited her next.

“Something’s there…” she whispered, narrowing her eye sockets at the shadowy figure up ahead. Then she froze. “Wait—is that a corpse? Oh no, it’s moving. It’s a zombie! Gah! It’s disgusting! Why does it have to look like that? Are they seriously going for trauma points now?”

Before Blanc could muster any sort of countermeasure, her panic overtook her, and her delay sealed her fate.

<<You may be resurrected within an hour. Would you like to respawn immediately?>>

“Zombies. Sure. Why not?” Blanc sighed, shoulders slumping as her consciousness returned to the respawn cave. “Didn’t see that one coming…”

Her head—or what passed for one—drooped. “I mean, we’re both technically dead, so I guess we’re…sort of kin? No, no way. Can’t justify that. Still…” She straightened up, gripping her bony fists with determination. “Think positive! If they’re not allies, they’re fair game. From now on, I’m roasting every zombie I see! Let’s make it a daily thing!”

She set off once more, determined not to repeat her earlier mistakes.

When Blanc reached the boundary between the cave walls and the stone ruins, she spotted a zombie standing there, motionless.

Was it the same one as before? Who knew? Either way, she refused to freeze again. She raised her hand and cast *Flare Arrow* without hesitation.

The zombie ignited instantly. Flames surged and crackled around its decayed body, burning far more fiercely than she'd anticipated.

"Wow," Blanc muttered, watching the smoldering remains collapse into a heap. "Magic's a lot stronger than I expected. Or..." Her skeletal fingers tapped her jaw in thought. "Is it just *Flare Arrow* that's this good? Or maybe magic's just broken in general. Oh, wait." She smirked. "I've been dumping points into INT, haven't I? Guess that means it's me. My magic's strong because *I'm* strong."

Whether it was the sound of burning flesh or the acrid scent of charred remains, something seemed to have drawn another zombie.

Blanc glanced at the figure emerging from the shadows. "Another one already?" she muttered, checking her magic's recast time. Seeing that her spells were ready, she calmly raised her hand and cast *Flare Arrow*. The flaming projectile struck the zombie, which crumpled into a smoldering heap with a single hit.

Before she could take a moment to breathe, another zombie appeared, shambling forward from beyond the stone wall. Then another. And another. Blanc squinted.

"Are they...traveling in a group?!" she exclaimed, watching the undead steadily closing in. "This is just like that old movie! What was it called? Oh, *Thunderbolt*! Let's give that one a shot!"

Crackling electricity surged into her palm, and with a flick of her wrist, the spell struck the closest zombie. Its entire body was engulfed in a blinding flash of lightning before collapsing as a charred, smoking husk.

Blanc smirked. "Nice. *Thunderbolt* works just as well as *Flare Arrow*."

She turned her attention to the next targets. "*Ice Bullet*! *Water Shoot*! *Air Cutter*!" she shouted, unleashing a flurry of magic. Each spell hit its mark, reducing the zombies to nothing but lifeless heaps.

Her high INT stat ensured every spell was a one-hit kill, no

matter which she used. The only difference lay in the aftermath—some bodies lay burned, others were shredded or soaked.

"Wait," she muttered, pausing as she watched the results of her handiwork. "Aren't they already corpses? Does this even count as making corpses?" She shrugged. "Whatever. They're dead—again—that's what matters."

Her relief was short-lived, though, as more zombies began to shuffle into view. Her jaw tightened. "Wait, seriously? There's still more of them?!"

Having already cast five attack spells, Blanc found herself facing an inevitable recast delay. She let out a sharp breath, her mind racing.

"Okay, time to back off for now," she muttered, retreating in careful, deliberate steps. Her focus remained locked on the horde as she bought time for her spells to recharge.

But as she continued her retreat, something unexpected happened. The zombies, though clearly aware of her, stopped at the boundary where the stone wall met the natural cave. They shuffled aimlessly in place, unable—or unwilling—to advance farther.

"Huh?" Blanc blinked in confusion. "They're not coming any closer?"

She observed them for a moment longer. The undead seemed to pace back and forth near the boundary, unable to cross into her current location.

"They can't follow me here," she murmured, a slow grin spreading across her face. "Wait... Does this mean—"

It was time to make some bonus EXP.

Grinning ear to ear, Blanc settled into a steady rhythm. She cast *Flare Arrow*, paused to let her MP regenerate, then repeated the process. One by one, the zombies fell as she methodically roasted her way through the horde.

After a few hours of steadily consuming the feast of bonus EXP before her, Blanc noticed the number of zombies had dwindled. A few minutes later, the last one milling around the entrance collapsed in flames.

She cautiously stepped over the remains, peering down the corridor of the ruins. Nothing moved. Taking a deep breath, she

edged forward into the ruins. The silence was eerie.

"Did I really get all of them?" she mumbled.

Satisfied that no threats remained, Blanc left the cave behind and ventured deeper into the stone passageway.

"Come to think of it, I've been playing for a while now..." She pulled up her interface and blinked at the time displayed. "Eight hours?! Huh. Oh well. It's not like I've got anything better to do."

Fortunately, Blanc's VR module was a high-end model that doubled as a medical bed. It allowed for extended play sessions without triggering warnings or risking health issues.

Walking through ancient ruins this old—as in, so old their age was impossible to guess—was an experience Blanc couldn't have even in other VR content, let alone in real life. After the hellish struggle with zombies, the shift to serene exploration felt downright relaxing.

Eventually, her aimless wandering led her to a massive, ornately carved door. Despite its age, the engravings were strikingly intricate. "Wow, this looks like a final boss room!" Blanc said, staring in awe. "Well, I guess I can't say it *is* the final room. I've got no clue where I even am in these ruins. Wait... Am I lost?"

She reached for the door, which creaked loudly as it moved. Surprisingly, it was lighter than it looked, swinging open partway before continuing on its own.

At the far end of the room beyond, a gilded throne sat elevated on a dais. Seated in that throne was a stunningly handsome man with golden hair.

"An intruder? How long has it been since someone dared trespass here?" His deep voice echoed through the chamber as his piercing gaze locked onto Blanc. "I notice my servants are nowhere to be seen. Was that *your* doing?"

Blanc gasped, her jaw dropping. "He spoke! And he's...a *person*! I've found my first villager!"

This was the first time since the game began that she'd encountered someone capable of speech. Excitement welled up within her.

"Who are you calling a 'villager,' you skeleton wretch?" the man snapped, his voice dripping with disdain. "Answer my question! Was it you who disposed of my servants?" So, he was a snobby type. Actually, with all his "I" and "my" talk, he was probably better

described as a full-blown arrogant noble archetype.

"Servants? Who are you talking about, exactly?" Blanc asked hesitantly. "The only things I've seen in these ruins were zombies..."

"The zombies, of course!" he roared. "And these are *not* ruins. This is my *castle*! Are you mocking me?"

"I'm not! I'm sorry! I burned the zombies, okay?!" Blanc admitted under duress.

"Burned them? But you're empty-handed..." He looked at her critically, then furrowed his brow, "Surely not... Are you telling me you can use magic, you lowly skeleton?"

"Uh... My name's not Shirley, but...yeah, yeah," Blanc admitted sheepishly.

The man's expression grew even sharper. "Wait. A skeleton capable of speech, with the intellect to hold a conversation? Who — No, *what* are you?"

Blanc tilted her head. "I mean, it's just talking. No big deal, right?"

But then she realized. If all his "servants" were those brainless zombies, it wasn't surprising he'd find a talking skeleton strange. Judging by his reaction, he'd probably been starved for proper conversation.

"I don't mind chatting for a bit," Blanc said casually. "I could use a break after all the fighting."

"Hmm... Very well. That could be amusing," the man replied with a smirk. "I shall make you one of my servants."

Blanc blinked. Did he just...offer her a job? Was this supposed to be an interview? The idea was so ridiculous it took her a moment to process. Apparently, just being able to hold a conversation was enough to get hired. *Talk about low standards.*

Still, she'd only ended up here because of a random respawn. If she had any say in it, she wanted to explore the outside world, not get tied down to some stuffy ruin—or "castle," as he so insistently called it. Making this place her base might be one thing, but staying here permanently? No way. "Uh, no thanks. I'm good," Blanc said, taking a cautious step back. "Best of luck with your...organization's growth, though!"

"You don't have the luxury of refusing!" the man snarled, his golden eyes flashing dangerously. "*Charm!*"

<<Resistance failed.>>

The system message appeared in her vision with its cold, neutral finality, and in that moment, the world seemed to shift. The man, already handsome in a too-perfect kind of way, suddenly became almost blindingly dazzling. His features sharpened to an otherworldly degree, and his golden hair practically glowed. *What the heck is going on with his handsomeness…?! And it's still increasing?! Impossible! What is this overwhelming charisma?* Blanc's panic rose as the strangeness of the situation sank in. *Wait—why can't I talk? Or move? And what's with this pink haze over everything?*

She desperately opened her status window to figure out what was happening. The explanation glared back at her: she was under the *Charmed* status condition. Her body was no longer hers to control, and her voice was locked away. Later, she would learn that the man's sudden "upgrade" in attractiveness and the rosy tint suffusing her vision were purely cosmetic—no actual mechanical effect, just dramatic flair meant to rub it in.

"Well, the charm seems to have worked. Next, *Dominate*," the man said with a triumphant smirk.

<<You have failed to resist.>>

"And now, *Retainer*. Become my vassal and serve me faithfully."

<<You have failed to resist.>>

The arrogant vampire unleashed one ability after another in rapid succession, and Blanc failed to resist every single one.

<<Special conditions fulfilled. You are now eligible to reincarnate as a Vampiric Minion.>>
<<Count de Havilland is attempting to tame you. If this is acceptable, please confirm within five seconds. If no response is given, the action will be canceled.>>

Blanc's vision filled with yet another flood of system messages. It had been a while since she'd seen such an overwhelming deluge—not since the fiasco with her respawn error.

Wait! Can we slow down here? Not everyone can keep up with this breakneck pace! Specifically me!

<<Task deferred.>>

Oh... The system actually listens.

Blanc felt a wave of relief wash over her. A pause was exactly what she needed to make sense of the chaos.

She started with the repeated *You have failed to resist* messages. Clearly, *Charm*, *Dominate*, and *Retainer* were all abilities used by this "Count de Havilland." Considering his control over the zombies and his imperious demeanor on the throne, the conclusion was obvious: he was a vampire—or something very close to it. And now, thanks to failing every resistance check, she was entirely at his mercy. Her body refused to move, her voice was locked away, and she was on the brink of being "tamed" like some wild creature.

Next came the part about reincarnation. The mention of vampiric minions brought an uncomfortable realization: it referred to the zombies she had incinerated earlier in the hallway. If she accepted this so-called reincarnation, it seemed she'd transform into the same type of monster—a Vampiric Minion. That idea filled her with a sharp, visceral rejection.

Finally, there was the taming attempt itself. Blanc didn't know much about how taming worked in this game, but the implications were clear enough. If she agreed—or failed to object—she'd essentially become the Earl's pet.

"Yeah, that's a hard pass," Blanc muttered internally, even if she couldn't voice the words.

Could a player actually become an NPC's pet? It seemed unlikely. The fact that the system had deferred the process suggested that the choice ultimately lay with her. Count de Havilland had declared she had no say in the matter, but NPCs couldn't hear system messages. If he really were an NPC, it was possible she would have been tamed outright without any chance to resist.

"Hmph. I don't feel as though you resisted my power, yet my

abilities seem to have no effect on you… You truly are an intriguing skeleton," the Earl mused.

He was muttering something, but Blanc ignored him for now.

What really caught her attention was the way the system distinguished between "reincarnating as a minion" and "becoming a subordinate." The two actions had been presented as separate options. It seemed possible to accept the former while refusing the latter, like escaping from some villainous lab after being experimented on but before being brainwashed.

That's…like the story of the original masked bike rider, she thought.

Taking the same path as the legendary hero of a long-beloved Japanese live-action series was something you wouldn't expect in any ordinary life.

Blanc considered her options carefully. Fortunately, the Earl was content to wait, still muttering to himself.

After deliberating for some time, she made her decision. She would accept the reincarnation.

Of course, she outright rejected the taming.

`<<Conditions fulfilled. You may reincarnate as either a Vampiric Minion or a Revenant.>>`

Oh, in that case, I'll go with the Revenant, Blanc thought without hesitation.

Anything but a zombie. Her goal was to escape after the transformation—not to spend her afterlife shuffling mindlessly.

`<<Conditions fulfilled. By paying 100 experience points, you may reincarnate as a Lesser Vampire.>>`

Wait a minute!

`<<Task deferred.>>`

The system, as accommodating as ever, was willing to wait.

Wow, being a player is ridiculously convenient.

A Lesser Vampire—essentially a junior version of the Earl

himself. There were downsides, presumably, like being unable to move about in sunlight or being weak to garlic. Then again, Blanc realized she hadn't seen sunlight once since starting this game. For all she knew, the game world might not even have areas exposed to daylight. As for garlic...well, she'd always hated the stuff anyway. It wasn't much of a downside.

Blanc used half the experience she'd amassed from farming zombies to reincarnate as a Lesser Vampire.

"What?! Impossible—!" the Earl roared in disbelief.

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From then on, Blanc spent her nights exploring and hunting in the wilderness outside the castle, always returning before dawn. During the day, she either logged out or passed the time in the castle, often acting as the Earl's conversation partner.

There were a few days where the medical testing on her body in real life meant she couldn't log in at all. Her medical tests had kept her away from the game for so long that, by the time she got back to it, the game had officially been released. Fortunately for her, the monthly subscription fee had been automatically deducted from the cryptocurrency wallet linked to her account during setup.

Back to that moment—

Blanc had pulled off the ultimate diva move, reincarnating while refusing *Retainer* like the protagonist of a certain masked bike-riding hero's first act of rebellion. Yet, far from resenting her, the Earl seemed oddly impressed.

He held Blanc in high regard for achieving the status of Lesser Vampire through her own efforts. To show his approval, he gifted her a set of noble clothes—something straight out of a vampire's wardrobe—and a cane. Apparently, the Earl couldn't stand the idea of a member of the vampiric ruling class wearing the shabby starting gear. The clothes were secondhand, likely hand-me-downs from the Earl himself, and designed for a man. But since Blanc hadn't scanned her real-world self during character creation or made any adjustments to the default avatar, her appearance was androgynous enough to make the fit work. With her small frame, she could even pass for a young man when dressed in masculine

attire. However, the default avatar's long, flowing hair had become a nuisance, so she tied it back in twin ponytails for convenience.

The Earl even went so far as to grant Blanc full access to the castle, treating her as a personal friend.

Still, while she appreciated the hospitality, Blanc had bigger dreams. "Someday, I'd like to have a castle of my own," she had remarked offhandedly.

She hadn't meant it seriously—her comment was more about wanting a home to call her own. But the Earl took her words at face value, laughing cheerfully as he began suggesting small, poorly defended countries that would make good targets for conquest. "Once you've grown stronger, you should try attacking one of them," he said, his tone genuinely encouraging.

"But that country... If I'm recalling correctly— Oh, wait, I think I read it somewhere; it's not rich or poor, but pretty stable overall, right?" Blanc asked, tilting her head.

"Hmph. Stable, you say?" The Earl's lips curled into a condescending smirk. "For mortals, whether people or nations, stability is nothing more than a slow decline. A stagnant nation, where talent pools grow stale, will inevitably rot from within. From what I hear, it's already embroiled in vicious factional disputes behind the scenes. Its so-called stability is just a facade, and its fall is only a matter of time."

Blanc frowned. "Okay, but how do you even know all that? You're holed up in this old castle all the time!"

"'Old castle,' you call it... Hmph. Very well." The Earl crossed his legs and leaned back in his throne, unconcerned. "I've planted rats there. They bring me all the information I need."

"Wait—spies? That's so cool!" Blanc's eyes lit up with admiration.

"Not 'spies,' exactly. I mean literal rats. I've *Retained* them and sent them to infiltrate various organizations."

"Literal rats?" she said, her enthusiasm faltering. "Huh... Um... I guess that's...borderline acceptable?"

"Fu ha ha! Borderline acceptable, you say?" The Earl laughed, his mood seemingly lifted by her response.

Blanc grinned despite herself. "Still, that's actually a pretty neat idea. I'd love to try controlling something like that myself."

"You should be able to," the Earl replied, nodding. "When you reincarnated as a vampire, the *Control* skill tree unlocked for you.

Through it, you can acquire *Retainer*. Try unlocking *Control*."

Curious, Blanc followed his suggestion and unlocked *Control*. It only cost 20 experience points, and after all the zombies she'd farmed earlier, her experience pool was flush.

"Hey, you're right!" she said. "*Retainer* just showed up!"

The Earl smirked, clearly pleased by her progress. "*Retainer* alone won't accomplish much unless the difference in power between you and the target is overwhelming. It's a skill designed for those who can create familiars from scratch. If you want to subdue an existing creature, you'll need to pair it with *Mental Magic* like *Charm* or *Dominate*. Use them together, and you should find success."

Ah, so that string of debilitating status effects the Earl had hit her with earlier was exactly that combination. No wonder she hadn't stood a chance.

Unlocking *Dominate* under the *Enchantment Magic* tree wasn't cheap—it would take a considerable chunk of Blanc's experience points. Still, she didn't have any other skills in mind at the moment, and the idea of controlling creatures was too tempting to pass up. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to go for it.

"I've unlocked *Dominate*! Thanks for the tip, senpai!" she announced with enthusiasm.

"Bwa ha ha! *Senpai*, is it? I like that!" The Earl laughed, clearly amused by the title. "Now listen closely. Spells tied to *Enchantment Magic*, like *Dominate*, depend heavily on your mental strength. The stronger your mind, the higher your chances of success. Make sure you train it well."

Mental strength? Blanc quickly pieced together that he must be referring to MND, the game's stat for mental fortitude. She vaguely remembered seeing something about it in the stat descriptions during the tutorial.

Taking the Earl's advice to heart, Blanc dumped the rest of her remaining experience points into MND. By the time she was done, her MND had risen to match her INT—quite the improvement in her mental capabilities.

"All right!" she said, pumping her fist. "When night falls, I'm heading out to try *Retaining* something!"

"Good. Go on, then," the Earl said with an approving nod. "If you can *Retain* a creature with decent combat power, your training

will become much more efficient, and you'll grow stronger in no time."

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As night fell, Blanc ventured out of the castle and ran far enough into the wilderness that she'd have trouble making it back before sunrise if she didn't turn around soon. It was around that point she stumbled upon an abandoned graveyard.

Since she'd come this far, she decided to take a quick look around. Skeletons and zombies were common enough near the castle, but there was always the chance she might encounter something stronger here.

The graveyard was different from the wilderness outside—it seemed to host more than just the usual undead. In fact, there was a sign of life here right now, in the form of bats suddenly swarming her.

"Whoa! That scared me!" Blanc yelped as the bats flitted around her, their tiny bodies brushing against her cloak. She couldn't tell what they wanted—were they after food? If they were vampire bats, she wondered, could they even drink the blood of a vampire like her?

"Take this! *Fear*! That's right—be afraid!" she shouted, casting her spell in a panic.

The bats immediately fluttered to the ground, trembling in apparent terror. It seemed her *Fear* spell had worked without issue.

"Phew. Glad that worked..." Blanc muttered, catching her breath. "I thought I heard somewhere that the success rate for *Fear* wasn't that great, but maybe being a vampire gave me a bonus against these little guys? Vampire bats versus a vampire and all that..."

She glanced down at the bats, now huddled on the ground and quivering. Watching them like this made her feel oddly guilty.

"Come to think of it, since I started playing, the only things I've run into are ants and undead..." she mused. "Living creatures, huh..."

The idea wasn't half bad. Having a flock of bats as minions seemed appropriately vampiric, and with this many, even if they

weren't particularly strong, they could probably take down a zombie or two. Sure, calling them "living creatures" felt a little simplistic, but in a game filled with nonliving enemies, the distinction seemed fair.

Bats, Blanc thought, could come in handy as distractions in a pinch. More importantly, they might even be able to act as spies, just like the Earl's rats.

"Bats do have that nickname 'sky rats,' don't they?" Blanc mused aloud. "As the Earl of Rats's junior, this actually feels kind of fitting... No, better than fitting. It's perfect!"

With her mind made up, Blanc began casting *Retainer* on the bats huddled around her, one by one.

She skipped *Dominate*, but just as the Earl had suggested, the wide power gap between her and the bats made it easy to tame them all. As she finished, she let out a relieved sigh. "*Phew*. Glad that worked. If it hadn't, it would've meant..." She shook her head. "No, I don't even want to think about what it would've meant if I wasn't stronger than a flock of bats."

Blanc opened her interface. "All nine of them, huh? Let's see... Species is...Desmodus?" She tilted her head. "That's a surprisingly tough-sounding name for how they look."

The bats shuffled closer to her, flapping their wings and scuttling across the ground with their tiny hind legs.

"Wait, they can walk?!" she exclaimed. "And they're fast too! That's...actually kind of impressive. Guess it makes sense—they're cousins of rats, after all."

Still, their tiny strides couldn't match hers, and walking back to the castle with them would take forever. She sighed and scooped two up in her arms.

"Well, they're...kind of cute, in their own way," she muttered to herself, glancing at the small creatures nestled in her hands. "This'll work. All right, let's head home."

Blanc hurried back to the castle, managing to return just before sunrise.

"I'm home!" she called out cheerfully as she stepped inside.

"Hmm... What's that you've got there? Bats?" the Earl asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nice, right? Super vampiric, don't you think? Plus, they're

basically cousins to rats," Blanc said, grinning.

"Fitting for a vampire, I'll grant you that," the Earl replied with a nod. "However, bats and rats are entirely different species."

"Wait, really?" Blanc blinked, momentarily stunned. *So much for 'sky rats,' huh.*

"Well, whatever," she said, quickly brushing off her disappointment. "Oh, by the way, senpai, you mentioned before that creatures *Retained* by a vampire stay loyal after the transformation. But can a creature you've *Retained* actually reincarnate as a vampire?"

"Indeed," the Earl replied. "Under certain conditions, reincarnation is possible by having them drink special blood."

"Special blood?"

"The blood of a higher-ranking vampire," he explained. "For example, if a qualified revenant were to drink my blood, they might reincarnate as a Lesser Vampire."

Blanc tilted her head. "Couldn't they just drink *my* blood?"

The Earl paused, considering her question. "Hmm... Perhaps if you elevated your rank further. As you are now, it would likely be impossible. Transforming a Vampiric Minion into a revenant, however, might be within your reach."

"Elevating my rank..." Blanc murmured thoughtfully.

"It's not as far off as you might think," the Earl added with a faint smirk. "After all, you've already shed the 'Lesser' from your title."

Startled, Blanc quickly opened her status window. Sure enough, her title had changed from Lesser Vampire to simply Vampire.

"When did that happen?"

"Likely when you unlocked *Enchantment Magic* or *Retainer*. Both require a certain level of rank to access," the Earl explained matter-of-factly.

So, if she wanted to raise her rank further, she needed to earn more experience points and reinvest them in herself. The system clearly recognized and rewarded the effort, granting her a higher designation as she grew stronger.

"But the zombies around here don't give much experience anymore..." Blanc muttered, crossing her arms in thought.

"Hmph," the Earl said, stroking his chin. "I seem to recall that the underground waterway beneath this castle is home to a

colony of lizardmen. They should provide far better sustenance than the zombies."

"Lizardmen? Those exist here? Wait—this castle has a basement?" Blanc stared at him, wide-eyed.

The Earl shot her an exasperated look. "You came from that basement. Most likely, you wandered in from somewhere else, got lost, and simply ended up here. No matter. I'll sketch a simple route for you. Go and explore."

"Thanks, senpai!" she said, grinning.

"Bwa ha ha! By the way," the Earl added, gesturing at her bats, "these creatures seem to be a species with ties to our kind. Under certain conditions, you may even be able to reincarnate them. Raise them well."

"Got it! I'll do my best!" Blanc replied eagerly.

At first, she'd thought the Earl was just some cringey wannabe vampire, but the more time she spent with him, the more endearing even his pompous tone had become. It was strange how things like that could grow on you.

"Here, the map," the Earl said, handing her a detailed sketch. "The lizardmen will be easy prey for your *Enchantment Magic*, and you should find little trouble dealing with them. If possible, have your bats gain some experience too."

"Wait, what do you mean by *Enchantment Magic* being easy to use on lizardmen?"

"Hmm? I didn't mention it before? *Enchantment Magic* doesn't work on undead."

Blanc's jaw dropped. "That's news to me! Wait a second. Didn't you spam *Charm* and other enchantments on me when we first met?"

"Well, there are...loopholes," the Earl replied vaguely. "I'll teach you about them in due time."

She wanted to press him on it but decided to let it go for now. He promised to explain later, and right now, she was eager to start earning more experience.

"All right, I'm off!" Blanc said, already heading toward the door.

"Very well. Farewell," the Earl replied with a nod.

Without wasting a moment, Blanc descended into the castle's basement and made her way toward the underground waterway.

The underground waterway lay even deeper than Blanc's original spawn point, accessible through a crumbled wall in what appeared to be an old dungeon. Descending farther and farther into the depths, she eventually began to hear the faint sound of water.

The underground cave was pitch-black, so much so that the water itself seemed like a pool of darkness. Even with Blanc's enhanced vampiric vision, she couldn't make out what might be lurking beneath its surface.

Steeling herself, she kept her magic ready at all times and cautiously continued her descent.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been climbing down when she finally arrived at a more open area. It was a massive underground lake, its still waters shimmering faintly in the dim light.

Peering carefully around the cavern, she spotted several figures on the shore of the lake.

"Those must be lizardmen..." she muttered.

They had long tails, and there were enough of them to suggest a small settlement. A quick count revealed a significant number—more than she was ready to handle.

"There's no way I can grind experience off them," she muttered, frowning.

She couldn't gauge how strong the lizardmen were, but they were almost certainly tougher than the zombies and skeletons she'd fought before. Her bats wouldn't be much help as combat allies, and even with her newfound vampiric abilities, there was no way she could take on the whole settlement alone.

As Blanc hesitated, debating her options, a sense of intent radiated from the bats nestled against her chest. One of them seemed to be offering a plan.

"Huh? A diversion?" she asked, startled. "Isn't that dangerous? Oh... Right, you guys can fly..."

She considered the idea for a moment. "All right, then. Fly over and lure a few of them out, but don't lead them too far. I'll wait somewhere out of earshot from the settlement so the others don't notice."

Three bats flitted out from her cloak, spreading their wings and disappearing into the darkness.

Watching them go, Blanc quietly retreated deeper into the cave,

careful not to make a sound.

A short while later, two lizardmen appeared, cautiously making their way into the cave, following the trail of the bats. Their movements were slow as they searched for their prey in the darkness, inching deeper with every step.

“All this fuss over three bats? I guess even bats might be a valuable protein source for them,” Blanc muttered, watching them from her hiding spot.

She focused her energy and began preparing a spell. Considering they were likely a water-adjacent species, her opening move would be *Thunderbolt*. She’d heard somewhere that electricity worked well against water types.

“All right… Just a little closer… Come on… Here! *Thunderbolt*! *Air Cutter*!”

A flash of lightning streaked toward the lizardmen with blinding speed, striking one of them directly. A moment later, an invisible blade of air swept through the second lizardman, slicing into its scales.

The first lizardman collapsed instantly, dead from the electric shock. The second, though badly injured, still clung to life.

“Hm. I guess it’s hard to one-shot them without a clear elemental weakness,” Blanc mused. “*Ice Bullet*.”

A shard of ice shot through the air and pierced the remaining lizardman, ending it for good. Checking her experience points, she found they were indeed substantial.

“Not bad, I guess. But efficiency-wise… Hmm, it’s not great,” Blanc said with a sigh. “Luring them out, hiding, and then casting spells—it’s a lot of effort. There’s gotta be a better way to take out a bunch of them at once.”

Still pondering, she opened her skill acquisition menu in search of inspiration.

One tree caught her eye: *Vampiric Magic*.

It was a tree she hadn’t seen before—something that must have unlocked when she became a vampire. Opening it, she found the first skill: *Mist*.

“Let’s see… A spell that creates a wide-area mist,” she read aloud. “Its effects include boosting the success rate of *Vampiric Magic* and *Enchantment Magic*… Oh yeah, I’ve only been using

Enchantment Magic on the bats so far."

The skill also created a visual and sensory obstruction for enemies within the mist's range.

Using *Mist* to disrupt the enemy's visibility and movement, then locking them in place with *Fear* before taking them out one by one with spells—it sounded like a decent strategy. But if an enemy resisted *Fear*, things could get messy. Trying it in the middle of a fight without practice didn't seem like a great idea.

"Maybe I should've tested it on those two lizardmen earlier..." she muttered. "Oh well."

After some deliberation, Blanc decided to stick with her tried-and-true bat-luring tactic for now.

First, she unlocked the skills she needed: *Mist*, and the wide-area lightning spell *Lightning Shower*. The latter had a high MP cost, but the ability to hit multiple enemies at once would be worth it.

This time, the bats lured out three lizardmen.

Once all three had been drawn into the kill zone, Blanc started by casting *Mist*. In the dim, humid cave, the lizardmen didn't seem to notice the thickening fog around them.

Next, she cast *Fear*. The lizardmen froze in place, their tails trembling.

"I think it's working? Hard to tell if lizardmen are actually scared or if shaking their tails means something else. What if it's, like, a mating signal or something?" Blanc shuddered at the thought, then shook her head. "Eh, whatever. Let's go—*Lightning Shower*!"

Bolts of electricity arced from the ceiling to the floor, some striking the lizardmen directly. They convulsed violently, their muscles spasming under the shock, the whole thing over in mere seconds.

But they weren't dead. Blanc approached carefully, raised her staff, and brought it down on each lizardman's head in turn, finishing them off one by one.

"This might actually work on that lake-side settlement. If I can hit them with *Fear* before they notice me, I think I've got a shot. All right, let's do this!"

Encouraged by her success, Blanc made her way back toward the underground lake.

"*Mist*!"

She wasn't sure if the spell would reach the settlement from here, but if not, she could just wait for the cooldown and cast it again. No harm in trying.

"Wow… 'wide area' really means *wide area,*" she muttered, watching the fog expand. "I could probably cover a whole small village with this… Too bad the range for *Enchantment Magic* doesn't scale up to match. That's kind of a rip-off."

The *Mist* would last indefinitely unless canceled, but it drained MP the entire time it was active. Blanc would have to move fast to avoid running out of resources. Blending into the fog, she crept closer to the settlement, sticking to the cave walls. Despite the dense mist, her vision remained perfectly clear. It didn't seem to affect her at all.

"And now… *Fear*! Enjoy!"

The lizardmen closest to her froze, their bodies trembling. The mist didn't extend far enough to cover the entire settlement, but it was enough to reach those within range of Blanc's current position.

"All right, follow-up time. *Lightning Shower*!" This time, the bolts of lightning filled the cavern with an even greater intensity. The ceiling was higher than in the smaller cave, but the area still lit up from floor to ceiling with crackling energy. The resulting flash was so bright it would've been noticeable even from the farthest corner of the underground lake.

One by one, Blanc began eliminating the remaining lizardmen, picking them off methodically.

Soon, no lizardmen were left in sight. Blanc scanned the area and noticed several mound-like structures along the shore of the lake.

"Are those houses?" she wondered aloud. "If they are, the entrances probably face the lake, right? They seem pretty aquatic, after all. In that case, peeking inside might be dangerous…"

For a moment, Blanc considered using magic to collapse the structures. "Should I just blast them with magic?" she murmured, raising a hand. But after a second thought, she let out a sigh and dispelled the *Mist* instead.

If there's anything inside, it's probably just kids or eggs—or whatever they lay, if they even lay eggs, she thought. *No point in*

wasting them now. I'll let them grow up, come back later, and farm them for experience then.

"All right," Blanc said with a determined nod. "Time to head back. If I get any stronger, these lizardmen won't even be worth farming. When I get back, I'll focus on training the bats instead."

Humming to herself, she made her way back toward the castle, clearly pleased with her progress.

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Apparently, there had been a large-scale event while Blanc was away. It must have happened during her long stretch of real-world medical tests. The timing couldn't have been worse.

In the meantime, Blanc had settled into a routine of hunting lizardmen at the underground lake and funneling the experience points to her bats. As the lizardmen near the lake dwindled, she began venturing farther afield to attack what she assumed were different lizardman tribes.

"These bats are getting ridiculous," Blanc muttered, watching her loyal flock. "At this point, even a single one of them could probably take down a lizardman solo. And if I sent all nine at once? They could probably wipe out an entire settlement."

The amount of experience Blanc had poured into her bats was starting to rival her own investment in herself.

At some point—though she wasn't sure what triggered it—*Vampiric Magic* had appeared on the bats' list of learnable skills. Curious, she had them unlock it before she did, partly to test its effectiveness.

Alongside *Vampiric Magic*, she also had them unlock *Enchantment Magic*, which synergized well. This had been the Earl's suggestion after Blanc herself unlocked the *Summoning* and *Necromancy* trees. It seemed her skill trees influenced what was available to her bats.

Blanc had suspected for a while that skill acquisition depended on various conditions—other skills, species, and so on. But the realization that her minions' skill trees could be directly tied to her own choices? That had been a blind spot.

With this in mind, Blanc realized that she couldn't afford to pour all her resources into her bats anymore. She needed to grow

alongside them if she wanted to maintain her advantage. But this shift in strategy meant it was becoming increasingly difficult to farm enough experience from the lizardmen to sustain her progress.

"It can't be helped. Such times come to all eventually," the Earl said when Blanc consulted him about her difficulties. "Still, in terms of strengthening your forces, there are a few things you can still accomplish with the lizards."

"Oh?" Blanc asked, intrigued. "For example?"

"Hmm." The Earl nodded. "You already possess *Soul Bind* from the *Necromancy* tree, do you not? If you cast *Necromancy* on a defeated lizardman, you can reanimate the corpse as an undead. Then, if you successfully use *Retainer* on the undead lizardman, it can become a permanent subordinate."

"I see... That makes sense," Blanc said thoughtfully, though a frown began to form. "But undead, huh..."

The idea of dragging around a group of zombies didn't appeal to her.

"What if I gave my blood to one of these undead lizardmen?" she asked after a moment. "Could it turn into a revenant?"

"Hmm..." The Earl stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Lizardmen, as a race, are inherently of a higher rank than ordinary humans. Therefore, a lizardman zombie should be of a higher standing than the average zombie. Still, achieving a successful transformation might be difficult."

He paused, then added, "However, there's little harm in trying. Even if it fails, the only cost to you will be a small amount of life force."

"Life force?" Blanc repeated, tilting her head.

The Earl chuckled. "Ah, yes. In your terms, LP. For vampires, sharing one's blood is simply a mechanic that consumes LP as a cost."

"Got it," Blanc said with a grin. "Guess I'll give it a shot!"

With high spirits, Blanc returned to the underground lake where she'd first encountered the lizardmen.

She wasted no time, using her *Lightning Magic* to create three pristine lizardman corpses.

“All right, *Necromancy*,” she murmured, activating the spell.

A pitch-black mist began to rise from the lizardman corpses. Even in the dimly lit underground lake, the mist’s profound darkness stood out, as if it absorbed all the light around it.

The mist enveloped the lizardmen completely, accompanied by a hissing sound like air escaping a small valve. Their forms became obscured, utterly hidden within the swirling blackness.

After a few tense seconds, the mist dissipated on its own, fading into the air.

And then, the lizardmen stood. Only their bones remained.

“They’re skeletons!” Blanc exclaimed.

Despite their skeletal state, their silhouettes still resembled lizardmen—complete with long tails and snouts like something straight out of a dinosaur encyclopedia.

“Well… I guess skeletons are better than zombies,” she muttered. “All right, *Retainer*.”

<<You have successfully tamed a Lizardman Skeleton.>>
<<Conditions fulfilled. Would you like to reincarnate it as a Vampiric Minion?>>

“Uh, no,” Blanc said, declining the prompt.

When the Earl had used *Retainer* on her, the reincarnation confirmation had appeared directly to Blanc herself.

This time, however, the message appeared for Blanc, the one casting *Retainer*. Was this because NPCs couldn’t receive system messages?

<<You have successfully tamed a Lizardman Skeleton.>><<Conditions fulfilled. Would you like to reincarnate it as a Vampiric Minion?>>

“Seriously? I have to do this for each one? No again.”

<<You have successfully tamed a Lizardman Skeleton. Conditions fulfilled. Would you like to reincarnate it as a Vampiric Minion?>>

“Ugh. Still no,” she said, exasperated.

At last, Blanc successfully *Retained* all three Lizardman Skeletons.

“All right,” she said, clapping her hands together. “Next up: testing what happens if I give them my blood.”

The Earl had been clear—if it didn’t work, she’d only lose some LP.

With little to lose, Blanc decided to try it on all three. She bit her finger with her sharp fangs and smeared her blood across the foreheads of the three Lizardman Skeletons.

“Oh… Wait. Are these technically fangs and not just sharp teeth? Could tha—”

Blanc’s thought was abruptly cut off as a strange, draining sensation washed over her. Blanc’s strength left her in an instant, and she dropped to her knees. Alarmed, she checked her status window. Sure enough, her LP had taken a significant hit—nearly half of it gone in one go, even though she’d built up a decent reserve recently.

“That’s such a heavy cost… You could’ve warned me, senpai,” she grumbled, clutching her chest.

As Blanc contemplated how best to teach the vampire Earl the importance of proper reporting and communication, a system message appeared.

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<<Your minion has met the conditions for
reincarnation. Reincarnation will now begin.>>
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Before her eyes, the skeletons started to glow faintly red, their transformation already underway.

“Oh? Something’s happening… It doesn’t look like it’s going to fail. Hang in there, my precious life points…!”

The changes weren’t limited to color. The skeletons’ very structure began to shift. Spiky ridges formed along their backs and tails, their finger and toe bones sharpened into claws, and their overall frames grew thicker and sturdier. Finally, two short horns sprouted from the back of their skulls, marking the end of their transformation.

“Whoa…! They look awesome! Way tougher! Totally different creatures! Well, not *creatures*, but you know what I mean!”

She checked their updated information and tilted her head. “Uh… ‘Spartoi, the Sown Ones’…? What does that even mean? What got sown into them?!”

The name didn’t make any sense to Blanc, but there was no denying it—reincarnation had been a success.

“Oh, *Sown Ones*, is it? Quite the powerful undead you’ve created,” the Earl remarked, impressed as Blanc proudly showed off her new minions. “As always, your unpredictability is your most amusing trait. Fu ha ha.”

True to the Earl’s words, the Spartoi’s combined stats were on par with Blanc’s when she had first become a vampire. It was an accomplishment she couldn’t help but feel a little smug about.

“By the way,” the Earl continued, “are you not planning to give your bats any of your blood? They might sulk if you’ve prioritized these new Spartoi over them.”

“Wait, really?” Blanc asked, startled.

She glanced at the bats nestled in her cloak. They looked back at her with their round, innocent eyes, as if to say, *What are you talking about?* They didn’t seem upset in the slightest.

Still, as she thought about it, Blanc began to feel a twinge of guilt. The bats had been with her from the beginning and worked so hard, yet she’d gone ahead and evolved the skeletons first.

“Then again,” she muttered, “it’s not like this doesn’t cost a ton of LP…”

“Worry not,” the Earl said with a smirk. “Should the need arise, I’ll lend you my hand. Do as you wish. I admit, I’m curious about the results myself.”

“All right, then…” Blanc said with renewed determination.

Just as she had with the skeletons, Blanc bit her finger with her fangs and allowed each bat a single drop of her blood. Once every bat had taken its share, she carefully placed them in the center of the throne room and stepped back to observe the transformation.

“Here goes…” she murmured.

As expected, Blanc felt the familiar sensation of her LP being drained. This time, however, she was prepared for it and managed to keep herself upright, avoiding the embarrassment of collapsing

to her knees. Still, the amount of LP lost was just as substantial as before.

<<Your minion has met the conditions for reincarnation. Reincarnation will now begin.>>

A black mist enveloped the bats, growing steadily thicker. Unlike with the skeletons, there was no eerie hissing sound this time, but the mist itself seemed to expand, becoming larger and larger.

Before long, it had swelled to a size big enough to encompass several people.

"Well, the system message means the reincarnation worked," Blanc said hesitantly, staring at the massive cloud. "But...isn't this a bit too much?"

"Quiet," the Earl said, his voice calm but commanding. "Just watch. The mist is clearing now."

Oh, it's mist, not smoke, Blanc thought idly. Sure enough, just as the Earl had said, the mist began to dissipate.

What it revealed was no longer bats.

There, sitting on the floor, were three people.

"Who are they?!" Blanc exclaimed. "Wait—why are there only three of them?"

"Ah," the Earl said, a note of interest in his tone. "It seems the three bats have reincarnated together into a single set of Mormos. One bat alone would not have been sufficient to form a complete vessel."

"Mormos?" Blanc echoed, tilting her head.

"Indeed," the Earl confirmed. "A type of vampire known for their skill in *Transformation Magic*."

"Vampires?!" Blanc's voice rose in shock.

Sitting before them were three pale-faced girls of striking beauty, though their unhealthy complexion hinted at their vampiric nature. They wore no clothing, which immediately caught Blanc's attention.

"Uh... Earl?" she asked, glancing nervously in his direction.

"Bwa ha ha! Always causing trouble, aren't you?" The Earl chuckled, waving his hand. "Wait here. I'll have clothing brought for them."

"Thanks!" Blanc said gratefully.

At the Earl's command, one of his zombie servants hurried off, returning moments later with suitable garments.

However, the Mormos seemed utterly baffled by the clothing. Holding the garments in their hands, they tilted their heads in confusion, unable to figure out how to put them on.

Sighing, Blanc stepped forward to help, dressing each one herself. She tried to help them stand as well, but they immediately crouched back down.

"Well, they *were* bats until just now," the Earl remarked with amusement. "Walking on two legs will take some getting used to. For now, they'll need to practice moving—walking, using their hands, that sort of thing."

"That's gonna take a while..." Blanc muttered.

One of the Mormos made a strange noise. "A-Aah...ooh...u-ihh..."

"No, it's fine," Blanc said gently. "Don't worry. I'll take responsibility and teach you everything you need to know."

"Their will aligns with yours, as they are your minions," the Earl explained. "But they have not yet spoken. That was likely their first attempt at vocalization."

Now that she thought about it, Blanc realized the Earl was right—of course the bats had never spoken before.

That said, they had always listened to her words and seemed to understand her commands perfectly, likely because of their bond as minions. It wasn't that they didn't comprehend language; rather, like walking on two legs, their bodies simply hadn't adapted to the necessary coordination of muscles and nerves.

Fortunately, Blanc was no stranger to rehabilitation.

There didn't seem to be anything inherently wrong with their bodies, so she was confident they'd be able to walk and speak in no time.

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For a while, Blanc devoted herself to training her minions, focusing on walking practice and vocalization drills for the Mormos. Occasionally, she took the Spartoi to the underground lake and beyond to farm experience points.

At the Earl's suggestion, Blanc used the accumulated

experience to unlock *Body Control* and *Agility* for the Mormos, which dramatically improved their movements.

However, when she tried having the Mormos fight lizardmen, they earned no experience points. After some thought, it made sense—each Mormo had consumed the combined experience of three bats. Since even a single bat had nearly matched Blanc's experience points, each Mormo effectively had the strength of three of her.

"They're way stronger than me..." Blanc muttered, glancing nervously at her minions. "There's no, like, betrayal system in this game, right? Right?"

"Impossible," the Earl assured her with a wave of his hand. "They are bound by the *Retainer* skill. They cannot harbor even a trace of disloyalty."

"Whew, good to know," Blanc replied, visibly relieved.

"That aside," the Earl continued, stroking his chin, "as I mentioned before, Mormos are a species adept at transformation. You should experiment with it."

Curious, Blanc opened their skill menus and spotted a skill called *Transformation*, which had an extensive skill tree already unlocked.

"Hey, what can you guys turn into with *Transformation*?" Blanc asked, tilting her head as she addressed the Mormos. "Try it out for me!"

The three Mormos nodded in unison, their bodies enveloped in black mist—or rather, fog. Moments later, the fog cleared, and Blanc found herself staring at three versions of...herself.

"Whoa! That's...me! This is amazing!" she exclaimed, stepping closer to inspect them.

Checking the *Transformation* skill tree again, Blanc noticed a subskill called *Mimicry*. "Ah, this one lets them mimic anyone whose blood they've consumed," she muttered, reading through the description.

Next, the three Mormos transformed into bats—one becoming three individual bats.

"This looks familiar," Blanc said with a wry smile. "Wait, they're just like their prereincarnation selves! Ah, how nostalgic." She paused, her expression turning curious. "But what happens if one of them dies in this form?"

“Most likely,” the Earl replied, folding his arms confidently, “they would lose one-third of their life force upon reverting. However, as long as one remains alive, they can cancel *Transformation* and recover through rest.”

“Senpai, you know everything!” Blanc said, genuinely impressed by his depth of knowledge.

“Bwa ha ha! How long do you think I’ve been a vampire?” the Earl said, puffing out his chest. “I didn’t earn my title as an Earl for nothing!”

“Oh, right!” Blanc suddenly remembered, clapping her hands together. “I need to give everyone names. That includes the Spartoi too.”

Blanc wasn’t exactly known for her naming sense, something made obvious by her own name.

“Okay, let’s start with the Mormos,” she said, pointing at each one in turn. “You’ll be Azalea, you’ll be Carmine, and you’ll be Magenta.”

She then turned to the Spartoi. “As for you three, you’re Vermilion, you’re Crimson, and you’re Scarlet.”

She’d decided to stick to shades of red for consistency. Blanc thought it was one of her better ideas—after all, her own name was based on a color, so it felt thematically fitting.

“With this, your forces have grown considerably,” the Earl said with a satisfied nod. “Perhaps it’s time to conquer... If not a nation, then at least a town or two?”

Blanc froze, blinking. “Oh, right. That *was* the plan, wasn’t it...”

Around this time, the game administrators announced a large-scale event. It was labeled as the second of its kind, though Blanc had no context for the first, having not participated.

“All right! This time I’m joining for sure!” Blanc declared enthusiastically.

Through consistent grinding and minion training, she had managed to amass a small army of about thirty Spartoi under her command. The Mormos, however, hadn’t increased in number beyond the original three. The Earl, apparently inspired by Blanc’s success, had gone out and *Retained* a bat of his own.

Now, a strikingly handsome butler stood constantly by the Earl’s side—a Mormo reincarnated from his bat. Exceptionally capable,

the butler made even the talented Azalea, Carmine, and Magenta seem like novices. No matter how hard the Mormos tried to assist Blanc, the butler always seemed one step ahead, completing her tasks with impeccable precision.

Adding insult to injury, the butler was technically one of the Earl's minions, meaning he only had time to assist Blanc after fully tending to the Earl's needs. And yet, he never missed the opportunity to deliver his cutting remark:

"And yet, there are three of you," he would say with a polite bow.

The comment left Azalea, Carmine, and Magenta sulking in Blanc's bed, burying their faces in pillows and muttering complaints.

But back to the matter at hand.

"Senpai!" Blanc called one day, bursting into the throne room. "I'm planning to attack a town. Got any recommendations for a good target?"

The Earl rested his fingers against his sharp chin, unusually contemplative.

"Is something wrong?" Blanc asked, tilting her head.

"Not wrong, no," the Earl replied. "However, this castle sits upon high ground—a plateau. Any town you choose to attack would be in the lowlands below. The question becomes how to move your Spartoi army down there."

"May I offer a suggestion?" the butler interjected smoothly, bowing.

"Speak," the Earl commanded.

"Thank you," the butler said. "Lady Blanc's strength should be sufficient to forcibly open an exit from the caves along the underground waterway using magic. It could provide a suitable route for the army."

Blanc considered the idea. With her stats, breaking through a rock wall was easy, but collapsing the caves would be a real headache.

"Not a bad plan," the Earl said thoughtfully. "Though, it carries some risk. If you proceed, your Spartoi's claws should suffice to widen the path without compromising the structure."

"Oh, right! Spartoi are higher-tier undead," Blanc said, clapping

her hands.

She quickly ordered the Spartoi to excavate the cave exit near the underground waterway where the stream flowed out.

“So, once we’re outside, is there a town nearby?” she asked.

“If you follow the river for a short distance, you should see it,” the Earl replied. “This wilderness lacks any nearby monster territories—areas humans fear to tread. Because of that, the town has no walls or fortifications. It’s easy to assault but difficult to defend—a perfect starting point.”

“That’s perfect!” Blanc exclaimed. “And since there are no monster territories nearby, there probably aren’t many mercenaries or adventurers around either. It sounds like a great tutorial target!”

“Tutorial…?” The Earl frowned. “You do say the strangest things sometimes. But very well. Even a small detachment of your Spartoi should be enough to take that town.”

“Better safe than sorry!” Blanc said with a grin. “With this kind of power difference, there’s no way I could possibly die!”

“Pardon me,” the butler said, his tone calm but firm. “I would advise against saying such things aloud.”

Blanc blinked, glancing at him curiously. “Wait, are you saying even games have flag mechanics?” she muttered, frowning. “It’s not like I was trying to jinx myself…”

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Before the event began, the Spartoi completed the task of expanding the underground waterway’s exit.

“All right, everyone, time to head out!” Blanc declared, brimming with enthusiasm.

“Wait,” the Earl interjected, his sharp tone halting her. “Take a cloak with you, just in case. The sun rising would be…problematic. You have not yet attained the rank of Daywalker, have you? You cannot always count on finding shelter during daylight hours, especially with your lack of planning. I can already picture you stranded in the middle of the wilderness.”

Blanc accepted the cloak with a mix of gratitude and wounded pride. “Thanks for the faith, Senpai,” she muttered, her sarcasm lost in the Earl’s steady gaze.

With that, her preparations were complete.

“All right, I’m off!” she announced confidently. “The event lasts for a week—uh, ten days. After we take the first town, I’ll use the main roads to smash as many human towns as possible in that time!”

“Very well. Just mind the sunlight,” the Earl said, his tone utterly casual.

“Why do you make it sound like I’m crossing the street and should watch for cars?” Blanc grumbled under her breath.

That night, as soon as the sun set, Blanc set off with great excitement, leading her forces toward the first human town.


Blanc
Count DeHavilland

“Come to think of it, this might actually be my first time meeting humans. And my first contact with them is a communication style based entirely on murderous intent? I’m really starting to feel like a proper monster!” Blanc said with a self-satisfied grin.

The Mormos walking beside her exchanged wry smiles. Without the Earl or the butler around, Blanc easily claimed the top spot on the “most useless” ranking, leaving the Mormos at a comfortable last place. At times like these, they almost seemed competent by comparison.

The group advanced along the riverbank, passing through the exit the Spartoi had opened.

Since the Spartoi didn’t tire, they required no breaks. They neither ate nor relieved themselves. They didn’t need warm clothing, nor did they carry anything beyond the bare minimum—practically marching stark naked. As a result, their pace was remarkably fast.

Thanks to their efficiency, the journey proceeded smoothly, and before long, a town came into view in the distance.

The town appeared quiet, with only a few scattered lights. Perhaps the residents conserved fuel by turning in early after sunset.

However, their careless approach toward the town had consequences. The light atop a wooden watchtower—likely a lookout post—suddenly began moving frantically. Moments later, a bell rang out, its resonant peals echoing into the night. Lights in the town flickered to life, gathering toward the outskirts in Blanc’s direction.

They’d been spotted.

“Well, yeah... If a group of bright red skeletons is marching toward you, it’s gonna be harder *not* to notice,” Blanc muttered.

“Setting aside our presence for the moment,” Carmine interjected, “you could have had the Spartoi walk through the river instead. They were originally lizardmen, so it wouldn’t have been impossible.”

“Ah,” Blanc said, freezing mid-step.

It was too late now. Judging by Carmine’s expression, she had only just realized this herself, so it wasn’t entirely Blanc’s fault. Still,

if that overly competent butler had been present, he would no doubt have preempted the issue with his usual, “If I may be so bold…”

“The butler has nothing to do with this!” Carmine blurted, flustered.

“I didn’t say anything yet!” Blanc shot back indignantly.

As always, Blanc and her minions communicated without needing words, their bond allowing for a level of mutual understanding.

“Well, we’ve been spotted, so there’s no point worrying about it now,” Blanc said, brushing it off. “All right, everyone! Go get them!”

This was yet another phrase Blanc had always wanted to say. There were so few opportunities in ordinary life to give such a dramatic command. Saying it aloud filled her with giddy satisfaction.

At her order, the Spartoi surged forward, sprinting toward the town like a tide of bone and crimson.

Meanwhile, Blanc and the Mormos assumed spectator mode, leaving the fight entirely to the Spartoi.

“Wow, look at all this experience rolling in,” Blanc said, watching her notifications. “These guys are total weaklings, but why is the payout so good? Am I actually earning more than I did with lizardmen? Is this like a bonus stage?”

Her assessment was, for the most part, correct.

As stated in the official announcement, this event granted bonus experience points throughout its duration.

The invasion battles of this event were essentially a jackpot for monster-race players—provided they had enough strength to make the most of it.

In the previous battle royale event, monster-race players were noticeably absent. Held shortly after the game’s launch, the event came at a time when playing as a monster was notoriously challenging. Surrounded by hostile environments and lacking the conveniences of human towns—like clearly marked safe zones or accessible inns—monster players had an uphill battle. Even if they found a refuge for grinding experience points, they couldn’t sell materials or buy equipment to improve their odds.

While monster characters started with a bonus pool of experience points to offset these challenges, it wasn’t enough to

compete with the rapid progression of human players who leveled efficiently. Unsurprisingly, the event left many monster players frustrated and excluded.

The current siege event, however, was designed with inclusivity in mind. For monster players it was simple: blend in with NPC monsters, infiltrate towns, and rack up experience points by killing NPC residents. Town guards posed minimal threat to moderately leveled players, and defeating them often came with the bonus of lootable weapons.

Still, not every town was a safe target. Towns with walls were risky, as defenders—including well-organized human players—often posed a far greater challenge than the guards. For maximum efficiency, players needed to target towns with weaker defenses and minimal countermeasures.

Blanc, however, had chosen wisely. Her target was a perfect beginner's town. Without walls, there was no need for siege tactics. It had almost no defending players, so the threat of a counterattack was slim. The guards, who were the town's main defense, were no match for the Spartoi and quickly fell under their relentless assault.

Adding to the advantage, there were no rival monster players in the area to compete for kills.

Just as Blanc had said, this truly was a bonus stage.

"Master, it seems most of the guards have been taken care of," reported Carmine, standing at Blanc's side.

"Great! Next, search every house and kill any residents hiding inside. I want to use their corpses to raise more skeletons with *Necromancy*. Once you're done, have the bodies gathered in a plaza or some open area for me to work. Got it?"

Vermilion, the Spartoi commander clacked his teeth in acknowledgment before summoning a nearby subordinate with a rattling jaw motion. The Spartoi quickly picked up on Blanc's orders and sprinted back toward the town to relay them.

"You know," Blanc said thoughtfully, watching the skeleton run off, "it'd be nice if there were a skill like a radio or something. You know, for giving commands remotely. Wouldn't that be super useful?"

"Dreaming of convenience, are we?" Carmine remarked dryly. "If something like that existed, there'd be no need for messengers,

letters, or carrier pigeons. The whole system of communication would collapse."

"Yeah, fair point," Blanc admitted. "So that's the kind of tech level we're dealing with here... Well, if we can add more skeletons in this town, I might as well make a dedicated messenger unit. Problem solved."

As Blanc and the Mormos continued their idle chatter, the cries of townsfolk grew louder in the distance. The Spartoi messenger had clearly done its job. Screams echoed intermittently, signaling the start of the slaughter.

The Spartoi had begun breaking into houses, dragging out terrified residents, and killing them on the spot. Following Blanc's orders, they carried the bodies to a plaza in the heart of the town.

With the Spartoi systematically sweeping the area, the danger in the streets had decreased significantly. Confident in her safety, Blanc entered the town alongside her entourage—Vermilion, the other Spartoi commanders, and the trio of Mormos.

"By the way," Blanc asked, glancing around, "where's the plaza, exactly?"

"Wait—are you wandering around without even knowing?" Carmine exclaimed, exasperated.

"Well, do *you* know where it is, Magenta?" Blanc shot back.

"Azalea?" Magenta said, passing the question along smoothly. "Would you like to answer that?"

"Carmine," Azalea replied, not missing a beat. "I'll leave this to you."

Carmine cleared her throat dramatically. "Very well. Scarlet, take the lead. Find the plaza."

Blanc sighed and rolled her eyes. "You're all hopeless."

With Scarlet now leading the way, they soon arrived at the plaza.

The Spartoi, their gruesome task completed, had gathered around the area, where a towering pile of townsfolk corpses had been assembled at the center.

"Whoa. This is...quite a sight," Blanc muttered, taking it all in. "Okay, so these bodies should all be within an hour of death, right? We're probably cutting it close, though. Let's get started! First up, *Mist*."

The *Mist* skill was one of the racial abilities under the vampire-exclusive *Blood Magic*.

In Blanc's case, it had been enhanced through the later-unlocked *Death Fog*, which added bonuses to the success rate and potency of *Necromancy* skills cast inside its area of effect.

Without wasting time, Blanc activated *Necromancy*.

As the Earl had once explained, corpses within an hour of death still retained their souls. By casting *Necromancy* on such a body, the soul could be trapped within the flesh, transforming it into a new undead creature.

Normally, this process wasn't guaranteed to succeed. A soul still tethered to its body would instinctively resist, reducing the likelihood of successful reanimation. However, Blanc's investment in the *Necromancy* tree—including the *Soul Bind* and *Death Fog* skills—had significantly boosted her odds. Against the bodies of NPC townsfolk, the success rate was effectively one hundred percent.

"All right, looks like they all turned out fine," Blanc said, inspecting her new creations. "But... Oops. I wasn't paying attention, and now they're all zombies. I wanted skeletons, but here we are. Zombies are so slow—it's such a hassle."

"Why not just leave them here in the town?" Carmine suggested. "There's no need to bring them along if they're not useful right now."

"Oh, good point. Let's go with that plan," Blanc agreed. "We'll leave them here. If we tell them to hide inside houses during the day, they won't end up dying unnecessarily, right? All right, listen up!" she commanded, turning to the newly raised undead. "We're leaving now, but if any humans enter this town, kill them, okay?"

With her subordinates in tow, Blanc left the town and continued down the road.

At one point, she spotted a figure in the distance along the highway. The person noticed Blanc's group almost immediately and quickly disappeared from sight, vanishing without a trace.

As the eastern sky began to brighten, signaling the end of night, Blanc glanced up with concern.

"Crap, dawn's coming. Time to put on the cloak," she muttered.

"It's exactly as the Earl predicted... I scarcely know what to say," Carmine quipped dryly.

“I know, I know! Shut up already!” Blanc snapped, tugging the cloak around her shoulders.

As they continued walking, another town came into view on the horizon.

“Ugh, bad timing,” Blanc groaned. “A fight at this hour? What do we do?”

“Wait a moment,” Carmine said, squinting at the town. “That town appears to be preparing for battle. It seems they’re already on alert—possibly because of us.”

“What? Seriously?” Blanc asked, her brow furrowing.

“Perhaps that figure we saw earlier was from this town,” Carmine added thoughtfully.

“Ah…makes sense,” Blanc muttered, frowning.

If there had been someone wandering in this wilderness, it stood to reason that they were connected to a nearby settlement. And if this was the nearest town to where they’d spotted the figure, then this reaction wasn’t surprising. Still, it would’ve been nice if someone had warned her earlier.

“The butler has nothing to do with this!” Carmine snapped suddenly, crossing her arms in annoyance.

“I wasn’t even thinking about him!” Blanc protested, throwing up her hands in mock surrender.

“Enough about the butler,” Azalea interjected smoothly, her voice calm but firm. “We have more important matters to focus on. What’s the plan?”

Carmine’s defensiveness flared predictably, and Blanc’s preemptive protests only fueled the exchange. Azalea, as always, cut through their antics with her unflappable composure. Meanwhile, Magenta merely observed, her thoughts as inscrutable as ever.

“Hmm… Morning’s almost here. I’m not sure we’ll perform as well as we did earlier,” Blanc admitted, crossing her arms in thought.

“If I may, Master,” Magenta spoke up. “Why not use the experience points we gained from destroying the last town to strengthen yourself? If you can gain resistance to sunlight—or some kind of countermeasure against it—you could easily handle a town of this level.”

“That’s a great idea, Magenta. Let’s go with that!” Blanc said, her

expression brightening.

"Then how about enhancing your *Blood Magic* skills further?" Azalea suggested. "*Mist* proved to be quite useful."

"Oh, true. It's a wide-area skill, and it gives bonuses to undead," Blanc said, nodding in agreement. "Since my entire army is undead, that'd definitely come in handy."

As Blanc traced through the skill tree, she noticed two newly available skills: *Dark Mist* and *Mist Form*.

The first, *Dark Mist*, enhanced the effect of her self-generated *Mist*, adding a buff that amplified the power of her attack-based magic. Essentially, it was the offensive counterpart to *Death Mist*. The second, *Mist Form*, was a unique skill that allowed her to transform her body into mist once per day. Its cooldown began immediately upon activation and required twenty-four in-game hours to reset. While in this form, her physical body became completely incorporeal, rendering her immune to all physical damage.

However, there were drawbacks. Blanc frowned as she read further. "So, I'll take way more damage from fire and lightning attacks, and I can't resist wind-type movement impairments. Plus, I can't attack while I'm in mist form." She sighed. "Guess whether it's worth keeping the form active really depends on the situation. Still, for dodging physical attacks, it's pretty amazing. Unless, y'know, the attack's something like *Lightning Slash*—then I'm toast."

After some deliberation, she unlocked both skills.

"Hmm, doesn't look like anything else popped up," Blanc muttered, glancing over the list.

"There could be other useful skills," Azalea suggested from her side, her tone thoughtful. "And acquiring certain ones might unlock more options."

"That makes sense," Blanc replied, scrolling through the tree again. Then her eyes widened in surprise. "Oh, wait! *Dark Magic*! I didn't notice this earlier. When did it unlock?"

She frowned, realizing she'd focused so much on grinding experience points and strengthening her subordinates that she forgot to check the skill tree recently. Whatever had triggered this branch, it didn't matter now. "This looks promising. Maybe it'll have *Light Resistance* or something."

After unlocking four skills in the *Dark Magic* tree, Blanc was thrilled to see her hunch had paid off. “Finally! *Light Resistance*! That’ll make things way easier.”

She scrolled further and chuckled at another skill’s description. “Huh. A lot of these are utility effects. Like, *Veil of Darkness*? It just dims the surrounding area. What’s even the point of that?”

Azalea tilted her head slightly. “If used during the day, it might reduce the effects of sunlight.”

“Ohhh, that’s smart. And if I combine it with *Mist*, I could make a favorable battlefield anytime I want.” Blanc nodded, satisfied.

With these new skills, she felt confident her preparations for daytime combat were complete. Sunlight now spilled across the horizon, a crisp morning breeze stirring the air. Blanc shifted slightly, testing her new *Light Resistance*. The direct sunlight didn’t harm her, but a faint sense of sluggishness lingered in her limbs.

Blanc glanced at the Spartoi. Despite lacking *Light Resistance*, they didn’t appear to take damage from the sunlight. Perhaps their sheer strength allowed them to endure its effects? If that was the case, then further strengthening herself might grant Blanc complete immunity to sunlight as well.

“Does this mean I’m getting closer to becoming a ‘Daimonger’ or whatever?” she mused aloud.

“*Daywalker*, Lady Blanc,” Azalea corrected. “A vampire who can roam freely during daylight.”

In any case, Blanc now had the option to act during the day, though her entire group’s performance was still notably weaker in daylight than under cover of night.

“For now, at least,” Blanc said, pondering aloud. “The Spartoi managed to handle the last town on their own, but it’s daylight now, and these guys look way more on edge. No way this is going to play out the same way.”

She knew better than to expect the town’s defenders to simply sit tight until nightfall.

“All right,” Blanc declared, clapping her hands. “Let’s inch a little closer, hit them with *Veil of Darkness* and *Dark Mist*, and then blast away with magic. Once their lines start to crumble, the Spartoi will charge in and mop up.”

“Do take care to avoid injury while approaching, but for now, it seems like the best plan,” Azalea replied thoughtfully.

Carmine added, “From what we can see, there’s no sign they’re preparing for long-range attacks.”

“And even if they do start casting spells, we can counter them,” Magenta assured her, a faint smile playing on her lips. “As for archers, it doesn’t appear they have any stationed.”

As the group began their slow advance, the town’s defensive forces didn’t react much beyond maintaining their position. From their vantage, the defenders likely saw nothing more than a red skeleton horde. Perhaps they assumed that as long as neither side closed the distance, there was no immediate danger.

But that assumption couldn’t have been more wrong.

“They’re in for a nasty surprise,” Blanc muttered, grinning.

Once they were close enough, she stopped and raised her hands. “Here we go: *Mist*, *Veil of Darkness*!”

Without a sound, mist and a dim, shadowy haze began to radiate outward from Blanc. The spreading *Veil of Darkness* wasn’t true darkness, just a faint dimming of the light, but combined with the lingering morning mist, it was almost imperceptible to the untrained eye.

“This is awesome,” Blanc said, marveling at the effect. “If I used this at night, though, I’d…just make it slightly darker? Yeah, not much of a game changer there.”

“Glad you worked that out on your own,” Azalea deadpanned.

Still, in the current scenario, the skill was proving to be an effective tool.

“Too late for that now. *Hellflame*,” Blanc intoned as she activated her spell.

Flames surged outward, spreading through the mist as if it were a flammable vapor, licking at the fields surrounding the town.

“Whoa! It really looks like this mist is combustible! Or maybe it’s those fields—what are they growing? Barley or something?”

“That would indeed appear to be barley,” Azalea confirmed. “Judging by the climate and its growth pattern, I’d say it’s a safe guess.”

“Those fields are likely the town’s lifeline,” Magenta observed.

As the barley fields went up in flames, chaos erupted among the town’s defenders. Soldiers rushed about in confusion while an officer—presumably the commander—shouted orders, only to be accosted by a group of panicked subordinates.

“Let’s go! Charge!” Blanc commanded, thrusting her arm forward.

At her signal, the Spartoi surged ahead, racing toward the town en masse.

“From this distance, we might be able to provide some cover fire,” Azalea remarked, raising her hands as icy particles coalesced before her chest, forming into crystalline arrows. With a sharp motion, she unleashed *Ice Bullet*.

The spell zipped past the Spartoi, its trajectory true, but it fell just short, striking the ground near the feet of the frontline soldiers.

“It didn’t reach them,” Carmine noted flatly.

“It was deliberate,” Azalea replied, maintaining her composure. “That was a spotting shot to gauge the range.”

Not convinced, Carmine and Magenta stepped closer to the town, readying their own spells. They each cast *Ice Bullet* in unison, this time striking true. Two soldiers collapsed where they stood, unmoving.

The sight of their comrades falling before their eyes sent the defensive line into utter panic. Some soldiers began fleeing into the town’s interior, desperate to escape.

“These guards have likely never faced real combat before,” Magenta remarked. “This region is far from any known monster territories. The most they’ve encountered are wild animals or weak monsters at best.”

“Running into the town won’t save them,” Azalea added coldly. “It will only delay their deaths.”

The Mormos ignored the fleeing soldiers, instead targeting those who remained on the front lines. With calm precision, they cast their spells one by one, striking down any guard still willing to fight.

By the time the Spartoi closed the distance to the defensive line, the remaining soldiers had been reduced to a disorganized rabble. As the two forces collided, chaos erupted, and the battle descended into a frenzied melee.

Seeing this, the Mormos ceased their ranged attacks, unwilling to risk hitting their allies in the chaotic skirmish.

The Spartoi charged farther into the defensive line, cutting down soldiers mercilessly and leaving nothing but lifeless bodies

in their wake.

"It seems the humans are even weaker than we expected," Carmine observed, her tone almost pitying. "While we're certainly weaker during the day, we're still far more capable than ordinary humans."

Blanc furrowed her brow in thought. "Hmm... In that case, maybe for the next fight, we start by sending in the Spartoi. If they struggle, we'll back them up with *Mist* or something. If it still looks bad, we'll all just start slinging magic."

"If that's your intention," Azalea interjected, her voice calm and measured, "then it would be wiser to have the Spartoi charge first, regardless of the outcome. Before the enemy has time to recover from the impact of their assault, we should bombard them with magic to break their ranks entirely."

"What Lady Azalea describes," Magenta added, her tone edged with subtle amusement, "is a proper wave attack. What you've suggested, Lady Blanc, would amount to little more than piecemeal deployment—a waste of resources."

Blanc pouted. "Okay, fine, but seriously, are you three really my kids? You're way too smart! Stat-wise, my INT is higher than all of yours, you know!"

The Mormos' noses twitched in delight, though what exactly had amused them was anyone's guess.

"Anyway," Blanc continued with a sigh, "it's a good thing this plan's working so far. Once we've got this place locked down... Hmm, if we do the same thing as before, the zombies'll die the moment the sun comes up." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Guess we'll wait for nightfall, then use *Necromancy* to zombify them and stash them indoors. Sure, they'll lose their souls and turn into weaker undead, but at least they won't be dead-dead."

"All right! Let's head for the next town!" Blanc declared with enthusiasm, already setting off as the sun dipped below the horizon. With the town's former residents now zombified, her group wasted no time beginning their march toward the next target.

"That's all well and good," Magenta began, her calm voice cutting into Blanc's excitement, "but it seems this town has roads leading northwest and southwest. Which one shall we take?"

“Uh…” Blanc paused, scratching her head. “Didn’t anyone escape when we attacked? If they did, where’d they go?”

“If someone fled,” she continued, half to herself, “then wherever they ran off to probably has another settlement. Makes sense, right?”

“One moment, please,” Carmine said with a small nod before moving toward the Spartoi. After a brief conversation with the skeletal soldiers, she returned briskly. “A few individuals fled northwest on horseback, apparently.”

“Northwest, huh…” Blanc mulled this over, her gaze distant.

If those fleeing had chosen that direction, the town they’d headed for must have seemed more capable of dealing with an attack—either by offering safety or by sending reinforcements.

“Unless that town is drastically stronger than this one, we should be fine, right?” Blanc ventured.

Azalea’s measured tone broke in, caution threading through her words. “Perhaps, but even if they’re not significantly stronger, a larger force could overwhelm us by sheer numbers. After all, our army is a little over thirty soldiers.”

“Good point,” Blanc admitted, crossing her arms.

“It’s also possible,” Magenta offered, “that the northwest town is simply closer. If the fugitives were seeking help, they’d prioritize reaching the nearest settlement as quickly as possible.”

Blanc sighed, frustration evident in her voice. “Yeah, that makes sense too. Ugh, this kind of decision isn’t my thing. I have no idea which option is better…”

“One thing is certain,” Azalea said firmly. “The northwest town is already aware of our presence.”

“Moreover,” Carmine added, her tone sharper, “since we’ve seen no reinforcements arrive here, it’s clear the northwest town has no intention of aiding this one. They’re likely preparing to meet us in battle.”

Blanc groaned, throwing her hands up. “You’re right. Fine, let’s go southwest instead. It might be farther, but I’d rather not walk straight into a trap. Let’s pick up the pace, though. Do you think we can march at a jog? You guys don’t get tired, right?”

Carmine blinked, visibly startled. “March…at a jog? A military unit running nonstop? That’s absurd!”

Blanc grinned cheekily. “But, like…skeleton armies aren’t exactly

normal either, right?"

Magenta gave a small shrug. "Fair enough..."

Azalea nodded smoothly. "If the goal is to cover more ground before dawn, a brisk pace could suffice. There's no reason to hold back."

With that decided, the skeletal army set off at an unorthodox but efficient pace, their glowing eyes cutting through the growing night as they marched southwest.

Several minutes later, Blanc lay slumped atop a formation of Spartoi—Scarlet, Vermilion, and Crimson—who had formed a makeshift platform beneath her, reminiscent of a horse in a cavalry competition.

"Aren't undead supposed to not get tired...?" she muttered, barely lifting her head.

"Only skeletal types or those without living muscle tissue are immune to fatigue," Magenta explained with her usual calm. "There are many kinds of undead, after all. For instance, within the broader category of magical creatures, golems do not tire, while homunculi do."

"Magical creatures, huh..." Blanc echoed groggily.

"Creatures created through magic or other mystical methods," Magenta clarified.

"You really know everything, huh, Magenta?" Blanc remarked with a weak grin.

"I don't know *everything,*" Magenta replied, her tone modest. "Just what's written in books."

The other two Mormos, meanwhile, made no effort to join the conversation. Having shifted into their bat forms, they clung lazily to the heads of some nearby Spartoi. Magenta herself transformed back into her human form only long enough to answer Blanc's questions before resuming her compact, bat-like state.

Turning to glance behind her, Blanc saw the thirty Spartoi marching in a long, dusty column.

"This must be what they call a bottleneck, huh? It's like the start of a marathon. Not that I've ever done one."

"Still," Magenta noted, shifting back to her human form to speak, "moving like this, with so much dust and noise, we're sure

to be noticed before we get close, even at night."

Blanc frowned. "Once we're close, maybe we should, like...walk? Or crouch-walk? That's stealthy, right? Wait, can't you guys transform and scout ahead or something? If you did that, we could get a lot closer without being spotted."

Magenta blinked. "So you've finally realized, my lady. Very well, I shall investigate."

"Hey, no! That's not what I— Wait, *really?* You're seriously just going to go now?!"

Magenta didn't respond, simply shifting into the form of a sleek wolf before bounding off into the distance.

"I can't tell if she's competent or totally useless..." Blanc muttered, watching her vanish into the night.

After another two hours of running, Magenta, still in her wolf form, returned. "My lady, about the road ahead..."

"Yeah? Are we getting close to another town?" Blanc asked, her ears perking up.

"Well...there is what *was* likely a town, or at least its remnants. What I found was a field of rubble, utterly destroyed and scattered among churned earth."

"So, a ruin? I guess that explains why no one fled in this direction from the last town."

"Not exactly," Magenta replied, shifting back into her humanoid form. "The debris is sharp and jagged, and the soil shows no signs of grass or other growth. It isn't the site of an old ruin—it appears to have been reduced to rubble very recently, as if something utterly annihilated it."

"Hmm, interesting!" Blanc leaned forward with renewed curiosity.

If the destruction was recent, it was likely the work of a monster attack. Blanc felt a twinge of disappointment at being beaten to the punch. But for an NPC monster faction to demolish an entire town so thoroughly, and so early into the event, seemed unlikely.

That left one plausible culprit—another monster player.

"Maybe it's someone I could be friends with! What do you think?"

"Player..." Magenta said hesitantly, her brows knitting together. "You mean someone like yourself—one of your countrymen?"

“Yeah, exactly! If the town was destroyed by a player, they’re probably someone like me. And if that’s the case, maybe we’d get along!”

“Even if it is as you say…this player would have reduced an entire town to rubble in less than two days. They’re likely immensely powerful. Please approach with caution, my lady.”

“Aw, don’t worry so much! It’ll be fine. Probably.” Blanc grinned, already imagining the potential meeting. “A fellow monster player, huh? This could be fun!”

As Blanc’s group continued forward, the hill of rubble Magenta had described finally came into view.

What had once been a town sprawled across a gentle slope now appeared as if the entire settlement had become a single massive heap of debris and churned earth.

“Whoa…this is…seriously bad,” Blanc muttered, her usual levity replaced with unease as the scene sent a chill down her spine.

She couldn’t begin to imagine what kind of power could devastate a place to this extent.

“Why didn’t the people from that last town come here for help?” she asked, her voice trailing off.

“They might have known about this situation,” Magenta offered, though she quickly added, “but it’s more likely a simple matter of distance. There was probably another settlement closer to the northwestern side of the last town.”

“Hmm, that makes sense. Judging by this mess, there’s probably no one alive here…but let’s stay cautious, just in case—”

“My lady!”

Azalea suddenly grabbed Blanc’s arm and yanked her off her perch atop Crimson and the other Spartoi, sending her tumbling to the ground.

“Ow! What was that f—”

Her protest was cut short as an arrow struck the ground right in front of her, the soft *thunk* punctuated by the realization that it had been aimed at her.

“Whoa…thanks, Azalea,” Blanc breathed, her heart racing.

“Do not stand just yet,” Azalea warned, her tone low and urgent. “There’s a group targeting us.”

Peering through the gaps between the Spartoi’s legs, Blanc

spotted a cluster of figures in the distance. They appeared lightly armed, moving deliberately as they advanced. Bandits, perhaps?

"No…their coordination is far too precise," Magenta interjected, her voice tinged with tension. "And let me remind you, my lady—it is currently nighttime. For them to be able to shoot so accurately under moonlight alone suggests exceptional skill."

Despite their remarkable accuracy, their appearance was far from polished. They looked ragged, clad in battered armor that seemed as though it had been salvaged from the ruins around them.

"And let me remind you," Blanc muttered dryly, "I'm perfectly aware that it's night."

The lightly armed group continued their slow advance, their formation tightening as they approached.

"Who are you?! Are you agents of the harbinger?" the leader, a man with slightly finer—though still weathered—attire, shouted. Even he looked worn and grimy, as though no one in the group had escaped the disaster that had befallen this place.

"What do they mean by 'harbinger'?" Blanc asked, frowning as she tried to make sense of the accusation.

"Judging by the context, I'd guess it refers to the entity that destroyed this town," Azalea replied evenly.

"In that case, we're catching the blame for someone else's mess," Carmine added with a note of irritation.

Blanc shrugged. "I mean…it's not like we can really complain. We *did* come here planning to raze the place if it wasn't already in ruins."

"Perhaps, but whether we're the hunters or the hunted here remains to be seen," Magenta interjected, her tone cautious.

"What? Are these guys seriously that dangerous?" Blanc asked, alarmed.

"If their skill with bows is comparable to their close combat abilities," Magenta continued, "our thirty Spartoi may find this engagement…challenging."

Blanc had assumed the ragtag group before her was no different from the guards she'd easily overpowered before. Evidently, their shabby appearance was misleading; these enemies were on another level entirely.

"So running away is out of the question," Blanc muttered.

“They’d just pin us with arrows if we tried…”

“It seems our only option is to fight,” Azalea said, her calm voice belying the tension in the air. “And if we must fight, it would be wise to act first.”

“Got it. Let’s get started. *Mist!*” Blanc called, casting her spell.

Dark, swirling mist spread silently outward, quickly enveloping the battlefield. Almost immediately, the enemy grew restless. While they couldn’t seem to sense the mist itself, their instincts were sharp enough to warn them something was amiss before they were fully shrouded. These opponents were a far cry from the lowly town guards Blanc had faced before.

“Foul sorcery! Be on your guard!” the leader barked. “All units, stay alert! Permission to engage!”

“Spartoi! Counterattack! Stay within the mist’s boundary!” Blanc ordered, her voice cutting through the growing chaos. Even as she gave the command, she began preparing her next spell. The enemy was just on the edge of her range, but they were closing in fast.

“*Hellflame!*” Blanc chanted, unleashing a torrent of fiery destruction.

“*Hellflame!*” chorused the three Mormos, their spells igniting alongside Blanc’s.

The combined force of four *Hellflames* tore through the battlefield, spreading chaos and fire among the advancing enemy. However, the devastation wasn’t enough to stop them entirely. While a few enemies fell, most managed to recover from the shock and continued their charge undeterred.

As they continued to fight, Blanc couldn’t help but panic. “No way! That didn’t work? These guys are insane!” she exclaimed.

“I did warn you,” Azalea said, her tone calm but pointed.

The Spartoi had engaged the enemy in close combat by now. While the earlier magic had weakened the opposition, making them stagger or collapse when struck, the Spartoi’s attacks struggled to connect due to a glaring disadvantage.

“It’s the weapon’s reach,” Carmine observed. “We should have confiscated those weapons from the earlier guards.”

Blanc groaned. “Yeah, but who could’ve known we’d need those crummy swords? We left them because we thought they’d just slow us down.”

Looking at the dwindling numbers of Spartoi, Blanc realized the situation was dire. Only a few regulars and the named elites—Crimson, Vermilion, and Scarlet—remained. The tide of battle was shifting rapidly, with the enemy still pressing forward despite their heavy losses.

"Does this mean we weren't even supposed to be here yet? Like, difficulty-wise?" Blanc muttered nervously, watching as the balance tipped further against them.

The remaining Spartoi held their ground, but the enemy's relentless assault whittled them down further. Blanc winced as another fell. Soon, it was just the elite three against the ever-advancing enemy.

"Oh, wait!" Recalling the existence of *Enchantment Magic*, Blanc desperately shouted, "*Fear!*"

The spell swept through the battlefield, but the enemies didn't even flinch. They'd all resisted it.

"It doesn't matter for the Spartoi, but our enemies have lost nearly all their forces and yet they continue to attack without hesitation," Magenta observed grimly. "Their morale is unnaturally high. They don't seem to fear death at all."

Blanc frowned. "Why doesn't it matter for our troops?"

"Because, my lord," Azalea explained matter-of-factly, "your Spartoi will simply resurrect at the previous town we rested in."

"Oh, right... Wait, so maybe they're the same? What if their leader has some sort of resurrection ability for them too?"

"An astute deduction," Magenta conceded. "If their leader belongs to the ruling class of humanity, they may indeed possess similar powers."

Their discussion was cut short as a lone enemy slipped past Crimson and charged toward Blanc.

"Whoa! *Thunderbolt!*" Blanc reacted on instinct. The spell struck true, halting the attacker for a moment, but they pressed on, clearly battered yet undeterred.

"*Ice Bullet!*"

"*Flare Arrow!*"

Carmine's spell missed, though it forced the enemy to stumble over debris. In the same instant, Magenta, now in her wolf form, dashed forward and tore out the assailant's throat with a swift bite.

“Nice! But that was too close…” Blanc sighed, relief washing over her. “I think we’re—”

“My lord!” Azalea’s urgent cry cut through the moment.

Blanc snapped her head forward in time to see the enemy commander taking aim with a bow.

He still has arrows?! And he’s good with a bow?!

Time seemed to slow as the arrow left the bowstring.

This is it. I’m toast.

Blanc shut her eyes, bracing for the fatal blow and the inevitable system message heralding her demise.

But instead of the cold monotone of the system, she heard an earthshaking explosion.

“Wait…what?!” Blanc’s eyes shot open in confusion.

Chapter 6: The End of the Kingdom of Hilith

“—And that’s how it all went down!” Blanc concluded her tale with a flourish, her enthusiasm lighting up the room.

It was an outlandish, almost fantastical story, but undeniably entertaining.

But most of all, it was reassuring. If this was how Blanc had gained *Retainer* and her other unique abilities, then it wasn’t something other players would replicate easily.

“So, a vampire, huh? Vampires can use their own blood to transform their minions into stronger forms?” Leah asked, mulling over the implications.

Blanc nodded eagerly, and Leah turned the information over in her mind. The LP and MP costs seemed steep, but those resources regenerated naturally over time. From a practical standpoint, it was an efficient ability. The restrictions—being limited to minions bound by the vampire and likely only undead or similar creatures—kept it balanced. It wasn’t quite the same as Leah’s *Retainer*, but it was a quintessentially vampire-like power, steeped in theme.

“So, Leah, what’s your race? It’s obviously not one of the starting options, right?”

Leah hesitated, carefully considering her response.

Blanc seemed honest enough not to spread Leah’s secrets, but that same honesty had just led her to lay out her story without a hint of reservation, offering details that could easily become liabilities in the wrong hands. Could Blanc keep her mouth zipped if it came to it? Leah doubted it.

But say that, hypothetically, they were to form some kind of alliance. Or, by some one-in-a-million twist of fate, end up on each other’s *friend lists*—hypothetically. Withholding the truth now would only breed mistrust later.

It was clear Blanc would eventually find out the truth, and besides, Blanc had been honest. It only seemed fair to answer in kind.

“I’m…”

Blanc and her Mormos—Azalea, Carmine, and Magenta—

leaned forward as one, their eyes gleaming with curiosity. Despite their distinct features, their expressions were so in sync that Leah couldn't help but wonder: Did minions, no matter how much INT or MND they had, inevitably mirror their master in some way?

"I'm"—Leah paused, savoring the moment—"a Queen of Destruction."

Blanc's jaw dropped. "Wait, for real?!"

Leah grinned, feeling the weight of the reveal. "Yep. That's my current race. I actually started as an elf, but..."

And just like that, Leah found herself caught up in her own tale, recounting the twists and turns of her journey.

"So that means—those ants are your minions now, Miss Leah? Which means they avenged me, right?" Blanc asked, leaning forward eagerly.

Leah tilted her head, considering. She couldn't be sure that there weren't other ant-filled caves on the continent, but it seemed likely from context that the ones in question were Sugaru's. "That wasn't really my intention," she admitted, shrugging. "But I guess you could look at it that way. They're my minions now, though, so I'd appreciate it if you could forgive them for destroying the city."

"Of course!" Blanc said brightly, before tilting her head curiously. "But wait, Miss Leah—have you been playing solo this whole time?"

With a *whump*, Leah's wings stretched reflexively at the sudden question.

Wings weren't a natural feature of her starting race, and she was still growing accustomed to controlling them. Even so, she managed to keep the rest of herself composed. Progress.

"Yeah, pretty much," Leah said, folding her wings neatly. "My playstyle isn't exactly...standard, I guess. But I've talked with other players here and there."

Leah left out the part about how she'd PK'd all her conversation partners.

"Really?" Blanc's grin widened. "I've always thought my playstyle was kind of out there too! Guess that makes us two of a kind! Don't you think?"

Leah allowed herself a small smile. This was promising.

"Yeah, I think we'll get along, Miss Blanc."

“You can just call me Blanc!” she corrected with a laugh, waving her hands. “Oh—hey, Miss Leah—want to, um, exchange *friend cards*?”

“Sure.” Leah thrust forward her friend card a little too eagerly.

When it came to sheer numbers of friend registrations, Leah was unmatched—not with players, of course, but minions. She’d honed the process to the point where it was practically muscle memory.

“Thanks!” Blanc said as she took the card. She turned it over in her hands. “So…what is this?”

Leah blinked, realizing the issue. “Oh, you’ve never done this before, huh? You just put the card into your inventory,” she explained patiently. “Once it’s in there, we’re officially friends. If we both exchange cards, it’s a mutual registration.”

Not that a mutual friendship is much different from a one-way registration in this game, but still.

“Got it!” Blanc nodded enthusiastically. “Now, where’s my card…?”

After a brief tutorial on accessing her inventory, Blanc finally managed to locate and hand over her own card. The exchange completed, Leah and Blanc officially became mutual friends.

“My very first friend!” Blanc declared, her face lighting up with delight.

“You’re my first…player friend too,” Leah admitted with a small smile. “And, uh, no need for formalities. Just call me Leah.”

“Got it, Lealea!” Blanc chirped without missing a beat.

Whump. Leah’s wings flared reflexively again.

Once the friend registration was smoothly completed and they’d established an understanding of each other’s positions, the two began to discuss the current situation.

“So, my current species is Queen of Destruction,” Leah began. “And it seems humanity is gunning for me because they’ve decided I’m a ‘harbinger.’ Oh, right, a harbinger is—”

Leah launched into an explanation about the concept of harbingers. Since she hadn’t thoroughly researched it on social media yet, some of her account was speculative, but her overall understanding wasn’t far off.

“—and that’s why it’s actually better for me if they think I’m just

an NPC event boss," she concluded. "It lets me efficiently monitor humanity's movements through their SNS chatter."

"Oh! Because if they figured out you're a player, they'd stop casually discussing their plans on social media!" Blanc nodded, looking impressed. "Makes sense. So, *you* were the big bad harbinger everyone's been talking about, huh, Lealea?"

"If you say so," Leah said with a small shrug. "Which brings me to an idea: Blanc, what if you role-played as an NPC boss too?"

"That's awesome! An evil femme fatale! The beautiful vampire, right hand to the Queen of Destruction!" Blanc spun in place with wild excitement. "This is *crazy intense*! No, scratch that—it's *EPIC*! Absolutely *EPIC*!"

"Epic?" Leah blinked but let it pass. "Well, I'm glad you're into it. So, if you happen to encounter any other players, just stick to that role, okay?"

"Roger that! I gotta start brainstorming some cool lines—I mean, this kind of thing needs the perfect vibe, right?"



Leah chuckled softly. “If you do end up talking to other players, it’s better to keep it brief. I tend to say too much when I get excited, and that’s how you accidentally give things away.”

From Leah’s perspective, she’d found an ideal ally for her current circumstances. She made a mental note to invite Blanc along if they encountered any groups of human players in the future. A team-up sounded promising.

“So, what’s your plan, Blanc?” Leah asked. “Are you heading for the town northwest of the last one?”

“Hmm, probably! The road from here leads to the capital, right? Since you’ve got that one covered, I’ll go hit up another route. If we divide and conquer, we’ll dismantle this country even faster!” Though there was a faint—nigh imperceptible, really—twinge of loneliness at parting ways, Leah had to admit that splitting up was more efficient. While she had some concerns about Blanc’s forces, there wasn’t much she could do to address that.

“Here, take this,” Leah said, retrieving a map from her inventory—something she’d received as a reward at some point—and handing it to Blanc.

“Huh? A map? They have maps in this game? Even the count’s library didn’t have one of these!” Blanc exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Technically, there were maps in the library,” one of Blanc’s Mormos added helpfully (though Leah couldn’t tell which one it was), “but they were so old they were useless as references.”

“I managed to get this through a connection of mine,” Leah explained. “I’ve got others like it, so you can have this. It should help with your invasion plans.”

“Are you certain?” the Mormos asked. “After you already saved our lives, now you’re giving us something so valuable?”

“It’s fine. Blanc is my, uh—we’re friends now. Oh, and one more thing.”

Unfastening the sword at her waist, Leah handed it to Blanc, scabbard and all.

“This sword is a monster in its own right,” Leah explained. “Even if you can’t wield it yourself, it’ll attack your enemies autonomously. Once you take down the next town, send me a message in chat or something. I’d love to hear how it went.”

“Of course!” Blanc grinned wide, clutching the items.

The two straightened up, exchanging a moment of mutual

respect. They could have continued chatting, but there would be time for that later.

“Good luck, Blanc. I’ll be rooting for you,” Leah said, giving a nod.

“You too, Lealea! See you later!” Blanc called back with a wave.

The Mormos transformed into bats and took to the skies, while Blanc, carried aloft by her three red skeletons—Scarlet, Vermilion, and Crimson—set off.

Leah stood there for a while, watching the surreal image of a vampire borne by skeletal warriors until they disappeared from view.

***

[Celebration] Thread: Harbinger Defeated! [Event Boss Vanquished]

001: Tough and Doesn’t Peel

This thread commemorates the defeat of the event boss. Participants can post your joy if you were there, or your envy if you weren’t.

002: Amatain

Thread OP, good job.

003: Anonymous Elf

Nicely done! How’d you find out it was defeated, though? I was about to start a thread myself, but I didn’t expect someone who respawned to beat me to it.

004: Tough and Doesn’t Peel

Well, I was looking at my skill screen, and when you see a sudden burst of experience like that, it’s kind of obvious, you know?

005: Amatain

Yeah, that experience gain was wild. We owe the

leader a big thanks.

006: Monkey Dive Sasuke
>005 And Gil too. If he hadn’t spotted that thread, we probably wouldn’t have made it there.

007: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Elf, you survived, right? Being in the backline and all. Did you get any drops?

008: Anonymous Elf
Yeah, I made it.
There were drops, but the same item was scattered all over the town. Decent quality, I think, but with that many out there, I doubt they’ll be worth much.

009: Amatain
Figures. This event felt more about the experience gain anyway. No XP loss either—it was probably designed to be an XP-heavy boss fight.

010: Orinkii
Makes sense. Even if you sold the items, they wouldn’t go for much. Honestly, I wouldn’t mind if we just let the leader keep everything.

011: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Nah, Wayne would probably insist on splitting it. Even if it’s just symbolic, it’s better to distribute stuff.

012: Country Pop
Sasuke, we only met today, but you’re, well...

013: Amatain
Yeah, you’re definitely that.

014: Monkey Dive Sasuke
What the hell does “that” mean?

015: Sonote Atataka
Sasuke, you’re surprisingly thoughtful despite your rough language.

016: Country Pop
Aww, here it comes.

017: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Cut it out! It’s not like that!

018: Arafubuki
Sorry, is this thread a joke or something? What’s an event boss?

019: Amatain
>018 This is sort of a follow-up thread. A while back, there was one titled something like “Confirmed Event Boss—Assemble at Hilith’s Capital,” and this is the after-party, so to speak.

020: Arafubuki
Wait, what? Event boss? Seriously? You actually beat it already?

021: No Garnish
Ugh, just another top-tier group taking all the rewards.

022: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Well, it was a tricky location and the timing was tight. If you’ve got complaints, direct them to the devs.

...

...
...

052: Gealgamesh
Man, that thing was insane.

053: Wayne
Sorry, everyone.

054: Mentai-list
The harbinger’s back. And it’s stronger now.

055: Anonymous Elf
>054 Huh? What do you mean?

056: Mentai-list
Exactly what it sounds like. The harbinger powered up and returned. Wayne thinks that last fight wasn’t a final boss battle—it was a transformation event. For the boss.

057: Gealgamesh
That checks out. Here’s what we’ve confirmed so far:
New ranged physical attacks.
Some kind of area buff ability.
Silent (no casting motion) magic attacks.
Spells are way more accurate—nearly impossible to dodge.
Three times the number of wings.
Glowing eyes.

058: Wayne
>057 The second half sounds like a toy ad, but yeah, that’s accurate. It wasn’t a second form; it was a third. And silent casting is brutal—it’s like getting hit with a surprise insta-kill.

059: Mentai-list
That small black-hole-like spell the knights got hit with? Yeah, that’s what I’m guessing. By the end, the power gap was so massive we couldn’t even feel like resisting.

060: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Wait, that’s an actual spell? What the hell?

061: Amatain
We’ve still got almost a week left in the event. I figured it wouldn’t end with the boss being defeated on day two, but I didn’t expect this to be the big mid-event reveal.

062: Monkey Dive Sasuke
No way. I burned through so many items for that fight. That’s not fair.

063: Mentai-list
Yeah, Soulbind Stones were tough to lose, but considering the XP gain, it was probably worth it overall.

064: Monkey Dive Sasuke
What about the Squidink Bombs?

065: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
Those were way cheaper, lol.

066: Wayne
Sorry, but I died before I could grab the boss’s metal drop. And the capital is done for. After I died the second time, I couldn’t respawn at the royal palace.

067: Mentai-list
The capital...yeah, there’s no saving it. But I managed to grab a few metal pieces while escaping the city.

068: Gealgamesh
Wow, you’re incredible! Wait, where are you right now, Mentai?

069: Mentai-list
In Wels. A town called Chiarro—it’s been my base. What about you, Wayne?

070: Wayne
...I have no idea where I am. It’s another random respawn. Again.

071: Country Pop
Leader, is this your third random spawn in half a day?

072: Anonymous Elf
Wow. You might be cursed or something.

***

Game Lore Speculation Megathread Part 5
053: Professor Mori-artsy
To summarize, there are six harbingers known worldwide:
The Primordial, the Archdemon, the Archangel, the King of Insects, Rulers of the Seas, and the Golden Dragon. Does that sound right?

054: Haust
You’d need to add the Undead Angel from the current event. It was already defeated, but it should be

documented.

055: Kuraaku
Actually, it seems that Undead Angel powered up and came back. It killed three players still in Hilith’s royal capital and then completely took over the city.

056: Haust
Wait, are you saying Hilith is gone?

057: Kuraaku
Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying.

058: Professor Mori-artsy
The NPCs’ term for it isn’t clear, but we should establish a name for it in this thread for now.

059: Saint Regan
You’re always so reliable, Professor.

060: Justise
If it’s an Undead Angel, how about “Angel of Death”?

061: Professor Mori-artsy
Too close to “Archangel.”

062: Saint Regan
It flies, right? How about “Celestial King”?

063: Professor Mori-artsy
Too similar to “Celestial Citadel,” and it doesn’t highlight the Undead aspect.

064: Haust
How about “Descending Death”?

065: Justise
Poetic.

066: Professor Mori-artsy
Not bad, but it’s a bit cringe to say out loud...

067: Saint Reagan
The Professor’s dropping their stoic act!

068: Makuraren
Quick question—are those six harbingers the only ones?

069: Haust
There are seven total. Up until now, every country only recognized six.

070: Makuraren
So, there’s this legend in my village about a dragon that used to live atop a nearby mountain. No one’s seen it in ages, but back in the day, it caused crazy intense damage.

071: Professor Mori-artsy
Is it different from the dragon in the Arctic? Could there be more?

072: Kuraaku
Which village are you talking about?

073: Makuraren
A place called Peare’s Route Village.

074: Saint Regan
Never heard of it.

075: Haust
Forget that—what about the seventh harbinger's name? Can we go with my suggestion?

076: Professor Mori-artsy
Actually, let's just use that. The provisional name is "Seventh Harbinger."

***

After parting ways with Blanc in Rokillean, Leah instructed Sugaru to arrange the air transport of infantry and worker ants to the area. This time, she made sure they would conduct a thorough underground exploration to guarantee nothing was overlooked. With these final steps, she could finally close the chapter on Rokillean.

Using *Summon Summoner*, Leah returned to the capital and immediately turned her attention to the social network, scrolling through the latest shared information.

"So, there are six harbingers identified aside from me," she murmured, her voice thoughtful.

The data, drawn primarily from NPC legends and records, lacked reliability, but that didn't bother her. Leah wasn't looking for absolute truth—she only cared about the shared perception among players and NPCs. If both groups believed the newly emerged Queen of Destruction was the seventh Harbinger of Destruction, then behaving accordingly would ensure she didn't stand out.

"Still," she mused, leaning back, "it's probably safe to assume the NPCs' count of harbingers isn't entirely accurate."

Her thoughts wandered to the Kingdom of Hilith's leadership. They seemed to view the Fey King as an ally rather than a threat to humanity. If that assessment was correct, the Fey King likely wouldn't be classified as a Harbinger.

Leah frowned, tapping her fingers on the desk. "I wonder if the Fey King would even be announced as one. That sort of classification—system designation, really—was probably decided by the developers. Whatever the NPCs think likely doesn't matter." She sighed, muttering, "I need to figure out how to get my hands

on that Oracle skill."

Considering its name, the skill was probably tied to religious NPCs. She'd glossed over temples and churches thus far as she hadn't thought they'd mattered. By now, most of those NPCs in the capital were probably getting back up as undead…which would wipe away all their skills.

Leah grimaced. "That was a mistake. From now on, if I encounter a religious NPC, I should *Dominate* them instead of killing them."

The idea of tracking down another Oracle crossed her mind, but it was hard to tell if any remained in the other cities of Hilith. Very few players had reported NPCs discussing harbingers in the kingdom. In contrast, rumors suggested that in other nations, street preachers openly talked about such calamities. Perhaps Hilith had imposed an internal information restriction to control news about the disasters within its borders.

"Information isn't exchanged in real time between countries…yet, but that won't always be the case," Leah mused. Her tone sharpened as she considered the implications. "If a player became a knight or infiltrated a government's inner circle, their nation's information-gathering abilities would be on another level entirely."

Still, someone like that wouldn't post their findings on social media. They'd be like Leah—quietly absorbing everything.

Her fingers drummed against the interface as her thoughts shifted to potential threats. "I'll have to account for players like that. If one of them gets their hands on one of those artifacts, it could spell trouble…another loss."

The idea unsettled her. Leah's gaze darkened as a new possibility came to mind. "They could even use social media to manipulate information."

"This is big news—I should share this with my, heh, f-friend. Better to do it sooner…" She pulled up the friend chat interface, but then hesitated, her brows furrowing. "But what if they're in combat? I'd just annoy them. Maybe I should wait until I'm out of the country…but acting quickly might be better."

In the end, Leah sighed and dismissed the interface. She decided against sending the message that day.

***

Leah had achieved her initial goal of transforming the capital into a ruined stronghold. Now, she needed a new plan to guide her next steps.

"Let's start with the big picture," she said to herself. "The ultimate goal has to be conquering the continent. That's inevitable if I'm going to keep the promise I made to Sieg when I appointed him as my retainer—to destroy the remaining five nations. Of course, that'll mean going to war with every human-side player, but there are probably others like Blanc out there. If I can find them and work together, we might stand a chance."

Still, alliances came with risks. Leah's identity as a Queen of Destruction, her status as a harbinger raid boss, and other sensitive information couldn't be freely shared. Even if their interests aligned, trusting others too easily would invite disaster.

"As a stepping stone toward taking the continent, I'll start by securing complete control of the Kingdom of Hilith," she decided. "I need to define what 'control' means, though. Invading every town and village would take forever. In a normal war, you'd capture the capital, force the leadership to surrender, and negotiate a peace deal on your terms. But that's not an option here."

The Fey King's inheritance, it seemed, carried more weight than the kingdom itself. Leah wondered if it was a critical asset for fending off other harbingers, something the kingdom's leaders refused to let fall into enemy hands.

Whatever the truth, she couldn't worry about it now. What mattered was deciding how to handle the remaining cities in Hilith.

"For now, I'll plant a World Tree terminal in the center of each city I take, then release ants and treants to turn it into a green, overgrown ruin," she said, tapping her fingers against the desk. "If I can create paradise cities for ants and treants, replacing humans with ants and houses with treants one at a time, I'll eventually gain full control."

One problem stood in the way: Sugaru's *Rebirth*.

There was a good reason as to why this was such a priority for Leah at the moment. The number of retainers that Sugaru could produce as a queen vespoid had hit its limit.

She hadn’t kept an exact count of the ants under her command, but the current numbers worked fine for managing operations in the Great Woods of Lieb and the underground areas of the neighboring plains. Expanding her reach, though, would stretch her forces far too thin.

The numbers just wouldn’t cut it for larger invasions.

Even the treants had limits on their growth and density within a specific range, so it made sense to assume the ants operated under similar constraints.

That meant Leah needed a new queen ant.

The eggs Sugaru laid always predetermined the type of ant they would grow into. It stood to reason that if the next queen ant were to be born, it would have to be designated as such the moment it was laid as an egg.

In other words, since there was no skill in the current tree for producing next-generation queen eggs, some kind of breakthrough would be necessary to create another queen-class ant.

The situation reminded Leah of the World Tree’s *Root Cutting* skill. Even though the skill allowed her to spread parts of the World Tree, it couldn’t create an entirely new tree. Similarly, it was entirely possible that Sugaru had a built-in limitation preventing her from producing another queen of equal rank. So she figured, in that case, she might as well aim for a breakthrough by reincarnating Sugaru into something stronger.

“The experience points I spent earlier should be easy to recover from the capital’s residents, thanks to the event’s EXP boost. And since there’s no penalty for dying right now, the player battle I had yesterday afternoon ended up as a net gain for me, considering how many I killed. Lucky—I’m so lucky! Ha ha ha!”

Yes, everything was under control. Leah was perfectly calm.

“This should cover the cost of Sugaru’s *Rebirth*. As for saving up extra… I’ll start stockpiling from tomorrow.”

Still, Leah knew the more experience she spent, the more she’d need to hold in reserve for emergencies.

“If I die…everything will go to waste. But if I don’t die, it won’t be a problem,” she said, her tone shifting to self-assurance.

And really, investing now made sense, even as a way to reduce the risk of death in the first place.

Leah used *Summon* to bring herself to Sugaru's location, arriving in the queen's chamber. Inside, the wolf pups tumbled over each other in playful scuffles.

Right, she'd left Diaz to babysit them. While in the capital, she'd wondered what had become of the pups, but it seemed Sugaru had taken on their care. Not wanting to forget, Leah used *Summon* again, this time calling Diaz. He appeared surrounded by the pups, who eagerly pestered him as he made his way to his usual spot by the wall.

"Sorry about yesterday," Leah said, smiling slightly. "I didn't mean to die on you like that. Also, thanks for your work restoring the forest."

<Not at all, Lady Leah. By the way...doesn't Diaz look rather impressive now in his new form?>

"Ha ha ha, you should've seen me in my youth—"

As she suspected, his personality had become a bit more troublesome. Returning closer to a human form after being undead had brought back a layer of human quirks, perhaps even remnants of his old life. It wasn't intolerable, but Leah made a mental note to keep tabs on it.

"Well, you're about to look even cooler, Sugaru—probably."

Without delay, Leah opened her inventory and withdrew a greater philosopher's stone.

She had left the standard philosopher's stones in the capital but always kept the Greater versions under her personal management. The difference between an ordinary *Rebirth* and an advanced one was too significant to risk mishandling.

"All right, Sugaru, it's time for your *Rebirth*. Come here."

Leah handed the greater philosopher's stone to Sugaru. The egg-shaped vial glowed as it dissolved in her hand, transforming into light that merged seamlessly into her body.

<<Your retainer has met the conditions for Rebirth.>>
<<Would you like to be reborn into "Queen Insect"?>>
<<Would you like to spend 3,000 experience points to Rebirth into "Queen Asrapada"?>>

Three thousand points. The number wasn't just recent—it carried memories. It was the same amount Leah had needed for her own *Rebirth* into the Queen of Destruction or the Fey King.

This meant Sugaru would ascend to the same level as Leah herself. The King of the Undead had required only 1,000 experience points, a noticeably smaller cost. If those values reflected potential, even among calamity-class beings, the range of power could vary significantly.

"I'll pay the 3,000 and allow the *Rebirth* into Queen Asrapada. Then again, the World Tree demanded 5,000, didn't it? Based purely on cost, the World Tree would rank higher..."

`<<Rebirth initiated.>>`

"What does 'Asrapada' even mean? Is it split into 'Asra' and 'Pada'? Asra? Ashura? Pada... Paada? Ashura Paaada... Oh, wait. Arthropod?"

As the light faded, Sugaru's new form became visible—smaller than before, by about a full size.

"Oh? Now that's impressive!" Leah exclaimed.

Sugaru's silhouette had taken on a much more human shape. Her face was covered by a masklike layer of what appeared to be tough, shell-like skin. It didn't look as if it would allow for much expressiveness. If she truly was the queen of an arthropod species, this exoskeleton was probably just that—a carapace.

The carapace split vertically at her mouth, resembling two separate masks—one for the upper jaw and another for the lower. Her head had antennae and appeared to have hair, but the soft, feathery texture reminded Leah of a Japanese silk moth more than a human.

Her eyes were compound, slightly recessed behind her masklike face, and positioned roughly where a human's eyes would be. Sugaru's body was segmented at each joint, fully encased in a hard exoskeleton. The closest comparison Leah could think of was a ball-jointed doll.

But the humanlike silhouette stopped there.

Sugaru now had three pairs of arms. Counting her legs, that gave her eight limbs in total—decidedly inhuman. Behind the base

of her legs, in what would correspond to a human's hips, extended an abdomen resembling that of ants or wasps. At first glance, it looked like a thick tail.

Her torso also bore a segmented structure, like the pedicel connecting the abdomen to the thorax in insects. Leah wondered how legs could grow from that lower section—it didn't quite add up.

Her three pairs of arms and two pairs of wings sprouted from her thorax, consistent with insects' winged body segments. Below that, her anatomy seemed to merge with traits from other arthropods. Perhaps this was some sort of hybridization.

<<Disaster-class entity "Queen of Insects" has been born.>>
<<The standard message has been canceled because "Queen of Insects" is already under an existing faction's control.>>

"It's like an all-you-can-have package... Well, at least it looks cool, so I can't complain," Leah said with a grin.

<Thank you, Lady Leah. I feel...incredibly powerful. I understand now why you ventured out yesterday,> Sugaru said, her voice laced with awe.

"What do you mean?" Leah asked, raising an eyebrow.

<With power like this, the temptation to test it must be irresistible,> Sugaru replied.

"Ah...well..." Leah trailed off, considering the point. She hadn't gone on her outing for that reason, but now that Sugaru mentioned it, she couldn't completely deny it.

Sugaru glanced at Diaz, who was standing at his usual spot by the wall. <Diaz, despite your impressive new form, you seem remarkably composed,> she noted.

Diaz chuckled. "I have more important priorities than indulging in my strength."

"Still," Leah said, turning back to Sugaru, "I noticed the system referred to you as a 'Disaster-class entity,' not a 'Specific Disaster-class entity.' Maybe it's because you're not a targeted threat to any one faction, like undead or demon lords. Or maybe it's because

you’re troublesome for everyone—a sort of neutral disaster.”

If her guess was correct, the system might have announced Sugaru’s *Rebirth* to every faction character with the relevant skills. That would’ve meant more enemies targeting them, something Leah didn’t need.

“Well, there’s no use worrying about it now. Let’s focus on the new skills that just unlocked,” she said, changing the subject.

Leah checked Sugaru’s *Selective Birth* skill tree but found no new skills available. However, an entirely new tree called *Proliferation: Insects* had unlocked.

The first skill in the tree, *Queen Ant*, seemed likely to be the one for producing new queen ants. Leah wasted no time unlocking it.

Unlike the usual method of laying ant eggs, this skill required experience points to use, following the same system as the treants’ *Root Cutting* skill. Even with the cost, the ability to produce a new queen-class ant outweighed the expense. Leah paid the necessary experience points and instructed Sugaru to use the skill.

<This egg is much larger than usual,> Sugaru observed. <It also seems to take slightly longer to hatch.>

For regular ant soldiers, the eggs were about two sizes smaller and typically hatched almost immediately. This one seemed different—it wouldn’t take days, but it also wouldn’t hatch within seconds.

“Well, we’ll just have to wait a bit. Let’s take a look at the other skills in the tree while we’re at it,” Leah said, waving a hand toward the interface.

The tree included skills like *Queen Spider* and *Queen Beetle*, listed parallel to *Queen Ant*.

“Spiders make sense—there are social species—but beetles? Do they even have queens?” Leah muttered. “Let’s hold off until I’ve saved up some extra experience points.”

As she reviewed the options, the egg’s membrane began to break. A familiar figure emerged: a queen ant.

It was a queen vespoid.

“With this, we can finally start expanding the front lines,” Leah said, nodding in satisfaction. “Let’s assign the surrounding areas strategically. Diaz’s undead army will guard the capital. The treants and World Tree will secure Trae and Lulude. Sugaru can continue managing Erfahren. And as for the Great Woods of Lieb… With the

nearest town gone, it's become a stable base for us. I think we should turn it into a training ground for managerial roles."

Leah tapped her chin thoughtfully. Even if new managers were summoned to oversee towns, there was no guarantee they'd be ready to handle the task immediately after birth. A relatively safe environment like the forest would be perfect for preparing them in advance.

<Understood. I'll produce a few more queens right away and have them begin their tasks in parallel,> Sugaru said with a nod.

Leah considered the situation. She needed to unlock skills like *Enhance Retainer* for the queens and boost their base stats as much as possible. The stronger their abilities, the greater the benefit to her forces overall. Pouring in experience points was essential.

If she planned to increase the number of queen-class units, she'd need an enormous amount of experience points.

"This is endless..." Leah muttered, sighing.

Her own enhancements still had room for improvement. The same went for the recently reborn Diaz and the rest of her retinue. Sugaru likely had even more skills that could be unlocked.

"First, though, I need to sort out Rokillean. That town sits at the intersection of several major trade routes in the kingdom. It has the potential to become a highly accessible area. Let's temporarily repurpose it as a new beginner-level dungeon."

<In that case, leave Rokillean's management to me,> Sugaru offered. <I have experience with such tasks.>

"That makes sense," Leah agreed. "Also, I'll take a seed from the World Tree and raise an elder to serve as a terminal there. Right now, it's just a pile of rubble—completely bleak. Let's turn it into a lush, natural space that people will want to visit again and again."

If she was serious about turning it into a theme-parklike area, there were other issues she needed to address, starting with lodging.

Without a designated respawn area nearby, players wouldn't have a reason to linger. An area like that would tie guests to the location.

"But maybe it doesn't matter," Leah mused aloud. "If the dungeon itself is compelling enough, players will figure out how to deal with the inconvenience. It's not like every area worth clearing

will have a town conveniently next to it."

She chuckled to herself. If she wanted, she could even ask the developers directly: *What should players do if there's no logout-enabled safety area near a dungeon they want to clear?* Developer responses to player questions were public, but the questioner's identity remained anonymous. Leah could submit the query herself, and if an actionable answer was added to the FAQ, other players would take care of the rest.

"Well then, Sugaru, let's head to Rokillean," Leah said, standing with purpose. "The wasps and ants I sent ahead should have arrived by now."

<Not quite yet, it seems. Shall we move them using *Summon* once they're there?> Sugaru suggested.

"No... I'd like to test your flight capabilities while we're at it. Let's fly there together. Besides, it'll be more fun this way," Leah replied, then glanced at Diaz. "Diaz, you're on babysitting duty."

Diaz gave a resigned sigh. "Your Majesty, I trust you understand..."

"I won't fight alone, I promise," Leah reassured him. "Sugaru will be with me."

With that, Leah took off with Sugaru, soaring toward Rokillean to begin transforming it into her envisioned forest park.

***

Kelli and her crew had made their choice: they would join the defense effort in the town of Cornatol. The town lay three days' journey south of the Great Woods of Lieb at the pace of the white wolves. It was a decision that aligned with the boss's orders: *Help the humans.*

Everything had started with one simple sentence. Back then, Kelli had turned to Leah and said, *"I want you to be our boss."*

That single moment had changed everything. Meeting the boss had reshaped their lives in ways they never could have imagined.

Now, someone had dared to harm the boss. The thought was infuriating, utterly unforgivable.

But no matter how much it burned in their chests, there was nothing they could do right now. Their orders were clear: stay in Cornatol and watch how things unfolded. Even if it grated on

them, they had no choice but to follow the boss's instructions.

<We've decided to take part in the town's defense. What about you?> Kelli asked the white wolves over friend chat.

<Defense battles aren't really our specialty,> one of the wolves replied, after a thoughtful pause.

<The boss didn't give you any specific orders,> Kelli continued. <Originally, the plan was for the boss to move to the volcano using *Summon*, so maybe you could go ahead and start clearing the path to the volcano?>

<Makes sense. Leave it to us,> the white wolf said confidently.

<Thanks. I'll count on you for that,> Kelli said with a slight nod.

When Kelli and her crew stayed in town, they rented an inn. The white wolves, however, couldn't stay in town accommodations—they were far too large. Instead, they made a temporary den off the main road, finding a quiet spot free from monsters. It seemed they'd even registered their respawn point there, making it a safe fallback if needed.

After wrapping up the friend chat, Kelli turned back to Lemmy, Riley, and Marion. She studied their faces for a moment, letting her thoughts drift before speaking.

"Hakuma and his hounds will head to the volcano as planned. We'll stick to our orders and defend this town," Kelli said, addressing the group.

"Understood. So, what's been attacking this town, anyway?" Lemmy asked. "I didn't get a chance to check before we left this morning."

At a glance, the town didn't seem to be in a dire state.

The walls appeared intact, and there were no signs of enemies having breached them yet. It was possible the monsters attacking lacked the power to destroy the outer walls or gates, but that was just speculation.

"Not sure," Kelli replied. "We'd probably find out if we checked with the Mercenary Guild or something. It didn't look too serious to me, though."

"Still," Lemmy said, "the town probably isn't able to maintain trade or supply lines, right? Especially for things like essential

goods.”

Kelli nodded. Lemmy had a point. As someone who ran a shop in Erfahren, Lemmy had a keen sense for these kinds of logistical issues.

“Whatever the enemy may be, there’s no shortage of combat strength thanks to the players,” Kelli said. “But players don’t really care about the town’s survival beyond how it benefits them. So even if trade and supplies are cut off, they won’t go out of their way to hunt down the enemy leader. In fact…” She paused, tapping her chin in thought. “Since the day after we left the forest, there’s been something called an ‘event,’ where players earn more experience points for ten days. So they’d rather keep the enemy leader alive during the event period.”

It was a grim reality for the people of this town.

“So, if we’re pretending to be players, we’re doing the same thing, right?” Lemmy asked. “Kill some of the weaker enemies, figure out the players’ strength, and keep our cover.”

“That’s part of it,” Kelli replied. “But Riley, I’ve got a different job in mind for you. Are you up for it?”

“Sure, what is it?” Riley asked.

“While the players are busy playing with the pawns, I want you to sneak into the enemy’s territory and locate the leader,” Kelli explained. “We don’t know if the boss will decide to act after the event or sometime later, but it won’t hurt to have as much information as possible when the time comes.”

“So, you’re Vault Holder mercenaries too, huh? Well, I’m grateful you’re here to protect us. However…is there any way to stop the undead from attacking at night in the first place? I’ve already sent a message to the kingdom. Unfortunately, their response has been…slow,” the weary middle-aged man behind the Mercenary Guild’s reception desk said with a sigh.

It was the day after Kelli and her crew had arrived. They had come to the guild to inquire about the details of the town’s defense. As they’d discussed the night before, the players showed no intention of taking proactive steps to resolve the situation.

As they spoke, a man who appeared to be a mercenary called out from the lobby.

“Well, we’d like to do something about it too, of course,” the

man said, his expression grim. “But not everyone here thinks the same way. And even if one or two of us did head for the undead’s base, it’s not like we’d get anywhere…”

His frustration was obvious. Judging by his tone, he also had storage access—a clear sign he was a player.

Kelli gave the man a quick appraisal. From what she could see, he wasn’t much of a threat. No mercenary of his caliber would have been able to harm the boss, no matter how many of them there were.

“That might be true,” Kelli said coolly. “And you are?”

“Ah… I’m, uh, Gilgamesh,” the man replied, stumbling over his words.

It was a clumsy introduction. Perhaps it was a fake name? But if he was a player, and likely saw Kelli as one too, what reason would he have to give a false name?

Sensing Kelli’s suspicious gaze, the man hurried to explain himself.

“I know what you’re thinking, and no, I’m not who you think I am. It’s just that I managed to snag the name first when I finished my character creation. But now the other guy with the same name is famous, and, well, it’s kind of embarrassing…”

He clearly didn’t understand the nature of Kelli’s scrutiny. Then again, Kelli wasn’t sure what he was trying to say either, so the confusion went both ways.

Kelli remembered something the boss had once mentioned about names and overlap. Maybe players couldn’t share the same name, even if they were completely different individuals.

If Kelli introduced herself here, it might create trouble if there happened to be another player with the same name.

“You can call me Kelli,” she said evenly, gesturing toward her companions. “This is Riley, Lemmy, and Marion. They’re all nicknames, but we’re used to going by them.”

She left it at that.

“You four usually play together?” Gilgamesh asked, his tone curious.

“We do,” Kelli replied. “Though Riley has an errand to run and will be leaving shortly.”

It would be simple to have Riley slip out while pretending to stay in their room at the inn. Riley was well suited to stealth and

reconnaissance, having acquired several skills for moving unseen and observing her surroundings. It was the very reason Kelli had tasked them with investigating the enemy leader.

“So, three of you, then,” Gilgamesh said. “If there’s an attack tonight, why don’t we team up? You haven’t defended this town before, right?”

Kelli couldn’t help but wonder why players like Gilgamesh and others seemed so eager to help. It reminded her of Wayne, another player she had encountered.

To Kelli, it seemed too good to be true. Every stranger who had approached her and her crew in the past had only done so to steal or kill. This apparent goodwill made no sense and only bred distrust.

But Kelli and her crew weren’t innocent either; they had their own agendas.

“That would be helpful,” Kelli said with a polite nod. “There’s a lot we’d like to learn, after all.”

Kelli and her crew parted ways with Gilgamesh for the time being.

There was still plenty of time before the undead would begin moving at night, and Kelli wanted to get a sense of how the town’s residents were faring. Besides, if the enemy only operated at night, it made more sense for Riley to infiltrate during the day.

“I’ll be back,” Riley said before disappearing into the bustling crowd.

Kelli watched Riley vanish, then turned to Lemmy and Marion. Together, the three of them set off to explore the town again.

A quick survey of the marketplace revealed no immediate signs of a serious supply shortage.

It was only the third day since the event had started, so it seemed the impact on trade and logistics hadn’t yet reached critical levels.

“Potions…they’ve gone up a bit in price,” Lemmy observed, scanning a vendor’s wares. “If supplies stay cut off and we can get our hands on the right materials, there might be a chance to make some decent coin.”

“Depending on how tonight goes, it might be better for you to focus on production,” Kelli said thoughtfully. “If the defense is

manageable, we'd be more efficient that way. Our funds aren't limitless, after all."

The price hike likely stemmed from either a lack of raw materials or a shortage of alchemists in the town. That could mean merchants were too afraid to leave the safety of the walls, or it might simply be that there weren't many craftspeople in the area to begin with.

In either case, Kelli felt confident that Lemmy could make it work. She'd always had a knack for turning opportunities like this into profit.

As night began to fall, Kelli and her crew regrouped with Gilgamesh and moved outside the city walls to prepare for battle.

They weren't alone; several mercenaries and town guards were already stationed outside. It was hard to tell at a glance, but some of them were undoubtedly players.

"All right, once the sun starts setting—or, well, just before—it's game on," Gilgamesh said, scanning the horizon. "The enemies should start spawning any moment now."

"Spawning?" Kelli asked, her tone sharp. "What exactly do you mean by that? Are they coming out of the ground?"

"Ah, no, not like that," Gilgamesh replied, shaking his head. "See over there? That rocky patch and the dense forest just beyond it? They crawl out of there. Look—here they come."

Just as Gilgamesh pointed, several undead figures emerged from the forest. They were likely skeleton knights, and they began shuffling toward the town.

The mercenaries, already prepared, quickly dispatched them. The undead crumbled into piles of bones, scattering lifelessly across the ground.

"Feels like there's nothing for us to do," Kelli muttered, crossing her arms.

"For now, yeah," Gilgamesh said with a shrug. "The efficiency-obsessed players here are mowing them down the moment they spawn. But give it some time—once it gets darker, the spawn rate will outpace their kill speed. That's when things get busy."

According to Gilgamesh, these hyperefficient players spent their days hunting in other towns, traveling back and forth in pairs using some kind of once-a-day teleportation service. The process

apparently allowed them to farm experience as efficiently as possible. Kelli didn't understand most of the jargon he used, but she committed the details to memory. If she relayed it to the boss later, the boss would make sense of it.

As the night wore on, stray undead began slipping through the initial lines of defense, and Kelli and her crew finally had their turn.

Lemmy opened with precise shots from her bow, while Marion unleashed spells that cleared swaths of enemies. During cooldowns or while Marion recovered MP, Kelli and Gilgamesh moved in to engage the enemies up close. The group worked together in a steady rhythm, repeating this routine as they progressed.

The enemies were so weak that the defense felt more like a chore than a battle.

"Well, that's the gist of it," Gilgamesh said, wiping sweat from his brow. "Some nights are a little more intense, but with the experience bonus, this is a pretty solid event. Not much money to be made, though—the undead don't exactly drop gold."

"I see. That explains a lot," Kelli replied with a curt nod.

Kelli's overall impression was clear: neither the town guards, the players, nor the attacking monsters posed any real threat. She and her crew had deliberately held back during the defense, gauging the situation and maintaining their cover. If none of the mercenaries or players were holding back like they were, then it stood to reason that an army of ants or adamantite-class monsters under her command could easily overwhelm the city through sheer numbers alone.


Marion

Everything now hinged on Riley's report. The boss believed that beings like Diaz were likely scattered across the continent, making it unlikely that commander-class entities would be concentrated near this kingdom. Even so, confirming the undead leader's identity was a necessary precaution.

Once that was handled, they could blend in with the players and pass the time without drawing suspicion.

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The greening of Rokillean—or what was *once* Rokillean—was progressing smoothly.

A Divided Treant, planted at the center of the hill as a terminal for the World Tree, had begun to expand its influence. Using *Seed Dispersion*, more treants had been grown around it, transforming the area into something resembling a small forest.

However, while the treants grown through *Seed Dispersion* were the same species as the original, they lacked the functionality of a terminal. Only individuals created directly through the World Tree's Division could act as terminals.

Thanks to the Great Blessing provided by the terminal, the treants were growing at an extraordinary rate. The central terminal itself had already matured into an Elder Camphor Treant.

In the greening streets of what was once Rokillean, the ants sent ahead had burrowed extensive nests underground. Above, aerial units circled in patrols, maintaining vigilance from the sky.

"With all these trees, we could probably use more layered tactics," Leah mused aloud. "The ants are mostly ground-based, and the wasps are too large to maneuver effectively in the forest. Maybe it's time to try adding some spiders to the mix."

<It would be wise to review your available options before large-scale combat begins again,> Sugaru suggested.

Leah nodded. That made perfect sense.

If this was what passed for a moment of peace, there was no harm in preparing now while the opportunity was available.

"Then let's do it. This area is spacious, and if we're raising it as a forest, there's plenty of room to expand. The more variety in monsters, the better. I'll try out Queen Beetle later too," Leah said decisively.

While the greening of Rokillean progressed, reports reached Leah of resistance forces attacking the capital.

Given the short time that had passed—barely a day—it was unlikely that NPCs would have relayed this information. The attackers were almost certainly players who had seen something on social media.

If they weren't disposable NPC mercenaries who stayed dead, Leah needed to ensure they would come back repeatedly.

She had ordered weak skeletons to be stationed on the outskirts of the capital, while the adamantite-class monsters waited farther in, ready to eliminate any intruders near the royal castle. During the day, the undead would be weakened, making them easy for players to defeat, but the adamantite monsters were unaffected by sunlight and would finish the job regardless.

"In the Great Woods of Lieb, I had the supply ants assist with balancing the players' experience points," Leah mused aloud. "But Sieg doesn't have subordinates like that, does he? I should assign the tamed maid zombies and bureaucrat zombies at the castle to handle that. I'll allocate points to INT and MND for them. If I specialize them in those stats, and then use a Philosopher's Stone, it might unlock a *Rebirth* path in that direction."

The idea felt promising.

Currently, her forces leaned heavily toward insect-based units, so strengthening the undead army here seemed like a prudent move.

Besides, players had started referring to her forces as "angelic undead," an amusing misunderstanding she had no reason to correct.

"Well, I'll hop over to the castle for a bit. Hold things down here for me," Leah said.

<Understood. Safe travels,> Sugaru replied.

For most of that day, Leah focused on strengthening her forces.

She now sat on the oversized, heavily modified throne in the capital's castle, contemplating her plans for the days ahead.

The capital's defenses were, by now, largely in place.

For the management of these defenses—and the operation of the urban dungeon attraction she had in mind—Leah had

assigned bureaucrat zombies to handle administrative tasks. She boosted their INT stats using experience points and philosopher's stones, enabling them to undergo *Rebirth* into Wights.

At the time, the *Rebirth* options had been a choice between Wights and a type of monster called Sentient Dead. Since Leah had maxed out their INT stats before *Rebirthing* them, she wasn't entirely sure which path was the intended one.

As for the maid zombies, she had chosen to *Rebirth* them into Revenants instead. There wasn't much difference, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her—she wanted to see if their *Rebirth* paths led to unique outcomes. The Wights were assigned to manage the city, while the Revenants took charge of the castle's operations.

Even now, one of the maid Revenants was serving Leah a cup of tea.

"Well, where should I attack next?" Leah murmured, her gaze fixed on the kingdom's map spread out before her.

She had given Blanc her map because she had already found this one in the castle. From what she could tell, it was nearly identical to the one provided by the game's administration.

Of course, this sort of task wasn't something typically done in a throne room. A side table had been brought in to hold the map, and the maid Revenants had wheeled over a tea set on a cart. If she was going to go to such lengths, she might as well have moved to an office in the first place. The chair was also absurdly large.

However, heading to the office would mean wasting time returning here later, so Leah had ordered the maids to bring everything to her. It was a purely rational decision and had absolutely nothing to do with indecision about where to sit.

As Leah sipped her tea, a friend chat notification popped up.

<Good evening! Is now a good time?>

It was Blanc. Leah straightened herself in her oversized throne.

<Of course, anytime is fine. What's up?> Leah replied.

<I saw the news on social media! Congrats! And great work!> Blanc said enthusiastically.

Leah blinked, confused. Since parting ways last night, nothing particularly celebratory—or exhausting—had happened.

<Thanks? But…I'm not sure what you're talking about.>

<Oh, don't play dumb!> Blanc teased. <You conquered the Kingdom of Hilith, didn't you? Social media's going wild—everyone's saying the six major nations are now down to five!>

Leah nearly dropped her teacup.

What is she talking about…?

It was true that the capital of Hilith was entirely under her control, as were several other key locations. She'd taken the kingdom's major commercial hub, two outlying frontier towns, and Blanc herself had destroyed two cities farther inland.

However, the royal family had fled the country, and there were still towns left to conquer.

<When did this happen? The part about there being five nations now, I mean,> Leah asked, her curiosity mounting.

<Wait, you didn't know?> Blanc sounded genuinely surprised. <Let me think… I saw it earlier today. Maybe this afternoon in-game time? You should check the social media threads—there's one titled "Hilith is dead!" or something like that. That's the one I was reading!>

<I see. Thanks for the heads-up. I'll look into it,> Leah said thoughtfully. <Really, Blanc, I'm glad we became friends. It's so helpful to have someone to share info like this with.>

<Aww, you mean it? Hehe, I knew I was a good pick! Glad to help!> Blanc replied, her voice bright. <Oh, and since it's night now, I'm heading out to attack a town—Ellental, I think it's called, according to the map you gave me. I'll check in once it's done!>

<Good luck. And if anything goes wrong, don't wait—reach out immediately, even if the battle isn't finished,> Leah instructed firmly.

With Sharp in her party, it was unlikely Blanc would face serious danger, but Leah wanted to be cautious.

<Got it! Thanks, Leah! Okay, talk later—bye-bye!> Blanc said cheerfully before signing off.

"Phew… Now then," Leah murmured to herself, setting down her teacup.

The news was clear: the Kingdom of Hilith had fallen due to her actions.

If that were the whole story, there would be no problem.

However, something about the situation nagged at her—specifically, the fact that the royal family had apparently managed to escape entirely unscathed.

The timing was also peculiar. Why had the news surfaced this evening, rather than late last night when the decisive events had occurred?

"Social media, huh?" Leah mused. "I'll need to look into this. Let's see… I'll start by tracking down the threads about Hilith's fall. If I trace the sources, I should be able to pinpoint when the first post was made."

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[Bug?] Thread: Mysterious Phenomenon Report [Feature?]

563: Wayne

Is this the right place to report this?
I started in the Kingdom of Hilith as a player, but after my base was destroyed, I've been stuck with random respawns.
Up until this morning, I was still respawning near towns within Hilith, but now I've ended up in a town in a completely different country.
Is anyone else experiencing the same thing?

564: Oceantea

>>563
Wasn't Hilith destroyed by that boss everyone's calling the "harbinger"?
Maybe since the kingdom doesn't exist anymore, your starting area got reset?

565: Wayne

>>564
That's what I thought, but as of this morning, I was still respawning in towns that seemed to be within Hilith.

The harbinger destroyed the capital last night, so if a reset was going to happen, it would make more sense for it to have happened then, right?

566: Andy
>>563
I'd been eking out a living in Hilith's Velstead, but I died on the first night of the event and have been stuck on random respawns ever since.
No respawn points anywhere in Hilith now, so I'm gonna test it out and die again to see what happens.

567: Heitaro
>>563 >>566
Seems like random respawns are more common than I thought. This is my first time seeing this happen.

568: OverMonk
>>567
Nah, it's definitely not normal. These guys must be special cases—I've never heard of this happening before.
...
...
...
590: Andy
I'm back. Sorry it took a while—I had to walk pretty far.
I respawned in a town outside of Hilith. I'm confident there are no longer any random respawns happening within Hilith's borders.

591: Oceantea
>>590
Welcome back! So can we officially say Hilith is gone?

Maybe once a kingdom is destroyed, the system stops recognizing it as a nation?

592: Gealgamesh
Sorry to jump in, but I just checked the official site. The continent description has been updated from “six major nations” to “five major nations.” Hilith has also been removed from the list of individual kingdoms.

593: Mentai-list
So it’s official. Wayne, can you pinpoint when you stopped respawning in Hilith?

594: Wayne
>>593
Thanks for hopping over to this thread.
Let’s see... I was still respawning in Hilith until around noon. I didn’t eat lunch, so my sense of time is fuzzy, but it must’ve been just before or after midday.

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Leah closed the thread and took a sip of the freshly replaced tea, its warmth spreading through the cup in her hands.

The issue was clear: the Kingdom of Hilith had still existed at least until midday today. Yet by evening, it had vanished—even from the official site.

“A bug doesn’t seem likely,” Leah murmured, tapping a finger thoughtfully against the side of her cup. “It makes more sense that some condition was met, prompting the system to recognize the kingdom as destroyed and update automatically. The site updates are probably handled by AI anyway.”

If that were true, what condition could have caused it?

She set her cup down and leaned back in the oversized throne. “It’s definitely not just the number of destroyed cities,” she reasoned aloud. “So far, six cities have fallen, including the capital.

But according to social media, none of the player-held towns have been affected beyond that."

Leah frowned. "And it's unlikely that simply taking the capital triggered it. The castle was under my control last night, and if that was the condition, Hilith would have been marked as destroyed then. Wayne respawning in Hilith this morning makes that explanation inconsistent."

She steepled her fingers, her mind racing. "So, there's some other condition—something that stops the system from recognizing a nation's survival. If I had to guess…"

Her gaze drifted over the teacup. "It might be tied to the royal family. If they successfully fled and renounced their sovereignty in exchange for asylum in another country, that could do it."

It wasn't an outlandish thought. If the Hilith royal family had been granted asylum under the condition of renouncing the nation's sovereignty, it would make sense for the system to declare the kingdom defunct.

"But half a day…or a little over one day, counting from when I first attacked the capital. That's not a lot of time." Leah tapped the table lightly. "For them to travel to another nation, negotiate terms, and formally renounce their sovereignty—that seems like a stretch. Especially if they fled to a border town, one at the fringes of their neighboring country. Would an NPC in such a place even have the authority to broker such a high-level political decision?"

She shook her head. "If those terms were imposed, they were probably dictated by someone of similar status. Another royal family, perhaps."

Her eyes narrowed as another possibility surfaced. "Or…the Hilith royal family could have been wiped out entirely."

The thought came with its own brutal simplicity. "They were likely traveling together," Leah mused. "An ambush would be the fastest way to resolve it."

She picked up her cup again, its warmth soothing her as she considered the next problem. "But if that's the case, then who did it? The royal guard must have been with them. To eliminate them all would require serious power. Even *I* wouldn't go after them alone—not because I couldn't handle it, but because going solo is rarely the smartest move. Too many risks."

Logically, Leah knew she could likely pull it off herself. But the

possibility of unexpected pitfalls or loose ends made relying on numbers the wiser choice.

“Are they dead, or did they successfully find asylum? Which is more likely?” Leah mused aloud.

At this point, there wasn’t nearly enough information to reach a conclusion.

Instead of guessing, it might be more productive to consider which scenario posed a greater threat to her.

“If they succeeded in fleeing,” she began, “the problem lies with the artifacts they likely carried. That would mean the nation that granted them asylum now has access to the tactical weapons of two kingdoms.”

She frowned, recalling the artifact known as the “Heart.” While it was unclear how the other artifacts compared to it—or even if multiple Hearts existed—she knew one thing: a single artifact like that was enough to set a clear path to her death.

The restrictions on its use were significant, but any future invasion of such a nation would demand maximum caution.

“That much, at least, I’d already considered when I heard from the chancellor about their escape,” Leah muttered.

She tapped her fingers against the armrest of her throne. “The other possibility is that someone wiped out the royal entourage entirely. If that’s the case, the main concern is figuring out who’s capable of such a feat. We’re talking about someone—or something—able to amass the strength necessary to annihilate the royal family and their guard. They must also be within a day’s travel of the capital, assuming they were using a carriage or some other means of group transport.”

Her gaze hardened. “If this is true, it’s a serious concern. Someone with that kind of power being so close to the capital makes our current defenses less than ideal. While I doubt they could take the city outright, it’s not impossible to imagine them breaching the castle itself.”

Leah sighed and took another sip of her tea. “And then there’s the fact that they might now possess the artifact themselves. Considering that it can only be activated within the grounds of a nation’s capital, it’s clear we need to strengthen the castle’s defenses.”

Still, she wasn’t overly worried about a direct attack using the

artifact. “Its range, duration, and scale of effect are limited. No matter how powerful it is, sheer numbers can overwhelm it. And attempting something as risky as infiltrating the castle while carrying such a valuable item—it’s hard to imagine anyone being reckless enough to gamble on a mission with no room for failure.”

Leah paused, her thoughts swirling. “If the artifact is now in the hands of a nonstate faction, that’s at least slightly less threatening than if it had ended up with another nation. But still…what kind of force could pull something like this off?”

She tapped the edge of her cup. “Bandits? No, it’s not something common bandits could manage. Perhaps the monster factions attacking during the event? That seems more plausible.”

Her voice lowered as a chilling thought crept into her mind. “If it’s purely a matter of strength, then perhaps a group of players…”

A shiver ran down her spine.

If players had gotten their hands on those artifacts…

“No, that’s unlikely,” Leah said, shaking her head. “For one, there’s no reason for them to attack. If it were human-aligned players, they’d be more likely to protect a heavily guarded royal entourage, not attack it.”

Still, if the attackers weren’t human-aligned players, it wasn’t entirely impossible.

“A group of monster-aligned players, then?” she mused. “If such a group existed, they’d have no shortage of enemies—likely even more than I do. It’s hard to imagine them launching a sudden attack against me, but I can’t ignore the possibility. I’ll need to stay vigilant.”

Leah leaned back in her oversized chair, reflecting on the possibilities with the information at hand. This was as far as her current deductions could take her.

“Ultimately,” she muttered, “it would be far worse if some nation ended up holding two kingdoms’ worth of artifacts. A nation could use them for both offense and defense, but a nonstate faction would likely be limited to offensive use only.”

She paused, frowning. “No…both scenarios are a headache. Either way, the fact that we don’t know where the missing artifact is—that’s the real issue. Pinpointing its location needs to remain a priority.”

Her gaze hardened as she continued. “For now, the plan hasn’t

changed. Strengthen the defenses around the capital and focus on tracking down that artifact. And I'll need to share this information with the others…"

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Leah left the task of fortifying the capital and Rokillean to her subordinates, using *Camouflage* to vanish before teleporting to Kelli and her crew.

"The enemies attacking here are undead, right? So, what about the leader? You've scouted them out, haven't you?" Leah asked, her tone casual but curious.

According to Kelli, Riley had gone on a solo reconnaissance mission. Leah couldn't help but appreciate how reliable her subordinates were.

"Yes," Riley replied. "I couldn't determine the exact species, but it didn't have the same presence as Diaz or Sieg. It looked like a skeleton proficient in magic, equipped with a sinister staff and a tattered robe."

Leah tilted her head thoughtfully. "A lich or a wight, perhaps? If it's a magic-wielding type, it's probably got high INT. And if it's been around since the old kingdom era like Diaz and Sieg, it might be worth talking to."

"I doubt it's that intelligent," Riley said, shaking her head. "Every night, it simply orders its skeleton minions to charge. It doesn't appear to be thinking much at all. On the other hand, some of the individual minions seem unusually skilled in combat. Those ones seem more capable than their leader."

"Unusually skilled? What do you mean?"

"Yes," Riley confirmed. "There are a few who prioritize targeting the town's guards—likely the ones who originally lived here—over mercenaries or, presumably, the players. They avoid us as well. Whenever we try to engage them, they retreat before we can make contact. We haven't managed to take out even one of them."

Leah frowned. A leader who gave nothing but mindless charge commands wouldn't be issuing such tactical orders. Nor would it make sense for low-level undead NPCs to act independently. That left one likely explanation.

"Monster-aligned players," Leah muttered. It was the first time

she'd encountered such players aside from Blanc. "And there's more than one, you say? If that's the case, it's possible they're collaborating for this event."

If they were monster-aligned players, she could consider approaching them for cooperation. However, expanding her network carried the risk of information leaks. With Blanc, Leah had let her guard down and revealed her status as the Queen of Destruction, though she'd made Blanc promise to keep that information confidential.

And even Blanc didn't know the most critical secret: that Leah's retinue, despite being NPCs, had access to an inventory system.

"Well," Leah said, shrugging, "right now, the story is just that there are four beastfolk players unconnected to any harbinger. No need to make contact just yet. Riley, do you think you could take down their leader on your own?"

"If I can get the jump on him, yes," Riley replied confidently. "During the day, most of his undead minions retreat underground, and he himself doesn't hide in a cave or anything. He just rests in the shade."

That meant the undead caster wasn't a player. If he were, he would've been resting in a respawn-safe area.

"What I'm more curious about," Leah said, "is where those player-like undead go during the day. But it's probably best not to investigate too deeply and risk them noticing you."

She made up her mind. "Riley, wait until the end of the event—about five days from now—and then deal with the magic-wielding undead during the day. Once that's taken care of...the white wolves are heading for the volcano, right? Let's regroup at the Great Forest afterward."

"Understood," Riley said with a slight bow.

"Let me know when the job is done. Until then, stick to the usual routine—selling potions during the day and handling the nighttime defenses. Busy schedule, huh? Don't overdo it, though. Take it easy where you can."

Leah sighed inwardly. She had hoped the undead forces might have a connection to Diaz's former comrades, but that didn't seem to be the case.

With a parting glance, Leah watched as Kelli and her crew prepared to fend off the next wave of undead before she

teleported back to the Great Forest.

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Leah sank into the throne in the queen's chamber, taking a moment to catch her breath.

"Wouldn't it be nice if someone served tea here too?" she mused aloud.

"If that is your wish, I can attempt it," Diaz offered solemnly.

"Wait—you can make tea?" Leah asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have never done so before," Diaz admitted. "But I see no reason why it would be beyond me."

"No, it's fine," Leah said quickly.

Experience had taught her that situations like this rarely ended well.

Leah sat back on the throne in the queen's chamber, letting out a soft breath.

"Diaz, if it's not too painful to talk about..." she began, her tone cautious, "could you tell me a little about the Fey King?"

As her subordinate, Diaz was now on Leah's side, but the Fey King's legacy remained one of the few factors that could threaten her. She felt guilty about potentially dredging up painful memories, but it was time to clarify exactly what the Fey King's powers and creations entailed.

"What sort of abilities did the Fey King possess?" Leah asked. "And that legacy item—was it really something he created himself?"

"Indeed," Diaz replied thoughtfully. "Whether His Majesty actually crafted that particular item, I cannot say. But in matters of craftsmanship, His Majesty possessed unparalleled skill and created many extraordinary artifacts."

"Craftsmanship, huh?" Leah mused. "So he was built like a production-focused NPC, then?"

Perhaps he had accumulated experience points through crafting, ultimately reaching the level of the Fey King. It wasn't an impossible scenario.

"Not only was His Majesty exceptionally skilled with his hands," Diaz continued, "but his physique was equally extraordinary. While

others might have gathered materials for him, he personally obtained those that were particularly difficult to acquire."

Leah raised an eyebrow, momentarily taken aback. But it was Diaz—there was no way he'd make an inappropriate comment.

By "extraordinary physique," Diaz must have been referring to sheer muscle mass. That would make the Fey King male, Leah reasoned, since it didn't sound like something Diaz would say about a woman.

"Sounds almost like a dwarf," Leah remarked offhandedly.

"I thought I had mentioned it," Diaz said, his expression neutral. "The Fey King was originally a dwarf."

"What?" Leah blinked, caught completely off guard.

So even dwarves could ascend to become the Fey King?

It made sense, in a way. Legends outside the game often described dwarves as originating from elemental spirits.

"So, dwarves too..." she murmured, deep in thought.

Leah had assumed the Fey King's path was exclusive to elves. If dwarves could achieve it as well, that broadened the possibilities significantly. Even if the probability remained low, a larger pool of potential candidates increased the likelihood of another Fey King emerging to stand in her way.

Whether modern NPCs could reach that level remained to be seen. The only precedent was the original Fey King, who had also been the ruler of a continent-spanning empire. That suggested the feat was far from easy.

But what about players?

Among the player population, elves were the most common race, followed by beastfolk, humans, and homunculi. Dwarves were nearly as rare as skeletons or goblins—most players preferred appearances that were aesthetically pleasing, at least in the game.

"From that perspective," Leah said, thinking aloud, "adding dwarves as a starting point for the Fey King or Queen of Destruction path doesn't seem like it would significantly increase the risk from players."

She summarized her thoughts. "In short, the Fey King's dwarven origin explains his abundance of crafting skills. It must have been an exceptional skill among those that enabled him to create those items."

If that were the case, the risk of similar artifacts being newly crafted seemed low. It was hard to imagine a production-focused player ascending to the Fey King's level. And if an NPC showed signs of heading in that direction, they'd become famous long before reaching it. Leah could easily recruit them—or eliminate them, if necessary.

"Thank you, Diaz. That was incredibly helpful," she said with a nod.

"I'm pleased to have been of assistance," Diaz replied, tilting his head. "If you'd like, I could also share the muscle training routines His Majesty frequently practiced—"

"No," Leah cut him off.

"Perhaps some poses to better showcase a well-toned physique—"

"No."

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<We've finished taking the town! Oh, and good evening! Is now a good time?> Blanc's friend chat popped up, her usual energy shining through even in text.

<Congratulations! Well done. I'm glad to hear it went smoothly,> Leah replied, her tone polite but warm.

<It's all thanks to you, Lealea! Oh, uh, thanks to you, ma'am! Sharp—was that his name?—he's insanely strong! He's so strong it made me switch to formal speech!> Blanc gushed.

<I'm glad he was helpful,> Leah responded simply.

Leah had just reached a natural stopping point in her own tasks.

If Blanc had no pressing concerns, Leah considered using *Summon Summoner* to travel directly to her and have a face-to-face discussion. It was also a good opportunity to explain the versatility of *Summoning* skills.

Blanc had already acquired *Minion Control* and was a cooperative ally, so it wouldn't hurt to teach her some of the useful skills related to *Summoning*, *Necromancy*, and *Taming*.

<Would it be okay if I came over now? There are a few things I'd like to discuss,> Leah suggested through the chat.

<Of course! Totally okay! But it's pretty far, you know? It'd

probably take half a day even if you ran,> Blanc replied.

So, they'd been running for half a day after that?

Leah recalled Blanc also providing information about social media during the journey. It was likely that the Spartoi had been doing most of the actual running while Blanc multitasked.

<That's fine. I'll be there in an instant,> Leah thought, confident in her plan.

<Ha ha, yeah right, sure...> Blanc responded, clearly unconvinced.

"And that's how it is," Leah explained. "The *Summoning* and *Taming* skill trees have a lot of useful abilities."

She continued. "Also, if you didn't get *Minion Control* from those paths, then it likely came from a dedicated tree with similar skills. If you explore that path further, you might unlock other abilities that complement it. These skills seem to stack their effects, so if you have experience points left, it's worth experimenting with them."

"Huh, I see..." Blanc nodded along. Then, with a grin, she added, "But I can't believe you actually got here in an instant. I thought you were just being polite."

"Nope," Leah said with a shrug. "I'm not great at making empty gestures."

She glanced around at the surroundings. "You've left most of the buildings intact. Are you planning to reuse them?"

Blanc followed Leah's gaze to the zombies shambling through the streets—once the town's former residents. "Reuse? Not exactly. I figured, hey, I destroyed the place, so why not claim it all for myself? I'll just fill it with my minions."

"That makes sense. From what I've seen on social media, players already know two neighboring towns have been wiped out," Leah noted. "They might come here during the event to farm experience points. I've even heard of players carrying others on their backs across two or three towns to get here. It wouldn't be surprising if they showed up soon."

A sudden influx of players would be bad news for Blanc's forces.

"And if any of the players who killed me are among them," Leah added, her tone darkening, "seeing Sharp could expose our connection."

“Our connection?” Blanc said with a laugh. “That sounds like something out of a gossip show! Ooh, does this mean I’ve made it as a celebrity? Though, I guess in that case, I’d be the ‘ordinary girl’ in the story.”

Leah blinked, unsure how to respond to Blanc’s playful rambling. Still, the aimless chatter felt comfortably like a conversation between friends.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I suppose I don’t either,” Leah said, smiling faintly.

“Mind? Not at all!” Blanc declared. “I’m going to be the Demon Queen’s right hand, after all! Hey, should we form the Four Lords of Doom or something?”

Leah chuckled. “We already have Kelli and her group, technically. But they’ve been focusing more on espionage than frontline battles. Considering how much we need information on human nations, that’s probably for the best.”

She paused thoughtfully. “If we did go with the Four Lords of Doom structure, I’d say Sugaru, Diaz, and Sieg would be solid picks. Do you want to join?”

“Count me in!” Blanc grinned. “Is there some kind of formal appointment ceremony? Should I prepare something?”

Even if they held a ceremony, the only attendees would be their respective minions. They could use it as an introduction, but Leah’s forces were spread across the western part of the kingdom, making it logistically challenging.

“A ceremony might be tough right now…” Leah admitted. “For now, let’s focus on whether players will come here. I’ll order a scout to check things out.”

She summoned Ominous, giving him simple directions before sending him into the sky.

“Oh, wow!” Blanc exclaimed, watching Ominous take off. “That’s one way to do it! But how will he report back? Will he have to fly all the way back here?”

“There’s a skill in the *Summoning* tree,” Leah explained, “that lets me piggyback on a minion’s vision. I can check in whenever I need to.”

“Whoa, that’s amazing! I really need to prioritize the skills you mentioned, Lealea. Mind if I watch?”

“Of course not,” Leah said with a nod. “I’ll keep an eye on social

media in the meantime to track player activity."

Leah skimmed through a few threads to get a feel for the overall event dynamics.

Among the players active on social media, there didn't seem to be any major developments.

Most players were stationed in frontier towns or areas near monster territories, grinding for experience. As a result, these towns remained in a constant state of alert, causing supply chains to falter. Prices for food and consumables were gradually increasing.

However, most players viewed these higher costs as the price of gaining more experience points, and few were motivated to address the underlying issues.

In some towns, though, the local knight orders had taken it upon themselves to act. They had already ventured into monster territory and defeated the apparent leaders of this event's adversaries. While such actions might not be ideal for maximizing event rewards, they undoubtedly benefited the NPCs in those towns, marking those knights as exemplary rulers.

"Well, either way, that's not something I need to worry about," Leah muttered. "Oh, Ominous has made it to the neighboring town."

"For real? That's so fast!" Blanc exclaimed.

"He's flying, after all. The advantage of flight is incredible. Let's see..." Leah's vision shifted to Ominous's perspective, allowing her to scout the town from above.

If there were players in the area, they'd likely be near the inns or the Mercenary Guild.

"Ah, there are some likely suspects. I can't imagine this town, which isn't even close to monster territory, having so many NPC mercenaries. They're probably all players."

Though this town wasn't on the front lines yesterday, things had changed.

Blanc's undead forces had overwhelmed the neighboring town of Ellental, pushing this area into the fray. What was once a quiet settlement had now become the effective front lines.

The players might originally have been headed for another town farther out, like Altoriva or even Rokillean. But today, they would have realized something: Ellental was no longer an option

for teleportation. That alone would have tipped them off that it was now a battlefield.

“Would we be in trouble if a lot of players showed up?” Blanc asked.

“That depends…” Leah said thoughtfully. “I can’t judge their strength just by looking, but during the day, the zombies won’t be of much use, will they?”

“Hmm, maybe… If they stayed indoors and ambushed anyone who entered, they might hold up. Or we could use *Curtain of Darkness* or *Fog* to make them more effective, but covering the whole town would be impossible…”

“I can use *Curtain of Darkness* too,” Leah offered. “If we split the work, we might extend the range a bit. And if we summon Diaz, *Miasma* could help cover more ground. That skill also buffs allied undead, right? Though I’m not sure how it distinguishes friend from foe.”

“Diaz!” Blanc’s eyes sparkled. “One of the Four Lords of Doom! This town has two of them already! It’s practically the final dungeon!”

“By that logic, since I’m here to keep an eye on things, this town might as well be the final dungeon,” Leah quipped.

“An early-game final boss that runs away if things go south!” Blanc declared. “I read about that in a comic once!”

“Hmm…instead of running away, I’d just kill them all,” Leah replied coolly.

“That’s the kind of boss who turns the fight into a defeat-event instead!” Blanc exclaimed, clapping her hands in mock realization.

<So, I thought I’d enlist a friend’s help for a little while.>

<First, Your Majesty, may I express some concerns regarding your decision to travel to that town alone,> Diaz’s tone was formal even in text.

<Oh…well…> Leah tried to sidestep the subject.

<Very well. Provided you summon me before any engagements, I shall overlook it this time.>

<Thank you. And remember, Diaz—under no circumstances can you reveal that you can use an inventory. That remains an absolute secret, regardless of who we are dealing with.>

<As you command, Your Majesty,> Diaz assured her.

"*Summon: Diaz.*"

A ripple in the air unfolded, and a powerful undead figure emerged before Leah and Blanc, exuding an air of gravitas.

"Oh, wow! Dignified and imposing! Though, honestly…the summoning effect's kind of plain," Blanc remarked.

"Well, there might be times I'll need to summon discreetly," Leah replied with a small shrug.

Recognizing Leah and Blanc, Diaz straightened his posture and dropped to one knee with fluid precision.

"Responding to the summons, Diaz of Wrath stands ready, Your Majesty."

"Whoa! That's so cool!" Blanc exclaimed, practically bouncing on her heels.

"Wait—Diaz, you don't usually say things like that," Leah noted with a raised brow.

"I thought it befitting, given the presence of Your Majesty's companion," Diaz explained, his voice measured and deliberate.

"Oh, I see. You were putting on a show for us. Thanks for the effort," Leah said, smiling warmly. She appreciated his formality, even if her reaction diluted the drama.

"Ah! I'm Blanc! A vampire! I've just been inducted as one of Lealea's Four Lords of Doom—er, the lowest seat—but it's an honor to meet you!" Blanc introduced herself with enthusiasm.

"Four Lords of Doom? I understood her to be a friend…" Diaz's expression shifted to mild puzzlement, a change Leah welcomed since she now no longer had to guess his feelings as his master.

"Oh, well. You could call it…role-play. Or maybe make-believe. Just think of it like a game," Leah explained.

"I understand. If it is acceptable to Your Majesty, I have no objections," Diaz replied, inclining his head slightly.

"She might not look it," Leah added, "but Blanc is the leader of a faction with over thirty subordinates. I'll be working with her to strengthen them, so let's all be patient."

"Not look it?!" Blanc huffed indignantly. "Excuse me, but how do I *not* look like a capable villainess?"

Leah glanced toward Blanc's subordinates. The moment her eyes landed on them, they awkwardly looked away. Best to leave that one alone, she decided.

“That is an impressive feat,” Diaz said with a touch of admiration. “I must admit, I still lack even a single subordinate of my own.”

“Really?” Blanc’s face lit up. “Then let me teach you a thing or two!”

At least they seemed to be getting along, Leah thought. That was one less thing to worry about.

It took some time for the player party to arrive at Ellental. By then, the sun had risen high, an inconvenient time for the undead. Still, it made sense for the players to attack now, considering the event’s main enemies were undead. It showed resolve—this was the line they would not let the monsters cross. If they hadn’t cared, they could have waited in the next town over instead.

“They should be visible soon…not that I can see them with my own eyes,” Leah remarked.

She shifted her vision from Ominous’s aerial perspective back to her own and activated *Evil Eye*.

“That’s such a handy trick!” Blanc said, her eyes sparkling. “I should find a flying undead to befriend and learn it too.”

“A flying undead…” Leah mused aloud, considering the idea.

“Oh, but wouldn’t something like a skeleton bird lose its wings and not be able to fly?” Blanc interjected, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“Hmm, I’m not sure,” Leah replied, glancing upward as if picturing it. “At least for me and my subordinate, Sugaru, we’re flying using a skill called *Flight*. Once you acquire the skill, having wings doesn’t matter. But Ominous doesn’t have *Flight*—or rather, hasn’t taken it—yet he’s still flying, so I think he’s doing it purely on his own.”

Blanc’s face lit up with curiosity. “Wait, so if that’s true, then even if someone’s legs were badly damaged, could they still walk if they had a skill like *Walking*?”

“Probably,” Leah replied with a shrug. “That’s what I’d like to test, but I’ve never seen a skill called *Walking*. Everyone has legs, but no one seems to need a skill for that.”

“Lealea, you really focus on the strangest things!” Blanc teased, laughing lightly.

“Strange? Really?” Leah’s brow furrowed. “You think so?”

“Definitely strange! But funny!” Blanc said, grinning.

Leah paused, turning the word over in her mind. Funny. Was that a compliment? Blanc didn’t seem to have any negative intent, at least.

“Oh, look! I can see them now!” Blanc exclaimed, pointing excitedly.

The two stood on the balcony of what was likely once a lord’s mansion. The structure jutted out slightly, giving them a clear view of the town’s entrance. With no walls surrounding the settlement, the streets leading to the main gate were plainly visible.

“All right,” Leah said, stepping forward. “Time to activate some skills. I’ll disappear and fly over to the town entrance, then darken the area from above.”

She turned to Blanc, her tone more serious. “The bulk of this town’s forces are your subordinates. If you die, it’s as good as our defeat. Stay here and don’t join the fight directly.”

Blanc nodded, her usual playfulness momentarily subdued. Leah continued, “I’ve stationed Diaz by the estate’s gate. No enemy should make it this far, but just in case, he’s ready to intercept them.”

With her instructions given, Leah turned back toward the open air. “Well then, see you soon.”

Leah leaped gracefully off the balcony, her figure disappearing into the sky.

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“Wow, that was seriously cool. The way those wings spread wide, and *bam*!” Blanc said, her voice full of awe.

She was, of course, referring to the sight of Leah unfurling her three pairs of six wings before gracefully leaping off the balcony into the night sky.

“From what Lady Leah mentioned earlier,” Azalea said thoughtfully, “it doesn’t seem like wings are actually necessary for flying. I suspect she does it purely because it looks dramatic.”

“Maybe that’s just how all you players are wired,” Magenta said. “Master, you’re kind of like that too, aren’t you?”

“Eh? I dunno,” Blanc responded, feigning nonchalance. “I don’t even have wings.”

“You would if you could. And you’d definitely flaunt them,” Azalea replied without missing a beat.

Blanc paused to consider. If she were to sprout wings, they’d likely resemble those of a bat or a devil—dark and ominous. She imagined them slicing through the air with a dramatic sweep as she rose into the night, shrouded in shadow.

“Okay, fair. I’d do it,” Blanc admitted with a grin. “Because, yeah, it’d look awesome.”

She made a mental note to ask Leah later how to acquire wings of her own.

“But first,” Blanc continued with a wistful sigh, “I need more experience points. I’m counting on these players to bring in a ton of it.”

“If Lady Leah assists,” Azalea suggested, “hunting should proceed safely, don’t you think?”

“True,” Blanc conceded, “but Leah did mention she only creates darkness from above to avoid splitting the experience points, didn’t she?”

According to Leah, experience distribution was based on contributions in combat. To maximize gains, Leah refrained from directly attacking. Instead, the Spartoi would handle the heavy lifting.

“Come to think of it,” Blanc said, furrowing her brow, “couldn’t Azalea and the others just cast darkness from above too?”

“That’s quite the astute observation,” Azalea replied, nodding slightly.

“Well, why don’t you?” Blanc asked, crossing her arms.

“Unfortunately,” Azalea said, looking slightly sheepish, “none of us have learned *Dark Magic.* It simply wasn’t practical enough to justify acquiring it.”

Blanc tilted her head thoughtfully. Now that she thought about it, she recalled skipping over *Dark Magic* during training because of its limited utility.

“Maybe I should learn it if I end up with extra points,” Blanc said, mulling over the idea. “Wings, though… Those can wait till next time.”

From the vantage of the lord’s manor, the battle didn’t seem to be going poorly. The players were mostly cutting down zombies,

leaving the Spartoi unscathed for now.

“Guess these players aren’t all that strong, huh?” Blanc remarked, leaning against the balcony rail.

“I’m not so sure,” Carmine replied, her eyes narrowing. “Lady Leah seems to be doing something occasionally. The enemies freeze sometimes, like they’re caught off guard.”

“Maybe I should pay attention to how the experience points are coming in,” Blanc said, straightening up. “If Leah’s interference affects the numbers, it’d be good to know for planning.”

“An excellent point, Master,” Carmine agreed. “Knowing how much her support reduces your gain could be crucial for coordinating with her later.”

Blanc squinted at the numbers. “Hmm… Oh, there it is! Yep, I’m getting experience points. Quite a bit, actually. Does that mean these players are higher-level?”

“They’re certainly stronger than the Spartoi or zombies,” Carmine replied.

“But sometimes I only get half as much,” Blanc said, frowning. “Is that because of Leah’s support?”

“That seems likely. Even without direct damage, her actions are clearly influencing the battle. It’s likely why the system accounts for her contributions.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Blanc muttered. “Support players wouldn’t gain much otherwise. Whoever designed this system knew what they were doing.”

She fell silent, watching Leah sweep across the battlefield, her wings catching the light. “This feels weird,” Blanc said finally. “I’m just standing here doing nothing while Leah’s working her tail off. Shouldn’t I be doing something?”

“If you want my opinion,” Carmine replied with a small smile, “doing nothing might actually be your best contribution right now.”

Blanc groaned. “That’s…kind of depressing.”

“In that case,” Carmine said, “why not do what you were doing the other day? Checking… What was it? Social media? You might find something useful.”

Blanc perked up. “Oh, yeah! Leah was browsing earlier. If anyone’s talking about her or our team, it might give us some intel.”

Pulling out her interface, she got to work. For someone like Leah, dealing with so many players, even a small scrap of information could make all the difference.

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[Hilith] This isn’t happening out on the frontier! It’s happening right here in the heartlands! [Collapse]

012: Lusk

The three cities of Velstead, Altoriva, and Ellental in the Hilith Kingdom have already been wiped out.
Well, Velstead and Altoriva are more like large towns than actual cities, but still.

013: Country Pop

Looks like there’s another one gone since I last checked.

014: Lusk

Ellental is supposedly to the west of Altoriva.
I heard it from one of the knights under my city’s lord, so it’s probably accurate.

015: Taroz

Oh, so that’s why there’s been a big gathering of players around here.
Ellental is actually the next town over from where I am.

016: Taroz

I thought it might’ve been something like a failed defense or some new faction getting wiped out.

017: Taroz

>>016 Nah, it’s an invasion.

018: Country Pop
Hmm, makes me wonder.
Like, Gil and his crew were saying they finished defending their city on the first day, but which is more efficient? Wandering from town to town hunting down boss-tier enemies or skipping the bosses and farming weaker mobs everywhere?

019: Mentai-list
Boss hunting is probably better for efficiency.
The problem is whether you can get to those areas every day and whether you can actually take down something boss-level.

020: Country Pop
Oh hey, Mentai-list! Aren’t you busy babysitting your guild leader?

021: Mentai-list
Don’t call it babysitting, lol.
Anyway, we can’t regroup...
I *think* we’re getting closer, but who knows at this point.
...
...
...
030: MicFlat
But why did places so far from the frontier fall first? Doesn’t make sense.

031: Mentai-list
Uh, you do realize even the capital—the *heart of the heartlands*—has already fallen, right?

032: Country Pop
Ah... I see.

So, there’s a pretty high chance this is all the harbinger’s doing, huh?

033: Gealgamesh
Probably not *everything,* but yeah.
Same kingdom, undead involved—seems pretty likely in this case.

***

“Lealea is taking all the heat for this!” Blanc exclaimed, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

“What’s the matter?” Azalea asked, glancing up curiously.

“The three towns I destroyed are being blamed on Lealea!” Blanc said, pointing at her interface with a mixture of indignation and disbelief.

“Strictly speaking…isn’t that technically correct?” Azalea replied, tilting her head. “You did join forces with her, after all.”

“I mean, if you put it that way, I guess it’s fine? Is it fine?” Blanc muttered, frowning as she seemed to wrestle with the idea.

***

038: Justise
Oh, this might be unrelated, but one of the knights in my town seemed to know that Hilith had fallen.

039: Country Pop
Well, yeah, it’s super famous by now. Of course, they’d know.

040: Mentai-list
Wait, that doesn’t make sense.
Isn’t it only famous among players on social media?
Most NPCs wouldn’t know about it yet, right?

041: Justise
Exactly! I thought it was weird too.

At first, I figured he just meant the capital was destroyed, which I already knew. But he was talking about the whole country being gone.
The timing of when he told me lines up suspiciously with when the official site updated.

042: Gealgamesh
We’ve been traveling to a bunch of towns every day, and I’ve never heard anything like that from NPCs.

043: Mentai-list
Same here. I don’t think the testing team has mentioned anything like that either.
Could it be that only certain important NPCs get that kind of information?
By the way, which town are you in?

044: Justise
It’s Hugelkuppe in Oral. Probably the second-largest city there.
It’s got a castle as big as the royal palace, so you’d spot it right away if you’re nearby.

045: Mentai-list
Oh, that place.
Geographically, it’s kind of close to Hilith, isn’t it?

046: Lusk
How do you even know that?
Do you have a map or something?

047: Mentai-list
There’s a simple map on the research thread. Someone made it collaboratively.
It’s not to scale, but it’s like a Sugoroku board—

just a rough layout of where towns are in relation to each other.
They pieced it together from player reports across various towns.

048: Country Pop
That’s genius.

049: Justise
Um, who’s Sugoroku? Are they famous or something?

***

“I’m back. From what I can see, there probably aren’t any players left. What are you up to?” Leah asked as she landed gracefully nearby.

While Blanc had been scrolling through social media, it seemed the invading players had all been successfully repelled.

“Oh! Welcome back, Lealea!” Blanc replied, spinning around in her seat. “I had nothing to do, so I figured I’d check social media instead of just sitting here staring at the battlefield. Oh, and I also tracked how the experience points were coming in. Whenever you did something, it dropped by about half.”

“You even kept an eye on that? Thanks,” Leah said with a nod of appreciation. “There were a few players who couldn’t just be overwhelmed by sheer numbers, so I tried supporting with a little disruption—things like *Disorient*. Still, losing half the experience points just for that… I’ll need to be more careful.”

Blanc shrugged, feeling a little awkward. “Well, actually, it was Magenta’s idea, so…yeah.”

“Oh, and speaking of social media,” Blanc continued quickly, “apparently someone made a…uh, Sugoroku board? Isn’t that amazing?”

“A Sugoroku board?” Leah tilted her head. “You mean, like, they created it in game and are selling it or something? In a brutal world like this, I can’t imagine a market for games… Wait, do dice even exist here?”

“Dice? What do those have to do with anything?” Blanc asked,

confused.

"Wait, what?" Leah blinked. "Aren't we talking about...?"

The two stared at each other, realizing their conversation wasn't connecting. Clearly, there was a misunderstanding somewhere.

"So, apparently, someone made a rough map showing the general positions of towns on this continent. It's not super detailed, but it's laid out kind of like a Sugoroku board," Blanc explained.

"Ah...I see," Leah replied, nodding thoughtfully. "That makes sense. They'd be able to figure out neighboring towns' names using the teleportation services, right? Combine that with social media chatter, and it's definitely possible to create something like that. Impressive. Is it something anyone can access?"

"I think so? Let me check—oh, the thread I was looking at earlier was..." Blanc quickly pulled up the thread and shared it with Leah. After giving a brief thanks, Leah excused herself to focus on checking social media. Blanc decided to use the time to review the results of the recent battle.

"Hmm, I can't get everything, but I should be able to pick up some strengthening skills. Oh, and *Summoning*—seems like I need to start with the basics for that, so it'll burn through a lot of experience points. Let's see, what else... Ah, *Spatial Magic*. Looks like I can get stuff for vision, and maybe mental or personal-related skills too. What were those again?"

"*Spirit Summoning: Mental* is a skill for remotely controlling a retainer's body," Azalea explained. "The *Personal* one allows you to summon yourself directly to a retainer's location."

"Oh, that sounds handy. I'll just grab them all."

Azalea blinked in surprise. "What? Are you sure?" she asked, her tone cautious. "What about growing wings or our *Dark Magic*? You mentioned it before."

"Oh, right!" Blanc said, smacking her forehead. "I forgot about that. Well, it's already done, so no use worrying about it now."

Blanc sighed, trying to make peace with her choices. "Wings... I'll need to ask Leah how to get those anyway, so it's not like I could do it now. And *Dark Magic* doesn't cost much, so I can grab it later if I need it."

She decided to push aside regrets over the past and focus on what she could do moving forward. For now, what she needed

most was a retainer capable of aerial reconnaissance.

"Hey, can't you guys fly?" Blanc asked, glancing at her undead companions.

"We can," Azalea replied, "but conducting long-distance reconnaissance is beyond our capabilities. Even within a town, we can't fly very high, so covering a wide area would be difficult."

"That said," she added, "we're better suited for narrow or dark spaces."

"That's useful, I guess," Blanc muttered, "but with the whole town already under control, it doesn't really seem necessary."

She glanced over at her skill tree. "The *Domination* branch from the Vampire-related tree lets me control bats or wolves, but anything else just ends up as zombies. Looks like that's my only option for now."

Maybe she'd have better luck if she came across a birdlike monster in the future.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Thanks for sharing that thread with me. I learned a lot from it," Leah said, returning her focus to the conversation. Or rather, she returned to the game world—perhaps more accurate than calling it "reality."

"You learned a lot? That's amazing!" Blanc exclaimed, her eyes wide with admiration. "I didn't even figure out who Sugoroku is!"

"Sugoroku isn't a person," Leah replied with a slight smile. "It's the name of an old board game. Think of it like backgammon, but simplified for children."

"Back...gammon?" Blanc repeated, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

"If you don't know it, that's fine," Leah said, waving it off. "What's more interesting is something else I found in the thread."

Knowing Leah's penchant for picking up on unusual details, Blanc could only wonder what part of the thread had caught her attention.

"It's about a town called Hugelkuppe in Oral. Apparently, one of its knights already knew that Hilith had fallen," Leah said, her tone thoughtful.

"Oh, yeah, I think I saw something about that. What about it?" Blanc asked, tilting her head.

"Well, Hilith officially fell on the evening of the third day—

yesterday," Leah began. "But that was the result of the system's judgment, not necessarily how the NPCs in the region perceive it. As for the capital's destruction, that happened the night of the second day—two days ago."

"So it's weird that they already know about something from two days ago?" Blanc asked.

"That's part of it," Leah said, nodding. "But there's actually a plausible reason other countries might have known about the capital's fall as early as then. You see, Hilith's chancellor had arranged for the king to flee to another nation in case of an emergency."

"Oh, so they'd already relayed the message to neighboring nations that 'If anything happens, we'll be sending the royal family over, so please take them in,' right?" Blanc summarized.

"Exactly. At the time of the capital's destruction, it wouldn't have been strange for the chancellor to inform surrounding countries about the situation—that the capital had fallen and that the royal family was in exile."

"Hmm, okay," Blanc murmured, nodding along.

"But here's the strange part," Leah continued. "According to this player, Justise, the knight wasn't talking about the capital's fall. They mentioned the entire country being destroyed. That's a very different nuance. And the timing is suspicious. The knight knew about the country's destruction at the exact moment the official site updated with that information."

Blanc frowned, processing the implication. "Even if that knight had heard about the chancellor's exile plan and guessed the capital might fall, they wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion that the entire nation was gone, right?"

"Exactly," Leah agreed. "Take modern Japan, for example. The capital, Tokyo, might be destroyed, but that doesn't mean the whole country of Japan would cease to exist."

In a monarchy like the Hilith Kingdom, the capital likely holds more significance than it would in other systems of governance, but only because the king resides there. If the king and the royal family have fled, then the capital's status wouldn't necessarily have a direct impact on the survival of the nation.

"What about what this Mentaiko person said?" Blanc asked. "That some NPCs might have gotten that kind of announcement?"

“If that were the case, other knights in different towns would likely know about it too,” Leah replied. “But I couldn’t find anything similar from any other player’s posts. Just this one.”

Blanc raised an eyebrow, impressed. Leah had combed through posts surprisingly quickly. There might be a trick to it—something worth asking her about later, alongside the wings question. For now, though, Leah seemed to be enjoying herself, explaining her theories with enthusiasm. Blanc decided it was best not to interrupt.

“If that’s the case,” Leah continued, “then the first possibility is that this player intentionally spread false information. But I think that’s unlikely. If that were their goal, you’d expect to see similar statements in other threads or maybe attempts to recruit collaborators to spread the story.”

“Yeah…I guess that makes sense. Plus, what would be the point of doing that anyway?” Blanc asked, frowning.

“Exactly. There’s no clear motive. So I don’t think that’s worth considering,” Leah concluded.

Azalea and the others had started heading out to patrol the area around the town, likely bored from sitting idle. They’d been staying close as Blanc’s guards, but with Leah present, the balcony’s security was more than assured.

“The other possibility,” Leah said, her tone lowering slightly, “is that these knights knew the Hilith royal family had been killed before they could escape, and that’s how they learned so quickly about the kingdom’s fall.”

“Oh, I get it!” Blanc exclaimed, pausing before continuing. “But why would they tell a player something like that?”

“That, I have no idea,” Leah admitted with a shrug. “But I’ll tell you this: I’ve been searching for those so-called Hilith royals.”

“Really? Is this, like, a perfectionist thing? Can’t leave loose ends hanging?” Blanc teased with a grin.

“Not quite,” Leah replied, smiling wryly. “It’s more practical than that. I’m after certain items they might’ve taken with them. But either way, it doesn’t matter. The problem is I don’t know where they fled to, and just barging into another country without any leads would be dangerous. That’s why this information caught my attention.”

That explained Leah’s unusually high energy. It was rare to see

her this animated, but Blanc was beginning to understand why.

"Hmm... But doesn't it all seem a little suspicious?" Blanc asked, her brow furrowed.

"I won't deny that it's suspicious," Leah replied. "But no one would suspect me—an event boss-level harbinger—of browsing social media. Even if it's some kind of trap, it's unlikely to be aimed at me."

Leah crossed her arms thoughtfully. "If it's targeting someone else, I can just smash it when I find it. And if it's not a trap, it might lead to valuable new information."

Blanc frowned, clearly unconvinced. "It feels *super* shady to me. I can't explain it, but...something's just off about it. Really off!"

"Well," Leah said with a shrug, "if you're that worried, why don't you come with me?"

"I'm coming!" Blanc blurted, raising her hand enthusiastically.

Despite Leah being far stronger, Blanc couldn't shake the nagging worry about her. Leah had a certain air of naivete, as though she lacked worldly experience. Blanc figured this might be the sort of person others referred to as...well, a bit of a ditz. Not that she'd ever dare say it to Leah's face. That would be *way* too rude.

Up until now, Blanc had mostly been on the receiving end of Leah's help. If guarding her could pay back even a fraction of that debt, Blanc was all for it.

"Oh, but...I can't fly," Blanc muttered as the realization hit her. "What do we do about that?"

"Ah, that reminds me!" Blanc said, brightening up. "So, uh, could you maybe teach me how to grow wings or something?"

Leah raised an eyebrow. "All right, but first, tell me what skills you can pick up right now. Oh, and by the way—this kind of information is really sensitive. You're not supposed to share it with others."

"I wouldn't tell anyone! What do you take me for?" Blanc snapped, pouting.

After some searching, they managed to find a skill that would allow Blanc to grow wings. However, since she didn't have enough experience points, they decided to stay in the town for another day, earning the necessary points by defeating players who

appeared the next day.

Eventually, Blanc successfully grew her wings. As she had imagined, they were bat-like in appearance.

“It’s great that we’re heading out,” Leah said, “but there’s a good chance more players will show up here in the coming days. Oh, I know—I’ll ‘summon’ one of the beetle queens from the forest near Lieb and run a field test with it. Is that okay with you, Blanc?”

“Of course! Thanks for being so considerate!” Blanc replied cheerfully.

With that, the two of them set off together, heading for the town of Hugelkuppe, the source of the mysterious information.

Apparently, Leah had been getting an earful from Diaz about the trip, but in the end, she pushed through with the idea of a “girls-only adventure.”

Thus began the fifth day of the event—the halfway point.

Chapter 7: Reunion

Even though Hugelkuppe was technically in a neighboring country, the town was still quite far away.

Traveling at a moderate pace to match Blanc's speed, it ended up taking them a full day to get there. This meant the distance exceeded what a messenger pigeon could cover. It was safe to assume that most nations wouldn't bother sending pigeons across borders to neighboring countries.

"Hmm. But if someone was using *Domination* on the pigeons, wouldn't that change things?" Blanc suggested. "Even if they died, you could just send another one. Plus, you could make them fly through dangerous areas without worrying about it too much."

"That's true," Leah admitted. "I hadn't thought of that."

Her mental image of messenger pigeons had been based on their real-world capabilities, limiting her perspective. But this was a world of swords and magic, where cities' and nations' fates were often on the line. It wouldn't be surprising if someone went to those lengths.

"Blanc, you're amazing," Leah said, impressed.

"Hehe, well, you know!" Blanc replied, beaming with pride.

Leah couldn't deny that Blanc often pointed out things she might have missed when thinking alone. It was a big help.

"Bringing you along really was the right decision," Leah said with a smile.

"Don't worry, I'll keep you perfectly safe!" Blanc declared confidently.

"I'm counting on you," Leah said warmly.

A massive castle soon came into view, its size suggesting it belonged to a noble closely tied to the central authority or one with significant accomplishments. Leah briefly considered her earlier theory: could the royal family have fled here, relinquishing their sovereignty for sanctuary? No, that was too soon. It had taken them a full day to fly from Ellental, making such a journey impossible by land in a single day.

If the knights here had killed the Hilith royal family, it would mean they left as soon as the capital fell, intercepted the royals, and returned immediately to report to the player. For that to happen, they'd need real-time knowledge of the capital's destruction and the royal family's escape plans. What kind of method would allow for that? And why share this information with one player? It made no sense.

"For now, let's land discreetly at the edge of the town," Leah said. "We'll use *Charm* to brainwash a random resident and gather information."

"Uh, Leah," Blanc interjected, raising an eyebrow, "with how you look, I don't think being discreet is an option. And calling that 'gathering information'? Feels more like drug-induced confessions."

"Ah, but I've got *Camouflage* from *Light Magic,* so I can hide my appearance," Leah replied matter-of-factly.

"Well, in that case, sure. Let's find our first victim!" Blanc said cheerfully.

"Our first *collaborator,*" Leah corrected.

***

After a series of events, they finished questioning their "collaborator" and promptly reduced them to ashes using *Fire Magic,* efficiently cleaning up the scene.

"So they *were* a victim!" Blanc exclaimed, pointing an accusatory finger. "You just dealt with them once you were done!"

"Well, *Charm* doesn't erase their memories," Leah replied frankly.

It was simply a matter of efficiency. Whether the cooperation was voluntary or forced made little difference in the end.

"Still," Leah continued, "it seems like the fall of Hilith is widely known in this town. Even the general populace is aware. If we account for an extra day having passed, the fact that news has reached every corner of a city this size suggests that someone is deliberately spreading the information."

"So it *is* a trap!" Blanc declared.

"Well, we've only questioned one person so far. It's still possible that he just happened to know," Leah said calmly. "Let's move on

to the next coopera—uh, victim."

"Yeah, sure," Blanc muttered, her tone dripping with resignation.

Still, there was something they needed to be careful about: selecting their next target. They couldn't afford to accidentally ensnare a player instead of an NPC.

According to Blanc, who had previously been *Charmed,* the experience left the victim fully conscious. It felt like being paralyzed, unable to move or resist, but the awareness remained intact.

They could use *Charm* to extract information from NPCs, but Leah doubted it would work on players.

"Still, are there even any players here?" Blanc asked, tilting her head. "I mean, this isn't exactly some backwater town—it's what they call the heartlands, right?"

"That's true," Leah agreed, "but the person who posted on social media must be in this town. And just because it's the event period doesn't mean there are no players around."

It was hard to distinguish players from NPCs just by watching them walk down the street. So Leah had a plan: target people who were shopping.

When someone makes a purchase, unless it's through bartering, they'd need gold coins. An NPC would pull out a purse or wallet from somewhere, while a player rarely carried one. Players could store their gold in their inventory, making wallets unnecessary.

While this method wasn't exactly foolproof, the goal wasn't to perfectly identify NPCs, but to avoid targeting players. Simply excluding anyone who might be a player reduced the risk. Unless a player was deeply committed to role-playing, they wouldn't be carrying a wallet.

"And if they're that into role-playing, maybe they'll collaborate if we just talk to them," Leah added with a small shrug.

"Collaborate? With us?" Blanc said, raising an eyebrow. "I mean, what are we even doing here? Kidnapping townsfolk, brainwashing them, killing them, and covering it up. Let's face it, Leah, your love of the word 'collaborator' is kind of ironic. Are you just really lonely? An only child, maybe?"

"Who knows," Leah replied quietly.

Her memories of her siblings weren't exactly happy ones. But that was Leah's problem, not something she wanted to share with Blanc. Bringing it up would only darken the mood—or worse, Blanc might laugh.

The two continued questioning several more collaborators. While not everyone seemed to know, it became clear that a significant portion of the town's population was aware of Hilith's fall, likely through word of mouth.

"If someone's spreading rumors on purpose, they must have used a lot of NPCs as plants," Leah speculated.

"That's possible," Blanc said, "but this town isn't on the frontier, you know? It doesn't even have walls. There are fields of...is that barley? Plus, lots of merchants and wagons everywhere. I bet this place thrives on agriculture and trade. If someone understands how the economy here works, they could spread the rumor with minimal effort and maximum reach."

Leah glanced around the town, taking in the bustling activity. "Wow, Blanc... You're amazing. I don't believe you when you say you're not smart. Your insights are sharp, and you know so much! I mean, I've never even seen barley growing before. I wouldn't have recognized it if you hadn't said anything."

Blanc grinned, scratching the back of her head. "Hehe, well, like eighty percent of it's just stuff I've picked up. My retinue is super smart and teaches me all kinds of things. The barley thing? That's just dumb luck—I happened to see it recently."

"Your retainers—the Mormos, right? They definitely seemed capable," Leah said thoughtfully. "A retainer's abilities are a reflection of their master's strength, after all."

"Really? You think so? Ha ha, thanks!" Blanc replied, clearly pleased.

"If you're right," Leah continued, "it wouldn't be surprising if this news has already spread to nearby towns too. Maybe it's time to go straight to the source—someone closer to the town's power, like a knight."

Unlike ordinary townsfolk, however, knights wouldn't be so easy to deal with. Using the same questioning methods risked tipping off the local governing noble.

"So, what's the plan? Should we just storm the castle?" Blanc

suggested, half joking.

"Bold move," Leah said with a small smile. "But it honestly might be the simplest option."

"Wait, seriously? We're actually doing that?" Blanc's eyes widened.

"Wait, are we not?" Leah blinked in confusion.

"No, no, I'm fine with it. It's just... Leah, you seem so cautious most of the time, but when things get annoying, you kind of throw all caution to the wind. Me? I throw it out right away because it's easier."

"Do I? Do I really?" Leah muttered, frowning slightly.

"Well, either way," Blanc said with a shrug, "if we're doing this, we should probably wait until night."

Leah nodded. Waiting for the cover of darkness was the wisest course of action.

"All right, combining this darkness with *Veil of Darkness* should make it nearly impossible for anyone to spot us," Leah said.

"You're hard to miss, Leah," Blanc teased. "Couldn't you just use *Camouflage* like you did during the day?"

"*Camouflage* works for staying hidden when standing still or moving slowly, but it blurs the outline if I move too much. It's not great for combat. It's fine for talking, though."

"Still, you turned it off when you were brainwashing people," Blanc pointed out.

"That's because *Charm* is less effective if they can't see me," Leah explained. "And for the record, it's not brainwashing. It's...a collaborative request."

They quietly lifted off from the roof of the inn. The area immediately around them was unnaturally dark compared to their surroundings, but up in the night sky, it was unlikely anyone would notice.

"So, where should we head in the castle?" Leah mused. "Do we aim for the treasury, or would it be faster to just ask the lord directly?"

"Hey, do you think it's possible the lord—or maybe even the nobles—are being *Dominated* by someone else? Like your Doom Lord guy, Sieg?"

Leah had considered the possibility. From the perspective of

someone wanting to use *Domination,* it would be a highly advantageous strategy. But for the nobles being controlled, it would be nothing short of a nightmare.

A noble under *Domination* would have no incentive to cooperate. They'd have to sustain their subordinates without earning any experience points for themselves. To keep up appearances, they'd need to request experience points from their superior, but from the top-down perspective, subordinates of subordinates were nothing more than disposable pieces. Providing them with experience would likely feel like a waste. Such an arrangement would only work if there was an extraordinary level of trust between the parties.

"That's why, if it does happen, I think it'd be limited to close family or friends—not something tied directly to the power structure," Leah concluded.

"Got it," Blanc said. "In that case, since this is such a big castle, if there's a noble in that kind of relationship here, it's probably the lord at the top, right?"

"Exactly," Leah agreed.

Despite Blanc's occasional lapses in general knowledge and tendency to act without thinking, Leah had to admit her insights were often sharp.

"So," Blanc continued, "should we aim for one of the higher floors, maybe where there's a room with lights on? Important people always seem to hang out in fancy, well-lit places."

"Good idea. There's no better lead, and it's likely. A governor managing a city of this scale through production and commerce would probably still be working late, even after dark."

Leah spotted a large balcony jutting out from the middle section of the castle. Bright light spilled from the room behind it, and there didn't seem to be any illuminated rooms above it.

That balcony looked like their best bet for answers.

The balcony curtains were open, and from the outside, the room appeared empty. Even Leah's *Evil Eye* confirmed no signs of anyone inside—it was safe to assume the room was unoccupied.

Leah landed silently on the balcony, making no noise.

She considered using *Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum* to investigate further, but the glowing cascade of white feathers it produced

would be far too conspicuous for their stealthy approach. Fortunately, Leah had her *Evil Eye,* and Blanc had mentioned her *Darkvision* allowed her to see well in the dark. It was better to proceed while maintaining the cover of *Veil of Darkness.*

Normally, the *Veil* only slightly dimmed the surroundings, but with the effects of both Leah's and Blanc's skills combined, the central area was plunged into deep darkness.

Leah gently pushed on the balcony window. It wasn't locked. Evidently, the inhabitants didn't expect intruders capable of scaling a window this high.

Inside, the room was lined with suits of armor—Western-style full plate armor commonly seen in mansions inspired by European design.

It didn't feel like an office. The decor was too grim and oppressive for that. If this wasn't the office, though, why were the lights on at this hour?

"Ah! The window—" Blanc's voice broke the silence.

Leah turned sharply to see the balcony window closing—this time, it wasn't the glass pane from earlier but a heavy iron shutter. It looked like the kind typically used as a storm board on the outside of a window.

The one closing the window wasn't human. It was one of the suits of armor standing by the wall. And to make matters worse, it was meticulously welding the iron shutter closed using some sort of crafting skill.

Through her *Evil Eye,* Leah could see faint pink mist thinning out around the figure, like an ordinary obstacle in her vision. If her sight could be trusted, the full plate armor was completely devoid of magic—yet it was moving on its own, welding the window shut.

"It's a trap after all…" Blanc muttered, her tone resigned.

Leah had to admit, Blanc's earlier suspicion was right on the mark.

"I'd heard that harbingers are capable of conversation," a voice said.

The source was a particularly ornate suit of armor near the room's door. It wasn't a living armor speaking, though; there was clearly someone inside. The voice was slightly muffled but distinctly feminine.

"So, you're the harbinger, correct?" the voice continued. "You're

a bit earlier than expected, but I suppose that makes things easier. Good evening, harbinger."

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<<Resistance successful.
Resistance successful.>>
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"Hmm. No response? Or perhaps you're not the harbinger after all? The timing seems off, but if anyone were to attack, I assumed it would be a harbinger," the voice mused.

Leah remained silent. She had come to this castle to question the lord, so a conversation wasn't entirely unwelcome—but something felt wrong.

"I am the lord of this town," the figure said. "What business brings you to my castle at such an hour?"

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<<Resistance successful.
Resistance successful.>>
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Leah frowned. She was under attack, though she had resisted so far. It felt like *Enchantment Magic,* but she couldn't pinpoint the source—whether it was the so-called lord or one of the suits of armor around the room.

More troublingly, she couldn't sense any magic from the armor. That left her uncertain of their nature or purpose. And then there was the lord's confident assertion, addressing her as "Harbinger" without hesitation. This meant they had anticipated her arrival tonight.

Leah had come because of the social media post, but there was no way the lord could have known a harbinger would see it, let alone act on it. Based on their remarks, the lord didn't seem to think Leah was a player either. The defensive setup and their words suggested not that they had merely expected a harbinger, but that they had actively lured her here.

"Hm. No response at all. I see—this isn't going to work," the lord said with a sigh. "No matter."

At their signal, the suits of armor moved as one, rushing toward Leah.

At this point, stealth no longer mattered. Leah activated

Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum and countered with *Feather Gatling,* firing a barrage of magical feathers to hold back the advancing armor.

She didn't expect to destroy them with this attack—but she was ready for what came next.

"*Thunderbolt!*"

Blanc unleashed her spell. It was a single-target spell, likely chosen to avoid causing unnecessary collateral damage indoors. Quick to cast, *Lightning Magic* was an excellent choice for reliably dealing damage, and against opponents clad in full metal armor, it should have been particularly effective.

"Huh?"

Yet, the suit of armor hit by the spell showed no signs of being affected. It staggered as though resisting an impact, but its movements were no different from the other suits of armor that hadn't been struck. In other words, only Leah's *Feather Gatling* seemed to be causing any damage.

"*Flare Arrow! Ice Bullet! Wind Cutter!*"

Blanc followed up with a rapid series of spells, all aimed at a single target. None of them appeared to have any effect.

It became clear that the armor possessed a high resistance to magic. This might explain why Leah's *Evil Eye* detected no magic emanating from them—magic itself seemed ineffective against them.

"*Feather Bullet,*" Leah muttered calmly.

Her experience in Hilith's royal capital had shown her the value of this skill. Leah had invested experience points into DEX, boosting both her accuracy and precision. While *Feather Gatling* offered overwhelming firepower, it lacked the precision necessary to exploit weak points. In contrast, the single-shot *Feather Bullet* allowed her to carefully aim for the gaps in the armor.

Using the Gatling to destabilize their posture, Leah followed up with precise *Feather Bullet* shots aimed at critical joints. When her strikes hit their mark, the armor collapsed, never to rise again.

For those too hunched or awkwardly positioned to be targeted with precision, Leah simply maintained a barrage with *Feather Gatling* until their LP was completely depleted. The resulting wreckage left the armor in a twisted, unrecognizable heap.

Throughout the battle, the lord remained motionless,

seemingly observing the fight. Leah didn't care—her goal was to gather information, and if the lord chose to stay quiet and refrain from interference, it was of no concern to her.

Before long, all the suits of armor lay defeated, brought down by Leah's feathered bullets. Now, only Leah, Blanc, and the lord remained alive in the room.

If these armored figures were indeed the lord's knights, they would likely respawn somewhere else and return within the hour. That was the window of time Leah had to work with.

"I see," the lord said calmly. "In Hilith, the mercenaries were able to fend off the harbinger, and even effects like *Fear* worked against them, so I thought this would be manageable. But no—this isn't going to work. I failed."

The lord's calm demeanor was unsettling, especially since nothing remained to protect them. The sense of unease in the room was palpable, and even Leah felt it—a vague, oppressive foreboding.

"What's with this confidence?" Blanc muttered, frowning.

Before Leah could respond, the lord continued, "Fine. I'll handle it myself."

No sooner had the words left their mouth than the lord lunged forward at incredible speed, a sword in their left hand. Leah hadn't even noticed when they had drawn it.

"Get back!" Leah shouted, shoving Blanc behind her.

With barely a moment to spare, Leah twisted her body, pulling back her right leg to narrowly avoid the initial thrust.

"Hmph," the lord grunted, their voice cold.

As Leah dodged the first strike, the lord twisted, their free right hand shooting forward in a piercing strike aimed directly at Leah's chest—a knife-hand thrust delivered at point-blank range.

There was no dodging this one.

"*Wing Strike!*" Leah shouted.

"Guh—!" the lord grunted.

Just before their hand made contact, Leah swung her wing with full force, sending the lord flying backward.

"*Feather Gatling!*" Leah followed up immediately, unleashing a barrage of feathers to push the lord even farther back. She had hoped to finish them off, as she had with the knights earlier, but

the lord's armor appeared to be of much higher quality.

Still, the gap between them had widened. Judging by their combat style, the lord excelled in close quarters. Maintaining distance would minimize the risk of being caught off guard.

"*Feather Bullet*!" Leah aimed for the gaps in the armor, releasing a precise shot.

But the lord dodged it. Leah hadn't expected anyone to avoid an attack that fast. Their AGI must be remarkably high.

Nobles, by design, tended to accumulate experience points more easily within their hierarchical structure. It was possible this lord had invested heavily in their own stats rather than those of their knights.

"*Blinding Flash!*" the lord shouted, activating a skill.

It was unfamiliar to Leah, but the name suggested it was meant to obscure her vision. However, it was ineffective—Leah had her eyes closed. Her *Veil of Darkness* was still active, and it seemed the lord hadn't realized they couldn't see her face.

Then, in an instant, the lord vanished.

No—they reappeared right in front of her.

Leah recognized the movement. This was *Blink Step.* The lord had simply changed the activation keyword for the skill.

Oh yeah, that update did happen! But can NPCs really do that too?!

The lord now held the sword in their right hand, thrusting upward from a low position. Leah reacted instantly, raising her left foot and striking the lord's hand with her toes, kicking the sword out of their grasp and sending it flying.

However, the lord seemed to have anticipated this. Without hesitation, they slipped their shoulder under Leah's raised leg, grabbing hold of it while locking her knee in place. Leah felt a sharp discomfort in her knee—they intended to break it.

Spinning her body, Leah adjusted the angle of her joints and the force being applied to them, neutralizing the hold.

Ordinarily, such a maneuver wouldn't have been possible in time, but in this world, differences in stats could make the impossible achievable. Fortunately, Leah's AGI was higher than the lord's, allowing her to narrowly escape.

"*Wing Strike!*" Leah swung her wing, aiming for the lord's neck.

The lord countered by lifting Leah's leg sharply, throwing her off-balance and dodging the attack. Though her strike missed, the

maneuver allowed Leah to free her leg from their grasp.

"*Feather Bullet*!" she fired, using the shot as a feint. She knew it would be dodged.

As the lord evaded the attack, Leah followed up with a kick. The impact reverberated through her leg. It was like kicking a steel wall. *What kind of metal is this made of?*

The attack had done no damage to the lord; in fact, Leah felt pain radiating from her own foot. Still, the kick's recoil created enough distance to reset the fight.

"You fight in close combat as well, but I heard your magic is supposed to be your strongest weapon," the lord said, straightening. "Yet you haven't used any magic at all. Could it be...I have the wrong person after all?"

It seemed the lord intended to take a moment to reassess the situation.

Leah, too, used the chance to reevaluate. There wasn't a crushing sense of defeat looming over her, but this opponent was unquestionably stronger than any she had faced previously. At the very least, they were stronger than Leah had been when she was still weakened.

That means if this lord has access to the same kind of artifact as before, I probably wouldn't be able to win.

Adding to the problem, their armor appeared to negate magic entirely, making them a nightmare for any magic user. The armor's strength wasn't limited to magic resistance either—it seemed to offer physical protection far beyond anything Leah had encountered.

The proof is in my own kick, Leah thought bitterly. *Not only did it fail to deal any damage, but my foot took recoil damage from striking the armor. Their defense value must exceed the combined protection of my VIT and these boots from the Great Forest.*

This was a level of armor capability Leah had never seen, and it didn't bode well.

Leah and Blanc's strategies were already exposed, and keeping *Veil of Darkness* active served little purpose now even as it steadily drained Leah's MP.

She couldn't know exactly how much magic the lord's armor could repel, but it was hard to imagine it nullifying all her abilities. If the worst came to pass, brute force through sheer magical

output would have to suffice.

Leah deactivated her spell and opened her eyes. Blanc, who had retreated to a corner of the room, also canceled her own spell.

Despite the chaos of the earlier battle, the room's lights remained undisturbed. They weren't torches, but some kind of magical device producing a steady illumination. Leah made a mental note—both the armor and these lights would be valuable additions to her cave if she could somehow take them back.

Under the magical light, the lord's full plate armor looked even more refined than it had when Leah had seen it indirectly through mana perception.

They'd endured a significant number of attacks, yet their armor showed barely a scratch.

"Ha, ha ha..."

Suddenly, the lord began to laugh.

"Ha ha, ah ha ha ha ha! Aaah ha ha ha ha!"

"Lealea, what's their deal? Did you mess them up somehow?" Blanc asked, her tone tinged with suspicion.

"I mean, I punched and kicked them, sure, but none of it should've done much damage," Leah replied. "If they're losing it, it's not because of me. They've probably been 'off' from the start."

After a long fit of laughter, the lord finally seemed to calm down. Their once-guarded posture relaxed into something far more casual as they leaned slightly and fixed their gaze on Leah.

"Ha ha ha... Well, well. I thought you were just an NPC set up by the developers, given the timing. But to think the event boss is actually a player! That was unexpected!" the lord said, their tone brimming with amusement.

"Did they just say 'player'?" Blanc exclaimed, her eyes widening as she turned to Leah. "Lealea, this guy's a player too! That whole 'lord' thing was a lie!"

"Oh? So your companion is also a player," the lord remarked casually. "But let me correct you on one thing: my claim to being the lord isn't a lie."

The bigger issue, however, was how this so-called lord had identified Leah as a player so quickly. Judging by appearance or behavior should have been nearly impossible—after all, not even Wayne or the other members of that raid party had figured it out.

Until just moments ago, this lord had also clearly believed the

harbinger was an event boss.

"You're wondering how I figured out you're a player, aren't you?" the lord said, their tone playful as their eyes fixed on Leah. "Lealea, was it? Hmm, not the most creative name, but I'm hardly one to talk."

Not the most creative name. The words struck Leah like a hand grasping her heart.

Whose name are they comparing it to? Leah thought, her pulse quickening. *Could it be…*

"Shall I show you the answer?" the lord continued with a smirk. "Here it is."

The figure before her—no, the player—slowly removed their helmet, letting it drop to the floor with a metallic clang.

"What…? Wh-What?!" Blanc stammered, her eyes darting between Leah and the now-unmasked lord.

The face revealed was identical to Leah's in every way, save for jet-black hair and dark eyes.

"The reason I knew you were a player is simple," the lord began, their tone calm yet piercing. "You're…unnaturally pale now, and sure, the game's system seems to have polished things up a bit, but there's no way I could mistake *your* face, my dearest Lealea."

"Wha—? T-Twins?" Blanc stammered, looking back and forth between them.

"Oh, what a flattering thing to say, my friend," the lord replied with a smirk. "But no, I'm afraid I'm the older one by quite a bit."

Why were they here? Why had they set up this trap? How could they, as a player, be the lord of this town? And more importantly—*why* were they playing this game? Where were they even living now?

Leah's mind swirled with questions, so many that she couldn't tell which ones were worth asking, or even if they should be asked at all. Her thoughts felt like a tangled web.

"You've got that look on your face," the lord said, interrupting her thoughts. "The one that says, 'I've got a million questions, but I don't know where to start.'"

"Huh? Is that true, Lealea?" Blanc asked, tilting her head.

"No…" Leah muttered, her voice sharp.

"See? It's not true!" Blanc declared.

"It probably is, though," the lord interjected with a shrug. "But

that’s fine. We’ve got time, and this doesn’t feel like the kind of mood to keep fighting, does it? Besides, today’s outcome is clearly my loss. So, go ahead—ask me anything.”

Loss.

It wasn’t clear enough to call it a decisive defeat, but the lord’s words seemed to offer Leah the upper hand. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of frustration—it was almost more irritating than losing outright. Still, Leah forced herself to stay composed, pushing down her emotions. She was used to doing that when facing this face.

“Your name?” Leah asked, her voice steady.

“Oh, right, I forgot to introduce myself,” the lord replied with a casual smile. “I’m Lyla. As you can see, I’m a player using a human avatar. I usually serve as this town’s lord. And you, over there?”

Blanc shifted slightly, still wary. “Uh… That intro feels weirdly familiar,” she muttered before clearing her throat. “I’m Blanc. A ske—uh, I mean, a vampire.”

Leah cut in, her tone sharp. “Lyla, what’s your goal here? Why did you set all this up?”

There were many things she wanted to ask, but for now, she kept the focus on the game. Blanc was here too, so the questions needed to stay relevant.

“That’s a bit vague, but I’ll try to answer,” Lyla replied smoothly. “If by ‘all this,’ you mean luring Lealea here and trapping her, then sure, let’s go with that.”

Leah nodded.

“My goal was simple: I wanted to *Dominate* the event boss known as ‘The Descending Death.’”

Leah flinched at the unfamiliar term. Was that supposed to be her? If so, the name was unbearably embarrassing.

“That expression!” Lyla chuckled, clearly amused. “No, no, don’t worry. It’s not an official title. Some players started calling you that, and it just stuck. But seeing that look on your face made saying it worth it.”

Leah sighed, deciding to push past the teasing. “Can you use *Dominate,* Lyla?”

“That tone—you’re not surprised. You can use it too, can’t you, Lealea? Makes sense. As for me, yes, I can. I unlocked it after evolving from a human to an advanced race. My current race is

Noble Human, essentially a noble-class variant."

Lyla leaned back slightly, gesturing casually as she explained. "Advanced races gain access to racial skills like *Dominate.* As for how I became a noble in the first place, well, that's a long story. If I start from the beginning, it'll take a while. Want to take a quick break?"

"I'm fine," Leah replied firmly. "I've got more questions anyway, so keep going."

"All right," Lyla said, nodding. "Let's go chronologically, then. It all started when I got accepted into the very first closed alpha test."

"The closed alpha? Isn't that going way too far back?" Blanc interjected, incredulous.

Leah's eyes narrowed. "Wait—are you serious? The character data from the closed alpha wasn't supposed to carry over to later tests..."

"That's right," Lyla confirmed, smiling knowingly. "That's where it all began. And yes, it's a long story. Really, though, would you mind if I set up a few chairs and drinks? Just to make things a bit more comfortable? No need to be on guard—I'm not planning any ambushes at this point. Oh, and would you mind if I took off this armor?"

Chapter 8: Alf’lyla wa’Lyla

Ahh, freedom.

Full plate armor—it’s great for protecting against slashes and stabs, but it’s not exactly ideal for brawling, let alone explaining something. Wearing it during a fight makes sense, sure, but standing around in it to have a conversation? Not so much. Anyway, more on that later. Let’s get back to where we left off.

Right, it all started when I applied for the closed alpha test.

There were the usual rules—don’t talk about the game, keep everything confidential. Standard NDA stuff. At the time, I didn’t think much of it. I just figured I’d get an early sneak peek, try things out, and maybe lock in a good strategy for launch. That was the plan. Nothing too serious.

And then, I stepped into this world.

It wasn’t this town, but the capital of this kingdom. The moment I felt the air and talked to the NPCs—and well, occasionally killed them—I was hooked. I knew I was playing something special. It’s been a long time since a game grabbed me like that.

But no matter how much I loved it, it was still an alpha test. Everything I did—every moment, every achievement—would get wiped when the test ended. My avatar’s data would vanish like it had never existed. Meaningless, right?

But here’s the thing: that only applied to the avatars.

Lealea, you’ve probably heard the rumors, right? About this game being built using world-simulation tech? Think about it—this place is way too detailed, way too alive, for the devs to reset everything just because they found a bug. They wouldn’t just delete all this—the maps, the objects, the NPCs living their lives—just to tweak a couple of mechanics.

So, I decided to take a gamble. If it didn’t work, who cares? My data would get wiped anyway. But if it did...well, the potential payoff was worth the risk.

From that moment on, I spent the rest of the alpha test gathering resources however I could.

Mostly, I went after the rich NPCs.

At night, when the towns went quiet, I'd break into their estates or shops, stuff their safes into my inventory, and get out. I did as many runs as I could every night.

The next day, I'd take the safes somewhere remote and smash them open for the loot. Anything locked that I couldn't open on the spot, I left for later.

I kept this up all the way to the final days of the test. On the last day, I even raided noble estates, grabbing anything shiny or heirloom-looking and tossing it into my inventory.

And then, I buried it all. I'd scouted a secluded corner of a safety zone deep in monster territory, and I stashed everything there.

The idea was simple: if my gamble paid off, and the world didn't reset, I'd dig it all up in the next test and start miles ahead of everyone else. And if I could keep it up all the way to launch? The kind of advantage that would give me? Absolutely priceless.

Of course, I applied for the next test as well and was accepted.

I'm not sure if it was to make comparisons easier or what, but once you were selected as a tester, you were pretty much guaranteed to get picked for the next round too.

Suppressing my excitement, I set my first goal: the spot where I had buried my treasure.

At this stage of testing, players typically spawned in the capitals or major cities of their respective countries, so getting there wasn't a logistical issue.

What was a concern, however, was the sheer density of testers in those areas. I had to be extra careful not to draw attention to myself or have anyone tailing me.

Eventually, I reached the spot—no doubt the exact location where I'd buried the hoard.

But there was no sign that anyone had disturbed it. The ground was untouched, overgrown with grass and shrubs. No hints of anyone digging, no signs that anything was ever hidden there.

I felt a wave of despair but decided to dig anyway. Just in case.

And there it was—the treasure I'd buried, completely intact and untouched.

That was the moment I knew.

Whether or not this game actually used world-simulation

technology, I couldn't say. But what was clear—what was *unmistakable*—was that this game had been developed with the intent to create a true, living world. A world that didn't just exist for players, but for itself.

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"Too long!" Leah interrupted, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

"It *is* really long," Blanc added, nodding along. "But at least it's interesting. I really liked how you were going on about how the NPCs are living their best lives just a few seconds before switching to armed robbery. It's giving off serious 'dangerous person' vibes. Makes me think, 'Ah, yeah, of course this person is connected to Lealea.'"

"So, Lyla," Leah said, her tone sharp, "what's your point, then? What are you actually trying to say?"

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Well, the real story started here. Come on, sit down, Lealea. Have some tea—my maid made it just for you. Oh, and look, there are tarts! I baked them myself. Don't rush; there's plenty. You always loved these, didn't you?

So, with that treasure trove and a glimpse of this world's truth in my pocket, I set out to make the most of it. Naturally, leveling up my avatar wasn't worth much at this stage of testing, so I focused on what really mattered—resources.

This time, though, I kept it clean. No more sneaking around or robbing merchants. Instead, I took the funds I'd made last time and started a business. A real one.

But here's the crazy part: when I went to set up a merchant guild, I found out that ten years had passed in this world since the first test. *That's* why the spot where I buried the treasure was so overgrown. It wasn't some system reset—it was just time.

That gave me an idea. You see, among the heirlooms I...uh, 'recovered' during the first test, there were a few noble treasures. So, I thought, why not return them? Make it look like I defeated some thieves and recovered their stolen goods. Solving my own

crimes was the perfect way to build connections.

There had to be some way to turn those connections into something else I could pass along to my future self. Gold wasn't necessary anymore—I had more than enough. But items? Special, unique items? If I could carry those over between tests, I'd get a huge advantage in the next round.

In a stroke of good luck, one of the treasures I stole—er, *returned*—was actually an artifact gifted to someone by the king of that era himself. That little gesture earned me an invitation to the royal castle.

Honestly, I thought I'd just gotten lucky at the time.

The reward offered by the king came down to two choices: gold or a noble title.

A title wasn't something I had any use for, but by then, I already had more gold than I knew what to do with. So, on a whim, I decided to ask for the title. That's when the king demanded I swear fealty in return.

At the time, I didn't fully grasp what swearing fealty to the king entailed, so I nodded along without much thought.

And that's how I obtained it—the item required to evolve into a *Noble Human. Sangre Azul,* the blue blood of nobility.

The moment I received the item, I instinctively understood how to use it. According to the king, some items—or "artifacts," as he called them—came with an inherent guide to their function. Basically, a built-in manual.

But I also realized something else at that moment.

That noble's heirloom I had "recovered," the one that earned me the king's invitation to the castle? It was an artifact. And most likely, the gold I could have chosen as my reward wasn't just a token of appreciation—it was hush money. Which meant that this oath of fealty the king demanded? It probably came with some sort of binding condition designed to ensure my silence.

So, I stashed *Sangre Azul* in my inventory, and before anything could be done to me, I killed myself on the spot.

It was a shame to abandon the merchant guild I had worked so hard to establish, but there was no helping it.

I respawned back in my guild's office, grabbed everything from the guild's vault, and disappeared before the crown could seize it.

And as a little parting gift, I broke into the estate of the noble

who had arranged my introduction to the king, taking all their heirlooms and valuables. Think of it as my inconvenience fee.

When the open beta—well, technically early access—arrived, I ran into my first real problem. The spawn points were randomized.

But while it was annoying, it wasn't a deal-breaker. I took my time, made my way toward the royal capital, and leveled up a bit along the way. Once I reached the stash, I retrieved my funds and, most importantly, *Sangre Azul.* Using it, I evolved into a *Noble Human.*

At the time, this city was a royal demesne—land without a ruling lord, directly managed by the crown. The castle was impressive, and I found myself wanting the city for my own.

This time, a few generations had passed since the last test.

From what I could gather, the noble who had "helped" me before had fallen into ruin, their bloodline extinguished. However, their loyalty to the crown until the very end had turned their demise into something of a bittersweet legend.

Naturally, I started thinking about how I could use that to my advantage.

The *Noble Human* race, as it turns out, can only be born from the union of two other *Noble Humans.* If they reproduce with regular humans, the hybrid offspring are always human.

So, for someone like me to suddenly appear without any record of using *Sangre Azul* under the king's watch, it was clear I had to be a descendant of a noble lineage—but the specifics of my origin were, conveniently, a mystery.

The *Sangre Azul* I had once received was, according to records, supposedly lost alongside the corpse of a certain "bandit," and there was no evidence linking me to it. No one even suspected me. Besides, this was the official game launch, and I was using a fully scanned avatar, so my face was completely different from back then. And I *love* this face, by the way.

So, I stepped forward and made my claim: I was the direct descendant of that fallen noble house. And this—here I presented the dagger engraved with the family crest—was the proof of my lineage.

With that, I was formally recognized as the rightful heir of a restored noble family.

But there was one problem—our ancestral lands were already in the hands of someone else. I couldn't exactly demand them back just because they had once belonged to my "ancestors."

So, I petitioned the royal family.

I requested a city from the crown's royal demesne, a place where I could reestablish my house and uphold my noble lineage.

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"You two are seriously like identical sisters…" Blanc muttered, glancing between Lyla and Leah.

"We're nothing alike," Leah replied, raising an eyebrow.

"No, you are!" Blanc shot back. "You look the same, you act the same, and your…let's say 'colorful' way of speaking is the same too. I mean, who points at something that looks exactly like a person and calls them a 'hybrid'? Even in a game, that's not normal. It's like the opposite of your whole 'collaborator' thing, but the vibe is weirdly similar. Oh, and that ridiculously excited face you make when explaining something? Identical!"

"I did think it was a bit of a long story," Lyla admitted with a shrug, "but I'm glad you enjoyed it. So, shall I move on to the history and design of full plate armor?"

"Don't bother," Leah said flatly.

"No thanks," Blanc echoed.

"Instead," Leah continued, crossing her arms, "how about explaining the methods you used to lure me here? And while you're at it, those magic-resistant suits of armor."

"Wait a sec, Lealea," Blanc said, tilting her head. "Aren't you forgetting something? Maybe on purpose?"

"What?" Leah asked, frowning.

"Our whole reason for coming here! You were looking for the whereabouts of the Hilith royal family, weren't you?"

"Oh, *that*." Lyla waved a hand dismissively. "Sure, let's cover that next. I'll explain everything. It'll be long, though."

"Long?" Leah and Blanc blinked.

***

Let's start with how I brought you here, Lealea. Though, if I'm

being truthful, the plan didn't work out quite as cleanly as I'd envisioned. My real aim was to draw the harbinger to this city, and to do that, I spread a very particular piece of information using the trade networks in the area.

I'm sure you've already guessed what I'm going to say—it was the claim that the Kingdom of Hilith had fallen.

After becoming a noble, I came to understand something about how nations are viewed on this continent. For most people, a nation's identity is tied to two symbols: its land and its royal family. The capital is important too, of course, but only the king's inner circle and certain high-ranking nobles truly grasp the weight it carries. I suspect you might already know that, though, Lealea.

So when NPC nobles hear that a nation has "fallen," their first assumption is usually one of two things: either the nation's land has been seized, or its royal family has been wiped out. For Hilith's own nobles, it's a crisis that determines their futures. For the nobility of neighboring nations, it's a major diplomatic issue. And merchants? To them, it's an economic disaster waiting to happen. Prices, trade routes, markets—they all hang in the balance.

Naturally, those who understand the implications—whether nobles or merchants—scramble to verify the truth. And their very efforts to uncover the facts only serve to spread the rumor further.

Once it spread far enough, it was bound to reach the harbinger. After all, I reasoned, the harbinger must be paying close attention to NPC rumors and whispers, especially those related to Hilith.

Why was I so sure? Simple. The harbinger has been searching for the missing royal family of Hilith. After being taken down once —ow, hey! Put those wings away! Okay, okay, I won't mention it again.

Anyway, the harbinger's troubles could be traced back to players wielding an artifact. But by the time the capital was destroyed, both the royal family and the artifact had already disappeared from within the castle.

Naturally, the next step would be to search for them. A fleeing royal family carrying the kingdom's national treasures? They'd be impossible not to notice with their security detail. Even the most cautious attempt to stay hidden would attract attention. Rumors about their whereabouts would crop up in no time, and if the harbinger were desperate enough, capturing random NPCs for

interrogation would likely yield results quickly. That's what I assumed, at least.

Now, imagine what happens when a rumor like "Hilith has fallen" begins to circulate. Who started such a claim, and for what purpose? If the fall were real, then the one spreading the rumor would need to know what happened—it would have had to come from the person responsible. And if it weren't true, then what reason would someone have to spread a lie like that? The ones most troubled by a rumor like that would be the fleeing royal family. It would look like an attempt to flush them out.

Either way, it was only natural for the harbinger to investigate the source of the rumor. Finding it wouldn't even be difficult; I didn't bother hiding it. I wanted the trail to lead straight here.

Sooner or later, the harbinger would trace it to this city. That was the point, after all. Someone spreading rumors about Hilith's supposed demise when it clearly hadn't happened? Suspicious enough to draw attention. That's what I was counting on.

Of course, whether the harbinger came alone or not was always going to be a gamble. Its goal wasn't destruction—at least not this time. It was looking for information, not an all-out battle. A large-scale assault would risk losing the trail yet again. And after its last defeat, which was entirely due to the artifact, I doubted it would expect the same kind of resistance in a city that's far from being a royal capital.

So, I figured it would opt for a quieter approach—a solo visit, or maybe leading a small group. A quick, efficient night raid. And, well, here we are. More or less how I planned it.

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"Can I ask a few questions?" Leah finally spoke, her tone measured.

"Of course," Lyla replied smoothly. "Ask as many as you like."

"First," Leah began, narrowing her eyes slightly, "you said your plan failed. But here I am, lured out and standing right in front of you. Doesn't that count as a success?"

"Ah, that," Lyla said with a knowing smile. "It's because you arrived far too quickly after hearing the rumor. For someone who was supposedly drawn in by the information I spread, you got

here faster than I expected. Honestly, I should be the one asking you—how did you pinpoint this city so accurately?"

"I saw it on social media," Leah answered bluntly.

"You sound like you're answering a user-experience questionnaire!" Blanc interjected. "Lealea, you seem a little different today. No expression, and you're barely talking!" Turning to Lyla, she clarified, "Someone made a post about how they'd overheard a knight mention Hilith's fall."

"Ah, I see," Lyla said. "Social media, of course. It's faster than any rumor network could ever hope to be. But that means your arrival here was purely coincidental. My plan didn't work after all."

Blanc tilted her head. "Still, isn't that kind of a flimsy plan? It was based on rumors and guesses. Weren't the odds of nothing happening far higher than the odds of anything actually working out?"

Lyla shrugged nonchalantly. "True enough. I only wanted to try 'enslaving' a harbinger, after all. It didn't have to be this particular one—any would've done. The problem is, there's so little information out there. All I could really do was spread a rumor and see if it caught on. Considering how little effort it would take, it was worth a shot."

She continued, "Of course, I had assumed that if a harbinger did show up, it would be after the event had ended. So there was a decent chance I might take a death penalty."

"I see... Then next: why is the royal capital so important to a nation? Is it tied to the activation conditions of certain artifacts?" Leah asked.

"Exactly," Lyla replied. "While we're on the topic, let me tell you something interesting. This city? It used to be the royal capital of a flourishing kingdom a long time ago. You might already know this, but the ruler back then was someone called the Fey King. I thought this city might still hold some connection to that past—perhaps even enough to activate an artifact. I didn't have the artifact in question at the time, though.

"But the thing about that artifact is... It's not some benign tool. It was imbued with some kind of cursed energy—something born from the Fey King's vengeful wrath against the royal lineages that deposed him. For that reason, it only activates in the current royal capital of one of the Six Royal Families. So this city, unfortunately,

doesn’t meet the criteria.

“Alas, the Fey King’s tragic miscalculation was this: the curse he forged with his final strength was far too potent, far too refined. It transcended its intended purpose and became the artifacts. Something so powerful that anyone who touches them can instantly understand how to wield them. And therein lies the irony—his cursed creations, intended to destroy, now serve as safeguards for the authority and safety of the very royal families he sought to ruin.

“That’s why I suspect that, now that Hilith’s royal family is gone, the artifact might no longer function in its capital. It’s something that would need testing. If you’re interested, I could—”

“*No*, obviously,” Leah interrupted coldly. “Moving on. These next questions are probably related enough to bundle together: When Hilith’s royal capital fell, you said there were no royals or artifacts left. How did you know that? Where are the royals now? And earlier, you said you ‘didn’t have the artifact in question at the time.’ Does that mean you have it now?”

“All right, let’s unpack this,” Lyla said. “You’re right—they’re all part of the same answer. I had my subordinates eliminate Hilith’s royal family and secure the artifact. It’s currently stored in the treasury of this castle. I had planned to keep it in this very room for easy access, but there’s no point since it can’t be activated here.

“Originally, when I arranged for the rumor to spread, I intended to use the artifact myself. But later, I found out it wouldn’t activate here. If it had... Well, let’s just say things might’ve turned out quite differently. Perhaps by now, I’d already have you under my control.”

“You’re a creep,” Leah spat. “To ‘enslave’ a player, their explicit consent is required, so that’s absolutely impossible. Anyway, you mentioned commanding your subordinates. From the timeline, that means you had already confirmed the royal family’s escape when Hilith’s capital was attacked. But the royal family’s escape was suggested by O’Connell, the NPC chancellor. There’s no way you could have predicted that.”

“Wait, there’s a chancellor who suggested his country’s sovereign flee? What an outrageous idea. I’ll have to keep an eye out for people like that,” Lyla remarked.

“He’s…not around anymore,” Leah said.

“Oh, is that so? Then I guess it’s fine,” Lyla replied. “Hmm, this is tricky. This part of the story doesn’t directly tie into the current chain of events. Or, rather, it ties into too much. Feels like I’m tipping my hand a bit too much here… Ah, how about this? If you agree to one little favor, I’ll tell you.”

“Then forget it,” Leah said, cutting her off immediately.

“Hey! At least hear her out first!” Blanc cut in. “If it’s no big deal, we can just do it and get the info!”

Leah sighed. “What’s the favor?”

“Give me your friend card,” Lyla said with a grin. “I’ll give you mine in return. That’s how friend registration works, right?”

“Then forget it,” Leah repeated, deadpan.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Blanc cried. “C’mon, just give it to her! I mean, aren’t you curious now? I definitely want to hear what happens next!”

“Fine… Here,” Leah finally said, holding out her card.

“Oh, nicely done, Blanc. You’re really pulling your weight here,” Lyla said with an approving nod. “Now then, about the royal family’s little escape plan.

“I’ll admit, I wasn’t expecting the chancellor to suggest something like that. But the idea that the royal family would choose to flee? That wasn’t exactly a wild guess. Think about it. There are six nations on this continent, right? Not one has ever collapsed, and war is basically unheard of. You think they just came up with the idea of exile out of nowhere? Doubtful.

“After becoming a noble, I made a point of focusing on trade and diplomacy. As part of that, I built up some connections with Hilith’s royal family and their inner circle. We had our chats, and—just hypothetically, of course—I may have mentioned that my city would make an excellent bolt-hole if they ever found themselves in trouble. It’s far from monster territory, right in the middle of the continent. Couldn’t ask for a better escape route.

“And wouldn’t you know it? Disaster struck. Humanity’s Enemy—or as I prefer to call her, Lealea—made her grand debut.

“I saw posts on social media about it, things like ‘*The harbinger is attacking Hilith’s capital! Join the raid!*’ and I immediately sent out my best knight. From what I’d gathered, there was no way the harbinger could lose, no matter how many players they threw at

her. The capital was doomed.

"I figured, once the harbinger attacked and left the royal family despairing over their future, they'd think back to my offer. So, I sent my knights to intercept them. The orders were simple: Find the royal family, kill them all, and bring me the artifacts."

"You're *evil*," Blanc whispered to herself.

"I…see." Leah then laid on a barrage of follow-up questions. "Why bother planting the idea of exile in the first place? Just to grab the artifacts? And what about the other royal families? Did you pull the same stunt with them?"

"Of course, I planted the idea with Hilith for the artifacts," Lyla replied. "You can't make those things anymore. Even if I can't use them here, they're still worth keeping around. And who knows? If their bloodline dies out, having the artifacts might give me a claim to the throne. Though, now that the kingdom's officially marked as fallen on the website, that angle's gotten trickier."

Lyla continued, "And as for the other royal families? Sure, I pitched it to the ones I had ties with. Most of them just laughed me off."

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After encountering this woman—who Blanc assumed must be Leah's sister—Leah's behavior had been odd. Her expression was unusually blank, and her words sparse. Even from Blanc's perspective, it was painfully obvious.

It was as if Leah were deliberately suppressing her emotions, refusing to let anything show on her face.

"Hey…are you okay? You're not feeling sick or anything, are you?" Blanc ventured, her tone gentle.

"I'm fine. Same as always," Leah replied flatly.

After an awkward pause, Lyla resumed her explanations. "Anyway, those knights' armor. I specifically prepared it in case *Enchantment Magic* didn't work. The idea was that, even if the spell failed, the armor would allow them to physically overpower their target. Magic doesn't affect that armor, after all, so there was no risk of them being wiped out en masse, like what happened in Hilith's capital.

"Actually, that armor has quite a story behind it. Supposedly, it

was once worn by the nobles who defeated the Fey King—our present royal families' ancestors. They used it to protect themselves from the Fey King's magic, or so the tale goes. Who knows if it's true, though?

"That said, its magic resistance does seem genuine. So I threw a lot of money around and gathered as much of it as I could. If it really was worn by royalty, they wouldn't have parted with it so easily, right? It's probably just made of replica pieces.

"Though now that I think about it, none of the Hilith royals I disposed of had anything like that. And if there's nothing like it in Lealea's treasure vaults either, then it's possible this whole story is nonsense—or that the set I wore was the only genuine article. Either way, it's all scrap metal now. Except for my set, of course."

And with that, they'd asked everything they needed to. The things they'd come to learn had been covered, and even some unexpected mysteries had been unraveled.

Blanc unfortunately hadn't been of any real use to Leah, but perhaps another opportunity would arise.

For now, they could afford to relax a bit, maybe even indulge in idle chatter. From Blanc's perspective, it was clear Leah had questions that extended beyond the game—something more personal she wanted to ask.

"Well…I'm done here," Leah said, her voice devoid of emotion.

"Huh?" Blanc asked. "You're leaving already? You're not going to talk more? I mean…she's your sister, isn't she?"

"She's a stranger. There's nothing between us," Leah replied, her expression completely unreadable.

Her wings, however, betrayed her unease, fluttering restlessly behind her. Blanc glanced at Lyla, whose expression was an odd mix of resignation and regret, as if she wasn't sure how to feel or what to say.

Whatever emotions were behind Lyla's face, they had an undeniable weight to them—one that tugged painfully at Blanc's chest. Seeing someone with Leah's exact features wear such an achingly melancholy expression was too much to bear.


Lyla

“You can’t do that,” Blanc said firmly.

“What?” Leah turned, confused.

“You can’t just leave. Both of you were completely shocked when you saw each other earlier, right? It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” Blanc pressed. “I don’t know the details of your family situation, so maybe I’m out of line, but…if you walk away now, who knows when—or if—you’ll get another chance to see each other? Shouldn’t you talk more while you can?

“Leah, your way of speaking…is a bit unique, you know? And honestly, it feels like something you picked up from her,” she went on, gesturing toward Lyla. “You two talk *so* similarly, it’s uncanny. Anyone could tell you grew up watching her.”

“And the tarts she baked—they were delicious! Those are your favorite, aren’t they? I bet she baked them all the time. Even here, in the game, she’s still baking tarts. Every day, just to—”

“Um, could you please stop now? I’m dying over here. From embarrassment,” Lyla said, her voice muffled as she covered her face with both hands.

Blanc hesitated, but she had a feeling that if she backed off now, these two might never reconcile.

“It’s not like we’ll never see each other again,” Leah said flatly, though her wings twitched slightly. “We’re friends now. On the registry.”

“Oh,” Blanc said, the realization dawning. That’s right—Leah had registered Lyla, and even Blanc herself had exchanged friend cards with her.

Even if they parted ways now, it wouldn’t be impossible for Blanc to arrange another meeting.

Reflecting on her earlier outburst, Blanc felt a pang of regret. Maybe she *had* crossed a line by meddling in something so personal. Being new to the whole concept of “friends,” she could ride out casual conversations thanks to her extensive—but mostly comic-derived—knowledge of social interaction. But situations like this? She had no idea where to draw the line.

“Um, sorry if I said too much,” Blanc began, glancing between the two sisters, “but…”

“It’s fine,” Leah interrupted, her tone softer. “I’ll talk to her. A bit. I’m going to blacklist her the second we leave anyway. Blanc, you can—”

“Oh! Don’t mind me! I can totally head back alone! I’ve got *Summon*! I’ll be fine!” Blanc said hurriedly, already activating her spell. “All right, see you later! *Summoner’s Recall!*”

“Wait, you idiot—” Leah started, reaching out to stop her.

“*Summon?*” Lyla began to ask. “Wait, what’s with *Summon*? You’re leaving? How are you—”

“Oops.” Blanc vanished in a flash.

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The darkness of the recall faded, giving way to the warm light of the lord’s manor in Ellental.

Blanc blinked, adjusting to the sight in front of her: Diaz, ever composed, was seated elegantly across from a massive, regal, beetle-like creature. It sipped tea in its own peculiar way, while Azalea moved about the room, serving with practiced poise. Blanc had targeted Azalea for the recall, so it was no surprise to find herself here.

“Welcome back, Lady Blanc,” Diaz greeted her, his tone measured and polite. “And Her Majesty? I trust she is well?”

Blanc hesitated, fumbling for an answer. “Uh, well… Leah’s, um, kind of… Let’s see, how do I explain this? She stayed back. She’s talking to someone—a friend she just made.”

“Is that so,” Diaz said. “Well, the trip home is an instant, unlike the journey there. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about if she’s in the company of a friend.”

“Er, yeah.” *Man*, had Blanc screwed up. In her earlier panic, she’d used the *Summon* ability to recall herself—right in front of Lyla, of all people. She might as well have handed Lyla a blueprint for trouble. If anyone could twist a skill like that to dangerous ends, it was Leah’s sister.

“Well,” she muttered to herself, “no use worrying about it now. What’s done is done. I’ll just have to wait for Leah to come back.” She shifted her focus to the massive beetle and tilted her head. “So, uh, what’s this big pincer beetle’s name?”

“This creature bears no individual name,” Diaz replied with his customary dignity. “You may consider them akin to the Spartoi under your command, save for your principle three. Their kind is known as Queen Beetles.”

The beetle inclined its whole body in a full-body nod.

“Oh, right. No neck,” Blanc said, nodding to herself. The title “Queen” gave her pause, though. If it’s a queen, why did it have such massive mandibles? She decided not to mention it.

“Did any players show up?” Blanc asked instead, focusing on the matter at hand. “How’d things go while we were gone?”

“They did,” Magenta answered between elegant sips of black tea. “Roughly the same number as yesterday. The spawn of the Queen Beetle handled them decisively. Most of the intruders were split in two.”

Blanc wondered for a moment why her subordinate was leisurely partaking in teatime, but apparently, they were taking turns with their servile chores.

“There isn’t anything to worry about on our end,” Diaz said, returning to the main subject. “What of yours, Lady Blanc? Did your venture yield the results you sought?”

Blanc couldn’t help but grin. “Oh, it definitely did! For starters, we figured out what happened to the Hilith royal family after they fled the capital. And we also learned where the artifact they supposedly carried ended up. So yeah, I’d say our mission was a success.”

“Excellent,” Diaz replied, a note of warmth in his otherwise formal tone. “I trust Her Majesty will be most pleased with the results.”

“Yeah,” Blanc murmured, her grin faltering. “Here’s hoping she is.”

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“Setting aside the connection between that skill she used to disappear and *Summoning*,” Lyla said. “for now, let’s respect her wishes and chat a bit.” She tilted her head with a slight grin. “How’ve you been?”

“You can see for yourself, can’t you?” Leah replied, her voice as flat as her expression.

“That’s an avatar, though,” Lyla pointed out. “A game character.”

“Well enough, I guess.”

“Did you miss me?”

“Not really,” Leah said after a pause, her wings twitching. “I

tried not to think about it."

"I see..." Lyla said gently.

"What about mother or grandmother? Aren't you going to ask if they've been well?"

"Not really. I've seen them on the regular."

"Wait, what?!" Leah's wings flared. "How?!"

"'How'? They're family. Of course I'd see them sometimes."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Then what *do* you mean?"

Leah paused for a moment. "Forget it," Leah muttered, turning her gaze away.

"Oh, is it that you're wondering why I visited them but didn't visit you?"

"I said, *forget it*!" Leah snapped.

"I mean...you did seem pretty mad," Lyla said. "Not now, but back when I decided to move for school."

"I wasn't angry," Leah said after a tense moment. "Just...disappointed."

"Because I said I wouldn't take over the family legacy? Or because grandmother agreed with me?"

Leah hesitated before quietly admitting, "It's because you were always better than me. I've never once beaten you. And yet you chose to run off to some university instead of stepping up to take over."

"I might have been stronger back then," Lyla said, "but now? I bet you're stronger than me, Leah. And for the record, I didn't 'run away.' I just found something else I wanted to do."

"That's not true! If we'd trained the same way, there's no way I could ever beat you—"

"But it *is* true," Lyla interrupted gently, shaking her head. "Because I *can't* train the same way. Everyone has things they can do and things they can't. Me? I couldn't train the way you did. Instead, I could do most things without even trying. On the other hand, I'm pretty good at everything I touch without putting in much effort. That's why I knew, someday, you'd surpass me. It was only a matter of time."

"So...that's why you stepped down?"

"Exactly. A rational choice," Lyla replied with a small shrug. "I never really understood *why* I was strong. I just...was. But you're

different, aren't you? You couldn't hold a candle to me when you first started, but nowadays I hear that even our grandmother can't beat you. Day in and day out, you worked at it—to a kind of weird level, honestly. With all that effort, I'm sure you could teach anyone how to follow in your footsteps."

Leah contemplated her next words. "Is that why grandmother didn't say anything when you left? Was that her 'rational choice' too?"

"I can't say for sure what grandmother thought. But if I had to guess…maybe it was because you looked like you were having fun with your training. That said, it was pretty clear I didn't have any talent for teaching, even from an early age. She told me as much to my face back in middle school."

"I wasn't doing it because it was fun," muttered Leah, glancing away.

"Really? You looked like you were having fun to me. Sure, you'd cry every time I beat you, but after— Ow! Stop with the wings already!"

"Then when you decided to leave for university, both mother and grandmother already knew?"

"Of course they did," Lyla said matter-of-factly. "How else was I going to afford tuition and living expenses? Do I look like the kind of person who'd work while studying?"

Leah's voice wavered. "I thought you just dropped everything and ran away."

"Why would I do that?" Lyla asked, incredulous. "What would I even be running *from*? Come here, Leah—no tears now."

"I'm not crying."

"I know, I know," Lyla said softly, pulling her closer. "You're not crying—it's just that your eyes are leaking a little, right? It's fine. Let it out."

Leah sniffled, her voice thick with emotion. "You just…left so suddenly. You didn't tell anyone you were going to university."

"It wasn't sudden," Lyla corrected. "I told you. I told everyone."

"I didn't hear about it."

"Maybe you just didn't *want* to hear it," Lyla replied smoothly. "Besides, discussions about college plans don't usually include the younger sibling. If grandmother or mother didn't bring it up, maybe they thought it was something you didn't need to know."

Leah's hands clenched at her sides. "I could never beat you. Not once. Then all of a sudden, grandmother announces I'm the heir. I didn't get it—you were right there. But then she told me you couldn't do it anymore because you were going to college."

"Ah, I see…" Lyla said, her voice softening slightly. "Look, I didn't leave because I hated the idea of being the heir. It's not like I was dying to do it, but if you really didn't want it, I probably would have stepped up."

Leah shook her head, her voice trembling slightly. "And mother never said anything either."

"That's just how she is," Lyla said with a shrug. "It's her approach to things. Grandmother handles everything related to the family legacy, so mother leaves it to her."

"She never says anything, but she gets mad if I leave burdock root on my plate."

"You still can't eat that? How old are you now?"

"Age has nothing to do with it," Leah sulked. "Grandmother doesn't eat it either."

"How old is *she* now, anyway?" Lyla snickered.

Leah's shoulders sagged slightly as her voice softened. "I don't have anyone left to complain to about this stuff anymore."

"I… Yeah, I'm sorry about that. But, you know, when I left, you seemed so mad. And every time I asked mother how you were doing, she said you were fine, so I thought you were okay. Sometimes she even sent me stuff of you in your gi or—"

"What?!" Leah shouted.

Lyla jumped, startled. "Whoa, no need to yell all of a sudden!"

"What kind of stuff?!" Leah demanded, glaring at her.

"Pictures, duh," Lyla said, looking almost amused. "You looked great in your training gear, all serious and focused."

"Delete them! That's so creepy!"

"Absolutely not," Lyla said with a grin. "It's my VR module's startup screen now."

"I hate you!"

"Hey, don't cry now," Lyla said gently, leaning forward.

"I'm not crying!" Leah shot back, her voice tight. "Just…forget it. Whatever. What I really want to know is—what's this 'thing' you wanted to do?"

"Thing?" Lyla tilted her head.

“You know, what you mentioned earlier. You said you didn’t run away, you just had something you wanted to do.”

“Oh, that.” Lyla smiled softly. “Well…you always looked like you were having so much fun training, you know? Watching you made me realize—I didn’t have anything like that for myself. Nothing that made me feel that passionate. So, I started thinking, what’s the thing that makes me happiest? And you know what I realized it was? Watching you.”

“You’re weird,” Leah said flatly.

“But I thought, okay, if I’m not cut out to inherit the family mantle, how can I keep watching you? That’s how I landed on this idea: researching VR rehabilitation technologies. If I can get it right, we could integrate it with the VR training systems we already use. There’s so much potential for synergy there! That’s why I’m working toward a physical therapy qualification at a medical school’s health sciences program.”

“I thought you were spouting complete nonsense for a second there, but…that actually makes sense? Wait—so that’s why you moved out of the house? A rehab-focused program like that probably has practical components, so I guess it wouldn’t be all remote learning.”

“Nope. It’s close enough to commute from home.”

“Then *why*?!”

“I regret it now, you know,” Lyla said, rubbing the back of her neck. “Running away from home just because things felt a little awkward between us. I was young. I mean, I am still young, obviously.”

Leah frowned, her voice trembling. “I thought I’d never see you again. I thought you were just…gone.”

“Uh, so…does that mean you’re not mad at me anymore?” Lyla asked hesitantly.

Leah sighed. “As long as you didn’t leave because you were abandoning me, then…I guess it’s fine.”

“Abandon you? Never,” Lyla said, shaking her head. “We decided ages ago that you’d be the heir. Honestly, I thought you already knew that. That’s why I didn’t think twice about choosing my own path.”

“I didn’t know! The first time I heard about it was when you said you were going to college! And then I—” Leah’s words broke off,

her face scrunching up as her eyes filled with tears.

"Here." Lyla handed her a handkerchief, smiling gently. "So…does that mean you're not mad anymore? Can I come back home now?"

Leah dabbed at her eyes, her voice muffled. "I don't know. Don't ask me. Besides, there's no room for you anymore."

"What?! What do you mean, no room?" Lyla leaned forward in alarm.

"Mom cleaned it out," Leah replied. "That's another reason I thought you weren't coming back."

"That's…harsh," Lyla muttered, looking genuinely hurt.

"Is it?" Leah asked, tilting her head. "I mean, you left."

"Well, then… How about I crash in your room? There's gotta be enough space for two VR modules."

Leah stared at her. "You seriously think my room *only* has a VR module in it?!"

"Well…you had stuffed animals and the VR modules last time I checked," Lyla said, grinning. "Did you add anything else? Clothes are in the closet, right?"

"No…nothing else," Leah admitted.

"Perfect! Let me stay. I'll talk to mother later and get my room back. This'll just be temporary." Lyla's expression brightened.

Leah groaned, shaking her head. "I'm not mad anymore, and I'll forgive you for disappointing me back then, but now I'm just disappointed in a whole new way."

"Well, maybe after the event ends, I'll move back in. Imagine that! Seeing the real you again after all this time. It's been ages since I've seen you outside of the video on my home screen."

"Wait—video?!" Leah's eyes widened in horror. "What do you mean, *video*?"

Chapter 9: Multiplayer

Blanc had no way of knowing what Leah and Lyla had talked about during their private moment.

Even so, when Leah returned, the expression on her face told Blanc all she needed to know—her actions that day hadn't been a mistake.

"I think it's a good thing," Blanc murmured as she gazed down at the city below. "Really, I do. Leah seems to be enjoying herself every day. She chats with Lyla often, visits her castle for tea parties—it all seems so positive."

She hovered high above the royal capital of Oral, her newly acquired *Flight* skill granting her a clear view of the bustling streets below.

The long-running event was nearing its conclusion, with only two days remaining. By investing a substantial amount of experience points into skills like *Flight*, *Summoning*, and *Taming*, Blanc had unexpectedly risen to the rank of *Greater Vampire*. With that evolution came a significant milestone—complete immunity to sunlight.

Oral was renowned for its knights, not just in quantity but in strength, making it a nation well suited for intermediate to advanced players.

Beneath her, chaos reigned as knights clashed swords in the streets.

This wasn't some festive tournament or ceremonial display—it was genuine warfare. Humanity's knights were locked in battle with one another.

The opposing forces had clearly defined roles: one group advanced toward the royal castle, while the other fought desperately to stop them.

It was obvious who commanded the attackers—these knights served Lyla. Hugelkuppe, Lyla's domain, was located to the north but remained part of Oral's territory.

Simply put, this was a coup d'état.

“I think it’s great they made up. Really, I do. But still…” Blanc muttered, watching the horizon.

Once upon a time, they had probably been like any other pair of close sisters. So it made sense that, after reconciling, they’d want to team up. Leah, after all, only had Blanc as her sole player friend, and Lyla—thanks to her wildly unconventional playstyle—was so often mistaken for an NPC that it almost seemed intentional.

Lyla had confessed that her original goal in seeking control of the harbinger was to stage a coup. Her motives? Far from noble. She wanted artifacts, held a grudge against the royal family, and felt like paying them back a hundredfold. Petty, sure, but not exactly surprising.

Launching a coup just because she was annoyed? That was peak sibling energy. Except Lyla’s age seemed to have sharpened her recklessness into something much more dangerous.

Of course, overthrowing a kingdom isn’t something you can just do casually. Lyla had explained that it required meeting one of two conditions: eliminating the royal family or taking all their territory.

That’s where the harbinger came in, the same event boss that had wiped out Hilith’s royal capital. If Lyla could control it, destroying Oral might actually be possible.

That was her reasoning during the recent incident. But now, Lyla had come to a new conclusion: why force the harbinger into submission when negotiation was an option? And in this case, the harbinger wasn’t just any player—it was Leah. Her sister. Her newly reconciled ally. Cooperation was just a conversation away.

“But this disaster is what their reconciliation led to,” Blanc muttered, her eyes fixed on the chaos below.

Lyla’s knights weren’t trying to capture the castle outright. Their goal was to disrupt the capital, using their push toward the royal castle as a way to pressure the royal family.

In terms of sheer numbers, the capital’s knights far outmatched Lyla’s forces. A direct confrontation was out of the question, especially with the defenders having the advantage of home ground. The only reason the chaos hadn’t collapsed entirely was that many of the capital’s knights were currently deployed to the frontiers, dealing with the surge of monsters triggered by the ongoing event.

The kingdom’s army had to defend its entire realm, while Lyla’s

forces only needed to keep the capital in turmoil. Even with the odds stacked against her, it didn't take much to see which side had the upper hand strategically.

Lyla herself was likely inside the castle by now, accompanied by Leah's familiars, Kelly and Riley. The coup had to look like a purely human affair. The official story was that a patriotic young noble had risen up to depose a self-serving royal family and establish a new kingdom. That was the narrative they were banking on—if it succeeded.

By now, Leah was probably teleporting into the castle using a sword Lyla had recently gifted to the royal family.

The plan was audacious and carefully timed. Lyla, accompanied by Leah's familiars, would enter the castle under the pretext of delivering additional information about the gifted sword. This allowed her to request an audience with the king.

On the way to the throne room, she would signal Blanc, who was circling above. Blanc would relay the signal to Lyla's knights stationed in the city, triggering their uprising. The knights' role was to provoke the royal capital's forces into a fight, locking down the castle and cutting off any escape routes for the royal family.

Once the chaos was underway, Leah would use *Summon Summoner* to teleport directly into the treasury and seize the artifact. Meanwhile, Blanc, Azalea, and their aerial forces would patrol the skies, watching for anyone attempting to flee the castle. Their orders were clear: intercept and capture any would-be escapees.

It was an ambitious plan, bold to the point of recklessness. But then again, with Lyla at the helm, would you expect anything less?

The commotion outside had undoubtedly reached the castle by now.

Inside, the atmosphere was growing tense and frantic.

Or perhaps Lyla had already made her move. Among them, only Lyla could infiltrate so deeply into the royal castle, reaching the king himself. The plan was simple: get as close as possible to the king and use *Summon* to bring in her elite strike team stationed back at her territory. From there, she and Leah would quietly finish off the remaining royals within the castle.

“No one’s come out of the castle yet,” Blanc muttered, her gaze fixed on the scene below. “Did they already clear everyone out? I kind of wanted to help too.”

“Master,” Azalea called, approaching with her usual poise.

After gaining significant experience by defeating players who had attacked Ellental, Azalea and the others had picked up new skills like *Flight* and *Dark Magic*, making them even more versatile.

“We’ve dealt with the individuals who appeared to be princes,” Azalea reported.

“Wait, what? When did that happen?” Blanc asked, startled.

“On the north side of the castle,” Azalea explained. “It appeared to be a service entrance, likely used for moving supplies. A battered carriage emerged, escorted by knights. We neutralized the knights and stopped the carriage. Inside, we found two young men in ornate clothing, likely princes, along with what seemed to be their attendants…”

“And?” Blanc pressed, sensing there was more to the story.

“My apologies,” Azalea said, bowing slightly. “The force required to halt the carriage was too great. They were killed by the impact.”

“Seriously?” Blanc sighed, her tone hovering somewhere between disappointment and resignation. “I wanted to have some fun too. Well, if that’s how it went, it can’t be helped. Good work.”

“Lady Lyla mentioned the possibility of a princess still being in the castle,” Azalea continued. “As for the king and queen, Lady Lyla is likely meeting with them now.”

“Got it,” Blanc replied, her expression sharpening. “Keep looking for the princess. She’s the last one left, so if you find her, don’t kill her—just let me know.”

“Understood,” Azalea said with a nod before retreating to continue her search.

***

Leah stepped out into the hallway, her expression smug as she stowed every single item from the treasury into her inventory.

The door leading to the treasury floor was secured with a magical lock, making it inaccessible from either side. However, once inside the floor, the internal doors had little in the way of serious security.

<Done here. How's it going on your end?> she messaged.

<Nice work. Everything's going smoothly on my side too,> Lyla replied, her tone almost cheerful. <I have to say, your familiars are quite impressive. They might even outshine my knights. Right now, they're working with the strike team I summoned earlier to track down the remaining royals and nobles in the castle. Kelli's the one assigned to me at the moment.>

<Got it. I'll head toward Kelli, then.>

Gripping *Sharp* in her hand, Leah activated *Camouflage* to conceal herself before triggering *Summon*.

She arrived in a grand space lined with plush red carpet.

It was likely the audience chamber.

Camouflage didn't seem to hide the effects of her summoning, as several heads turned her way. However, seeing nothing emerge from the portal, their attention quickly returned to Lyla.

"Hmph. I thought you'd called for more knights, but it seems your little trick failed," scoffed a man seated on the floor in the center of the room. His voice was heavy with disdain. Judging by the circumstances, he was most likely the king. Three other individuals—likely nobles—were seated beside him, surrounded by knights with drawn swords.

<Who are the four in the center? One's the king, right? What about the other three?> Leah asked.

<Nobodies,> Lyla replied. <Advisors, I think. The chancellor, the queen, and...oh, the minister of agriculture, if I recall.>

<Wait, the queen doesn't count as a royal? And...agriculture? Really?> Leah's confusion was evident.

<The queen isn't part of the royal bloodline,> Lyla explained casually. <As for the minister of agriculture? No idea why he's here. But does it really matter?>

The timing of the official website's update, coinciding with the moment Lyla had eliminated the royal family, made one thing clear: with their extinction, the nation of Hilith had ceased to exist.

But logically speaking, it was hard to believe that everyone carrying the royal bloodline could be confined strictly to the current royal family. Surely, there were cases of princes founding new houses as dukes, princesses marrying into noble families and losing their royal status, or even illegitimate children being born in

secret.

Still, officially, the Hilith royal family was considered extinct.

This suggested that “royalty” wasn’t strictly defined by bloodline but perhaps by some other factor—such as having a recognized claim to the throne. That was the theory Leah and Lyla had pieced together.

If that were the case, then eliminating anyone in Oral with a legitimate claim to the throne would effectively complete the coup.

“Let’s see…that leaves the first prince, the second prince, and the first princess, right? Chancellor, there’s no one else, is there?” Lyla asked, her tone sharp.

Leah, unable to tell which one was the chancellor, glanced around, but none of the captives said a word.

“Fine. *Charm.*”

The spell had no effect.

Lyla frowned, displeasure clear on her face. “It didn’t work. Ugh, my *Enchantment Magic* has been unreliable lately.”

“As if it would!” the man who appeared to be the king barked. “We are rulers of a nation! Strengthening our mental fortitude is the first priority of any leader worth their title!”

He wasn’t wrong. If a ruler’s mind could be controlled, no country could function securely.

<Should I try?> Leah offered. <I’m probably better at it than you.>

<…Maybe. But if I let them see you, we’ll have to eliminate all four of them,> Lyla replied, her tone cautious.

<That’s the plan anyway, isn’t it?> Leah shot back. <We just need to leave one alive—maybe the princess. If we can track her down and spare her, that should work fine.>

Initially, Lyla had planned to kill all members of the royal family. After all, this was the same country that had once driven her to choose self-destruction during the closed test—though she was technically a different person back then. She had no intention of forgiving them.

However, wiping out the entire royal family posed a significant risk. Even if they seized control of Oral, it might be officially declared extinct, just like Hilith. To prevent this, Lyla decided to spare one seemingly harmless member of the royal family and

Command them instead. This would keep Oral's name intact on the official website, making it seem like the coup was all part of a planned narrative, ensuring players perceived it as a natural progression of the story.

<If the princes and princess managed to escape and Blanc killed them all, that'd be a problem,> Lyla mused. <But the princess doesn't seem like the type to flee, so we should be fine.>

<If they're all gone, why not just wipe everything out and pretend to be a surviving royal?> Leah suggested. <Grab the artifact and flee to another country.>

<My face is already too well-known among NPC royals,> Lyla replied dryly. <Though I wouldn't mind staying at your place, Leah.>

Leah rolled her eyes but didn't respond. Lyla's current status as a noble of a human nation was too valuable to waste. If possible, it needed to be exploited to the fullest.

<Fine, come on out,> Lyla finally said.

She deactivated *Camouflage*. Folding her wings tightly around her body to draw as little attention as possible, she stepped forward.

The sudden appearance of the pure-white figure sent a ripple of shock through the four captives.

"Who— Who are you?!"

"That face...it's the same as Lady Hugelkuppe's...?!"

"A demon...? Is Lady Hugelkuppe connected to monsters?!"

Without her wings visible, Leah apparently resembled a demon. It was probably the horns.

"Well, no matter. Let's get this over with," Leah muttered, her tone indifferent as she cast *Disorient* and *Charm.*

The risk of revealing herself was too great to allow failure, so she prepared by casting *Disorient* first. It worked. The man who seemed to be the king stared at her, dazed, his eyes clouded.

"Y-Your Majesty? Your Majesty!" the queen called, shaking him, but he didn't respond. Such efforts weren't enough to break the *Charm.*

Leah stepped closer, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Answer Lyla's questions."

"Thank you," Lyla said smoothly, moving forward. "Now we can have a calm conversation. Let's begin, Your Majesty. Tell me—who

holds the right to inherit the throne in this kingdom?”

“The queen, Augusta. The first prince, Gunther. The second prince, Rudolf. The first princess, Cecilia,” the king answered in a flat, detached tone.

“The queen has inheritance rights too?” Leah asked, raising an eyebrow.

“She is…my cousin,” the king replied slowly.

With only Kelli present in the room, it seemed the others were working with Lyla’s knights to search the castle. Leah opened the friend chat to relay instructions.

<Liley, Lemmy, Marion, target the first prince, Gunther; the second prince, Rudolf; and the first princess, Cecilia. If you find anyone matching those descriptions, bring them to the audience chamber. Whether they’re alive or dead doesn’t matter, but make sure at least one survives.>

“Well, let’s see,” Lyla said, her gaze shifting to the remaining nobles. “We don’t need the chancellor or the minister of agriculture anymore.”

At her signal, four knights stepped forward, each grabbing one of the two older men by the arms and dragging them to another room. It was clear they wouldn’t be returning.

Leah might have dealt with the situation on the spot, but Lyla, ever so slightly more experienced, had chosen to spare the queen unnecessary distress. It was a small but telling act of consideration.

<Boss, we’ve found someone who looks like the first princess,> came a message over the friend chat.

<Good work. Bring her to the audience chamber, and handle her with care—I’ll confirm her identity myself,> Leah replied, her tone crisp and composed. It certainly wouldn’t do to let the princess see her. With that in mind, Leah reactivated *Camouflage*, her form fading from sight as she prepared for what came next.



“Pardon the intrusion,” a knight announced as they opened the doors to the audience chamber. Riley stepped inside, escorting a woman dressed in a maid’s uniform.

“Oh? Welcome back. You’re…Riley, right?” Lyla greeted, her gaze shifting to the maid. “And this girl… She’s dressed as a maid, but that face—it looks like Princess Cecilia, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” Riley confirmed. “She appears to be the princess. It seems she swapped clothes with one of her attendants.”

Lyla blinked, surprised. “How could you tell? I doubt you’ve seen her face before.”

“The hands,” Riley explained simply. “The woman in the princess’s clothing had rough, calloused hands. Meanwhile, this maid’s hands are unblemished. I brought the attendant along as well, just to be certain.”

Behind her, one of Lyla’s knights entered, guiding a woman wearing the princess’s regal attire.

<Wow… She’s good,> Lyla remarked through the chat.

<Told you,> Leah replied, a hint of pride in her tone.

“Lady Lyla!” the woman in the maid’s uniform suddenly cried out, lunging toward her. But before she could get far, Riley seized her arm with swift precision, halting her in her tracks.

“Princess Cecilia,” Lyla began, her voice heavy with feigned regret. “Believe me, I never wanted things to come to this. But I had no choice!”

<Oh no, here we go.> Leah commented dryly over the chat.

<Shh. Let me work.> Lyla replied, lowering her gaze and dabbing theatrically at her face, pretending to wipe away tears with the back of her hand.

“You are aware, I hope,” Lyla continued, “that I have long urged the royals of other nations to consider fleeing to my castle in times of crisis—to seek refuge in my lands?”

“Yes,” the princess replied, her voice trembling. “It always struck me as a noble endeavor.”

“But, ah… Alas…” Lyla paused, her expression turning pained. “His Majesty here”—she gestured subtly to the dazed king—“upon hearing this, ordered me to do the unthinkable. He commanded me to hunt down the fleeing royal family of Hilith, slaughter them, and seize the artifacts they carried!”

<Cover me, please,> Lyla messaged Leah.

<Fine, but you owe me,> Leah replied with a sigh.

The princess's wide, tear-filled eyes were locked solely on Lyla, leaving Leah free to act. Hidden by *Camouflage*, she leaned close to the king's ear and whispered the words Lyla needed.

"It is true," the king muttered, his voice wooden and detached.

The queen started, her voice ready to jump out of her throat, but Leah immediately silenced her with *Disorient* and took control of the room once more.

"No...father...why...?" the princess whispered, her voice breaking.

Leah leaned in again, whispering fabricated words that dripped with venom into the king's ear.

"Ah, yes. The Hilith royals...were nothing but swine," the king murmured haltingly. "Mere cattle...to our kingdom. Killing them...was no crime."

"How could you..." The princess broke down, tears streaming as she collapsed to her knees. Her posture was awkward, as Riley still held one of her arms firmly, leaving her slumped like a marionette caught mid-motion.

Slowly, deliberately, Lyla stepped forward. She knelt before the princess and lowered her head in a display of solemnity.

"Princess Cecilia, I rose up out of a sense of justice," Lyla said, her voice steady but laced with righteous fervor. "Such barbarity as this cannot—must not—be allowed to stand."

"Your Highness, I implore you: take the throne as queen in place of His Majesty. Should you accept this role, I, Lyla, vow my undying loyalty to you—no, to Your Majesty the Queen."

She extended her hand with dramatic poise. "Like this: *Command*."

The princess's body sagged for a brief moment, her strength seeming to leave her. Then, as if nothing had happened, she rose again, her movements sharp and deliberate.

"Of course, Lady Lyla," Cecilia declared with calm resolve. "I shall defeat my father and rule this country under your guidance."

<Did we really need that whole little performance just now?> Leah asked through the chat, her tone dry.

<It saved me the trouble of using *Disorient*,> Lyla replied, a hint of smugness slipping through. <Honestly, she was probably already in a natural state of disorientation.>

It was true enough—Leah had proven before, with Sieg, that breaking someone's spirit through combat or other means removed their resistance to *Command*. Since *Enchantment Magic* worked by inducing mental debuffs, there was little need to cast it when someone was already in a vulnerable state.

"Well, I suppose that's that," Leah said aloud, deactivating *Camouflage* and stepping forward. She preferred direct communication when necessary, especially since only she and Lyla could use friend chat. Without speaking out loud, coordinating with Riley or Kelli became cumbersome.

"You…you! Who are you?!" the queen shouted, her voice quivering with both anger and fear.

Ah, right—the queen was still here. By now, she must have pieced together that the entire charade was orchestrated by Lyla and this mysterious "monster" by her side. Leah turned her sharp gaze toward the woman, her expression unflinching.

"Oh, what to do…" Lyla muttered, seemingly lost in thought.

"Why not just *Command* all the remaining royals?" Leah suggested casually.

"Hmm, but no…" Lyla frowned, shaking her head. "*Command* doesn't get any bonuses against Noble Humans. Plus, the cost is steep, so it's tough to pull off multiple times in one day."

"Bonuses? Cost? What are you talking about?" Leah asked, her confusion evident.

"Wait, what?" Lyla blinked, surprised. "Oh, right—you probably don't know. The version of *Command* tied to the Noble Human race tree comes with specific effects. For one, it has a higher success rate against lower-ranked species—like Humans, in this case. But the activation cost is tied to LP and MP consumption, and the amount depends on the target's rank. Commanding the princess just now drained over twenty percent of my LP. Using it on the other two would be risky."

So that's how it worked.

Leah considered this. Blanc's *Command* skill, for example, came with the drawback of turning all subjugated creatures into undead. It made sense that, despite sharing the same name, skills with *Command* in the title would differ slightly depending on the user.

As for why these different effects shared the same name? Leah

had a theory. It was likely for balance reasons—features like her "Horns," which granted bonuses to *Command*, might apply broadly to anything under that umbrella. A unified system would make it easier to tweak success rates and resistances across the board.

"I see. That was helpful. Thanks," Leah said with a nod.

"Wait, no, that's not the takeaway here! What? Your *Command* works differently, doesn't it? It does, right? Spill it!" Lyla pressed, narrowing her eyes.

"Thank you, big sister!" Leah replied, grinning mischievously.

"Ugh! Don't you dare try to dodge the question! Explain, now!" Lyla huffed, clearly not falling for Leah's deflection.

When Leah had checked her *Command* ability after becoming a high elf, she'd noticed it lacked any specific bonuses when used on elves. Compared to other high-tier races' versions of *Command*, hers seemed distinctly weaker.

Perhaps high elves weren't naturally inclined toward creating subordinates. Or maybe, like the Noble Human's *Sangre Azul*, there was some unique item tied to the High Elf lineage that could enhance its *Control* skill.

"Are you even listening to me?" Lyla interrupted, her exasperation cutting through Leah's thoughts.

"If you're willing to help me out with a few things, I might consider telling you," Leah said, her tone nonchalant.

"Depends on what you want," Lyla replied cautiously.

"First, domination of this continent," Leah said, almost too casually. "Eradicate all human nations and expand the territory of the monsters. Ideally, the entire area would fall under my control. Oh, but we can consider this country already handled."

"I can't promise success…but I don't mind helping. Honestly, I was planning to head in that direction anyway with how I've been playing," Lyla admitted, shrugging.

"And the second thing: tracking down a few specific players. I've got some names," Leah added.

"Oh! The ones who killed you, right?" Lyla said with sudden enthusiasm. "Yeah, I know their names too—I saw the celebratory threads. Ow!" she yelped as Leah swatted her.

Since Lyla already had the information, the conversation would proceed much faster.

Leah explained the specifics of her *Command* skill to Lyla,

including how to acquire it.

However, Lyla was reluctant to actually obtain it. Doing so would lower her reserve experience points below the threshold she liked to maintain as a safety net. Finding the whole discussion tedious, Leah finally handed Lyla a life potion and a mana potion, effectively forcing her to use her own *Command* skill.

“Ugh…fine,” Lyla grumbled, downing the potions. “Oh, right. We need to ask Blanc to verify the faces of those two princes we dealt with earlier. If the princess was disguised, it’s not impossible they pulled the same trick.”

“Good point. I’ll send her a message,” Leah replied.

And with that, the current king, queen, and soon-to-be queen were now under Lyla’s control.

The official story would go something like this: Princess Cecilia, horrified by her father’s heinous acts—murdering the Hilith royal family and stealing their artifacts—rallied loyal nobles and launched a coup to dethrone him. The current king and queen would be imprisoned in some faraway location, their knights now serving under the queen’s banner to atone for their misdeeds.

Once the new queen delivered a carefully worded apology to the official website on behalf of the now-extinct Hilith royal family, the transition would be complete.

With night falling, that announcement would have to wait until tomorrow.

No one could have predicted that the grand finale of this long-running event would culminate in a neighboring country’s regime change.

Epilogue

Thread: Reflecting on the Second Event
001: Mentai-list
Great job, everyone, on the Second Event!
Here’s a timeline of major incidents that occurred across the continent during the event. If there’s anything I missed, feel free to copy and add it to the list.
This thread is linked to verification, summary, and event threads, so we’re hoping to gather as much input from players as possible. Whether you’re a regular poster or just stopping by, don’t hesitate to share your thoughts.
Anyway, with the postevent maintenance locking us out, take your time and relax while discussing!
Event Timeline
Before the Event:
[Kingdom of Hilith] “The Seventh Harbinger” emerges.
Day 1:
[Kingdom of Hilith] Erfahren destroyed.
Llyrid destroyed.
Velstead destroyed.
Altoriva destroyed.
Day 2:
[Kingdom of Hilith] Rokillean destroyed.
Hilith’s royal capital attacked by the harbinger.
First battle (Daytime): Players win.
Second battle (Night): Players lose.
Hilith’s royal capital destroyed.
Day 3:
Hilith removed from the official website (declared extinct).

Day 4:
[Kingdom of Hilith] Ellental destroyed.
[Kingdom of Peare] Neuschloss destroyed.
Days 5-6:
No major events.
Day 7:
[Kingdom of Shape] Einpalast destroyed.
[Kingdom of Peare] Tensions escalate between Peare and Shape (practically at war?).
Day 8:
No major events.
Day 9:
[Kingdom of Oral] Coup erupts in Oral's royal capital, leading to regime change.
Day 10:
[Kingdom of Oral] New government announces its establishment.
Note: Successes in defending towns aren't listed (most nondestroyed cities were successfully defended).

002: Country Pop
OP, great thread—thanks for the recap!

003: Alonson
So, the event boss—or should I say, the new boss—gets introduced, and Hilith is wiped out. Then, just when it seemed like we'd be heading into the first human-on-human war on the continent, bam, a coup in stable Oral? Wild.

004: Tough and Doesn't Peel
The devs really went for the "all-in-one package" approach, huh?

005: Amatain

I was baffled when the new boss showed up on Day 2 and Hilith got obliterated so early. But looking back, there was never a dull moment—something big was happening every day.

006: Anonymous Elf
So was the grand finale—the revolution in Oral—the highlight of the event?

007: Mentai-list
It doesn’t feel like the devs are controlling every detail of the event. It seems more like they just set up some triggers and let the NPCs and players handle the rest. If that’s the case, the order of the incidents might not have been all that important.

008: Haust
So, the devs’ main contributions were introducing the seventh harbinger, stirring up tension between Peare and Shape, and planting the seeds for Oral’s coup?

009: Youichi
No, the coup in Oral was actually triggered by Hilith’s collapse.
On the final day, Oral’s new government issued a statement revealing that the previous king had murdered the surviving members of the Hilith royal family to steal that artifact everyone’s been talking about. The princess, appalled by such inhumane acts, overthrew him in a coup.

010: Kuraaku
Were there any players who actually took part in the coup?

011: Monkey Dive Sasuke
>>010 Not likely—it was during the event in the royal capital. There were hardly any players there to begin with. Maybe a few crafters, at most?

012: Smith Co., Ltd.
Even most crafters had relocated to the front lines. There’s no point in making stuff if there’s no one around to buy it.

013: TKDSG
The laid-back players who aren’t into combat or crafting made a killing though. A bunch of them banded together to run a delivery service, transporting materials, water, and food to remote towns using teleportation. Supplies stopped flowing during the fighting, so the outskirts were desperate for goods.

014: Orinkii
At first, I thought skipping the bosses to focus on EXP farming was a bad idea, but that delivery service really helped a lot of towns. There were tons of civilians in those places, not just soldiers.

015: Mentai-list
Looking back, the number of towns destroyed wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been. That’s definitely a relief.

016: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
>>015 Please don’t forget about the entire country that got wiped out early on.

017: Gealgamesh

Yeah, that one was pretty much unavoidable.

018: Wayne
Agreed. It was basically a natural disaster.

019: Mentai-list
Well, if you think of the harbinger as this event’s monster boss, it makes sense. Considering how humanity’s been hunting monsters all over the continent, from her perspective, wiping out an entire country was probably the only way to retaliate.

020: Monkey Dive Sasuke
>>019 Stop defending her so much. Then again, she *was* gorgeous.

021: Amatain
>>020 True that.

022: Anonymous Elf
It wasn’t just her looks, though. She *had* to have some kind of skill—probably something charm-related. I swear, I almost lost the will to fight for a moment.
Maybe Mentai’s under some kind of status effect too.

023: Mentai-list
Since we’re talking about the harbinger now, I’ll summarize the flow and outcome of the harbinger battle (skipping ahead).
First, there was Wayne—yeah, the same Wayne from earlier—who happened to be in Hilith’s royal capital when...
...
...

...

041: Arafubuki

So, what if...the harbinger wouldn’t have powered up in the first place if we hadn’t pushed so hard to take it down initially?

042: Anonymous Elf

>>041 That’s possible, but considering the artifact was in the royal capital, I think the knights would’ve taken it down eventually, even if no players had gotten involved.

043: Mentai-list

>>042 I agree with that.
Also, let’s not forget the artifact was probably an event-exclusive item, given how powerful it was and the strict limitations on its use. But since it’s still an item, there’s always the chance it could have been used by monsters. No way could we risk letting that happen.
That might actually explain why the king of Oral decided to secure the artifact, even if it meant killing the Hilith royals. The way he went about it was wrong, though, and that’s what triggered the revolution.

044: Monkey Dive Sasuke

Yeah, I’d have killed for it too. Makes sense.

045: Gealgamesh

>>044 Of course you would. But for a head of state to make that call? That’s messed up. He could’ve just protected them and kept the artifact safe that way.

046: Wayne

What I found interesting about the Oral story was the revelation that the Hilith royal family wasn’t wiped out during the capital’s destruction. How did they even survive?

047: Gealgamesh
Maybe they were trying to flee into exile?

048: Wayne
Still, it’s impressive they even thought of that. According to the official lore, this game hasn’t had any wars between nations before. How did they come up with the idea of exile?

049: Amatain
The chancellor of Hilith was said to be an exceptionally capable figure. It wouldn’t be surprising if he had plans in place to at least save the royal family and their national treasures.

050: Wayne
So that’s why there was a delay between the capital’s destruction and the official declaration of Hilith’s fall as a nation?

051: Professor Mori-artsy
So, does this mean that in this game, a nation essentially boils down to its royal family and national treasures?
Even if that’s the case, how do they objectively prove the existence of these entities?
In the real world, a nation’s existence is proven through its undeniable land, population, and international treaties. But relying solely on a royal family and treasures lacks any real objectivity when it comes to proof of existence.

052: Kuraaku
That’s only true in modern times.
Take ancient Japan, for example. Back then, the nation was defined by its imperial authority and the ritsuryou system. The foundation of that authority was the Three Sacred Treasures—essentially national treasures.
I don’t think this setup on the continent is all that different.

053: Professor Mori-artsy
That’s because Japan is an island nation. If there’s only one nation within limited land, that system works fine.
But from an external perspective, even in Japan, the existence of the state was ultimately proven by its land and population.
On this continent, cities hold considerable autonomy. Politically, it’s closer to feudalism than the ritsuryou system.
Furthermore, if the frontier towns here function as settlement outposts, then I’d compare the system to the shouen kouryou system in historical Japan.
Back in Japan, rugged terrain and mountainous regions required significant effort and time to clear for agriculture. On this continent, the equivalent challenge is clearing out monster territories.

054: Haust
Ancient Japan is just one example. Dismissing it while ignoring others isn’t fair.
Take ancient China, for instance. There was a period when the Emperor’s authority rested on the possession of the Imperial Seal. Even a vast empire at the center of the Eurasian continent relied on an

object as the cornerstone of royal authority...
...
...
...
070: Gealgamesh
Hey, should we just leave this?
Most players probably have no idea what’s going on anymore.

071: Mentai-list
Sorry about the earlier derail—I’ve started a new thread:
[In-Depth Discussion: Continental Nations and Their Intricacies]
Now, back on track. The next major point is the escalating conflict between Peare and Shape.
I’ve only skimmed the relevant threads and don’t know much myself. Does anyone have more details?

072: Amatain
From what I’ve heard, it all started with the fall of Neuschloss, a town in Peare.
I’m playing in Shape, but it’s far enough away that I don’t have any firsthand information.

073: Clack
I was actually in Neuschloss when it went down.
Around the second or third day, the monsters shifted from undead to goblins. After that, it was just wave after wave of goblins.
We tried calling for reinforcements from nearby towns, but not enough showed up in time. We were overwhelmed.
I died defending the town and respawned in a neighboring area. By the time I checked social media, the town had already fallen.

074: Gealgamesh
Okay, but how does that lead to war?

075: Amatain
Geography. The town next to Neuschloss is in Shape’s territory.
Players, with their instant social media updates, saw how dire things were in Neuschloss and rushed to help. But NPCs in the neighboring Shape town didn’t have that perspective. To them, it looked like mercenaries were abandoning their post en masse.
The local lord panicked and fled the town.
When he sought refuge in Peare, the story was twisted: he claimed Shape’s mercenaries deliberately abandoned Neuschloss, worsening its fall.

076: Sonote Atataka
That neighboring town, Resia, didn’t actually fall at that point.
Players quickly respawned and returned, holding the line for a while.
But the last carrier pigeon from Neuschloss claimed that Shape provided no official aid. It said the town fell despite “well-meaning mercenaries” trying their best.
The lord’s flight only fueled the fire. Rumors started that he had orchestrated the attack on Neuschloss to save himself and fled to avoid the fallout.

077: Amatain
Who knows where that rumor came from? The pigeon’s letter was clearly biased, almost like someone wanted to stir the pot.

078: Clack

Whatever the source, the damage was done. Distrust of Shape spread rapidly in Peare.
Peare’s beastfolk NPCs, already a hot-headed bunch, decided to “avenge Neuschloss” by launching an attack on Shape.

079: Gealgamesh
They sure are prickly!

080: Clack
Beastfolk NPCs have this thing—they just can’t stand being disrespected.
You don’t see much outright racism between species, but there’s a clear pride thing going on. They refuse to let anyone look down on them.

081: Amatain
And then there’s Shape, where dwarves make up most of the population—that brings its own issues.
The average dwarf NPC fits the stereotype—obsessed with crafting and minding their own business. But the noble class? Entirely different story.
Their pride is off the charts. Sometimes, it feels like they’re a completely separate species. And while the commoners stay detached, those nobles are constantly fanning the flames of conflict.

082: Wayne
Arrogant and proud nobles, and yet they ran at the first sign of trouble when players got poached?

083: Sonote Atataka
Well, for dwarven nobles, there’s this unspoken rule: you don’t let the bloodline die out.
At least, that’s the impression we got from talking to people in town. We can’t say for sure, though.

084: Gealgamesh
Yeah, noble superiority complexes aren’t exclusive to dwarves. It’s the same everywhere.
Take Wels, for instance—they’re generally more laid-back, but even there, nobles and commoners don’t mix.
If a noble marries a commoner, they’re stripped of their title and dropped to the commoner class.

085: Amatain
Then along came Peare’s beastfolk units.
Beastfolk have exceptional night vision, so they launched a surprise attack on Einpalast, one of Shape’s cities.
Now, dwarves also have decent eyesight, but they’re no match for beastfolk at night.
To make things worse, beastfolk look human enough in the dark, so the defenders didn’t realize they were under attack until it was too late.
They stormed the lord’s manor before anyone could react. It was a bloodbath, with casualties on both sides.

086: Sonote Atataka
There’s a detail you’re missing, though.
Yes, Peare’s beastfolk NPCs were behind the attack on Einpalast, but here’s the thing: players saw the beastfolk moving and assumed it was part of an event.
They joined in, following along without understanding the situation. What started as an NPC operation turned into a full-scale night raid, with players making things even worse.

087: Gealgamesh
...Yeah, that tracks.

088: Mentai-list
I checked the old threads from that time.
Since NPCs initiated it, players had no way of knowing whether their actions were justified. Most just followed the crowd, assuming the beastfolk must be fighting bad guys.
It turned into a frenzy. Let’s hope this doesn’t spark something even worse.

089: Wayne
So... Is the war still ongoing?

090: Amatain
Neither side knows how to back down, so yeah.

091: Sonote Atataka
It’s probably the first human-on-human war this world has seen.
They might not even know how to end it. After all, there was no formal declaration of war in the first place...
...
...
...
111: Mentai-list
Finally, let’s talk about the coup in the Oral Kingdom.
I don’t know much beyond the basics, so if anyone can fill in the details, please do.

112: Youichi
I was active in Oral, so I’ll take this one. Others who were there, feel free to add anything I missed.
As mentioned earlier, the coup was triggered by the fall of the Hilith Kingdom—or more specifically, the annihilation of its royal family.

The Oral King ordered their extermination, but his daughter, the princess, couldn’t stand by. She rallied a faction of nobles and launched a swift attack on the capital, capturing the king.
The first and second princes, who sided with the king, were killed in the fighting. However, the king and queen remain alive, held captive. They’re being kept alive to extract information on the artifact they seized.
Additionally, since the royal guard is loyal to the king, killing him outright could cripple the kingdom’s military strength.
The princess issued a formal declaration on the final day of the event, and just like that, the coup concluded in a single day.

113: Amatain
So, the Hilith royal family was wiped out on the third day, and the coup was launched five days later?
That’s...impressive.

114: Mentai-list
There was probably some groundwork in place already. If the king was the type to casually order something that extreme, he likely had a history of erratic, dangerous behavior.

115: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Yeah, but we players never got close enough to the king to know that for sure.

116: Youichi
When I heard about the coup, I made it to the capital on the final day.
The new queen seemed like a strong-willed young

woman. There was someone in full plate armor by her side—probably one of the noble allies who supported her.

117: Wayne
A noble wearing armor? That’s unusual.

118: Youichi
It wasn’t ordinary armor. It stood out, far more elegant and refined than what the other knights were wearing.
Their bearing was noble too. I’d bet they’re one of those combat-oriented aristocrats.
Oh, and they were probably a woman.

119: Anonymous Elf
So, you’re focusing on the armor and not the coup itself?

120: Monkey Dive Sasuke
Bet it was just some fancy female armor.

121: Gealgamesh
Speaking of coups—what about those goblins in Neuschloss? Did they stay there, or move on to other towns like the ants in Erfahren?

122: Clack
They’re sticking to Neuschloss and the surrounding forest, scavenging for food.
They don’t seem interested in attacking another town.
Honestly, they probably don’t even know there are other towns out there.

123: Wayne

Makes sense. The harbinger really was a unique event boss.
Now that you mention it, towns aren’t visible from each other—no way the goblins could know about nearby settlements.
...
...
...

151: Gealgamesh
Feels like everything started moving at once all of a sudden, doesn’t it?

152: Mentai-list
I hate to say it, but this might be a case of player influence—both good and bad.

153: Country Pop
You’re saying players lured the harbinger around or incited wars?

154: Anonymous Elf
Not exactly.
Think about it—this continent’s nations have always had low population density, right? Barely any interaction between countries or other races. Most of the time, the gaps between them were just monster territories.
Then players show up and, for better or worse, introduce breakthroughs to their culture and way of life.

155: Mentai-list
Exactly.
And once the event kicked off with teleport services, players started moving en masse, accelerating the whole process even further.

156: Gealgamesh
Damn... I guess we really can’t afford to act carelessly, huh?

157: Anonymous Elf
It’s not like one person worrying about it will change anything.
At this point, you just have to accept that this is a game where the overall behavior of players causes ripple effects.

158: Mentai-list
Yeah, that’s probably why the devs intervene so minimally.
Rather than planning out every event in advance, it feels like they’re just responding to the aftermath of whatever unfolds.

159: Wayne
I was a little bitter, thinking the fall of Hilith was inevitable no matter what we did.
But maybe that was the point. If the harbinger’s creation was unavoidable, they had to lean into it.
She liked Hilith’s capital so much that she turned it into her dungeon, and she hasn’t done much since.

160: Andy
What are you talking about? She’s definitely done stuff.
There’s word that both Ellental and Rokillean have been turned into dungeons too.

161: Tough and Doesn’t Peel
(Relatively speaking, of course. Turning cities into dungeons doesn’t quite compare to wiping out an entire kingdom.)

Afterword

It’s been four months since the release of the first volume. Thank you for picking this up once again. For those who are encountering this series for the first time—though I doubt there are many—allow me to extend a warm welcome.

With the publication of the first volume, I’m certain many readers who weren’t previously familiar with this work have now had the chance to discover it. For that, I am deeply grateful.

This includes people in my own circle—well, almost all of them aside from a select few friends. I hadn’t told them about it. Among this group, especially those who don’t often read light novels or who aren’t as familiar with games or anime, I received quite a few comments like, “There’s a lot of specialized terminology, and I couldn’t really follow everything from the start.”

They’re not wrong. Some of the terms weren’t explained in detail, and I can see how unfamiliar words might not immediately click. If I were to shrug it off by saying they weren’t part of the target audience, that would be the end of it. But I want to do my part to broaden the appeal of the genre, even just a little. So, I made an effort to provide as much explanation as possible. The process of explaining my own jokes felt oddly embarrassing, like breaking down my own humor.

By the way, who did I explain things to? Mostly older relatives and my company’s president. Yes, my president. He even gifted the book to a department head at one of our client companies, which was slightly nerve-wracking. Thankfully, I wasn’t asked to provide direct explanations to the clients themselves.

In the afterword for the first volume, I shared some stories about my childhood love for light novels. I thought I might talk about my university years and the start of my doujinshi activities for this second volume. Unfortunately, with just two pages for this afterword, there’s no room to delve into that now. Perhaps I’ll save it for another time—if the opportunity arises. I’ll rely on your continued support to make that happen.

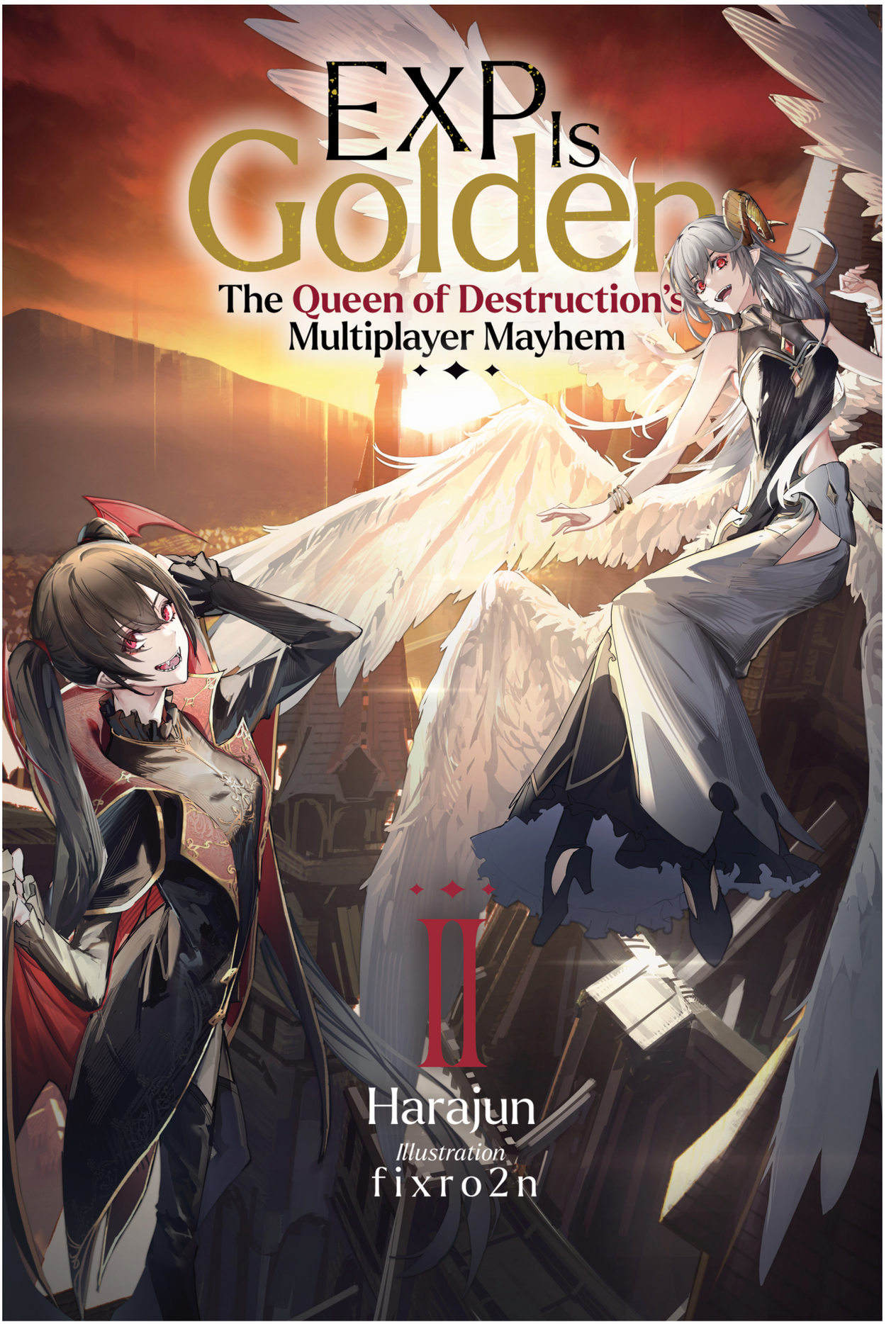
Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the incredible

illustrator, fixro2n. Without giving too much away for those who might read the afterword first, let me just say that the double-page landscape illustration in Chapter 3 is absolutely breathtaking.

To my editor, who worked tirelessly with me to adjust the flow and trim unnecessary parts, and to the proofreader, who once again caught those subtle inconsistencies—thank you for your keen eyes and expertise. You never fail to impress.

And to everyone who helped bring this book to life, my deepest thanks.

Sincerely,
Hara Jun


EXP Is Golden
The Queen of Destruction's Multiplayer Mayhem
II
Harajun
Illustration
fixro2n



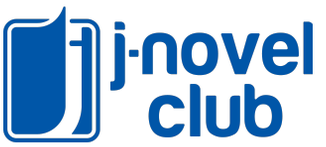
II

EXP Is Golden

The Queen of Destruction’s Multiplayer Mayhem


DARK IMPLOSION!
There was no way she would lose again.
Leah fully opened her eyes, focusing on the knights before her. She concentrated her focus through the *Evil Eye*.


<Should I try?>
<...Maybe. But if I let them see you, we'll have to eliminate all four of them.>
<That's the plan anyway, isn't it?>
<Fine, come on out.>



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EXP Is Golden: Volume 2
by Harajun

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