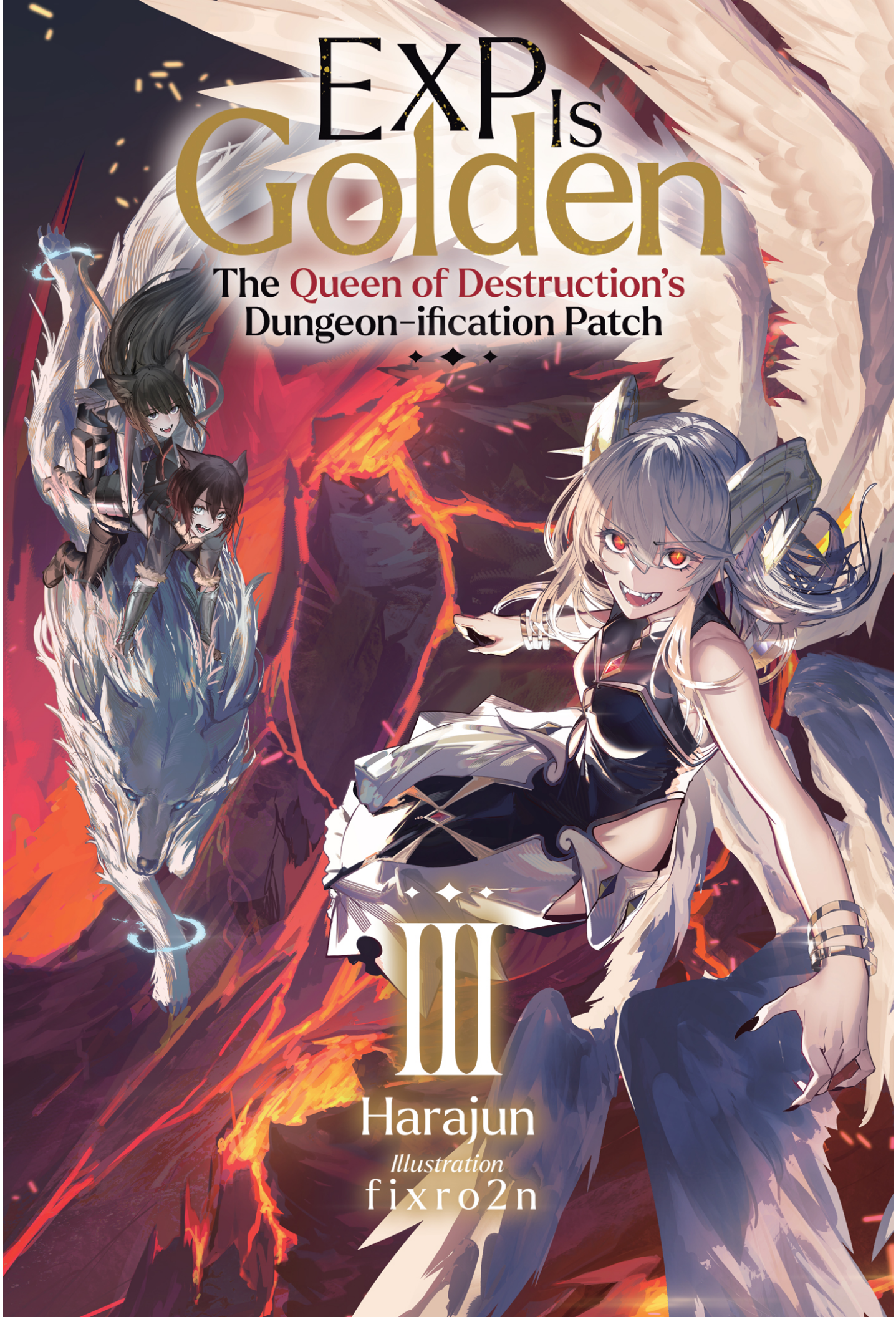
EXP Is Golden

The Queen of Destruction's Dungeon-ification Patch

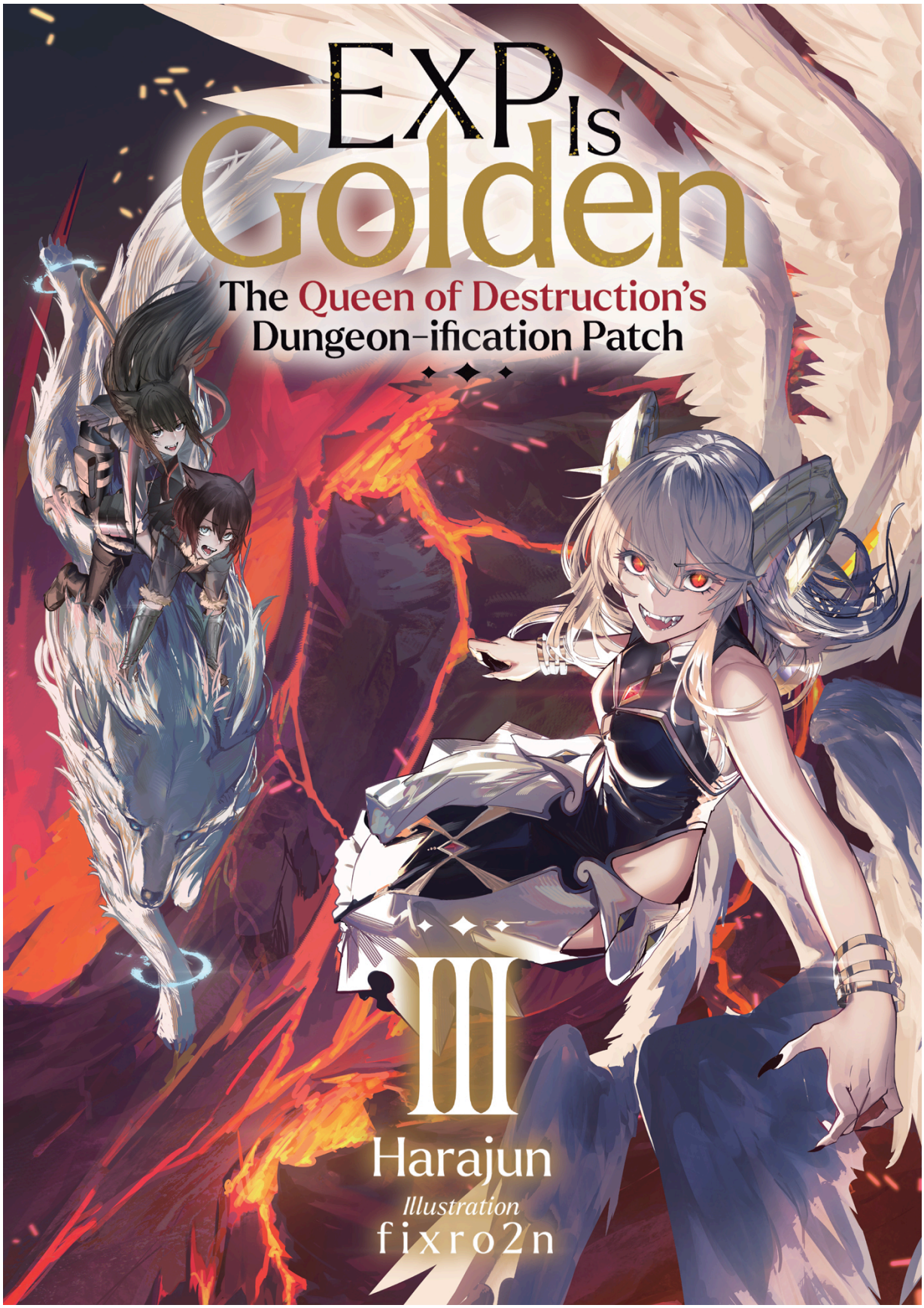


III

Harajun

Illustration

fixro2n


EXP Is Golden
The Queen of Destruction's Dungeon-ification Patch
III
Harajun
Illustration
fixro2n





III

EXP Is Golden

The Queen of Destruction's Dungeon-ification Patch




"But the golem doesn't have a face. That makes it hard to tell how low its LP is."
"Leah cast the advanced ice-AoE skills Snowstorm and Cold Snap, then followed up with Downburst... The frigid onslaught slammed into the massive golem."


“All right, then.
Let’s take
things outside,
shall we?”

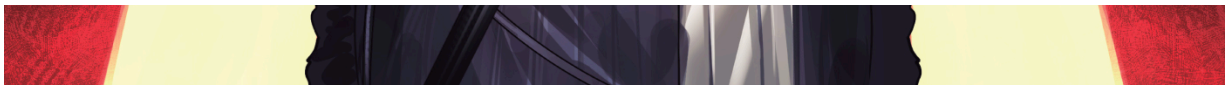
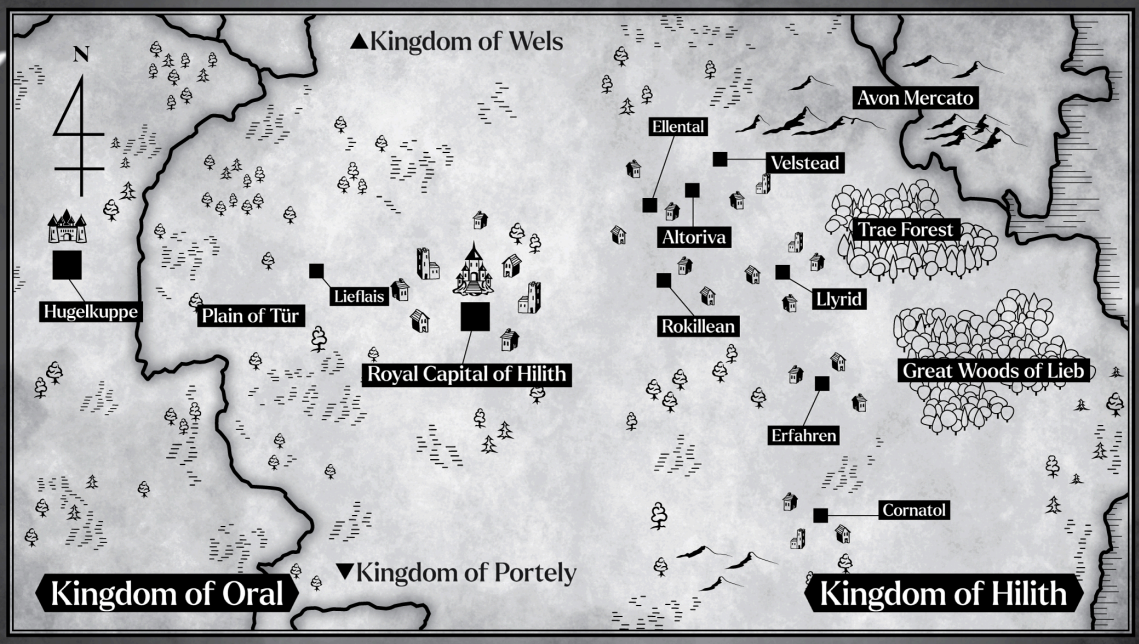


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Map



Map of the Kingdom of Hilith



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Prologue

[[To our valued players,
Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* player community.
Thank you for taking part in the second event, “Large-Scale Offense/Defense Campaign.” Your participation made the event a resounding success.
This is one of many events we have planned, and we look forward to sharing more with you in the future. Stay tuned for upcoming updates.
Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we look forward to seeing you in game.]]

***

[[**Server Maintenance Announcement**
Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* player community.
The game will be down for maintenance after the large-scale event on the following date:
X Month Y Day, 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM (*The maintenance window may be extended due to technical issues.)
As part of the maintenance, we will be making the following adjustments:
Made the condition for a player riding on another player to be counted as equipment stricter.
Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we

look forward to seeing you in game.]]

***

[[**Frequently Asked Questions**
This section will list the answers to the most common questions sent in by customers, in addition to methods to resolve commonly encountered problems. Please check here to see if your question is addressed before contacting support.
We cannot answer some questions regarding game content or game systems, and we ask for your understanding when it comes to providing information that should be discovered in game.
Q: The official website has been revised to say the game now only has five kingdoms down from six. Why is that?
A: We apologize for not informing players sooner. In the game's lore, the Kingdom of Hilith met the conditions for its destruction and has thus ceased to exist.

Q: What are the conditions for a kingdom's destruction?
A: A kingdom on the starting continent must meet one of the following criteria to be considered destroyed. Please note that this applies only to kingdoms on the starting continent and does not affect those on other continents or outlying islands:
Loss of more than half its territory.
Loss of more than half its population.
Extinction of its royal lineage.

Q: There's a cool place I want to attack, but there are

no Safe Areas nearby. What should I do?
A: We are implementing an item that allows players to create a temporary Safe Area, provided it meets certain distance requirements from an existing Safe Area and the player is in a relatively safe state. The item will be available in game after the upcoming maintenance. However, like other in-game items, players will need to discover how to obtain it on their own.

Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we look forward to seeing you in game.]]

***

[[To our valued players,
Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* player community.
Survey on Proposed In-Game Systems
We are conducting a survey to gather player feedback on the following in-game systems. Your input is greatly appreciated.
Microtransactions
We are considering adding the following items to the cash shop. These will be a new category of direct-use items, meaning they cannot be transferred or even removed from a player’s inventory. Additionally, identical items with the same functionality will also be available through regular in-game methods, without requiring a purchase from the cash shop.
Proposed Items:
Race Rebirth Item - Allows a player to *Rebirth* as any of the seven starting races.
Quick Safe Area Deployment - Creates a temporary Safe

Area that can be used by up to five players upon activation.
Skill Unlearning Item - Enables a player to unlearn a skill. Note that EXP used to learn the skill will not be refunded.

Permanent In-Game Teleportation Services
A temporary teleportation service was tested during the most recent event.
Since unrestricted teleportation can significantly impact the in-game economy, the planned permanent teleportation system will not allow free travel between any city, as was the case during the event. However, due to a few regions seeing significant upheaval after the event, we have decided to implement this system as a form of support, particularly for new players.
The planned specifications for the teleportation service are as follows:
Players will generally be able to teleport from any Safe Area, but the travel will be one-way, with fixed destinations.
The specific destinations are still under review, but they will be areas where players can expect to progress from the starting phase up to the current average player level.
Please include any feedback for the proposed systems in the field below.
Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we look forward to seeing you in game.]]

***

<<To the player [Blanc],

Thank you for being a valued member of the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* player community and for your participation in the second large-scale event.

We are reaching out to seek your cooperation regarding the future operation of the game. Currently, the following portions of the former Kingdom of Hilith are under your control: Ellental, Altoriva, and Velstead.

Due to significant in-game changes following the most recent event, the new player experience has been drastically affected, making it difficult to provide an enjoyable experience for newcomers.

To address this, we would like to request your permission to transform the areas under your control into a raid zone for new players. This would involve:

Sending willing players with a suitable progression level to regions controlled by a single faction, such as your own.

Implementing a one-way teleportation service to such areas, meaning players cannot return once transported.

Consolidating Safe Areas within regions under your control and relocating them to more accessible locations nearby.

Adjusting the teleportation system to direct players to these new Safe Areas.

We would greatly appreciate your cooperation, particularly in supporting new players as they progress. If you agree to this proposal, we are open to discussing potential adjustments to the death penalty for your character in these zones, as well as other forms of administrative support for your continued control over the area.

Please let us know your thoughts on this request. We look forward to your response.

Note: This message has been sent to all players who currently control significant portions of the map.
Best regards,
The development team.>>

***

"Whoa. The heck?"

What greeted Blanc after a day's absence away from the game post maintenance was an avalanche of system messages.

She skimmed through every message just to clear the notification, but there was one message with a reply field that wouldn't go away unless she replied—the one asking for her cooperation.

"Sent to all players who currently control significant portions of the map," she muttered aloud. "That means Lealea should've got one too."

She hummed in thought.

"But if I'm getting turned into an area for beginners, I wonder what Lealea's getting."

She shrugged the thought away. "Well, whatever. I'll ask her what she thinks when she gets back on."

Leah wouldn't be logging on for a few days. Leah—and Lyla, actually—had sent Blanc tells explaining their absences. Given the timing, Blanc figured it had to be a family matter. She wondered what kind of family they had if making up required days away from the game, but without more information, it would just be speculation on her part. Not that she wasn't curious, but her curiosity didn't matter compared to what was truly important: their making up.

That was a good thing, and Blanc was super happy about that.

"Okay," she said, closing her messages. "Can't do anything about the dev message until Lealea's back, and the event is over, sooo it's time to pay my old friend the count a visit! I still have that queen beetle Lealea lent me, and she told me I could use her as I see fit, so I'll get her to hold down Ellental until I return!"

Azalea made her presence known. "Then shall we head to His

Lordship the Count's old— I mean, *bold* castle?"

"He resents it being called old, you know?" Blanc said.

"Slip of the tongue," Azalea smiled back.

Blanc and the Mormos trio cast *Flight* and set off for the count's castle.

***

"Hey Count, didja miss me?"

"Hah. Hah. Hah... Blanc, my wretched kin. You return—and with glad tidings, I suspect? Tell me, how many towns did you cast to ruin?"

It'd been quite a while since Blanc last saw the old earl—or at least, it felt that way to her. But the count didn't seem to find their reunion nearly as momentous. Perhaps ten days to someone who had lived as long as he had was a mere drop in the bucket. Or perhaps all the fun and excitement of the past ten days had simply blown up Blanc's own sense of time.

"We got...three towns? I think?" Blanc replied. "At least three towns under my control. But so much happened! I wanna tell you all about it!"

"Speak. To your heart's content. For I have all the time in the world."

***

"After setting out from your old castle, we tore through town after town. In the blink of an eye, three were completely wiped out.

"Everything was going great—until we arrived at the ruins of a city that had already been attacked. That's where we ran into a group of elites straight out of a final boss fight. I mean, yeah. In hindsight, ruins and final bosses kinda go hand in hand, so that one's on me.

"But then, just when it looked like our adventure was about to end, Leah, the Queen of Destruction, showed up and saved our lives. Naturally, we joined forces.

"From there, we made a quick pit stop in the old capital of Hugelkuppe or whatever. That's when we found out the city's ruler was none other than Leah's estranged sister!

"Thanks to me and my incredible tact, the two had a heartfelt reunion, and as proof of their renewed bond, they went and kicked off a revolution in the nearby Kingdom of Oral."

***

"That is...quite the tale," the count said as Blanc finished. "I have many questions, but the most pressing, I suppose is... Who is this...Queen? of Destruction, you said?"

"Yep! Queen of Destruction!" Blanc replied jauntily. "And we're friends! We exchanged friend cards and everything! I mean, not that you know what those are, but we did! She's super nice! Wait, no she's not. Moderately nice? No, not really that either. Um, she's cute! Yeah, super adorable!"

Calling Leah "super nice" didn't quite fit. Sure, she was nice to Blanc. But she was rather standoffish toward Lyla, and even more so when it came to other players. NPCs? She kicked them aside like pebbles on the street.

"Nice" was debatable when it came to Leah. But cute? Adorable? No one could argue otherwise about her appearance.





"I see," the count rumbled, "that you continue to defy expectations in ways most unpredictable. Listen well, my kin. Lords of Destruction—that is, your Queen of Destruction—are beings similar to the True Vampire: the sire of all vampires, the being sovereign over you and me. They are entities of unfathomable power, far beyond our reach. Perhaps this one, newly born, has yet to demonstrate that strength. But in time, I would not be surprised if she came to rule over the entire realm."

"Wow. That's crazy," Blanc murmured. She knew that Leah was something special, but not *this* special. Then again, should she *really* be surprised after seeing Leah in action? And seeing her own growth hop onto an exponential curve after teaming up with her?

"And to think she already has enough worthy lieutenants to have Four Lords of Doom..." the count muttered to himself.

"Oh, I think I forgot to mention: I'm one of them!"

"And to think she already has enough worthy lieutenants to have Three Lords of Doom..."

"Hey!"

"The Lords of Destruction are not ones to gather followers. They are ill-suited to rule—'tis not in their nature. To have four—or three—powerful lieutenants is not unheard of, but an *entire army* at her command? That is a manner of leadership more befitting a Thearch...or a Heresiarch."

"Thearch? Heresiarch? What's the difference between all these archs?" Blanc asked.

"The blood they bore before their ascension," the count replied. "Those fated to rise as Lords of Destruction... They are not of a kind meant to wield *Retainer*, for theirs is a path of chaos unbound. In contrast, Thearchs and Heresiarchs... They arise from races bound in order, where *Retainer* is not merely a boon but a blade with which to carve their rule."

"Then, a Lord of Destruction with a whole freakin' army under their command is..."

"An existential threat. Perhaps not now, but in time. In the end, she may be even mighty enough to defeat Draco Aureus itself, that slumbering titan sealed at the Furthest Reach."

Thearchs, Heresiarchs, and now this Draco Aureus—each term was more unfamiliar to Blanc than the last. She wondered if even Leah knew about them. But the more she thought about the name, the more familiar Draco Aureus sounded.

"Draco Aureus?" she murmured.

"A being not of this realm, one not bound by its laws," the count explained. "And yet, for that very reason, it proved vulnerable. Binding magic was its weakness. That weakness allowed it to be sealed away, imprisoned in that distant land where all but time stands still.

"It was the Thearch who cast the seal, though he did not stand alone. He led a gathering of disparate souls, bound solely by purpose. And among them...the True Vampire, our lord. I was but a whelp at the time. What I know is what was passed down to me."

"And where is this Thearch now?" Blanc asked.

"He is no longer," the count replied. "Lost in that great battle, and since that fateful hour, no new Thearch has risen to take his place. The Heresiarch...perhaps lingers still. He did not take part in that great undertaking. According to our lord, he was a bit of a recluse. If he yet lives, he has not surfaced in an age."

What Blanc got out of all this was that Leah had contemporaries.

"Isn't there also some archangel?" she asked. "What's their deal?"

"The Archangel," the count said softly. "An upstart, yet one that rose with unnatural swiftness. Born in the wake of the great Fey King's fall, and in but a fleeting span, they grasped power enough to shake the heavens themselves. Their Celestial Citadel now hangs above, claimed as their throne. And from it, they cast their whims upon the land—upon its populace. I have never crossed their path, nor peered into their design. My halls stand untouched. So long as that remains, I see no cause to stir."

"If attacked, would you retaliate?" Blanc asked.

The count furrowed his brow in vexation—a display of emotion quite novel to Blanc. "It galls me to admit, but I doubt I could reach."

"Oh! Did I tell you I can fly now?"

The count boomed a deep laugh. "That is not what I meant by

reach.” He laughed again.

“And, and, and! We were in a coup d’état, and overthrew a whole civilized kingdom! Aren’t you gonna say anything about that?”

At this, the count blinked his eyes slowly, then turned to the Mormos.

Magenta stepped up. “Forgive me for speaking out of turn. Our lord speaks truly. What she means to say is that in concert with a human noble named Lyla, we have dismantled the prior regime of a civilized kingdom and installed in its place our own puppet regime. Lady Lyla, as our lord has alluded to, is the woman who shares a bond with Lady Leah.”

A moment of silence, then, “Bwa ha ha!” the count’s laughter burst forth, a great booming mirth that filled the hall. “Then you mean to say exactly what I thought you meant! One of the usurpers of the Fey King has now tasted the same bitter fate—felled by their own methods! Ah, how rich! How poetic!”

The count was in a great mood. The way he spoke of the Fey King suggested, if not a close friendship, then at least a passing acquaintanceship. One thing was clear—he certainly preferred the memory of the old Fey King over the current rulers of this realm.

Though, in hindsight, this was perhaps something Blanc should’ve clued into when he’d sent her off to pillage and destroy with a smile on his face.

“Well, shucks, I’m glad, but I can’t take all the credit!” Blanc said. “Really, Lyla and Leah came up with the plan.”

A question seemed to occur to her. “Why don’t you attack any civilized towns yourself, Count?”

The count’s laugh slowly tapered off into the quiet. His gaze turned distant, as if he were looking into the past. “An ancient covenant binds me,” he muttered. “I cannot directly interfere. But at this rate...it might not be long before I walk the surface world once more.”

“Wait, for real?!” Blanc gushed. “Like humanity is done for or what?!”

“For the covenant to break, it would take something drastic, but perhaps not *that* drastic,” the count said. “When that time comes, I

will not bid you to follow me. Your path is your own to choose. After all, you are one of the rare few who became a vampire by your own will."

That statement didn't entirely jibe with Blanc. It wasn't like she chose to fail a resistance check against *Retainer*—or to be given the option to become a vampire while keeping her free will. That end result only happened because she was a player.

When she vaguely voiced this thought to the count, he chuckled softly.

"The end result is all that matters. For most things in life, anyway."

***

"So yeah, that's the rough gist of what happened these past ten days. And...I feel bad, because you've given me a place to stay and all, but I was thinking from now on, I'd live in the town I conquered."

"Do as you wish, my kin," the count replied nonchalantly. "What, did you think your leaving could wound me?" His tone was almost amused. "I offered you a place out of my own self-interest. Besides, all vampires must spread their wings and leave the nest one day."

But as his voice faded, so did his amusement, leaving his face almost desolate.

Looking back, Blanc realized the count had been with her since day one. This wasn't a final goodbye, but she still wanted to say something—she wouldn't be the vampire she was today without him.

"Hey, Count? If there's anything—though I doubt there'll be anything—give me a shout, yeah? I'll be in this town—Ellental—for the time being."

"Even if you named them, I would not know a single town of this age. It matters not. I will be fine."

"Ah, I know!" Blanc summoned one of her Spartoi from Ellental. "I'll put this guy over here, and I'll summon myself over to hang out every now and then!"

"I'm afraid I do not follow."

"Uh, here. Lemme show ya!"

Blanc trotted out the room, then used *Summon Summoner* to reappear before the throne, right next to the Spartoi.

"What is this...?" the count said incredulously. "Teleportation? No, 'tis not. How did you do that?"

Teleportation? The term caught Blanc's interest, but it didn't feel like the right time to ask for more details. Not at least until Blanc had answered the count's own question. Even though she tried hard to keep it brief, her explanation ended up being longer than she intended, as she walked through the skill and its prerequisites.

"I see..." he murmured in understanding. "To think that such a skill existed."

A slow, persistent chuckle rumbled from him, as if something in the exchange amused him more than it should.

"And to think the day would come when I would learn something from you. Even eternity holds its surprises." He paused, then let out a quiet breath. "Ah, yes. Before I forget."

He cast a glance to his side. The butler, waiting in silence, gave a nod and stepped forward.

"Take him with you," the count said. "Perhaps, through him, I might even step beyond my old haunt now and then."

"You can leave the castle?!" Blanc almost shouted. "And wait, you're just giving him to us?!"

"I can leave, so long as I do not directly engage in anything that could be construed as combat. And no, I am not *giving* him to you. I am having him *accompany* you."

"But he's your butler. How will you, you know, manage?"

"Suppose I've spent millennia wallowing in filth simply because I had no butler!"

The butler gave the count a deep bow and moved to Blanc's side.

This disgusted the Mormos immensely.

"Should you continue to grow in power and find that this one can longer keep pace," the count said. "Return him to me, and I shall see to his improvement."

The count really thought of everything. The whole arrangement was a bit new to Blanc, having someone who isn't her retainer

accompany her, but she supposed it was just like having a noncontrollable character in her party.

Not that I've played enough video games to know what I'm talking about, Blanc thought. *Suppose I'll just chalk this one up as the count doting on me and leave it be.*

Blanc bowed her head low. "Thank you, Count! I really appreciate it!"

The count chuckled. "Take good care of him. I've ensured he will obey *most* of your commands. If you're curious, I encourage you to test where that line is drawn."

The butler turned to Blanc. "I now place myself wholly under your care. Please, guide me as you see fit." He then turned to Azalea and the Mormos, and smiled.

Azalea and the others expressions' twisted with loathing. Evidently, that smile had been interpreted as more of a shit-eating grin.

"Wait," Blanc suddenly said. "I realized that I totally don't know your name."

"Give him a new one," the count said. "It will not change the fact that he is my kin. But perhaps this way, he may forge a new bond with you."

"Hmm..." Blanc looked the butler up and down. "You're pretty pale for a vampire so... White... Dracula... Oh, but you have red eyes... Red-Eyes White Dra...?"

The butler listened quietly, though the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth hinted he wasn't entirely thrilled with the suggestions.

"Ah! How about Weiss? I forgot which but it definitely means 'white' in some foreign language!"

The butler bowed immediately. "Weiss will do just fine, milady; thank you, milady; that will be all, milady," he said all at once, as if rushing to stop Blanc before she could pick something even worse.

The Mormos almost looked at him in sympathy.

Was it really that bad of a name?

"Oookay then," Blanc said. "Well, Count..."

"It won't be goodbye, my kin," he replied. "Come back anytime."

Her expression brightened. "Yep! You can count on that!"

Once, she had called this place a ruin—a word that had angered the count. Now, if someone said the same to her, she was sure she'd feel the same way.

That strange, crumbling castle she had stumbled into on day one was no longer strange, no longer crumbling. It had become *home*.

No longer did she need to leave via the castle's main entrance, or the underwater stream. Instead, she moved to the nearby window.

Suppose she didn't need to jump out the window either, but a part of her wanted to show the old count just how much she'd grown.

Just as she put a foot on the sill, a voice cut in.

"I'm terribly sorry," Weiss said. "But I can't fly."

"Oh, ruin the moment, why don'tcha!"

With a quick turn, Blanc asked the count to teach Weiss *Flight*. Then, at last, they soared into the sky—five figures in formation.

Even as the castle shrank to a speck, Blanc could still see the count standing by the window, watching her go.

Chapter 1: A New Dawn

Leah logged on for the first time in days, and a flood of system messages greeted her.

The phrase "in days" hardly seemed long, but after logging on almost every day since the game's launch, a break of just a few days felt like an eternity.

The system messages were intriguing. She quickly responded yes to the one dev message addressed personally to her, then sat up in her bed.

It was a strange feeling. How long had it been since she last logged out in a proper bed? It must have been since the closed beta. Ever since early access, she had slept on that rocky throne of hers. She'd thought perhaps her wings might suffer in a sleeping position, but they wrapped around her nicely and didn't seem any worse for wear.

Suddenly, the door to her room swung open.

"Hey, Leah. Short time no see. Or suppose I should say 'Good morning,' as it's about time to get out of bed."

"Morning, Lyla. Ever heard of knocking?"

They were in a guest room in the Oral royal castle. As all the remaining royals and kingdom administrators were now under Lyla's control, Leah didn't have to hide herself here. In fact, the fact that the current regime was in cahoots with the Seventh Cataclysm was a bit of an open secret in the castle.

Showing herself to any NPC that wasn't bound by *Retainer* would still be a big no-no, though.

"Did you see the system message?" Lyla asked.

"I saw many system messages," Leah replied.

"The FAQ laying out the requirements for a kingdom's destruction. So the artifacts aren't tied to royal rule. That means we can do whatever with them, right?"

“I guess so. But first, how exactly is ‘royalty’ defined? Succession rights?”

“Maybe. Then, if the current regime names me the successor, I become a royal?”

They both paused, imagining the possibilities. If that were true, their options would explode. But that would be nigh impossible to determine. They’d have to name Lyla successor, then wipe out the royal family. And if they were wrong, they’d just have trashed another kingdom with nothing to show for it.

“Maybe, but we can’t test that. The risk is too high,” Leah said. “Wait, can we even kill them in the first place? They’re all your retainers.”

“To remove retainer status...you have to contact support. That means NPCs are just stuck being retainers forever?”

It sounded like a question the answer to which only the devs would know.

“But we can’t ask the devs questions willy-nilly,” Leah said. “We don’t want to chance our secrets being put on blast on the official FAQ. Considering the absence of players with similar playstyles on socials, they must be keeping quiet too, pretending to be NPCs like us.”

Or they were players like Blanc: players who enjoyed the game for what it was and didn’t have a habit of engaging with online content outside of it.

“Blanc,” Leah mumbled under her breath. “Right. I should go say hi to her. She probably got a message from the devs too.”

“Oh? You got one?” Lyla asked.

“Oh?” Leah shot back, surprised.

Leah and Lyla compared messages. As it turned out, their messages weren’t exactly the same. While Leah’s message was the devs offering to help her run her dungeon, Lyla’s message was the devs offering to help Lyla administer her kingdom.

“So... Basically I’ve done enough to unlock kingdom simulation mode, and you’ve done enough to unlock dungeon simulation mode,” Lyla said.

Lyla put it rather bluntly, but Leah supposed it was exactly that.

What had intrigued her, though, was the devs offering to adjust the death penalty for her in the conquered areas of Lieb, Erfahren, Llyrid, Trae, Rokillean, and the former Hilith capital. What this seemed like was an option to avoid EXP loss entirely. Don't want to lose EXP? Then just hole up in your dungeon and be a final boss.

"I already agreed," Leah said. "If I venture outside my domain, it's the same as before. If I stay within it, I don't suffer EXP loss. The only downside is that unlike a normal player, I can get attacked in my own Home. But with no EXP penalty for dying, that hardly seems like an issue."

With the addition of nearby Safe Areas and teleportation, the dev's intent to turn Leah's domain into an area of interest for other players was as clear as day. Leah wanted to turn her holdings into a dungeon—well, the devs said, *I got your dungeon riiight here*.

"Right. Makes sense," Lyla muttered. "What should I do, though? I've some experience running a city, but not a whole kingdom... My city's built on trade, but with its main trading partner of Hilith now destroyed, it's going to need to find a new identity for itself. Ugh, there's so much to do."

"You don't trade with any other kingdoms?"

"We do, but not nearly enough to sustain a city. The trade routes are undeveloped, making the risks high. Not to mention spoilage is an issue, what with the long distances and all."

"Ah, I didn't think about that. Then interkingdom merchant sounds like a great niche for player characters to slide into. Anything carried in their inventories would be safe."

"The market is indeed woefully underserved. Plus duties or tariffs aren't a thing at all, so some enterprising players could definitely strike it rich."

Leah had seen on social media that during the last event, not a small number of players had taken advantage of the situation and the free teleports to move goods around. As a result, Lemmy hadn't made nearly the killing she'd expected selling potions. Though by no means did that mean she'd incurred a loss—she was far too experienced a trader for that.

"There's also that conflict going on right now between the

civilized kingdoms," Lyla said. "No doubt that also presents an opportunity for some players to earn some gold and EXP."

"You...didn't have anything to do with that, did you, Lyla?"

During the in-game event, a full-blown war had erupted between the Kingdoms of Peare and Shape. According to what Leah read online, Peare had lost the town of Neuschloss, while Shape had lost Einpalast, meaning neither side was backing down anytime soon. The event was supposed to be a battle between the civilized races and monsters, so for two civilized kingdoms to suddenly go to war in the middle of it was, at best, surprising—and at worst, completely unnatural.

Leah had only been active in Hilith and Oral, and the same was true for Blanc. Lyla was the only one in their little group who could have been up to shenanigans.

"Wasn't me," Lyla replied. "It's strange, and I do think something was behind it, but it wasn't me. We don't even trade with Shape. Actually, why *are* you even suspecting me? Weren't we both in Hugelkuppe then, up to our schemes?"

"If that something is a player, that could be a problem," Leah mumbled.

"And if it's an NPC, that makes it somehow *less* of a problem?" Lyla said. "Like I said, the NPCs in this game are not normal NPCs."

Fair point, Leah thought. *Not that it helps narrow things down much. In fact, it did the opposite. If someone* had *instigated the conflict, what's their goal?*

"We have more questions than answers right now, but one thing's clear—whoever this instigator is, they don't hold a central position of power like I do," Lyla said. "Everything suspicious happened at the city level.

"Take the thing with the carrier pigeons in Neuschloss. All they'd need was access to the city's lord. With the chaos, even killing the person in charge of sending the pigeons and taking their place might have been enough.

"Then there's the town that Neuschloss's lord fled to. Resia, was it? Planting the idea in his or in one of his aides' heads wouldn't take much. I know because I've done it myself.

"As for the hot-blooded beastfolk who attacked Einpalast? That would've been the easiest part. If they were already itching for a fight, all it would take is the right rumor in the right tavern."

"But nobody could have pulled all that off in such a precise span of time," Leah countered. "Besides, Neuschloss fell because of a monster attack. How do you explain them having advance knowledge of that?"

"Simple: There was more than one actor. The monsters that attacked, the one who tampered with the carrier pigeons, the one who led the fleeing lord to Resia, and the one who stirred up the beastfolk—any of them could have been different people. Different players, in fact. If they were coordinating through chat, it would've been easy to pull off."

Leah didn't like how complicated this was getting, but she couldn't argue against it. She and Lyla had just pulled off a conspiracy just as complex—maybe even more so. Though, in their case, it had been more like two separate conspiracies converging into one.

"But hey, this is all just for argument's sake," Lyla clarified. "Do I think it was some grand conspiracy? No. More likely just a player or two trying to make a quick buck off war profiteering, and things just landed the way they did."

"Makes sense," Leah muttered absentmindedly. Her mind was fixed on one particular player in this plot—the one who allegedly led the goblins to attack Neuschloss. If that had been a player, they had almost certainly *Rebirthed* into a higher race capable of using *Retainer*. And if they were powerful enough to overwhelm an entire city, they might even be considered Harbinger-class in their own right.

"Oh, right, Lyla," Leah suddenly said.

"What is it?"

"Is there a church in this city or something? Doesn't have to be a church, just some facility or group to do with faith."

Leah had been interested in the *Oracle* skill for some time now. In Hilith, she'd made the mistake of wiping out the church, but here, she wanted to glean whatever knowledge she could. The skill that

had alerted the continent—or maybe even the world—to her existence could be incredibly useful. It might even warn her if a Harbinger-class entity emerged on the Fey King's side, opposing her own.

"Church, eh?" Lyla hummed. "Yeah, there's one here. There's also one back in Hugelkuppe: the Holy Church of Oral. I've been to a few of their banquets. Nice enough bunch. They're the austere, choose-to-live-in-poverty type, so I never had much to do with them. Why do you ask? Looking for revenge after they outed you?"

"Seriously? Am I that petty in your eyes?" Leah shot back. "No revenge. I just want to know how they detected the birth of a Queen of Destruction. If it's a skill, I want to figure out how to get it. Plus, I have other questions—what qualifies as a Harbinger-class entity, what triggers *Oracle*, what doesn't, you get the idea."

Lyla's eyes gleamed, and she gave a mischievous half smile. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down—one unfamiliar word at a time. Queen of Destruction? Is that what you are, Leah?"

Leah blinked. Had she really never mentioned this to Lyla before? "I haven't told you? Huh. Guess I haven't. Thought I did."

The only person she'd properly introduced herself to was Blanc. But since this was Lyla, she must have just skipped over that part.

"Let me take a peek at that gameplay diary of yours, Leah," Lyla teased. "Your big sister's interested."

"Nice try. Not happening. But I suppose a little knowledge exchange wouldn't hurt."

Emphasis on *a little*. Lyla was *not* finding out about NPC inventories. Other than that, she already knew about *Retainer*, so there wasn't much Leah couldn't share. Maybe the philosopher's stone? But there wasn't really a way around explaining that if she was going to talk about her ascended status.

"You've seen the forces I've summoned to the capital, right? There's a lot more where that came from. A world tree, for one..."

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"...And that's how I ended up as a Queen of Destruction. Now—"

"Still got any left? Those greater philoso-whatevers?"

"I do. But it's only for good, quiet, noninterrupting little boys and girls," Leah said, tightening up her smile in irritation.

Like her sister—though maybe not quite as much—Leah wasn't a fan of interruptions.

Or hypocrites.

"Wait, you were gonna give it to me right after this, no questions or favors asked?! You're letting me off too easy, sister." Then Lyla hummed, as if in thought. "I wouldn't have bothered with *Sangre Azul* if I knew there was an item better in every way just sitting around. Do you have *any* idea what I went through for my *Rebirth*?"

Oh, yes. Leah was intimately familiar with the pain Lyla had gone through. Because Lyla had treated her to an excruciatingly detailed, long-winded account of every single moment of it. But from the way Lyla had told her game-life story, Leah was surprised to hear her refer to it now as a hardship, as if it had actually been trouble for her. Maybe it was the way she'd told the story, or maybe it was just the way Lyla was. (You know, perfect.) But either way, Leah found it hard to imagine her ever truly struggling with anything.

"Do you really want one?" Leah asked. "As in, if I gave you one, are you going to use it? How much EXP do you have in reserve anyway? If noble human is on the same tier as high elf, then using the greater philo stone is probably going to come with a four-figure price tag."

There was something to be gained for Leah here. Originally, she wanted to learn about the *Oracle* skill or its evil counterpart, and decide whether to invest in it—either for herself or someone under her. What race Lyla would become after *Rebirthing* again was unclear. But if noble human was the "intended" evolution of a human—as opposed to something like dark elf from elf being the "unintended" evolution—then Lyla's next evolution might bring her closer to becoming something like the Fey King. She based this assumption on the fact that the queen Lyla had just *Retained* was a noble human.

If *Oracle* was a skill that came naturally to that race, then Leah could start testing how it worked right away.

"Pause, pause, pause—*four* figures?!" Lyla exclaimed. "How much did Queen of Destruction cost?"

"Three thousand."

"That is outrageous! Who sold you that? Do you still have the receipt?"

Yes, sister. Because the game scammed me. Leah mentally rolled her eyes. "The World Tree was 5,000, I ascended two other NPCs for 2,000 each...and there was another one who cost 3,000."

"Christ, you're loaded. The hell did you do?"

"I ran a little theme park, I guess. It was a humble little monster ranch at first, but then word got out that it was an official dev-ran beginner dungeon and that's when things really started taking off."

Though, it was a while before Leah actually learned the dev-ran rumor herself.

"Dang. I guess I better actually start running this country, then," Lyla said.

"Lemme know when you've farmed up enough and I'll give you one. Friends-and-family pricing. 'Kay. Now, as I was saying, when I became a Queen of Destruction..."

Leah then went on to explain how the birth of Harbinger-class entities such as herself and Disaster-class entities such as Sugaru would normally trigger a global announcement *unless* they were under the control of an existing faction at the time of birth.

"That's why I believe *Oracle*, or its evil counterpart, will be a useful skill for us to have—to alert us in case a big bad somewhere else in the world not under our control arises," Leah finished.

"I see, I see," Lyla hummed. "In that case, why don't we go to the church, *Retain* a patriarch? Then we start a new religion worshipping you, our Queen of Destruction. Count me in as believer number one."

"Huh? Why would we do something like..." Leah's voice trailed off. The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. Having a faith under their control, and the network that came with it, could be incredibly useful—as long as no one knew the object of worship was a Cataclysm. To avoid word getting out, they could ban idolatry. A symbol, something abstract, would be enough for worship. Done

right—*bam*. A network of spies, instantly spread across the continent.

"Well, *I* think it'd be a good idea," Lyla said. "How about it? You can trust that I have only the purest intentions with this one. What better to control my new populace than faith?"

"Purest intentions. Riiight."

If Leah were to be honest, she had neither the interest nor the time to run a religion. But if Lyla wanted to start it up as a little side hustle to her country-running job, then maybe there was no downside?

"Fine. Let's say I'm down for your little plot," Leah said. "Let's go summon this patriarch or whatever and *Retain* him. Then he can go and *Retain* all the other regional bishops himself."

"Why bother? You can make yourself invisible, no? Just go invisible and fly over to the church. Here's a question: Can you cast that invis spell on me?"

"No, it's self-cast only."

"What if I piggyback on top of you and you take us both to the church? Not like I can fly, so you'd have to carry me anyway."

Leah thought about this for a moment. Maybe? But there *was* the patch note that said the devs tightened up the loophole with players carrying players being able to teleport all together.

"Eh, it's whatever," Leah said. "It's okay. I'll go by myself."

"Tsk. Fine. I'll see you later, then? You know your way around?"

"I'll send you a message if I can't locate the church from above."

Leah checked herself in the mirror, tidied up, then leaped out the nearest window.

That might've been the first time she'd looked at herself since her *Rebirth*. As Kelli had pointed out, there was a divine aura about her now. But since her character's face still resembled her own, she didn't exactly feel like she was looking upon a god.

She was reminded of an incident from her childhood. She'd gotten into their mother's makeup, and blasted herself with so much foundation and powder that even her eyelashes and eyebrows turned white.

Boy, did she ever get scolded that day.

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By air, the royal capital of Oral was, on the whole, a completely unimpressive sight.

Hilith's capital, with its concentric rings radiating outward from the royal castle, was far more memorable—both in layout and aesthetics. Oral, by contrast, was all straight angles and rigid grids, its buildings packed into a dense, monotonous pattern. Overall, the city resembled a giant cross. Its outer walls weren't rounded but sharply angled with clear sight lines—likely engineered with the same strategic intent as real-world star fortresses. Who knew what lurked in those deadly corners? Long-range artillery? Gunners? One thing was certain: This city was built for defense.

They had taken the city from the inside this time—and Leah was *very* glad for that. Had they relied on a direct assault, a repeat of Hilith, this would not have been.

From the air, Leah spotted the church—a cathedral, as it appeared to be. It was the second-largest structure in the city after the royal castle. The church sat squarely in the south, noticeably far from the castle, almost as if making a statement: *We are the church. We are not in league with the crown.*

Leah cast *Camouflage* on herself, then descended toward the grand cathedral. She peered through the largest window, scanning the scene inside. The chamber had towering, vaulted ceilings—likely the nave. Below her, something massive loomed at the center, its presence overwhelming. A small group prayed before it in reverence. Their elaborate attire seemed to mark them as high-ranking officials. Lyla had described the church folk as the kind who embraced poverty—which meant that if anyone here was dressed in such finery, they had to be at the top.

"Now, how do I get inside?" Leah wondered to herself. "Considering what we plan to do, I probably shouldn't make too much of a mess."

There was no way in through the roof or the windows. Leah

dropped to the ground—still camouflaged—and searched for a back or service entrance. She found one almost immediately, but a man stood in front of it. He held a broom, appearing to sweep, but his watchful posture made it clear he was on guard.

Hoping for the best, Leah cast *Dissociate* and slipped past before he could regain his senses. The door swung open freely—unlocked. Good. If it had been locked, she would've had to cast *Charm* and that would've been a whole process just to get the key.

Moving silently, she navigated the halls using her eagle-eye memory of the building's layout. When she reached the nave, she found the holy men from before still knelt in prayer.

"Your devotion is duly noted, but starting from today, you'll have a new object of worship," Leah said. She removed *Camouflage*, spread her wings out wide, then cast *Lustrous Maiden's Sanctum*. The sudden rain of feathers finally alerted the clergymen to Leah's presence. They stood and turned to face her but it was already too late.

"*Charm. Dominate.*" Leah cast the familiar sequence of spells, feeling them take effect immediately. "Easy. Then this should work just fine." Leah cast *Retainer* on each member of the group.

If even kings and queens—with their innate *Retainer* skill granting them more EXP in a lifetime than most people could ever hope to earn—were powerless against Leah's *Charm* when stacked with *Beautiful*, *Sublime Beauty*, and *Horns*, what chance did these poor saps have? Leah had this group confirm their identities, and they were indeed the patriarch and his aides.

"Congratulations, you now all worship me," Leah said. "Work with Lyla, the noble who bends the royal family to her will. Her word is as good as mine."

"So it shall be, my master," the patriarch said. He dropped to his knees, then prostrated himself in reverence. The sheer immediacy of his obedience unnerved Leah, so much so that she immediately raised the patriarch's INT. Then she checked his skills. The patriarch was human. The absence of the noble designation suggested the church really did operate independently from the crown. After memorizing all his skills, Leah bid the patriarch to stand.

"This is my gift to you," Leah said, taking out a few philosopher's stones, enough for the assembled congregation and then some. "Take them. Remake yourselves and whoever else you deem worthy in my name."

These were stones Sieg had returned to her, a few leftovers after he'd finished *Rebirthing* his subordinates. For a moment, she considered unlocking *Retainer* the conventional way through the skill tree, but decided the version granted to noble humans would suffice.

The patriarch prostrated himself again, this time even more reverent than before. Leah quickly put a stop to that, oversaw the *Rebirths* and skill acquisitions, then made her way back to the castle.

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Leah returned to the castle to inform Lyla of the results of her mission.

She reported that all the clergymen who were bishops or higher at the cathedral were now under her control, that she'd *Rebirthed* them all as noble humans, and that she'd instructed them to obey Lyla's instructions for the time being.

"What, you're dumping them on me?" Lyla said. "I mean, yeah, I guess the whole thing *was* my idea. Can I just use them as my pawns, then?"

"'Course," Leah replied. "I already got what I needed from them, so you can do what you want with them. I'll come back to check up on them every now and then."

And that was Leah's business at the royal capital, done. Time to finally go see Blanc and say hi.

"Oh, one last thing, Lyla."

"Yeah?"

"You might wanna never show your face outside this castle again."

"Why?!"

"I've fought other players. They've seen my face. If someone then sees your face, they'll know we're in cahoots. We're both role-playing NPCs so one of us has to stay hidden. Can't be me sooo

thanks, sisteeer!”

“Ugh, seriously? Well, whatever. But don’t come raging at me if I accidentally slip up now. Oh! I know! If that happens, I’ll just claim I have a baby sister. We were separated at birth, she died, then an evil necromancer raised and spliced her body into an undead chimera, one who now happens to be a Great Cataclysm.”

“Sure. Have at it.”

The one remaining plot hole was how such an entity then became an object of near fanatical worship, but as long as Lyla could account for that, then it was actually not a bad cover story. Lyla. Her on-the-spot bullshitting skills were second to none.

“Okay. Then I’m off to Ellental to see Blanc,” Leah said.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Drop the loot. You really thought you could ransack the castle treasury and I wouldn’t notice?”

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“Hey, Blanc. Sorry for not logging on for a few days. How’ve you been?”

“Welcome back, Lealea! You back for good?”

“Should be. For a while, anyway.”

Leah had used *Summon Summoner* on Diaz to move directly back to Ellental’s lord’s manor, where Diaz had been stuck on assignment.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty,” Diaz said. “I trust the coup d’état was successful?”

“Diaz,” Leah said, acknowledging him.

Another of the Fey King’s usurpers had been laid low. No doubt Diaz was pleased. Leah had considered bringing him along to take his revenge personally, but ultimately decided against it—he stood out too much. Plus, there was always the risk he’d lose control and fly into a rage again.

“Lealea, did you see the dev message?” Blanc asked.

So I was right, Leah thought. *Blanc did get one.* “Yeah, I saw it. We probably got similar messages. There didn’t seem to be any

downside, so I just agreed to it."

"Cool. Then I shall...agree to it too." Blanc seemed to only then shoot back a reply to the dev message. No doubt her control extended to the triplets of Ellental, Altoriva, and Velstead.

"But what if some, whaddya-call-'ems—no-lifers?—come around?" Blanc asked. "Like sure, the area's meant for beginners, but what's stopping some sweaty gamer from wiping us out?"

"I don't think there is anything, unfortunately," Leah replied. "It's the same as PvP, just all part of the game. The same way we've been mowing down lowbies, some powerful player could do the same to us."

The conversation suddenly reminded Leah of another system message they'd received—the one about microtransactions. Specifically, the item that allowed a person to switch to a different race.

Leah found this item intriguing, but not for its immediate use as a race-change tool. Leah, Lyla, and Blanc were all reborn individuals. Changing into a starter race would be a clear downgrade, and cash shop items were nontransferable, so their retinue couldn't use it either. What interested Leah was the idea that someone still playing a starter race might exploit it in unintended ways.

Say someone who was a dwarf yesterday became an elf today. How would others—especially NPCs—perceive that change? Could this actually be the best disguise tool ever, one that real money could buy?

That said, there were some issues. All player characters would be aware of the item's existence and would likely catch on after the first or second use. NPCs, on the other hand, wouldn't have that immediate knowledge—but they weren't entirely out of the loop either. As the survey pointed out, all cash shop items would also be obtainable through conventional in-game methods. That meant some NPCs could eventually become aware of it as well.

Another possibility, perhaps a more "legitimate" one, was skill collection—cycling through races and their ascended forms to accumulate every racial ability possible. Say Lyla, a noble human, switched to elf, ascended to high elf, acquired their skills, then

moved on to dwarf, ascended again, and so on, stacking the human *Retainer* with other race-exclusive abilities. To what end? Well, Leah was a Queen of Destruction skilled in *Divine Magic*. She hadn't done that intentionally, but this was the sort of offbeat speccing this race-change item might be capable of enabling. But that, even Leah had to admit, seemed unlikely. Because the item was talked about in the same breath as a skill unlearning item, one could infer the devs wanted these to serve as a sort of emergency respec function. One would naturally then expect these items to have caveats, such as the losing of all racial skills upon switching, converting back into EXP. Now that Leah really thought about it, what would a dwarf casting *Wing Strike* even look like?

Her curiosity remained, but the cost of experimentation seemed too high for what were likely meager benefits.

"Whatcha gonna do after this, Lealea?" Blanc asked. "Like what's your plan after the event?"

"That's a good question," Leah replied. "I guess I *should* be lying in wait in my domain like a good dungeon boss for any players that'll come knocking, but that shouldn't be for a while yet. There's this volcano area south of the Great Forest of Lieb. I was thinking maybe I'd set my sights there."

"Not going to sack any more Hilithian towns? There's still a ton out there."

"I mean...I *could*. But do we really need to? Considering our goal to wipe out all six civilized kingdoms, and the clarified win conditions, it's way faster to just take out the royal families. Less hassle for us, not to mention *way* less liable to turn us into public enemy number one in the eyes of the playerbase."

"I didn't think you to be the type to care about your reputation."

"I don't. It's more that I'd rather not provoke a full-blown race war between the civilized and monster players. Even the most pacifist civilized player is going to have something to say if we wipe out every single one of their towns.

"And besides, just think about it—what *actually* changes for the people living here if six kingdoms suddenly turn into a bunch of city-states? I mean, sure, you could argue the people rely on the crown

for protection against monsters, but with regional lords, their knights, and especially players now too, do we really need them?"

"So what you're saying is," Blanc said, "now that there are a ton of mercenaries—aka the players—running around fighting monsters, the whole idea of kingdoms kinda...stopped making sense?"

"Yeah, that's a good way to put it," Leah replied. "We're probably heading into some kind of transition period for the whole continent."

"A transition period..." Blanc echoed. She had a blank look on her face.

How could Leah better explain this?

"Okay. Think of it this way," she said. "Take the whole system of nobility—the way towns and cities are governed. Take Lyla. She became a noble because the king just...made her one. If we assume that's the norm, then none of these nobles actually have any tangible hold on their power. Either they or their ancestors were just handed their titles out of thin air by the royals."

"Uh-huh," Blanc said.

"When these kingdoms expand, they push closer and closer to monster territory, and naturally, things get more dangerous. So, in exchange for taking on that risk and developing the land, people are given the right to rule over it. That's what a noble is. They turn around and pay taxes to the crown, and boom—you've got feudalism, the type of government medieval Europe and Japan had.

"The crown of Hilith—the central authority in this case—managed to scrape together a huge army to fight me. That was their big show of power, something independent city-states never could've pulled off. A solid argument for the monarchy, right? Wrong.

"By focusing all their resources on a single fight, Hilith left its outlying towns and backwater regions to fend for themselves. And if you're one of those towns? If you made it through all this upheaval without a single bit of help from the crown? Then why the hell would you think you need a king *at all*?

"On top of that, I destroyed their grand army. You and I, Blanc, we sacked all the cities we wanted and nobody could stop us. The central authority was completely helpless against a Cataclysm, and what does that tell the average person? It tells them that no

kingdom, no government, no *king* can actually protect them when it really matters. And just like that, trust in the state hits limit down."

"Limit down!" Blanc exclaimed. "No idea what that means but it sounds super bad!"

"Well, it's actually worse than that because it's not like 'trust in crown rule' has a circuit breaker to stop it from completely tanking. Anyways, as I was saying, it's been two weeks in game since the capital fell, and there's been zero unrest in any of the former Hilithian territories. Like riots, angry mobs burning down towns—none of that. The capital's in ruins, the government has collapsed, and basically, nothing has changed. People might feel a little uneasy now, but eventually, it's gonna hit them. When that realization sinks in, there's no going back. The way society works is already shifting. That's what I mean by this being a transition period."

Every now and then, a post would pop up online about some regional lord in former Hilith declaring independence. But seeing as every single one of Hilith's territories had already become de facto independent when the capital fell, these so-called declarations were meaningless. Trade hadn't stopped. Towns that relied on commerce kept doing business with their neighbors, same as always. Even the ones that traded with other countries were carrying on like nothing had changed. Lyla had mentioned that the concept of tariffs didn't exist, so literally the only thing that could've been disrupted with the fall of Hilith, hadn't.

It was almost like the only real job of these kingdoms, the only reason they could claim legitimacy, was their ability to wield their artifacts in times of crisis.

No. Not *almost like*. That *was* the reason. That was the only reason the Six Kingdoms had lasted as long as they had. Without those artifacts, things would've unraveled ages ago. Unlike the Imperial Seal of ancient China or Japan's Three Sacred Treasures, these weren't just ceremonial symbols of authority. The artifacts were real, tangible weapons of war—something Leah understood better than anyone.

If this really were part of some larger collapse of feudalism across the continent, then Leah had to rethink how she saw the whole

conflict between Peare and Shape. The beastfolk claimed they wanted revenge for Neuschloss, and the dwarves talked about their noble pride as if that justified the war. But what if that wasn't actually about something as structured as patriotism? What if it wasn't about nations or ideals but something older—something more instinctive? What if, at the core of it, this wasn't about territory or justice, but just plain tribalism or racism?

"Well, in any case, these are just my personal thoughts," Leah muttered.

"You really are sisters," Blanc said.

"What? How?"

"You both love to explain things, don't you? Basically, what I'm saying is: I'm glad you two made up."

"Oh yeah. Weren't you supposed to get an award or something?" Blanc asked out of nowhere.

"What? Huh? What's this about awards now?" Leah said.

Blanc always had a knack for throwing out statements that boggled the mind. Not because she was unclear, exactly—more like she got ahead of herself and skipped a few words. Leah had learned that much in the short time they'd known each other.

"You know, like the last event. Didn't you get something then?" Blanc asked.

"Oh! My MVP award?"

"Yeah, yeah! That participation trophy!"

MVPs and participation trophies were...*not* the same thing. Honestly, they were probably opposites. But whatever. Leah let it slide.

"Hmm. Not this time, I don't think," she said.

"Wait, why? 'Cause you died?"

Harsh.

Come to think of it, when had Leah even told Blanc about what happened at the capital? She *had* told Lyla, though. So either Lyla had blabbed, or Blanc had actually checked the forums for once. Well, whatever. It wasn't like it was a painful memory anymore. Not when she could just kill those players on sight.

"Nah, that has nothing to do with it," Leah said. "Honestly, if anyone should get MVP, it's the people who killed me. See? I'm not a sore loser. Who said I was a sore loser?"

No one had said she was a sore loser.

"I don't think I'd even be eligible in the first place," she went on. "I played for the monster side because the devs asked me to. That basically made me a standin dev. MVP stands for most valuable player. *Player.* I wasn't one, so by definition, I wouldn't even be in the running."

"Oh, I didn't think about that," Blanc said. "Wait—does that mean *I* wouldn't be in the running either?"

"No, you played for the monster side because that was just your playstyle. I'd say you have a shot."

Leah hadn't even thought about the whole MVP thing because she'd thought it'd be done and dusted by the time she and Lyla logged back on. Apparently not.

"Yeah!" Blanc said. "What if they have two different MVPs, one for the attacking side, one for the defenders? I took two towns by myself, that should put me in the running, right?"

"Totally. I mean, who else can say they subjugated two whole towns by themselves? I guess I get why the devs are taking so long to make an announcement. A *lot* of weird stuff happened. They probably don't even know where to start. Anyway, what about you, Blanc? What's next? You heading back to that count or whatever? That's your Home, right?"

"Oh, my Home? You're standing in it! It's Ellental now. I said goodbye to the count for the time being, and as a parting gift, he gave me *this* butler!"

Right on cue, a white-haired butler stepped out from the corner of the room and bowed. "Weiss, at your humble service."

That was...unexpected. He'd been so still she'd honestly thought he was part of the wallpaper. But she kept her expression neutral, playing it cool. "Oh, hello there. I thought there was an unfamiliar face in the room. Are you one of Blanc's underlings now?"

"Technically speaking," Weiss replied, "Count de Havilland remains my master. However, His Lordship has directed that I heed Lady

Blanc's commands. Therefore, whatever assistance you require, you shall have my full service."

Oh, cool, a dispatch worker, Leah thought. She vaguely remembered reading something about staffing agencies being a big deal in the old world. Back before everything went fully virtual—before VR and remote attendance made even the most formal events doable from home—people used to hire temps for *everything*. You could even rent a date if the occasion called for it. Wild times.

While she was off in trivia land, Blanc had already finished telling her story about the count. "...then *bam*! Senpai gave me Weiss as my own personal butler."

Blanc didn't mention it, but Leah could tell—the count had assigned Weiss to keep an eye on her. Probably to yank the leash whenever she got too close to trouble.

"I see," Leah said. "In that case, I echo the count's sentiment. Weiss, keep Blanc out of trouble, will you?"

"That is my prime directive," Weiss said.

"It is?!" Blanc yelled.

With even the obligatory Blanc ribbing out of the way, that was every loose end tied up. Now Leah could finally get started on her volcano expedition. Diaz and the queen beetle could handle whatever players decided to show up, and with Weiss around, Blanc's chances of staying out of major disaster territory were looking better than ever.

"Diaz, you too—keep an eye on things," Leah said. "We're sticking to the original plan, so for this, I'll be bringing...Kelli and company, plus the wolves. They should already be there waiting."

Diaz's brow knit for a split second in concern, but when he heard Kelli and the beastfolk would be involved, he relaxed, bowing his head in silent agreement.

All right. Now all that was left was flying over to Hakuma and giving Kelli a call. It'd been a while since this team-up happened—probably not since that first boar hunt in the forest.

"Okay then. Take care, Blanc. If you need anything, let me know. I'm always just a DM away. And when we've all got some time, let's have a proper chat. You, me, and Lyla. There might be other players

out there coordinating between factions like us. Could be a golden opportunity to team up and rake in even more gains."

"Sure thing! Leave it to one of your Four Lords of Doom! Huh. Wait. If we're this villainous organization, what would that make Lyla? An adviser?"

"Adviser...makes her sound like some kind of external consultant. Which isn't *entirely* wrong, but also kind of hilarious. Call her that next time—I wanna see how she reacts."

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Wayne, Gealgamesh, and Mentai-list hadn't been able to regroup until the latter half of the event. When they finally had, Mentai-list suggested prioritizing EXP gains over gold for the remainder of the event. As a result, Wayne progressed tremendously. He was still far from catching up to his two party members, but at least now he could fight alongside them without being a liability. They had done all their farming in Mentai-list's home Kingdom of Wels.

Currently, they were in Carnemonte, one of Wels's major cities. For a city of its size, it was positioned relatively close to monster territory, making it a prime hub for players looking for action. Server maintenance had just ended, so they logged in, left their rooms at the inn, and headed down to the common area. Now, they sat around a table, sipping tea.

"Wayne," Gealgamesh said. "Your gear is looking kinda sketch, man. What is that, iron and...some kind of monster leather? Hell, I'm just impressed it's held up this long, considering how much stronger you've gotten—both skill-and stat-wise."

"Yeah, well, tell that to Mentai. He's the one insisting I hold off on gear upgrades," Wayne grumbled. "Do you have any idea how many parties I've joined, only for them to disband on the spot the second they see me?"

He'd complained to Mentai-list about this more than once, but Mentai-list wouldn't budge. Not that Wayne had really pushed the issue. At the end of the day, Gealgamesh and Mentai-list were his main party members. If they didn't have a problem with it, what was

he supposed to say? He just had to live with this weird, uncomfortable feeling of both dragging the team down and getting carried at the same time.

"Mentai," Gealgamesh said. "Come on. It's about time you let us in on what you've got planned, right? You *must* have a reason for leaving poor Wayne out to dry like this."

At that, Mentai-list tipped back the rest of his tea in one gulp, then stood up.

"All right," he said. "Let's talk. But in my room."

***

The group moved from the common area to Mentai-list's room, Wayne and Gil each taking chairs from their own rooms so they'd have a place to sit.

"Right then. Let's go over a few key points," Mentai-list said. "When we fought and defeated the Great Cataclysm, the only thing that dropped was a few lumps of metal. Lumps of metal we failed to loot. We explained this to the rest of the raid, they accepted the no-loot outcome, and we all parted ways without any reward. Am I overlooking anything?"

It was a bitter memory for Wayne. They had all the time in the world before the Cataclysm reappeared to grab at least something, but hadn't. Now, with the former Hilithian capital firmly under the Cataclysm's control, no doubt she had already reclaimed those metal chunks.

"I don't think so," Wayne said. "My fault."

"Aw, you gotta stop beating yourself up for that, Wayne, buddy," Gil said. "There were thirty of us there, nothing that happened was only your fault. But Mentai, brother, weren't you the one who said you recovered a few pieces?"

"I did," Mentai-list replied. "I have it on me right now."

Then we have something to split with the raid! Wayne thought hopefully for a second, before the realization set in that these metal chunks were chunks Mentai-list personally recovered during the escape from Hilith, making them his and his alone.

"Hell yeah," Gil said. "So? Did you find out what this metal is? Enchanted metal? Were you going to use it to craft Wayne some gear finally?"

"Correct on all counts—except that it's not enchanted metal," Mentai-list said. He took out the metal from his inventory and placed it on the table between them. "A blacksmith in town cast it into an ingot for me. I tried in several smaller towns along the way, but none would so much as touch it. Even here, I had to seek out the renowned smithy in the center of town to have it worked."

"You serious?" Gil said. "Then what am I looking at here?"

"A metal known as adamas, apparently."

Adamas? Where had Wayne heard that word before...? Ah, Hesiod's *Theogony*. It was an ancient Greek word that meant something along the lines of "unconquerable," used to denote something like steel in this context. Basically something tough, unyielding.

"If its etymology is anything to go by..." Wayne muttered. "Gil, you ever heard of the stuff?"

"Adamantium or adamantite in other games, sure, but...you think they're similar?" Gil looked at Mentai.

"I think they're one and the same," Mentai replied. "The master blacksmith at the smithy told me it's one of the toughest natural metals—stronger even than enchanted ones. He also mentioned a legendary metal, something something calchum... Likely whatever the analogue is to orichalcum? That's probably the only thing stronger."

Wayne was impressed by how much research Mentai-list had done. But if what he'd said were true, that meant they'd had the chance to get their hands on samples of ultra materials—a chance Wayne had let slip.

"Damn. Cataclysm boss drops are no joke, eh?" Gil said. "After word gets out, how long do you think it will take before the former Hilithian capital is swarmed by players? Assuming the regular undead there all drop the same stuff."

"Not long," Mentai replied. "But not that I intend to go public with this knowledge even in the slightest."

"I see," Wayne said. "Sorry, Mentai-list."

Gil looked askance at Wayne. "For?"

"Come on, Gil, can't you see what Mentai-list has done for us? I was the one who screwed up and lost us the boss drop. Back then, no one cared because no one knew what kind of metal it was. But now that we know it's incredibly rare, what do you think would happen if this got out? Mentai-list kept it a secret because he's looking out for us."

"I see," Gil said. "But Wayne, come on, dude, I just said it wasn't just your fault. And think about it, if this metal only drops from her undead minions, then the boss herself probably had a completely different drop."

"Different. You mean better," Wayne said. "That just makes things worse. Everyone assumes the Cataclysm dropped these metal chunks—no one's thinking they came from her minions. So if we say otherwise, people are just gonna assume her actual drop was even more valuable."

Wayne was stuck between a rock and a hard place. His guilt urged him to come clean to their former raid members, but doing so now would implicate not just him but Gil and Mentai-list—especially Mentai-list. There was no way to prove the metal he had was the exact one from the boss, but the fact that he possessed the real thing made it all the more damning. If word got out and tensions flared, Wayne and his group would find themselves at the business end of a mob of pitchforks.

"Mentai, what's your plan, buddy?" Gil said. "You could've sold them off to avoid the trouble but the fact that you're hanging on to them suggests you have an idea."

"You touched on it earlier," Mentai-list replied. "I was thinking we'd use this to get you and Wayne some new gear. Why would I sell it if I didn't want word to get out?"

"Wayne?" Gil looked at him.

Wayne was conflicted. This kinda felt like pulling a fast one on all the players who had helped them. Not to mention the item technically belonged to Mentai-list—it wasn't even his. So not only would he be stiffing everyone else, he'd be taking a freebie on top of

that.

But if it was Mentai-list's item, then it was his call to do whatever he wanted with it, right? And it wasn't like Wayne could ignore the obvious—his gear *was* garbage. He was dragging the whole party down with him. If he turned down Mentai-list's offer, he knew Mentai-list would use this exact logic against him, guilt-tripping him into accepting anyway.

Mentai-list was all too ready to use Wayne's goodie-goodie nature against him. And he wasn't even being subtle about it—offering to use some of the material on Gil too, knowing full well that Gil, with his playstyle, would need *way* more of the metal to craft proper armor. It was definitely calculated, a move to make the whole thing seem more fair.

Yeah. This was a setup. And a damn good one at that.

"I'm just glad you're on our side, Mentai-list," Wayne said.

"Your words honor me, leader," Mentai-list replied. "Can I take this to mean you're on board?"

"Yeah," Wayne said. "And...thanks again, Mentai-list."

There was another way to look at this, he realized. The real goal wasn't just upgrading gear—it was taking down the Cataclysm again someday. And when that happened, *that* loot would be the real prize. This metal was just an advance on that. If taking it now meant he could take less later, then there was no reason to hesitate.

"Hell yeah!" Gil exclaimed. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go pay that blacksmith a visit."

"Indeed, we should hurry," Mentai said. "Poor guy's probably been sitting by the forge all day waiting for us to show up."

"Likes his job that much, huh?" Wayne said.

"Adamas is rare, even in a place like this," Mentai-list said. "Probably one of the few times he'll ever get to work with it in this quantity."

"Ah. Makes sense."

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The master blacksmith in question turned out to be a dwarf, a

rare sight in the Kingdom of Wels. He looked crotchety and disagreeable at first glance, but then he opened his mouth and blew that impression away. He was down-to-earth, friendly, and most of all—*loud*.

"Aye, aye, aye! Let's get straight to work, eh? Time's a-wastin'! You just plant yer boots right there, and I'll have it done in a blink—Bah, no I won't, but I'll have it done before the day's out!"

He grabbed all the metal and Wayne's and Gil's current gear, then disappeared into his workshop.

"Welp, screw waiting here all day. I'm out," Gil said.

"Hey, he's gonna hear you," Wayne said. "What are you gonna go do? He took our gear to take measurements, not like we can go grind."

"Why don't you explore the city, do something else for a change?" Mentai-list suggested. "I'm headed to a bookstore. There's a little something I'm interested in."

Mentai-list was something of a forum power user. He contributed to all sorts of threads, from theorycrafting to lore to event summaries. He was probably going to look into the origin of the kingdom or something along those lines.

"Bookstore, huh," Gil grunted. "Can't say that's my thing. What about you, Wayne? What are you gonna do?"

"I think I'll join Mentai-list. I've never been to a bookstore in game. I'm curious."

Any intel to be gleaned in a bookstore would be widely available knowledge, nothing too deep or game-changing—or so one would think. Wayne and the others had learned the big tidbit about the Six—well, *Seven*—Great Cataclysms from the chancellor back in Hilith. But who was to say that wasn't also just common knowledge? If that much was out in the open, then maybe there was more where that came from.

"Welp, not gonna get anything done by myself so I guess I'll come too," Gil said. "Also, I feel like an idiot now for vendoring all my old gear. Walking around with nothing on just doesn't feel right. Better hold on to a spare set from now on."

Wayne had to agree. With the inventory system, there was little

downside to lugging around spare gear.

"It'd be bad if we encountered thugs or PKers in our current state," Mentai-list said, "but if we stick to here, the center of town, we should be fairly safe. Safer than returning to our inn anyway. I still have my gear, so if anything happens, we'll still have my magic at least."

The group asked the smithy's clerk for directions to the bookstore, then set off. She must have overheard their conversation, as the route she gave them stuck to major avenues and well-populated areas.

The bookstore was sizable, its entry marked by a heavy-looking door at its entrance. With no windows, it almost resembled a warehouse at first glance. If not for the sign, they might have assumed they were in the wrong place.

Mentai-list, leading the group, grabbed the handle and puuulled! The door opened, but as expected, it was heavy—especially for a caster who had invested little in STR. It was a wonder he had managed to lift that chunk of adamas back in Hilith.

Inside, the store was surprisingly bright despite its lack of windows. What looked like magical lighting implements illuminated the shelves.

"The prices are...actually not that high," Mentai-list said, checking out a volume. "Printing technology must exist."

Wayne noticed the same thing and nodded along. Paper was fairly common, and literacy rates seemed high—evidenced by the postings on job boards at Mercenary Guilds—so books or other reading material should have been widespread and accessible. It only made sense that printing technology existed.

A gruff, irritable voice cut through the air. "Books, rare? You country yokels. Probably never even heard of *Replication Magic*. If you want the original, you gotta go to the Grand Library in the capital."

Wayne turned to see a bespectacled old man who he assumed to be the shop owner speaking to them. He'd thought he looked like a bit of a curmudgeon, like the dwarf blacksmith, but unlike the dwarf blacksmith, his words did little to counter that outward impression.

Oh boy, Gil's probably got something to say about this old grump, Wayne thought, glancing over—only to see Gil completely ignoring the exchange, already reaching for a book of his own. *Well, good for you, Gil.*

"*Replication Magic*? Of course! Why didn't I think of that! Excuse me, sir, could you tell me more about that?"

Before Wayne could even turn to see the other member of their party, he had already abandoned their original mission and thrown himself at the old man in excitement.

Well, their original mission was to kill time, so he supposed anything went.

In that case, Wayne figured he might as well do some research of his own—something where Gil had already apparently beaten him to the punch, to his mild surprise.

He wandered the shelves, studying how everything was organized. The shop was quite well structured, with books neatly arranged by subject. Since he was interested in the Cataclysm, he kept searching until he came across a section labeled *Legends and Folklore*.

"This seems like the place," he muttered, pulling a relevant-looking volume from the shelf. The title read *Discovery of the Century! There Are Not Six Cataclysms but Seven? On the Legend of the Dragon Entombed in Darkness!*

He flipped through, finding pages with large, simple text and others with crude illustrations depicting what the author believed the Six Cataclysms looked like. But the drawings were so crude that it was impossible to take them seriously—there was no way they even remotely resembled the real thing. Hoping for more illustrations, he skimmed through the rest of the book, flipping all the way to the end without finding so much as a mention of the dragon promised on the cover, let alone an artist's interpretation.

"...What did I just read?" Wayne muttered.

What a total waste of time.

Well, maybe not *total*. If nothing else, the book's existence proved that knowledge of the Cataclysms was fairly widespread.

"I guess it makes sense. Otherwise, there wouldn't have been

similar reports in Portely," Wayne mused.

"Hey! You read it, you buy it!"

Hurriedly, Wayne shoved the book back onto the shelf. *Yeesh.* Mr. Bookstore Owner was even grouchier than expected.

Then again, the guy was running a business. Letting people browse through entire books in their free time wasn't exactly profitable. There'd been a word for it—when people just stood around and read entire magazines and books in bookstores. Tachiyomi, was it? IRL bookstores didn't exist and hadn't existed for some time, so the concept was purely academic to Wayne, but it was a fun little bit of trivia.

"Find anything useful?"

It was Mentai-list. If the shop owner had time to yell at Wayne, it probably meant their conversation had wrapped up.

"Nah, you?"

"Oh, I learned something very interesting, all right."

Mentai-list had learned the specifics of *Replication Magic* from the old man. The basics were as follows:

To *Replicate* something, you needed the original item and all the materials required to create an identical copy. For books, that meant enough paper for the page count, string for binding, and any additional materials—leather for the cover, gold for gilding, and so on.

You would then target the original item with *Replicate*, consuming MP and the gathered materials in the process. However, the resulting copy wouldn't be a *perfect* duplicate—it would always be at least one rank lower in quality than the original, depending on the skill of the caster.

"The quality suffers, huh?" Wayne mused. "Wait. Is that why the lettering and sketches in that book were so terrible?"

It was...an idea that a "lesser quality book" would have worse grammar and illustrations. Sure, it technically fit the definition of "poor quality," but didn't that make copying books almost pointless if the content itself was altered?

Still, if that was how the game handled it, then it was what it was.

"Yeah. For that reason alone, *Replicate* is kind of a niche spell," Mentai-list explained. "It's just not usually worth the effort. A properly skilled crafter can cut down the time enough to make a brand-new item from scratch anyway. It's mostly used for books and not much else."

"Makes sense..." Wayne nodded along. "Anyways, I learned what I came here for. What about you? What was it you were interested in?"

"Race-rebirth items. Did you read the system message?"

Right—the survey about adding that and other items as microtransactions. Wayne had immediately voted in favor. To someone with a regular day job, having more options to solve in-game problems with real money was never a bad thing.

"What about it?" he asked.

"The system message said all cash shop items would also be obtainable in game through conventional methods. If that's the case, I wanted to get a head start on finding it."

Because if this was an existing conception in game, Wayne mused, *there should be literature on it.*

"Good idea, let's look for it. I'll help."

"Right? Get Gil too."

For the next couple of hours, the trio scoured every inch of the bookstore until the furious owner finally kicked them out. They hadn't found any direct information on how to acquire the race-rebirth item, but they did come across a few references confirming its existence. Not the most productive way to spend an afternoon, but at least they had proof that Mentai-list's theory was correct.

"Welp, guess I'm a proud owner of this crappy book now," Wayne said, looking at his brand-new copy of *Discovery of the Century!*

For all the shop owner's insistence that he *had* to buy it since he'd read the whole thing, Wayne had only skimmed the illustrations. There was still plenty left to read—so joke's on him. Hah.

Mentai-list had bought a book that contained mentions of the race-rebirth item. He'd only skimmed it as well, meaning there was still a chance he'd learn something about the item's acquisition.

Gil bought...a recipe book. You'd never guess just by looking at him, but apparently, he was quite the cook.

"I've never had a guy cook for me," Mentai-list mused aloud.

"You gotta problem? What difference does it make who makes it?" Gil shot back.

Wayne wasn't nearly as hung up on the idea. Weren't basically all the stalls they ate at run by men?

"Let's head back to the smithy, yeah?" he said. "Considering how long we spent at the bookstore, there's a good chance he'll be done by the time we get back."

Even if the dwarf *wasn't* finished, there wasn't much else to do. It was already evening, and if they had to kill more time, they might as well do so at the smithy.

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When they got back to the smithy, the dwarven smith was standing proudly next to his clerk at her desk.

The work order's all done, then, Wayne thought. It felt a bit too quick for a labor-intensive, precision job that involved shaping and working literal metal, but he assumed that the existence of crafting-related skills probably helped speed that up a fair bit.

The smith flashed them a toothy smile, then nodded with his chin toward the back room.

The trio followed the smith back into his workshop, where two sets of armor awaited them. The first was an imposing suit of gleaming plate armor. Beside it, the second set, crafted from an intricate weave of small rectangular platelets—lamellar armor. It was easy to assume that the full plate of armor was intended for Gil, and the lamellar set, Wayne.

They got to fitting right away. The suits were perfect fits, adjusted with precision by the master smith using a series of belts and buckles.

Gil's plate armor was thinner than it'd appeared. Each piece was hammered into shape to maximize structural integrity and resilience, and the aesthetics of it weren't entirely unlike fluted armor. Despite

its imposing appearance, it wasn't as heavy as it seemed—allowing the STR-and VIT-heavy Gil to wear it with ease. Its defense was on a different level entirely. The iron sword Wayne had been using couldn't even leave a scratch.

Wayne's armor, on the other hand, looked lighter than it actually was. The individual metal platelets were small, but their sheer number added up to a considerable weight. The leather components weren't exactly light either. But that just meant it was *durable*. Against slashing or piercing attacks, it could probably hold its own just as well as Gil's full plate. The key difference was that Wayne's set had intentional gaps at the armpits, crotch, knees, and elbows to allow for mobility. Those gaps would require extra awareness on his part, but as long as he stayed mindful, the powered-up Wayne should be able to dodge any precisely aimed attacks with ease.

"This is terrific," Gil said.

"Yeah," Wayne agreed.

The two stood motionless as the smith made the final adjustments of the armor on their bodies, appreciating the master work done by a master smith with master materials.

"Oy! Don't be leavin' these behind now!" the smith suddenly bellowed. He gestured with his thumb toward the armaments on the nearby workshop table.

There were two swords and a shield. The smaller one was a broadsword—a one-handed weapon, ideal for use alongside a shield, clearly meant for Gil. The other was a longsword. Agile enough to be wielded in one hand, but with a long enough grip for two-handing if one so wished, it was the kind of weapon that could be called either a longsword or bastard sword, depending on whom one asked.

Gil's shield could be described as a scutum—a convex, oblong, full-body shield. Real-life versions had been made of wood and leather; a full-metal shield would have been impossibly heavy. But in-game mercenaries and knights with high STR and VIT could wield them just fine. Just like his full plate armor, it was absurdly durable. Wayne's regular iron sword couldn't even leave a scratch.

Both Gil and Wayne were itching to try their new swords on something, but there was nothing in the workshop resembling a

suitable target.

"Guess we'll have to go monster hunting," Wayne said.

"Use this firewood!" the dwarf suggested heartily. "If ye cut it down the middle, that spares me the work of splitting it!"

Split firewood? With a sword? Yeah, no.

"No thanks, Mr. Dwarf," Gil said. "I'll leave the splitting to you. Cleaving it in half, though..."

He raised his sword into a high stance. The smith grabbed a log from his firewood pile and tossed it in a high arc.

Normally, in a contest between a sword and a solid log, one would expect the sword to act more like a club. Sure, it might cut into the wood, but the impact would just knock the log aside, killing its momentum and sending it tumbling to the ground.

Wayne kept that in mind as he watched. The log flew. Gil slashed downward, and...

Gil blinked. There hadn't been a sound. Just a faint whoosh of air. Then—a clatter.

He turned. Behind him, the log lay neatly in two pieces.

"Holy shit," he said. "I just got goose bumps."

Wayne was just as stunned. He had watched Gil fight countless times—he knew exactly what his swordsmanship was capable of. That wasn't an increase in skill. That was pure *gear difference*.

"Wayne, your turn," Gil said. He picked up one of the log halves and tossed it in an arc.

Since it was half the size of the original log, this was a considerable difficulty increase.

Wayne tracked the log, raised his sword high...and slashed!

The blade cut clean through. He had put so much force into the strike that his sword carried past the log, the tip hurtling straight toward the ground.

At the last second, he managed to stop it just before impact.

Thank God I'd leveled my STR. Else that would've been embarrassing, he thought. But this sword was dangerous. This time it was the floor, but the next time it might be his foot. That was a rookie mistake he should be far beyond at this point.

"This is... Yeah," Wayne muttered, staring at the sword that had

just sliced effortlessly through an already halved log. Not a single scratch marked its edge. *Can you say fantasy metal?* With this, he could probably cut straight through a monster—bones and all.

"Ho ho ho!" the dwarf bellowed. "Aye, that's another fine bit o' work, if I do say so meself! A pleasure and an honor to forge, that was!"

"Thanks, boss! This is some stellar equipment you've made us," Wayne said.

"You can say that again," Gil said. "We were about to outgrow our gear, but I think with this we'll be good for a *long* time."

After properly thanking the smith, it was time to decide what to do with their old gear. The dwarf offered to take Gil's as a trade-in, but Wayne wasn't even given the option. In the end, they both chose to keep their old sets. After all, they'd already discussed the danger of being caught completely gearless earlier in the day. Better safe than sorry.

Mentai-list, seeing the satisfied looks on his friends' faces, moved to wrap things up. "Looks like you two are happy. Now then, let's settle up and pay, shall we?"

"About that, I have a proposal for ye," the smith said. "With all the resources ye provided today, I was able to craft all this an' still come away with a bit extra. If ye agree to let me keep what's left, I won't charge ye a thing."

Wayne and Gil looked to Mentai-list. It was his materials, his call.

"As long as you promise to not divulge where it came from—that is, us mercenaries—you can have it," Mentai-list said. "Think that's something you can handle?"

"'Course! Not that I reckon anyone'll come askin'!" the smith replied. "Few can work the stuff. What're they gonna do, eh? Take the metal an' just stand there gawkin' at it?"

"Perfect, then I have no objections," Mentai-list replied. "But I must ask if you're sure? It feels like a crime to get craftsmanship of this level for free."

Even though both sets had only taken half a day to make, it was clear the smith hadn't cut corners. Every detail had been carefully considered, with small refinements added wherever possible. Even

with time-saving crafting skills, maintaining *both* speed and quality usually meant a steep cost.

A softer voice—the clerk's—cut through the discussion. "The master delivered on the craftsmanship of his own accord. It wouldn't feel right to charge you for work you didn't ask for, would it? Besides, considering the market price of the adamas left over, it's not much of a difference."

She'd peeked into the workshop to offer her two cents. She must have handled the bookkeeping—and overheard their conversation through the ajar door.

"In that case, we gladly accept," Mentai-list said.

And with that, Wayne's and Gil's gear upgrade was complete. It would probably take some time before they truly felt like they were wearing their gear rather than the other way around, but the only solution for that was *practice*, *practice*, *practice*.

There also remained the matter of settling their debt to Mentai-list. Wayne hadn't given it much thought before, but after what the clerk had said about the value of the leftover adamas, paying off his set would take ages—let alone Gil's.

"I'd say don't worry about it," Mentai-list said. "Back in the capital, I'd already made up my mind: This was the crew I was going to run with. What I did, I did for the party. I guess, if it really bothers you *that* much, you can pay me back in the form of more boss drops."

"Sounds like a promise," Wayne said. "Okay. Our gear's set, EXP's farmed—it's time to strike back at Hilith. I was thinking we first head to this town called Ellental to cut our teeth. One of the Cataclysm's minions overran that town, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah, I heard there are zombies and red skeletons there," Gil said. "And these like, huge stag beetles."

"It's far. Farther than the map would suggest," Mentai-list said. "To reach Ellental from Wels, we'd have to go around the entire highland. Not complaining, just stating the facts."

Wayne, Gil, and Mentai-list had just about hit their limit on what they could farm and accomplish here. The journey toward Old Hilith would serve as both a test for their new equipment and a way to

rack up more EXP. And if the rumored teleportation service was implemented before they arrived, they could simply use it to jump straight to their destination.

Thus, the intrepid trio set their sights on conquering the former Hilith capital.

Chapter 2: To Walk the Path Less Traveled

Leah cast *Summon Summoner* on Hakuma to travel quickly to the great volcano.

<It is great to see you again, boss,> the great wolf said telepathically.

Hakuma and Ginka had been ordered to wait near the volcano, but as Leah looked around, all she saw was dense forest. Aside from the unusually warm air, nothing about this place suggested a volcano was nearby.

"Gosh, it's sweltering here. Not too hot for one of your kind, is it, Hakuma?" Leah asked in concern. Without waiting for a reply, she cast *Summon* and summoned forth Kelli and the rest of the Mountain Cats.

Hakuma chuckled, shaking his head. His *Rebirth* into Skoll seemed to have come with a trait that granted high resistance to heat. It was only fitting. According to legend, Skoll was the mythical wolf that chased the sun. Interestingly, Ginka seemed to have gotten the same trait after her *Rebirth* into Hati. The game's lore seemed to interpret Hati not as the wolf that chased the moon, but as the one that ran ahead of the sun. That left room for the existence of a Mánagarmr or some other entity that actually pursued the moon.

How was Leah so knowledgeable about Norse mythology? If you asked her, it was because she was a young person without many friends, and that was exactly the kind of thing young people without many friends tended to get into.

"Now then, let's get going, shall we?" Leah said. "Though, I realize as I say that that I have no idea *where* we're going."

"Are you sure you don't need Mister Plates, boss?" Kelli asked.

"Should be fine," Leah replied. "I need him back at the capital

pretending to be the Cataclysm, Phase One. I have all of you here protecting me. That should be enough, right Kelli?"

Kelli nodded solemnly, though her ears twitched and tail wiggled in an obvious display of glee. It was very cute, but...Leah's wings didn't do the same thing, did they?

Better they keep an eye on that in the future, she thought. *Sorry, Kelli, but your mistake is my gain.*

<Boss, the volcano in question is that way.> Ginka nudged her snout in a particular direction. Leah looked but saw nothing but more trees. Still, Ginka's word was good enough for her. The squad moved out.

As they trekked, Ginka led the way, followed by Kelli and Riley. Leah stayed in the middle, with Lemmy and Marion behind her, and Hakuma bringing up the rear.

The forest was dense. At first, Leah thought about how lucky they were to be traveling through the only open stretch wide enough to accommodate the wolves. But upon closer inspection, the fallen trees and crushed foliage were fresh. This wasn't a natural path. The wolves had just carved it out for themselves, just like they had in Lieb.

<A few monsters dared to challenge us,> Hakuma said. <We drove them back—back to their den—and devoured their leader. Look there. That side path leads to their lair.>

Leah followed his gaze. A narrower, less-trodden path snaked off into the distance.

"Our original objective was to assert our claim over the volcano and the surrounding region," Leah said. "If you've already eliminated their boss, doesn't that mean our mission is already complete?"

<I don't think so,> Hakuma replied. <For the monsters in question were undead—remnants, I believe, of that 'event,' or so you called it.>

Leah blinked. *You ate undead...?* Was that...okay? They weren't going to get sick or anything, right?

But dogs in real life liked to gnaw on bones. If the undead in question were skeletons, maybe it was fine? Probably?

"Hmm." She pondered a different thought that occurred to her.

"That means the original denizens of this forest didn't come into conflict with the newly risen undead."

A similar thing had happened in Trae Forest. The elder camphor treant hadn't fought Sieg. That had been likely due to their antipodal active hours and the near-hopeless matchup between them. Maybe something similar was happening here.

"But speculation'll get us nowhere. Let's get eyes on," Leah said. "We'll keep heading toward the volcano for now. But do we even know that's where the original boss is?"

<I attempted to scout the volcano, but was unable to get very close,> Hakuma said.

<Because *I* stopped him,> Ginka added—a little smugly, or so Leah thought. <I told him it would ruin our boss's mood if we did anything without her permission.>

Leah doubted she was *that* petty, that something as minor as an unsanctioned scouting mission would *ruin* her mood, but...clearly Ginka was looking for praise. Her snout was raised high, nostrils flaring expectantly.

Leah obliged, reaching up to scratch her chin. If the area boss wasn't in the forest, then logically, it had to be in or around the volcano. The plan didn't need to change—they would continue their march.

But as she thought more about it, she was clinging to the idea that every monster zone had an area boss like it was an established fact, when in reality, that wasn't necessarily true. Sure, her experiences in the Great Woods of Lieb and Trae Forest anecdotally supported the theory, as did Blanc's experiences in the highlands of Avon Mercato (though that count seemed quite an exception, power-wise), but that was just a sample size of three, hardly enough to call it a rule.

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At last, the trees began to thin, and a volcano came into view. If it'd been sweltering before, now it was positively boiling. Earlier, Marion had taken it upon herself to lower the temperature of the

surrounding air. Had she not, the entire party would've been drenched in sweat.

"All right, well. We said the boss was gonna be here." Leah cast her eyes up at the barren, rocky peak. "So where is it?"

There wasn't a trace of vegetation, let alone anything alive. Just scattered boulders littering the mountainside.

They adjusted their formation, letting Kelli and the Mountain Cats take the lead as they began their ascent.

It was slow going. The jagged boulders and sheer cliffs made a direct climb impossible. They had to zigzag across the terrain, sometimes moving horizontally for long stretches before finding a new path upward. But despite the rough landscape, it wasn't tiring. With the magic of high physical stats, scrambling over unstable rock and steep slopes might as well have been a leisurely walk through a park.

Leah suddenly remembered something and opened up Hakuma's and Ginka's skill panels. Back when she'd *Rebirthed* them, she hadn't been able to thoroughly check their skills for a lack of time, but given the legends behind Hati and Skoll, there should have been a—Ah. There it was.

Skyrunning. A skill that enabled flight.

It was a distinct skill from *Flight*, which intrigued Leah. *Flight* was a form of magical flight that enabled the user to move freely in the air, even without the use of wings. But *Skyrunning*, if the skill description was anything to go by, allowed one to *run* through or on the air. The only way that distinction made sense to Leah was if *Skyrunning* required some physical aspect to function—like legs or footing. Maybe it even allowed the user to generate footing in midair.

That was probably it, wasn't it? Creating footing in midair. Because now that Leah thought about it, if she tried to attack while flying, she *couldn't*—not properly, anyway. She had no stable footing, so any motion that required leverage would just send her twisting off-balance.

This was something to keep in mind for any future flight-capable minions. Other players would inevitably figure out ways to enable flight for themselves, and with known aerial enemies like angels

already in play, being adept at aerial combat might become crucial one day.

Boop. Acquired.

<Boss! This is incredible!> Hakuma said.

<Pushing off from nothing but air will take some getting used to, but this is truly a wonderful ability,> Ginka added.

"I'm glad you two like it," Leah said. Skoll and Hati were the mythical wolves who chased and led the sun. It would've been an affront to their namesakes if they couldn't fly.

Their initial clumsiness must have just been from surprise, though, because almost immediately, they adjusted, prancing effortlessly through the sky. Those animal instincts sure were something.

To accommodate the addition of their new airborne units, the group adjusted their formation again. Leah could already fly, so she stayed on her own. Ginka took point in front of her, carrying Kelli and Riley. Hakuma took up the rear, carrying Lemmy and Marion. Now, they could scout from the air.

Hati, she who leads. Skoll, he who chases.

They flanked Leah perfectly, sandwiching her between them. Whether it was coincidence or some subconscious-rooted awareness of their legendary namesakes was unclear, but...didn't that mean, on some level, they saw Leah as the sun?





“I don’t see anything, boss,” Riley said, her eyesight as sharp as ever. “Nothing but rocks down there.”

This jarred Leah from her self-aggrandizing daydreams. “Could be a type of monster undetectable from above,” she said. “Though why any being would feel the need to camouflage themselves from aerial threats when clearly none exist is a bit of a hole in that theory.”

Then again, this was a world of sword and sorcery. Who was Leah to apply her real-life isms here?

“Let’s descend to the ground every now and then and scout on foot,” she said. “It’s a pain, but it beats climbing the entire way.”

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“Welp. There really is nothing here.”

A fair bit of exploring later, they hadn’t found anything that so much as moved. They still hadn’t checked the volcano’s mouth, but the intense heat and toxic gases made approaching impossible. If they wanted to explore it, they’d need some combination of skills that offered extreme resistance to heat and being able to live *without* breathing.

“That’s not a problem we’re going to be able to solve right this moment,” Leah said.

Assuming they even had the right skills on hand, what sort of creatures could survive in such an inhospitable environment? If they could shrug off living inside the mouth of a volcano, would they not be able to shrug off any of Leah’s group’s physical or magical attacks no problem?

Leah ordered the group to land for now. They needed to decide whether to continue forward or retreat. She picked a landing spot almost at random, choosing the first sizable rocky outcropping that caught her eye first. It was a fairly large one they’d been forced to go around earlier when they were still climbing on foot.

“So. Do we continue our search? Is there still any merit to it?” Leah asked.

“Unsure,” Kelli replied. “Marion, Hakuma, and Ginka are magically modulating the surrounding air temperature, which is continuously

draining their MP. If they stop, the group's LP will likely start to drain instead. To mitigate this, we should limit our time on the mountain."

Kelli was absolutely correct. Leah didn't think the mountain would be this hot. She had gravely underestimated the level of danger. In fact, she was starting to wonder if she had been underestimating the level of danger of the entire continent. That was something worth reconsidering.

This might've been the starter continent, but that didn't mean there weren't some more mid-to end-game zones sprinkled around for players looking for a challenge. The forest surrounding the volcano might've been par for the course, but the volcano itself could've been something like a high-risk subzone.

"It might be a smarter idea to come back after the official dungeon system has been implemented and we've farmed some more EXP," Leah mumbled to herself.

Despite being a member of a race powerful enough to be considered a Cataclysm, Leah couldn't help but think she was still quite far from living up to her namesake. Considering what Blanc's vampire count had said, and how the artifact had rendered her completely helpless, she was still probably much more like an infant than a true force of destruction.

"Okay. Then let's stop here for—"

"Boss! Something's coming!"

Lemmy's sudden shout cut through the air—the first time she had spoken all day. At the same time, Hakuma and Ginka stiffened. That specific combination of individuals reacting could only mean the incoming threat had revealed itself through...

"Sound?"

Leah had barely reached that conclusion when she heard it too: a thunderous, impossibly low rumble. Not just a noise, but a *force* that seemed to shake the very ground beneath her.

"Or not! The ground's shaking?!" she exclaimed.

The outcropping they stood on shook violently. And Leah noticed, for what seemed like the first time, a faint trace of magic, seemingly bubbling up from the very ground itself.

And it was growing stronger.

"Shit. This isn't rock!" Leah shouted, launching herself into the sky.

The Mountain Cats scrambled onto Hakuma and Ginka, and the wolves wasted no time taking off, lifting them all to safety.

From above, they watched as the magical energy surrounding the "outcropping" condensed, solidified...

And then, stood up.

"A giant?" Leah said, then shook her head. "No, a golem! Our very first encounter."

Of course. The only beings resilient enough to call this harsh locale home would *literally* have to have been made of rock—if they could even be called beings at all.

As the massive golem fully came to life, it did *something*, and all across the mountainside, the scattered "boulders" began to stir.

It had summoned its kin.

Not every boulder had stirred, but enough to make it a problem.

"Hakuma and Ginka can't engage in melee combat like this," Leah muttered.

Not with such important cargo on their backs. If they'd planned for cavalry-style fighting from the start, that might've been different—but right now, they had neither the equipment nor the skills for it. For now, they should be safe in the air. But that also meant their only viable attack strategy was magical bombardment.

"I guess we could call in Airborne Troopers and Artillerists in to flatten the mountainside, but... No, getting that set up here in the middle of all this would be a nightmare."

Rock. What magic was strong against rock?

Wasn't the unlock for *Earth Resistance* in the *Ice Magic* tree?

"And the ants back in the cave had been weak to ice as well. Ants seem like a fairly earth-aligned species. Let's give it a shot."

"Then it sounds like I'm up," Marion said.

From Hakuma's back, she unleashed a barrage of ice upon the mountainside. It appeared to be an AoE spell, but the kind that targeted each enemy within its radius individually.

As she waited for the spell to come off cooldown, she observed its effects, which were...more effective than anticipated. While the

massive golem, perhaps due to its sheer size, seemed to shrug off most of the damage, the smaller golems (relatively speaking, since they still towered over an average human) fared far worse. It didn't make too much sense that ice was somehow harder than literal rock, but when a chunk of ice hit a golem, it sheared off whatever part it hit clean off.

Satisfied with the results, Marion recast the spell the moment it came off cooldown, hammering the golems with relentless waves of ice. Hakuma and Ginka fired off similar spells in between, ensuring the icy onslaught never let up.

At this pace, the smaller golems wouldn't last much longer.

This...almost feels kind of unfair, Leah thought.

But no sooner had the thought crossed her mind did a huge boulder rip through the air.

"I just had to go and jinx it," Leah yelled. "Pause the attack! Disperse!"

The massive golem grabbed another large boulder, and whipped it skyward at terrifying speed. Whoever got hit by one of those would definitely be finding themselves with a one-way ticket to the ground.

"Antiair, eh?" Leah mused. "Oh, yeah. Now you're definitely some kinda area boss."

She could hardly imagine the average player standing any chance against this hulking colossus. At the very least, this was a raid-level threat. Hakuma and Ginka leaped farther up into the sky to avoid the incoming boulders, but Leah didn't budge.

She had yet to experience a proper aerial battle. Yes, the golem was technically earthbound, but with its antiair attacks and sheer size, it might as well have been an aerial opponent. Leah needed to prepare for the eventual raid group that would come to take her down. And to do that—she needed solo combat experience.

"Everyone, deal with the lesser golems," Leah commanded. "I'll take on the big one myself."

"Boss..." Kelli said.

"I'll be fine. I haven't done much of anything today—I've still got all my tricks up my sleeve. And if things really go south, I have

Castling. Don't worry, I won't die."

It was important to keep a reserve of EXP as insurance in case of death, yes. But what was more important was having insurance against dying in the first place. *Castling* was that insurance—that was its original purpose.

Leah had already preselected Ominous as the swap target, meaning she could activate it instantly. If she ever found herself about to take a kill shot, she'd trigger *Castling*, and Ominous would immediately take her place—taking the hit in her stead.

She felt bad for the poor owl, but there was no one else available to take on the role. Ominous was the only one free, so to speak.

"First off, a little bit of *Ice Magic*—" Another boulder streaked toward her. She dodged it by a hair, but then the boulder sprouted arms and legs. Leah twisted midair, narrowly avoiding the sudden attack. "Holy crap, that was close!"

She looked down. The massive golem was still picking up boulders by its feet and flinging them upward, but now it seemed that every so often, one of those boulders turned out to be a golem. Now that was an uptick in difficulty.

"It's not doing it on purpose, is it?" Leah muttered. "It better not be."

She peppered it with a few random ice spells as she thought up a battle plan.

"*Feather Gatling*."

A barrage of razor-sharp feathers shot out, piercing the massive golem and leaving countless tiny holes across its surface. It didn't so much as flinch, suggesting it didn't feel pain. But the damage did seem to affect its movement. Each successive boulder toss was slightly more off target than the last. But after just a few more tosses, the holes started to seal back up—the golem's natural LP regeneration seemed to have kicked in.

"Forget complex mechanics, huge size and high LP are enough to make a boss annoying enough already. I don't want to find your weak spot, just let me whittle down your LP bar in peace..."

Was there anything more frustrating than a raid boss that regenerated a percentage of its LP over time? Yeah, yeah, players

had natural regen too but come on, in this case, it wasn't fair!

Maybe she could take down the golem with just *Feather Gatling*, but who knew how long that would take? Also, *Feather Gatling* was a spell with an LP cost. She didn't exactly want to be known as the Queen of Destruction who cheesed an earthbound boss by flying, spamming attacks, *and* chugging LP pots.

Leah locked onto her target with *Evil Eye*, then cast *Dark Implosion*. Its function of swallowing everything in its radius and crushing it into the shadow realm made it one of the most potent spells in Leah's arsenal. Despite its high MP cost and cooldown, she'd used it to great effect in the capital. Nary a soul had been able to escape its destructive power.

Until...now? That was?

The spell didn't go off. Everything happened as normal; her MP was even consumed, but just...nothing happened. It felt like some requirement of the spell hadn't been met, causing it to be a dud.

Don't tell me...because Dark Implosion is an AoE spell that swallows everything in its radius, if there's something bigger than the spell's radius, it just doesn't go off?

Like not even a limb imploded or anything? It just...doesn't work at all?

"Well, that sucks."

In that case, it was back to the original plan of death by a thousand cuts. Though maybe with something closer to *Ice Magic* than just *Feather Gatling*.

Leah cast the advanced ice AoE skills *Snowstorm* and *Cold Snap*, then followed up with *Downburst*, a hybrid ice and wind skill unlocked only after obtaining the top-tier AoE spells from both trees.

The frigid onslaught slammed into the massive golem.

And it worked.

Like, really, *really* worked, better than any spell that had been thrown at it so far. The AoE spells were positively tearing through the golem, but why would that... *Ah!*

"Because of its massive size and subsequent huge LP pool, AoE skills must be able to deal more than one instance of damage to it!"

So that was the downside to being huge. As Leah waited for her

spell cooldowns, she kept casting *Feather Gatling* in between to offset the golem's LP regeneration. Meanwhile, she thought.

It only made sense for a massive enemy to have this weakness—otherwise, how would a normal humanoid-sized opponent ever do meaningful damage?

"But the golem doesn't have a face. That makes it hard to tell how low its LP is."

In this game, an enemy's LP wasn't conveniently displayed anywhere. Usually, one had to judge by expression. If they looked hurt, they usually were hurt.

But just because LP wasn't displayed by default, that didn't mean it couldn't be displayed ever. There might very well have been a skill out there that allowed someone to visually interpret damage and remaining LP. If there was one, though—Leah didn't even know how to begin obtaining it.

After several rounds of damage, the massive golem's movements began to slow. But whether this was due to the accumulated damage it had taken or the chilling debuffs from all the ice spells, Leah couldn't be sure.

"Either way, you are one tanky boy. With all the AoE hitting you, you should have taken quite the amount of damage by now."

But aside from its massive LP pool, this boss didn't seem to have much else going for it. With its weakness exposed, the fight boiled down to spam spells, dodge boulders, and—importantly, if a bit forgettably—keep peppering it with smaller spells between the big ones to counteract its regeneration.

Of course, it had to be said that this all seemed easy because Leah could stay in the air, limiting the golem's attack options to just hurling boulders. It was hard to imagine a ground assault going nearly as well. With an enemy of that size, even dodging a footstep would be an ordeal. It was important to remember that its movements only appeared sluggish due to the distance. In reality, it was far faster than it seemed. At close range, with a limb that massive moving at that speed, it'd be like trying to dodge a freight train.

If a ground assault were the only option, one would likely have to

cheese the boss somehow—maybe forcing it into a similar state where it couldn't really fight back and then just whaling on it.

Or you could just really out-level or out-gear it, I guess.

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Finally, after what felt like an unreasonably long time, the massive golem was brought to its knees.

"I would've liked to test whether other elements of magic worked just as well on it," Leah said. "But, eh, one unknown at a time. Already couldn't tell how much LP it had left. At least we know ice works."

The golem still wasn't dead. But maybe that wasn't the right wording for something that couldn't be deemed alive in the first place—the golem's LP hadn't yet hit zero. Even though it could no longer stand, there was still strength in its limbs; it strained as if trying to force itself back upright.

"Looks like someone's ready to bend the knee. Now, cease your futile resistance and join me. *Retainer.*"

Leah skipped the usual sequence of *Enchantment* spells; they wouldn't work on a golem without first implanting a soul from *Soul Bind*. She'd thought about doing just that, so she could use *Dominate* and *Charm*, but ultimately decided against it, so she could use this battle as a chance to purely test her combat abilities. After all, she'd already thoroughly experimented with *Enchantment* spells.

What she needed now was experience with her offensive arsenal. There was always the chance she'd face an enemy resistant to *Enchantment* one day, and she wanted an ace up her sleeve for when that happened. Now, she had one. But as she gained more EXP and powered herself further, she aimed to have two, maybe even three.

She felt a faint trace of resistance from the golem, but with *Horns* amplifying it, *Retainer* easily broke through. Still, the fact that it could push back even in this battered state was telling. If the golem had been in better condition, *Retainer* might have been resisted entirely. Its MND was clearly nothing to scoff at.

"Let's see, you are a...elder rock golem. I'll take that to assume the smaller ones are just rock golems, then."

It didn't seem like there was any retainership going on between the elder golem and the smaller ones; when the elder one came under her control, there was no feeling of the smaller ones coming with. Then when she checked its skill panel, sure enough, it didn't even possess *Retainer*. Not a huge loss, considering more than half of the smaller rock golems had the golem knocked out of their name by Hakuma and co.

Leah thought she'd seen a post online about golems dropping loot rather than corpses, but...unless the loot in question was rocks, they seemed an awful like corpses. So...who was wrong here?

"The 'elder' in your name implies that you got this big through age," Leah said, staring at the massive golem. "You're like big, rocky, marimo balls, aren'tcha?"

Or a stalactite or a coral reef or anything else that just gets bigger the longer they're left alone.

"I wonder what you can *Rebirth* into. The condition for the elder camphor treant to be *Rebirthed* into a World Tree was being tamed by an elf. I wonder what it is for you... A dwarf, maybe?"

She could always try brute-forcing the *Rebirth* with a philo stone, but she wasn't exactly liquid enough for another 5,000 EXP expenditure right this moment.

"My list of expenses just keeps getting longer. Which I could say the same for my list of EXP sources."

There were still players who assaulted the Old Hilith Capital and Rokillean, but it wasn't an everyday occurrence. The EXP probably wouldn't start rolling in until the teleportation service was implemented, or the P2W quick Safe Area was added to the game.

"Well, no need to bore you with the details. For now, just stay here and hang out like you've been doing all this time. Now, I'd like you to place the smaller golems under your command, but— What's that? You refuse to fight your own kind unless absolutely necessary? All right, never mind, then. Just leave them be."

What a gentle, peace-loving race of rocks. They didn't need to hunt other creatures for sustenance, nor did they seem to have any

innate drive for conflict. They grew larger and stronger simply by existing. So what need was there to fight? Since their primary activity between getting disturbed seemed to be pretending to be boulders, it was logical to assume their existence was predicated on attacking players who wandered too close to the mountain.

Now, might this be the end of Leah's volcano expedition? Since there were still plenty of—not hostile, but unfriendly nonetheless—monsters left nearby, full subjugation of the zone wasn't quite achieved, but with the big guy now under her control, she could probably call it mission complete for now.

"Okay, let's head back to base. Until the results of the latest dev survey come in, we'll focus on strengthening our strongholds. That means the Old Hilith Capital, Rokillean, Trae, and Lieb. We'll leave each area under the control of a single boss and let them handle the rest."

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Leah went to the Great Woods of Lieb and dropped off Hakuma and Ginka. The forest, and its monster ranch, was currently under the command of a queen vespoid, one who had been assigned to replace Sugaru after her *Rebirth*. The wolf cubs had been assisting with the ranches in a role not unlike shepherd dogs. Having outgrown their most rebellious phase, they were finally starting to contribute—an encouraging phase of growth that most pleased Leah. The forest also housed a few queen beetles and queen arachnia. These fledgling monarchs-in-training were busy spawning eggs and assisting in forest management, gaining experience before they were dispatched elsewhere.

The same thing was going on in Trae. A few other queen-level entities were being trained up there. Considering the size of both forests and their original intended difficulty, both had firepower in excess, so to speak.

"Beetles are more heat resistant than ants," Leah mused. "If not the volcano, they can manage the surrounding forest. Suppose I'll send over a queen beetle from Lieb."

Leah picked a queen who'd trained up sufficiently and sent it to the unnamed jungle surrounding the volcano. (Unnamed for now, but maybe that just meant she could claim the privilege of naming it?) She ordered it to set up a nest there and start spawning and managing the forest.

Next, she went to Rokillean to get an update from Sugaru.

<The renovations are progressing smoothly,> Sugaru said.

Indeed, Rokillean no longer looked like the hill of rubble Leah had left it as. Plant growth had softened the ruins, transforming the area into a bona fide fantasy forest. Every now and then, a giant insect would buzz by overhead. They didn't look like beetles or ants or spiders; Leah wondered what they were.

<That is a megathairos,> Sugaru said. <There are no queens of their kind. They must be spawned directly by me. Thus, they are costly units, but consequently, very powerful.>

Leah could only describe the creature as the head and wings of a dobsonfly attached to the body of a centipede. If its name was anything to go by, it was likely inspired by the ancient insect Mazothairos, though it was clear the devs had taken some creative liberties.

"Rokillean should be good on queens, right?" Leah asked.

<We have a full set,> Sugaru confirmed. <Enough for our purposes, and then some. The same goes for the treants, who have bolstered their numbers as much as possible. Airborne troopers are transporting rodent-type monsters from Lieb to serve as food for the insect-types. We've already succeeded in breeding them. The rodents feed on fruits produced by the treants, which are generated by consuming LP, so we are fully self-sufficient.>

Then it seemed like Rokillean was running smoothly and didn't need Sugaru any longer. So Leah took her and flew to the Old Hilith Capital.

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"Just so we're clear, I didn't *want* to make the capital my base. But considering the incoming dungeon system and my holdings as a

whole, the capital's really the only choice."

Can you smell the pretense in Leah's statement?

Of course, the main reason she'd decided to make the capital her base was because she saw Blanc's manor and Lyla's castle and got jealous.

Though, yes, her strategic reasoning was sound. Out of all her territories, the capital was guaranteed to attract the most player interest. Considering what happened during the fall of Hilith, the ruined capital became somewhat of a symbol of the Seventh Cataclysm. Conquering that meant conquering the Cataclysm.

Rokillean, too, was likely to see its fair share of action, serving as a potential stepping stone to the capital. But with its three queens overseeing its defense, it hardly felt like one. Three queens gave Rokillean a higher overall combat potential than Lieb. Not to mention the majority of trees that made up its forest were treants.

"I wanted to plant treants all around the capital too, but considering the terrible compatibility between them and undead, I think I'll pass."

Setting up something similar to Trae where undead walked the woods at night and treants during the day was possible, but that felt rather heartless toward the treants. Just because they slept through the night didn't mean they couldn't feel the miasma from the undead seeping into their trunks.

"I want to be a bad guy, but I don't want to be a *bad guy*. Just gonna do the same thing in Ellental and have the insects pick up the slack during the day."

<Then I shall spawn a few more queens,> Sugaru said.

"Please," Leah said. "Ugh. You really can't have enough EXP."

Queen-class insects consumed EXP to spawn, making them costly investments.

Leah had wanted to spend some EXP on herself too...

"Oh, well. Add it to the list."

She flew to her throne and sat down. Something felt...*off*. The throne seemed strangely higher than before—not to mention much more comfortable. Looking down, she realized why. She wasn't sitting on the throne at all. She was sitting on Mister Plates's lap.

Apparently, he'd been doing a fine job as her standin, occupying the throne the entire time. Now, Mister Plates wasn't exactly living, so he could go for long periods of time motionless, and seemingly had no problem doing so.

"In that case..." Leah took out a piece of monster-hide large enough to be a rug from her inventory and placed it over Mister Plates' lap.

Now this was a throne worthy of Leah's butt.

"Now then, let's figure out how this whole oracle thing works, shall we?"

Finally, Leah had time to do what she did best—theorycraft.

She pulled up the Oral patriarch's skill panel as she thought. Distance wasn't a factor when it came to leveling up the skills of her retinue; all she needed to do was scroll through the mental list of windows and open the correct panel.

Despite her brief interrogation back in Oral, the patriarch hadn't been able to confirm which specific skill delivered the divine message. That either meant *Oracle* wasn't the name of the skill—or that it had been the first time the patriarch had ever received such a message.

An interesting-looking skill tree caught Leah's attention: *Mysticism.*

Expanding it, she saw the first skill in the tree was one called *Anthropism*. Its effect read: *You gain the ability to intercept faint echoes of global announcements.*

That certainly seemed like the one. However, the operative phrase in the skill description seemed to be "faint echoes." Did that mean not all the information made it through? There had to be some determining factor for what could be heard and what couldn't. And if anything could modify that determination, it would be the next skill in the tree: *Veritism*.

This skill didn't have a direct effect on its own but acted as a complement to others, similar to how *Soul Bind* was useless by itself but essential when paired with other skills. Its description was simple: *The echoes are clearer: You are able to interpret more information gained from Mysticism.*

That was where the patriarch's investment in the *Mysticism* tree ended—just *Anthropism* and *Veritism*. Both skills focused on hearing certain global announcements, but they offered no explanation of how those announcements were interpreted. In other words, how Leah's existence had been immediately decried as a Cataclysm.

"Maybe there isn't a skill that parses that," Leah mused. "Maybe the births of all Disaster-class entities are broadcast equally, but the enemy of humanity determination is made subjectively?"

The discrepancy between humanity's treatment of the Fey King and the Archangel came to mind.

When the Fey King had been born, it'd been likely that contemporary religious figures had heard the world announcement. As he rose to power and ruled the continent, people would have realized that he was the entity referenced. Under his long reign, civilization thrived, and it likely had come to be known that a "Fey King" wasn't a threat.

The Archangel—if the information Leah had heard from Blanc, who had heard it from the count could be trusted—then rose around the end of the Fey King's reign. Online, the popular theory was that the Archangel and the Fey King were of similar alignment.

Two beings of similar alignment, so any global announcements for the Fey King and the Archangel should have been similar, if not identical. And Leah was betting on identical; what little she knew about these announcements was that they didn't specify exact races. No NPC had ever referred to her explicitly as a Queen of Destruction.

So *why*—if another "Fey King"-type entity had emerged in the Archangel, why had it, that time, been labeled a Cataclysm? It seemed that if these announcements were the same, the civilized races certainly knew they weren't to be treated the same.

Leah had been classified as an enemy of humanity immediately. Not just immediately, but globally—posts from players in every kingdom had revealed that all kingdoms had independently, and seemingly without any discussion, reached the same conclusion.

"Seems like I've got no choice but to ask how these announcements are worded exactly."

Leah had thought she'd just need the skill descriptions and that

would be enough, but it seemed like she'd need the pawn she pawned off to Lyla once more.

After checking with Lyla that the patriarch was not presently occupied, Leah summoned him to Old Hilith.

This kind of follow-up visit should've been unnecessary as Leah should've gotten the answers to all her questions when she'd tamed him, but that day had been the first day back in the game after a long absence; there'd been too much to do, too many people to see.

"I hear and obey, master," the patriarch said. "You seek the truth of the divine revelation. So be it. I recall it with clarity, for it was the first I ever heard:

"*An unorthodox raid boss has emerged in the Great Forest of Lieb in Hilith.*

"Such were the words. The other bishops heard it as well, though not all the same. It seems the divine voice speaks differently to each of us, offering only pieces of the whole."

Unorthodox... In that case, if the message when the Fey King had been born read something like "An *orthodox* raid boss had been born," and that phrasing had been recorded and passed down through generations, then it made sense why Leah's birth triggered immediate and global suspicion.

"You are the patriarch of the Oralian Church," Leah said. "If anyone were in a position to declare this 'unorthodox raid boss' an enemy of humanity, it would've been you. So tell me—why did you?"

"Mercy! Please mercy, oh dark master!"

"Uh, no, it's all right. Just answer the question."

"The sacred texts speak of beings known as 'raid bosses.' Like man, they are said to possess the capacity for both good and evil. Yet, unlike us, they wield immense power. If good, they are benevolent leaders, guiding and protecting us. If evil, they bring only calamity and ruin.

"This was my first time interpreting a revelation. It was a grave task, indeed—was this 'raid boss' a beacon or a blight? I had to know. If it were a blight, even acknowledging its existence could doom us all.

"I had to tread carefully. But then came a detail granted only to

me: the word ‘unorthodox.’ None of the other bishops heard it in their revelation. I believed it to be a product of my *Veritism* skill, a gift earned through my ascetic devotion. I thought this single word held the answer I sought. Oh, how wrong I was.”

Huh.

That was all it took—a single word to seal Leah’s fate. It hardly seemed fair for Leah to be branded a target of extermination before she’d even made her intentions known. But then again, this wasn’t a modern society governed by rule of law. The guiding principle that had enabled civilization’s survival thus far wasn’t “innocent until proven guilty,” but “eliminate what is different.”

That aside, though, it explained a lot. The *Oracle* skill wasn’t faction-or alignment-specific—it was just a skill. How the message was interpreted by the receiver mattered a great deal.

But what was up with that wording, *unorthodox*? Was this some weird anthropocentric bias where the side aligned with civilization was considered “orthodox” and the monster side “unorthodox”?

“I guess that makes sense... But my gut says there’s more to it.”

Not to get too ethical, but what *really* separated a human from a goblin? Leah thought it felt deeply wrong for the devs to create this living, breathing world, one where you could play how you wanted—with or against society—and then arbitrarily label one race as “good” and another as “bad.” How unfair was that for NPCs who didn’t even get to *choose* the race they were born into?

Now, for *Rebirth*, maybe you could argue that a good-or-bad distinction applies because being reborn involved actual individual agency. In order to be reborn, one had to perform specific actions and meet specific conditions, putting one on the right track to—

Hmm?

“The right track? The *orthodox* track?”

Leah turned her thoughts to all the global announcements she’d heard thus far. Since she didn’t have the relevant skill, every announcement she’d heard had been directly tied to her or her retinue.

When she’d first been given the option to *Rebirth*, the game message had read, *“Special conditions for* [Rebirth] *met.”* Then,

upon completing the *Rebirth*, she had been labeled a "Harbinger-class" entity. That exact moment had triggered the global announcement, the exact wording of which the patriarch had confirmed to be, *"An unorthodox raid boss has emerged."*

Next was Diaz and Sieg's *Rebirth*. The system message had only said. "Your retinue have met the *conditions* for *Rebirth*." No "special" that time. Though the condition for their *Rebirth* had been heightened emotions, which was already quite strange to begin with. It was possible that Diaz and Sieg were already special as undead who felt emotion. Upon their transformation, they, too, were labeled "Harbinger-class" entities.

Though, Leah mused, what else would undead kings *be* if not harbingers of destruction?

But the interesting one was Sugaru's *Rebirth* into a queen asrapada. That transformation had been wrought by a greater philo Stone and EXP. That'd been it—no special, no conditions, no nothing. If orthodox meant what Leah thought it meant, this was as orthodox as *Rebirths* could get.

Surely enough, that time, the system message had read *not* "Harbinger-class," but simply "Disaster-class."

"Then, can I take that to mean 'orthodox' as 'vanilla' *Rebirths*, while anything else is 'unorthodox'?"

That interpretation felt more accurate to Leah. If orthodox and unorthodox were being used to describe normal and abnormal processes—rather than moral judgments—it made a lot more sense. And it also explained how anyone could potentially walk the path of unorthodoxy if they so chose.

"Would that mean if Sugaru's *Rebirth* announcement had actually gone out, it would've said, 'an orthodox raid boss has emerged'?"

This was an idea worth testing, and one she would soon get the chance to when Lyla used her philo stone.

Another takeaway from this was that Leah's initial assumption about there being some physical divide between the civilized races, monster races, and neutral entities had been incorrect.

"And if it's one-skill-fits-all for divine revelation, then I'm already set."

The patriarch was already under her control and could be counted on to be her ear.

It was just unfortunate she couldn't find out how to unlock the skill for herself. The bishops and patriarch had all claimed they had gained it through ascetic devotion, which as far as Leah knew, meant absolutely nothing.

"Ah, speaking of you, patriarch. I shall teach you something in return for your assistance."

Leah proceeded to teach the patriarch how to access friend chat and his inventory.

His eyes practically popped out of his sockets, and he immediately tried to prostrate himself again before Leah stopped him. After giving him a firm warning to keep this knowledge confidential (and sprinkling a little more INT and MND on him for good measure), she sent him back to Lyla.

But not before adding one final warning to never let anyone see him using friend chat.

Taking her place back on Mister Plates' lap, Leah mulled over this new information. Specifically, how it pertained to her ascension to Queen of Destruction.

She'd gone straight from high elf to Queen of Destruction using the greater philo stone, skipping dark elf and dark fey entirely. If the stone bumped one up two tiers, that meant dark elf and high elf were on the same tier, dark fey was one tier higher, and Queen of Destruction was another tier above that. The "special condition" that had enabled this unorthodox *Rebirth* had been the one to enable the lateral move from high elf to dark elf.

"Though, just what could that condition even be? I haven't the foggiest."

That darn unknown. If not for it, a Fey Queen might have very well been sitting upon this throne, and a direct conflict with Hilith might've been avoided.

Well, maybe not. She'd still have gone after Hilith. The only difference was she probably wouldn't have been targeted by a player-character raid. That had only happened because she was a Cataclysm.

"If I had even a clue, I might be able to test a theory or two, but I've nothing..."

It didn't seem likely that a unique combination of skills had been the special condition. Yeah, *Shade* and *Shadow* spells were practically her signature at this point, but those had only come after her *Rebirth*.

Could it have been the sheer number of undead under her control? That seemed more plausible at first glance. But then Blanc had mentioned something she'd heard from the count—Lords of Destruction weren't known for commanding minions. If that was true, then her army of undead didn't seem like the right trigger either.

"Hmm... Well, what's the big deal? If it's that obscure, just all the more unlikely there'll be more of me anytime soon, right?"

Still, on the ridiculously slim chance she ever stumbled across another Lord of Destruction, there'd be questions. Lots of them. And experiments. Plenty of experiments to figure out what made them alike.

Chapter 3: Dungeon Conversion

The results of the second event had just been announced.

Leah's name...was nowhere to be found.

"Well, we knew that," she said.

MVPs on the defense side, as ranked by Defense Points—a term Leah had never heard before, probably some backend metric to measure player performance—were Gealgamesh in first, Amatain in second, and a player named TKDSG in third. Those were the only publicly announced names, though every player received a private message with their individual rank.

Leah's rank was NOT ELIGIBLE.

On the attacking side, Blanc came in first, Lyla second, and a player named Bambu third.

Leah's rank was still NOT ELIGIBLE.

"Well. I guess we did stage a coup. It only makes sense that Lyla's name is on there."

The event had only split players between their decision to defend or attack; a player's race had been completely irrelevant. Together, Lyla, Blanc, and Leah had basically overthrown the entire Kingdom of Oral. Apparently, that had earned Lyla enough points to rank high among the attackers.

"Poor Lyla. Not only will she have to hide her face, but her name now too. What did the NPCs call her? Lady Hugelkuppe? Guess we just have to avoid saying anything that connects those dots."

Not that it would be okay if Blanc's player status got doxxed either.

"We'll just have to be more careful moving forward. Moving on, this Bambu character. They must be the goblin who sacked that town of whatchamacallit. Weird. You'd think they'd earn more points for that. More than Lyla, at least."

"Whatchamacallit," of course, referred to Neuschloss, the town in

the Kingdom of Peare that had been completely destroyed by goblins. Lyla's coup in Oral had been nearly bloodless. So it only made sense to assume a full-on razing would earn way more points.

"Whatever. That's a different kingdom's problem. If need be, I can always air-drop Uluru in and flatten the entire town to see what's what."

Uluru was what Leah had named her elder rock golem. Sure, if it were a unique entity like the World Tree, she could've called it by its government name and earned no more confusion for it. But "elder rock golem" was a mouthful. "Uluru" just rolled off the tongue—named, of course, after that famous giant rock in Australia, also called Ayers Rock in a bygone age.

Of course, if she did send Uluru on a rampage, she'd probably need to *Rebirth* it first. In its current state, it might not be strong enough to take on an entire town by itself. Better to prep it properly before unleashing that kind of chaos.

Now, onto the loot.

Leah, for her help, received from the devs a prize that was slightly less than what the third-place MVPs got.

She was unsure how to feel. On one hand, it was a reward despite being labeled NOT ELIGIBLE. She should feel grateful for that. On the other hand, if she'd ignored the devs' offer and just played normally, she could've snagged first place.

"Eh, better not go down that rabbit hole."

Her reward was three mithril ingots. Mithril, apparently, was an enchanted metal. But Leah quickly realized she had no real sense of how valuable it was. She knew the adamant-whatever metal she used was pretty high spec, but where it ranked compared to mithril—or anything else for that matter—was a mystery.

Not that monetary value meant much to her. Leah didn't trade with anyone, so it all came down to performance.

"Guess I'll just stash this until I figure out what to do with it."

Thinking back, this reward was a huge improvement over the scraps she'd gotten for participating in the first event. That thought lifted her mood a bit.

But what she'd really been looking forward to today was this: The

announcement that the teleportation service—essentially, the official dungeon-ification of her holdings—was finally happening. It was set to be implemented after a short server maintenance the next day. When Leah had logged in, the devs had left her a detailed message explaining how the system would work, pending final confirmation from her.

The message primarily addressed the proposed changes to her death penalty. In place of an EXP penalty, the devs proposed that if Leah died, she would be locked out from respawning for three in-game hours.

That was...actually kind of rough. Honestly, she'd have preferred losing some percentage of EXP instead.

Three in-game hours was two real-life hours of being unable to play. That was fine; Leah had logged off before. But when she logged off, at least her retainers would still be doing their things. Being dead for three hours meant her retinue would be dead for four. That was a long time for players to be looting their way through piles of bug and treant corpses and exploring areas left unguarded by inert living weapons and armor. She didn't even want to think about rebuilding. Or the giant pain if Leah respawned only to find herself face-to-face with the players who'd just killed her. Imagine them figuring out her spawn point? Three hours was plenty of time for players to prepare and set up a system to farm her—and with the teleportation service in place, it'd be ridiculously easy too.

"I guess I just...can't die anymore?"

Also, this setup meant all of Leah's holdings would be locked as dungeons automatically. There was no way to pick and choose—no option to say, "I want the capital to be the dungeon, but leave Lieb out of it." Just as she'd suspected, agreeing to this meant her Home was locked in for good.

Truly, there wasn't any rest for dungeon bosses.

Still, despite all the drawbacks, Leah agreed.

The thought of hapless players wandering into her web, bolstered by the devs' official blessing, was just too tempting to pass up.

With the EXP penalty on death gone, Leah no longer had to keep any in reserve. She spent all her reserves boosting INT and MND for

her middling minions: maids, wights, logistics troopers—basically anyone who needed to engage in strategy and leadership.

But as she finished assigning the last few points, a thought hit her. "Maids and wights... Why did I lump them together? Now that I think about it, it's not like maids need to be super intelligent."

At this, the maid quietly attending to her widened her eyes in hurt and surprise. An act, Leah was sure. A useless little flair her newfound intelligence had unlocked.

"Oh well. What's done is done. It's not like my minions can die and lose EXP. Their growth's permanent."

Then, as the final item on her agenda before server maintenance, Leah summoned all notable leaders in her service to the grand ballroom in the royal castle. Why? To exchange friend cards with each other. Until now, Leah had only handed out her friend cards unilaterally; her minions couldn't communicate directly with one another. That had to change. Leah couldn't keep playing mediator forever.

The ant-type monsters, with their biology requiring only brief, minute-long power naps, could remain operational with minimal downtime. Sugaru, who shared this biology, would serve as the overlord for all such creatures. To ensure she could move quickly to where she was needed, a direct retainer would be stationed in each area. This way, Sugaru could summon herself to any location at a moment's notice to command or fight, if necessary. The same applied to Leah. She also needed a summon target in every area, so her retainer would move in tandem with Sugaru's.

Though it was Leah's intent that she, Sugaru, and even Sieg would avoid combat as much as possible. If any one of them were to fall, a significant portion of her forces would go dormant immediately. They could only fight personally if all Queen-class insects, undead, or treants had been wiped out. At that point, it wouldn't matter if all their retainers perished, because they would already be gone. And Leah *would* fight if it came to that. Because fleeing the premises after all her minions had been defeated would just be entirely too lame.

Everything was mostly in order, but Leah had one lingering

concern: Blanc.

Leah had messaged Blanc right after the revised death terms were sent to them, urging her to be cautious. But Blanc had brushed her off with a cheery *"Don't worry!"* and *"I've already accepted!"* In fact, she'd seemed downright oblivious to the risks of the three-hour no-respawn window, even calling it the perfect excuse to take a break.

Leah had debated whether to summon herself over and drive the point home directly but ultimately decided against it. Blanc had Diaz, a queen beetle, and a powerful adviser in the form of Weiss.

Weiss, I'm counting on you buddy.

"I should be worrying about myself. Players can teleport anywhere, directly to the capital if they so wish. No doubt I'm going to get the lion's share of players. Blanc will be fine."

***

Twenty-four hours later, it was finally time. The brief server maintenance had ended on schedule, and the teleportation service was officially live.

In anticipation of the great rush of players she expected to flood her domain, Leah sent Ominous soaring high above the capital to scout her surroundings. She put herself into Ominous's mind, seeing through his eyes to find...!

"Nothing. There's absolutely no one. Okay, if they're not in the capital, then maybe Lieb or— Nope. None there either. There is not a single soul, anywhere..."

It suddenly dawned on her that she had no idea where the predetermined teleport spots actually were. She'd completely forgotten to check. There had to be one near her domain—there was no way the devs wouldn't place one nearby, so...what was going on? Was there another, more attractive spot for players that wasn't hers?

"Crap, why didn't I think to figure this out beforehand? But how *could* I have figured this out beforehand? Where would I even have gotten that information? They said they wanted the teleportation service to mainly be for beginners, but...how would that even be

determined?”

If you don’t know, ask somebody who does.

But who *would* know? Blanc was in the same boat as her, and Lyla was running a kingdom, not a dungeon...

In that case, there was only one option left to her: *to the forums!*

***

[Patch Day Game Thread] Where we teleporting boys? [Dungeonssss]

001: Thermos

The patch is live! Which dungeon will you hit up first? There should be no restrictions on teleport destinations so feel free to use this thread to find party members!

Here’s a list of dungeons that show up as teleport destinations: (There’s a ton, so I’d recommend taking notes!)

...

...

[Kingdom of Peare]

Neuschloss ☆☆☆☆

...

...

[Other]

Old Hilith Capital ☆☆☆☆☆

Great Woods of Lieb ☆☆☆☆☆

Rokillean Forest ☆☆☆☆☆

Trae Forest ☆☆☆☆☆

Ellental ☆☆☆

Altoriva ☆

Velstead ☆

002: Nohghis

Dang, look at all ’em dungeons.
>>001 Thanks for the roundup!
By the way, what do these stars mean?

003: Alonson
>>002 difficulty
Devs said it doesn’t represent the difficulty needed to clear the dungeon, but rather the minimum combat level to at least function inside.
Also, they said the difficulty might change without notice.
In any case, you won’t really know until you go and see for yourself.

004: Amatain
We can use the Old Hilith Capital as a difficulty yardstick since players have fought the Cataclysm there. We can assume it’ll be a suitable challenge for top ranked defense players in the last event.

005: Country Pop
Old Hilith giving me difficulty whiplash
Also, why are the Hilith dungeons all under “Other”?
What happened to Hilith?

006: Thermos
>>005 Don’t shoot the messenger, I copied the in-game list word for word.
Probably because the kingdom is no longer, so it’s just classified as “Other” now?

007: Manifo
>>004 This doesn’t help at all LOL why are we using the

most difficult dungeon as a yardstick
Where are the lowbies supposed to farmmmm

008: Tough and Doesn't Peel
I’m not convinced 5-star is the true difficulty rating. Maybe it just maxes out as 5 and anything 5 and beyond is just 5. I mean yeahhh you’ll totally be able to farm the cataclysm with just a few people.

009: Anonymous Elf
In the prerelease version of the Lieb dungeon, there was a mechanic that killed you instantly if you stayed too long. In terms of game design, that’s what the cataclysm might be. Just a wandering one-shot juggernaut that lets you know you’ve overstayed your welcome.

010: Amatain
>>009 Could be
Hilith is just gonna be a bit of a wild card, eh?
I mean, there’s no rush to be diving into these things headlong. Can’t wait til we understand the mechanics better. Considering Lieb’s star rating, should probably stay away from there for now as well.

011: Country Pop
That means Rokillean and Trae are also gonna be tough going. Not tryna die and lose my exp over and over again.
I’m guessing the devs’ intention was to have 1 and 2 star dungeons for beginners, 3 and 4 stars for experienced players, and 5 for those looking for a challenge?

012: Nohghis
All I’m getting from this is that beginners should go do 1 stars go go go

---

013: Kuraaku
Okay but hear me out. Would it not be worth to just farm trash in the five stars? Just pull one at a time, stay near the entrance, play safe. Even one five star mob has to be worth a lot

---

014: Tough and Doesn't Peel
>>013 I guess you could. High risk high reward
I’d assume it’d still take a full party of solidly leveled players to take down even a single 5-star Hilith trash mob. That’s a lot of EXP down the drain if that group wipes.

015: Alonson
EXP down the drain is a new one. Like my money down the drain

---

016: Orinkii
The Great Wood of Mentorship, now a five star dungeon. Oh, they grow up so fast.

***

“I see. So that’s how it is. It’s listed by difficulty. That’s why no one’s coming.”

The last event had, very importantly, waived the death penalty. Now that hard-earned EXP was actually at stake, it seemed players weren’t as eager to dive headlong into danger.

And danger, Leah was. All her holdings were marked as five stars—the highest difficulty available, as far as she could tell. Of course,

no one was lining up to dive headfirst into that.

"I *may* have overdone it. Ugh, what do I do? I can't exactly lower the difficulty of the capital. And Trae has the World Tree. I don't want people finding out about that. Lieb has my monster ranches and the wolf pups... All right then, Rokillean—it has to be you."

It was interesting that Rokillean was now labeled as a forest rather than a town. Technically accurate, considering it no longer resembled the bustling settlement it once was, but Leah was mildly surprised at how quickly the devs had updated the classification.

"And yet, for all that responsiveness, the volcano and its surrounding forests didn't even make the list. I get that the devs couldn't make every dangerous location a dungeon, but at the very least all of my holdings should have been included. Which means..."

The region wasn't under her control.

Her insects had already begun fortifying the surrounding forest, and Uluru stood watch over the mountainside. Even if there were a few golems left on the mountain or undead lingering in the forest, how was that any different from Lieb with its monster ranches or Rokillean with its air-dropped monster feed?

"There has to be some other power entity around the volcano, then—maybe in the mouth."

The original system message *had* specified that only "*regions controlled by a single faction*" would be turned into dungeons. If Uluru was sharing control of the volcano with another entity, it all made sense.

It was good that it made sense; it was just too bad there was nothing Leah could do about it now.

Leah contacted the queen arachnia overseeing Rokillean and ordered her to scale back her efforts. She also had Sugaru withdraw the giant, terrifying insects that were the megathairos and other high-tier minions back to the capital. Sugaru seemed a bit disappointed, but Leah assured her this was the best way to draw players in. They needed confidence—not a lot of it, but at least a little—before they'd be pounding on the capital's doors.

By the end of the reshuffling, only low-level spiders and ants remained in Rokillean. Half of its stronger forces were transferred to

the capital, while the other half was sent to Trae.

Leah was monitoring socials the whole time, and it wasn't long before players started noticing that Rokillean's difficulty had dropped to three stars.

"It's a bit unwieldy that I have to check my dungeon's difficulty outside of the game, but... Oh well, I guess NPC dungeon bosses can't even do that, so who am I to complain?"

Rokillean's three-star difficulty put it on the same level as Blanc's Ellental. That was a little surprising, considering Ellental had a queen beetle and Diaz. But if that one poster was correct—that the star rating only indicated the minimum viability for entering the dungeon—then perhaps the true difficulty of reaching Diaz in the manor and engaging him in combat was higher. The roaming Spartoi and beetles in the town were likely what set the baseline at three stars.

A post popped up saying that the devs quickly readjusted Rokillean's difficulty to better spread out players in that difficulty bracket. *Interesting theory.* Indeed, it seemed most players were gravitating toward one-to three-star dungeons.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before Rokillean saw its first visitor.

"I'd like to go check on things myself, but I don't want to mess with the difficulty rating... I'll just send Ominous."

A single giant forest owl shouldn't affect the overall difficulty too much. Leah summoned herself to Rokillean's queen arachnia, summoned Ominous over, then returned to the castle's throne room.

"Looks like my brief appearance in Rokillean didn't mess with the difficulty rating. Great."

No way someone would just be there, eyes glued to the difficulty rating, just looking for changes. And even if there were, they'd probably just dismiss that brief two-second flicker as just their eyes playing tricks on them.

***

"Ho ho. Hello, my first visitors. Oh? They're not approaching from the capital or Ellental. Looks like there's a new Safe Area somewhere

I’m not aware of.”

Rokillean had been an important trade crossroads, with many roads branching from it. Leah was familiar with the route to the capital (obviously) and the one to Ellental (she’d seen Blanc off that way), but this intrepid group was approaching on a road that led somewhere unknown.

Leah didn’t see any chatter online about forming a pickup group to head to Rokillean, so she assumed this was a group of players who often ran together.

“Given how early you are, this must be your first dungeon postmaintenance. To take on a three-star as your first, you must have quite the faith in yourselves.”

The difficulty adjustment had taken some time, but not enough for this to be the group’s second dungeon of the day. The teleportation system was one-way, so there was no chance they could have simply hopped from dungeon to dungeon. The devs had been clear in their intent to limit disruption to the world economy that free teleports might have caused, so Leah doubted they left any loopholes.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, shall we?”

First impressions were everything. The players needed to enjoy themselves enough during the grind that they wouldn’t complain—even if they died at the end of it. Positive word-of-mouth would spread, and business would be booming.

This was no beginner-friendly Great Woods of Lieb, but these players weren’t beginners either. They were individuals who had invested significant time and effort into their characters. They should be able to handle Rokillean just fine.

***

The five-man party was perfectly balanced—a tank, a spearman, an archer, and two casters. As they entered the forest, the archer led the way, and the group moved cautiously. Every so often, they marked a tree, staying vigilant for traps and ambushes. The archer seemed to double as lead scout, carefully clearing brambles and

branches to ensure the casters' robes wouldn't catch on anything.

Their teamwork and coordination made it clear: This was a very experienced party.

It was just too bad that experience wouldn't mean much here.

There was no trap. Or rather, there was no trap that they were used to. Almost every tree nearby was a treant in disguise. The party had marked the trees to find their way out of the forest, but the treants' natural regeneration would soon erase those marks. The same went for the branches they had lopped off for room to maneuver.

The archer raised his hand; the party immediately halted.

"A small trash mob," the archer said. "A rat, from the looks of it. These are three-star mobs? They're not much different from the rabbits we farmed as newbies."

"I'll handle it," the spearman said. "Save your arrows."

He stepped forward, and with a quick lunge, skewered the rat with ease. Leah was impressed with the archer's perception. This was indeed the starter area rat, though one that had been bred here intentionally to serve as fodder for insects and treants.

"Nice," the spearman said. "Uh. What do we do with this? We still want rat mats or...?"

"This really is just a normal gray rat," the archer said. "Nah, just leave it. Can't be assed to sell it."

While the inventory system meant they didn't need to worry about being overencumbered, skinning the rat and selling its materials wouldn't be worth the effort.

Leah could hardly complain. The rats were just fodder anyway—it hardly mattered if they were dead or alive. Sooner or later, the corpse would be consumed by an ant or spider for sustenance.

"There's no way a three-star dungeon just has us fighting rats, right?" the spearman said.

"We've barely made it two steps into the forest," the archer said. "Be patient. I'm sure something— Ah, there we go. Something's coming. Definitely bigger than a rat."

The archer cupped his ear; it seemed he had *Sentinel's Ear*.

There was no good reason the ants and spiders in the forest

couldn’t move completely silently if they wanted to. The treants making up the bulk of the obstacles could easily shift their branches and leaves aside without a sound.

The fact that there was noise now... Well, that was probably a bit of a welcoming gift from the resident queen arachnia.

“Here they come!” the archer yelled. “Spider!”

“Holy shit, you call that a spider—that’s a freaking tarantula!” the spearman said.

“Careful of its webs!” the tank, seemingly their leader, exclaimed.

Smart. But not smart enough.

Like their real-life counterparts, all spiders in the game could secrete sticky, silklike substances. It was a hazard to watch out for, though hardly a tarantella’s weapon of choice. Some species possessed a rare ability: ejecting hairs from their abdomens to ward off attackers. These hairs, known as urticating bristles, could cause severe skin irritation.

In nature, tarantellas flick their rear legs to launch these bristles. In the game, however, the lesser tarantellas simply shot them out—with no physical mechanism needed. Video game logic, perhaps a bit unfair, but Leah’s *Feather Gatling* worked in much the same way, so she wasn’t one to talk.

Also, these bristles were venomous. After getting hit by one, skin irritation was the least of one’s worries.

“Whoa, what the heck was that?!” the tank exclaimed as something whizzed through the air.

“Gah!” the archer grunted. “Poison needles! Watch out!”

“Hey, you okay?” one of the casters rushed to the injured archer’s side. “*Cure Toxin*!”

He must’ve been the group’s healer. *Cure Toxin* was a skill from the *Treatment* tree, its skill description simply being *“Cures all toxin effects on the target.”* It was a universally useful skill. Toxins in this game came in all sorts of flavors: neurotoxins, hemotoxins, myotoxins, but *Cure Toxin* was effective against them all.

The venom from the lesser tarantellas was a myotoxin. It seeped into the flesh, breaking down muscle tissue. At first, it caused symptoms resembling normal muscle soreness, but if left untreated,

it could escalate to spasms, respiratory arrest, and ultimately, death.

In game, though, that just meant the victim took damage-over-time until the debuff expired—and so did they. Hemotoxins were a more potent DoT that didn't have an instant death effect, while neurotoxins added status effects like paralysis along with their damage.

The lesser tarantella's myotoxin inflicted both damage and pain as long as the initial effect wasn't resisted. However, its instant death effect required the victim to fail an additional resistance check based on their VIT. Lower-level players would probably die, but this group had a good chance of resisting it.

Another barrage of bristles flew toward the party, striking the spearman.

"Ngh!" He grunted, but he immediately stood back up. "I resisted the poison, all right! These spiders ain't so strong!"

The tank also got hit, but the bristles just bounced harmlessly off of him and his high VIT.

"Don't need to resist it if you don't even get hit!"

Lesser tarantellas were stronger than infantry ants, but seeing as infantry ants were one of the weakest monsters in Leah's army, that wasn't saying much. Against a party confident enough to enter a three-star dungeon, and likely well prepared for the challenge, these spiders didn't stand a chance.

With a well-placed strike, the archer dispatched the tarantella using his knife.

This was a monster that could have easily overwhelmed an entire party of newbies back in Lieb. Putting that in context, Leah had to admit—these players were strong.

Yeesh, player power inflation is getting out of hand, thought Leah, the most power-inflated player in the game.

"We ever come across one of these spiders before? Let's take it with us," the tank said.

"Wait a sec," the archer interjected. "I heard somewhere you can eat tarantellas."

"Tell me where, so I can *not* go there!"

The group burst into laughter. They were all smiles as they

hauled the spider into inventory and continued deeper into the forest.

"Hmm. Now that I think about it, is it weird we weren't able to notice it until it got so close?" the spearman asked.

"Yeah. This forest is...really loud," the archer said. "It's like all the leaves are rustling, but there's no wind."

That was likely the treants. Just as they could muffle the sounds of approaching bugs, they could simulate the noise of one moving. It was the perfect counter to a scout who relied on *Sentinel's Ear*.

***

After that first encounter, the party moved through the forest at a steady pace, dispatching any spiders and ants that attacked them with little effort. Clearly, their confidence had not been misplaced.

Meanwhile, more and more groups were beginning to gather around Rokillean. A quick glance online showed the name Rokillean popping up more frequently, with numerous pickup groups forming.

Leah tasked the queen arachnia with monitoring these new arrivals while she honored the inaugural group by following them until the end. The party slashed through the forest, steadily racking up kills. Even though the EXP was split five ways and the monsters were relatively weak, they were on track for a decent haul. But before long, they abruptly stopped and decided to head back—it seemed they wanted to play it safe on their first visit.

Leah, of course, wasn't about to let that happen.

"Shit," the archer suddenly grumbled.

"What's wrong?" the leader asked. "If something bad's coming, we won't be here to see it. Come on, let's get out of here."

"Shit, shit, shit. Damn, I'm sorry."

"Seriously, what is it?" the spearman said. "Do you hear something? Something big?"

"No, it's just...I don't know the way out."

"What?! How is that possible? You scored the trees, you just need to follow the marks to—"

"Wait!" the healer interjected. "Here it is. This is the tree he

scored, I'm sure of it. And yet, there's no mark..."

It was very much like the healer to be the voice of reason. He'd been entirely correct—the tree *had* been the one they'd scored earlier, as an obviously cleared path lay beside it.

Well, not *entirely* correct. That was no tree.

"Well, shit," the spearman said. "I really didn't want to have to death warp out of here."

"Sorry, guys. Entirely my bad," the archer said.

"Nah, this is our first time here," the tank said. "We didn't know, but now we do. Take it as knowledge gained. I'm sure at this point we're the only ones who know about this. It's not your fault."

What a stand-up guy. The spearman wasn't all that bad either. Though annoyed just a second earlier, he clapped the archer on the shoulder in support.

They proceeded down the trail for a few minutes, but then...

"Wait... Huh?" the archer said. "Where did the trail go?"

It was gone.

As they'd ventured deeper into the forest, the treants behind them had been subtly shifting, erasing the path without them noticing. Even the rat carcass they'd left behind had been recovered. With no landmarks remaining, the party was well and truly trapped.

"The forest...shifted?" the tank mused. "I see... The forest shifted! This is a three-star dungeon not because of the enemies, but because of its gimmick!"

"A forest maze..." the archer muttered.

"Guys...is it just me or is all this underbrush taller than before?" the spearman asked, looking around.

At his words, they all looked down. He was right. The forest floor seemed lusher, more overgrown than before. This was no coincidence. To cover any evidence of the treants' movements, strategically placed elder camphor treants had been periodically casting *Blessing*. It was a much weaker version than the World Tree's *Great Blessing*, but it was enough to make the underbrush grow, concealing any tracks in the soil that might have revealed the treants' shifts.

In other words, this forest was a death trap.

One that had been going easy on them. The treants hadn't even joined the battle.

"I don't know what to do," the archer said.

"Goddamn it, we're going to have to die, aren't we?" the spearman said.

"Hold on," the tank said. "There's gotta be more people who've come here since... Ah, yep, there are. Quite a few parties have come here after us."

"Then let's get the word out. Warn people that are coming in," the archer said. "Even though it's too late for us."

Warn however any people you want, Leah thought. *The entire game will know soon enough.*

But there's one thing I cannot abide—you leaving on your own accord.

She needed that sweet, sweet EXP.

Suddenly, from all sides, spider webs shot toward the party, binding them in place.

"What the?! Spider webs?!" the healer exclaimed.

"More?! When did they...!" the tank said, struggling against the bindings.

"There's no way—I didn't hear a thing!" the archer said.

"Shit! We're surrounded!" the spearman said.

The archer hadn't heard the spiders approach—nor the path shifting behind them—because the treants had been masking all sounds with their constant rustling.

Now, the group found themselves encircled by a swarm of greater tarantellas. These were significantly larger than their lesser counterparts, at least two sizes bigger, with darker and more menacing coloration.

"These aren't the ones we fought before!" the tank yelled, ripping the webbing from himself. But he was a second too late. Before he could raise his defenses, venomous bristles shot through the gaps in his armor. He collapsed—not from pain, but from the paralytic toxin coursing through his veins. Another spray of webbing hit him, and this time, he was completely helpless.

"I need...*Cure Toxins*..." he managed to croak.

But the healer couldn't answer. He hadn't been able to break free of the initial web assault. Already spun into a tight cocoon, he was being dragged toward the tarantellas.

The other caster was gone too, as was the archer.

The spearman managed to tear free from his initial bindings, but before he could do anything, the venomous bristles struck him as well. The paralytic toxin took hold, leaving him incapacitated.

Greater tarantellas, despite their name, weren't all that strong. They wouldn't have stood a chance against this party in a fair fight.

It was just too bad Leah wasn't above playing dirty. Numerical advantage, ambush tactics, and crowd control—with these tactics, even experienced parties would be at her mercy.

The spiders delivered the coup de grâce to each player trapped in their webby cocoons. One by one, their bodies vanished, confirming they'd been respawned elsewhere.

Satisfied, Leah retreated from Ominous's vision back to her own.

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"They farmed a decent amount of mats, probably came out ahead in EXP—and if I were them, I'd call that a positive first experience," Leah muttered. "If they believe their failure wasn't due to the monsters but to their inability to escape, they'll likely be back soon. If the combat had been too difficult, they'd probably steer clear until they farmed up elsewhere."

Even if they couldn't figure out the shifting forest gimmick, they could still stick to the shallow forest, farm a bit, and leave right away.

The real challenge for Leah would be baiting these players, who'd decided not to venture into the deep forest, into going deeper anyway. Perhaps an enticing item placed somewhere farther inside?

Idea after idea began popping into Leah's mind as she turned her attention to the PUGs that had come after the first group.

"Seems like everyone's having similar experiences," she mused.

The groups would come in, farm to their heart's content, only to be picked off and sent home faster than they would have liked.

The warnings had already begun spreading online, which meant that every now and then, a far more cautious group would wander in. For those parties, Leah opted to allow them to leave via their own accord rather than the greater tarantella express. The rumor that the forest consumes all who enter wasn't good for business. Far better to spread the idea that overconfidence was the downfall of those who failed.

That said, Leah was running a business here. Even the most cautious adventurers wouldn't always be getting off scot-free.

"Quite the successful launch day, if I do say so myself."

But in business, what mattered wasn't the owner's opinion—it was the impression left on the customers.

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[Old Hilith] Dungeon Strategy Megathread [Other]

001: Kuraaku

Use this thread to share your dungeon tips and tricks. Looking for strategies in other areas? Check out these threads:
[Oral] Dungeon Strategy Megathread
[Peare] Dungeon Strategy Megathread
[Shape] Dungeon Strategy Megathread
[Portely] Dungeon Strategy Megathread
[Wels] Dungeon Strategy Megathread

002: Manifo

>>001 thanks for this

003: Tut

All right. Old Hilith. Who's doing what?

004: Nohghis

>003 Bout to start the 1-star altoriva.

...
...

122: Nohghis
Altoriva impressions (1-star): Didn’t venture too far in, but so far, it’s just zombies. A lot of zombies. Stay alert, or you’ll get overwhelmed fast.
They seem to stay indoors during the day, so you can safely explore the town during daylight. That said, it’s just a regular town—nothing too exciting to see anyway.

123: Alonson
>>122 thanks!
I wonder if the boss comes out at night...
...
...
231: White Seaweed
Hopefully this is the right thread.
My tip for Rokillean: be careful.

232: Alonson
Well that’s ominous. Care to elaborate?

233: White Seaweed
From what I’ve seen so far (and from first impressions online), the mobs aren’t super strong for a 3-star dungeon.
The catch is the forest. It’s always changing, so you can get lost, trapped without an exit, and surrounded before you know it.
So yeah, be careful.

234: Alonson
Wait, like the forest is procedurally generated?

235: White Seaweed
>>234 I wish.
Maybe I didn’t phrase myself correctly. The forest doesn’t reset each time you enter—it literally changes while you’re inside. Try going back the way you came, and it’s just...gone.
The marks we left on trees marking the path disappeared. The monster carcass we left on the way just vanished. It’s like the whole forest is alive—leaves constantly rustling, disorienting you. And you can’t see the sun, so there’s no way to orient yourself.

236: Clamp
So it’s like a lost woods-esque maze?

237: Tut
Weird. Seems to be a unique mechanic from what I’ve seen so far. Devs sure like to keep us on our toes. Didn’t there used to be a town there? Then the forest just sprang up overnight and consumed everything? Maybe if you clear the dungeon, you’ll find out what happened.

238: Manifo
Damn that’s cool. I’m a sucker for well-implemented in-game lore drops.

239: Tough and Doesn't Peel
First the cataclysm, then its destruction, now the

nightmare difficulty dungeons, the devs just love Hilith, huh?

240: Thermos
Only from the players' perspective. Try telling the NPCs that live there god loves them so much they destroyed their kingdom.

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"Not bad... Not bad at all," Leah muttered, finishing up her read of online impressions. "Good. The more players flock to Hilith—or Old Hilith, I should say—the more I'll be swimming in it."

Leah had been focused on the many mentions of Rokillean, but early on, there'd also been a post about Altoriva, one of Blanc's holdings. From the post, it seemed that Blanc had done little more than raise the townsfolk as zombies and just...leave them there to their mindless existence. Blanc hadn't shared much about her plans for that town, so maybe that was the extent of it. Or maybe she'd just forgotten about the place entirely—who knew?

The idea, though, sparked Leah's interest.

An unimpressive, low-effort dungeon populated with weak zombies that respawned on the hour, every hour? Talk about a beginner's paradise.

"The devs said they wanted the teleportation service to be beginner-friendly. Maybe that's what they had in mind with places like Altoriva. Hmm... Could I do something similar? Like, if I create a forest from scratch, fill it with ants, would the devs recognize it as a brand-new dungeon?"

Leah imagined what could be: a single teleport destination—*her* teleport destination—designed to offer something meaningful for players at every stage of their journey. Experienced players would flock to Rokillean, experts to the capital, and beginners to this hypothetical new dungeon filled with idle ants and little else. The amount of traffic such an arrangement could attract was staggering.

“Definitely worth trying,” Leah said to herself. “Not sure how I’ll spread the word, but... Oh, I’m sure someone will take care of that for me once it’s up and running.”

<Shall I make the necessary arrangements?> Sugaru’s voice echoed in her mind.

“Please,” Leah replied without hesitation. All the better if she could hand the whole task off to Sugaru.

She returned her attention to Rokillean. The crowd around it continued to grow, even faster now, fueled by online rumors of a procedurally generated forest and hidden deep lore.

Would her dungeon survive the onslaught?

Of course, she reassured herself. This was the forest that had swallowed the town that had swallowed the hills. It had room for everyone—barring some monstrous top-ranker showing up and steamrolling their way through it for shits and giggles.

“Oh?” Leah muttered, spotting a familiar face. “I know you from somewhere.”

It was an elven healer.

“Somewhere,” she scoffed. “I know exactly where—you were part of the raid that killed me. Well then. I must welcome you personally.”

She paused, thinking it over.

“Okay, maybe not personally. Can’t have anyone figuring out I can travel to and from Rokillean. Or that I’m watching everything.”

After all, raid bosses weren’t supposed to be able to do that. And Leah wanted everyone to know: She was a raid boss.

<Then shall I have the queen arachnia engage them at a suitable time?> Sugaru suggested. <I find it only fitting that players capable of setting back even you would face a special challenge.>

Leah liked the sound of that. From the moment she spotted the elf, she’d had no intention of letting her leave alive. This elf would repay the EXP she’d taken during the raid, with interest.

The greater tarantellas might not be enough to bring down this party, but a queen arachnia was a different story. Especially with a queen beetle and a queen vespoid stationed nearby as reinforcements—just in case.

“Let’s do that,” Leah said to Sugaru. “Though I’d want nothing

more than to crush her with everything I've got—including the treants—it would be a problem if word got out that the maze itself is made up of monsters. We'll stick to the bugs for now."

<At once, boss,> Sugaru replied.

Leah was a little disappointed she wouldn't get to deliver her revenge personally, but at least she'd have the chance to see it unfold. When the moment came, she'd transfer her vision to the queen arachnia for a more immersive experience.

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"They were right about the forest being loud, but other than that...it feels like any of the forests back home," Anonymous Elf muttered, scanning her surroundings.

She and her party were standing before the forest sprouting from the ruins of the Hilithian town of Rokillean—now dubbed the Rokillean Forest by the devs.

They'd traveled to Old Hilith to explore the new dungeon system because in their home kingdom of Portely, the options weren't ideal: only one-, four-, and five-star dungeons were available. Anonymous Elf was technically one of the top players in the game at this point, so speed clearing one-star dungeons felt disrespectful to new players. Meanwhile, tackling four-or five-star dungeons all but guaranteed a wipe—so far, no party had successfully cleared one. While their party might have been able to scrape by farming small sections of the harder dungeons, it didn't seem worth the effort. Delving into a better-documented three-star dungeon for a deeper clear like Rokillean felt like the smarter choice.

"Spider monsters are quite rare back home," Anonymous Elf commented. "Apparently, they show up in the four-star areas, but it didn't seem worth farming just a few mobs before retreating."

"Yeah, much better use of time to sit around waiting for more three-star info to drop before doing *anything*," Haruka, one of her party members, quipped sarcastically.

They were joined additionally by Kurumi and Lampu, making for a party of four. They were all elves, they were all female, and they

were all frontliners, except, of course, for Anonymous Elf, who was a caster.

Their group composition *was* a tad unusual. Not just because of its unusually aesthetic female elven nature, but because they lacked a dedicated tank. Instead, the three physical fighters shared the role. One of the frontliners would hold threat while the others dealt damage, rotating as needed so no single member bore the brunt for too long. It required a higher degree of mechanical skill to pull off, but given the lack of tankbuster mechanics in this game, a purely defensive tank wasn't strictly necessary—for most content, at least.

Anonymous Elf was the only one in the party to have participated in the previous raid against Leah. At the time, the frontliners had been tasked solely with getting her from Portely to Hilith.

"Come on, Haruka, you didn't want to wander headlong into another Cataclysm-type situation, did you?" Kurumi said. "We had to make sure there were no big one-shot attacks before coming."

"That's right," Lampu agreed. "We're glass cannons, after all."

No one took offense to that. While they were all incredibly mechanically skilled players, they knew none of that made up for proper defensive equipment.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Haruka said.

"Thanks for understanding, Haruka," Anonymous Elf said. "Now then, shall we get going? From what I saw on social media, even midrange groups seem to be doing fine here, so we shouldn't have too much trouble."

No concrete strategy had been developed yet to deal with the shifting forest, but one consistent trait among groups that made it out alive was a strong grasp of direction. If they stayed confident in retracing their steps, they had a fair shot at escaping.

That was easier said than done, of course. Most parties still suffered casualties trying to navigate their way out. But this wasn't "most parties"—this was Anonymous Elf's party. If anyone could make it out with all members accounted for, it was them.

To aid with navigation, they had purchased a magnetic compass back in Portely. It wasn't the sleek, handheld kind but a ship-based compass designed for naval navigation. While it was bulky and

inconvenient, the magical inventory system allowed them to stash it away and retrieve it as needed. It had been a hefty investment, but they were banking on recouping the cost—and then some—with the spider silk they planned to farm from the forest's arachnid inhabitants.

Good caster gear was hard to come by—the reason being a lack of widely available materials, like the aforementioned spider silk. A high-defense robe like the one Anonymous Elf wore was prohibitively expensive. Compared to melee classes who could craft suitable gear at any level from a natural progression of monster hides and affordable metals—case in point, the three frontliners and their coat of platelike armor—casters clearly drew the short end of the stick.

The nobles in Portely traded in an exceptionally expensive type of spider silk harvested from the spiders deep within its forests. The spiders in Rokillean were rumored to be a lower-tier version of these, and the silk they produced was supposedly of lesser quality. But given the novelty and thus scarceness of the material on the market right now, they could be sold for way above asking.

They were looking to farm the greater variant of spider that were confirmed to dwell in Rokillean Forest. Online discussions emphasized that ambushes were the main threat, but for Anonymous Elf's party, this didn't mean much. They were scoutless as much as they were tankless. Ambushes weren't unexpected for her and her crew; they were simply how battles began.

Brushing aside branches and undergrowth while stepping carefully to avoid the roots underfoot, the party proceeded into the forest. Their pace was brisk; they were already familiar with the threats likely to appear at this stage, so their focus was sharpened for any sign of trouble.

"Something's coming," Anonymous Elf said.

"An ant or a spider, if the internet is to be believed," Haruka replied.

"Preferably a spider, but I guess an ant's still worth something."

Ants had been the go-to beginner mobs in Hilith, farmed endlessly until the sheer supply of their drops tanked market prices. Even though Hilith was no longer, its former merchants had brought

those plummeting prices to other regions, keeping their value low.

Out from the underbrush, the threat emerged—a tarantella, its venomous bristles already flying through the air.

"*Gust.*"

But Anonymous Elf was all too prepared for it. A blast of wind scattered the bristles harmlessly aside. *Gust* was a low-level wind spell with minimal offensive potential, but its versatility made it invaluable. It could deflect small projectiles like these bristles, or kick up dust to blind an enemy. Experienced casters appreciated its utility, especially given its negligible MP cost and cooldown.

Haruka attacked from the left, Lampu slashed from the right, and that was lights out for the unfortunate tarantella. Kurumi stayed on guard, watching for more, but it seemed this one was alone.

"Whew, talk about overkill. I might be able to one-shot these," Haruka said.

"Yeah, I think we'd handle it even if they attacked as a group," Lampu added.

Each frontliner wielded a one-handed sword and shield, paired with relatively light armor to enable quick, evasive maneuvers. The group prioritized balance above all else, so none of them packed devastatingly strong attacks. The conservative bunch had, for their first encounter, chosen to strike in tandem just to be safe.

"It's never a bad thing to be dispatching your enemies *too quick*," Anonymous Elf said. "Now, let's grab the carcass and keep moving."

Their initial encounter turned out to be the first and last time the bugs attacked alone. Tarantellas came, ants came, sometimes they came together, but none could slow the party's momentum as they delved deeper and deeper into the forest.

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The deeper they went, the more numerous the enemy became. A swarm of bugs had just assaulted them in what felt like an endless wave, the enemy skittering out from every gap in the trees from every direction. It had been a veritable monster house—but one that was still no match for Anonymous Elf and her crew. They cut

through the horde with ease, pausing for a moment when the action finally let up.

"Jeez," Lampu sighed. "I love me a good gold farm as much as the next person, but *this*..."

"Do ants and spiders coexist in this forest?" Anonymous Elf mused aloud. "Or are they working together, like a team, to hunt people who wander in? Or...is this just a video game and I'm overthinking it?"

"Third option, Nacchan, as always," Haruka said.

"Don't call me Nacchan!"

Anonymous Elf's observations weren't entirely superfluous, though. Trying to explain video game logic was usually a losing battle, but this game had a particular knack for crafting ecosystems where monsters modeled after real animals and insects seemed to interact much like their real-life counterparts.

"Whatever, you say, *Nacchan*," Haruka said. "Anyway, is it just me, or is this dungeon actually harder than what we were sold on socials? Like, are we just unlucky, or are these huge packs actually supposed to swarm us like this?"

Anonymous Elf nodded thoughtfully. "The first enemy we came across...was a rat, so that doesn't count. The first *real* enemy we came across—the single spider—was the only one that actually matched the difficulty we expected. After that, it's just been ramping up more and more."

She hummed in thought.

"You don't think...the dungeon measures player power and dynamically adjusts the encounters to match it, do you? Like, it's not just the forest itself shifting, but the overall difficulty too?"

Even as she voiced the idea, a chill ran down her spine.

"A game that scales difficulty based on player power—reminds me of this ancient game," Haruka said casually.

"Isn't the Cataclysm a queen? That game had something like that too, right? A dread queen?" Lampu added.

"She's got ants, so that tracks," Kurumi chimed in. "Not so sure about the undead and spiders, though."

The three frontliners' casual musings belied the true danger they

were in.

They had chosen to delve into this dungeon under the assumption that they could succeed where others had failed—by making it out with their entire party intact. But that relied on their power gap. If that advantage didn't matter here...

Then their guarantee of escape was no guarantee at all.

"Let's call it here for today and head back," Anonymous Elf said.

"Huh? We can still keep going," Haruka said.

"Yeah, yeah. Our LP and MP haven't even dipped," Lampu added.

"Our hunger—or stamina, whatever—is still fine too," Kurumi chimed in.

"I know it's ahead of schedule," Anonymous Elf said, "but considering this new bit of information, I think it's smart to call it. We've likely made good progress into the forest by now, given how long we've been playing. We can still farm on the way back. It's not like this will be our last trip here, right?"

"All right, if you say so, Nacchan," Haruka said.

"I told you not to call me Nacchan!"

The three frontliners might have been different in many ways, but one thing they all shared was respect for their leader. When Anonymous Elf spoke, they listened and followed.

Ribbing her about her name aside.

The group looked to turn back the way they came, only to find the path they'd taken was long gone. As they knew, the forest was constantly shifting—not in a way directly observable as they moved, but a few steps back and the trail simply vanished.

This was foul magic at work. And if there was an entity capable of such magic, it was the Cataclysm.

Anonymous Elf's mind drifted back to that grim day—the raid against the loathsome demon in white. Every spell she'd cast had wiped out dozens of raid members, even under the weakening effects of a powerful event artifact. Without that artifact, even the chosen frontliners who'd somehow survived direct hits would've been insta-gibbed. A raid boss whose AoE attacks one-shot tanks had to be the devs' idea of a cruel joke.

Her thoughts wandered further back to the caster player who had

dominated the first event. Back then, Anonymous Elf would have stood no chance against them. Only now did she feel like she might've finally caught up.

Would she ever feel that way about the Cataclysm?

Somehow, she doubted it.

The forest they now walked through was once a town destroyed by the Cataclysm. It was entirely possible that the Cataclysm had magically created the forest to serve as her dungeon. There were many questions right now, but if there was some hidden narrative to be unlocked by conquering the dungeon, that was a good place to start for answers.

"Do you think they'll ever release an official lore ebook about the game's universe?" Anonymous Elf said. "You could buy it and it would come with an in-game item as a bonus."

"Ooh, in-game bonuses, I love those!" Haruka said. "I hope it's a cosmetic item. I wanna adjust my jawline a bit, ya know?"

"I want to change the color of my hair," Lampu said.

"Uh. You sure you can't do that already? There's gotta be like an alchemy item for that or something."

Idle chatter lightened the mood, but the four-person group remained on high alert. Forum posters had been consistent on one crucial warning: It was always during the retreat that players suddenly found themselves overwhelmed.

How this worked was up for debate, but logically, Anonymous Elf assumed it was because as players moved through the forest, they were constantly being tailed by its monsters. The constant rustling of leaves wasn't random—it was a cover for their movement. When players turned back, they'd run straight into the group tailing them, while the group they would have encountered deeper ahead would then cut off their escape from behind.

It was time to test the theory. Sure enough, the brush shook violently behind just as movement tousled the brush in front.

"I knew it!" Anonymous Elf yelled. "*Cyclone!*"

Immediately, she sent a wave of AoE toward the forest behind them. This would preemptively deflect any webbing or venomous bristles shot from the brush in that direction. She turned to confirm

her work, and sure enough, the bugs' projectiles were scattered harmlessly aside. From the front, similar projectiles flew toward them, but the frontliners were ready, using their swords and shields to block the barrage.

As the initial assault subsided, they emerged—the rumored greater spiders, their large, dark forms as menacing as expected.

"The first hurdle to escape—making it out of the ambush alive," Anonymous Elf muttered under her breath.

She focused on the rear, unleashing AoE spell after AoE spell to protect their flank. Meanwhile, her party members engaged the pack in front. There was little she could do to help them. Any AoE spells aimed at the front would only end in a friendly fire disaster, and she trusted the capabilities of her party members, so she kept her focus firmly on covering their rear.

The greater spiders were, as expected, much tougher than the ones they'd faced so far. Some even survived her spells without going down in a single cast, which irked her. Though she was hesitant to use her strongest magic—risking damage to their spoils wasn't ideal—survival took priority.

Wave after wave of her more powerful spells tore into the group behind them, and soon the greater spiders began to wilt under the relentless assault. Glancing forward, she saw her party members making steady progress as well, gradually thinning the numbers of the pack in front.

With a martial yell, Haruka slipped past a spray of webbing and slashed the offending tarantella in the abdomen. But the beast reared back, unyielding, and unleashed a burst of bristles. She raised her shield swiftly and deflected the attack. The creature lunged at her with its fangs. She parried the strike with her sword and seized the opening to bash it upward with her shield, throwing it off-balance. Another blade—Kurumi's—thrust in from the side, piercing the tarantella's abdomen at the very spot Haruka had struck earlier. The tarantella writhed, collapsing under its own weight. Haruka wasted no time in dealing the killing blow, driving her blade down into its cephalothorax. She took no time for a breather, jumping immediately to the tarantella Lampu was fighting and bashing it in

its flank with her shield.

This was the style of combat the three elves were accustomed to. Whether they focused their efforts on taking down a single enemy or whether they focused on holding off their own targets, they protected and supported one another without missing a beat.

And while the frontliners held the line, it was up to Anonymous Elf to bring an end to the fighting.

"*Blaze Lance!*"

A shaft of hot fire shot out and pierced the tarantella. With her cooldowns nearly complete, Anonymous Elf cast the single-target spell to assist her party members but refrained from doing more. She didn't want to be caught with a laundry list of cooldowns when potential reinforcements arrived.

They fought in this manner for what seemed like an eternity, but eventually, the forest stilled. No motion remained except for the four elves standing amid the aftermath.

"Was that the last one?" Haruka said, breathing heavily.

"I think so," Anonymous Elf, letting out a sigh. "I think we made it."

They'd survived the initial ambush of greater tarantellas, and it was all thanks to the knowledge they'd come armed with. Without it, they would have lost the initiative to the webbing and toxins, and they wouldn't have been able to dictate the pace of the encounter.

"Okay, let's continue our retreat," Anonymous Elf said. "But stay on guard—there could still be more surprises ahead."

Just in case, she retrieved the compass from her inventory and checked their bearings. Sure enough, the path they were about to take wasn't exactly the one they needed to follow.

"This place is a nightmare," she muttered.

Navigating a dense forest was challenging enough without it constantly changing around them. Marking trees to retrace their steps would've been the go-to solution, but that wasn't an option here.

"I can't guarantee we'll be taking the quickest route out of here, but at least we should make it out..."

The compass was bulky and inconvenient, but there was no other

choice. They had no other way to orient themselves.

The group pressed on, occasionally stopping to adjust their heading. It wasn't just the dense growth slowing their progress—large pieces of rubble often blocked their path, forcing detours. In some areas, trees had grown through gaps in the rubble, creating large impassable walls. These spots often required significant changes to their route.

None of these sights had appeared on their way in, suggesting that this new terrain was a result of the dungeon's internal structure continuing to shift.

A forest you can enter, but never leave...

"It's like an antlion pit, and we're the ants..."

The irony was not lost on her, but right now, it was no laughing matter.

"Nacchan, wait!" Haruka cried out.

"Seriously, can you stop calling me Na"—Anonymous Elf looked up from her compass—"cchan..."

They'd walked straight into a dead end.

She had been so focused on the compass that she hadn't noticed where their latest detour had led them. The dead end wasn't the kind you'd find at the end of an alleyway. Instead, it was a clearing where, for no apparent reason, no trees grew.

"It's okay," Anonymous Elf said quickly, spinning around. "Let's turn back for now until we can—"

Before she could finish, a loud crash cut her off. A massive piece of rubble had fallen from seemingly nowhere, blocking the narrow animal trail they had just been following.

"Seriously? Where did that thing even come from?" Haruka said.

She glanced upward, but all she could see was a tangled canopy of branches, completely blocking the sky from view.

"I'm assuming something doesn't want us to leave..." Anonymous Elf said.

"Something...like *that*, Nacchan?" Kurumi said, pointing back toward the clearing.

This wasn't the time or place to care about her (lack of) anonymity anymore. Anonymous Elf turned to see, in the middle of

the clearing, a *gigantic* spiderlike creature.

"That's...a boss," Lampu said.

"Figures, since it doesn't want us to flee and all," Haruka said.

It wasn't clear from the strategy threads whether or not you could escape from a boss fight—mainly because, as far as anyone knew, no one had made it far enough to encounter one yet.

"World first," Kurumi said.

"Only if we defeat it," Haruka countered.

Haruka's quip came with a tinge of self-deprecation. Unlike a traditional, balanced group comp, their party, with its three almost identically specced frontliners, was "balanced" in a way that made it hard for them to deal with unknowns.

The creature before them dwarfed any of the greater tarantellas they had faced so far. Its legs, though appearing thin and spindly at first glance, were only deceptive in proportion to its massive size. In reality, they were likely thicker and sturdier than those of a typical tarantella. Unlike the rounded, stubby legs of its lesser counterparts, these were sharp and jagged, with spiny protrusions jutting out at each joint. Its coloration was a mix of yellows and reds that instinctively screamed danger, a stark contrast to the dark monotone of its predecessors.

But the most striking feature was what extended beyond its abdomen. Instead of another insect-like segment, it had an almost humanoid upper body—though "humanoid" was used loosely here. It was more like a grotesque approximation of a humanoid form, pieced together from spider parts.

It didn't feel like a higher-tier version of the monsters they'd fought so far, but a different type of monster entirely.

"This one's definitely got a 'queen' at the start of her name," Haruka muttered.

It was widely known that hive mind-like monsters, such as ants, were often led by a queen figure that coordinated their actions. This towering, nightmarish creature certainly seemed to fit the bill. If there was one ray of hope to cling on to, it was that the dungeon had only opened today. There was a chance this might be a fledgling queen—not yet grown to her full potential.

“But no...” Lampu muttered. “Fledgling ant queens can only produce weak ants. The greater spiders we fought earlier prove this one’s no baby.”

“Right?” Anonymous Elf agreed grimly.

An extra-loud rustling echoed through the forest, cutting off any further speculation. Suddenly, tarantellas emerged, crawling along the trees and rubble, while an army of ants swarmed the ground.

“It has adds?!” Haruka exclaimed.

“Looks like this is as far as we go,” Anonymous Elf said. “Whatever. We make our stand, kill as many as we can, earn as much EXP as we can before we go down!”

They still had the bounty of EXP from the mobs they’d farmed on their way in. Even if they died, they should at least break even. Even then, if they somehow came up short on EXP, the gold they’d earn from the materials they’d gathered would still put them ahead. In no way could this outing turn into a loss.

One thing was now crystal clear—the dungeon absolutely adjusted its difficulty based on the players attempting it. While the three-star rating might reflect the average difficulty, it was by no means the full extent of its challenge. They had entered expecting to make quick work of an area designed for mid-level players, only to find themselves outmatched instead.

But then there was something that occurred to Anonymous Elf after she took a moment to assess the situation. The adds in this boss fight were a mix of ants and spiders. The tarantellas here clearly belonged to the queen spider—so who commanded the ants?

There must also have been a queen ant somewhere nearby.

If that was true, then what if their party had been stronger? Would the dungeon have summoned both a queen ant and a queen spider to face them?

It seemed the upper limit of this dungeon’s difficulty was something they hadn’t even begun to touch.

“Well, at least we won’t be bored here for a while,” Anonymous Elf said.

Their decision to come to Old Hilith had already proven well

worth it.

***

"Here it comes!"

The fight kicked off with a barrage of venomous bristles fired by the spider queen.

"*Cyclone!*" Anonymous Elf cast her go-to spell against projectiles, only to find that instead of scattering the bristles aside, it merely altered their trajectory. Fortunately, none of her party members were hit, but that wasn't a good sign to start off the encounter with.

"Sorry, girls," she called out. "Looks like my magic won't be much help defensively here!"

She quickly relayed the information to her teammates so they'd know to properly guard themselves against the spider queen's projectiles. Her magic, then, could be reserved entirely for offense—to take down this monstrous foe and its swarming minions.

Instantly, she pivoted and cast AoE *Fire Magic* against the boss's adds.

If you thought *Fire Magic* was far from the best idea in a heavily wooded area, then you knew exactly why she'd avoided it up until now. But in this relatively open clearing, there was little to catch on fire and choke everyone with smoke. A ring of fire also had the added benefit of liquefying any projectiles the adds would launch toward the party.

The air was quickly filled with the stench of scorched arachnid and formicid. It was also the smell of countless potential loot drops being reduced to ash, but it was no time to be thinking about that right now.

This was their usual strategy—to have the three frontliners hold the boss's attention, while Anonymous Elf focused on clearing the arena of adds before turning her magic back on to the boss.

At first, it felt like business as usual. But after cast after cast of add-clearing spells, something became grimly apparent—their numbers weren't diminishing.

She *was* defeating them. She knew that because of the steady

stream of EXP rolling in. That just meant there was an overwhelming number of bugs lying in wait just beyond the treeline, ready to replace the fallen as soon as they were defeated.

This was *not* good news. Casters in this game excelled at delivering decisive, final blows—not at sustaining wave-after-wave survival combat like this. The way cooldowns worked in this game heavily punished such constant spell usage. If something didn't change soon, she would inevitably run out of options, and the tide of insects would overwhelm them.

Time. She needed time to recover MP and cooldowns. Mulling over her options, she looked to her three party members and the boss; they were holding their own against the massive spider. She felt shame at not being able to handle her own role, but this was no time for pride to get in the way.

Elf, despite being a magic-oriented character, *did* carry a melee weapon on her for emergencies. And she was a very experienced VR gamer. Even without the proper skills and stat distribution, she had the instincts to handle herself in melee combat. Her STR was low, but if all she needed was to survive in a melee fray, she could manage that much.

"Sorry!" she yelled. "I can't deal with the adds any longer!"

"Then don't!" Haruka yelled back. "We'll at least take the boss down with us!"

"Okay!" Anonymous Elf replied.

"Sounds like a plan!" Lampu said.

"Roger that!" Kurumi said.

Elf was technically the leader, but in moments like these, anyone could shout out their best plan. Haruka had taken the initiative this time, and the others followed without question. At the end of the day, they weren't just party members—they were friends. And whether the strategy came from the leader or someone else, their ultimate goal was the same: to work together, have fun, and overcome the challenges ahead.

Most of Elf's AoE spells were on cooldown, but her single-target spells were ready to go. If the plan was to focus on the boss, she could weave those spells between dodging attacks from the adds.

Sounds easy. Never is.

She divided her focus between the boss and the encroaching enemies, carefully aiming her next spell.

"*Blaze Lance!*"

The shaft of fire materialized and streaked toward the boss, when —"No way?! It can use magic?!"—a second fiery lance appeared in front of the boss, identical to hers.

It launched toward her. The two lances seemed to gravitate toward each other, and they collided in midair, resulting in a huge explosion. The energy of two *Blaze Lances* rained down on the battlefield, engulfing the area in flames, immolating nearby spiders and ants.

"Ow!" Haruka yelped.

"That's freakin' hot!" Kurumi added.

Of course, the same damage was afflicted on Elf's frontliners. Only Lampu, who'd made her way around to the boss's backside, wasn't sprinkled by a little fire damage.

It was utterly unheard of for insect-type monsters to be capable of using magic. How could Elf have messed this up? A queen ant in a different kingdom was said to only use physical attacks. There were records of an NPC knight defeating one! This was good firsthand—well, secondhand—knowledge from a player posting about it!

But this was no time to be dwelling on the impossibility of what was happening when it was happening *again*. The queen spider was already charging up a second magical attack—this one ice-based, from the look of it.

"Um... Uh...! *Flare Arrow*!"

Elf's fire arrow shot toward the queen, while the queen's icy spear hurtled toward Elf.

She knew *Flare Arrow* wouldn't be enough to neutralize whatever the queen had conjured—it wasn't even close. But she had no other options. *Blaze Lance* was still on cooldown, and she wanted to counter with a spell of the opposite element this time lest the reaction hurt her friends again.

As expected, the icy spear obliterated the fire arrow. The collision only slightly reduced the spear's size but didn't alter its trajectory as

it streaked through the air, striking Elf directly.

"Gah!" she grunted in pain. She'd lost the magic duel, and it wasn't hard to see why. The queen spider showed no concern for its offspring, while Elf had to be cautious not to hurt her teammates. This wasn't a fair fight—it never had been.

"Not like I'd ever considered I'd be having a magical duel with a bug, anyway."

She kept moving, casting *Treatment* on herself to mend the damage as she thought up her next move. If only she could've also healed her friends. Her decision to forgo learning *Healing Magic*, so she wouldn't overwhelm herself with unnecessary cooldowns was coming back to bite her in the ass.

"Damn it, I'm out of options!" Elf shouted. "I'm sending a big one her way—get out of the way!"

"Roger that!" Kurumi called back, while Haruka and Lampu nodded to confirm they'd heard her.

Elf quickly decided on *Lightning Shower*. Its AoE effect could target the spider queen directly, so any fallout from a potential counterspell reaction would hopefully still mostly damage the boss. The spell's area of effect was also relatively narrow, so her teammates should've had no trouble getting clear in time.

"*Lightning Shower!*" she chanted.

"Get out the—!" Haruka began, but her voice cut off abruptly.

"I'm— What the heck?!"

"Huh? My foot!"

Similar lines came out of Lampu and Kurumi. Horror dawned on Elf as she looked down and realized all three of her friends had for some reason, tripped and fell down right where they'd stood.

But it was too late. The spell had already been cast.

The queen, towering over the fallen trio, moved with unnatural speed, leaping clear of the incoming lightning as it struck Elf's friends.

"Gaaah!"

"Ack!"

"Bzbzbzbz."

Lightning Magic had one of the fastest activation times in the

game, making a clean dodge nearly impossible. But the spell's incantation and the trio's sudden movements to escape must have tipped the queen off just in time.

"I'm so sorry! Are you okay?!" Elf shouted, dashing to their side.

The queen's leap had at least created an opening, allowing Elf to finally reach her allies. She dropped to her knees, ready to heal them with *Treatment*. Together with a few potions, she hoped it would be enough to keep them in the fight. Ever since the queen began casting magic, her underlings had also started staying away from the fight, so they were left alone.

"*Treatment*. And here, a potion," Elf said. "Take an MP one as well, just in case."

"Thanks," Haruka croaked. "But I don't know if it'll help all that much."

"Why do you say that?" Elf asked.

"Why do you think we tripped?"

Elf looked down.

"You can't see it, but we're stuck," Lampu said. "Probably the queen's webbing. She must've been slowly laying her trap since the fight began."

Hearing this, Elf hurriedly tried to stand only to find her knee wouldn't budge.

Could a boss really have set up such an intricate trap?

Elf supposed it wasn't impossible. In fights like these, the frontliners' job was to hold the boss's attention while surviving its attacks. That meant their movements were, to some extent, dictated by the boss. Could the queen have subtly guided the entire group into her web without them realizing?

In PvP, this kind of maneuver might've been expected. But against a boss? And a bug one no less? Since when were they capable of such calculation?

"...I should have realized when it started using magic," Elf said bitterly. "Magic mostly relies on INT modifiers, so I should've adjusted my strategy for a more intelligent opponent."

Furthermore, she realized, for the queen spider to produce a *Blaze Lance* capable of completely countering her own, it must have

had at least an INT level comparable to hers. While it wasn't confirmed that high INT in mobs directly translated to higher intelligence, why wouldn't it? Now that she thought about it, it was obvious how higher STR lets one lift heavier objects—so why wouldn't the same apply to INT?

Thinking back, she hadn't seen any webbing come from a mob known as the spider queen. That alone should've been a red flag. Something had been happening just beyond her perception, and she had missed it.

To think this forest was home to not just one boss enemy of this level, but multiple—of course the rate for making it out alive was low.

But why isn't it zero*?*

The thought struck Elf. From a NPC mob's perspective, there was no merit to having a player leave alive. So why wasn't the queen spider coming to devour every single party that entered, no matter how strong or weak they were?

As she'd somewhat suspected all this time, there must've been something strange going on under the hood here. A limiter. There was a tweak somehow so that only the most powerful players could reach a boss. Maybe a kill counter or something. Reach that, and you'd unlock this nightmare.

Slash your way through the forest as a high-level player, grow overconfident, and for your hubris, your reward—your queen.

Elf looked up. The queen had made no effort to return to the party now that they were thoroughly stuck. Instead, it loomed in the distance, conjuring up a massive fireball. How many of those could they survive, she wondered?

"So, *that's* how you play it," Anonymous Elf muttered. "Whether it's next time, or the time after that, or the time after that, I don't know, but eventually, we *will* beat you."

Fire, ice, lightning, wind. Attacks of every element slammed into their party. Earth pulverized them into dust, then water washed away the remains.

Chapter 4: Exploit Early, Exploit Often

Back in the Old Hilith Capital, Leah slowly opened her eyes atop Mister Plates atop her throne.

"Oh, that felt *fantastic*," she said with a coy giggle.

Revenge never tasted so sweet. That elf girl, if she remembered correctly, had been the one who'd pointed at her saying how she "definitely thought Leah was magic focused" or something.

For a magic aficionado like her, what better way to go out than with a dazzling display of every color in the magic rainbow?

During the elven party's fight against the queen arachnia, Leah had taken full control of the queen's actions. It hadn't been her original plan; she'd only intended to watch the battle unfold through the queen's senses. But as the fight dragged on, her restlessness grew, excitement bubbling until she couldn't resist anymore and seized control entirely.

One thing she learned from this experience was that even if you fully summon yourself into one of your retainers and take complete control, you can still only cast spells the retainer knows.

Leah had only given the queen arachnia the most basic single-target and AoE spells for each element. They weren't particularly powerful, and even with the queen's boosted stats, she'd only barely managed to counter the elf girl's magic. But with that sticky web trap at the end there, she'd created an opening to strike with impunity.

It should've been a valuable learning experience for the queen arachnia too. With its high INT, its capacity to acquire knowledge—though not a power increase on paper—was still nothing to scoff at.

Taking a quick look at the Old Hilith dungeon tips and tricks thread, Leah saw that a new post had already popped up, likely from

the elf she'd just faced. The poster, going by "Anonymous Elf," was a name Leah actually recognized—this wasn't the first time she'd come across her online, but it was good to put a face to a name. A nameless name.

Much to Leah's delight, "Nacchan" had done exactly what Leah had hoped, confidently and thoroughly detailing her findings about the dungeon's dynamic difficulty system. Not that there was any great deception going on here; Leah had indeed designed the dungeon to work that way when left under the control of her queens.

The only exception was that for a certain...flavor of challenger (those who'd defeated her before), there would be no dynamic difficulty. They'd face the hardest difficulty from the start.

All in all, this had been a great launch day for Leah. The dungeons in her domain were going as well as they could.

Well, dun*geon*, that is.

Rokillean was still the only one seeing any traffic.

"I wonder if a four-star would attract any players," she mused aloud. "Trae and Lieb are too important to mess with, so I can't lower their defenses...but maybe the capital? Would it be strange for *me* to be in a four-star dungeon? And would the difficulty even drop as long as I'm there?"

Then maybe the solution was to remove herself from the capital, at least temporarily. But how could she let the playerbase know without relying on social media? Perhaps a grand spectacle, like the Cataclysm appearing somewhere else, would make it clear.





If visibility was the goal, then the best place to stage a show would be where the playerbase was currently laser-focused on: dungeons.

She could make a surprise appearance at a popular dungeon—show up at random, clear it for funsies, and stick around for a while. At the same time, she would lower the capital's difficulty.

"Then the first question would be," she hummed to herself, "which dungeon do I show up at?"

The term "dungeon," as a term coined by the playerbase and not the devs, was something of a misnomer. The areas it referred to weren't the linear, closed off, or even instanced spaces primarily inhabited by enemies as the word usually connotated, but a much broader subset of areas. Sure, there were probably cave-style dungeons, but there were also forests, towns, basically open sections of the world map she could easily scout out and drop into. For those, the fastest way to clear them would be to simply descend from the sky and challenge the boss directly, skipping the tedium of clearing the trash altogether.

"In that case, I should just drop Uluru in from the sky. Now that would be a spectacle."

It would be quick, easy, and an unbeatable strategy for clearing any dungeon.

But no, Leah had to remind herself—the goal wasn't to clear the dungeon; it was to let the playerbase know that the Cataclysm wasn't home.

Almost put the cart before the horse there.

With that in mind, she ought to make her entrance as visible as possible. Perhaps say, by approaching from a nearby Safe Area where players gathered before heading into the dungeon. It wouldn't be the speedrun she'd have preferred, but a more traditional dungeon clear might work better for this purpose.

"Next question: What motive does a 'Cataclysm' have for randomly showing up and obliterating a dungeon?"

The playerbase seemed to love events with lore tie-ins. The influx of players to Rokillean after rumors spread was proof enough of that. Maybe a similar approach would work here.

Not that she'd go around announcing her reasoning on a loudspeaker, of course. But on the off chance someone asked, she'd have an answer ready. Only if asked, though—staying mysterious suited her character better. Why spell out her motives when the playerbase could come up with something far more compelling on their own?

Leah pulled up the teleport destination list from the forums and set it side by side with a map of Old Hilith and Oral.

Looking at it now, it struck her that Hilith was kind of a boring, unassuming kingdom. Its territory was average in size, with no standout geographical features or particularly dangerous areas. For the people who had lived there, that must have been a blessing.

Had been a blessing, Leah had to remind herself.

Oral, by comparison, was a larger kingdom. Situated at the very center of the continent, Oral encompassed the former capital of the once-unified kingdom that had ruled the land. How it managed to retain such a crucial piece of territory after the split was a mystery to Leah. Regardless of the reason, Oral's central location meant it bordered almost all of the Six Kingdoms. This also meant Oral's territory touched on and included far more monster territories than Hilith. Perhaps that constant threat was why Oral was said to produce better knights than Hilith—or so Leah had heard.

Apparently, these knights—now Lyla's knights—had been dispatched by Lyla alongside the Oralian army to subdue regions that weren't designated as teleport destinations. Whether this was a part of Lyla's kingdom simulation thing was unclear, as Lyla hadn't provided a clear explanation, but Leah suspected that avoiding teleport destinations was at least partly to keep players from raising a fuss about it on the forums.

"If word ever got out that Lyla and I looked alike, wasn't the plan to say we were once blood-related? Maybe there's a story to spin if I caused a stir near Lyla's domain in Hugelkuppe."

Hearing this, Sieg, standing by the throne, shifted in his armor. "Given that Lady Lyla and Your Majesty are sisters, could we say it's some subconscious yearning for the warmth of lost kin?"

Leah could feel her brow furrow instinctively. There was nothing

wrong about Sieg's suggestion. In fact, it was quite good. But the way he worded it, the things it implied, gave Leah an ick.

"It behooves me to advise against making that expression when Ser Diaz is around, Your Majesty," Sieg said. "Well, if that plan does not suit you, then allow me to propose another. Your conquest has already followed a westward trajectory, from the Great Woods of Lieb to the Old Hilith Capital, and it is believed by some that the Cataclysm's march is fated to continue in that direction. We could use this to our advantage. By striking farther west, we could imply that the capital was merely a waypoint, with your true goal lying beyond—perhaps in Oral. Such a narrative would naturally support an attack on a dungeon in that region."

Now *that* was something Leah could get behind.

But would it conflict with anything she'd already said or done? She'd talked to Wayne once—right before obliterating him in their rematch at the capital—telling him she wanted to take over the city because she found it beautiful, or something along those lines.

Would that be an issue?

Probably not, because it wasn't a lie. And besides, he doesn't know why I'd been heading toward the capital to begin with. Suppose I just happened to pass by and became enamored of it.

Of course, all this complicated motive stuff only mattered because she was intent on playing as an NPC. A player wouldn't need any deeper reason to take over the capital beyond seeing if they could—which, admittedly, *had* been her actual motivation.

But the playerbase couldn't know about that. In order to continue her deception, they had to think she was committing all this destruction for a reason.

Carving a path westward. It just so happened that Hilith had been in the Cataclysm's path, and it would just so happen again that Lyla's domain lay in that same direction—and definitely not for some yearning for lost kin or whatever, *ew*.

"All right," Leah said, "we'll go with your plan, Sieg. As for any dungeons west of here... Ah, here's one, right before the border with Oral. And there's a quaint little town next to it. According to the list, it's a one-star, but... Well, I suppose it'd look suspicious if an NPC

started picking and choosing based on a star rating they had no knowledge of, so we'll just have to flatten them all as we go."

But perhaps she'd spare the town. It'd be useful to have a friendly town next to the dungeon she was about to go flatten. God knows there weren't many of those left in the area.

"The Plain of Tür, eh?"

That was the name of the dungeon. The plains had been a favored leveling ground for beginners, with the nearby town, called Lieflais, serving as its hub. It was a safe space for new players to find their footing and build confidence before venturing into more dangerous areas—similar to what the Great Woods of Lieb had been. The difference was that, in Lieb's case, the surrounding grasslands didn't have a specific name. It and the forest itself had been treated as a single zone since the devs "dungeon-ified" everything.

The thought of ruining yet another safe space for new players gnawed at Leah's conscience. *But,* she argued. *How long had the* playerbase *known to avoid Hilith? Since at least the third day of the event.*

The difficulty curve in Hilith had been shattered for a while now, so anyone hoping for a gentle start already knew to steer clear. The teleportation service had been bringing in additional players to challenge Leah's domain, but those were players who'd scrolled to the bottom of a list and specifically chose a dungeon listed under "Other." If they wanted to argue they didn't know what they were signing up for, Leah didn't want to hear it.

Basically, because Hilith was a raid boss's kingdom now, and that should be common knowledge at this point, if you wandered into it, that was your own damn fault.

Besides, Leah wasn't planning to camp in the plains forever. Once she was done, she'd leave some of her weakest underlings behind and convert the area into a one-star dungeon. Sure, she'd trample over it for a bit, but as long as she restored it afterward, no harm, no foul, right?

It reminded her of something from the old days: the "five-second rule." If something bad only happened for a short time, it was like it

hadn’t happened at all.

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Leah decided to wear Mister Plates for this excursion. Since the whole point was to emphasize her absence from the capital, leaving the dummy Cataclysm behind made no sense.

As for companions, she agonized over the choice before ultimately settling on Sugaru. Clearing a one-star dungeon with a Cataclysm and a Disaster-class entity was massive overkill, but she wanted to do this for Sugaru. She’d been cooped up in Lieb for so long, she barely got to see anything beyond her domain.

Plus, Sugaru could fly, which saved Leah the hassle of arranging alternative transportation.

It was fully night now. With Rokillean under the command of the queen arachnia, it was in good hands.

If they wanted to cause a spectacle, it was best to wait for morning. Still, Leah decided to leave now so they could arrive early, scout the town and surrounding areas, and get a better sense of the lay of the land before making their move.

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They arrived at Lieflais well before dawn. In terms of distance, the town was actually closer to the capital than Rokillean. Thanks to the power of flight, it had been a quick and easy journey.

From high in the air, lights flickered on the distant ground below. They seemed to be streetlights, their glow visible to both natural sight and the magically enhanced vision granted by Evil Eye, making Leah suspect they were magical in nature.

“Magical streetlights,” she mused, impressed. “Now *that’s* a town that believes in public safety.”

Beyond the town lay a vast stretch of open land—likely the Plain of Tür. From what Leah knew, it resembled an African savanna during the rainy season. Though there was no confirmation if this region even had rainy or dry seasons, it was entirely plausible it

looked like this year-round.

They landed in an area a little removed from both the town and the plain, setting up camp. Though all that really meant was just finding Leah a place to log out, as both Mister Plates and Sugaru only needed a few minutes of sleep at a time.

This made sense for Sugaru, given her origins as an ant-based life-form. But it was curious that Mister Plates, an enchanted hunk of metal, required sleep at all. He didn't get tired, no matter what position he was in, and he didn't need to eat, so logically, he shouldn't need to sleep either. Yet, he did.

Leah considered this. In the game, "sleeping" was how players saved their respawn points. Maybe that was what Mister Plates' sleep really represented—not rest, but a way to log a checkpoint. Thinking of it that way, the few minutes he and Sugaru spent "sleeping" might simply be the minimum time required for the game to register it.

Satisfied with her conclusion, Leah dug a hole in the ground with *Earth Magic*, plopped Mister Plates inside, and logged out right inside him.

The next morning, Leah logged in at the (in-game) crack of dawn. Before crawling out of their dirt hole, she cast *Camouflage* to make herself—and by extension, Mister Plates—invisible. For Sugaru, she simply instructed her to cling to Mister Plates. Since they'd be flying, no one would see through the camouflage to spot Sugaru hitching a ride. Unless, of course, someone was flying higher than them...

Once again, they took to the skies to scout Lieflais, this time in daylight. The night before, Leah had mostly relied on *Evil Eye*, but in the morning light, Mister Plates' vision, enhanced with *Eagle Eye*, offered a much clearer view. She could see that even at this early hour, a steady stream of players was already venturing out into the grasslands to farm.

Talk about dedicated.

On closer inspection, Leah noticed two distinct groups in the stream of players. One group was heading into the grasslands from the town, while the other was coming in from just outside the town.

She guessed that the latter group had arrived via the Plain of Tür teleport node. That made sense, given the teleport node's name. If it were located in the town itself, it would have been called the Lieflais teleport node.

"Hmm? Wait a second."

The teleportation system allowed one-way travel to designated destinations. This limitation was designed to reduce the disruption free teleportation might cause. But...

Isn't Lieflais a teleport hub just a stone's throw from the Tür teleportation node?

Ergo, wouldn't it be possible for players to teleport to the plain, walk over to Lieflais, then teleport somewhere else?

She retrieved her map from her inventory and cross-checked the list of teleport nodes with a map of Old Hilith. She found that the Plain of Tür teleport node was the only one that could feasibly facilitate this kind of interaction.

Next, she pulled up a map of Oral she'd pilfered from Lyla. After a quick review, she found another town-teleport node pair in Oral that seemed to work the same way.

"That basically means these two towns are linked—there's free teleportation between them," she murmured. "Depending on what the playerbase does with this knowledge, these towns might even grow more wealthy than their respective capitals..."

Did the devs really think this through?

With one node in Old Hilith and another in Oral, it seemed reasonable to assume these "exceptions" to the one-way teleportation rule were deliberate—perhaps a safety net for beginners, a kind of get-out-of-jail-free card for when they needed help.

They trusted the playerbase *with something like this?*

Time and time again, across every game and every era, players had proven exactly why they couldn't be trusted with anything remotely nice. If there was an exploit to be found, the hardcore crowd would sniff it out, milk it dry, and ruin whatever well-meaning feature had been intended for everyone else.

Leah just felt lucky to have found it on the second day.

She doubted she was the only one who had, but whoever else had figured this out was definitely keeping dead quiet. The developers had been clear about their intention to prevent teleportation from disrupting the in-game economy, but if each kingdom had a teleport node like this, it'd be more than easy to set up a system of smuggling between kingdoms. This kind of oversight was exactly the sort of thing that could trigger an immediate hotfix or even a rollback if someone exploited it on a large scale for economic gain. Leah suspected the silence surrounding it was intentional—no one wanted to risk losing the opportunity.

"I should call Lemmy and Riley, have them buy up a few properties in this town," she muttered, then reconsidered. "Hmm, no. Might as well bring in Kelli and Marion too and shark the whole place. We still have all the funds we liquidated from the noble residences in the capital. This is the perfect place to put it to use."

Once again, Leah found herself playing an entirely different game than everyone else. Though, if others were attempting the same strategy, then she wasn't so special.

Or maybe she was. She had access to capital most other players didn't.

In the current in-game economy, NPCs held significantly more economic power than players. Even if players wanted to borrow large sums to buy land in these towns, there was only so much capital a newcomer to the world—just a few months in—could realistically access.

Even if a handful of plots were already player owned, it wouldn't amount to much. Leah could easily buy up the rest and control the majority. And that should be *fairly* frictionless. Since she didn't have an immediate plan for these land or buildings, there wasn't a need to evict residents or argue about her intentions with the sale. She could simply purchase the deeds and allow the current residents to stay—a "sell the land to me, but otherwise it's business as usual," arrangement. If she offered landowners a price significantly higher than what they'd earn in rent over several decades, they'd almost certainly sell.

In that case, it might also be worth *Retaining* a few of the

residents in the town. Not all of them, of course, but just enough to maintain stability and serve her purposes.

The attack on the dungeon would have to wait—Leah had found something far more worthwhile. She contacted Kelli, instructing them to crack open the castle treasury and bring over as much as they could carry.

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"I see. In other words, you want us to rule over this town from the shadows without letting the 'players' catch on?" Kelli asked.

"That's...not exactly my intention, but yeah, I guess that's what it amounts to when you buy up all the land," Leah said.

She had summoned the Mountain Cats to Lieflais and just finished explaining her plan to them. To make it work, she'd also spent all the EXP she'd earned the day before to unlock *Retainer* for each of them. It was another unplanned expense, but there was no way around it if she wanted this to succeed. She decided to think of it as an investment.

"I'll leave the execution up to you," Leah said. "You can use *Retainer* heavily to save money, or sparingly and buy the land normally. Ah. But leave the town's lord and his retinue alone—I'll *Retain* them myself. Beyond that, do as you like."

"Understood," Kelli nodded.

"As for the players," Leah continued, "try to keep them from catching on if you can, but honestly, I doubt most of them are here for anything other than farming the dungeon. Let's call it a stretch goal. What no one can find out under any circumstances is that the four of you are working for me. That's the only hard rule. Do whatever you want, as long as it can't be traced back to me."

Leah also wanted to control the towns in other kingdoms with similarly placed teleport nodes—call them portals for simplicity—but she didn't know their exact locations yet. Besides, she didn't have enough hands to manage them all. If her assumption was correct and each kingdom had one such portal, then controlling this town would already give her command over one-sixth of the portal

network spanning the continent. That alone would be significant.

Hilith might have lost its designation as a kingdom, but in return, Leah had turned it into a place of high demand among players. The raid boss, the special dungeons—all of it was her doing. So why shouldn't she be the one to control this vital gateway? In fact, the most vital gateway of them all?

"Now then. It's time to delve into the dungeon. But first, a quick visit to the town's lord," Leah said.

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First, Leah *Retained* the lord. The nobles in Old Hilith were far more compliant than those in Oral. A quick *Charm* was all it took to turn the town's lord into her drooling lapdog.

Next, she moved on to his wife, daughter, and son, *Retaining* each of them in turn. If Lyla's supposition was correct, all three of them should've been noble humans, not just the lord.

Finally, she *Retained* a man in his fifties or sixties who had seen her slip into view while casting *Charm* on the lord. She assumed he was their butler. Killing him was an option, but given the importance of a butler in managing the estate, she decided he was worth keeping.

With the entire noble family and their butler under her control, the household was as good as hers.

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"Sugaru, sorry for the wait. Shall we head to the dungeon?" Leah said.

<Have you finished everything you needed to in town?> Sugaru asked.

"As far as my part goes, yes."

Leah's job was done here. The rest of the plan was now up to Kelli and the town's lord to carry out.

The unexpected side quest had delayed their start, but that might have worked out in their favor. By now, quite a crowd had gathered

near the dungeon. Among them, at least a few were bound to post online about whatever unfolded today.

"That said, I'm still a little undecided as to *how* we're going to clear the dungeon," Leah murmured.

<We could carpet bomb the entire thing from above with magic.>

"No, we're still planning to use it later. I'd rather not take control of a smoking wasteland."

It'd be a waste of a perfectly good grassland.

"We'll proceed on foot. Do it normally," Leah said.

Leah cast *Camouflage*, and they flew to a corner of the zone where a large crowd of players had gathered—likely the dungeon's entrance. Once there, Leah canceled *Camouflage* and dropped from the sky like a rock. Flashiness, after all, was everything.

Inside the heavy suit of armor that was Mister Plates, she made an impressive sound hitting the ground, the impact kicking up a thick cloud of dust that obscured her from view. Sugaru landed quietly in front a second later.





As the dust settled, Leah found herself staring at a sea of flabbergasted faces.

Well, with Mister Plates being the three-meter-tall behemoth that he was, and Sugaru an almost two-meter-tall eldritch horror herself, Leah couldn't blame them for being a *little* surprised.

But that surprise didn't last long.

"Huh?" someone muttered. "Who is that? *What* is that? A monster?"

"Did someone trigger a special event?" another voice asked. "Who did this? Anyone know?"

The crowd seemed strangely nonchalant about their sudden appearance.

Really? Leah thought, unamused. *No one recognizes the Cataclysm that befell Hilith?*

Then again, this was a one-star dungeon. Most of these players were probably new and hadn't progressed far enough in their gaming journey to know what a raid boss looked like.

But maybe they'll recognize me if I step outside Mister Plates?

But Leah couldn't bring herself to do that. It felt kinda too...out there.

<How vexing,> Sugaru's voice buzzed. <Shall we teach them a lesson?>

<Nah, leave them alone,> Leah replied telepathically. <Unless they want to aggress, of course. Then do want you want with them.>

There was no EXP to be gained from slaughtering such lowbies—or from clearing the dungeon's monsters, for that matter. Dragging it out would just be a waste of time.

Following that reasoning, there was no need to waste time on a self-introduction either. Even if these players didn't know who she was, their eventual posts online describing their experience would inevitably alert more experienced players to make the connection. Leaving the dots for others to connect was always more effective at generating buzz, anyway.

Ignoring the gawking crowd, Leah and Sugaru stepped toward the dungeon entrance.

Curiously, most of the players began to follow them.

Do they still think this was part of some event? Leah wondered. *Or do they intend to trail after us in the dungeon, scavenging whatever loot we left behind?*

Was that even acceptable from a dungeon etiquette perspective? It felt like being followed by a pack of hyenas.

Not that it mattered much. Leah didn't have her sights on anything that would drop from this dungeon. If they wanted to waddle behind her and pick up the leftovers, so be it.

Suddenly, something burst out of the ground ahead of them, halting their progress. At first glance, it looked like a massive capybara, but Leah quickly realized it was a gigantic mole. Sugaru stepped wordlessly in front of Mister Plates, and struck the mole down with her bare hand. Her blow tore a hole clean through the creature. Blood sprayed across the pristine grasslands as the mole fell to the ground, dead.

<It seems these creatures have dug innumerous tunnels in the soil beneath,> Sugaru said.

As she spoke, her antenna-like appendages fluttered gently. Leah guessed she could use them to gauge the condition of the ground below—like active sonar, but for earth.

<I see,> Leah replied, considering this. <Do you think that's why this area is a plain instead of a forest? The mole infestation is so extensive that trees can't take root here. But grasses can, because their roots don't reach the tunnels.>

If that was true, it might be possible to turn the plain into a forest by exterminating the moles. Alternatively, she could keep the tunnels and fill them with ants instead, transforming the entire plain into one massive ant nest.

<This zone might be better suited to us than I thought,> Leah said. <Let's get a few sapper ants in here and have them start working, shall we?>

<Very well,> Sugaru replied. She summoned five engineer ants. <Go forth, my brood. If you encounter an entity you suspect to be the leader, do not engage. Return to us and report immediately.>

The ants wasted no time, disappearing into the earth. Whether

they found a tunnel right away was unclear, but given how quickly they vanished, it certainly seemed like they had.

Sugaru then summoned another group of five engineer ants and sent them into the ground beneath the plains. She repeated this process five times, bringing the total to thirty ants.

<Thanks,> Leah said. <By the way, why did you specifically tell them to keep the leader alive? If it's within their capabilities to handle, why not let them?>

There was a slight pause before Sugaru replied, <I must admit, I am rather eager to test my abilities against another. It may be an overmatch, but a monster considered lord of its domain could make for a suitable opponent.>

Leah had completely forgotten—after *Rebirthing* Sugaru, she hadn't had the chance to assess the new Disaster-class entity's combat skills. Sugaru was absolutely right that she would overpower whatever boss-type monster came their way, but Leah supposed it was still better than nothing.

<In that case, I'd be more than glad to have you handle all the combat for this occasion,> Leah suggested. <You can try your hand against the players too, if you'd like.>

It was just then that a concerned murmur spread through the group of players behind them.

"Seriously, what's going on? What kind of event is this?"

"So is that thing the chief of all ants? It's gonna attack the plain?"

"Then what the hell is that giant suit of armor? You're telling me that's some type of ant?"

"A huge suit of armor with an ant boss in tow... I feel like I know this from somewhere..."

Leah and Sugaru turned to face them. Immediately, the group of players took a cautious step back.

"It's looking this way..."

"Are... Are we in danger?"

"Wait!" someone blurted. "My friend just got back to me. This is *that*. That raid boss—the one that destroyed the entire Kingdom of Hilith!"

"No way! The one they were talking about online? What the hell

is it doing here?”

There was the reaction Leah had been looking for. Better late than never, she supposed.

Now, it was unfortunate for the assembled crowd, but they had just unwittingly triggered a raid encounter. The number of players present was roughly equal to the team that had taken Leah down in the capital—so fair play, right?

“Sugaru,” Leah said, raising her voice so the players could hear. “Deal with this unruly lot.”

That sounded like a line triggering a boss encounter, right?

<Understood, my queen.>

Shock rippled through the crowd.

“Bwa— Huh?! Did we just walk into a raid boss encounter?!”

“Who did it?! Who freakin’ did it?!”

“What does it matter who did it?! The fight’s already started! Tanks! Get the tanks up here!”

Interesting, Leah mused. It seemed this group wasn’t entirely made up of new players. Friends helping friends, perhaps.

The way the game was designed, with its lack of a structured party or alliance system, didn’t discourage this kind of behavior. Since EXP wasn’t automatically split, higher-level players could tag along with lower-level ones without siphoning their EXP, so long as they didn’t intervene. Their purpose was to intervene only if the situation spiraled, as it had here.

Sugaru stood motionless, patiently waiting as the group’s tanks clattered forward to the front. She likely felt that winning the battle against this ragtag group with a surprise attack was pointless.

The tanks formed a line, raising their shields and taking defensive stances. Their strategy seemed to be to wait for Sugaru to make the first move, live against her first attack, and then counterattack appropriately.

Leah wasn’t impressed with this. Sure, they weren’t a proper raid group, and yes, they were fighting a boss they’d never seen before, but it still just felt too...passive. When facing an unknown opponent, knowing you’re able to defend against their attacks was important, sure, but...why even give them that chance? Why wait and give

them full rein to land effective strikes when you could disrupt them first?

Sugaru seemed to understand this completely as she strolled up to the shield wall, not a care in the world for her own safety—and swept her hand across the line with the same casual brutality she'd shown earlier against the mole.

"Gah!"

"That packs a punch!"

The shield wall crumbled as the tanks scattered—not quite like leaves in the wind, but they were still sent sprawling a good distance. Some shields were torn clean in half, while others bore heavy damage. Either the materials differed, or some defensive skills had mitigated the blow.

The counterattack came. A flurry of fireballs hurtled toward Sugaru, the casters timing their spells perfectly to strike while she was still recovering from her attack. They looked like single-target spells. More accurate than AoE spells, they were almost guaranteed to hit as long as the target was within their effective range.

Almost, however, didn't mean always. Leah hadn't witnessed it firsthand, but apparently, if you could move faster than the spell, you could simply slip out of the way, or dodge behind cover and let the spell impact that instead.

Sugaru seemed to do a combination of both as she grabbed a shieldless tank at her feet to use as her own impromptu shield. The fireballs slammed into the unfortunate player, who screamed in agony before bursting into particles of light. She stomped down on another tank frozen beneath her, while the remaining tanks took this opportunity to scramble away to a safer distance.

But then, without seemingly so much as a word, the retreating tanks burst into red-hot flames.

Sugaru's magic?

Some entities in this game, like Sugaru and her ilk, couldn't speak, yet could use magic all the same. That raised the question of how activation phrases worked for them. Sugaru had been Leah's companion since nearly the start of the open beta test. Leah had funneled a significant share of EXP into her, both for testing

purposes and because she was a formidable *Retainer* user in her own right, commanding a mighty swarm of insectoids. It was worth remembering that Sugaru had ascended to a level that was basically on par with Leah's. If she hadn't been Leah's retainer, she would've likely become the tenth Great Cataclysm by now.

None of the mid-level players, let alone the beginners, stood a chance against her. The roaring inferno consumed the tanks, along with a few melee DPS players who had ventured too close for a better look.

"This raid boss ain't no joke!" a player yelled. "How are we supposed to beat this thing without the event item?"

"Wait, wait, wait. Isn't the one behind it the *real* raid boss?! This one's just a warm-up!"

"A bug who uses *Fire Magic*...? Then, maybe it's weak to water spells... Or ice?"

"Forget that! Quick, someone send out a distress signal online! Maybe if we hold out long enough, some bored pro players will come to save us!"

It was an admirable thought, Leah mused, but not a likely one. It was only the second day of the patch. Any high-level player worth their salt would be busy grinding their own dungeons. Or, at the very least, would have already used their one-way teleport to get somewhere far from a hub. Even if someone wanted to help, it would take time for them to get here.

Not that Leah would mind if they did. She'd be more than happy to give them a suitably "warm" welcome. If the call for help reached "pro players," there was even a chance members of the raid that had defeated her the first time might show up.

<Wait, Sugaru,> Leah said. <It seems we might have some additional company. The goblins are calling for backup, so let's give them a little time to arrive, shall we?>

<Of course, boss.>

While they waited, Leah discreetly checked the online chatter from within Mister Plates. Unsurprisingly, several threads had already popped up about her appearance. But the response this time was...less than ideal. In fact, it was *terrible*. Some threads were

even being flagged as spam because so many had appeared at once.

Well, that doesn't bode well for anyone else showing up.

Back then, Wayne's call for help had drawn a crowd of top-level players, but that might have been more about the timing of the event than anything else. Right now, with EXP penalties for dying active and no "event" item to incentivize participation—though Leah knew this misconception about the artifacts was widespread—people seemed far more pessimistic about their chances of victory.

And the optics of this situation didn't exactly help. A raid boss attacking a beginner dungeon, to the playerbase, probably looked like a territorial dispute between monsters. Why bother intervening in something like that when no direct harm to NPCs or civilization was at stake?

Then there was the other, far more practical reason no one was rushing to help out: Even if this entire group of players were wiped out, these were mainly new players. They had low levels of EXP; anything they lost could be regained quickly. There was no world in which veteran players teleporting in *potentially to their deaths* for a bunch of newbies and a one-star dungeon made any sense. In the worst-case scenario, the playerbase lost access to a one-star dungeon. Or it might get turned into a much harder one. Either way, there was nothing about this one in particular that merited saving when there were plenty of other one-star dungeons out there.

Of course, if they knew the true *value of this particular dungeon's teleport node...*

But would those who *did* know actually fight any harder to save it? Leah doubted it. Any player sharp enough to figure it out would also realize their odds of winning were slim and choose to cut their losses instead.

"It stopped attacking," a player said cautiously.

"Why?" another asked.

"Does it matter why?! How's it looking for reinforcements?!"

"They think we're trolls! Damn! Someone, help me out here!"

This group of players, instead of using the lull to regroup or rethink their strategy, seemed content to waste the opportunity,

waiting for someone to come save them. Leah almost felt bad for them. They might've been beginners, but the gap between them and the so-called high-level players wasn't as vast as they thought. This game was designed without a leveling system, its only measure of progress being total EXP expenditure, but even that was just a yardstick, nothing more. True strength came from crafting the right build and executing it well. She couldn't help but wonder when these players would figure that out and stop relying on "better" players to bail them out.

Sugaru chittered in Leah's mind. <My queen, I don't mind waiting, but *must* we keep these stooges alive?>

<Well, my thought was that keeping them alive might make them more desperate to call for help. And while they seem to be trying, nobody's coming.>

Leah tried speaking to the players. "It seems you're all intent on calling for aid, but no one appears to be coming. How is that? Have you no friends?"

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Who you calling friendless?!" someone stammered.

"Hey! What are you doing, getting baited by an NPC?!"

But the conversation ended up being as pointless as Leah had expected. "If help isn't coming, then this is just a waste of time."

Taking Leah's words as a signal, Sugaru unleashed a barrage of AoE ice spells toward the group. Another wordless cast. She seemed to purposefully target the player who had been muttering about her supposed weaknesses, as if to say, *Weak to* Ice Magic*? Hardly.*

The remaining group was mostly backline casters. If the tanks hadn't been able to stop Sugaru's attacks, the squishies stood no chance. One by one, they froze solid, then shattered into icy shards, leaving just a single party of players still alive.

"Christ. What's with the sudden scripted loss...?" one of them muttered.

"I swear, when I find who triggered it..."

Facing them, Sugaru raised her hands (her two topmost hands, that is), and shot webbing toward the group.

Leah actually did a double take. She shouldn't have, really, as it made perfect sense Sugaru could use the same skills as her arachnid

offspring, but...she'd shown no evidence of it all this time. It must have been a skill automatically acquired during her *Rebirth*.

"Spider webs?!" someone shouted.

"You're telling me that thing *isn't* some kind of ant?!"

"Wait, it has eight legs! Of course it's gotta be some kind of arachnid!"

"Yeah, but arachnids don't have wings last time I checked!"

True, Leah thought. *True...* From her number of legs to her wings to her...well, everything else, Sugaru had long transcended being inspired by any known life-form. The webbing coming from her hands, though, suggested that was where her spinnerets were.

...Perhaps Leah would have Sugaru take up spinning one of these days.

<I think you'll find that the queen arachnia are also capable of this feat, in addition to spinning webs from their abdomen,> Sugaru said.

Putting the odd, violating feeling of having her mind read aside, Sugaru had just told Leah something very interesting. If the queen arachnia could do that, perhaps she would acquire *Sewing* for the trainees in Trae, assign them to be spinners and clothiers. Humanoid members had recently spiked within her circle, after all.

Leah returned her attention to the battle at hand. After securing her remaining prey in tight cocoons, Sugaru sprayed a mystery liquid onto them. White smoke hissed up as the substance made contact, accompanied by an acrid, pungent smell. Equipment, flesh, and bone melted away almost instantly. It seemed to be a more potent form of the formic acid secreted by sapper ants, but its ability to break down nearly any material put it well beyond the domain of "chemistry" and firmly into "magic."

When the liquid had done its work, only the silk from the cocoons remained, floating in a shallow puddle of what used to be her victims.

"A job well done, Sugaru," Leah said aloud. "Though that silk of yours... If it can withstand the corrosive effects of your acid like that, I can foresee it being very in demand, indeed."

<Shall I have the queen arachnia set to work producing it? They

produce silk of the same quality. Lower-rank arachnids will yield silk of slightly lesser quality.>

"Hmm... We could, but just having the silk wouldn't be much help without the ability to spin and weave it. Let's wait until I've trained them in *Sewing*."

Some crafting skills required a certain level of DEX and INT to unlock, but that should be no problem for Queen-class individuals. This then gave Leah further inspiration to give queen vespoids *Alchemy* and *Blacksmithing*, and queen beetles *Leatherworking* and *Crafting*. They had plenty of time to devote to a hobby. It wasn't as if the queens were going to personally fight every group of players that came into their dungeons, not with the number of underlings at their command.

"The sappers still haven't found the boss, eh?" Leah asked. "Given the size of this plain, I guess it'll take a while."

<I can increase their numbers, see if we can't speed up the process.>

Sugaru summoned thirty additional engineer ants and sent them burrowing into the ground.

"Maybe we could get a few hornets, have them scout up in the sky for—" A commotion interrupted Leah's train of thought. She turned to see a group of players approaching from the direction of the nearby teleport node. "Never mind. Now's not the time. Looks like we've got company."

And quite the company it was. A massive crowd approached. Leah quickly checked socials again, wondering if she had missed something, but no—the response online was still as lackluster as ever. So where had this crowd come from? The timing was curious.

Even more curious was their gear. It didn't just look good, it almost looked...matching. Leah didn't possess any skill to judge the quality of their gear just by looking at it—nor did she know if such a skill existed—but she doubted anyone would make the effort or spend the gold required to make low-tier gear matching.

"There it is!" one of them shouted. "The big son of a gun is the raid boss that destroyed Hilith!"

"Well, looks like all the newbies are dead. Poor saps," another

said.

If their aggressive approach hadn't made it obvious, their conversation left no room for doubt—they were here for Leah. And from the way they talked about the players she'd wiped earlier, it was probably safe to assume they weren't connected.

That means they must have responded to the distress call online. Yet, they didn't post about it—nor had they needed to, considering they'd managed to round up this many people. Leah counted them, and there were more of them than the group that had defeated her during the battle in the capital. At least forty, if not more.

Forty. Freaking. People.

Sure, the lack of a formal party or raid system meant there were no technical limits on group size, but really? *Forty*? This wasn't some full-scale battle—it was a duel against a single opponent. At this point, was it even practical or useful?

Leah decided to make first contact. "My, my, my, *such* an impressive crowd. Come to avenge your friends? Tell me, how did you all manage to come here so quickly?"

She tried to speak as NPC-agnostic as possible while still probing for useful information. At the very least, she could figure out who the leader was based on who responded first.

Sure enough, someone who stood toward the front of the group, a tank-looking player equipped in shiny armor, spoke up. First to his teammates, "Whoa, are we sure this is the Cataclysm? It looks the part, but it's voice is kinda...cute."

Then more loudly to Leah, "We players have methods of communication beyond your comprehension, foul creature! Your arrogance will be your undoing!"

Leah wasn't entirely sure she was supposed to catch that first part, but Mister Plates' *Sentinel Ear* was nothing if not thorough. Whatever. She'd pretend she hadn't heard it.

"Hmm, is that so?" she replied haughtily. "These methods of communication—how intriguing. Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me?"

"You wouldn't understand it even if we did! And...wait, why are you so curious about *that*?!"

Whoops, did I make it too obvious? Leah quickly looked for a way to recover. "Your friends I just destroyed moments earlier, they spoke aloud about calling for help. No one came, of course, and they met their end. Yet, here you are now, seemingly answering their cry. Forgive me for finding that...peculiar."

That should do it, Leah thought. Everything she'd said was grounded in facts she could reasonably know based on what actually happened. Nothing too incriminating.

"Hmm..." the clan leader hummed thoughtfully. "How should I explain this? We have this thing called 'social media'? It's akin to shouting at the top of your lungs in the middle of a crowded town square? But not really, because no one's obligated to respond? I mean, we coordinated this through our private clan chat, but there's no way an NPC would—"

"Hey, commander," interrupted a player standing next to him. "Why don't you just say, 'We have no obligation to answer your questions,' and leave it at that? Seriously, why are you even talking to a raid boss in the first place? Is it because she has a cute voice?"

"I have no obligation to answer your questions!" the clan leader bellowed.

"That's what I told you to say to the *boss*, what are you doing saying that to me?!"

Leah resisted the urge to facepalm. *Real Abbott and Costello duo we've got going on here,* she thought dryly, watching the exchange devolve.

But she got the gist of it—clan chat.

Just because the game lacked an *official* clan system didn't mean players couldn't organize one themselves using any widely available variety of third-party tools at their disposal. This group had seen the distress call, organized privately through their chat, and arrived to challenge her.

This was a feat harder than it sounded, as anyone who has tried would know. Getting *this* number of people to pull in the same direction was not an easy task. Cultivating that kind of unity required a leader with exceptional charisma, as well as the technical know-how to set up and foster a sense of community using the tools

available to them. The uniform-like gear made sense now—it was part of building camaraderie.

Leah recalled someone asking about clans in the FAQ at one point. Could it have been this person?

A clan system created in the absence of one—now that was an interesting concept. Leah found it appealing in many ways. Conventional clan systems were often rigid and awkward. You were expected to greet your clanmates every time you logged in, participate in group activities, and contribute to clan goals—or risk being labeled a poor team player. If you wanted to help someone outside the clan, you had to justify it or leave altogether.

Without those rigid structures, players likely enjoyed much more freedom. They could join and play with others at their own leisure, without the pressure of clan priorities. Leadership, in turn, wasn't burdened with micromanaging every member. Forget a huge clan house for the whole group, a small clan house rented for just the leadership could suffice, where others could come and go as they pleased. Crafters could seamlessly update equipment, while older gear could be repaired and passed down to newer members, creating mutual benefits without strict obligations.

Was this the kind of organization Leah was facing now? It seemed the perfect explanation. If they had coordinated privately, it would be no wonder public social channels hadn't reflected any change.

The clan broke into chatter among themselves.

"Well, well, looks like taking a day off before jumping in is paying off. Who knew the event boss would show up?"

"Right? And here I thought we'd be behind starting on the second day."

"Clan leader wanted to scope out the perfect dungeon first. Would've been bad PR to start griefing the popular ones with our numbers right away. We're supposed to be the first to clear a dungeon to get our name out there for recruitment, remember?"

"Damn, our leader's thought of everything."

"Wait, though. If we're trying to get our name out there, shouldn't we have publicly announced we were going after the

Cataclysm?"

"That'd backfire hard if we wiped."

"Damn, I take that back, our leader's thought of *every*thing."

Hearing this, Leah couldn't help but respect the tanks in this game. They always seemed like some of the most capable players out there. She was thinking that, and how she'd been wrong—apparently, not all top-tier players had spent the first day grinding. Some, like this clan leader, had taken a different approach.

"Fine," Leah said. "If you're not going to answer, then fight me. Ready?"

"That's what we're here for," the clan leader replied without hesitation. "Let's do this."

This group had clearly planned ahead. The way they carried themselves was too polished to be improvised—they must have been carefully studying the Cataclysm strategy threads from the previous event, discussing and refining their approach. They'd been preparing for an eventual showdown with Leah—one that, if it hadn't happened today, would have happened on another.

Well, what can I say? Leah thought. *It's the ultimate honor for a raid boss.*

"Sugaru," she said quietly.

<Yes, my queen.>

Leah had promised to leave all engagements this outing to Sugaru. She didn't want to break that promise, but she also wanted to do something a little extra. In that case, a little bit of raid boss RP wouldn't hurt, right? Just to set the tone.

"If you wish to face me," Leah declared, "you must first defeat my right hand, the Queen of Insects herself—Sugaru. Only *then* will you earn the right to challenge me. Good luck, *heroes*."

Immediately, the preemptive strike came. "Unit three-two, *D-ni-ro*!" the clan leader shouted.

"*D-ni-ro*!" echoed a unified cry.

At their clan leader's command, four casters in their ranged group unleashed what appeared to be water-based AoE spells.

The raid didn't seem large enough to house thirty-two squads, so the numerals likely didn't correspond directly to unit numbers.

Perhaps they served a more distinct purpose—a system where the first digit indicated a specific role or type of troop, and the second represented the squad number within that role. If that was the case, squad three-two would mean the second unit of the third role type.

And *D-ni-ro*—was that the activation phrase for the spell? The way it had been uttered, with the clan leader shouting it first followed by the casters suggested that the clan had standardized activation phrases across their members.

This was interesting. From what Leah had seen so far, solo players often customized their activation phrases for their own spells—either for ease of use or to obscure their intentions. Parties, on the other hand, tended to stick with default phrases for consistency and clarity among pickup teammates.

This clan, however, had their phrases acted as a kind of code, unique to their group. It was shorter, secretive, and fostered a strong sense of identity—all clear advantages. And unlike the speechless casting that was enabled by Leah's *Evil Eye* and *Spell Fusion*, speech-activated casting didn't examine a player's brain waves for intent—it was determined purely by the words spoken.

In other words, the players who chanted the phrase didn't even have to know what spell the phrase was associated with. As long as the clan leader knew, all they had to do was repeat his command, and the rest would fall into place. Even if the phrase changed, it wouldn't matter. As long as the clan leader understood what was happening, his casters would move like an extension of his will.

Leah wasn't done being impressed by what this clan had accomplished, but now was quite literally not the time. Magic was currently hurtling toward them. The casters had carefully coordinated their AoE spell to target both Sugaru and Mister Plates.

"And here I thought I'd made it clear you had to get through Sugaru before attacking me," Leah muttered to herself.

There was nothing stopping the clan from targeting her directly, of course; her declaration had been purely for RP flavor. Clearly, they understood that, aiming to damage both of them in one strike. A provocation, as it were.

But Leah was no NPC. She didn't have to rise to their

provocations. Nor react at all, really.

Much to the dismay of the clan, the four water spells splashed upon Mister Plates harmlessly, making him a little wet, but no worse for wear. Sugaru meanwhile, had taken flight to minimize damage taken. She had a little bit of moisture on her legs, but that was the extent of the damage.

The clan leader issued another command. "Unit three-one, *B-ni-ha*!"

"*B-ni-ha*!" came the response, on cue.

This time, four different casters unleashed *Lightning Magic* at Leah and Sugaru. From the intensity of the spells, it was clearly high-level. Leah found herself surprised—not by their coordination this time, but by the fact that every member of squad three-one had invested so heavily in *Lightning Magic*.

Casters, on the whole, were supposed to be the most well-rounded and versatile members of any party. To handle a variety of enemies and content, they needed to spread their EXP across multiple schools of magic. But these players had poured so much into *Lightning Magic* that it left little room for other schools. At best, they probably had one other school leveled to a similar degree.

This flew in the face of conventional wisdom—or so Leah had thought. She had to remind herself that this was a large group of people who usually played with one another. For them, specialization wasn't a drawback. As long as they were coordinated, it was a massive advantage, allowing each member to rely on the others to cover their weaknesses.

Suddenly, she realized something. "Ah, so this is why you splashed us with water first. Targets that are wet suffer a penalty to lightning resistance."

And coordinated they were. The leader issuing these commands clearly had a good head on his shoulders. He knew that a metallic set of armor like Mister Plates's lowest base resistance was to *Lightning Magic*.

Base resistance.

Unlucky for him, Leah had already learned this lesson the hard way. After falling victim to that weakness once, she'd put in the work

and sunk the resources to ensure it wouldn't happen again. Mister Plates now boasted enhanced MND and INT stats and had delved deep enough into the *Earth Magic* tree to unlock *Lightning Resistance*.

As expected, the spells harmlessly bounced off Mister Plates. The additional resistance was more than enough to make up for the water debuff.

Leah smirked inwardly. *Just as Anonymous Elf has grown stronger since our last encounter, so have I.*

The magic also did just about nothing to Sugaru, who had begun flying toward the group.

Seeing this, the clan leader grimaced. "Unit three-three, *E-ni-i*!"

"*E-ni-i!*"

AoE *Wind Magic* shot up in the sky toward the advancing Sugaru.

Again, Leah couldn't help but admire the level of tactics on display. Sugaru was currently airborne, and in that state, getting hit by *Wind Magic* would trigger a movement-impairing effect regardless if it did any actual damage or not. If she failed to resist it, she'd be pinned in place temporarily.

"Units one-one to one-three, defensive formation! Protect thirty corps!"

Very smartly, the clan leader didn't wait to see if Sugaru would be ensnared—because she wasn't—and ordered the raid group to defend their casters. Because of his decisiveness, they were able to arrange themselves just in time before Sugaru unleashed her first attack.

Unfazed by the wall of tanks assembling before her, Sugaru dive-bombed toward the raid. As if preparing to unleash a devastating physical strike, she raised all three pairs of her hands. The tanks braced, tightening their formation in anticipation—only for Sugaru to spray webbing from all six limbs, snaring them effectively. The tanks, focused on defending against a melee attack, had no time to draw their weapons and cut through the sticky webbing. Sugaru planted a clawed limb on each of the immobilized tanks, then propelled herself—and them—upward with astonishing speed, shooting into the sky.

It all happened so fast.

No one could react.

No one could see Leah's face hanging slack-jawed behind Mister Plates's visor.

Sugaru climbed to an apex of about thirty meters above the ground, then launched the captured players upward.

"I feel like I've seen this one before," Leah muttered to herself.

Indeed she had. Back in Erfahren, during the attack on the town, the hornets had done the same thing to unsuspecting knights. Sugaru hadn't been present, but perhaps she saw things unfold through her hornets.

The clan leader stared up at the sky, dumbfounded. "What in the... How am I supposed to counter *that*? I've never even taken fall damage before. I don't know what, if anything, might mitigate it."

He should've just been glad he hadn't been picked up alongside his men.

Sugaru didn't wait for him to recover. She dove back down toward this raid, this time unleashing AoE spells down on the raid as soon as she was within range.

Now that was unfair, Leah thought. Sugaru could dip and rise out of the raid's effective range, but they, stuck firmly on the ground, couldn't dip any lower to get out of hers. She had utter control over the terms of engagement in this battle.

"She likes one-sided battles where the opponent can't fight back," Leah said, watching the battlefield erupt into pandemonium. "Wonder where I've seen that one before."

It was a satisfying sight. No one had attention to devote to Leah anymore. No more smartly placed AoE strikes, no more provocations, just pure struggle to survive.

Low LP casters were the first to go, disappearing into motes of light. Then the melee DPS, the poor saps running around like headless chickens. Lastly, the tanks. They'd raised their shields to try and mitigate some of the spell damage, but not all of it was blockable. Dictionary: look up "exercise in futility."

Sugaru's magical prowess probably now rivaled what Leah herself had been capable of back during the battle in the capital. The fact that anyone was surviving her bombardment at all was a testament

to their strength—and their gear.

Some were surviving. Not many squishies, but more than a few tanks. To finish them off, Sugaru plunged back to the ground, unleashing another round of her webbing attack.

"Lower your shields!" the clan leader commanded. "Use your swords to cut through the webbing, unless you want to be taken like the others!"

Speaking of those hapless souls, they were nowhere to be seen. Sugaru had flung them so far that their bodies weren't anywhere nearby. If they hadn't made it back by now, they were just as gone as the rest.

Heeding their leader's command, the remaining tanks managed to cut through the webs and avoid being bound. It wasn't easy. The survivors had condensed into a tight defensive square to protect their DPS, leaving little room to maneuver. In fact, space was so limited that, even with Sugaru back within range, the casters couldn't focus enough to launch any attacks. They'd survived the second round of web attacks.

But then, panicked, fearful voices rang out.

"Gah! What is this?!"

"This liquid...it burns! Is this...acid?!"

Of course, Sugaru was smarter than to use the same move twice. This time, between some of her web volleys, she had mixed in streams of acid. Leah had assumed the acid would come from Sugaru's mandibles, but it emerged from the same place as her webs. While the tanks had managed to cut through the webs, liquid acid behaved differently. Slicing at it only caused it to splash everywhere, with some unlucky players getting it in their eyes. The game, recognizing the affected body part, seemingly inflicted a blindness status on those players.

The acid wasn't strong enough to eat through the plate armor of the tanks, but for the DPS, it was another story. The leather connective pieces in their armor were eaten clean through. Without the leather to hold everything together, the metal plates slid off their bodies, clattering to the ground with a series of heavy clanks.

Then just when the raid realized what was happening and raised

their shields to guard against acid, it was pure webbing that came, ensnaring them. Instead of hauling them into the sky, Sugaru's threads bound the players where they stood, tangling them together into a grotesque chain, like some macabre pearl necklace.

With that, there were no players left who could mount a meaningful threat. All that remained was a writhing mass of players struggling to free themselves from the webbing or escape the lingering acid.

"And that's game," Leah muttered.

Had Sugaru faltered, Leah would have gladly stepped in to finish them herself. But it seemed that wasn't to be this time.

More AoE spells slammed into the immobilized group, the players dissolving into motes of light. The clan leader was the last to fall, but with a final single-target lightning spell from Sugaru, he too earned himself a quick trip back to his Home.

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"Well then, I think it's safe to assume no one else is coming."

Leah remained at the scene for some time after the encounter with the clan, lingering just in case any more would-be challengers had set their sights on her.

Occasionally, an uninformed, non-social-media-browsing newbie would wander too close, only to catch sight of Mister Plates and promptly turn tail.

<Boss,> Sugaru said. <My failure in the last encounter allowed harm to befall you. This disgrace is mine to bear, and I beg your forgiveness.>

"Not at all," Leah dismissed. "Nothing happened to me. Nothing that I would call harm, anyway. Hardly your fault our intruders had poor listening comprehension, Sugaru. Pay it no mind."

Seriously, Leah thought. *Talk about impatience.* Did they really think they could just sidestep one of Leah's most notable mechanics —her retinue—to challenge her directly? In any proper boss-killing strategy, failing to deal with, or even considering *all* the mechanics, was a surefire way to turn a winnable fight into an immediate

disaster.

Not that this was a perfect metaphor, since the fight with Leah was not winnable for them any more than they could've dealt with the mechanic that was Sugaru, but the point still stood.

"They were found lacking this time," Leah mused, "but they have potential. When their crafters are capable of producing an Artifact-grade item, perhaps I'd like to face them again."

Artifact-grade items. If artifacts were just items, that meant even Leah or Lemmy could just create one.

That meant *anyone* could just create one.

It didn't have to be a debuff-field item like the one the previous Fey King had made—maybe an artifact sword was entirely possible. And if that was the case, even something as durable as Mister Plates might not be able to withstand its destructive power.

And if something could get past Mister Plates, it could reach *her*.

And if something could reach her, it could *kill* her.

Not that Leah intended to just roll over and die the next time she faced an artifact-wielding opponent. But from now on, possessing one would have to be the minimum requirement for anyone even thinking about challenging her again.

"Hmm, but still... Clans, eh?"

Leah's mind drifted from artifacts to clans. The encounter had presented to her a challenge she hadn't yet considered. That there was information being exchanged in channels she wasn't privy to. She'd made a point of monitoring online chatter since her defeat in the capital to avoid walking into another trap, but if there were discussions happening beyond her reach, then that was a major blind spot.

Well. Suppose there was nothing she could do about that. Better make herself and her faction even stronger.

"Speaking of getting stronger, I wonder if the capital will start to see any visitors soon?"

The difficulty had already been lowered to four stars—she'd checked. Initially, there'd been the concern that with Sieg present, the difficulty wouldn't go down, but after a bit of testing, Leah had confirmed that interestingly, the castle wasn't considered part of the

capital itself for difficulty calculations. Indeed, Sieg made the difficulty jump up to five-stars if he even stepped so much as a toe outside the castle, but as long as he remained within it, the capital stayed at four. This strange interaction only begged the question why the Hilith capital castle didn't have its own associated dungeon and teleport point.

Leah figured it might have something to do with subdomains within domains being a special case. Perhaps the devs intended "boss rooms" to only be accessible to those who had cleared the surrounding dungeon first. It was also probably for this exact reason that Ellental was only a three-star dungeon. Diaz was in the lord's manor, so he didn't contribute to the difficulty rating because the manor was Blanc's "boss area."

Now then, Leah had dawdled in the plain long enough. She had successfully advertised the Cataclysm's absence. That accomplished, her business in the region was done. She might as well wash her hands of the whole thing, but thinking of the ants under her command, who had been working so diligently, maybe she'd turn this land into their own little slice of paradise. With a portal town right next door, there would be no shortage of willing "vacationers."

Keeping the dungeon at one-or two-stars should ensure a steady flow of beginners. In fact, raising the difficulty beyond two stars would probably be a mistake. If anyone noticed that this portal town was somehow different from the others, it might draw unwanted suspicion.

Yep. Indeed. One-star was the way to go.

<Boss, sorry to interrupt,> Sugaru suddenly said. <It seems a sapper has found some enormous beast in...> she trailed off, eyes dimming. <Apologies. It seems the ant perished halfway through its report.>

"Oh, dear. Found it, have they? Let's proceed with caution."

Immediately, Leah and Sugaru took flight toward the location of the dead sapper's last known location. They arrived at a cave entrance made of mounded dirt—one that looked suspiciously like the generic cave icon on video game maps—and descended inside.

Inside, Leah was surprised to find that not only was the entrance

oversized, but the passage itself was large enough to accommodate even the three-meter-tall behemoth that was Mister Plates. Far larger than necessary for the mole they had encountered earlier—but for a zone boss? It made perfect sense. As they proceeded down the pitch-black tunnel, Leah was reminded of the ones beneath Lieb. Those had been smooth to the touch, carved by sapper ants using their acid. Here, in contrast, the soil was loosely packed and crumbly, as if the entire passage could collapse at any moment. It certainly wasn't a reassuring construction, but it at least clearly illustrated the differences between a tunnel excavated by moles and those by ants...

With no light, natural vision (and by extension Mister Plates's *Eagle Eye*) became useless. Leah switched to *Evil Eye* mode and took manual control of Mister Plates to navigate. Needless to say, Sugaru was completely unbothered by the darkness. She had once ruled over an intricate underground tunnel network herself. Back then, Leah recalled, Sugaru's antennae had acted as sort of feelers against the cave walls as she moved. But now, she wasn't doing that anymore. Must've been part of the "active sonar" navigation upgrade.

<We're almost there, boss,> Sugaru said.

"Ah, I think I see it," Leah replied. "That chamber up ahead? Judging by its observable MP, it's about as strong as a newly born queen ant. Which is to say...not very."

They stepped out of the tunnel into a wide chamber. At its center loomed an enormous mole. Leah half expected it to attack immediately, given what had happened to the ant that first discovered it, but for now, the creature remained still.

"Doesn't seem like it's noticed us. All yours, Sugaru."

<You're not going to *Retain* it?>

"Eh, doesn't really seem like the type to fit in with our forest holdings. And I doubt it's easy to breed, unlike our insects and treants. Also, it kinda does the same thing as the ants anyway? So I figure we can just stick with the ants."

Insects were the most diverse life-form on Earth. While Leah was sure that level of variety hadn't translated perfectly into the game—

there certainly weren't over a million species like in real life—her insect retinue had already proven versatile enough to cover nearly every use case she could think of. Given the adaptability of her brood and the range of specialties they provided, as long as she had a Queen of Insects under her command, she didn't really *need* anything else. As a matter of fact, Sugaru's *Selective Birth* tree had had some new additions allowing her to spawn monsters based on aquatic insects and other arthropods. Though Leah hadn't spawned any yet for a lack of appropriate environments under her control.

<In that case, allow me,> Sugaru said. <The earlier battle affirmed my capabilities in the air. This is a good chance to test myself on the ground.>

"Go for it," Leah replied.

Sugaru strode toward the giant mole, and only now did it seem to register the presence of intruders. It sniffed annoyingly toward the air so much as to say, *Ugh, another bug?*

But Sugaru made it all the way next to the mole, close enough that she could touch it, and yet it still didn't attack. Strange, but she supposed it made sense. If it had been hyperaggressive, the sapper ant wouldn't have even gotten part of the message out before being killed. Still, for it to act this nonchalant despite not knowing Sugaru's strength... Wasn't it a bit *too* confident?

"Is this some form of built-in handicap so players can always get the first strike?" Leah muttered to herself. "No, that doesn't make sense for the devs to be so generous. Probably just a quirk of this particular mole."

If it had grown this large and dominant in its habitat, it likely thought itself invincible—fearless out of sheer complacency.

Leah reminded herself that the dev message she'd received stated that only areas under the control of a single faction would be consolidated as dungeons. In the absence of a formal party or clan system that could unambiguously define "faction," the term could only be taken to mean a single individual. So for a zone to be able to simultaneously satisfy this "single faction" criteria and have more than a single monster, it must've meant that there was one head honcho while the rest were its direct retainers. In other words, in

each dungeon area, the boss, whether they were a player character or a NPC, were *Retainer* users.

Of course, this was all just speculation on Leah's part, but all things considered, she was probably right. And there was a way to confirm it. Once they defeated the mole, they could watch for any remaining moles. If they all disappeared along with it, then her theory would be proven correct.

Returning her attention to the battle that was still yet to unfold, Leah saw that Sugaru had given up waiting for the mole to strike first. Her hands morphed into scythe-like blades, and she slashed down at the creature.

Hands...morphed into scythes? Leah didn't believe her eyes for a second, but looking closely, it certainly did seem that the top pair of Sugaru's arms, which had always ended in hands and fingers, had now transformed into sharp, curved blades.

Leah hurriedly pulled up Sugaru's skill panel. The only suspicious skill was *Perverse Transformation*.

Not suspicious in the sense of *huh*? *Perversion*? But stood out in the sense that this might explain what she had just witnessed.

Leah *had* noticed the skill back when Sugaru first *Rebirthed*, but she'd dismissed it out of an abundance of confusion. In her defense, transformation in the context of insects usually meant something like metamorphosis. But the ants in this game didn't actually undergo metamorphosis—they hatched fully formed, skipping the larval stages entirely. So she'd dismissed it, because if metamorphosis was off the table, she didn't want to believe the skill made Sugaru into some sexual deviant.

But now she saw the skill in action. And how much better it was than what she'd originally assumed. This wasn't some wrap yourself in a cocoon for a while and come out with different types of ability, but a way of instantly transforming one's body on the fly to adapt to combat or possibly even crafting needs.

Now that she read the actual skill description, it read *transforms part or all of the user's body into a chosen form. Consuming additional MP reduces transformation time. Transformed parts may grant temporary skills based on their form. Duration scales with MP*

spent. Furthermore, it seemed the forms Sugaru could transform into were predetermined—and the list looked very similar to the one of different bugs she could produce. There was *Scythe*, the one she was using now, then *Silk* and *Acid*.

Oh. So this whole time, when Sugaru was shooting webbing or acid, she was actually physically transforming into a different form.

Was that what she'd meant by saying the queen arachnia produced the same quality silk as hers? If so, in reality, she meant it the other way around, because she was actually transforming into *them* to produce quite literally the same silk.

"So would I be right in assuming the more types of insects she spawns, the more powerful she herself becomes?"

More insects, more forms, more tools in this multi-tool—made sense.

And sure, like any multi-tool, there would likely be situations where a specialized tool would outclass it. But in evenly matched encounters, having more options was never a disadvantage.

"What a fearsome race the queen asrapada are," Leah murmured, impressed. "But then again, what else should I have expected from the arthropodic evolutionary pinnacle? I better not fall behind myself."

The battle before Leah was evolving quickly. Suddenly faced with razor-sharp blades that had seemingly appeared from nowhere, the giant mole panicked. It reared up and swung a foreleg, attempting to crush Sugaru flat. But then, with a sudden flash of pink, the limb was severed—sliced clean from its body.

Leah's eyes narrowed. Sugaru's scythe-arms weren't nearly large enough to shear through something of that girth on their own. That flash had to be a skill activation—likely the one tied to her *Scythe* metamorphosis.

Now, with one of its limbs lost in a single stroke, the giant mole finally seemed to grasp the scale of the threat before it. It reared back, quickly adjusting to stand on its hind legs. Its remaining foreleg came up defensively, shielding its face, while a single furrowed eye peeked out from behind its claws. Then suddenly, the ground behind Sugaru bulged.

“Interesting,” Leah muttered. A second later, the earth exploded. “It seems you aren’t just a massive hunk of flesh, are you?”

That had clearly been an AoE earth spell. And, more notably, a rare coordinate-targeted one. The mole must have deliberately aimed it behind Sugaru in an attempt to blindside her.

“Sugaru, back when she was a queen vespoid, was never able to use magic. Assuming this giant mole is on the same tier as she was back then, then in exchange for lower defense, it has magical ability. It’s also just stronger from a pure stat perspective considering it seems to have had quite a bit of time to mature.”

But a queen vespoid, Sugaru was no longer. She could shrug off spells from casters who had dumped all their EXP into a single school—what was low-level AoE magic from a boss that wasn’t even mainly magic supposed to do?

Without even flinching, Sugaru let loose another slash with her scythe-arms, and that was the giant mole’s other foreleg gone. Even then, with its flesh wounds, the creature desperately tried to cast another spell. But before it could do so, Sugaru’s scythes flashed again, and this time, it was the mole’s head.

“Hmm. First the lustful Queen of Destruction, now the perverted queen asrapada. Whatever, skill descriptions are pretty much for private viewing anyway. No one will ever know.”

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<<Successfully defeated unique enemy: [Moles of
Paradise].>>
<<Unlocked zone: [Ruins of Paradise].>>
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The system messages for assuming zone ownership looked slightly different from what Leah was used to. She assumed it was because there was no Safe Area in this zone, meaning she couldn’t physically set it as her Home. Still, the fact that the notification appeared at all confirmed what she needed to know—she had successfully claimed the area, becoming its new “single faction.” Now, it was officially hers to do with as she pleased.

“Hold on a second,” Leah said, a thought striking her. “The whole

time we've been here, the dungeon's difficulty never spiked past one-star."

At least, not when she last checked—back when the beginners were calling for help.

"But now that I think about it, *of course* my presence wouldn't increase the difficulty. I'm role-playing a raid boss but I'm not *actually* one. No matter what my star rating is, I'm still just a player attacking the dungeon, just like anyone else."

The crux of it was that Leah hadn't been part of the faction controlling the dungeon.

"Thinking about it that way...could I not just send my forces into another dungeon—intentionally avoid killing the boss—and have them stay there, attacking players while pretending to be the dungeon's native monsters? Isn't that basically cheating the system? Like I'd be able to farm all the players I want for free?"

She already had a framework for how these encounters would play out—Sugaru's encounter with the players earlier.

"It'd end up being a constant three-way battle between me, the players, and the dungeon's original master, but I'm more than capable of fine-tuning my forces to hold out against whatever might come their way."

This was a good idea; she was onto something here.

"Okay," Leah said with a huff, sounding excited. "But I better still confirm my theory before I commit to it."

She could do so right now. Diaz was already perfectly situated within Blanc's domain.

With a quick message to Blanc asking for permission, all Leah needed to do was have Diaz step outside Ellental's manor. If the difficulty didn't change, that would confirm her theory. Then she wouldn't need to keep Diaz holed up in the boss area like Sieg. More importantly, if this little plot of hers worked, that would mean she could bypass the hassle of balancing dungeon difficulty entirely. Instead of officially claiming a dungeon, she could take de facto control, and it would be the exact same thing.

"If this works..." Leah practically salivated at the thought of the EXP rolling in. "Feels a little like déjà vu, though... Ah. That's

because I *have* done this before—just on a smaller scale. The goblin ranches in Lieb were basically the same thing."

In that case, broader horizons deserved broader ideas. Why hadn't she *Retained* the mole boss earlier? If she was going to control more dungeons, she needed greater monster variety. Players would get bored if all they ever fought were undead and insects. It might be worth finding and *Retaining* another zone boss—something different—to diversify her forces.

But if she was going to do that, she needed to be strategic. The best targets would be monster territories that weren't easily accessible by the new teleport system. That way, no one would start asking questions when entire zones mysteriously emptied themselves of monsters.

Wait a second.

Subduing regions that weren't designated as teleport destinations—where had she heard that before...?

The realization came as a jolt.

"Lyla..."

Chapter 5: Report, Inform, Convulse

Wind back time to the first day of the new patch.

Blanc stood atop her balcony overlooking Ellental, gazing down at the town below.

"Wow, is it just me or are people showing up already?" she said. "Look at them, just standing there. Why aren't they coming in? They waiting for something?"

Standing diagonally behind her was Weiss. "As this town lacks outer fortifications, my lady, there exists no precise boundary to separate it from the lands beyond. You observe that they have yet to 'come in,' but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, by positioning themselves within your sight, they have already trespassed upon your domain and thus have already thrown themselves at your mercy."

The warm morning sun cut through the early morning chill to shine down on the oddly mismatched pair. Weiss, like Blanc and the others, was a daywalker, possessing the skills necessary to survive in daylight. Had he not been, Blanc would have sent him back to the count for adjustments. But, of course, the old vampire was far too considerate for that.

"Well, if you say so, Weiss," Blanc said, giggling.

"I must confess I'm unsure as to what I've said to provoke such a reaction, but I assure you I meant anything but."

Meanwhile, Azalea and the others busied themselves inside the manor preparing tea and snacks. The leaves were gifts from Leah. The snacks, Lyla.

And yes, while vampires were usually creatures that sustained themselves primarily on blood, in the game, that trait was translated to a modifier to their hunger gauge.

Blood remained the most efficient way to replenish hunger, but normal food worked too, just at a significantly reduced rate.

In the absence of both food and blood, sap from trees and other plant juices also sufficed. In fact, they were actually *more* effective than regular food. Maybe this was inspired by mosquitoes, which could drink both blood and nectar. Or maybe it was a nod to certain fictional depictions where vampires could substitute blood with tomato juice.

Essentially, any vital fluid would do—if not animals, then from plants. Plant fluid, leaf juice, tea.

From a bit of testing, Blanc had found that her hunger could be fully satiated with a cup of royal milk tea paired with a fruit tart.

In addition, she'd learned that processing food, as in cooking it, stripped away its good-for-vampire properties, even if its origins were technically vital fluids. Blood sausage, for example, replenished hunger like regular food instead of blood.

To work around this, the milk for the tea was carefully heated to just below boiling, and the tea leaves were bloomed separately before being added to the hot milk and steeped further.

"I mean, yeah, it only makes sense they did this," Blanc mused. "Imagine how hard of a sell it would be trying to get players to drink nothing but straight up blood."

Of course, world-building still mattered. That was probably why the devs even bothered to implement the different satiety mechanics for vampires. It was a neat little middle ground that went far enough to add a little bit of flavor without forcing players to go full vampire.

"My lady," Weiss interrupted smoothly. "Tea is served. Please, go inside. I shall remain here to keep watch."

"Really? Okay then! Thanks, Weiss."

Blanc stepped inside to find Diaz already seated at the tea table, just as Azalea was in the middle of pouring her cup.

"It seems that these *players* have already begun assembling at the gates," Diaz said, noticing her approach.

"Yeah," Blanc replied. "There's quite a few of them. Though, I'd wish they'd come *inside* the gates."

She caught herself saying it again, but quickly reminded herself

of Weiss's perspective about them already intruding on her domain just by being there.

Blanc took her seat, sipped her tea, and eyed the strawberry tarts on the table.

"Where's the queen beetle?" she asked.

"On the roof, surveilling the streets," Diaz replied. "Like me, she was ordered by Her Majesty to guard you with her life. So, if she's anything like me, I would assume she's taking her duty *very* seriously."

Surveilling, eh? Blanc thought. *Well, that's a big help!*

In the end, she'd never gotten around to *Retaining* that flight-capable monster she'd wanted. She had no idea where to even find one, and even if she had, there simply hadn't been time after the event.

There were just too many EXP points to allocate postevent to waste any time doing *that*.

Let's see how that all went down.

***

The first place Blanc had decided to invest her event winnings was herself.

Not because she wanted to fight on the front lines. Diaz and Weiss had both given firm warnings against her direct involvement in combat, and truth be told, she wasn't exactly eager to die. But there was something she needed to test—something she'd pieced together from a prior conversation with the count.

The count hadn't been explicit, but what Blanc had read between the lines was this: Vampires could empower their children by feeding them their blood, and the effect scaled with the strength of the sire vampire.

She wanted to become stronger. She needed to answer that question gnawing at her mind: If she could power up further, pushing past Greater Vampire into something even more powerful, what would happen if her children drank her blood then?

The last time she'd shared her blood, she'd been a vampire. Not

greater, not lesser—just a vampire. Now she was already one step beyond that, a Greater Vampire, and she could test the effects right away. Since she had the chance, she wanted to push herself further—but cautiously. Leah had warned her that, in rare instances, *Rebirthing* retainers could exact a hefty EXP cost. Blanc had no intention of paying that price. With caution firmly in mind, she planned to monitor her status closely, stopping at the first sign of any significant change.

First, she acquired all the skills related to strengthening her retinue—just as Leah had advised. When nothing happened, she started dumping EXP into pure stat increases for herself.

A few stat boosts later, and her race changed from Vampire to Vampire Baroness.

Huh, Blanc thought, mildly interested. *A noble title, huh? Appointed by who?*

Well, whatever. That wasn't important. She had reached her goal. Maybe she *could* push further, but considering what she'd just told herself, she decided to stop here. Instead, she called over the first three Spartoi she had ever created: Scarlet, Crimson, and Vermilion. She gave them her blood all at once and, just like before, she was hit with the same draining sensation. But this time, it was stronger than before. She wasn't just being drained, she was being wrung dry. She quickly checked her LP, and saw that she barely had any left.

A shiver ran down her spine. Not because she almost died, but because she'd almost earned herself a scolding for dying. Not that it mattered, because afterward, Weiss and Diaz *did* find out and she was still scolded. Heavily. For doing something so risky without notifying them. Now she knew better than to do all three at once.

The system message came just like before, confirming Blanc's intent to *Rebirth* her retainers (luckily, without an EXP cost). She confirmed, and the transformation began. Her Spartoi grew a size larger, their silhouettes curving into something more hulking and aggressive. Most notably, a set of sleek, curved horns sprouted from their skulls, slicked back like blades. To Blanc, they now resembled the skeletal remains of humanoid dragons rather than lizardfolk.

And seemingly confirming her theory was their new race name: Dragonstooth.

They had a new skill in their repertoire: *Skyrunning*. The description stated it allowed them to walk on air. That definitely looked interesting, so Blanc acquired it for all three of them.

Satisfied with the evolution of her Spartoi—*sorry*, her Dragonsteeth—she turned her attention to her loyal Mormos next.

She gave herself (read: Diaz and Weiss forced her to take) a day to recover, and this time, went about the process of *Rebirthing* them one at a time. She also had potions now, from Diaz, courtesy of Leah, which she could use to further offset the LP loss.

The Mormos' *Rebirth* did come with an EXP cost. Only 200 each, though, which was much more agreeable than the four-figure cost Leah had scared her into expecting, so she went ahead with it.

Azalea, Magenta, and Carmine evolved from Mormos into Laestrygonians.

They didn't change much in terms of appearance, but a *Giant* form was added to their list of possible transformations. In *Giant* form, they lost the ability to use magic and their hunger gauge depleted at an accelerated rate, but in exchange, they gained a tremendous boost to STR and VIT. Though besides that and becoming physically larger, that really was the only difference between their *Giant* and humanoid forms, which kind of sucked because Blanc had primarily built them up to be casters.

That slight disappointment aside, Blanc used her remaining EXP to acquire some new skills for her bigger and better lieutenants.

First was *Unarmed Combat*. As the name suggested, it allowed melee combatants to fight effectively without a weapon. Because they needed at least something to work with in *Giant* form if the situation ever called for it.

Second was *Dissection*. Because wasn't there that one old manga series with the doctor villain that was like, "*I'm going to dissect you with my bare hands*"?

Unfortunately, it seemed *Dissection* required a small blade to use, killing the meme-dream.

When Blanc griped about this to Leah, Leah suggested she have

them learn *Pharmacology* followed by *Treatment*. Blanc took this advice to heart and then some, by acquiring *Pharmacology*, *Treatment*, and also *Healing Magic*.

That was as far as she got, though—because with that, she was officially out of EXP.

It was only then that she realized she'd forgotten to give her lieutenants *Veil of Darkness*, a skill they'd been requesting for some time.

Oops.

The next day—or night, rather—Blanc went around town, giving each and every one of her zombies a single drop of her blood. With that, they evolved from vampiric minions into lesser vampires. Blanc, however, had woefully underestimated the sheer population of the former townspeople turned undead in Ellental, and after just a few dozen houses, daylight was already creeping in.

So the day after that, she took a different approach. Blanc ordered all the zombies to gather at the manor. They formed a long line, and with Azalea, Magenta, and Carmine rotating *Treatment* on her to keep her LP levels topped off, along with a fresh supply of LP potions from Leah, Blanc continued the absolute grind of upgrading all her minions before the dungeon system went live.

When Blanc had asked Leah for the potions, Leah had sent them along with a simple but encouraging message: *"Sounds rough, but keep going."* Blanc had felt actual sentiment in her words, as if they came from someone who had gone through something similar, rather than just hollow encouragement.

Since the work could only be done at night (lest the zombies be burned to ash), Blanc devoted herself to the tedium for three whole nights.

The price had been steep, but the reward had been worth it. At the end of it all, Blanc had a force of over two thousand vampires strong reigning over Ellental.

***

"Milady, players have begun entering the town," Weiss reported

as he stepped in from the balcony.

At last, the defense of Ellental could begin.

Ellental turned out to be a three-star dungeon. What that actually meant in terms of difficulty, Blanc had no idea. But judging by the sheer number of players gathering outside, it couldn't have been *too* bad.

"All right!" she said, "Then let's get out there and kick some player butt! If we kill everyone, they might not come back again, so let them flee if they wanna flee! But all bets are off if they wanna wander too close to the manor! Show them no mercy!"

***

"So this is Ellental," Wayne said, scanning the gathered crowd. "Clearly, we weren't the only ones with the idea."

"Well, it's a three-star, right?" Gealgamesh replied. "Considering five's the *max* max, three's the happy medium. 'Course everybody wants to see what 'average difficulty' feels like."

"Five is the max *displayed* difficulty," Mentai-list said. "Who knows how hard the actual five-stars can really get?"

Wayne, Gealgamesh, and Mentai-list had arrived in Ellental as planned.

After leaving Carnemonte, they had taken a chill, meandering route to Ellental, clearing whatever monster camps they came across to earn EXP and to get a feel for their new gear. Midway through, the launch date for the dungeon-ification patch had been announced, and after maintenance, they'd used the teleportation service to come straight over.

"The Cataclysm's in the capital, and I highly doubt she's only five-stars," Mentai-list went on. "If she is, though, then three-stars to our party might be the perfect difficulty, if not a little challenging."

"I mean, a little challenging is where the most EXP gains are to be had, right?" Gil said.

"Right, right," Mentai-list said. "Well, I kinda doubt it, though. I still think five-star's just the maximum displayed difficulty. The Cataclysm should be way stronger than that, which means this place

should be more manageable for us."

The part about true difficulty not being the displayed difficulty was what Tough and Doesn't Peel had said in the dungeon tips thread, and Mentai-list believed in it wholeheartedly.

Either way, Ellental was going to be their proving ground. Not that they expected to clear the place immediately, but it would be a proper gauge of their power, as Gil had said. If they couldn't make it here, then the capital was nothing more than a pipe dream of a pipe dream.

"Wait a second," Mentai-list said. "Huh? Since when was Rokillean a three-star? That makes it the same difficulty as Ellental. Damn, if I'd known that, we should've gone there instead. It's closer to the capital."

Gil frowned. "What's the rush? We can head there after we're done here. Matter of fact, you're still checking the forum? Come on, we're literally here. Let's go."

Without waiting for a response, Gil took the lead, marching into Ellental. Mentai-list fell in step behind him, and Wayne hurried to catch up.

The town was eerily quiet. Nothing really stood out.

Unless of course, you count the complete lack of townspeople.

There were marks on doorframes and window sills that were clear signs of forced entry, but the doors and windows themselves were perfectly intact. It was almost as if, after a monster attack, someone had gone through the trouble of fixing everything back up.

"Let's try to avoid running into other players," Wayne said. "Sure, we could run into friendlies, but I'd rather not chance it."

However more trusting Wayne had grown of other players since teaming up with Gil and Mentai, the scars of the past still lingered. Increased trust didn't necessarily mean fewer PKers. In his mind, trusting others didn't equate to letting his guard down. Thankfully, the unspoken rule among players in the area seemed to be no interference, allowing them to progress into town without player interruption.

Or monster interruption, for that matter.

"I like a stroll through town as much as the next guy, but..." Gil

said. “That’s not why we’re here, is it?”

Wayne hummed in thought. “That large structure in the distance has to be the manor of the town’s former lord. If we assume that’s where the boss is, there should be monsters placed nearby to keep us from getting too close.”

“All I see are houses,” Mentai-list replied. “Streets are empty.”

What were all the other parties doing? Were they all heading straight for the manor? Or were some maybe checking inside the houses?

Gil seemed to have the same thought. “*Streets* are empty. We haven’t been checking the houses.” He reached for the knob of a nearby door and pushed. “Whoa! The heck?! There are zombies in here!”

He burst into the house, forcing Wayne and Mentai-list to rush in after him. Inside were four zombies. One was already sprawled on the floor—slain by Gil. Wayne charged another and swung his sword in a diagonal arc, slicing from shoulder to hip. A normal blade might have caught on bone, but his adamas longsword cut clean through, just as it had with every enemy they’d encountered on the way here. A second zombie approached, but Wayne reacted instantly, twisting his body and slicing horizontally at waist level, bisecting it in one clean motion. A third quickly had its heart pierced by Gil, and that was it, combat over.

“Well that was...easier than expected,” Gil said.

“A little tougher, but clearly still zombies,” Wayne said. “Hmm... But is it just me, or are these zombies...rather clean? Like they aren’t decayed? Do things even decay in dungeons?” He surveyed the carnage around him. “Well, stronger zombies are still zombies so they probably don’t drop anything worth a damn. And I’m not really here to desecrate human corpses, so how about we bounce?”

“Yeah, let’s get outta here,” Gil said. “I’d search the house, but that’ll probably be a waste of time too.”

“Why would the trash in a three-star dungeon be just zombies, though?” Mentai-list asked.

“Beats me,” Gil replied. “I mean, hey, maybe these are super strong zombies, it’s just our weapons are stronger? Like yeah, we’re

one-shotting them, but we're basically swinging around royal treasures— Okay, maybe not *that* but at least like noble heirlooms over here."

He had a point.

For Wayne, the feeling that his gear was wearing him never quite faded. The dwarven master smith had given them each a special whetstone to sharpen their swords, but so far neither of them had to use their whetstones once. The cutting edge remained as razor-sharp as it had been on day one. The only maintenance required was wiping off whatever gore it had sliced through.

Wayne was still mulling this over, admiring his blade, when something caught his eye. "Gil, I think you're right. These might be super strong zombies."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Look here. At the cutting edge. No chips or anything, but it's ever so slightly dulled. When it sliced through, the bone must've *worn* it down—just a little."

"No shit..." Gil checked his own sword. "Oh, mine too." He gave his shield a quick once-over. "But my shield's fine. Then again, all the zombie threw at me was a punch."

Gil must've blocked an attack when Wayne and Mentai-list had been rushing in to back him up.

"So this is what you're hiding, three-star dungeon," Mentai-list muttered. "What seemingly looks like a normal town at first glance is actually filled with high-level monsters. If we hadn't upgraded our gear, we'd be struggling right now. If all the other parties here are mid-tier at best...I can't really imagine any of them making it out of here alive."

A quick glance at their EXP revealed quite the gain. If Wayne and his party could be considered high-level players, then that level of EXP gain meant they'd just slain four mid-to high-level monsters. Perhaps appropriate for monsters this deep into the dungeon, but Wayne had to remind himself they'd only gotten this far because they'd encountered no resistance before this point. Was this initial encounter even close to the dungeon's true potential? The general consensus online suggested three-star dungeons were suited for

mid-level players, but after what they'd just faced, he doubted an average, uncoordinated mid-level party could have survived this house. It seemed entirely possible that, at this point, even three-star dungeons were actually suited for high-level parties.

"Let's not linger inside any longer," Wayne said. "Zombies can't survive in daylight, so we're safer outdoors. At least while the sun's up, anyway. We can decide whether to push forward or retreat—but let's make that call outside."

The others nodded, and the party filed out of the house; the town was still as quiet and dead as ever.

"Hmm?" Gil suddenly muttered.

"What's up, Gil?" Wayne asked.

Gil blinked a few times, frowning. "Nothing. Thought I saw something, but there's nothing there. Must've been my imagination."

They had just come off the realization that even the lowly zombies in this town were way stronger than expected—Wayne wasn't about to dismiss anything as simple imagination. Clearly, there was more to this town than met the eye, and even the slightest suspicion deserved investigation. Yet Gil was already looking toward the path leading deeper into town. Venturing farther without a clear strategy felt reckless.

"Yeah, probably," Gil continued. "Just my eyes playing tricks on me. It was far—I don't even know what I was looking at. Like that house in the distance, I thought I saw a glint of light coming off that stone wall over there."

Wayne looked to Mentai-list. "What do you think, Mentai? Worth looking into?"

Mentai thought this over for a moment. "I think so. We should check it out. I mean, we came here to get our feet wet. Can hardly do that if we don't take any risks. I hate to toot my own horn, but we're probably the group best equipped to deal with any surprises."

"Okay then," Wayne said. "Gil, you lead the way. Mentai'll be in the middle, and I'll bring up the rear."

They moved cautiously toward the wall where Gil had spotted the flash. So far, so good. They took their time, moving slowly, step-by-step.

They reached the wall.

Nothing.

"Forget it," Wayne said. "There's nothing he—"

BANG.

There was a deafening sound; a blinding light.

Magic?! Wayne's mind screamed. And not just any magic—AoE *Lightning Magic*.

Even with all the EXP he had farmed in the capital, even with his brand-new shiny gear, the spell *wrecked* him. His LP dropped past the halfway mark. One more hit like that, and he was gone.

Gil was the self-proclaimed tank of the group. His defense and LP were likely among the highest of all players, but *Lightning Magic* might as well have been his one weakness. The spell staggered him heavily, showing just how much damage he had taken.

As for Mentai-list, he was already face down in the dirt. He was the squishy of the group, low in defense and LP. He only bothered to raise his MND, which only gave bonuses to *Enchantment* and *Bestowal*. As a pure support player, he never stood a chance.

"No... Mentai..." Wayne croaked weakly.

"My, my, *my*," a voice drawled above them.

Wayne looked up. A pale woman hovered in the air, her raven-black hair drifting in the breeze. She sat as if perched on an invisible throne, legs crossed, gaze distant.

"I heard a party managed to flee one of our zombie houses in record time, and without a scratch, no less. I thought that was worth seeing for myself, but what a disappointment. That was a single spell, you know?"

Wayne couldn't respond. He could only watch as she absently ran a hand through her hair, her focus shifting back to him like a cat watching an injured mouse.

"I suppose I should commend your courage. Not many dare to carry themselves here. But don't worry—you won't be leaving empty-handed."

Her fingers twitched. The air grew heavy.

“Take your vaunted courage with you...straight to the afterlife.”

***

Azalea, Blanc, and Diaz gathered as one of Leah’s queen beetle’s underlings delivered its report: A party had been spotted emerging from a zombie house—alive.

Why this was significant wasn’t clear to Blanc, let alone Azalea, so Diaz stepped in to interpret.

“Lesser vampires are currently deployed in units of four, each stationed within the former homes of the townsfolk. For a party to escape such an encounter in such a short span, all of them unscathed, speaks to their skill in battle. We would do well to tread carefully where they are concerned and confirm their capabilities.”

With Diaz having put it like that, there was no room for arguing.

It irked her, just a little, how Diaz spoke with such authority—as if he, rather than Blanc, were in command. But she knew he didn’t mean it that way, and she could accept that. Leah had placed Diaz here as a courtesy. Though technically stronger and under no obligation to obey Blanc, Diaz had been instructed to defer to her under normal circumstances. Only in abnormal situations—especially those involving Blanc’s safety—could Diaz rely on his own judgment.

No, Diaz was fine. It was the *other* individual present under the same arrangement that she truly couldn’t tolerate.

“Lord Diaz speaks truly,” Weiss said. “If I may be so bold as to add: If this band is as formidable as they appear, it may be prudent to see their excursion cut short. This time. While I certainly understand the value of assessing their full combat capabilities, it is not an immediate necessity. If they are as confident in their strength as they seem, they will return. Perhaps then, with better information at hand, we can test them properly.”

Diaz gave a solemn nod, sealing the plan.

Azalea quickly volunteered herself for this mission. She was the obvious choice, she argued. From the air, she could strike at them with impunity, raining magic from above with no viable counterplay. And if they did manage to counter, then she’d shift into her giant

form, and that alone—a giant suddenly appearing in town—would be enough of a visible signal for reinforcements. A giant couldn't cast, but her sheer endurance would buy her the time needed for Diaz to arrive from the manor.

Although sending Diaz as the contingency seemed like overkill, realistically, any adversaries powerful enough to defeat her would demand Diaz's intervention.

With that settled, Azalea vaulted over the balcony railing, the wind rushing past as she plummeted toward the town.

***

Azalea's *Lightning Shower* seemed to have taken quite the bite out of the three adventurers before her.

This was quite the disappointment.

She'd expected the spell to instantly carbonize all of them. Not only were they still flesh and blood, but two of them had even survived.

Despite herself, she had no choice but to admit these humans were on a different plane of existence than the others entirely.

Admit internally, that is.

Externally, she put on an overconfident sneer.

"But...what a disappointment. That was a single spell, you know?"

Azalea's gaze sharpened as she took a closer look at the man in full plate. His armor was completely unscathed. Not a single mark. Meaning the lightning hadn't struck the metal itself—it had conducted through it, bypassing the armor entirely to harm the man inside.

Which meant any attack other than lightning might have done nothing at all.

Her eyes flicked to the one in scalelike armor. Same story. No visible damage. He was likely just as resistant.

That was...a vexing proposition. Defeat wasn't an option—of course not—but this complicated things. She had to actually think about her next move.

Lightning Shower was still on cooldown. She could try a different spell, but if it got resisted, it wouldn't just be a waste—it would push *Lightning Shower*'s cooldown back even further.

The best course of action was likely to stall with nonmagical means to buy time while *Lightning Shower*'s cooldown ran its course.

But then, movement from the direction of the manor caught her eye.

A streak of red tore through the sky, closing in fast.

Ah. A Dragonstooth. From the looks of it—Crimson.

In terms of seniority, the Dragonsteeth came after Azalea. Built for close-quarters combat, their lightweight frames made them blindingly fast. The "dragon" in their name wasn't just for show either—they sported vicious claws and fangs, sharp enough to carve through armor with ease. Endurance was another strength. Being made entirely of bone rendered them nearly impervious to slashing and stabbing attacks. Only blunt force could properly break them.

Magic wasn't much help either. Normally, skeletons had a weakness to fire. But since evolving into Spartoi, they'd gained *Fire Resistance*. Azalea had never understood why. Because they were red? No, that was just a side effect of drinking their master's blood. It had nothing to do with fire.

But no matter. With another dependable member of Blanc's retinue joining the fray, victory was all but assured.

Time for a little more gloating.

"I suppose I should commend your courage. Not many dare to carry themselves here. But don't worry—you won't be leaving empty-handed. Take your vaunted courage with you...straight to the afterlife."

Crimson closed in, nearly within striking range. Then, at the sound of her words, he seemed to shake his head in disappointment—or cringe.

Azalea felt a twinge of irritation, stronger than when this group had survived her attack, stronger than the frustration of dealing with their resistances.

On impulse, she lashed out.

"*Hell's Flames!*"

She didn't care that Crimson was within the radius of the spell. He had *Fire Resistance*—he could handle it. Any friendly fire damage she caused, she could easily undo with *Treatment*. Consider it a lesson in showing a little more respect toward one's—

"Ga-hah!"

A sharp scream tore through the air. Azalea looked down to see the caster—the one she *knew* she had finished with *Lightning Shower*—was now skewered on Crimson's claws, his body dissolving into motes of light.

He... He was dead, so how did he scream?

The truth took a moment to catch up to her.

He *hadn't* died.

He had only pretended.

Sure enough, his position where he got impaled—just slightly off from where he had fallen before—was proof he had tried to crawl away from *Hell's Flames*.

"Wayne! Mentai!"

Azalea turned just in time to see the man in scale mail consumed by flames, his form dissolving into light. The one in plate still stood, shouting his comrades' names.

His resilience was remarkable. But if resilience was all he had, he was never much of a threat to her—not while she had the sky.

The caster, though—the one Crimson had impaled...

If his magic had matched the sheer durability of his fallen allies, then there was a real chance he could have conjured something truly dangerous—maybe even fatal.

Was that why he had played dead? Had he been waiting for an opening to strike?

If so, then Crimson might have just saved her life.

Azalea was proud, but not so much that she wouldn't give credit where it was due. In light of this, she'd let him off the hook. *For now.* That attitude, if it flared up again, though, would still need correcting.

The man in plate quickly turned his attention to Crimson, engaging him in combat. Probably to avenge his fallen caster ally. Of course, the one he *should've* engaged, the one who most deserved

his ire was the one who was floating just out of reach.

Their battle was a total stalemate. Crimson's claws, sharp as they were, failed to pierce the heavy plate. Meanwhile, the warrior, outmatched in speed, couldn't land a clean hit on Crimson either.

Azalea simply watched, waiting for her cooldowns to finish.

When they did, she struck, sending a bolt of lightning toward the man. He glared up at Azalea in frustration, but that was about as much as he could actually do. And even then, the action only distracted him, creating an opening for Crimson to land an attack.

"I'll give you credit," Azalea said, "you managed to waste my time. But now it's time to end this."

At this, Crimson leaped up into the sky, disengaging as if to say, *hell if I'm getting caught in that again.*

With Crimson out of the way, Azalea unleashed every lightning spell she knew.

The man had less LP than she expected. He vanished into light before the final spell could even land.

***

"Hey, you're back!" Blanc said. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," Azalea muttered back nonchalantly. "They were hardly a challenge."

"Hardly a challenge," Weiss interrupted smoothly. "And yet it took you quite some time to return. Even with Sir Crimson's assistance."

Azalea shot Weiss a sharp glare. Then Diaz spoke:

"Now, Azalea, it is not our intent to question your skill. But for our purposes, I urge you to give an accurate report. These 'players'—they do not die when killed. Not truly. Which is why, for your lord's safety, it is imperative we understand their full capabilities for when they return. We are all on the same side here, including Weiss."

At this, Azalea realized how foolish she was being. "My apologies!" she said, dipping her head low in remorse.

Then, without embellishment, she relayed everything. She acknowledged the strength of the trio, that they were stronger than any they had faced thus far. She even admitted that even with

Crimson's assistance, they had taken longer to defeat than expected.

She attributed their resilience to their armor. The metal had completely stopped Crimson's claws, meaning it had to be made of something with formidable properties. Based on what she had observed, she suspected only the strongest *Lightning Magic* had any hope of dealing damage through it.

"Armor effective against all but the strongest *Lightning Magic*..." Diaz said thoughtfully. "Why, that almost sounds like Her Majesty's Mister Plates."

"Mister...Plates?" Blanc echoed, confused. Then her eyes lit up. "Oh! Mist Ur-Plates! Like that robot? They got robot strength? That's crazy."

This encounter had ended in their favor. *This time.* Having lost EXP from dying, the players would not attempt Ellental again for some time. But there was no doubt—they would be back.

Blanc needed to be ready. She had to farm more EXP and grow stronger, more prepared. Because God knows if she wasn't, her enemies were.

"Hmm... But I guess I should let Lealea know, huh? That there are people walking around with armor just as strong as hers!"

Chapter 6: Summon Squared

Leah had Sugaru spawn a brand-new queen vespoid to oversee her newly acquired Plain of Tür.

She gave the queen no training, no stat boosts, no skills. Just left her as she was to figure things out, one-star style. The only aid Leah offered was a handful of potions, enough to keep her going while she pumped out infantry ants and sapper ants to populate the plain.

She managed all of this from within the giant mole's chamber. Since it was a boss room, her presence wouldn't affect the plain's difficulty. Just to be sure, she checked socials. And indeed, there was nothing new beyond the beginner's distress call from earlier.

"But would it be suspicious for a dungeon to swap mob types completely without adjusting its difficulty?" she muttered to herself.

Thinking it'd be better to make a buzz about it, Leah stepped outside the cave with Sugaru, then checked online.

"And the reaction is...pretty much instant. There are already posts about the plain becoming five-stars. And with that, we can officially confirm that boss areas are exempt from difficulty rating."

It was a good sign that Leah got instant confirmation. It meant Tür was a hotspot for players right now. While she was at it, Leah shot Blanc a message, asking for permission to let Diaz take a little walk outside the manor.

Speaking of player hotspots and Blanc: Ellental—Rumors of a roaming boss had turned it into a destination of particular interest. The boss's presence could be confirmed the moment Ellental's difficulty temporarily jumped to four stars. Though that confirmation wasn't much help to the players inside the dungeons; only those in town, next to the teleport hub, with the teleport list open, could see the change. If you were already inside, hoping for a warning before things got rough, you were out of luck.

When Leah asked Blanc about this, Blanc said this "roaming" boss

was actually one of her three vampire lieutenants. Apparently, she'd first sent one out against a particularly powerful group of players that had come sniffing around. It was a warning to high-level players: *Farm content your own level or face your doom!*

Diaz then chimed in with a helpful bit of information that this group of particularly powerful players likely had gear made of the same adaman-whatever material she had been using. That came as a bit of a surprise to Leah. She was certain someone else would find a vein of the stuff sooner or later. It was just that, well, she had been banking on later rather than sooner.

Well, that was nothing potion popping to fuel a nonstop grind of mass-producing philo stones to update her adamanlegion couldn't fix.

"Wow, Ellental has its own dedicated thread. I'm jealous," she muttered, scrolling through the chatter. "Oh, wait. Rokillean has one too. Guess all the discussion was cluttering up the main threads."

She kept scrolling.

"Oho, the Old Hilith Capital has one too. Weird, considering no one's actually been there yet." She passed her eyes over the thread. "At least it seems that people are starting to figure out the difficulty's dropped."

The discussion was going exactly as Leah had envisioned. Someone pointed out the drop in difficulty in Hilith, another linked it to the Cataclysm's appearance in Tür, and the prevailing conclusion was that the Cataclysm's absence had caused the shift.

Well, *almost* exactly as planned. The only hiccup was that no one was willing to challenge the capital yet, too afraid the Cataclysm might return without warning.

"In that case, people should begin trickling in if I stay away from the capital for a few more days. Now, let's see, Diaz should already be out and about in Ellental, and...aha. The difficulty isn't changing. That means Operation Farm Other People's Dungeons is a go."

She let Diaz wander a little longer, just in case there was some kind of delay. But after what felt like a reasonable wait, nothing changed. That was enough confirmation for her. She had him head back to the manor—stealthily, of course. It wouldn't be great if some

random player ran into Diaz in Ellental.

Now Leah had her answer. No reason to hang around the Ellental thread any longer. But half out of curiosity, half out of boredom, she scrolled up through the past few days' posts—to find something interesting.

"It was Wayne's party that got wiped by the roaming boss! Ohhh. Then that makes sense why they had adamant gear. But they never mentioned it in their posts."

Wayne wasn't that strong. But he ran with Gealgamesh and Mentai-list, two of the top players in the game. If anyone had access to the latest and greatest, it was those two.

Though... *Huh.* Wasn't Shape the kingdom best known for its mining and blacksmithing? If they got adamant-whatever from anywhere, it would be there. But from what Leah knew about Wayne, he didn't have much to do with Shape at all.

So where had they gotten it?

Ah.

"The capital. They stole it right out from under me."

She had to give them props. To still have the presence of mind to pull that off with everything going down at the time—perhaps Wayne was sharper than she gave him credit for. Not that she thought Wayne was dumb, per se. Just that his impression gave...tunnel vision. Like once he decided on something, that was it. So seeing him act on the fly like that was mildly surprising.

The battle in the capital had bestowed Leah with two key takeaways.

One: that she wasn't as powerful as she thought and could never afford to get complacent.

And two: that an undying, respawnable army of adamant soldiers was an infinite source of those adamant chunks.

She'd recovered a decent portion of adamant chunks in the aftermath of that battle. Since her army had respawned afterward like always, it got her thinking: If she could somehow engineer a setup where they kept dying over and over, she might be able to farm adamant indefinitely.

The problem was, she hadn't found a clean way to replicate that

scenario.

The most obvious roadblock was that just like how friendly units didn't give EXP when fighting one another, they didn't drop any loot either. As for any other theories, regular NPC monsters weren't even close to strong enough to bring down an adamant soldier, and while throwing players like Wayne at them might *technically* work, the problem was trying to recover the drops from them after the fact.

Though now that she thought about it again, perhaps there *was* a way.

"Maybe I should challenge Lyla to a friendly wargame one of these days. With the condition that all spoils are returned to their rightful owner, of course."

But that would be a prospect for later. For now, Leah had finished onboarding her newest dungeon master. Sitting around wouldn't accomplish much, so she decided to head back to town and check on how the Mountain Cats were doing.

***

Leaving Sugaru in charge of the plain until the queen vespoid's egg laying settled down (and keeping Mister Plates there simply because navigating him through the town was *not* practical), Leah returned to Lieflais alone. She headed to the lord's manor to find only Kelli there.

"How's the land-sharking going?" Leah asked her.

"Well, boss," Kelli said. "We've locked down all the prime spots along Main Street, plus the entire warehouse district. The artisan district's still holding out, even when we drop the lord's name, so we decided to shift focus to the residential areas for now."

Leah figured the rest of the crew was out handling negotiations. But to have that much under their control in just half a day? That was beyond her expectations.

"Eh, leave it. The residential area isn't a must-have," Leah said. "Not while we already have the lord under our sway. Can you arrange for all the former landholders from Main Street and the warehouse district to be summoned here? I want to *Retain* them and

have them continue their lives exactly as they did before so as to not raise suspicion. And let's see...who's in charge of the artisan district? Lemmy? Then let's just have her go ahead and *Retain* them all there."

Leah had plans for the artisan district. It would become a new crafting hub. The makeshift smithy in Lieb had been limping along for far too long. She'd managed to improve it to a state to work adamant through brute-force skill ups, but some things just weren't possible without better facilities.

By studying the workshops in the artisan district, she could improve the one in Lieb and other work areas. Ultimately, her master plan was that Lieb would become a skunkworks for experimentation, while Lieflais would be the hub for mass production.

As soon as the Cataclysm cleared out, new players would come flooding back to the plain. She'd be ready. Production on beginner gear would kick off immediately to meet the demand. Apprentices would crank out the low-level stuff, while journeymen and masters focused on mass-producing adamant equipment. It would generate EXP, bulk up her forces, and earn her a tidy profit—and that profit, that coin, was the crux of her plan.

"When players use the teleport system, even if they're not actively smuggling, they're still moving their personal wealth with them. If Hilith becomes disproportionately popular among players, that means wealth will start concentrating there."

Essentially, this would create a one-way transfer of wealth from every kingdom to Hilith. Or rather, wealth would flow out of all nations and into a void. Given that Hilith was no longer a functional state and players were mysterious black boxes to NPCs, the economic advisers of other kingdoms would have no clear understanding of where their wealth was going. At best, they might suspect that players were hoarding it somewhere beyond their reach.

Which wasn't entirely inaccurate, but once that gold was gone, it was gone for good. The entire continent operated under a universal currency—gold coins—meaning they were all tied to the gold standard. And since there was no concept of currency conversion or

independent monetary policy, this meant a kingdom's economic power was directly tied to the physical amount of gold it possessed. Since one can't buy gold if one doesn't have any gold, there were no mechanisms by which the NPCs could use to reclaim any wealth, once lost.

Of course, minor wealth disparities had always existed. But because of the relative peace between kingdoms and limited interkingdom trade, it had never been a serious issue. But now, with the explosion of players and the way they could move wealth, the kingdoms would start to feel the effects. As their coffers drained, governments, starting with the already economically disadvantaged ones, would eventually be forced into a position where selling off everything of value was the only way to keep their kingdoms functional.

"But of course, all of that won't happen overnight."

The effects would take time to build. But once the wealth started moving, Leah figured this town—Lieflais—would see the bulk of it. To prepare, she'd have the town's lord immediately begin construction on a new set of walls, expanding its footprint to make room for more storefronts and housing. That way, when savvy players showed up to claim their share of the economic boom, the infrastructure would already be in place. The increased activity would draw in even more NPCs, compounding the growth.

Then, if Leah were to put in the work to manage the boom using visas, business permits, and a revamped residency system, she could tax entrepreneuring players at a higher rate than the locals. Because why go through the effort of monopolizing trade when you can simply take a cut every time it happens?

"Ah," Leah said, an idea striking. "Let's send someone to that volcano from before. Have them *Retain* a few rock golems to use as material for the new town walls."

Walking building materials? Talk about convenient.

"In that case, may I suggest Marion for the task?" Kelli said. "I'm sure she'd appreciate rocks for company over people. Plus, with her *Ice Magic*, she can more than handle herself."

"Sounds good," Leah nodded. "And while we're at it, I want to set

up a registration system for all town residents. Use the redevelopment as an excuse—I just want everyone's names officially logged. That way, we can easily separate players from the townsfolk."

"For that, allow me," said an unfamiliar male voice.

Leah turned to see the town's lord. "Right. This is your town after all. Have at it, um..."

"Albert, Your Majesty," the man said. "Viscount Albert Seebach of Lieflais."

"Cool name. Wait, your last name isn't Lieflais?"

"No, Your Majesty. My family once served as Nobles of the Robe in the royal court. It was my grandfather who, upon exposing the corruption that plagued this town, was granted its viscounty by the king, displacing the former ruling house."

Cool story, Leah thought before handing him the reins on executing the town's expansion plans and everything else that came with it.

Meanwhile, she called over Marion and gave her the rundown on the volcano mission. To make things easier, she acquired *Summon Summoner* for the girls' ease of travel. In addition, she gave Albert a few new skills to make his noble human default *Retainer* skill function better.

"All right, you all have your missions," Leah said. "Good luck. I'll be heading back to Lieb for now—there's something I need to take care of."

***

Leah almost reflexively chose Sugaru as her *Summon Summoner* target to return to Lieb before picking Hakuma instead. Sugaru was posted away from home for once, and the wolves were who she wanted to see in the first place, so it all worked out.

<Welcome back, boss,> Hakuma said. <How did your business in the plain go?>

"Very well, Hakuma, thank you for asking. The plain is firmly under our control, and we've secured the town next door as well. It's

our first time managing a human settlement, but with the lord under my sway, it should all work out."

Albert had already been entrusted with his tasks and should've been faithfully carrying them out even as she spoke. To make sure nothing went sideways, Leah had boosted his INT—along with that of his old man butler, just in case.

"Which brings me to you and the wolves, Hakuma. I've got a new mission for you—and the rest of the pack. The pups are big enough to handle their first mission, right?"

Hakuma suddenly looked very excited. <Of course they are! I'll call for them right this very instant!>

Before Leah could remind him she could just summon them over, Hakuma had already bolted out of the cave and into the sky.

Well, with the ability to run on air, this wouldn't take long. Leah decided to patiently wait.

A few moments later, Hakuma returned with Ginka and the pups in tow. The cave had once felt spacious when Leah first found them, but now, with two full-grown wolves and six nearly grown pups, it was anything but.

As Leah explained the plan, she noticed the pups sitting unusually still and obedient. No biting, no play-fighting; it was almost sad to see, but that's how it goes. They all had to grow up sometime. By now, they were probably on the verge of outgrowing the goblins they tore apart every day.

When she finished, Hakuma spoke. <In other words, you want us to go to another monster's domain and tear the place up?>

Ginka snorted. <No. Were you even listening? The boss doesn't want us going just anywhere—she's choosing the place. And we're not just 'tearing the place up.' We're staying there, finding out where its leader lives, and keeping players away from them.>

<That's what I meant. You just explained it better,> Hakuma muttered, looking away.

The pups, meanwhile, nodded their heads excitedly.

Leah hadn't added them as friends. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but she took it as a sign that they understood.

"By the way," Leah said, "how does 'adulthood' work for you

guys? They shouldn't be pups for much longer, right?"

At some point, "pup" would drop from their names, and they'd become full-fledged wolves. But as for when or how that happened, neither Hakuma nor Ginka seemed to know. Apparently, they had just become ice wolves when the time came. That obviously wouldn't work this time—now that the pups were Leah's retainers, nothing would happen without her approval.

Like everything else in the game, it was probably an EXP trigger. She could brute-force their growth with a philo stone, but something about *Rebirthing* a juvenile wolf before its time made her hesitate.

<I'm not sure,> Ginka replied. <I was hoping that perhaps we could find out while you were here, boss.>

In that case, Leah took a random wolf pup, Mizore, and fed her some EXP, raising her stats in small, careful increments. Then, suddenly, a system message popped up:

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<<Retainer has satisfied conditions for [Rebirth].>>
<<Allow retainer to be reborn as a [gray wolf]?>>
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"There it is," Leah said. "Huh? Gray wolf? Not an ice wolf?"

Was it possible that wolf pups were like a "larval" form of wolves, capable of branching into different evolutions? If that were the case, then each evolution path must have its own unique conditions. It would also mean her previous theory about Skoll and Hati evolving into Fenrir was probably wrong. Instead, Skoll and Hati were likely just the top evolutions of their particular wolf branch—while Fenrir belonged to a completely different lineage.

"Well, let's have Mizore evolve into a gray wolf. I'm curious to see where this leads."

Leah confirmed the *Rebirth*, light engulfed Mizore, and when it faded, she had grown much larger—about the size Ginka had been before her own transformation.

To experiment, Leah picked Hyo next. She gave him *Fire Magic*, then boosted his stats by the same amount she'd given Mizore.

<<Retainer has satisfied conditions for [Rebirth].>>
<<Allow retainer to be reborn as a [gray wolf]?>>
<<Allow retainer to be reborn as a [fire wolf]?>>

"Oh, good. For a second, I was worried the condition was based on growing up in a specific biome. Looks like learned skills are all that matter."

Satisfied, she continued. She gave Arare *Ice Magic*, *Rebirthing* her into an ice wolf. Fubuki got *Wind Magic* and became a wind wolf. But then, she hit a snag.

She gave Kogome and Zarame *Earth*, *Lightning*, and *Water Magic*, but none of them seemed to trigger a *Rebirth* option on their own. She put the *Rebirth* task on hold, then gave them a random assortment of skills in a completely unscientific manner. Fortunately, the system offered new *Rebirth* options: sky wolf and forest wolf. Unfortunately, because of said unscientific manner, she had no idea which combination of skills had triggered either option.

Still, she pressed forward—*Rebirthing* Kogome into a sky wolf and Zarame into a forest wolf.

Now, with everyone finished, she examined the new pack.

Mizore, the gray wolf, stood out as the largest, his imposing build suggesting a role as a specialized physical attacker.

Hyo, the fire wolf, had taken on a coat of deep reds and blacks, making him look absolutely bitchin'. His skill set was a combination of *Fire Magic* and nonmagical fire abilities, a setup that mirrored that of the ice wolves. Between spells, he could weave in those aforementioned fire abilities, making him a well-rounded fighter.

The new ice wolf, Arare, had grown up to look just like her adoptive parents. Her fluffy white coat looked just like Ginka's pre-*Rebirth*.

Fubuki, the wind wolf, had a pleasant jade green coat with a pure white underside, making her look distinctly more husky-like than the others. Like the other elemental wolves, she had magic—wind, in her case—paired with complementary nonmagical skills. Some of those skills enhanced her speed and mobility, meaning wind wolves were

built for agility, hard to pin down in a fight.

Kogome, the sky wolf, had a pale blue coat, the same shade as the open sky. She came equipped with *Skyrunning* by default, and her skill tree was vast. By the time Leah was done, she had sunk more EXP into Kogome than any of the others.

Zarame was a deep, mossy green, like the heart of the forest. She had access to *Plant Magic*—which...made sense. Leah had needed *Light Magic* to unlock *Plant Magic* for herself, but this seemed to be one of those unique racial exceptions.

Six new wolves, six powerful additions to her team. Along with their new elemental skills, Leah boosted their INT across the board, added them as friends, and taught them how to access their inventories. She could have also taught them how to use friend chat, but...eh. Better to leave at least something for Hakuma and Ginka to do.

The wolf pack, complete at last. Now, this was a squad that could tear through any three-star dungeon without breaking a sweat.

"Hmm. You guys once mentioned being born in a forest to the north," Leah said. "Would that be somewhere in the Kingdom of Wels? If so, how about a little homecoming? You can take over the very forest you were driven out of."

Yes, there was a chance that their old home wasn't a designated teleport destination, but that didn't matter much anymore. Leah had that new way of making use of nondesignated areas—*Retain* a boss, expand her roster, and gain control over more monster types.

In fact, this was the *better* use for Hakuma and Ginka's pack. They didn't have the numbers for dungeon occupation anyway. Instead of using them for ranch control, they'd be her personal dungeon strike force.

***

After seeing off the wolf pack, Leah turned her attention to the goblin ranches. With her plans expanding to ranching entire dungeons, this small-scale operation wasn't particularly useful anymore. Instead of shutting it down, she decided to *Retain* the

goblins and form a new goblin corps for her grand army of the apocalypse. It was the least she could do to thank them for their endless service. They would now farm instead of being farmed.

Leah floated down in front of the goblin that looked the most like a chief. "Now, I know we've had our differences," she said. "I've treated you like pawns. That's on me. But what do you say we let that be water under the bridge? Work with me, and we'll build a brighter, better future for both of us."

But the goblin chief clearly had no idea what Leah was saying. Nor did it even seem to know who Leah was.

"*Retainer.* Ope, don't run. *Fear.*"

After *Retaining* the chief, she *Feared* the rest of the goblins so they wouldn't scatter.

"Chief, chief, chief... What should I do for you?" She thought for a moment. "Ah, I know. How would you like to be as strong as one of my adamanleaders?"

Leah took out a greater philosopher's stone and tossed it at the goblin chief.

***

"I proudly report that all my kin in this forest are now under my control, Your Highness," said a short, lean, green-skinned man with a big ol' hump on his head.

This sharp-looking, middle-aged-looking individual standing before her was, of course, the former goblin chief. With the power of the greater philo stone, he'd evolved from a goblin leader to a goblin general. A generous boost to his INT and MND had eventually granted him the ability to speak.

With his new stats and Leah's enhancements, his combat prowess was likely on par with an Adamanleader. If not as he was, then certainly with the full set of adamant gear Leah had just outfitted him with, fresh from Lieb's forges.

It would've been poor form not to give him some magic to go with his newfound intelligence, so she'd also granted him *Enchantment*, *Control*, *Necromancy*, *Summon*, and, of course,

Retainer.

Of all her recent acquisitions, he had probably been Leah's most expensive. She wasted no time putting her EXP to good use, immediately sending him on a mission to *Retain* every goblin in the forest. If his report just now was anything to go by, he had just completed that task.

"Well done," Leah said. "Now, for your real mission. I want you to go on the offensive."

She laid out her dungeon ranching plan.

"I understand well," the goblin chief said. "But if I may speak plainly, I fear our warriors, as they stand, are ill prepared for a task of this nature."

"Ah, of course," Leah said. "What do you need? Assault teams? Guard units? Or how about I give you the equipment and experience, and you outfit your men however you see fit?"

The rank-and-file goblins were expendable; they could die. But the one thing that absolutely couldn't happen while the goblin corps were out raising hell was the general dying. If he did, every single goblin would vanish on the spot, and they'd lose control of whatever area they were in. So yes, outfitting a few specialized squads to hunt down powerful opponents and defend the general was a smart move.

"I'll send word to the smithy," Leah said. "Anything you need will be waiting for you there. As for EXP...I'll give you this much. Distribute it as you see fit."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you, Your Majesty!"

"You're welcome, goblin chief. Or should I say...*Gaslark*."

"Gaslark? Might that be...?"

"It's your name; don't wear it out."

With that, another big part of Leah's plan was set. Hakuma and the wolf pack would aggress in unmarked dungeon areas, while the goblins would infiltrate and take over the known ones.

"I'll call for you when the time comes," Leah said. "Be ready."

***

After finishing up in Lieb, Leah returned to the lord's manor in Lieflais. It'd been quite the busy day so far, but there was yet more to be done. Here, there was one final experiment she wanted to conduct.

Lord Seebach bowed upon seeing her entry. "Your Majesty, all proceeds as planned. We've sent notice, bidding the townsfolk to present themselves for the new register within the allotted days. Once that time is spent, we shall go door-to-door to ensure their compliance."

"Glad to hear it, Albert," Leah replied.

"But if I may offer counsel," Seebach continued, "do we truly need to go to such lengths? Would it not be simpler for me to *Retain* them all at once? With the boons Your Majesty has bestowed upon me, such a feat is well within my grasp."

"Nooo, no, no, no, *no*." Leah waved the suggestion away. "That can't happen."

If that happened, all her efforts would be for nothing. The town would fall entirely under the control of a single faction. In other words, the town would become a dungeon.

That was the logical assumption, anyway. In Leah's case (as it might very well be for NPC-owned dungeons—she didn't know), she'd already agreed to convert all her holdings into dungeons. She doubted there were any conditions like *only the ones she owned at the time of signing* or anything like that. More likely, any area that fell under her control in the future would automatically become a dungeon, thereby ending up on that teleport list. If she took full control of the town, that would trigger the change: A new dungeon would form, a teleport node would be added, the Safe Area would vanish—and her portal to riches with it.

So yeah, if there was one thing that couldn't happen, it was that.

She quickly explained this to Seebach, who seemed to get the gist of it.

"I see," he muttered. "Forgive me—I didn't realize the full scope of your plan. I'll keep my use of *Retainer* to a minimum."

"Thanks for understanding," Leah replied. "To be perfectly honest, I don't know where that 'single faction' line is drawn, but this town is

not the place to be testing for it."

Indeed, that was a mechanic worth testing, but in some podunk town in the middle of nowhere, not this vital link between kingdoms.

"Anyway. Got a bed or a chair I can borrow?"

Back to the task at hand. Leah didn't come to this town just to explain to Seebach how dungeons worked.

***

Leah borrowed a guest room in the manor, pulled a few philosopher's stones from her inventory, and set them on the coffee table.

<Kelli, I need your help with a little something. Can I *Summon* you over to the manor?>

<Of course, boss.>

She summoned Kelli, then lay on the bed and used *Summon Summoner* to enter Kelli's body, just as she had before. But it had been so long, it almost felt like the first time.

In this form, Leah couldn't use *Flight* or *Evil Eye*, as those were her skills. But she could still use *Summon*, since Kelli had that ability as well. The catch was, she could only use it with the modifiers Kelli had unlocked. That meant she could summon a random member of a specified race or one of Kelli's retinue.

This was why Leah had come back. Her experiment involved using *Summon Summoner* to summon her retainer somewhere else, in the consciousness of said retainer to try...something she'd always wanted to try.

She picked a random name from Kelli's retainer list and off she went.

The world spun. A moment later, Leah found herself standing in front of a middle-aged man who looked thoroughly surprised to see her.

"Lady Kelli, what a pleasant surprise," he said. "I apologize. Had I known you were coming, I would've made proper preparations to receive you, but alas..."

"Ah—uh, ahem. Sorry. This actually isn't Kelli. My name's Leah.

I'm Kelli's master."

So it worked. *Summon* within a *Summon*—or summon squared, as Leah decided to call it—was a success.

The man, she gathered, was "Gustaf Orban" as listed under Kelli's retainer list. After introducing herself, Leah quickly explained how she'd gotten here.

"Your Majesty!" Gustaf said, finally, grasping the situation. "This is a most unexpected honor. I am Gustaf Orban, head of the Orban Trading Company, at your most humble service."

Leah had no idea what the Orban Trading Company was, but based on the orders she gave Kelli, she figured they were one of the major players on the town's main street.

A human merchant. That's a happy coincidence, Leah thought. He would perfectly serve Leah's purposes for part two of this little experiment.

"I'm running a little experiment through Kelli here," Leah said. "The first part of which just ended in success. For the second part, I will need your cooperation. I want to see if, through our current method of communication, you can use an item that would ascend you from human to noble human."

Gustaf's eyes bulged. "Nobility? *Me*?! Such an honor would be..."

"If you don't feel up to the task, I can find someone el—"

"No! Sorry. But no, please! Let it be me!"

Of course, this would be a promotion purely in a backend, racial classification sense. It wasn't like Gustaf would suddenly become an actual noble with land, titles, and everything that came with it.

She considered explaining that for full transparency, but on second thought...why *couldn't* he become a real noble? *Hilith as a kingdom no longer exists. I'm basically the ruler of this land now. I can give him whatever title I want, right?*

She saw little downside to this arrangement. A new nobility. With Leah-ordained nobles. *Maybe this could be the start of something new...*

"Okay then, here you go," Leah said, pulling a philosopher's stone from her pocket and handing it to Gustaf.

He took it, used it, and was immediately enveloped in light. Then,

system messages popped up.

<<Player input detected. Canceling automation.>>
<<Retainer has satisfied conditions for [Rebirth].>>
<<Allow retainer to be reborn as a [Noble Human]?>>

Ah, so that's how it works, Leah thought to herself with a smile.

This was what Leah had actually wanted to figure out—whether she could "intercept" system messages meant for her NPC retainers by being in their consciousness.

She could. And from the way the messages were phrased, it seemed that when *Rebirth* happened purely between NPCs, the system just processed it automatically. That made sense—NPCs couldn't react to system prompts even if they wanted to. But the moment a player's presence was detected in the chain, they could see and confirm it.

Allow, Leah thought.

<<Triggering [Rebirth].>>

And it even let her confirm it just by thinking!

"Then that settles it," Leah said aloud. "I can totally pretend to be a normal player by borrowing someone else's body. There's basically no difference."

There was one thing that merited at least a warning, though: She couldn't access Kelli's inventory.

That was why she'd pulled the philosopher's stone from her own pocket instead of pulling it from inventory storage. Earlier, when she'd tried to grab one of the stones from the table and store it, she found she couldn't. Inventories seemed to be coded as strictly personal, completely inaccessible to third parties, even through possession.

"I guess that doesn't matter *too* much," she mused. "If I really need something, I can just relinquish control to Kelli for a moment, let her grab it, then hop back in."

And who knows, the need might arise. The fastest way to prove to other players that she was one of them was to flash an inventory, after all.

Though, thinking about it now... That meant Leah would be a player pretending to be an NPC pretending to be a player.

Um. Anyway...

"Ho... So this is what nobility feels like," Gustaf suddenly said.

"Whoops. Almost forgot you were still here," Leah said.

Gustaf was now a noble human. The change wasn't all that dramatic—maybe a slight refinement to his features to match the racial boost, but being slightly more attractive didn't exactly make for a striking, earth-shattering change.

"What sets you apart from the rabble is your ability to wield the *Retainer* ability to make others heed your command," Leah explained. "And *Enchantment Magic*, because I'll give that to you, why not. Plus a bonus to INT and MND for being such a cooperative test subject. I'm sure a merchant like you will put it to good use."

She wrapped up by warning him not to *Retain* too many of the townsfolk. In response, Gustaf practically flattened himself to the ground in gratitude.

"All right then," Leah said. "Take care. I got something else I want to do, so I'm outta here."

Leaving Gustaf on the floor, Leah headed into town, strolling down Main Street. Her destination? The local Mercenary Guild. She could've just asked for directions, but for once, she wanted to find it herself. Because just walking through town like anyone else—when was the last time she'd done that?

"These streetlights are nice. The streets are safe, the people are vibing... What's not to love about this town?" she muttered, taking in the sights. "Now, given how important the plain is to the local economy, the Guild should be in a pretty prominent spot. Like, say...over there."

She spotted a building where mercenary types—that is to say, players—were coming and going. It looked promising. Leah followed

the crowd inside, plastering a wide-eyed, curious look on her face.

***

Peculiar things were happening in the Mercenary Guild.

Not the players who strode in and made a beeline toward a door leading to a room farther inside without stopping or talking to anyone—they were fine. Ish. Leah was talking about the ones standing motionless in the lobby, their avatars frozen in place, eyes empty, like lifeless mannequins.

"...Is that what checking socials mid-game looks like?" Leah quietly muttered to herself. "Yikes. That looks...off-putting. Better not do that in broad daylight anymore."

That was a good bit of information to know, but not what she was here for. She came here to ask around to find the portal device—the doohickey the devs had placed in town, the physical device that allowed players to teleport to their dungeon of choice.

Though...judging by the steady stream of players heading straight for that one room, she might not even have to ask.

So the portals are in the Guilds themselves... Leah mused.

Which made sense, really. If you were going to put a portal to monster-infested hellscapes, what better place than the very building where mercenaries, armed to the teeth, gathered regularly?

The only reason she hadn't immediately suspected the Guild was because of the number of NPCs inside. Wouldn't they find it at least a little suspicious? Teleportation was one-way, so a room where people just entered and never returned? That was a ghost story you'd tell to spook your buddies at best, alien abduction or ritual sacrifice at worst...

Deciding to cut straight to the point, Leah walked over to the reception counter.

"'Scuse me, you got a sec?" she said.

The man behind the counter looked up. "Yes, ma'am, what can I do you for?"

"I'm trying to get to a dungeon. Do you know where I can do that?"

"A dungeon?" The man blinked, then nodded in understanding. "Ohhh, monster territory, you mean? See that door over there?" He gestured toward the one Leah had already suspected. "See all them of yer lot headin' down it? Just tag along, and you'll be right as rain."

"Thanks. Say, you wouldn't happen to know how the teleportation thing works, would you?"

He shook his head. "Not a clue, I'm afraid. But yer one o' them vault holders, ain'tcha? They say it runs on the same trick as that vault o' yours. All magic mumbo-jumbo to me, but if you're one of 'em, I reckon ye understand, right?"

Leah just nodded along.

"Actually, that teleportation thing, whatever it is—some bigwig from headquarters showed up, set it up in a day, then buggered off. If ye really wanna know, best take it up with them."

Leah thanked the clerk for his time and walked away.

The way he hadn't even blinked at the word "teleportation" was interesting. That was the behavior of a man who'd seen plenty of things he didn't understand and had long since stopped trying to. Probably an attitude he'd adopted after the third, fifth, or seventh time something completely inexplicable happened, just to save his sanity.

But *that* was a bit of interesting information: The Mercenary Guild had a headquarters.

Was that even feasible? What methods did they use to oversee and communicate with all their branch locations across the continent in a world where the usual methods of communication were unreliable at best and nonexistent at worst?

It seemed impossible. And in all likelihood, it was. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one. And the simplest explanation Leah could think of was that this "bigwig from headquarters" was just a dev logging into the game using a specialized dev-only avatar. They showed up, said they were from "headquarters" for the sake of keeping things simple, and left.

Social engineering, as it were.

Anyway, back to the backroom with the teleportation device. The door led to a corridor that led to a courtyard of sorts. In the middle

of said courtyard towered a stone obelisk type deal. Players crowded all around it, sealing the deal that it was the aforementioned portal device.

"This isn't a room. Who said this was a room?" Leah muttered to herself. "Oh, wait, I did."

She stepped closer to the obelisk, weaving through the players, when she caught wind of a peculiar conversation.

"So?" someone said.

"Hold on," another replied. "It's still one-star. I've been checking nonstop since, but it hasn't gone up again."

"Okay. So the five-star thing was what, just an anomaly?"

"I don't know. I mean, when we ran into the raid boss, apparently the difficulty never went up. Remember when you posted about it and got slammed as a troll or bait? That was because the difficulty never actually changed."

"Okay, but it definitely happened, all right? People saw it, they posted about it. The analysis thread said it was probably the event boss launching an invasion of the dungeon, and that was what caused the spike."

"I mean...yeah. I guess if we encountered the event boss while it was still in the process of invading, then the difficulty wouldn't have shifted."

"Um, I still don't follow..." a meek third voice piped up.

The first person sighed. "Okay, let me try to put this in a way you'll understand..."

Ah, no wonder I thought they looked familiar, Leah thought. *It's the same party Sugaru knocked down like bowling pins this morning.*

From their conversation, she could see her scheme was unfolding perfectly. And why wouldn't it? The most effective schemes were always the ones rooted in reality. Leah *had* invaded the dungeon. She *had* taken ownership of it. She *had* stepped outside the boss room, if only for a second—just long enough to send players scrambling for answers. Now, curiosity was doing the rest.

In the end, the group decided to rechallenge the dungeon to see what was really happening in the plains for themselves.

Leah could only wish them luck.

The spirit to reattempt content that had just wiped them—that was the privilege of the inexperienced. Once they had a bit more EXP under their belts, they'd think twice before attempting something so foolhardy.

Their intrepidness seemed contagious. One by one, other players followed suit, touching the obelisk and vanishing. Within moments, the once-crowded courtyard was empty.

Perfect.





Now was the ideal time for Leah (via Kelli) to interact with the obelisk. On the off chance it reacted differently to NPCs, no one would be around to witness.

She pressed a hand against the stone.

```
<<Select teleport destination.>>
<<Error: Entity activating device does not match
authenticated player.>>
<<Warning: Only entity [Kelli] in contact with the
obelisk will be teleported. Character [Leah] will not.
Confirm continuation?>>
```

"'Course," Leah said. "Confirm."

```
<<Select teleport destination.>>
```

For a second, she thought the error message would end her experiment right then and there. But all it really seemed to want was informed consent.

Still, something about the wording caught her attention. Why did one system message call it a device while another referred to it as an obelisk? Was that intentional? Or just an edge case the devs hadn't accounted for, leading to inconsistent phrasing?

It *was* only the second day of the new patch. This wouldn't be the first bug found, and it definitely wouldn't be the last.

She scrolled through the teleport list before settling on the three-star dungeon the Golf Club Mines in the Kingdom of Shape. She'd seen the name floating around before. An interesting one, to say the least. Whether it was because of the name itself or something about the dungeon's design, it was one of the more popular dungeons in Shape.

It was her first time experiencing teleportation since the first event, but it felt just like using *Summon Summoner*. The world spun for a brief moment before she found herself standing on an unfamiliar mountainside.

She was pleased to find that teleporting hadn't disrupted her presence inside Kelli—her spirit had traveled with her seamlessly. That was good to know; otherwise, the inventory issue wouldn't have been the only drawback of playing as her retainer.

The first thing she noticed was a small group of players lingering in the Safe Area, likely waiting for the rest of their party to arrive. She accidentally made eye contact with one of them, who immediately approached.

"Hey, you lookin' for a group?" he asked. "We still have space if you wanna join?"

"Uh. Sorry," Leah said quickly. "My friends are waiting for me inside."

"Ah, I see. No problem. Then take care, yeah?"

She nodded, and sidestepped past him making her way toward the mine entrance carved into the mountainside. The Safe Area looked a lot like one of those waystations set up halfway up a mountain for climbers to rest. Which...made sense, since now that she was paying attention, they were pretty far up. The mine entrance itself was a bit a ways ahead, but since the path was a straight shot, it didn't take long before she reached the entrance and stepped inside.

"'My friends are waiting for me inside,'" she muttered to herself, shaking her head. "What am I, a girl trying to get into a club?"

It was good that that guy fell for it, but *man* was that a terrible excuse.

The abandoned mine tunnels were cool, damp, and most of all, *dark*. The only light came from the faint glow of daylight spilling in through the entrance. Examining the walls, Leah spotted remnants of what looked like the magical lighting implements that would've kept this place lit for the miners, but they were broken, shattered, nonfunctional.

The monsters here were goblin-type. If she were one of those forum posters who loved dissecting game lore, she'd probably argue that either the goblins overran the place and forced the miners to flee, or something else drove the workers away first, and the goblins simply moved in afterward.

She made her way deeper into the cave, hugging the wall as she moved. A little farther in, she found a spot that seemed suitable. She relinquished control of Kelli's body, and her consciousness shot back to the manor in Lieflais. She immediately sent Kelli a chat message telling her to standby and stay alert before this time, summoning herself over wholesale.

"Whew. Thanks for the help, Kelli," Leah said. "I learned a lot thanks to you."

"I've done nothing, boss," Kelli deflected graciously.

Now, with her *Evil Eye*, Leah had a much clearer view of the tunnels ahead. No players were nearby, but a group of goblins loitered farther inside. The tunnel stretched in a straight line with nothing blocking the view between them, yet the distance seemed enough to keep the goblins from noticing them.

"Okay, Kelli, you can just stand by for now. *Summon: Gaslark*."

With that, a fierce-looking goblin general materialized before them. He glanced around, taking in his surroundings. "Oh?" His eyes narrowed. "Your Majesty, might this be...?"

"Your assignment, general."

"I hear and obey, Your Majesty. The goblins stand ready. We await your command."

"Good. We're turning this dungeon into our personal EXP farm. You, General, are in charge of getting it up and running."

Gaslark dropped to one knee in reverence. "As you command, these tunnels shall be yours."

"Your main objective is EXP acquisition. You'll accomplish that by attacking any enemy elements you come across. Nearly everything in these tunnels will respawn after it's killed, which means your targets are, for all intents and purposes, endless—*unless*—you kill the dungeon's original master. So please, do try to avoid that."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Same goes for you. Your forces are endless too, as long as you don't die."

"Understood."

"This is a three-star dungeon. Expect the goblins here to be just as strong, if not stronger, than the tarantellas back in Lieb. Your

regular troops might struggle, even with the EXP we've spent to bolster their stats. If you need more, just ask."

She glanced around the tunnels, then back at Gaslark.

"This is the pilot project. Every other farm we set up will be based on this one. There's no manual, no guidebook. If there'll ever be one, you'll be the one writing it. We're heading into the unknown. Failure will be forgiven—if not expected."

Gaslark stayed silent, as if refusing to even acknowledge the word "failure."

"Good. That's all from me. If you decide to carve out a base, send word. I'll have some sappers sent out to assist you. If you need tunnels dug, they're the ones to call. Good luck, general."

"Your trust shall not be misplaced, Your Majesty!"

With the future of the tunnels securely in Gaslark's hands, Leah decided her work there was done and returned to the Old Hilith Capital.

Kelli had no reason to stay either, so Leah sent her back to Lieflais. With the town's lord overseeing things, there was truthfully little need for Kelli to linger, but Leah wanted her to get used to life in town. Watching how players behaved—that could be fun for her.

At last, Leah could put her legs up for a bit. The day had been a nonstop cycle of teleporting here and there, delegating this and that, but she didn't mind. It'd been a while since she'd been this busy.

Besides, her work was frontloaded. As long as she delegated properly, everything else would fall into place.

The next day, the new queen vespoid had finished populating the Plain of Tür, so Leah recalled Sugaru from the plain, along with Mister Plates. The throne was too big for Leah—sitting on it alone just didn't feel right.

Now came the hard part—the waiting. As long as she stayed patient and bided her time, the players would come.

Chapter 7: Fake Identity

[☆5] Old Hilith - Capital [DON’T CLUTTER THE MAIN THREAD—POST HERE]
001: Alonson
Created a separate thread. The amount of speculation in the main Hilith thread was getting to be a lot so figured we’d get out of their hair.
Links to other threads:
> Dungeons Megathread
> [Old Hilith] Dungeon Strategy Megathread [Other]

...
...

251: Orinkii
I see. So you guys aren’t coming?

252: Mentai-list
We got completely destroyed in Ellental, and that was just a three star. Don’t think we’re ready yet.

253: Anonymous Elf
Same here. We’re sticking to Rokillean for now. Gonna farm a bit before even thinking about the capital. If we can’t clear this place comfortably, no point rushing in.

254: Country Pop
The variable difficulty dungeon, eh? Must be nice.

Lucky for us this game doesn’t work like a certain retro game that scales your enemies by the number of battles you’ve fought.

255: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Rokillean’s right next to the capital, yeah? Worst case, if things go south, we just pivot there instead. I’m in.
>>240 can a brother still get an invite?

256: Kuraaku
>>255 Sure thing
That makes 26. Last call for anyone else who wants in on the capital raid. Going once, going twice...

257: Kuraaku
Going three times. Roster is now locked.
First dungeon attempt, and we’re jumping straight into the heart of Cataclysm territory. Keep your expectations in check. Stay positive even if things go sideways.
The Cataclysm seems MIA for now. Hopefully, it stays that way. If not... well, good luck.

258: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Please. Cataclysm Schmataclysm. We already defeated it once, we’re just coming back for round two.

259: Orinkii
>>258 >>says it’ll be easy, prepares backup plan anyway. KEK

260: Kuraaku

Meet-up time is...

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"They're here, Your Majesty," said Sieg.

"Oh? Lemme see, lemme see."

Leah returned her vision to Ominous flying high above the capital.

"One, two, three... Twenty-six, eh? Matches the number in the thread. Guess no one else wanted in on their little crusade."

Still, twenty-six was almost an unreasonable number of people. And not just *any* people, but twenty-six of some of the best players in the game.

According to other forum threads, some had already tried tackling four-star dungeons. The results were middling at best, even from some of the most well-known parties in the game. They either ended in full wipes or early retreats, nothing anyone would call a success.

Against the sheer wall of insurmountability that was the four-star dungeon, Leah supposed this was one way to handle it—sheer force. Overwhelming numbers. Forget the usual single-digit party size, just run the place down with dozens. If the system didn't enforce a party size limit for dungeons, that meant it was ripe to be abused.

Not that Leah saw it as unfair. If she were in their shoes, she'd do the same.

If she weren't entirely antisocial, that is.

She mused on how she would deal with this rabble.

"I could avoid meeting them in the dungeon. Ambush them one by one, catching them exhausted after their run. Yes, that's logical," she muttered. "That's what they get for plastering their info online for all to see."

But no, she needn't rely on such underhanded methods. Not anymore. Not since she had trusted friends to do the job for her.

Leah had a live feed to the action through Ominous, as always, but this time, she ordered him to stay high——high enough that no one on the ground would spot him. A forest owl in the city would stand out. Since she wouldn't be able to hear anything from that

altitude, she used *Summon Vision* instead of the full-sensory *Summon Summoner: Spirit*. It was a pity, because despite the devs insisting that monsters were no different from NPCs, players still acted differently around them. One of their funniest tells was that they'd say their strategies out loud when fighting them, as if the creatures couldn't understand.

"I was looking forward to that, but what can you do? Guess I'll just enjoy this like a silent movie."

She kicked back, relaxed, and watched on as the first invasion of the Old Hilith Capital began.

***

Unlike the lush ruins of Rokillean, the endless, rolling Plain of Tür, or the majestic Great Woods of Lieb, the capital stood apart in one key way:

It had *big* freaking walls.

A masterpiece of functional beauty, the capital's defenses remained flawless and unmarred—untouched even by Leah's invasion. She simply liked them too much to let harm come to them.

That was also why she left the main gate open. Not as a courtesy to the incoming raid party, but because she couldn't bear the thought of such perfection taking damage from their attempts to break in.

The raid party filed through the gate in a single column, moving down the main boulevard with the tentative curiosity of out-of-towners in the big city. To Leah, they looked less like hardened warriors and more like students on a "field trip" of yore—slow, cautious, heads swiveling to take in the sights. It was almost endearing.

From her throne, she tilted her head, watching with lazy amusement. "If field trips are all about throwing students into the unknown to broaden their horizons...well, you won't find a better teacher than me."

As if her smug little soliloquy had triggered the first encounter (though really, it was just timing), zombies began darting out from

the alleyways, ready to strike.

But with how wide the boulevard was, calling this an ambush was being generous. Before the zombies could even get close, a ranger, who seemed to be lead scout, sensed them and put an arrow through each of their skulls. A moment later, *Fire Magic* rained down, reducing their remains to ash.

Leah hummed thoughtfully. "I might have to reconsider. Do regular old zombies even deserve a spot in a dungeon of this caliber?"

The majority of the capital's citizenry had been raised into undeath within an hour of their demise. Even with how undecayed (and thus strong) they were—zombies were still zombies. At the end of the day, even a beginner could take one down if they really put in the effort.

"They could use a bit of a glow-up, but what am I supposed to do, personally go around *Rebirthing* them one by one? Who am I, Blanc? Credit where it's due, but let's be real—I have way more zombie citizens to manage."

On a serious note, if the capital still qualified as a four-star dungeon *despite* the zombies' presence, then they were practically just there for show. And if there was one thing Leah could not abide by, it was being there simply *just* for show.

"Fine, I'll *Rebirth* them. Or, more accurately, I'll make Sieg *Rebirth* them."

"Huh?"

Oops. Leah had been so enamored watching the raid's progress she'd forgotten he was right there.

"We don't have anything as convenient as vampire's blood, so I guess we'll have to rely on philo stones," she mused. "Well, that's gonna be brutal. At least *Rebirth* a few—mix in some stronger units with the weaker ones. After this is over, of course."

Sieg *almost* let out a sigh. "Yes, Your Majesty."

She supposed that would be the first and last time she sent zombies out against this squad. They probably weren't getting any real EXP from them anyway, and they'd long outgrown any use for their drops. For both sides, it was just a giant waste of time.

Next up against the raid were a squad of skeleton knights. These were part of the contingent of undead originally under Sieg's command. If skeletons were on par with zombies, then knights should be a tier above. Leah waited to see how they would fare.

The knights formed up in disciplined ranks, engaged the raid with tight coordination and well-rehearsed tactics...!

But no, it was the same story as before. The moment they clashed with the raid's front line, they crumbled immediately.

Except a few, that is?

A handful of skeletons survived the initial encounter and managed to halt the raid's advance. Upon closer inspection, they weren't normal skeleton knights at all, but carknights, magical creatures encased in armor forged from that magically reinforced, superhard alloy.

Their enchanted armor seemed to be harder than the frontliners' weapons, forcing them to call to the casters for support. Fire rained down on the carknights, but still, they didn't fall. When it became clear they had high fire resistance, the casters immediately switched to ice magic.

That gave Leah pause. Why swap to ice magic of all things against undead? Cold effects barely affected undead—there was no way they *didn't* know that. Did they just figure, *Well, fire didn't work, so maybe its opposite will?*

Whatever their reasoning might've been, it turned out to work in their favor. She'd love to call it dumb luck, but the truth was, this was the perfect counter to carknights. Their carbide armor was brittle, vulnerable to sudden fluctuations in temperature. Fire attacks temporarily lowered their resistance to cold, and cold attacks did the same for fire. By alternating the two, the raid had unintentionally set up the perfect conditions to shatter them completely. Under the sheer force of the group's ice bombardment, the carknights were smited into oblivion, leaving behind nothing but a few hunks of metal scattered across the ground.

Things were heating up faster than Leah had expected.

Those poor carknights didn't deserve that level of overkill. Were these players really that determined to bring an end to her reign? Or

had the early ineffectiveness of their melee weapons rattled them so much that they felt the need to go all out, even this early in the dungeon?

***

Squads of skeleton and carknights continued to engage the raid.

Carknights were, on their own, not weak to *Ice Magic*. So when the second squad rolled in and the raid opened with ice spells, assuming it would work like last time, that all but confirmed Leah's dumb luck theory. However, that second attempt was all they needed to figure out the actual gimmick. Before long, they were alternating waves of fire and ice to exploit the carknights' biggest weakness. Once they cracked that code, the fights became almost too easy. At this rate, Leah wouldn't be giving the raid so much as a run for their money as she was actual money in the forms of EXP and loot.

"Having this many casters is a bigger threat than I expected," Leah said. "The fact that they can alternate to cover for one another's cooldown is huge. It's like volley fire back in the days of musket warfare. Who's leading this group, Maurice, Prince of Orange?"

It was only then that the real threat posed by such a large, coordinated group became clear to Leah.

Up until now, every large-scale battle she'd fought had been many against one. When she first engaged the raid in the capital, and when Sugaru took down that clan, the power imbalance had been obvious. Single spells barely mattered, and she wasn't even sure the opponents had time to launch coordinated, wavelike attacks. But now, when it was combatants of similar strength facing off, the sheer advantage of numbers was becoming impossible to ignore.

It was the casters that were particularly meddlesome. Physical attackers and scouts she could outmatch easily with better gear, but it'd be much harder to make up for the way the casters, with their numbers, and especially with their new grasp of the carknights'

weakness, were carving through her minions like a hot knife through better.

"Well, well. I thought I'd be the one giving the lesson, but turns out I'm the one getting schooled instead. Just like with that clan, some players bring a strength that can't be quantified by mere EXP. And that kind of strength is priceless, for it pushes my kin to grow in ways raw stats never could."

The casters in the clan party had been specialists, each fine-tuned to maximize the group's overall combat effectiveness in a way most parties couldn't. Sugaru, with her diverse insect spawns, each suited for a specific role, had something to learn from their coordination.

These casters, on the other hand, were generalists. They used and relied on their versatility to compensate for one another's weaknesses. The more uniform soldiers of the adamanlegion stood to gain something by studying their strategy.

Two different approaches, each suited to different needs—and Leah saw value in both.

Meanwhile, the raid progressed quickly, nearly reaching the gates of the royal castle.

The castle was where all bets were off when it came to difficulty. Leah could unleash hell within its hall to destroy them. But there was something else that had to happen before she could do that: The raid would have to break through the castle's grand, beautiful doors. And once again, she *really* didn't want it to come to that.

"Maybe I should send out a few adamanscouts—just a few, so as to not affect the difficulty—and end this? They're stealthy, have none of those glaring weaknesses like the carknights. Why waste time on a caster v caster duel when we can just slit some throats from the shadows? What do you think, Sieg?"

"If you're offering, I gladly accept," he replied.

"Yes, I think I am. They've had their fill today and then some. A little first-time bonus, as it were. I say it's about time we ask them to settle up and head home."

Leah summoned an entire battalion of adamansoldiers from Lieb to the castle. This being the boss area, their presence wouldn't

affect the surrounding difficulty. Sieg picked out a few adamanscouts for the mission, sending them ahead, while the rest of the battalion remained on standby.

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Heeding Sieg's orders, the adamanscouts slipped through the streets of the capital, crept up behind the raid, and took the heads of their casters.

Literally. They'd struck them at their necks.

The neck was the most glaring weakness of all humanoid races. Any hit there was a guaranteed critical. Though, for its obviousness and easily exploited nature, it was also one of the easiest weaknesses to make up for. Armor, weapons, gear—there were plenty of ways to keep one's head firmly attached to one's shoulders.

Then, how did that happen? You might think. How did a group that had made it this far into enemy territory not be more cautious about their rear?

It wasn't entirely their fault. This false sense of security had been brewing ever since they set foot in the capital. Every threat they'd faced had come from straight ahead, or occasionally from the sides. Never once from behind. So they'd adapted, focused their resources toward where it was needed—until it wasn't.

To carry out a minimum viable strike, Sieg had sent out just one scout for each caster. This way, it could be done in one clean swoop and without affecting the difficulty rating of the dungeon. They'd slipped in, chose their targets, and popped off their heads like they were harvesting cabbages. One clean strike per caster, no fuss, no time for counterplay. The fight was over before the victims even realized it'd begun.

By the time the raid's front line and scouts registered what was happening, the adamanscouts were already gone, vanishing into shadows and alleyways. Whether it was because they genuinely outclassed the enemy scouts in perception or because the raid had simply been trained to look the wrong way, it didn't matter. The result was the same. They got away without a trace.

Without their casters, the remainder of the raid folded like wet tissue paper.

Leah sent another wave of carknights their way. Just like before, the frontliners' weapons couldn't so much as scratch the carknights' enchanted armor. But unlike before, the raid could no longer call on their magic-wielding friends to bail them out.

Sensing an opportunity, Leah gave the carknights a new directive: *prioritize breaking their gear.* If they had the chance, she wanted them to break weapons, shatter armor, send them to the grave with nothing more than the clothes on their back.

It wasn't exactly a tactical move. She was just curious.

These players had teleported all the way to the capital. If their gear was wrecked, what would they do? There wasn't a friendly town for miles. No easy resupply, no safety net. How would they manage?

No friendly town... This gave Leah another bright idea.

"I've already confirmed that player retainers can wander into Safe Areas unrestricted with the only caveat being they can't take hostile actions against players. Maybe...I could have someone infiltrate the Safe Area at the capital's teleport node and set up a little settlement for players to use."

A town to lure players to further lure them into the dungeon—it was a perfectly devious little ploy. And she already knew exactly who she wanted the job: Kelli. Or more accurately, one of Kelli's retainers—Gustaf.

If his trade company was important enough for him to name-drop it in his introduction to her, then it had to be quite the sizable operation. He had the resume, the experience to back it up, and assuming he could delegate some of his responsibilities in Lieflais to family or a subordinate, Leah definitely wanted him to oversee the development of this new town.

Besides, she had made him a noble. Just in name now, but if this worked out, he'd be a proper noble, with holdings and all.

Sieg interrupted her train of thought. "The last invader has perished, my queen."

"Oh? Did they now? Thanks for the hard work, Sieg."

Too busy with her schemes to have paid any attention to the last bit of the fight, Leah ended *Summon: Vision* and returned her focus to the throne room.

This encounter with players had turned out to be very enlightening for Leah. She was sure Sieg had taken plenty of notes as well. They'd learned firsthand just how devastating volley-fire casting could be when a party had enough casters to pull it off. That was something that merited developing a counter to.

"But...how can we do that without ruining the difficulty I so painstakingly curated?" Leah muttered to herself. "Strengthening the carknights is out of the question. So either we stick with the assassination squad or...maybe use items or something."

For items, she could consult with Lemmy. Not only did Lemmy have her own skills and knowledge, but her network of retainers was full of artisans and craftspeople. If there was one type of wisdom that would actually help her find the right tool for the job, it was NPC wisdom.

"Yeah, I think that's the way to go," Leah mused. "The carknights aren't supposed to be indestructible anyway. They're the carrot on the stick to keep groups engaged. The only problem is...I had to give away a few too many carrots this time."

She supposed this wasn't an issue numbers couldn't fix, though. Just like the players had tried to brute-force the capital through sheer numbers, Leah could do the same right back at them.

"The only problem being if multiple dozen-plus-player groups show up at once. But how likely is that, really? Just in case—Sieg, on the off chance that does happen, call for Sugaru immediately. We forget the difficulty balancing and just focus on wiping the players."

Sugaru already had a retainer stationed in the throne room for *Summon Summoner* purposes, and she'd exchanged friend cards with Sieg. If he needed her, it wouldn't take more than a moment to bring her in.

Just a little insurance, in case things got *really* messy.

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In the aftermath of the inaugural capital incursion, Leah briefed Kelli and Lemmy on their respective tasks, then pulled up the forum to see how the raid party was reacting.

Apparently, they considered the raid a success.

The main reason being the metal drops they'd managed to recover from the defeated carknights. They cited the near invincibility of the armor worn by a "very strong variant of undead"—the carknights—and how even their steel knives couldn't so much as scratch the lumps of metal that had dropped as signs that they had come across a very rare, very powerful metal.

Well, if they viewed it as a success, then I can expect more raid-level groups coming my way in the future, Leah thought. And next time, the raid groups would be even stronger—powered up with brand-new gear forged from the superhard alloy they'd looted today.

"I feel a little bad for the other dungeon masters, but what can you do? Power creep is inevitable. Of course, I'll be working to help them out as much as I can."

By "help them out," she of course meant taking over their domains and turning them into her own personal EXP ranches.

She'd be doing them a favor, really. If they couldn't keep up with the relentless growth of the playerbase, Leah's underlings would take the burden off their hands and run their dungeons for them.

As she scrolled through the forum thread, she suddenly remembered the slack-jawed way those players at the Mercenary Guild had looked while doing the exact same thing. Almost instinctively, she straightened herself.

She'd always been careful about how she presented herself in the game. She kept her eyes closed, so maybe that already ruined the illusion, but the only way it would look outright ridiculous was if she let her mouth hang open too. But that wasn't going to happen. That had been drilled into her, same as everything else.

She could still picture it—her mother, standing over her and her sister, that wooden naginata in hand. Lining them up. Then the strike, sharp and precise across the backs of their hands. Never hard enough to leave a mark, but always enough to sting. It was impressive, really, the control she had over it. The way she could

deliver pain without a single visible sign of it afterward. Like getting backhanded by a naginata, if that made any sense.

She'd learned it too, of course. How to wield the weapon just the same. Whether that kind of precision translated into the game was another question, but in reality, she knew exactly how to strike with a practice blade so that pain landed cleanly, without anything extra. Probably even with a real blade too, if she ever decided to try.

"A naginata," she murmured to herself. "An adamant one, of course. I guess I owe it to myself to try."

With her facilities both in Lieb and Lieflais now, surely someone knew how to make the thing. Though, there was the problem of the uniquely...*Japanese* nature of the weapon. She was supposed to be an NPC raid boss from the game. A game decidedly set in not-Japan. Swinging around a naginata would be as immersion-breaking as swinging around a rectangular white banner with a crimson-red circle at its center.

But still. This was a game, wasn't it? Games were meant to be fun, so why shouldn't she indulge herself every now and then? If she couldn't have it as herself, she could have it as someone else. Maybe Kelli, like before. But no, Kelli had spent too many years with short swords and daggers, and the muscle memory ran deep. The same went for the rest of the Mountain Cats.

Someone fresh, then. Someone whose hands hadn't yet settled around a hilt, whose feet didn't already know where to step.

"Didn't that Albert fellow have a daughter? Maybe I'll ask him about that then, see if I can't borrow the girl from time to time."

***

Leah swung by Lemmy's in the artisan district to put in a commission for a naginata—or something close enough—before heading to the manor.

Asking dad for permission was just a formality, really. Since the lord's family were Leah's direct retainers, they were bound by unwavering loyalty. Of course, he accepted. Though, almost too eagerly, as if he were handing his daughter off in marriage or

something.

Not what I meant by borrow the girl, but, oh well.

After the father, it was off to the girl. She reached the door of her room and knocked, waiting for permission before stepping inside. The girl was there, as expected, head bowed, eyes down.

"Raise your head," Leah said. "I've come to you today to ask a favor."

"A favor? Why, I'd do anything you'd ask of me, so long as you—"

"It's a bit of a long-term project, is why I'm asking. I spoke to your father about it too."

Only then did the daughter look up.

She was quite beautiful, as expected of a noble human. She had blonde hair like her mother, rather than the brown-haired Albert. If Leah had to guess, she was about the same age as her. Similar in build too—and discipline, it seemed, judging by the flawless way she carried herself.

Quickly, though not at all succinctly, Leah gave the girl the rundown of what she wanted her to do. To summarize, though: She wanted the girl to become an extension of herself (quite literally), pose as a mercenary, engage in combat, and basically every other thing no noble girl worth their salt should ever do. So it only came as a surprise, then, when despite the absurdity of Leah's request, the girl accepted without so much as blinking. Yes, technically *Retainer* forced her to accept. But really, to do so without any reaction at all spoke volumes about her upbringing.

"I am honored beyond words that you would choose me for this great mission, Your Majesty," she said.

"You'll be by my side even when there's nothing going on, so I suppose that sort of makes you my personal attendant," Leah said.

"Goodness. To think I'd be chosen over my father for such a role..."

"Yeah, well, your father has his duties here."

The town won't run itself.

Though, now that Leah thought about it, it wasn't unheard of in noble societies for noblewomen of high rank to take a lower-ranking one to be their personal attendant. Thinking of it this way, that this

had precedent before in the real world, she didn't feel nearly as bad.

"All right. Then it sounds like you accept. I'm looking forward to working with you, um..."

"Amalie, Your Majesty. Amalie Seebach, at your devoted service."

"Amalie. Cool. Then I guess friends call you Mali?"

"No one has ever called me that before, but it sounds suitable, yes."

"Then outside of this house, you are to be known as Mali. That is the name you'll give if anyone asks. On second thought, I should probably check whether an NPC or player already has that name, but...if we say it's a nickname, it should be fine, right?"

With consent out of the way, it was time for the real task—making her stronger. Since she was to be an extension of Leah's self, a weapon to mete out punishment upon monster and human alike with her naginata of justice...

Then this was going to take a while.

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Leah prioritized funneling EXP into stat boosts rather than skills to increase Mali's combat potential.

That didn't mean she neglected skills entirely. She still granted Mali the essentials—the ones that had already become core to her playstyle: *Enchantment*, *Necromancy*, *Summon*, *Control*, *Retainer*, and *Spatial Magic*, just to name a few, She also threw in a handful of offensive spells for emergencies, just in case.

What she didn't do was sink any points into *Weapon Mastery: Spear* or *Weapon Mastery: Blade*—the two skills that, on paper, seemed like they'd be key to unlocking Mali's fighting style.

Why? Because she didn't need to.

Weapon Mastery skills improved hit chance, conferred a damage bonus, and unlocked weapon-specific active abilities. Useful, sure—but for a master of the weapon in real life, unnecessary.

She didn't need help landing hits or active skills; her natural proficiency more than covered for that. The damage bonus, she could get the same effect by just dumping more EXP into raw STR.

Sure, investing a little EXP into *Weapon Mastery: Spear* would be a very cost-effective way to boost Mali's offensive power. But what was the point? Her naginata was going to be made of adamant, one of the strongest materials out there. It didn't need extra damage boosts when it was already in a league of its own. That EXP was better spent rounding Mali elsewhere, as in the aforementioned support skills.

As for the all-important naginata in question, Leah had received several prototypes in the interim. She had sent back just as many. But each revision brought her closer to her ideal weapon. It was close now. She could feel it. The thought filled her with excitement.

At the same time, she commissioned a shortsword as a sidearm. If there were situations where she couldn't wield the naginata to its full potential—or if she ever found it knocked from her hands—she needed something reliable to fall back on.

While they waited for the weapons to be completed, Leah gave Mali a crash course in everything. She introduced her to Kelli, the Mountain Cats, and all the other key figures she'd be working with. She took her to their domains, let her observe and familiarize herself with their operations. She also invited Mali to watch players farming their dungeons from midair, just to give her a sense of how things worked from that perspective.

This was done by asking Mali (as well as the Mountain Cats) to *Retain* one of the wild birds that had recently started nesting in Rokillean's artificial forest. Leah stressed the importance of having a direct eye on the battlefield, though she couldn't take all the credit for that idea. She *might* have been inspired by Lemmy and her network of *Retained* spy rats scattered across Lieflais.

Despite everything she had to pick up, Mali was a quick study—no doubt thanks to the hefty INT boosts Leah had prioritized for command figures like her and her father.

Watching Leah in action was already a lesson in itself, but Leah also made sure to run practical training sessions using *Summon: Spirit* to refine Mali's physical combat skills. Though really, this was less Mali's training than it was Leah's. Semantics aside, the sessions were productive, and Leah quickly grew accustomed to moving in

Mali's body. It helped that Mali was a blank slate. Her sheltered upbringing meant Leah didn't have to waste time undoing bad habits or ingrained quirks. She could mold her from the ground up, exactly how she wanted.

Then, after just a few days of intense training, something unexpected happened: Mali was already starting to move like Leah—despite still, lacking the actual skills in *Weapon Mastery* to do so. It was pure imitation sure, but imitation was always the first step. Imitate, then innovate. If she kept this up, Leah wouldn't be surprised if Mali hit assistant instructor level before long.

"It seems that NPCs can learn new abilities without the explicit use of the skill system," Leah muttered. "Does that mean the AIs in this game have implicit memory? Like a consciousness? Now why would the devs bother to implement something like that?"

Summon Summoner: Spirit restricted the summoner to using only the skills of the summonee. Movement and other actions that didn't rely on "skills," on the other hand, could be carried out freely. This suggested that an NPC's skills were separate from their "consciousness" on a fundamental level. If this alleged implicit memory resided in the AI side—i.e., their mind—then actual skills learned through the skill system were tied to the avatar the mind controlled—i.e., the body.

This meant that those weird quirks experienced when controlling an NPC's body were actually due to the physical skills learned on the body side, and had nothing to do with the NPC's "consciousness," so to speak.

"That does make sense, now that I think about it. That feeling of being easily able to walk around in the forest with Kelli might have been due to a racial skill more than anything else."

In that case, she'd been wrong to think a "stronger or weaker sense of self-identity" explained the difference in vibe when controlling Mister Plates versus Kelli. The real reason was just that they were beings of different races with different racial skills.

"Who knows if I'm just talking out of my ass, though," she added quietly.

"Your Highness, Lady Lemmy approaches," a voice suddenly said.

"Oh, thanks, Mali," Leah replied, snapping back to her surroundings.

She was in the basement wine cellar of the manor in Lieflais, where she'd taken up temporary residence while working on the project with Mali. The wine was long gone, replaced with furniture and furnishings, turning the space into her private office.

She chose the basement not because of some deathly fear of the sun—only direct exposure for a prolonged period of time would cause any damage to her now—but just because she felt more at home in dark places.

...Which was a silly thing to get hung up on now that she thought about it. Everywhere was dark with her eyes closed all the time anyway.

"Got the latest one here for you, boss," Lemmy said as she came down the stairs, pulling the newest prototype naginata from her inventory. She looked rather nervous as she handed it to Leah.

"Thanks," Leah said, taking hold of it. She muttered a thoughtful *hmm*, weighing the weapon in her hands. The basement was far too cramped for any proper practice swings—one wide arc and she'd be scraping stone walls and ceilings. Not that the blade would take any damage, but the scuffed stone would absolutely ruin the aesthetic.

After a quick assessment of its weight and balance, she decided it was time to move things outdoors.

"Mali," Leah said.

"Ready whenever," the girl replied.

Leah handed her the weapon, lay down on the bed, and summoned her consciousness into Mali's body.

"All right then," Leah-in-Mali said. "Let's take things outside, shall we?"

"After you, boss."

Tastefully arranged flower beds framed the manor's courtyard. At its center was a space meant for a table and tea set—typically used for gatherings, but currently empty.

Here, Leah moved through a series of practiced forms, alternating between the sweeping arcs of her naginata and quick, precise strikes with her shortsword sidearm, performing a solo demonstration of

martial technique.

She'd known it from the very first prototype, but an adamant naginata was *heavy*. Sure, only the blade was metal, but the shaft itself was made out of a branch of the World Tree, and World Tree wood wasn't exactly light either.

Though with the magic of stats, "heavy" was more an objective descriptor of the absolute mass of the weapon rather than a subjective measure of unwieldiness. With her current build, Leah could swing the hefty weapon like it was a twig in Mali's hands. She could even pull off moves that would've been impossible in real life, like windmilling the weapon around a single finger. To her, it might as well have been a wooden practice sword.

For about an hour, she lost herself in the rhythm, cycling through forms, refining her movements, feeling out the weight and flow of the weapon. And by the end of it, she had to admit—she liked what she was seeing. Despite how effortless it felt to wield, its sheer mass made it slice through the air like nothing else.

This might've just been pure armchair speculation on her part, but with how things were shaping up, she figured she might even be able to take down players on the level of those who'd raided the royal capital the other day. The only real challenge would be surviving their magical onslaught long enough to close the distance. But if she could? Then it was absolutely possible.

But I digress, Leah thought. *This setup is meant to conquer dungeons, not players.*

"So, what do you think, boss?"

"Oops, Lemmy, I forgot you were still there. This is the one, I think. It's perfect. Send my regards to your people."

Lemmy's face lit up with a wide, satisfied grin. She dipped her head in gratitude before heading back to the artisan's district.

The artisan's district... Is that where she lives now?

It was a strange realization—Leah had been so caught up in everything else that she hadn't even kept track of that. But it made sense. Lemmy had been making great strides on her own, enough that Leah could keep her hands well and truly off. Lemmy had been thriving in the artisan's world, creating and developing new things

independently, which was a great boon to Leah.

Apparently, she'd even taught *Alchemy* and other magical skills necessary for crafting philosopher's stones to some of the town's master craftspeople. They were handling production and refining the process. If Leah ever needed more of those in the future, she knew where to turn.

As for the other Mountain Cats, Kelli was out on the outskirts of the capital with Gustaf, hard at work setting up a simple lodging facility—one of the first steps in Leah's broader vision for the area. Gustaf was already proving invaluable in that regard. With his name and wide web of connections, he was able to send for skilled workers, gather materials, and keep the construction effort moving at a rapid pace. Since the game had construction-related skills, things were progressing far faster than they ever could in real life.

Of course, Kelli being out in the open in Hilith was a bit of a risk. If Wayne—who knew her face—decided to swing by and investigate, there could be trouble. But for now, that wasn't an issue. Leah had been keeping tabs on him through the forum, and as of now, he and his party were still in Ellental, busy duking it out with Blanc.

Riley was comfortable in Lieflais, hard at work establishing herself as the town's local head of security. She'd *Retained* all the constables already working there and installed herself as their new leader.

In addition to the full-time constables that patrolled Lieflais, there was also the Lieflais Watch, a sort of neighborhood watch group comprising volunteers. Riley hadn't bothered *Retaining* them, because there just was no need. They'd originally been a subordinate force under the constables anyway, so as long as she had control of the constables, she had control of them. Her known association to the town's lord also helped her earn their trust.

Marion, whom Leah had sent to fetch a few rock golems, had done just that and was now overseeing the construction of the town's new outer walls.

Rock golems, as it turned out, didn't grow larger with age but with EXP. Which, unfortunately, meant Leah's original marimo comparison didn't quite hold up. Sadder still, this wasn't an

acquirable skill—it seemed to be a purely racial trait. In the wild, this gave the impression of the golems growing larger with time, but under Leah's control, they had no EXP sources unless she gave them some.

So she did, handing Marion a hefty sum of EXP to use for size adjustments. Each golem had come in at slightly different sizes, but with a little fine-tuning, Marion could even them out to match.

"Everyone else has their marching orders, all that's left is me. Finally, time to have some fun."

Leah's EXP machine was humming along. As long as she stayed logged in, the EXP would keep flowing in. It was time to turn her attention to something new.

"Let's see...which one was it again... Ah, Neuschloss. The urban dungeon that's not under mine or Blanc's control. I hear the boss there is a goblin too. Might be worth stealing a trick or two for Gaslark's build. Yes. Let's go see what they've got for me."

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As Leah shortly found out, there was another benefit to playing in not her own body: None of her fussy retainers cared to chide her for it.

It was true, the danger to Leah's life playing this way was slim. Not *technically* nonexistent as backlash damage inflicted upon the caster during *Summon Summoner* was a thing. The closer the caster's and target's MND stats were, the greater this backlash damage was. But since Leah's MND was astronomically high, this damage was basically negligible.

Even then, Leah couldn't march Mali headlong into danger without a care. When players died, they vanished into motes of light. NPCs left corpses. If Leah wanted to pass as a player, leaving a corpse behind for a full hour during Mali's respawn would immediately blow her cover. Of course, a way to avoid that would be to play solo.

Leah traveled to Lieflais's Mercenary Guild, where she teleported straight to Neuschloss. Along the way, she managed to keep a low

profile. Mali's beauty was striking, but so were that of many players. The long weapon slung across her back was a little unusual (most players tended to stash their weapons in their inventories), but it wasn't anything that couldn't be explained away by the desire to role-play as an NPC merc.

For armor, Leah equipped Mali with a lightweight set. Lightweight, but the fabric was woven from silk spun by a queen arachnia, and the metal parts were adamant-whatever, making it stronger than most full-plate getups.

A specially made hood, reinforced with adamant plating along the collar, rested around her neck. She had it down while she moved among players, but in combat, it could be easily raised to effectively protect the head and neck.

The Neuschloss teleport node dropped her in a field just outside the town. A large rock served as a landmark, but beyond that, it was mostly empty grasslands, save for a few tents set up by players. As far as Leah knew, the only group that had made *any* significant inroads into a four-star dungeon was the massive raid team that had intruded upon the capital. Because of that, the sheer difficulty this content presented, few players attempted four-star dungeons with a standard-sized party. Those who did were either farming trash mobs right near the entrance or just sightseeing.

Either way, the lack of crowds worked in her favor.

For now, she continued down the road to Neuschloss.

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The town was a good twenty-minute trek away from the teleport node. The scene was one of devastation. The town walls were crumbling and riddled with large gaps anyone could just waltz through. On the far side of town was a forest—probably the original monster territory. Since it wasn't classified as a dungeon separately, it was probably considered part of the town now. The forest that had swallowed the town—much like how Lieb had overtaken Erfahren, and Trae Llyrid.

Leah crossed the broken walls into town, where the destruction

was much the same. If anything, it was even worse. It looked as though the invading monsters had gone house to house, systematically wiping out everyone who lived here. She could think of two possible reasons for this indiscriminate slaughter. Either the monsters had been starving, or the killing itself had been the objective.

If it was hunger, then they were just ordinary, wild creatures. But if the massacre was intentional, there was a good chance the dungeon's boss was a player. After all, mindless killing wasn't a real goal—but farming EXP was.

She proceeded cautiously, eyes scanning her surroundings, when out from the shadows of a ruined house leaped a goblin. But this goblin was not one she was used to. It was green like one, lean like one, but its height, at nearly that of an average human, made it unlike any she'd seen.

She drew her shortsword. As the goblin lunged, she slipped under its reach, dashing past while slashing behind its knees.

A heavy thud followed as the goblin collapsed. This almost came as a surprise to her, as she'd felt no resistance when the blade connected. She almost thought she missed, but no, the adamant-whatever edge was just that sharp. Or, the goblin had been just that weak.

She didn't waste time pondering. A quick turn, a sharp motion—her blade bit deep into its throat. Hot blood sprayed, but she stepped back in time to keep herself clean. The moment the creature hit the dirt, she was already moving, because this one hadn't been alone—more goblins were already upon her.

Leah reached for the naginata on her back, sliding it free from its sheath in one fluid motion. "Hah!" With a sharp exhale, she met the first wave, deflecting blows with a single hand as she resheathed her shortsword with the other. Ideally, she would've wiped the blood clean first, but now was hardly the time.

The moment the shorter blade was secured, both hands closed around the naginata's shaft. Now, the *real* fight could begin.

Windmill cuts, waterwheel cuts, overhead strikes and throat jabs—the glaive-like weapon twirled through the air as Leah slashed,

thrust, and cut her way through the horde. Through sinewy arms and legs, clawed hands and feet, adamant-whatever could not be stopped. She did not slow. She did not strain. It was as if she were still at the manor, moving through the same martial forms, only now with goblins wandering into her personal space every now and then.

The goblins swarmed. One came from behind. Without thinking, she rammed the adamant-tipped butt of her naginata backward, expecting to shove it away. Instead, the tip punched clean through, emerging from the other side. Smirking, she swung the impaled body around like a bludgeon, fulfilling the old saying—*I'm gonna beat a motherlover with another motherlover.*

If her grandmother could see her right now, she'd be thoroughly miffed by the way she was treating her weapon. But this wasn't some delicate heirloom of steel and lacquer. Adamant-whatever and World Tree wood didn't bend nor break, nor chip or crack. If anything, they demanded to be used to their fullest.

And so, Leah did.





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An exhilarating few moments later, Leah found herself without any quarry. Not because she'd let any escape; they all lay motionless at her feet. Blood and guts slicked her arms, her armor, the haft of her weapon. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe herself off, only to quickly realize the tiny square of cloth was woefully inadequate.

Then she remembered she'd given Mali magic. Specifically, she had the water spell *Wash*. In the real world, touching a naginata to water would've been a mortal sin, but magic water should be fine...right?

She cast the spell. At once, the gore on her armor and her weapon vanished, swept away as if it had never been.

Huh, talk about magic.

Curious, she then tried the spell on her shortsword and its scabbard. The result was the same. It wasn't just simple water, then—something more, something that scoured away filth in an instant. Which, from a game design perspective, made perfect sense. Who would want to spend hours scrubbing weapons clean in a video game?

"And there I was bothering to clean things manually in the closed beta," she muttered to herself.

She didn't bother to dissect the corpses for loot. She didn't even have the requisite knife to do so. She'd learned *Dissect*, but only because she needed to in order to unlock *Treatment*.

Besides, this wasn't her dungeon. *Not my mess, not my stress.*

Leaving the bodies where they lay, she pressed on with her exploration.

"For four-star trash, they were awfully squishy compared to my carknights," she mused. "Honestly not sure which one is stronger overall..."

Leah had a practical reason for choosing a four-star dungeon for her first outing. She needed to see what the competition was doing—what set them apart, where they fell short. Even within the same

star ranking, dungeons varied wildly. If she wanted hers to stand out, she had to understand what could be improved.

So far, she wasn't impressed. She was only one encounter in, but already, she could already see why the capital was drawing more players by the day, while Neuschloss had all but that handful of tents scattered outside.

Ever since that initial raid, Leah's capital had been seeing more and more traffic. Despite the large group requirement, the heavy reliance on casters, and melee players serving as little more than walking shields, everyone wanted a shot at the EXP and loot.

Guaranteed death wasn't even a deterrent anymore—it was just the price of entry. Players had stopped trying to survive and instead focused on squeezing out as much EXP as possible before their inevitable demise. It was a common tactic for tackling high-level content in many games, and in this case, Leah couldn't be happier it applied to hers.

Though, she couldn't help but wonder how long that would last. Players were notoriously fickle, always in the pursuit of the most efficient, fastest way to play the game. There was no telling when the meta might shift, leaving all of this behind.

For example, what if someone were to clear Neuschloss by killing its final boss? What if they discovered a way to farm the boss repeatedly, and that method of play offered better EXP and rewards?

Leah was almost certain that bosses could be farmed indefinitely. A dungeon wouldn't simply delist itself or transfer ownership the moment its boss died—if that were the case, she would have lost control of Lieb and Trae a long time ago.

It all fell back to that "single-faction" rule for control. Back when Leah first defeated Sugaru and took over the caves, she had also wiped out every single ant under Sugaru's control. Only when no other presence remained—only her and her retinue—did the ownership transfer.

In Tür, as well, she'd only managed to gain control by killing the giant mole *and* driving out all other players. While the mole's death had automatically despawned the smaller ones, if other players had still been present, she likely wouldn't have been granted the option

to take ownership. Because in the system's eyes, players, just like monsters, were separate factions.

This meant that in any normal situation, where multiple player parties occupied a dungeon at the same time, ownership was unlikely to change, even if the dungeon boss was killed. If NPC bosses followed the same respawn rules as Leah, then it would return in three hours, with its minions respawning an hour after that.

So in that event that the Neuschloss boss fell, and it turned out to be an easier fight with better rewards, the balance could shift. More players might flock to Neuschloss, drawn by the better value proposition.

But *would* the value proposition shift? That depended on what the end boss actually dropped. That she didn't know. One thing she was sure of, though, was that if any end boss turned out to be farmable, it wouldn't be hers. After all, Harbinger-class Undead King Sieg the Mournful guarded the castle. If he fell, then it'd be Sugaru and Diaz. It hadn't been her intention to let the castle fall or let her bosses be farmable, so if it turned out boss farming was massively rewarding, that could be a problem for her.

Though, I should say, this is all predicated on the assumption that this dungeon's boss is an NPC. If this is the level of its minions, I have nothing to worry about. Let's go confirm that assumption, shall we?

***

"Wait. Was that goblin wearing armor just now?"

As Leah progressed deeper into Neuschloss, the tedium began to set in. The first few engagements had been novel and interesting, but after that, it just felt like a chore before she could get to the *actual* interesting bit. After a while, she didn't bother giving anything a second glance—if something so much as moved, she gutted it on the spot.

But that last goblin. The one she just killed. Something had felt different when her blade passed through it.

Sure enough, as she looked down, her latest filleted victim—and

their friends—were already dissolving into motes of light.

"Ooh, you guys were players..."

Well, that could've been bad. Leah had been on autopilot. She had been the one to spot and start the engagement, so chances were, they hadn't got a good look at her face. Even if they did, there was nothing particularly outstanding about a player wearing a hood wielding a spear. Plenty of people liked hoods. Plenty of people liked spears—reach mattered just as much in VR games as it did in real life. Swords had gained traction as players got more comfortable with the mechanics, but spears were still plenty common.

Not that these poor saps had the time to consider any of that before being brutally and unexpectedly murdered.

"My bad. But that was your fault for popping out of nowhere."

Judging by how fast their bodies turned to light, they were used to dying. Their respawns were almost instant—like they were spam-clicking the revive prompt before the death message had even finished displaying.

Wait.

A troubling thought hit Leah.

Back when she died in the capital, she'd definitely done the exact same thing. She'd definitely clicked respawn almost immediately—so why was there no buzz anywhere about the Cataclysm's corpse disappearing into motes of light, just like a player's?

She'd managed to pull the wool over their eyes. But *how*?

Was it just because that was the playerbase's first time encountering an event boss, and they assumed event bosses just died like that? Was it because Mister Plates dropped loot like a normal NPC? Leah couldn't shake a sense of unease, but at this point, she might never know.

Oh well, what's happened, happened. No point worrying about it now.

With a carefree shrug, Leah continued toward the center of town, making her way to the lord's manor, where the boss was likely waiting. Thanks to the absolute power gap between her and everything in her path, the pace of her advance wasn't so dissimilar from a casual stroll through the city.

If the boss had any way to track the intruders in their domain, the one strolling through and effortlessly liquefying every minion in their path would be at the top of their watchlist.

***

As she got closer to the manor, nothing really changed. Still, the only monsters stepping up to challenge her were the same relatively large goblins. A few capable of magic showed up, but their magic was limited to basic single-target projectile spells. They were easily dodged with Mali's impressive speed.

Given the rank of spells being hurled her way, Leah figured they could cast AoE magic but simply weren't. This puzzled her. Was it because she was alone? Or something else at play?

Like, say, orders from above? A directive to conserve mana?

A strategy of magic conservation, huh...

That struck her as odd. Not *just* odd—rigid to a fault. Leah understood the value of efficient resource management, but this wasn't about hoarding individual assets. It was about optimizing global ones, like time. If an AoE spell could end a fight faster, she'd expect her own forces to use it.

That said, she wouldn't expect her low-level grunts to make that kind of call on the fly. In fact, her gruntiest of grunts—the infantry ants and zombies—were so low-threat individually that the only hope of making them viable was to have them go all out, all the time.

For her, the only real decision-making happened at the command level. For example, what troops to place where. That was why she'd invested so much in developing competent leaders, ensuring they could make smart, strategic choices.

"Organizational structure is tricky," she muttered. "We're basically a corporation with a top-down hierarchy. Sugaru and the queens act as middle management, bridging the gap between high-level strategy and frontline execution. It's bulky, but necessary. If I had to micromanage everything myself, execution would suffer."

The size of the organization dictated the structure. A small force could benefit from a dictator-style approach. It'd be fast, responsive,

adaptable in ways she couldn't be. But with numbers, her current system was the best one she had.

She wasn't sure why thinking about this now, but she supposed the fact that she was at all told her she was more convinced than ever there was a player at the top of this chain of command. Wild monsters didn't think about resource management. They didn't hold back. They went all in, every time, to secure the kill.

She continued to cut down goblin after goblin, pushing forward toward the manor that was now rising on the horizon. Despite getting closer to the most vital structure in the area, still, this tepid response. No real challenge, no shift in strategy—just more of the same.

At this point, she was almost getting bored.

Not helping which was her adamant naginata. Naginata fighting style had been developed to work around the limitations of a weapon wrought with wood and iron. But for a weapon that wouldn't bend nor break, nor chip or crack, sticking to proper form almost felt like a waste of time. When the weapon was *this* indestructible, raw power mattered more than technique.

I might've overdone it with this naginata. Should've picked a material that was closer to my level...

***

At last, Leah arrived in front of the manor gate. It was closed, but not locked. In fact, it almost looked like it had once been broken and then propped back into place. Peering through the bars of the wrought iron fence, she spotted the main door of the manor. Same story. Clearly, no players had been through here recently.

Leah shifted over to a section of the fence still standing firm, and pulled herself up and over in one swift, fluid motion. It was a method of entry any player who had made it this far would have no trouble with. She landed in a garden that had clearly seen better days. Compared to the manor gardens back in Lieflais, this was a wasteland. Approaching the front door, she gave it a push. It opened. Or rather, it fell. The thing hadn't even been attached to its

hinges. It was less door than piece of wood placed there to stop the wind from getting in.

"How does the boss even get in or leave his own manor?" Leah muttered to herself.

Either it never left, or there was another passage hidden elsewhere. In which case, it might've already fled the premises. This was fine, she supposed. Not like she came here with the express purpose of defeating the boss in the first place. Else she wouldn't have come alone. This was just a playful excursion, with getting to see the boss's face a nice little bonus. Then again, taking it down would at least confirm or disprove her theories about boss farming.

Thinking about it that way... I kind of do want to see if I'm right. Maybe I'll put in a little more effort to find and take it out.

She started with a sweep of the ground floor. The foyer was spacious, with staircases on both the left and right leading upward. A chain dangled from the ceiling, clearly meant to hold a chandelier—but the fixture itself was missing. Either the goblins had hauled it off, or it had been destroyed in the initial battle.

She moved through the rooms: parlor, dining room, kitchen, servant quarters, linen room, and a laundry area facing the overgrown rear gardens. Not a single goblin, let alone a boss. The entire first floor was empty.

"Is all the trash just still out and about in town?" Leah said. "Not even a token 'protect me as goblin shields' move when its life is on the line? What is this boss even doing?"

If she'd made it this far without the boss taking any precautions, maybe she'd been wrong about it having surveillance. But still—you'd think that anyone uncertain about where or when a threat might show up would at least put some effort into basic defenses.

For now, she headed back to the foyer and climbed the stairs to the second floor. More empty rooms. Guest quarters, bedrooms for the lord and his family—still no goblins. Only one room remained, tucked deep on the west side. Based on what she'd seen so far, it was likely the office, the one space she hadn't yet come across.

And yet, something about it stood out. Even before opening the door, she had a feeling. There was something behind it.

She approached the door slowly, then, in a single breath, slashed three times—one clean strike across the hinges, followed by two in an X across the center. The wood splintered apart, breaking into four pieces as it collapsed to the floor.

The moment it did, magic blasted out from the room.

No time to counter with a spell. No space in the narrow corridor to dodge. Leah had no choice but to take the hit. She crouched low, raising an arm to shield her face...!

"Ngh!"

A sharp impact. For the first time today, she felt her LP drop.

But the damage was minimal. Her smaller stance had reduced the hitbox, and the spider silk armor had absorbed more of the force than she'd expected.

Thank God for good gear, she thought. *And thank God I didn't charge in the second I broke down the door.*

She'd never really given much thought to armor before. This would be the moment that changed that. When she got back, she'd make sure every retainer of hers that could wear gear got an upgrade made of adamant and queen arachnia silk. Seriously, the magic resistance on this stuff was no joke. Even just handing everyone a spider silk cloak might be enough to let them shrug off low-level spells.

Such were the thoughts on Leah's mind as she charged into the room, not giving her attacker the chance to fire a second volley.

As she'd suspected, it was an office. Bookshelves lined the walls, a few sofas sat against the sides, and at the center stood a regal-looking writing desk and chair. On that chair lazed a goblin. Apparently it didn't even deign to stand before it greeted her with that opening attack.

Talk about being underestimated... Leah thought with a wry grin.

The goblin raised its right hand to cast another spell. But it was too slow this time. Leah surged forward with divine speed and took the hand clean off. The force of her charge sent the coffee table between them flying, smashing into a bookshelf and bringing the whole thing crashing down.

"Guh-gyaaaah!" the goblin shrieked.

"That's a new one," Leah said, smirking. With her naginata already extended, she gave it a little twist, and that was the goblin's other hand gone—along with half the desk, which split apart under the force of her strike. She didn't hesitate, cutting through the wreckage and reducing it to splinters. With the desk out of the way, the goblin's legs were exposed. She took those next.

Deep gouges now lined the ceiling and floor, the room left in shambles. *Oh well. Not my manor. Your fault for wanting to fight in such an enclosed space.*

"Ga-ga-gyaa!" the goblin shrieked again.

"Ah, you're not even trying to say anything. Just screaming like an animal. Guess you're just another goblin, then."

It was bigger than even the big goblins she'd encountered outside, outfitted with better gear, which led Leah to believe it might've been the boss. But that clearly wasn't the case. If it'd been a player—or even mildly intelligent—it would've been able to communicate like Gaslark. The fact it couldn't just made it another dumb NPC.

"If you're not the boss, then who is?" Leah demanded, despite knowing full well it couldn't respond. Maybe she just wanted to hear it shriek again.

Kill this one, then head back to town. If any goblins were still standing, that meant this wasn't the boss.

If only there had been a few goblins inside the manor—she could have confirmed it without stepping outside.

...No, that wouldn't have worked. She would've slaughtered every last one anyway.

She sliced up the poor goblin so that there could be no doubt it was dead, washed the blood off herself, then stepped out of the manor.

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Immediately, she spotted a group of big goblins and cut them down.

Well, at least that quickly confirmed things.

Ever since she'd set foot in this town, she'd had a nagging feeling like there weren't as many enemies around as there should've been. At first, she'd brushed it off. But now that she thought about it, maybe that was because she was solo.

Because, wouldn't it be exponentially harder to track a single player's movements through a dungeon compared to a large, attention-grabbing party?

The train of thought led her to an interesting possibility—one she hadn't considered before.

Up until now, she'd focused on the obvious threat: massive raid groups storming the capital. But what about the opposite extreme? Small teams. A single player specialized in stealth. In dense urban environments like the capital or Ellental, couldn't they slip past her defenses and cause just as much damage as a full raid parading down the central boulevard?

Of course they could.

She was proving that right now.

And to think, she wouldn't have even considered it if she hadn't come here herself.

See? This is why it pays to look at things from a fresh perspective every now and then.

Filing that realization away for future dungeon improvements, Leah refocused on her search for the boss.

If it isn't in town, then it has to be in the forest. Now that I think about it... I might have been too fixated on the name Neuschloss. There was no rule saying the dungeon's namesake had to be the final stage. And really, why would a boss just sit in the most obvious part of the zone, waiting to be attacked anyway?

"Onto the forest, then," she muttered, setting off.

To get her bearings, Leah summoned the wild bird under Mali's control and sent it flying overhead. She ordered it to locate the nearby forest and hover in its direction like a waypoint. The bird led her out of town through the broken northern wall. As soon as she stepped past the ruins, a dense fog swallowed her surroundings. Through it, she could just barely make out the looming silhouette of the forest in the near distance.

"I'd like to have a word with whoever thought it was a good idea to build a town this close to a forest..." she muttered, then paused. "Or maybe it was the forest that expanded until it reached the town."

If not that, then maybe the outer walls had been built first, meant to protect vital infrastructure like roads, with the rest of the town developing inside them over time—not that this was the question Leah ought to have been pondering at the moment.

Within the fog, Leah moved cautiously. She had sent the bird back. In this visibility, it was as good as useless for scouting. The fog seemed so dense as to block out most sunlight. Even weeds struggled to grow.

With the land so barren, there were no obstacles to hide behind, no cover for an ambush. Even the goblins from town were nowhere to be seen.

Still, Leah didn't let down her guard.

She took a step, then another.

A dry rustling stirred the earth beneath her. The moment she heard it, she whipped her naginata backward, striking the ground with the butt end exactly where the noise had come from. A sharp crack followed—her weapon had connected with something.

A bony hand, shattering into a million tiny fragments.

Something had been digging its way up from the dirt.

Then, all around her, skeletal limbs burst from the ground, clawing their way up from the dirt.

"No sense playing whack-a-mole with skeleton hands," Leah muttered. If they were so eager to rise from their graves, she'd be happy to speed up the process. "*Earthquake!*"

Despite its namesake, the spell didn't create a literal earthquake. It turned the ground itself into a weapon. The earth convulsed, twisting and writhing like something alive. Jagged, two-meter pillars of stone erupted upward, stabbing through the soil before crumbling back down, only for more to rise in their place. A relentless cycle of stone spikes stabbing and shattering, tearing apart anything caught in the chaos.

Five seconds later, the ground fell still.

Nothing stirred again.

The skeletons likely never stood a chance. Caught in the upheaval, they were torn apart mid-emergence, their bones shattered and buried in the freshly reconfigured earth—nothing more than harmless fragments now.

"Well, that did the trick. Too bad they were so weak I barely gained anything. Just a waste of MP."

She caught herself. No, that wasn't the right way to think about it. In terms of time saved, the MP expenditure was well worth it.

After that, as she progressed through the wasteland, she sensed the presence of skeletons a few more times. Each time, she shook them clean with *Earthquake*.

But is it just me or are these skeletons...ugly? she mused. *I mean, I might be biased, but my own undead are way better-looking.*

Since she hadn't seen a full skeleton emerge intact, it was hard to get a complete picture, but from the scattered remains—especially the skulls—one thing was clear: They weren't the same as her undead.

If her skeletons resembled modern humans, these looked almost...primitive by comparison. It wasn't the most elegant comparison, but the closest thing she could liken them to were the fossils of early humans.

Were they a different kind of human? Were there even different kinds of humans?

"...No," she muttered, realization clicking into place. "They're goblins. These are the skeletons of the big goblins I fought earlier."

Goblin skeletons. That seemed like the most plausible explanation—especially considering that, during the early stages of the last event, the forums had reported undead attacking the town.

Big goblins, now goblin skeletons. Whoever was running this place clearly had a thing for the warty, green humanoids. After that whole decoy situation in the manor, Leah knew better than to let her guard down. If this place had already thrown one surprise at her, there was no telling what else was waiting ahead.

The forest loomed just ahead now. She sensed no more

skeletons, and stowed away *Earthquake*. The fog ended at the tree line, but that didn't make things any better. Even though it was daytime, the forest interior was impossibly dark. Not just shadowed—but almost...unnaturally obscured. The deeper she looked, the harder it was to see.

"*Hell's Flames.*"

She let the spell loose with no hesitation. All trees in the area of effect were engulfed in flame, then burned to ash. The once-dense patch of forest instantly became charred, smoldering ground and bits of scattered charcoal. She kicked a clump; it crumbled instantly, dissolving harmlessly into the wind. It seemed they weren't treants, at least.

She proceeded through the burnt clearing. Right when she reached the edge of it, about to step into the forest once more, she sensed a presence—multiple presences.

"*Lightni—*"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey!" a voice cut in. "Excuse me, hey!"

Leah had been fully prepared to zap whatever came into ash, assuming it was just another hostile encounter. But as the figures came into view, she hesitated.

Players. Five of them, in fact.

She halted her spell but kept her eyes locked on them, gesturing with her head to urge them to speak.

"Ah, hi there," the one who seemed to be their leader said. "We're just a couple of players heading into the forest. I'm assuming you are too?"

Leah wondered for a brief moment if she should even respond or just reopen with her spell and wipe them out on the spot. Maybe if they hadn't seen her face. But they had. And she'd already acknowledged them, turning to speak. If she killed them now, they'd recognize her if they ever crossed paths with her again—cementing Mali's reputation as a PKer. That wasn't the kind of attention she wanted. So, for now, she chose peace.

"I'm also a player. But I'm solo," Leah said in a fairly prim, carefully enunciated tone.

Not because she was trying to role-play, but because, looking

ahead, if Mali was going to operate independently in the future, it made sense to establish a consistent persona. It'd be easier for Mali to maintain a manner of speaking she was already used to, rather than trying to mimic Leah's casualness.

Besides, players in this game tended to speak politely anyway. If anything, this was the less suspicious approach.

"Solo? *Here*?" the leader gawked. He looked her up and down. "Are you a caster? But you've got that large...spear? looking thing? A melee mage, then? And definitely one of the best in the game at that... Do you mind telling me your name? I'm Takuma, by the way."

Leah paused. Should she tell them her name? Should she not? *It's a nickname, so it should be fine, right?* "My friends call me Mali. You may do the same."

Tankman (Leah misheard his name) was a beastfolk, and ostensibly (not to mention very practically), the group's tank. He wore an impressive set of armor and carried a sturdy shield. Both had seen better days. His armor was scratched and gouged in multiple places, and his shield was dented and battered. There should've been a production-related skill that allowed one to fully repair such minor damages without drawback, so the fact that his gear was banged up meant this party hadn't returned to town for some time.

An elf in their party spoke up. "Guessin' those friends of yours couldn't make it today? Or judgin' by the fact I don't know you, you're a new player and made it here just in one day? Ba-ha, just kiddin'! Name's Shiitake, nice to meet ya."

The gap between his elven appearance and his crude name and speech couldn't have been more jarring. He had a shortbow slung across his back—likely a skirmisher, probably the group's scout. In Leah's opinion, if he wanted to play as a scout, he should've rolled beastfolk for the extra sensory racials, but who was she to tell anyone how to play the game?

"Hi, I'm Kouki." A second elf introduced himself. "That was some impressive *Fire Magic* back there! How high's your INT?"

Yes, the sanest and politest question to ask someone you've never met before: *How high's your INT?*

As if Leah would answer that. She'd thought he'd looked the most friendly but just turned out to be the most rude. Now that she got a second look at him, though, the shape of his ears were elfish but the rest of him looked decidedly human. Must've gone for the full-body scan, same as her.

"Hey, what the hell's wrong with you?" a rather large human said, chiding Kouki, then turned to Leah. "Sorry, you don't have to answer that. Hi, I'm Tonbo, melee spear DPS."

Leah didn't expect that from the roughest, most stern-looking man of the group. Sideburns, mustache, and full beard—had this man never heard of a razor in his life?

Still, Tonbo, huh? Let's see if his spear is as sharp as his namesake.

"Hourai," said the last and most reserved man in the five-man outfit. Leah had to look down on him. Bro was short. Like a child. But he had a huge warhammer on his back. Must've min-maxed the hell out of his STR if he wielded that from the beginning. Though now that she really looked at him, he was a dwarf. She apologized internally for the child comment.

Tankman decided it was his turn to speak up again. "Look, this might not be my place to say to someone who came here solo and blew up a big chunk of the forest, but I'd be remiss not to warn you—this forest isn't the same as the town you just came from. The four-star rating—it's probably averaged out over the town and forest."

Leah appreciated the free intel, but it wasn't anything she hadn't already considered. The town's relative ease could very well be because the bulk of the dungeon's forces were concentrated in the forest.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is—join our party for the time being?" Tankman continued. "Having someone with your firepower is obviously a win for us. As for you, you get Kouki healing you, Shiitake watching your back for threats—sounds like a more comfortable experience, no?"

Comfortable. For them? Maybe. For her? Not so much.

She didn't mind discomfort—not when it came to the game. But

five strange men hovering around her the whole time while she played said game? Now that sounded a lot worse than going solo.

This was getting annoying. Leah was tempted to just kill them after all. But after deciding to introduce herself, that wouldn't be the most productive option. Well, she supposed there could be some benefit to this arrangement. Not because she needed help, but because she'd have the chance to observe an elf scout and a regular spear user up close. She could watch their skill usage, their coordination, and the effectiveness of their equipment. She might stand to learn something from this.

"I suppose you're right," Leah replied. "I'd be happy to join, for as long as you'll have me."

If push really came to shove, she could always just kill them all anyway, consequences be damned. Whether now or later, that was the only real question. No harm in waiting to see how things played out. The only issue would be if someone witnessed the PKing happen, but...oh well, that was a problem for future Leah.

Chapter 8: Necro Revival

"Cool spear," Tonbo said. "After that insane magic earlier, I thought you were a pure caster. But you can handle a spear too?"

"Thank you," the girl who'd introduced herself as Mali replied. "I suppose so, yes."

Tonbo's party had stumbled upon her earlier, standing alone on the outskirts of the forest outside Neuschloss. They'd watched as, with a single spell, she wiped out an entire swath of trees. That alone had been impressive. But if she could also wield a spear to effectively clear this level of content? That took her from impressive to outright terrifying.

And he hadn't even gotten to the shortsword at her waist yet. It was too long to be just a dissecting knife, too well-placed to be decorative. If she carried it for combat, that meant her shortsword skill might be on par with Shiitake's.

A triple threat. Magic, spear, sword. Tonbo couldn't shake the feeling that they had just run into a player who was the cream of the crop.

We might've been a bit too presumptuous, he thought sheepishly.

They'd reached out to her out of kindness, thinking they were helping someone avoid a mistake, but maybe that had been overstepping.

Tonbo had always believed their party was among the best in the game. That pride had made them blind to the possibility that someone even better was out there. And because of it, they might have just made an awkward social misstep.

A hood covered her face so he couldn't quite catch her expression. But from her tone, it was exceedingly clear she was just being polite and wasn't entirely comfortable with this arrangement. Yet, she had still agreed. That meant she saw some benefit in being here. The thought lightened Tonbo's sense of guilt somewhat.

Whatever her reasons, she was here now. He decided to approach this impromptu collaboration with optimism—make the most of the short time they had together.

"All right then, let's get this show on the road," Takuma said. "But before that, I guess we should clarify our roles. Since we already have Tonbo and Hourai as melee DPS, would you mind joining Kouki as magic DPS, Mali?"

"No, of course not. I'd be happy to," she replied.

It was a shame Tonbo wouldn't get to see her spear or swordsmanship in action, but he couldn't argue with the decision. Casters were powerful, and their only real limitation was their cooldowns. More of them was always a good thing.

With that settled, they moved into formation—Takuma, Shiitake, and Hourai in the front, Kouki and Mali in the rear, with Tonbo sandwiched in the middle.

Together, they stepped into the forest.

***

"Boy, were we surprised to see the forest just go up in flames like that."

Even as they made their way into the forest proper, Takuma found himself growing a little annoyed—Tonbo still wouldn't stop trying to talk to Mali. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't afford to take his focus off the front. He should've seen this coming. He should've known Tonbo would grow chatty upon finding a kindred spirit. He should've shut this down earlier when he'd had the chance.

"Ah, right," Mali replied. "Sorry about that. I ran into a lot of skeletons crawling out of the ground earlier. Just wanted to make sure there weren't any in the forest."

"What do you have to be sorry for? That was *incredible*!"

Not you too, Kouki, Takuma thought.

"What spell was that? I mean, to roast a four-star forest like that and cover such a huge area—it has to be some *insanely* powerful magic! None of the fire spells I know can do that. Wait, don't tell me...was that compound magic?"

"Compound magic?" Mali uttered back, puzzled.

"Oh, dang, I thought for sure it was," Kouki replied. "Yeah, compound magic. It's just theorycrafting at this point, but you know how individual spells don't share cooldowns? Well, as the theory goes, if you can get the sequence and timing of two or more spells *just* right, you should be able to, *in theory*, fire them off at the exact same time. The idea is that by doing so, they could combine, and certain combinations would have all sorts of synergistic effects."

"I've never heard of that," Mali said, her tone sounding genuinely intrigued. "But thank you for telling me."

Okay. Now Takuma *had* to say something. It was like they had one stronger player with them and suddenly they forgot all the times they'd failed to make it out of this forest alive. "Okay guys, we gotta __"

"Shh! Skeletons, approaching from ahead. Probably goblins too!"

Shiitake's warning cut him off instantly. Hourai was already locked in, both hands gripping his hammer, eyes fixed in the direction.

Shiitake loosed an arrow into the darkness to draw the ambush out. The skeletons weren't really fazed by arrows, but if there were any goblins, the shot would bring them out.

The arrow disappeared into the dark. A moment later, the dark fired back: a blast of magic.

Crap, they have mages, Takuma thought.

The goblins in the forest were already a size larger than the ones in town. If the town ones had been roughly human-sized, these towered over them. Worse, they'd faced these goblin mages before, and their magic was on par with actual player spells. Depending on the exact composition and number they faced, this very well could turn out to be an encounter they didn't walk away from.

But then—"*Thunderbolt*," enunciated a crisp and clear voice from behind him. A sharp crackle of lightning shot between them, threading through the gaps in their formation. It collided midair with the incoming blast, neutralizing it instantly. Sparks scattered harmlessly around them, flickering out in the damp forest air. As the magic dissipated, a skeleton leaped from the trees.

But Hourai was ready. With a single swing of his mighty

warhammer, he sent the skeleton flying, smashing it into a tree with a bone-shattering crunch. Skeletons were weak to blunt damage—between the hammer's impact and the force of the collision, that thing had to be on the verge of death.

A goblin emerged next, but Shiitake was ready this time. A few well-placed arrows halted its advance, buying Takuma the time he needed to act. Raising his shield, he stepped forward. The moment Shiitake lowered his bow, signaling his part was done, Takuma moved.

Shield Charge.

The skill propelled him forward in a straight line until canceled. He slammed into the goblin at full force, driving it backward—then kept going until he crushed it against a tree.

With the impact delivered, he canceled *Shield Charge* and immediately activated *Disengage*, vaulting backward to rejoin his party.

He caught a glimpse from the corner of his eye as Kouki finished off the stunned goblin, then raised his shield and cast *Taunt* on the next target.

***

"*Blaze Lance*! And that's good night, final goblin."

As Kouki finished up the last goblin mage, the group took a moment for a collective breather. Shiitake continued to stay on alert for any lingering threats, but after a moment, even he sheathed his sword.

"That was a bigger pack than usual," Takuma said, then turned to Mali. "I don't know what we would've done with you. That first spell—the one that neutralized the goblin one—that was you, right?"

"It was just a counterspell, nothing fancy," she replied.

"Tell that to Kouki here, who won't use his offensive spells for any reasons other than...well, offense. That was great. Starting the fight at full health made a huge difference."

"Hey, I can heal, remember?" Kouki butt in. "It's more MP-efficient for me to cast *Treatment* a few times after battle than to

blow a big spell on a counter."

Yeah, more important for you*,* Takuma wanted to quip. What was easier on him wasn't necessarily easier for the whole group. But since Kouki hadn't exactly held them back thus far, he held his tongue.

"Okay then. Let's get these corpses looted and move out," he said. "Tonbo, Kouki, that's all you."

Goblins weren't exactly known for their great and valuable loot. The only thing worth a damn was the dark crimson, translucent stones embedded in their foreheads—the reason for those odd bumps. NPCs bought them at a premium. Players? Not so much. No one had figured out what recipe they were meant for yet.

"Mali, just so you know, we only loot the stones from goblins," Takuma explained. "We'll split what we get evenly. That sound good to you?"

Goblin skin and bones were sturdy crafting materials, but harvesting them was a gruesome process. When the group had first started out, they'd gathered every last scrap—but by now, they were comfortable skipping that particular ordeal.

Judging by Mali's outfit, she wasn't exactly hurting for money either.

"Sure, I don't mind," she said.

With her agreement, they pressed on.

***

Packs of goblins and skeletons continued to sporadically engage the group as they made their way deeper into the forest. It seemed like more than usual, but thanks to a certain additional party member, it felt like anything but.

Mali quickly proved to be an invaluable asset. Not because she went around doing anything as flashy as burning down entire swaths of forest (not since that first time, anyway), but because she provided steady support to the group when it mattered most. Whether it was neutralizing enemy magic with a perfectly timed counterspell or turning the terrain beneath their foes into mud to immobilize them, her contributions were subtle yet essential, making

everyone else's job a heck of a lot easier.

One feat that particularly impressed Takuma was her ability to cut down arrows fired by goblin archers, striking them with magic before they reached their targets. When he asked her about it, she explained that *Lightning Magic* activates and travels faster than arrows—something anyone could master with the right timing. Yet, Takuma couldn't help but wonder if it was really that simple, since he'd never seen anyone else pull it off.

She never sought the spotlight either. She always let Kouki land the killing blows, almost as if she were silently reassuring him, *Don't worry, I'm not here to take your place.* In truth, she was a near perfect party member—outstanding at her craft and genuinely a good person. And despite having her around to split loot and EXP with, it somehow felt like they were walking away with more.

"What a world of difference another caster makes," Shiitake muttered. He tried to make it sound neutral, but it was obvious—he was enamored with Mali and disappointed with Kouki. Of course, Takuma echoed the sentiment. If it were up to him, he'd invite her to join their party permanently. But she'd mentioned having friends, so that probably wasn't an option.

"Takuma, I think we can make a stab at the center of the forest today," Tonbo said. "What do you think?"

Takuma wanted to say yes immediately. The original plan had been to farm a bit more EXP, bring up the whole party's baseline, return to town for a quick gear repair, then come back prepared for a full attempt. But if they had the opportunity now, why not take it? It wasn't a drastic deviation—at worst, they'd get a preview of the boss before their real fight, which could only help later.

Still, before making the call, he figured he should get their guest's input.

"You know I'm in, but what do you think, Mali? We'd be more than happy to have you come check out the boss with us. That said, there's a chance we wipe. If you'd rather cash out now with what you've got, I totally understand."

Mali seemed to consider his words for a moment. "I'd like to come. I'm curious about the boss myself. But if we engage, I hope

you understand—I'll be prioritizing my own survival."

Takuma let out a breath. "Oh, of course! Yeah, duh."

He wouldn't dream of asking for more. Trust wasn't something that was formed instantly—it took time, experience. She was a surprise addition to their party, and expecting her to risk everything for a group of strangers she might never even see again was unreasonable. Just getting her to come along was already more than he could have asked for.

"Okay then, we're decided," Takuma said. "We are not retreating but proceeding to the center of the forest."

He made it sound confident, but the truth was, they didn't know exactly where that was. From their repeated excursions, they had a general direction, but the exact location of the boss was anyone's guess.

Shiitake, using special items and skills, had been mapping the forest over time, filling in more and more with each attempt. By now, the early and midsections were pretty much complete. But past a certain point, there was an arc drawn around a large, blank area.

The center of the forest. Their ultimate destination.

Crossing that invisible boundary always marked a sharp increase in monster density. Every time they pushed forward, the sheer volume of enemies had forced them to turn back.

Somewhere in that uncharted space, probably dead center, was the dungeon's boss.

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As they pushed deeper, the difficulty ramped up *fast*.

Even with Mali in the party, they were barely scraping by.

There was no real downtime—only brief lulls between waves, just long enough to chug stamina and MP potions before the next fight hit.

They didn't have enough potions to split with Mali. They'd offered anyway, but she'd refused, saying she didn't need them.

The increase in difficulty hadn't come from the enemies getting stronger—they were still the same goblins and skeletons as before—

but from the sheer number of them. There were too many for Takuma to taunt, or tank all at once. No matter how well he fought, gaps inevitably formed. A goblin would slip past, an opening would appear, and control would waver.

It was only lucky that their group composition had the right balance to keep disaster at bay. Kouki was the only one who couldn't hold his own in melee, so keeping him safe became the priority. Whenever an enemy broke through, Shiitake would intercept, buying just enough time for Tonbo and Hourai to strike and force the attackers back.

But if it was luck that had given them a team capable of holding the line, something else entirely had handed them Mali.

Without her, the party would've collapsed long ago.

With the battle constantly shifting into a chaotic melee, she didn't have the room to wield her spear properly. Instead, she moved like water, flowing past enemy attacks. She hurled goblins aside as if they weighed nothing, or drove her shortsword into vital points with deadly precision. And somehow, while doing all that, she still had the presence of mind to cast magic with a single hand—countering enemy spells, hindering enemy movement.

One episode in particular left Takuma and the rest of the party with their jaws on the ground.

They'd been ambushed from behind.

Or rather—they *almost* had been. If not for Mali.

The group had been exhausted. Their vigilance had been slipping for a while now. Shiitake, usually sharp, had kept his focus trained forward—where enemies had always appeared. He'd let his guard down.

Out of nowhere, Mali, positioned in the back with Kouki, suddenly spun around and unleashed a storm of lightning into the seemingly empty forest behind them.

For a second, they thought she'd lost it. But then—several charred goblin corpses dropped from the thickets.

At the same time, goblins surged in from the front, forcing the front line to engage. If Mali hadn't caught the ambush in time, Kouki—and likely the whole group—would've been torn apart.

But because their supposedly foolproof attack had been, well, fooled, the goblins' coordination collapsed. And once the ambush fell apart, Mali looked back to the front lines, turning what should've been a fatal encounter into an effortless rout.

Don't get Takuma wrong, he was as grateful as anyone in his position should be to still be alive and kicking, but this...

This was a rude awakening.

Because, really, what did it say about them as players if one single addition to their party made them capable of clearing content one—maybe even two—levels above what they were normally capable of?

This didn't feel like a hard-fought dungeon run.

It felt like they were strapped onto the Mali-go-round, getting a scenic tour of the forest while she handled business.

"Um, Mali, sorry if this comes off as rude," Takuma said.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Could you... Maybe if when we fight the boss, you could just kinda...not do anything?"

"Whoa, Takuma, what are you—" Tonbo began, only to cut himself off. "Uh, yeah, actually, I agree. Mali, would you mind letting us try our hand at it first?"

It seemed like the whole party felt the same way. Shiitake gave a quiet nod. Hourai said nothing, just kept his eyes closed—the way he always did when he agreed with something. Kouki looked rather unhappy, but he didn't argue. And for someone like Kouki, who wasn't shy about voicing his complaints, his silence was less about his disagreement as it was frustration at his own inadequacy.

Mali studied them for a moment before speaking. "As long as I can still act in the preservation of my own safety, then I don't mind."

What a saint this person is, Takuma thought.

They were essentially asking her to sit back and let them die. Without her, they didn't stand a chance.

This wasn't about clearing the boss—it was about dying on their own terms. About proving, even in failure, that they could at least fight without being carried. When they inevitably died, the boss would turn on her next. And no matter how powerful she was, facing

it alone... That was a death sentence.

The least they could do was acknowledge that.

They had no idea if this trade-off was worth the ten percent of her total EXP, but as a group, they unanimously decided to give Mali their shares of the loot.

Mali looked momentarily blank as each member stepped forward, dropping their share of the loot into her hands.

"Oh, um, thank you?" she said, fumbling slightly as she tried to sort the items into her inventory. "Could you hold on a second?"

There was an unusual pause. Then, "Thank you. And you. And you. And you."

How polite she was, thanking every member, despite her apparently clumsiness with the inventory system—what was up with that?

Polite and capable. Oh, how Takuma felt blessed enough to have met her. He would've loved it even more to add her to his friends list, but Shiitake had already tried once during the journey—and failed spectacularly. If they brought it up again now, after handing over loot, it might come off as a cheap bribe.

For now, they had no choice but to let it go.

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After a fair bit more exploring, they stumbled upon something unexpected.

"Is that...a house?" Takuma said, squinting.

"Goblins build houses? Huh. Learn something new every day," Tonbo muttered.

They had likely reached the center of the forest. And if this house—or log cabin rather—built upon a logged clearing *wasn't* a boss arena, then they didn't know what was.

The structure was large, looking almost two stories tall at first glance. There was no visible door from their angle, but it could've easily been on the other side.

Now, where was the—

"There it is! The boss! It's coming out!"

From the far side of the cabin, something massive lumbered into view.

A *giant* goblin.

Eyeballing it, the thing had to be at least three meters tall. So scratch that about the cabin being two stories. It was just one giant story.

The goblin was wearing *clothes*. Not just rags or scraps but actual stitched-together clothing. It was a patchwork of different fabrics, haphazardly sewn together.

Upon closer inspection, the patches themselves weren't just fabric squares. They had form—purpose. They were shirts, pant legs, and dresses, no doubt former possessions of the slaughtered population of Neuschloss.

Monsters didn't care about fashion. They didn't decorate themselves for aesthetics. This wasn't vanity, but a *statement*. A war trophy as if to say, *This is how many people I've slaughtered. Care to join the list?*

"That is some diabolical work," Shiitake said. "What do you give for our chances of beating it?"

"You mean besides zero?" Tonbo quipped. "Are four-star bosses all like this? Or are bosses exempt from the difficulty rating or something?"

"Less chatter, more fighting!" Takuma barked. "Here it comes! Mali, hide!"

The goblin picked up a club, which was nothing but the trunk of a nearby tree, and came barreling down upon the group.

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Leah was already safely tucked away in the shadows of the trees. She watched as the giant goblin swung its massive log down on Tankman, blew straight through his defenses, and flattened him into the ground.

Oof, that's gotta sting.

It was just a shame they'd been standing around talking like that even as the boss approached them. If they'd been serious about

winning, they should've prepped the field, set traps, preemptively blown the log cabin to hell, done *something* other than stand around and let a stronger opponent get the first move.

With the tank gone, the rest of the group didn't stand a chance. Every time that log came down, another party member was reduced to dried squid jerky. When it seemed like Tankman and Hourai had somehow survived the first hit and were about to push themselves back up, the big guy made sure they stayed down. A few more heavy, skull-rattling smacks for good measure.

The log-shaped impressions in the dirt stilled. Then, motes of light.

The fight was over, just like that.

If it had been her in there, she would've opened up with some status-effect-inflicting spell. She would've focused on dodging the club rather than trying to straight up tank it. And she would've targeted a single leg, crippling the goblin first before trying to do anything else.

If they'd done that, the group should've been able to last a little longer. But, as always, backseat gamers are best ignored. Truth is, if she had been in there, she probably would've gotten blindsided by that absurdly powerful club attack too. A surprise one-shot mechanic, as it were.

Of course, this was all for argument's sake. No matter what strategy they used—even if they had played perfectly—she doubted that party could have won against that thing.

Suddenly, the giant goblin seemed to notice Leah, its head turning squarely in her direction. Its gaze hardened. Seemingly, it had no intention of leaving any survivors.

Just as well, Leah thought. *Because I have no intention of fleeing.*

In fact, she ought to thank the big guy for doing the dirty work of taking out those players for her. Now she could fight at her full potential, take it down, and get her answers about what happens to the dungeon with its boss absent.

The goblin stared at her, not moving. She stared right back. It seemed willing to give her the first move. In that case, it'd be rude

of her to reject.

She targeted the midway point between the log cabin and the goblin and cast *Hell's Flames*.

Just because you think you can't lose doesn't mean you won't.

Wayne's raid had taught Leah that lesson the hard way.

Now, it was her turn to pass it on.

A courtesy, from one boss to another.

Hell's Flames decimated the clearing. The fire spread hungrily, licking at the edges of the battlefield, reducing trees and shrubs to smoldering embers and expanding the open space. The log cabin was reduced to ash, and the giant goblin had gnarly looking burns all over its body. The burns were a good sign. They meant the burning status effect had stuck, even if the initial blast hadn't done much direct damage.

Burn damage inflicted damage-over-time until healed, scaling with the area and severity of the burns. If a creature's natural regen was higher than the DoT damage, the effect would fall off over time. But she doubted fast regen was a quirk of this particular goblin.

The goblin glanced back at the smoldering ruins of its log cabin—then snapped its gaze forward and charged at Leah.

Interesting. Was it more enraged by the destruction of its home than the pain of its burns?

Then it really *was* cocky, even by Leah's standards. To care more about its property than its own life, either it truly had the power to squish Leah like an insignificant gnat, or...

It doesn't care about dying.

Because it's not a monster.

Players respawn when they die. Burned-down log cabins, not so much. If that cabin had been something a player had painstakingly built themselves, then yeah, Leah could understand why they'd be pissed off.

The giant goblin charged at Leah, its massive foot rocketing upward in a kick meant to take her head clean off.

Leah flung herself sideways, dodging the attack by a breath. Behind her, the earth exploded—grass, dirt, and shattered tree trunks spiraling into the sky like a storm had torn through.

She didn’t stop. The moment her feet hit the ground, she darted low, closing the gap before the goblin could recover. Its left foot was still planted—her opening. She struck, the blade of her naginata flashing three times across its thick Achilles tendon.

“Gwah!” the goblin roared out in pain. Its wounded leg buckled, forcing it to slam its other foot down to keep from toppling over. It crouched low, arms snapping around its injury, its massive form coiling like a wounded beast. It whipped its head around, scanning for Leah. But she was already moving.

If this had been a versus Uluru-type situation—an actual giant—then even her adamant naginata might not have been enough. But three meters? That was manageable. Especially with it hunched down? She could reach all of its weak points.

Leah had already studied its undead skeletal minions. She already knew that goblins had an anatomy similar to humans. In front of her was the goblin’s large, exposed back. Thick muscle wrapped around the vulnerable bits inside, but she doubted it was harder than any of the steel she’d already cut through.

She sprinted forward, leaped onto its broad back, and found her mark—right where the heart should be. Without hesitation, she drove her naginata deep into its flesh.

The goblin shrieked in pain again. A massive hand swung wildly, but she yanked her weapon free and pushed off before the goblin could swat her like an insect. She hit the ground running, rolling into a crouch a safe distance away. Her grip tightened on her naginata as she re-stanced, eyes locked on the wounded beast, ready for whatever came next.

But nothing did. The goblin’s wild flailing ceased, and it just crouched there, one massive hand pressed against its chest. No signs of another attempt at an attack. That desperate swing earlier—it had just been a reflex.

Then this should be easy to finish.

“*Blaze Lance.*”

Even so, Leah didn’t drop her guard. She didn’t rush in for the killing blow. She kept her distance, opting to finish it off with magic. If this goblin were a player, that whole chest-clutching act could’ve

been a trick.

She'd play it safe and whittle it down with ranged spells. The DoT damage from burning was still ticking. And with those injuries, it wouldn't be standing up to close the gap anytime soon. The way it clutched its chest told her plenty. Her naginata had pierced straight through—back to front. No humanoid could just walk that off.

Still, the goblin didn't move. It looked almost a little *too* calm. Like it was resigned to its fate or it was...*waiting for something*.

Reinforcements? That wouldn't be a big deal. She had already cut down everything it had thrown at her. If more came, she could deliver the killing blow with one hand while holding them off with the other.

She kept up her magic assault, launching spell after spell, but still —no reaction.

Was it already dead?

No, its body still heaved periodically, and it almost sounded like it was muttering something.

What was it—

"*Necro Revival!*" the goblin suddenly yelled.

"What?!" Leah shouted in surprise.

Darkness erupted across the arena. Inky black tendrils coagulated in midair, swirling toward the goblin like a living storm. Within seconds, they coiled around its massive form, weaving a dense, stygian cocoon.

This wasn't the type of shade granted by *Veil of Darkness*. This was pure, suffocating night, a void that devoured all light. No matter how hard she strained her eyes, she couldn't pierce through it.

If only I was in my original body, she cursed silently. With *Evil Eye*, she could have pierced through the shadows, seeing exactly what was happening inside. But in this form, she was blind.

She narrowed her eyes, straining to make out anything within the suffocating black. But it was a waste of time. Worse, her curiosity might have cost her the finishing blow. The goblin was still at the center—she knew that much. She should have kept hammering it with magic, pressing the attack instead of standing there trying to see the unseen.

It was too late for regrets. The darkness collapsed in on itself, drawn inward like a tide reversing. Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone, vanishing as if it had never been.

In its place stood a goblin, smaller than the one before.

Gone was the brutish, hulking beast she'd been fighting. This one was skinny—or perhaps lean was the word—its muscles stretched wire-taut over a lanky frame, more sinew than bulk. It stood just shy of two meters now, its proportions eerily unnatural. Its skin had turned dark and ashen. And if not for its monstrous face, it could almost pass for an elf.

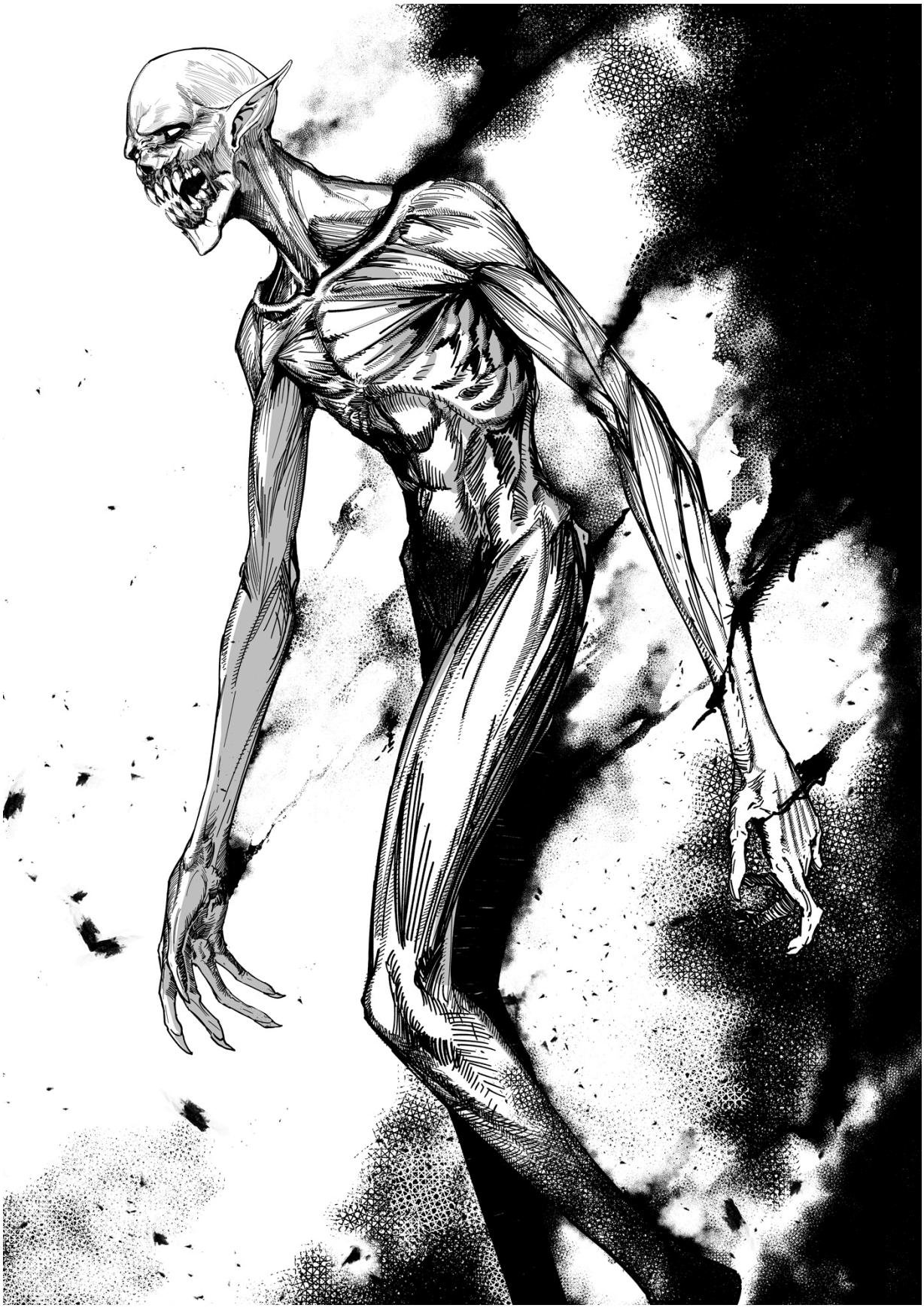
Is this really still a goblin? Leah asked in her mind. The creature's gaunt cheeks, its bared fangs, the deep-set sockets absent of eyes where a menacing red glow flickered instead—it looked less like a goblin and more like...a mummy.

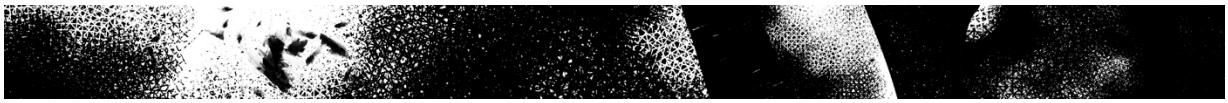
Leah's skill in *Necromancy* whispered to her: This indeed was no longer a goblin, but an undead.

A wise man once said that all bosses worth their salt should have a transformation phase. This guy took that to heart, huh?

The skeletons on the way over should've been a clue, but the sudden appearance of the giant goblin with the enormous club had wiped that from memory. It only made sense for that big, beefy boy to have a necromantic side to it. And now, standing before her, was the culmination of all its experiments with the dead.

Leah had never heard of a skill called *Necro Revival*, but she'd bet it was buried somewhere in the *Necromancy* tree, locked behind some prerequisite. If she had to guess, it turned the user into an undead and bumped them up a tier—maybe even two.





"I never thought the day would come so soon. Now this is my lucky day. Or maybe your unlucky day."

It spoke.

Or rather—*he* spoke.

That settled it. This wasn't just some crazy, hopped up undead goblin with high INT. This was a player.

Undead NPCs could talk. That was nothing new. (See: Diaz, Sieg.)

Intelligent NPCs could also talk. (See: Gaslark.)

But for an intelligent, undead NPC to talk *only* when the timing suited them?

That made no logical sense.

This was a player. In fact, *the* player who had orchestrated the fall of Neuschloss and placed third on the attacking side of the previous event: Bambu.

Now, the crucial question emerged: What was a girl to do with such knowledge? Say nothing and engage him in combat? Confess her true identity and ask him to join her cause?

Leah doubted he'd agree.

Imagine someone had waltzed into the capital alone, knocked aside her carknights, stormed the castle, toppled Mister Plates, and then dragged Leah into battle only to ask for her allegiance—would she say yes? Of course not. Well, maybe only after she got to land one good sucker punch or two.

Also, revealing herself and pleading for his support at this juncture would imply fear—fear of the transformation he'd undergone—and a last-ditch attempt to escape death. She couldn't let him think that. That she was afraid. So, the only path forward was combat. And winning, at that.

Was that easier said than done? In the first round, she'd shut him out thanks to the element of surprise and a matchup that favored her. Now, though, the enemy before her—slender and mummy-like—was anything but a big and easy target. His *Rebirth* had powered him up; he wouldn't have gone through all that trouble just to emerge weaker. She suspected that even before his transformation, on a pure stat basis, he'd already been much stronger overall than Mali. Mali could sprint, sure, push beyond her means for a time, but

this was one race of endurance she wasn't built for.

If he could wield a log in one hand, his STR was off the charts. If he survived a direct strike to the heart, so was his VIT. And if his *Necromancy* specialization was any clue, his MND was equally formidable. His shrinking in size also complicated things. In their previous encounter, the size difference had let her slip away from him, but that wouldn't be so easy here. She didn't know his background, his fighting skills without that log, or how much real-life experience he carried, so she couldn't assume the upper hand. On top of all that, the transformation probably boosted his AGI and DEX as well, making him much harder to dodge or outrun than before.

"You've trampled through my domain long enough. Your skill and weapon might have carried you this far, but your journey ends here," he said.

As if I'm going gentle into that good night, Leah thought defiantly. If this had been an ordinary NPC boss, she might have accepted the risk of death. But facing a player was different. Mali's lifeless body lying there for an hour—just so he could strip her of her gear and expose her as an NPC? That wasn't happening. Worse still, this Bambu person was a fellow *Retainer* user. Give him an hour with the corpse, and he might figure out that Mali was, in fact, an NPC retainer. Bambu probably believed Mali was a player now, but that illusion would vanish once he saw her dead form.

What to do, what to do... Could Leah just leave Mali's body right now and summon her back to Lieflais? No—making her vanish suddenly would be just as suspicious as leaving a corpse for an hour.

Annoyance pricked at her thoughts. If only she'd finished him while he was helpless in his transformation instead of standing there like a mouth-breathing idiot.

Wait a second. Is that why the heroes in those Japanese live action shows of old never attacked a villain mid-transformation?

She, of course, was referring to tokusatsu. Had the heroes just been too curious, like she was? Too indulgent, always wanting to see what cool new form their enemy would take? If so, that was a mistake—because that indulgence only made victory harder to grasp.

Darn it. Now she couldn't make fun of them for doing that anymore. Lest she be a total hypocrite.

"I don't think that's happening," Leah finally said.

"Hmm?" Bambu hummed. "Well, figures. Nobody wants to die."

He was right. But probably for the wrong reason.

Just because you think you can't lose doesn't mean you won't.

That thought prickled at Leah again, a reminder of the tenet she now swore by. A tenet she would've laughed out of the room not long ago.

Even now, her opponent seemed intent on giving her the first move. Despite all his bluster about her journey ending here, he showed no sign of attacking.

Last time, Leah had jumped at the initiative because she had seen his capabilities firsthand. But now, without any clear understanding of his strengths or weaknesses, it was hard to justify taking that unknown plunge.

Her martial arts training, steeped in the art of self-defense, had always taught her to react to an opponent's strike rather than initiate one. Taking the initiative was only an option when you already had a good read on your adversary or there was such a skill gap you could secure a swift, decisive victory regardless of what they had up their sleeve.

"Don't want to die that badly, huh? Come on, hit me," Bambu taunted.

"Weren't you the one who wanted to kill me? Come on, you hit me," Leah shot back.

They were locked in a standoff, each waiting for the other to strike. Leah's caution made sense, but Bambu's? He'd just pulled off a slick transformation, monologued about his lucky day or whatever, only to hold back? What was up with that? Was this just his playstyle or had Leah's dominance in their first engagement rattled him *that* much?

But in the end, Bambu blinked first.

"All right. Since you dodged me once—let's see if you can do it *again*."

When he said *all right*, his body tensed. By the time he said

again, he was already on her, claws slashing through the air with terrifying speed.

Yeah, he was fast.

But Leah—she was faster.

He had given himself away the second he opened his mouth. The moment she heard him speak, she moved—not waiting to react, not waiting to get caught like an idiot. She had gambled that even if he saw her dodge, he wouldn't be fast enough to correct mid-strike.

And she'd been right.

Bambu's claws tore through empty air. His eyes widened. "You can dodge even that?!"

As fast as his new form was, he was still slower than *Lightning Magic*. Speed alone wasn't enough—especially when his body was lean to the point of revealing everything about his musculature. Every twitch of muscle, every shift of weight before a strike stood out. The game replicated reality with painstaking detail, and Leah could read all of it. Every tell, every subtle cue. Even someone like her—just an assistant instructor in her family's martial art—would've found it hard not to notice.

If I can track his movements, then I'm not as outclassed as I thought.

Though by no means did that mean she *wasn't* outclassed. Her naginata, especially, was useless here. Against an opponent who fought bare-handed and stayed in her face, it was more hindrance than help. She had no illusions—Bambu wasn't stupid enough to let her use its range to her advantage.

If she couldn't use it, she wouldn't hold on to it. With a clang, she dropped the naginata by her feet.

Bambu scoffed. "Is that you giving up? Because why else would you drop it instead of putting it away in your inventory?"

Leah groaned internally. The relentless barrage of fists and kicks she could deal with. But did he *really* have to go and taunt her about her inventory?

Bambu pressed the attack. Leah dodged each strike by a hair's breadth, her body twisting and rolling as she searched for an opening.

His attacks were simple but clean. Not a single wasted motion. It didn't seem like he was trained in any formal martial art, but he was definitely experienced. The way he moved, the precision behind each strike... It was obvious he had fought before. A *lot*.

Must've spent quite a lot of time in games like these...

With more opponents like this showing up, she was starting to realize—there was no place where she could afford to let her guard down. Not in the real world, not in the virtual one. But at least one good thing would come of it: Her family's business wouldn't be hurting for customers anytime soon.

"You thought my naginata was the main act? Well, it's nothing more than a sideshow," Leah quipped. She liked the naginata. But it was just a hobby, nothing more.

She bobbed, weaved, sidestepped. Every dodge, every slip, every brush past his blows wasn't just survival—it was analysis. She was feeling him out, letting his movements flow through her senses. Every missed punch, every deflected strike, she was piecing it together.

His rhythm. His quirks. The cracks in his form.

Slowly but surely, she was starting to understand him.

Then she struck—at the exact moment Bambu did.

As Bambu lunged, she moved in perfect sync. In one measured, almost casual motion, she seized him and twisted his own momentum against him, sending him arcing high into the air.

Leah had honed her skill fighting opponents who were twice her size. She baited them into a rhythm, letting them throw punches and swings until they fell into the trap she had meticulously laid. In a heartbeat, they found themselves caught. Her strike was deceptively slow, almost expected—and yet they never had a chance to react. Even if they caught a glimpse of what was coming, they were so committed to their own attack that they couldn't change course.

It was a tactic that stumped the self-taught fighters the most. They thought they knew the rhythm, the right move—until she disrupted it all, turning their own strength into their undoing.

What goes up must come down. Bambu hit the peak of his arc. Then gravity reclaimed him. He slammed into the ground with a

resounding thud.

"Ow!" he groaned. "What the hell was that? Some kind of throwing skill?"

But Leah was disappointed to see that the hit hadn't hurt him nearly as much as she'd planned. His lean muscle meant he didn't pack as much weight as his size suggested—gravity's pull wasn't enough to turn his own momentum into a fatal force. And his high VIT only made him tougher to crack.

So, what was her next move? Relying on gravity had been her best bet; with the stat gap between them, any direct attack would barely leave a mark, and she couldn't do anything like joint lock him when the difference in STR would just leave her overpowered instead.

I see. So this is what it feels like to fight someone you have no hope of beating. Really wishing I had an artifact of my own right about now.

Her thoughts drifted to Wayne and the others—they'd been brave to face her despite knowing the odds.

In a contest where the strength gap was this wide, technique hardly mattered. Leah supposed that was what skills were meant for, to close that gap, but she, in her infinite wisdom, had forgone giving Mali any. A purely technical maneuver like the throw she had just executed, with no skill-enhanced damage modifiers, could only do so much.

So this was it, then. Leah was hopelessly outmatched. Half a victim of an overpowered enemy. Half a victim of her own overconfidence. Again.

For now, Bambu seemed cautious, wary of Leah's throwing skill, and didn't rush in. If she were back in her own body, this would have been the perfect moment to unleash a holy spell—an undead monster's worst nightmare, but alas...

But...wait. Why can't *I do just that?*

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The hooded woman was strong. And her spear-like weapon was

made of a high-tier material. If it wasn't mithril, something close.

Keeping pace with her hadn't been as challenging as Bambu had expected; her stats were lower than his. Prior to his *Rebirth*, his large size as a Greater Hobgoblin Shaman had cost him, but now, as a deovoldraugr, he wouldn't be so easily outmaneuvered.

Deovoldraugr, he repeated the name, savoring its sound.

To think he had once been nothing more than a humble goblin...

Bambu reflected on his journey through the game.

***

Goblins were weak.

So weak that Bambu doubted anyone besides him would choose such a pitiful race.

What goblins lacked in strength, they made up for with the highest initial starting EXP. More EXP meant more options—more freedom. In that sense, goblins could be considered the freest race in the game.

Bambu craved that freedom, even more than he was entitled to. In addition to his enormous starting bonus, he willingly accepted negative birth traits that granted him extra EXP.

Among these were *Poor Eyesight* and *Glutton*. The *Glutton* trait doubled the rate at which satiety decreased and came with a unique effect for each race. For goblins, it was the ability to consume more food than normal, pushing satiety beyond its usual limits. Essentially, they could binge eat and store much more satiety than others. Although *Glutton* only awarded 5 EXP—a modest bonus—its benefits essentially canceled out its drawbacks, so Bambu had been happy to take it.

Besides, Bambu liked to eat. So, naturally, his avatar should reflect that, he'd thought.

However, he quickly discovered that finding enough food to satisfy his appetite was far more challenging in the game than it was in real life.

It wasn't a problem of compatibility. Goblins could eat things most other creatures could. It was purely an issue of being so low

on the totem pole that it was nearly impossible for him to secure sufficient food.

With his hunger gauge depleting so rapidly, it didn't take long for him to suffer his first death. He lost EXP. For his gluttony, he had more EXP in reserve than was allowed before the death penalty kicked in. So, he was left with his negative birth traits and nothing to show for it.

He'd chosen to spawn in a forest biome. The forest was home to an encampment of hobgoblins. The hobgoblins didn't go out of their way to hunt him down, per se, but they certainly did outcompete him for food.

What was worse, the forest was next door to a settlement. One filled with beastfolk. Apparently he'd spawned in the beastfolk kingdom. Peare, the website had called it. Occasionally, mercenaries would wander into the forest to vanquish goblins. Goblins like Bambu. He was caught between a rock and a hard place: mercenaries looking for his blood, or hobgoblins taking his food.

For a while, Bambu's gameplay loop consisted of hunting small beasts for food, earning a meager amount of EXP for his efforts only to lose it all, and dying of starvation a few moments later. He died of starvation several times a day. In the game, respawning only restored about ten percent of the hunger gauge, so if he didn't find food quickly, death was inevitable.

In the midst of this negative feedback loop, he regretted his character choice, sure, but the idea of rerolling never crossed his mind. He had a vendetta against the hobgoblins and the people of the nearby town. He wanted them on their knees. If he rerolled, there was no guarantee he'd spawn anywhere near them again.

And he had his pride. He was a veteran gamer. He'd butchered beastfolk and hobgoblins in plenty of other VRMMOs—was he really about to flee from them with his tail between his legs? Unthinkable.

Regret or not, the only path forward was through. He had to win despite the handicap.

That was when the idea struck him: If his hunger was the cause of all his woes, what if he could have a body that didn't need to eat at all? It sounded ludicrous—after all, all living things needed

sustenance in one form or another...

All *living* things.

If he could become a walking corpse, the living dead, then he wouldn't have to worry about hunger. It was a slim hope, but it was something.

With the little EXP he had, Bambu unlocked *Necromancy*. To his surprise, there was a skill immediately available to him called *Necro Revival*. What a stroke of luck! Unfortunately, he didn't have enough EXP to unlock it, so his first step was clear: grind a bit more.

He spent the remainder of his EXP boosting STR and AGI, then set out to ambush players wandering into the jungle.

With his VR combat experience and the points he'd invested in STR, he could hold his own against beginners. The fights weren't always clean. Sometimes, he got the jump on an unsuspecting player and won easily. Other times, he was caught off guard and had to rely on his high AGI to escape into the forest.

But slowly, through this two-steps-forward, one-step-back grind, he started making real progress. A few *Rebirths* later—under conditions he still didn't fully understand—he had clawed his way to dominance. He had become the undisputed king of the forest: a Greater Hobgoblin Shaman.

Normally, a greater shaman was a magic-focused race, but since Bambu had always played frontline brawler classes in other games, even after he was no longer starving for EXP, he kept dumping most of his points into physical stats. Surprisingly, this approach worked well with the hobgoblin side of his lineage, a race known for their physicality. When he *Rebirthed*, the unique effect of his *Glutton* trait changed as well, allowing him to convert excess satiety, plus a bit of EXP, into raw size.

In the primitive world, bigger meant stronger. Stronger meant dominance. So Bambu cast aside the shaman aspect of his race entirely. If size was power, he would be the biggest of them all.

And what would you know, it worked perfectly to his advantage against the party of players that had just intruded upon his forest cabin. Had he built himself like a typical greater shaman, he wouldn't have stood a chance alone, not without his retinue.

Speaking of his retinue, they'd all been slaughtered—a massive loss in mere moments. For any other dungeon boss, this would have been a catastrophe. But for someone with *Necro Revival*? It was the greatest boon imaginable—and it all unfolded according to his plan.

To activate *Necro Revival*, the user first had to meet specific conditions—conditions that relied on other skills. That external reliance made it a combo skill, a skill that couldn't be used on its own but required setup through another skill first.

The first activation condition was souls. Without absorbing a certain number of them, *Necro Revival* couldn't be activated.

Bambu accomplished this with *Necromantic Ritual*, a skill that allowed him to gather and bind souls to a designated area. While *Necro Revival* didn't explicitly state that the souls had to be collected through *Necromantic Ritual*, there were no other skills in the *Necromancy* tree—or any other tree, for that matter—that could gather souls at the necessary scale. In fact, soul manipulation skills, as far as he knew, were almost nonexistent.

He suspected *Necromantic Ritual* was a racial ability unique to the greater shaman lineage, which in turn made *Necro Revival* effectively a shaman-only skill. Well, shaman-and-necromancer-only skill, if the latter existed.

Now, *Necromantic Ritual* could gather loose souls, but it didn't help with the all-important step of creating them. Bambu would've liked to harvest souls from the nearby town's residents, but since it'd been their very destruction that had provided the EXP he'd used to acquire these skills, that, unfortunately, wasn't an option.

So he turned to his retinue. Activating *Necro Revival* permanently destroyed the souls of those used in its activation. This meant he'd effectively sacrifice his retinue for his own ascension, but something something omelet, something something eggs. He positioned his retinue within the range of *Necromantic Ritual* so that when they died, their souls would be instantly captured.

The problem was that members of his retinue respawned an hour after death. This imposed a hard limit on the window he had to gather the requisite souls—which was no small number of souls.

And all that was still just the first activation condition. There still

was the second: Bambu himself had to be dead. But he also had to be alive to activate it. The solution? Activate the skill—then die immediately after.

He assumed there was a grace period, maybe a few seconds, maybe a few minutes, where his death would still count. But in this case, he didn't have to test the limits. His hooded opponent had made the timing easy. The damage-over-time effect she inflicted was steady and predictable. He just needed to track that along with the occasional magic spell she hurled his way.

Of course, the entire plan hinged on the assumption that whoever reached him would actually be able to finish him off. But considering the other condition, that they would've had to be strong enough to slaughter his entire retinue within an hour, that seemed like a safe bet.

Since acquiring *Necromantic Circle*, he had kept it active at all times—just in case. But really, he had been waiting. Waiting for the day the playerbase would grow strong enough to challenge him. He had expected it to take longer, but as luck would have it, a party had made it to him today.

The last surviving hooded woman had burned his log cabin to the ground, but that was just another sacrifice—well worth the cost for *Rebirth*. Besides, his new form had shrunk considerably. He would've had to renovate anyway.

Though, not everything had gone the way Bambu had foreseen.

The hooded woman before him had thrown him. Actually managed to damage him, a deovoldraugr. Considering the stat gap between them, he had thought that was impossible. He knew firsthand how hard it was to harm a stronger opponent. He had spent his entire time in this game fighting uphill battles, struggling against foes with superior stats.

If he could take damage, that meant he could be killed. Not by the minor hit he'd just suffered—his natural regen had already erased that. But if that throw had just been a test, a feeler move to set up for something stronger, he couldn't afford to lower his guard.

At first, he'd focused on that glaive-like weapon of hers. That was why he had engaged her at point-blank range early on—to limit her

ability to wield it effectively. But it quickly became apparent that wasn't the only trick up her sleeve. Spearmanship, hand-to-hand combat, magic—whoever she was, she wasn't just anybody.

After the throw, he refrained from getting too close again.

Her spear still lay on the ground, but that could be a bluff. No telling if she had another one tucked away in her inventory, ready to skewer him the moment he let his guard down.

He watched her carefully. Then, something shifted. Something about her demeanor itself. Was this the prelude to an attack? He tensed, ready.

Then she yelled.

"Huh? Oh, um, okay. S-Sacred Smite!"

That was no spell name he'd ever heard before.

There was a delay. The space in front of the woman wavered, distorted for a moment—then nothing. A dud.

"A bluff?" He smirked. "Now why would you go ahead and—"

Do something so useless—was what he meant to say. But before the words could leave his mouth, a pillar of pure, white light slammed into him. It erupted from the ground, surging skyward, stretching toward the heavens. To where exactly, Bambu couldn't tell. Not that that of all things mattered right now.



He couldn’t even scream. The damage was on par with a strike to the heart. One more hit, and he was done for.

But it wasn’t just the damage. Multiple status effects stacked onto him at once—blinded, burning, dissociated, petrified.

He’d known the hooded woman wielded fearsome magic—her first attack had reduced his cabin to ash, after all. But this? This was beyond anything he had imagined.

She’d probably held back on casting it until now because of the slight time delay. In the middle of combat, with so much movement, landing it cleanly would have been nearly impossible. But just now, with him standing there, watching her, waiting—she had taken full advantage.

The massive hit, combined with the status effects, was crippling—but maybe he still had a chance here. The only saving grace was that magic that powerful had to come with a long cooldown. She wouldn’t be casting the same spell again anytime soon.

But...*argh*! He couldn’t do anything. Not while he was dissociated, blinded, and petrified. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t see. There were no good options. If she picked up her spear and ran him through, that would be it. Game over.

Maybe he could lunge toward where he last saw her, take a desperate swing, hope for a miracle. It was his only shot. But before he could do anything, the woman’s voice rang out again.

“Hmm? Okay, very well. Holy Explosion!”

That was the last thing he heard before everything went dark.

`<<Death exception: You cannot respawn for three in-game hours.>>`

Chapter 9: Stand by Me

Holy Explosion had been the best spell Leah had for this situation. *Dark Implosion* technically did more raw damage, but the effectiveness of *Holy Magic* against undead pushed it over the top.

She hadn't expected to need it, though. She'd figured the single-target *Sacred Smite* would do the job. Turns out, she'd underestimated Bambu's LP. With LP tied to VIT and STR, he must've dumped a lot of EXP into both.

A necromancer with maxed-out physical stats. A caster who fought in melee range—and he was tanky on top of it. Yeah, his build was all over the place.

Yet, Leah couldn't criticize it. For all its wonkiness, it *had* given her trouble.

Well, most of the trouble had been her own overconfidence, as usual. But his build certainly didn't make things any easier.

She looked at Mali—the real Mali—next to her. "You know, I think I'll start giving you some backup from now on."

"Please." Mali nodded. "That was enough thrill to last me a lifetime."

This was probably the last time Leah sent Mali out on her own. Next time, even if she was the one in control, she'd make sure Kelli or someone else was there. To help handle any threats, yes, but also to keep random weirdos from taking pity on her.

But that would depend on their availability. Unlike Leah, the Mountain Cats actually had jobs.

As it turned out, returning a retainer's body to them wasn't seamless. There was a slight lag before they regained control, making the action a bit unwieldy mid-combat.

Leah first noticed this back in the forest with Tankman's party, when they were handing Mali her share of the loot. She'd briefly come out just so Mali could stuff the items into her inventory. Every

other time she'd relinquished control, it'd been after the action was over, so she'd never had a reason to notice.

It was a good thing she figured it out then. If the lag had kicked in during the fight with Bambu, things might've gone south fast. That said, the only reason she even had the chance to relinquish control was pretty much sheer luck—Bambu had actually paused his attack. If he'd been the kind of fighter to press forward when faced with the unknown instead of stepping back, the outcome could've been very different.

But in this case, it worked out. Leah slipped back into her own body, cast *Camouflage*, then summoned herself to Mali while instructing her to yell, "Sacred Smite."

She had to admit—it wasn't the slickest play. If the timing was off, the delay between Mali shouting the activation phrase and Leah silently casting the spell through *Evil Eye* and *Spell Fusion* could seem suspicious. But in a pinch, it worked well enough as an emergency option.

That gave Leah an idea. Since activation phrases could be customized to anything, maybe she could have Mali say something that sounded like casual small talk—only for it to drop a massive spell on their opponents' heads.

"Though the obvious issue with that," Leah muttered to herself, "would be suddenly opening with small talk in the middle of a fight. Too tricky for me, but surely doable for a well-mannered noble lady like Mali."

"I'm sorry, I must've slept through that one etiquette lesson on making small talk mid-fight to the death..." Mali replied.

Whatever, that conversation could wait. Right now, it was time to figure out what, if anything, had changed in the dungeon after its boss's demise. But since Leah wasn't presented with the option to take control of the domain, she already had a clue.

Mali summoned her bird to scout the forest, while Leah sent Ominous to check the town. From above, they spotted several of the larger goblins they'd fought before—all dead. A few players were still lingering around the bodies, looking thoroughly confused.

That confirmed it. Bambu had been the dungeon boss. And the

other players present had prevented her from taking control of his holdings.

Not that she'd ever planned to. Even if she had, she might've reconsidered. The log cabin made it obvious—Bambu was deeply attached to this forest. Taking it for herself would only earn her an enemy for life.

"But surely," Mali said, "one would think it simply a matter of practicality. A creature of that size could hardly be expected to reside in town, let alone navigate a manor with any degree of comfort."

"Huh." Leah mulled that over. "Good point. I hadn't considered that."

But now he was smaller. He'd fit just fine. When he respawned, she expected a letter of thanks for leaving him at a size better suited for civilized life.

Jokes aside, she hoped there at least wouldn't be any hard feelings. In case there ever came a time when she needed his help.

Well, if there were any, they'd be directed at Mali, anyway. Leah would just have to keep them apart.

"Ah, I know. I should place a little shortcut here," Leah said.

The teleport node already existed as a quick way to get here, but she couldn't use it in her own body. Technically, she could lock down the Mercenary Guild for a while just to slip in, but if the best way to avoid causing a ruckus was to cause a ruckus, then yeah—clearly not an option. Traveling to another town just to use a different teleport obelisk wasn't any better.

Leaving Mali there, Leah summoned herself to Uluru, near the volcano, and placed a few rock golems under her control. She was mildly surprised to find the once barren, boulder-strewn mountainside now just a barren mountainside. Marion must have moved a lot of golems to town for her work.

She returned to Mali, bringing one of the golems with her, and placed it at the edge of the burned-out clearing. She considered dumping some EXP into it for reinforcement but decided against it—that would make it bigger and thus stand out more.

Finally, she used *Plant Magic* to restore the scorched land, bringing it back to its pre-encounter state. With so much changing

all at once, one extra boulder would be the last thing on Bambu's mind.

"All right then. Let's take this corpse and get the hell outta here, shall we?" Leah said.

Stashing the dead mummy in her inventory, Leah suddenly remembered all the way back in Rokillean, she'd stuffed a knight's corpse in there too. When she crossed paths with him again, he'd been wearing rags. Made sense, considering his clothes and armor were still on her.

Funny memory. What *wasn't* so funny: the state of her inventory. One of these days, she'd have to sort that mess out.

The corpses were there so she could experiment on them. Not go full-on Dr. Frankenstein, but at least use them as parts for creating undead. Stuffing a piece of dead mummy into Athanor and seeing what came of it? That would be interesting.

On another note, wasn't "mummy" already doing the heavy lifting on the whole "dead" thing? Like, did she really need to keep emphasizing it? But it was a dead undead mummy, so maybe? Well, whatever, it's a dead undead mummy. The undead mummy's dead. Deader, if that helps.

"Oh, right, almost forgot," Leah said. "Wasn't the fall of Neuschloss directly caused by the conflict between Peare and Shape? But I didn't see any potential collaborators. So maybe it really was just one big coincidence?"

From her overhead scouting, she could see no suspicious players roaming around after the boss's death. They were either wary of the goblins dropping dead on the spot, or too busy looting them.

Bambu certainly seemed to be the kind of player that kept his player status on the down-low. Given that, it was probably safe to assume there wasn't any collaboration between monster players and regular players—at least, not right now.

It made sense that she and Lyla were exceptions, not the rule. Already, with the two of them being players with enough sway to influence national politics, they had to be outliers. Even if there were people trying to do the same, there was only so much a couple of grunts could accomplish. And if anyone had started the game

planning to team up, you'd expect them to have chosen the same or at least similar starting points.

Lyla was probably right. Rather than being complicated, things were simple—one event set things in motion, and the rest just kinda fell into place.

"Cool," Leah said, letting out a breath. "Well, that was a solid test run for the naginata. Almost too solid. It's a bit beyond what I can handle. I was thinking of making a few more, but now I might go with a weaker metal instead."

"Then, if I may propose a method by which you might procure such materials, Your Highness?" Mali said. "The city of Lieflais has flourished considerably under your guidance. At present, its immediate surroundings can only accommodate lower-ranking mercenaries, but is it not your intention to weave this region into a sort of broader network spanning the continent? If that is the case, might I suggest that merchant—Gustaf—expand his trade to include mid-tier weaponry and armor? I daresay there would be ample demand for such a service. You could then acquire materials from the arms he procures, reforging them into naginatas as the need arises."

Mali had a point. Even if she weren't going to be melting down existing weapons to fuel her needs, having at least the arms there would open up a supply chain to acquire raw materials.

"Very wise," Leah said. "I'll have someone on that right away."

"Or," she started again, another idea striking. "We could turn that existing facility we were building next to the capital to include a... Hmm, no, the materials primarily traded there would be carbide, huh? In that case, we might have to build another one near Rokillean's Safe Area. Get suitable materials there."

She hadn't checked in on the construction at the capital's outskirts, but it didn't matter. If it wasn't finished, Gustaf would just have to juggle two projects at once. He wanted to be a noble, right? Then he'd have to learn to delegate like never before.

Quickly, Leah issued an order through Kelli, putting Gustaf in charge of building all Safe Area towns, including those near the royal capital and Rokillean.

Once those were underway, the next town in line for the same treatment would be Blanc. Leah wasn't doing it to earn gratitude; it just made sense. And if it helped Blanc in the process, all the better.

Chapter 10: Whose Skeletons Are These?

[[To our valued players,
Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* player community.
It has been exciting to see the discussions surrounding the new teleportation service and its impact on gameplay. To facilitate these conversations, we have increased the post limit on all official forum threads to 9,999. We look forward to the exchange of strategies, tips, and insights within the community!
Additionally, we are grateful for the positive feedback regarding the proposed cash shop items. Based on community interest, we plan to expand the selection of items available through this system in the future.
More events are also in development, and we look forward to sharing details soon. As always, we appreciate your participation and enthusiasm.
Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we look forward to seeing you in game.]]

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[[**Frequently Asked Questions**
This section will list the answers to the most common questions sent in by the community, in addition to methods to resolve commonly encountered problems. Please check here to see if your question is addressed

before contacting support.
We cannot answer some questions regarding game content or game systems, and we kindly ask for your understanding when it comes to providing information that should be discovered in game.
Additionally, this page may include not only common questions but also some unique and interesting inquiries.

Q: Can town NPCs travel through the teleportation system?
A: The teleportation service requires user confirmation via a system message. As a rule, NPCs cannot receive system messages, and thus are unable to use the system.

Q: What happens to a dungeon’s inhabitants when the boss is defeated?
A: When the controlling entity of an area is defeated, all associated entities are temporarily defeated as well. The controlling entity will respawn at a designated location after three hours.
(Note: While “dungeon” is not an official term, we acknowledge its common use within the community to refer to open-world areas where fast travel is enabled by the teleportation system.)

Q: I asked a question but didn’t receive a response. It’s not even listed on the FAQ. Why?
A: If a question falls into a category that we are unable to address, our team may choose not to respond or include it in the FAQ. We appreciate your understanding.

Q: What kinds of questions can you answer? What can’t you?
A: We are happy to provide information on general game systems. However, in principle, we do not address questions related to specific players, in-game skills, items, or NPCs.

Q: Are there plans to add a feature for viewing detailed monster and item information?
A: While this question typically falls into one of the aforementioned unanswerable categories, we are making an exception. A skill with this functionality has been available since launch, though its unlock rate remains low. We are currently evaluating the possibility of implementing it in another form as a paid consumable item.

Q: As a goblin or skeleton player, can I ask to be hired by a dungeon boss?
A: Technically, yes—but we wouldn’t recommend it. While national labor laws don’t apply in a video game, we’d prefer our AI not subject you to highly questionable working conditions.

Q: Can you share more about how dungeon difficulty is rated? Is it an average value? Does it include the boss?
A: The dungeon difficulty rating displayed in the in-game UI represents the average combat challenge posed by the faction controlling the zone. In other words, it reflects the expected difficulty of a typical random encounter within the area.
The core area (that is, the area where the boss is

located, not the geographical center of the zone) is not included in this calculation. This is done because some factions concentrate a significant portion of their defenses around the core, and factoring this subzone into the overall rating could misrepresent the typical experience a player will encounter elsewhere in the zone.

Q: Where do the skeleton mobs' skeletons come from?
A: If you're asking about the standard "Skeleton" mob—well, they're just skeletons. No prior history, no former race, just bones with a purpose. However, if a skeleton has a prefix, like "Goblin Skeleton," then you've got your answer.

Thank you for playing *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse*, and we look forward to seeing you in game.]]

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[☆3] Old Hilith - Ellental [Dungeon thread]
0324: Tough and Doesn't Peel
So, did you guys end up beating the roaming boss?

0325: Wayne
>>0324 Nah, we got wrecked. Just not built for it.
If only we had a dedicated ranged DPS. My magic's too weak, and Mentai's mostly debuffs, so.
Not sure I feel like suddenly respeccing into magic either.

0326: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Oof. Classic "jack-of-all-trades, master of none" moment.

Guess ranged DPS is mandatory for any party, huh?

0327: Gealgamesh
Tbh, as long as we stay away from that big manor or castle—whatever it is—the roaming boss doesn't even spawn.
Just farming inside the buildings is straight up gains central.

0328: Anonymous Elf
>>0327 Are those really zombies?

0329: Clamp
>>0328 def not.
Mid-level players are struggling with them. If you don't destroy the head or heart, they don't go down.

0330: Haust
sounds like vampires to me

0331: Gealgamesh
nahhh, no way. I mean, they're in *every* building.
You're telling me there are thousands of vampires in that town?
Plus, some of them don't even get up when we enter their house—they just stay dead. Whatever they are, one thing's for sure: they're corpses.

0332: Clamp
>>0331 You sure another party didn't clear them out first?

0333: Gealgamesh

No signs of damage on them, so I doubt it.

0334: Haust
I see. Then maybe not. Anyone got more info?

0335: Gealgamesh
They got these fangs. Like crazy canines.

0336: Haust
So...vampires

0337: Mentai-list
Vampires, huh? What if there’s some hidden mechanic where getting bitten turns you into one?

0338: Clamp
No way, that would be sick.
But none of them have hit me with a bite attack yet.
And I’ve already died in Ellental.

0339: Haust
Darn, so not vampires

0340: Anonymous Elf
>>0339 are you doing this on purpose?

***

[☆5] Old Hilith - Capital
1312: Kuraaku
By the way, I forgot to ask. What do you frontliners do with your broken gear afterward? There wasn’t anywhere to repair it, right?

1313: Tough and Doesn't Peel
We managed to talk a blacksmith player into coming to the capital safe zone. Guy charged a fortune, but we pooled resources with other frontliners and made it work.

1314: Country Pop
>>1313 BTW, some NPC vendors are hanging around the safe zone now.

1315: Tough and Doesn't Peel
>>1314 Wait, what? How’d they even get there? They can use the teleport system?

1316: Orinkii
Nah, just normal carriages.
Also, saw this beastfolk (looked like a player?) escorting one of them. They unloaded a bunch of mats from their inventory, and next thing you know, NPC builders are putting up some huge house.

1317: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Ohhh, so *that’s* where that building came from!
I logged in and suddenly it was there. Thought the devs pulled a sneaky on us or something

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1318: Orinkii
I watched them. They built that joint in just three shifts—24 hours.
Crafting skills go crazy.

1319: Tough and Doesn't Peel
So what’s it for? Can we stay there?

1320: Kuraaku
>>1319 Does definitely seem to be some kind of lodging. Also has a bunch of crafting stations.
Apparently, the NPC running the place is sticking around and plans to bring in more craftsmen to support us—aka the mercs trying to take back the capital.
Not out of charity, obviously. They see a gold mine in us. So yeah, seems like it's meant for us.
Tbh, I was just happy we finally have repair options now, which got me thinking—how the hell were we even managing before? That's why I made the post in >>1312.

1321: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Think they'll buy all my loot off me?

1322: Orinkii
Oh yeah. They're actually real interested in buying the metal drops from the capital.

1323: Kuraaku
>>1322 We should spread the word. More players showing up might mean more facilities popping up.

1324: Orinkii
>>1323 Like a settlement expansion minigame!
Step one: Increase the population.

1325: Kuraaku
Also, heads up—talked to that beastfolk guard. Apparently, there's some weird new forest growing out of the ground on the other side of the capital teleport node.

1326: Tough and Doesn't Peel
Wait, for real? I’m free right now—gonna check it out. Who’s coming with?

1327: Country Pop
>>1326 Man, I wish I had your level of reckless energy LOL.
But yeah, devs probably wouldn’t drop a harder zone right next to the hardest zone in the game. I’m in.

1328: Kuraaku
>>1326 I’ll tag along too. Someone’s gotta update the forums with good info.

***

[☆3] Old Hilith - Rokillean Forest [Dungeon thread]
1512: White Seaweed
Anyone else feel like how you do is down more to the luck of the draw sometimes?

1513: Lampu
Yeah. Feel that.

1514: Yamabudo
It’s like just when you think you’ve timed your retreat just right...bam! a queen spider comes out of nowhere and flattens you.

1515: Kurumi
Then there are the inescapable traps.
Just when you think there weren’t any, you get webbed and killed.

1516: Anonymous Elf
Even then, we're still solidly in the black EXP-wise. And spider silk might as well be made of gold. I'd say it's a solid farming spot?

1517: Burning Lass
Sup bro. Just saw you in the Ellental thread

1518: Anonymous Elf
Don't call me bro.
Was just over there to check things out. We're basically neighbors, might as well pop over there, switch things up every now and then.

1519: Haruka
Oh yeah. You guys see those merchants come? They're building some kinda house or something

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1520: Anonymous Elf
Oh that's what they were? Can they just build like that lol?
Don't they need permission? Whose land is this anyway?

1521: Lampu
Since the cataclysm usurped the kingdom, guessing the cataclysm?

1522: Yamabudo
So they got permission from the cataclysm?

1523: Kurumi
If they didn't, they sure are brave.

1524: Anonymous Elf
They'd be brave even if they did get permission. How do you even set up a meeting like that? With the cataclysm? Speaking of that hunk of metal, where are they right now? Still not back in the capital, right?

***

[☆1] Old Hilith - Plain of Tür [Dungeon thread]
0722: Mouglas DacArthur
So we agree that the event boss took over the dungeon?

0723: Makki
Yup.
Monsters changed from giant moles to giant ants.

0724: Dyna
So what, is the cataclysm the boss now...?

0725: ElectaSnuff
No way this would be a one-star if that were the case. There's probably a separate boss here.

0726: Zekio
Or it could have no boss. Like that other Hilith one star dungeon—I forget the name. The ruin with just zombies.

0727: RinCo
Altoriva?
Makes you wonder if there's no boss, how you're supposed to clear the dungeon

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0728: Mouglas DacArthur

Were dungeons ever confirmed to be “clearable”?

0729: Cocu
True. Both boss and boss-less dungeons existing implies beating the boss != clearing the dungeon.

0730: RinCo
Wouldn’t it be funny if whoever gets the first clear on a dungeon gets to take it over and run it?

0731: Zekio
I’d love that—in a game that isn’t boot hour, shoot curse!
How would a player populate the dungeon with trash anyway?

0732: RinCo
>>0731 Use your party members

0733: Zekio
>>0732 worst. party leader. ever.

...
...

3006: Zekio
Is it just me or is the town twice as big as it was last week?
All these buildings popping up... Are there even enough people here to live in them?

3007: RinCo
You haven’t heard? Lieflais is becoming a bit of a hub

for players and NPC alike.
Normally, the one-way teleport network makes it so that getting back to town after teleporting is a significant trek. The Tür teleport, however, is almost right next to Lieflais and its obelisk. Meaning players can teleport here then almost immediately teleport somewhere else.
Apparently, there are a few towns like this dotted around the continent, so for all intents and purposes, they're basically linked.
That's why players have arrived en masse, with NPCs following the players. This is happening in all the aforementioned towns, but this town and a town called Felicita in Oral are seeing the biggest booms.

3008: Zekio
Wow. I had no idea.
Is that why they started with the whole resident registration thing?

3009: Cocu
Saw a flyer saying it was for land readjustment or town planning or whatever.
Did you know players can register too?
You can get either a residency or temp permit. Even the temp one gets you discounts on consumables at most shops. Lodging's cheaper too, but with all the construction going on, buying might be the smarter move.

3010: Zekio
You're in a one-star dungeon thread buddy. Doubt any of us here have enough coin to buy.

3011: Dyna
Yeah, according to the OG thread—the one from the first player who figured out how these towns work—some rich merchant player or players already bought up most of the land and buildings.
Lieflais and Felicita are basically already locked out unless you're leasing. But with how fast things are moving, it's obvious the town lords are pouring in investments. That's why, even with the current market, some are doing all they can to grab shop space in either town.

3012: Zekio
Is that why there are so many people showing up in town that clearly aren't beginners?
I thought it was strange because whatever they were here for, it definitely wasn't the dungeon.
Also, does anyone know why it's just Lieflais and Felicita booming?

3013: RinCo
Former kingdom of Hilith is volatile. That's why. Either if it goes up or down, that makes it a hotspot for players. Town lord probably took note of that and is actually being smart about it.
As for Felicita, it's cuz it's the closest town to Hilith. Oral neighbors Hilith.

3014: Mouglas DacArthur
But you're teleporting anyway, why does distance matter?

3015: Dyna

Players can teleport. NPCs can’t. It’s still mainly local NPCs driving development, so location is important.

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[☆4] Kingdom of Peare - Neuschloss [Dungeon thread]
0258: Clack
It’s happening!!!

0259: Saint Regan
What is?

0260: Clack
A rare boss has finally spawned in Neuschloss!

0261: Saint Regan
Real? Where at? The forest? Town? What’s it look like?

0262: Clack
In town! No clue! We were chilling, minding our own business, then we died!

0263: Saint Regan
Bruh.
You didn’t even catch a glimpse of it?

0264: Clack
All four of us died in the blink of an eye, it was crazy.
We didn’t even know what was happening let alone get the chance to look at it.

0265: Thermos

unamused.jpg

0266: Clack
But there’s probably a way you can tell it’s coming. If you see a lot of slain goblin in pieces on the ground, probably your sign to run.

0267: Saint Regan
Or...another party might have just passed through before you?

0268: Clack
I’m talking just straight corpses on the ground with nothing dissected, nothing looted.
Besides, these are the omega goblins we’re talking about. In pieces! Tell me a player who can slice clean through their skin and bones like that.
And when we respawned, our armor was also cleanly split, so whatever killed them killed us no doubt.

0269: Thermos
So you’re saying armor is useless against it? It has gear-destroying capabilities? Armor piercing?
Either way, sounds like a pain.
How’d you get it to spawn?

0270: Clack
No clue. First time seeing it, after all.

0271: Tut
Did you get too close to the center of town? Or the forest?

0272: Clack
Never been to the forest. But isn’t there that one party that only does forest runs? You’d figure if it was the forest they would’ve found out about it already.
Maybe it’s the manor? Makes sense since the forest group ignored it.

0273: Saint Regan
Hm. Interesting theory. Wonder if that group might chime in? Must be mid-run right now or something.

0274: Thermos
Now that I’m thinking about it, why’d you sound so happy about it in >>258? You’d think you’d be more bummed about triggering a boss so powerful that it might one-shot you at any given time.

0275: Clack
I just thought, you know, maybe if I hammed it up a little we’d get some more eyes on this forgotten part of the game, attract some more hardcore players. Neuschloss gets lonely sometimes.

...
...

0311: Takuma
Hey, Mali, sorry about earlier.
If you see this, I’d love to stay in touch!

0312: Saint Regan
Oh hey, it’s the forest squad.

Who’s Mali?

0313: Shiitake
This solo player we ran into and teamed up with! Actually I probably shouldn’t call her solo cuz they probably have friends. Just not today. Anyway, they’re absolutely cracked out of their mind.
Heyo! Mali, ya here? You lurkin’? Drop us a line!

0314: Takuma
Mali pretty much carried us on their back all the way to the center of the forest. We found the boss. It’s there. The one in the manor is probably just a dummy.

0315: Clack
Dang, really?
If the manor boss is fake, that kinda kills our whole “Jack the Ripper comes from there” theory.

0316: Kouki
Jack the who now?
Anyway, judging by the strength of the boss in the forest, the one in the manor’s probably just a mook.

0317: Saint Regan
So? What’s the boss like?

0318: Takuma
A goblin even larger than the trash leading up to it. It wields a club the size of a log. We quite literally got flattened by it.

0319: Thermos

Ouch. So did this super OP Mali person also get wrecked along with you guys?

0320: Tonbo
No, they didn’t engage with the rest of us. Which is fair, considering we kinda forced them to come along with us in the first place.

0321: Saint Regan
So you guys split up before the boss?

0322: Takuma
We should have, now that you mention it. But they were with us right up until we pulled aggro. Given how fast we got deleted, I doubt they even had time to run.
Probably had to 1v1 the boss after we respawned.
They knew the risks, but still—feels bad. Why I wanted to catch them so I could apologize and thank them again.

0323: Clack
Cool, cool, cool. More importantly. You guys come across Jack the ripper?

0324: Takuma
Who’s that? A player?

0325: Clack
Nah, it’s this rare spawn, like a roaming boss or something.
We were just chilling in town, saw a bunch of shredded-up goblins, and then *boom*, we got shredded too.

0326: Thermos
Basically, the devs, in their infinite wisdom, decided to add an unbeatable boss to an already unpopular dungeon.

0327: Kouki
Just caught up on the thread. Wow, had no idea that was a thing.
We never ran into it. We were probably still in the forest around then. Maybe Mali did, though? The timing kinda lines up.
Or maybe not. Could've just missed each other.

0328: Shiitake
No shot Mali saw it. Looking at the time stamps when you guys got bodied by Jack versus when we met Mali, they'd have to have literally sprinted over.
Through town. Through all those goblins. As a caster, no less? What are cooldowns?

0329: Tonbo
They did have that spear-looking thing though

0330: Kouki
Too bad we never got to see them use it. Their martial arts(?) and swordplay were incredible though.

0331: Clack
Whoa, whoa, whoa, so you're telling me this player is a better caster than you guys, has insane melee skills on top of that, *and* they're cute?!
Sounds like a VR idol in the making! Our time is now, Neuschloss!!!

0332: Takuma
Hold up, nobody said anything about how they looked. Or what gender they were...

0333: Clack
I can smell simp energy from a mile away.

0334: Shiitake
You’re the only one simping here, buddy.

0335: Saint Regan
Hold on, I’m in town right now, but where’s all the trash?
Wait, I see them. They’re all dead...

0336: Clack
Jack the ripper???

0337: Saint Regan
No. The corpses aren’t in pieces. Or harmed at all, actually.
I thought they were sleeping for a second.

0338: Thermos
What the... Well, this I gotta see.

0339: Takuma
I’d love to come but we just died.

0340: Hourai
Takuma, we earned so much EXP earlier that even after the death penalty, we’re still ahead.

0341: Shiitake
Holy smokes, you’re right.
Kay, then let’s go check it out too.

0342: Thermos
Wow, there really are just bodies lying around everywhere.
It’s a free for all come get yer loot boys yahoo

0343: Tut
Hello? Where’d everybody go? Don’t tell me the whole thread’s in town right now?

0344: Takuma
No mobs to stop us so we ran all the way to the forest. There’s nothing here.
Well, there are corpses, but you get me.

0345: Clack
Just checked out the manor! There’s nothing here. Looks like a tornado passed through the office but the body’s clean. Got spooked by a big goblin sitting in a chair for a second but no worries, it’s dead!

0346: Kouki
Well this is quickly becoming a ghost story I never wanted to be a part of...

0347: Takuma
We’re at the clearing where we fought the boss. It’s totally empty. There’s no corpse, not even that log cabin we saw...

0348: Shiitake
Wait. Then don’t tell me... maybe Mali-poo solo’d the boss? And that counts as clearing the dungeon so all the trash despawns cuz of it?

0349: Tonbo
Then you’d think she’d still be here, somewhere.

0350: Hourai
Maybe they both died?

0351: Takuma
Just what is going on...
Seriously, Mali! If you’re in here, say something!

0352: Saint Regan
Does this warrior princess of yours really exist? This whole thing reeks of devs dropping in some overpowered NPC to do a tie-in or something.
Aren’t the nobility in some kingdoms insanely strong? Maybe this is some incognito duke’s daughter traveling the world seeking to fix it, one injustice at a time?

0353: Tonbo
Nope. Definitely not. She stuffed all the loot we gave her into her inventory. Our whole party can vouch for that, we all saw it.

0354: Clack
Mass hallucination?

0355: Saint Regan
>>0354 You’re one to talk, mr. jack the ripper guy

Just for the record, I believe them more than you.

0356: Takuma
Mali, for the love of god, say something. Are you lurking??? Please, I’m begging you!!!

0357: Tut
Takuma, aren’t you guys all together? Why are you posting here instead of just talking lol. Perhaps your party isn’t as tight knit as you make it seem?

0358: Saint Regan
In any case, If Takuma’s crew is telling the truth, this could be the first recorded dungeon clear in the game. Too bad the person who did it isn’t even here. And if clearing a dungeon makes all the monsters despawn... do they ever come back? Or does it stay like this forever?

...
...

0381: Tonbo
Mark that as three hours after Mali defeated the original boss did the next one spawn.

0382: Shiitake
How can you be so calm? We just got obliterated.

0383: Kouki
Was that jack the ripper? Didn’t seem to have a weapon.

0384: Clack

Huhhh? What happened?

0385: Takuma
We were in the boss arena when a monster we'd never seen before suddenly appeared and wiped the floor with us.
It's like a ripped, zero percent body fat, mummy kind of dude? Roughly human sized. Might be the new boss. Hard to tell whether the old one or this one was stronger. We got completely blasted either way.

0386: Saint Regan
Well, at least we know the dungeon doesn't just disappear.
Maybe it's like when you defeat the old boss, a new one spawns type deal?

***

[☆3] Kingdom of Shape - Golf Club Tunnels [Dungeon thread]
0892: King J
Did the spawns get better in here or is that just me? Feels like my EXP/hr has gone up.

0893: Suama
Not just you. Something def changed. Patch, maybe? Before you had to go really deep just to fight anything, but now there are weaker mobs placed near the entrance.

0894: Fuji no ou
Patch came in? Did they fix that bug then?

0895: Suama
You found a bug?
You guys know there’s a rumor that devs will reward you for reporting a bug they then fix? No one’s found one so far, though.

0896: King J
How is that even a rumor if no one’s found a bug yet lol

0897: Fuji no ou
Idk if it’s a bug per se but I saw this goblin attacking another goblin. Then a bunch of other goblins jumped the first one.
Seemed weird, at least.

0898: Suama
Huh, interesting. Could be a feature instead of a bug. Maybe that first goblin was from a different cave and wandered into the wrong territory? Like how animals stick to their own packs IRL.

0899: King J
Could be. These devs are known for sneaking realism into the darndest things.

0900: Fuji no ou
Now that you mention it... that one goblin did seem a little out of place.

0901: Suama
Maybe just report it as a bug anyways?

0902: Fuji no ou
Nah, I haven’t seen it happen again, and if it’s an actual feature, I’d just be embarrassing myself.

0903: King J
Can’t be that embarrassing.

0904: Suama
Well, what’s embarrassing for one is expected for another.

***

[Wels] Dungeon Strategy Thread
2011: Farm
Saw them too. You’re talking about that pack of massive freakin’ wolves, right?
Yeah, they don’t attack you first. But so much as breathe wrong near them they’ll wipe you out no questions asked.

2012: Monmon
They hunt dungeon mobs. Well, “hunt” implies failure. They downright farm the schmucks.

2013: Hasera
Maybe that’s just how they are?
Have there been any sightings outside Wels yet?

2014: Monmon
Not as of now.
They’re so colorful and fierce-looking and fluffy. Lots of players trying to ambush them for pets only to end up ripped apart. Poor guys.

2015: Farm
By poor guys...you mean the wolves, right? Cause I got zero sympathy for the idiots trying to pet one.

2016: Beam-chan
Guess they’re just uniques? Hilith has a lot of unique dungeon mechanics and encounters. Wouldn’t put it past Wels to have some roaming wolf spawns.

2017: Monmon
Roaming colorful beasts of legend.
Must...not...make...pokemon...reference...!

2018: Farm
I know the red one’s fire at least. Roasted me good the other day.

Epilogue

Now that they had accomplished their initial plans for the new patch and things had settled for the moment, Leah, Blanc, and Lyla gathered for a meeting in Oral's royal castle.

"Um, Lyla," Blanc said. "Would you mind it if I placed one of my zombies here? I don't know if I want to make the flight over again..."

"Oh, good idea, Blanc," Leah said. "I was gonna go with an ant, but if you're doing zombies, so will I."

"If you both hate me, I'd rather you just come out and say it," Lyla said. "Enough with this passive aggressive stink-up-my-castle approach. And Lea*lea*, don't think I didn't catch you teleporting over to the patriarch today. I have eyes."

`<Successfully resisted the effect.>`

Leah blinked, then turned a sharp glare on her sister. "Lyla? What did you do?"

"Hmm? Me? Nothing. Why? What are you talking about? What did *you* do?"

Leah squinted, then sighed. "Okay. Setting that aside for *now*... More pressing for Blanc's travel issue—if these meetings are gonna be a regular thing, why not move them to my town, Lieflais? It's central, way more convenient for everyone."

"Lieflais..." Lyla thought for a moment. "The Hilithian town closest to Oral? Didn't know you conquered the place."

"Oh, I didn't. Not really," Leah replied. "Think of it as more of a...soft acquisition. The actual place I took over is the plain right next to it."

"Oh, wow. Look at you, setting up puppet governments now. What's next? Economic domination? Controlling trade routes? Come on, was being a dungeon master on the monster side not enough for

you?”

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the pot calling the kettle black. Don’t think I haven’t noticed *your* little secret projects. *Retaining* monster bosses, taking control of dungeons, turning them into EXP farms. Why, I wonder who gave you *that* idea?”

“Guys, I’m just really happy to be here. These waffles are delicious.”

A well-timed snipe from Blanc to break the sisterly tension.

“Aren’t they?” Lyla said, perking up. “They’re liege-style.”

“But how’d you even make them? You have a waffle iron?” Blanc asked.

“Didn’t have one. So I made one,” Lyla replied proudly. “I used the reward we got from the last event. Mithril doesn’t rust, has great heat conductivity, is super light, and it’s magic-compatible. So if I temper it with fire affinity, I could probably cook with just that. No external heat needed. Huh. That’s a good point, I should try that next.”

Leah raised a brow. This was the first time she was hearing about mithril’s properties. Where exactly did Lyla pick that up?

“Oh, that’s what you did with yours?” Blanc mused. “Huh. Now I don’t know what to do with mine... I don’t cook, so...”

All three had received mithril ingots from the devs as a reward for their participation in the last event—Blanc and Lyla for placing in the top three, and Leah for her dev-sanctioned role.

Leah had expected a metal with a name as legendary as mithril to have better properties. But if Lyla was using hers as cookware...maybe not? And here she was, thinking it might be on par with adamant-whatever.

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“All right. With our bellies full, let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Lyla swept her gaze over the other two before she continued.

“It’s been three weeks since the teleport system was added to the game, so I figured now’s a good time for a little info swap. My

projects have *been* going well. I'm guessing you two are in the same boat? Blanc? Lea*lea*?"

"Hueh?"

Blanc blinked, dazed, out of nowhere. Clearly, whatever Lyla had done last time, she just did again.

Leah wanted to press her on it, but held back. If she let herself get sidetracked now, they'd never get through the meeting. She knew how Lyla worked. Like she'd said, this meeting was about sharing information. Whatever weird thing she was up to, she'd explain it eventually.

Swallowing her curiosity, Leah refocused on the meeting. She was very much in the same boat, as Lyla had put it. Her holdings had been thriving in the intervening weeks. Old Hilith Capital, Rokillean Forest, and the Plain of Tür were all seeing steady rises in traffic. With that surge came an increased spread of high-level materials across the playerbase. To keep them from flooding markets outside of Hilith, Leah had her NPC merchants aggressively buying up excess stock from players looting her dungeons.

Meanwhile, the expansion of Lieflais was progressing smoothly. The outer areas were developing well, and city management was taking shape. The original walled section had been unofficially designated District One, while the newly incorporated area outside became District Two—just for convenience's sake. Business was booming. NPCs, drawn to the wealth of players—richer than common folk but not quite on par with merchants or nobles—were flocking to Lieflais. Shops were opening, homes were being built, and the town pulsed with activity. It was a positive cycle: More people meant more business, which, in turn, attracted even more newcomers.

Through the grapevine, Leah had heard that there was some lingering anxiety about the fall of Hilith, and thus the town's precarious situation, but the general consensus seemed to be that if things ever went south, they could always flee to Oral, which was right next door.

For now, uncertainty lingered, but it wasn't enough to stop the influx of people. Among them was a surprising number of NPC

refugees—not fortune-seekers, but those simply drawn by the promise of safety and community. They hadn't much in the way of clear plans to rebuild their lives, so Leah provided one. The shallow plains nearby were well suited for medicinal herb farming, and with excess labor appearing in town, it was the perfect opportunity. Originally, sapper ants from Lieb had been brought in to handle the work, but with so many idle hands available, she pivoted. Framing it as an initiative led by Lord Albert, she organized the refugees and put them to work cultivating, harvesting, processing, and selling.

Maybe it had something to do with the dungeon, but herbs grew at an unusual rate within its domain. Perhaps that was the trade-off for cultivating crops in inherently dangerous land. But since this was Leah's territory, she ensured no pests or monsters threatened the fields or the farmers, eliminating that particular downside.

As for the refugees, they were likely the remnants of towns Blanc and Leah had destroyed. The lands they once called home had already fallen under Leah's rule, their former inhabitants now undead under her command. In that sense, it only made sense to consider these refugees her subjects as well—the only real difference being whether they were alive or dead. And Leah was nothing if not a benevolent ruler. Of course, she would come up with a way to support them. That was simply expected.

After roughly explaining all that to Blanc and Lyla, she exhaled a long breath. "So yeah, I'd say things are going pretty well for me. Got some other projects going on as well, of course, but I've talked long enough already."

"I'm assuming the reason you chose Lieflais is that it's a teleport entrance in close proximity to a teleport exit?" Lyla asked.

"Correct," Leah replied. "If similar towns exist in other kingdoms, it could make for a neat little long-distance teleportation network, was my thinking. The economic potential would be nigh unquantifiable."

Lyla smiled. "Then I guess now's a good time to tell you a similar town does exist in Oral. Place called Felicita. I call 'em portal towns for convenience's sake. If Hilith's portal town is under your control, then we really might relocate these meetings there."

"Okay, cool. I guess I'll call them portal towns too."

Blanc's hand shot up in the air. "I have a question!"

"A portal is a word meaning doorway, gate, or other entrance," Leah said.

"Okay, I had two questions!"

To answer the second one, Leah quickly explained what it was about Lieflais and other similar towns that made them important.

"Ohhh," Blanc said. Then frowned. "Is instant travel *really* that big a deal? I mean, *Summon* is basically a free TP if you set it up right. And flying is convenient enough already."

"Most players can't fast travel on their own, nor fly," Leah said.

"Huh. Guess so. Teleportation's cool and all, but imagine if someone raided my place while flying? That'd be a pain."

"Trust me, it'd be just as much of a pain if they could teleport. Anyway, Lyla? How are you doing? How's your, uh, kingdom simulation coming along? And your EXP ranches?"

Lyla put down her teacup. "Ah, yes. So, kingdom management. On the whole, I'd say it's a lot like your dungeon management. The main difference is that I still have my Safe Areas, so my death penalty still applies. Now, normally, a nation exists to take care of its people, keep them happy, all that. But I don't actually have to care about any of that. I'm a player. The game gives me the structure, sure, but there's no real goal. So I figured—why not start by annexing a few nearby towns? Not by force, though. That'd be the easiest way, obviously, but it's a bad idea. I don't want to start a war. Some kingdoms I could steamroll, others...not so much. So I started thinking—what's the easiest way to secretly take over a town? And then it hit me: economic warfare. But there's a few problems with that. For one, the kingdoms are all pretty much isolated, right? Their economies are all self-sufficient. There's some trade, sure, but it's not like there's a central authority tracking cash flow. At most, you'll have a city-level ruler paying attention to profits and losses, but that's not really—"

"Get to the point," Leah said.

"Uh, can I get some more tea?" Blanc added.

She wasn't even listening, just enjoying her tea and waffles.

Apparently, she'd been starting her days with a fruit tart and a cup of royal milk tea every morning. *That's a lot of sugar. Hope she's holding up okay.*

"Right. Anyway," Lyla continued. "It took me about two weeks to *Retain* every single lord in Oral—part one of my plan to unify the kingdom into a more cohesive entity. Part two was strengthening trade with neighboring towns as much as possible. I did this by improving roads and infrastructure, and wiping out monster encampments to make trade routes safer.

"I also expanded the number of monsters under my command. When time allows, I send them into nearby dungeons—not to take them over but to farm EXP by killing players and trash mobs. That's what you mean by EXP ranching, right, Leah? But my main goal is still to position Oral as the rising leader in trade. We cleared out the monster camps, improved roads and infrastructure, and even ran a campaign where I basically gave away our agricultural produce for free. To *really* seal the deal, I had my monsters attack the fields of neighboring nations. And when our knights weren't busy, I had them disguise themselves as bandits and raid food supplies. Some cities no longer needed their knight orders after we took care of their monster problems, so I gave them new jobs—as saboteurs."

Blanc blanched. "I was planning on nodding along in uninformed bliss. But I did understand that last part. And it's horrible!"

"Hey, as long as you steer clear of Hilith," Leah said. "Honestly, I'm surprised you're only going after fields and food supplies. If you want to weaken your rivals, why not kill their people?"

"We're an agricultural powerhouse," Lyla replied. "Wouldn't do for a farming country to wipe out its potential customers, now would it? Sadly, a few heartless bandits do sometimes attack the populace...but wouldn't you know it, they only injure, not kill. Everybody needs grain. Even the wounded."

Lyla had some nerve calling Oral an agricultural powerhouse. Hilith had been one too—until Lyla murdered its king and his family, that is.

Blanc suddenly perked up. "Oh, you're a farming country? Then give me some fruit! So, funny story. Recently, I've been noticing my

lesser vampires dropping dead on their own. I was like, what's up with that? Turns out, they're starving to death! Then I was like, huh, makes sense. Not like they've been getting any blood recently!"

Leah just stared. For someone so quick to call out Lyla's coldhearted nature, and for someone who loved to say Leah was just like Lyla, Blanc was a little twisted in her own way.

Yep, I'm the only normal one here, she told herself.

"Blanc," Lyla said, adopting a vaguely motherly tone, "that's a little...cruel, don't you think? You should treat your workers better. You don't want to get sued, do you?"

"Oh, I didn't do it on purpose! I just figured if my zombies don't need food, then maybe my vampires didn't either!"

"Well, you're a vampire too, aren't you?" Leah said. "You'd think the fact that you need a fruit tart and a cup of milk tea every morning might've clued you in that *yes, they do*."

Undead, as a rule, didn't need sustenance. Vampires were the exception. Or maybe it'd be simpler to say vampires weren't technically undead at all.

The discussion ended with Lyla agreeing to send regular shipments of fruit to Ellental. Distance was a concern, but they settled on transporting the fruit to Lieflais, where Blanc would simply *Summon* herself over and carry it the rest of the way. To that end, it was decided that Blanc would leave one of her retainers in Lieflais as well. She needed one there anyway, since the next meeting would be held there. As for Lyla, she could always just take the portal from Felicita.

"Oh, and stop me if you've heard of this one before," Leah said, "but you can use the teleport system while possessing one of your retainers. Works with NPCs too."

"Really?" Lyla hummed. "Thought the devs said NPCs can't use the system, as a rule."

"As a rule?" Blanc echoed, frowning.

"Well, what do rules imply if not the potential for exceptions?" Leah said. "If they wanted to say NPCs definitely couldn't, they'd have phrased it differently."

Lyla feigned thought. "That means I don't have to hide my face

when I go out anymore. I can just go in someone else's. When I visit Lieflais, I think I'll borrow...Cecilia."

"No."

"'Twas a joke, Lea*lea*."

<Successfully resisted the effect.>

Ignoring her annoying sister, Leah turned to Blanc, who looked thoroughly confused. "Cecilia is the current queen of Oral," she explained. Then, as an afterthought, she added, "And if you're planning to pass as a player, be careful. You won't have access to your inventory—it seems to be tied to your character on a deeper level."

She said this also for Blanc's sake. Not that she liked assuming the worst of people, but something told her she needed to say it, lest a slipup of catastrophic proportions happen.

The conversation lulled. Everyone had said what they wanted to say, the waffles were nearly gone, everyone's hunger gauge was full—not that you couldn't eat past full—and it felt like a natural place to wrap things up.

Leah wordlessly slid her plate over to Lyla.

"Thanks," Lyla said with a thin smile. She handed the plate to a nearby maid, who promptly left the room.

"All right," Lyla said, turning back to the table. "Seems like we've covered everything on current affairs. Any last-minute nuggets of wisdom anyone wants to share before we disband?"

"Just shared my hefty tidbit, so I'm good," Leah said.

"About teleporting with retainers? Hefty tidbit is a bit of an oxymoron, no?"

"Oh, wait!" Blanc suddenly shot up. "Lealea! Totally forgot to tell you! A player as tough as your robot showed up in Ellental recently! Well, three weeks ago now, but yeah!"

Leah gave her a flat look. "Bit late, don't you think? I already know."

Lyla blinked. “Robot? Wait— Huh? You have a *robot*, Leah?”

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“I want to see that robot next time, you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, jeez you’re annoying.” Leah waved her off. “Anyway. You don’t have anything you want to share with the class, Lyla?”

“I do, but I thought it was still Blanc’s turn?”

“Uh, yeah, I don’t think she has anything so we can just skip her.”

“Hey!”

Sorry, Blanc. It wasn’t a matter of doubting her intelligence—just practicality. If she’d learned anything important over the past few weeks, Diaz would’ve already caught wind of it and passed it along to Leah.

Sure, there were times when Blanc visited the count without Diaz around, but anything she picked up there probably wasn’t meant for Leah’s ears anyway. And that was fine. This wasn’t some mandatory, share-all meeting. Leah certainly wasn’t laying all her cards on the table. And if there was potential for even Blanc to be holding back information, then it was almost a certainty for Lyla.

“Hmm, what to share, what to share...” Lyla hummed. “But you know, Leah, for how inconsequential your little discovery was gameplay-wise, it sure deserves a lot of secrecy. Like, ‘never let another soul find out unless you want to be burned at the stake’ level secrecy. That kind of thing directly contradicts what the devs have publicly claimed.” She shot Leah a pointed look. “I wonder if I have anything that could rival that level of consequence... Hmm...”

Then she tilted her head. “But it’s interesting how you figured that out. That’s not something you just stumble on. You *wanted* to test whether NPCs could receive system messages, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, ’Course,” Leah replied immediately. “I mean, that’s the only real difference between PCs and NPCs, right? So if you can find a work-around for that, then there’s no difference.”

“The *only* difference, eh?” Lyla eyed Leah suspiciously.

For Leah to just parrot that dev-approved phrasing seemed to

trigger alarm bells in Lyla's head. It was common knowledge that NPCs, for all their near-equal status with PCs that the devs liked to claim, couldn't access inventories or use certain systems.

She started humming again. "Hmm... What to do, what to do... I want to share something just as mind-blowing, but wow, you really set the bar high."

"Can you stop grandstanding and get to the point?"

"I should scold you for being so generous with your intel. Oh, but I suppose it's fine. This is a tea party among friends, after all."

"Um, excuse me. Do you have any more waffle makers? Can I trade a mithril ingot for one?" Blanc said.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to take it up with Lady Lyla," an unfamiliar voice replied.

Leah turned to see Blanc speaking to a nearby maid. Apparently she'd completely given up on the conversation and chosen to talk to someone more her speed. Normally, a mithril ingot for a waffle iron would be the worst deal ever made, but if the waffle iron was made of mithril, then maybe not?

"Also, I just realized I called it a waffle iron earlier, but that's not technically correct," Blanc added.

"Well, waffle mithril doesn't have quite the same ring to it," Lyla said with a smile before turning to the maid. "Give her the spare. If she's giving us an ingot we can just make another one."

"Anyway. If we're quite done with *that*," Leah said, exasperated. "Can we finally hear what earth-shatteringly important information you have to share with us, Lyla?"

At this, Lyla closed her eyes for a second. It was so quick it could've been nothing more than pretense, a continuation of her attitude. But Leah knew Lyla's brain could, and did, work that fast at times. It was intuition, instinct, pure gut feeling. The polar opposite of Leah's own methodical approach.

"Okay, I guess I could part with this," Lyla announced, looking proud. "Did you all read the most recent FAQ?"

"Yes."

"Nope!"

"Right, well, that's fine, Blanc. There was a question on there

about if it was possible to view detailed monster and item information."

"No way..." Leah muttered.

"Yes way!" Lyla declared, looking triumphant. "Worship me, for I have found it: *Appraisal*! Obtainable only after unlocking both *True Insight* from the perception tree and *Judge of Worth*—which you can *only* get after first unlocking *Discerning Eye* in the crafting tree and *Bargainer's Insight* in the negotiation tree. It's an acquisition process so convoluted and niche, no one in their right mind would ever go for it! The FAQ said the acquisition rate was low, but honestly? I wouldn't be surprised if it was *zero*. I mean, who in their right mind would level up crafting, negotiation, and perception all at the same time?"

Wow.

Appraisal.

Honestly, this was perfectly timed. Leah had been planning to dump a blank check amount of EXP into hunting down the skill right after this, so now, for Lyla to just hand it to her, that spared her wasting copious amounts of EXP.

"Nice. How'd you find it?" Leah asked.

"By wasting copious amounts of EXP, obviously. I used one of my retained craftsmen for the experiment, so it wasn't as bad as starting from scratch. They already came equipped with *Discerning Eye*."

"Uh. Sorry. What's so good about this...app-raisal skill? I don't get it."

"Oh, Blanc, you sweet summer child..." Lyla said.

"What my sister means to say is, imagine you could start a fight knowing everything about your opponent. Even one you've never seen before. You know how strong they are, how they're gonna attack. Well, that's what *Appraisal* does, it gets you that information: their name, their skills, heck, even their race. All of that is available to you."

"Oh, I see! Basically, you get to peep at the cards in their hand! If I could do that, then I could totally shut down their strategy, or deny them the chance to play their trump card in the first place! And if I

can’t do either, then at least I know I have to hightail it outta there!”

Huh. Card game metaphors. Does Blanc mainly play card games in her spare time or something?

“You know, sometimes I feel like I don’t know whether I should talk down to Blanc or not,” Lyla said.

“She’s smart. Just doesn’t choose to be most of the time,” Leah said. “So, *Appraisal*. Is that what you were doing to us earlier?”

If so, then that contemplative blink earlier really just had been a pretense. Obviously, she’d intended to divulge this all along.

Immediately, Leah acquired the skills Lyla described, and unlocked *Appraisal* for herself.

“*Appraisal*,” she said, looking at Blanc. “Oh, since when were you a baroness, Blanc?”

“Peek at my cards, will ya?! Well, two can play that game.” Blanc rummaged around in her UI for a bit. “Got it! Take this! *Appraisal*!”

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<Successfully resisted the effect.>
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“Huh? Why didn’t it work?”

“Since nothing came my way, I’m assuming you used it on Leah and got resisted?” Lyla said. “Yeah, the tooltip doesn’t exactly make it clear what the resistance check is based on. I experimented with buffing and debuffing every combination of stats I can think of, but nothing seems to affect it. And the outcome when it gets resisted isn’t exactly consistent either. Sometimes you get a name, a race—with Leah, you get nothing at all. I know because I’ve been secretly casting it on her this whole time. To resist everything I throw at you... You sure you weren’t holding back on me during our last sparring match, Leah?”

“No, not really. I’m just built more for magic than melee combat. Not that I totally neglected my physical stats, but they’re nowhere near on par with my magic. And yeah, I couldn’t tell you were casting something on me, totally.”

“Really?” Lyla asked. “Why go caster when you’d be exponentially stronger in melee?”

“Because I can do that in the dojo whenever I want? I’d rather do stuff in game that I can’t in real life—like throw around magic spells or swing a real naginata.”

“Wait, you have a naginata? Oh! Wait! Then that player who cleared Neuschloss was you! Ohhh, okay, okay, okay. The way they said it was a player made me think it couldn’t have been you, but this? With the whole playing a retainer thing? Yeah, makes perfect sense. Whew, glad that’s the case. Otherwise, I was like, uh-oh, we’ve got competition.”

She must’ve been talking about Mali.

Which meant...the truth about NPC inventories was out there now? The forum thread had pinned Mali as a player based on her use of an inventory. But this was Lyla. She wasn’t the type to blab. If she could keep it under wraps, then it’d be fine, maybe?

“Anything else you’ve been up to that I need to know?” Lyla asked, eyeing her. “Since, clearly, you’ve been holding out on me.”

“Um...” Leah thought for a moment. “Oh, uh, if you were wondering who submitted that question about what type of skeleton skeletons are, that was me.”

“That is literally the last thing I need to know.”

“Wait, you’re telling me they aren’t just the skeletons of whatever creature they used to be?” Blanc asked. “But I raised my Spartoi from lizardfolk...”

“No, we’re only talking about skeletons that were *born* skeletons,” Leah clarified. “Like, skeletons that didn’t used to be anything else.”

“Skeletons that were...*born* skeletons?” Blanc repeated. “Undead are born?”

“Like you. You used to be a skeleton, right? But you weren’t a skeleton of anything.”

“Whenever Blanc joins the conversation, it’s like she sweeps us off to Blancland. It’s chill here, I like it,” Lyla said. “Oh, but speaking of you, Blanc, I had a question. Your Azalea or whatever—your vampire lieutenants. Were they already vampires when you found them, or were they *Rebirthed* into ones? ’Cause they look just like humans, and they seem pretty handy to have. Thinking I might get one myself someday.”

Lyla currently had no aerial units under her control. While birds or other flying monsters were an option, an intelligent, humanoid flying unit would exponentially expand her tactical choices.

Blanc practically lit up. “Aha! Finally interested in what I have to say, huh? Yes, my lovely vampire lieutenants—Azalea, Magenta, and Carmine! I found them as bats in a cemetery. Caught a whole bunch, gave them my blood, and *Rebirthed* them!”

“I see.” Lyla nodded along. “So what happened to the rest of them?”

“The rest of them?” Blanc blinked blankly.

“You said you caught a whole bunch of ’em. Three isn’t exactly a bunch, right?”

“Oh! Uh, right! I caught nine. Three of them fused to become a Mormos each. Even now, when they shift into bat form, they turn into three separate bats, each with a third of their original LP pool.”

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Leah and Lyla gaped—almost in perfect sync.


×9



That was a bombshell. Up until now, they'd assumed *Rebirths* only happened on an individual level. Every *Rebirth* they'd done had been under that assumption. But if fusion was possible...

That opened up an entirely new set of doors.

"I really thought I had the most impactful intel drop in the bag... Now my *Appraisal* reveal is looking downright pedestrian," Lyla muttered.

"And I've only shared information you'd find useful..." Leah added.

"Whoa! What's with this reaction? I didn't expect that at all! Did I say something weird?" Blanc asked.

"Nope, not at all. Thank you, Blanc," Leah said.

"Yes, thank you. It just means you figured out something amazing," Lyla added.

If this was true, then there was a lot of experimentation ahead. Thinking of possible combinations, testing them out... Leah just hoped there was such a thing as nonviable combinations. Because the idea of fusing multiple humans, elves, and whatever else into one being? That was some nightmare horror she did *not* want to think about.

"But Blanc, didn't you *Rebirth* the legion of zombies at your command all individually?" Leah asked. "Couldn't they combine? Or did you do it differently than with the bats?"

"Um, I don't know, I never really thought about it," Blanc replied. "With Azalea and the others, I *Rebirthed* all nine bats at the same time, and to my surprise, they emerged as three beautiful vampire daughters. With the zombies, I lined them up and *Rebirthed* them one by one. That took a lot of LP out of me. I tried doing more at once, but Sieg and Weiss wouldn't let me."

In other words, it was a matter of timing. *Rebirthing* certain races nearly simultaneously could cause them to fuse into an entirely new life-form. It might be an interaction limited to vampire blood or specific to creatures with a vampire affinity like bats. Still, at least there was no information out at this juncture that precluded this interaction from happening, say, with a philosopher's stone.

Of course, just because nothing precluded it didn't mean it was

necessarily possible. In this game, where hidden mechanics abounded, there were always extra conditions at play—like a vampire using its own blood to *Rebirth* its kin.

Considering other races likely to fuse, besides the undead, the top candidates had to be magical constructs and golems. How could Leah replicate this special vampire interaction vis-à-vis these other life-forms? Fusion, combining. These words naturally made the skill *Alchemy* come to mind—specifically *The Great Work*. Considering that, then, it seemed possible that—

"Thinking pretty hard there, sister. Got an idea?"

"...No?"

"Wow, you suck at lying."

"Even I could tell that was a lie..." Blanc interjected. "If you've got an idea, share it with the class! I mean, the info I just dropped was pretty valuable, right? Not that I knew it at the time. But still—doesn't that mean you owe me one?"

"Grr..." Leah ground her teeth.

It wasn't that she hadn't offered some valuable intel of her own. But then again, since it hadn't been particularly useful to Blanc, she supposed she really might owe her something.

Fine, she thought with an internal sigh.

"It's just an idea," she said with some air of resignation. "It might not work at all. Even if something does happen, there's no guarantee it'll lead to fusion."

"But that's exactly what you plan on finding out, isn't it?" Lyla said. "Then just let us in on what you're trying to do. Come on, what does it cost you to let us just watch? Practically nothing."

Practically was the load-bearing word there, clearly. As much as it irked Leah to admit it, Lyla had a point. An infinitesimally small point.

She huffed out a sigh. "You can watch. But I'm not explaining anything. That okay?"

"That's fine with me," Lyla replied.

"Wait, wait, wait! I've seen this before," Blanc interjected suddenly. "This is the part where she swears she won't explain, but then does when we ask. That's a tsun—tsun-something, right?"

Ignoring her, Leah thought about how best to carry out this little experiment. The presence of spectators or not, she had to choose the right location for this.

"I'm just wondering where we should do this," she mused, "but I might have to call in a...very big retainer, so indoors probably won't work."

"How big?" Lyla asked. "The castle courtyard's fairly spacious. Would that do?"

"Mmm... As big as the castle, actually. If it trips, it might take the whole castle with it."

"Go big or go home, I get it, but you don't have to go *that* big!"

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Ultimately, Leah settled on Trae Forest for the demonstration site. While she could teleport there herself, she needed to arrange transport for the other two.

"Trae Forest is a five-star dungeon, so you both can head to the Mercenary Guild in town to teleport over," Leah said. "No one's ever come, so I haven't scoped out the Safe Area, but I'll come pick you up if I'm able."

"'If I'm able.'" Lyla scoffed. "You could just say you're not coming to pick us up."

"Question!" Blanc's hand shot up again. "How do I teleport?"

"There's an obelisk in the Mercenary Guild. It should be obvious once you see it. Lyla, you'll have to cover your face. And I guess you will too, Blanc. Your unhealthy complexion and red eyes might not give you away immediately, but if you open your mouth, they definitely will."

"Did you just call me the type of woman whose beauty is only skin deep, ruined as soon as she speaks?!" Blanc yelled.

"I didn't call you beautiful, nor did I comment on anything inside of you just now," Leah said. "I just meant that if you speak, your canines will show. That's all."

"Ohhh, okay. Phew!"

"Just now." So don't hate me if I comment on it later.

***

Arriving ahead of the others in Trae, Leah took a moment to organize her thoughts on what Blanc had revealed in Oral and to map out her experimental plan. This was the first time she had seriously considered the idea of multiple creatures merging into a single, more powerful entity. Although it was hard to visualize immediately, she figured that, like coral reefs or jellyfish—creatures with similar biological traits—the result would be something along those lines.

If a creature as large as a bat could amalgamate into a larger individual, then it wouldn't be a stretch to assume larger beings would follow suit. Depending on the combination, this process could create entities surpassing existing Harbinger-class ones.

Uluru, a magical construct, was the perfect test subject. Since it wasn't a living being but one formed from magic, the barriers to transformation were significantly lower. Forget simple *Rebirth*—Uluru could be reshaped, enhanced, and fused in ways never seen before.

And once she had fully explored those possibilities, it would be time to turn that same methodology on herself.

"Hmph." Leah smiled to herself. "Just when I thought I was running out of goals to achieve."

Afterword

Hello again! It's been five months since the release of volume 2. As always, thank you for reading. First, a big thank you to Kadokawa Books for letting me sneak in extra pages with each new volume without raising the price. I really appreciate it.

In the afterword for volume 2, I had planned to talk about my college doujin activities, but page limits got in the way. This time, though, I've been given five whole pages to write about whatever I want. So, I figured I'd finally share those stories, along with a few other schoolyard memories that aren't exactly academic.

Not interested? No problem. Feel free to skip ahead to the promotions and acknowledgments at the end.

I'd like to start with my middle school light novel fanatic years. Back then, I was in the science club. I was by no means an exceptional or accomplished student, but every now and then I would take part in a biological distribution survey, organized either by the municipality or some other group—I can't quite remember now. There was a small reward involved, so I was more than happy to take part.

When I moved on to high school, there was no equivalent club, so I decided to follow my hobbies and joined the fine arts club instead. By then, I was already a full-fledged otaku, so naturally, I had an interest in drawing. That said, I wasn't exactly the most dedicated member. I often skipped club activities—not because I was slacking off but because the watercolor and oil painting assignments didn't exactly align with the manga style I wanted to pursue back then. Or at least, that's the excuse I gave myself at the time. Looking back, the truth is simpler: I simply didn't want to accept the fact that I just wasn't *that* motivated. Case in point, my good friend who joined the fine arts club with me. He became incredibly skilled

at painting anime characters in oil. After graduation, he and I formed a doujin circle and started selling doujinshi at Summer and Winter Comiket. This, as I hinted earlier, was the beginning of my doujin career.

Then, in a grand betrayal, right around the time I got the offer to publish this work as a book...he went and got married. Not that it really matters or anything. But still. Traitor.

Our doujin circle actually had a third member—the takoyaki shop owner I mentioned in the author's notes of volume 1. To be precise, he runs a taiyaki shop that also sells takoyaki.

Like me, he's still single. Which makes him a good guy. For now, anyway.

When I entered college, I planned to continue my doujin activities while also participating in a club. Not just any club either—I wanted to start one from the ground up.

But as a clueless freshman with no idea where to begin, I figured I should do some research first. My plan was simple: attend information sessions for existing clubs, get a feel for how things worked and what kinds of clubs were out there, and maybe refine my own vision along the way.

And that's when fate intervened. At one of these sessions, I met a certain senpai.

Long story short, that meeting completely derailed my plans. Right then and there, I abandoned the idea of founding my own club and decided, on the spot, to join theirs instead. Looking back, I'm certain that if I hadn't met this senpai, my college life would have taken a very different path.

The guy was, in a phrase, *something else*.

Objectively speaking, he was nobody to look up to. As club president, he off-loaded nearly all his responsibilities onto the vice president and lower-ranking members. Was it so he could focus on his studies? Perish the thought. For every class he was on the verge of failing, he bummed notes from friends, copied them wholesale, and crammed at the last minute. Not exactly a role model.

Was it his looks that drew me in, then? Well, if a middle part, ridiculously thick glasses, and an endless rotation of plaid shirts and

jeans—aka the classic otaku uniform—are your idea of attractive, then sure. In the summer, he even accessorized with a camo bandanna tied around his head. If that doesn't paint a clear enough picture, I don't know what will.

As for his behavior, I wouldn't go so far as to call him a delinquent, but let's just say that on his way to his part-time job at a certain castle-shaped hotel (IYKYK), he had a habit of jaywalking across a major road, climbing over the median instead of using a crosswalk. So, yeah. Hardly admirable by societal standards.

Also, for reasons known only to him, he insisted we call him "captain." Captain of what, exactly? Your guess is as good as mine. The point is, he could be a little...cringe at times.

So then, you ask, what was it about him that made me abandon my plans and join his club on the spot?

Simple. His absolute and overwhelming charisma.

The work he off-loaded onto his subordinates? They took it on—grumbling under their breath, sure—but they still did it. Because he was the one asking. The same went for the friends he bummed notes from; they actually wanted to hand them over. Even some of the faculty spoke about him with a degree of respect.

He had exceptional interpersonal and communication skills—far beyond what I thought possible for a college student. I said he dumped work on others. The truth is, he delegated. He knew exactly what each member was good at and assigned them tasks that played to their strengths. And let me tell you, that kind of skill? It's rare for a student. Then there was his ability to handle sudden problems during big events. His crisis management skills were second to none.

In game lingo, he would be a *Leadership* and *Charisma* pure, ranking S in both and E in literally everything else.

So yeah, despite not knowing what exactly he was the captain of, I found myself calling him that almost immediately.

It really spoke to me then how someone just a few years older could feel so vastly different. I truly respected our captain. I dreamed of becoming someone like him, of surpassing him. I devoted myself to our club with that goal in mind. The year I spent

chasing after him probably shaped me more than anything else. Every day, he gave me new reasons to think, *this guy is seriously something else.* And yet, no matter how many times he surprised me, my respect for him never wavered.

When he graduated, I took over as club president—a role I held for the next three years. Our college was in the middle of transitioning from a junior college to a full four-year institution at the time, so while he graduated in two years, I stayed for four.

I served as president three times longer than he did. I even earned the honor of giving a lecture of sorts to underclassmen as the first student from the four-year program to land a job offer. And yet, it never felt like I truly surpassed him.

If I could say one thing to my past self, it would be this: Just because you get an early job offer, don't rush into deciding on that company. I no longer work at that first company. After I left, it was essentially taken over by an outside executive that'd been brought in as a consultant. Interesting times ensued. Apparently, the executive's office was forced to relocate to the men's locker room or something like that, among other fun happenings. Looking back, I kind of wish I had stuck around a little longer—just to witness the chaos firsthand.

My club had no shortage of other interesting senpais. One could knead work gloves into realistic-looking male genitalia in seconds. Another made balloon animals so well you'd swear he did that for a living. There was a super buff guy who nailed impressions, and a girl who went on to become a race queen after graduation, among others. But—it would be disingenuous to say any of them left nearly as deep an impression on me as our glorious captain.

Sometimes, I wonder how he is. I have no way of contacting him anymore, but I hope he's doing all right. But if, by some chance, he picks up this book, flips to the afterword, and thinks, "Wait, this is me!" then maybe—just maybe—that would be the moment I could finally say I've surpassed him in something.

That said, if it turns out the captain is actually one of my senior peers in the writing world... Then I would concede for good. GLHF.

Ah, just remembered! (As if I could forget.) You might have

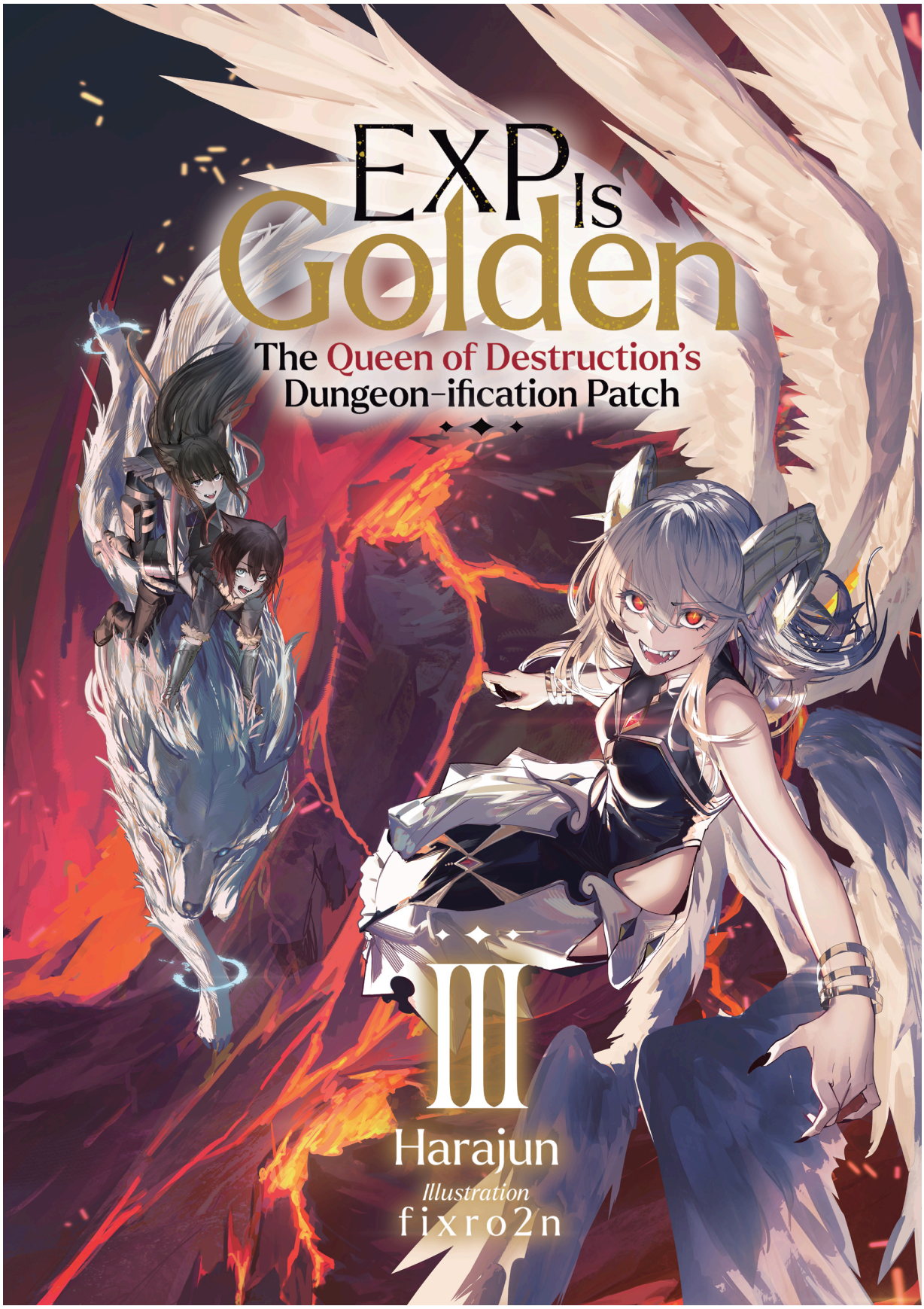
already seen it on volume 2's obi, but *EXP Is Golden* is getting its very own manga adaptation. It officially begins serialization on *Doradora Flat ♭* starting October 19th—right after this volume's release. I repeat, the only place you can find Shimotsukishio-sensei's gripping and meticulously crafted take on *EXP Is Golden* is *Doradora Flat ♭*.

Lastly, it's time for acknowledgments. To the incredibly talented illustrator, fixro2n, thank you again for your breathtaking work. For the record, I'm the one who gave the order to reduce the chest size of a certain Harbinger-class character. Please don't hold it against my editor.

Proofreading. You might have thought there were a few more corrections than usual this time. But I think that's because we started using Arabic numerals for dungeon ranks in volume 3... Ah, well, sorry for the extra trouble. I really appreciate all your hard work, as always.

And to everyone who helped bring this book to life, my deepest thanks.

Sincerely,
Harajun


EXP is Golden
The Queen of Destruction's Dungeon-ification Patch
III
Harajun
Illustration
fixro2n

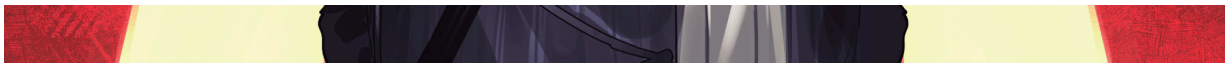


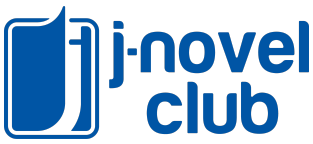

Clearly Ginka was looking for praise. Her snout was raised high, nostrils flaring expectantly.
III
EXP Is Golden
The Queen of Destruction's Dungeon-ification Patch




"But the golem doesn't have a face. That makes it hard to tell how low its LP is."
"Leah cast the advanced ice-AoE skills Snowstorm and Cold Snap, then followed up with Downburst... The frigid onslaught slammed into the massive golem."


“All right, then.
Let’s take
things outside,
shall we?”





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EXP Is Golden: Volume 3
by Harajun

Translated by Dawson Chen Edited by Ruuri

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