

EXP^{Is} Golden

The **Queen of Destruction**
Speedruns Her Ascension



I
Harajun

Illustration
fixro2n

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“It itches...”

“You look
divine!”

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“I’ve made sure
I won’t be causing
any unnecessary
collateral damage...”


*Consume the
world in flames!*

**FLAME
DETONATION!”**

The grasslands near Erfahren
had been turned into a blasted
wasteland in a single night.

The kingdom resolved to
put an end to that threat
before that could happen.





Now that she
knew which
direction they
were coming from,
it wasn't much of a
challenge to avoid
them or even grab
them out of the air.

*“Mwa
ha ha!
Futile!
Your
attacks
are futile!
You
vermin!”*

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Prologue

The events of that day sent a shock wave through the continent. The first tremors were felt in the cathedrals to the Holy Church located in each kingdom's capital. The panic was contagious, and it soon spread from the cathedrals to the palaces the rulers of those kingdoms called home.

The Kingdom of Hilith, a human kingdom on the southeastern corner of the continent, felt the impact of the news propagating across the land most keenly. The unfortunate people of Hilith had found themselves at the epicenter of a continent-shaking event.

A brilliant white silhouette shone over the dark night sky of the plains, as though a human-shaped moon had suddenly appeared in the heavens. While this world had many strange things within it, the sight of a humanoid moon shouldn't have been one of them. It was true that given the size of this world—this particular game world—such a moon might exist somewhere, but if there were such a thing, this particular silhouette wasn't it.

No, the silhouette belonged to a girl who floated high above the grasslands below. She was no ordinary girl. Her head was framed by golden horns, and from her lower back sprouted a pair of wings the same bright snow-white as her hair.

The reason she had waited for this late hour was due to a particular effect of her Albinism. That condition made her highly vulnerable to sunlight, and exposure to the sun marked her pale skin with burns far more severe than the mere sunburns suffered by most.

The moonlit night provided a surprisingly clear view of the plains that stretched below. The hour was late enough that there wasn't a single soul in sight. The NPC mercenaries that made up the bulk of the population during the day were fast asleep, and the players that would be online at this hour were occupied with the current hunting hot spot in the forest.

“Well, this seems like the perfect place to give this a try,” she said to herself, glancing down at the grasslands below. “Let’s see... I used *Hell’s Flames* on the forest during the last event...” She trailed off for a moment in thought. “Why don’t I use this chance to try out my most powerful spell?”

She had already acquired the most powerful spell in the *Flame Magic* skill tree. Given its impact during the first event, she knew *Hell’s Flames* was more than enough for most cases, but it was always better to be prepared for the unexpected. This was why she had gone out of her way to maximize all her magic skill trees, irrespective of their elements.

“It doesn’t look like there are any of my ‘ants’ in the area of effect...” she said, looking over the ground below. “I’m sure there are a few rabbits wandering around down there, but they’ll just have to chalk it up to bad luck. Right then, I’ve made sure I won’t be causing any unnecessary collateral damage, so I guess it’s time to test out the power of the Demon Lord! *Consume the world in flames! FLAME DETONATION!*”

The city of Erfahren was located within the Kingdom of Hilith. Jim had been born and raised in Erfahren and now made his living as a mercenary there. On this day, Jim had stayed out past sunset hunting in the plains outside of the city.

Recently, a new alchemist’s shop had opened in Erfahren. The shop had been a blessing for mercenaries like Jim, selling its goods at a significantly lower price than the older shops scattered around the city. One of the goods offered by this alchemist was a new type of lantern oil that burned longer and brighter than the traditional oils available in the market. The new oil allowed Jim and his fellow mercenaries to stay out and hunt after the sun had set. It didn’t last quite long enough to allow them to hunt into the dead of night, but it was enough for them to hunt until the local taverns switched from eateries into pubs.

The opening of the alchemist’s shop had coincided with an influx of outsiders known as Vault Holders. Rumors swirled about these outsiders, the most unbelievable of which was that they were incapable of dying. Their behavior gave some credibility to the rumor, as most of them spent every day fearlessly heading into the monsters’ lair that was the local forest, returning at the end of

the day with proof of their triumphs.

Perhaps due to their immortality, these outsiders were capable of going hunting for only a portion of each day, but this was hardly a handicap given that the goods they harvested from the woods were worth several times the price fetched by anything that could be obtained in the plains. For mercenaries like Jim who made their living from hunting in and around the city of Erfahren, the only way to keep up with these newcomers was to take advantage of their own ability to spend long hours hunting in the plains.

While Jim was as yet the only one who went out hunting well into the night, it was only a matter of time until the other native mercenaries of Erfahren would be forced to adapt and expand their hunting hours too, for the number of Vault Holders seemed only to grow by the day. Jim had decided that it was better to be one of the first to expand his hunting hours rather than simply wait until his hand was forced.

That particular day, Jim had filled his lantern with the alchemical oil and stayed out past sunset to continue his hunting. He had caught his last prey for the evening and drawn his knife to start field dressing it when he suddenly felt an unsettling presence in the area.

Jim, in all his years, had never felt such an unnatural, unnerving presence. He shivered as he began to sweat profusely, and he felt an impending sense of doom creep into his thoughts. While Jim couldn't figure out *why* he felt this way, all of his instincts were screaming at him to get the hell away from this location. As the panic began to take hold of him, Jim started slowly backing away toward the city, leaving his prey on the ground in front of him. This was clearly not the time to worry about such a trifling catch.

Jim had been emphasizing stealth as he backed away, trying to avoid alerting the looming presence to his existence, but his caution gradually gave way to his sense of panic, his backward steps turning into a backward run. Then he abandoned even that pretense, turned his back to the plains, and broke out into a full sprint.

It was just as he turned to run that the sky lit up as though the sun had returned, a blinding light shining upon the entire plain followed by a searing

heat that seemed to envelop his entire body. Jim let out a panicked scream and desperately dashed toward the city.

When he finally arrived at the city, the guards standing watch at the walled city's gates were staring in mute horror at the plains Jim had just left behind. A few heartbeats later, the guards noticed his approach and shouted down at him.

"Hey! You! What the hell is going on?! The plains are—"

"Hold up! Now's not the time! You okay there?! Your back is all..."

A surge of relief washed over Jim as he reached the city gates. Exhausted from his death-defying run, the panic no longer sustaining him, he passed out in front of the guards. When he woke the next day in the clinic, he was told that he had suffered terrible burns on his back. Fortunately, potions were able to treat the burns and he wasn't facing any permanent disabilities, but the cost of the healing potion had wiped out his earnings from the past few days.

As he lay recuperating in the clinic, the guards from the gates who had brought Jim to the clinic the night before came by to visit. It seemed they had some questions for Jim.

"Glad to see you made it," one guard said with a palpable sense of relief. He continued, "We need to ask you a few questions. Just what happened in the plains last night? You probably know this because you were there, but whatever happened last night has reduced the plains to a scorched wasteland..."

The grasslands near Erfahren had been turned into a blasted wasteland in a single night. Despite their best attempts, no one in Erfahren was able to figure out what had happened. But in the kingdom's palace, the king's inner circle knew that just before that night's events, a new enemy of all humanity had been born. A threat with the raw power to reduce a vast grassland to cinders. It was impossible to know when that threat would turn its gaze to humanity itself.

The kingdom resolved to put an end to that threat before that could happen.

Chapter 1: Leah

By the 112th year of the New Era, humanity had shifted its focus from escaping the confines of Earth's gravity to escaping the confines of physical reality. Humanity's efforts to transcend the limitations of the physical body resulted in the development of highly sophisticated VR—virtual reality—technology.

At its inception, the term “virtual reality” referred merely to a digital simulacrum of the world, but in the years since, the technology had advanced to the point where the worlds it created were parallel, tangible worlds as “real” to its users as the physical one. VR technology had spread into every aspect of human life, from medicine to entertainment, education to infrastructure, manufacturing, service industries, construction, real estate, finance... VR's use was ubiquitous and had greatly contributed to the advancement of society. The technology was now so ingrained in human society that most people couldn't imagine life without it.

It was in this age of widespread VR technology that a new game was announced.

Boot Hour, Shoot Curse.

The game was a traditional fantasy-world massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). While it offered little in the way of revolutionary advances in gameplay, it was a painstakingly created labor of love from a famous game company that had several million-seller games under its belt. That alone was enough to set both fans and industry players abuzz with excitement.

After its announcement, development went smoothly, with several alpha tests and closed beta tests. Finally, the developer announced that it was ready to begin an open beta test.

While the open beta was intended to serve as a final test of the game, in reality, the developers had already ironed out most of the issues and bugs during the previous testing, making the open beta more a form of early access

for players. The developers had informed players that they would need a formal account for the open beta, and that the account and character data would be carried over into the public release. Since it was technically still considered a beta test, it would be free to play until the formal release, but with that came the possibility of sudden outages for maintenance.

Even with the open beta test looming, there was only a limited amount of data widely available on the game itself. Information had been strictly controlled in the closed testing phases through nondisclosure agreements (NDAs), and the game's systems themselves prevented recording any videos or taking screenshots. Still, it was impossible to close down all sources of leaks or to prevent people from speculating on social media. Due to the excitement around the game, social media networks were quickly flooded by a mix of leaked information, speculation, and fake news. With the open beta in sight, it was only a matter of time before the truth would be revealed.

In the middle of a large tatami-floored room filled with stuffed animals sat the latest VR machine, a functional, unadorned piece of equipment that looked out of place in the sea of cute plushies. A girl with long black hair lay inside the machine. Her mature demeanor contrasted with the youthfulness of her features, belying the fact that she was old enough to be a young woman rather than a girl.

Looks like the basic setup is the same as the closed beta.

The woman—the girl—gazed at the specialized character creation window and compared it to her memory of the same window during the previous closed beta test.

This game had dispensed with the concept of levels and fixed classes. Experience points (EXP) still existed, and those experience points could be spent to increase character attributes or to learn special abilities known as skills. It was a classic class-less, level-less, skill-based game system.

This customization system was also part of the character creation process, and every player started with 100 EXP. The player then chose one of seven races: human, elf, dwarf, beastfolk, goblin, skeleton, or homunculus. Selecting a

nonhuman race had an associated EXP cost. For example, choosing elf subtracted 20 EXP, while choosing goblin added 120 EXP to the pool. Attribute increases cost 10 EXP per 1 point, and skill acquisition ranged from 10 EXP to 40 EXP depending on the particular skill.

This system had already been in place during the closed beta. Judging by the difference in costs between various skills, it appeared that not much had changed since the closed beta either.

What was of more interest was the category called traits. This was a system that hadn't existed during the closed beta. It seemed that these traits referred to inborn traits of the character, and when the VR machine conducted a full scan of the player, it automatically added a trait to the default avatar.

Birth Trait: Beautiful

EXP Cost: 20

You have been born with a natural beauty.

Provides a bonus to NPC affinity (med).

According to the information in the help guide, this sort of birth trait was only adjustable on character creation, similar to racial traits. These traits still had EXP costs, and even traits granted automatically would deduct EXP from the available EXP pool. While the EXP could be regained by removing the trait, it also significantly changed the appearance of the avatar.

I remember seeing this system in an antique game book at the VR Library.

While 20 EXP was a pretty painful price to pay, it felt like the game would win if she let herself be forced into removing it to tweak character appearance. The player decided she'd leave the trait as it was.

Since the game had no concept of levels, it also lacked the concept of leveling up and using that event to spend EXP. Instead, due to the game's level-less system, it was possible to spend EXP at any point in the game. That meant there was no need to spend all 100 EXP from the starting pool at once. So, the player chose to spend another 20 EXP on selecting the elf race, then picked up a new

birth trait called *Albinism*.

Birth Trait: Albinism

EXP Cost: -20

You are born with white hair, white skin, and red eyes.

If you stay in the sun for too long, you suffer light burns.

* Burns: Causes continual damage over time (DOT) based on severity until healed.

She chose this trait to regain the EXP lost on Beautiful without changing the appearance of the character too much. Considering the description, it was a trait that wouldn't be that large of a disadvantage if she chose to log in primarily during the game's night. While she had learned in the closed beta that the enemies that spawned at night were somewhat more powerful than those that spawned during the day, subjectively, they hadn't felt so much more powerful that it would cause a major issue.

She also considered the fact that in this game world, elves tended to be quite pale to begin with, so her character wouldn't stand out too much from the rest even with her Albinism trait. Speaking of elves, the player next turned her attention toward trying to regain the 20 EXP that she had spent on choosing elf as her race.

Birth Trait: Poor Eyesight

EXP Cost: -30

You have weak eyesight.

You cannot aim at targets that are far away.

You gain a penalty to accuracy and hit chance on targets at midrange (med).

When targeting objects reliant on eyesight, you cannot

target objects that are at far distance and greater.

The trait came with some pretty heavy penalties, but those penalties weren't a big deal if she wasn't planning on attacking enemies that were at mid to far distances away. It was a handicap for sure, but it was one that could probably be corrected by acquiring items like glasses or some sort of magical support.

Or at least that's what the player told herself to justify the choice. Then she moved on to the rest of character creation. She chose the name "Leah." The ability to choose such a short name was one of the benefits of beta testing or getting in during early access.

She currently had 110 EXP. Thanks to her birth traits, she was able to choose a race with various attribute bonuses but start the game with extra EXP. That was going to be a major advantage going forward. That was assuming, of course, that the EXP gain mechanics were the same as in the closed beta.

The game started off with an extensive and, more importantly, unskippable tutorial. An assistant AI used a combination of voice-overs and videos to lay out details of the settings and essential game mechanics. As far as tutorials went, there was nothing wrong with it except for one glaring fact. It was impossible to skip over portions of the lectures and the AI itself would check in at random intervals to make sure the player was paying attention, which made it impossible to relegate the tutorial AI into background noise and just wait for it to end.

The contents of the tutorial could be summarized as follows: First, the only major distinction between player characters (PCs) and non-player characters (NPCs) was whether or not they could receive system messages. Second, the game's systems made no particular distinction between NPCs and monsters. Finally, player avatars didn't despawn when players logged out from the game, instead remaining in place and being treated as though asleep.

Although the tutorial itself stretched over an hour, the AI appeared focused on accentuating those three particular points. As far as Leah's player could tell, the tutorial's content wasn't noticeably different from the tutorial during the

closed beta test.

Experience during the closed beta had shown that while the game itself didn't differentiate between NPCs and monsters, the AI used on the two types had significant differences in terms of intelligence, and there was enough variation between the individual NPCs and monsters to make each unique. The developers probably chose to emphasize that NPCs and monsters weren't distinct categories in the game system more as a moral primer to the players. They wanted players to approach all encounters with non-player characters, in the broader sense, with the same attitude, and not to metagame encounters by acting arrogantly with NPCs and killing monsters simply because they were monsters.

The unskippable tutorial reached its merciful end, and Leah found herself in the corner of a damp, dimly lit space. A quick glance around and a whiff of the musty air within the room were enough to tell Leah she was in a cavern of some sort. The only thing that felt unnatural was that the cavern was illuminated at all, despite the lack of any visible light sources. A moment's reflection led Leah to the conclusion that the room was lit rather than completely dark because it was a starting area for new players. Another glance around the room confirmed that it was empty. There was neither the threatening sight of an enemy nor the silhouette of another player.

Players had the option of choosing a general location to spawn in when starting the game. If the player chose one of the six countries on the continent, they spawned at one of the random spawn points set inside each country.

The six countries all belonged to the civilized peoples. While one might be primarily populated by humans, another by elves, and yet another by dwarves or beastfolk, all of these countries were populated and ruled by races considered civilized peoples according to the game lore.

Spawning inside one of these countries was hardly a problem if you chose one of the civilized races at character creation, but it was a significant problem for players who chose races like goblin or skeleton to spawn near a civilized settlement. The civilized races considered goblins and skeletons "kill on sight." Spawning near towns included a high risk of being spotted by the residents and reported to a hunting party. Part of the reason choosing a race like goblin or

skeleton gave so much extra EXP was partly to offset that massive handicap. What made the situation even worse was that when killed by a hunting party, the character would be saddled with a death penalty, then immediately respawn in their original spawning location. If the hunting party was still nearby, there was a chance the goblin or skeleton could get caught in a death-respawn loop—making the character rack up a truly impressive stack of death penalties.

Fortunately, NPCs such as the town residents and the mercenaries out hunting for the PC all had realistic AI, so unlike in older, cruder games, those NPCs wouldn't just keep mindlessly killing the poor player character. Once they had identified the respawn point as where the monster emerged, they'd instead place a cage or a trap in that location and capture the player instead. That meant the player only had to deal with the completely unknown question of what NPCs did with captured monstrous races...a question Leah neither knew nor cared to know the answer to.

Fortunately for players of monstrous races, the developers weren't complete sadists and had included spawning options outside of the six established countries. These were the territories the civilized races called the monster realms. These monster realms typically had no civilized races living in them. While monstrous races might still attack other members of their own race, it was possible for a monstrous race character to avoid getting into a fight there, unlike with the uncompromising kill-on-sight policies active in the civilized kingdoms.

The area Leah had spawned into was one of those monster realms. While she was an elf and technically one of the civilized races, the game had no race-based restrictions on the choice of initial spawn points. Leah had chosen this particular spawn point because of her birth traits. The combination of her vulnerability to sunlight due to Albinism and her Poor Eyesight made her unsuited to wide-open spaces like an open plain.

So Leah found herself in a cavern of some sort, a random spawn point that was probably intended for players of monstrous races, like skeletons. Since the relationships between the civilized kingdoms had no bearing on the monstrous races, when choosing a spawn point outside of the Six Kingdoms, a player would simply pick the type of environment, like a cave system, in which to spawn and

then be randomly assigned to one of the preset spawn points. While Leah was definitely in one of the monster realms outside the jurisdiction of the Six Kingdoms, there was no way for her to tell where she was in relation to those kingdoms.

Anything that made its home in this cavern was going to be hostile by default to an elf like Leah, which meant that her first order of business was to secure some sort of home base for herself. She had no way of knowing whether or not such a space existed within the cavern, but given that a skeleton or goblin player would be in the same position, there were probably safe areas designed for player use nearby. All Leah had to do was search for them as she explored the cavern.

With her short-term goal established, Leah decided to begin working toward that goal as quickly as possible. Being in a cave system meant that the lethal combination of a hostile NPC and a passage with a dead end could be lurking around every corner, raising the distinct possibility of getting caught in an infinite death and respawn loop.

Since Leah hadn't purchased any skills yet, she had to get by on the character's base physical attributes for the moment. So long as the starting enemies were about the same strength as they had been during the closed beta, Leah's current stats should be enough to allow her to deal with them, even without any equipment in hand. Considering her own particular set of skills, however, Leah hoped that her first encounters would be humanoid enemies.

After a short stroll through the cavern, Leah came across her first fork in the cave. She pressed herself up against the wall separating the two passages and peeked half of her face out to look at the passage ahead. So far as she could tell, there was nothing moving up ahead. While the cavern's poor lighting and Leah's own innately weak eyesight made it difficult to make out much detail, she could still see well enough to track any movement within the space before her.

She continued to peer down the passage for several minutes, but no moving objects emerged from the darkness. Leah used a rock to mark the wall she had

been sheltering behind before setting off into the right-hand passageway. She proceeded along using the wall as a guide and eventually saw a faint glow coming from around a bend in the cave ahead. While it was possible that this glow meant Leah had come across an exit, there wasn't much of an advantage to exiting the cave just yet. If it really did lead to the surface, the glow meant that the sun was still up—and Leah's reward for clambering out of the cave would be the warm sting of minor burns on her albino skin. Still, knowing where the exits were in the cave system would be useful in the future. After weighing the risks, Leah cautiously made her way toward the light.

As she approached the light source, she began to hear something that sounded like conversation.

Wait, there are civilized races living in a cave out in the monster realms...?

No, that wasn't necessarily the case. The mere presence of conversation wasn't any guarantee that the speakers belonged to any of the civilized races. There was also the possibility of intelligent monsters. Regardless of the source of the voices, the way those voices reverberated off the walls told Leah that she probably wasn't near a cave entrance.

If the light wasn't sunlight spilling in from a cave entrance, chances were that someone had prepared the light source for their own purposes. Would monsters do such a thing? No, it was likely that whoever was up ahead were members of one sort of civilized race or another. They might even be players that had spawned in the same area.

Just as Leah cautiously peered around the corner, she heard a person call out.

"I'm going to go pee in the back."

Kelli gazed into the campfire as she considered her surroundings.

I guess we were lucky we found this cave.

They had found the cave relatively quickly after entering the monster realms. Although the entrance had been obscured by its unusual location, the eagle-eyed Riley had found it with ease. This cave would serve as their home for the

time being. After all, there was no place for them in the civilized kingdoms.

Kelli and the others who made their home in this little cave within the monster realm were originally children from a hamlet of catfolk. In recent years, the expansion of the monster realms near the hamlet had slowly choked the life out of the thriving community. As monsters crept closer to the hamlet, the crop yields dwindled and the amount of game the hunting parties caught fell.

Things had finally gotten so bad in the hamlet that Kelli and her three companions fled before the adults in the community could sell them off into slavery.

The world wasn't so kind that four children could scratch out a living in the wilderness. There was already a shortage of foodstuffs near the hamlet. With the monster realm so close, there was also always a risk of being attacked by vicious monsters. And if they were caught by any of the people of the hamlet, they'd be dragged back and sold to whatever horror awaited children sold as chattel.

Kelli, the eldest, had taken her three close friends and fled into the night. They went all the way to the neighboring village, found a place to hide, and raided the village's crops for food. At times they had sneaked into the buildings at night and stolen clothing, knives, and foodstuffs other than vegetables. If the people they were robbing woke up, they would kill the residents of that house and flee. They then went on to the next settlement and repeated the same series of crimes. They were all desperate to survive.

There were times when they'd run into and fight groups of adults who lived life like they did. Yet every time they ran into such groups, Kelli and her companions took advantage of their smaller size and greater speed and coordination to secure victory. Each time they won, they became stronger, and they gradually became better at hunting both animals and adults. While they couldn't eat the bandits they hunted like they could the animals, the bandits had weapons and money. Weapons gave them greater strength, and money could be exchanged for food in towns. Bandits were pretty good prey.

They spent their days hiding within the branches of trees or the brush, coming

out at night to steal, hunt, then run. For five years they had been constantly robbing and then running from settlement to settlement, trying to get as far away as they could from the hamlet where they'd been born and raised. Before they knew it, they had fled all the way into the monster realms. That was when Riley had found their cave.

That cave was where they currently made their home. While the cavern entrance and the first few feet of the cave were narrow and winding, making it difficult to navigate, after a certain distance, the cave opened into a large chamber. The four of them had decided to use that chamber as their home base. And once they had finished their initial survey of the cave, Marion, the youngest, went to answer the call of nature.

The remaining three members of the group used the campfire to prepare a meal, but there was no sign of Marion. They had decided that the dead end near the big chamber would serve as the outhouse. Could she have gone all the way to the underground lake deeper in the cavern?

"I'll go get her. You two go ahead and start eating."

With that, Kelli made her way to a hole that led deeper into the cave system. She still saw no sign of Marion. The side passage forked in two directions, one leading to the dead end, the other leading all the way to an underground lake. Kelli decided she would briefly check the dead end, and if Marion wasn't there, she'd go check the underground lake. As she turned toward the passage that led to the dead end, Kelli felt a sharp impact before the world around her plunged into darkness.

"Aha. I was wondering why there were civilized races in the monster realms. Guess they're low-level bandits."

Leah had knocked out the solitary bandits she had run into in the passageway, then took out the two in the large chamber at the same time. She had knocked them unconscious, but there was a brief flicker of concern in her mind that she might have killed them by accident, as none of them made any sign of stirring

when Leah moved all four of them into the center of the large chamber.

While cleaning up after her little scuffle, it occurred to Leah that if a player of a monstrous race spawned into the monster area, if all of the surrounding NPCs were monsters of the same type, there was the possibility they wouldn't be hostile, robbing those players of an opportunity to casually gain experience points around their initial spawn point.

But if the hostile NPCs near one of the spawn points were bandits of a civilized race, it made it easy for players of both monstrous and civilized race avatars to take them down for experience points. It was a thoughtful little touch by the game's designers.

Leah had etched the tutorial's support AI's warning into her memory and had avoided killing the NPC bandits. While she was free to kill them later, NPCs that died didn't respawn. Besides, she had already gained a large amount of experience points by simply neutralizing them.

The fact of the matter was that players were able to obtain experience points in ways other than combat. Players could gain experience points by crafting, or if they didn't want to craft or fight, they could gain experience points by sneaking in to rob a location and escaping undetected.

The experience points gained from these actions changed based on their difficulty and the player's own current strength. When calculating a player's strength, the game only included skills and attribute scores, and completely ignored the player's pool of unspent experience points. This meant that if a player who hadn't spent a single experience point on skills or attributes did crafting, they'd gain substantially more experience points than a player who had already spent their experience points to strengthen their character.

Of course, that was limited to cases where the player succeeded in the crafting attempt. While experience points were still granted on a failed crafting attempt, the amount was low enough that it was more efficient for a player to spend some experience points on a crafting skill to increase the success rate of each crafting attempt.

Experience points were useless while held in reserve and only gained value

when they were spent on character enhancements such as skills or attribute points. In Leah's case, not only had she not spent a single one of her 100 starting experience points, but she had used innate traits to be able to start with a pool of 110 experience points in reserve. In terms of game mechanics, the experience points system treated Leah as little better than a complete novice in every type and genre of skill or attribute.

Leah's playstyle took advantage of that little design quirk. In her real life, her family's business meant she had to learn a martial art specialized in self-defense. The particular school had a long history and had been developed specifically for use by women hailing from high-ranking or wealthy families. As the school was meant for heiresses, it was developed under the core tenet that a young heiress, though lacking in size, strength, and dexterity, could apply the mechanics of aikido and ancient fighting techniques to subdue an enemy without doing damage.

Because it was developed to empower heiresses to defend themselves, it discouraged its practitioners from engaging in types of training that built physical bulk and muscle. The school as a whole emphasized (in what some might call an antiquated way of thinking) that it was meant to be used, first and foremost, by a traditionally feminine, beautiful, young heiress from a well-established family. As a consequence, the school had long been regarded by martial arts practitioners as one that was more concerned with form over function, a relic that excessively emphasized theory over anything resembling practice.

The leaps made in VR technology flipped this notion on its head by making it possible to practice and train in the fighting style without moving a single muscle, doing the practical training on how to defeat an opponent without using one's own strength, all within the confines of a VR space and the practitioner's head. Experiencing those applications within the VR world allowed a practitioner to gain practical experience and mastery over those techniques, then adapt them to their own physical abilities in the real world.

Leah had been taught these techniques in the VR world since she had first learned to walk. If anything, her avatar's mundane physical attributes made it easier for her to apply her personal abilities to the game.

As far as game balance was concerned, the designers had scaled the starting spawns under the assumption that players would have spent all of their initial experience points. That much Leah had learned from her experiences during the closed beta.

Leah couldn't help but quirk her lips into a satisfied smile at the unexpectedly large amount of experience she had just gained. Taking down these four bandits had been worth a total of 300 points. Combined with her original pool of experience points, that meant she now had 410 points to spend.

She wasn't sure why the game had given her so many points, but she set that question aside for the time being. She had no intention of spending those points just yet. Instead, she turned her attention to restraining the unconscious bandits lying at her feet.

Since Leah hadn't found any rope among the bandits' belongings, she stripped them and used their clothes to tie up their arms and legs. After a suitable pause, Leah rolled each of the bandits onto their backs and woke them one at a time using smelling salts.

It was time for Leah's much-anticipated first contact with some NPCs. What? No, the random hostile encounter where she ambushed the bandits didn't count as contact.

Despite Leah's excitement, her hopes were quickly dashed when the newly awakened bandits all responded by wailing pitiably and thrashing against their restraints. Their little tantrums made conversation basically impossible.

Left with little choice, Leah took the time to properly persuade each of the bandits. Since the circumstances were less than ideal for verbal persuasion, she used the most primitive and effective method of coercion—ahem, persuasion—available to her. It took more than a single attempt per bandit, but after repeated attempts on Leah's part, the bandits gradually began to behave more like civilized beings than captured animals.

It was finally time to make first contact with the game's native population. What's that? No, the persuasion process didn't count either.

"Hi there. Why don't we start with introductions? I'm known as Leah. As you

can see, I'm an elf. I'd guess you guys are beastfolk? Let's make this easier—which one of you is the leader? We'll just limit the conversation to me and the leader for now, all right?"

Leah addressed her captive audience in a casual, soothing tone. After a moment's pause, the bandit who had put up the most resistance earlier nervously spoke up.

"I-I'm K...Kelli. Wh-What the blazes are..."

"Did you just call me a 'what'? Didn't your mother teach you how to speak properly to strangers? Especially strangers that have you tied up and at their mercy?" Leah snapped.

"Eep! I'm s-sorry, real sorry! What am I s'posed to call you? My parents never taught me nothin' about talking to strangers! I swear!"

"Oh...I didn't realize that. Your family wasn't too keen on education, I suppose? Sorry about that," Leah apologized in a softer tone, then continued. "First, it's rude to address people as though they're objects, asking them what they are. When you meet someone new, it's best to ask *who* they are rather than *what* they are. I'm sure that'll make your introductions a little less painful in the future. Speaking of painful, you seem to be struggling a bit to talk. Do you need some sort of magic potion?" Leah asked before retrieving a life point (LP) potion from her inventory and setting it on the ground in front of Kelli.

An inventory was a feature available to player characters from the beginning of the game, a mysterious hole in space-time where players could store their items. Leah's starting inventory had included ten of these healing potions, including the one that now sat in front of Kelli's face.

Kelli narrowed her eyes and glared suspiciously at the LP potion before letting out a small groan of despair. "Wha...wha's this...? Iz-Izzat some sorta poison...? A-Are ya planning ta kill us?"

Leah's eyes widened in surprise. She answered, "Wait, have you really never seen a potion? Are they just not available to average people? Or maybe they're just rare in this region... Back during the clos—um, when I went to the cities a little while ago, I'm pretty sure I ran into a number of stores that sold potions at reasonable prices."

Kelli noted with a glum huff, “We’ve...only ever been ta town...ta buy food and clothes.”

“Oh, so that’s it. This is a magical medicine that’ll heal your wounds. I doubt it’ll heal you completely, but it should patch you up enough to make it easier to talk. Here, hold still, I’ll feed it to you.”

Leah smiled as reassuringly as she could, popping open the potion bottle and pouring its contents into Kelli’s mouth. The potion seemed to sting some of the cuts inside Kelli’s mouth, and she crinkled her features in discomfort for a moment, an expression that was rapidly replaced with an astonished look up at Leah.

Based on that reaction, Leah’s mind finally brought up the possibility that these four weren’t actually bandits. She had attacked them almost reflexively when she’d run into them, her natural reaction being to treat an armed and raggedly dressed group evidently living in a cave in the monster realm as a group of highway bandits. After some reflection, however, it occurred to her that they might be a more peaceful gathering, like mercenaries sent to survey the area, or a group of hunters from a nearby village using the cave as a place to rest.

Assuming that they were meant to be easy-to-defeat hostile NPCs because they were wandering near a spawn point was a bit of metagaming on Leah’s part, but when it came to this particular game, it was more likely that the placement of NPCs wasn’t an intentional concession to new players. While the official announcements from the developers claimed that the game’s systems were designed with a pursuit of realism as its top priority, rumors spread among players that the game was an operational test for a new type of world simulator.

Leah wasn’t fully convinced that those rumors were correct, but if there was even a kernel of truth to them, there was no reason to make minute adjustments for individual players in an environment where the game was simulating an entire alternate world.

With all of that said, it was highly unlikely that any mercenaries wouldn’t know about healing potions, and even relatively modest hunters would have at

least heard of their existence. Further, based on her interrogation of Kelli, Leah got the impression that these four had little in the way of social connections either in the city or in any nearby villages. Leah let out a soft sigh of relief. Even if it was only in hindsight, her conclusion that these four were bandits had been right after all.

“Hopefully the pain’s subsided by now. Would you mind humoring me and telling me a little bit about yourselves? What your lives have been like up to this point, and why you’re here in this cave?”

Until today, Riley had never been so thoroughly outmatched in a fight. She hadn’t even noticed when she’d lost consciousness, and when she awoke, she and her companions were all tied up and lying on the floor.

Kelli, their leader, tried raising a fuss and struggled against her binds to try to find some way out of their predicament, but all that resistance was for nothing. The Pale Woman who had captured them would simply reach out and grasp Kelli, ending her resistance and eliciting a high-pitched wail. Each time Kelli cried out in pain, the Pale Woman furrowed her brow, coolly telling Kelli to be quiet and striking her with a single blow. At some point in the struggle, Kelli had cut the inside of her mouth, and blood trickled from the corner of her lips.

Riley, Lemmy, and Marion had all been kicking up fusses of their own, but quickly fell silent after witnessing how the Pale Woman dealt with Kelli. For the first time in their lives, the three made a serious attempt to be well-behaved, triggered by the shock of seeing the normally unflappable Kelli break down and weep. If it was so bad that Kelli couldn’t withstand the Pale Woman’s wrath, the three knew there was no chance they would fare any better.

Once the Pale Woman noted Kelli’s change in demeanor, she introduced herself and received Kelli’s introduction in turn. When Kelli’s rough language made the Pale Woman frown, the others couldn’t help tensing up.

The Pale Woman forced Kelli to drink the contents of a small vial. Only a few heartbeats later, Kelli’s bruised and swollen cheek shrank back to its normal size, leaving Kelli looking like her usual self. Kelli stared with wide-eyed wonder at the Pale Woman. Soon after, the other three joined in on the gawking.

Evidently the Pale Woman had fed Kelli something called a magical potion. The potion had healed most of Kelli's wounds.

Having resigned herself to her fate, Kelli began to tell the Pale Woman their life story. When Kelli missed a detail or two, one of the other three piped up and contributed their two coppers to the conversation. At first, the three had feared provoking the Pale Woman's wrath by speaking out of turn, but all she did was smile gently in their direction and listen to their story.

Perhaps the Pale Woman was a kinder person than they had thought.

Despite beating the four of them so soundly, she hadn't killed them. Nor did it seem like she was hanging on to them to sell as slaves at a later date. If all she intended to do was sell them to make some coin, there wouldn't have been any reason to use a healing potion on Kelli.

The Pale Woman was a type of person that the four had never met before. Not just in the sense that she was an elf rather than a beastfolk. Had their own mothers been as strong and as kind as the Pale Woman, the four of them might still be living in the hamlet with their families. All four of them exchanged glances, as though suspecting that the others were thinking along the same lines.

Kelli had started to cry as she told their story. Riley had thought she'd never seen Kelli cry because she was tough and unshakable. It was at that moment that she learned why she'd never seen Kelli cry before. It was because Kelli had been the oldest among them. Kelli had to be the strong one and avoid showing weakness in front of the others. With the Pale Woman here, Kelli was no longer the strongest one present, and that meant Kelli could finally vent all of the feelings she'd piled up on her shoulders.

Leah let out a deep sigh after hearing the bandits tell their stories. Partly due to the fact that their backgrounds were even worse than she had imagined, but also because, based on how they described their experiences, their memories were built on events they had actually lived through. That realization came as a shock to Leah. She paused for a moment to organize her thoughts on the matter...

First, the world within the game was vast. Evidently the world had been procedurally generated using a random map creation algorithm, left to run automatically over several years to fill out the map and the objects that populated it. But if that generation process meant that the game also seamlessly simulated each living creature's life from birth to death individually, it would require the use of AI on an improbably large scale.

Even if the number of life-forms equipped with sentience-level AI existed at a far lower density than on Earth, and even if they were locked in a constant struggle for territory with far larger, more powerful, and less intelligent creatures, that still meant the world itself required several billion complex AIs running in parallel.

Just how many people would it take to create proper backstories and memories for that many AI entities? And just how difficult would it be to take those billions of backgrounds and create a coherent, consistent world where they all matched without glaring inconsistencies?

Realistically, that sort of project would be so labor-intensive that it defied plausibility. No, if anything, it seemed far more realistic that the world's population was created by running the rumored world simulator at several thousand times the speed of real time for several years before opening the game for service. The implication of that fact was a bit staggering: that would make the game more than a game—it would be an alternate world that existed solely in VR space.

This was all speculation on Leah's part, as she was hardly an expert on this technology. It was possible that AI-teaching tools were also advanced enough to brute force the creation of such an intricate collection of AIs. It was an interesting question to ponder, but Leah had no way of knowing the right answer, whatever it ended up being. She set aside the question as irrelevant and moved on.

Leah decided to focus on the group of bandits—the four girls that lay in front of her. They all looked pitifully ragged. Their hair was wildly overgrown, and the fur on their ears and tails was matted and unkempt, appearing quite rough to

the touch. All of them had similarly colored hair, but it was hard to tell if that was because they actually shared the same hair color or because the patina of grime left it all looking the same color.

Leah guessed their heights based on her brief tussle with each: Kelli seemed the tallest at around 170 centimeters; Riley was similar in height to Leah, so about 160 centimeters; and the younger pair were clearly smaller than other children of their age. That implied they had been malnourished from a young age.

With their background and circumstances, it was hard not to feel a pang of sympathy for them, but what stood out to Leah was their tenacity. Despite being victims of the inequities of the world, the four of them had chosen to strike back, preferring to become predators rather than meekly die as prey. While their chosen way of life would be considered criminal in the modern world and the game's world alike, so far as she could tell from their stories, they had avoided drawing enough attention to have bounties placed on their heads. They might have been scrappy and uneducated, but they had a good instinct for avoiding excessive scrutiny and knew when to back off.

Even though Leah now knew they were bandits, she still felt some hesitation toward converting them into experience points. She began to wonder if there wasn't some way to permanently make NPCs into companions.

"Well, I have a better sense of your upbringing. It must have been hard to grow up and live like that. But, just as you lost to me today, if you keep living as bandits, someday you'll not just be defeated but lose everything to someone stronger. You understand this, right?"

Leah's words seemed to come as a shock to the four in front of her. It was understandable. They had been so busy with survival that they'd never really had the time to reflect on that possibility.

"You say that, but...we ain't got nowhere ta sleep in the city. And there ain't people like us out in the city. The only way we can get by is by takin' money from folk," Kelli interjected with a furrowed brow.

"Ah, so let's start with the very basics."

Leah started by teaching them how to legitimately acquire money. That required a long lecture on how the money economy worked, how society itself was organized, the history of how the major Six Kingdoms had come into being—fortunately for Leah, she was able to crib summaries of those histories from the official website verbatim. It was such a long lecture that for the sake of the four in her custody, she freed them from their restraints midway through her talk. Since Leah had allowed them to ask questions during this lecture, by the time they finished up the whole lesson, it had taken the better part of five hours.

Leah had taken some risks when creating her character so she could get a head start early in the game, but she had wasted most of that time giving a social studies lesson to a group of NPC bandits. On the whole, it probably wasn't a bad trade, considering it allowed Leah to build a rapport with some NPCs. Though, that depended on just how useful these four girls would be.

Leah looked over at the girls as she pondered the possibilities and noticed a slightly unsettling fact. All four of them were gazing adoringly at Leah with expressions of awe.

Kelli, the eldest, began the barrage of compliments.

"Lady Leah the Elf is wise. I ain't never met no one like 'er. An' she's so nice too!"

"An' she's so strong! An' kind!" Riley added. The two youngest, Lemmy and Marion, nodded intently to those observations.

"No, I wouldn't say I'm particularly kind or anything. I just like explaining things to people. It was fun to tell you about how the world works," Leah tried explaining modestly, but her deflection had little effect.

"We never had no one take the time to teach us things like this," Kelli said.

"Even when we lived in the hamlet, if we asked about somethin', the grown-ups would smack us an' tell us to stop askin' stupid questions," Riley glumly added by way of explanation.

"That...must have been difficult."

Still, in a small hamlet where people were viewed primarily as sources of

labor, it was perhaps unavoidable. There was no real need to learn about a currency economy or the history of the kingdom if that person was going to spend their entire life in that hamlet. The adults had probably responded the way they had because they themselves had no answers for those questions.

“Yeah, you’re a nice lady,” Kelli said, fixing her eyes on Leah. Her expression had gone from one of fond adoration to one tinged with worry, her eyes wavering in their gaze upon Leah.

“Lady Leah the Elf, I beg ya. Please be our boss.”

<<Applicable skills not acquired. Skill [Retainer] required to tame [NPC: Kelli].>>

A strange message popped up in front of Leah.

Huh, what? Tame? You can tame NPCs?

Leah was surprised not only by the sudden revelation that the game allowed players the ridiculous ability to tame civilized races like pets, but also because this was the first time she’d even heard of a taming system at all in the game. At the very least there was no such system in the closed beta. Maybe it simply hadn’t been discovered, but Leah had never heard of it.



◆ Leah ◆

◆ Kelli ◆

She had no idea how the system worked, but the fact that the game displayed an error message meant that someone had tried to activate the taming system. The only possibility that came to mind was Kelli's request. "Please be our boss" was interpreted by the system as the NPC expressing a desire to be tamed by Leah, but because Leah had no skills related to taming, the request couldn't be processed and produced an error message.

During the closed beta test, testers had spent a great deal of time theorycrafting: using the character creator to test out a variety of builds, checking skill combinations and mapping out skill trees, revealing the existence of a large number of skills and skill trees that were locked behind prerequisites. Testing so many different builds required repeatedly creating new characters, which had set off a cycle of rerolls among the beta testers.

Yet, despite the enormous number of combinations that they had tested, they had never been able to find any taming-related skills. That implied that taming hadn't been implemented during the closed beta, or that it had been implemented in a way that made it impossible to unlock with the 100 starting experience points. Regardless, there were either no players who had any information about taming skills, or, if they existed at all, they were an extremely small and secretive group. Leah was now a member of this select group of players.

Leah couldn't hold back her excitement. It wasn't as though she had wanted to be the first to discover a certain skill tree, or become some sort of secretive information broker for the game. Still, there was something exciting about the possibility that she was the only one who knew about a game system.

While there was no guarantee that there wasn't some other player who had somehow fulfilled the prerequisites and gotten the same error message, considering how she had come across her own particular situation, that was extremely unlikely. Leah had fulfilled the terms necessary to trigger the error message by earning the trust of these NPCs. There couldn't be that many players who were willing or able to build a good enough rapport with NPCs from scratch, given that the game had only been up for five hours.

“Are we...askin’ fer too much?” Kelli murmured anxiously, casting her gaze downward. *Drat*. Leah chastised herself for getting caught up in her musings. There was no point in figuring out the mechanics if Kelli felt rejected and withdrew her request to be tamed.

“Not at all. I have no objection to becoming your boss. If anything, I gladly welcome it. However, I...um, right, need a moment to think through a matter that’s just come to my attention. Would you mind if I took a bit to think it over? Go ahead and finish the meal I appear to have interrupted, yes?”

Leah’s words appeared to have put the four at ease, and they took their now-cold meals and started warming them by the campfire. Leah watched them out of the corner of her eye as she resumed thinking about skills related to taming, specifically the *Retainer* skill described by the system error message. The most likely candidate was the *Control* skill tree. Leah guessed the concept behind it would be to use *Control* to make an NPC into a *Retainer*.

However, as far as Leah was aware, during the closed beta, the *Control* skill tree only had a single skill: *Control*. The *Control* skill was an active skill that, when used successfully, allowed the user to control the target’s actions for a short duration. For example, when fighting monsters, *Control* could be used to take control of one of the enemy monsters, forcing it to fight the others. In that form, it was a tricky skill for use in combat and only marginally related to taming.

That limited use of *Control* didn’t even provide a unique effect. It was perfectly possible to replicate the effects of that skill using the *Confusion* spell from the *Enchantment* spell school. While *Confusion* didn’t allow the user to specify the exact actions taken by the target, confused targets defaulted to attacking the nearest creature, which effectively allowed the user to replicate the effects of *Control* for a lower activation cost.

The *Enchantment* skill tree also included spells like *Charm* and *Fear*. While these skills cost more to acquire than *Control*, they also had a higher success rate. They were even more effective when combined with *Dissociate*, the prerequisite spell in the *Enchantment* skill tree. Furthermore, once the target was charmed or frightened, the player could cast the higher-ranked *Dominate* spell—

Could Enchantment be the key?

It was certainly possible. In particular, *Dominate* sounded like a good candidate, but acquiring *Dominate* required spending at least 150 EXP in the *Enchantment* tree. This made it impossible for a freshly rolled character to obtain. If the prerequisites for taming NPCs also included specific in-game actions or making connections with particular NPCs, there wasn't a whole lot of hope for Leah. But if choosing these *Enchantment* spells led to a dead end, Leah was just out the EXP cost of those spells, and all she'd have to do is make that EXP again.

Since Kelli and her companions were driven by highly complex AI, even if Leah couldn't tame them at that particular moment, they would probably at least continue to accompany her. After all, they intended to make Leah the boss of their bandit group.

Still, even if there was some room for error, Leah wanted to carefully consider the possibilities before committing to the plan that had the highest probability of success. She decided to file away the *Enchantment* tree as one of those possibilities and consider some alternative approaches.

While the meaning was slightly different, there was a similar skill called *Summon*. Like the *Control* skill tree, the *Summon* skill tree consisted solely of the base skill. The *Summon* skill would summon a random member of the specified race or species to appear next to the user. The summon would remain with the summoner until either it or the summoner was killed or the ten-minute duration of the skill expired.

According to the helper tool that described the details of available skills, when the *Summon* skill was activated, the NPC or monster it summoned was forced to choose whether or not to obey the summoning. If they tried to refuse the summoning, they would roll a resistance check against the summoner, and if it succeeded in resisting, the summoning would end in failure.

Since the summon was a randomly chosen individual and attribute scores varied within each race and species, the chance of success for the summoning changed with each try. This meant that *Summon* was saddled with the

structural flaw of a highly variable and unpredictable failure rate. As a result, beta testers treated it more as a joke skill than a seriously useful ability.

I wonder why it's restricted to summoning random creatures.

The whole concept of single-skill trees like *Control* and *Summon* was an oddly inefficient design choice. Leah found it difficult to believe that there wasn't some sort of hidden meaning behind the decision.

A notable example of another single-skill tree was *Alchemy*. However, if the player acquired the skill *Pharmacology* from the *Pharmacology* skill tree, then the skill *Transmute*, which allowed the player to create magic potions, would be added to the *Alchemy* tree. The skill description for *Alchemy* itself more or less revealed the existence of additional hidden skills in the skill tree by outright stating: "Required to activate alchemy-related skills. Provides a bonus when rolling for success for alchemy-related skills." The skill was useless on its own.

If *Control* and *Summon* had similar functionality to *Alchemy* in terms of hidden skills, what was the key to unlocking them? For the moment, Leah chose to add those two skill trees to the list of possibilities, under the assumption that both trees contained additional hidden skills that would be unlocked by meeting the right prerequisites.

Next, Leah decided to approach the problem from a different angle, going off the specific skill name *Retainer* rather than the broader concept of taming. In terms of creating retainers, the closest example among the starting skills was *Necromancy*. The common view of necromancers was that they enslaved the poor souls of the dead to serve them as unwitting retainers.

Furthermore, like *Control* and *Summon*, *Necromancy* was another tree that had only a single skill. The skill turned a corpse within a medium distance from the user into undead, a loyal slave that followed any commands given by the caster for five minutes. Once the five minutes were up, the undead would crumble to dust, leaving no corpse behind.

It appeared to be a useful skill at first glance, but if there was a soul remaining in the corpse, the soul could resist the caster, just like with *Summon*. While a corpse without a soul in it could be instantly turned into undead, the resulting

creature was so weak that a single blow would destroy it. These two factors meant that *Necromancy* was only a marginally useful skill.

Leah wasn't sure if it was just a coincidence that the three skills in the single-skill trees were all of questionable utility. There was something that felt more than a little intentional to that trend... Was she just letting her hopes cloud her judgment...?

Meanwhile, in the cave's wide chamber, the four catgirls were just about finished with their meal. They occasionally glanced Leah's way and tried to offer her some food, but Leah wasn't feeling particularly hungry... Or rather, it felt like eating was a low priority for her at the moment, so she tactfully refused their offers of food. She was out of time. She needed to draw a conclusion from her contemplation and make a move.

Leah had come up with three major conjectures about taming: First, that *Dominate* in the *Enchantment* skill tree was a prerequisite. Second, the *Control* and *Summon* skill trees had additional hidden skills. Third, there was some relationship between the *Necromancy*, *Control*, and *Summon* skill trees.

She had no solid evidence to back up any of those three hypotheses, and the last one felt like a bit of a desperate reach, but she had a framework to use. At the very least, mathematically, she had enough EXP to test out her theories.

That wasn't to say there was no risk associated with using up her existing EXP pool. Once she'd spent her current points, Leah wasn't going to be able to earn much EXP in this general vicinity. Efficient EXP gain required fighting enemies that had either equal or greater amounts of EXP spent on skills. That meant Leah would have to move to another area, but effectively defeating those enemies with a set of skills of questionable usefulness would be difficult.

While Leah was prepared to make that sacrifice if necessary, she wanted to keep her EXP expenditures as low as possible. Which was why she decided to leave the *Enchantment* spells for later and start by acquiring *Control*, *Summon*, and *Necromancy*. She spent the 60 EXP needed to acquire them, then checked each of the skill trees. Unfortunately, there were no new skills that appeared in any of the trees.

Well, I'd factored that into my plans. It's not time to panic quite yet.

If it were that easy to meet the prerequisites for hidden skills, someone else would have found them by now. Which meant the next step was to invest in *Enchantment*. Since the goal was to acquire up to *Dominate*, that meant spending 10 points on *Dissociate*, 40 points each on *Fear* and *Charm*, and finally, 60 points on *Dominate*, for a total of 150 points.

While Leah had considered in the worst-case scenario that she'd need to earn EXP with a bunch of questionable skills, Leah would actually be a proper enchanter with these skills, wielding a solid array of *Enchantment* spells. Since *Enchantment* used the Mind (MND) attribute for success checks, if Leah sank the rest of her EXP into boosting her MND score, she'd be more than capable of taking on tougher enemies. It would be a pretty efficient use of EXP too, as MND was also the stat used to calculate mana points (MP), which were used to activate skills.

That meant there was no reason for her to hesitate. Leah spent the 150 EXP to buy all of the *Enchantment* spells up to *Dominate*. If her hypothesis was correct, this should unlock some purchasable skills in one of the other trees.

All right... Let's start with Control...

There were no new skills in the *Control* tree. Nor were there any new skills in the *Summon* tree. As for the *Necromancy* tree—a new skill called *Soul Bind* had appeared.

There! Gotcha! I'm definitely on the right track!

Leah could hardly contain her excitement and spent the EXP without a moment's hesitation. The description for the new skill *Soul Bind* was as follows: "Binds and takes the soul from a corpse that has been dead for an hour or less. If the target of the *Necromancy* skill has a soul, *Soul Bind* will prevent the soul from resisting the effects of *Necromancy*. If the user has a soul cache, they may spend those souls to apply the effects of the *Enchantment* spell *Dominate* on an undead, homunculus, or golem."

Whoa! That's pretty sick... Uh, right?

As a stand-alone skill, *Soul Bind* would only remove a soul from a corpse,

making it hard to find a use for it. If that were all the skill did, it would make the skill almost seem like a role-playing skill, just there to provide flavor text. However, in order to obtain this skill, it was necessary to have both the *Necromancy* and *Dominate* skills. When combined with those skills, it removed a major weakness from each skill: *Necromancy*'s low chance of success and *Dominate*'s inability to be used on nonliving creatures. Leah wasn't quite sure what was involved in having a soul cache, but it seemed a safe guess that it referred to the souls harvested using *Soul Bind*.

Despite its minimal utility on its own, *Soul Bind* cost 60 EXP to buy, making it cost as much as a high-tier skill like *Dominate* even though it was only the second skill in its skill tree. Even if a player wanted to spend their starting EXP to try to obtain this particular skill, it would cost them 170 EXP to get all of the prerequisite skills, including *Dominate* and *Necromancy*. That meant it wasn't possible to obtain this skill with a newly rolled character.

While the closed beta made it easy for players to experiment with rerolling new characters, birth traits hadn't been implemented at that point. The build was also one that wasn't all that reasonable to try unless the player knew it would unlock something. Leah was fairly certain that there were only a handful of players who even knew about the existence of *Soul Bind*, much less acquired it.

The *Necromancy* skills had also revealed another aspect of the world. *Soul Bind* only worked on corpses that had been dead for an hour or less, and that combined with how *Necromancy* worked suggested that the souls of those that died in this world remained in their bodies for at least that long after death. Up until now, no one had bothered to test the conditions under which a corpse retained a soul. The playerbase as a whole had just assumed it was determined by the "feel" of the corpse or the amount of damage it had suffered, but by unlocking *Soul Bind*, Leah had unwittingly discovered how to identify corpses well suited for use with the *Necromancy* skill.

Whatever the case, although it had cost her two-thirds of the EXP she had banked to this point, Leah had acquired a passive skill that improved both *Dominate* and *Necromancy*. It certainly hadn't been a cheap purchase, but the buffs to those two skills more than made up for the cost. Reassured by this fact,

Leah pressed forward in her experiment, regarding any additional finds to be a nice bonus, and checked the *Control* skill tree again.

Control was still stuck in its lonely isolation. Leah groused that it was hardly fair for the devs to call *Control* a skill tree if it only had a single skill, before next opening up the *Summon* tree.

She was greeted by the newly available *Pact* skill, which Leah reflexively purchased on sight. The skill's description read: "Binds the soul of a creature that has been successfully summoned with a pact. After binding a creature, the summoner can pick any bound creature to summon and the creature will not resist the summoning. May add corpses that have had their souls removed with *Necromancy: Soul Bind* to the bound list as undead."

Pact, like *Soul Bind*, was a pure enhancement skill for the base *Summon* skill. It also added an additional effect to its prerequisite skill *Soul Bind*. As a whole, it was a very powerful skill, well worth the total 310 EXP required to gain access to it. Now that she had acquired *Pact*, Leah was able to fight as an enchanter, a necromancer, and a summoner. It had cost a pretty penny in terms of EXP, but the return was well worth the investment.

She had also been able to confirm a few of her hypotheses from earlier. Leah also felt certain there would be a skill waiting for her in the *Control* tree, a certainty that was vindicated when she opened the tree to find the skill *Retainer*.

The moment she saw that skill, Leah felt her heart skip a beat. She was certain she was the only player in the game who had acquired that skill. It had taken 390 EXP to unlock all of the prerequisites to acquire it. That was nearly four times the amount of starting EXP provided to new characters. There weren't going to be any other players who spent this much EXP on dubiously useful skills like *Summon* and *Control*. While it was only obvious in hindsight, Leah's combination of skills was also an extremely useful set of skills.

Retainer required *Control* and *Pact*. *Pact* required *Summon* and *Soul Bind*. *Soul Bind* required *Necromancy* and *Dominate*.

She had needed to learn *Control*, *Summon*, and *Necromancy* first, but things had gone pretty smoothly once she started buying up *Enchantment* spells. No, it

was the fact that she had bought those three base skills first that had allowed her to steadily unlock new skills after acquiring *Dominate*.

Leah had been lucky. The outcome had been so unlikely that it felt like she'd spent a lifetime's worth of luck to get to this point. No, that wasn't quite accurate. Luck had certainly played a role, but Leah had carefully weighed the possibilities and drawn conclusions on her own. Leah's efforts had been the key that she needed to open the door that Lady Luck had found for her.

The effects of the newly acquired *Retainer* skill were as follows: "Tames the target and adds it to the player's retinue as a retainer. If the target succeeds in resisting the taming effort, the *Retainer* skill will fail. Creatures who have had their souls bound with *Summon: Pact* will not resist *Retainer*. Undead who have had their souls taken by *Necromancy: Soul Bind* will not resist *Retainer*. Creatures under the effects of *Enchantment: Dominate* will take a penalty on their resistance checks. The player shares all experience points with their retinue. When using *Summon*, the player may summon a retainer. If a retainer dies, the player cannot summon the retainer for at least one in-game hour." *Retainer* was a skill worthy of being the culmination of the choices Leah made in her build.

After Leah had finished checking the skill's details, she received a new system message.

<<You may now resolve a task in your queue. You may now tame [NPC: Kelli].>>

Evidently if the player was incapable of meeting the skill or other requirements to resolve a task, the game automatically cached them in a queue. While it was unlikely that Leah would be allowed to keep a task in queue for an indefinite amount of time, and most skills probably had some sort of expiration timer, evidently that timer was long enough to last through a meal and the subsequent cleanup. Leah activated tame on Kelli without another moment's delay.

There was no visible or audible skill activation. It seemed that if the target wanted to be tamed and join the player's retinue, there was no need to actually activate the *Retainer* skill; the player just had to have it. The moment Kelli was added to Leah's retinue, she jerked her face upward in surprise and gazed over.

Leah answered that gaze apologetically, "Sorry to keep you waiting. I think you may be able to tell, but Kelli, you're now formally one of my retainers. I'm now your boss in both name and in truth."

"Righto, Boss, thank ya!" Kelli replied brightly.

When Leah checked her character screen, she noticed that it now displayed Kelli's ability scores and skill setup just like her own. Kelli's EXP total was 0, but that must have been because Kelli's EXP had been transferred to Leah's total. Leah wasn't sure if her own EXP pool had grown because she had successfully tamed Kelli, or if that EXP had been Kelli's unspent EXP.

Leah then gave Kelli's build a quick once-over. Kelli's skills were focused on melee fighting, and she had spent quite a bit of EXP not only on her skills but also on her physical attributes. In fact, Kelli's total spent EXP was quite a bit higher than Leah's current total. Kelli was so powerful that a newly rolled character stood no chance against her in a normal, stand-up fight.

"Mm... Tha's a weird feeling... I feel the boss bein' close...an' it jus' feels right..." Kelli sighed out with a dreamy expression, as though she'd been given a particularly potent dose of catnip. Leah decided to set that aside for the moment and hoped Kelli would get used to it in time.

The remaining three looked jealously over at Kelli, prompting Leah to coax them into asking to join her retinue. It wasn't long before Leah had successfully tamed all of them and added them to her retinue. It was at that moment...

<<Successfully defeated unique enemy: [Mountain Cat Clan].>>

<<Unlocked personal area: [Lair of the Mountain Cat Clan].>>

<<Do you wish to set [Lair of the Mountain Cat Clan] as your player house?>>

Player housing! Didn't even know there was a system for that!

The housing system was the least of Leah's concerns at that moment, though. The four catgirls were, as a unit, a unique boss. That meant that Leah had spawned right next to the lair of a unique boss.

While it was true that the recommended environments for monster avatars were places that seemed like good candidates for boss lairs (like caverns, volcanoes, and ruins), Leah would never have imagined that she'd spawn right next to an actual boss lair. It demonstrated just how difficult it was to start as a monster character in this game.

It made sense why monster races started with more EXP, though Leah wasn't sure that additional EXP would make much of a difference if they were unlucky enough to spawn right next to a boss lair like Leah did. Particularly if the spawn point was a dead end like the one Leah had spawned in.

Leah had started the game with a low-cost build to get a leg up on the grind race, chosen to spawn in the monster realms to make up for her weaknesses, acted cautiously knowing she was in unfriendly territory, encountered a boss that just happened to be Leah's favored opponents as humanoids, somehow managed to get the drop on them to subdue them, decided on a whim not to kill them, learned about taming through this bizarre set of circumstances, and had just enough EXP to tame that boss. It was an almost divinely ordained set of coincidences and circumstances that had allowed Leah to get to this point.

A single decision or move done differently and Leah's first foray into this world would have unraveled as quickly as it had started. Given that fate had seen fit to bring her here, Leah decided to trust herself to fate and set the lair as her player house. The dimly lit cavern was the perfect place for a character with Albinism to call home. Leah couldn't help but feel that fate was smiling on her the whole time.

After setting the lair as her player house, Leah was rewarded with access to

the player housing menu. She used the menu to check the scope of her newly found home. The lair included the subterranean lake located deeper in the cavern. Leah initially felt that the lair was rather large to be a player house, but on consideration, it was effectively just one large room and a bunch of narrow corridors, meaning that there wasn't that much usable space.

Leah tilted her head quizzically and asked her newly minted retainers, "So, do you guys call yourselves the Mountain Cats?"

Kelli blinked at her in confusion. "Nah...? I mean, we're catfolk, but we ain't mountain cats."

"That's not what I meant..."

"Then...?"

Evidently the four of them hadn't actually come up with a name for their little gang. That meant the whole "Mountain Cat Clan" thing was a name the game used to describe the unique boss. Leah decided to drop it. It wasn't going to matter from here on out.

Learning that Kelli and the gang were considered by the game to be a unique boss answered a few of the questions that had bubbled up into Leah's mind.

Why they had been worth so much EXP.

Why the newly tamed catgirls were a lot stronger than she expected.

And why Leah's EXP pool had increased so much. Most of this was probably from the fact that she had succeeded in taming a boss spawn.

Leah currently had 320 EXP to spend. Since she had no intention of spending any EXP on physical attributes like Strength (STR) and Vitality (VIT), she had three options: spend EXP on the other attributes, spend EXP on acquiring more skills, or spend EXP on strengthening Kelli and the others.

For the moment, Leah decided it would be best to wait on spending any EXP on Kelli and the rest until she was able to test the rules on EXP gain when hunting with a retinue. Furthermore, while she had no intention of going out of her way to test it, she wanted to know if retainers were subject to the same death rules as players. During the closed beta, the accepted wisdom had been

that NPC deaths were permanent. Was that also true of retainers?

Leah then realized after a quick bit of math that even if she spent all 320 EXP on herself, Kelli would still be more powerful than her on paper. Since Leah was now the boss of this outfit, it was probably best to make sure she put some points into improving her own strength. MND was probably the most useful stat for her current build, so for the moment, Leah spent 200 EXP on increasing her MND score, then spent another 40 points each to acquire *Confusion* and *Sleep* in the *Enchantment* tree.

Leah finished spending her EXP and let out a breath. Although her encounter with the Mountain Cat Clan had been a boss battle of sorts, it had taken a lot longer to sort through the results of that encounter than she had expected. She needed to take the next step toward starting her adventures in game.

First things first, she needed to make this lair a bit more homelike. Since player characters are treated as asleep when the player is logged out, she needed a secure sleeping place to be able to comfortably log out. She wasn't so fussy as to require a bed, but at the very least she wanted something that would cushion her from the cold stone floor.

Of course, Leah was more than prepared to rough it if absolutely necessary, but she felt it was important to at least try to maintain a semblance of civilized life. Still, the lair was basically a moderately sized cave. She wasn't exactly in a position to be picky. The best she could hope for was probably some pelts of wild animals or monsters. Leah didn't know what sort of environment awaited her outside of the cave or what sort of creatures were out there, but animals with furry pelts of one kind or another probably were, as, thankfully, Kelli and the others had mentioned they were in the middle of a forest.

Chapter 2: Ants and Wolves

Leah decided to take the whole group and explore the area outside of the cave. But first, the four looked so ragged, Leah was compelled to take them to the subterranean lake to have them clean up. Since there was only water to wash with, she wasn't exactly able to restore the fluff and luster to their fur, but it was at least good enough to get the grime off them. The dirt and grime had made all four of them look like they had the same color hair and fur, but after a bit of determined scrubbing, it was evident even by torchlight that they had slightly different shades of color in their hair.

Kelli's hair looked to be a lighter shade of reddish-brown, perhaps auburn. Leah imagined that it looked dazzling with proper care and lighting, but whether or not she would ever get to see it in that state was another matter.

Riley's hair was a rusty-brown sepia color and stood out the least among the four in the dim lighting of the lair.

Lemmy had the lightest hair color of the group. In its current state it was a shade of mustard brown, but with proper care it would probably be closer to a dark blonde.

Marion's hair had taken the most effort to wash. Whether it was because she wasn't used to bathing or she just wasn't fond of water, she had put up quite a fuss when told to wash. Leah had spent an embarrassing amount of time scrubbing at Marion's hair, frustrated that it seemed to stubbornly cling to the muddy brown shade brought on by the grime and dirt, only to realize that muddy brown was Marion's natural hair color.

Leah planned to find hair-care products such as oils and extracts to clean up their hair as soon as she had the opportunity, but this was as far as lake water was going to take her in her effort to clean the girls up. If there had been any scissors on hand, Leah would have given each of the girls a proper trim, but for now they'd have to settle for the wild, untamed manes of knife-trimmed hair.

By the time the group exited the cave, the sun had set, plunging the area into darkness and making it hard to see past their immediate surroundings. Leah appreciated the night as she had no need to worry about being exposed to too much sunlight. The darkness hardly bothered her, since even if there were more light, her weak eyes meant she wouldn't have been able to see much further than she could see at the moment.

If there was a moon, the dense canopies of the trees above blocked any of its light from reaching the ground below. In the distance, Leah heard a high-pitched cry. Evidently there were quite a few nocturnal creatures up and about.

"Kelli, do you know this forest well?" Leah asked as the group slowly made its way forward.

"Nah...we ain't been 'ere that long. We only found tha' cave this mornin'."

Oh, right. They'd mentioned something along those lines earlier. So the cave had been claimed as their lair even though they'd just found it this morning? Considering the game had just launched, that probably meant that both the lair and the group were just getting started. The devs had probably intended for them to have some time to grow and develop before any players found them.

"Speakin' of...where in the cave were ya, Boss?" Kelli asked with a note of genuine curiosity. "We took a look through the whole place when we found it, but we didn't find nothin' this mornin'."

"Ah, as for that, I'm not sure either. When I woke up, I found myself deep in that cavern. Then you—or rather, a group of armed strangers—wandered by, and I attacked because I needed to protect myself."

"Huh, well I'll be... Funny things happen, don't they, Boss?"

Although it might have been caused by the influence of being master and retainer, Leah couldn't help but find Kelli to be a little too willing to take what Leah said at face value. Leah considered the possibility that Kelli didn't have a high enough Intelligence (INT) score and was therefore a bit gullible—or put another way, had a trusting personality. If that was the case, perhaps it would be a good idea to spend a bit of EXP to increase her INT, even if she was primarily a melee fighter.

However, Leah needed a great deal more EXP before she felt comfortable investing EXP on a secondary stat. After all, Leah now needed to stretch any EXP she earned to cover all five of them. That meant it was going to take a great deal more effort than when she was alone.

While she theoretically now had a war party of five to fight with, the game's design meant that she'd have to find opponents who were at least a match for her party to earn any appreciable amounts of EXP.

The primary objective for this outing was to obtain pelts, food, and experience points. The simplest way to secure all three was to hunt a furry, edible monster.

Once Leah had explained what she was looking for, Marion knelt down and began sniffing at the air. After a few moments, Marion's nose twitched and she said, "Boss, I smell a boar." Marion had a skill called *Hunter's Nose*; this must be part of its effects.

Leah instructed Marion to follow the scent of the boar, then directed Lemmy to keep her attention on the group's surroundings, making use of Lemmy's skill *Sentinel's Ear*. The five cautiously inched their way through the woods with Marion in the lead and Lemmy in the center of their circle.

Fortunately, Leah had already dealt with the learning curve of walking through untamed woodlands in another game, so she avoided losing her footing on tree roots or fallen leaves. Any hanging vines or low-hanging branches were swiftly dealt with by Marion's and Riley's machetes.

"Old up." Lemmy softly directed the group to halt, craning her head and closing her eyes to focus on her hearing. She said in her usual tone, "I can 'ear fightin'... Monsters fightin' each other, I think..."

Marion sniffed and added her own observation, "Can smell blood... Prolly a boar an' a wolf."

Kelli acknowledged the reports with a nod, then said to Riley, "Riley, go take a peek at wha's ahead."

"Gotcha," Riley responded with a faint bob of her head, then crept forward

alone. Riley possessed the skills *Watcher's Gaze* and *Hawkeye*. The second was a skill in the *Archery* skill tree that provided a boost to accuracy at long ranges, but it had a secondary effect of making it easy to spot objects from a distance—after all, you couldn't hit what you couldn't see.

Kelli watched Riley depart, then, after a few heartbeats, she lightly bit her lower lip and said apologetically to Leah, "O-oh... S-Sorry, Boss. Wasn't tryin' ta take over or nothin'. Jus' habit..."

Leah smiled reassuringly and shook her head as she replied, "No, you did well. In situations where we're out in the field or when you need to make a quick decision, I would prefer you act first and ask for my permission afterward. Oh, that reminds me, shouldn't we be whispering in a situation like this?"

Kelli thinned her lips and shook her head in response. "Hmm? Nah, we're good. Them's a boar an' wolf. They can smell better 'n us. They knew 'bout us long b'fore we noticed 'em."

Leah processed the information and bobbed her head. "Ah, I see. That makes sense." It appeared that it was quite difficult to get the drop on wild animals in a forest. It certainly made sense, but it raised new questions in Leah's mind.

If even the catgirl quartet, with their keen senses enhanced by their skills, still couldn't match a wild wolf's senses, how the heck were normal players supposed to hunt these wolves on their own? Leah hadn't done enough prospecting in forests during the closed beta to even picture how to go about turning the tables on the wild animals prowling in these woodlands.

Riley returned a few minutes later, suddenly appearing from the shadowy depths of woods, cloaked in darkness. She gestured in the direction she had emerged from. "Yep, Marion was right. It's a wolf. It's prolly attackin' the boar we was after."

"Got it. Yer orders, Boss?" Kelli turned and asked Leah for further directions. Was it Kelli's role to relay instructions to the others and get Leah's input or approval? They were surprisingly well organized; though, it felt like in some ways it was closer to the natural hierarchy of a pack of wild predators than a military chain of command.

“I considered waiting for the wolf to be taken down by the boar before we attack, but...” Leah paused for a moment. “Let’s hit them while they’re still busy fighting each other. I don’t want to miss out on any experience points.” If they were lucky, the system would regard that as attacking two hostile enemy animals at once and hand out a little bit of extra experience points.

“Arright. Le’s get goin’, guys,” Kelli said. Then she turned to Leah. “Oh, Boss. Can we go?”

Leah nodded. “Of course. If you think you can take them, go ahead and finish them off before I get there.” Leah’s order drew a predatory grin from Kelli, who turned and vanished into the darkness. The other three quickly followed after. Leah watched them disappear from her line of sight before following, using the sounds of fighting to guide her.

A small clearing with fewer trees appeared ahead, and Leah heard the sounds of fighting coming from a slightly sparser stretch of forest. Leah kept herself hidden in the shadows and peered out at the clearing. There Leah saw the wolf, the boar, and the Mountain Cats in a three-sided battle.

“Oh my, those things are huge! Those *have* to be monsters; there’s no way they’re just wild animals,” Leah muttered under her breath. The wolf was easily around the same height as Kelli at its shoulder and looked to be at least three meters long. The boar it was fighting was even larger: just considering its height, it was at least three meters tall.

The space ahead wasn’t a natural clearing in the woods but a space carved out as the two battling beasts had mowed down the trees around them while fighting. From what she could see, the wolf had focused on the boar’s legs. The enormous hog wobbled on its feet. Kelli used her sword to hold the wolf at bay, at the same time adding her own attacks against the boar’s wounded legs. Kelli danced around the car-sized boar, accurately landing slashing attacks every few seconds. This was a fighting style Leah knew even she couldn’t mimic, probably enabled by Kelli’s use of the *Swift* and *Finesse* skills.

Kelli’s sword strikes evidently had the desired effect, and the boar fell forward

as one of its front legs gave out from under its enormous weight. A blink of the eye later, an arrow pierced the boar straight through the eye. The boar roared out in pain and tried to rear up, shaking its head from side to side. When the boar paused to turn its head back in the opposite direction, a second arrow took out its other eye—Lemmy and Riley’s handiwork, using their *Archery* skills. Even though the arrows hit it in both eyes, the boar was so large that they had failed to penetrate its brain, and the boar continued to thrash and flail about on the ground.

However, the wolf and the Mountain Cats had shifted their attention away from the boar and onto each other. “I’ve been on the edge of my seat watching them fight, but I guess there’s no rule against my getting involved,” Leah murmured to herself as she stepped forward. It was a perfect opportunity to test out her own skills and ability scores.

“First, we start with—*Dissociate*,” Leah briefly felt resistance to her skill, but it soon shattered under her efforts and the wolf stopped in place, eyes unfocused and staring blankly into space. It was clearly suffering from the status ailment dissociated.

“Didja do somethin’ to it, Boss?” Kelli asked, bewildered by the wolf’s sudden change in behavior.

“Yes... Kelli, stay back and let me handle it,” Leah said to her retainer before turning back to the wolf. “Next up, *Charm*.”

It was imperative to cast *Charm* or *Confusion* on a target after landing a *Dissociate*, before it could recover from its disoriented state. Leah cast *Charm* and this time she felt no resistance from the wolf. Dissociated targets suffered from penalties to resist *Charm* and *Confusion* spells.

The wolf narrowed its eyes, nose twitching in the air as it slowly padded toward Leah. It was seeking out the caster that had charmed it. Leah nodded to herself with a smile and continued. “Success. Next up...*Dominate*.”

There was a faint resistance to the spell, but before long the wolf walked up to Leah and bowed its head.



“Finally, *Retainer*.”

The wolf lay on its side and exposed its stomach. There was hardly any resistance to Leah’s skill.

“Aha. Success. So *Retainer* works against a hostile enemy so long as I make good use of *Enchantment* first,” Leah mused to herself, then thought back to the fighting between the Mountain Cats and the wolf. Based on what she had seen, the wolf was clearly stronger than Kelli or the others. While they would probably have been able to handle it without much trouble if fighting four-on-one, running would have been the only option for them if any of them had found themselves facing the wolf alone.

The reason Leah was able to make the wolf her retainer so easily, though maybe partly due to having ambushed it while it was busy fighting the boar, likely came down to her high MND score. Leah had used her experience points to close the gap between the four catgirls and herself, but she might have overdone it by putting all those points into boosting her MND attribute.

Although she had spent those 200 points casually, with the benefit of hindsight, she realized that 200 points was twice the starting experience points of a newly rolled character. She couldn’t imagine a player dropping 200 points into a single attribute; they would either have split the attribute boosts or added some more skills to their list. Even comparing it to the higher overall attributes of Kelli and the others, Leah’s MND score was over three times their highest attribute score. There was no way that a monster that was only slightly stronger than Kelli had any chance of winning a resistance check against MND.

“Wait, if this wolf’s only a little weaker than the four unique boss candidates...these two beasts are really strong for monsters that spawn so early in the game. What’s the deal with these woods?” Leah muttered to herself as she looked around. Just where had the game put her?

Leah didn’t regret her choice of starting location, but what if it had been some more-average skeleton player in the same boat? She felt a pang of sympathy for any players with monstrous race characters if this was the sort of welcome the game had in store for them.

“At least our hunt was a success. Let’s get this boar back to the cave,” Leah

said breezily, clapping her hands together in approval.

“Boss, better ta butcher it ’ere. Gotta drain the blood while it’s still alive,” Kelli pointed out helpfully.

Leah nodded her head in understanding. “Well, that makes sense. Go ahead and get to work on that. Lemmy and Riley, keep watch on our... Oh, wait.” Leah decided to make her newly recruited underling earn his keep. “Well, Mister Wolf, you’re now one of my retainers. You understand that, right? We’re going to make the boar easier to eat, so can you make sure that no other monsters drop in and try to take it?” Leah said as she tousled the fur on the wolf’s stomach. The wolf immediately rolled back onto his feet, twitching his ears and nose every few seconds as he slowly padded in a circle around the clearing.

The second Leah had tamed the wolf, Kelli and the others had instinctively grasped that the wolf was now part of their group, and had turned to focus on butchering the boar, trusting their backs to the wolf’s scouting abilities.

Leah was left as the only one without a task to do, so she opened up the wolf’s stats to take a look at his build. He had a number of skills that Leah had never seen before. They appeared to be skills that would only be unlocked if the character met specific prerequisites. The makeup of those skills made it seem like they’d be available to one of the catgirls as well, but when Leah compared their skill lists, the catgirls were unable to take the same skills as the wolf. Evidently some skills had prerequisites beyond just having the right combination of skills. Leah silently thanked the developers for not making *Retainer* one of those skills.

The wolf possessed several inborn traits, including *Greater Hunter’s Nose* and *Greater Sentinel’s Ear*. Evidently the game used inborn traits on monsters and wild animals as a way of distinguishing between various species. It made sense: after all, it would be nonsensical if a wolf didn’t have a keen sense of smell because it hadn’t chosen the right set of trainable skills. The inborn traits used for differentiating various species must only be available to specific species and disabled for the rest.

According to the status display, this wolf was an “Ice Wolf.” As expected, that

made him a monster rather than just a wild animal. Though, when she pet the wolf's stomach, it was nice and warm, a stark contrast to the name of ice wolf. The name entry on the wolf was blank. That meant Leah needed to name him. Since the Mountain Cats were done dressing the boar, Leah decided to hold off on naming the ice wolf until they were safely back at home.

"All done, Boss. We wrapped the meat in the pelts fer now. We's can bury stuff we dun' need like the guts, but wha' do we do wi' the bones? The wolf can carry the meat, but we ain't gonna be able ta carry the bones," Kelli explained a bit apologetically after gesturing to the neatly dressed pile of boar pieces.

"Don't worry, I can carry all of it. Here," Leah said casually and placed all of the meat, bones, innards, and the pelt of the boar into her inventory.

Kelli spoke out in surprise as the pile of boar parts disappeared. "Boss, the meat disappeared! Didja do it, Boss?"

"That's right. It's called an inventory, and it's a way to store things in a hidden place," Leah explained as she closed her inventory.

"Wow! How's it werk?" Kelli asked in awe.

"How...? I mean, well...hmm... There's this invisible bag, and you put items into it, or you cover what you want to put in with the big opening in the bag and just close it," Leah said, struggling to explain how a game system like the player inventory works. Not that there was much point in explaining how it worked since only players had access to that particular system.

"I dun' get it..." Kelli said with a slightly frustrated sigh.

"Well, don't worry, I'll explain it better next time. Anyway, since we've got what we came out here for, let's head back to the cave," Leah answered a bit haphazardly and stood up, only to be greeted by the wolf nuzzling at her tummy. Now that the wolf was a retainer, Leah could vaguely understand what he wanted to tell her.

"Huh? What? Your family? You're not a lone wolf?" Leah asked with a tilted head. It seemed the wolf had a family. While calling a wolf a "lone wolf" sounded cool, the reality was that a solitary wolf was a defeated wolf that got

kicked out of its pack after losing a leadership battle. While this was the only ice wolf Leah had seen so far, there was no air of weakness to it, and she had a hard time imagining it was so weak that it'd get exiled from its pack—though, now that it was her retainer, it looked like a giant puppy that wanted approval.

“Sure, that’s fine. If you have a family, I’ll take care of them too. I don’t want to be the one that tears your little family apart,” Leah said with a welcoming tone. She had already decided she wasn’t going to care about any possible downsides that might come from having a large retinue. True, a large retinue meant that the amount of experience points she needed to earn would vastly increase, but given how well Kelli and the others had just fought against the boar, that was outweighed by the benefit of a significantly lower risk for Leah herself.

The experience points gained in the most recent battle, where they had neutralized a wolf that was as or slightly more powerful than each of the members in the group, was equal to the amount she would have made from fighting roughly equal strength opponents solo. Splitting those experience points across five characters was going to hurt a bit, but the battle had taken much less time than expected. While soloing still came out significantly ahead in terms of efficiency, there was a consistency and stability that came from being in a group.

The excitement of finding something special like the whole retainer system had gotten Leah engrossed in the game, but she wasn’t a hard-core competitive player who intended to aggressively work on beating the game or dominating in PvP. She just wanted to savor the game for her own enjoyment. She had wanted to try the game so badly that she’d applied multiple times for not just the open beta but for the closed beta as well, and she just happened to be picked as a tester. For Leah, a drop in efficiency was something that she could easily make up for through increased playing time.

Leah and the party followed the wolf through the woods. They were navigating what was probably an animal trail, but because it had been made by such a large animal, it was wide enough to function as a standard trail for people. After a short walk along that trail, they found a cave entrance to the

home for the wolf family that was similar to the entrance to Leah's own lair.

Leah and the others waited outside as the wolf went in to get the others. Since the large wolf, which Leah assumed was the leader of the pack, was under Leah's control, there probably wouldn't have been much to worry about if they had decided to follow it into the cave, but there was no guarantee that they wouldn't be attacked by another hostile inside, something they wanted to avoid given they had no idea what else lurked in the cave.

The wolf returned a few moments later, trailed by several other wolves of the same type. The tamed wolf was the largest of the group, followed by a slightly smaller individual, and then six wolf pups that were each about the size of a large real-world dog. While these six were large enough to pass as a fully grown wolf, they looked a little chubbier and squatter, particularly in the face and limbs. They were big, but the overall body proportions made it clear they were still pups.

"Wow, they're super adorable..." Leah said to no one in particular. The wolves were evidently already aware of the situation, and as they approached the elf, each bowed their head to her.

<<[Ice Wolf], [Wolf Pup], [Wolf Pup], [Wolf Pup], [Wolf Pup], [Wolf Pup], [Wolf Pup] are available to tame.>>

Because they were offering to join her retinue like Kelli, Riley, Marion, and Lemmy had, there was no need for Leah to activate her *Retainer* skill for the wolves.

"All right, then you're all part of my family starting today. I'm the boss, understood?" Leah's declaration prompted the wolves to approach her and nudge their snouts against her leg, before rolling over and showing their bellies. "That's a good wolf, aww..."

The bellies of the pups were all significantly warmer than those of the adult wolves, and delightfully fluffy to the touch. Leah took her time to give each of them a thorough petting, which took a good while given the sheer size of each

pup, but the end result was satisfying both to the newly minted master of these wolves and wolf pups themselves.

According to the wolves—not that they were verbally explaining the situation—while they were a family, they weren’t all connected by blood. Their original pack had been attacked and they had scattered as they ran. The large wolves had taken the pups under their protection and brought the whole group down to these woods. Evidently their native habitat was a good deal to the north of this area.

“I guess that makes sense, given that they’re called ice wolves. I was wondering what you were doing down here,” Leah said. Although Leah wasn’t exactly certain where the “here” in “down here” actually was, based on the weather and temperature, she had guessed it wasn’t particularly far north.

“So, we’re going to move to my lair, but do you mind if I take a look inside your cave? Is nothing left inside?” Leah asked, and she sensed the wolves nodding in answer to her question. Although the wolves had indicated there was nothing left in the cave, Leah decided to take a look around before heading back to her lair.

They had gone into the woods to obtain some animal pelts, but they had long since gotten sidetracked on their quest, and Leah felt her initial objective had been left far behind. This wasn’t of particular concern for Leah, as she considered herself more of a casual gamer who was in the game to take her time and enjoy all the world had to offer.

Besides, the large wolf was strong enough to fight the four catgirls on his own. If, like Kelli’s group, they had run into all of the wolves at the same time inside the cave, they would have been a much greater challenge. Then there was a good chance that this little wolf pack was a unique boss as well. If the cave counted as the unique boss’s lair, maybe they could make the cave into player housing too. There was nothing wrong with checking out the interior. If it proved nicer than the other cave, they could move their home here. Fortunately for Leah and the Mountain Cats, they hadn’t left anything back in the other cave, so they wouldn’t be out anything if they chose to move.

The cave turned out to be larger than the original lair. It only occurred to Leah after entering this larger cave, but she now remembered how small the entrance was to the Mountain Cat lair. If she had taken the wolves back with her, the two adults would have been stuck outside because they were too big to get in. There was no question of using the old lair over this new one.

Although it was a fair bit larger, the actual layout of the cave wasn't very different, with a large open chamber a short way beyond the initial passage, and a tunnel that appeared to stretch further underground. The large chamber was shaped like a pear, with two round spaces joined at the center, and there was a circular opening on the back wall where the "stem" of the pear would be. Unlike the side passages in the Mountain Cat lair that were crevices cut into the walls, this hole was unnaturally round and large enough for a human-sized creature to crawl through.

"Huh, what in the world is that...?" Leah asked as she caught sight of the suspicious opening. The wolves had said there was nothing left in the cave, but this seemed to imply the opposite. It was safe to assume there was another resident of this cave beyond that passageway. The hole was practically screaming to be explored. If they were going to make this cave their new base of operations, they needed to take care of any potential threats ahead of time.

No system messages related to player housing appeared when she entered the cave, but that might have been because they hadn't gotten rid of the neighbors that lived beyond that hole. Since Leah wasn't sure what made a location eligible to be player housing, there was the distinct possibility that this cave simply didn't meet those conditions, but that was a problem she'd tackle if that ended up being the case.

"I want to see what's inside that hole, but how can I check...?" Leah mused to herself, stroking at her chin as she gazed at the unnaturally round hole in the wall of the cave.

"Think the only way ta know is ta go crawlin' in there. Ain't no clue what sorta creepy crawlies are inside, so we's can go look fer ya, Boss—" Kelli offered before she was cut off by a bark from the wolf and a warning from Lemmy.

"Rrwoof!"

“‘Ey, ‘old up, I ‘ear somethin’.”

The group held its breath and stared intently at the hole. No one moved a muscle, and complete silence fell over the chamber, one so complete that Leah swore she heard the soft whine of her own ears straining beneath the pressure of the moment.

A few moments later, Leah’s ears also picked up the sounds the wolf and Lemmy had heard earlier. It was a scraping or clicking noise that sounded like the regular beat of picks digging at stone. The rhythmic noise slowly came closer—and then a black, shimmering creature stepped out of the hole.

“A-An ant?!” Leah let out a cry of surprise as an ant the size of the wolf pups emerged. Evidently the mystery hole led to an ant’s nest.

Leah suspected that the ants had avoided coming into this part of the cave because the ice wolves had made it their home. That, or the ants had been choosing times to scout when the adult wolves were out hunting and only the pups were around. This must have coincided with one of their regular scouting runs. With that said, given how large the ant was, Leah felt that a full nest of hundreds of these ants would be able to overwhelm a mere eight oversized wolves if they put their minds to it. There must have been another reason they hadn’t sent a swarm of ants to take care of any unwelcome neighbors.

Kelli made no secret of her disappointment in running into these ants. “Tch...ant monsters... They’re tuff and ya can’t eat ‘em. They’s nothin’ but trouble. Whaddya wanna do, Boss?”

Leah had already made up her mind. She was going to tame those ants. With the ants’ abilities and their labor at her disposal, it would be easy to expand the cave system to suit her needs. If the ants were organized in a way that was anything close to their real-world counterparts, Leah knew she would be able to tame the entire colony by bringing the queen under her control. That would require reaching the deepest depths of the ant’s nest.

“Need to find some way to go straight to the deepest part of the nest...” Leah pondered to herself as she tapped her chin in thought. If the ant she just saw was an example of a standard worker ant, and they were capable of being tamed, the most straightforward way to bring the ant colony into her retinue

would be to go through the passages and dominate the ants as she encountered them. This was, however, much easier said than done. Since that was the only hole they knew of that provided access to the nest, then Leah, the only one capable of recruiting new retainers, would have to travel through that passage on her own, recruiting ants one at a time.

“Not exactly the smartest idea to charge into enemy territory alone, especially when the passages are this cramped...” The side tunnels were too short for Leah to move normally, but perfectly sized for the ants to use as a defensive corridor. Then there was the fact that Leah’s current build had nothing in the way of attack skills. While she was confident in her combat abilities that weren’t reliant on skills or attribute scores, those combat skills were strongly focused on fighting humanoid opponents. She wasn’t at all sure she would be able to fight six-legged exoskeleton-armored insects that stood around hip height.

That meant that tactically speaking, as far as Leah was concerned, there wasn’t much advantage in fighting the ants in an open environment over a closed one. If worst came to worst, the most rational course of action would be to go in alone and rely on *Enchantment* skills to get her through.

“Besides, if there’s an open space on the other side of that tunnel, I could use *Summon* to bring the rest of my retinue along,” Leah continued to debate the subject with herself. The only remaining question in that case was whether *Enchantment* spells worked on the ants or not. “I wish another ant would come along.”

“Want me to go and catch one?” Marion suggested, pointing to the passage. Since Marion was the smallest of the group, she could move along more comfortably than Kelli within those side chambers, but even so...

“Hold on...”

The current members of Leah’s retinue were strongly tilted toward physical firepower. While the grown ice wolves had a smattering of *Ice Magic* skills, at the moment they were far too large to fit into that passage. So, this was a good opportunity to acquire some flexibility through magical abilities. The ants looked pretty resistant to physical attacks, and even if direct combat wasn’t

high on the preferred solutions list for this particular encounter, there would be enemies in the future that would need to be disposed of with attack magic.

Since part of the goal of creating a large retinue was to bring about some stability and predictability in combat, the highest priority for the retinue as a whole was to increase the tactical options available. With the addition of the ice wolves into their ranks, Leah and her retinue had a total of 200 experience points available. It wasn't nearly enough experience points if it needed to be split between thirteen characters, but it was more than enough to greatly strengthen a single retainer.

"Marion, I intend to listen to your proposal and have you go catch one, but first, I want to give you the power of magic," Leah spoke after a few moments of thought.

"Ma...jick?" She paused. "Magic?! I'm gonna be able ta use magic?!" Marion replied with surprise, initially unable to process what Leah had told her because her proposal had been so unexpected.

"You know about magic?" Leah asked in mild surprise.

"The gran' matron of my village could use it. Folk who can use magic get ta wear nice clothes an' eat till they have full tummies," Marion explained. The attribute spread of most beastfolk wasn't suited to magic use, which meant that an NPC that could naturally wield magic was a rare and prized member of their community.

"I see. I intend to eventually give Kelli, Riley, and Lemmy magic skills of their own, but I'm going to start with you, Marion. The question is, what sort of magic to teach you..." Leah went from explaining to Marion to talking more to herself as she considered what type of magic to use. She wanted to give Marion a magic type that was as effective on ants as possible. Leah began to contemplate what that might be.

Fire seemed like it would be a useful type against insects, but that was mostly based on Leah's observations of real-world insects, and even then, it wasn't that insects were particularly vulnerable to fire in the real world; pretty much any living thing in the real world would die if exposed to open flame. That also meant that fire spells would be useful to have for attack magic in a wide range

of situations.

“Fire might be all right, but...not really ideal for using inside a cave,” Leah concluded as she realized fire spells would quickly deplete a cave of its oxygen if it obeyed the laws of physics. Then again, trying to deliberately rob the ants of oxygen might be a valid line of attack. While Leah wasn’t sure what the differences were between these ants and those from the real world, as insects they must have a large number of tiny holes distributed around their body called spiracles that they use to absorb oxygen. Insects needed a great deal of oxygen to actively move around, and most insects slowed considerably when they were stuck in low-oxygen environments.

Of course, because these ants were many hundreds of times larger than real-world insects, they would need much higher concentrations of oxygen to survive. The fact that these ants were able to move around normally meant there was some sort of magical biology at work that allowed these ants to grow to this size without hampering their activity.

Finally, there was the question of whether or not magically created flames needed to consume oxygen at all. Leah was intrigued by the question and hoped to run tests about it in the future, but to come to any concrete conclusions she’d need some well-equipped facilities for testing.

“Having magical monsters wandering around is a bit of a pain... I suppose the best way to fight magical fantasy biology is to use magical attacks of our own,” Leah noted to herself.

If fire was going to prove difficult to use, what would the next most effective type of magic be? Not that there was any proof that fire was the ideal magic type to use on ants... Leah let out a sigh of frustration and chose for the moment to set aside any of her preconceptions about ants gained from their real-world counterparts and spend her theorycraft efforts on developing tactics based solely on the data she possessed on the game’s giant ants.

Not that they had all that much information about those ants: First, the ants were large, at least the size of large dogs. Second, they moved with a fluid rapidity that clearly marked them out as ants. Next, they had the ability to dig clean round holes through the hard-looking stone of the cave wall. Leah had no

direct evidence that the ants were the ones who had dug those holes, but they hardly looked like they had formed naturally. Then, an ability to tunnel through stone had to be accounted for.

“Oh, Boss. Mebbe they dun’ like wolves? Since the ice wolves never saw ’em, they musta never showed up while them ice wolves were ’round, yeah?” Riley spoke up, interrupting the murmured stream of Leah’s observations. Aha, not only did Riley have *Watcher’s Gaze*, she seemed to have sharp observation skills to go along with her keen eyes. Leah had considered that possibility, but she had let herself forget it as she got lost in her musings.

If that’s the case, what did it mean that they were vulnerable to the wolves? Or rather, more precisely, vulnerable to ice wolves.

“Ah, I think I’ve got it. Ice wolves indeed... Maybe the ants don’t like ice?” Perhaps an ant scout had just happened to witness one of the ice wolves manipulating ice when scouting out this part of the cavern. Ice wolves weren’t native to this area of the monster realms—these ice wolves had lost a battle of the fittest and fled southward as a family. If the ants were native to this region, it was hard to imagine they’d immediately develop an effective set of tactics against an unknown enemy like the ice wolves.

Perhaps the ants were vulnerable to low temperatures. No, ordinary insects were vulnerable to lower temperatures, and it was possible this world’s ants lacked any magical defenses against cold. Or rather, the magical nature of these ants might be what makes them vulnerable to ice and cold. Essentially, it was a question of opposing elements coming into play.

Leah roused herself from her musings. “No use endlessly debating it with myself. I’ve run out of data I can use for any further theorycrafting,” Leah said with a resigned sigh as she chose a set of *Ice Magic* skills to give Marion. First, she would unlock the *Ice Magic* school and buy *Chill*. While she also wanted to give Marion *Ice Bullet* as an attack spell, the most important goal with *Ice Magic* was to lower the ambient temperature and disable the targets without killing them.

Attack magic schools relied on the character’s INT score to determine damage. Since Marion was beastfolk, her starting INT score was low, meaning

that there was a strong possibility Marion's initial *Ice* spells wouldn't do much in the way of effects or damage. Worse, Marion's INT score hadn't reached the minimum necessary to unlock the spell tree, and as things stood, she wasn't even capable of learning those skills. Which was why Leah needed to spend a fair number of points bolstering Marion's INT score before moving forward.

Leah couldn't afford to put too many points into Marion's INT, so she limited it to a moderate increase. Even that modest improvement gave Marion the same INT score as a magic-focused elf's starting INT. Considering that Marion was already an effective ranger, with one more attack spell she'd be more than capable of one-hit killing any newbies. Not that Leah had any intention of aggressively engaging in PvP at the moment.

Her experience point investments complete, Leah turned to speak to the young catgirl. "Marion, how do you feel? You should now be able to use basic *Ice Magic*."

"Wow... That's amazing... I understand it now...the power and how to use it... Did you give me this power, Boss?" Marion asked, awestruck at her new abilities.

"That's right. I hope you like it." While Leah wasn't the source of Marion's newfound power, she had been the one who used the game system to give Marion her new skills and abilities, so she wasn't lying...at least, not technically.

"Everyone else, so long as you work hard for me, I'll gift you with magic and other abilities. I've given Marion an early present, but I'm sure she'll work hard with her newfound magic," Leah said solemnly.

Marion nodded in enthusiastic agreement. "Yup, I'll chill the ants and capture them."

Leah nodded approvingly and gestured for Marion to head out. "Good. We'll wait here; we're counting on you, Marion."

The party chose to wait as Marion made her way into the passage. The status display allowed Leah to keep track of the health statuses of her retinue so long as they were within a certain distance. If Marion ended up getting into trouble, Leah retained the ability to *Summon* Marion back to safety.

While they waited for Marion to return, Leah used the remaining experience points to strengthen the other members of the retinue. While she hadn't planned to immediately hand out magic spells to the other catgirls, Leah was concerned that by boosting Marion's INT score, she risked creating tension among the Mountain Cats stemming from a difference in their intelligence. Since Kelli and the others had started with min-maxed builds that neglected INT, Leah decided it wouldn't hurt to boost their INT scores to a respectable level.

Leah didn't dislike the simple, frank way that Kelli and the others spoke, but if they were ever going to go to places like cities, it would be useful to expand their vocabularies and teach them how to speak more formally. Leah wasn't sure if boosting INT on its own would be enough to enable the catgirls to learn things like etiquette, manners, and formal ways of speaking, but it was worth a try. Even if that boost served no purpose in that domain, it wouldn't be a waste since Leah intended to have all of them learn magic of one stripe or another down the line.

Leah spent most of her remaining experience points to boost Kelli's, Riley's, and Lemmy's INT scores. She didn't have enough points to boost them quite as high as she did with Marion, but even so, they now had higher INT scores than the INT score Leah had started with as an elf. She'd created a quartet of catfolk who were all smarter than an elf. Leah wasn't particularly bothered by this fact, because the player avatar's INT score didn't impact the player's own thinking ability.

Since there were only 20 points left and Leah might learn standard attack magic in the future, she spent the remaining points increasing her own INT score. This boosted Leah's INT enough that she had a slightly higher score than Kelli, Riley, and Lemmy. There was no deep meaning to that fact. In fact, Marion's INT score was still the highest out of the five. Not that this bothered Leah in the slightest. Of course not; she didn't care about it at all.

Lemmy must have caught the sound of Marion's returning footsteps, and she reported her discovery to Leah, interrupting Leah's train of thought. "Boss, Marion's coming back." It seemed Marion had succeeded. After a pause,

Lemmy continued, “But sounds like she’s brought back some company. I can hear the sound of ants walking behind her.”

That meant there might be a group of ants pursuing Marion. She was probably more than capable of evading them on her way back, but there was no need to take any unnecessary risks.

“*Summon: Marion.*” Leah activated the skill and the ground in front of her began to glow. Soon Marion appeared within the circle of light. She was carrying an ant covered in frost.

“Oh! Is this your magic, Boss? Thanks, I was afraid I wouldn’t make it.” Marion had sorted the situation in her mind based on the circumstances and thanked Leah before she could explain. Leah wasn’t sure if it was because of Marion’s newly increased INT or if it was Marion’s own personality, but she liked the fact that Marion was quick and succinct in her reporting. Technically, *Summon* was a skill, not a spell, but that wasn’t particularly important at the moment.

Leah nodded approvingly to Marion and gestured toward the ground. “No, I can see you did the job assigned to you. I’m impressed. Now, I’m sure that ant’s pretty cold to hold; go ahead and put it down on the ground.” The ant Marion held in her arms wasn’t completely frozen or dead, but it barely moved. Marion had gotten the balance just right on this one.

“Lemmy, what about the pursuing ants?” Leah asked after looking at it.

Lemmy considered. “I think...they’re wandering around the spot where Marion went poof,” Lemmy said after a moment, a little uncertainty in her answer.

“Perhaps that’s because their target suddenly vanished...? Do you think they’ll send some scouts this way?” Leah asked.

“I don’t know... Oh, they went back. Guess they’re tellin’ the rest of the colony?” Lemmy reported while mixing in her own opinion. While adding assumptions and optimistic observations into these reports wasn’t desirable, that was something Leah could warn her about later. The fact that Lemmy had thought for herself and reported on her own ideas was a good development. Leah decided that when she had the points to spare, she’d actively work on boosting Lemmy’s INT score. Leah wondered if the reason Lemmy had been

quiet up to this point had been because she'd struggled to keep up with the conversations.

"For the moment, let's defrost this ant. I suppose I should have given one of you *Fire Magic*. I've already used up all of the experience points, so we'll have to wait for it to unfreeze naturally. It's a pity because I don't want to give the ants too much time," Leah said pensively.

"Boss, do ya mind?" Kelli chose that moment to interrupt.

Leah turned to answer. "Sure, Kelli, what is it?"

"Ya sure ya can't run your *Retainer* test with this ant while it's still frozen? It isn't like we're tryin' to make use of it as an ally right now, right?"

Well that's a shock! Kelli had given her a very useful suggestion. This had to be the result of boosting her INT score. She might even be smarter than Leah at this point, even though Leah's INT score was higher. It was a reverse example of how the player's intelligence wasn't impacted by the character's INT score—the additional points hadn't made Leah any smarter.

Wait, no, it was a good thing that Leah's retainers could think quickly on their feet. While she still needed to teach them how to separate their opinions from their reports, the improvement to the group's INT was an unexpected bonus in a nonnumerical fashion.

Leah turned and smiled at Kelli and sang her praises. "I see, that's an excellent point, Kelli! You're completely correct; let's test it out right now."

Leah then immediately cast *Dissociate* on the ant. It was hard to tell given that it was barely moving, but it looked like it succeeded. Since there was barely any resistance, Leah felt a touch of uncertainty about whether the spell had worked at all. The lack of flashy visual results was one of the major shortcomings of *Enchantment* spells.

Next, she cast *Fear*. Ordinarily she would have cast *Charm*, but since she had never used *Fear*, she decided this was a good time to attempt it. While she hadn't felt much resistance when she cast *Charm* on the ice wolves earlier, she felt a great deal of resistance this time when casting *Fear*. However, she was able to overcome the resistance. Why did the ant have a higher resistance to

her *Fear* than the ice wolf had to *Charm*? Leah had to admit, it was difficult to imagine a situation where an insect would feel fear; maybe there was just some inborn resistance that ants possessed. That or Leah herself might have been better at casting *Charm* than *Fear*, but there wasn't any difference in terms of the game system or its mechanics—

“...Oh, right. I'm supposedly beautiful, I guess,” Leah said almost like an afterthought. That specific inborn trait mentioned that it provided a bonus to the friendliness of NPCs. Which must mean that it also provided a bonus to the effects of the *Charm* spell. It made sense when she thought about it. This trait might also explain why Kelli, Riley, Marion, and Lemmy were able to be tamed within five hours of meeting her. Given all these influences, it probably made sense for Leah to focus her efforts on using *Charm* rather than *Fear* or *Confusion* in the future.

Whatever the case, *Fear* had worked. Since it and *Dissociate* had worked back-to-back on the ant, that proved *Enchantment* spells worked on these ants. So long as the *Dominate* spell worked, *Retainer* ought to succeed too. If there was one concern, it was the possibility that *Enchantment* spells worked on ants but they were immune to the *Control* skill tree.

“Well, I guess I'll worry about that when I get there...” Leah said airily. She continued, “First, *Dominate*... Good, it worked... And finally...*Retainer*—What?!”

<<Cannot execute [Retainer]. The target [Infantry Ant] is already tamed by another character.>>

She heard the system give her that message.

That's a lot of information in a single error message!

First, it mentioned the ant's type. The ant was called an infantry ant, which meant it was one of the rank-and-file ants in the colony. Based on the name, the ant was a social monster and there was some sort of superior ant that commanded these infantry ants. Next, the notice that it was already a retainer to another character further reinforced the idea that there was a superior in its hierarchy. In this case, it probably meant the queen of this particular colony.

The retainer system was similar to the organizational structure of companies and corporations. The leader who stands at the top receives all of the profit generated by the organization—in this case, experience points—and then distributes those points to the people within the organization. The individuals in the organization cooperate and collaborate as they act, allowing the organization to exist and operate like a single living entity. This was similar to the social structures of extremely hierarchical animals such as ants and bees.

Perhaps the *Retainer* skill was originally created for animals and monsters with hierarchical structures like ants. It might be a skill that was made for specific species, like the *Maul* and *Bite* skills that the ice wolves possessed. For a skill like *Maul*, it might be possible for a player to obtain it by having something like a bear claw attached to the character using magical body modifications, but at heart, the skill was designed for monsters.

If that was the case, it was possible that monsters of certain species were born with the skill *Retainer* but wouldn't have the prerequisite skills like *Enchantment* or *Summon*. Further, the fact that Leah got an error message because the target was already a retainer meant that her own *Retainer* skill would have worked had the ant not already had a master.

"No, that's just wishful thinking," Leah chastised herself as she continued thinking about the subject. The ants might not have *Enchantment* skills by default, but if they were capable of learning it, it would be a serious threat. While Leah's currently super-boosted MND score was enough to resist any *Enchantment*, even from significantly more powerful opponents, the same didn't apply to the members of her retinue. Fortunately, it appeared that *Dominare* and *Fear* were effective against the infantry ants, so Leah going alone was probably the best way to avoid taking excessive casualties.

There was plenty about the *Retainer* skill that remained a mystery, such as the possibility that *Retainer* would only work coming from superior members of the same species in certain situations.

"I'll go in and deal with this myself," Leah said after another moment's silence. "It seems *Dominare* works on these ants, and in those narrow passages, only the person at the very front is going to be able to fight anyway."

“But, Boss, ya won’t be able to *Dominare* all the ants if they send a bunch at ya at once, right? It isn’t safe for ya to go in alone... At least take one of us to be your shield,” Kelli objected.

She was soon joined by Marion. “You should at least take me, Boss. If I can use my *Ice Magic* to slow them, that’ll buy you time to cast your spells on them.”

Lemmy added her own two copper pieces a moment later. “Y’all should take me along so I can tell y’all where the ants are by usin’ my *Sentinel’s Ear*.”

And finally Riley noted, “My eyes aren’t gonna be real useful given how dark it is in that tunnel, but...there’s no such thing as too many shields, Boss.”

Despite Leah’s original plan to go in alone, she was unable to overcome the strong objections from the beastfolk, and in the end, all of the humanoids in Leah’s retinue ended up entering the ant tunnel on their mission to bring the ants to heel. Leah told the ice wolves, who had no physical possibility of entering the tunnels, to keep watch outside. While the pups might have been able to fit, there was no point in taking pups along on this expedition.

“Oh, before we go, I need to name you all,” Leah said, as though it had just occurred to her.

While she had been putting it off, Leah decided it was best to name the ice wolves before she left. Without names, it would be hard to use *Summon* on them. Just as Kelli mentioned when saying she intended to act as a shield, there was no guarantee that there wasn’t a large, wide-open room further down where they might be swarmed by a large group of ants. It would be a massive advantage to be able to summon the ice wolves in those circumstances.

“First, we have to start with you. Your name is Hakuma. Next, you’re a girl, so I’ll name you Ginka. Now for the little ones: in order, your names are Mizore, Arare, Hyo, Fubuki, Kogome, and Zaramé.”

Hakuma was a reference to a type of severe blizzard considered a massive natural disaster. Ginka referred to the poetic comparison of snow to a shimmering silver flower. The pups were all named for various types of cold precipitation, with the male pups being named Mizore and Hyo and the female pups being named Arare, Fubuki, Kogome, and Zaramé.

Once Leah finished naming the wolves, the party entered the tunnel with Kelli in the lead, followed by Leah, Marion, and Lemmy, and finally Riley in the rear. The tunnel was cramped and dark, and since all five had to crawl, they made slow progress through the dark passage. The floor and the sides of the tunnel felt quite smooth, almost slippery. They were similar in texture to the smooth surfaces of dripped stones like stalactites, but since there was no way that stalactites formed in perfectly cylindrical tunnels, the smoothness had to be the work of a monster, or more specifically, the ants. Of course, if the tunnel had been bare rock, since she was still in her starting equipment, the rock would have taken a heavy toll on Leah's palms and knees. Perhaps Leah even owed the ants some thanks.

Although, even with perfectly smooth stone, placing her knees directly on that surface in the real world would result in thick calluses forming on her knees, something that would move her far from the ideal of beautiful, slender legs. Leah wouldn't dare to do such a thing; she had no desire to risk drawing the ire of her mentors or the head of the family, so she was grateful to have the opportunity to experience spelunking in VR.

In the end, the group made their way to the end of the tunnel without encountering any ants, eventually arriving in a space that was just tall enough to allow them to stand up and walk. In terms of space, it was enough for the ants to deploy a squad, and for Leah and her retainers to set up a defensive formation, but there wasn't enough room to use *Summon* on Hakuma.

"This is where I captured the ant that was...on watch? The other ants started chasin' me when they noticed on their way back that the guard wasn't there," Marion explained as they looked around the room and stretched their arms and legs.

"I see... There's no ant on guard right now. I wonder why. Given that they just had someone nab their sentry...have they retreated back to a more defensible space now that they know it's easy to sneak in this far through the tunnel?" Leah mused as she noted the lack of any ants in their vicinity. Their overreaction made sense, considering this was probably the first time the ants had been attacked from this direction, and their attackers were connected to the ice wolves they wanted to avoid fighting.

“It’s still a bit cramped, but at least we can walk from here on out. Let’s move,” Leah instructed, and the group fell into formation. Kelli drew her sword and cautiously stepped forward to take point, while Lemmy and Riley equipped the bows they had been carrying on their backs. Until recently, Marion would have joined them in drawing a weapon, but now, she cast her gaze around her surroundings with empty hands. Leah made a note to get Marion some sort of equipment that would help her channel her casting.

As the group continued to cautiously move forward, Lemmy’s ear detected the presence of the ants and she reported, “There’s probably a bunch of them up ahead. Seems to be a lot of ‘em, but they aren’t movin’...might be waitin’ to ambush us...”

It was almost time for battle. Leah instructed Marion to be ready to unleash her cold spells as necessary, while Leah herself prepared to cast a barrage of *Charm*. Although her success rate was going to suffer because of the lack of *Dissociate* to soften her opponents, *Dissociate* could only target a single enemy at a time, while Leah was able to *Charm* multiple enemies at once. Even if the overall success rate was lower, *Charm* affecting only a third of the targets in the room would be better than trying to hit targets one by one.

With their weapons and spells ready, the group continued down the corridor and arrived in a slight opening filled wall-to-wall with ants. There was no specific light source in the area, but the sheer number of ants and their glimmering black chitinous exoskeletons reflected a dull, ominous black light into the room. Even Leah, who didn’t suffer from any particular insect-related phobias, still found herself repulsed at the sheer concentration of insects packed into the space.

However, the realization that these ants would be under her control in a number of hours provided a reassuring boost to her own morale. Though, it was a bit too early to count these chickens before they could hatch.

The ants were clearly aware of their presence, but they remained frozen in place, perhaps lacking orders to attack. It was possible the entity that served as the queen had some sort of plan up its proverbial sleeve, but Leah had no

intention of waiting for it to bring that plan to fruition.

Leah stepped forward and cast her spell: “*Charm!*”

Almost all of the ants turned to Leah at once—they were the ones that had failed their resistance check against Leah’s *Charm*. Of the larger ants toward the back of the room, about a third had managed to resist the lure of the *Charm* spell. That meant all of the smaller ants and two-thirds of the large ants had been neutralized. The spell had been far more effective than Leah had expected.

With a nod, Leah turned to Marion. “Marion, you’re up.”

“Right, Boss.” Marion stepped forward and filled the room with her *Chill* spell. It was not a particularly powerful spell, but with the targets clustered together and the vast majority of the ants unable to move under the effect of Leah’s *Charm* spell, it had plenty of time to chill the ants to their very core.

And Marion’s INT score was also significantly higher than the average starting character. If the ants were designed with fighting newly rolled characters in mind, they wouldn’t be able to bear a spell cast using Marion’s high INT.

The first cave Leah had spawned in just happened to have a unique boss in the form of the Mountain Cat Clan. The boss-level ice wolf had been wandering around right outside that cave. So where were the weak spawns that were supposed to be the main hunting targets for new players? Leah guessed that this nest of ants was part of that answer.

A short while later, the ants were all covered with frost and Leah’s party were the only living things moving in the room.

“Well, I guess I made a mistake. We should’ve made some winter clothes using the pelt we got from that boar earlier,” Leah said as she suppressed a shiver from the cold. The cave was now rather cold inside, and on top of that, the party had to walk over rows of frozen ants. While the cold wasn’t unbearable, it was bad enough that the trek would sap both body heat and energy from the group as they navigated the room.

“Eh, not like we were planning to spend much time here anyway. Let’s get this

over with quickly and be on our way,” Leah added breezily after a few moments.

The ant they had left with Hakuma and the other wolves had looked nowhere near defrosting when Leah and her group had departed for the tunnel. Either Marion’s high INT meant that it would take a long time for the frozen status ailment to wear off, or the caves had started out at a low ambient temperature that made it difficult for frozen objects to melt. The ants in the large chamber would probably be frozen for a few more hours, since the air was also much cooler in the ant chamber than it had been in Hakuma’s lair.

Lemmy’s hearing picked up signs that there was another room up ahead full of ants that were stuck and unable to move. In that case, Leah wanted to make sure their party made it into that room and took care of its inhabitants in the same way they had dealt with the first group, before this second group was alerted to their presence. For the moment, it was possible the colony’s queen hadn’t realized there were intruders within the nest. The best-case scenario would be for Leah and her group to arrive at the queen’s chamber before any of the other ants even noticed they were there. “Well, why don’t we move on? Watch your footing; I don’t want anyone slipping on the ice.”

The group then proceeded through a series of narrow corridors that joined a number of low-ceilinged chambers full of ants. Each time the group arrived at one of these chambers, they repeated their practiced tactics, neutralizing the ants with a combination of *Charm* and *Chill* spells. Leah pieced together a map of their path so far, and she realized that the layout bore a resemblance to the ant’s nests that she had seen of real-world ants. There were some forks in the path as they moved deeper in, but Leah operated under the assumption that the more important assets were located deeper down in the nest, and continually chose the path that led downward, deeper into the cave.

The total number of ants they had immobilized added up to quite a force of army ants. Although they hadn’t finished off the incapacitated ants, because they had canceled out their disadvantage in numbers with their well-matched spell combos, they had been able to obtain a large number of experience points. Each ant was only worth 4 points on average, but the pool was close to

hitting 400 points total.

It was soon after the total had passed 400 points that Lemmy gestured for the group to stop. “Hmm... There isn’t a big group of ants in the room ahead... I’m only detectin’ a single one.”

They had broken straight through the colony’s defenses. If the room ahead wasn’t something like the egg nest or a storage room, it had to be the queen’s chamber.

“All right, prepare yourselves. Time to meet with royalty.”

When they arrived at the new chamber, they saw it was around the same size as the others, the only distinguishing characteristic being a significantly higher ceiling. At the back of the room was a particularly large ant with wings sprouting from its back. That must be the queen. Ants in the real world shed their wings shortly after they began building their nests, so perhaps the fact that this queen still had her wings meant she had just started building her nest. That or the queens of this species of fantasy ants didn’t shed their wings.

“Chitter chitter chitter...” The queen’s mandibles clacked together and made a chittering noise. It seemed that she was trying to say something, but sadly, none of the group could understand. Either way, Leah had no intention of letting the queen take the initiative. Since there was only one enemy, Leah opened with a *Dissociate* spell.

“First, let’s start with a *Dissociate*! Wow, it worked... Figured it wouldn’t work against a boss, but I guess everything’s worth trying at least once... Next, *Charm*! Hmm...you resisted it!” Leah noted with surprise. A peculiarity about Leah’s specific build was that compared to *Dissociate* itself, *Charm* cast on a dissociated target had a significantly higher success rate. The fact that the *Charm* was unsuccessful meant that either the queen was immune to the spell, or that the spell simply didn’t work on targets of the same sex.

Another complication was that by resisting the *Charm* spell, the queen had also broken out of her dissociated state. A weakness of *Enchantment* spells was that a successful resistance check against one effect removed any existing effects placed on the target.

Leah wasted no time in issuing orders. “Marion, hit her with *Chill*! Everyone else, pin her down with ranged attacks! I need a little time for my *Dissociate* to finish its cooldown.”

“Yes, Boss. *Chill*!” Having recovered from her dissociated state, the queen charged toward Leah. Lemmy and Riley took aim at the queen’s legs just as she began charging; the arrows ricocheted off the chitinous exoskeleton but knocked the queen off-balance, causing her to tumble forward. This momentary collapse bought enough time for Marion’s *Chill* to take effect, and the queen was noticeably sluggish as she tried to pick herself up from the ground. The queen wobbled as she tried to stand up, and Kelli’s sword hurtled through the air and struck the queen’s head. The armored exoskeleton was too tough for the blade to pierce, but the impact was enough to make the queen stumble and force her back on the defensive.

Marion’s ice spell continued to steadily lower the temperature in the room, and with each passing moment, the queen’s movements became more labored and sluggish. Each time the queen attempted to stand, Riley and then Lemmy threw their handheld weapons at the queen’s legs, knocking her back to the ground. Kelli would use that opening to dash in and pick up the thrown weapons, before departing with a quick strike to the queen’s head, knocking the queen back off her stride. By this point, the queen’s body temperature had been so reduced by Marion’s magic that the queen only managed to lash out with an occasional strike, strikes that Kelli dodged with ease.

At last, the cooldown for *Dissociate* was done. Leah hesitated to use it. Even when she had landed it earlier, the queen had resisted the *Enchantment* spell she had used as a follow-up. There was a good chance that repeating the same *Dissociate* and *Charm* combination would just end with the same result. While Leah’s companions had managed to weaken the queen since the start of the battle, Leah wasn’t at all certain they’d done enough damage to force the queen to bend the knee in surrender. She needed a couple more cards to add to her psychological advantage.

“*Summon: Hakuma, Summon: Ginka!*” The instant after Leah chanted these words, two giant wolves appeared in front of her. While this chamber was larger than the others, it was still too small for two adult ice wolves to move

around freely. The addition of these two new giants to the room restricted the movements of not only the newcomers but everyone who had already been there.

Kelli and her companions were caught in a frustrated silence at the sudden appearance of the wolves, but the queen was simply dumbstruck. After all, from the queen's perspective, the safety of her own sanctuary had suddenly and openly been violated by two of her natural enemies.

"Hakuma! Ginka! Hold down the queen!" Leah immediately barked out her orders. The suddenly summoned ice wolves quickly grasped their situation and followed Leah's orders, using their weight to pin the queen to the ground with their paws. It might not have been the most elegant move, given the cramped environment, but they had the ant queen fully at their mercy.

"All right! Here we go! *Dissociate!* That worked... Then next...*Dominate!*" The second *Dissociate* had an even shorter duration than the first. While the lack of a *Charm* between the *Dissociate* and *Dominate* reduced the success rate substantially, Leah decided to skip straight to trying to use *Dominate*. She felt the queen put up powerful resistance to her spell, but in the end, the resistance shattered and Leah felt the *Dominate* spell take hold of the ant queen, whose cold-slowed movements suddenly stopped.

Leah paused. "I guess I have no choice but to test *Retainer* on the queen herself. Surely you can't be tamed by someone else, right? Here, accept me as your master... *Retainer!*" It was difficult to tell immediately if the skill had worked because the queen remained as still as a statue, but Leah soon felt the queen's presence within her retinue. Leah could now see the queen's stats and build. It said that the queen was a "Queen Vespoid."

"Huh? You're not an ant?" Leah said with a puzzled moue. *Vespa* was the scientific name used to refer to hornets. It seemed the queen wasn't an ant like Leah had assumed, but some sort of giant hornet.

<<Successfully defeated unique enemy: [Vespoid Queendom].>>

<<Unlocked personal area: [The Abandoned Queendom].>>

<<Do you wish to set [The Abandoned Queendom] as your player house?>>

As expected, everything worked out similarly to the Mountain Cat Clan. Still, to declare this little cave system a “queendom,” a country in its own right, was a bit of an overstatement. There were certainly a lot of insects lurking around the various rooms, but it was still a small hive, not quite worthy of being called a queendom quite yet. Either way, this was a good place to end for the day. Leah set the current location as her player house and returned the Lair of the Mountain Cat Clan to be claimed by another party.

“Wait, if we connected this player house to the other cave with a tunnel, would it be regarded as a single home? I wonder how that works...” Leah said as the idea occurred to her. It was certainly an idea worth testing, but Leah let out a tired breath. “Testing that out will have to wait until the ants are all defrosted. That’ll probably take a day or two... The pups should be able to fit in here if I summon them, but there’s no way the grown wolves can leave without our spending some time expanding the tunnels here. Then there’s all this experience we’ve acquired. I want to spend some of that to make sure everyone can cast some spells.”

Leah listed off the large number of things she wanted to do next, but she was about to go beyond twelve hours of game time. She needed to log out, lest the hardware’s VR module send her a warning. Leah had hoped to use the boar pelt they had acquired earlier as a blanket to sleep on, but since it hadn’t been cured yet, she was overwhelmed by the smell of blood and gore the moment she took it out of her inventory, and she promptly shoved it back inside.

Leah recalled that it was possible to cure any harvested hides through some semimagical means by learning and using the *Leatherworking* skill. It was a useful skill to have for the long run since it allowed the skillholder to cure acquired hides without needing any chemical concoctions. It would be useful for someone in her retinue to learn.

Leah let out a tired sigh and turned to her companions. “I apologize for needing to do this when things are still far from settled down, but I need to get some rest. When I wake up, let’s discuss what we’ll do from here. Oh, there’s

no need to ready a specific sleeping area for me. I'll just lay down somewhere in the corner. Anyway, good night."

While it was important to try to maintain a civilized way of life, flexibility was also a virtue during times like this. Leah stopped Kelli and the others from taking off their clothes to make a sleeping area for Leah, chose an appropriate spot on the ground to lay down, and promptly logged off.

Chapter 3: Training Retainers

After completing various errands that demanded her attention in the real world, Leah logged back into the game. When Leah's avatar opened her eyes in game, the sight that greeted her hadn't changed much since she logged out. She had logged out about an hour earlier, and time in game flowed at about one and a half times the speed of the outside world, but the queen ant was still encased in frost. There was some moisture beading on her exoskeleton, but that was probably condensation rather than any actual melting. The queen's status was still listed as "frozen."

Leah noticed that despite the ambient temperature, she didn't feel cold. She soon discovered the reason when she noticed that Hakuma and Ginka were lying down next to her, serving as a makeshift sleeping bag.

"Mornin', Boss. Didja get enough sleep?" Kelli greeted Leah as she sat up and glanced around.

"Good morning, Kelli. I don't need much sleep most of the time." After a moment of thought, Leah added, "Of course, there might be times where I'll end up sleeping for what feels like an unnaturally long time." It was possible something might require her attention that would take her away from the game for an extended period of time. That said, she was in a position where she could take time for herself when she wanted to, and there wasn't anything she could think of in the foreseeable future.

Leah checked with Kelli on whether anything had happened while she slept. Lemmy had evidently gone to check on the wolf pups, but she had already returned to the queen's chamber. The pups were fine and resting in the wolves' lair. It would have been understandable if they had panicked when their guardians had suddenly vanished, but evidently they had known it was Leah that had summoned them. The whole retinue system included some sort of magical notification system. Convenient.

The reports had raised another question in Leah's mind. Unless memories for the retainers had been automatically generated and saved over their existing memories, it meant that her retainers had been acting under their own volition while their master was logged out. On a moment's reflection, it made sense. The game was designed with an emphasis on its ongoing nature, with even player characters remaining in game, treated as simply being asleep. It would have been unnatural if just retainers disappeared while the player was logged out.

Retainers existed as living creatures that were part of the world. In which case, perhaps it was possible to have retainers hunt monsters and earn experience points while the player was logged out.

It was worth testing.

It wasn't as if Leah were trying to cheat. If the game's design allowed this sort of hunting, it was a legitimate way of playing the game. It wasn't an exploit or anything dodgy.

Leah called Kelli over to her. "Kelli, would you mind going out into the woods and hunting something...? Anything is fine. A small animal or something. I intend to go back to sleep. I should be back in around the same amount of time, so I'd prefer if you could be back by then."

"Got it, Boss. Can I take the others with me?" Kelli asked as she straightened out her outfit and equipment.

"Yes, of course. If necessary, get Hakuma and his brood to help... I guess you actually can't yet, since they can't leave the cave. Once the ants can move, I need to get them to widen the passages," Leah mused. She took a moment to think before she continued, "All right, I'll move Hakuma and Ginka back to the entrance of the cave before I go to sleep. I don't have any preferences in terms of prey, but...if you're going to get Hakuma and Ginka to help, probably best to get something on the larger side. But don't take any needless risks."

Kelli nodded. "Then...lemme think. I'll have Hakuma come with, and we'll go grab somethin' about the same size as the boar from earlier."

"That sounds fine," Leah said approvingly. Then she added with a start, "Oh, but wait. Could you leave Lemmy here?"

“What is it, Boss?” Lemmy asked, hearing her name.

“Lemmy, I wanted to ask you to do a different task.” Leah pulled up Lemmy’s skill acquisition screen and purchased the *Curing* skill from the *Leatherworking* skill tree. Leah then took the boar hide from her inventory and held it out to Lemmy while she explained, “I think you may have noticed it just now, but I just gave you a skill for *Leatherworking*. You should be able to picture what to do with this pelt, right?”

Lemmy looked at the unprocessed pelt for a moment, then nodded. “Oh... Yeah, Boss. I can. Never knew I had this in me...”

“Good. Are there any tools you need?” Leah said, clapping her hands together.

Lemmy tilted her head for a moment then shook her head. “I can think of a few things it’d be nice ta have...but I can do it without any of ’em. I think.”

There was clearly something both supernatural and a little bit cheat-y about skills. There wasn’t really a better word to call something that let people cure leather without any equipment. Not that Leah was complaining, it was quite a lifesaver in their current situation.

“I’d like you to work on it while I’m sleeping. You don’t have to finish by the time I wake up, so take your time and work carefully. Can you do it?” Leah asked as she handed the pelt over to Lemmy, who simply bobbed her head and took the pelt in hand. “Yes, Boss.”

Leah nodded in approval before she added, “Okay then, I’m going to go back to the wolf lair and move Hakuma and Ginka there, then come back here and go back to sleep. I’ll be asleep for about the same amount of time as earlier. Kelli, Lemmy, I’m counting on you two.”

“Yes’m,” Kelli answered with a quick nod.

Lemmy said with a newfound confidence, “Yup, leave it ta me, Boss.”

Leah logged out and returned to the game an hour later.

“Mornin’, Boss,” Lemmy greeted her when she woke up in game. Laid out on

the ground was a finely made boarskin rug.

Leah sat up and took a closer look at the rug. “Good morning, Lemmy. This rug...does it mean you’ve finished working with the pelt?”

“Yup, Boss.” Lemmy nodded. “I got it done pretty quick, so I was watchin’ ya sleep, Boss.”

Leah scrunched her features into a faint wince. “I must admit that’s a little embarrassing... Did you make any observations?”

“You breathe real quiet, no snorin’, and you got pretty long lashes.” Lemmy’s explanation made it clear that she really had just been watching Leah sleep. When a player was logged out, their character appeared so soundly asleep that even close scrutiny by NPCs didn’t dispel the illusion. It was an unexpected but useful bit of information.

“Are Kelli and the others still out hunting?” Leah asked as she finished examining the boarskin rug, to which Lemmy answered in the affirmative.

“Yes, Boss. Want me ta go check on ’em?”

Leah shook her head. “No, it’s fine. I’m sure they’ll be back soon. In the meantime...”

Leah needed to name the queen and teach Lemmy as much *Fire Magic* as her EXP reserves would allow so she could start defrosting the frozen queen. The queen herself was patiently waiting for the frost to finish melting. Leah felt bad for keeping the queen in her current state, but more importantly, she was starting to find the room’s temperature unbearably cold, particularly without Hakuma or Ginka there to serve as living blankets.

“Queen Ant. Your name is Sugaru,” Leah said simply.

While there was no movement in response, Leah felt the queen mentally nod. Leah had taken the name from the Japanese word “sugaru.” While the word’s origin was related to wasps rather than ants or hornets, it was a traditional Japanese word that was used as a compliment for women who had a thin waist and wasplike flair to their hips. It might not have been the most conventional compliment in the modern world, but it felt appropriate for the name of an insect queen.

Leah had memories of being called a sugaru maiden by old fossils—er, old gentlemen—who looked more like mummified museum displays than respected elders. They meant it as a compliment, but at the time, Leah remembered fighting back the urge to tell the old fogies that compliments that used obscure language not taught in schools were inappropriate to give to children.

She put those thoughts to the side and moved on to teaching Lemmy *Fire Magic*.

“This is your reward for your work with the hide, Lemmy,” Leah said with a smile.

“Wha...? Magic? I can use magic now...?” Lemmy murmured in awe.

“You did good work, Lemmy. Now, let’s make use of the spells you just learned,” Leah said, leading Lemmy by the hand to Sugaru.

“Start with the *Heat* spell to melt the ice holding Sugaru in place. Start gently, really gently,” Leah added as a kindly warning. She had given Lemmy *Magic Focus: Fire* along with the spells, so Lemmy should have a good innate grasp of how to control her spells, but this was, after all, Lemmy’s first attempt at using magic. The game’s emphasis on realism meant that friendly fire was a constant risk—most sources of damage made no distinction between friend and foe.

Lemmy nervously and cautiously began casting *Heat* on Sugaru. If this process went as planned, Leah intended to send Lemmy out to thaw the rooms full of frozen ants. Even accounting for the need to let Lemmy’s MP recover between each session, it should go a lot more quickly than waiting for the ants to defrost naturally.

“Oh, hey Boss. Looks like Kelli and them are back,” Lemmy said as she continued to cast *Heat*.

Leah was pretty sure even Lemmy couldn’t passively hear the noises that might come from the cave entrance, so Kelli must have shouted out her return upon entering the wolves’ chamber. “Lemmy, can you stay here with Sugaru and continue warming her up? I’ll go greet the triumphant hunters.”

Leah crawled through the narrow passages to the large chamber near the

entrance. She arrived to find Kelli and the others field dressing their catch. The animal appeared to be a tanuki... Though, given how far along they were in dressing the thing, it was hard for Leah to have any certainty of that fact.

“Hey Boss, we’re back. We bagged ourselves a nice big’un,” Kelli said proudly as Leah approached the group.

“Yes, this is a wonderful catch. Whereabouts did you find it? Did you have to go far?” Despite the questions, Leah already had a fair idea of how far they had traveled to catch the monstrous animal. They couldn’t have gone too far off.

“Nah, we finished ’im off pretty close by. Took us a bit ta find a good target. When we finally found ’im and started the chase, we ended up drivin’ ’im toward this cave. Wasn’t until just now that we finished ’im off... Did we keep ya waitin’?” Leah waved off Kelli’s apologetic explanation and opened up the hunting party’s skill screens. The status screen was the reason Leah had known the hunting party hadn’t gone too far from the cave.

When Leah had logged back in, the amount of EXP in her experience point pool hadn’t changed, despite the fact that Lemmy had clearly succeeded in working the boar’s pelt. From that, Leah had concluded that retainers could act independently even after the player had logged out and that it was possible for the player to give instructions for the retainers to follow. Furthermore, while the retainer’s actions produced results such as finished products, the results didn’t provide any experience points.

However, when Leah had been looking at the skill menu to purchase *Fire* spells for Lemmy, there had been a sudden bump in available experience points. Leah had wondered if it was simply a delayed EXP reward for Lemmy’s leatherworking, but the total amount she had acquired was clearly too large for succeeding at such a simple task. The fact that Kelli and the hunting party had returned a short while later had given Leah enough clues to guess that Kelli’s group had finished off their target a short distance from the cave entrance.

Although Kelli’s hunting party had been the ones to dispatch the target, it was Leah who had received the resultant experience points. The retinue system gave all of the acquired experience points to the master, giving the master the

option to spend that pooled experience on any retainer of their choice. When the master was logged out, the pool for storing the acquired EXP was absent, and no one received the experience points gained from any actions. This signaled the death of the dream of having an army of officially sanctioned EXP farming bots... Although, that idea had been a long shot to begin with.

However, even if the retainers couldn't be used to farm experience points, they were more than capable of earning gold while the player was absent. During Leah's most recent "nap," Lemmy and Kelli had both produced or secured items that could be sold for gold.

Leah also had the option of assigning particularly time-intensive tasks to her retinue before logging out and returning when the tasks were almost finished. It would allow Leah to avoid the most tedious aspects of those tasks and still grab the experience point rewards.

However, for Leah to actually take advantage of this system, it would require careful testing of how long various tasks would take, along with lots of trial and error to nail down the details. If she was going to spend that kind of time gaming the system, Leah preferred to spend it effectively commanding her retinue in hunting expeditions. Given her large retinue, Leah needed to earn a great deal of experience points. It wasn't absolutely necessary for Leah to focus entirely on efficiency, but she preferred to use her time effectively.

"Kelli, you've earned a reward for this tanuki. I had a chance to look at the hide Lemmy cured earlier, and she did a wonderful job on it. I gave Lemmy a reward for that work, but I think the rest of you have earned a reward for your efforts as well," Leah told the hunting party. She granted Kelli the *Lightning Magic* skill *Magic Focus: Lightning* and the spell *Thunderbolt*, and Riley the *Water Magic* skill *Magic Focus: Water* and the spells *Wash* and *Water Orb*.

"Wow... I finally have my own magic..." Kelli murmured to herself.

"B-Boss, I-I got three! Is-Isn't that too many?!" Riley frantically asked as she confirmed her new abilities.

"Well, I mean, one of them is *Wash*, so...I figured it'd be a little sad to only have the one. Now, Marion, here you are," Leah said. She gave Marion the new

spell *Ice Bullet*. Now Leah just needed to give Lemmy a spell like *Flare Arrow*, and that would give all four of the catgirls some form of attack magic.

“Thanks, Boss! Next time, I can take on the queen by myself...I think?” Marion said excitedly. Although Sugaru was a fair bit more powerful overall than Marion, the young catgirl might have a decent chance at victory if she had time to prepare the right battlefield and attacked first.

That was because Sugaru currently had no ranged attack abilities of her own. Leah had considered spending some EXP to give Sugaru some sort of attack ability when she bought *Flare Arrow* for Lemmy, but a quick glance at Sugaru’s build showed it wasn’t well suited for direct combat. Her combat style was basically tailored toward letting the ants under her command do the dirty work. Leah had only been able to quickly subdue Sugaru in that first encounter because they had already neutralized all of her army ants beforehand. That being the case, it would probably be more effective to provide Sugaru with a skill that strengthened her army.

Regardless, Leah needed more experience points. Once the ants were all thawed out, Leah intended to discuss upcoming plans with Sugaru. The lair needed to be expanded and renovated to make it more comfortable for humans and ice wolves, while Leah needed to teach Kelli, Riley, Lemmy, and Marion the very basics of civilized life—starting with basic etiquette and polite speech. Things were quickly piling up on Leah’s to-do list.

“Hey Boss, I was wonderin’ if ya could tell me more about the...uh...inbenterry? Or whatever you called it?” Kelli asked, breaking Leah’s reverie.

“Oh, right. I promised to teach you about it, didn’t I?” Leah was impressed that Kelli had remembered that conversation. Those points spent improving Kelli’s INT had been worth it. With that said, if Leah were being completely honest, she had only told Kelli she would explain how the inventory system worked later because she had wanted to avoid explaining it at all. Leah briefly considered brushing Kelli and the others off a second time, but she found it impossible to disappoint them when they were looking at her with eyes

practically sparkling with curiosity.

Leah decided she would describe how it felt to actually use her inventory functions. There probably wasn't much point in this little lecture, but if the catgirls weren't able to turn the description into a useful skill, at least it would be a reason for them to give up on the possibility.

"Let's see... I think I mentioned it before, but imagine that there's a large bag either right next to you or in a space above you. You imagine opening the bag with your hands, then put what you want to store into it. When it seems like it might be too large to store inside the bag, you imagine taking the bag and covering the thing with the open bag..." Leah explained as she placed the recently harvested tanuki hide into her inventory.

"When you cover the thing with your bag, it slides right over even if you don't try to force it down. While you can't see the bag, the opening is really big and flexible; it's all really useful." Leah found herself at a loss for more detailed words. Understandable, considering she was trying to describe a system that only existed in a video game and had no comparable example in reality. It made detailed description rather difficult.

There was a part of Leah that questioned why she was explaining a game mechanic in character, but when she considered it as an opportunity to bond with her retinue, it felt a little less absurd than it initially seemed.

"Vwoof!" Hakuma suddenly barked, interrupting Leah's lecture. Leah turned her gaze toward Hakuma and blinked in surprise. The meat in front of Hakuma had vanished.

"You...didn't eat it or anything...right? That was a bit too much to eat... Huh? What actually happened? Did you actually eat it?" Leah asked in confusion, to which Hakuma replied with an indignant bark, and the meat reappeared on the ground. Leah couldn't quite put aside her disbelief, but it was clear Hakuma had stored, then retrieved, items from his own inventory. However unlikely it seemed, an NPC—or rather an ice wolf, a creature that would typically be categorized as a monster—had just made use of the inventory game mechanic.

"I got it! Look!" Marion was next with a triumphant cry, making a white stick, presumably one of the tanuki's bones, disappear then reappear. Leah struggled

to process what she was seeing, but if she had to force herself into accepting the reality she was witnessing, it made perfect sense for Marion to be able to do something that even a monster could manage. After all, the tutorial had gone out of its way to point out that there was nothing in the game's code that distinguished between NPCs and monsters.

While Leah was still recovering from the staggering revelation that NPCs had access to the inventory system, she also felt a newly growing sense of excitement and anticipation. It was commonly accepted wisdom that inventory systems were solely meant for players. Yet, no one had actually proved that was the case.

When players had used the inventory system during the closed beta, NPCs who witnessed the action had all reacted with surprise. "I don't know anyone who can use that sort of magic," all of the NPCs had said in awe. As a result, the playerbase had concluded that only players had access to the inventory system, that it was a special system designed specifically for players. Their experiences had backed up this conclusion: no player encountered any NPCs capable of using the inventory system during the entire closed beta.

Yet absence of evidence wasn't evidence of absence. Just because no one knew of NPCs that used the inventory system, that didn't rule out the existence of NPCs who had that ability.

The idea that the inventory system was limited to players wasn't accepted wisdom for just the players. The NPCs of the world believed the same thing. That had helped cement the idea that the inventory system was a game system made exclusively for players. Kelli, Riley, Lemmy, Marion, even Hakuma were different. None of them had been educated on what passed for common knowledge in the world. That was why they had been interested in Leah's use of the inventory and wanted to use it themselves.

The shock of this discovery suddenly forced Leah to rethink all of her initial assumptions. Specific words from the tutorial echoed in her head. It was a phrase the tutorial AI had repeated ad nauseam: "The only difference in the system between PCs and NPCs is whether they receive system messages."

Leah had interpreted the phrase as a moral message, a way to keep players from mistreating NPCs. That hadn't been the intention behind the message at all. The message had been meant literally. NPCs and monsters were fully capable of doing anything a player could do.

Even as Leah was processing her shock, Marion and Hakuma were explaining how to use the inventory with a certain smug triumph.

"Hmm... I can almost grasp it...but there's something that's just out of reach... It's frustrating," Kelli said with a huff.

Riley added with an exasperated sigh, "I have no idea what y'all are tryin' ta say. Can ya explain it again?"

Leah observed her retainers, and she found herself recovering from her discovery, curiosity starting to override the shock.

Hakuma and Marion had been able to use the inventory system. Given that they were able to do so after hearing Leah's less-than-comprehensive explanation, the act of accessing their inventory wasn't a mental mystery to them. Then why were Kelli and Riley struggling to do the same thing? Hakuma appeared to be trying to teach Ginka to access her inventory, but Leah felt a mix of confusion and irritation emanating from Ginka. The wolf pups had long since lost interest in the lesson and were off playing with the tanuki bones. Whatever bits of flesh had been clinging to the bones had been cleanly nibbled off by the playing pups.

Since Hakuma and Marion had been able to access their own inventories, there was a good chance that all NPCs could use the inventory system. Leah wasn't ready to declare that all characters could use it right here and right now, but she considered what might be different between the two that had learned to use the inventory system and the three that were struggling.

A possibility flashed in Leah's mind, and she immediately brought up the ability scores of her retainers. The scores backed her initial intuition. It appeared that the ability to access one's inventory was dependent on how well they could understand abstract concepts. The key difference between the two camps was in their INT scores. Currently, Hakuma and Marion had the same INT

score, tied for the highest INT score in the group. Leah was next on the list, but she didn't count for the sake of this testing. Kelli was next on the list, followed a bit lower down by Riley, Lemmy, Ginka, and lastly Sugaru.

"Kelli, can I borrow you for a moment?" Leah asked as she approached her.

Kelli looked glumly apologetic as she replied, "Sorry, Boss... You went outta your way ta explain and yet..."

Leah gently shook her head. "No, don't worry about it. Let me try giving you a little help."

Since Leah was a player, she couldn't participate in the testing, so she decided to start by increasing Kelli's INT to match Leah's before encouraging Kelli to try again. "There, give it another try. How about now? Do you think you can do it?"

Kelli furrowed her brow in concentration. "Umm...maybe better than earlier...but...I think I'm gettin' closer...but somethin's missin'..."

Leah was confident she was at least on the right track, as the INT boost had helped Kelli improve her grasp of the concept. Leah continued to boost Kelli's INT, raising it to the same score as Marion and Hakuma. And then...

"OH! Oh! I got it! It's like this! I got it, Boss!" Kelli said excitedly, demonstrating her newfound ability to access her hidden inventory.

Leah smiled in approval. "Good, congratulations! I'm glad I took the time to teach you. Just need to help Riley and Ginka now. Come on over, you two." She was certain of it now. High INT enabled NPCs to access the inventory system. Or at least, it was one of the prerequisites. Were it the only requirement, there would be at least some NPCs out there that naturally met that prerequisite, and yet no one had ever reported any NPCs with inventories out in the wild. That meant either the NPCs with the ability were all carefully hiding it, or there was another requirement that had to be met.

Leah intended to probe and prod high-INT NPCs when she encountered them to test the former hypothesis, but if the latter hypothesis was true, the obvious prerequisites were either being a retainer to a player character or being taught how to do so by a character capable of using their inventory.

She wondered if this had something to do with the fact that between the

closed beta and the open beta, the developers had changed the tutorial to make it impossible to skip. The tutorial included an explanation of how to access and use the player's inventory. While the developers hadn't said anything about the tutorial, they may have made the tutorial mandatory because there were players in a previous test that skipped it and weren't able to access their inventory.

That would mean the prerequisite of being taught how to access one's inventory applied equally to PCs and NPCs alike. Just like the AI's warning that receiving system messages was the only distinction between PCs and NPCs. Whatever the case, there wasn't much else Leah could do to test this hypothesis.

Leah had Hakuma store the tanuki meat in his inventory, then told him and Ginka to eat a meal, before Leah and the catgirls in her retinue crawled on their hands and knees back to the ant's nest section of the cave. Once they returned to the queen's chamber (temporary name), they found Sugaru thawed out and waiting with Lemmy for the group to arrive. Leah watched Marion show off her inventory skill to Lemmy out of the corner of her eye as she spent experience points on Lemmy's and Sugaru's INT scores.

"Why don't you give it a try, Lemmy? Marion? Would you mind teaching Lemmy how to access her inventory?" Leah asked. It was a perfect opportunity to see if Lemmy could learn how to access her inventory from Marion's explanation. At first Lemmy stared blankly at Marion, but after seeing Marion demonstrate storing then retrieving items from her inventory, Lemmy was soon able to access her own inventory.

Leah was now pretty sure that being taught how to access the inventory system was a key prerequisite; more specifically, a character might actually have to see the system in action before they could fully access it. But if those were the only prerequisites, even if the teacher wasn't intentionally teaching the learner how to access the system, the learner should be able to pick up on the system. There was still the possibility that there needed to be a conscious effort by the teacher to pass the skill on to the other party. It might also be necessary for the student to be making an effort to learn the skill.

Leah hadn't yet been able to test those two theories, but Sugaru's continued lack of success as she tried to access her inventory lent some credibility to at least one of those theories. That might stem from the fact that she had only told Marion to teach Lemmy. Marion herself didn't appear as though she were demonstrating with an eye toward teaching the skill to Sugaru.

Leah decided to put the theory to a more specific test and approached Lemmy. "Lemmy, now that you've learned how to use your inventory, can you show Sugaru how to do it? Make sure you demonstrate to her how to do it, all right?"

"Got it, Boss," Lemmy said, then began to show Sugaru how to use her inventory. If this allowed Sugaru to use her inventory, it would essentially prove Leah's current theory about the prerequisites for NPCs learning to use the inventory system.

Leah played around with Sugaru's INT score as she belatedly looked up Sugaru's skill set. There were quite a few skills she hadn't seen before. Leah had to admit she was a little curious about the skills that were definitely not intended for players, like *Selective Birth* and *Multiple Births*, but what drew Leah's attention the most were the skills that began with *Enhance Retinue: STR*.

At the moment they were only available skills and Sugaru hadn't actually acquired them, but if she had possessed *Enhance Retinue: MND* before Leah's party had encountered their nest, the ants would have probably put up a much better fight... Leah wasn't even sure if she would have been able to win.

Another point that caught Leah's attention was that the *Enhance Retinue* skills weren't stand-alone skills, but part of the *Control* skill tree. Since they were on a standard skill tree, the *Enhance Retinue* skills were probably available to anyone with the *Control* skill so long as they met the necessary prerequisites. The question was just what those prerequisites actually were.

These were definitely skills that Leah wanted to add to her arsenal. By allowing her to boost her retinue's abilities, the *Enhance Retinue* skills would let her conserve experience points, since she wouldn't have to go in and spend experience points increasing each retainer's ability scores individually.

The issue for Leah at the moment was that Sugaru possessed the *Retainer* skill

despite having no *Enchantment* spells. That raised the strong possibility that the species trait for queen ants was that they were able to acquire skills on the *Control* tree without meeting the standard prerequisites. If that was the case, Sugaru had access to *Enhance Retinue* without the need to meet any prerequisites, and her skill set gave Leah no clues on how to unlock the skills for her own use.

Turning back to the basics, Leah started her theorycrafting with the assumption that, like *Retainer*, the *Enhance Retinue* skills were linked to some sort of magic skill. The most likely candidate in that case was *Bestowal Magic*. *Bestowal* itself was a skill tree that initially only had the base skill, and players in the closed beta had teased out the prerequisites for acquiring new spells in the line.

The prerequisites were as follows:

Bestowal and *Fire Magic* unlocked *Bestow STR*.

Bestowal and *Water Magic* unlocked *Bestow MND*.

Bestowal and *Wind Magic* unlocked *Bestow AGI (Agility)*.

Bestowal and *Earth Magic* unlocked *Bestow VIT*.

Bestowal and *Lightning Magic* unlocked *Bestow DEX (Dexterity)*.

Bestowal and *Ice Magic* unlocked *Bestow INT*.

It seemed likely that acquiring these *Bestowal* spells would unlock the corresponding *Enhance Retinue* skills. Even if her theory was wrong, the spells were still useful for Leah, given that she intended, for the moment, to avoid wading into the fray herself. *Bestowal* spells were single-target spells that temporarily strengthened an ability score. They could be cast on the caster herself, but they could also be cast on any target that was within visual range. About the only downside to testing this hypothesis was the fact that learning all of the necessary skills to unlock the *Bestowal* spells required a vast amount of EXP.

Since Leah had given all of the catgirls an attack spell and increased their INT

to allow them to access their inventories, she only had 144 EXP left in reserve. The base *Bestowal* skill cost 20 points, the cheapest elemental spell cost another 20 points per spell, the specific *Bestow X* spells cost 20 points apiece, and finally, each *Enhance Retinue* skill cost 40 points for a total of 100 points per attribute. This meant Leah only had enough experience points to obtain one of the *Enhance Retinue* skills.

In which case, she needed to choose the one that provided the most benefit to her current retinue. If she wanted to prioritize safety for herself and her retinue, VIT would be the ability to choose. The game measured health in life points (LP), which were calculated using the character's VIT score plus the higher of the character's STR or AGI. That meant regardless of the character, more VIT meant more LP. VIT also impacted the character's defenses against physical damage, making the character harder to kill.

With all of that said, in all of the fights up to this point, Leah had never seen any of her retainers actually take any damage. About the only time she'd seen an attack hit any of them was when she first encountered them. No, Leah decided, that first encounter didn't count. She was sure she'd already filed the whole thing as an aberration in her own mind. That meant her retainers hadn't taken any damage yet. She wasn't wrong in her observation that she hadn't seen any of her retainers get hit. Which meant...AGI made the most sense. It was the ability score that had the highest synergy with the fighting styles of both the catgirls and the ice wolves.

Leah chose the spell *Cutting Wind* from *Wind Magic*. She had debated between it and *Dry*, but she couldn't figure out how *Dry* would improve the tactical flexibility of her team, so decided to skip it for the time being.

Next she purchased *Bestow AGI* from the *Bestowal* school. She then checked the *Control* tree—and as she had expected, *Enhance Retinue: AGI* was available to learn.

"Hmm. I guess this means I'll have to use all of the experience points we gain on myself until I can unlock each version of this skill," Leah mused as she mentally did the math. Unlocking all of the *Bestowal* spells and the associated *Enhance Retinue* skills was going to take another 300 experience points. Leah's

eyes briefly gazed off into the distance at that thought. There was a long road ahead for her.

“Anyway, so what does *Enhance Retinue: AGI* actually do...”

The description of the skill said it added one percent of the skillholder’s AGI score to each member of the skillholder’s retinue.

“Whoa! It’s a passive skill?! Then it looks like it’ll even stack with *Bestow AGI*! Oh, wait...does that mean...” If the skill’s description was accurate and there were no restrictions on stacking, if Sugaru also took *Enhance Retinue: AGI*, the bonus that applied to all of Sugaru’s ants would be one percent of Sugaru’s AGI score after adding one percent of Leah’s AGI score to it.

The peculiar set of circumstances of a character with *Retainer* adding another character with *Retainer* to her retinue was probably the mother of all edge cases, but if Leah and Sugaru continued to stack enhancement skills of the same type, depending upon Leah’s base ability scores, there was a good chance the ants would become the core of her fighting strength.

“I wish I’d had a chance to see if I get experience points from the ants before committing to this idea,” Leah said with a sigh. “I mean, most of them were frozen, but still...”

The *Retainer* skill’s standard experience pooling would send all of the experience gained by the ants to the queen, but since any experience gained by the queen would go to Leah, the end result in terms of EXP gain shouldn’t be any different than if the ants were direct members of Leah’s retinue...at least in theory.

Either way, it was going to take a while longer for all the ants to finish thawing, and there was no way for Leah to test her theory on experience points until that was finished. For the moment, Leah spent the EXP to buy *Enhance Retinue: AGI* for Sugaru. The queen, who had been playing around with her inventory, turned her attention to Leah. Leah nodded in response.

Leah was now down to a mere 4 experience points.

Going out and farming more experience points was of the utmost importance, but Leah needed to make sure she finished securing her most recent gains. The

first order of business was to thaw out the ants, but first Kelli and the other catgirls needed to rest. The catgirls had remained active even when Leah had logged out to get a few hours of downtime.

Leah called the four over to her and started in a gentle voice, “Kelli, Riley, Lemmy, Marion. You all did wonderfully today. It’s time you got some rest. You’ve been awake for quite a while, haven’t you?”

“No, we don’t need ta—” Kelli started to say, before Leah cut her off in a firmer tone of voice.

“It’s not good to skimp on sleep. It prevents you from performing at your best. Don’t worry, I’ll have plenty for you to do when you wake up, so take this chance to get some rest.” Fortunately, the boarskin rug Lemmy had made lay in the middle of the room. Leah made the four lay down upon the rug with a gentle smile backed by forceful, steely determination in her eyes, waited for them to fall asleep, then moved with Sugaru to the adjacent chamber.

Rows of half-frozen ants were stirring as Leah and Sugaru entered the room. The ants near the entrance who had been the first to be frozen by Marion’s spell looked about ready to start moving around. The queen guided them to a room where the ants hadn’t been exposed to the spell, one of the rooms that Leah and her party had avoided in their initial assault on the nest.

The moment they entered the room, dozens of compound eyes turned to look at Leah. “Phwoo,” Leah muttered in shock under her breath as she looked over the teeming multitude. A heartbeat later, the ants performed a perfectly coordinated bow, kneeling to Leah. While none of these ants were Leah’s direct retainers, they were still subject to Leah’s empathic connection and would loyally follow her orders.

“Oh, I’m sorry about that. You just caught me by surprise. You can look at me if you’d like. I’m your queen’s boss. I’m glad to have you at my side,” Leah said as she examined the ants. During the hive assault Leah had been so caught up barreling through the ranks of ants with *Charm* and *Chill* barrages that she hadn’t gotten a good look at them, but now that she had the time, she noticed several distinct types among them. Infantry ants were just the tip of the

iceberg.

Since Leah was unable to look at the character menus of the ants directly, she asked Sugu for details, an effort that ran headlong into a communication barrier. Leah was able to understand in broad strokes what the retainer was trying to get across, but Sugu wasn't able to tell her the specific names of each ant type. As an attempt to get around those limitations, Leah took Sugu's suggestion to check the queen ant's skill list again. The only relevant skill Leah saw on Sugu's skill list was *Selective Birth*. This wasn't a skill within some other skill tree, but a skill tree of its own.

The tree appeared designed exclusively for the vespid queen, and the individual skills had names like *Infantry*, and allowed the queen to give birth to an ant of that type. Ants were evidently born into distinct subtypes rather than developing those traits later. In addition to *Infantry*, the tree contained skills named *Sapper* and *Dragoon*. The ants she saw that were a different color from the common infantry ants were probably created using the *Sapper* skill and were likely called engineer ants, so what would *Dragoon* create? What would they use as their mounts? The answer turned out to be a bit anticlimactic: they were simply a more powerful version of an infantry ant. Dragoons in this case were more like an ant version of a knight than mounted infantry.

However, the difference in combat ability between the two types of ants seemed to be at least the same as a common human foot soldier and mounted cavalry. There was a trade-off in that they required greater LP and MP (mana points) to birth.

In any case, Leah was more interested in the engineer ants. It seemed reasonable to assume they were the ones who had been responsible for excavating this nest and had some sort of skill that allowed them to create the smooth-walled tunnels that linked the chambers together.

Rather than continue to speculate, Leah called an engineer ant over to her and had the ant demonstrate her digging skills. The engineer ant curled her body upward and pushed her thorax toward the front before releasing a powerful stream of pungent liquid of some sort. There are ants that have similar organs in the real world, but where those ants usually sprayed their

target with venom or formic acid, the engineer ant's liquid began to melt the stone. Any acid that melted stone this quickly would do massive damage to living flesh. It seemed a little excessive for ants that were meant to be sappers.

The answer to that question of game balance was rather more mundane than Leah expected. The acid simply didn't work on anything other than stone. Some of the acid had spattered on some nearby ants, but it had no effect on their exoskeletons. Leah steeled herself and cautiously touched the acid, and her shoulders unknotted when she felt no sting or pain. It was a conveniently magical acid.

The queen ant clarified that the acid worked on materials other than simple stone. When Leah translated what Sugaru tried to tell her into game mechanics terms, it seemed that basically the acid was effective on low-rank or common minerals. Apparently calcium counted as a common mineral; according to Sugaru, the acid had been used to melt human bones in the past.

Then again, there were probably things like dragon bones in this world, meaning that simply being made of calcium might not be enough to make it vulnerable to this acid. If anything, for organic materials like bones, it was more likely that the strength of the creature it came from, not the type of mineral it was made of, determined its strength. Though, on reconsideration, Leah wasn't at all certain dragon bones would be made of something as mundane as calcium.

"It didn't do anything to me when I touched it either," she mused, rubbing the acid between her index finger and thumb. Leah was a superior life-form to the engineer ant, and by the game world's logic, she was immune to this acid. The in-game "rank" of a character seemed to scale with the amount of experience points invested into that character. While Leah was now quite powerful, it was more than possible that a freshly rolled character was at risk of having their equipment or bones melted by the engineer's acid.

For a player starting the game as a skeleton, the engineer ant might very well be the most frightening thing in existence. Given that there were countless caves a skeleton could spawn in, and that these ants lived in these random caves—a player that had been completely abandoned by luck and cursed by the RNG gods might very well find themselves spawning into a cave crawling with

engineer ants.

Still, the acid seemed more than enough to melt the stone that made up the cavern system, so Leah quickly put the engineer ants to the task of digging a passage to connect the wolves' lair to the queen's chamber. The initial plan had been to have the engineer ants widen all of the tunnels on the route Leah's party used to get to the queen's chamber, but the direct route turned out to be shorter. There were currently ten engineer ants that were capable of work, so Leah assigned all of them to the immediate task of tunneling. Once the remaining engineers thawed out, she intended to assign them to dig a tunnel linking the ant nest to the old Mountain Cat lair.

Once the engineers had gotten to work, Leah took the time to review Sugaru's *Selective Birth* tree. Considering the name of the skill and the type names, it was likely that there were more skills beyond the basic *Infantry*, *Sapper*, and *Dragoon*. By fulfilling the right prerequisites Leah suspected there were other types, like *Cannoneer*, waiting to be unlocked.

Leah stroked her chin as she looked over the list and mused, "It's like they dropped in a miniature strategy game with this tree..." Having strategy game aspects to play with sounded like fun, but that also meant she had to learn the rules of that game.

Currently, there were five infantry ants and one dragoon ant available to deploy. Leah formed them into a six-ant squad, with the dragoon as the squad leader, then sent them off to serve as a picket near the cave. Leah planned to make this six-ant squad the minimum viable unit size for the ants and deploy them as necessary on a squad-by-squad basis.

Leah would then be able to do a cost-benefit analysis on each squad and use that as the base set of assumptions on how to play this strategy game. While the first squad was composed almost entirely of infantry ants out of necessity, she intended to form additional squads with a balanced combination of ants from each category.

Still, even if she was going to operate the ant colony as an army, unless she was going to start a war with one of the Six Kingdoms, they weren't going to be

fighting organized armies but smaller groups made of a handful of individuals.

Leah turned her attention back to Sugaru herself before asking, “How do you handle spending experience points on your retainers, Sugaru?” Sugaru hadn’t had enough experience points pooled to be able to properly distribute them among her nest of several hundred ants. How had she actually dealt with the issue of training them?

The answer was simple. The thought hadn’t even occurred to Sugaru. It seemed that to her the various types of worker ants were little better than disposable servants. There was nothing wrong with this attitude; if anything, from Leah’s point of view, an army of continually disposable units was a remarkable asset. It evidently only cost Sugaru LP and MP to birth new ants, which was like being able to farm an army using a plot of land. The only fertilizer Leah needed to provide were potions for Sugaru. Leah could hardly contain her excitement as she felt a new world of possibilities open up before her.

“They may be disposable, but what happens to an ant when it dies? Is there a penalty of some sort? Like, do you lose strength—specifically, do you lose any experience points, or even the character itself?” Leah asked, only to receive a mental shrug from Sugaru. The queen ant’s grasp of the subject was pretty nebulous. It seemed she did try to collect any corpses that she could, but according to Sugaru, the gathered bodies always vanished by the time she went to check on them. As for reviving any dead ants, she had no information on that subject, given her distinct lack of skills that were capable of doing anything of the kind.

Just going by the numbers, it likely made more sense to birth new worker ants than spend any resources to revive dead ones. Leah got the distinct impression that the thought of reviving dead ants had never even occurred to Sugaru. Furthermore, Sugaru didn’t even possess a precise grasp on the number of ants in her colony. Leah had never heard of an army that could function without an idea of the available numbers, but given how easy it was for Sugaru to produce new workers, she only needed a general sense of the forces that were quite literally at her disposal. The life of an individual ant was a rounding error.

This contrasted sharply with Kelli and the catgirls or Hakuma and the ice

wolves. Partly because each of them were many orders of magnitude more powerful than any given ant, but also because she had no intention of treating named retainers as cannon fodder. She needed to find some method of resurrecting fallen retainers in case of the unthinkable. However, as far as Leah was aware, no one had, as of yet, discovered any skill with that sort of power.

For now, the priority was to recover and expand the forces available to her. At the very least, she wanted Sugaru to continue producing soldiers to match the natural regeneration rate of her LP and MP.

Leah nodded and began giving instructions to Sugaru. “Well! Let’s avoid wasting your LP and MP recovery and start by adding some more engineers to our ranks. There’s a whole heap of things that we need done, and it’s not like they’re defenseless either.” She then paused and tilted her head as she asked, “Do you have a room you use for birthing new ants? I know Kelli and the girls are taking up your usual chamber.”

Sugaru’s answer was straightforward: since the cave only had allies within it, there was no need to restrict her egg-laying to a single room. Leah kept an eye on Sugaru’s skill status as she watched her lay new engineer eggs. Engineers weren’t particularly expensive to create, and Sugaru was able to birth several eggs without any side effects.

“I didn’t realize you gave birth through eggs. Huh, one’s already hatching,” Leah observed with a faint note of surprise. She had initially assumed Sugaru had live births because she hadn’t seen any signs of eggs in the ant’s nest. Instead, it seems she hadn’t seen any sign of eggs because they didn’t stay eggs for very long. The rubbery membranes of the eggs ripped open and each produced a single burnt-brown engineer ant.

The five newly born engineer ants took little time to gather their bearings, immediately lining up at attention in front of Leah. They already appeared to possess full awareness of their surroundings. That, or there was a strong hierarchical control that made up for any deficiencies on the part of the individual ant’s sense of self. Either way, the fact that they were able to function so quickly after hatching suggested the ants shared the quick maturation of the insect monsters from a popular monster-training game.

“If I needed infantry ants right now, could you give birth to them immediately? Is there any sort of cooldown timer on birthing different types of ants?” At Leah’s query, Sugaru answered in rather general terms that she could birth new infantry ants immediately, but she needed some time before she could give birth to engineers again. There was no theoretical limit on how many she could give birth to at any one time, which meant that, practically speaking, the limits were determined by Sugaru’s maximum LP and MP pools. Using the current situation as an example, Sugaru further elaborated that she could immediately use *Infantry* to birth infantry ants after birthing engineering ants with *Sapper*, but then the cooldown timer for *Sapper* wouldn’t start until *Infantry* had finished its cooldown.

This functioned the same way as the casting delay system used for magic. Each spell in the game had a casting delay cooldown, but only the most recently used spell’s cooldown recovered at any given moment. For example, if *Flare Arrow* and *Ice Bullet* both had a casting delay of five seconds, and a character cast *Ice Bullet* immediately after casting *Flare Arrow*, each spell would be locked behind a five-second timer. However, only *Ice Bullet*, the last spell cast in the sequence, would count down, while *Flare Arrow*’s casting delay remained locked at five seconds until *Ice Bullet* finished its cooldown.

It was possible for a character to chain together a series of different spells to rapidly cast a large number of spells at once, but the larger the chained volley, the longer it took for the character to be able to chain-cast spells again. The system was a bit convoluted, but according to the developers, it was meant to keep spellcasters from dominating by using long-range firepower while retaining their ability to deal with situations that required quick access to burst damage.

Evidently the same system had been reused for the queen ant’s *Selective Birth* skill as well. Did that mean a queen could do a rapid burst of births in emergencies? That didn’t feel particularly logical, but that was sometimes the nature of game mechanics.

Leah had taken much longer than usual to work out that *Selective Birth* used the same cooldown mechanics as spellcasting. That was due to the fact that

Sugaru was only able to communicate using the empathic connection to retainers that allowed Leah to understand her retainers' emotions in a general sense.

Leah crossed her arms and frowned, muttering to herself, "It's really quite inconvenient to have to play twenty questions to get at an answer when a direct question could arrive there in a single exchange. Hmm... There's got to be a better way...like talking to my retainer in my head or something... It'd be even better if we could communicate over long distances...a telepathic instead of just an empathic bond... Or a long-range...messenger service... Hmm, wait a second."

The fact that Kelli and all the other retainers had learned to access the inventory system proved the tutorial's statement that there were almost no differences between player characters and NPCs in the game's systems. In which case...

"Could I add my retainer...to my friends list...and just use the chat system to talk?" Leah mused as she considered the possibility. It was worth trying, at least.

Leah immediately put the theory to the test, using Sugaru as her guinea pig. "Sugaru, let's register as friends," she said, without bothering to couch it in non-system terms. Based on the emotions she felt from Sugaru, the queen would be blinking at Leah in confusion if she had eyelids. It was time to try a different tack.

First, she needed to figure out how to even register a character as a friend using mental control. Was it just a matter of becoming friends with a character? But then, how did the system define friendship? Just how do you go about becoming friends in the first place? Leah had to admit she hadn't the first clue how to do so.

If there was no difference between player characters and NPCs in the system, then the most natural thing would be to try to register an NPC as a friend in the same way players would add one another to their friends lists. However, Leah hadn't added anyone to her friends list during the closed beta. Since all of the

character data was going to be deleted after the test and there was simply so much to explore, Leah had spent her time in the closed beta letting her curiosity guide her, without interference from such silly things as rhyme or reason. It was a playstyle that left her soloing most of the time. As for the current open beta, Leah had spawned in a random cave in monster country—she'd yet to meet another player.

It was just her playstyle that kept her away from other players... There were *definitely* no other reasons Leah had no friends...in game, that was.

Leah opened the help menu and sighed. "Let's see... How to add friends...I guess." A search immediately brought up an entry in the User's Manual.

Friend Registration:

You must have a friend card to send a friend request. Friend cards are created by opening your inventory and taking out a friend card. Your inventory will always contain a friend card item, and retrieving it from your inventory will create a new friend card. The friend card in your inventory will be unaffected.

Once you have created a friend card, give it to the person you wish to add as a friend and have them place the card in their inventory. Once the card is stored in the recipient's inventory, you will be registered as friends.

If you wish to remove someone from your friends list, simply take their friend card from your inventory and rip it up.

Even if you remove someone from your friends list, you can reregister them as a friend by completing a new friend request.

"Aha, interesting..." Leah said after reading the entry. The friend registration system was essentially modeled on Japan's tradition of exchanging business cards. Well, it wasn't so much an exchange since only one character needed to

give a card to another to complete the registration.

Leah checked her inventory and found the friend card item. When accessed through the system menu, the inventory would provide a list of items within it, but when attempting to retrieve items from the inventory without the system menu, the user had to have a clear mental image of the item they wanted to retrieve. Even if there were other NPCs capable of accessing the inventory system, it was impossible for that NPC to picture a friend card. This meant that for all practical purposes, only players had access to the friend system.

Leah handed the friend card she retrieved from her inventory to Sugaru and directed the queen to place it in her inventory.

<<Character [Sugaru] has been added to your friends list.>>

The system message chirped a moment later. The friend registration had gone through without a hitch. Leah had to wonder why the game was designed to make it possible to register NPCs as friends. Did the developers just think that anyone who'd get immersed in a game of this type wouldn't know any real players to add as friends? Just remarkable! Great work! Love you!

"Umm... How's friend chat supposed to work again...? Wait... I've never used it... Oh, like this."

<Sugaru, can you hear me?> Leah thought the words toward the queen. Sugaru twitched a moment later in surprise. <You should be able to do the same thing with me, Sugaru. Try it? Imagine my name in your mind and then try speaking to that image.>

<BossBossBossBoss... Oh, did I do it? Is this right?>

Leah heard the voice in her head after a few heartbeats and clapped before responding through friend chat. <Yes! You got it! This will let us talk no matter how far apart we are. Since there's no need to make any noise, it's also great when we're trying to remain hidden.>

◆ Sugaru ◆



How did Sugaru seem to be able to communicate so articulately when Kelli and the girls were still figuring out formal speech? Then again, Sugaru wasn't technically *speaking* per se, but rather the game's interpretation of Sugaru's thoughts were being presented as this style of speech and voice.

Leah reveled in this particular discovery, as the ability to communicate with her retinue over friend chat dramatically increased the options available to her and her retinue. The successes in all of these tests also planted the seed of a new theory in Leah's mind. If player characters and NPCs were treated so equally by the game systems as to allow NPCs to use systems that were ordinarily reserved for players, could Leah also tame players like she had the NPCs in her retinue?

If it was, in fact, possible, she would be able to gather all of the experience points gained by those players to her own personal pool. It's as though the developers *wanted* Leah to play a queen bee.

Since players controlled their characters in game by moving their own bodies, in this game, like many other VR services, the developers had made it difficult for players' avatars to diverge significantly from their own physical appearance and sex. Difficult, but not impossible. Which was why there were always a certain number of men who played female characters and women who played male characters.

Taming other players would take the *Retainer* system to an entirely different level. Not only would the tamed PCs bring her gold and items, but Leah could force them to farm experience points for her like good little worker bees. Powerleveling was far too tame a word for that. It would be the ultimate avatar of the accumulated greed and exploitative social dynamics of MMORPGs since the inception of the genre.

However, given that this game was a product provided as a service to paying customers, it would be financial suicide for the developers to completely ignore the free will of users. If a player was about to get tamed by someone, the system was probably going to spit out a warning message of some sort, even if there was an overwhelming gap in power that prevented the player from resisting the taming attempt. That was probably the major difference between

taming players and NPCs. It was possible the NPCs were receiving that sort of warning as well, but since they couldn't actually see or respond to system messages, they were unable to select the option to reject the taming.

Either way, any attempt to put this theory to the test would reveal the existence of the *Retainer* skill to the target player. That meant any test would have to be with a player she thoroughly trusted. Furthermore, that player needed to be willing to accept the possibility of being tamed by Leah.

Unfortunately Leah had no player acquaintances that met those requirements—or any player acquaintances at all in this game. That might have been a problem for someone else, but it was no longer an active concern for Leah. Even if she encountered obstacles too difficult to deal with solo, she had Kelli and the others to fall back on. In fact, if Leah invested enough experience points boosting their INT, there was a good chance they were going to be smarter and more organized in a fight.

Leah had found a truly wonderful system, one that felt tailored to her personality and playstyle. She couldn't help but feel a great deal of appreciation toward the development team. *Love you all!*

Once Kelli and the others wake up, I'll teach them how to speak properly. Once I get enough experience points for it, I'm going to give them all a nice INT boost, so that unlike in most stories, my Four Catgirls of the Apocalypse are going to be super smart AND capable. Heh heh... So much to look forward to!

For the time being, Leah would wait for the ants to finish thawing out before sending them out to secure the woodlands around the cave and earn experience points. Once Sugaru's LP and MP regenerated, they would increase the number of hunting parties so that both Leah and Sugaru could obtain all of the *Enhance Retainer* skills...and then, finally, set off to fully conquer these woods.

Chapter 4: Launch Day

While there were some players who, like Leah, rolled up a character from one of the civilized races and still chose to start in the spawn areas intended for monstrous ones, they were a tiny and rare minority. The vast majority of players created a character from one of the civilized races and then started the game in one of the cities in the Six Kingdoms.

And among those normal players was a man named Wayne. He, like Leah, was a veteran of the closed beta and had started the game enthusiastically intending to get a jump on other players. Unfortunately that enthusiasm soon ran face-first into the unanticipated wall of earning enough money in the opening stages of the game. About the only things he could safely hunt with his starting equipment were the wild rabbits that spawned in the grasslands, a problem exacerbated by the fact that he was playing solo.

Wayne clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Tch. Three straight days down the drain hunting rabbits...” Those three days had been monotonous tests of patience, but they hadn’t been in vain, as they freed him from the lowly ranks of characters stuck wearing starting equipment in all of their equipment slots.

The piles and piles of rabbit corpses he’d sold to the town’s merchants had lowered the value of rabbit leather, and Wayne was now the proud owner of a full set of rabbit-leather armor. The default shortsword, which was of such low quality that he couldn’t even identify the mystery metal used in its construction, was now just an unpleasant memory, replaced by a cast-iron sword with better offensive stats.

It was still visibly a weapon of low quality, being a mass-produced piece made of poorly cast iron, but with the price of iron itself on the rise, Wayne had settled for a blade he could afford today over waiting and paying through the nose for something that was, at best, a minimal upgrade in quality. Gossip that

Wayne had picked up around town spoke of the local iron mine getting gobbled up by the monster realms, now producing more new monsters than iron ore.

Though frustrating, it was a reasonable way to constrain the quality of weapons available at a starting town. Since the town was populated by intelligent AI-driven NPCs who were prone to ignoring things like developer intent when given enough material, Wayne figured it was easier for the devs to restrict the supply of quality weapons by simply adjusting the availability of raw materials. Without an iron shortage, it was only a matter of time before the town's artisans flooded the market with the highest-quality iron items the game system was capable of producing, crashing the price of high-end equipment in a starter town.

That would wreak havoc on game balance by allowing starting characters to purchase and equip high-quality equipment early in their careers, while freezing out any player attempts at breaking into the crafted goods market. Cutting off the supply of iron ore was a simple and effective way to stop that from happening. It also meant that at some point the developers would be able to offer a quest to retake those iron mines, something that would be a major undertaking that would probably be posted on the game's official website. Wayne decided that he would focus on character growth until that announcement came.

Having secured a few precious hours to log into the game on a weekday, Wayne's first destination on popping up in game was the local Mercenary Guild. In-game time ran at 150 percent of time in the outside world, so when he logged in at night, he found that it was morning inside the game.

The game was two real-world days away from the official launch date. The developers had already announced there would be scheduled maintenance a day before the launch. That meant that today was effectively the last day of the open beta and early access.

Wayne had just learned to cast magic spells a day earlier by picking up *Magic Focus: Fire* and *Flare Arrow* from the *Fire* school. Wayne's choices had been driven by the fact that monsters early in the game were, on the whole, vulnerable to fire, and that *Fire Magic* as a whole held an edge in firepower

over the other spell schools.

Wayne hoped that some magic in his arsenal and a set of half-decent equipment would buy him a little credibility with local mercenaries, and he had planned to spend the day getting to know some NPC mercenaries in anticipation of the in-game event he assumed was on the horizon. There were, of course, other player characters in town, but Wayne had his reasons for wanting to avoid any players he'd never met, which meant he hadn't interacted with any of them. Still, in-game events were rarely solo player friendly.

Since NPCs were firmly rooted in the world and lived within it, mercenaries that lived in a particular community were much less likely to commit crimes or engage in fraud, making them more reliable than a random player character. It was a sad state of affairs that AI-driven NPCs were more trustworthy than other human beings, but that was the reality of this game world. All that remained was to figure out who to approach and how to do it.

Since it was relatively late in the morning, there were only a smattering of mercenaries inside the guild hall, and Wayne was gazing vaguely in their direction when the middle-aged man who acted as the guild receptionist called over to him. "Hey, you there. Was hoping to run into you and ask you something."

"Huh, me? What did you need?" Wayne asked, after his initial surprise had faded. This was the first time the receptionist had bothered to approach him first. Guild employees still had plenty of work to do, even if the guild hall was mostly empty. Did the receptionist have something specific to offer him?

"Yeah, you. You're a Vault Holder, right? Your kind tend to stick together, so I found it a bit interesting you chose to be a loner," the receptionist started. Despite the initial question, it was clear that had just been the preamble in this conversation. "Ran into another Vault Holder yesterday. A loner like you. Being a mercenary isn't exactly a safe life, if you know what I'm saying. A trio's better than a pair, and a pair's still better than going solo. Don't mean to be all pushy, I assume you got your reasons for staying solo, but..." The receptionist trailed off as Wayne processed those words.

Vault Holders—NPCs used the term to describe players, who had access to

personal inventories, or “vaults.” Wayne had thought the handful of open beta players in this town had formed into a little clique, so he was surprised to learn there was another solo player around.

During the closed beta, Wayne had been attacked by a player killer, a PKer being someone whose playstyle focuses on hunting and killing other players. The PKer had, at first, pretended to be an NPC. Their character avatar had appeared to be a poorly dressed waif curled up in a corner of a back alley. Wayne wanted to help the girl, who appeared to have fallen on hard times, and find out her story. She told him that she couldn't talk about it with so many people around, and led him by the hand from back alley to back alley until they were in an isolated spot—where Wayne suddenly found a knife lodged in his throat. Once he was dead, the PKer had proceeded to methodically loot his corpse.

While placing an item in one's inventory kept it from getting looted, that also meant that anything that wasn't inside the inventory was lootable. Items a player character was wearing would vanish along with the corpse when that character respawned, but the sudden murder had left Wayne dumbstruck, so it had taken him a bit to answer the system's query of <<Would you like to respawn?>> with an affirmative. The PKer had evidently anticipated that delay and had taken the opportunity to loot Wayne's corpse, starting with high-value items like weapons and other pieces of equipment.

By the time Wayne had respawned, the only things he had left on his body were cheap pieces of equipment like his underwear. While the PKer had mostly taken his equipment, Wayne had lost a lot more than just the value of those items. He'd also lost a small amount of experience points, but more importantly, he'd lost his faith in other players.

Since that day, Wayne had put a great deal of effort into learning how to distinguish between player characters and NPCs. For better or for worse, Wayne hadn't run into any other malicious players masquerading as NPCs, but he had learned how to distinguish between a player and an NPC without needing to directly interact with them: player characters used their inventories out of habit. That was only natural given it was a system they had access to

from the moment they spawned into the game.

Yet, that habitual use of their inventory was a dead giveaway. NPCs never used inventories in the same way. They simply weren't capable of doing so. Which was why Wayne used the presence and use of the inventory system as his method of distinguishing between player characters and NPCs. Although, given the fact that he hadn't run into any PKers since that incident, his ability to distinguish between players and NPCs hadn't been of any particular use.

From what he gathered from the rest of his conversation with the receptionist, the new solo player had appeared at the guild the previous in-game day. In terms of real-life time that meant it was a player who had started the game either sometime yesterday evening or sometime earlier today. To only be able to create a character right before launch day while having early access...that player had to be incredibly busy in their real life.

Despite his stance on treating all random players with suspicion, Wayne couldn't help but feel an affinity for that new player. He, too, had a demanding real-world job that took up most of his time. That wasn't the only reason Wayne was willing to lower his guard for this player. The fact that they were starting out by visiting the mercenary's guild meant that the player, even if playing solo, wasn't inclined toward antisocial behaviors like PKing.

There was nothing in the rules prohibiting killing other players, but it was still a playstyle that clashed with being a contributing member of society. After all, from an in-character point of view, killing a character in town and stripping the corpse of its belongings was straight-up banditry and murder. That meant it was unusual for PKers to take advantage of public facilities like the guild hall.

The receptionist broke into Wayne's reverie. "Hey, speak of the devil. That beastfolk lady that just walked through the door, she's the new Vault Holder." When Wayne turned to look, he saw a single individual entering through the door.

It was a beastfolk woman with distinctive light auburn hair slicked back to keep it out of her face. While there was nothing remarkable about her features, something about her made her easy to trust, a certain cuteness that Wayne

couldn't lay his finger on. It might have just been because Wayne was a cat lover.

The catfolk woman made her way directly to the reception counter and produced rabbit corpses out of thin air, placing them on the cart next to the counter. Wayne was all too familiar with that process—it was, after all, the way he had spent most of his time in game when he had first started. The equipment she wore was also all just starting equipment. The only item that stood out at a glance was the sword she wore on her hip, which must have been her first investment from her earnings. That, too, marked her as a player. NPCs, who faced the prospect of permanent death, were more likely to start out by investing in armor upgrades. Wayne had no doubt she was a fellow player.

The receptionist gazed smugly at Wayne, as though in some sort of silent triumph. The catfolk woman also seemed to notice the receptionist's gaze and turned her attention to Wayne for the first time.

Wayne hesitated a moment before speaking up. "Are you...a player? Oh... I'm sorry, I'm Wayne and I'm a player."

Wayne's introduction momentarily caught the woman by surprise, but she soon replied with a grin and a cheerful, "Yeah, you got me. I'm a player just like you. The name's Leah, good to meet you."

[[To our valued players,

Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community. The prelaunch maintenance that began at midnight today was completed as of 11:00 PM today. With the completion of this maintenance cycle, we have upgraded the game client to version 1.01.

The game will officially launch tomorrow morning at 10:00 AM. With the official launch of the game, payment of subscription fees will now be required. When logging in for the first time after the maintenance downtime, you will

need to read and acknowledge our End-User License Agreement, Subscription Services Use Agreement, and our company's Privacy Policy before being able to play the game.

For the official launch of the game, we have made a number of adjustments:

- Adjustment of Initial Spawn Points

During early access several of the starting spawn points meant for player characters of certain races were more challenging than anticipated. We have adjusted the starting spawn system to randomly select a spawn point of the appropriate difficulty. This should alleviate the issue of spawn points varying wildly in difficulty level based upon the population of the nearest civilized town.

- Clarifying Several Game Mechanics

We received feedback that a number of parts of the game system were unclear, so we will be clarifying them here.

Regarding the Retainer system of some kingdoms: the Retainer system allows some non-player characters such as nobles to recruit characters as retainers to allow the character to join organizations such as knighthoods belonging to that faction.

Depending on the traits of that faction, this may unlock additional skills for the character.

Other traits of the faction may also allow the character to take advantage of Rebirth.

* For example: A human character becomes a retainer to a vampire character -> the human may choose to be reborn as a zombie squire.

- On Rebirth

This is a system where characters that meet specific conditions and trigger an in-game event can change their current character race.

Depending on the type of Rebirth, a character may also be required to spend experience points as part of the process.

- On Characters Who Become Retainers

Characters that are under the influence of the Retainer skill will no longer receive a penalty on death. Additionally, once the revival period after death passes, the character will automatically respawn.

Retainers cannot obtain experience points.

The retainer's master will receive all of the experience gained by the retainer. The only time the retainer may receive experience points is if those experience points are given to them by their master.

- On Removing the Retainer Status

Please contact in-game support using the "Feedback and Request" form using the tag "Breaking the retainer status" from under the "Requests concerning game mechanics" drop-down menu.

We will then communicate how to break the retainer status using the in-game messaging system.

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.

We are planning a large-scale in-game event to celebrate

the official release and formal launch of the game. The event will be scheduled for two weeks after launch and run for two hours starting at 8:00 PM. We will be temporarily accelerating in-game time so that you will experience a full two days during the two-hour event.

- Note that players will not be able to join the event once it has begun.
- Players who leave while the event is running will not be able to rejoin the event.
- Players must sign a separate release form to participate in the event.
- Players who are minors must also receive parental permission to participate in the event.

Details of the event will be shared on the official website at a later date.

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

[First!] First Commemorative Thread: *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* [Launch Date]

001: Gealgamesh

The long-anticipated launch day has arrived!

Since beta testing threads have all been archived and are ROM I've started a new thread!

002: Amatain

Was gonna congratulate on being first, but...

Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you're a tad late.

Looking at the time stamps, the other thread was up a bit earlier.

003: Jeans

Lessee, thread name is “Preemptive Thread to Crush the Hopes and Dreams of Thread Starters Entitling Their Threads First, or Launch Thread.”

“Thread this, thread that,” subject name’s so cringe you’d think an AI wrote it.

004: Orinkii

What a troll lmao

OP there’s name is PROfessor Moriarty.

005: Arafubuki

Got owned out of the gate, man.

Step up your game.

Bet you also couldn’t claim “Gilgamesh” fast enough either.

006: Anonymous Elf

You can still read the archived threads, just can’t post in them.

There’s a thread I made on spell CDs back in the closed beta, go check it out </plug>

007: Tansu ni Ponzu

That reminds me, I was gonna post on the old board but couldn’t—you guys heard about the ridic forest in Hilith?

008: NO Ecchi

The woods next to Erfahren, right?

The one full of ants.

009: Country Pop

Aren't ants only dangerous when they spawn in huge numbers?

010: Antogy

Not the ones in that forest!
They go around destroying equipment.

011: Amatain

Ouch. Def. not newbie friendly.

012: NO Ecchi

I mean, they can't do anything to stuff like steel gear.
It's just...one second you're wearing rabbit gear, the next your whole avatar's pixelated.

013: Tansu ni Ponzu

I mean, yeah, the ants are nasty, but there's this OMG huge wolf that shows up at random.
Tho I've only seen it once.

014: Orinkii

Is it adorable at least?
How big is it?

015: Tansu ni Ponzu

Could prolly fit like 100 peeps in the same amount of space

016: Country Pop

Cripes! That's f'n huge.

It strong?

017: Tansu ni Ponzu

No clue, lol

It batted me and I saw the respawn screen.

018: NO Ecchi

Yikes, that sounds bad.

Wonder if the ants are what it usually eats

019: Dorataro

Monsters eating monsters, rly?

020: Sonote Atataka

Peeps have seen spider monsters eating rat monsters in other areas

021: Arafubuki

Then maybe the wolf shows up if you kill too many ants? Like you're on its turf or something.

And why are peeps adventuring in places with things that are that nasty?

I mean, game's just launched.

No need to be in a rush or anything.

Launch day for the game was finally here, and Wayne had taken off work to play on the big day. The launch day was also before his usual days off, meaning he had a full three days to enjoy the newly released game. Wayne had been playing since the early access period (aka the open beta), so he wasn't interested in the scramble to grab experience and gear before the flood of new

players soaked up the available supply. But for the players who had missed out on the open beta, the next two or three days were going to be critical.

Wayne wasn't particularly concerned with the flood of new players onto the servers, but he wasn't about to sit idle and find out if they were going to wipe out the cushion he'd built up during the open beta. A woman's voice broke in on his thoughts. "Did I keep ya waitin', Wayne?"

Wayne shook his head and answered, "No, I only just got here myself." Even though he didn't need to jump into the rat race, Wayne had used his PTO to play on launch day with the friend he'd made in game. Wayne had made plans with Leah at their initial meeting just two days before to go explore the woods near Erfahren.

At least, that's what they had planned on at the time, but Leah was mostly wearing starter gear, and Wayne would have felt just as responsible as the monsters that did the actual slaying if he took Leah into the woods like that and she ended up getting killed. Fortunately, he had been able to earn just enough money to buy a machete and a cloak, while Leah's rabbit hunting had fetched her enough to afford new armor and a cloak of her own—thanks to the crash in rabbit-leather prices brought about by player activity. Fortunately for starting players, rabbit meat was also a valuable commodity in and of itself, so while rabbit-leather prices had been in free fall, the price per whole rabbit hadn't yet taken a major dip.

While they would only have a single machete, so long as Wayne took point as they went into the woods, they would probably be all right with just one. And Wayne would have been lying if he didn't admit there was a part of him that wanted to show off the extra knowledge he had from being a more established player than Leah.

Leah's coarse way of speaking contrasted rather sharply with her appearance. When Wayne had broached the subject early on, Leah had simply stated she wanted to enjoy role-playing as a mercenary in this world, which meant staying in character with her mercenary's personality and treating both player and NPCs alike as simply being denizens of this world. It was an approach that Wayne himself agreed with.

It appeared that Leah had friends other than Wayne and seemed to be engaged in friend chat from time to time. He had asked why she wasn't playing with those friends instead, and Leah had answered that she hadn't known players on one another's friends lists were given the option to spawn at the same initial spawn point.

While the option required you to add your friends to your friends list outside the game before creating your character, it was a function that the developers had included. Wayne's explanation of the feature seemed to catch Leah completely by surprise, and she seemed bewildered by the fact as she told her friend, drawing a soft chuckle from Wayne.

Wayne had considered asking if he could add Leah to his friends list, but it wasn't something that he was comfortable casually suggesting. Given the importance of privacy in the VR age, even asking for in-game contact info from someone was an implicit test of trust, and Wayne wasn't confident that he'd been able to earn Leah's trust enough to make a friend request.

There was also the fact that Wayne felt a twinge of guilt about tweaking his own avatar's appearance until he acquired the Beautiful trait. Leah's avatar had a very natural look, particularly in her facial features. Anyone who bothered to change their avatar's appearance would do so until they received the Beautiful trait, and considering that she hadn't done so, her avatar was probably the default avatar created through a full scan of her body. About the only thing she appeared to have changed was her hair color; the bright rusty auburn wasn't a common color in the real world. Based on what he knew of her personality, Leah wasn't the type who went out of her way to dye her hair a shade like that... Though, that might have just been wishful thinking on his part.

It wasn't as though Wayne had done anything wrong, though. Changing an avatar's appearance was perfectly within the rules, and this was, after all, a VR game, but he still felt a touch of regret at altering his appearance. He should have started the game with an avatar that represented him. Perhaps that would have prevented this weird hang-up he had about asking Leah to become his friend.

There was no point in continuing to dwell on the subject of the friends list, so Wayne returned his attention to prepping for their outing. Since cloaks and leather armor were available at the same leatherworking shops, Wayne took Leah to the shop where he'd purchased his own rabbit-leather armor.

"Hey, Leah, did you see the announcement about the event they're running to commemorate the launch?" Wayne asked on their way to the store. Leah paused for a moment as if in thought, then answered, "Uhh, um... Yeah, I saw the announcement."

Maybe she hadn't seen the announcement and had just asked about it in friend chat. Wayne felt a momentary stab of jealousy at that friend, but that soon melted as he watched Leah pretend she had known all along about the event. She looked awfully cute in the attempt, and then there was the whole fact that the other friend was female.

"I wonder what they've got planned. Holding an event that gets all the players, scattered across the continent, involved at once sounds like a logistical nightmare. It'll be interesting to see how the devs pull it off. Were you planning on taking part, Leah?" Wayne asked, after airing out the questions that had been lingering in his head all day in a stream-of-consciousness comment.

Leah shook her head a little and said apologetically to Wayne, "Nah... I um, won't know until the day arrives, actually. Since um...you can't join once it's started or rejoin after leaving, right? I don't know how...things'll be for me till the day comes."

"Gotcha... Well, if you wanted to..." Wayne started a touch awkwardly, though he quickly pushed past his own nerves. "Do you wanna take part in the event together? I don't mind just tagging along, if you end up being able to take part with your friend."

Leah brightened and replied with a smile, "Hey, yeah, that'd be great. I'll go ahead and tell my friend too."

The conversation trailed off as they arrived at the leather goods shop. There they bought two rabbit-leather cloaks and Leah's new set of rabbit-leather armor before setting off from the city. Their destination, a stretch of tree-

covered land that was known to the locals as the Great Woods, soon came into view as they left the city walls behind.

There wasn't any reason to hesitate, so Wayne led them directly into the woods, watching his step as they made their way inside. Once they were well into unexplored woodland, Wayne led the way, clearing the vines and brush with his machete.

Even though it was the middle of the day, the woods were dark, with limited visibility into the distance. While the monster realms technically didn't start until further into the woods, Wayne wasn't sure where the relatively safe shallow woods ended and the monster-infested deep woods began.

"You've never been this way, right?" Wayne asked as he chopped at another hanging branch.

"That's...um, right. It's my first time," Leah answered with a bit of a pause, as though the wooded terrain took up most of her attention.

"I figure there's better hunting in here compared to the endless rabbit hunting closer to the city. That and En—uhh, the natives don't seem to come here very often, so I bet the materials we find here will fetch a decent price back in town," Wayne said as they slowly made their way through the thick woodlands. He hadn't seen Leah fight yet, but based on her appearance she seemed to be a melee fighter of some sort, a style that combined well with her choice of beastfolk as her race.

For the moment, Wayne planned to let Leah handle the front line while he provided support with magic. It was a simple plan, but it left open the possibility for Wayne to join her at the front if it appeared she'd struggle to fill the tanking role on her own.

Warrior mage builds like Wayne's had a tendency to end up sacrificing strength on the altar of flexibility, and the versatility that provided made them ideal to fill a swing role in situations like this, where the capabilities of both friend and foe alike weren't clear. The game's lack of a set level system also meant that with enough effort and experience, even a jack-of-all-trades build like Wayne's could be raised into a powerful character who could handle anything the world chose to throw at him.

The dimly lit woods made it easy to lose track of precisely how long they had been walking, but after what felt like an hour of trekking through the woods, they had to be approaching the border between the “normal” forest and the monster realms that lurked beyond. The pair hadn’t run into any monsters yet, but there was a good chance they’d face their first monster encounter before long.

“Should be running into monsters soon. Let’s be careful,” Wayne said, dropping the pace of their advance as he prepared for what might come next.

Leah glanced around the surroundings then nodded. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Can’t hurt ta be prepared.”

Shortly after they slowed, the pair knew they were no longer alone when they heard rustling from a nearby bush. Wayne and Leah turned to look at the bush just as a gigantic burnt-brown ant emerged from within. Gigantic compared to normal ants, but it was still small enough that it barely reached Wayne’s knees.

Wayne glanced back over at Leah, worried she might be put off at finding herself face-to-face with such a large insect, but she appeared unruffled as she examined the ant in front of them. Perhaps she was used to seeing giant insects from playing other games—after all, monstrous insects of various kinds were a common low-end spawn in most games, partly due to how easy it was for designers to have them show up in large quantities.

“Think you can handle it, Leah?” Wayne asked as he dropped into a fighting stance. “I’ll try to stay back and provide cover for you with my magic.”

“Yep, I got this!” Leah said breezily, drawing her short sword and lunging at the ant. Her movements were a bit awkward, but thanks to high physical attributes as catfolk, Leah closed the distance to her target quickly. The ant’s attempt at dodging was too slow, and Leah’s slash took off one of its legs. Without that leg for support, the ant lost its balance and...

“Got you! *Flare Arrow!*” Wayne’s spell pierced the ant and immediately reduced the creature to ash. The “support” spell Wayne cast had been more than enough to kill the ant on its own, but with Leah landing a slash too, he hoped she’d gotten her share of experience points.

When Wayne checked his experience point pool, he noticed he had gained a bit more EXP than if he had been hunting rabbits on his own. If the ant yielded that much experience against a group, it must be a significantly stronger opponent than the rabbits.

“Was that your spell, Wayne?” Leah asked, wiping the blade of her short sword. “That did a whole lotta damage.”

Wayne smiled. “Yup... But I guess it was a bit overkill. There’s nothing left to loot, so let’s take the next one out with our swords.”

Leah nodded in agreement and sheathed her sword. “Sure thing.”

They continued hunting ants for the rest of the day, leaving late enough that the sun was just about to set when they got back to town.

“I see... So if one retainer attacks another, even if they would have otherwise gotten experience points out of the encounter, they don’t gain any additional EXP,” the elven Leah mused to herself as she watched Kelli take out one of the engineer ants. “It wouldn’t be a good idea to leave an infinite experience point exploit out there.” Sugaru nodded along to Leah’s murmured explanation. Sugaru herself had never tested the idea with her own ants, so the whole experiment was a useful discovery for her as well.

Leah sat in the queen’s chamber of the newly renovated ant lair with Sugaru lounging next to her and watched Kelli, posing as an adventurer, fighting in the woods.

Aside from the day spent on server maintenance, Leah had used the week since she had tamed Sugaru and the ants to bring the entire monster realms around the cavern under her control. Over the course of that week, Leah and her retainers had managed to wipe out the factions capable of challenging their supremacy, leaving only small herds of animals that were useful as food supplies and a few goblin villages, to serve as experience point farms, alive in their wake.

Once they had succeeded in bringing the monster realms within the woods

under her control, Leah had moved her player toward the center of the Great Woods. Simply having an area under her control wasn't enough to qualify it as part of her player housing, and only a handful of areas within a certain radius of the queen's chamber were recognized by the game as a private area. As a result, while she hadn't bothered to try it, that meant Leah wouldn't have been able to just have ants dig their way to the old Mountain Cat lair and combine it into a gigantic home.

While they had been expanding the network of caves beneath the woods, Leah's forces had inadvertently run into an NPC-run mine that just happened to be near the monster realm. It was an unexpected encounter with human NPCs, but since it was on her own doorstep and she wanted the iron ore it produced, she had used her retainers to invade and occupy the mine.

The engineer ants had also found seams of peat running along the underground waterways beneath the outer edges of the forest, and seams of coal further below that. The ants were able to easily extract those newly found resources through their tunnel system without the need to carry them to the surface.

The steady supply of coal and iron ore had dramatically improved Leah's faction's access to metal goods. Lemmy was now trained in a number of *Blacksmithing* tree skills, and she was now busy cranking out metal equipment in a smithy in its own corner of the lair. Leah had spent some experience points teaching a specialized cadre of engineer ants crafting skills such as *Blacksmithing*, *Leatherworking*, and *Sewing*, assigning those ants as workers under Lemmy's overall direction.

With their control of the woods complete, Leah had started to expand out into the grassy plains around it. The ants had dug an extensive system of tunnels deep underneath the grasslands, with a handful of exit points scattered around at random where the ants could pop their heads up and watch the surface. Using these tunnels, Leah was building up a fairly comprehensive view of the civilized races around the plains.

She had issued strict orders for the ants to avoid engaging any member of the civilized races they ran into, but she had also given these ants permission to

hunt prey like rabbits so long as it was within their assigned territory. While that deprived her of some potential sources of experience points, Leah considered it more important to avoid drawing too much attention from the civilized races and having one of them invade the forest looking to put an end to the ant swarm.

There were rare occasions when the scouting parties were discovered by humans, and in those cases Leah had issued orders to leave no witnesses in their wake. Evidently, few of the humans in the plains were able to take on a full squad consisting of five ants, and the poor souls that happened to run into them soon became just another source of experience points piling up in Leah's experience point pool.

From these encounters, Leah discovered that humans were worth more experience on an individual basis than monsters of roughly equal strength. The developers hadn't changed that system since the closed beta test. Since most humans were equipped with weapons and armor that enhanced their base abilities, their equipment must have been adding to the experience points they dropped. When viewed solely from the perspective of efficiency, humans made an excellent source of experience points.

For maximum efficiency, hunting down players made the most sense, since they would continually respawn. But because they did respawn, even if her scouting parties killed them, they'd still take the information they'd gleaned from the encounter back to town. That made them a much riskier farming target.

With that said, Leah was under no illusions she could stay hidden forever, and if there was a noticeable increase in players with the formal launch of the game, she planned to include periodic player character culls to her routine list.

Leah had also discovered what happened to the bodies of slain ants. They automatically respawned back at the lair about an hour after they were killed. Sugaru hadn't paid close enough attention to the size of her colony to notice that the ants were respawning, but now that Leah had organized them into squads of five and kept track of their numbers, it was clear that's what was happening.

While Leah hadn't been able to test whether this was due to a particular trait held by the ants or if it applied to retainers overall, the adjustments made by the developers with the launch announcement had clarified how respawning worked for retainers. That meant Leah no longer had to worry about yanking her retainers out from danger using the *Summon* skill.

In the process of subjugating the Great Woods and the tunnels beneath the plains, Leah's experience point pool had grown by an order of magnitude as the points kept flooding in. Since the ants had gathered most of these points, Leah had initially thought the ants also deserved to receive the lion's share of the benefits from them.

She quickly changed her mind after she broached the subject with Sugaru. Instead, Leah had prioritized spending the experience points on getting the *Enhance Retinue* skills for herself and Sugaru, and because the bonuses those skills provided were based on the master's ability scores, the remaining experience points were then used to massively boost Leah's attributes, to the point where they were high enough that the *Enhance Retinue* skills provided a noticeable increase to the base attributes of each of the retainers. Once she had finished increasing her own abilities, Leah then did the same with Sugaru's attributes.

The result was that even the most basic infantry ant was a challenge for a starting player to defeat one-on-one, though the engineer ants were still relatively easy to kill due to the fact that they simply weren't designed to fight.

What made *Enhance Retinue* such a powerful skill set was that only the master was treated as investing experience points in their build. The experience system treated the retainers as baseline characters with no experience point-based enhancements. With the boosts from the *Enhance Retinue* skills, these retainers were able to fight enemies that were a fair bit more powerful than they were, but that was only because their master was powerful, and the retainers' amount of invested experience points hadn't increased at all in the eyes of the experience system. Meaning when they fought enemies that were roughly their equal in strength, the retainers were rewarded like they had defeated a more powerful opponent.

The ant squads she used to secure most of the Great Woods and the plains were primarily made up of basic, unenhanced infantry ants. The buffing effects of the *Enhance Retinue* skills had allowed these basic ants to just rake in the experience points.

Sugaru would probably have done the same thing even if Leah hadn't intervened by taming her. Of course, the entire process wouldn't have gone as efficiently as it had with Leah's supervision, but even then Sugaru would have been able to secure an astonishing amount of experience points for a single creature.

That was probably how the "Queendom" described by the system would have taken over the caverns and the woods. Sugaru hadn't just been a unique boss in training; she would have turned into a raid boss given enough time. Leah had discovered new skills that seemed to confirm this hypothesis too.

In Sugaru's *Selective Birth* skill tree was a skill called *Airborne Trooper*. The skill had been unlocked after teaching Sugaru the *Wind* school of magic.

Sugaru had originally been unable to learn magic-related skills. However, by learning the *Enhance Retinue* skills, the spell schools that corresponded with each attribute became available for purchase. In this case, the *Wind* school had been unlocked when Sugaru obtained the *Enhance Retinue: AGI* skill.

Leah had originally prioritized the other *Enhance Retinue* skills and put off experimenting with Sugaru's unique skill development, but when giving her *Wind* spells unlocked *Airborne Trooper*, Leah resumed her experiments.

The skill *Airborne Trooper*, unlocked by obtaining *Wind* spells, created a new type of creature called a soldier hornet. As its name implied, it was a giant hornet. While the dense trees in the outer sections of the forest allowed them to fly only above the canopy, the larger trees in the deep forest gave room for them to showcase their formidable speed and attacking prowess. They weren't exactly cheap to produce, but with Sugaru's current attribute scores, her LP and MP pools were large enough that the cost difference between the hornets and the basic soldier ants amounted to a rounding error.

Fire school spells unlocked *Assault Troopers*, the skill that created assault

ants. These ants resembled a much larger version of fire ants, but instead of spraying toxins and acids, they could spray jets of flame from their abdomens. Their flames had a range and power that put real flamethrowers to shame. The flames came from spraying a flammable liquid at their opponent, and once the burning liquid made contact with the victim, they kept burning until the liquid had completely burned away. Since using the flamethrowing ability ran the risk of setting the entire forest ablaze, the assault ants were given strict standing orders to only use their flames when given permission by their superiors.

The *Sharpshooter* skill unlocked by learning *Lightning* spells created, as the name implied, sniper ants. They had slightly longer antennae and slimmer bodies than standard infantry ants, and their venomous abdominal stingers were shaped like gun barrels rather than syringes. Sniper ants bent their bodies in the opposite direction as engineer ants and assault ants, rearing up like scorpions and sniping at their targets. Leah had examined their projectiles, which were evidently formed by melting stone with acid and reforming it into a smooth metallic bullet inside the ant's body. Leah suspected that *Sharpshooter* was tied to *Lightning Magic* because the ants used electricity to launch the projectiles, like they were a living rail gun. Sniper ants made for excellent assassins, as their attacks barely made a sound.

Earth Magic unlocked *Artillerist*, which created the appropriately named artillery ant. In appearance they resembled very fat sniper ants, and while they had a range disadvantage compared to their slimmer siblings and required a longer cooldown time between attacks, they had enough firepower to conduct long-range, wide-area suppressive fire with a single shot. Their default attacks launched explosive shells at the enemy, but they were evidently also capable of firing solid shots, making them a potent force against both enemy soldiers and fortifications. The only downside for Leah was that she hadn't been able to try them out yet.

With *Ice Magic* came the *Reconnaissance Trooper* skill that produced scout ants. Scout ants also filled the role of radio operators and could conduct long-range communications with other scouts. The ability was a bit redundant since every squad leader was registered as a friend with Sugaru, which allowed them to communicate using friend chat, and Leah wasn't entirely sure if they had a

useful role to play in her forces. For the time being she chose to make the best of their stealth abilities, assigning a single one to each squad to serve as a scout.

Water spells unlocked the *Logistics Trooper* skill. This skill produced transporter ants, but currently they were probably in the least enviable position among the ant types. Currently, even infantry ants had the necessary INT via *Enhance Retinue* to make use of the inventory system, which meant that the ants in the Great Woods had no need for supply logistics. While she had Sugaru birth a few for testing purposes, they were all currently idling at the nest without much to do.

Once Sugaru could mass birth these new types of ants, her army would be powerful enough to wipe out the civilized kingdoms and sweep the map clean. If this was the scale of raid boss that the developers intended to create, it meant raid bosses required mobilizing a staggering number of players to defeat. In fact, the forces under Leah's command were fast approaching that scale.

As Leah excitedly considered the possibilities open to her with a new, powerful army of ants, she watched Kelli hold back as much as possible as she attacked an engineer ant with a blunt piece of metal that could only charitably be described as a sword. This Leah watched directly through Kelli's eyes.

After obtaining all of the magic schools necessary to unlock the *Enhance Retinue* set and raising her ability scores to the level she felt was needed to make the most of those skills, Leah considered what to spend her overflowing surplus of experience points on. Ability scores were a straightforward representation of a character's strength, but unless there was an overwhelming gap in those abilities, a few well-chosen skills could easily overcome that difference.

Yet, Leah couldn't bring herself to spend those experience points on weapon-related skills at this juncture. Leah herself had no intention of participating directly in combat, and the various standard weapon skills were going to be the first things other players acquired. Players would be eagerly swapping information on useful skills and their prerequisites over social media and various forums, meaning that Leah only had to wait to cherry-pick the skills she

wanted. There was no need for her to waste her time or her experience points on testing weapons skills.

Leah also found it hard to be enthused about experimenting with crafting skills either. She already had a factory filled with specially trained engineer ants directed by Lemmy who did most of the hard work.

Which was why Leah had chosen to invest in *Spatial Magic*. This school of magic wasn't available by default and required the character to have *Bestowal Magic*, *Wind Magic*, and *Earth Magic* before it was unlocked. This was information that had been public knowledge during the closed beta, and there were a fair number of players who already had it unlocked.

The school didn't have any spells that functioned on their own. They were used to support the other schools of magic, similar to the relationship between *Soul Bind* and *Summon*.

For example, the skill *Sense Coordinates* from the *Spatial Magic* school enabled a caster to have their spells go off at specific coordinates. This made it possible, for example, to cast a *Flare Arrow* and have it fire from behind the enemy, hitting it in the back. It was an extremely useful ability as it opened up all sorts of possibilities for redirection and ambush attacks, but most players regarded it as a marginal skill at best. This was because the spell provided no direct boosts to spell strength, but still required a heavy experience point investment to obtain. Most players who had that amount of EXP preferred to spend it on skills and spells that gave more direct boosts to their fighting abilities.

Furthermore, *Sense Coordinates* was limited to spaces that the caster could perceive, generally limiting it to locations that were within visual range. While it was a powerful spell for player versus player combat, the reliance on visual perception meant a skilled opponent could actually anticipate attacks by watching their opponent's gaze.

Leah had only taken the spell to see if she could use it to specify the summoning coordinates for her *Summon* ability. Since she already had the

prerequisite spells unlocked, the only cost was the cost of unlocking the *Spatial Magic* school itself. While *Sense Coordinates* did allow a summoner to specify summoning coordinates, it was still limited to their line of sight. Given Leah's weak eyesight, a spell that was as reliant on vision as *Sense Coordinates* didn't provide her with much of an advantage.

She had been ready to write off the whole experiment as a failure, but first she checked to see if she had unlocked any new skills by taking *Spatial Magic*. What she found was a skill called *Sense Retainer* in the *Control* tree. It allowed the skillholder to detect the exact coordinates of each of their retainers, and based on the powers and name, *Sense Coordinates* had clearly been the prerequisite skill. All that was left for Leah to do then was to buy this new skill and keep checking her other skill trees.

The thrill of discovery that had gripped her during the first day of open beta testing returned. The *Summon* tree, which she checked next, had a new skill: *Summon Vision*. With *Summon Vision*, the skillholder could reach out to a retainer they had located using *Sense Retainer* and "summon" the retainer's sense of sight, allowing the skillholder to see through the eyes of their retainer by closing their own eyes.

This was unquestionably a powerful skill. If Leah were to tame an avian monster of some sort, it meant she would be able to directly watch the results of an aerial reconnaissance run. What made the skill even more useful was that it was based entirely on the retainer's eyesight, without filtering it through the master's own visual acuity. Leah had been seeking ways to make up for her birth trait of Poor Eyesight and she now had one.

Leah had given Kelli the *Watcher's Gaze* and *Sentinel's Ear* skills, then sent her off to gather information on the closest city by posing as a mercenary and visiting the Mercenary Guild. By synchronizing her vision with Kelli's, Leah would be able to immediately issue instructions when a quick decision was needed. The reason she had also given Kelli *Sentinel's Ear* was that Leah had taken the skill *Summon Hearing* at the same time.

Leah had sent Kelli to the city closest to the Great Woods and instructed her to use the name "Leah" while in town. This was to provide a cover for why Kelli

was able to use the inventory system. At the moment, Leah was the only person who knew that NPCs were capable of accessing the inventory. None of the various searches of official social media feeds, forums, and fan sites had produced any results to the contrary.

Even if other players eventually found out how to unlock powerful skills such as *Retainer*, Leah wanted to keep NPC access to the inventory system away from public knowledge for as long as possible. While the best way to keep that knowledge hidden would be to keep the NPC retainers from using their inventories in public, that would have partially defeated the point of even being able to use the system. It was a system that was far too useful, particularly for retainers assigned to distant lands. She preferred that they risk being seen using the inventory system rather than deal with the complications related to normal logistics while out of reach.

Which was why Leah had decided that if Kelli was caught using her inventory in public, the simplest thing to do would be to have her pretend to be a player character. Leah didn't know if there was a player character named Kelli, but since this game prevented identical character names, it felt like too much of a gamble to risk using a potentially unavailable name. The one name she was certain no one else would be using was "Leah." Since Leah herself had no intention of going out in public, and there was no legitimate way for a player to actually use the name Leah, that made "Leah" the safest alias for Kelli to use on her assignment.

To avoid drawing unnecessary scrutiny from players while they were in town, Leah had given Kelli and the other mountain cats a brief primer on "players" in general. In Leah's description, players were people who had a connection to an outside world. While they slept in this world, players lived a wholly different life in the other one, and as a result they were able to share information about this world with anyone in the outside world, regardless of where they lived.

Leah had also taught them that "devs" and "developers" referred to beings that were akin to gods to players, and "official announcements" were pronouncements from these gods. And while the players knew that these devs existed and believed in their proclamations, almost none of them actively worshipped them or paid them the sort of respect expected to be given to gods.

Overall Leah was pleased with how she had been able to describe the concept of players and developers to her girls.

Given how early it was in the game's life cycle, it would have been unnatural for a player to show up in town dressed in the well-worn leather armor of a mountain bandit, so Leah had given her starting clothing to Kelli to wear on the scouting trips to the city. As for Leah herself, she made do by wrapping her body in the hides and furs taken from animals in the woods and tying them on with several straps of leather in lieu of a sash. The overall look was closer to an ancient Greek chiton than something out of the Stone Age, but since the clothing was made of furs rather than wool, it had a distinctly feral, lumpy look to it.

Leah had instructed Kelli to prioritize gathering information while running odd jobs around town. If Kelli ran into a player, she was to actively go and engage with them as a fellow player. Even if Kelli wasn't able to perfectly act the part of a player, they could just brush that off as her role-playing.

Leah had once pretended to be an NPC, and while there might be other players who did the same thing, the idea that there was an NPC pretending to be a player was so far-fetched that the chances of discovery were close to zero.

After taking the new skills unlocked in the *Necromancy* tree as well as the *Summon* skills for senses other than eyesight and hearing, Leah paused her skill acquisition. She felt like she had taken all the skills she needed for the moment, and she also needed to unlock the *Summon* skills for Sugaru.

Leah's immediate goal was to obtain a retainer that was capable of long-distance flight. The ideal would be if that creature also came with a special skill, like *Night Vision*, as a default skill. While Leah's forces included soldier hornets that were capable of flight, they were Sugaru's retainers rather than Leah's, which meant Leah wasn't able to summon their senses for her own use. Hopefully there was a perfect creature wandering around out there, one that had the endurance to fly outside the woods for days, was nondescript enough to be considered commonplace, possessed useful abilities like *Night Vision*, and could hold their own in a fight...

While Leah had Kelli exploring the city, she had Riley patrolling the forest. While there shouldn't be any monsters left in the forest that Leah's army hadn't encountered or defeated, Riley had standing orders to seek out owl-type monsters, and, if she found one that looked particularly powerful among its type, to capture it and bring it back to the lair. When Leah wasn't watching what Kelli was up to, she would flip over to Riley to take a look at the conditions in the forest.

As she was doing these things, Leah sat in a throne placed in the queen's chamber for her benefit. After the engineer ants had carved a boulder into the right shape, she had them bring enough worked furs to soften the surface and make it more comfortable to sit in for long stretches of time. She gradually tweaked the shape of the throne to provide better support for her bottom, a gentle bit of lumbar support to her back, and better weight distribution over its surface, and the current product was, ergonomically at least, a throne fit for the greatest of royals. It was so comfortable that lately Leah would just curl up on the chair and fall asleep when logging out instead of bothering to crawl into bed.

<I've returned, Boss.> Leah's tour of the forest through Riley's eyes and ears was interrupted by a friend chat message from Kelli. When she returned her vision and hearing to her own body, Leah found Kelli waiting for her in the queen's chamber. It seemed like she had walked her way back to the lair, still clad in the cheap rabbit-leather armor she'd purchased in town.

Leah couldn't contain a chuckle. "Heh, didn't expect to see you dressed like that. There's nothing wrong with it, mind you. No, it's more that it's cute, it makes you look like a proper starting mercenary."

Kelli bowed her head apologetically. "Even if it was in pursuit of your goals, I apologize for wasting your money on such low-quality gear..."

Leah waved off the apology and continued. "I mean, since it was pretty much the same amount as you made while you were working undercover as a

mercenary, I don't see the problem. It's not as though we have a burning need for money."

Leah's forces controlled the iron mine that served as the lynchpin of all the metal supplies in the region. The same could be said for the lumber and coal that served as valuable fuel and materials. They also controlled the forest that was the only source of monsters with high-quality pelts and caterpillar-type monsters that produced valuable fabric threads. There was essentially nothing for them to spend money on trading with any of the neighboring settlements.

Kelli straightened and returned to giving her report. "Boss, as you have heard, there is going to be a large-scale 'ebbent' of some sort..."

"Yes, so there is... What to do, what to do." Leah pursed her lips in thought. Leah was interested in the commemorative launch event that had come up in the conversation between Kelli and...what was his name again? That's right, it was Wayne. Given the nature of this game, Leah had thought events that gathered large portions of the playerbase would be difficult to plan and execute. Just where were the developers planning to hold it?

She needed more information about the event before she could make a decision on whether to participate or not. Whatever the case, Leah wasn't particularly enthused about the prospect of going and taking part in the event herself. Since the opportunity had presented itself, she wanted to have Kelli join the event with Wayne, but Leah had no idea if NPCs were able to participate.

"Either way, until the devs release more information—" Leah's words were cut off by a sudden friend chat message from Riley.

<Boss, there's something odd going on in the forest.> "Something odd" was vague enough to mean just about anything, but Leah was certain Riley had deliberately phrased her report that way.

<What do you mean by something odd, Riley?> Leah sent back.

<I've seen corpses of the goblins we keep around scattered throughout the woods. There's too many of them for it to be part of a training mission for new ants. That, and I feel an unfamiliar presence...> Though Riley had replied promptly, it seemed she couldn't quite put her finger on what, precisely, was wrong with the situation. The items she reported could very well be within the

day-to-day variations of life in the forest.

Leah turned to Sugaru. She'd made sure that any reports of anomalies in the areas under their control were relayed to Sugaru through the ants on patrol. She should have been receiving a similar report from the ants accompanying Riley, but evidently her ants had noticed nothing unusual and Sugaru returned Leah's gaze with simply a puzzled tilt of her head.

Which meant that some completely unexpected creature or object must have appeared out of nowhere. But it was hard for Leah to believe there was something that could sneak by the patrolling ant squads and reach deep into the woods where Riley was operating without tripping off some sort of warning. After all, the ants covered all the potential approaches into the woods, whether by air, land, or underground.

As Leah sat back on her throne to consider the possibilities, another message from Riley cut in. <Boss! A report from one of our patrolling parties! An army of bones has appeared out of nowhere! They're currently near point W-18.>

Leah furrowed her brow at the report. <Bones? Skeletons, then. Can you clarify what you mean by appearing out of nowhere? What sort of damage have they inflicted?>

<There's currently no reports of any casualties on our end. A few goblins from the nearby goblin ranch went out to look and appear to have been killed by the intruders,> Sugaru responded as Leah processed the report in her head. It made no sense. W-18 was a little bit east of dead center in the forest, and while there was a goblin ranch nearby as Sugaru had noted, was there anything else in the area this could be related to? No, there simply wasn't enough information. Speculation was still worthless; she needed a better idea of what was going on.

Fortunately Riley and her scouts were already in the area as she gave her order. <Riley, take your squad and go find that skeleton army at once.>

Riley's response was prompt and simple: <Understood.>

<Also, if there are goblin corpses around you, that means the enemy's already been deployed to that area. We don't have a good sense of how stealthy these skeletons might be. Be extra careful while you're out there.>

<Yes, ma'am,> came the short reply from Riley as she and her scouts set off.

Leah turned her attention back to Sugaru. "Was there anything near that goblin ranch that might be related to this skeleton army?"

Sugaru paused a moment before replying, <I believe there is a location where the goblins went to root around for weapons, but as for bones...>

"Weapons?" Leah asked with a brief note of confusion before the pieces mentally snapped into place. "Oh, that's right. They've sometimes got rusted swords and such they like to wave around... It felt like natural equipment for goblins to have in a video game, and I didn't think anything of it since goblins didn't have the strength to actually harm our ants with those rusted things, but...where the heck did those things come from anyway?"

<We hadn't paid much attention to their weaponry either, so we do not have any detailed information. However...there was evidently a location near the ranch where a lot of ruined weapons and armor were buried...> Sugaru noted, adding a little additional context to the situation.

Leah had tried to avoid having ants patrol too closely near the goblin farm to prevent the goblins becoming frightened into a defensive crouch that reduced their breeding rates...but if there was some sort of ancient grave or something the goblins were robbing, they should have paid closer attention to it. Given that none of these items were found when digging the tunnels directly beneath the ranch, that meant the rusting arms and armor weren't buried particularly deep. Probably just under the surface.

The fact that Sugaru hadn't reported the presence of such debris suggested the weapons and armor must have been in such poor shape that anything they excavated was inferior to the equipment they already had on hand, and was in no state to be reused or recycled. Even if it had been included in a report, without a black swan event like this one, Leah doubted she would have paid much attention to it either.

Leah shrugged after a moment and said with a resigned exhale, "Too late to make a fuss about it. If there's a bunch of ancient arms and armor buried there, there's nothing strange about their previous owners being buried in the same place. While we have no idea who they actually are, we've been able to identify

a rough source of those bodies. We'll wait on Riley's report, and once we have confirmation, I'll go join them at the front. After all, I'm probably the most qualified to greet our unexpected and undead guests."

It was also a good opportunity to try out her shiny new *Necromancy* skill.

Riley and her scouts reported back some time later confirming that the skeleton army was spawning out of the area where the goblins had been scavenging weapons. For convenience's sake, Leah designated that area as the gravesite.

"All right, let's get going. Sugaru, keep an eye on the situation from here. Kelli, you're with me," Leah said as she stood up from her throne.

"Yes, Boss," Kelli said with a simple nod, falling into step with Leah as they made their way out of the queen's chamber into their labyrinthine network of tunnels. All of the passages beneath the Great Woods and the plains had been expanded to be tall enough for the humanoid members of Leah's retinue to travel on foot.

Leah continued to coordinate with Riley and Sugaru to deploy squads of infantry ants to keep the skeletons contained near the gravesite while she and Kelli made their way through the tunnels. Though the woods were vast, both the queen's chamber and the gravesite were located near its center, and it was only a short walk to get from one to the other. Once near the gravesite, Leah and Kelli headed to the nearest exit, guided by Riley's group on the surface.

On the surface, they were, in fact, greeted by an enormous horde of animated bones. Leah wasn't able to tell with a glance whether or not they were specifically the "skeleton" monster type, but it seemed a decent bet.

Any of the shambling bones that tried to leave the gravesite were driven back by the ants guarding the perimeter, preventing the large army of bones from spreading out into the woods.

"Having them all clumped together like this makes the next part easier. Let's give this a try," Leah said as she activated her new *Necromancy* skill:

Necromantic Circle.

A black magical circle appeared in the gravesite in the space specified by Leah. Forming a domed barrier of magic, the darkly shimmering spell easily covered the entire gravesite. The skeletons engulfed by the magic circle immediately stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to Leah.



Necromantic Circle, according to its description, turned all of the corpses in the specified area into undead and placed them under the control of the necromancer. Hostile undead located within the circle's effects had any previous status modifiers canceled and were, instead, dominated by the caster of the circle. Each individual undead made its own resistance check against the domination effect. The circle would continue to consume MP while it was active and would collapse if deactivated by the skillholder or if the skillholder's MP was depleted.

The skill was unlocked by acquiring the *Spatial Magic* skill *Spatial Control*. Although it had a limited radius, only worked on specific types of monsters, and sucked away MP by the bucketload, it was a powerful skill that was meant to stop massive hordes of undead and weed out the weakest in their ranks. Once the skill was activated in an area, it also removed the possibility of continual undead spawns by instantly turning all of the corpses in that area into undead. If there were any undead lurking around that couldn't be dominated by the skill, it had the added benefit of dragging them into the open to be dealt with properly.

Leah organized her newly dominated undead into rows and marched them out of the gravesite. Once they were clear of the gravesite, she sent a command to Sugaru to use the artillery ants under her command to wipe out groups of undead by bombarding them with shells. Since the undead only remained under Leah's control while *Necromantic Circle* was active and the skill continually drained MP, there was only so long Leah could maintain control of the undead. She made the most of that limited time to methodically wipe out the skeletons as they emerged from the ground.

The ideal would have been to send a group of assault ants in to wipe out the undead with their flame-throwing abilities, but given that they were in the middle of a forest, that was also a recipe for gigantic unintended consequences.

Once all of the undead under Leah's control were disposed of, the only thing that remained standing in the gravesite was an extra-large skeleton dressed in scrap metal that appeared to have once been an intricately ornamented suit of armor. Even with Leah's high MND stat, she had been unable to bring this particular skeleton to heel.

Leah deactivated the circle once all of the low-ranking undead were defeated to preserve her MP pool.

“Nrreaagh... Urreaangh,” groaned the last of the undead. While it was incapable of human speech, the *Necromancy* skill, or something very much like it, combined with a game system modifier allowed Leah to understand what it was trying to say. The giant skeleton sought vengeance for the leadership that had sent it and its subordinates into these woods to be slaughtered.

According to the giant skeleton, it and the other undead had once been knights of the kingdom that ruled this region. The skeleton assumed that Leah knew what it meant by “the kingdom,” but Leah could only guess at its identity and assumed it referred to the kingdom that ruled over the city of Erfahren. If that were the case, it’d be the Kingdom of Hilith mentioned by “Leah’s” friend Wayne...but something told Leah that the skeleton wasn’t referring to that kingdom.

The skeleton’s sense of time had long since worn away, like its own flesh and much of its armor, and Leah had a hard time determining how long ago the events in question had transpired. It was possible that its kingdom had long since vanished into the mists of time.

According to the skeleton, there had been a unified kingdom that ruled over the entire continent during its time. If that was the case, the skeleton was the knight of a long-dead kingdom, and for whatever reason, it had lain trapped within these woodlands for centuries.

While the official website had touched upon the origins of the Six Kingdoms, there had been no mention of a unified monarchy that had once ruled over the continent as a whole. If the skeleton was right, there was a great deal of history about this continent that remained to be uncovered. How utterly fascinating.

“Then, what was it you all...or I guess at this point, just you, were trying to accomplish? I’m sorry to say that I had to destroy what was left of the men and women under your command. With that said, I’m not part of the kingdom that sent you here to die. I have no hostile intentions against you, but I’m sure you still have plenty you want to vent,” Leah said to the skeleton directly. “Since I’m the one who destroyed your subordinates, I don’t object to helping you achieve

your goals. Why don't you tell me what it is you're looking to accomplish, first?"

Leah's request was answered by another series of inhuman groans and growls from the skeleton as it began to communicate its wishes to Leah.

Leah stood and listened for an interminable amount of time as the skeleton struggled to articulate its thoughts. It seemed the skeleton was burning to avenge the lives of its subordinates. The skeleton's rage wasn't directed at Leah. By the skeleton's own reckoning, it and its subordinates had died long ago, and while something had reanimated their bodies and brought them back to the world, only this skeleton was conscious of the event. The rest had simply been reanimated corpses driven by some unknown force. Leah, with her *Necromantic Circle* and the ants under her command, had simply put the reanimated knights back into the ground and returned them to their eternal slumber. If anything it was grateful that Leah had put its subordinates back to rest.

No, the objects of the skeleton's rage were the usurpers who had conspired to send the guardians of the kingdom to their doom, overthrown the rightful rulers of the kingdom, and divided the continent into their own petty kingdoms.

The usurpers at the heart of the skeleton's seething resentment were probably the founders of the current Six Kingdoms ruling the continent. Leah thought the founders themselves were long dead, but that was an idea that the skeleton only vaguely appeared to grasp, and in its mind the descendants of those usurpers were still worthy of its vengeance.

"I see, I see. As you may—or maybe may not—see, I'm not affiliated with any of those kingdoms. I'm...what you might call...an exile from civilized society. I not only head a group of outlaws, but also rule a number of organizations under my banner, including an ant colony, among other things. I am, essentially, the one who holds these disparate groups together," Leah said. The skeleton listened quietly as it appeared to have no hostile intentions toward the elf.

"So, here are the choices available to you," Leah said, ticking off the options on her fingers. "First, I can destroy you here and now and return you to your slumber. Second, you can join me as one of my retainers. And finally, I could

simply let you leave the woods to do whatever it is you wish to do.” After she finished laying out the options, Leah held up the three fingers to demonstrate the choices. While Leah herself would have liked to learn more about the history of the continent, there was no need to get all of the details from the skeleton itself. Considering how large the continent was, there were surely others who had that knowledge. In fact, there were probably dozens of old elven nobles she could ask directly in one of the many cities scattered across the continent.

That and there was the little complication that if she added the skeleton to her retinue, she was, essentially, choosing to openly side against the Six Kingdoms of the civilized races. Then again, she wasn’t exactly on the friendliest terms with them at the moment anyway. After all, she’d taken their only source of iron and carved out her own territory in the woods near Erfahren. She’d just be making that hostility official.

“Let’s see... If you choose to join my retinue, I’ll lend my forces to your efforts. Helping you bring your vengeance down upon the Six Kingdoms sounds like fun, actually. In exchange, of course, you’ll have to follow my orders on a day-to-day basis.” Leah could have just forced the skeleton to be her retainer, but it was fun playing the part of an evil overlord. After all, this was a game; the whole point was to enjoy it.

<<Successfully defeated unique enemy: [Diaz the Vengeful].>>

With those dry words in the system message window, Diaz became a member of Leah’s retinue. According to the menu, the game classified him as a “terror knight.” He came well equipped in terms of attribute scores and skills, slotting him roughly between a unique boss and a raid boss in terms of power. If those abilities were combined with the army of skeletons Leah had destroyed... He might not have been able to defeat the ant’s nest, but he would have been able to easily deal with the feral, untamed version of Kelli’s Mountain Cat Clan.

Diaz’s power was also clear from the fact that Leah received a decent amount of experience points just by succeeding in making him a retainer. It was a stark

contrast to the nonexistent experience points gained when Leah had wiped out the army of skeletons that had spawned in the woods.

As for the skeletons, while it was true that Leah probably would have been able to obtain a decent amount of EXP by letting the ants take care of the skeletons with no intervention on her part, she had written off the experience points as an acceptable opportunity cost to have the chance to test out a powerful but niche ability like *Necromantic Circle* in actual combat. It would have been a waste of a golden opportunity had she not taken advantage of the skeleton horde to try it.

With Diaz under her command, Leah left the ants to deal with cleaning up the gravesite and swiftly made her way back to the queen's chamber. Poking around for too long outside would have risked being caught under the sun, and when she had asked Diaz about what to do with the remains of the skeletons and their equipment, he had dismissed all of them out of hand as irrelevant. His subordinates hadn't left so much as a fragment of their souls behind on this world, and the remains were so badly decomposed that there was no point in giving them a proper burial. It was a religious view that Leah found puzzling, but if Diaz was fine with the current state of his subordinates, who was she to argue? Besides, the goblins would eventually find a use for all the discarded equipment, and the human remains would return to the earth.

The question that lingered for Leah as she returned to her throne was why Diaz's soul alone had lingered behind in the gravesite. That was related to the nagging question of why the soulless knights had suddenly sat up and started popping out of the ground like new shoots in the spring. Regardless, she knew that no amount of speculation was going to answer those questions at this particular moment. So Leah did what she could do under the circumstances. She directed Riley to continue searching for a suitable owl, and she, Diaz, and Kelli returned to the underground warren and the queen's chamber.

<<Simultaneous connected user count confirmed to match or exceed minimum required.>>

<<Event start conditions for large-scale event met.>>

<<Event AIs proceed according to established processes and begin advancing scripted scenario.>>

<<Sending execution code to event AI.>>

<<Program execution error, unable to confirm script execution.>>

<<Sending execution code to event AI.>>

<<Program execution error, unable to confirm script execution.>>

<<Warning: Expected event characters not in idle status.>>

<<Canceled code send.>>

<<Section leaders report to meeting to discuss alternatives.>>

[[To our valued players,

Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community.

Our team had planned a large-scale event to commemorate the launch of the game, but due to unforeseen circumstances in game, we can no longer proceed with the original scheduled event.

As an alternative to the scheduled event, during the announced event time frame, all players are invited to a special area to take part in a battle royal-style PvP event.

Due to this change in plans, the login restriction that was going to be in place during the special event will no longer be implemented. Players who do not wish to

participate in the PvP event may log in and enjoy playing the game as usual. Players will also now be able to enter and exit the new PvP event area as desired.

The registration for the battle royal event will close at 10:00 AM the day before the event.

We will also be providing a special spectators' area for players who choose not to participate in the PvP event but wish to watch the festivities.

* Please be aware that both the battlefield and the spectators' area for the special event will have an additional time compression of 6:1 during the event.

* For safety purposes, please avoid unnecessary entry and exit into the special event areas.

* In accordance with the Brain Function and Mental Health Preservation Law, you will be required to read and acknowledge the following document: "Notices and warnings related to the effects of virtual time compression on the brain."

Additional details about the event will be announced on the official website at a later date.

We look forward to seeing you in game for this special launch day event.]]

<<Frequently Asked Questions

This area 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. Please note that we will not answer questions related to game content or certain specifications.

Q: After saving a new respawn point by staying at an inn or other location, what will happen if that respawn point disappears in game?

A: You will respawn at the spawn point you had set prior to the one that was destroyed. If the spawn point that was destroyed was your starting spawn point, the game will choose a random respawn point with the same set of conditions as your original spawn point.

Q: Is there a buddy or clan system in the game?

A: Regarding a buddy system:

Boot Hour, Shoot Curse does not have any systems related to groupings such as a buddy or party system. You are free to cooperate with your choice of other players and NPCs to face the various challenges that await you in the world. Experience points will be distributed to all characters that participate in a fight and the exact amounts will be calculated based on the level of contribution by that individual. The game does not and will not publish the contributions of each individual in a fight.

As for item drops, the characters involved must sort out the distribution of such items through negotiation, and we highly recommend that your group settle those arrangements before going out hunting or exploring.

A: Regarding a clan system:

There is not a distinctly defined clan system in the game, but you may form large groups to play together or to purchase or rent a piece of property. Players are free to use such properties as their home base and begin operations under a name of their choosing. Please make use of this ability as you deem necessary.

Q: Is there a pet system or something similar?

A: We cannot answer this question at this time.

Q: What happens if I have no experience points in reserve when I die? How does the game determine how to apply the death penalty to my character?

A: When respawning, please select a skill or attribute score boost that you feel is unnecessary and the experience from those purchases will be refunded to your experience point pool, where it will then be applied to the death penalty. Any experience points remaining after the death penalty will remain in your pool to be reused as desired. If you cannot select a skill or attribute on your own, the system will automatically refund experience points from the most recently selected skills or most recently boosted attribute scores to be used to pay off your death penalty.

* Please note that refunding skills and attribute points may only be done through the respawn window.

* If a skill that is a prerequisite for acquiring other skills is refunded, the skills that required that prerequisite skill will also be automatically refunded at the same time.

If we could not answer your questions through this FAQ, please use the contact form located below.>>

Chapter 5: Battle Royal

After spending a massive amount of experience points to obtain *Enhance Retinue* and *Spatial Magic* unlocks, Leah no longer obtained any experience points from fighting any of the enemies that spawned within the Great Woods. Fortunately for her, she was able to indirectly gain experience points by having the standard infantry and squads and platoons hunt targets such as goblin villages. It wasn't exactly a large haul of experience points, but by setting up goblin ranches in the forest and regularly sending hunting parties to cull the populations, Leah was able to maintain a decent and stable stream of experience points flowing into her reserves. Leah watched the experience points in her pool slowly tick upward as her retainers did all the hard work, and then she turned her attention to the skill tree that had been tugging at her curiosity.

The tree in question was *Alchemy*. It seemed like a tree that would lead to various types of magical creations, but all of the social media posts by other players revealed that, at the moment, the only known advanced skill was the *Transubstantiate* skill that was unlocked by acquiring the starting *Transmute* and *Pharmacology* skills. Of course, there were probably players hiding information, like Leah had done with her *Retainer*-related skills, but that still meant there were skills that were counterintuitive and difficult to obtain through standard patterns of skill acquisition.

What drew Leah's eye toward *Alchemy* was the existence of the homunculus race among the character creation options. Traditionally, homunculi were depicted as artificial life-forms created through alchemy. The existence of homunculi as a playable race suggested there was some sort of alchemical skill related to their creation.

During closed beta testing, homunculi were humanoid creatures that appeared about a head or so shorter than humans on average. Most of their attributes were in the same range as humans, but they were also given a higher

starting INT score than humans. Overall, they were more powerful than humans, but choosing to play one came with no additional experience point costs.

That was because within the Six Kingdoms of the civilized races, homunculi were categorized as monsters rather than people. While those that were able to blend into the population were left alone, if they were ever identified as homunculi, the NPCs of the city would regard them as monsters and go out of their way to either kill or capture them, a massive potential downside that more than balanced out a higher INT score.

Based on the hostility displayed toward them by the civilized races, it was clear that homunculi were considered an aberration, an artificial life-form created by alchemists who had gone insane with power and dared to attempt feats that ought to be outside the realm of human achievement. Leah hoped that by unlocking additional *Alchemy* skills, she herself could join the ranks of those mad alchemists and create homunculi of her own.

She would start by acquiring the *Transmute* skill. If that wasn't enough to unlock additional skills, she would then take the *Pharmacology* skill. Since she had a large pool of experience points to play with, she was also willing to try acquiring a bunch of low-cost magic spells that weren't particularly useful in combat. *Dry* from the *Wind* school and *Heat* from the *Fire* school had little utility in combat, but their names and effects practically screamed their potential worth in crafting trees such as *Alchemy*.

Leah spent the experience points harvested by the ants to go on a skill buying spree. She started with *Pharmacology*, then *Transubstantiate*, *Dry*, *Heat*, *Wash* from the *Water* school, *Electrify* from the *Lightning* school, *Cool* from the *Ice* school, and *Pulverize* from the *Earth* school—it was right when she purchased that last spell that the *Alchemy* skill itself appeared in the *Alchemy* tree.

She had finally unlocked the skill that shared its name with the skill tree. But the sheer number of skills Leah had to unlock before it showed up seemed a mite excessive. The typical crafter who'd invest the necessary experience points into *Alchemy* ordinarily wasn't going to invest in learning magic, and even those that did would typically narrow their focus to a single school. Perhaps the

developers had no interest in having crafters obtain or use the *Alchemy* skill.

Once she purchased the *Alchemy* skill, Leah was immediately rewarded with the skills *Philosopher's Egg* and *Athamor*. While the *Alchemy* skill was probably the last step needed to unlock them, they might have already been unlocked when she'd acquired the raft of other skills on her list. Not that there was any way for her to check at this stage.

Based on these names, however... "Wait...aren't these just pieces of alchemy gear?" Leah asked aloud as she reread the names of the skills.

The descriptions for both skills simply described them as "required to activate *The Great Work*. Provides a bonus to success rolls for the *Alchemy* skill." All right, so they were probably prerequisite skills, but even then, the descriptions felt overly vague.

"Then again, I suppose going into too much detail would bring the loonies out of the woodwork..." Leah mused with a sigh before she took *Philosopher's Egg* and *Athamor*. They had unreasonably high experience point costs for being prerequisite abilities, but taking them immediately unlocked the next skill.

"*The Great Work*... Well, I suppose that makes sense, considering it's name-dropped in the descriptions," Leah said to herself with a nod. The term "Great Work" in alchemy was historically accepted to be the ultimate culmination of all alchemical processes. Putting aside for a moment whether there should be anything considered a "historical understanding" in a mythical pseudoscience, if the game was using the generally accepted definition of the term, mastery of *The Great Work* should allow its user to create the philosopher's stone.

Leah had no idea if that was how the skill worked in game, and it had an astronomical acquisition cost of 100 experience points, but at this point Leah had sunk so much into this whole *Alchemy* tree that she felt she had no choice but to acquire the skill.

"As for the effects... I see. The only requirement is to have the right ingredients... That and the vast amount of MP needed to activate the *Philosopher's Egg*, *Athamor*, and *The Great Work* in quick succession—easy enough for me at this point," Leah mused as she examined her newly acquired

skill. There had been a brief worry that the skill would demand the ingredients real-world alchemists had believed were necessary to create homunculi, but fortunately, the devs had chosen to pad out the ingredient list with materials that were more commonly found in game, such as monster components and magic metals. There were, however, a few ingredients that were listed as “unknown.”

These unknown ingredients were likely items Leah had yet to encounter in game. The only things Leah could identify on the homunculus recipe were a monster heart and a soul. While Leah had never seen a soul as a tangible in-game object, this probably meant the souls of the dead she obtained through the *Soul Bind* skill. She thought about this fact and reflected, “If that’s true, then does that mean it’s impossible to create life from nothing?”

Now that she had obtained this skill, Leah was sorely tempted to use it. Among the item recipes that were about the same in terms of difficulty level as a homunculus, there was one where all of the ingredients were known to her. However, unlike the homunculus, the actual item this recipe produced was listed as unknown. If the identification of ingredients was based on whether Leah had seen them in game, this was probably because Leah had already seen all of the ingredients, but had yet to encounter the completed item.

“I wonder what this makes. Since it’s in the same category as a homunculus, it’s probably another abomination against nature like artificial life, but the materials are all metals of one sort or another...” Leah said, tapping her chin as she considered the list. “About the only weird thing on this list is...a Knight’s Grudge...? What the heck is that supposed to be? Since I know the name of it, I must have seen it somewhere...” The only thing related to knights or grudges Leah knew about was the mass burial site of the knights she had encountered the other day.

“Was there something near that mass grave that I missed? If so, that’s going to be a headache and a half to find. There was a whole lot of stuff there, but I only remember seeing broken armor, shields and swords, and some bones. I don’t remember anything that looked like a special item...” Leah mused to herself.

Sugaru responded through friend chat, <Why don’t we try gathering

everything available at the gravesite? One of them must be the right object, and if none of them are, then we will know it's not referring to any ordinary armor or bones.> Perhaps because her retainers tended to respond to her muttering, Leah had been speaking to herself more often as of late.

"Good point. Let's do that. Can you get the ants on patrol to deal with that for me?" Leah asked.

<Of course. As you wish.>

"Then all that we'd have to find are the metals. It just says refined metal ingots here, so it gives no hints on what to use..." Leah pursed her lips as she read through the list. "Why don't we just start by using the best metals we've found in our mine. Sugaru, can you have someone take care of this too?"

<As you wish, Boss,> Sugaru replied.

The mine in the Great Woods had originally been owned and operated by the NPCs of the nearby city, but currently it was under the control of Leah's forces. Engineer ants could use their acid to melt stone and minerals, but they were unable to melt minerals that were of a higher rarity rank than the ant itself. Taking advantage of this property of the ant's acid, the efforts to expand the mineshafts had resulted in a bonanza of high-quality iron ore, silver ore, and various magic metals that had no real-world equivalents.

Currently, these metals were being refined under Lemmy's direction, using the engineer ants' acid and coke made from coal. Thinking about the little industrial operation run by Lemmy, Leah said out loud to no one in particular, "Hmm, thinking about Lemmy, I guess it's time to teach her a bunch of noncombat spells. It might unlock a bunch of *Blacksmithing*, *Sewing*, and *Leatherworking* skills."

A while later, a group of infantry ants brought the desired items up to the queen's chamber.

"Thanks. So, here are all the materials..." Leah clapped her hands together as she looked at the piles of items laid out before her. The disorderly pile of broken armor and knight bones contrasted sharply with the glimmering stack of metal ingots next to it. The two piles must contain the ingredients needed to

complete the mystery recipe.

“Since it doesn’t require a soul, I’m guessing it’s going to create something that doesn’t have a soul of its own. The simplest reason for that would be because the end result is an item, but...” Leah trailed off, lost in thought. The recipe was categorized in the same group of recipes as a homunculus. Were it just a simple inanimate item, it would’ve been listed somewhere else.

Acquiring *The Great Work* had unlocked tons of categories of recipes. Of course, almost all of the recipes were currently listed as “unknown,” along with their ingredients, rendering them little more than curios that took up space on Leah’s skill screen.

“No time like the present to see what it does. Let’s begin with the *Philosopher’s Egg*,” Leah said, as she burned a chunk of her own MP creating a giant crystalline egg in front of her. The skill description had called this object a flask or beaker of some sort, but Leah couldn’t tell from her vantage point whether or not it was hollow. Rather than concern herself with the possibility it was a solid lump of crystal, Leah continued with the instructions in the recipe from *The Great Work* and carried the ingots toward the egg. “Be a pity if I screwed up the first time...so let’s start with about five kilograms of metal.”

Just as the ingots were about to touch the egg’s surface, part of the egg transformed in shape and swallowed the ingots. “Aha. I was wondering how I was supposed to put things into it... Should’ve figured it’d be something magical like this,” Leah said to herself, then shook her head with a chuckle. That the egg would be magically self-loading was something she should have figured out for herself, given the egg had appeared out of nowhere and just hovered above the ground.

“The problem is this Knight’s Grudge stuff. If it’s like the soul used to create a homunculus, it probably refers to something akin to the soul of a fallen knight, in which case...” Leah trailed off and picked up one of the ruined swords and held it up to the egg, which duly swallowed it. If any piece of equipment embodied the soul of a knight, Leah figured it was probably their sword.

Leah nodded to herself as she looked upon the collection of ingredients sitting in the egg. “Since this whole thing was a bit of a gamble to begin with, let’s go

with this. Now...*Athamor*!" A golden lamp immediately appeared beneath the floating egg and began heating it with its flame.

"A little anticlimactic when the skill is called *Athamor* and you get something other than a furnace... I mean, this looks less like an arcane furnace and more like an ethanol lamp... Come on devs, the two words might sound similar but they're totally different things!" Leah complained to no one in particular. It was true that Leah, having grown up in a mostly VR world, had never actually seen an ethanol lamp in person. The only time she'd ever seen one was during the VR lab experiments during her VR school's chemistry classes. In a certain sense, those experiments weren't all that different from what she was doing now.

The contents of the egg eventually turned into a translucent rainbow pattern and began swirling around. "Is this about what it's supposed to look like?" Leah asked, but receiving no answer from the empty air around, she activated a skill instead. "*The Great Work!*"

The ability consumed a great deal of MP, even considering the vast pool of it at Leah's disposal. The egg began to emit a golden glow, bright enough that it was difficult to stare directly at it.

"Wonder if we can use this to light the caverns." As Leah contemplated alternative uses for the glowing egg, the light died down, leaving a single sword inside the egg. "It looks like it just ate the metal ingots... Did the attempt fail?" Leah said aloud as she peered into the egg.



<Boss, please look more closely. The sword inside is not the knight's sword you placed in there earlier,> Sugaru politely interjected via friend chat, prompting Leah to look more closely at the sword in the egg.

"Oh, you're right. The design's not much different, but it looks new. That and it's just floating inside the egg..." A few moments after this observation, the philosopher's egg broke open and the sword slowly descended from the air down toward Leah.

"Tch, the philosopher's egg is a single-use item...? It's not exactly a cheap investment in terms of MP," Leah muttered to herself, her attention focused more on the broken shards of the egg than the sword hovering motionlessly in front of her. After a moment, Leah turned her attention to the blade. "Well I'll be... This sure doesn't *feel* like a normal weapon... Is this like a sword monster of some sort?" Leah crossed her arms and looked over the sword for a moment before she continued her musings. "Hmm... It doesn't feel like it's under my control as a retainer either..." Leah trailed off. Despite the lack of an official retainer label, the sword in front of her was bound to her in some way.

"Well, whatever. If it's a monster I can just make it a retainer. *Retainer.*" There was no visible change to the weapon, but Leah felt the weapon become her retainer without offering up any resistance. When she peered over its stats, its race was classified as "living weapon."

"Oh! Got it! So you're a living weapon! Now that I know what you are, you definitely fit the description of a living weapon," Leah said, nodding to herself before continuing to speak to the sword. "Though living you may be, I'm not feeling a lot of consciousness or will coming out of you... Anyway, let's try this..."

Leah withdrew a hunk of meat from her inventory that had been there so long she no longer remembered what animal it had come from and pointed to it. "Can you slice this for me?" No sooner were the words out of her mouth than there was a flash of silvery light that cut a crescent through the air. The blade had quickly and silently sliced clean through the meat.

"Wow, you're an impressive one, aren't you! If I could make a whole bunch of these, it'd really open up our options in terms of our disguises!" Leah said with

a delighted tone, before realizing she had just asked the ants to bring her a single sword for experimentation.

“Sugaru.” Leah turned to the queen, but her follow-up was interrupted by the queen’s chat message.

<I have already sent the transporter ants to retrieve the rest. Any that you end up not using, we can have the transporter ants hold on to and keep them in this chamber.>

“Well done. I knew I could count on you,” Leah said with a smile to the queen. Most of the infantry and engineer ants had strictly regulated shifts that laid out their responsibilities. While ants never slept, they still required breaks to retain their ability to work that added up to a minimum of several hours a day. This was why most ants belonging to the nest were on set shift schedules. There were only a handful of transporter ants, and due to their scarcity, they weren’t incorporated into the colony’s basic squad structure. As they had no specific tasks assigned to them, their tasks were usually limited to tidying up the queen’s chamber.

“Feel like I have enough in the tank to give it another try, so why don’t we try a suit of armor next? And since it’s a suit of armor, it’ll probably need more metal... Let’s try it with fifty kilos this time,” Leah said to herself as she activated *Philosopher’s Egg* again and placed the ingredients inside. She immediately followed it up with *Athamor* to heat the egg. Like last time, the egg immediately filled with a coruscating pattern of rainbow light. “*The Great Work.*” The rainbow hue was replaced by golden light, and once the light faded there was a full suit of plate mail inside the egg. It was a heavy suit of armor, and it was large enough that its feet reached the bottom of the egg, preventing it from floating within.

“This suit’s definitely its own thing...” Leah said to herself as she looked over the suit of armor. Unlike the sword, the armor’s appearance had changed dramatically. Perhaps because Leah had created it, it was just the right size for her to wear. The design had also changed: the charming clunkiness of the old-fashioned bucket helm was gone, and the new helmet had a sharp, predatory look, complete with a pointed visor. The cuirass, pauldrons, gauntlets, and greaves also looked like they came from an entirely different suit of armor, and

while not quite ornamented to the extent that it would be taken for ceremonial armor, there were tasteful carvings decorating the now thicker, more substantial plating. The joints and other openings were now covered with chain mail in an effort to eliminate any obvious weaknesses in the armor itself. And perhaps most notable was the color: an ebon black, perhaps a manifestation of the fallen knight's rage.

When the egg finally shattered, the suit of armor floated down to the ground and immediately dropped to one knee in front of Leah. She carefully regarded the suit as it knelt in front of her. "Assuming it's about the same weight as steel, then full-body armor for someone my size would probably weigh in at around thirty or forty kilograms. I suppose the fifty kilograms of ingredients gave the skill a lot more leeway in the end product..." The ingots Leah had fed into the philosopher's egg had felt like fifty kilograms in her hand. She wouldn't be able to even lift that much with both hands in the ordinary world, but with Leah's current attribute scores in game, the ingots felt as light as a feather.

Leah turned to the kneeling armor and flicked her fingers upward. "Stand up, will you?" The armor stood up with a clanking noise as Leah gave it additional orders. "Try picking up those ingots." The armor lifted the ingots without any signs of difficulty. Leah nodded approvingly. "It seems you can do anything normal people can do. Which reminds me...*Retainer*." Once the armor was added to her retinue, Leah examined its stats.

"Attribute scores...seem awfully focused on STR and VIT. DEX and AGI are about average, but...wow, INT and MND are *really* low! You'd have no chance of resisting any *Enchantment* spells. Though...do those spells even work on a piece of armor?" Leah wondered aloud as she looked back over at the armor. Ordinarily creatures such as homunculi and undead were immune to *Enchantment* spells. According to the description of *Soul Bind*, stocking up on souls allowed an enchanter to overcome that limitation. Essentially, by spending the bound souls to give undead or homunculi a soul, it allowed the enchanter to bring those creatures under her influence.

But then, why do homunculi have no souls if a soul is a key ingredient in their creation? What was the difference between a homunculus that required a soul to make and this—"Sorry, I forgot to check. I can probably guess, but just to be

sure...”—this set of living armor? “Was it a difference in the ability to take initiative...? Or in having a will of its own?” Leah wondered as she looked at her two pieces of animated equipment. Both the living weapon and the living armor had little in the way of free will or personality, even if they loyally followed orders.

“I see... I suppose I can try making a homunculus when the ingredients become available, but it seems like living weapons and living armor are pretty useful,” Leah said to herself as she looked over her creations. “The battle royal event is coming up soon. I’m looking forward to seeing what you can do...”

Leah ended up crafting five living swords, naming them “Primus Sharp” through “Quintus Sharp,” and the suit of full plate “Mister Plates.” With her crafting complete, Leah eagerly began counting down the days to the battle royal tournament.

The big day had finally arrived. Leah had signed up by the deadline the day before. She had wondered if she could sign up her retainers, but the actual RSVP for the tournament came in the form of a system message, meaning that the event was intended solely for players. No doubt it would be difficult to take them along to the event grounds as well.

Leah headed toward the entrance area to the event grounds that had been posted on the official site. These areas were located in designated safety zones throughout the continent, such as the starting cities. There were five safety zones located within the Great Woods, all located halfway between the center of the forest and its outer edges.

The safety zone Leah had chosen for this event was centered on a quiet spring surrounded by a blooming field of wildflowers. It was a beautiful little place, but the beauty was currently marred by the giant ants and the undead knight hanging around the area. Diaz ordinarily stood inconspicuously at the ready in the queen’s chamber, but whenever Leah left that room, he made it a point to escort her to her destination. Even in undeath he remained the loyal knight, always ready at his master’s side.

Inside the safety zone, Leah found a faintly glowing magic circle carved into

the ground. It was evidently designed to respond only to players, as Leah watched several ants scurry into it without any noticeable effects.

<Your Highness, must you attend this event alone?> If Diaz's constant presence wasn't enough evidence of his loyalty, he made sure to back it up with his tone of chiding admonition. He had a habit of referring to Leah as "Your Highness," or more informally as "princess." Leah had no objections to being treated like royalty, but she felt that it was odd for Diaz to describe Sugaru as "the queen" while still addressing Leah, Sugaru's superior, as princess. Perhaps he had been part of a princess's honor guard or had wanted to be, and "Princess" Leah was giving him the opportunity to live out in death what he had been denied in life.

"Yes, I do. I'm pretty sure this portal is only going to let me through. You can try following me, but I don't think it's going to work... Besides, I won't strictly be alone," Leah said gesturing to the armor she wore. She was covered from head to toe in the armor created using *The Great Work* and wearing a hooded cloak over the plate. This complete cover from the sun allowed Leah to wander around in broad daylight.

Underneath her cloak, Leah had a total of five swords strapped to her hips and back. Like the armor, all of these blades were living weapons. In this state, Leah suspected that living equipment-type monsters would be considered equipment rather than monsters, allowing her to take them with her into the event area.

After showing off the living equipment that was going to accompany her, Leah turned her attention back to Diaz. "It's about time I got going. Diaz, go back to the queen's chamber and protect Sugaru while I'm gone... I should be back in about two hours."

There was a brief pause before he answered, <As you wish, Your Highness.>

"See you later," Leah said casually before she stepped into the magic circle in the corner of the safety zone. As had been published on the website, a warning popped up into her line of sight, but she only skimmed through it before acknowledging the warnings that it conveyed. An instant later, Leah's line of sight changed completely as her armored form vanished from the spring.

After being teleported out of the forest, Leah found herself in an arena that reminded her of the Roman Colosseum. Based on the number of participants, the arena should be a little too small to accommodate everyone, but curiously the crowd was not overflowing out of the arena itself. Despite the fact that there were clearly more people in the arena than it was physically capable of holding, there was no suffocating crush of humanity threatening to break into a panic at any moment.

The space must be far larger than it appeared. It was unclear if this was because this specific area was designed for large-scale events or because it was a standard part of the game's capabilities. The same could be said of the teleportation circle that brought her here. Was it a special system that was only meant to be used in large-scale events of this sort, or were there locations out in the world equipped with similar facilities?

A glance at the distant stands showed a large crowd seated and looking down upon the arena. These were probably the players that had decided to sit out the day's festivities. According to the developers, any players that were defeated during the battle royal would immediately be teleported to the spectators' stands, where they would be free to leave whenever they wished.

Some time later, with the event's start time evidently at hand, a voice that sounded like a system announcement spoke up. Leah let out a soft huff of impatience, but considering that time in this area was running at six times the speed of the outside world, arriving five minutes before the scheduled start time meant waiting a full half hour inside the arena for the event to begin. This area was simply an arena for the opening and closing ceremonies, as well as a place for spectators to watch the fighting. The actual combatants were going to be teleported to their respective battlefields right after the opening ceremony ended.

The battlefield was relatively large, and it was divided into thirty-two separate sectors. The participants in the tournament were also divided into thirty-two groups by random draw and would be sent to their assigned section of the battlefield to start the group phase of the tournament. Once each of the thirty-

two groups had a winner, the main event with all thirty-two group-stage winners would begin.

Leah had been assigned to Group 16. Most of the battlefield was covered in woodlands, terrain that felt like home to Leah, who spent much of her time in game watching the Great Woods above her base through the eyes of her retainers. Once all of the participants were assigned to a group, the game wasted no time in teleporting them out to their respective battlefields.

Once she arrived in her wooded arena, Leah immediately set about exploring her surroundings. Leah also had her living weapons on constant alert, having them cut down any players that she encountered during her search. With only two weeks since the official launch of the game, even the players with metal armor were only protected by low-grade metals that proved little better than paper against Leah's blades.

You know, I probably should have checked what sort of metal I used on these boys... It had only just occurred to her that she had no idea what metals had been used to forge her living swords. While Leah had some training with a naginata, she was an amateur when it came to handling European swords. Given her ignorance on the subject, she had come to the conclusion that the swords themselves had a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, and she allowed the swords to decide the best swing to use. While Leah's gauntleted hand gripped the sword's hilt, the sword in her hand was actually doing its own fighting without any input from its wielder.

Leah decided that she would be able to win her group just by cutting down players as soon as she encountered them, so she began wandering aimlessly around the area, taking a casual stroll through the battlefield. A few minutes into this walk, one of the Sharps tied to her back (Tertius was the most likely candidate) suddenly drew himself from his scabbard and cut down an arrow screaming toward her.

Interesting. Even if I don't issue any orders, it'll react to threats heading my direction...

Living weapons gained another level of importance and utility in Leah's mind

with this discovery. More arrows followed the first, but now that she knew which direction they were coming from, it wasn't much of a challenge to avoid them or even grab them out of the air.

"Tha'fft—!" She heard someone try to muffle the words that had instinctively left their lips. As a precaution against situations of this sort, Leah had sunk experience points into giving Mister Plates all of the sense enhancement skills, and Leah was using his keen senses instead of her own. In terms of total number of experience points invested, Mister Plates now ranked third behind Leah and Sugaru.

The arrowheads seem to be made of iron. Yikes, I can just bend them with my fingertips...and they're not even leaving a scratch on the gauntlets! Just what kind of metal did I end up using on Mister Plates? I don't think I even need to dodge these arrows from now on...

With the armor proving nearly impervious to the enemy's arrows, Leah no longer had to worry about incoming arrows. She ignored the arrows flying her direction and began to confidently stroll toward the source of the arrows.

I'm really starting to enjoy this. Mwa ha ha! Futile! Your attacks are futile! You vermin!

The archer continued to put up some useless resistance as Leah approached. It was only when Leah had gotten closer that the archer finally grasped the futility of their situation and ducked out of the tree into the brush underneath, hurriedly making their escape.

Too late! Far too late for you! You can't escape the wrath of Mister Plates!

With boosted AGI and the *Fleet of Foot* skill, Mister Plates was substantially quicker on foot than the average player. Although the full suit of armor made Mister Plates look cumbersome, the armor itself only weighed about fifty kilograms. Even when combined with all of the weapons strapped to it, the full package was just shy of eighty kilograms in weight. It was lighter than the average rugby player barreling across the pitch, ball in hand. As for sheer physical strength—though Mister Plates lacked the muscles that usually produced that brute force, the armor was much stronger than any human.

The trees of this battlefield were much smaller and more delicate than the

mighty, hulking trees of the Great Woods, and Leah tore right through them, leaving armor-shaped holes in shattered trunks as she chased straight after her prey. Hearing the sound of the armored figure just tearing through the trees behind them, her prey glanced backward and screamed in frustration and panic, “What the hell?! How is that even allowed?!”

And yet...Leah noticed that this archer seemed awfully confident of their escape route. Almost as though they had been in these woods before. It meant that up ahead—

When she emerged from the woods into a clearing, arrows pelted her from all sides.

It's a trap! Figures!

Several archers must have entered into a temporary truce to engage in some ambush hunting, luring unsuspecting players into this clearing to be turned into pincushions. While Leah had been wandering casually through the area, the other players had been engaged in all sorts of subterfuge, some going so far as to create alliances of convenience.

According to the rules of this tournament, if multiple players were still alive in a group after the end of the initial stage of the tournament, the survivors were forcibly thrown into the arena to fight in a sudden death round. This meant that if all of the archers banded together and hunted down the rest of the players, the overtime melee in the arena would be full of archers. An archer was at a disadvantage in the close confines of the arena if they had to face off against a melee fighter, but against other archers, they typically had an even shot at winning.

Although...I bet the one who came up with the idea has a bunch of melee weapon skills too...

The archer that suggested the plan would only have brought it up if they had an ace up their sleeve, some advantage that would help them secure victory once the dust settled... At least, that's what Leah would have done if she were in their position.

Despite the continual volleys of arrows, none of them had managed to even scratch the surface of Mister Plates. Which was why Leah completely ignored

the arrows bouncing off her and continued to chase after the original archer, reaching out and grabbing them by the neck. However, the excitement of the chase had robbed Leah of her fine motor skills, and instead of just catching the player, she crushed their neck in her grasp, leaving her holding a dangling corpse.

Oops! Oh well.

Leah shrugged it off and casually tossed the player's corpse aside. Her opponents evidently didn't share her relaxed view of the situation. "What the?! Jeans! You poor bastard!" said the first voice, followed quickly by a second, equally filled with panic.

"D-Did that dark lord just crush that guy's neck with his hand?!"

A third, marginally more reasonable voice chimed in after. "C-Calm down! They've clearly min-maxed all their points into STR! They can't kill what they can't catch!"

Pretty sure a min-maxer wouldn't be able to chase down an archer...

Leah shook her head under her helmet as she listened in on the conversation. While the sheer number of arrows had initially made it difficult for her to tell where her enemies were, Mister Plates and his enhanced hearing had picked up on the conversation and given Leah a rough idea of where her opponents were hiding.

I mean, if you're going to use ranged weapons like bows, why throw away your advantage by clustering together within earshot of one another...?

Leah let out an exasperated breath through her nose. The fact that they were talking verbally instead of using friend chat demonstrated just how ad hoc and fragile their little group was. Leah then drew Primus Sharp from her hip and, using the momentum from the draw, threw her sword toward the voices. Primus spun as it whirled through the air, cutting straight through the trees that stood in its way. The player who tried to duck behind one of these trees fared no better, as the wood absorbed none of the force behind the spinning blade and it chopped them to pieces.

"Th-That's ridiculous! How much min-maxing does it take to do *that*?!"

“Screw this! I’m getting out of here!”

The two remaining players who witnessed Primus hurtling through the air to cut down their fellow archer turned to run, but there was no escaping from Primus Sharp. The living sword flew through the air under its own power, diligently following Leah’s orders and cutting down every tree in its path as it chased after the other players. Most players would never have imagined that a sword would bend its own trajectory in midflight to come after them...which was why almost all of the victims of Primus Sharp found themselves sitting in the colosseum’s spectator seats without the faintest notion of what had killed them.

Leah wasn’t sure how many players had been part of the archer cabal, but Mister Plates heard nothing else attempting to flee the area. She had cleared out the immediate threats around her. Primus Sharp reported back, telling her it had chased after and struck down eleven players. Leah had crushed the spine of a twelfth...and once she added the ones she had cut down during her casual walk, that made for a grand total of fourteen players so far.

Right. No use wasting any more time on this; let’s find the rest.

Leah wanted to wipe out the other players in her group as quickly as possible so she could watch the other matches from the spectators’ stands. She wanted to at least get a glimpse of how powerful the players coming up from the other groups were going to be.

Leah tried to follow her ears and her nose as she ran around looking for other players. It didn’t take her long to realize that the sound of her own running created such a racket she could barely hear herself think, much less detect any hidden players. With a sigh, Leah decided it was better to reserve her running until she found her next victim.

After her encounter with the archers, Leah kept the Sharps at the ready, sending one flying off to kill a player the moment she encountered one.

Wait a sec... What was the point of giving Mister Plates various sword skills if he can’t use them!

That was, of course, because the Sharps, being living weapons, were conveniently automated, doing all the hard work of moving and landing killing blows on their own. That, however, rendered all the experience points she'd spent giving Mister Plates combat skills useless. Leah decided she would cut down the next player she saw by her own hand.

When Leah wore living armor like Mister Plates, the armor didn't require any input from the wearer to act. In such situations it was Mister Plates himself that decided on what actions to take. Leah would, essentially, simply be along for the ride. That meant Leah couldn't use her melee skills—or rather, she couldn't if she had bought any to use in the first place.

Leah had, instead, spent the experience points to give Mister Plates skills from the *Sword* and *Agility* skill trees. At first, Leah had her misgivings about letting Mister Plates take full control while she was still inside, feeling her body move without her own input. Once she had a chance to try it, however, the concerns proved unfounded. It didn't feel nearly as disorientating or strange as Leah had feared. Having the game indirectly take control of your body...perhaps that was often how most players felt when they were using their physical ability skills.

Leah continued through the woods, closing her eyes and shifting all of her focus to her ears. Gradually she picked up the sound of metal clanging against metal. The clangs rang out at irregular intervals with the occasional moments of strong, urgent footsteps. It sounded like there were people engaged in battle. Leah tried not to fixate on the sounds of combat and lose awareness of her surroundings as she stealthily made her way in the direction of the clashing swords.

What she found at her destination was a pair of players engaged in a sword fight. Based on what she saw, both players had dumped their experience solely into skill trees used in melee combat. When combined with their baseline abilities as players, they made for formidable warriors and presented the perfect target to test Mister Plates against.

Leah made no effort to conceal the sounds made by her armor as she

appeared in front of the fighting warriors.

“The hell?! Another player?” the first one said even as he lunged for his opponent.

His opponent parried the attack, clicking his tongue in irritation. “Tch! Stay the hell out of this and wait your damned turn! I’ll be done with him in a minute!” Then, dismissing Leah’s presence, he went back to their duel.

Leah lumbered forward and swung her sword at the dueling duo. This prompted an outraged response from both players.

“You little—!”

“Is that how you wanna do it?! FINE! Bring it!”

All this yapping in combat... Good on them, I guess. Shows uh...character?

Mister Plates activated his skill *Slash* and swung Primus Sharp in a horizontal line. *Slash* was, as the name implied, a skill that produced a slashing attack, but a player could choose whether that slash was a vertical or horizontal swing based on the blade’s orientation upon skill activation.

Leah hadn’t consciously targeted either of the fighters, but wielding her sword in her right hand, she went for the chatty swordsman to her right. The swordsman tried to block the slash with his own blade. For a moment his excellent reflexes appeared to give him a chance—only for him to be betrayed by the poor quality of his sword. Leah’s swing sliced clean through the opposing blade as though it were made of paper and continued on to cleave the hapless swordsman in half. Such a wonderful collaboration between Mister Plates and Primus Sharp.

The player that had taken the slash died instantly, but the survivor still had the wherewithal to vent his shock. “How the—?!” He had also jumped back a few feet, dropping into a defensive stance and eyeing Leah warily. Unfortunately, that wasn’t enough of a distance to make a difference to Mister Plates or Primus Sharp. The living armor used a highly advanced *Agility* skill, *Vanishing Step*, to instantly close the distance and split her opponent in half with a downward *Slash* attack.

He’d looked like he’d have the skill to put up a fight... But they were both all

flash and no mettle.

Leah felt her excitement for this event deflate like a balloon. She had no idea how many targets were left in her area, but it would take time to find them. She wasn't sure if there was enough time on the clock to meticulously search out and kill any hidden players. She decided to invest in a few search-and detection-related skills for next time.

Wait, hold on...

Leah turned her gaze to the five Sharps that were sheathed and strapped to her armor. They were capable of independent flight.

<Secondus, Tertius, Quartus, Quintus, could you fly up above the trees to look for other players? When you find them, report back—wait, never mind. Just go ahead and kill them,> she instructed through friend chat. It was time to wrap up testing on Mister Plates. Leah was pleased with the results and there wasn't much more she could learn from this phase.

Leah watched the swords fly up and vanish into the sky before she resumed her own search for other players. However, Leah encountered no players during her wandering, and instead received a notification that the group stage in Leah's area was over.

The colosseum's spectator section was filled with players, but there didn't seem to be anyone who noticed when Leah appeared on the fringes of the observation deck. She immediately pulled her cloak over her armor before she caught anyone's attention, concealing the ornate black armor beneath.

When she looked around the colosseum, she saw large numbers of screens floating in the air, allowing all the spectators to watch the fighting in the preliminary groups. The screens limited what they showed, only displaying footage that appeared to come from cameras located in hiding spots within each area. And they really did seem to only be interested in catching fighting. The screens either had not caught or had deliberately not shown things besides combat, like the archers forming their little ad hoc hunting co-op.

All of the players were currently chattering about the events that had been shown in a dark, unlit screen, presumably the one that had shown Leah's group.

She stopped to catch snippets of the buzz.

“I really wonder who that black knight actually is...” came one. “That thing was just way too strong. Are we sure that’s even a player? Maybe it’s a boss that the devs made for the event?” said another. “No, I don’t think that’d be the case,” a voice of reason chimed in. “If it was, I’m sure the players of Group 16 are going to file a protest against the devs for screwing them over like that.”

That explanation, of course, didn’t stop the speculation. “So, that thing’s a player character...? I mean...how the hell do you get a full suit of plate armor in just two weeks?” Leah swore she heard the next voice shrug its shoulders. “Who knows? Maybe they attacked a giant merchant’s shop or something. They looked really comfortable chopping player characters in half...so it wouldn’t surprise me if it’s the type of player who gets a lot more ruthless when in game.”

That prompted a pensive response. “The whole chopping in half thing was also outright bizarre. Just how much STR do you need to chop someone cleanly in half, sword, armor, and body?”

It seemed Leah had drawn quite a bit of attention with her shenanigans. She’d made a mistake in how she judged the rest of the field. True, Leah had such vast amounts of experience points that she was inarguably one of the top players on the server. She had still expected there would be a few players who were capable of standing toe to toe with Mister Plates.

She’d even had a plan for when she ran into such players. When they defeated Mister Plates, she’d wait a few dramatic moments before arising from the remains of her living armor, a perfect two-stage transformation like a boss monster. Or that had been the hope, but for now that’s all it would remain: something she hoped to do in the future.

Leah turned her attention back to the screens. The fighting showed the ingenuity of the playerbase, who used a wide range of tactics and stratagems to defeat their opponents. One type of play that Leah found particularly educational was the use of ruses and traps to corner opponents, and she studied that fighting intently.

Youichi had a thing for nurses.

He had been a sickly child, so he was a frequent visitor to a VR clinic. At that clinic there was a young, gentle nurse who always tried to cheer him up before each examination. Youichi was enough of a realist to know that the nurse was probably a specialized AI and that no such nurse existed in the real world. In fact, nursing itself no longer really existed in the real world, but that made no difference to his fondness for nurses.

His love for nurses was so strong that whenever he played a game where he could customize his avatar's clothing options, he'd wear the classic nurse's outfit. In this day and age, those outfits only existed between the pages of reference books, but that helped make it a popular choice, ubiquitous even, in VR games and other types of fiction.

This would have been fine, really, were it not for the fact that Youichi had a strong revulsion to misrepresenting himself in any fashion, including playing games with anything but his real name, gender, and appearance as his avatar. Which was why his avatars were always male and used the name "Youichi."

While Youichi suffered from a fragile constitution in the real world, that wasn't true of the VR world. Moreover, he didn't want to dishonor the beloved nurse's outfit he wore by being an easy mark. Youichi spent years of intense training in a wide variety of VR games honing his skills and movements so that no one could lay a glove on his precious nurse's outfit.

In recognition of his achievements, he was affectionately referred to as "Youichi the Nurse" in the VR gaming world. Youichi himself liked the nickname and was particularly fond of being a master of the bow in the games he played. Even if the game went out of its way to make being an archer a miserable experience, Youichi always climbed into the ranks of the top players. He had also taken up kyudo in the real world, and it was hard to find any traces of the sickly child in the athletic bowman.

Although the game had only launched two weeks ago, the general consensus

was that the bow was a decent weapon, without any glaring, unbalanced drawbacks. With that in mind, Youichi felt he had a decent shot at winning the whole thing.

Since the game's launch, Youichi had been pouring all of his effort and experience points into improving his effectiveness with the bow. The number of bow skills he possessed and the amount of points he had sunk into archery-boosting attribute scores, combined with his real-life skill with the bow, made Youichi not only one of the top archers in the game, but a player with few peers among all weapon-related skillholders.

With all of his advantages as an archer, it was only natural that Youichi would be the one to win his group. He had even managed to do so with plenty of time to spare before the sudden-death elimination round would have been triggered.

However, what awaited Youichi when he returned to the stands were thirty screens showing preliminary fights and two that were completely dark. The dark monitors were for groups where the preliminary round was already finished.

There were two of them.

Someone won their group before me...?! It took a moment for Youichi to process his shock.

Youichi had invested in *Watcher's Gaze*, *Sentinel's Ear*, and even *Hunter's Nose* to maximize his effectiveness as an archer. In his group he had used those skills to be the first to find the enemy and swiftly put them down with an arrow.

If players were in the middle of combat, he'd detect them with his hearing, then take them both out from a distance while they were preoccupied with their duel. If a player was hidden, silent, and unmoving, he'd use his sense of smell to find them, then thread an arrow right into their hiding place. If a player decided to face him directly, Youichi had no qualms about letting the enemy see him before putting an arrow through their eye.

These were all reasons why Youichi had been the top player in Group 14 with fourteen kills. Since he had prioritized efficiency in his hunt, Youichi had expected to be the first to get out of his group.

I wonder what sort of player they are... Youichi couldn't help but wonder. There was a player who was at his level. That was proof there was a player who had a passionate dedication to something as strong as his own. Youichi found himself looking forward to the upcoming final.

With all the preliminary group battles decided, those who would move on to the final match were now assembled in the arena once more. Someone in this group was the Conqueror of Group 16. Most of those present in the arena had confident, relaxed expressions...though a handful of them looked over at Youichi with trepidation. If those looks bothered him, he made no sign of it; if anything, he was used to this kind of scrutiny.

A short while later, the system announced the beginning of the final battle royal and teleported all thirty-two participants out of the arena. Youichi found himself in a grassy plain—a wide-open terrain that wasn't well suited to his playstyle. But he caught a glimpse of a copse of trees a short distance away. There would be a place to conceal himself there. There was nothing wrong with fighting an open, head-to-head battle, but to make the most of the bow's strength as a weapon, it was best to snipe at the enemy from outside of their range.

Youichi calmly turned toward the copse and set out for it.

After a few minutes of walking, Youichi's enhanced ears picked up footsteps approaching him. When he glanced back to see the owner of those footsteps, he saw a younger man equipped with two short swords with a strangely forgettable air to him. The sort one might forget is in a room if they stopped talking.

"Damn, didn't think you'd hear me for a bit longer," the man grumbled. "I'm even using an active skill. Bah! Guess you're everything they say you are."

Youichi remained on guard, unslinging his bow and nocking an arrow as he observed the man in front of him. He was dressed entirely in tight black clothing. Based on the weapons wielded in each hand, he was a dexterity-based

melee fighter. Or was he? Given the strange air he gave off of not being present, his fighting style was probably more that of a ninja or a rogue.

“Rumors? About me?” Youichi said with a feigned incredulity. “I don’t think I’ve done anything in this game notable enough to become a rumor.” Youichi cautiously waited for his opponent to make the first move. He wasn’t sure when and in what game this player had heard the rumors about him, but it didn’t change the fact that he knew far more about Youichi than Youichi knew about his interlocutor. Since Youichi had doggedly stuck to the same playstyle across a range of games, that information gap was enough for his opponent to know how Youichi would fight. This was hardly a safe position to be in.

The man in black shrugged his shoulders. “It’s not like I know a whole lot about you...but I’ve heard you’re a pretty good player. That, at least, seems to be true.” Even as he was speaking, the man in black tights began to move toward Youichi.

Youichi turned his bow on his approaching stalker and said airily, “No further, yeah? As a staunch devotee of the bow, I can’t let a skirmisher get too close without extracting a price.”

The statement seemed to set off a flash of anger in Black Tights. “Devotee?! Are you f’n kidding me?! Have you looked in a mirror?! Look up the words ‘stoic’ and ‘devotee’ in a dictionary sometime, it’s definitely not going to—”

Youichi wasn’t sure if it was exactly as the man in tights went into his rant, but then or a moment later, Youichi found himself back in the spectators’ section. Something had killed him in the battle zone.

Did that weirdo in black tights do something to me...?

The idea only lingered in Youichi’s head for a moment. A brief glance to the side showed the man in black tights staring blankly at his surroundings. He, too, had died. Probably at the same time as Youichi.

“You sonuva... Wait, you’re dead...too? When...? When did that even...” Black Tights trailed off and muttered to himself. Youichi understood how he felt. There was a player who took out two finalists who were armed and on guard without either of them noticing that anything was amiss. They turned to the

screen to get information, any information that could shed light on what had happened. Instead, what they saw were the plains they had been standing in a few moments before. There wasn't a creature in sight as the wildflowers gently swayed with the breeze.

Just like in the group stage, Leah was teleported to the battlefield wearing Mister Plates with her cloak covering her from head to toe. Since there were no other players wearing a hooded cloak, the spectators who had watched the group stage must have known that Mister Plates lurked beneath that cloak, but that wasn't necessarily true of the participants. Since Leah had been the fastest to win her group, none of the finalists would have seen Leah, or more precisely, Mister Plates, fighting.

Leah materialized by a fresh-water spring. Behind her lay a copse of trees, while beyond the spring lay a grassland with the wind making the tall stalks of grass ripple like the surface of the sea.

In her current state, Leah had *Summon Vision*, *Summon Hearing*, and *Summon Scent* active. With her senses synced with Mister Plates, Leah had a clear view of the grasslands ahead.

As she examined her surroundings, she thought she caught movement among the trees. Leah knelt in place and focused her attention on her hearing. She heard something moving. A player, probably. They were crouched as they slowly came closer. A few steps closer and they entered into range of Mister Plates' skills, including *Fleet of Foot*. Mister Plates immediately activated it.

"Got you! *Fla—*" Leah's prey had caught on to what she was aiming to do and was preparing to attack her with magic. However, the player was either unaware of the existence of the skill *Fleet of Foot* or simply didn't expect someone in full plate armor to be able to use it, and Leah closed the distance and lopped the player in half before they could finish their incantation.

The gap in strength was so great that Leah hadn't so much defeated the player as butchered them, but she soon remembered that she had something she wanted to test against another player. She hadn't been able to test how

durable Mister Plates actually was in combat. The same was true of both Leah herself and the Sharps.

She had no idea how much damage various attacks would do to her with her current stats and equipment. This was something she needed to test, if possible. It was true that Leah's own durability wasn't much of an issue. She had no plans of being out in the open, and now that she had Mister Plates she was protected from any direct attacks, but that also meant Mister Plates would be the one bearing the brunt of enemy assaults.

Fortunately, iron arrowheads had just bounced off the plating, but she wanted to test the armor's effectiveness against slashing weapons like swords and axes, bludgeoning weapons like maces, and even against magic spells. While all melee attacks caused physical damage, the game's system did have different calculations for specific types of physical damage such as piercing, slashing, or bludgeoning damage.

Leah now wished she'd let that spell hit her. Even if she took damage, she had potions in her inventory. Since she could make her own potions using *Alchemy*, Leah had enough potions to make a lazy river of the stuff. Leah's ants had set up a farm to grow the necessary ingredients, such as herbs and mushrooms, and engineer ants specially trained in *Alchemy* were put to work harvesting the materials and crafting the potions, then storing them in the inventories of the transporter ants.

While Leah had initially struggled to find a use for the transporter ants, she now employed them as a combination of maid staff and mobile warehouses.

Leah now sought out another target, this time with the intention of taking a hit from them. That meant it made more sense for her to be out in the open rather than in an area with lots of obstacles to hide behind. Once she decided upon that course of action, Leah headed toward the open grasslands.

Soon after stepping out onto the plains, Leah caught sight of a pair of players in the distance. It wasn't as though she was trying to spot them, but Mister Plates and his enhanced eyesight made it too easy. In fact, she would have preferred to have avoided seeing them at all, given that one was a weirdo

proudly letting his hairy legs show while dressed in an old nurse's outfit who was talking to another weirdo clad from head to toe in black tights.

Even with *Sentinel's Ear* she wasn't able to make out what they were talking about, but Leah was convinced the sooner those two ceased to exist, the better it would be for the world.

She wanted to avoid being attacked by either, though she was particularly weirded out by the guy in the nurse's outfit. Fortunately, he was armed with a bow, and she had already tested the effectiveness of her armor against arrows.

Leah unleashed Tertius and Quartus into the air and skewered them from above. With that unsightly pair taken care of, there were now twenty-eight players left on the field. That would be more than enough to do all the tests she wanted to run. She just hoped she would be able to find them before they started to kill each other off. Leah strolled along the edge of the trees, to make sure that players both in the grass and in the trees could spot her.

As expected, Mister Plates made for a tempting target in the open, and Leah soon found herself the target of multiple spells and arrows. Perhaps because she was wearing metal armor, quite a few of the spells launched in her direction were *Thunderbolt*, but not a single one of the spells managed to penetrate Mister Plates' magic defenses to reach Leah within. The arrows, of course, did even less.

Leah checked Mister Plates' LP just to see if some of the spells had had any effect, but that number hadn't changed. Either he had taken so little damage that the automatic healing had already taken care of it, or the spells hadn't done any damage at all. Regardless of which it turned out to be, it meant that Mister Plates was immune to attacks of this level. That was an important discovery.

Tertius and Quartus disposed of the players who had attacked her. She had left them hovering overhead after they had eliminated the weirdos. Whenever Leah was attacked by a player, she had them wait until she was satisfied with the results of her testing before ordering them to swoop in and cull the offending player.

After being hit by five or so players, Leah came to the conclusion that any further testing was a waste of time. Currently, there weren't any players who posed a threat to her. Meaning that once the event was over, she could go back to hiding away in her lair and doing a bit more theorycrafting and testing for the time being.

As for the social connection she'd gone to the trouble of cultivating, after this event, she had no further use for Wayne. In terms of overall ability, he wasn't even at the same level as the players left in the tournament. He contributed nothing to her understanding of the game.

If she wasn't going to take any damage fighting against these players, there was no need to continue walking around in an attempt to draw fire. The copse of trees made it hard to see the entire field, but this area was made solely for use in this event. Which meant it wouldn't be used for anything after this event. There was no need to keep it intact.

Leah uttered a short incantation: "*Hell's Flames.*" The spell that triggered in response was an advanced *Fire* spell, which only became available after obtaining the area-of-effect spells in the school. There were probably some additional prerequisites from other magic-related skills, but since Leah had unlocked pretty much every type of magic available, she had no way of knowing what those prerequisites might have been.

While Mister Plates had no magic skills and therefore couldn't cast any spells, at the moment, Leah was wearing Mister Plates as her armor. She could let Mister Plates handle the physical movements in battle while Leah herself focused on casting spells from within. It was as if both the mount and the knight were able to fight and attack at once. At the moment, this combination gave her the greatest possible fighting power as a single character.

The spell erupted as a pillar of flames over the trees, Leah's high INT and the passive skills *Magic Focus: Fire* and *Magic Mastery: Fire* further enhancing the power of the formidable spell. The flames quickly swallowed the entire copse, vaporizing the trees and leaving nothing, not even ash, in their wake.

Leah had never cast this spell before and she was as shocked at its sheer

power as anyone else who saw it. After all, this wasn't the sort of spell that could be tested within a forest or underground cave. While it was true that the trees were obstructing her view, Leah's real motivation for using that particular spell was a simpler, more primal one. She wanted to burn some trees with this spell. She had nothing against trees or nature, but the fact that committing arson with this level of firepower was considered taboo presented an irresistible temptation. Sometimes human beings were simply incapable of ignoring their urges.

For Leah, this was that one moment when she gave into her primal need to destroy. The trees of the Great Woods were a valuable environmental resource that provided all kinds of benefits to Leah and her retainers. There was no question of ever burning those down on a whim. But if the trees weren't part of her forest...what harm was there in burning them? It was, after all, so very satisfying to watch.

And so, the small copse of trees vanished from the map.

The area was a space for thirty-two finalists to duke it out; it wasn't nearly as large as the areas from the group stages. There was no sign of life left in the burned-out patch of wasteland that had once been a small forest.

So Leah turned her attention to the grasslands, pondering how to flush out the rest of the players within it. Then again, her little bit of arson hadn't drawn anyone out of hiding. She'd simply reduced any of the players that were hiding among the trees to ash along with them. So perhaps for the plain itself, she could try literally flushing out the remaining players with water.

"All right then, *Tidal*—well, hello there." Just as Leah was about to cast her spell, a large number of silhouettes emerged from the plains, heading toward her. Evidently, by incinerating the small woods, she had managed to smoke the players hiding in the grass out into the open.

"At a distance you look like a mage with that hood and cloak...but then you're wearing that chunky suit of armor underneath," a voice observed as it drew closer. "Is the armor just to make you look more intimidating?"

Another voice chimed in. "You seem to be specialized in fire magic... Though

that's far more powerful than any I've ever seen. But now that we know what to look for, we...might be able to take you if we attack all at once."

A third voice added their opinion. "I don't know why you're in such a hurry, but wasn't it a little too early to be playing your trump card? If you draw too much attention to yourself, you're just inviting the other players to gang up on you first."

It seemed the approaching players had identified Leah as the most dangerous player left on the field and formed an impromptu party to deal with her. There was a part of her that wondered why they didn't just attack her instead of announcing themselves with their commentary, but perhaps that went against their spirit of fair play. It seemed they hadn't witnessed Leah killing any players before she cast *Hell's Flames*, and so they seemed to be under the impression that Leah was a pure caster of some sort.

To Leah, this group was another golden opportunity to collect some data. After all, she might very well face an organized group of players in the future. This was a good opportunity to get some practical experience in fighting them.

"*Thunderbolt!*" two of the magic-focused members of the group shouted in unison, unleashing their spells as a swordsman crouched low and charged at Leah with a shout. A warrior wielding a mace and a shield followed closely after, as well as a spearman using the warrior as cover as they approached.

The *Thunderbolt* spells, which appeared to mostly have been meant to provide covering fire for the others, once again struck harmlessly against Mister Plates. Which was why Leah ignored the spellcasters and turned to face the swordsman as he approached. The player was skilled enough to realize the futility of penetrating full plate armor with his blade and targeted the joints on Mister Plates.

Sadly for him, it made little difference whether his blade hit plate or the chain mail links covering the gaps. His sword made an unpleasant grinding noise as it slid ineffectually off the chain mail, leaving undamaged metal in its wake. Once again, Mister Plates proved impervious to a player's assault. Leah turned away from the swordsman and waited for the mace-wielding warrior.

"Seriously?! How'd she shrug off that spell?! Isn't that metal full plate?! Or is

it some sort of defensive skill?!” one of the casters shouted in disbelief.

Taking a step backward, the swordsman replied, “My sword’s not doing much either! Pretty sure it’s the armor, not a skill!”

“I’ve got this! Graaaagh!” The mace-wielder let out a war cry as he swung his mace at Leah. She had to give the warrior credit, that sort of war cry was a key part of playing a heavy-melee character. In most cases a target already knew they were about to be attacked by a heavy weapon. That meant it was better to squeeze out every extra bit of strength by letting loose with a war cry rather than just quietly swinging the weapon.

The theory behind it was simple: when crying out, human beings were able to mobilize both their voluntary and involuntary muscles to muster the very physical limits of their muscular strength. Leah had no idea if that was true in game as well, but given how much detail the devs put into the game itself, there was no reason to dismiss the possibility. There was nothing to lose and everything to gain by trying. Leah felt that made the mace-wielding warrior the most pragmatic of the group.

Yet tragically for the valiantly shouting warrior, there was no guarantee that mustering all of his energy would produce results. The mace bounced harmlessly off the armor, and the shock from the impact broke the warrior’s grip on the weapon, sending it flying. It would prove to be a lethal mistake. “Damn, that’s tough! What the hell is it made of?!”

Leah glanced down at the fallen mace. It was poorly constructed, with little in the way of refinement, as though the blacksmith had just barely managed to refine the ore and make it into the shape of a bludgeon. The tournament finalists made up what were supposedly the best-equipped players in the game, and yet they couldn’t even dent Mister Plates. Even if they assembled a larger group, say, the type of numbers that would be considered a raiding party in other games, Leah was certain it wouldn’t make any difference.

Which meant there was no more reason for Leah to let them attack her. It was now her turn to fight. Mister Plates bent down and picked up the fallen mace and threw it at one of the casters. The mace spun violently through the air, taking the caster’s head clean off before vanishing into the grass. Leah had

invested in the *Throwing* skill for Mister Plates. That meant he was just as lethal at a distance as he was up close.

“Hey—” Leah heard the swordsman try to speak, but she had no interest in chatting with these players. It was better to kill than to bother with conversation. She took the swordsman’s head and crushed it between her fingers, cutting him off midsentence.

Leah drew Primus from her hip and cut down the warrior who had dropped his mace. She thought about waiting for him to ready his shield, but if the shield was anything like the mace in quality, then that wouldn’t have made any difference.

The spearman kept his calm through all of this carnage and struck out with his spear. Leah was impressed. It seemed he had aimed for the visor in Mister Plates’ helmet. A desperate move, but probably the only one that had any chance of success.

That didn’t mean Mister Plates would allow that to happen. The living armor grabbed the spear point with its empty gauntlet and crushed it in its grasp. A moment later, Mister Plates activated his *Slash* skill and sent the spearman’s head flying through the air.

The only one left was the final caster. They were crouched in the grass a short distance away, all hope of resistance beaten out of them.

Leah considered whether there was anything else left to test. She had been able to test the effectiveness of both her armor and weapons. She’d also been able to unleash spells that were otherwise hard to experiment with. She’d gotten what she wanted out of the tournament; any other testing she could do back at the Great Woods. Leah finished her testing by casting *Tidal Wave* and sweeping away the mage, along with the rest of the grasslands itself.

The *Tidal Wave* evidently killed the remaining players, and Leah received a system message congratulating her for winning the tournament. This message was immediately followed by a request to participate in an exhibition match.

There hadn’t been any announcement of an exhibition match before the tournament, but it was true that the battle royal had ended far ahead of

schedule. Much of that was Leah's fault, and if they ended the event here, only about an hour or so would have passed in terms of real-world time. The exhibition match's format would be a battle royal, with sign-up open to anyone who wished to participate.

<What do I get out of it?> Leah asked. She had already finished testing the abilities of Mister Plates, the Sharps, and herself against other players. About the only thing she'd gain from participating in the exhibition match would be the grim thrill of clubbing baby seals.

While there was no death penalty active during this PvP event, they were probably going to make a big announcement that included the winner's name—in fact, Leah vaguely recalled something about publicizing the winner's name when signing up for the tournament—which meant there was the possibility that a bunch of PKers would swarm the Great Woods looking for a player named Leah. Wayne already knew of the existence of a player character named Leah, even if Kelli had been using it as an alias.

Of course, Leah was confident that the players weren't going to be able to overcome her army of ants in the Great Woods. After all, the ants had the advantage of being on home turf and could fight a guerrilla war against the players with the benefit of heavy-fire support. They also had the advantage of being a well-trained and disciplined force with access to a warren of underground tunnels that allowed them to pop up seemingly out of nowhere.

In that scenario, players were, at best, walking bags of experience points waiting to be harvested by her ants. Even better, since they respawned, they would effectively be a walking gang of masochistic renewable resources. Wait, now that she'd put it into those terms, Leah wasn't seeing a downside to the publicity.

While Leah was already leaning toward accepting, she knew that in negotiations it was always useful to let the other side point out the benefits of accepting their offer, so she waited to hear what the devs had in mind.

<<The developers' proposal is as follows: "The player character [Leah] receives experience points for player

kills during the exhibition match.” Does this seem a fair exchange?>>

It wasn't a bad offer, considering that the scheduled tournament gave no experience points because it lacked a death penalty. With that said, if all Leah wanted was experience points, she would get far more just waiting for players to try their hand at attacking the Great Woods. No, Leah needed something that only the devs could offer. Something she currently needed but had no easy way to obtain.

<I don't need the experience points, so I'd like some information I can use in game.>

<<Currently under consideration... It would depend on the information desired.>>

<I'd like a map of the region around my forest... Um, I guess around the Kingdom of Hilith?>

The areas in the game were vast. While Leah could just throw bodies at the problem by having the ants go out and try to map the area, it would take a great deal of time and effort on her part. Avoiding that hassle would be a handy reward.

Leah and her forces were now fully exploiting the resources available in the Great Woods. If they wanted to expand the types of materials at their disposal, they would have to move into new territories.

<<Under consideration... We appreciate your patience... The response from the developers is as follows: “That sounds like a fair trade. We will send the map and the prize for winning the tournament to your inventory after the postevent maintenance cycle. You will also receive experience points for kills during the exhibition match as we proposed earlier.”>>

<Wonderful! In that case, I'd be more than happy to take part in your exhibition match. I'll make sure you get your money's worth by killing as many players as possible—>

Wayne struggled to process what he had just heard.

He hadn't seen Leah since the day they went into the woods. He figured that something had come up in real life, or he was simply not logging in at the right time to see her, but since he and Leah weren't friends in the game, he had no way to contact her.

Time hadn't bothered to wait while Wayne sorted out his thoughts on the absent Leah, ruthlessly ticking down to the day of the event. Wayne had tried to find comfort in the fact that if she was going to participate, he might see her at the tournament grounds.

He was disappointed once again when he reached the grounds, where he failed to spot anyone who looked like Leah in the crowd, and now that he had been beaten in his preliminary match in Group 2, the only thing Wayne could do was sit in the stands and watch the final on his own.

The final progressed a lot more quickly than the group stages, as a mysterious player clad in all black armor easily wiped out the other players on their way to a flawless win.

It was what came after that threw Wayne for a loop.

<<Thank you all for your participation. The winner of the First Official Event: The Battle Royal Tournament is [Leah]. Congratulations on your win.>>

<<As the tournament has ended far earlier than anticipated, we will be hosting an exhibition match featuring the tournament winner [Leah]. The exhibition is open to any participants who wish to join.>>

<<The exhibition match will be in a battle royal format like the tournament matches, but there will be a special prize awarded for the players that defeat the champion [Leah].>>

Leah?! Did the system just say Leah...? No two players could have the same name in this game. Meaning that the only player named Leah would be the Leah that Wayne knew. Did that mean that the black-armored figure looming ominously on the screen was that same Leah? Just what had happened in the two weeks since he last saw her?

The first time they met, she was a beginner wearing starting equipment and just dipping her toes into the game. She'd even said something about seeing magic for the first time. How had that player turned into...

There was only one way to find out. He needed to talk to her directly. Wayne made his way down to the arena to sign up for the exhibition match.

The system notified all of the players present that sign-ups for the exhibition match were closed, and a few moments later the participants were teleported to the battlefield.

Wayne was deposited in the middle of a grassy plain. His priority was clear—he needed to find Leah as soon as possible. According to the announcement, there was a special prize for defeating Leah, the reigning champion. Which meant that most of the participants were going to focus on her.

Since the notification said “players that defeat the champion,” it likely meant that if a group defeated her, everyone would receive the prize, just like how the system automatically awarded experience points to all participants in a fight. Which meant it was unlikely that the other participants would target anyone but Leah.

Wayne tried to avoid drawing undue attention to himself and approached a clump of players lingering near a copse of trees. One of the players called to him when he got within earshot. “Hey, are you looking for the champ?”

Wayne nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. What about you guys?”

Another of the players chuckled and responded, “Of course. They might call this a battle royal, but in a one-on-one fight the champ’s gonna wipe the floor with us. The only way for us normal players to make a dent is to team up and take on this boss monster together.”

Wayne thinned his lips and said, “Boss monster, eh...?”

The player grinned. “Yeah, fits perfectly, right? Even if we can’t take her out, I’d at least like to get a peek under that helmet.” Wayne already knew. He alone out of all the players knew that under that helmet was a slightly awkward catfolk woman.

“Yeah, that’s true...” Wayne said with a dry chuckle. He decided he would tag along with this group of players. Even if they were just searching at random, it would be easier to find Leah in a group than it would be on his own.

As they made their way along the trees, Wayne caught sight of other players wandering in the same general direction. “Think those players are after the same thing?” he asked as he watched the procession.

The player next to him nodded. “Maybe one of their friends found the champ and they’re on their way to join them.”

A third gestured to the other players and said, “All right, let’s follow them.”

The trees fell away, revealing a clearing with a large group of players. They all faced a single direction, probably where Leah was standing. At that moment, Wayne wanted more than anything to get a glimpse of her.

One player took charge of the situation and called out to the others, signaling the start of the battle. “Okay, everyone! I think we’ve got enough folks gathered here! Let’s get this raid started! Charge!”

Wayne was capable of both melee and ranged fighting, but since his goal was to meet Leah, he ran forward into the scrum. When he had first seen the group, he’d been worried the sea of players would make it impossible to make any headway, but with the battle now begun, all the players had spread out to secure their own firing lanes and line of sight, making it easier for him to run to the front.

When he eventually reached the very front of the group, he found several players equipped with shields and metal breastplates surrounding a single figure clad completely in black plate mail. Spells and arrows rained in from a distance, which the players armed with swords and shields carefully threaded between on their way to attack the black knight from behind their tanking shields.

Wayne swiftly moved forward to join the fight. He lunged with his sword from behind a shield-bearer and called out, “Leah!”

Leah turned toward Wayne. None of the attacks raining down upon her seemed to have any effect. There was no use in his worrying: it was clear that none of the attacks were going to harm her. Undeterred, he called out again, “Leah! What’s going on? Where did you get that armor?!”

A player next to him reacted as Wayne tried to shove his way past. “Hey! What’re you doing?! You know the champ?!”

Another noticed Wayne calling out Leah’s name and shouted, “Hey! Lemme ask you some questions later! Even just a hint on how to get that strong!”

Wayne ignored the players who tried to talk to him. Now wasn’t the time. He called out again, “Leah!”

Leah made no indication she heard any of them and instead raised a hand and murmured something to herself. A heartbeat later, a torrent of lightning erupted from her hand, lashing out in a violent whirlwind of destruction, consuming the players in its wake. Wayne’s fight ended right then and there.

Wayne stood in shocked silence as he was instantly returned to the spectators’ stands.

“Hey, I saw you trying to talk to the champ. You a friend of theirs?” one of the players who had tried fruitlessly to tank against Leah with a shield asked as he made his way toward Wayne.

Wayne shook his head and answered quietly, “No. We’ve been hunting together a few times, but that’s it.”

The player seemed to deflate at Wayne’s response. “Oh, gotcha. But, well, no

one else knows the player. So far you're the only source of information. Do you have any way of getting in touch with them?"

"If I see her, I'll ask her about today," Wayne answered after a pause. "But as far as I was aware, she wasn't this powerful..." He trailed off.

"Oh, so the champ's a woman, huh? Well that's something, anyway," the player said with a shrug. "Hmm, guess that means there's a way to get really strong really quickly. The plot thickens." The player fell silent for a moment, then held out his friend card. "Hey, you mind if I add you as a friend? I'd be interested in knowing what you find out from her."

Wayne slowly reached over and took the card and placed it into his inventory.

<<Character [Gealgamesh] has been added to your friends list.>>

"Call me Gil, yeah?" Gealgamesh said with a laugh. "I wanted to grab the name Gilgamesh, but someone else snagged it first."

The shortened nickname "Gil" only made sense in that context, given his actual character name. But if Wayne hadn't added him as a friend, he wouldn't have even known his actual name was "Gealgamesh" to begin with. It wasn't as though there was anything restricting you to calling someone their registered character name—

"Names..." Wayne murmured to himself. It felt like he'd just stumbled across something important, but his mind was still reeling from the day's events, and he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. Exhausted, Wayne said goodbye to Gil and made his way back to Erfahren, where he logged out for the day.

[[To our valued players,

Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community.

The Battle Royal Tournament, our first major community

event, was a great success thanks to your enthusiastic participation. We would like to thank everyone who came out to take part.

We have a wide range of different upcoming events planned, so please keep an eye out for any new announcements.

We look forward to seeing you at the next event!

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 our first community 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 issuing a game update to implement a change prompted by a common player complaint.

“The voice-activated skills and spells are poorly named and embarrassing to say aloud.”

We thank you for your honest feedback, and after thorough internal deliberation, we have implemented a change to allow characters to set their own activation phrases for each skill. If a character does not set a custom activation key, you may still use the poorly named and embarrassing key phrase to activate your skills.

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: There's a ridiculously overpowered player character in the game. Was she given her abilities by the development team, or could she be exploiting some sort of bug in the game?

A: We have looked into the matter and have found no issues with the player.

Due to the fact that information regarding in-game systems and mechanics provides a large advantage in the game, no employees of our company are allowed to play the game.

As you may be aware, Generation 5 and later VR systems make it structurally impossible for client-side cheating in a game of this type. In addition, our game features a system AI that has full debugging capabilities and is designed to spot and close any exploits that arise due to bugs. This makes it impossible to exploit bugged systems to get an unfair advantage in the game.

We understand that there has been a great deal of variation in progression between players, but that is part of the design of the game.

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

<<To the player [Leah],

Thank you for being a valued member of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community.

We would like to extend our thanks for your help in making the first community event, the Battle Royal Tournament, such a resounding success.

As part of our marketing efforts, we would like to make use of several of the combat scenes involving your character in our upcoming commercials, and we are writing you today to ask for your permission to use your likeness in our commercials.

The scenes we wish to use are->>

Chapter 6: Grand Opening of the Great Woods of Lieb

Leah found several messages waiting for her when she logged back in after the maintenance was completed. There was a notice about the maintenance downtime, but that had arrived before the server maintenance had started, and she'd left it unopened after looking at the message title.

"Combat scenes, hm? Well, since my face isn't showing, I guess there's no harm in letting them use those clips. Oh, I have an idea..." Leah said to herself and made a quick note of her idea for later. It had the potential to make things interesting. She then turned her attention back to the fallout from the tournament. "Now, I guess I need to do something about Wayne."

"Did something happen with Wayne?" Kelli, who had been standing near Leah, asked with a faint edge to her voice. Since her little hunting trip with Wayne, Kelli had spent most of her time here in the queen's chamber. It seemed that pretending to be much weaker than she was and attacking the engineering ants had been quite stressful for her. Kelli had no intention of interacting with Wayne again unless commanded to do so by Leah.

"Had a little encounter with him at the event—" Leah stopped and clarified for the sake of her retainers. "The other day when I was gone for two hours."

<If this Wayne is an obstacle to your plans, Your Highness, would you like me to cut him down for you?> Diaz said, looming menacingly by the throne as he so often did.

Leah shook her head. "No, you don't need to trouble yourself... Hmm. Okay. Let's do this. Kelli, you head to town where I'll possess you using *Summon Summoner: Spirit*. I'll find Wayne while possessing you—and then we'll draw him into the woods and make a tasty experience point snack out of him."

Summon Summoner was a skill in the *Summon* tree that was unlocked by

Spatial Magic and some other combination of skills. Since Leah had obtained a vast number of skills, there was no way for her to know what other prerequisites were necessary for *Summon Summoner*, but the important thing was that the skill allowed “the summoner to be summoned to their retainer’s location.”

Although the target was restricted to “self,” when activated the skill displayed a list of summonable objects. All of the objects were some aspect of the summoner, and included items that the summoner was currently wearing. That meant the skill could be used to teleport items to a retainer, even if the items were limited to equipment like armor, accessories, and weapons.

The list also had an entry for “spirit,” which summoned the summoner’s spirit and placed it within the retainer’s body. It was essentially the reverse of skills like *Summon Vision*, which summoned a retainer’s senses and placed them in the summoner’s body. In addition to allowing the summoner to possess the retainer’s body, the skill also provided a passive bonus of ten percent of the summoner’s ability scores on top of any bonuses provided by *Enhance Retinue*.

The amount of time a summoner could possess a retainer was dependent on the summoner’s MND score, and with Leah’s current MND score, she could remain in a retainer’s body for several days. The only limitation was that, because the body was still the retainer’s, the summoner couldn’t use skills that the retainer didn’t have while possessing the retainer.

The first time Leah had used *Summon Summoner: Spirit*, Leah had possessed Kelli and looked around to see her own avatar asleep on the throne. She had found the surreal scene entertaining, as though she were playing a VR game within a VR game. It reminded Leah of an article she had once read at the library dating from the days of pre-VR MMORPGs, when players in a game had gotten hooked on playing mahjong within the game. However much the technology had changed since those days, it seemed the humans playing the games hadn’t changed much.

After receiving word from Kelli that she had reached Erfahrung, Leah immediately activated *Summon Summoner: Spirit* and jumped into Kelli’s body. She hadn’t possessed Kelli since that first test of the skill, and she felt the same

sense of unease, a sense that she was a stranger inhabiting someone else's body, as she adjusted to her surroundings. Given that Leah was, in fact, a stranger in someone else's body, perhaps that sense of unease was natural, but it was a strange feeling nonetheless.

It was different from when she possessed Mister Plates. In that case, Mister Plates was much larger than she was and had less awareness, making it feel as though she were in the cockpit of a giant robot.

"Might be that the feeling is more pronounced when the character has a stronger sense of self-identity and has their own distinct demeanor and habits," Leah mused to herself. In the real world, individuals had distinct behavior patterns and body language habits, which were used for forms of biometric identification like gait recognition. While Leah doubted that they would go so far as to replicate that in a game, she also wouldn't have been surprised to find this specific game had modeled that sort of behavior.

"Guess it's the old cliché about any sufficiently advanced technology being indistinguishable from magic..." Leah murmured as she made her way toward the Mercenary Guild's hall. She realized that she'd developed a habit of talking to herself. That was fine when she was in a friendly space like the queen's chamber, but she needed to be careful out in public like she was now.

Leah entered the guild hall expecting to see it mostly empty, but the hall was busier than usual. A close look at most of the assembled mercenaries hinted that the idlers were primarily player characters. It was mostly their attitude—they were far too relaxed to be the scrappy mercenaries who made their living in the city. To put it a bit more negatively, they had the air of city kids visiting their grandparents out in the country during a school break.

Having spent most of her life in the country, Leah was particularly sensitive to the distinction between locals and outsiders. Although advancements in VR technology meant people went outside less often, if anything that had helped to widen the divide between urban and rural life. While rural life no longer had that distinct sense of isolation that it'd had before the advent of VR, it also meant that people were less interested in learning about what made rural locations unique—to city dwellers the country was now just "the country."

“So, where’s Wayne—aha, there he is.” Leah looked around the hall and found Wayne sitting in a chair in the lobby, staring down at the floor. He gave off such a gloomy air that for a moment Leah wasn’t sure if she was still in the game or had accidentally wandered into a VR work-placement facility. Not that she’d ever been to a VR work-placement facility.

She wandered over and called out to him, “Hey, Wayne. Did I keep you waiting?”

Wayne looked up, his eyes widening when he saw her. “Oh! Leah... Umm, no, you didn’t... Did you come to see me?”

“Yup. You looked like you had some questions, and we hadn’t had time to chat since we went out to the woods that one time.” Leah mentally clicked her tongue in irritation even as she answered him. Wayne calling out her name had drawn a few glances from the other players in the hall. It was that careless inability to read a room that made him a loner, Leah thought to herself. Not that Leah was really in any position to be criticizing someone about having no friends.

“I don’t mind chatting, but...looks like we’ve drawn a little too much attention. I don’t want anyone to interrupt us, so why don’t we head out to the woods? There shouldn’t be any monsters in the outer parts of it,” Leah suggested, gesturing toward the door. Wayne stood up with a tense expression and nodded. The pair left the Mercenary Guild’s hall together. None of the players followed them out the door. Not that it would have particularly bothered Leah if someone had decided to follow them.

As they headed toward the woods, Leah did her best to copy Kelli’s usual gait, walking in a way that felt most natural in this body to minimize her sense of unease and awkwardness.

While Leah had no idea how closely Wayne had observed Kelli in their past encounters, from her point of view, she felt like she was on an undercover mission to interact with a stranger without giving herself away. Framing the encounter that way made it feel more exciting. And if she was on a mission, she might as well make sure she maintained her cover till the end.

Once at the woods, they spent another twenty minutes or so walking deeper in. That was about enough distance to avoid being seen from anyone outside of the woods. The woods were Kelli's home turf, and this additional time gave Leah a good lesson in navigating them. The more she attempted to keep a natural gait, the easier it was for her to walk over the wooded terrain. Perhaps it would be worth tagging along on Riley's regular patrols while possessing Kelli.

Leah looked around, decided they were deep enough into the woods, and turned to Wayne. "This should be good enough. So, Wayne, what did you want to ask me?"

He asked a bit haltingly, "Are you...are you really Leah?"

"Well, yeah, of course I'm Leah. No doubt about it," she said airily. Since Leah was possessing Kelli's body, the one speaking was, in fact, Leah herself. If anything, the "Leah" Wayne had interacted with before was the fake one.

Wayne regarded her a moment before speaking. "I...don't think...you're the Leah I know." Leah sucked in a breath, surprised at Wayne's words. What had she done wrong? He'd already seen past her cover. Was Wayne just a lot more observant and sharper than she had anticipated?

She put on a puzzled expression and responded, "You say that, but the game uses brain-wave verification when logging in. You can't swap accounts with someone else. You can't fool it like the older biometrics that used fingerprints or retinal scans." That and the body was Kelli herself, the very character Wayne had interacted with before. The person standing in front of Wayne was the Leah that Wayne knew—that is, Kelli's body—inhabited by the actual player "Leah." In a sense, this was the purest form of Leah that Wayne had ever interacted with.

"Was that what you wanted to ask? Is that all?" she asked as though to put the matter to rest.

"Hold on, you haven't answered my question!" Wayne interjected. How had she not answered the question? What else was there to say? What did he want from her?

Then again, however much of a pain it was to deal with him, if Wayne sensed something was off, it might be useful to know what, exactly, had given her

away. For future reference. Leah nodded and said, “All right. Then let me ask you something. Why do you think I’m not Leah?”

“First...the way you talk. Leah was into role-playing her character, and talked how you’d expect a mercenary to talk,” Wayne pointed out, reminding Leah that Kelli had spoken with a pronounced accent before Leah had taught her how to speak properly. Kelli had still had bits of that accent left when she’d interacted with Wayne. Leah had completely forgotten about that.

“Yeah, umm, well. I figured we could drop the pretense. But if it makes ya feel better, how’s that?” Leah said with a faint drawl. Since Kelli and the others now spoke in formal tones without an accent, Leah couldn’t remember the exact details of their accents.

It seemed Wayne wasn’t quite finished, and he continued, “Then there’s how you walked through the woods. The last time we were here, Leah was following behind me...as though she didn’t know the area well, but you walked right on ahead of me like you knew this place inside and out. While it’s been about two weeks since that trip, even in a game, it’s not that easy to learn your way around woodlands.”

He was right about that. Leah had only been able to look so practiced because she was trying to ape Kelli’s natural gait. But when Kelli had gone out hunting with Wayne, she had followed slowly behind him. The stress of pretending to be weaker wasn’t just about combat, but also from having to pretend she was inexperienced in walking around the woods. This, too, was a genuine mistake on Leah’s part.

“And finally, you mentioned the whole login verification thing, but when talking to Leah, I got the impression she wasn’t didn’t have a deep knowledge of either hardware or software. For someone like that to suddenly talk about old biometric verification just doesn’t feel right,” Wayne said. He was, again, right. There was no way for a denizen of this world—that is, an NPC like Kelli—to know much about VR technology or the software around it.

Wayne must have gathered from his conversations with Kelli that she was a player who didn’t know much about the technology behind the game. Out of habit, Leah had displayed her usual knowledge of VR technology and the game

itself. This, too, was another oversight on Leah's part. How embarrassing; there was a rube here, but it wasn't Wayne. It was all on her.

"I'm guessing...you're the friend that was chatting with Leah over friend chat, aren't you? And the Leah I know isn't actually named 'Leah.' Since I never added her to my friends list, she could call herself Leah, and there would be no way for me to check if that was her actual name in game," Wayne concluded.

While Leah had been a bit of a careless rube walking into this, it was also probably true that Wayne was sharper and more observant than she had originally given him credit for. She hadn't expected him to take these disparate clues and piece them into a hypothesis that was so on the mark. Leah hadn't thought she'd get to experience what it felt like to be a villain in a whodunit thriller being cornered by a sharp-witted detective. It was wonderful.

"I see... So your conclusion is that there are two players who look exactly alike. I'm one of them, and the other is the Leah you met. Is that your hypothesis?" Leah casually emphasized the fact that they looked exactly alike and that they were both players.

As far as Leah was concerned, so long as the truth about her appearance and the fact that NPCs could use inventories and friend chat remained secret, it didn't matter what else Wayne might learn about her. If he found out that Leah looked completely different from Kelli, that would raise questions about how Leah was controlling Kelli's body, which would then bring about the possibility of the skills she'd kept secret being exposed to the world.

"So, that's it, isn't it...?" Wayne said with a sigh, slumping his shoulders. Evidently he'd interpreted Leah's words as a confession. She'd managed to steer him toward the conclusion she wanted him to draw. He was certainly sharp, but that was easier than she'd expected.

"As for why we did that, well, there's not really a big reason behind it," Leah said with a shrug of her shoulders. The real reason was that Leah had wanted to avoid going to the city herself, and her Albinism and Poor Eyesight were contributing factors. But admitting that would point toward her real appearance, so she wasn't able to use it as her excuse.

"It's kind of a honey trap of sorts? I wanted to hunt players when they let

their guard down. An NPC you only get to kill once, but you can kill players over and over, right?” Leah said with a chuckle. “I was a tester during the closed beta too, and back then I pretended to be an NPC and used that to kill some gullible players—”

“Wait, what did you just say? Pretended to be an NPC...in the closed beta...? Is that what you said?” Wayne’s voice had a faint tremor as he asked.

Leah nodded. “Yup. It was hilarious. I did it a few times, but you can’t do it too many times in a single city, so I stopped and—”

“You!” Wayne suddenly shouted. Leah flinched in surprise. “The gullible player you killed...that was me!”

Ah, that made sense.

“Wow, that’s such a coincidence! It almost feels like fate!” Leah said in delight. “At the time, I wondered how anyone could be so gullible...but now you’re the one figuring out my scheme! You’ve gotten way sharper! I’m impressed!”

“Aargh...y-you...!” Wayne ground his teeth together and reached for the hilt of his sword.

Leah watched him with amusement. “Oh, drawing your sword, hm? That’s fine. That was the plan all along anyway.”

“You called it a honey trap...! Why didn’t you do it by yourself?! If you have the same face...why did you have to drag Leah...drag her into this?!” Wayne’s voice trembled as he glared at Leah. Well, that was because they didn’t actually have the same face, and the whole honey trap thing was a random reason she’d just come up with on the spot.

“You might have noticed based on this conversation, but...I’m not good at that sort of thing. She’s a good deal more personable and honest at heart...so I figured she’d be more convincing. And you’re proof that it worked. Though, it seemed like it stressed her out a bit, so I don’t plan on having her do it again,” Leah said casually.

“You’re the one stressing her out!” Wayne shouted.

No, if anything it's your fault, Leah thought to herself. Not that saying it out loud would do any good. The conversation had just about run its course; it was time for one last bit of advertising before bidding adieu to Wayne.

"I'm now using these woods as my base. I'll think of the details later, but I'm planning on doing a whole lot more player killing from here on out. You have the privilege of being victim number one," she said coolly.

Wayne drew his blade and glared. "Seriously?! Do you think you can get away with—"

"And how will I not get away with it? Is everyone going to gang up and come kill me? I'm fine with that. If you kill me enough times, I'll eventually be weak enough that I can't beat any players," Leah replied. The death penalty was ten percent of a character's total experience points. No matter how vast Leah's pool of experience points was, after about thirty or so deaths, her total would be reduced to less than five percent of her current amount, essentially crippling her. Of course, she had no intention of dying at the hands of players the likes of which she had faced at the exhibition match.

As she finished speaking, Leah reached her hand out to the sky. Primus Sharp, who had been circling overhead, immediately swooped down and landed in her hand.

Wayne stared at the blade. "That sword...that's from..."

"Anyway. Goodbye for now, Wayne. I'll be waiting for you and any others that want to challenge me," Leah said. Then she triggered *Fleet of Foot*, closed the distance between herself and Wayne before he could react, and used *Slash* to whip his head clean off his shoulders.



◆ Wayne ◆

The developers were evidently happy to go along with Leah's latest proposal: when posting the promotional videos that featured Leah's fighting from the battle royal event, add a comment from the developers stating "a player stumbled upon a method to become extremely powerful in game and participated in the event to show off that power. The developers had designed the game with this sort of possibility in mind and put together a highlight reel to show off the possibilities available in game. The player, however, has no intention of telling anyone about her power-up method and is currently holed up in a great forest."

The idea behind that specific wording was to invite speculation from other players and draw more attention to the game. Everything about the statement was true, which made it easy for the developers to say yes to, and the resulting video ad was everything Leah had hoped it would be. If there was one thing to nitpick about the wording of the description, it was that Leah had participated in the event to gauge how strong other players were rather than to simply show off, but since she was the only one who knew her own motivations, the developers were telling the truth so far as they knew.

Further fanning the flames started by the tournament was the fact that Wayne had publicly posted everything he knew about Leah over social media. Things like how the player in the black armor from the video was going around repeatedly PKing other players in the Great Woods of Lieb. As for the matter of Kelli, Wayne had also gone around telling people that Leah was using an innocent player as bait for her PKing antics, but since that information was built on layers upon layers of false assumptions and misunderstandings, Leah had convinced herself that it wasn't doing any harm.

Correcting that bit of information would require Leah herself to go on social media to post clarifications, and would also threaten to undo all of Wayne's efforts to spread word of her infamous deeds. It was better for a villain to remain quiet and mysterious. The only time a villain should be out blabbing information about themselves is when they've been cornered. Just like Leah had done with Wayne the other day.

It had been a week since the promotional campaign had gotten underway. Though Leah herself hadn't done much, the various promotional efforts had borne fruit. The Great Woods of Lieb—the forest's formal name that Leah had just recently learned—was starting to attract a steady flow of players. The nearest city, which she had recently learned was called Erfahren, was seeing a major economic boom as a result of the new player activity. The video ad and Wayne's unintended viral marketing had given players just enough information to draw the conclusion that Leah had gained her power by farming experience points in the forest.

To take advantage of the surge in interest, Leah had turned her own game time from classic RPG to dungeon management. She had her engineer ants turn the low-quality metals extracted from the mines into weapons and armor, then scattered them at random locations along the outer regions of the forest under her control. These items were steadily replenished as players happened upon them and claimed them on their forays into the woods.

She further enticed the players into the forest by scattering other items of value, such as low-quality potions, lumber harvested from deeper within the woods, fruit, monster pelts, and other useful resources. It was a convenient way to get rid of the excess resources her forces had gathered from the midlevel areas of the Great Woods. Instead of loading gathered resources onto transporter ants, Leah had the infantry ants who were gathering the resources simply hang on to them and drop them at convenient locations.

Scout ants maintained constant surveillance of the randomly distributed loot and the players who came to collect it. The number of players arriving at the woods had ballooned so quickly that she had Sugaru birth a whole new army of scout ants, which Leah then arranged into specialized surveillance units.

The goal was to have the players enjoy hunting monsters (mostly ants) and finding decent weapons and items in the Great Woods, before they were inevitably killed by more powerful members of her army, like dragoon ants or sniper ants.

This was all due to a realization that had dawned on Leah early in this process. While she wasn't able to gain any experience points by having ants kill other

ants, she had found the next best thing. She gained more experience points when her ants killed players who had been farming their own EXP by hunting ants.

The key was to make sure that players kept coming to the forest. Items alone weren't enough of an incentive if players suffered a net loss of EXP when hunting there.

To that end, she set up the woods so that players gained enough experience points before dying that they either broke even or came out ahead after subtracting their death penalty. This, of course, required careful observation and measurement of player strength, something which Leah was able to delegate to Sugaru by massively boosting her INT. This also increased the average INT of every ant, due to *Enhance Retinue*, making it easier to coordinate the massive operation.

The increased INT had the additional effect of strengthening the power of the acid produced by the engineer ants. More specifically, it meant that engineer ants could now melt items made of bronze. This meant that engineer ants were strong enough to provide a challenge for players with equipment made from bronze or the bones of weaker monsters.

Leah's dungeon management brought to Erfahren not only a large influx of players but also, indirectly, a return of the iron supply from the Great Woods, which had stopped when Leah had invaded and occupied the iron mine, as the players gathered loot on their adventures. This helped to lower the inflated prices in the city, but since the players were bringing back finished items rather than raw ore or ingots, times were still relatively tough for blacksmiths. Many had already left the city, and those that remained were getting by doing maintenance on metal items.

Leah had learned this information courtesy of Lemmy. With the production lines established in the Great Woods, there was no need for Lemmy to continue overseeing the manufacturing teams. So, Leah had reassigned Lemmy to the city to do business as a wandering alchemist who sold low-level potions and other consumable items.

While players could gather potions within the forest, few were dumb enough to go hunting without buying some supplies in the city. There were also players who wanted to sell the surplus potions that they acquired on their hunting trips. The existing potion merchants and alchemists in the city were strictly sellers of potions and didn't buy any surplus stock from players. This was natural since they had set up shop when they were the only suppliers of these consumable items.

The situation was now quite different, with a steady supply of potions coming out of the forest that had no discernible manufacturer but were just as effective as any found in stores. The fact that Lemmy's shop bought surplus potions off players allowed her to differentiate herself from her competitors, and at the moment the shop was turning a tidy profit of its own.

Turning the Great Woods of Lieb into a dungeon had dramatically increased the amount of experience points rolling into Leah's coffers. Player farming was so effective that Leah's forces had stopped regularly culling the goblin and monster ranches, resulting in a population boom among the feral goblins and monsters. Leah took advantage of this little surge by using her ants to corral these monsters and send them to attack hunting parties, doing something very close to monster player killing (MPKing). This had the benefit of allowing players to fight monsters other than ants, bringing some variety to the hunting experience in the woods and preventing it from becoming too monotonous.

While the goblins weren't much stronger than engineer ants, many of the beasts bred at the ranches were powerful in their own right. Leah's forces usually took them down effortlessly thanks to the sheer weight of numbers, but the monsters were strong enough that they could easily kill an unprepared party of players. They essentially filled the role of mini-bosses for players to challenge themselves against.

With her massively increased INT, Sugaru was now more than capable of running the whole dungeon operation on her own. A group of transporter ants was always nearby with various supplies that she could tap into when necessary, and there was always the option of sending out Diaz if Sugaru's ants ran into something they couldn't handle.

Leah sometimes sent Kelli off into the woods wearing the newly crafted little sister to Mister Plates to fill in for Leah and hunt down players. It was important to keep the armored player in the public eye to maintain the main attraction of the forest, but Leah wasn't always around to fill that role herself.

Luck had been on Leah's side since she started playing, spawning her in the open beta, pre-balance-tweak Great Woods of Lieb by chance and setting off a chain of lucky coincidences that helped get her to where she was now. But just as importantly, Leah had taken advantage of that luck to carve out this little empire.

The Great Woods of Lieb was Leah's homeland in this game world. Its bounty had once nourished countless animals, monsters, and the people of Erfahren. Leah had turned those woods into a well-oiled machine, using its resources as bait to efficiently gather experience points.

This wasn't exactly what Leah had looked to accomplish in the game, but now that she had established her little slice of the world, she intended to embrace the role of the villain and enjoy whatever came next. After all, she'd already hammed it up as a villain for the playerbase; she might as well take it as far as she could.

"Here. A gown that belonged to either a noblewoman or an heiress, and a uniform for knights serving the regional lord," Lemmy said as she unshouldered a bundle of clothing from her back.

"Thanks, Lemmy. Hope money wasn't too much of a problem." Kelli took the bundle and handed it off to an engineer ant standing nearby.

Lemmy shook her head. "No, my store's doing pretty well. I've got more than enough to handle buying some clothes."

Kelli nodded but said, "Well, have one of the transporter ants reimburse you for it anyway. Best to have some money for future assignments."

Lemmy smiled. "Got it."

Lemmy, who was on assignment in Erfahren collecting and manipulating intelligence undercover as a merchant, had temporarily returned to the forest to pay the others a visit. She was here to stock up on funds and supplies, make her regular report, and attend the regular leadership meetings of Leah's top retainers. Kelli had also asked Lemmy to buy some fashionable used clothing in the city. Kelli had left the determination of what was "fashionable" up to Lemmy, but given that Lemmy had been in charge of all crafting before she'd gone to the city, she was probably the most qualified out of the group to make that sort of aesthetic judgment.

While Kelli and Lemmy had initially tried to get their boss, Leah, to make that decision, the boss had refused, stating that she lacked any talent whatsoever in terms of aesthetic taste. Given that their boss was pretty competent at everything, neither of them found that excuse convincing, but they had given up due to the sheer vehemence behind Leah's refusal.

<Ah, so that's the new clothing, eh? Though, for new clothes they sure smell like other humans...> the overgrown dog, Hakuma, said disdainfully as he sniffed at the bundle of clothes. For some reason, this dog seemed to feel a sense of rivalry with Kelli and the other catgirls and had an annoying habit of finding random things to critique.

The regular meeting had originally been something Kelli had held with the other three members of her old bandit gang, but for some reason it had grown to include the dogs, represented by Hakuma, the ant queen Sugaru, and the terror knight Diaz. Since the goal of the meetings was to minimize the number of problems the boss had to deal with directly and ensure smooth operations within the Great Woods, overall their presence was a boon, even if they had to put up with the dog and his continual whining. They'd scheduled the meeting to take place while the boss was asleep.

Kelli shook her head and sighed. "Look, that's the whole thing with clothes, okay? Clothes take a lot of money and time to make. Money's obviously not a problem, but you need connections to get access to the people with the right skills. For outsiders like us, the best we can do is buy used clothes. Right, Lemmy?"

Lemmy nodded. “Kelli’s right. Besides, we’re not gonna give these clothes to the boss. We just got them so the ants have something to use as a model when they make new clothes from the materials we’ve got here in the forest.”

<Ah, got it. Must be tough to not have fur,> Hakuma said with a dismissive sniff.

“Now hold on a second, you big mutt. Did you just insult the boss for not having fur?” Kelli bared her teeth at Hakuma.

Chastened, Hakuma immediately shook his head. <Oh, no, that wasn’t what I was getting at! Yes, that was definitely my mistake... I mean, the boss is almost perfect. Only thing missing is a fur coat and the ability to walk on four legs.>

As Lemmy had noted, the noblewoman’s dress would be used to make a new outfit for the boss. They’d use the general design as a basis, then combine it with more practical boots designed for mercenary groups and accessories to make the final outfit. The end product would be made from materials they harvested in the woods and was intended to be the boss’s new everyday attire.

Because she stated that she had no intention of appearing in public, the boss always wore a simple outfit consisting of furs tied together with a sash. Despite her beauty, the boss evidently had no interest in fashion. That was even true when she had gone out for that “ent.” The boss had said something about revealing herself to the crowd if Mister Plates was defeated. Had the plan been to go out in public dressed in her furs?

Kelli and the others had agreed that they couldn’t possibly let their beloved boss appear in public like that and decided to put together an outfit worthy of the ruler of the Great Woods of Lieb. While they were at it, they had also decided it would be a good idea for Kelli and the others to have a uniform they could wear as the boss’s retainers. That was why Lemmy had also bought a set of clothes that had belonged to a knight serving the local lord.

It seemed that most knights in this region were men, and the only clothes available secondhand had been men’s clothing. Still, the basic design was sound, and when combined with something like the bottoms worn by most female mercenaries, Kelli and the others were confident they would look sharp enough to do justice to their boss.

“Anyway, it’s all in your hands now, engineer ants. We’re counting on you to make us some equipment that’ll do the boss and us proud,” Kelli said to the engineer ant holding the bundle of clothing. While none of the ants had the same level of skill as the best human tailors, they were all able to do each tailoring task with exactly the same level of detail, could split all of the tasks equally among themselves, and required less rest than their human counterparts. Although sewing clothing ordinarily took a great deal of time, the ants were able to effectively split up the process to make an entire outfit in a matter of hours.

Leah, the boss, woke up when they were done with their reporting and about to sit back and wait for the ants to complete their work. The boss stretched as she looked over the assembled group. “Morning. Oh, hello, Lemmy. Welcome home.”

Kelli stood up and straightened her posture as she greeted their boss. “Good morning, Boss. Lemmy, get breakfast ready for—”

“Oh,” Lemmy winced and froze in place.

Kelli stared at her for a moment. “Lemmy, did you...”

Lemmy snapped out of her momentary freeze and bowed her head. “I’m sorry. I’d been so caught up on the clothes...”

“No, don’t worry about it. There’s no need for it to be food from the city. If there’s nothing ready at the moment, you can cook it now. I’m sure there’s plenty of ingredients harvested from the forest,” the boss said, graciously forgiving what had clearly been a blunder on Lemmy’s part.

“Well, yes, of course. If you don’t mind that it’s what the ants and I usually eat...” Kelli said a bit hesitantly.

The boss answered with a chuckle, “Oh, I didn’t know that your meals weren’t the same as mine. I guess it makes sense, given my strange schedule. All right, this is a good opportunity. Why don’t I try the food you all normally eat for today?”

And so Lemmy, who was the closest thing they had to a cook in terms of skills

and experience, started cooking a meal for the boss, aided by some idle ants. It was a chance for Lemmy to make full use of the plating and serving techniques she'd picked up in the city. Diaz also contributed his knowledge of etiquette gained from his days as a living knight. Finally, Kelli got involved in the whole exercise to gain some practical experience in acting as a servant for her distinguished boss.

<We are starting with hors d'oeuvres, Your Highness,> Diaz, dressed like a skeletal butler, said as he placed the plate onto the table. Kelli had wondered where the butler's suit came from, but evidently the ants had made it while Lemmy was preparing the meal, using the knight uniform as a model. Since the suit had no need for defensive enhancements or special magical properties, they had been able to whip it together quickly.

"Impressive. It's a proper meal service and everything. And this dish is...what, exactly?"

<According to the chef...it is a poison crawler and fresh mountain herb ceviche,> Diaz said after a momentary pause.

"A poison...what?"

<A poison crawler, Your Highness. A large poisonous caterpillar that can be found in these woods,> Diaz explained rather casually.

"A caterpillar?! Setting that part aside for a second...the bigger problem is the whole poison thing. Is this really safe to eat...?"

The boss furrowed her brow as she looked skeptically at her plate. The fresh green of the herbs and the vibrant, lively purple of the crawler meat were plated perfectly, and it looked delicious to Kelli, who regularly ate this particular combination. But the boss, with her keen mind, was unmoved by the appetizing appearance and was concerned about the poison.

<It is perfectly safe if the poison glands are removed properly. It is considered a delicacy in the city, and a handful of merchants carry it. Though, I am told chefs are required to be licensed poison-crawler handlers,> Diaz added helpfully.

The boss continued to look at the plate. “I guess it’s a bit like pufferfish...? A caterpillar, huh...? Hmm... Oh, you mentioned a license, but does Lemmy have one?”

Diaz hesitated. <I do not believe she does, but...it should be fine. We eat this all the time without any problems,> Diaz said calmly. Usually the crawlers were prepared with a lot less care, but Kelli had never felt sick after eating it.

“No no no, trusting that sort of judgment is the scariest thing you can do with something like this. Same goes for things like mushrooms. It’s not that I doubt Lemmy’s skills as a chef, but why don’t we hold off on the poison crawlers until she has her certificate?” the boss said as she gently pushed the plate away. The boss was right. The crawlers being edible after the poison glands were removed was an observation backed only by the personal experiences of Kelli and the others. It was possible they had missed something, or that the poison, while harmless to beastfolk, might still harm an elf like Leah.

<Well, I understand your feelings on the matter, Your Highness. There was no culture of eating such things when I was still human... I suppose it is best to play it safe. Kelli, you and the others will have to eat this dish,> Diaz said apologetically.

Kelli nodded. “All right. I’ll eat it later.”

Diaz brought the next course. <Next is the soup, Your Highness.>

“Wow... Wait... Why’s there tree bark floating in the soup?” the boss said with a frown.

<According to the chef, this is a chilled burdock root soup, Your Highness,> Diaz explained as he pointed to the soup plate.

The boss was clearly upset at the news. “Burdock root?! That’s not food people should be eating! It’s a root! It tastes like dirt!”

<Your Highness! That’s going too far!> Diaz raised his voice.

“Um... I-I’m sorry... But I can’t do burdock root! I don’t play a game just to have to eat burdock root!” The boss looked momentarily chastened, but then steadfastly refused to eat the soup, crossing her arms to show her utter refusal

of the dish.

While Kelli felt a slight bit of regret at serving the boss something she disliked, she had also learned that serving burdock root was a good way to get a cute reaction out of her boss. She glanced over at the kitchen where Lemmy was looking right back at her. Kelli surreptitiously gave her a thumbs up, which Lemmy returned with a wink. It was an example of why the catgirls worked so well as a team.



Diaz next returned with a large plate. <The fish, Your Highness. Trout meunière.>

The boss clapped her hands together. “Finally, a normal dish!” She paused. “But that’s huge?! Aren’t trout supposed to be a bit smaller?”

<The average trout in the Great Woods is about this size. They have parasites like a human thumb,> Diaz once again helpfully explained.

“Ugh...parasites? Well, I’m sure it’s fine now that it’s cooked, but...” the boss trailed off as she daintily cut into the fish with her knife and fork. Her table manners were elegant and precise. While Kelli had never eaten with a noble, she was sure that her boss was at least as refined as one.

“Ack! There’s a finger! A finger in here! Whose is it?! It’s not Lemmy’s, right?! RIGHT?!” The boss lurched back from the table, prompting Diaz to look at the object in question.

<Ah. That’s the parasite.>

“Para... So wait, when you said like a human thumb, you didn’t mean it was the *size* of a human thumb, but that it was *shaped* like one! What the heck is going on with the stuff in this forest?!”

Diaz waited for Leah to calm down before he asked, <Your Highness, there are still two meat courses, dessert, and a digestif left in the meal. What would you like to do?>

Leah folded her napkin and placed it on the table. “Um, I’m afraid that...I don’t have much of an appetite today... So, I’m going to go rest. You all can go ahead and finish up the food...”

After the boss returned to her throne, they all shared Lemmy’s cooking. It was definitely far better than the stuff the ants usually cooked. It might have partly been because Lemmy had pulled out all the stops to cook for the boss. They had offered to share the food with Diaz, but he had politely declined, saying, <I’m truly disappointed that I cannot partake of the food, as I am undead.>

With everything now running smoothly, Leah finally had a bit of time to herself. She also had the experience points to run some experiments. Leah had decided to spend the time and experience points experimenting with alchemy as she waited for Marion to report in from her assignment.

First, she would use metal and a Knight's Grudge to make a new living...*something*. Since she had already made a lot of armor and swords, the next item on the list to try was human bones. It was desecrating human remains and an abominable act, but progress required sacrifices. Besides, Leah wasn't one to worry about her reputation.

"Let's get started. *Philosopher's Egg*." Leah activated the skill, summoning a crystalline egg. She placed the metal ingots and the bones inside. Leah fed a generous number of ingots into the crystal, as she had discovered when mass-producing the Sharps that if there was too much metal in the egg, it wouldn't consume the extra ingots. The egg evidently didn't just consume everything that was placed inside.

As for the reverse situation of not putting in enough materials, the creation process would simply fail. The crystal egg would shatter, leaving the ingredients untouched. Basically, the only thing that was wasted in that case was the MP required to create the egg.

Since there was no telling when or even if she could obtain more bones of fallen knights, Leah decided to start with as small a piece of bone as possible, placing a single rib into the crystal. She then activated *Athanor*, and the contents of the egg turned into a swirling pool of multihued lighting. Success. "All right, then. *The Great Work*!"

As Leah went through the process of activating the alchemical skills, she remembered the announcement from the devs about adding the ability to change the activation key for skills. Perhaps she ought to change hers to something more...dramatic?

While she didn't feel much need to change the activation key on crafting skills like *Athanor* or *The Great Work*, there was a great deal of tactical value in

changing the activation key for combat skills. When engaged in close combat with enemies, it would prevent the enemy from guessing her next move based on the activation key.

For example, if she could swap the activation keys for *Flare Arrow* and *Slash*, she would be able to make it look like she was about to activate a melee skill, then attack with an arrow of fire. She needed to test if it was possible to use activation keys that were the same as existing skills.

As Leah pondered the possibilities presented by custom activation keys, the light from the egg dimmed and finally vanished. Inside the egg was a black skeleton wearing a suit of black armor.

“A skeleton knight...I guess?” Leah craned her head as she looked over the monster within. No, the bones were too black to be a normal skeleton. Bones were generally depicted as white, so there was something that was vaguely unsettling about a black-boned skeleton.

Leah immediately activated *Retainer* when the egg shattered and the skeleton emerged from within. This was another process that was now just routine work for her. Over the course of many repetitions, Leah had discovered that monsters created with her skills didn’t put up any resistance to the *Retainer* skill. That was also probably why Sugaru was able to immediately issue orders to newly hatched ants.

“The monster type is...adaman...knight?” Leah sighed at the pun, but the punny name had also inadvertently just told Leah what sort of metal Mister Plates and the others were made of. Adamantite, one of the mainstays of magical metals. While the precise name of the ingot might be anything from adamantite to adamantium, it was clear it was named adaman-something. In most games it was known for being a very tough metal. It was certainly true that Mister Plates had that characteristic durability.

There were no leftover materials after the process was complete, and while the adamanknight had used up quite a bit of metal, it had only required a single rib. That meant Leah would be able to produce a large number of these adamanknights.

It would be difficult to obtain additional bones that were infused with the wrath of fallen knights, but the bones she currently had on hand were enough to create an adamknight army that was larger than the original knight company that had been sacrificed to these woods. A single knight's skeleton would produce multiple adamknights.

A host of these adamknights would make a powerful addition to her army. They were made of the same metal as Mister Plates and had roughly the same stats. They had slightly less STR and VIT compared to Mister Plates, but they made up for it with slightly higher INT.

Leah took some MP recovery potions from a transporter ant and gulped them down before she began the task of mass-producing an army of adamknights.

Leah made a few discoveries while using all of the bones in her possession to create her new army: When using bones connected to the torso, like ribs, the resultant creation was an adamknight. When using leg bones, like a femur, the process created an adamscout. Arm bones created adamanmages, and finally skulls created adamanleaders.

Some bones, such as finger bones, were considered too small for the process and the skill would fail when she tried to use them. In those cases she could make up for the small size of individual bones by putting in multiple bones at once. In these cases, if the bones were a mix of bones from different parts of the body, the end result was always an adamknight even if no torso pieces were used.

This meant that there were far more adamknights than the other types. Leah had carefully sorted the bones to secure a decent number of adamscouts and adamanmages, but there was nothing she could do about the number of skulls available to her. That meant she had to settle for a small number of adamanleaders.

However, the handful of adamanleaders she possessed were about as powerful in terms of stats as Diaz, her recently recruited terror knight. When factoring in Diaz's superior combat experience, they might not be able to defeat him at equal strength, but that was hardly a problem when facing players. They

were all capable of making quick work of any party they came across.

As Leah approached the end of her work, her store of carefully husbanded adamantite ingots started to run low. For the last few batches of knights, she swapped out the adamantite for metals she had in greater numbers.

The new metal produced a creature called a “carknight.” It took Leah a few minutes to suss out what the name actually meant, but she figured that it was a play on the word carbide. There was nothing at all magical about carbide; it just meant it was a carburized metal of some sort and gave no indication of what it actually did.

After some testing, she found that the carknight had armor that was as hard as that of an adamanknight. The carbide in this case was some sort of high-strength metal like tungsten carbide. However, the carknights did have low VIT, so despite their armor being very hard, they didn’t have much in the way of overall durability or endurance. When considering that they were made of metal, that was probably a representation of the fact that they were more prone to chipping. Essentially, like tungsten carbide itself, the carknight was hard but brittle.

Since the carknights had the same *Physical Resistance* skill as Mister Plates and the adamanknights, Leah guessed that carknights were extremely hard and tough to break down while the skill was active, but that the moment that skill was breached, they’d easily shatter.

Carknights had a similar STR score to adamanknights, so when combined with their sheer weight, they still packed a mean punch. However, that weight also meant that their AGI was a bit on the lower end.

Since Leah decided to exhaust the rest of her bones by making carknights, by the end there were quite a few of them. They even outnumbered the adamanknights. While they were brittle and easily shattered when compared to adamanknights, they were still hard enough that anyone attacking one with an iron sword would have their hand numbed on impact, their blade ruined. On the other hand, carknights were a bit more vulnerable to bludgeoning weapons

like maces if hit in the right areas, so they did have a weakness.

Because of the physical properties of the metal they were made of, they were also highly resistant to heat and shrugged off most forms of *Fire Magic*. *Water Magic* was also ineffective against them, but they did have a weakness in that casting *Fire Magic* followed by *Ice Magic* in short succession would remove their *Physical Resistance* effects. They also had no resistance to *Lightning Magic* and took normal damage from those spells.

Since, like skeletons, they were vulnerable to bludgeoning attacks, it was best that they avoided fighters who specialized in bludgeoning weapons, but that was simply a matter of relative strengths and weaknesses. Those factors only came into play when the opponent was of sufficient level, and at the moment, Leah imagined there weren't many players who could take advantage of a carknight's weaknesses.

The fact of the matter remained that there was no way of knowing how a carknight would perform in combat without sending it into battle. Just like with the battle royal event, Leah needed to actually test the abilities of the carknight against players. Even though the carknight would probably pass muster as a low-cost alternative to Mister Plates and the adamanknights, she still wanted to watch the carknight actually fight.

Which was why Leah decided to send a single carknight after a group of players. Essentially, she wanted to try out her new toy.

Leah had hoped an appropriately powerful group of players might just wander by, but life rarely worked out that conveniently. Instead, Leah had to borrow the eyes of the owl-type monster that Riley had caught and tamed, a giant forest owl named Ominous, to find her prey, a group of players.

She found a party that was about as strong as the players she'd faced in the championship round of the battle royal event. While Leah would have preferred a stronger party so she could test more aspects of the carknight, it seemed this party was the best she could hope for. They were going to bear most of the burden of the tests she was about to conduct, so as a show of thanks, Leah intended to let them leave with some slightly higher-quality gear than was

usually available.

Leah ordered some ants to stealthily place some swords and armor that she had crafted as test items along their path. The items were of higher quality than the typical mass-produced cast-metal items that were found in the woods or sold secondhand in the city.

The party rejoiced when they found the items and wasted no time equipping them. Then, seeking to test out their gear and in search of greater discoveries, they made their way further into the woods. Helping them along were some artificially cleared beast paths Leah had recently installed to draw players to specific areas of the forest.

Leah struck with the carknight just when the group reached the point where they were ready to make their way back to town. The party was thrown into a panic at the sudden appearance of a mysterious new enemy. “That one looks like trouble!” one of them said. “Is this the boss monster for this area?!” another asked, followed quickly by a panicked third voice, “No way, it can’t be! We were fighting ants and goblins... Why would they suddenly bring out an undead monster to be the boss?! It makes no sense!”

One of the more levelheaded players took charge. “We can argue about that later! If we can’t run from it, the only choice we’ve got is to fight! With the gear we picked up earlier, we should have a decent shot even against a stronger opponent!” Under the circumstances, quickly rallying the group and deciding on a course of action was impressive enough.

Since Leah had no intention of letting them escape, the call to be ready to fight in case they couldn’t run was probably a wise one. However, if they were at a level where they thought the gear they picked up was high-quality gear, they were never going to put up much of a fight against the carknight, no matter how sound their judgment.

While she had thrown in the sword as a sort of bonus item, there was a good chance it’d immediately get ruined fighting the carknight. Leah had tried to give them items they’d be happy to find, but perhaps she needed to be more careful when picking items to provide guinea pigs as their treats.

That was a problem to solve later. For now, she needed to focus on the test in

front of her. Based on her past experiences, she decided to start by letting the players attack the carknight. If it could survive an attack from a party of players of this level, that was more than enough to make it a worthy addition to her forces. After all, she had dozens of them at her disposal.

As the carknight stood there looming ominously, one of the players slashed at it with the sword they had picked up a few minutes earlier. “Hyah! *Take that!*” It seemed they had used a skill, but Leah couldn’t figure out what skill it was on the activation key alone. The player must have set the activation key as something they usually said when attacking. It was a pretty clever move on their part.

Yet, while it was impossible to know what skill they were activating the moment they said the activation key, the subsequent movements revealed to Leah that the player had used the *Slash* skill. If players like this were to become the norm, it would be hard to remain competitive in high-end PvP without having seen the skills players might use firsthand.

Fortunately the adamantite series of skeleton monsters had a range of types. If Leah gave each type different skill sets, even if Leah herself didn’t take the skill, she’d be able to study up on most combat skills. Though, considering that she had a literal army of adamantite soldiers, she’d need a staggering amount of experience points to run that experiment. This meant she needed to make sure the players kept frequenting her house of horrors.

Even as Leah considered what she would do in the near term, the fight she was watching through Ominous’s eyes continued. What was probably an attack with the *Slash* skill wasn’t even able to scratch the carknight. The unfortunate player, like the mace-wielder from the event, had their weapon knocked out of their hand by the impact.

It seemed the party had no magic users, and the other party members followed up that first attack with weapon attacks of their own. Leah paid particular attention to attacks using maces, but the carknight didn’t seem to have suffered any chips or cracks.

After watching the battle unfold for a few minutes, Leah concluded that there was nothing else to gain from this party. Leah reenacted a scene from the battle royal and had the carknight grab a player by the head and crush it in its grasp. Seemed the carknight's STR stat translated perfectly into its physical strength.

She then had the carknight chase after the fleeing players and kill them in the same way. While the carknight's AGI was low, that was only compared to other units in her army. It was still fast enough to catch players who weren't AGI-focused builds. Hopefully the party learned a valuable lesson about being prepared, and they'd have a bit more tactical flexibility next time she encountered them.

While the players didn't yield much in the way of experience points, Leah was pleased that she got any experience points at all given the sheer disparity in power between the carknight and the players. Players were definitely a great source of EXP.

The test was a success in terms of assessing the carknight abilities as part of Leah's overall retinue, but it was a failure in terms of trying the carknight out as a potential new addition to the rotating cast of huntable monsters in the forest. If monsters like carknights started regularly wandering around the woods, player interest would dry up quite quickly. She needed monsters that were weak enough to fill that role. Or, perhaps she simply needed to strengthen the players visiting the forest.

Should she order the ants to take it easy on the players to encourage them to grow? After granting the adamantite army permission to obey Sugaru's orders without first getting approval from Leah herself, she decided to let Sugaru deal with that problem.

Considering the full force of the ants at her disposal, plus the adamantite army as backup, even with some growth among the players, they weren't going to be able to penetrate into the heart of the Great Woods. Heck, even Leah, with all her power, would probably find that to be a bit of a tall order.

That thought caused Leah to recognize that this might be a problem. While

there was no way that her current forces would simply turn against her as an enemy, if Leah could make such an army, it was more than possible that NPCs and monsters were already doing the same thing. That, or the Six Kingdoms themselves were the result of NPCs doing exactly what Leah had done.

While at present Leah was only engaged in minor skirmishes and wasn't explicitly considered an enemy of the Six Kingdoms, there was nothing about her or her retainers that made it likely she'd have cordial relations with them in the future. That meant that she needed to build up her forces with the intention of facing off against such kingdoms.

There was also an important piece of information she was missing: what happened to retainers when their master died? If retainers died along with their master, then Leah getting killed had the potential to be catastrophic. While players were never able to permanently die, perhaps there was a difference between NPC masters and retainers as opposed to a situation where a player was the master. Still, in terms of contingency planning, it was probably best to consider a worst-case scenario where Leah dying would mean her retainers would also be dead until she respawned.

The only real way to guard against such a possibility was to make sure Leah was strong enough that it would take a great deal more than luck to kill her. Since Leah's attribute scores contributed to the strength of the entire retinue through *Enhance Retinue*, Leah had already made a habit of reserving a certain percentage of incoming experience points to boost her own attributes. Still, perhaps it was time to consider alternative methods of growth. She wanted a little extra something. A trump card to keep up her sleeve, whether some sort of skill or otherwise.

As her thoughts went in this direction, her mind latched onto the *Rebirth* system. According to the official announcement, someone who became a servant of a vampire could be reborn as something called a zombie squire. The announcement had gone on to say that "characters that meet specific conditions and trigger an in-game event can change their current character race." That must mean there were more possibilities outside of just zombie squires.

Leah had a card in her deck that looked like it had something to do with that

system. The philosopher's stone, an item crafted using the secret *Alchemy* skill, *The Great Work*. While Leah wasn't sure if it was true in this game, generally the philosopher's stone was said to be an object that could do things like grant people immortality or turn common metals into precious ones.

Then, would using the philosopher's stone after meeting preconditions allow characters to change their race? Even if that wasn't possible, it would at least transform an object into something greater.

Traditionally *The Great Work* was supposed to be the process used to create the philosopher's stone. If Leah could just create a philosopher's stone, it should let her change her character's race into a greater realm. Leah opened up *The Great Work* and gazed at the recipe.

The most likely candidate among the recipe list was a single recipe that didn't belong to any of the other recipe trees and stood on its own. For the moment Leah marked it as the most likely candidate to be the philosopher's stone.

The recipe required six components. The ones that were currently unlocked were mercury, sulfur, iron, the heart of a monster, and a strong acid. There was one unknown item. The fact that strong acid was unlocked meant that Leah had seen it before. The only acid that came to mind was the acid produced by the engineer ants, which probably qualified for the purposes of the recipe.

Since there probably wasn't any harm in making the acid as strong as possible, when she went to experiment with the recipe, she'd ready an engineer ant to make acid specifically for the philosopher's stone and spend experience points to make its acid as strong as possible. If this recipe was not the philosopher's stone, the specialized ant would immediately lose her job, but with those stat boosts she would probably find a new role pretty easily. Those who are masters of a skill can usually find a way to apply that mastery to a different task when necessary.

Leah had mercury and sulfur extracted from the mine. She had used *Alchemy* to extract sulfur from the metal sulfides they had dug up. Leah wondered if, rather than having the two separately, she needed to use their combined form cinnabar. If there needed to be a special combination of the two made through

Alchemy rather than a standard sulfide material, she wasn't going to argue.

Cinnabar on its own had once been called the philosopher's stone in some ancient alchemy texts. Once Leah had acquired the *Alchemy* skill, she had spent her time outside the game devouring books about ancient alchemy at the VR Library. Cinnabar was used not only in European alchemy but also in various ancient Chinese magic medicines like shintan. Of course, the reality was that it was still just mercury sulfide and very poisonous, so most people who took it as medicine ended up achieving eternal slumber rather than eternal life.

If mercury and sulfur were on the ingredient list because they were necessary to create the philosopher's stone known as cinnabar, then that raised the question of why the other ingredients were needed in the recipe.

The first thing that caught Leah's eye was the requirement for iron. It was a strangely commonplace item to be required for such an exotic object. Perhaps it was to preserve the mercury. Mercury had a habit of bonding with all sorts of metals, but it didn't react with iron. Or was there some other reason?

If there was some special meaning to the iron, then Leah could guess what the last mystery item might be.

If she assumed that the cinnabar was the actual philosopher's stone, and that the other materials are materials necessary to create the philosopher's stone, another famous compound other than cinnabar that was once considered the philosopher's stone was prussiate of potash. That was an ancient name for potassium ferrocyanide, and in the Middle Ages they would place iron and potassium carbonate into a nitrogen-rich object like livestock innards—

"Aha, so that's what the iron is for," Leah said excitedly. Then the monster's heart must be on the list in lieu of livestock guts. In that case, the last item would be a replacement for potassium carbonate.

Something that had some sort of magic associated with it and included potassium carbonate. Ignoring purity for a moment, the easiest way to create potassium carbonate was to burn plants and mix the ashes with water.

Yet Leah had already done something similar at the public event. Although she had vaporized most of the trees rather than burned them to ash because of

the sheer power of her spell, there had to have been some ash left from the copse of trees she had burned down. There was a steaming hot spring nearby, so there should have been potassium carbonate, even if it was in minute quantities. Which meant Leah had seen it. Yet, the ingredient name remained a mystery.

That meant whatever was needed wasn't simply potassium carbonate itself, but a magical substance that was related to it. Leah pursed her lips in thought. "Something fitting...ash of some sort of land plant...and something fantasy related..." If, for example, this meant ash from the world tree, Leah was ready to throw her hands up in surrender.

Even if such a tree existed, she had no idea where it would be. At the very least, it wasn't marked on the map that the devs had provided.

If the recipe was like the living armor recipe and the quality of ingredients just changed the quality rank and type of the completed item, but the process would still work with lesser-quality items, then anything that fit the broad definition of "ash from a fantasy plant" ought to work.

"In which case, I guess I should work on securing some fantasy wood to use," Leah murmured to herself. The trees that grew in the Great Woods of Lieb were hardly mundane trees. Some grew abnormally quickly while others were harder than iron. Since the ingredient was still locked after making charcoal out of those trees, that meant they weren't sufficiently fantastical or magical enough. Leah found herself a bit irritated at that fact, but decided to move forward.

If she couldn't acquire such plant matter in the forest, she'd have to obtain it from somewhere else. The materials available in the city were probably just from the grasslands and these very woods; she doubted they were growing magical plants in the farms within the city walls.

Leah sighed. "Guess I just need to wait to hear back from Marion..."

Now that she had a map of the surrounding area, there wasn't a need to send out random exploration parties to map out the area around the Great Woods, so Leah had ordered Marion and Ginka to scout out the closest monster realm.

Based on their regular reports, they seemed to be making good progress. When comparing their position using *Sense Coordinates* and the map, they

were also headed in the right direction. At their current pace, they should arrive at that monster realm soon.

The neighboring monster realm was a forest like Lieb, perhaps because of the similar climate and environment, and Leah wanted to conquer it and bring it under her control if possible. She wouldn't be able to tell if it was possible until she saw it, but once Marion made it to that region, Leah just had to use *Summon Summoner* to move to Marion's coordinates, then summon the adamantite army to her with *Summon* to start the conquest.

The ideal scenario would be that the neighboring forest had a different biosphere and also had fantastical or magical trees growing within it.

Leah decided to kill time until Marion's report by sending impossibly powerful boss monsters against various player groups in her forest. She engrossed herself in the player hunting, having completely forgotten about taking it a little easy on the players for a bit.

**[Lowbie Hunting Spot] Thread: The Great Woods of Lieb
[Seems stuck at the lowbie stage]**

521: NO Ecchi

Maaaan.

I know I should probably move on, but there's just something about the place.

522: Kinzel the Round

Is it really that great a hunting spot?

523: Tansu ni Ponzu

I mean, not really? It's balanced really well, though.

Every time I go there, I end up getting killed right as things are getting good.

It'd be perfect for hunting if we could just get home

without dying.

524: Dorataro

Lieb's a sweet little spot.

That is until you've hunted a bit and the stupidly strong undead come kill you. Then it's pretty sour.

But you know... No, never mind.

525: Jeans

Don't you "never mind" us! C'mon, spill it!

526: Dorataro

If I do, it's just gonna draw more people.

If the stronger players come and kill the undead or something, it'll just make the rich way richer and us peons all the poorer.

527: Tansu ni Ponzu

I get it.

I mean, I think we've all drawn the same conclusions about those undead.

528: Jeans

C'mon! Just tell us already!

529: Amatain

I thought the whole thing with Lieb was the ants.

The ones that destroy your gear. Is it still worth it with those things wandering around?

530: Antogy

I mean, the ones that destroy gear are there, but they're also the weakest ants in terms of overall stats.

It's hard if you're just starting out, but once you get the hang of it, they're not that hard to farm effectively.

And, after a while, you can tell the gear destroyers apart, even from a distance.

531: Sonote Atataka

Wow, that's impressive. You're an ant expert.

532: Antogy

Woo! I got a compliment from Atataka!

533: Tansu ni Ponzu

Uh, are you sure that's a compliment...?

I mean, I guess it's fine if you're taking it as one, but...

534: Orinkii

Ants and undead are good and all, but what about the fluffs?

I remember hearing there's fluffy animals there.

535: NO Ecchi

Yeah, they're around. I've even seen little ones. Though, that's all relative, they're still the size of a really big dog.

Always nice to see them, they're so adorable. Also means your hunt's done, since they always kill you.

536: Jeans

Good that there's adorable monsters. It's good, but I

wanna know more about the undead.

537: Tansu ni Ponzu

It's just a theory, though a pretty solid one, but the armor the champ was wearing probably came from killing that undead. They've got a similar look. And there's the whole ridiculously powerful defenses too.

538: Dorataro

Now you've done it. Guess it had to get out eventually.

539: Jeans

Seriously?!

The armor that crushed my neck with its gauntlet?

540: Sonote Atataka

Um... Could we not go into all the gory details?

541: Antogy

Hey, stop it! They don't want to hear about it!

542: Jeans

Hey, I was just talking about my own experience...

543: NO Ecchi

It's not just the undead, the champ seems to be wandering around the woods from time to time.

Oh, and just FYI, they'll PK you the second you run into them.

544: Dorataro

So guess it's true that they've found some sort of sweet

hunting spot in Lieb. Not that I've ever run into them.

545: Tansu ni Ponzu

Hmm... Can't say, really.

There's a feeling like it's not quite the same person. They move a little differently compared to the official video footage. Also, they never say anything.

546: Gealgamesh

Well, it's not like they ever said anything in the first place. Though, that does lend credence to the idea that it's actually an event character the devs made...

Chapter 7: The World Tree and the High Elf

Leah finally received word that Marion had reached the neighboring monster realm. Leah waited until nightfall, then teleported to Marion with Kelli and Diaz in tow, leaving Sugaru and Riley in charge of the Great Woods of Lieb. Since she was wearing Mister Plates, there hadn't been any need for Leah to wait until dark, but she'd become so used to traveling at night that it was now second nature to her.

"It's nice to see you two in person again, Marion, Ginka," Leah said to the two explorers.

"Welcome, Boss, you honor us with your presence," Marion said.

<It's good to see you, Boss.> Ginka gestured with her muzzle toward the forest. <That's our neighbor's territory.>

The neighboring forest had a slightly different air from the Great Woods of Lieb. According to the map, unlike Lieb, which had a border separating the monster-held areas from the rest of the forest, the human kingdoms evidently regarded this entire forest as monster territory. Like Lieb with Erfahren, evidently there was also a fortified city nearby that served as a staging point for mercenaries.

Leah and her group, however, were a good distance away from that city. The main road to that city had been laid to avoid intersecting with this forest, and that was the route Marion and Ginka had used to get to this point. The city and the road served to cordon off the forest. It was a sharp contrast to Erfahren and Lieb, which existed essentially side by side.

Leah suspected that the reason Erfahren had been built so close to Lieb was that no powerful monsters had made their home there until recently. That had probably also been the reason Hakuma and the ice wolves had chosen Lieb as their refuge. While Leah wasn't sure how Lieb had managed to remain such a peaceful territory, she assumed it was because the devs had meant Lieb to

serve as a cradle for Sugaru and her ants. It might have been intended to be a cradle for Diaz and his knights as well, but either way, Lieb had been placed to allow a raid boss to grow within its confines.

The intent had probably been for Sugaru and her ant army to slowly fatten up on experience points gained from killing players as the player population in Erfahren steadily expanded. With that in mind, the fact that this city and the main road went out of their way to avoid this forest likely meant that this forest was a deadlier monster realm than Lieb. Humanity had already considered it a threat when the game had launched. In that sense, this forest probably had a lot to teach Leah and her retainers.

“I’ve been looking forward to this trip. Let’s see what sort of things we can learn from our forebears,” Leah said as she gestured toward the forest.

Diaz chimed in immediately. <I shall serve as the vanguard, Your Highness. Your life is of the utmost importance; I ask that you stay back from the front line.>

Leah sighed. “Can’t say I’m not disappointed, but you’re right. The whole point of coming here was to obtain reinforcements to avoid dying. It’d completely defeat the purpose if I ended up dying here.” Diaz was a powerful individual in his own right and was more than capable of anchoring the front line of their group. Since Leah had never actually seen him fight, this outing also had the benefit of giving Leah some insight into his combat abilities.

Leah crossed her arms and turned to Diaz. “I plan to summon some of the adamantite army. How many do you think we’ll need?”

<I would like to say they are unnecessary, Your Highness, but I assume you wish to measure my abilities as a commander as well. In that case, I would ask that you summon one platoon, Your Highness; any more would be excessive for this forest,> Diaz rumbled.

“I figured this forest was more dangerous than Lieb, but if you think a platoon is enough...” Leah said with a nod. “Just tell me if you need more.”

Leah then summoned a platoon consisting of an adamanleader, nine adamanmages, six adamanscouts, and fourteen adamanknights. It was only a

single platoon from her army, but the group felt large in the thickly wooded confines of the forest.

“I know the game doesn’t have any system for it, but I guess this feels about right for a raiding party. I bet it’s a bit of a pain to actually gather thirty players,” Leah said as she looked over the group. At her present power level, she could easily handle a group of this size, even if it was made up entirely of adamantleaders. That was true even without Mister Plates. Assuming, of course, that it wasn’t broad daylight.

Leah turned back to Diaz. “I’ve set the adamantite army and the carknights to obey orders from you or Sugaru in my absence. When neither of you are available, I guess Kelli would have seniority. If no one else is around, I’d assume they’d act on their own judgment, but as living-object-type monsters, they don’t have a lot of initiative or consciousness, and on their own, I think they’d just focus on killing the enemy as efficiently as possible.”

<I believe that should be sufficient. Let us start evaluating their abilities and I shall demonstrate my skill as a commander.> With that, Diaz issued a short series of orders to the adamantite soldiers. Following his orders, the six scouts scattered and headed into the woods. They moved quickly and quietly, despite being made entirely out of metal, and soon disappeared between the thick rows of trees.

Adamanscouts were lighter than they appeared, wearing light skirmishing armor and lacking muscle, organs, or fat. Leah estimated that each scout probably only weighed about as much as a similarly sized individual of one of the civilized races. Since they were constructs rather than warm-blooded animals, they gave off no heat and could avoid the infrared sensing abilities that snake-type monsters used to see in the dark. They had all of the tools necessary to stealthily carry out their mission.

Leah had armed the members of her adamantite army and the carknights. Given their sheer numbers, she was forced to arm them with mass-produced weapons of relatively low quality. Most of them were armed with bladed weapons of one type or another to give them a different type of damage to do than the bludgeoning damage they could do with their fists. With that said, Leah suspected if all she wanted to do was maximize their damage output, she

could probably just have them tackle their targets.

The ideal would have been to give every one of them a living weapon, but there simply weren't enough swords containing a Knight's Grudge. Part of the reason Leah had come to this forest was the hope that there might be another buried company of knights from the fallen kingdom. Diaz's company simply wasn't large enough of a force for a kingdom that had ruled the entire continent. It was probably safe to assume that there were mass graves of those knights scattered around the continent.

Once the adamanscouts disappeared into the woods, Diaz ordered the rest of his forces to advance. Unlike the scouts', their advance was a slow, cautious one. They made sure to thoroughly clear away any brush that might become obstacles in combat, expanding the room they had available to fight as they advanced. While ordinarily evaluating a commander's abilities included seeing how well they managed to impose their will upon the forces under them, Leah concluded there wouldn't be any need for that type of recruitment for the foreseeable future and chose to focus purely on Diaz's tactical command abilities in the field. From that point of view, so far Diaz had demonstrated a cautious but logical and efficient grasp of both the forces under his command and the environment around him.

Leah felt a sense of satisfaction as she watched Diaz and the adamantite soldiers. She had sufficient numbers waiting back in the Great Woods of Lieb to create multiple platoons of this size. If they were able to face off against another faction on this outing, it would let Leah make an objective evaluation of the strength of Lieb's forces.

Leah slowly walked along the path carved out by Diaz and his forces. Kelli and Marion flanked her while Ginka covered the rear. Everyone, including the living armor, had sense enhancement skills. Only a much more powerful opponent had any hope of ambushing them. She could have brought Ominous the forest owl to serve as an aerial scout, but he wasn't a particularly powerful combatant. There was a strong possibility that he would be easy prey for any flying monsters they encountered in this forest.

A certain distance later, Diaz and his forces suddenly stopped their advance. Evidently the scouts had encountered some sort of monster. After listening to the report from the scouts, Diaz sent a friend chat message to Leah. <Your Highness, we have encountered the enemy. It appears this forest is already under the control of a single faction.>

Leah quirked an eyebrow and responded via friend chat, <Really? That's good to know. Does that mean if we eliminate this faction or force them into submission, we can take control of this forest? So, what are we looking at in terms of enemies? It's not a group of civilized types, is it?>

Diaz took a moment to respond. <No, Your Highness. The monsters that control this forest are undead. Based on their armor...I believe they were once my comrades.> That meant that like Lieb, this forest had suffered a mysterious mass spawning of undead.

<I wasn't counting on them being here, but...heh, I guess we're in luck,> Leah replied.

The situation screamed of some sort of outside intervention, but was there a Diaz-like unique monster among the undead here? If there was, Leah was eager to recruit them into her retinue. Part of it was because she wanted to give Diaz a companion, but it would also make it easier to determine why there was a single sentient example among the undead if she had more than one sample to study.

<Say, Diaz—> Leah began, but she was immediately interrupted by Diaz.

<I thank you for your kindness, Your Highness. I assume you are going to propose trying to bring the boss here peacefully under our banner. If you are doing so on my account, you need not concern yourself.>

<No. Well, that might end up being what happens, but that's not my motivation. I'm interested in adding them to my forces, and since there's rumors that there's an undead boss that wanders around Lieb, it'd be nice to have some weaker options available,> Leah explained. In that case she'd have to give up on acquiring more cursed items. Based on the example of Diaz and his command, once reanimated as undead, the armor and weapons no longer

contained the cursed grudges of the knights and reverted to mundane crafting materials. But if giving up on those items meant obtaining an entire army of undead, that was a trade-off Leah was willing to make.

<So, if possible I'd like an undead army to add to our ranks. Diaz, can you bring me such an army?> Leah said over friend chat.

After a brief pause Diaz responded, <As you command, Your Highness.>

Once the order was given, Diaz's forces went from a straight march to proceeding in a loose zigzag pattern. Evidently they were advancing while avoiding the enemy pickets. The scouts quietly dispatched any pickets they weren't able to avoid.

Leah had the option of dominating all of the undead using *Necromantic Circle*, but while she could dominate undead that were already under the control of another character, she wasn't able to use the *Retainer* skill on them. It produced the same error that she got when she first encountered the ants and attempted to add one to her retinue.

While the undead that had spawned with Diaz had been "wild" at the time, Diaz had spawned with both *Necromancy* tree skills and the *Retainer* skill. If left to his own devices, he would have eventually made all of those undead into his retainers and conquered the Great Woods.

That would herald the birth of a new raid boss to rival Sugaru. Leah had wondered why there were two nascent raid bosses in Lieb, but perhaps the goal had been for one to consume the other as a source of experience points.

If this forest had started in a similar state, then it meant that the undead had won the battle for supremacy—and whatever commanded them was a fully mature raid boss.

"This is going to be fun..." Leah said to herself. This was a good-sized forest. It was going to take quite a bit of time to reach the center. Diaz and the adamantite soldiers might be tireless and require no rest, but that wasn't true of the living members of their group. They would have to find a place to set up camp. Since the experience points stopped coming in while Leah was logged out, she preferred that her forces avoid fighting while she was resting.

<I'd appreciate it if you could plan it so you do most of the fighting while I'm awake,> Leah told Diaz.

<That should be possible if we are not attacked, but...> Diaz hesitated.

Leah reassuringly replied, <Just consider it a goal to aspire to. No use worrying about how the enemy's going to react; we just have to accept that's out of our hands.>

After this discussion, Diaz increased the pace of the platoon's progress, favoring a bold, aggressive advance without completely throwing caution to the wind. The undead they occasionally encountered appeared to be skeleton knights of one sort or another. The scouts hadn't missed them but had simply ignored them because they were in groups too large to tackle alone. Although too much for the scouts, they were no match for the adamanknights, who cut them down with ease. Leah wasn't sure if "corpse" was the right word to use for what remained of the skeletons, but she made sure to gather any remains before they moved on.

The location they chose for camp that night was, according to the map, about a third of the way into the forest. Considering the massive size of the forest, they had made remarkable progress. Part of the reason was that they had barely stopped to rest on the way. While they were going to set up camp at this location, it was a day camp rather than a night camp, because Leah was basically nocturnal, active at night while sleeping during the day.

Once the camp was established, Leah turned to Diaz and his forces and said, "All right, I guess I'll get a little sleep. Let's see, I'll probably wake up in about five hours, so keep the camp safe while I'm gone. You're free to advance if you want, but if there's any new monsters or materials, I'd like you to wait for me to rejoin you before tackling them."

Diaz rumbled, <That would be a challenge, so we shall behave ourselves and maintain a close vigil on the camp.>

Leah nodded, then turned to Kelli, Marion, and Ginka. "I'm going to go back to Lieb to sleep. What about you all? Do you want to come back with me?"

"Yes, Boss, we would like to accompany you," Kelli said respectfully.

“All right, then I’ll see you in a moment,” Leah said, activating *Sense Coordinates* at Sugaru’s location before using *Summon Summoner*. Once back in the queen’s chamber, Leah summoned Kelli, Marion, and Ginka using the *Summon* skill.

Leah settled onto her throne as usual, reclining and preparing to log out. Kelli took off Miss Plates and disappeared with Marion behind a partition located near the back of the chamber. There were beds installed in a sleeping area so that Leah’s retainers could rest in the same room while Leah was logged out. Ginka curled up at Leah’s feet. As an ice wolf, she was more than satisfied with curling up on the giant bearskin rug to sleep.

“See you all in a bit. Good night.”

Leah logged back in a few hours later to find that it was the following day in game. After returning to the camp, she listened to Diaz’s report of what had transpired in her absence. “Were there any attacks while we were sleeping during the day?”

<Yes, Your Highness. We were attacked by a mysterious monster and were forced to defeat it. My apologies.> Diaz bowed his head slightly.

Leah shook her head. “There’s no need to apologize. But you ran into something other than undead? Does that mean that in this forest the undead are active at night while something else wanders around during the day?”

<I believe that is a possibility,> Diaz replied. <What we encountered was a monstrous tree. We have the remains of its body stored in the inventory.>

“I guess as a plant-type monster it gets more active during the day because it can do photosynthesis...? But the fact that it attacked you probably means it can’t get enough nutrients through photosynthesis alone. If it can move around, that means it’s got developed limbs that are less efficient as roots, so I can see why it’d want more nutrients. Feels like it took a wrong turn on the evolutionary tree,” Leah mused to herself. Still, it was good news on the whole. Plant-type monsters—there were few types of plants that were more fantastical or magical than that. Leah planned to capture a few and start growing them on a giant plantation in Lieb. She told Diaz, “For the moment,

let's capture the next one we run into. Think we'll run into any more?"

Diaz was hesitant to make a definitive statement. <I am not certain. Since the sun has not yet set, one may come along.>

Leah shrugged. "Well, let's think about it as we advance. If there's no undead during the day, that makes it a good time to make some progress. If these things attack campsites, I'm sure they'll attack a party on the move."

Leah's words had evidently triggered a flag, since they were ambushed as soon as they set off. "Aha! So they're disguised as the trees growing in the forest! No wonder the scouts missed them!" There was no way to miss a walking tree when it had to move to attack a camp, but if their quarry was coming to them, they could just sit still and hide among the mundane trees, making it nearly impossible to catch them before they struck.

Despite the fact that the trees around them had suddenly turned into monsters and attacked, Diaz and the detail under his command dealt calmly with the situation. Then again, Leah wasn't entirely sure they had a setting other than "calm."

Thirty adamantite soldiers were a force to be reckoned with. Even when ambushed and surrounded on all sides, they barely worked up a proverbial sweat. The battle was soon over, leaving the surrounding area littered with lumber.

"Are they...a different faction from the undead that are sharing the forest? Or is a single thing controlling both...?" Leah wondered as she collected the fresh timber. Either way, she figured they'd find the answer deeper in the forest.

The group continued its advance through the forest. On this march they were able to confirm that the plants attacked during the day and the undead at night. Though, based on how Diaz was performing during the day, Leah wasn't sure why the undead went dormant in the daytime. Was it just that Diaz, being a higher-ranking type of undead, suffered no limitations involving sunlight?

The reverse could be said about the plant monsters. At least in their case it made sense that they couldn't actively hunt without engaging in photosynthesis

under the sun.

Either way, the enemies that had attacked to this point were all low-level mobs of low-level monsters. At best they were roughly comparable to the ants of the Great Woods. They might have been stronger than engineer ants or infantry ants, but they weren't much different from dragoon ants or assault ants in terms of individual strength.

Considering that this forest was a more mature monster realm than Lieb, the forces they had encountered had been disappointingly modest. Leah wasn't sure why the main road or the city would be located quite so far away from the forest. And while she wasn't sure about how long the plant monsters had been around, if Diaz was any indication, the undead had only spawned en masse relatively recently. They probably weren't around when the city and road had been built.

The forest still had secrets it wasn't sharing. "At this rate, I don't think we need to worry too much. Though there's always a chance they're toying with us the same way we toy with players back in Lieb."

Leah and her forces completed their scheduled march that day without issue and set up a new camp just as the sun was rising. They were about two-thirds of the way toward the center of the forest. If Leah had been the master of the forest, even if she were toying with a group of visitors, she never would have let them get this deep into the forest unmolested. They were long beyond the red line Leah would have set where any intruders were to be killed on sight. And yet the only thing that occurred during the day was an attack like the one the day before. Perhaps the ruler of the forest didn't quite have full control of the creatures within it.

After two days, there was also no doubting Diaz's abilities as a tactical commander. There wasn't any need to continue the evaluation. Leah instructed him to avoid making any unnecessary demonstrations and to focus on reaching the center of the forest as quickly and as safely as possible. So far there were no monsters in this forest capable of damaging any of the adamantite soldiers, and invading it was as simple as continuing in a straight line and pummeling anything that got in their way.

Thanks to this change of policy, they arrived at the center of the woods by dawn the next day, a little bit ahead of schedule. “Doesn’t look like there’s anything special about this place. It’s just a forest,” Leah said with a faint note of disappointment. However, the mass grave that Diaz and his company had been buried in wasn’t dead center in the middle of Lieb, and this forest wasn’t a perfect circle either. So was the right play to set up shop here and slowly sweep outward into the forest?

Leah would have liked to summon some engineer ants to start setting up temporary fortifications using the materials available, but since they were direct retainers of Sugaru, Leah wasn’t able to summon them on demand. “I wonder if I can make adamantite crafters if I find things other than a Knight’s Grudge. Like a Carpenter’s Grudge, or a Chef’s?” Leah mused to herself. While it was certainly a possibility, it wasn’t as though wondering about it was going to do her any good in the present.

Either way, if she was going to rule this forest, she needed someone who could manage and oversee its operations. The labor Leah could bring to this forest via *Summon* were heavy metal skeletons, and a common characteristic of them was that they were only really capable of fighting.

“If I’m going to add this forest to my lands, then I’d like someone local who can look after it. I’d like to at least add the bosses for the undead and the plants to my retinue.” Leah sighed. For the moment it was about time to log out. She decided to head back to the lair for the time being, after ordering Diaz to begin construction of temporary fortifications. Since Diaz had been in command of a knight company charged with long-distance campaigns, that was at least a skill set he possessed.

When Leah logged back in a little past noon the following day in game, she found Diaz and the others fighting timber. “Good morning. Seems you’ve been busy,” she said in greeting.

<Good morning, Your Highness. I wouldn’t say we’ve been particularly busy, Your Highness,> Diaz replied rather drily.

Leah looked around at the large amount of lumber scattered through the area. “They seem to be pretty aggressively attacking you while the sun’s up.” The vast piles of lumber lying around were just the visible fruits of the day’s labors. Leah had no doubt Diaz and his forces had already stored some of the lumber in inventory, so it must have been a veritable army of tree monsters.

“If they’re continuing to attack after you’ve killed so many, that must mean either they reproduce and mature really quickly, or they’re retainers to someone and they’re just respawning,” Leah said to herself. Either way, conquering this forest would be an enormous boon for her. She could build a giant experience point farm here or turn it into a second dungeon theme park. The place was rich with possibilities.

“I’d like to make some charcoal with this wood, but let’s clean up what’s in front of us first. I suppose it’s always better to keep dessert for last,” Leah said. She summoned additional adamanscouts from Lieb and placed them under Diaz’s command.

“The first priority is exploring this forest. Let’s wait on the scouting reports. While we wait, I’ll give harvesting these monsters a try myself. If they can’t damage the adamantite soldiers, they won’t be able to do anything to me,” Leah said as she drew Primus Sharp, which she wore on Mister Plates’ hip, and waded into the front line with the adamanknights.

<As you wish,> Diaz replied.

Leah cleaved through the tree monsters with a level of skill that put the adamanknights to shame. There wasn’t even a need to activate any skills. Just as Leah was thinking of how she could support the soldiers with her magic, another thought crossed her mind. “Wait, that reminds me. I’d forgotten since I hadn’t had much chance to use it lately, but if I use *Retainer* on these monsters we can see if they belong to someone or something else.”

It was also a good opportunity to test whether *Enchantment* spells even worked on plant monsters. Leah turned back toward the attacking trees. “Let’s start with *Dissociate*! Hmm, no change, I guess? *Sleep*, *Confusion*... Nope, not working. *Fear*... *Charm*... Oh, hey, *Charm* works. I wonder why. Is it because plant monsters have minds, but they’re constructed differently?” The important

thing was that one of them worked. Leah immediately cast *Dominate* followed by *Retainer*.

The tree monster, a camphor treant, put up little resistance and stopped moving. It then—looked at? in any case, turned its attention to—its master, Leah. “If they’re tamable that makes this a lot easier. Let’s start taming the whole group,” Leah said. A short while later, perhaps a bit longer than it would have taken to just cut all of them down, Leah had finished taming all of the attacking treants and bringing them under her control.

“These are tamable, so they’re wild monsters. Meaning either there’s a huge number of them or they grow at a ridiculous pace,” Leah mused as she looked over their skills. They had a special skill tree called *Thicket* that contained skills such as *Root Cutting* and *Photosynthesis*. It seemed that all skills related to plant growth and propagation were concentrated in this skill tree. Based on the unlocked skills, it was clear that the camphor treants had a rapid spawning cycle.

“There are some weird conditions put on these skills. Like, if there’s more than a certain density of plants of the same kind in an area, they start to die off... I guess with these attributes and these skills, the forests would quickly swallow up any civilized lands.” Leah couldn’t dismiss the possibility that the skill was the result of evolving to maximize the amount of nutrients to each plant in a given patch of land, but it seemed like a safer bet to assume this was a design decision by the developers.

“I wonder if they’ll be able to take root in Lieb. Though, ‘take root’ is a weird way of putting it since they can just move around on their own.” Leah looked over at one of the treants. While they looked exactly like any other tree if they were just standing still, this was akin to a human burying their feet up to their ankles in the ground. If they so desired, they could easily pull up those roots and resume moving.

Leah patted one of the treants on the trunk. “We’ll take the biggest one back to Lieb and plant it there. Using the root-related skills in *Thicket* might make it settle down and act a bit more treelike. The others we’ll leave here. We’ll have them propagate here and kill off any that aren’t part of our group.”

Leah was also curious what would happen if a retainer multiplied. Obviously if a new tree grew out of a seed, it would be a new individual plant, and unlike ants, they weren't an animal with a social hierarchy...assuming they were an animal at all, and Leah would have to tame it as a separate entity. But what happened if a plant multiplied using a process like root cutting? Was it correct to assume it would be considered a duplicate of the same individual? If that was the case, was the newly grown "clone" also Leah's retainer? Leah mentally shrugged. "I guess that's something to test."

Now all that remained were the undead. While they didn't appear during the day, a particularly powerful individual might be active. Since that individual was the objective, there was no problem with continuing the hunt during daylight hours.

Leah issued new orders to the scouts, instructing them to ignore the treants in favor of the undead. If the boss is near the center of the woods, given the search radius of the scouts, they should be pretty close to finding it. Either way, the sun was going to set soon. The undead were about to stir. While that would make it harder to find a specific undead that can move during the day, it would at least let them observe the general behavior patterns of the forest's undead.

Dusk approached. While the newly tamed treants hadn't slowed down, for the moment Leah instructed them to return to being trees and rest as she waited for the undead to appear.

<Your Highness,> Diaz said, signaling the end of the wait.

"Okay, got it. Let's give it a go," Leah acknowledged with a nod.

A scout had reported that a group of undead was already actively moving around at dusk. Since the rest of the undead hadn't even begun stirring, the presence of an active group of undead indicated that either it was near the spawning point of the undead or there was some other important thing or creature in that area.

<I do not recommend splitting our forces, but would you like to leave some here?> Diaz asked.

Leah shook her head. "No, let's go together. This may be our temporary base,

but it's not like we have anything here. Just our sleeping treants. There's no point in protecting it."

They already had a rough idea of the terrain and distance to the undead group from this location thanks to the scouting reports. There weren't any active undead nearby, and since the treants in the area were now under Leah's control, that meant there were no hostile forces left in the immediate vicinity.

Even though both the temporary base and the undead group were near the center of the forest, that was only true in relative terms. Because of the sheer size of the forest, it still took a fair amount of time to make the journey to the undead.

As they made their way toward their destination, the sun's last rays vanished from the horizon and the undead began to stir. Since the undead crawled out from the ground, that would ordinarily leave Leah's forces in danger of being ambushed, but Leah and Diaz could sense roughly where they might appear. Perhaps this was because they both had a great deal of experience points invested in *Necromancy*. It was like having arrows pointing at where a mole was about to appear when playing whack-a-mole. They crushed the ones spawning that would either disrupt their formation or get in their way with a few effective stomps before hurrying along.

Mister Plates handled the walking part automatically, so there was no particular problem with Leah spending her time thinking instead of focusing on the path ahead. The only time she needed to do anything was when she had to point out where undead were about to spawn, but even then Mister Plates would deal with the whack-a-mole aspect. It was a great way to travel.

<It appears we've arrived, Your Highness,> Diaz said. They were at the base of a tree that was noticeably larger than any around it. There was an unhealthy miasma swirling around near its roots.

Leah wasn't sure if she could see the miasma because there was so much energy that it was visible to the naked eye or if it was a benefit of having so many points in *Necromancy*, but she could clearly see it in the air. In the middle

of that swirl stood a black skeleton knight armored in a similar style to Diaz. Skeletons continually spawned around him. It seemed safe to conclude they'd reached the epicenter of the undead epidemic.

Leah said quietly, "Someone you know, Diaz?"

Diaz made a show of leaning forward and looking at the figure. <Hmm... Based on the armor, there is a good chance it is one of my colleagues, but he has changed quite a bit over the years. I'm afraid I can't say for certain.>

Leah let out a soft chuckle. "I'm sure he'd say the same about you." After all, the flesh had long since withered away from both faces, leaving naked skulls behind.

Leah decided she was going to just go in and tame the powerful skeleton without delay. Since *Enchantment* spells didn't work particularly well on undead, she intended to subjugate him with her combat ability before forcibly using *Retainer* on him. She hadn't had enough combat power when she had tamed Sugaru, but now the situation was much different.

Besides, thanks to Diaz, she had a fair idea of how the knight would attack. There wasn't much chance of her getting caught flat-footed by him. Leah turned to Diaz for a moment. "All right, leave this to me and pull back... Wait, no, can you try to hold back the skeletons around us? I'd like to add as many of them to our ranks as possible, so try not to break them too much."

<As you wish. Do be careful,> Diaz said. Then he and Kelli bowed their heads in silence. Leah left them behind and headed toward the undead boss. As she approached, she could more clearly feel the unnatural energy in the air. It felt almost as though each step was heavier than the last. Since it was Mister Plates doing the actual walking, Leah's own emotional state had nothing to do with the pace of the steps, so it must have meant the energy was actually slowing them down.

"Is he generating a field that debuffs the enemies around him? Guess that makes him more powerful than Diaz," Leah murmured to herself. The knight's aura was clearly more powerful than any other character that Leah had encountered to date. She had assumed he had spawned around the same time as Diaz, but if the aura was any indication, he must have spawned as an undead

long ago.

“All right, let’s go, Mister Plates.” Leah immediately closed the distance with the knight using *Fleet of Foot* and attacked with Primus Sharp. The sword strike was boosted by the *Slash* skill. Up to this point, no one had been able to avoid or block this attack from Mister Plates. It was an attack so fast that most couldn’t respond even if they knew it was coming.

“Wow!”

However, the boss in front of her managed to deflect it. He had instantly determined he couldn’t avoid the attack and that his sword would break if he blocked it, and instead he used his sword to deflect the attack away from him.

To avoid an attack that was impossible to dodge or block was a sign that strength and fighting ability weren’t all that would show up on a character’s stat screen. This knight had to have been someone with a sizable amount of fighting experience, probably a fellow knight captain who served with Diaz.

Mister Plates followed up with additional attacks, but the enemy skillfully navigated the flurry, avoiding taking major damage in the process. All of the vertical slashing attacks were either deflected or dodged, while the knight avoided a horizontal strike that was more difficult to dodge by sacrificing his shield so he could step back. The knight dodged the thrusting attacks by the slimmest of margins, and while Primus pierced part of the knight’s armor and cloak, the skeleton beneath remained unscathed.

“*Flare Arrow!*” Leah used magic spells between these attacks to keep the knight’s movements in check. Since she was trying not to kill the knight, she was aiming at either the legs or the shoulders to knock him out of the fight.

The undead boss responded ably to these spells. But while he avoided any direct hits, he wasn’t able to completely avoid any damage. Leah had succeeded in burning part of his greaves and his shoulder. It also looked like he had slowed just the slightest bit.

“*Thunderbolt!*” Leah exploited an opening with a different, faster spell, and a blast of lightning took out the knight’s knee. Even the undead boss wasn’t able to avoid the spell while dealing with attacks from Mister Plates and timing his

defense to the speed of *Flare Arrow*. The knight fell to his knees.

Leah took a step back and watched to see if he could stand. The boss used his sword as a cane to try to lift himself up, but Leah's spell had blown out one of his knees and the best he could do was stay standing. Considering his likely STR and DEX scores, he was probably capable of fighting on one leg but had taken too much damage to continue the fight.

Leah looked the undead knight in the eye. Well, the eyes had long since rotted away, so she stared into the empty eye sockets of the skull. Based on his demeanor, it seemed he'd made his peace with his fate. She felt no hostility emanating from the knight. It was safe to assume Leah had subjugated him.

"Then, you'll accept this? *Retainer*." Leah activated the skill, and without any resistance, the undead terror knight [Sieg] joined her retinue.

"I suppose the fight was basically your attempt at resistance," Leah said with a soft laugh. It was basically the same way she had brought Kelli's group into the fold, when she had knocked them out and recruited them.

Once Sieg was under her control, the undead around him stopped spawning. Evidently the continual spawn of undead was an effect of the skill *Conscription* in Sieg's *Undead General* skill tree. It temporarily spawned undead that obeyed the creator's orders, but the undead would evaporate when exposed to sunlight. The advantage was that the skill only required the user to spend their LP and MP to spawn the undead.

<So it was you, Sieg... It has been a long time...> Leah heard Diaz say over friend chat.

Sieg responded with a series of groans and grunts, "Nrrgh...arrn...mrraagh..." Leah wasn't sure what precisely he was saying, but she caught the gist of the message, which was, "I am glad to see you are doing well, ser." Sieg was clearly a rather open-minded sort to compliment Diaz for doing well in his current state as a terror knight. That, or he was so far gone the only thing that came to mind was a pro forma greeting.

Either way, she needed to actually be able to talk to him, so she forcibly

taught him how to access his inventory and added him to her friends list. “That should do it. So, it seems like it was someone you knew after all, Diaz. Are you two former colleagues?”

Sieg took a moment to answer. <Y-Yes, ma’am. I am the captain of the Third Company. I was somewhat newer to the role than Ser Diaz.>

The fallen kingdom Diaz and Sieg had served had six knight companies, each of which had their own assigned roles. Diaz’s First Company had served as the royal guard, while Sieg’s Third Company and on through the Sixth Company were purely military units that served as the kingdom’s standing army. While the individual quality of the knights in Sieg’s Third Company was inferior to that of the knights of the First, the Third Company was by far the larger unit.

However, only the First Troop, led directly by Sieg and representing only a fraction of the Third Company’s forces, had been sent to this forest. So, it wasn’t as though a quarter of the country’s entire army lay buried here.

“That explains why Sieg and his forces were at rest here, but why were you and the royal guard off inside Lieb?” Leah asked.

<Your Highness, there is only one reason the royal guard goes anywhere,> Diaz answered solemnly.

Leah blinked and said a bit incredulously, “Wait, so a member of the royal family went to Lieb...?”

Diaz nodded. <That is correct...>

Diaz had mentioned that the governing class of the kingdom had conspired to send Diaz and his forces out to die, but evidently that conspiracy also involved assassinating royals in the process. That explained why the captain of the royal guard felt such hatred that it burned long after his life had ended. Even if the conspirators were long dead, she understood why Diaz would want to destroy all of the kingdoms founded by them and ruled by their descendants.

For Leah, it was a good motivation to use to set her goals in game. The trend in modern VRMMOs was to emphasize mechanical character growth as the driving motivator for players, shying away from having a clear objective like an

overarching storyline. Instead, most games had a constantly evolving set of AI-generated miniquests and the flavor of a living world around it.

This game was in that genre, and there was no fixed objective established as a default scenario. At the same time, while many players were happy focusing on their own character's growth, there were as many players who sought a greater goal to achieve in their games. Some found that objective by completing sequential quests that formed miniature storylines. Others scratched that itch by killing "civilization destroying" monsters that the devs created as raid bosses and protecting what they saw as civilization itself.

After listening to Diaz and Sieg tell their stories, Leah also felt the urge to strive for a greater goal. Essentially, the NPCs in her retinue had asked her to "destroy the civilized kingdoms" as a quest. The raid boss in each case was the institution of the kingdom itself.

Leah felt giddy with anticipation even as she spoke to Sieg. "So, Sieg, do you also want vengeance against the Six Kingdoms that currently rule the continent?"

Sieg paused before answering, <Unlike Ser Diaz...I...I wasn't forced to witness the assassination of the person I was sworn to protect, so I cannot say that my emotions are the same as his. However...what I am certain about is that I swore an oath to my kingdom and I feel a sense of responsibility toward my subordinates that fell here. If the path to finding some peace in my current state is to destroy those Six Kingdoms, then you shall have my sword alongside Ser Diaz in fulfilling that goal.>

Leah nodded and said, "I see. Then let's do that... Though, to be honest, I've been holed up in my woods this whole time, so I only have secondhand information on what those Six Kingdoms are like. It's also important to define what we mean by destroy..." For the moment, the only members of her retinue who wanted to destroy the Six Kingdoms were these two undead. Unlike Kelli and the other catfolk, they were monsters. Which meant that if she continued to bring monster realms under her control, like she had with this forest, and expanded them until they swallowed the areas where the civilized races lived, that ought to count as destroying that kingdom.

Leah articulated her thoughts on the matter to Diaz and Sieg and concluded with, “How does that sound?”

Diaz rumbled, <It sounds truly wondrous, Your Highness.>

Sieg bowed his head in agreement. <When that is accomplished, Princess Leah, let us found a new unified kingdom for all of the oppressed monsters of the lands with you, Your Highness, as queen. The bloodline that we swore our loyalty to has long since passed into history, meaning you are the person most worthy of the throne.>

Sieg was evidently a good deal more uptight and prone to grandiosity than Diaz. But since Leah was already serving as the ruler of the ant kingdom, even if she did create a new kingdom, she could just assign one of her retainers to deal with the finer details. That made the prospect easier for Leah to swallow.

“All right, then first things first: let’s take full control of this forest. Sieg’s forces are...ha, larger than I thought, but scattered around the forest, I see. Then Sieg, I’m going to leave you in command of this forest as a place where pla—uhh, where humans vanish. A cursed weald, so to speak,” Leah said.

After consulting with Sieg on the state of the forest, Leah learned that since Sieg had awoken here, not a single person who wandered into the woods had escaped it alive. It was now known as the Weald of No Return, and people rarely made their way into it. Since the treants made sure to kill any intruders during the day, no word had gotten out about the type of monsters that lived in the forest.

At least, that would be the case if there were no players among the people Sieg, his undead, and the treants had slaughtered. If there *were* players among those killed, while it was possible the ones killed during the day never saw the treants that attacked them, the players killed at night would know they were killed by undead, because players would just respawn back at town every time they died.

“My treants will entertain our guests during the day. If they also show up at night, Sieg, you’ll send your weaker retainers to fight them and let the intruders win a few encounters. That will help draw in more people and in the end allow us to kill more of them,” Leah said, explaining the plan to Sieg who nodded

along.

<That sounds eminently reasonable. Once I became your retainer, Your Highness, I felt as if a fog had lifted from my mind. I no longer feel doomed to wander aimlessly.>

Thinking about Sieg's ability scores, that newfound clarity was probably because *Enhance Retinue* had boosted his INT and MND, but that didn't explain the dramatic shift in behavior or personality. It wouldn't surprise Leah if the act of making an NPC a retainer also included some sort of change to their AI type.

"Well, I'm glad to hear your mind is clear. Then, let's have you spend some time with...let's see, Diaz. He's been at my side and witnessed how I changed the Great Woods of Lieb, so he should be able to give you some advice on how to run this forest. Once things have settled down a bit, just contact me and I'll *Summon* you back to Lieb..." Leah continued to lay out her plans for the forest.

Diaz rumbled a bit sourly, <Mm. If you command it, I shall obey. However, Your Highness, please do not do anything too dangerous while I am absent...>

"I know, I know," Leah said with an exhale of breath halfway between a sigh and a chuckle. "Oh, there was something I wanted to check," she said, brightening and turning to the giant tree that they had encountered Sieg looming beside. Leah pointed at the tree. "Is this just a tree? Or is it a treant? No way to tell right now since they don't move at night..."

<As far as I am aware, this tree has never moved,> Sieg answered, turning to follow Leah's gaze.

Leah thinned her lips a moment and said, "Gotcha. But there's...maybe...a chance that it's just pretending it can't move because it doesn't want to bother, or because it'd take too much damage fighting you or something... No harm in testing out the theory."

Even if it wasn't active at the moment, if it was a monster, it would still have a mind of its own. It ought to respond to any *Enchantment* spell cast upon it. "*Charm!*" The tree's branches suddenly rustled to life.

"Boss!" Kelli hurriedly tried to jump in to protect Leah.

Leah held up a hand to reassure her. "It's fine." Leah felt a significant amount

of resistance to her *Charm* spell, but she was sure she had this in hand. Next to monsters that were simply immune to the spell, this was the most resistance she'd ever felt against *Charm*.

Yet, she eventually overcame that resistance with brute force. "Aha! I thought so! You're a treant after all! *Dominare!*" Despite being charmed, the treant put up significant resistance to *Dominare*. That raised the possibility that this wasn't just a larger-than-normal treant, but a more evolved version of the monster. "You fought well, but I still win. *Retainer.*"



Eventually the violently rustling branches calmed down and returned to a stationary position. The treant had accepted becoming Leah's retainer. It was evidently an extremely powerful monster. The initial *Charm* had gone through because of her high stats and her birth trait, but it was possible this monster was so powerful she wasn't supposed to be able to add it to her retinue yet.

However, if it had been pretending to be just a tree because it didn't want to fight Sieg, then at least in terms of pure combat strength it was less powerful than him. Perhaps it had accepted Leah's *Retainer* skill because it had seen Leah defeat Sieg. She got her answer when she looked at the treant's stats. "I see. So you're an elder camphor treant. I guess you're a more evolved version of—"

<<Retainer has satisfied conditions for [Rebirth]. The retainer may be reborn by spending 5,000 experience points. Allow retainer to be reborn?>>

A system message suddenly broke in. The message mentioned *Rebirth*. Leah hadn't expected one of her retainers to meet the conditions for *Rebirth* before she did.

Still, this was an excellent opportunity. She would have to think about what the conditions had been later, but she needed to make use of her chance now. Yes—

Even if it costs me some experience poi—wait...five THOUSAND?! SERIOUSLY?!

Even Leah had to balk at the prospect of spending 5,000 experience points. It wasn't that she couldn't afford it. No, not that she couldn't afford it, *but*—"Can't I take out a loan...or something?"

Diaz turned to Leah. <Is something the matter, Your Highness?>

She waved him off. "No, it's nothing. I just need you to wait a second..."

<Task on hold.>

Leah sighed. "No, I didn't mean you...never mind. I suppose I should thank you." What Leah needed was to escape the spiral of confusion she'd suddenly

found herself in. This was a moment that called for calm, even if she had to force it.

Was this an opportunity that she'd only have this once? If she let it go, would there be another one? Leah succeeding in taming this elder treant had to be at least part of the conditions for triggering the *Rebirth*. The key question was whether the condition was "when the treant is tamed" or "once the treant is tamed."

If it was the former, this would be the only chance ever to trigger its *Rebirth*. But if it was the latter, it would mean she could trigger the *Rebirth* at a time of her choosing. In certain walks of life, the difference between successfully taking advantage of an opportunity and watching it vanish in front of your eyes was a matter of timing.

She probably should do it. It wasn't without significant risks, but she shouldn't let this opportunity go to waste. Besides, she simply couldn't hold back her curiosity.

It was five THOUSAND experience points. Leah couldn't imagine there were any characters who could casually gather that much. Just who was going to be able to make this thing trigger a *Rebirth*? Who other than Leah, that is.

Okay, I'll pay it. I'll allow the Rebirth.

<<Triggering [Rebirth].>>

With that, the elder camphor treant's branches began to shake, scattering what appeared to be motes of light. Those motes of light enveloped the branches, leaves, and the tree trunk itself, and the tree began to glow.

<Wh-What is this?!> Diaz sharply turned his attention to the tree.

"Boss?! What's..." Kelli asked in alarm. She and the others already knew the treant was one of their allies, so they didn't seem to feel any danger from the sudden light show, but they were still surprised at what they were seeing. Since Diaz and Sieg were once living knights and now undead, they had to have undergone the *Rebirth* process at some point, but perhaps they had never seen

the process from the outside.

The glowing treant then trembled in place and began to grow, its branches audibly stretching skyward. While it had been the tallest tree in the forest, it now grew so tall that it was impossible to see the top of the tree from the ground.

The trunk grew in proportion to its height, forcing Leah and the others to back up. The trunk had grown so thick that it expanded past where Sieg had stood earlier, the roots pushing up the earth as it continued to grow.

Leah and the others were suddenly startled by the sound of trees collapsing behind them. They turned to look and found that the elder camphor treant's roots had started uprooting and tossing aside the trees that were in their way. No, it wasn't an elder camphor treant anymore. The screen in front of Leah said that it was now a "World Tree."

Leah looked over the stats, then gazed up at the giant tree, murmuring to herself, "Now I get it... No wonder it took 5,000 experience points."

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<<Special conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character  
eligible for rebirth into race [high elf].>>
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"Seriously?!" Leah asked rather more loudly than intended. The initial question that crossed her mind was "who" had unlocked the option to be reborn as a high elf, but given that the system message didn't use the word retainer, it was safe to assume that it referred to Leah herself.

Although she had looked forward to making use of the feature herself, to have it suddenly offered to her caught her by surprise. Not that there was any question of whether or not she would do it. The system had even been kind enough to inform her of her new race.

It was the difference between a player and an NPC retainer. Though, she couldn't discount the possibility that the system had tried to inform the elder camphor treant that it was now "eligible for *Rebirth* into race *World Tree*."

She immediately approved the *Rebirth*. She knew what had triggered it. Based

on the timing, it was probably “place a World Tree under one’s command.”

<<[Rebirth] requires spending 200 additional experience points.>>

There wasn’t the slightest hesitation about spending that EXP. It almost felt like a bargain. But, Leah had to remind herself, it was that the World Tree’s 5,000 was absurdly high, and 200 points for a high elf was still on the high end by normal standards.

<<Triggering [Rebirth].>>

At that moment, Leah felt a strange, ticklish sensation flood her body. When she opened her eyes, she was momentarily blinded by the amount of light emanating from her body. She probably looked just like the treant had, covered in glowing motes of light.

“Boss!” She heard the worried exclamations of her retainers. <Your Highness?!> But she quietly held her hand up to reassure them that everything was fine.

The *Rebirth* into a high elf ended quickly, and the light faded with the change. This was probably because unlike the change from an elder camphor treant into a World Tree, elves and high elves weren’t much different in terms of physical size. Although Leah hadn’t physically gotten bigger, she felt as though she were somehow more complete, the same feeling she got when she poured a pile of experience points into an ability score. It felt good.

“I have just been reborn as a high elf, but...how do I look? Has anything changed?” Leah asked as she posed for her retainers.

“Yes, um...your facial features haven’t changed...and yet, it seems that you have gotten even more beautiful than before...?” Kelli said slowly, as though she were still processing the sight herself.

“Yes... And your hair has grown. Along with your ears,” Marion mentioned the

latter as though it were a minor detail, as though ears normally grew longer just like hair. It was certainly a detail worth noting. The length of the ears must have been the main feature that distinguished high elves from ordinary elves.

As for the beauty that Kelli struggled to describe, it was probably related to the racial trait.

Racial Trait: Sublime Beauty

Your race is extraordinarily beautiful. All living things exist to bow down at your feet.

Provides a bonus to NPC affinity (large).

All characters under your command have a constant bonus to morale.

It was a racial trait for a race meant to rule over others. In addition to the trait, there were new skill trees that were clearly intended to be used with the *Retainer* skill tree. These weren't unlocked for acquisition, but rather added to Leah's skill list. They appeared to be special racial skills. Leah doubted that a high elf would be born with these skills without also possessing the *Retainer* skill. When considered in that light, the only reasonable conclusion to draw was that members of the high elf race were born already possessing the *Retainer* skill.

A system message from the devs had mentioned becoming retainers to certain NPCs, such as nobility. Those NPCs probably all possessed the *Retainer* skill from birth as one of their racial skills. That probably meant that all of the nobles of the elven kingdom were high elves. It also raised the possibility that other races like humans had some higher-level version that came with *Retainer*-related skills. For example, the ruling class of the Kingdom of Hilith might consist of those greater humans.

When Leah initially read that dev announcement, she had been concerned that going to war with a kingdom meant dealing with the *Enchantment* spells wielded by its ruling nobility. This was because the *Enchantment* skill tree was a prerequisite for acquiring *Retainer*, but if the nobility were like Sugaru and had

Retainer as a starting racial skill, that dramatically reduced the possibility that the nobility possessed *Enchantment*, *Necromancy*, or *Summon*.

“Huh, so I added a World Tree to my collection, and while I was at it, managed to fulfill my goal of *Rebirth* without needing to make a philosopher’s stone from that World Tree... Kind of skipped right to the end of my short-term goals, but I guess that’s fine,” Leah mused to herself. “If the magic potassium carbonate that’s needed for the philosopher’s stone is ash from the World Tree, then I’ll be able to mass-produce them for my experiments.”

Adding the elder camphor treant to her retinue explained why it had been dormant while the undead were flooding the forest. Treants were simply unsuited to fighting undead. As monsters that represented natural life, treants, like the World Tree, were the polar opposite of the undead.

The miasma that Sieg generated had a constant and powerful debuffing effect on the elder treant. Even if it decided to fight, it was starting at a disadvantage. That had been why it had lain dormant and pretended to be a normal tree the moment Sieg had spawned in the forest and started flooding it with his undead. The debuffs from the miasma might have also been why Leah had successfully *Charmed* the treant.

The reason the other treants had only been active during the day wasn’t because they needed photosynthesis to move around, but simply because the presence of the undead at night made them too ill to move.

Leah tapped her chin in thought. “In that case, we can’t leave Sieg and his undead here... I suppose I’ll have Mister World Tree manage this forest and take the undead back to my woods. There’s plenty of work to go around. Diaz, do you mind looking after them when we’re there? We’ll let the undead loose in Lieb to entertain our guests.”

<As you wish. I shall be sure to drill the new recruits,> Diaz rumbled in friend chat, prompting a laugh from Sieg.

<Heh, that certainly brings back memories. Having Ser Diaz as a drill instructor again would be lovely.> Despite the fact that the pair were hollow-eyed, undead skeletons, the mood of the conversation felt more like a lively little reunion between old colleagues.

“Well then, with that settled, it’s time to go back home and continue my research. Mister World Tree, would you mind parting with one of your branches?” Leah asked, holding out a hand to the tree.

Chapter 8: Ascension of the Queen of Destruction

The branch the World Tree gave Leah was as big as a tree on a city boulevard. From the point of view of a gigantic World Tree, it was probably no more important to it than a fingernail clipping, but for Leah, this was more than enough material to do a wide range of experiments.

Once the branch was processed into different pieces, she would burn it to make charcoal and ash for use in her experiments. She also wanted to try crafting a staff out of the wood to see if it was possible to make a weapon that could enhance spellcasting.

“Is *Carpentry* the right skill tree for working on the branch? I guess that’d mean you could make things like bows out of this too. Use the tendons from the deer monsters in Lieb for the bowstring...but how would you make the glue?” Leah murmured to herself, standing over the branch laid out in the queen’s chamber.

“You can make the glue from the tendons and such from the deer. You can also use the leftovers after curing the hides,” a voice said from behind her, providing a reply to her monologue.

“Oh, Lemmy, it’s good to see you. Now that we’ve got the wood from the World Tree, I was hoping to make something out of it. Did you want to give it a try?” Leah said as she turned to face Lemmy.

“Yes, it’s why I have returned,” Lemmy said with a respectful bob of her head.

Lemmy had been running a mercenary’s supply store in the city of Erfahren, but Leah had recalled her to assist in the creation of a philosopher’s stone.

“It just reminded me that we don’t have a lot of weapons made of wood. Obviously, we don’t need to make them all out of World Tree wood, but since there’s plenty of lumber suited for it, why don’t we have anything of that sort?” Leah asked as she once again turned toward the branch.

Lemmy shrugged and said, “Likely because they are unnecessary, ma’am. As

you have noted, weapons that are specifically designed to be made of wood are staves, bows, and perhaps the shafts of polearms such as spears. None of them are of any use to the ants.”

Leah nodded as the reasoning cleared up her question. “Oh, right. That makes sense.”

The primary weapons of the ants were their jaws and the venomous stinger in their torso. They had no need for weapons. As for the adamantite soldiers, while they were equipped with mass-produced weapons, they were capable of doing more damage by just punching their opponents. There was no place for primarily bludgeoning-based wooden weapons in an army like that.

Leah considered the structure of the forces under her command. “Well, we’re going to have a large number of skeletons joining our army, so it might be nice to have some bows for them to use. If we make any out of the World Tree’s wood, those we’ll reserve for you and Riley. We can also make staffs out of normal wood or maybe treant remains for the adamanmages.”

Based on how casually the World Tree had offered this particular branch, it was probably capable of producing quite a few branches of this size, but Leah wanted to avoid having that material exposed to the public. While they would have to actually make prototypes and test out their effectiveness, letting too many powerful weapons out into the world could come back to haunt them later.

“Well, let’s start with charcoal, then. It takes about a week to make if you want to do it properly, right? We can have a batch that’s made that way...” Leah trailed off and handed the pieces of the World Tree she had cut for making charcoal.

Lemmy nodded solemnly and took the pieces. “I will make sure that it is done correctly.”

Primus Sharp, currently hanging on the wall, had done the necessary slicing work. Since he was a constant companion to Leah of late, he had picked up an ability to anticipate Leah’s wishes and act automatically when needed.

“Let’s turn the remaining bits into a little bit of ash,” Leah suggested, although they needed to be careful with such an experiment in the queen’s chamber. The

Fire Magic attack spells Leah and Lemmy knew were too powerful, and no matter how much they dialed down the power of the spell, they would still reduce everything in the chamber to ash. Even using a single-target spell like *Flare Arrow* would probably just shatter and vaporize the piece of wood, leaving nothing behind.

“Oh, I just had an idea. *Philosopher’s Egg*,” Leah said, summoning the crystalline egg. She then fed the piece of wood in her hand into the egg. “Now, *Heat*.” She began warming the entire egg using the *Fire* spell. Although Leah intended to simply heat the egg, the spell was fueled by Leah’s absurdly high INT score. The interior of the egg rapidly rose to several hundred degrees.

As Leah watched, the piece of wood ignited due to the temperature and began to burn. She deactivated the *Heat* spell and stood back to watch the process play out on its own. Since the crystal was sealed, no smoke escaped from within. Yet, in spite of that, something was feeding oxygen into the egg and there was no sign of the fire abating. It was a truly magical piece of crafting equipment.

The fire burned out after a few more minutes, and when Leah peered into the egg, she found a pile of World Tree ash. “Hmm. I was hoping we could make charcoal this way, but even this was too hot for it. Sometimes magical equipment brings problems of its own, huh?” Leah said as she turned to Lemmy.

“Perhaps if you used *Athanor* to heat the egg, you may see more success,” Lemmy suggested.

Leah clapped her hands together. “Yes, that’s a good point. Try that and report the results back to me.”

Lemmy nodded crisply. “Yes, Boss.”

Once the fire was completely extinguished, the crystal egg shattered and faded out of existence. “I guess it always does that. It feels like a waste of MP when these things break after a single use, but I guess that’s just part of the design...” Leah sighed and leaned over to sweep the ashes onto her hand. It hadn’t been visible when the ash was in the egg, but it sparkled with little shimmering motes mixed in with the gray ash. Considering how dark the room

was, it was possible the ash itself was emitting its own light. “I suppose I should have expected that from ashes of the World Tree... Anyway, let’s check the recipe.”

Leah opened *The Great Work* and scrolled through the recipes. The material was recognized as Ash of a World Tree and it appeared as an ingredient on a large number of recipes. It had also helped unlock a number of new recipes for crafting. Among those new recipes was the one Leah had flagged as a strong candidate for the philosopher’s stone. The final piece had been, as expected, ash from a magical plant.

However, the recipe called for “Ash of a Treant” rather than “Ash of a World Tree.” Leah couldn’t recall reducing a treant to ash, so that probably meant that the Ash of the World Tree counted as a type of Ash of a Treant. Since some of the other newly unlocked recipes specifically listed Ash of a World Tree as an ingredient, Leah was confident that was what she actually had in her hands. She concluded that it was possible that once a crafter saw a higher-quality version of a material, the system also treated the lower-quality versions as being unlocked for recipe purposes. In that case, there wouldn’t be any issue with using the higher-quality material. If anything, Leah figured she’d get more interesting results by using the highest-quality materials available.

“I can try it later with treant ash too. All right, let’s get started,” Leah said, summoning a transporter ant and retrieving the necessary materials from her inventory.

Mercury.

Sulfur.

Iron.

A heart from a bear monster considered the most powerful in Lieb’s monster ranch.

Acid from an engineer ant Leah had poured experience points into.

And finally, the Ash of a World Tree.

Leah placed these ingredients into the *Philosopher’s Egg* and began heating it with the *Athanor*. Like usual, a swirling marble pattern appeared within the egg

—but unique to this occasion, it started out with the coruscating rainbow of color. Usually, this only happened after Leah had activated *The Great Work*. Since this was a process she had repeated literally thousands of times, there was no way she would mistake the order in which these things were supposed to occur.

“Should I take this as a sign that I’ve made a breakthrough? I remember reading that ancient games about alchemists used to have effects like this for that situation... Anyway, it’s probably a good thing that it’s shimmering. Now, *The Great Work*.” The moment Leah activated the skill, the crystal lit up with an even greater intensity. It was no longer the contents of the egg but the egg itself that appeared to be emitting that light. It was so bright that Leah had to close her eyes.

When the light had died down to the point that Leah could open her eyes, the *Philosopher’s Egg* had vanished. Instead there was a crystal egg about the size of a chicken egg floating in the air in front of her.

“Did the egg shrink? This... It’s a container. So I guess this red liquid inside is the philosopher’s stone.” Leah understood how the item functioned the moment she took it into her hand. Evidently it came with a user’s manual. “I see. So it’s like magic or skills, and an activation key automatically breaks the container and the target absorbs the liquid inside. The effects...are that it increases the rank of the target two ranks... Not quite sure what it means, but I think I can guess. It doesn’t seem like it’d be a bad thing, but...”

The description was a little too lacking in details. Perhaps it was appropriate for a philosopher’s stone to have an air of mystery around it, but it was vague enough to make Leah hesitate to use it on herself. “I’d like something to test it on, but...first I should see if I can make more of them.”

Lemmy interjected after a long silence, “I believe we should also see if I can create the same item using the same process.”

Leah nodded. “Yes, good idea. Things like ability scores or other skills might impact the outcome. So let’s make a bunch to test things out. I mean, if we run out of ingredients, we just need to go gather more. There’s plenty at the ranches and the other forest.”

And so Leah and Lemmy mass-produced a large pile of philosopher's stones.

"Well. That was a productive bit of alchemy. We've got enough now that we can afford to spend a few on testing," Leah said as she looked over the collection of philosopher's stones. There had been no noticeable difference whether Leah or Lemmy had done the crafting. However, the tests they had run on crafting with lesser versions of ingredients, such as acid from engineer ants without EXP boosted stats or ash from a normal treant, did produce meaningful results.

In those instances, the *Philosopher's Egg* didn't glow when heated using *Athamor*. There was the usual faintly glowing marble swirl pattern, but that was no different from any other ordinary alchemical recipe. Leah assumed that signified a successful crafting attempt, just one that represented a passing grade rather than a perfect score.

The difference was apparent with a single glance at the finished products. The stones produced with ash from the World Tree were a brighter shade of red and gave off a faint inner glow. Leah picked one up. "The mental user's manual kicked in when I touched it. Evidently the duller ones only increase the rank of the target by one. So using the World Tree ash gives us a philosopher's stone that's twice as effective."

They had tested combinations where the only ingredient that was replaced with a lower-quality version was the ant's acid, and another where only the tree ash was of lesser quality, but in both cases the end result was the duller version of the philosopher's stone. Leah drew the conclusion that it took high-quality ingredients to produce the shimmering type of philosopher's stone.

Leah held the lesser stone in her hand and glanced around the chamber. "I want to start by raising something's rank by a single level. Since the end goal is to use it on myself, I'd like to try it on something similar to me, a character rather than materials or items. Are there any volunteers...?"

Diaz immediately rumbled his assent. <In that case, I will happily volunteer. I am undead. Since I am already dead, I will not grow through aging. If there is a chance for growth of any kind, it would be a great opportunity to increase the potency of our forces.>

Leah shook her head. “No... I’d rather use the shiny ones on leadership... Based on the manual, I suppose we can just use the dull ones twice...but it’d be a problem if it turns out there’s a limit to how many times you can use a stone on a character...”

Sieg spoke up a moment later. <Then how about one of the skeletons under my command? As Ser Diaz noted, we undead are best suited for your testing, and I doubt you will be using that item on each and every one of our skeleton knights. Even if you can only use it once, it should not be a problem if used upon a skeleton knight.>

After a moment’s consideration, Leah nodded. “That’s a good point. If it succeeds we can just use that one as a boss monster. Can you bring one over?”

Sieg bowed his head. <As you command. *Summon: Skeleton Knight.*>

A single skeleton knight appeared in the queen’s chamber. Sieg explained the situation to the knight and it nodded. It almost looked like an exchange between a manager and a subordinate at any other job.

Leah held out the dull red stone to the skeleton knight and said, “All right, take this stone. It should tell you how to use it the moment you hold it. Just go ahead and use it when you’re ready. Make sure you use it on yourself.” The skeleton knight took the small crystalline egg without a sign of hesitation and held it up.

The crystal emitted an intense burst of light, then shattered. The red liquid contents of the egg turned to powder and fell upon the skeleton knight like a fine dusting of red snow. Rather than raining down at random, tugged by the force of gravity, the dust appeared to be drawn toward the skeleton itself. The moment the dust made contact with the skeleton, it melted like a snowflake and was absorbed into the bone.

Once the red snowflakes were all absorbed into the skeleton knight, the knight began to glow. It was the same light they had seen when the elder treant became a World Tree.

“Looks like the *Rebirth* has started,” Leah said with a satisfied nod. “Increasing a character’s rank seems to basically mean that the character is reborn as a

higher-ranking version of its race.”

The light faded after a few moments. What appeared was still a skeleton, but rather than the ragged fragments of armor it had worn before, it was now dressed in a fine suit of armor worthy of a proper knight. The bones themselves appeared to be thicker, and on the whole the skeleton was taller than it had once been.

Sieg examined the newly emerged skeleton then explained to Leah, <He appears to have been reborn as a...skeleton leader. Since he was just a line soldier, it is perhaps best understood to mean he has been reborn into a command role.>

Leah nodded. “That makes sense. Seems safe to assume his rank went up by one.”

If there was a shortage of skeleton leaders in the undead army, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to use the dull stones to fill out their ranks. She could also use the stone to turn the skeleton mages into a more powerful rank of magic user and improve the overall magical forces available to her army. Even these dull stones held a great deal of promise. Leah just needed to be careful not to overuse the stones or else she’d have no “appropriately weak enemies” to use in running her dungeons.

“Things like materials and items can wait until later. Let’s test out using multiple stones in succession,” Leah said and held out another dull red stone to the skeleton. The skeleton leader took it and gazed down at the egg in his hand for a moment, but then shook his head and handed the egg back to Leah.

Sieg interpreted the skeleton’s actions. <It seems he can only use it once per day.>

“So the cooldown timer is one day, hm? That’s better than an absolute cap on the number of times you can use it. I wonder if that means I can be reborn as many times as I want so long as I have the materials to keep making stones? That sounds just a little bit too good to be true...” Leah mused to herself.

An item that allowed a character to become infinitely more powerful simply by using it over and over was the sort of bug a developer would look to squash as quickly as possible. It was the type of bug that the bug-fixing AI would be on

constant watch for.

For the moment, she planned to wait until the cooldown timer reset and have the same skeleton use another stone to see if he'd be reborn as a skeleton general or some other type of greater skeleton.

"Now, I guess it's time to try the shiny stone. Diaz, do you still want to try it?" Leah asked, holding the stone out to Diaz.

<If I may be so blessed, Your Highness,> he rumbled and almost reverently took the egg from her. While Leah hadn't intended to do so, the whole hand off had the air of a ruler giving a great reward to one of her followers.

With the egg in his possession, Diaz held it aloft with both hands. He cut quite a dashing figure despite being a skeleton, as though he were a paladin engaging in some divine ritual. The shimmering philosopher's stone shattered into shards of light. Like before, its red liquid turned to powder and was absorbed into Diaz.

<<Retainer has satisfied conditions for [Rebirth].>>

<<Allow retainer to be reborn as a [death knight]?>>

<<Spend 100 experience points and allow retainer to be reborn as a [death lord]?>>

"Aha. So being able to raise the rank by two also comes with the ability to choose which option to take," Leah said as she considered the system messages about Diaz. She had probably received those messages because Diaz was her direct retainer. It meant that Diaz could go from a terror knight to a death knight, then a death knight to a death lord.

One detail tugged a moment at Leah's thoughts. "Huh, unlike my turning into a high elf, this feels more like a change in class or occupation than race. I suppose I should just file that away as being part of the undead family tree?"

At any rate, since Diaz had already used one of the nicer philosopher's stones, Leah decided to spend the experience points and allow him to be reborn as a death lord. Diaz was wreathed in light and began to shift in form. The armor

that had given off such an ominous air shifted to become a bit more restrained in design, gaining greater mass and more elegant trim in the process. Diaz's body went from a bare skeleton to something that looked coated in a layer of ash, looking more like a mummy than a skeleton. His eye sockets were still empty, but they now had a shimmering red glow within, twinkling every so often as though Diaz were blinking.

<Ahh... How do I phrase this, Your Highness...? The power I feel within me... I feel more alive than when I was living...>

Leah gave him a once-over before checking his stats. "You certainly look a lot cooler now. I'm pretty sure you'd send children off in tears. As for skills...you've got some new options available. This *Miasma* one is one Sieg has too. It's a wide area-of-effect buff and debuff skill tree. It buffs allied undead and debuffs enemies. I wonder how it distinguishes between friend and foe?"

Overall, the testing was a success. Leah planned to take the opportunity to "promote" all of the leadership-level characters to higher versions of their starting races. "Though, since it seems there are quite a few cases where *Rebirth* costs experience points, I can't promote everyone at once," she said to herself. There was also the possibility that while *Rebirth* opened up new avenues for skill acquisition, it could also make it impossible to take certain other skills.

When Leah had been reborn as a high elf, she had a new batch of skills such as *Light Magic* open up for learning. If possible, she wanted to take all of the new skills available to her before her next use of *Rebirth*. While it seemed the basic framework was that characters were reborn as greater versions of their previous race, which made it less likely that she would encounter skills she couldn't take after *Rebirth*, there was nothing wrong with being cautious. After all, there was almost no information out there about *Rebirth* in general.

"I suppose that means we should focus on farming experience points for now. There's no hurry," Leah said, but Diaz disagreed.

<No, Your Highness. I believe it would be best if you were to finish your *Rebirth* before anything else. You may acquire traits that provide bonuses to all of those under your command, so an increase in your power would greatly

benefit all of your forces.>

“Hmm, that’s true... Good point. Then, I guess I’ll go ahead and take these skills...” Leah opened up the *Light Magic* and *Ruler* skill trees, which she had acquired when she became a high elf, and began distributing experience points into each.

Ruler was a tree full of skills that impacted all of her followers, rather than exclusively direct retainers, and it included a skill group called *Enhance Follower*. Another notable skill was *Castling*, which allowed her to immediately swap locations with one of her followers once a day. *Castling* was clearly designed with the assumption that the character *had* followers. It had been one of the reasons Leah theorized that high elves were born with *Retainer* as an innate skill.

Enhance Follower had the same effect as *Enhance Retinue*, but it affected a much larger group, one consisting of “all characters that are your followers,” meaning it applied to retainers of retainers. The way it was worded, it might even apply to those temporarily under Leah’s command through the *Dominate* or *Necromancy* skills.

The *Light Magic* tree was laid out similarly to the other magic skill trees, but acquiring *Light Magic* also unlocked *Plant Magic*. The prerequisites for that school must have been *Light Magic* and something else. The most likely candidates were *Earth Magic* and *Water Magic*, but there was no way for Leah to confirm the theory at this point.

While it was a complete mystery as to what had unlocked the option, there was also a new magic school called *Divine Magic*. Leah, of course, made sure to buy those spells.

Each time Leah acquired a skill, it seemed to unlock a new one, and it felt like she was playing a game of whack-a-mole that cost experience points every time she hit a new target. At the same time, she was determined to acquire every skill she could. Leah much preferred having to earn back a mountain of experience points in the future, rather than regret not taking a skill in the past. She could always earn more experience points, but even she couldn’t go back in

time to acquire a skill.

Besides, even the cost of acquiring all of the skills she unlocked was a drop in the proverbial ocean compared to the 5,000 experience points she had poured into the World Tree. She also had the additional experience points from mass-producing philosopher's stones with Lemmy. The philosopher's stone was, as expected, one of the highest ranked items that could be crafted through alchemy, meaning that even Leah, with her massive experience point investments, still earned experience points when making them.

"That should do it. That was a lot of EXP, but there's still enough left that it should cover any *Rebirth* costs," Leah said after she finished her skill acquisition spree. She picked up one of the shining philosopher's stones and activated it with the key: "Activate philosopher's stone." She had wondered how races who couldn't speak could use the stones, but after watching Diaz and the skeleton knight earlier, it was clear there was some sort of activation key that characters who were unable to speak could use.

Just as with the times before, the crystal egg shattered into shards of light, and the red liquid turned to a red powder that rained onto Leah, melting into her body. Once Leah had absorbed all of the red dust, she heard a system message:

<<You have used a [Greater Philosopher's Stone].>>

<<Conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character eligible for rebirth into race [fey].>>

<<Conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character eligible for rebirth into race [Fey Queen] by spending 3,000 experience points.>>

<<Special conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character eligible for rebirth into race [dark elf].>>

<<Special conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character eligible for rebirth into race [dark fey].>>

<<Special conditions for [Rebirth] met. Character eligible for rebirth into race [Queen of Destruction] by spending 3,000 experience points.>>

“Hang on, that’s a lot of information...!” Leah cried.

<<Task on hold.>>

Thankfully, the system responded as it always did and gave Leah the time she needed to regain her bearings.

First was the item name. Evidently the stone was a “greater philosopher’s stone,” not just a philosopher’s stone. Of course, that wasn’t a particularly important revelation at this time. Leah decided to move on to the next piece of information.

The race “fey” that had been shown first must be a higher-ranked version of elven race that slotted in above high elf. Based on the fact that it was shown first, it was probably located a rank higher than high elf. Next, “Fey Queen” must be a race that was a rank higher than “Fey,” and to get to that rank required an additional 3,000 experience points. It wasn’t quite equal to the World Tree, but it cost almost as many experience points.

Then there was the race type “dark elf.” This was the first entry that stated that special conditions had been met, so it was a reincarnation that had specific prerequisites. Leah had no way of knowing if that was an option because of the combination of skills that Leah possessed or some other conditions she fulfilled.

The other two options, “dark fey” and “Queen of Destruction” suggested that “dark elf” was equal to high elf, “dark fey” the equal to “fey” and “Queen of Destruction” the equivalent of “Fey Queen.” Perhaps it was best to think of them as paths diverging based on whether she focused upon darkness or light.

“What to do, what to do...” Leah murmured to herself. There were, on the whole, really only two options for Leah. Should she become a Fey Queen, or a Queen of Destruction? Either way, she faced an immediate problem: “I don’t have enough EXP.”

She hadn't been expecting the game to ask for four digits worth of experience points. Perhaps she should have put off learning some skills until later? No, given that there was the possibility she would no longer meet the prerequisites for some of those skills after *Rebirth*, acquiring them all was a necessary part of the process. After all, she couldn't imagine that *Divine Magic* was a skill tree available to something called a Queen of Destruction.

The important question was how long the system would let her keep the task on hold. Even if there was a time limit and she let it lapse, at most it would cost her a single shining philosopher's stone—or rather, a single greater philosopher's stone. And if the game treated the first stone as having been used, she would be able to use another one after the one-day cooldown.

Leah decided that, for the moment, she'd just leave the task on hold and if it expired, she'd deal with that later.

"Sugaru," Leah said.

<Yes, Boss?>

"I want you to turn everything in these woods that aren't part of our forces into experience points," Leah said offhandedly. "I need as many points as I can get right now. Do it as fast as you can without sacrificing too much efficiency."

Sugaru bobbed her head. <Understood, Boss.>

"Oh! But make sure you leave enough livestock in the ranches for breeding."

<Of course,> Sugaru responded.

At the moment, Lieb was filled with guests, almost all of which were players who had spent a fair amount of time hunting in the woods. If she sacrificed them to the experience point gods, they'd bring a decent return. Then there were the monsters in the monster ranches. They had grown to an impressive size in terms of overall population. Once she harvested them for experience points, leaving the bare minimum necessary to repopulate the woods, it would take a long time to get their numbers back up to where they were now, but that was a price Leah was willing to pay.

Leah sent similar instructions to Hakuma and the World Tree. There probably weren't any player characters in the other forest, but there were still plenty of

treants that weren't under her control. The goal would be to just utterly eradicate them.

Once she had finished giving out her orders, Leah watched her experience point pool, expecting a system message warning her she was out of time at any moment. The sudden flurry of activity in the caverns, no, the entire woods, brought Kelli, Riley, and the others into the queen's chamber.

Leah's experience point pool gradually started to tick upward, finally surpassing 3,000 after two hours. "All right! Then I will now be reborn as a 'Queen of Destruction'!"

There wasn't a particularly deep or involved reason for choosing Queen of Destruction. The first reason was that it had special conditions attached to it. That meant that even if there were players that followed in Leah's footsteps, the additional conditions to meet meant it would be that much harder to catch up to her. All people had a desire to be unique; Leah was no exception.

Second, she thought about what Diaz and Sieg had said about "liberating and uniting the oppressed monsters." If she was going to destroy the Six Kingdoms to achieve that goal, she ought to be the Queen of Destruction.

Like when she transformed into a high elf, Leah's body was enveloped in light. While she hadn't felt anything specific when becoming a high elf, this time Leah felt an odd itchiness on her head. There was also a faintly uncomfortable feeling coming from around her hips. But that discomfort soon vanished with the light enveloping her body.

Leah felt an enormous power flowing through her body, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. She'd felt a lesser version of this when becoming a high elf, but this was a much more pronounced feeling of raw power.

Leah felt omnipotent. She could do anything. She could defeat anyone.

It was a strange, unnameable feeling that filled Leah's entire body. It was strange, but it wasn't unpleasant.

<Ahhh...!> Sieg exclaimed. <Remarkable...> Diaz noted. "How divine...!" Kelli whispered. All of the retainers who witnessed Leah's appearance murmured in

awe.

“I suppose it’s done. Why aren’t there any mirrors...? I guess because I didn’t make them. What happened? Based on your reactions, I seem to have changed quite a bit,” Leah said, looking over to her retainers. This was one of those times when it would have been nice to have a way to look at herself. Not that such occasions were all that common.

“Um, first, your ears have gotten shorter,” Kelli answered. “They’re the same size as a human’s, only with pointed tips.”

“Also, now you have shining horns growing from your head,” Riley added. “A pair of them, growing outward from just above your ears in a curly way. A bit like a goat’s horns.”

<There are wings growing from a bit above your waist,> Sugaru noted. <They are beautiful pure-white wings. They make you look particularly divine, Boss.>

The other retainers added their observations, but they mostly just confirmed what Kelli, Riley, and Sugaru had told her. Leah touched the locations mentioned to confirm what they’d said. She felt the smooth, hard horns on her head. The wings sprouting from her hips had joints that were flexible enough that she was able to see them by wrapping them around herself. It was a bit of an effort to move the wings, as they were a brand-new set of limbs, but she got the hang of it after a little practice.

Leah was able to confirm that the wings were indeed white. The snowy white wings stood out in the dim lighting of the cavern, making them appear to be glowing. That pure reflective white caught Leah off guard. Wasn’t she supposed to be a Queen of Destruction?

She even went to check her status screen. Her character stats clearly identified her race as “Queen of Destruction.” She also had several new traits.

Racial Trait: Wings

You have wings. Gravity cannot keep you chained to the ground.

Provides the skill *Flight*.

Racial Trait: Horns

You have horns. You will never submit to inferior life-forms without horns.

Resistance Bonus (large) to *Enchantment*, *Ruler*, *Retainer*, and *Contract* checks against races without horns.

Success Bonus (large) to *Enchantment*, *Ruler*, *Retainer*, and *Contract* checks against races without horns.

Racial Trait: Evil Eye

Your eyes are imbued with power. None can escape your gaze.

Unlocks skill tree: *Evil Eye*

At the same time, there didn't seem to be any traits that were missing. She still had Sublime Beauty and her Weak Sight and Albinism—

It finally clicked in her head. "Oh! That must be why my wings are white." Ordinarily, the wings were probably meant to be an ominous black like that of a crow, but the Albinism trait had turned them into a white crow's wings. Her hair and skin were the same albino white they had been from the start, but it was possible that since the race tree started from dark elf, they were also supposed to have turned a darker shade during her transformation.

A birth trait had created a pure-white Queen of Destruction. What a concept!

"I took Albinism because I figured I wouldn't stand out much as an elf, but now I can't blend in anywhere... Not that I intend to go anywhere where I need to blend in."

Or rather, she probably couldn't even go out into public without some planning. A Queen of Destruction appearing in town would cause quite the scene. What was she going to do when there were major events? Even if she would always wear Mister Plates when going out, what would she do about her

wings and horns? Could she open holes in Mister Plates for them?

Leah had also just now noticed that the Beautiful birth trait was still on the list. She had unconsciously assumed it had been absorbed into the Sublime Beauty trait, but evidently birth traits remained unchanged when being reborn into another race.

That raised the question of whether the success rate bonus for *Charm* from the *Enchantment* school stacked between those traits. She had no idea as she hadn't had an opportunity to use *Charm* since becoming a high elf.

"Anyway, I guess that's fine. The important part is that I got this *Rebirth* done," Leah said to herself. She looked at her experience point pool again. It was slowly ticking back upward after she had emptied it on her reincarnation. "Sugaru, if you haven't finished hunting yet, you can go back to the standard operating procedures. Give me a report on the monster ranches later."

<Understood.>

She didn't see a need to alter the orders for the World Tree. Since they hadn't made anything like monster ranches in the other forest, there wasn't any problem with wiping out the hostile treants. If possible, Leah wanted to import monsters from elsewhere and run ranches in the forest under the management of the treants, but that was something that she'd work up to in the future.

<<Birth of Harbinger of Destruction [Queen of Destruction] confirmed. As an exception to standard rules, this message will be sent to all player characters and non-player characters with the specified skills.>>

"Wait, what?" Leah said after hearing the unusually phrased system message. Ordinarily system messages could only be heard by players. Not only that, but outside of messages for large-scale player events, most system messages could only be heard by the individual player it affected.

Leah had received this whole "Queen of Destruction" message because she was the Queen of Destruction herself. Based on the content of the message, it

must have been simultaneously sent to all of the characters who possessed some specific skills.

Had there been a time lag between her *Rebirth* and the message because it was an exception to the standard system message rules? And just what skill did the characters have that would let them hear this message? There was also the question of what a “harbinger of destruction” even was. Was it supposed to mean some sort of invader?

No amount of pondering was going to answer any of these questions. Nor could she contact support about it. If this was supposed to be a normal part of the game’s design and she sent a question to support, they might answer it on the official website, spreading information that there was a player who had risen up to be announced as a harbinger of destruction by the game system. Although Leah was far from happy with that state of affairs, she begrudgingly drew the conclusion that her only option was to hurry up and wait.

“I’ve got a lot of things I want to test out, and there are many new skills I’ve unlocked that I want to acquire. I also want to make sure that you all get reborn too, so I suppose we’ll just focus on gathering experience points for now,” Leah said with a soft sigh. For the moment it seemed the only option available to her was to sit back and focus on securing a stable stream of experience points from the Great Woods of Lieb and the Cursed Weald of the World Tree.

Leah’s own task would be to figure out how to secure a steady flow of experience points from the Cursed Weald while earning experience points making high-level items through *Alchemy*.

“Nothing to be done about it, I guess. Let’s sit back and focus on strengthening our forces. I’m now the Queen of Destruction, so the forces under my command should be powerful enough to provide a proper threat to the Six Kingdoms. Oh, and I need to test the basic stats on being a Queen of Destruction. Sheesh, my to-do list is longer than I thought...”

<Orders from the boss. We’re allowed to kill all the enemies in this forest,> Hakuma informed Ginka and the little ones near him. Technically, he had received the information secondhand from Sugaru rather than directly from

Leah. Still, if that was what the boss wanted, he saw no issue with calling it an order from the boss herself. He wasn't privy to the details of why, but evidently there was now an urgent need for something called experience points.

There were times that Hakuma suddenly found he could grow his abilities as he desired after hunting down prey or killing some enemies. Evidently experience points were the power that made that possible.

Right now all of the experience points went to Leah, the leader of their pack, so Hakuma and the others could get stronger without having to do any hunting on their own. That was a power worthy of the gods. Hakuma himself had never heard of gods, so that part had been information he'd been given by Kelli and the other cats.

Kelli and the others hadn't made much of an impression on Hakuma when they first met. He'd only seen them as stupid cats who were quick on their feet, but since then his opinion of them had grown considerably. Perhaps because they vaguely resembled the boss in appearance, they had been given various assignments and had gotten much wiser and smarter than they had once been.

The little ones had also grown a bit. They were still about the size of coyotes, and they still had the fluffy fur and round-ish silhouette of a pup, but they were about ready to start learning how to hunt. There was no need for it to be serious; they could learn as part of their daily play.

In that sense the orders came down at a good time. While the ants could probably hunt fine on their own, when thinking about it in terms of gaining more experience points, it would probably help for the pups to get in their first attempts at hunting.

Hakuma contacted Sugaru with the idea, and after a short discussion they agreed that the ants would handle the large monster ranches, but that Hakuma and the wolves would take care of the goblin farms. Sugaru also warned him to make sure they kept enough goblins alive to repopulate the farm later.

Hakuma and Ginka would only get in the way if the goal was to earn experience points from goblins. They planned to stick to watching and only

intervene if the little ones were in danger, so there was minimal risk that they would reduce the EXP gained from the goblin farms.

<Listen up, little ones, it's time to practice your hunting,> Hakuma began. <You know what a goblin is? The little smelly ones. They think they're clever and try to use weapons like humans, but they're real bad at it. 'Course, all the goblins in the woods had their weapons taken away.>

The little ones responded with variations of "yes" and "we know." The little ones were able to communicate with others of their kind, but couldn't talk to other races yet. According to the boss this was because of an inven-something, but the boss wasn't looking to get the little ones to play an active role yet, so she hadn't made them stronger. The boss had told Hakuma to give the pups a chance to grow up at their own pace.

Hakuma with the little ones in tow headed to the goblin farm. Once there, he left Ginka to watch over the goblins they'd need to repopulate the farm after and had the little ones try hunting the rest.

<They probably won't be able to hurt you, but there's plenty of prey out there that has claws, fangs, or venom. As practice for fighting them, try to avoid getting hit as much as possible,> Hakuma said, then unleashed the pups on the goblins. Each of the pups leaped at a goblin, one gnawing at a goblin's head, another tearing off the goblin's limbs as though playing with a chew toy.

Hakuma wanted to avoid letting any of the goblins get away, both to get the boss as many experience points as possible and to repay Sugaru's generosity in letting the pups handle the goblin farms. Whenever he saw a goblin that was about to escape the farm grounds, he told the little ones and they gave chase. Goblins were quick, but they weren't so fast that they could escape wolves, even ones as young as the pups. While the goal was for them to eventually keep the big picture of a situation in mind and hunt efficiently so that nothing could escape, Hakuma figured this was good enough given that it was their first hunt.

Hakuma spent his time bringing back goblins that the little ones had missed and bringing pups back to the farm when they wandered too far in their

excitement. After doing this for a while, he received word from Sugaru to stop. The boss now had enough experience points.

The ants would take over management of this farm. When Hakuma caught sight of ants in the distance, he called the little ones back to him. The pups dashed over, muzzles and paws dyed bright red with the blood of the goblins. All of the pups looked giddy, eyes shimmering with delight; it seemed they'd all enjoyed themselves. They might be pups, but they were still natural-born hunters. Hakuma decided that he'd ask the boss to let the little ones go out hunting sometimes as part of their play and training.

At that moment, Hakuma felt a strange sensation, a sort of pride well up from inside him. A glance at the little ones and Ginka revealed that they also had expressions of proud satisfaction on their faces. His intuition told him everything.

The boss must have ascended to greater heights. Hakuma felt his chest swell with the relief of having a great power above him as well as a sense of superiority from being one of her followers. He knew at that moment he needed to go have a look at the boss as soon as possible. But first, he needed to wash the little ones somewhere.

In a grand, ornate chamber, elaborate chairs were organized into rows of concentric circles. This was the meeting room on the first floor of the Kingdom of Hilith's Royal Palace. Ordinarily this chamber was leased out to members of the church to hold their religious meetings, but on this day the room was being used to host a meeting of the kingdom's most important individuals. The church was also well represented by the bishop of the Holy Church of Hilith and numerous high-ranking priests of the faith.

"We have received a revelation. A new enemy of humanity has been born," the bishop said gravely. Murmurs rippled through the circular rows of chairs within the room. Thomas, who stood guard near the wall, swore the cacophony of whispers built to a vibration that shuddered down his spine. The news was a shock to everyone in the room. That included a common soldier like Thomas.

Enemy of humanity. The Six Great Cataclysms. The Bringer of Despair. Slaughter Manifested. While there were many names to fear in this world, they all described the same thing.

The Primordial Palace said to exist on the western continent, a cursed castle home to the True Vampire, the sire of all vampires in the world.

The Great Crystal Wall, a towering wall of ice that stood at the northern edge of the world. A golden dragon that had appeared from the highest of the heavens was said to be sealed within.

The Great Wood Sea of the southern continent was said to have a gate to the demon world, and the land itself ruled by an archdemon of great power.

In the far east was an island kingdom populated by the inhuman. The ruler was said to be the King of Insects.

In the depths of the Great Aegir Ocean, the largest ocean in the world, which divided that far eastern archipelago from the central continent, resided the Ruler of the Seas, the King of the Merfolk.

And high beyond the clouds, a place no mortal eyes have ever seen, its name uttered only as hushed, fearful whispers, was the Celestial Citadel. Upon its throne sat the greatest of the archangels, who commanded the wrathful ranks of the dreaded angels, looking down upon the world in contempt.

The first voice to speak up sounded frail. “Wh-What shall we do... Where...where has this happened? Where has this new evil spawned...?”

The bishop paused portentously. “Upon this continent. God has stated that this new enemy of humanity has been born on the eastern edge of the Kingdom of Hilith, near the city of Erfahren, within the Great Woods of Lieb.”

One participant slumped in his chair. “We are doomed...”

Another gazed up at the heavens and said beseechingly, “How could this...how could this...?” Yet another simply collapsed out of his chair. They were all sharing a single emotion: despair.

That was true of Thomas as well. The banner-adorned spear he carried threatened to clatter to the ground as he felt his fingers numbing from the

shock. The enemy of humanity had appeared on this continent.

To this point, no enemy of humanity had ever existed upon the central continent. That was why the continent had managed to develop, to grow, and to prosper. Because there were trade relationships, they knew that people lived upon other continents and islands, but none of them were as advanced in terms of civilization as the peoples of the central continent. Outside of that safe zone, it was survival, not cultured living, that was the ultimate goal.

One of the greatest reasons for that fact was the Six Great Cataclysms. Their presence stirred the monsters and beasts of those realms and created individual monsters that were far more powerful than anything that could be found on this continent. In that environment, the idea of building up a civilization was reduced to a distant dream.

With none of the Six Cataclysms making their home on the central continent, the only true threat to civilization were the angels of the Celestial Citadel that would appear at random, laying waste to parts of the continent before disappearing. While they always inflicted a great deal of destruction upon the people, they were a passing threat. A storm that would blow over. They never settled to continue their destruction.

This was why they had been able to prosper in ways the other continents had not. But that was now likely a thing of the past. What made the situation even worse was that it wasn't one of the Six that had moved to the continent, but rather a brand-new harbinger of destruction. The Six Great Cataclysms had now become the Seven Great Cataclysms. Simply put, the level of risk in the world had ratcheted up by one. They could expect no help from elsewhere.

Someone finally seemed to think past their initial despair and said, "God help us... What sort of damage has this harbinger done? Has it already done as much damage as the angels of the Celestial Citadel?" That voice brought a measure of rationality back to the room.

"H-His Grace mentioned Erfahren. There was recently a report that the grasslands around that city were burned to ashes in a single night... Perhaps that was the harbinger."

A pensive voice chimed in, “Just burned a plain...? Even though there is a city full of people nearby? Why...? Could it be that the harbinger doesn’t yet have the power to fight humanity?”

It was a glimmer of hope that another clasped. “Perhaps. There are no records of any of the harbingers being defeated. But there are also no records of humanity fighting a harbinger that has just been born. We may have—”

“Yes! If it is like a newborn babe, then we may have a chance to silence it in the crib!”

Another voice said confidently, “Gather an army at once! We must make haste!”

Even as the room was energized by this discussion, Thomas felt his own blood run cold. An army? Who were they planning to send? All of the people at this meeting were senior figures in the kingdom’s court or the Holy Church. None of the speakers would be making up part of that army. No, they would never have to fight themselves.

The ones who would have to actually fight the harbinger were rank-and-file soldiers like Thomas. There was no way he was going to participate in such a foolish venture. It wasn’t as though the birth of a harbinger meant that the kingdom would immediately be destroyed. There was no reason to hurry eastward to die.

Things were different for the knight companies that served the ruling class such as the nobles present. So long as their liege lords survived, they wouldn’t die. The solution seemed simple to Thomas. They just needed to send those knight companies to the east. Then they could go on the offensive without worrying about losses. But Thomas knew that wouldn’t happen. The knight companies were the armor that protected the nobility. The nobles would never send them off and leave themselves exposed. Nor would any noble willingly head off toward almost certain death.

A soldier’s term of service was three years. The knight companies that were supposed to be the professional standing army of the kingdom were basically private soldiers of the nobility. As such, the kingdom had a conscription system to maintain the forces necessary to keep order.

Thomas himself had been a farmer until last year. While poor, it had been a peaceful life. He still had two years left to serve as a soldier. As far as Thomas was aware, there had never been a war on this continent. Conscription usually meant long days spent standing guard in a ceremonial capacity like today, or putting down ruffians, or standing guard in front of a city gate.

No one would have ever imagined it would come to this. Thomas felt an even deeper despair than he had when he heard the news of the new enemy of humanity as he watched the meeting unfold.

“Then that is the decision we have made. I will make sure His Majesty receives word to that effect. I hope that you can make the necessary arrangements?” the chancellor said.

“Leave that to us, Lord Chancellor. We shall not disappoint you,” a noble said.

“This is a threat to all of humanity. We should take all measures we can while we still have a chance,” the chancellor said pompously and closed the meeting.

The meeting had proceeded without much disagreement, coming to a conclusion surprisingly swiftly and determining an organized response. They had focused on a single goal, and the ruling class had come together in an intricate series of political maneuvers to make that goal a reality. They had decided to solve the problem by offering up a sacrifice—the lives of the conscripted soldiers.

Ordinarily, even conscripted soldiers needed to give their assent before the kingdom could send them on exceedingly dangerous missions. But the nobles had drafted an emergency measure with the excuse that it was unavoidable due to the appearance of a global threat in the form of a Seventh Great Cataclysm. They had all agreed to pass that measure at the next meeting by unanimous consent.

To add to the nightmare, they had also drafted laws that would reconscript soldiers who had served out their mandatory terms and lower the conscription age. The rulers of the kingdom were fully prepared to sacrifice the common people on the altar of war.

Once the debate had concluded, the various nobles with roles in the kingdom's government left the room. Thomas silently opened the door and bowed his head as they exited. The only people who remained in the room were the bishop and the priests of the Holy Church of Hilith.

"Your Grace... You appear troubled. Is there...?" one of the priests asked his superior.

The bishop nodded gravely. "Yes. An enemy of humanity is..."

He trailed off, prompting the same priest to try to coax more out of him. "Yes, Your Grace?"

"I believe that an enemy of humanity may only be named as such once it has become strong enough to be a threat... I do not believe that God would consider a nascent threat to be worthy of a revelation, and that such revelations only occur when the enemy of humanity is already powerful enough to make any efforts at slaying it futile..." the bishop said and fell into an uneasy silence. Yet, he was not going to be able to change the minds of the nobility.

An enemy of humanity was a being that would kill all of the civilized races near it, whether provoked into the act or not. That was clear based on their experiences with the angels. So long as there was enough distance, the damage could be contained, but given that the Seventh was within Hilith itself... Even in a best-case scenario, the Kingdom of Hilith would soon vanish from maps of the continent.

Thomas looked on as the bishop slumped in silence. He had long since stopped thinking or caring about the situation, and he wished the bishop and his retinue would just hurry up and leave.

Chapter 9: The Beginning of the End for Humanity

[[To our valued players,

Thank you for being valued members of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community.

We are happy to announce the second official event.

The event will be a Large-Scale Offense/Defense Campaign.

There are reports of signs that monsters such as undead will flood out from the monster realms around the continent and begin attacking nearby cities and villages.

Players will be able to choose between siding with the monsters or with humanity and take part in the event with the goal of succeeding in either invading or defending a locale.

We plan for the event to take place over a real-world week, or approximately ten days in game.

During the event all players will receive an additional ten percent to their experience point gains as an event bonus.

During the event we will be loosening the death penalties, removing the experience penalty and instead applying a five percent debuff to all ability scores for one hour per death.

We will be creating a new category on our forum for threads dedicated to the event. Please use it to coordinate between cities or build new communities during the event.

This event has no particular sign-up requirements.

* The event will be held across the entire continent.

Even in areas where the invasion or defense has been completed before the end of the event, the event bonuses will continue to be in effect during the event period.

* The event bonus and reduced death penalty will end after the event period, but the invasions will continue until there is a settled outcome.

* We plan to implement a teleportation feature that will take you from a safety area in your current city to a safety area in a neighboring city. The feature may be used once a day and it has no restrictions in terms of distance between cities. Please use the feature along with the event forum threads to move forces to where they are needed.

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

<<To the player [Leah],

Thank you for being a valued member of the *Boot Hour*, *Shoot Curse* player community.

We would like to notify you about the second official event.

Please refer to the message sent to all players for details on the event.

We have contacted you today to ask for your cooperation during this event.

The Great Woods of Lieb in the eastern part of the Kingdom of Hilith, where you currently reside, and the Trae Forest, where you recently planted a World Tree, currently make up the territories under your control.

As such, the monsters we planned to have emerge from those areas and attack the neighboring cities are your

subjects and we cannot conduct our planned invasion.

So, if possible we would like your cooperation in attacking the Kingdom of Hilith.

Of course, the choice is yours whether to accept the proposal, and if you choose not to accept, we will notify the players that those cities will not be part of the event. You are free to participate in the event on the side you wish to support.

If you agree to our proposal we will prepare a special reward for your help.

We ask that you give our proposal some consideration.

—Signed, the *Boot Hour, Shoot Curse* Development Team>>

“Hmmmm. Just when I’m *finally* ready to head south and check out that volcano,” Leah murmured to herself as she read the announcement for the upcoming event.

“Is there a problem, Boss?” Kelli asked, quirking an eyebrow in curiosity.

The notifications had caught Leah just as she was planning to take her main retainers to check out the volcanic mountain range to her south. It had taken a while, but she had finally finished checking her traits and newly available skills as a Queen of Destruction, acquired those new skills, and promoted her retainers. The event announcement caught her right as she was hashing out the details of her expedition.

According to the map she’d gotten after the battle royal event, there was a large volcano quite a bit south of the Great Woods of Lieb that was considered a monster realm. Since she had no monsters or materials related to volcanoes or fire, the idea of exploring the area had been quite appealing for Leah.

“No, well, yes, a little bit. There’s evidently going to be a large incursion into humanity’s lands from the monster realms. And I got a request to lend a hand. So I guess we’re going to have to put the volcano outing on hold until that’s

over,” Leah explained with a sigh.

<A large-scale incursion? Sounds rather grim. I don’t recall anything of that sort happening in our time,> Diaz rumbled.

<Which side do you intend to take, Your Majesty? The attacking side? Or the defending side?> Sieg asked respectfully.

When Leah had become Queen of Destruction, Diaz and Sieg began addressing her as “Your Majesty,” a promotion from being addressed as a princess. The other retainers continued to simply call her Boss, and Leah herself hadn’t made an effort to change that. She had expected Diaz, a bit of a stickler for protocol and formality, to have been a bit more insistent that the others address her properly, but it seemed he had his own standards of what he considered acceptable forms of address.

“Well, it’s not like I’ve been asked by either side, but if we’re going to take part, we’ll be going on the attack. If we’re not, we’ll stay neutral. It feels a little late to try to back humanity,” Leah said with a chuckle and a shrug. According to the system messages, if she chose neutrality, the devs would announce that nothing would happen around Lieb. That removed neutrality as an option.

If the devs said nothing and nothing happened around Lieb, players probably wouldn’t pay too much attention, but having an actual announcement would tip off a bunch of them that there was something going on here. Even if there wasn’t a flood of monsters emerging from the woods, the players would probably stop coming to Lieb altogether.

Sieg spoke up again. <What type of monsters will be leading this invasion? That would change whether we can cooperate with them or end up fighting over prey.>

Leah nodded and looked over the messages again. “Hmm, it says things like undead, so I guess it’ll mainly be undead monsters? I wonder if that means every monster realm has some undead—”

No, there was no way that was the case. Which meant that this event was intentionally designed this way by the devs. Diaz and Sieg had been planted in Lieb and Trae specifically for that purpose. Perhaps the devs had planned for this event to take place earlier. Thinking back on it, the devs had mentioned

changing the first official event into a battle royal because they couldn't hold the event they had originally planned.

Could that have been because Leah had tamed Diaz? What if the devs were asking for her help in this event because she had become a Queen of Destruction and they now considered her worthy of raid boss status? Leah tapped her chin in thought. "Hmm, that sheds some light on things..."

If the answer to those questions was yes, then it would mean Leah had thrown a spanner in the works of the devs' plans. It behooved her to help put things back on track. Just as Leah was taking advantage of opportunities to get maximum enjoyment out of the game, the other players had a right to have that opportunity as well. It wouldn't be right if Leah's lack of cooperation meant that the players in the nearby cities would be left out of the festivities.

"Of course, if I'm taking part, I won't pull any punches. Since I'm a player myself, I guess if I win and destroy the city, I think we can just chalk that up to being part of the event's outcome, right?" Leah said, more to herself than any of her retainers.

She heard Sugaru click her jaws in response. <I do not quite understand all of what you have said, Boss, but I'm pleased that you seem to be enjoying the idea of this invasion. Now, as for our...well, not exactly allies, but the attacking monsters. Will they all be undead?>

"Let's see. That's probably a safe bet. Though, there might be places where a different type of monster comes out in force, having taken out the undead flooding their own realms." She then glanced over at Diaz and Sieg, pausing a moment before continuing. "This is still just a possibility, but there's a pretty good chance that the undead would be former colleagues of yours. If your kingdom once unified the entire continent, then it makes sense for the fallen souls of that kingdom to be scattered across it."

<I see...> Sieg said. He exchanged glances with Diaz, who spoke up next in greater depth.

<Your Majesty, we were fortunate enough that fate brought us to your service. But that is all, we were lucky. There is no need to go out of your way to consider the others the same as us.>

Sieg nodded. <Yes, Ser Diaz is correct. We died long ago. The fact that we are lucky enough to be able to pledge ourselves to you ought to be considered the exception, rather than the rule. Please treat our colleagues as being long dead and do what must be done.>

Leah scratched her cheek a bit awkwardly at their responses. “Well, if you two insist...” Still, Leah wanted to bring some under her banner if possible. According to Sieg, the captains of the Fourth through Sixth Companies weren’t particularly skilled in terms of fighting ability. To put it uncharitably, those captains had been promoted due to their noble blood alone.

Which meant Leah hadn’t been particularly interested in the missing companies, but the Second Company was an exception. Leah had wondered, if the First Company was the Royal Guard and the Third Company the elite vanguard of the front line, what role had the Second Company served? According to Sieg and Diaz they had been the equivalent of military police.

The *Retainer* system by its very nature kept Leah’s retainers from disobeying her orders. That should have been true even during the time of the ancient unified kingdom. In which case, why had they even needed military police? All of the military forces, including the knights who were supposed to keep the others in check, would have been unflinchingly loyal to the royal family.

Leah wanted to know why they had been necessary, and if they seemed to serve a useful role, she wanted to add the Second Company to her retinue.

“If we’re attacking cities, we’ll probably be running into knights or military units that are specifically meant to protect that city,” Leah said. “If they’re retainers of someone, say the regional lord, even if we kill them, they should respawn somewhere, like their barracks.”

The event would last one real-world week—or ten in-game days. If the garrisons defending the cities respawned so long as the lord survived, the event might be an excellent opportunity to do some respawn camping. That was true of players as well. If her forces kept buildings like inns intact, couldn’t they theoretically just watch from a distance and quickly kill players as they respawned and came outside?

<With all respect, Your Majesty, I do not believe there are that many knights that would pledge loyalty to a lord in a remote corner of the kingdom like Erfahren.>

Diaz's comment broke Leah's train of thought, and she asked, "What do you mean?"

<It would be typical that knights such as ourselves, that is, company captains or generals, would pledge our loyalty to the kingdom and to the ruler body and soul, but that is not the case when we are talking about junior officers such as troop leaders,> Diaz explained. <The rite of loyalty comes with a burden on the side of those receiving the pledge as well, so most soldiers who die remain dead. Only certain units, such as the royal guard, would all undergo that rite.>

Leah nodded. The logic made sense. That must have been why the Second Company was needed. Although Diaz hadn't quite said so, it was likely the only units made up entirely of pledged retainers were the First Company and the Second Company, as royal guards and military police. The thing about taking on retainers exacting a toll didn't quite click for Leah, but if that was true, the system Diaz described was quite rational and efficient.

"I suppose that means we can probably gobble up the city more easily than expected, then?" Leah said with a tilt of her head.

It was Lemmy who answered. "You say more easily than expected, Boss, but considering what passes for an average mercenary in Erfahren, they would be lucky to survive an hour against our forces." Given that Lemmy did business with the mercenaries of the city, she was the one best qualified to opine on their capabilities.

Leah processed this information and nodded. "What about the soldiers? I wonder how strong the average soldier who isn't part of a retinue actually is."

Lemmy could only offer a faint shrug. "That, I do not know. Those types of people don't come to my shop... However, it does seem the city's guards are roughly similar in strength to its mercenaries."

That would be a problem. The event was supposed to last ten days, but they'd be finished in a matter of hours. But Leah had no intention of holding back. That would be mocking the players on the other side.

Then there was the fact that Leah, too, was only human. She'd spent a great deal of time and effort to achieve her current level of power, even if it was just inside a game. She had every right to want to show off the fruits of her labors.

"All right, bring me a map. We'll start with the assumption that we can easily take down Erfahren and the city near Trae, where the World Tree is...Llyrid, I think it was..." Leah said, tracing her index finger along the main road drawn on the map. "Let's also take this city called Rokillean. It's right where all the splinter branches of the main road intersect. It's pretty much the beating heart of the kingdom's trade. Taking it will probably earn us a place on the Kingdom of Hilith's naughty list. Hopefully that means they'll keep trying to retake it, even after the event's done."

On the first day of the event, Leah gathered her main retainers in the queen's chamber. Since the unit leader ranks of the ants and adamantite soldiers added up to a small army of their own, she'd had the chamber expanded a few days earlier. Still, there were a few retainers, like the World Tree, who were too large to fit even with all the extra room.

The gathering of even just this fraction of her forces made for an impressive sight. In the dimly lit environment of the lair stood rows of shining black figures arrayed with military precision. Since the ants and adamantite soldiers were similar in coloration, the only way she could tell them apart was their heights. There was a certain beauty to the rigid uniformity of her assembled forces.

Diaz and Sieg knelt at the very front. Sugaru's size meant she had to stand behind Leah. Had she been in front of Leah, she would have filled Leah's entire field of vision.

Mister Plates was standing behind her for the same reason—Leah had promoted Mister Plates using a greater philosopher's stone to make him into a suit of armor worthy of a Queen of Destruction. As a result of the promotions, Mister Plates was now a type of monster called a divine fortress. The order evidently went living armor, divine armor, and, finally, divine fortress. Leah had no idea why it went in that order.

Mister Plates still retained his slender, feminine silhouette, but had grown

immensely in size. He now stood approximately three meters in height. Again, Leah wouldn't be able to see anything else if such a large figure loomed in front of her.

The five Sharps had also grown in size to match Mister Plates. When promoting them, Leah had been given the option of choosing between longsword and greatsword. She had chosen greatsword for all five of them. They were now such massive swords that in reality there wouldn't be a human alive who could pick up and wield them, but anyone with enough STR could do so in this game. Their size fit Mister Plates perfectly, the divine fortress being able to wield them as though they were one-handed blades.

The Sharps were now something called divine arms. Weapons of the gods. The name hadn't surprised Leah, since she had already seen what Mister Plates had been promoted into.

Like before, Mister Plates wore all five of the Sharps, but Leah had changed where they were secured. She had removed the three on his back and the one on his right hip and shifted them so that Mister Plates had two secured to each shoulder. That had required redesigning the shoulder plates to have special holsters for the swords.

As for Kelli, Riley, Lemmy, and Marion, they stood on either side of Leah wearing identical military uniforms. Flanking them were Hakuma and Ginka, who sat like guard dog statues on either side of the dais. The pups were off in a separate room playing with some ants. A formal ceremony like this wasn't a place for children.

Yes, this was a ceremony. The event was a special occasion. It called for some fanfare. As she and her army prepared to declare war on a civilized kingdom, Leah wanted to have a ceremony and parade to revel in the glorious sight of her forces. It helped that her retainers were also enthusiastic proponents of the proposal.

"My dear friends. The time has come for us to reveal ourselves to our enemies," Leah said grandiloquently, projecting her voice as loudly as she could. She felt the attention of the entire room focus on her. "I have asked much of you to this point, having you refrain from killing humans you could easily slay,

calculating their experience point gain and only killing them when they've hit a certain threshold. I fear it was a great mental burden upon you all. Allow me to take this moment to apologize—no, allow me to take this moment to thank you for your sacrifices. Thank you. You have done well. But that ends today.”

Leah paused momentarily to catch her breath. She felt the unflinching gaze of her retainers and reflexively straightened her back. Leah resumed speaking, her voice ringing out into the chamber. “From this day forward, we shall step out of the shadows and take our rightful place under the sun. We begin with this kingdom, the Kingdom of Hilith. We shall destroy the city of Erfahren that intrudes into our domain as a declaration of war against all of the civilized kingdoms! No longer shall we stay our hands. Melt, burn, pierce, destroy, and kill all that cross your path. Teach them to fear your unique gifts. Show them that Lieb is ours. And with your strength, prove to them that I am the ruler of this continent. Know this is neither an order nor a request. It’s a simple statement of fact. I know that once we take the first step, all will fall before us.”

She heard a loud clacking noise ripple through the room. Most of the monsters in the room couldn’t speak, but the synchronized clicking of their jaws was their equivalent of a war cry.

“Come, let us begin.”



The devs had made it clear that, unlike the last event, this event spawned from and built upon the daily lives of the world's denizens. The start time passed by without any grand announcement or sign that the ground was shifting beneath the people of the continent. The NPCs knew nothing. The people of the city appeared to be going about their day, enjoying the simple pleasures of their daily routine.

Still, there were mercenaries that were hurriedly coming and going, drawing stares of bewilderment from the locals. Those must be players.

Leah watched all of this unfold as she observed Erfahren from the sky. Not through the eyes of Ominous the owl or the Sharps, but with her own eyes, even if she was technically inside Mister Plates.

Obviously she couldn't just don a three-meter tall suit of plate armor. Technically she wasn't even wearing the armor at all. The cuirass on Mister Plates opened like a door at the back, allowing Leah to step inside. Once inside, she found herself in a small pocket dimension roughly the area of three tatami mats. While inside this pocket dimension, Mister Plates moved in conjunction with Leah's own movements.

The room showed all of the outside world, other than the area behind the door used for ingress and egress. That meant there were no blind spots except immediately to the back. To see what was behind her, Leah had to turn Mister Plates' head, but that was no different from ordinary armor. Unlike an ordinary suit of armor, there was no helmet or visor narrowing her field of vision. In the specific case of Mister Plates, he possessed the skills *Watcher's Gaze* and *Sentinel's Ear*, the effects of which were replicated by the sights and sounds of the outside world shown in the pocket dimension. It meant that on the whole, Leah could hear and see the world better when inside her armor.

In terms of combat strength, Mister Plates was now worthy of being called a fortress. Leah had pitted Mister Plates against the adamantite soldiers in a mock battle. None of the attacks by the adamantite soldiers so much as registered against Mister Plates. In the end, the adamanleader had tossed aside its sword to maximize its firepower by brawling with Mister Plates. Instead of

doing any damage to the armor, it was the adamanleader's fist that had shattered.

It was the same with magic. Regardless of what element the adamanmages used, they did no damage to Mister Plates. That was true even when the adamanmages were equipped with treantwood staves. When given magic staves made from World Tree wood, *Lightning Magic* spells managed to penetrate the armor's defenses, only to have the damage quickly negated by the armor's quick regenerative abilities.

When Mister Plates shifted to attack, even barehanded he was able to knock down several adamanknights with a single blow. If he had been wielding Primus Sharp, he would have sliced all of them cleanly in two.

As for why Leah was hovering above the city, this was thanks to Leah's *Flight* skill. Although Leah was less wearing Mister Plates so much as controlling him like a giant robot from inside a cockpit, the game system still considered Mister Plates to be a suit of armor equipped by Leah. Her skills worked normally on the world around her, and she could cast spells at the location of her choosing, even using *Sense Coordinates* using the armor's enhanced vision.

When Leah was wearing Mister Plates, she could use her newly acquired skills *Hover* and *High Speed Flight* to soar through the sky. However, since those were Leah's skills, she needed to be directly in control of Mister Plates to fly. That meant if she wanted to dogfight in the air, she had to manually take control.

Leah could have won the battle for the city simply by using *Sense Coordinates* and unleashing a volley of high-powered spells at the city itself. She was perfectly willing to entertain the idea, but to Leah, her "power" wasn't just about her own individual combat abilities. If her forces were at risk of taking greater losses than expected, she was willing to intervene and use her magic to blast the enemy to smithereens, but unless that happened, she intended to play the role of Queen of Destruction and give orders as her minions did most of the dirty work.

This was the siege that Leah had been waiting for. While they might not have been besieging a castle, the walls surrounding the city were formidable enough

that they might as well have been. It was a perfect opportunity to try out the artillery ants that were too dangerous to use inside the Great Woods.

This would also be the first time her forces were going on the offensive outside of a wooded area, thus giving her a chance to try out and get a feel for the destructive power of the assault ants and their flamethrowers. Today they would be allowed to unleash as much fire as they wished.

Leah closed her eyes and borrowed the vision of Ominous the owl. He was currently far away, hovering above the Cursed Weald of Trae as an army of treants emerged from the forest. In the week since she received the notifications about the event, Leah had spent a fair amount of her extra experience points in increasing the ranks of the treants. Treants could use their *Root Cutting* skill to spend their experience points and create clones of themselves.

As the treants busily organized themselves into rows and marched out from the forest, it looked as though the forest itself was expanding. None of Llyrid's residents seemed to notice the weald outside their walls advancing toward them. Unlike Erfahren, due to a lack of players, there also weren't any mercenaries that were on edge, waiting for something to happen.

Since there was some distance between the Weald of No Return and the city itself, the treants probably weren't going to be able to pull off a complete sneak attack, but Leah didn't think the city's walls would last long against the sheer number of treants shuffling toward it. It seemed Mister World Tree had everything in hand.

Leah opened her eyes and once again cast her gaze down onto the city below. She watched as ants emerged from the nearby Great Woods of Lieb. A formation of soldier hornets rose into the air from the center of the woods without so much as a single antenna out of place and set off toward the city. Since they lacked ranged attack capabilities, they were there to serve as protection from any airborne forces that the enemy might have. If it turned out Erfahren had no flight-capable defenders at all, they might end up just being a large group of spectators hovering overhead.

“Oh. Now that they’ve got a fair amount of STR from *Enhance Retinue* and *Enhance Follower*, I wonder if they can fly while carrying artillery ants. If they can, I could use them like bombers, and with sniper ants they might be able to pick off enemies from super high altitudes,” Leah mused to herself. The possibilities were endless.

Leah shrugged after pondering those possibilities for a short while. “Eh, it’s too late to try it this time. I guess we can try it when we attack Rokillean. Hmm, now that I think about it, since we don’t have to take any of their facilities intact to use ourselves, or take any prisoners, there’s nothing wrong with just bombing everything into rubble.”

Her forces only needed to destroy everything and kill everyone in their way. Since that’s how they treated monsters on a daily basis, turnabout was fair play. Besides, there were bound to be some nobles with a large retinue of knights in a major trading hub like Rokillean. It’d be interesting to see how NPCs who’d accumulated a ton of EXP would react to things like being bombed or sniped from the sky.

Of course, at this point Leah was sure there weren’t many characters, players or otherwise, that could actually stand toe to toe with her. But there might be something strong enough that she would need to fight it herself.

“Now, it seems the players are all heading out of the city. I guess it’s time to get started. I’m looking forward to this...”

The first ones who noticed the advancing ants were the mercenaries, likely players, that had been wandering in and out of the city. Once they shouted something, more mercenaries began to appear from the city gate. She was a little too far away to hear what they were saying, so Leah decided to lower her altitude and use *Camouflage* from the *Light Magic* school to avoid detection. The *Camouflage* spell made the target visually disappear.

“It’s ants! Just like we thought, the event monsters for this city are the ants from the woods!” the player who spotted the first ants shouted to the others.

“Huh, I’d heard the event was supposed to mainly feature undead, but I guess

the monsters in the woods got a little antsy! Get it?”

A third player said, “Still, there’s reports of people seeing undead boss monsters in the woods. So there might be some undead coming too!”

“It’d be one thing if it was a dark, creepy forest, but I’m sure being in direct sunlight’s gonna make the undead a little weaker! Besides, we’ve got this many players out here, and if the monsters are attacking the city, I’m sure the NPC mercs are gonna help out! We can at least push them back into the woods!” a rather optimistic player said to the others. It seemed there were some interesting characters out there among the players today.

Heh, the monsters in the woods getting antsy...th-that was actually a good one.

In any case, it seemed like everyone was enjoying themselves.

“Dammit! Why would the monsters be attacking now...?! What the heck’s going on?!” Not all the voices sounded all that pleased by the development.

“Those newcomers must have pissed them off! Aw, dammit!”

The angry shouts were probably NPCs. The newcomers in question were clearly players, but this incursion wasn’t their fault.

Though, since Leah herself was a player, in a way they were right that the players were to blame. And considering that this was an event the devs had readied for the sake of players, again, it was perfectly fair to say the players were responsible for their current predicament.

“This is starting to get confusing. You know what? Let’s just blame the players. Players are just the worst, aren’t they?” Leah said with an exasperated shake of her head. “I think it’s time those sinful players paid for their crimes with their lives, hmm? Let’s start with the artillery. I should probably hold some in reserve for the actual siege, but we can figure out the logistics once the defenders are taken care of. All right, then! Load mortar rounds!”

<Load mortar rounds,> Sugaru repeated from the command center in the queen’s chamber. Once Sugaru repeated the order, word should have spread to all of the artillery ants. Leah watched as the artillery ants below stopped moving

and reared up to point their abdomens toward the enemy.

“The heck is that...? They look different from the usual ants...” said a puzzled voice.

“I didn’t know ants could do that. They almost look like scorpions in that pose...” said another.

“Um, shouldn’t we take cover or something? They look like they’re about to shoot at us,” suggested a third, more cautious voice.

“Don’t be ridiculous, those are ants, how would they—” The last voice never got to complete his sentence.

Leah gave the order that unleashed hell: “Fire.”

<Fire,> Sugaru repeated the single damning word. A moment later, the air was filled with the sound of mortar rounds being fired from the artillery ants. The barrage sped toward the mercenaries by the city gate.

“Argh.”

“Guh!”

The mercenaries who had been staring dumbfounded at the ants were slaughtered before they could utter a word, their ruined bodies disappearing several seconds later. There were a few corpses that remained. Those were probably NPCs.

“If their goal is to protect the city, mine is to destroy it. It’s not personal, it’s just the game we play. After all, nothing better in a game like this than cleanly killing the enemy for experience points.” Leah bowed her head toward the fallen players before she immediately issued orders to reload.

She wasn’t sure what the players thought, but the initial volley had evidently completely broken the morale of the NPC guards and they slammed the city’s gates shut to focus on defense.

“How lovely. Once the gates are fully closed, let’s try attacking them. I’m sure if we destroy the gates after they went through all the trouble of closing them, it will put a nice dent in their morale,” Leah said, clapping her hands together.

Sugaru answered dispassionately, <Understood.>

Not long after, the gates of Erfahren slammed completely shut as the city withdrew behind its walls like a turtle.

<Fire.> Another barrage of artillery, this time aimed at the gate. The rounds exploded when they struck the gate, scattering debris and flames in every direction.

The gate only withstood a handful of rounds before it was completely destroyed, and Sugaru appeared to switch to targeting the walls. The artillery fire from the ants quickly ate away large chunks of the stone wall. Based on the amount of damage the artillery ants were doing, Leah probably could have brought down the wall with simple catapults. If the soldier hornets proved capable of carrying the artillery ants to conduct bombing raids, all she’d have to do is order them to attack the city itself, and they’d quickly reduce the city to a burned-out wasteland.

“We’ll save that for next time. Anyway, once the wall is down, let’s send the assault ants and infantry ants into the city. Have the assault ants lead the charge using their flamethrowers, with the infantry ants sweeping up after them,” Leah said, watching the carnage.

<Acknowledged,> Sugaru replied.

A moment later, the assault ants and infantry ants that had been waiting near the artillery ants formed into columns, crawled over the rubble of the ruined walls, and poured into the city. A good number of the city’s guards had been blasted to pieces along with the wall, but the survivors and a number of what appeared to be player mercenaries formed up to block the ants from entering the city.

One of the players shouted out orders. “They might be monsters, but I doubt they’ll keep up the bombardment as their own forces try to breach the walls! We’ll take them down in melee!”

Another spoke up with words of encouragement. “We’re used to fighting ants! Once we repel them here, we’ll have the mages give those cannon ants a taste of their own medicine!”

Since the ants had done most of the heavy lifting in terms of welcoming guests in the Great Woods, most of the mercenaries had experience fighting them. However, because the assault ants couldn’t be used inside the woods, they had never been sent to fight the hunting parties. This was probably the first time any of the mercenaries had ever even seen an assault ant. Hopefully they’d get a good, long look before the fire claimed them.

As the mercenaries approached, the assault ants calmly exposed their bellies toward the mercenaries and welcomed them with streams of flame. “Agggggh!” An agonized scream went up, followed by shouts of surprise. “Wh-What the?! Gaaaaah!” The flames didn’t care if the target wore metal or leather armor; it burned all of them equally. The assault ants skillfully shifted their torsos from side to side, creating fan-shaped sprays of flame that burned everything around them. The magical flammable gel that the ants sprayed continued to burn for several seconds, hurting the mercenaries who somehow managed to avoid getting caught directly by the flames. The assault ants had turned the area into a kind of oven that did continual damage to their enemies.

Mercenary mages attempted to put out the flames using *Water* and *Ice* school spells, but the ants vastly outnumbered them. Their efforts fizzled and evaporated as mere droplets attempting to douse an ocean of flame.

Leah giggled as she watched the assault ants unleash hell upon the defenders. “Well, this is entertaining, but they don’t quite feel like assault ants with just flamethrowers. I wish there were assault rifles they could carry, but, well...they’re ants. I guess they wouldn’t be able to use them even if we had them.” Besides, that would make it a completely different game. In this world, a common soldier fought at melee range using a bladed or bludgeoning weapon. In terms of tactics, she probably should have sent the infantry out in front and had the snipers provide covering fire. But then she wouldn’t have been able to test out the assault ants and their flamethrowers.

“Guess the results kind of speak for themselves,” Leah said with a nod of

satisfaction. The mages in the back had given up on putting out the flames and shifted tactics, attacking the assault ants directly with their spells.

With the only remaining defenders being ranged fighters, there was no benefit to waging a staring contest separated by a wall of fire. Leah ordered the assault and infantry ants to temporarily withdraw, then had the artillery ants shell the mages from behind the rubble that used to be the city wall.

Sugaru had them using indirect fire, arcing their rounds over the rubble utilizing the hornets hovering above the city as artillery spotters—efficiently turning the mages into mincemeat. The defenders who took cover behind buildings were either broiled to death using flamethrowers or killed by bringing the building down on them with artillery. The ants grew more efficient with practice and steadily pushed their way further into the city.

The outer ring of city defenses had completely ceased functioning. The guards had been wiped out, all the mercenaries besides the players lay dead, and the residents of the city, who had never expected the ants to breach the walls, were fleeing in a blind panic. Leah had issued orders to kill all characters with combat ability for experience points, but ignore the civilians. The goal was to destroy the city, not massacre its population. Civilians were far too weak to be a source of experience points anyway. They were dying because they were getting caught in the fighting, not because of any intentional efforts to kill them.

The knights serving the region's lord arrived just as the ants advanced into the heart of the city. They were far too late. Even if Leah immediately withdrew all of her forces, the city was beyond saving at this point.

"Oh, I guess that's because the lord's estate is in the center of the city," Leah said after a moment. "It's not that they showed up, it's that we reached where the knights were stationed."

Since they'd come this far, Leah considered letting the assault ants burn the knights to end this whole battle, but she felt guilty about the fact that the soldier hornets had only served as artillery spotters. She wanted to give them

something rewarding to do. If this kingdom had basically no airborne forces, the soldier hornets would be fighting earthbound enemies from here on out. They could probably use some practice.

Leah came to a decision and clapped her hands together. “So, let’s leave the knights to the hornets. I’ll let you figure out how. Let’s have the assault ants and infantry ants retreat back to the artillery.”

<Acknowledged, Boss,> Sugaru replied. A few moments later the soldier hornets who had been watching the fighting from above swooped down to attack the knights.

The knights, who had been solely focused on fighting the ants on foot, were caught completely by surprise and panic quickly spread through their ranks.

“Whoa!” There was little discipline as they flailed at the incoming hornets.

“I thought we were only fighting ants?! Where the blazes did these come from?!”

The knights seemed more eager to assign blame than to figure out how to deal with the enemy. “Those damned mercenaries! Can’t even send proper reports!”

The knights continued to spew insults on the supposed shortcomings of the mercenaries, but that brought them no reprieve. The soldier hornets dropped down to just above ground level and quickly snatched up the knights, then darted back into the air.

“Dammit! Stop! Let go!” The knights shouted as they tried to escape the clutches of the hornets. But once they reached an altitude of about fifty meters, the hornets duly obliged their demands to let them go.

“Ahhhhhhhhh...!” The knights screamed as they hurtled toward the ground. Unlike the city’s guards, they were clad in expensive-looking armor. However, it appeared that the armor wasn’t able to do anything to absorb the physical impact of being dropped from the sky. The fully armored knights crashed to the ground, their armor causing them to be half-buried by the impact.

The impact was evidently more than enough to kill the person inside, and

none of the fallen knights so much as stirred.

Leah had created the soldier hornets to deal with any potential airborne forces the civilized races might have. That meant there were quite a few of them, and they outnumbered the knights. As a result, the knights were quickly wiped out, as the army of soldier hornets sent all of them on a cordless bungee jump.

If there were any knights who were formal retainers of the lord, they would eventually respawn. However, while players immediately respawned, NPCs who couldn't hear system messages took exactly an hour to respawn. Which meant that respawn camping NPCs was actually a poor use of resources. With characters this weak, they didn't yield all that much EXP when killed, so waiting an hour to kill them a second time was a waste.

"Then, I guess I'll go take a look at Llyrid. We're about done here, but I wonder how things are going over there," Leah said as she surveyed the scene around her. Since she had to control the armor to fly, she landed to avoid the risks of flying blind. Once on the ground, she could simply hand the reins over to Mister Plates. Leah let Mister Plates take back control of his body before closing her eyes and taking over Ominous's sense of sight.

It had been several hours since she had last seen Llyrid. The city was now surrounded by several gigantic treants, and its walls were covered with what appeared to be vines. However, the walls of the city were enormous, and Leah realized that they only looked like they were covered in vines because she was looking down at the city from a distance.

No, the walls were covered with something far thicker than mere vines. They were all tree branches and roots. The city was flooded with greenery, all of it stretching back to the Weald of Trae. Viewed from a distance, it looked like the city had been swallowed by the trees.

Leah's World Tree was at the center of the Weald, and the treants in the weald were under her command, so in a certain sense the city had been swallowed by the forest.

Even as she watched, a house collapsed as a branch within it grew outward. A rapidly growing tree trunk swallowed what was left of the house. The treant seeds that had been scattered all over the city were sprouting and growing at a remarkable rate.

The seeds that were created by the *Thicket* tree skill *Scatter Seed* normally didn't have the ability to grow this quickly. What made that possible were the motes of light filling the air around the city. Those motes of light floated down like pollen from the branches of the giant treants that surrounded the city—those treants were clearly in a class of their own compared to the others.

They were elder camphor treants that had been created via *Root Cutting* the World Tree. For standard treants, using *Root Cutting* consumed experience points to create an identical duplicate of themselves. However, a World Tree couldn't clone itself using *Root Cutting*. Instead, it created the original plant that the World Tree had evolved from: camphor treants.

While the World Tree version of *Root Cutting* made inferior copies of itself, it only cost the World Tree LP and MP instead of EXP. The newly spawned camphor treants could also channel and extend some of the skills of the World Tree.

For example, when Leah wanted to make use of the World Tree's scattering skills or area-of-effect buff/debuff skills, these cloned treants could serve as relays of the World Tree and channel the World Tree's skill around themselves.

The motes of light filling the city of Llyrid were from the World Tree's skill *The Great Blessing*. The skill made all plant life in the area of effect grow with supernatural speed. The normal plants that had been in the city had also undergone rapid growth, but since their flowers wilted before they could be pollinated, almost all of them had died without being able to bear fruit or seeds.

Unlike those ordinary plants, treants had no fixed lifespan. They usually took about a year to reach the size of an ordinary tree, then spent decades and centuries slowly growing into larger and larger treants, eventually becoming an elder treant.

However, the effects of *The Great Blessing* made the scattered seeds mature instantly and rapidly grow into larger treants. Since the *Scatter Seed* skill didn't cost experience points like *Root Cutting*, it couldn't instantly produce a fully grown clone like *Root Cutting* did, but *The Great Blessing* made that limitation meaningless.

The skill was so powerful that the camphor treants that had first surrounded the city and served as the relays for *The Great Blessing* had grown into elder camphor treants in a matter of hours.

There weren't many treants actively attacking humans within the city. That was because there was no need to. Tree roots were already so thick on the ground that it was impossible to see the ground itself, and there wasn't a single intact house in the entire city. The people who had lived in those buildings or had simply been walking around the city had been immediately swallowed by the trees that sprang up in the blink of an eye, either crushed beneath the growing mass of vegetation or stuck within and unable to move.

None of the small group of mercenaries and knights who had somehow managed to avoid getting crushed by the initial wave of plant growth had been able to continue to evade the randomly growing branches and roots.

<I thought Erfahren was bad off after being destroyed by the ants, but things in Llyrid are pretty awful too. I doubt there's a living soul left here. You can turn off *The Great Blessing* now. I think the job's done,> Leah said to Mister World Tree over friend chat.

<Yes, so it appears. I was starting to run low on MP, so it is a good time to stop,> the World Tree responded, and the motes of light gradually began to fade. With that the growth of the trees slowed and eventually the city was so silent that it seemed time itself had ceased to flow.

Leah stopped to admire the view, drawing in a slow breath. <The city's in an awful state, but this is such an epic sight... It's awe-inspiring. Amazing work.>

<It is a great honor to earn such praise from a divinely beautiful figure like yourself, Your Majesty.>

Leah knew that Mister World Tree meant every word, but she still felt

uncomfortable being praised that way by retainers who were, by default, meant to be unswervingly loyal to her. She decided, for the moment, to pretend she didn't hear those words and continued to observe the city. <I don't see anything moving in there. I wonder if all the people in the city are dead?>

Ordinarily, the players should have been able to immediately respawn, but the buildings they were supposed to respawn in had been completely destroyed and absorbed by monsters. They weren't respawning in Llyrid. Leah had originally hoped to do some respawn camping with players, but based on how things had gone in both Erfahren and Llyrid, it seemed like she wasn't going to have the opportunity.

<So it appears. What shall we do with this city?> the World Tree asked.

<Let the forest swallow it. Do the same with the road,> Leah replied.

<As you wish, Your Majesty.>

The treants rumbled out from the Weald of Trae and began to flood onto the road to swallow it. Both Llyrid and the road had been built to circle around the weald and put as much distance as possible between it and the city. Once it had finished absorbing the city and the road, Trae was probably going to be twice its original size.

<Anyway, keep doing what you're doing here. I'm going to go finish up back in Erfahren,> Leah said rather casually.

<Be safe, Your Majesty.>

Not that it seemed like there was much left to do in Erfahren.

Leah smiled with satisfaction as she opened her eyes. "So, Llyrid's all done. I guess we don't need the lord's estate. Let's just destroy it and move on." She ordered a proper barrage of shells from the artillery ants, who had patiently waited for her to finish checking in on Llyrid.

Once ordered, the artillery ants were eager to please, rearing back and reducing the lord's manor to rubble in the blink of an eye. Leah had no idea if the lord had even been in his estate, but if he was, he was surely dead by now.

If he was alive, Leah wanted to kill him to secure the experience points, but however much EXP he might be worth, compared to destroying an entire city, it had to be essentially a rounding error.

“I guess we can have the infantry ants look for someone who seems like the lord of this region. Let’s continue with the invasion using the rest of the army. This city’s too close to the woods to be useful as a base for our forces, so you can go ahead and level the whole thing,” Leah said. Once Erfahren was completely leveled, she’d leave mopping up operations to the infantry ants and take the hornets and artillery ants to have a picnic in Rokillean. If they took that city, they’d be able to effectively stop travel within the kingdom, cutting off its circulation.

Leah still wanted to create a new monster realm, a ruined city. But the event had given her an idea. If she was going to do a ruined city dungeon, she might as well do it on the biggest stage possible. The only suitable place for it was the capital. She was going to take the royal capital, the symbol of the kingdom, and turn it into a ruin. It was going to be the ultimate lair for undead.

Epilogue

“I bring a report from the front, m’lord!” a voice said loudly, briefly knocking before swinging open the massive door carved from Hilith ebony that had taken four craftsmen to make. The sudden entrance went against all norms of etiquette appropriate to entering the office of a kingdom’s chancellor. However, there was no way that someone granted the right to enter this area of the palace wasn’t aware of proper etiquette.

Hold on, did this impudent cur mention a report?

Lord Douglas O’Connell, a marquess and the chancellor of the Kingdom of Hilith, felt a wave of apprehension, and furrowed his brow as he braced himself for what promised to be a report of ill tidings.

“I beg pardon, my lord, but I bring urgent news—” The messenger was pale, as though he had just realized the extent of his social faux pas.

Chancellor O’Connell chose to be gracious and ignore the breach in protocol. “Yes? Speak quickly if it’s that urgent.”

The messenger hurriedly nodded. “Yes, my lord! We have received multiple reports from around the kingdom that monsters have emerged from their realms and are attacking our cities!”

The report’s contents were worse than the politically astute O’Connell could have imagined. “Impossible!”

Monsters emerging from the monster realms wasn’t in and of itself an unusual occurrence. Even monsters had to obey the various laws of nature. If their population in a place grew too large, a certain number would move out of their old home seeking new living space—or, less charitably, to invade civilized lands seeking new conquests. That was something that happened on a regular basis, to the extent that all of the cities along the frontier were staffed with personnel specifically tasked with watching for such events.

Yet none of those personnel had reported any signs of impending monster

invasions to the chancellor's office. "The monsters emerged...with no warning whatsoever...? Never in my years have I heard of such a thing." The details then relayed by the messenger further shocked the chancellor. The monsters had emerged all along the frontier and attacked the fortified cities near each monster realm. The garrisons had been fighting back, but in some of those cities the monsters had already breached the walls, resulting in damage to the cities themselves and deaths among the populace.

The cities had sent requests for aid, but there was no aid left to send from the capital. They had already sent all of the available forces to destroy the nascent cataclysm that lay to the east. The garrisons would have to deal with their monsters on their own.

O'Connell sighed. "Typically we would have included those garrisons when forming the expeditionary army... Perhaps our haste in organizing the army has worked to our advantage..." The sentiment was cut short when another uncultured ruffian burst into the room.

"I bring news!" the newcomer said, this time not even bothering to knock.

The chancellor barked out in irritation, "Mind yourself! Now is not the time for such—"

Whatever fueled the messenger's urgency was unaffected by the chancellor's ire. "M-My apologies, my lord! But the final words from the garrison are to spread the news no matter the cost!"

O'Connell's anger only increased when he was cut off. "Final words?! Where was this—"

The messenger spoke right over him again. "The fortress cities of Erfahren and Llyrid have both fallen!" O'Connell somehow avoided shouting out the word "impossible!"

He had managed to preserve his dignity by avoiding such an outburst, but that had only been because the impact of the news momentarily made him unable to breathe. Erfahren was the city closest to the area where the bishop had said the new enemy of humanity had been born. It was, in a sense, the destination for the grand army they had sent to defeat the new cataclysm.

Ordinarily the departure of a large army would be accompanied by a grandiose ceremony or parade intended to boost morale and explain the situation to the populace. This time, however, they had skipped the pomp and circumstances in the hopes they would catch the nascent enemy of humanity before it was a full-fledged threat.

The rush to send out the army had also affected logistics. Instead of providing a supply train, the army planned to requisition supplies at the various cities along its route. It was, by any reckoning, a desperate measure that was only possible because the army was marching toward a destination within the kingdom itself.

O'Connell sighed gravely. "So we were too late... There's already a force powerful enough to destroy an entire city... Wait...Llyrid? Where the blazes is that?" Not even the chancellor of the kingdom could keep track of all of the fortified cities along the kingdom's frontier.

"My lord! It is a frontier city near the monster realm known as the Weald of Trae—better known by its nickname as the Weald of No Return!" the messenger answered.

The chancellor paused thoughtfully. "I remember now. The city was completed without incident, but no one who ventured into the forest ever returned, preventing any development of the surrounding lands. How could that have happened? Did the cataclysm conquer Erfahren, then move on to conquer Llyrid?!" O'Connell asked, mentally mapping out the progression of the enemy forces in his head. That suggested the enemy moved with extraordinary speed. It would mean that Erfahren had already fallen by the time they had finished assembling the army.

But if that had been the case, surely they would have received word of the attack much sooner. All of the fortified cities that bordered monster realms were required to maintain multiple methods of rapid communication, ranging from carrier pigeons to messengers, and to immediately report any monster incursions into their territory.

The messenger shook his head. "No, that does not appear to be the case, my lord... Erfahren was attacked by an army of ant-and bee-type monsters, while

Llyrid was attacked by a large army of treants. Both cities fell at around the same time.” The messenger clarified what he had meant when he said the cities had both fallen. The implication had been there in the wording. He had come to report the two events at the same time because the messages had likely arrived at the same time. While Erfahren was technically further along the main road than Llyrid, in terms of actual distance from the capital, the two cities were at roughly equal distance. Any carrier pigeons carrying reports of their fall would only arrive at the same time if the cities had been attacked at the same time.

“There’s...a separate force...?” O’Connell said to himself quietly. The bishop had only mentioned one new harbinger. Or was this just an unfortunate coincidence? Had a new harbinger and another monster powerful enough to destroy a city been born at the same time? If so, that was closer to a curse than a mere coincidence.

“Impossible...” O’Connell murmured numbly. There wasn’t anything either of the messengers could tell the shell-shocked chancellor. The plan had been for the grand army to use the city of Erfahren as a staging ground to clear out the Great Woods of Lieb. That plan had fallen apart before the army had even gotten anywhere near the city. The chancellor pressed his fingers to his temples and sighed.

The next morning found the chancellor seated at his desk shortly after dawn. Or rather, he had spent a sleepless night at his desk. He had written letters explaining to the cities seeking reinforcements why none would be forthcoming, before sitting down to consider how to tell the marching army that Erfahren had already fallen. No matter how long he sat at his desk, no answers came to mind.

“I bring word, my lord!” Another ruffian with no manners rushed into the room without knocking. Unlike the previous evening, O’Connell felt no outrage at a high-ranking official of the kingdom being barged in on unannounced. Instead he felt trepidation at the fact that a messenger had brought news that made them forgo any formalities of office.

“What could possibly have happened now...this early in the morning...?” O’Connell said rather acidly to this morning’s messenger.

The man's face was grim. "We have received word that the city of Altoriva has fallen!"

"Ehhh?!" The chancellor searched desperately through his memories for that name. Surely there was no city by that name on the frontier. He stood up, kicking the chair out from behind himself, and glared at the map of the kingdom hanging from the wall.

The messenger immediately pointed to a spot on the map. "Th-There, my lord."

O'Connell couldn't conceal his shock. "Th-That isn't a frontier city...is it?" While Altoriva was located along the kingdom's border, it was a region that was protected by a giant sheer cliff that separated it from the impassable highlands of Avon Mercato. Tradition in the region said there was an old castle now infested with monsters in the highlands, but there was no way to scale the cliff or come down from it, and the kingdom had treated it as a giant wall protecting that part of their territory.

While the neighboring Kingdom of Wels existed on the other side of Avon Mercato, the existence of that giant barrier meant there wasn't much direct trade between Hilith and Wels. For those reasons, while that region was technically located on the edge of Hilith's territory, no one in the kingdom had truly considered Altoriva to be along the kingdom's frontier.

The city of Altoriva was blessed by large floodplains fed by the River Confinn and was primarily known for growing large amounts of barley. The kingdom's subjects in that area paid a portion of that barley to the lord of the region as their taxes, and the lord somehow made a living by selling that barley to the rest of the kingdom. There were no monster realms near it, and because the city was comfortable but not particularly prosperous, there wasn't much in the way of bandits or highwaymen in the region either.

"How did such a peaceful city...?" O'Connell asked in a daze.

"The report came via carrier pigeon from the neighboring city of Ellental, and according to that report, one of the guards who escaped Altoriva testified that an army of skeletons had attacked the city...and those skeletons had evidently

arrived from the direction of Velstead,” the messenger said gravely. Velstead was a city that was located closer to the highlands than Altoriva. If the army of skeletons had come from that direction...

“Impossible... That means that the skeletons have already conquered two cities!” O’Connell said, pinching the bridge of his nose. All of the borderland areas of the kingdom were beset by monsters. Four cities had fallen in the space of a single day. While the chancellor had no way of knowing this yet, the forces that had destroyed Velstead and Altoriva were completely unrelated to the “new harbinger” that the kingdom was focusing its resources on combating.

In any case, almost all of the forces at their disposal were heading east to attack the new harbinger. Even if they wished to send reinforcements, there were none to send. Perhaps they were fortunate that the army was heading toward Erfahren and Llyrid, the two other fallen cities. At the very least, it was a large enough force that it could find out what had happened in those cities.

“What is the state of the grand army? Surely they’ve sent their regular reports. They should be passing near the city of Rokillean either today or tomorrow...yes?” O’Connell asked after a long pause. Rokillean was a major transportation hub in the kingdom. From there, you could follow the main road to both Llyrid and Altoriva.

The army hadn’t yet reached Rokillean in the last report he had received. Rokillean was large enough to have its own dedicated pigeon house, and the army was under standing orders to send an additional report whenever it passed by cities equipped with such facilities.

It was no exaggeration to say that the fate of the kingdom, no, the continent itself, hinged on the success of the grand army’s mission. While they hadn’t requested aid from the neighboring kingdoms, Hilith had sent formal envoys to them. Since there were no pigeons that could be sent to other kingdoms, the envoys were using a relay system of horses to travel to their destinations. It was hard to say if word of the new threat had yet reached their neighbors.

Which meant that for the time being the kingdom was on its own. O’Connell silently murmured an apology to the residents of the fallen cities of Altoriva and Velstead. However, that region produced nothing that was irreplaceable, and

the lord who ruled it wasn't a particularly influential lord. For the time being, that region would have to fend for itself. The kingdom would return to it once the immediate threat had passed.

"The grand army...must make its way to Lieb as planned. As for the city of Erfahren...just how badly was it destroyed when it fell...? If it can still be used as a staging ground once retaken from the monsters, then we..." O'Connell trailed off. Since they had no idea where, exactly, the army currently was, they couldn't send a carrier pigeon to it. There was no way to tell when they would arrive at Rokillean, but once they sent word from there he could then send them a message updating them on the situation.

"My lord, I bring word!" Refreshingly, this messenger knocked and respectfully waited to be allowed in before stepping into the room. This was the chancellor's chambers deep in the palace itself. This was how things were supposed to be done, even in an emergency.

"The grand army has reached Rokillean!" the messenger said.

The chancellor felt relief that it wasn't another report of a city falling to monsters and said calmly, "Very well. Then I will write them a note apprising them of the situation and giving them updated instructions... What is it? Is there something else?"

"Yes, my lord! The army has also reported they have made contact with the enemy!"

"Th-The enemy? What have they run into? The fact that they bothered to report them must mean it's not some random monsters or bandits, doesn't it?" O'Connell asked with a building sense of dread.

"Yes, my lord! They have encountered...an army of bees carrying ants!"

Afterword

A pleasure to meet you if you are a new reader. If not, allow me to give my thanks for your continued support.

The very fact that I'm using that opening line for my afterword in my debut novel really puts into perspective how times have changed. As a reader I've read similar lines for years, since a young age. At the time, the term "light novel" wasn't in common use, and when I was going out to the bookstore I'd just tell my family I was going to buy a novel.

That was important because my family's child-rearing stance was quite harsh when it came to what sort of entertainment I could consume. For a long time my parents restricted my access to manga and video games. The first time I even got a console was at Christmas when I was in fifth grade.

My aunt on my mother's side also made a point to respect my family's views on what children should consume, and instead of giving me money for New Year's, she'd always give me book tickets.

Allow me to explain to those readers who don't know what those are. Book tickets were a gift certificate that could only be used at participating bookstores, and were formally called National Standard Book Tickets. They're an ancient piece of scrip that stopped being sold in 2005. However, that ancient scrip can still be used in participating bookstores.

The book tickets I got for New Year's were probably given to me in the hope that I'd use them to buy something educational. When I told my mother I wanted to buy manga with them, she furrowed her brow at me. Knowing I needed to try something else, I asked her if I could use them to buy novels that were all text. My mother's answer was an approving smile.

Which was why I would always just say "I'm going to buy a novel" when running off to the bookstore to buy a light novel. Mostly because I was afraid that if I called it a light novel, I'd have to explain the contents of the book.

At the time, my biggest source of entertainment was light novels. When I didn't have school, I'd sometimes spend the whole day engrossed in one.

After I had moved up to middle school, I eventually got enough of an allowance to freely buy manga and video games, but I think I still spent most of that money on light novels.

I, of course, loved light novels, but perhaps the most important reason I gravitated toward them was that when I did the math, I felt the same amount of money went further with a light novel than a manga—I got more enjoyment from the money I spent. In hindsight my reasoning was pretty silly.

It may have been silly, but there was a truth behind it. Reading text and text alone is an act that takes a certain amount of time. It was one thing to worry about stretching my allowance money as a child, but with the sheer number of options available for entertainment in this day and age, spending time on a hobby is something you only do when you think that hobby has value.

The reason I'm able to deliver these words to you today is because many of you decided that my words had value and were worth reading.

So allow me once again to say thank you.

For those of you who have read my work before, I'm truly grateful for your continued support. And for those who picked up my work for the first time, thank you so much for choosing to buy this book.

I hope that the time spent with my work is worth it. For those who are reading this after finishing the book, thank you for giving me your time. If I am allowed the opportunity, I hope I can take more of your time in the future.

Finally, I'd like to use this space to make acknowledgments.

To the illustrator fixro2n, I'm afraid I made a nuisance of myself with my constant comments, but I am extremely grateful for the beautiful illustrations that you completed in spite of my meddling.

To my editors, there were so many comments in the editing notes that could only have been made by people who carefully and deeply reread my earlier drafts, and I couldn't help but just admire the sheer skill and professionalism.

To my managing editor, I truly felt the love for my characters when you kept referring to Leah as “Lady Leah” during our meetings. I’m glad you got to see her profile in the illustrations. I also had trouble holding back tears when I saw the battle going on in the editing notes between the proofreader and my managing editor.

I’m sure there are also a great number of people I am not aware of who helped make this book possible.

I want to express my sincere, heartfelt gratitude to everyone who put their efforts behind getting this book published.

—Harajun

EXP^{Is} Golden

The **Queen of Destruction**
Speedruns Her Ascension





“It itches...”

“You look
divine!”

EXP_{Is} Golden

The **Queen of Destruction**
Speedruns Her Ascension

“I’ve made sure
I won’t be causing
any unnecessary
collateral damage...”


*Consume the
world in flames!*

**FLAME
DETONATION!”**

The grasslands near Erfahren
had been turned into a blasted
wasteland in a single night.

The kingdom resolved to
put an end to that threat
before that could happen.





Now that she
knew which
direction they
were coming from,
it wasn't much of a
challenge to avoid
them or even grab
them out of the air.

*“Mwa
ha ha!
Futile!
Your
attacks
are futile!
You
vermin!”*



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EXP Is Golden: Volume 1

by Harajun

Translated by Noboru Akimoto Edited by Jamie Johnson

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2024