Word Count: 44.600 words

UNDRAL LEGACY

By

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PROLOGUE

A Virtual World Named Undral

A collection of countless different and incredibly beautiful worlds, inhabited by fearsome fantasy creatures and mighty mages. This fairy-tale-like place was called «Undral», which defined the playable area of «Undral Legacy», a VRMMORPG. This vast universe was divided into 160 worlds or mostly called zones. Each one consisted of a unique theme and climate, while they sometimes defied any reason or logic. The diameter of each zone varied slightly, but as a rule of thumb, they were about twice the size of Tokyo in the real world. Needless to say, it could fit many villages, cities, lakes, plains, forests, and more in it with ease, making a single zone hilariously enormous.

With this place as their playground, the players of UL have been traveling through the dangerous first Zone of Undral, clinging to the hope to come across the supposed possibility of returning to their normal lives. However -even after two months- we did not even make it to the second Zone, which meant that we were still in the very first world.

You see, in order to advance to the next Zone, you have to find and beat the 3 Field-Bosses that held the keys for the entrance to the «World-Dungeon». In the deepest layer of this place, a final test awaited the brave adventurers in the form of a mighty World-Boss. If you, however, were able to overcome this great challenge and succeeded, a portal leading to the next Zone would open up solely for the victorious players.

This was by far no easy task to accomplish. Ignoring the fact, that each of the Field-Bosses was ridiculously strong; finding them on this massive map in the first place was difficult enough. Even after more than a month, the scouting parties had not managed to map out the first world entirely.

There were still 159 Zones ahead of us to explore and not a single player had yet discovered the promised method of returning to the real world. At this rate, were we ever going to clear the game and regain our freedom from a world-infamous hacker, or would we be held captive in the virtual world of Undral Legacy for eternity...?

CHAPTER 1

The Mage Called Myst

A furious slash hit me from the front. Looking at the upper-left corner of my vision, I saw that the green «HP bar» lost some of the already depleted points. There were 70 from 140 points remaining, which meant that I lost half of it by now. Beneath it was another bar in blue, which kept track of my mana. It showed me even fewer remaining points than the HP bar.

My body quivered for a short moment as I fell back. If I were to lose the same amount of HP again, the «Game-Over» screen would be the last thing that awaited me, before witnessing how my character would be reset back to zero.

“Not yet...!” I encouraged myself, as I gritted my teeth.

By stretching out my right hand in front of me, a magic circle appeared as I visualized the spell «Quick-Shot». Immediately, as my mana bar lost some points again, three white light-balls were summoned above me, which flew at the attacking monster -a huge dark-blue colored wolf.

“Gruoahh...!”

The beast growled annoyed at me for hitting it.

“Alright! A direct hit!” I shouted relieved, as I jumped to the side.

For a short moment, the smoke that resulted from my attack blinded its vision. I used this chance to reposition myself and quickly began to visualize another spell, called «Barrage». Chanting it took a bit longer than the other spell, which is why I needed this extra time.

The smoked around the wolf dissolved and the beast had locked me quickly as its target again. Not wasting a single second, the virtual enemy dashed at me once more.

“Give it a rest already!”

As I shouted unnerved, the attack I prepared manifested itself, creating similar light-balls as before. However, this time there were about 15 of them.

“Grooooahh!” The dark-blue colored wolf let out a last cry while being bombarded with the magic I had cast, before slowly dissolving into what seemed like red digital dust.

Absolutely exhausted from the battle I just had experienced; I fell with my back on the grassland beneath me as I tried to catch my breath. A bit hesitantly, I glanced at my HP and mana bar. The lower one, which used to be filled with a blue color, was almost empty. The indicator showed me clearly, that only 2 points remained out of 120. I completely ran out of mana, which made me helpless if another monster were to attack me now.

Resting my left palm on my face, I began to chuckle out of despair.

*All this work, just because of some dumb quest I received from an NPC (Non-Playable Character).*

The reward for killing 10 of these wolves was 300 Gall -which was the currency of UL- and some hand-gloves. I just risked my entire progress for a bit of money and EXP (Experience points). But this was the only way to get stronger in this world. In order to survive, I had to do these quests so that I could defend myself from the monsters roaming around in Undral.

Those wolves were not that strong on their own, but the problem was that they would often stick together as a pack. I did not even get the chance to take a small break between each of them, so my HP and mana points were bound to deplete as I fought one after another.

A gentle bell sound tried to get my attention when a small interface window popped up in front of me. As I got up to check, I could read that it said «Loot».

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*- You have defeated a Wolf Stalker (level 9)! -*

*Rewards:*

*- 1x Sharp Teeth*

*- 2x Apprentice Wolves-fur*

*- 210 EXP*

*- 10 Gall*

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“Hmm...2 apprentice wolves-fur and 1 sharp-teeth. Not bad.” I said as I clicked on the «Accept» button on the bottom of the window.

As a response, the interface closed with the same sound that it appeared with. The items that I had received were now stored in my Inventory.

“There you are, Myst! Are you out of your mind, running off alone?!” A young man yelled while he approached me from a nearby dirt-path.

That was my name: Myst. Well, at least it was the one I picked in UL, back when I created my character. It was necessary since you were not allowed to use your real name online.

“Sorry, I didn't think that the «Lurking Wolves» quest would be this tough.” I apologized and smiled softly at the man who halted right in front of me.

“«Lurking Wolves»?! This is a quest meant to be done with at least two other party members!” He scolded me harshly, showing how deeply worried he was. His long light-blue hair covered a bit of his face, but I could clearly see the shock and anger in his eyes.

“Oh, I didn't check that when I accepted it. I guess that explains a lot.”

“Seriously, what am I going to do with you...”

The emotional man in question was none other than Hilbert, the leader of our small guild «Night Owls» and a close friend of mine. I met him a month ago when we were out in the fields to grind for EXP, and he invited me to join his new guild. Although, you could have called it more of a party than a guild, since it only consisted of 6 members, including me.

“Well, was it worth it...? What did you get?”

“In total, 12 apprentice wolves-fur and 7 sharp-teeth.”

“That much?! Considering the drop-rate, you got pretty lucky!”

The eyes of Hilbert widened in awe. He gave me an encouraging slap on the back while grinning at me.

It was true, that the drop-rate of these items was rather low for wolves, but I just could not bring myself to be happy about it. This experience was quite terrifying for me, and my adrenaline was still pumping. Of course, I would not tell Hilbert how close this battle really was.

As I got up to my feet, we took off to the nearby village, called «Irgon». I had completed the quest and was now able to collect my reward for it there.

The sun began to set in the distance, coloring the wide plains in an orange light, which is why we wanted to return to our Inn at the village quickly. Our guild-members were probably waiting for us already after I ran off on my own.

It had been 3 months now since the start of Undral Legacy. Back then, no one could have imagined how our normal daily lives were about to come to an abrupt end. It was the same day as the game had been released and went online, that would turn this beautiful and magical world into a devilish prison...

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- 21st of March 2030, Tokyo. -

No matter whether you were watching TV, listened to the radio, or simply browse through the internet -you would see a news report about the upcoming release of Undral Legacy literally everywhere.

It was always the same: they praised «ArgoCorp.» for making the human dream of a completely immersive VR experience possible, and their affiliated game-design company «New-Level» for creating the very first VRMMORPG in the history of mankind. Another thing they were talking about was that the game immediately sold out in the online shops after a few seconds only.

“As you can see, the people here are waiting in the past 5 days in line for the offline-sale! No matter where you look, the sidewalks are crowded with tents and game-enthusiasts!” a reporter began, “Additionally, this is only one of the many shops in Tokyo with copies of Undral Legacy! In total, the first printing wave of the game is estimated to be around 28.000 copies, with many more already on the way! Official sources state, that several million people registered online for the next printing wave, ignoring the numbers outside of Japan! After the release today, Undral Legacy is scheduled to launch in April for the rest of the world, for the reason that ArgoCorp. is still waiting for the servers overseas to be set up for them!”

The female reporter was conversing all excited in a loud tone, because of the noise in the background made by the people at the scene. You could hear them yell and scream in celebration and the reporter seemed to be trying her best not to join them.

I turned off the stream on the internet and shut down my computer. There was not much time anymore until the servers went online and I would not want to miss a single second of it.

As I sat down on my bed, I took a last glance at my room. There was nothing special or noteworthy about it. Some games and novels were tidily lined up in shelves, a modern wooden wardrobe, a writing-desk with my computer equipment -paired with an office chair- and lastly the bed I was sitting on. I had no need for anything else since I would spend most of the time reading some novels or playing games.

“It is 4 pm now,” I stated to myself, as I checked the clock on my Smartphone.

*Finally, the time has come! The server for Undral Legacy is about to open!*

I smiled brightly and hold up a certain headgear in front of me. It was the hardware that was necessary to connect and dive into the virtual world -the ArgoSpace. I was lucky enough to order the game online, so I already had it delivered to me today.

In order to use the device correctly, I connected the sensors -that were linked to the ArgoSpace- at the top of my spine on my back, which was a crucial point for the human nerve system, and some on the left and right side of my neck. Lastly, I turned on the gear and put it on my head. All I now had to do was simply lie down in a comfortable position and initiate the dive-process, by selecting the «Start» button in the menu on the screen with my eyes as an input device. The interface was rather small and only covered a small part of my face, just like the equipment itself.

“The wait has finally an end, Undral!”

My words were full of excitement and without any delay the ArgoSpace took control over my body, engulfing my eyes and consciousness in darkness for a second. Shortly after, a bright light filled my vision as the game assets were loading, and many system gadgets scanned my yet invisible body.

When the game finished its start-up routine, a crimson-red text appeared in front of me:

*- Welcome to Undral Legacy! -*

I did not have much time to read it, because my vision blurred and I found myself in a virtual room for the character customization, shortly afterward.

This mostly empty space looked like the embodiment of science-fiction. Data constructs were passing by, decorating the digital walls that surrounded me in a circle. I seemed to be completely alone in this room.

“Welcome to the magical world of Undral Legacy, Player!” A female system voice called out to me, happily greeting my arrival.

I could not bring myself to give a reply. I was still dumbfounded about the design of the place I found myself in, but now an automated system began to talk to me out of nowhere.

“To start off your own adventure in the vast world of Undral, please enter a name for your new character!”

In unison with the voice, an interface titled «Character Name» popped up in front of me with a gentle bell sound. The contents of the small window were just a blank space with an «Apply» button on the bottom.

I did not give it much thought and began to type on the virtual keyboard, which appeared as soon as I pressed on the blank space. The letters that I pressed one after another were: “M-y-s-t”.

To wrap the whole process up, a single tap on the confirmation button was enough. There was no system message notifying me that the name was either invalid or already taken, so the interface closed without any problems afterward.

I would often use this name in online games if it were not already taken. There was no special reason behind it, other than that naming was not one of my greatest strengths and a good friend of mine picked it out for me. Luckily, since UL just went online, the chance of my name being already taken was incredibly low.

“A great name choice, Myst! To finish your customization, you will now have to choose the appearance of your character in Undral Legacy. In order to make your look unique and the editing easier, we processed the calibration of your ArgoSpace and the entered personal information to create a character template. Please edit and adjust the look to your own preference.”

While the voice had yet to finish, a virtual model of a person manifested in front of me. To my surprise and shock, these character templates really had been configured and build after my real-world appearance to the even smallest details. It was as if I was looking into a mirror.

Well, obviously you could tell that it was a digital replication of me since the look of this world drifted slightly apart from the real world. This was only natural because it gives off a greater fantasy feeling that way. Still, it was almost frightening how accurate the data was that the ArgoSpace had collected from me from the calibration.

You see, in order to safely use the device, there were a couple of steps you had to take first. This procedure was called calibration. Since the ArgoSpace makes use of Brainwaves and the human nerve-system, it needed more information on the person using it.

For example, touching yourself on your shoulders and your feet gave the system enough data to record the needed distance for calculating your height. If you followed the whole process correctly, the ArgoSpace should have created a virtual image of your body.

The policies of ArgoCorp. required you to enter some personal information afterward, like hair-color, age, address, and so on to create a user profile. It was apparently needed for legal reasons, such as in the case of emergencies or tracing back criminal activities. I could understand that very well since people tend to behave carefree in absolute anonymity and ArgoCorp. ensured they would not misuse the information.

As I swiped through the available customization options in the character interface, many common gadgets such as changing your hair-color, eye-color, facial features, and more were present.

It was an interesting concept to start with your real self because you could slowly edit and adjust the unique template to your liking, creating a better version of yourself. Or at least give yourself a slightly different look that fitted into the fantasy setting if you were already pleased with your appearance.

I decided to configure my character template quite a bit by changing my black hair-color to a western blonde together with a spiky long hairstyle, a more defined face, and making myself overall more muscular. You could say that this was the typical fantasy hero look, but there was something about it that intrigued me.

It was also a nice change to my rather androgynous appearance. I was your typical gamer, so I would not do something like building up muscles in the gym and I was only 17 years old, to begin with.

“Now this is what I am talking about!” I exclaimed, grinning widely at the creation in front of me that I had designed.

I was just about to confirm my character customization on the interface when something strange happened.

For a short moment, the virtual model in front of me distorted just like the TV screen when it had signal issues and switched to my original template, before going back to the edited one.

“How strange...”

Waiting for something to happen, I stared at the customized character for a short moment, but nothing similar of the sort occurred afterward.

I decided to shrug it off as a glitch and pressed the button to apply my changes. However, exactly at the moment that I tapped on the screen; the exact same glitch started to take over again.

This time, my character did not return to the edited version and simply stayed in the template form. I had hoped for the system to announce an error and ask me to confirm again, but that did not happen.

“This completes the character-creation setup! We hope that you will enjoy the magical world of Undral and the limitless features to its fullest!” The female system voice conversed normally with me again and did not notice any errors or complications.

“No! Wait a moment! This is not what I had selected!”

The system of Undral Legacy did not pay any attention to my protest and before I could add anything more, my vision had been engulfed in a white light once more.

When my eyes caught sight of my surroundings again, I was not in the digital construct of a character-creation room anymore, but in the middle of a huge plaza. The place was crowded with tons of players, where crazy hair-colors greeted me in every direction. Many of them looked like warriors from fantasy novels.

Within this huge crowd of avatars, there was me, who was now stuck with the default template of my real-world appearance. Even though I wanted a style that differed completely from the actual me, I was presenting the virtual world of Undral Legacy my real-life body.

“You've got to be joking, right...?!”

CHAPTER 2

The Day Everything Had Changed

Many background noises and chattering filled the whole plaza that I have been teleported to. Some of them were acting a bit awkwardly, seemingly not aware that the movements could be done the same way as in the real world.

UL was the very first fully developed game that had been released for the newly invented ArgoSpace, so I guess that was only natural. In the middle of them all, there was me, who left the avatar looking the same as the real version of my body.

“This can't be happening...” I thought loudly, talking to myself.

I did not know what just happened -when I created my character- but it seemed like a bug or glitch in the game. Maybe some other people experienced the same thing. It was not that dramatic, though, since I could just start over with a new avatar once the opening ceremony was over.

The developers had deactivated the option to create multiple characters for now, because of the massive amount of people logging in. They would not want to risk a server crash in the first few minutes after the game had launched.

There was some time remaining, before a good friend of mine was able to join and all players would assemble for the event here at the plaza again, so I decided to look around the city.

Leaving the huge crowd of people behind me, I ran toward one of the four alleys leading out of the plaza. The place looked like a capital from a typical fantasy world, being build out of stone bricks, having smith shops as well as Inns at every street corner and many street-markets which were all operated by NPC's. The name of this giant starting city was «Laos».

I somehow managed to get through the roaming players in the side-alleys, only to find myself in front of a huge gate leading out into vast green plains. This had to be one of the many entrances of the city.

Although, I promised to wait for my friend until he logged-in, there was an urge luring me toward the new area. It was the kind you just could not resist. The more I caught myself staring at the beautiful world outside of this place, the harder it got to stay put.

“I mean, it should be alright to take a quick little look, right?”

Finally -giving in to my curiosity- I stepped over the capital-border. As soon as I did, a small notification popped up in the upper-right corner of my vision, reading:

*- You have left a Safety-Zone! You are no longer protected by the safety-protocol -*

I guess this meant that wild monsters could now appear and attack me.

Just as that thought had crossed my mind, a brown lizard appeared on the right side of the fields. It had a name tag above it, spelling «Snappy Lizard». A weak low-level monster, which did not pose any real threat.

Luck was on my side because I read the instructions of the game beforehand. Thanks to that, I knew a little bit about the combat system in UL. First off -as the game-title had suggested it- the only form of combat here was with magic. This explained why there was no class to choose from in the character creation. Everyone in Undral was a mage.

The magic-system itself, however, was rather complicated and seemingly infinite in its depths. You would start with magic that was not restricted to an element or certain attribute. For the first period, everyone was only able to use magic that was accessible to all mages.

You could, however, decide whether you wanted to spend your skill points on the offensive, defensive, or supportive spells and abilities. These 3 categories defined the options of Undrals mages. If you looked at the offensive skill-tree alone, you realized that a single category had about 5 different spells to choose from since the very beginning. So even if you had 2 offensive-skilled mages, the abilities they had would be different.

In addition, the 5 choices at the start were only small options compared to what awaited next. Choosing a path in the skill-tree would only cause the options afterward to split up further, granting almost endless possible combinations for the players.

It was also rumored, that there were chances of «Awakenings» in the later zones of Undral, giving mages the possibility to specialize in certain attributes and even granting magic, which was unique to the player. So -to compensate for the lack of other classes in Undral Legacy- the developers had ensured that every mage would be unique in their strengths and abilities.

“You are the perfect opponent, to test out what I can do!”

Before engaging in any form of combat with the lizard, I opened my menu by swiping horizontally through the air with my middle- and index finger and selected the skill-tree. There, I checked what kind of basic-spells I had started with.

Only providing me with 3 attacks, there was not much to choose from. I had gained 1 magic from each category: an offensive spell called «Spark», a defensive «Slick» and a supportive «Mend». All of them were laughably weak, but they were Level 1 skills -so it was not surprising.

“I guess, I’ll try it with «Spark» then... Take this!” I shouted as I stretched out my right hand in front of me.

Visualizing said spell in my head, a magic-circle formed without any sort of incantation, and a small portion of my mana points depleted. Immediately afterward, a literal spark flew at the yet passive creature.

“-Zshhh!”

The lizard, being seemingly angry for hitting it, turned its attention toward me. At the same time, a Hit Point bar appeared above the enemy, showing me that its life-force lost half of the maximum points. Now being interest in the combat, the Snappy Lizard dashed at me with its tongue slipping out.

“Finally, in the mood to play with me, huh?”

Taunting the monster with my words, I chanted the same spell again. However, because the skill had just been used, it was now on a short cooldown. This did not stop the lizard from attacking me, though.

“Ngh! In that case, I’ll use «Slick»!”

Casting another spell, I spend some mana points again, but I did not create a magic-circle. Instead, my body began to move on its own, barely dodging the lizard to the side as it jumped at me.

Enough time had passed for the cooldown, which is why I started casting «Spark» once more. Without any mercy, the skill charged at my enemy before it could turn toward me.

“Zshaaa!”

Letting out a squeaky death-cry, the remaining HP of the Snappy Lizard went to zero. This caused it to freeze in the exact position, as it slowly dissolved into red dust –sound-alike to falling sand.

Those digital particles flew upward in the air until it left no trace of their original body on the floor. The only thing that proved the existence of the monster was a small interface popping up afterward, showing me the experience points and items that I had gained from killing it.

“Alright, I did it! That was just as exhilarating as I expected it to be.” I said relieved while pressing the «Accept» button on the Loot interface. Together with the now-notorious bell sound, the transparent screen closed and stored the goods in my inventory.

“-It sure did look like that, you traitor.” An awfully familiar passive-aggressive voice interrupted the moment, causing me to flinch.

I turned around to confirm my suspicions and to no surprise, it was my friend that wanted me to wait for his arrival. An extremely disappointed look decorated the youthful face of his avatar. The name of the young boy was Zen; at least that was his username most of the time. He was the one that helped me and came up with my online alias Myst.

...Although, something had caught my eye when I examined his appearance.

“-Wait a moment! You look just like in real life, Zen!”

“You’re the one to talk! I thought you were going to create another one of those fantasy novel protagonists!”

We were both pointing at each other, irritated about our characters being identical to our real selves.

“So, you had the same issue as me in the character-creation?”

“I thought, I was the only one.” He sighed out of frustration.

There were mixed feelings within me now.

Ignoring the fact, that Zen was very mad at me for leaving on my own, it was a bit suspicious having multiple players experience the same kind of error. If this were a serious bug or glitch in the system, there would be many people complaining about it online, ruining the reputation of the newly developed game. Being forced to present your real appearance in the online world was violating security and anonymity policies.

“I heard that you are able to create a new character after the Opening Ceremony of the game. So, it is just a matter of time for us before we can start anew.” My voice tried to hide the concern in it, but Zen seemed to pick up on it quickly.

“That is true, but this also means any progress we make now, would be lost afterward.”

“Well, let’s look at it from a different perspective. We can test out many skill trees and don’t have to worry about wasting our points. When we reset our progress, it will be clear what kind of path we want to level up!”

“Ha-ha…This is the Myst, I know! You’re always having a plan to make the most out of your situation. Your great ideas have helped us out in many other games already.” He smiled at me, which meant that he was not angry with me anymore.

To be honest, it felt like I was talking to him in the real world. Zen looked exactly like in High-School with his brown bangs, average height, and athletic build. His charisma ensured him the position as one of the popular boys.

Though, he hid the fact that he was privately a gamer like me at home. I only happened to uncover his secret by chance, when I was reading an article about an upcoming MMORPG at school.

“Then this is our plan! Let’s not waste any more time and get to work.” I turned around and headed toward a nearby hunting ground for monsters.

“You’re always so much more energetic when it comes to games, Myst. Way to go, hardcore-gamer!” He gave me a sarcastic thumbs-up, before following my lead.

“As if you are any different from me, Zen.”

“Can’t argue with that one. But this makes our relationship so amusing, doesn't it?”

“...Please don’t make it sound so weird.”

Thus, we had left the grassland nearby the city and searched for a better spot to kill monsters further outside.

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After roughly 10 minutes, Zen and I arrived at a river which was inhabited by brown bears with long sharp claws. A name tag above these monsters introduced them as «Grimly Ursidae» to us.

There were some other players already, shooting around «Spark» aimlessly and unsure how to fight them. On the way here we did not encounter many other players, thanks to the enormous size of this world.

“This seems like a nice place to grind for some experience points.” I stated, after analyzing the area.

“Myst, watch out!”

I followed the unnerved voice of Zen and turned my head to the right.

To my shock, the reason for his shouting was that one of the creatures has been charging at me out of nowhere. The bear managed to come awfully close to me already so there was not much time for me to react anymore.

My only chance was to use «Slick», which I promptly did.

“Hrgh…!”

I barely managed to dodge sideways as soon as the spell drained some of my mana. The bear passed and only stopped a few feet away from us, before turning around back to its prey.

“Seems like these are hostile mobs. We’ve got to be careful and watch our step around here.”

Zen had cast «Spark» immediately after he finished his comment. I did not hesitate and attacked with my own magic as well. Our spells landed on the enemy directly into its face.

“…Grrr!”

The Ursidae let out an angry growl when it got hit by our double attack. With its claws beginning to glow in a dark-red tone, the Grimly Ursidae dashed at us again.

Zen and I tried to evade by using «Slick», however, the distance toward our enemy shortened so quickly that we did not have enough time to react. The monster unleashed its attack with a powerful slash, wide enough to hit us both at the same time, leaving a similar dark-red trail in the air behind the attack direction.

As we were thrown to the ground, our HP bars lost a great portion of their value consequently.

"Urgh, are you alright, Myst...?”

“…More or less. This monster is definitely stronger than the ones before.”

Zen and I got back up to our feet, while the bear was still recovering his energy. I thought about using «Mend» to regain some of my HP back, but the cooldown on this spell was long. It does not heal a lot; however, it should still be used with care.

“Quick, let’s attack it again! This is a small opening for us!” I shouted as I prepared the spell «Spark» once more.

Zen nodded and attacked the monster with me together.

“-Grrrroa!”

The Ursidae led out a growl again as its HP depleted a bit, which sounded more painful this time. We knew his attack pattern by now, so it was obvious what would come next.

Just as I had expected it, our enemy dashed at us again with the same attack it used before. This time, we were prepared to react quick enough and used Slick immediately to dodge the dangerous claws of the Grimly Ursidae at the very last second.

Thanks to the long gaming experience Zen and I had together, it was easy to adapt to the pattern the monster used. We continued the fight with the same strategy over and over, but the damage we dealt to the bear was not remarkably effective. At this point, it was simply a matter of whether the HP of the enemy or our mana points would run out first.

-Then, as I feared for the worst already, the brown bear with its sharp claws led out a final loud growl, before collapsing on the ground. The HP bar above its head reached zero and vanished. As a cause, the body of the monster began to dissolve slowly at various places into crimson-red dust, just like the «Snappy Lizard» which I killed before.

Zen and I glanced at each other with a questioning look that asked: *Is it over?*

As if the game wanted to answer that for us, the soothing bell sound rang while a screen appeared in front of me and him. The contents were the experience points and the loot that we gained from this fight. Zen went from level 1 to 3, and in my case, I even leveled up from 1 to 4.

The reason was probably the monster that I killed before.

“We did it! We actually beat that damn bear!”

“And I thought that we were goners…” I sighed and sat down on the grassland, exhausted from the battle.

“But I have to say, this one was way too strong for normal level 1 players.” He then said thoughtfully.

I glanced along the river at the remaining Ursidae, which were not fighting with other players anymore. My guess was, that they lost against them and respawned at the starting city. It was then, that I finally saw the levels of the monsters next to their HP bars.

“You are definitely right about that, Zen. Look at their level for a second.”

Zen followed my gaze and eyed the Grimly Ursidae that roamed across the field carefully.

“Wait, what?! Their levels range from 4 to 6! It’s no wonder that we got so much EXP from them!”

I nodded in agreement.

It was only because we were together and had analyzed the attack pattern quickly, that we barely managed to beat our enemy. On top of that, I think we were lucky enough to face a bear that was only at level 4 and not higher. If it were even a single level stronger, there would have been no way for us to beat it.

“I guess, our plan to distribute our points for testing purposes is now realizable!” I smirked at Zen.

“Yes, that’s true! But I think we should get out of here first. I don’t want to be attacked by another one of them again.”

As if that was a keyword, the sound of multiple explosions in the distance caught our attention. Both of us looked at each other confused for a second.

At that moment, each of us got a system message at the same time. We opened the menu interface and scrolled through the options until we found a letter icon. I clicked on it which resulted in a mailbox popping up.

My eyes widened as I read the contents of it.

“Oh no, we lost track of time! The Opening Ceremony is about to start!” I shouted.

“We have to hurry! Even if we run, it’ll take us about 7 minutes to get there!”

Not wasting any time, I immediately got up and left together with Zen the fields near the lake. As if our lives were at stake, we ran with all we had got in the direction of Laos. Every step closer toward our goal made the sound of explosions in our ears louder until we could finally see the silhouette of the large medieval-age city in the distance.

It turned out that it was the sound of fireworks all along when the sky above us was painted in many different colors and effects creating a beautiful view. This scene alone made me realize again, how incredible the technology of the ArgoSpace was to process all this data and information with ease.

That was the last moment that I savored before everything in this world changed for me and the other 28.000 players in Undral forever.

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When Zen and I finally managed to get back into the city, most of the firework spectacle already toned down. This hinted the imminent event that was about to take place.

We arrived at the huge plaza, which marked the starting point of the game, and almost suffocated from the sheer number of players that were present there. All players were in heated discussions and excitement brimmed in the air.

It was quite hard to get through the masses of crazy hair-colors to the plaza, but Zen and I wanted to be first in line at this once in a life-time opportunity. We had to apologize quite often to the players we would bump into, as we made our progress to the front. I was a bit unnerved and uncomfortable within this huge crowd unlike Zen, who was a natural extrovert. He seemed to catch onto my thoughts.

“Are you alright? We can stay a bit farther behind if you feel unwell here.”

“No, it’s okay. This is a historical moment for us gamers after all.”

“Hm, if you say so. Don’t push yourself, though.”

Followed by many more apologies for bumping into even more players, our destination -the center of the plaza- came steadily closer. At the same time, the space between me and the other people shrank gradually until it was already a challenge to raise your arm.

*I can’t take this anymore. I think I’ll go crazy in here!*

My thoughts rushed through my head faster than I could count them. Every minute in this claustrophobic hell felt like an eternity for me.

Soon enough, I did not perceive the people around me as other players any longer, but more like a death trap generated by the game. Once you would get in, you would never escape again.

Just as these thoughts reached new extremes, Zen and I finally halted. As I looked around, I realized that we managed to reach the first row of players. In front of us, the huge runic monument that marked the center of the whole city, stretched above us into the sky. I did not dare to look behind me, as I already knew that it was an ocean consisting of people.

Unlike the farther rows in the back, the players here were holding their breath and waited diligently for something to happen as they gazed upon the gigantic object in the center. It was safe to assume that these people were part of the most enthusiastic gamers, wanting to savor every single moment here at this event.

“Well, this was certainly worth it. I bet you feel way better here than in the crowded back.”

“Yes, much better. I only had to give up on half of my sanity on the way here.”

“Don’t complain to me now, Myst. We made it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I shrugged playfully.

Of course, I was just joking. To be honest, I was incredibly happy that we managed to get through the masses and secured ourselves seats in the first line for the show.

“-Hey, what’s that?!” Zen shouted, as he stared at something behind me.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him, being a bit panicked from his sudden reaction.

Our conversation was cut off as out of nowhere, many particles and colored smoke effects filled the whole plaza. The grand sound of trumpets and drums began to ring through the area which seemed to come from an invisible orchestra, playing a medieval-like theme for the entrance of a king.

My gaze wandered toward the monument again and I followed its structure from the bottom to the top above us. Just as I had expected it, something manifested itself at the very top of it.

“Look up, guys!” I shouted, as my finger pointed at the unknown object in the sky.

The data construct had now taken the shape and form of an orb, which was dark blue colored. It was like looking into the deep abyss of the ocean if you stared at it from afar.

Then, shortly after, said orb began to blink slowly in a lime tone as if it wanted to tell us something. All of us knew by now, that the long-awaited Opening Ceremony of Undral Legacy had begun. The music, which the invisible orchestra played for us, shifted to the next phase apparently as the trumpets toned down and the drums picked up a monotone, yet fast rhythm.

As a response, the blinking orb descended a few feet before transforming in mid-air into a transparent object. -No, it was not an object. The data transformed into a huge transparent silhouette of a person, with two more behind it. When the show had finished, we could clearly see multiple figures occupying the sky. They were all wearing robes, covering their face with a hood that was attached to it.

“Are those … projections?” I muttered.

“Yeah … 3 of them. They might be Administrators.” Zen answered me, his voice sounded astound.

The drums then suddenly stopped playing, leaving the plaza in complete silence. No one said a word. All gazes were directed at the projections in the sky, waiting for something to happen.

Then, the giant projected figure in the front of the other 2 pulled down the hood, revealing the face of a wise mage with a grey beard and hair. His companions copied his movements and did like him, showing that their avatars were a middle-aged woman with glasses and black, curly hair, as well as a younger man in his twenties, with white hair and a warm smile.

“Welcome, dear players! I welcome you all in the magical world of Undral!” The wise man with the grey beard spoke up, along a deep and gentle voice.

“Is that…?”

“I don’t know…”

“Hey, that white-haired man in the back looks cute!”

“I know, right?!”

The people around us started to chat with each other, throwing comments left and right.

To calm the chatter down again, the assumed leader of the 3 figures raised his hands as if he were a principal talking to students. His facial expression remained calm and gentle. Unsurprisingly, everyone acknowledged his efforts and the plaza went silent once more.

“Allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Wellsburg, a leading Administrator and developer at NewLevel. Coincidentally, I also happen to be a representative of the Argo Corporation.”

Wellsburg directed his left hand toward the black-haired woman with glasses behind him. She picked up the speech now.

“My name is Harukane. I am an Administrator at New-Level as well. My specialized task is to oversee and manage the player-support.”

Her voice and appearance gave the impression of a school nurse, or simply someone you could entrust your problems without any worries.

*How fitting for a chief at the player-support department*.

It was now the turn of the white-haired young man, who was still smiling all the time.

“And finally, my name is Artis. Unlike my fellow colleagues, I am not an Administrator at New-Level. The task I am entrusted with is being a scientist for the Argo Corporation. I was also part of the leading developer group for the ArgoSpace.”

*He is what?!*

Everyone seemed amazed by the importance of the people in front of us. All of them were higher ups in the company, that created this world. The scientist called Artis could even be considered a celebrity.

“How cool!”

“We get to talk to these people?!”

“The cute boy was Artis?! You’re kidding!”

The players began to chat with each other again, with men being charmed by the kind Harukane, while the women went on and on about the genius Artis.

“Myst, can you believe it? How lucky are we to be among the first 28.000 players that get to experience this once time event?”

I nodded at Zen’s comment. Being able to attend this event and meet the staff behind this amazing technology was already reason enough to buy the ArgoSpace and Undral Legacy.

Wellsburg noticed the commotion and spoke up again.

“We are honored that some of you already heard of us. However, this Ceremony is not about the Administrators. We are here to celebrate the grand opening of the very first VRMMORPG, and most of all, you players that worked hard to be among the first ones that get to experience this wonderful world!”

His voice became more encouraging and motivational, which made all present people even more excited. In the blink of an eye, the whole plaza was drowned in cheering and energy from the players. Zen and I were part of it, of course. If anything, Zen might have been among the loudest and cheerful ones of all.

“From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank you all for being such a supportive and engaged community, which exceeds everything we could have hoped for! That is why-”

Wellsburg did not get to finish his magnificent speech. Amid his sentence, their projection distorted, and the voice cut off. It was the very same experience, that I had in the character creation. For some reason, it gave me a shiver down my virtual spine.

Shortly after, everything returned to normal again.

“What’s this? Are we experiencing connection issues?”

Wellsburg turned his head toward Artis, who seemed to be as confused as him.

“Hey, Zen. Doesn’t that remind you of the bug in the character creation?”

“Yeah, I thought I was the only one…” He answered, with a worried expression.

The people around us gave each other a dumbfounded look.

A small transparent window popped up in front of Harukane with an alarming system sound.

“Sir Wellsburg, this is not a connection issue! I was notified about an unauthorized IP logging into our server systems!”

His expression became shocked as he directed his attention toward Harukane.

“Come again?! At a time like this?! Who would do such- “

Wellsburg voice cut off again, as the projection of the Administrators distorted once more. This time, however, was much more intense and did not return to its normal state after a short amount of time. Instead, the projection vanished completely from the sky without leaving a single trace of it behind.

All players kept staring at the sky, waiting for the event to resume. Even after waiting for a minute, nothing happened.

“What’s going on?”

“Unauthorized IP…?”

“Is the Ceremony over?”

Muttering started from all directions. No one knew what would happen next.

*So, it was not a bug in the system that caused the error earlier for Zen and me?*

-As if something wanted to confirm my suspicions, a new projection appeared in the sky above us. Unfortunately, it was not the same one as before. This time, only a grey screen occupied that place which featured a description on it: «Audio-Only».

“What’s that?”

“Were the Administrators unable to reconnect properly?”

New theories roamed around the plaza regarding to what was currently going on.

Then, a monotone and emotionless voice spoke up from the mysterious projection.

“We apologize to interrupt this event for you, but this was the best timing to do so. -I want to get straight to the point and not waste any time. I am the head of a small organization, known as «Nonentity». As I speak, we have seized complete control over Undral Legacy and denied the New-Level company -along the ArgoCorporation- any possible access to this game. All online Administrators have been logged off manually by us, as you were able to witness firsthand. Currently, we are transferring the official server to our personal location, so we do beg for your understanding that you might experience some connection issues in the meanwhile.”

All players remained in complete silence. The expressions on their face were blank, as if they did not understand something that they had just been taught. It seemed as if time had stopped and all of us were frozen in place.

Then, Zen managed to find some words to express his confusion.

“Is this…was Undral Legacy… hijacked...?”

Surprisingly enough, the self-proclaimed head of Nonentity answered Zen’s question.

“That is correct. Our team had planned this carefully for a long time now. Thus, you are regrettably no longer in the safe hands of the Argo Corporation.”

*Does that mean that the error in our character creation originated from their attempt to hack the server? All this had already started, since the game went online...*

To be frank, I could not seriously believe this. Some unknown hacking group like them was able to seize complete control over Undral Legacy from the Argo Corporation? That was out of the question. New-Level has always been extraordinary proud of their security system, ensuring a safe experience for their games.

“-What is he talking about?”

“I don’t know…”

“Hacked the server? We are talking about the ArgoCorp. here!”

“Right? There’s no way!”

“Maybe this is some kind of prank?”

“Yeah, that’s it! This is part of the Ceremony!”

The chattering of the players kept going on, throwing in new ideas and logical explanations about our situation.

I shifted my attention to Zen, who was visibly thinking hard about the words of the presumed hacker.

“What’s your take on this?” I asked with a serious tone.

“I can’t say for sure. He does not sound like he is lying, but…”

“It’s just unthinkable, right?”

“Yeah. New-Level and the ArgoCorp. are not amateurs. They surely had thought about preventing something like this.”

I agreed with Zen. This scenario was definitely taken into consideration, when the game had been developed. How could some small group like Nonentity possibly pull off something like this? No matter how hard I tried to think, there was no answer that I was able to come up with.

The emotionless voice of Nonentity’s leader rang from the projection again.

“My apologies, I forgot to fully introduce myself. You must surely ask yourself who I might be, to be able to plan and execute this utmost flawless hijacking procedure. -I think that you might be familiar with the name -Helios-.”

*Helios?!*

When I heard said name, it was like someone pulled the ground beneath me away. My hands even began to tremble a bit.

“Hey, Myst… Isn’t that…?”

“Yes… it’s him… without a doubt.”

Helios. That was the name of the genius hacker, which managed to shut down multiple government security servers and some of the world’s biggest technology companies 5 years ago. It had been considered as one of the severest hacking events and a threat directed at the government. -Ironically, nothing happened during that time. No data had been stolen, nor was something damaged in any way. It was possible, that Helios only did it as a practice for something else, or out of simple boredom.

Maybe the first theory was correct. The genius hacker might have planned this already back then, before the ArgoSpace was even developed. Even if you took the tiniest possibility in account, that he might be the real Helios, then all of this would suddenly make sense. The only one -who could have pulled this off- was him.

The players around us suddenly stopped with their theories and disbelief of his words. It seemed that they knew him just as well as Zen and I did. All the courage we had suddenly left us.

*However, even if he might be the real Helios, that does not explain the most important thing here.*

“-Why…no, what is the purpose behind this…?” I asked with a frustrated tone.

Helios heard my question and answered with his monotone voice.

“The purpose, hm? That is a complicated question to answer. I would refer to it as an experiment. More importantly, you should be concerned about your own well-being right now.”

“Huh?”

*Our well-being?*

Sure, Undral Legacy being hacked was problematic. Although, that did not necessarily affect us players, other than that we were not able to play the game.

The other players probably thought the same as I did, which led to muttering and confused looks in the crowd.

“Let me explain this briefly. Our goal was not to simply steal the server from a game. There is something far more important in here for us.”

“…More…important?” Zen asked. He sounded like he was gasping desperately for air.

-The next words that Helios was about to say, would haunt me for eternity.

“You players are that something. It is all of you 28.000 people, who we are after.”

For the first time, I was able to notice an emotion in his monotone voice. It sounded like he was grinning widely or had a hard time to suppress his laughter.

“He wants us?” I asked Zen with a disbelieved expression.

“Doesn’t he realize that we can escape from here whenever we feel like it?”

“I don’t know. Helios shouldn’t be that clueless about games, when he was able to hack one.”

As if someone wanted to mock us, I heard a soft giggle. Not the good kind, but rather the one that was amused by something pitiful.

My suspicion about Helios in his last comment turned out to be true. It was him, who was showing some human emotions.

“You can forget about escaping right away. You may have not realized it yet, however, since the beginning of this Opening Ceremony, all of you were denied any possibility or chance to flee. To put it into more precise language: you cannot log-out of Undral Legacy anymore. The 28.000 players here are completely in the grasp of Nonentity. Every single one had been so immersed and distracted by this event that you did not even recognize it on your own.”

This was the moment that my disbelief of his words reached its limit. While I could accept the fact that Helios and Nonentity managed to seize control over Undral Legacy, saying something like trapping us in this world was laughable at best.

Zen was thinking the same as me in that regard.

“I had enough of this. Let’s get out of here, Myst! I am not listening to the words of a delusional criminal any longer!”

“Yeah, the police will handle this. There is no reason for us to stay.”

I opened the menu with the ringing bell sound and scrolled through the menu until the option «Log Out» appeared. Everything seemed normal, just like before.

*I knew that he was lying. No escape? Yeah, sure.*

I pressed on the option and waited for the disconnection from the game to take effect. However, nothing of the sorts happened. Instead, a small window popped up, that notified me about an issue:

*- System Error: Please contact an administrator to receive further instructions. -*

“Huh? Did you get an error too, Myst?”

“Yes. Let’s try it again. Probably some mistake, because of them transferring the server.”

Zen and I proceeded to press on the log out option again; however, the same notification popped up no matter how often we tried it.

Meanwhile, my ears were almost going deaf from the stacking bell sound effects, as I heard the other thousands of players on the plaza performing the same action.

“Well? Have you tried it out to your heart’s content? Has anyone had any luck doing so?”

The voice of Helios rang from the projection in its usual emotionless tone again, as if he wanted to make fun of us. He knew the answer to that question all too well.

“Quit this bullshit!”

“Yeah, what is this about?!”

“Let me log out of here, damnit!”

“Who do you think you are?!”

The people around us got frustrated and angry at Helios provocation. Everyone knew that he was right, but nobody wanted to accept this fact.

“Can’t we get out of here through another method? For example, pulling the hardware off manually?” Zen asked me then.

“I don’t think so. Since we can’t use our real bodies, there is no way for us to interfere with it.”

“You’re kidding… we need to think of something!”

Both of us tried hard to come up with a solution and Zen tried to focus by pointing with his fingers on his head. After a short moment, I managed to extend the idea of the manual log out.

“Wait a moment, what if we just wait for someone on the outside to get the ArgoSpace off our head?” I proposed.

“Oh! Nice idea! Since we are both High-school students, our parents will get us out of here in no time!”

Helios was already many steps ahead of us and shattered our hopes of rescue.

“If you think that anyone on the outside will help you, give it up. I do not believe that everyone read the instructions of the ArgoSpace carefully, so let me explain why removing the gear -without shutting it down properly- is a terrible idea. Since the virtual experience here is made possible by connecting your brain and the nerve system of your body to the ArgoSpace, the real-life body does not receive any signals from your brain whatsoever. This process can only be undone if the system of the hardware is shut down properly. If someone were to remove this by force, your body will be damaged quite severely. In the best-case scenario, you might lose your ability to speak or some of your senses. As for the worst case… being paralyzed for the rest of your lives might await you. For some, who are especially unlucky or already suffer from a bad health state, receiving the fate of being put into a life-long coma is not unthinkable.”

This time, no one was shouting at Helios anymore. His words were logical and made sense, which made it hard to distrust him. At the same time, realizing and properly processing what he said was not an easy task either. That was no surprise, since he basically threw in the theory of us being able to never wake up -after being rescued.

As for me, I had a hard time to remain standing on my feet. They were shaking so badly, because of how terrified I was. The reason for this was that I did read the instructions of the ArgoSpace thoroughly, just like the one for Undral Legacy.

*He… he is right! What he is saying… I remember something along those lines… that you were prohibited from removing the hardware, before shutting it down properly!*

“This is exactly, why there won’t be any help or rescue awaiting you. As long as your lives are not in any danger here, no one -including the police or doctors- is legally allowed to remove the ArgoSpace from your body, since that would be an act of crime for consciously damaging you and putting your health at a great risk.”

Again, his words made perfect sense and were the truth. Helios was not unprepared and thought of this whole scenario extremely carefully, making sure to cover even the tiniest holes and mistakes in his plan.

“However, do not worry that this cruel fate will choose you. To make sure, that everyone is on the same page as you, Nonentity is currently broadcasting this whole event worldwide for all people across the globe to witness!”

When he said that, multiple screen projections appeared in the sky in front of the monument, which showed us and the whole plaza from different angles and scenes.

“So…this means… we are trapped?” Zen stuttered almost incoherently.

“…I… I think so… he covered every possibility for rescue… except for…”

My eyed widened as I realized another escape option for us. Something even Helios cannot control in any shape or form.

“What if there is a power outage or an internet disconnection?”

Zen looked at me and he gasped for air as he realized what I meant.

“Yeah! In that case, the gear will shut down without having to remove it!”

We both grinned at each other. This was our only hope.

However, both of us underestimated Helios foolishly again.

“Connection and power issues have been dealt with. The script to shut down the ArgoSpace in case of the loss of a stable internet connection has been overwritten to simply wait for the problem to resolve itself. That means, removing the hardware in this state will have the same effect. As for power issues… the ArgoCorporation was kind enough to install a chargeable battery for these scenarios. If something like that were to happen, there will be no immediate shut down as long as the battery has power stored in it.”

Helios voice became dark and sinister, which indicated more human emotions within him.

“Nonentity found a fitting solution for this. In case of a regular power outage, the battery should suffice. If the lack of power was caused intentionally, however, and the power reaches the limit of its capacity, we uploaded a program to your ArgoSpace that disconnects the hardware without shutting it down. To put it short: it is as if you tried to remove it by force. So, you see, I was kind enough to think of all these problems for you beforehand.”

That was when I reached my limit. I sacked to my knees, as my feet ran out of any strength. Within my eyesight, the players around me did not have any blank or confused expression on their faces anymore. -Now, they were terrified. As if they were about to be eaten alive by a horrifying monster, they looked like they were screaming internally. Some even shed tears already.

“…No…”

“I don’t want this…!”

“…Let me out…”

There was no confidence in the voices of the players left. Their earlier demand turned into begs for mercy. Even Zen, who was usually composed and a leader in rough times, looked like a wind breeze could knock him over.

“Now that we got this long talk out of the way, let us discuss what I want you all to do for me. Naturally, there is a reason why you are in this game, after all. It is quite simple, really. Something that you all wanted to do anyways. Play the game. That’s it. That is all I am expecting from you.”

*What? He wants us to play Undral Legacy? All of this just for playing the game?*

I was dumbfounded. Not even a single cell in my brain could comprehend what his thoughts were. I did not even know if he had any thoughts about this.

“Yes, you heard me right. Play the game and explore the worlds of Undral. Of course, you do not have to. Enjoying your stay here is fine by me. However, somewhere in the many worlds of this game, I have hidden a method of logging out of the virtual reality. If you work hard enough and find it… I might consider freeing these players from Undral and return them to their real-life bodies. -This only applies to the ones who managed to do that, though. Hmm... But I do think that this is a bit too easy to accomplish… ah! I just got a perfect idea to fix that.”

*Liar.*

It was as clear as his name Helios -the sun-, that he did not just come up with it.

“We cannot endanger your precious life in here, but there is a way to make this more exciting and increase the difficulty of it. I will add a special rule to this game. In case your HP hit zero, meaning that you die, your whole progress will be reset, and you must start over again from level 1. You could say that you are being reincarnated into a new self. Quite the splendid thought, isn’t it?”

*Are you joking?*

That was just ridiculous. Imagine that you died nearby of this hidden method at a remarkably high level, just to start all over again. The whole progress that you made in that long period of time would be gone. Almost wasted.

Although, all this would do is to take up more time for the players to complete his request.

“There is a catch to it, naturally. Not all of you may know this, since you are new to the game, but the resources in Undral are limited. There is a set value for things to be generated and to appear. If you players die too often and use up all possible experience points in the game, you will not have any way of leveling up anymore. That means, you will be stuck in Undral forever. So please do keep this in mind and think of your deaths as something you should possibly avoid. If you are committed to return to your real-life bodies, that is.”

This was what I waited for. The devilish hook in that condition that was the real danger. If we were to die too often and use up all resources, there would be no way for us to beat the game. A dead end to the journey.

“I think that this concludes the Opening Ceremony of Undral Legacy. We, from Nonentity, do hope that you will enjoy this game with its new features added to it to the fullest! Remember that you hold your fate within your own hands, so choose your path carefully. You do not want to be reason, why the other players can no longer beat the game, because you used up all available help provided by the system. Additionally, we will broadcast the events of Undral Legacy to the real world for everyone to be able to cheer you on, so do your best to entertain them. I wish you all the best of luck on your magical journey through the worlds of Undral!”

When Helios finished his speech, the projection in the sky vanished together with his voice, leaving the plaza and the crowd in silence. While the NPC’s in the city resumed their work without a care, all players kept staring into the sky above the monument.

Just like the others, I was shocked to the very bone and some part of me still tried to deny what happened. We clung to the abysmal low chance, that everything was just a bad dream and we would soon wake up from it, or that it was simply the worst kind of joke, the ArgoCorp. could have possibly made.

Of course, these hopes never fulfilled themselves and despair would soon devour us.

“…Hey, Zen. What… what are we going to do now…?”

I turned my head to my left, still kneeling on the ground, and waited for a reply. Though, I never received one.

When I tried to take a glimpse of my friend, no one was there anymore. He was gone. No matter in which direction I looked, I could not find him in the crowd of thousands of people.

“…Zen…?”

That was the day when this beautiful game changed because of Nonentity’s unexplainable goal forever. It was also the last time, that I saw my friend.

CHAPTER 3

The Night Owls

3 Months later.

I was on the way back to the Inn together with Hilbert. When we finally reached the small village -which was surrounded by a deep forest- night-time had fallen over Undral already.

The streets were filled with NPC’s and some players hanging around the taverns or restaurants, chatting with each other and enjoying the evening. The smell of beer and meat hung in the air, accompanied with the laughter of people.

The players had finally managed to get somewhat used to their new home and started to live their daily lives in this world normally. It was a long and rough way to get to this point and the effect of the Opening Ceremony was still influencing us strongly. However, compared to 3 months ago, the overall atmosphere went significantly up.

1.000 players had left Undral within this time span. They did not find a way to log out of this game, though. Quite the contrary, they were victims. For some unfortunate souls, their families and friends were not able to accept the situation or simply could not believe it and ignored the warning of Helios and the Argo Corporation. Apparently, New-Level and the ArgoCorp. held a press conference shortly after Nonentity took over Undral Legacy, to confirm the threats of Helios and that the forced removal of the ArgoSpace was prohibited under any circumstances. I did not want to know, what kind of crisis they were now facing.

Then there was the second group of people, who were at the brink of losing their sanity. These players would be screaming into the air -hoping that they were broadcasted to the outer world at this moment- about that they did not care or did not believe the consequences of the forced removal and consented to be freed by the real world. Those people did indeed leave Undral shortly afterward, but we never heard from them again. It was unclear, whether they got paralyzed for the rest of their lives or got out healthy and unharmed. However, if the danger were to turn out as a bluff, we would have been rescued a long time ago.

This left Undral Legacy with estimated 27.000 active players, 3 months into the game. All of them were still in the very first world of the 160 in total.

Well, most of them, at least. There were rumors that some small parties supposedly managed to get to the second world and left us behind. Though, no evidence for that was official yet.

“Hey, Myst. Do you want to pay the market of the village a visit? These items you got sell very well.” Hilbert proposed.

“Hm, I don’t think so. It’s gotten late already, and I am not sure if I want to sell or use them as materials for clothes and items.”

“Fair enough. You worked hard and earned them, so you should make wise use of the loot.”

Hilbert and I went into a side-alley which was decorated with small street-lights and bushes. The alley only consisted of several inns and a small shop. Our dorm was within one of them. Everything was built in a fantasy medieval-age style, which made the wooden houses look quite comfortable.

We entered the one that was farther in the back and went upstairs to our room. I knocked politely on the door first.

“It’s us. We are back, guys.”

When Hilbert and I entered the dorm, the 4 other members jumped up from their beds with wide eyes.

“Myst?! Where the hell did you run off to? We were worried man!” A boy with short brown hair and a dark-orange top greeted me.

His name was Yakima. He was full of energy all the time, which gave him have a strong spirit.

“Jeez, you do this every time! At least leave a note or something behind!”

It was the charming Alice -with her long hazel hair and matching eyes- who was now scolding me. Her elegant red dress and small black cape gave the impression of Alice being an aristocrat. She was, without a doubt, a beautiful girl.

Alice was pouting a bit, visibly frustrated from my behavior.

“I know, I know. My bad.” I apologized bluntly, rubbing my palm on the back of my head.

Other than those two, there was also the shy Silke and the kindhearted Elm.

“Well, you came back in one piece, so that’s something.” Elm said, while smiling amused.

Just like the name, his hair had the color of an elm-tree. This gave him a warm and relaxed look.

“E-Ehm… I am glad that you are back, Myst…” Silke fiddled with her fingers around, forcing herself to say something.

Her long black hair covered the right side of her face a bit, while she was looking at her hands. This made her always look extremely cute and was bliss to witness.

“There you have it. Don’t make your guild members go through this again, alright?”

Before I realized it, Hilbert walked over from the doorframe and put his hand on my shoulder. His face was no longer showing concern. Instead, it was a playful grin of an older brother.

“Yeah, I will try my best.” I answered.

There were mixed feelings that I expressed at that moment. On one hand, I felt guilty for this not being the first time that I would run off on my own. On the other one, great joy packed me when I realized once again that I found wonderful friends in this world.

In a sense, Hilbert reminded me a bit of Zen. They were both charismatic leaders and very extroverted. I felt like I could follow him anywhere. Surely, the other guild members must have thought the same.

While Hilbert and the others chatted with each other, I walked over to the window and stared at the night sky outside. I knew that it was only virtual and a collection of data, but the stars that shined brightly in my field of view would always take my breath no matter how often I saw it.

*Where are you right now, Zen?*

After the day that he vanished without a trace at the plaza of the Opening Ceremony, I never saw or heard from him again. I did not know whether he ran away out of fear or simply ditched me to fight on his own. ...Of course, I also considered the possibility of his ArgoSpace being forcibly removed, but I hoped for this not to be the case.

“-What’s wrong, Myst? We are waiting for you.”

I turned around and saw that it was Alice, who was talking to me.

“Ah, it’s nothing. What do you need me for?”

“For our meeting, of course! We are going to explore a dungeon tomorrow!”

“Oh, right. I’ll be with you guys in a second.”

Alice was visibly satisfied and went back to the big wooden table on the other side of the room.

Our dorm was rather spacious and had plenty of room for the 6 of us, including an own bed for everyone. We had to save up quite a bit of money to stay here at this inn.

*Well, wherever you are right now, I hope that you are safe. I can’t wait to introduce you to this little group and tell you about the adventures that we had together!*

“-Hey, Myst! Quit dozing off and come join us!”

Yakima yelled and waved at me from the meeting table.

“Alright, I’m coming already.” I answered obligatory, while sighing playfully.

*...Although, you need to be a bit patient with them sometimes, Zen.*

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“-Silke, watch out!”

“Ah?!”

I grabbed and puller her toward me quickly, which made us fall on the ground.

The attacking monster rammed its fist into the mossy stone bricks, where Silke had just been standing a second ago. This created a chance for me to counterattack.

As I raised my right arm and chanted «Quick-Shot», a grey magic circle appeared. Shortly after, it manifested the spell and targeted the Golem made of rocks.

“Gigigi…!?”

The monster let out a high-pitched cry when it got hit directly at its torso.

“Now is the time! Attack it from both sides because it’s not very agile!” I shouted.

“Got it!”

“Leave it to us!”

Yakima and Hilbert acknowledged my plan and used the opening that I created for them.

In the meantime, Elm and Alice have been holding off a second golem that sneaked up onto us from behind.

Yakima already finished his chanting while I rescued Silke, so he could unleash the «Barrage» spell immediately. Hilbert used a different offensive magic, called «Stream». It was one of the first close-combat spells, which was essentially a 6 times stronger «Spark». For this, you had to make physical contact with the enemy by punching it.

“Gigigi!!!”

The golem, which was named «Sturdy Guard», let out a loud final death cry as its HP bar hit zero after this powerful double attack.

At the same time, Alice and Elm managed to defeat their opponent as well, which lead to both golems dissolving synchronized.

“Alright! We did it!” Yakima struck his fist into the air out of joy.

“That’s a level 13 monster for you. They are way tougher than the ones outside this dungeon!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Hilbert. You guys were 4 people; meanwhile Elm and I had to defeat that thing on our own!” Alice teased him jokingly.

Hilbert, however, always remained composed and did not let it get to him.

“I know, good job you two! Now we can explore the deeper parts of this place.”

Today we went just as we planned into a nearby dungeon of the village. It was located in the deeper parts of the forest and was not easy to find since the entrance was covered in moss just like the inside of that place. We happened to find it one day, when there was a quest for us to do nearby.

My eyes focused on the HP bar in the top-left corner of my vision. Next to it, my level was depicted.

*I am currently at level 12...*

By that time, it would have been possible to be at a higher level already. The problem was that I unfortunately died once with some of my other guild members, so we had to start over again.

At the beginning, that was a normal and common thing. Players have died within the first days faster than the lifespan of fruit flies. It took a while for them to get accustomed to the system and to properly understand the game. Luckily, we were all still at the very beginning, so nobody really lost much progress and stole the experience points from the others away.

While Helios was right that the amount of resources was limited in this world, there was still a lot of it in total to begin with. In addition, the limitation was unique for every monster and item, so just because there were no more bears did not mean that other monsters would be gone as well.

According to the calculations of informants, even if we were to keep farming the monsters in the first world, running out of these resources were nothing to worry about for at least another year and a half. This theory was made on the basis that we would be still stuck at the very beginning of Undral Legacy, so if we were to advance to the next worlds, the estimated time span would grow even further.

“Okay, according to our map, the deeper level should be where the treasure chamber awaits us.”

Hilbert scrolled through his menu and then turned the screen with his map toward us.

“What kind of loot do you think will be in there?” Alice asked, while she tilted her head to the side as she daydreamed.

“It better be something good, considering the work we had to do here!”

“Don’t worry, Yakima. Dungeons usually provide very generous rewards for completing them.” Elm assured his mind with a warm tone.

“E-Ehm…” A feminine voice talked to me from behind.

I turned around to see, that it was Silke who was tugging a bit on my sleeve.

“T-Thank you for helping me there earlier…” She stuttered, while staring at the mossy ground.

Her silky long hair covered her forehead and eyes.

*Silke is always so freaking cute when she does that.*

“Don’t sweat it. I managed to create a great opening for us, because of that. You did great!”

I patted her head gently and smiled.

“R-Really? I’m glad then!”

She finally looked me into the eyes and her face brightened up.

“Hey, you two! We are going to leave you behind if you stay there!” Hilbert shouted and waved at us.

The other guild members already went ahead and waited for Silke and me.

We grinned at each other shortly, before running after the Night Owls.

The layout of the dungeon we were in was similar to a jungle-temple. The floor and walls were made of mossy stone-bricks with wide hallways. There would be always multiple paths we could choose, so it took a while to find the correct ones which lead to the deeper parts.

After another half an hour, we finally arrived at a huge massive door. It was covered in runes and symbols that we were not able to read.

“Is this…?”

“Yes. This should be the treasure chamber of the dungeon.” I answered Alice.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s hurry up and see what’s inside!”

“Easy there, Yakima. Sometimes, there is a dungeon boss guarding the loot, so we shouldn’t rush things.” Hilbert stopped him.

Elm and I nodded at each other and slowly pushed the huge door open. It looked massive and heavy, but the system helped the player in these situations.

Halfway through opening it, the door automatically completed the whole process, which allowed us to enter the chamber. Inside, the room did not look much different than the hallways of the dungeon. The only difference was that the empty place was decorated with mossy pillars.

-Well, it was almost empty.

At the other end of the chamber, all of us spotted an old treasure chest on top of a small podium.

“There it is! We found it!”

Alice was overcome with joy and ran toward the chest.

We followed her and halted in front of the podium.

“Myst and I will open it. There is still the chance of this being a trap.” Hilbert then announced.

Both of us walked up the few stairs and exchanged glances with each other, before pulling the treasure chest open.

Within it, lots of stacked items greeted us and we were able to confirm that the loot was indeed safe to claim.

The Night Owls immediately swarmed around the chest and peeked inside of it. They were grabbing all kinds of stuff like potions, monster-materials and even some money.

“Wow! Look at this!”

“We were running out of health potions anyway, so this is just perfect!”

“There is even enough money to buy some new armor!”

All of them were satisfied and showed each other off what they had found in the loot.

There was something inside the chest that caught my attention. It was a scroll which was placed in the corner. No one seemed to notice it, so I picked it up.

*What is this? Is that a scroll for learning new spells?*

“Hm? What do you have there, Myst?” Elm asked me.

“I don’t know. It was beneath some materials in the corner, so I picked it up.”

“-Quick, open it!” Alice demanded with sparkling eyes.

I did as she said and slowly unfolded the scroll in my hands. To my surprise, it was not a magic learning scroll. Instead, it was a map. It depicted an area that was a bit deeper in this vast forest. There was also a marking on an area, called «Disregarded Woods».

“Is this… a treasure map? Alice asked confused.

“No… I think that this is the location of a Field-Boss.”

“Are you for real?! We could make a fortune by selling it!”

“That’s true, but we would need to confirm it ourselves first.” Hilbert added, thoughtfully.

I agreed. If it was really a map that revealed the location of one of the three Field-Bosses, then it held great value.

“Alright, then it’s decided! We are going on an expedition tomorrow, to check whether there really is a Field-Boss in these «Disregarded Woods»!” Hilbert shouted motivated.

“Yeah!” We agreed in unison.

“You all did a fantastic job! Let’s return to the village and call it a day!”

We grabbed the remaining loot from the treasure chest and stored it in our inventories, before leaving the deepest chamber of the dungeon behind us. Some golems tried to hinder us leaving the jungle-temple, but we managed to beat them all easily. Once their attack pattern was clear, there was not much difficulty to do so anymore. I even got another level up from it.

On the next day, we would set off to confirm the assumed location of the first Field-Boss of Undral. If this were to turn out as a success, it would -without a doubt- be a significant step forward to our freedom.

CHAPTER 4

Disregarded Woods

On the next day, our guild left the village at dawn. The destination was the «Disregarded Woods», a place which was supposed to hide one of the three Field-Bosses in the first world of Undral. After walking for roughly an hour, we managed to arrive in the deeper parts of the forest.

“Hey, how much further is this? My feet are killing me!” Alice complained.

“We are almost there. It should be at the end of this path.”

“You’re saying this for a long time already, Myst!”

Alice let out a sigh and put her strength together. She was not the most enthusiastic person when it came to the woods, so I was able to understand her displease.

The deeper we went into this thick forest, the harder it got to navigate us through. Sometimes, you felt like something was watching your every step.

“I’m getting the shivers of this place…” She commented.

Then suddenly, something fell out of the trees above us. It was a large spider creature with the name «Garvantula», a level 14 monster. The long hairy legs and glowing red eyes made it look quite terrifying for anyone with a fear of spiders. On top of that, it made aggressive noises which made clear that we were its prey.

“-Eeeek!!! Gross! Kill it, quick!”

To my surprise, it was Yakima who screamed out loud. Alice, on the other hand, tried her best to hold it in.

The spider was not in the mood to let us pass, as it proceeded to shoot a sticky web toward our direction. I managed to deflect it with «Quick Shot» before it could hit us.

"Hilbert!"

"On it!"

Both of us charged at the Garvantula from each side, encircling it while we were preparing our attack. The spider seemed to struggle which one of us it should focus on, so it decided to shoot the same kind of web at the two of us in each direction.

We managed to deflect the attack, since it was not a remarkably strong magic. This created a short opening for us, because the monster had to recharge after the attack, causing it to freeze at its spot.

"...Huaahh!!!" Hilbert and I screamed in unison as we launched our counterattack on our hunter.

He used his «Stream» spell, ramming his fist into the head of the Garvantula, and I mirrored his movements from the other side. We were about the same level, which is why I barely managed to get enough skill points to learn this spell.

"Zshhhhhh...!" The Garvantula let out a pitiful last cry before its body dissolved into data constructs.

When the familiar bell sound rang together with the small window that appeared afterward, we knew that the battle was over as fast as it started.

"...Ahhh.... is it over? Is that thing gone?"

"Yes, Yakima. You can come out of that bush there now."

I chuckled. While Hilbert and I were busy with that spider, Yakima hid himself in a nearby bush. I could not believe that this was our battle-maniac, who was always the first to be involved in the fight.

"D-Don't get the wrong idea, Myst! I was scouting the area, so we wouldn't be ambushed by another one of them! Nothing else!"

"Yeah, obviously. Good job!" Elm grinned teasingly at him.

*I hope that the Field-Boss won't be another spider, or else he might bail again.*

Leaving the Garvantulas home behind us, we moved on to find our target -the Disregarded Woods.

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"Hey, do you see that light shining through the trees over there?" Elm asked.

"Yes, it strays a bit off the path, but there seems to be an open space behind them." Hilbert concluded, after mustering the layout of it.

We decided to follow the light that was luring us from afar, only to find ourselves in an open field after passing through the trees. The area was not particularly wide, but had something mysterious about it.

*Why is there a place like this in the middle of the forest?*

I looked around the field for a clue and spotted something in the center of it. From the distance, it seemed like it was some sort of small statue.

"Guys, there is a mossy statue over in the middle of this field."

"Oh! You're right, Myst!" Yakima agreed.

When we came closer to it and I got a better view on the statue, I realized that it resembled a wooden golem. There were small trees growing on its shoulders and most of the body was covered in bushes or moss.

"T-there is something written on this stone plate..."

I looked to Silke and saw that she stood on the right side of the statue, pointing at something on it.

"Let me see..."

"Ah?!" Silke flinched.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

"Jeez, Myst... Don't sneak up on me from behind like that!"

She pouted at me, still being a bit startled, so I had to apologize to her.

I read the writings on the stone plate. The language was in English, so it was a bit difficult to understand what was written on it. This seemed to be written in an older fashion, since it used words like "thou" or "shall".

"English is not one of my strong points. Do you understand more of it than me, Myst?" Hilbert asked.

"I was not able to translate everything, but I got the general picture of it. I think that this statue is some kind of activate able device that connects this place to another one."

"Cool, so we just gotta' ask it nicely and it will teleport us to the Boss?"

"I don't think you can ask it to do that by itself, Yakima." Elm answered.

"No, we can't use it just like that. This plate said something about a requirement needed to activate the statue. I couldn't understand what exactly it was, though."

All of us tried to come up with an answer to that puzzle. However, no one managed to find a solution.

*A requirement... probably an item... like a key... or maybe...*

The plate did not define what kind of item it needed, or at least I did not understand it. This meant, the item did not have to be something like an orb or such. It could be an object, which might look insignificant at first look, or not special.

"I think I got it! If it doesn't mention a specific item needed to activate the statue, how about we try to use the one that got us here in the first place?"

"Huh? You mean the map from the dungeon?" Yakima asked.

Hilbert then attained a sparkle in his eyes.

"But of course! I should have thought of that! We followed the exact same path that was depicted on the map and we did not come across anything noteworthy other than the Garvantula!"

I nodded in agreement.

"Yes and since it would be impossible to drag that monster here, it would mean that from the point we obtained the map, we had everything we needed for the boss."

Alice had a stern expression on her face, trying her best to understand the puzzle.

"But why should the map also be the key at the same time? It already had another purpose."

"Then this only means that the main purpose was not to lead us here, but instead to work as an activation item. We should keep in mind that this place could have been found even without the map. I guess, this was to prevent finding a boss by accident."

"...I-I see." Silke commented.

I opened the game-menu and selected the dungeon map from my inventory. Shortly after, it manifested itself in my hand.

Before I could have said anything, the item began to glow in a cyan tone. The statue in front of us responded to it, by doing the same thing.

A small notification window opened before me:

*- You are about to enter a high-level instance. Do you wish to enter? -*

I glanced at Hilbert and he nodded confidently at me.

Thus, I pressed the confirmation option on the window. As the notification had closed on me, the glowing of the statue became stronger, until our vision was completely engulfed in a white light.

When our vision returned, we found ourselves in a quite similar place. The field we stood in looked almost the same as before, with the only exceptions being that the statue was missing and the trees surrounding the area were fixed behind an transparent barrier. I figured, that we would not be able to leave this place just like that again.

"Where are we...?" Elm asked.

Before anyone could come up with an answer, the earth had started to shake violently. To top it off, the grassland in front of us began to crack, as wooden pillar-like objects came out of it.

Soon, we realized that those were not pillars, but arms instead. As they grabbed onto the ground, an even more gigantic figure pushed itself out of the ground. It was the exact same creature that the statue symbolized: a wooden golem, covered in plants, moss and alike.

"Gruoahh!"

The golem let out a battle-cry and at the same time an immense HP-bar along with a name tag appeared on top of it.

"Forsaken Forest Guardian..." I read aloud in a tiny voice.

"Is that a field boss...? Are we supposed to fight this monster...?"

"You can't be serious..."

Even Alice and Hilbert had a hard time to find words for this situation.

However, it was clear as day for everyone. This gigantic golem was a field-boss and it would not let us go without putting up a fight.

We had no choice now, but to defeat it. If we fail to do that, all of our progress would be lost and we would find ourselves at the beginning again, not having come a single step closer to freedom.

*Losing is definitely not an option for us!*

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The sound of earth shattering around us was almost deafening. Our opponent, the Forsaken Forest Guardian, had enough power behind each of its attack that a single hit would crush our whole body in real life. Of course, in the virtual world of Undral, we might be able to survive it if our stats were high enough.

"-Gahh!"

"Yakima! Damn it!" I cursed.

"Myst, keep your eyes on the enemy!"

I followed the command of Hilbert and my eyes widened, as the Guardian swung his arm at me with terrifying power. Thanks to the advice, I was able to barely dodge it. Another reason was that, while the monster had incredible power, it lacked a bit in speed to back it up.

Silke, in the meantime, dashed to Yakima and casted a weak healing spell on him. Even though, he only got hit by a single attack, his HP bar had lost a significant amount of points.

Elm and Alice tried to distract the Guardian, so Hilbert and I could cast a strong spell, but the enemy seemed to have picked up on our strategy.

"What do we do now, Hilbert? That mossy giant is not interested in Alice and me!"

"I can see that! That monster refuses to give us enough time for a long-casting spell!"

Alice was visibly frustrated and got angry at the monster.

"What's the deal with it? How can that thing be unfazed by someone like me?!"

*No, I don't think that a virtual monster is interested in a human girl, Alice...*

At any rate, the situation could not be worse for us. We were struggling to deal enough damage to the boss, while also trying to avoid its attacks. A wrong move could kill us instantly. The HP bar of the Guardian had also more than half of its value remaining. No matter how you looked at it, we needed a plan as quick as possible.

*Think me! There is a pattern to its attacks, so we should be able to come up with a counter to it!*

As thoughts crossed my mind, Hilbert and I dodged once more to the side, avoiding fatal damage from the boss.

Yakima -in the meantime- had recovered already and dashed head-first at the Guardian.

"Leave it to me! That walking tree ain't a problem for the great Yakima!"

"No, don't!" Elm shouted at him, but Yakima continued to charge at the enemy.

The Forsaken Forest Guardian responded to his thoughtless attack, by using its fist to deliver a blow. This time, however, it was embodied with magic which caused its arm to glow in an orange color. There was no doubt that this attack would kill Yakima in an instant.

"This moron...!" Alice complained frustrated.

Time was running out fast, so I stretched out my left arm toward the gap between Yakima and the boss and casted a new spell of mine: «Forming».

In the yet empty space, something manifested itself. It was a boulder, but a rather small one.

Yakima understood my thought process to use the object as a springboard and jumped with a strong kick from it into the air.

There was an obvious weakness of the Guardian that I mentioned before -its speed. This flaw of the monster made it impossible for it to redirect an attack.

Because of that, Yakima managed to jump above the arm of the monster and landed right on it.

"Nice support, Myst!"

He did not even finish his sentence, before he rushed across the arm of the boss and casted his own attack.

"It's payback time, giant!"

Ironically, Yakima used a very similar spell like the Forsaken Forest Guardian, covering his own fist in an orange color, before ramming it into the head of our enemy. It was not nearly as powerful as the one from the boss, but the result was still remarkable. For the first time, the Guardian fell back and lost a big portion of its HP.

"Alright! I told you guys, that I can do it!"

"Are you kidding?! You would have surely died if Myst did not help!" Alice scolded him.

"Eh? But we are a team, so it is only natural to expect backup, right?"

"Listen, you...!"

Alice was about to finish the job that the Guardian failed to complete, but Elm and Silke managed to hold her back.

"Stop it, you two! We still have to deal with the boss!" Hilbert stepped in and all of us turned our attention to the Guardian again.

The HP bar has dropped below half of its full value by now and entered the yellow zone. This gave me hope, that we could maybe defeat it.

"Myst, I don't know what you did there, but let's repeat this strategy! I think, attacking its head is the best way to deal notable damage!"

"Are you able to use the same spell as Yakima, Hilbert?"

"Not quite, but I still have enough mana for a couple Stream. Can you summon multiple of these boulders?"

"Unfortunately, I am not. This magic is not designed for combat and uses resources, which I stored beforehand. I can do it one or two more times at best."

"Then we have to make the most out of these few tries!"

Hilbert gave the sign to resume the battle, while the Guardian caught momentum again.

Elm and Alice followed the same strategy, trying to get as much attention from the boss as possible.

I did not mention that before, but in terms of evading skills, both of them are on another level from the rest of us. Elm spent his points on these traits, because, just like me, he used to survive on his own before joining our guild.

Alice, on the other hand, just tried her best to avoid battles and confrontations with any monsters. For that reason, her level is a bit lower than Elm's and she did not have enough skill-points to learn some offensive spells on top of it.

"The boss seems to get mad, after failing to hit us many times! I think, we established a solid aggro from here on!"

"We are keeping it busy, so get moving already!" Alice complained, while jumping from side to side.

"I-I will provide help too, by healing you guys if you get hit!"

"Thanks, Silke! Okay friends, time to get serious!" Hilbert proclaimed motivated.

The three of us charged at the distracted field-boss, confident to defeat the monster.

I immediately summoned the first boulder for Yakima and as he ran toward it, the Guardian turned around to deliver a powerful blow at him. It seemed that the artificial intelligence for a boss monster was way more advanced than the normal ones, which allowed it to anticipate move patterns and counter them.

"Don't turn your back at us, big guy!"

Elm used the opportunity and casted a Barrage at the Guardian, who was focused on preventing Yakima's attack.

*-GRUUHH...!*

He managed to interrupt its spell and easily regained the status of being the monsters target. However, as the HP bar dropped even lower, the boss became more and more agitated.

Within a split-second, the Guardian used a new magic spell that was not part of his former attack pattern. It rammed a fist into the ground, which gave all of us who stood on the ground the «Seismic» status effect and dragged its arm 180 degrees around its body only to sent Elm flying.

He had no chance of evading this time, because the Seismic status caused you to fall on the ground and forced you to remain in that position for a few seconds.

"-Arghh!"

"Elm!" Alice shouted, as she watched him being tossed back more than 20 feet.

Silke immediately ran after him, her face covered in shock. In the meantime, I lost track of Yakima in the chaos.

"Gruoah!!!"

The Guardian let out an angry cry, as it stepped back a bit. At that moment, I saw Yakima in the air right in front of its head.

"That was for Elm, you mossy-faced tree!"

"Yakima? How did you attack him, when we got knocked to the ground?" I asked confused.

"Uh, I don't really know. I just jumped into the air from that boulder and attacked its head like we planned it."

"Maybe, only people who are touching the ground when the spell is casted are affected by it." Hilbert added thoughtfully.

Alice, as impatient as she was, did her best to gain the attention of the boss again. Silke, on the other hand, was using healing magic on Elm and he seemed to have successfully survived the attack.

*It's no good. I used them all up...*

There was not a single try left for my spell anymore. On top of that, the whole area was flatland without any objects which could come in handy.

My skill for the spell Forming was still low, so the boulders I created had disappeared shortly after they have been summoned. Using one for multiple people was not possible within the short time window. We needed to come up with a new type of plan; otherwise we would all end up like Elm. However, our mana and HP have depleted quite a bit by now, so time was not on our side in this fight.

With everything on the line, we had entered the final stage of the boss battle. Our options were to either get out of here victorious, or to start all over again with freedom being as far away as possible once more.

"Well, it's time to finish this already, guys! I want to drink a cold beer in a tavern!"

"Now you're talking, Hilbert!" The battle fanatic grinned widely.

"I think, Yakima gave me an idea earlier. If we all attack at the same time, we might be able to defeat it." I suggested with a serious tone.

"Any idea how to deal with that seismic status effect? I don't think a small hop over the ground is enough for that."

"Drink the «Small Sustain Syrup», which we got from the dungeon. It halves the duration of the next incoming status effect for 5 seconds. Though, it does not specify on which ones it works, so we just have to hope it helps in our case."

"Only one way to find out, then!" Our leader said, while opening up his menu.

Yakima and I did as well. Shortly after, the three of us had manifested the item in our hands.

"Would you guys wrap this meeting of yours up already, please?! Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep this thing busy all alone without getting killed?!" Alice, who was trying her best to survive the Guardian's attacks, shouted infuriated at us.

"You heard our princess! Time for the three magic knights to go and save the day!"

"Yeah!" Yakima and I replied in unison.

As we charged at the field-boss, Alice made sure to keep the attention from the monster on herself as long as possible.

"I know that my spells do not hurt you much, but it must annoy the hell out of you, right? Like a mosquito that just keeps stinging you over and over again!" She provoked confidently, while she shot the same spell over and over at the enemy.

*Keep at it, Alice! Just a bit more and we are in range to attack!*

With each split second, we came closer to the gigantic wooden golem. It was only a matter of moments, before the algorithm of the boss would check for any surprise attacks and ambushes from us other players.

However, our goal was not to hope, that the monster would forget about us. It was already enough for it to react a single second too slow, which would have allowed us to get close enough to engage in combat.

In that moment, everything seemed to have frozen in place.

...No, that was not it. Rather than that, everything seemed to move in slow-motion. I did not know, whether that was just my adrenaline pumping at an insanely high pressure, or the virtual time of Undral actually slowed down.

Then, after we passed a certain distance and only a few feet separated the Guardian from us, its head began to turn toward our direction with a gaze that was ready to kill.

"-Now! Drink it!" I shouted unnerved.

Yakima and Hilbert placed their trust in me and immediately did as I said.

We had to perfectly time our use of the Syrup, because it only lasted for a few seconds. If the effect were to fade even a millisecond too early, the whole plan would have failed as a consequence.

*Here it comes!*

We barely managed to gulp down the liquid, before the boss followed up the movement of its head with the whole body in our direction, completely ignoring the desperate Alice.

Just as I had expected it, the Forsaken Forest Guardian used the same magic spell as before. This time, it made use of the turn-movement as an impetus to put even more power behind the attack. There was no doubt, that it could kill anyone of us in an instant if it hit us directly.

At that moment, I was genuinely scared of the field-boss. ...On second thought, terrified was a more fitting word to describe it.

With a loud rambling, the Guardian rammed its fist into the ground in front of us and an immense shockwave forced us on our knees. Luckily, that this spell had been used was according to my plan, so we managed to not run right into the attack.

I felt, that the item did its job properly and we were able to stand up just as quick as we got knocked down. The seismic status effect was actually weakened thanks to the syrup.

"Go! Climb it!" I demanded and both of them finally realized what my intention was.

Hilbert and Yakima picked up their pace again and sprinted with a satisfied grin on their faces toward the arm of the field-boss, which was still stuck in the ground.

"Heh! Bold of you to copy the same strategy of mine and sell it as your own, Myst!" Yakima, the proud inventor of the crazy tactic to run on the limbs of a monster, chuckled flattered.

The time window for this was small, so all of us ran up the stiff wooden arm of the Guardian at full speed. When I felt, that I was about to reach my limit, I dashed even harder forward. The success of the whole plan rested now on our abilities and determination to pull it of.

Another jump from its moss-covered shoulders and we flew in the air, only to be greeted by a giant wooden head and a deadly gaze up there.

We had no time to be all petrified and scared of the sight.

I started the chant of Stream and so did Hilbert. With a wide grin, Yakima casted for the third time in this battle his own version of the Guardians attack and put all of his remaining strength into it.

In this moment, I started to have doubts. Doubts, whether we were able to defeat the boss with this.

*Are we strong enough? What if we fail? Would it not be my fault if we end up at zero again?*

Then, an even scarier thought struck me.

*Would they hate me for it? Would they leave me? Leave me like Zen did?*

It were familiar voices, that ripped these thoughts away from me. Loud and emotional ones, that rang from far below.

"I believe in you, guys! Finish it!" Alice screamed.

"Don't let us down, you three!" Elm joined her.

"Myst! Yakima! Hilbert! All of us are counting on you!" Silke, who I have never experienced to be that energetic, conveyed her feelings together with them as well.

I felt my determination coming back and we three brimmed brightly as we heard the voices of our friends. Putting all of our remaining magic and strength into the spells, we unleashed the final attack on the field-boss that would determine the outcome of this battle, who was only able to throw a piercing gaze at us in that moment.

"This is the end for you!" All of us shouted, as we rammed our magic and all the hope we had into its skull.

The wooden Guardian let out an ear-deafening cry when the pressure of our magic caused an explosion of energy, covering the air in smoke.

Yakima, Hilbert and I lost our momentum and fell a long way back on the ground with a loud thud. No one of us had any stamina remaining to get up.

The ground started to shake violently as something huge fell on its back as well. It was the Forsaken Forest Guardian. There were no attempts from it to get back on its feet. Not even a single struggle.

When the shaking had stopped, complete silence remained. What broke this nerve-wracking silence was a familiar sound of falling sand. This meant only one thing, so I got up on my weak feet and stared at the field-boss.

*Isn't that...?*

My theory was proven to be correct, because the sound was caused by the Guardian, who was slowly dissolving into red digital dust. The HP bar had hit zero and as a result, the monster was now vanishing from this place.

The system seemed to pick up on my disbelief of that fact and thus, a transparent text appeared in front of everyone, who participated in this fight to spell it out for us.

*- Congratulations on defeating the Forsaken Forest Guardian of the Disregarded Woods! -*

"We... we did it! We defeated the field-boss!" Our proud leader cheered.

"Of course we did! Don't tell me, that you doubted my skills!"

"No, of course no one did, Yakima. We all knew that you guys could do it." Elm, who survived that direct blow from the boss, joined us together with Silke and Alice.

"You all did great, guys. I am happy, that you are all well." The usually shy Silke smiled warmly.

"Good grief, you guys really let me alone with that thing! Aren't the boys supposed to protect us girls?" Alice complained sarcastically.

I chuckled softly at her desperate attempt to sound harsh.

"Sorry, Alice. We were only able to win thanks to your efforts."

She immediately turned her head away from me, to avoid eye-contact. I thought for a short moment, that she was blushing a bit, but her long hair hid her face behind them.

"...W-Well, as long as you are aware of it, its fine..."

Even with all the evidence in front of us, it was still hard to believe that we defeated that monster. This was the hardest fight that we had up until now. If this was the strength of only one field-boss, how terrifying would it be to fight a world-boss? My stomach began to hurt just by the thought of it.

Surviving in this virtual world was one thing, but trying to actually advance in the game was on another level. Even if we got stronger with each enemy and obtained new skills, I doubted that it would get easier later on.

This game was never intended to be finished as quickly as possible and you realized that fact very quickly by the sheer difficulty of the game in the very first world already. Yet, Helios told us to do exactly that if we ever wanted to return home and even increased the difficulty by adding a special rule to the game.

*How long will it take us, to escape from this game? ...Is it even possible for us to achieve that in the first place?*

Whether it was possible to do or not, however, was irrelevant to me. If there was one thing certain in this artificially created world, it was that I would be fighting for our freedom until the very end!

"...Hey, do you think that Helios was actually serious about that? You know that stuff about broadcasting the events of UL?" Yakima asked then.

All of us looked at each other puzzled for a few seconds, as if we did not understand a single word of what he just said. After thinking for a few seconds, our eyes had widened.

"I-I completely forgot about that over the months!" Hilbert shouted emotionally.

"I did my best to avoid this thought... Do you think that he is going to show our fight to the public?" I asked, trying my best not to panic.

Alice, in the meantime, collapsed on her knees, covering her face with her hands.

"U-Urgh... this is so embarrassing! How could that devil do that to us...?!"

"Hehe! Man, you really said some cringe-worthy stuff there, Alice!"

"S-Shut up, Yakima! As if you guys are any different!"

Elm chuckled, while he watched us losing our minds. How he could be so unaffected by it, was a complete mystery to me.

"Well, I am sure that there are worse cases than us. Maybe we will come off as some heroes, for defeating the first field-boss?"

"Yeah, as if standing in the backline and shouting: -I believe in you, guys!- would be seen as heroic!" Yakima laughed and it was clear that he meant Alice.

Her face reddened and suddenly, she was starting to shake from anger and embarrassment.

"Yakima, you...!!!"

*-Oh no, now he's done it! At this point, there is no turning back anymore! I think we should get as far away from her, as possible...*

Hilbert and the others quickly picked up on my thoughts and after giving each other a worried glance, we dashed away as hard as we could. ...If anything, I think we outmatched the speed that we had against the Guardian.

"There won't be any heroic tales to tell of you when I am done, you hear me?!"

Even though, only Yakima was responsible for this mess, all of us knew that in her current mental state, she would always be unleashing her anger equally on everyone of us.

*I think, we just got ourselves in another boss fight...!*

CHAPTER 5

Helios Makes An Appearance?

A few days passed, since our battle against the Forsaken Forest Guardian. In no time, the word about it spread like a campfire throughout Undral.

Our plan to become rich from the information about the boss was shattered, when the other guilds and players demanded a "mutual sharing" of crucial information like these. They were all going on about us being in this together and establishing a network between players to escape the game faster.

In the end, we had no choice but to cooperate with them, or we might have ended up becoming hated by every single player in Undral -maybe even over in the real world.

It was probably the right thing to do. Our chances of freedom would greatly increase, when lots of people advanced further into the game.

While the recourses of Undral Legacy had been limited, a boss still did not become a unique being in this world. It was not enough for a single group to take out a world-boss, for everyone to be able to advance to the next world. Only the ones that participated in the battle were, which was unsurprising. After all, it was exactly the same with regular MMORPGs.

This rule also applied to the field-bosses. If you wanted to enter the world-dungeon, collecting the 3 keys was mandatory to do it yourself. These items were bound to your account, so selling and trading them was not possible. That was the reason, why other guilds wanted to know the strengths and weaknesses of the Forsaken Forest Guardian to the even smallest detail.

Our guild, the Night Owls, has moved from the small town to «Sird», the second largest city in the first world of Undral, right after the starting city. We felt, that since players started to fight the field-boss in the Disregarded Woods, interacting with other guilds for information had become more valuable.

At first, I had troubles to get myself used to the city, since we spend a lot of time in small villages and towns. The crowded streets and marketplaces were a bit overwhelming, even if you only looked at them from afar.

"Well then, in celebration of moving to Sird and defeating our first field-boss ... cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Hilbert invited everyone to go out and drink in a lively tavern, which was nearby the main-streets. Naturally, it was brimming with customers, players and NPCs alike.

"But I gotta' say... we really made that battle harder for us than it should have been!"

"No use complaining about it afterward, Yakima. We simply did not know, that you could have teamed up with other players to reach 12 members." I said.

"It's not even that alone... we were a bit under leveled for that monster, don't you think?"

"Yeah, that was a crucial factor as well."

Elm shrugged and sighed.

"In the end, we did win, right? I think, that is all what matters."

"I-I agree. Us having survived is plenty to me..." Silke admitted.

She did have a point. After we saw, how prepared the other guilds and parties were, it was almost a miracle that we won that fight. In terms of level and manpower, we lacked in every single aspect. Even our armor and gear was barely acceptable.

Nonetheless, us beating the Guardian was a huge step forward for every trapped player in Undral. Not only were we the first, to discover the location of a field-boss, but we also provided decisive information to beat it. Not even 2 days after our victory, 5 other guilds defeated the Forsaken Forest Guardian as well.

Over 3 months had passed already since the start of Undral Legacy and because of the lack of progress; it felt like time had frozen for us. Unable to take a step forward and completing Helios demand of discovering the hidden method of logging out of Undral.

However, now that multiple players have overcome the first challenge, with countless more to follow, time seemed to have resumed ticking for us. Scouting players have already pinned down possible locations of the other two field-bosses, so every day that passed by we would actually start to accomplish something finally.

Even though, we were still worlds apart from regaining our freedom, this constant feeling of despair clouding your mind started to lift, step by step.

"I hope that you did not plan to do any quests and monster grinding in the next few days, because after this exhausting week of constant traveling I am taking a break, Hilbert!"

"...Eh? Haha, of course not, Alice..."

*You definitely did.*

We had spent a few hours in the tavern already. I remember, that we came here at dusk, but now darkness had been lurking outside. You could lose track of time quickly, because no matter whether it was day or night, the people here were drinking and laughing loudly without a rest.

Yakima then dropped the empty cup with a thud on the table.

"Alight, then! Silke and I are off for a day or two! Let's go, Silke!"

"Huh? Where did that come from? Have you even taken a look at the time?" Alice asked confused.

She gave him a doubtful glance, while holding a half-full cup in her hand.

"Where's the harm? She asked me to help her get a bit more confident in combat, so we are going into the wild!"

"Eh? Are you serious?"

"Y-Yes, I did ask him..." Silke confessed.

She fiddled around with her fingers, avoiding looking Alice into the eyes.

"And you are fine with that, Hilbert?! Leaving her alone, with that buffoon?"

"It's a good thing for her to become stronger. In actual combat, we need everyone to give it their all. We can't always protect her from getting attacked."

He continued to drink his beer, not showing any remorse against Silkes request.

"Glad to hear that from you, leader! I promise to bring her back in one piece, or two!"

*...In one whole piece is good enough!*

Grinning arrogantly, Yakima stood up and left together with Silke the tavern.

"That freak is obviously up to something!" Alice muttered, glaring at the exit of the building.

It may have sounded harsh, but I agreed with Hilberts opinion. From here on out, the monster would only become more aggressive and unpredictable. There was no telling what might happen in the future, so it was better to be safe than sorry.

"But I have to say, I am still curious as to what kind of spell you were using back then, Myst." Hilbert asked me with an excited tone.

"It's nothing special. The spell is called Forming and actually belongs to the craftsman magic category. It allows you to store materials and if you train your skill a bit, shaping the form of it becomes possible to a certain degree. I like to try out different kinds of magic, so I just put the bare minimum of points needed in it and learned the basics of the spell."

"Haha! To think, that you would use a non-combat magic in a boss fight! You really are something different, Myst!"

"I agree. I bet, not even the developers would have thought of it. If they watched the broadcast, some of them were probably chuckling amused." Elm added.

I was only able to give them a flustered smile as a response.

They were right, after all. I don't think that when craftsmen magic had been developed, they intended the players to use them as combat spells. But in this world, where the only thing that mattered was to win against the enemy, we had to use every option that we got.

Alice let out a gentle yawn, while covering her mouth with her hand.

"I'm getting tired. Can we go home soon?"

"Sure, I was thinking the same. By the way, we shouldn't be doing anything crazy with Silke and Yakima gone, so let’s take it easy tomorrow!" Hilbert suggested.

Elm and I agreed, since we did a lot of tiring explorations over the last week.

Thus, we had left the tavern and returned to our newest Inn at Sird.

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*Knock Knock*

"...Not yet..."

*Knock Knock Knock*

"...Five more minutes..."

"If you don't open that damn door right now, I am going to tear it down!"

"...Alice?!"

When I realized, who this voice belonged to, I jumped out of my bed in a flash.

Opening my menu, I selected my usual leather armor and clothes. Within seconds, they manifested themselves on my half-naked body as if I had never taken them off.

That was one feature of the game, which I absolutely loved. If getting dressed in the real world was as easy, as in Undral, I would not have been late to school many times.

I ran over to the door and tapped with a finger on it, which opened a small option window for me:

*- Would you like to unlock the door? -*

Pressing yes, you could hear the lock being removed and I was able to open the door with the knob.

As I pulled it open to the inside, a hazel-haired girl, who had both hands on her waist, stood behind the frame.

"Took you long enough! You're really living up to our guild name, the Night Owls!"

"...Sorry, I wasn't expecting someone to come over this early."

"It is 9 in the morning, you sleepyhead!"

"Wha-"

A simple glance to the corner of my vision was enough, to see the virtual clock on my interface. I have not looked at it yet, so it was surprising for me how long I had slept for.

"Anyways, I am going to do some shopping in the city. Do you want to come with me?"

"Oh, uh... sure, but I can't really help you when it comes to clothes and that stuff."

"Don't get the wrong idea! I'd feel bad for leaving you holed up in here the whole day, that's all!"

She turned her head to the side and started to pout a bit.

*...So you wouldn't feel bad for Elm and Hilbert...?*

"Stop spacing out and get a move on! The market becomes really crowded at lunch, so I want to get the popular ones done, while its still manageable! And don't you think its just one or two of them!"

The brown-haired girl waved for me to follow, as she walked down the hallway of the Inn.

Unlike in our last stay, this Inn was big enough to fit everyone in a single-bed room. The price for a single night was a bit more expensive, but considering the fact that I was able to have time for me alone, it was a small price to pay.

Or at least, I had assumed to have some free-time for myself...

"...I thought, we wanted to take it easy today..." I sighed.

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Alice and I walked through the tight passages that connected the main-streets with each other between side-alleys filled with shops, taverns, merchants and much more. Usually, at noon, these alleys were hard to pass through when most players were coming back from early hunting and exploration quests.

It was a pleasant experience, to see that players all around Undral have slowly gotten accustomed to the circumstances which we lived in, instead of drowning in despair.

"Oh! Look, Myst! That necklace looks beautiful, doesn't it?"

Alice was practically glued to the window of a jewelry-shop. Her eyes were wide open and sparkled brightly.

"But these are quite expensive and don't even boost any of your stats to begin with."

"They don't have to do any of that, just to be worth a lot!"

She glanced at me with a judgmental look and the sparkle in her eyes had faded.

"...Well, I am sure that it would look better, if you were to wear it."

"Y-You think so...?"

Suddenly, she started to pout again and her face flushed red, just like earlier.

"I-I'll think about it! For now, our next stop is a nearby cafe that I wanted to check out!"

She did not even wait to finish her sentence, before walking away down the alley with swift steps.

*I'm glad that we are inside a game, because in the real world my feet would have been killing me by now.*

I followed her, before she got lost in the crowd of people. We walked for another 5 minutes across the passages, until a luxurious-looking cafe marked the corner of a crosswalk.

It was not visited by many customers. Even when considering the fact that it was not a busy daytime, you would have expected at least more than a handful of people. At the entrance, an NPC maid welcomed us as soon as we stood in front of it.

Alice stepped eloquently inside and chose a table next to a window, which faced the crosswalk. Not even a minute, after we sat down, another NPC brought us the menu for the cafe and I was about to find out the reason for the lack of customers.

"Wha-! 500 Gall for a cup of tea?! Does it come served with a mana potion, or what?" I gasped.

"Quality does have its price, Myst. According to the written guide of Sird, you won't find a better cafe than this one!"

"But still, this is a little..."

I skipped over the menu once more, but even the most basic offers were expensive. As a reference, buying a new pair of boots with decent stat values would cost around 750 Gall from a good merchant.

"Hm... I think I'll take a black tea and a strawberry cake. Of course, you are going to treat me for lunch, right?"

She made a selfish smirk and pressed her cheek elegantly on her palm.

I had a bad feeling about it and searched for her order on the menu with strained eyes. When I had found what she picked out for herself, I felt as if my spirit left my virtual body. Rhetorically speaking, of course.

"550 and 700 Gall... I am going to be broke at this rate..."

"Excuse me, I want to order something!"

Alice did not waste a single thought on my mental crisis and waved for a waitress to notice her.

In order to prevent myself from spending even the last of my savings, I decided to go with a small cup of coffee. Although, nothing we were consuming in Undral would actually go into the stomach of our real body, the virtual recreation of the flavors was still incredibly accurate.

I think, they were stimulating certain areas of our brain to give us the illusion of eating and drinking something, so the result was not completely perfect. However, as with almost everything in Undral, it was shockingly similar to the real version of it every time.

Shortly after, the waitress came back with our order. The question, whether they really needed time to prepare meals or simply brought them to existence, made me curious for a long time already.

"Mhmm~! The cake is delicious!" Alice concluded with a high-pitched and satisfied tone.

"I'm glad you like it."

*It did cost a fortune, after all...!*

I took a sip from my still hot coffee, which suited my taste quite well.

Even if expensive, it was hard to deny the pleasing quality of their products. I was able to imagine, coming back to this cafe once in a while, just to enjoy the unique flavor of the coffee.

After a few minutes, Alice put down her tea cup and stared outside the window.

"Uhm, I've been meaning to ask you this for a while now, but how do you feel about all this?" She then spoke up in a tiny and soft tone.

"Eh? What exactly? You don't mean..."

"I'm talking about us being trapped in Undral, you moron!"

"O-Oh, right."

"I mean, we have been inside this for over 3 months now and don't know about anything going on in the real world. What did they even do to our bodies? The fact, that we are here means we are still alive, but that's all we can conclude from this."

I stared at my pitch black coffee, as if I hoped for an answer to reveal in front of me by doing so.

"I'm sure there has been a lot of chaos over there, when all this started. The distress that Undral Legacy had been taken over by Helios himself must have been terrifying. On top of that, authorities were now confronted with handling 28.000 people, who got trapped inside it. Families and friends were even able to witness all of our despair and horror through a live broadcast of the events inside here."

I paused for a second and took a deep breath.

"So to answer your question, my take on all this is, that even though we are trapped inside this game, the whole situation must be just as hard and painful for the people in the real world as for us." I concluded.

Alice did not show any response in her facial expression and simply nodded with her head.

"Mhm, I agree with you. I can't even begin to imagine, how my parents and my little sister must feel right now."

Then, she finally showed an emotion. It was a small chuckle, but her eyes were only filled with sadness.

"It's ironic, isn't it? All of us were so eager to finally play the game and now our only desire is to be able to leave this place." Her tone sounded, as if she was about to cry.

*She is right. Everyone in here has left behind their family and friends. That is a burden that we all share.*

While I did my best to come up with a way of comforting her, Alice and I overheard a conversation from two other players in the cafe.

"Hey, did you hear it? Helios is supposed to have made his appearance in Sird last night."

"Again? Isn't that, like, the fourth time in the last two weeks?"

"Yeah and there is more. Apparently, he promises people to give them special priveleges in Undral, if they work for him."

"Really? Like what?"

"Money, unique magic, level... you name it! If he takes a liking to you, getting freed from this game could be even arranged, depending on his mood!"

"You're kidding! I might be able to leave this place?"

An utmost familiar name caught my attention -Helios. If they were talking about the same one, that confined us in this game, any information regarding him was of significant importance.

I got up from our table and signaled Alice subtly to remain on her seat.

"Excuse me, may I join you two? I overheard something interesting and would like to know a bit more of it." I asked friendly, as I walked over to them in the cafe.

The two men, who were equipped with low-level armor, exchanged stern glances with each other for a second, before getting up from their seats.

"I don't know what you're talking about. We were simply about to be on our way, that’s all." One of them said, before both left the cafe without another word.

Alice came up to me from behind and followed the men leaving through the exit with her sharp eyes.

"What's the deal with these two? Throwing around all these rumors and using the name Helios, as if he is some kind of savior?"

"I don't know, but there is usually a truth hidden in rumors. If Helios really is in this city, then this might be a huge chance to meet the mastermind behind the scenes."

The hazel-haired girl, who was all emotional moments ago, put a hand on her waist and had regained her confidence.

"So? What are we going to do now? Run around the alley and hope to magically run into him?"

"The best thing for us to do, would be splitting up and ask around the city for these rumors. I think, we should focus on guilds and informants in that regard. They would know, if something unusual happened in this city." I proposed.

"Sounds like a plan. Let's meet up again in two hours at the goddess statue. Don't be late!"

Alice ran out of the cafe in high-spirits. It seemed, as if the chance of Helios being in Undral gave her some sort of new hope.

*Helios... what is he thinking? No, what is he trying to achieve by forcing players to work for him?*

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Following our plan, I had searched throughout Sird for any clues and hints, regarding the Helios rumors. The city was huge, so finding specific kinds of people turned out to be a draining task. While some players provided helpful information, others would only return me confused looks.

Then there were the informants, a special group of players. They decided, to not earn their money by fighting monsters, but rather by doing business with any information related to Undral. They were mandatory contacts to have as a guild, although, they were disliked by the majority of the player base for their egoistic and greedy behavior. Of course, none of them were willing to disclose anything to me without paying a large sum of Gall.

As promised to Alice, two hours after we parted in the cafe, I was now waiting for her in front of the goddess statue of Sird. It was a tall figure of an angel-like woman, who had her head covered in a hood. I did not know much about the history and mythology of Undrals cities, however, I remembered that she played a role when Sird had been given its name.

"There you are, Myst! Did you have any luck on your side?" The girl, whom I had been waiting here for, asked as she joined me.

"Not much, to be honest. Most people didn't know anything about it and when they for once did, it was only very vague. But I found out, that Helios is rumored to lure players into a certain location and sway them with offers to be able to leave Undral."

Alice sighed unmotivated.

"Same here, everyone responded with something different that didn't add up with the stories of the others. Although, I was able to fetch a member of the «First Legion» guild and he provided me with an interesting theory."

"A theory? What is it about?"

Alice began to grin and pointed with a finger toward the huge cathedral of Sird in the distance.

"Apparently, all players, who are supposed to have met Helios, were last seen in the area nearby that cathedral of Sird. So, assuming that people really did meet that Helios guy and vanished, our best shot to find him is there!"

"Amazing, Alice! That's the best clue, we could have hoped for!"

She scratched her nose tip with her finger flustered, while her cheeks turned slowly red again.

"Hehe... But we can't go there now. I was also told that every time a player went there, it was in the middle of the night."

"That makes sense, since there can't be lots of other people around, if Helios does not want to draw attention. We should hurry and inform Hilbert and Elm about this."

Just as I was about to head for our Inn, where our guild members were supposed to be, Alice took my hand and stopped me.

"Wait up! I don't think we should tell them about this." Her tone was rushed.

"Huh? Why? They would be worried about us, if we went missing!"

"That worrying is the problem here! Do you think, they are going to let us have our way and investigate a rumored Helios? Hilbert would be the first to tag along and we can't efficiently carry out our plan, when there is many of us running around, can we?"

I hesitated for a moment. She had a valid point. I was able to imagine Hilbert doing exactly what she said. If we were to have more people tag along us, sneaking around in our target area would become more difficult. On top of that, Hilbert was not known to be the stealthiest player in our guild, just like Yakima.

"...Alright, then it's just the two of us. Did that guild member reveal a specific time to you?"

"He mentioned in the middle of the night, so I would assume around midnight to 1 in the morning, maybe?" She said, while making a hard-thinking pose.

"I thought so. Still, we have a lot of time until then, so we might want to go over a strategy for this. It would be wise, to avoid being seen by anyone. People might start to think that we wanted to be Helios new subordinates."

Alice agreed and she had decided to spend the rest of our day at the marketplace, since we were not done with her shopping tour yet, apparently. Of course, I did not have any say in this matter at all.

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-5 minutes until midnight-

Darkness filled the empty streets of Sird, where people had been passing by in masses before. Most players were asleep already, or drank through the night in a tavern with their companions. The sole people, who still dared to roam around in Sird, mostly consisted of NPCs.

Although, there were two exceptions: Alice and me.

Like two shadow figures hiding in the depths of night, both of us stood in middle of the plaza that led to the cathedral of Sird. The only thing, which gave us assurance that time had not stopped in this seemingly empty world, was the sound of moving water coming from the decorative fountain in front of us.

As we followed the path behind it, the rumored cathedral awaited us, surrounded by tall bushes and black iron fences. Only a few street-lights illuminated the area, so staying in the dark was an easy task for us to accomplish.

Alice and I quickly hid behind a bush, when something caught her attention.

"Hey, Myst! Look over there! Isn't that...?" She pointed to the entrance of the cathedral and spoke in a quite tone.

I followed her gaze toward the building and to my surprise, two familiar figures were present at the scene.

"Yeah... Those are the same players from the cafe, no doubt about it."

In terms of stealth, both of them were probably even worse than Hilbert and Yakima. They were rapidly looking around themselves, seemingly terrified of the dark and made sure to stay in range of the lights.

After watching them painfully for a few moments, they had decided to enter the cathedral with bowed heads to cover their face.

"It seems, that this guild member you talked to was right about the location."

When we ensured that the two men were not checking their back anymore, Alice and I left our hiding spot to reach the entrance of the cathedral ourselves. I had checked earlier, whether there were any backdoors or alternate ways of entering the building, but anything of the sorts could have not been discovered.

"This is our only way to get inside, so make sure you don't get caught by any traps." I whispered.

She nodded and we entered the pitch-black entrance of the cathedral.

Once we had taken a few steps forward, our bodies almost merged with the darkness around us. It was nearly impossible to see anything at all, which meant that we had to stay close to the walls and advance with careful movements.

As we got further inside, a male voice could be heard from the deeper parts. It did not belong to the two men from the cafe, who had just entered before us.

*Someone, besides them, is in here!*

Finally, when we had reached the main hall of the cathedral, our eyes were able to identify our surroundings again, thanks to some windows letting the moonlight inside. On the other side of the hall, I was able to spot the players again. They were kneeling on the ground in front of a podium, which featured a third person on it.

Alice and I were unable to recognize the face of it, for the reason that the whole body was covered in an oversized dark-brown cloak.

"Oh? Have you two brought another pair of volunteers with you?" The mysterious person asked, while staring into our direction.

*What? How is he able to see us? Alice and I are not even near the light!*

I balled my fists together, as cold sweat found its way on my face. The system of Undral Legacy was remarkably thorough, when it came to picking up our emotions and expressing them.

"Huh? But lord Helios, there is no one here, besides us." One of the two kneeling men said dumbfounded, while checking his surroundings.

"Then I assume that we got ourselves some eavesdroppers. Come out, you two. I can see you as clear as in daylight."

There was no mistaking it; he really was able to spot us in the dark.

*Is this an ability of an administrator? So he is the real Helios, after all?!*

Alice and I understood that hiding in the shadows was no longer of benefit for us, so we approached Helios and his newly won subordinates directly. Halting within a safety distance away of them, I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

"Good evening, Helios."

The kneeling players jumped back on their feet promptly and pointed at me with accusing gazes.

"I-I remember you! You're from that cafe, earlier!"

"Yeah, right! What do you want from us?!"

Alice and I did not bother to look at them.

"Nothing, our business is with Helios over there." I answered.

"Is that so?" His tone was sharp and you could almost hear a grinning in his voice.

I mustered his appearance thoroughly from top to bottom. There was nothing special, or noteworthy about it. Beneath that cloak, completely average-looking clothes had been equipped, with no sign of any unique items and alike.

"Are you... the real Helios?" Alice then asked with caution.

"Of course, I am! If you have any doubts, then take a look at this."

Helios opened his game-menu nonchalantly and selected his own character with a simple few finger tips. After the screen had loaded, he made a rotating movement with his right hand and the menu revealed itself toward our side. The window was titled "Profile" and right beneath it, a certain name was displayed:

*- Character Name: "Helios" -*

My eyes widened and I felt as if my virtual throat was about to go dry.

*...He is not lying, his name is Helios!*

Alice and I had confirmed that his name matched the one, as the infamous hacker, who imprisoned us in Undral Legacy. With my virtual eyes, I quickly scanned through the shown menu-screen, before Helios swiftly forced it to close. However, I had still managed to notice something decisive in it.

"Well, I've been so generous and proved to you my identity! Shouldn't you two introduce yourselves now to me?" He sounded as if he was lecturing children.

"I am Myst, from the Night Owls."

"A-And my name is Alice. From the Night Owls, as well..." She was trembling and so did her voice.

*Hey now, you were so eager to meet him and now you're getting weak knees?*

Helios twitched for a short moment, before he decided to make a warm and welcoming pose with his arms.

"From the Night Owls, you say? Incredible, we have quite the celebrities here!"

"Celebrities? How come?" I asked.

"Now, don't be so modest! Everyone in Undral heard about the guild, which managed to be the first to beat a field-boss!"

Even his subordinates, who were upset with us moments ago, backed up slowly and seemed to be shocked by our association with the Night Owls.

"F-Forgive us! We didn't know, who you were!"

"Y-Yeah! Thank you for your hard work in the name of all players!"

Alice threw surprised looks at me and I felt the same way. After beating the boss, our guild only interacted with the ones, that were motivated to beat the game. They never treated us as a celebrity, or anything along these lines, and we would always see eye to eye.

Helios abruptly put his excitement aside with ease and resumed to talk in his sharp voice.

"Now, that we have put the tiring introductions aside, I have a quite interesting offer for you to make."

"An offer?" I raised an eyebrow.

My suspicions had led me to the conclusion, that it was most likely the one, that spread the rumors about him.

"Yes. You see, these two here have already agreed to work for me. Given your reputation, I have taken a liking to you two, so I feel like being kind tonight and give you the chance of it as well! I don't just take anyone, so it's alright to call you special in that regard."

I stood correct. His swaying words made me genuinely curious, so I thought about them for a bit, before responding.

"Where is our benefit in this deal? Aside from pleasing our captivator, of course."

Helios chuckled amused, almost as if everything I said was within his expectations. Under the illusion, that he pushed a mental switch, his attitude and personality had changed drastically.

"I am Helios, an administrator and the sole ruler of this world! Here, nothing is impossible for me! Gall, items... I can give you anything you might wish for!"

He paused and raised his arm, pointing toward the ceiling in the air.

"...And if you do as I say, I might consider freeing you from this game. Even that, my friend, lies within my power."

Alices eyes had gained a hopeful sparkle from his speech. Although, she should have felt nothing but hatred for him, Alice looked at Helios as if he was her savior from a fairy-tale prophecy.

"Free... from this game..." She muttered to herself.

Helios opened his menu once more and tapped around in it through multiple options. Shortly after, a notification window popped up in front of each of us.

*- Helios has invited you to join a guild. Do you accept? (Warning: This action will remove you from your current guild!) -*

Alice stared bedridden at the window in front of her. It appeared that she was fighting violently with herself on the inside. Nonetheless, her finger has been hovering over the accept and decline option, while leaning toward the accept one.

I, on the other hand, had already made up my mind. With someone like him standing right in front of me, the decision was by far an easy one to be made.

"Certainly, this is a generous offer, Helios. In fact, even hesitating for a single second could be considered foolish. However, there is just one question left that I want to get out of the way first..."

"You may ask away, my friend."

Without a word, I raised my hand and selected the decline option in the same motion.

"...Who exactly are you?" I asked with a strict tone.

Helios stared at me silently and motionless. What kind of expression he now had on his face could be only guessed, since the cloak merged his head in darkness.

"Hey now, could it be that your friend is suffering from amnesia, little girl? He even said it himself. I am Helios!"

"Myst, what are you saying all of a sudden...?" Alice tone had concern in it.

It seemed to me, that she did not realize what was truly going on in this cathedral. I sighed.

"I am well aware, that your player name is Helios. However, that is all there is to it. It's just your name. You are not the real one."

Helios hesitated a bit, before responding. It was possible, that he needed to swallow his emotions first.

"What do you mean by that...?" He balled his fists subtly.

"Exactly what I am saying. You are a fake, an imposter, a swindler... call it as you like."

The two subordinates of Helios, who waited patiently in the background of the whole scene, have stepped forward and decided to hinder me from accusing Helios any further.

"Hey, you should watch your tone!"

"Have you forgotten, that we are at his mercy?!"

"Silence, you two!" The shrouded man commanded.

Both of them squirmed in terror at his enraged words, instantaneously doing as they had been told. Helios then redirected his attention toward me again, feigning his imitation act at last.

"Congratulations! You're completely right; I am not the real Helios! Why would I be? Who in their right minds would honestly believe, that Helios himself wastes his time fooling around with a bunch of morons?!" His tone took form of an entire different personality and he began to emit an eerie feeling in our minds.

When I glanced at Alice, her facial expression had changed to shock and despair. Her weak knees had finally gotten the better of her and she collapsed on the ground with a thud.

"...I got... fooled. I fell for... a fake..." She muttered incoherent words, while shaking aggressively.

"But I gotta' say, you impressed me! You are the first, who is in possession of a functional brain! Tell me, how did you find out?"

His new attitude threw me out of my concept, which was oddly challenging to adjust to.

"Your way of speaking was completely off. You were trying to copy his style, but failed quite miserably at it. Helios may be the greatest hacker in the entire world, but not even once did he brag about what he is able to do."

The Helios imposter cracked an ugly laugh, when he apprehended my reasoning.

"Haha! And yet, so many have fallen for it! Look, even your companion did!" He pointed at Alice, who was still unable to get a grip of herself.

"...Also, as a hint of advice, you should not reveal your profile to others. Ignoring the fact, that your character statistics are laughable for someone supposed to be in charge of this world, you are not even in possession of the administrator flair in it. The manual of the game clearly stated to never trust someone, who claims to be a staff member, until they have proved to be in possession of a validated flair." I added.

This time, he busted out into even more intimidating laughter. In a sense, you might have called it disturbing.

"He read the manual of the game! I didn't even know that there are actual people, who do that! Give me a break, ahaha!"

"...Is he... that desperate? All this, just to get himself guild members...?" My hazel-haired friend stuttered.

Her voice trembled, as if she was about to go berserk.

It felt impossible for me, to find any words for his sudden behavior. Only when something seemingly crashed on the ground, Alice and my trance-like state escaped his captivating bane.

I hastily checked my surroundings for the root of the sound, just to find the subordinates of Helios being pushed on the ground by two unknown players, covered in the same cloak as the swindler himself.

"L-Lord Helios, what is happening here?!" One of the victims squeaked.

However, their beloved Helios did not waste his energy on an explanation for them.

"Lock these two idiots away, where we keep the others!" He commanded with a sinister tone.

While his shrouded companions dragged the innocent players into the darkness, which they had been ambushed them from, Alice and I found us surrounded by even more of their kind from each side. I estimated that around 8 of them were present in this cathedral. One could describe these players as hideous creatures, patiently sitting in the shadows and stalking their prey for an opportunity to strike.

"...Keke! Didn't ya' say, that this plan was foolproof, boss?" A stalker asked in a shrill tone.

"Shut it. That boy is just an irregular, nothing else."

Alice, who had finally regained her lost self-confidence, found her way back to her feet and tried to comprehend the scene.

"Myst, did you see that? They were able to use violence against these two, without the security protocol of Undral to punish them!"

The security protocol. It was a system designed for Undral, to protect players from abuse in the cities and other safety-zones. In this world, players were only able to use magic and spells outside of these places to ensure order. The only exception to that being non-combat magic, such as crafting. However, even those kinds of spells were only usable in designated areas.

That rule also applied to any form of acts of violence toward other players. If, for example, I were to punch a random guy on the street, the system would immediately teleport me to the prison for certain duration. Breaking the security protocol more than one time, would result in a more severe punishment next time.

No matter how you looked at it, these guys definitely broke the protocol for violence abuse.

"Yeah, I saw. I have figured out, what their dirty strategy is by now."

"Huh? You did?" She asked surprised.

I nodded and focused on the fake Helios, who was fixed on the podium.

"Normally, these players should have been sent to the prison by now, yet they were not. The reason for that is his guild invitation. Among many other benefits of joining a guild, one is a heavy lift on the security protocol. Guild members do not have to fear a punishment for being playfully rough with their friends in a safety-zone. Of course, sexual harassment is exempted from that lift." I explained.

"But what do they gain from this whole trouble? I mean, they are doing all of this in the middle of the night and have to spread made up rumors to attract innocent players!"

"Probably, to steal the belongings of their victims. Gall, equipment, items... it is essentially a robbery. A pathetic, but smart way of doing profit in Undral."

The leader of this group of criminals chuckled amused and gave an awkward applause. Helios did not seem to care about his anonymity anymore, when he chose to remove his cloak from the head, revealing his face.

He possessed sharp facial features, with spiky orange hair and a deep scar across his face.

"Once again, you are correct! Picturing all this together with only a handful of information, you are a smart one! It almost pisses me off, haha!" His tone featured a mess of emotions and an expression, which could be compared to the one of a psychopath.

*I’ve had enough of this freak!* *We need to warn the other guilds about this!* I thought to myself, as I grabbed Alice by her petite hand and pulled her away from the scene.

Before we were able to leave the cathedral, however, two more of his companions emerged from the pitch-black hallway, blocking out our escape path.

"Now, don't be so hasty! You might have refused to join the guild, but that does not mean we can simply let you walk off like that!" Helios stated, using a fake sympathetic tone.

"You can't stop us, Helios! If you even try, your friend here will go on a vacation in prison, before anything can happen to us!"

Helios either did not care about that fact, or his psychotic personality was impossible to read, as he resumed grinning in high-spirits.

"You're right about that... I think, we got ourselves into a little stalemate! Nonetheless, we need to deal with this one way or another, though..."

He paused and made a thinking pose, while it was obvious to everyone present, that he had already thought of a plan to deal with us.

"That's it! ...You know, it hurt me deeply, when you referred to my character stats as -laughable- earlier. Given my position as the leader of this scum pack around you, I need to keep my face in such occasions!"

"I couldn't care less about your reputation, but if you refuse to let us go, our guild members will soon start to look around for Alice and me!" I replied hostile.

"Well, you certainly can bark. ...How about it? You and me, right here and now?" Helios finished with a devilish smirk on his face.

There it was, the second exception for violence in safety-zones. If two players mutually agreed to fight each other, a PvP (Player versus Player) request could be sent, or in other words, a challenge for a duel. If this challenge were to be accepted, both players had the chance to battle each other, including magic spells, within a certain time-limit.

The winner was decided, once one player had reached the critical area of his HP bar, or when the time for the duel ran out. In that case, the combatant with more remaining hit-points would automatically be declared as victorious.

Helios challenge had led me to stressfully ball my fists together.

I knew, that there was no reason for me to fight him. He might have played it cool, but in reality, Helios and his companions were sitting on a timer. They had to wrap this incident up, before our guild members became suspicious of our absence. Letting us leave was not an option for him either, since we would warn the entire playerbase in Undral about their crimes in that case.

Logically speaking, refusing to take his challenge and waiting for assistance was the best solution for Alice and me to make. I was certainly well aware of this fact, but something about this man had irritated me so much, that it drove me into utter madness and fueled my desire to fight him.

"...Fine, let's do it."

"Myst! You don't have to do this!" Alice raised her voice, while tugging at my sleeve.

Helios, on the other hand, laughed satisfied with the result of his evident provocation. It took him only a short moment to navigate himself though his menu, when suddenly a notification window appeared before me.

*- Helios has challenged you to a duel. Do you accept? -*

A short glance at the details of the challenge revealed, that Helios added a special rule to them. Duels in Undral were configurable, which made it possible to insert consequences such as joining a guild in case of a loss, or victory.

*If I lose, then I will automatically join his guild...*

However, unlike earlier, I tapped on the accept button to initialize the duel countdown. It would always count down from 15 to zero with an audible ticking, before the match were to begin.

"Sorry, Alice. I simply can't withdraw from this challenge, not after what he did to innocent players."

"You...! Suit yourself! Hope you don't get beat to a pulp!" Her tone was filled with frustration and she turned her back toward me.

The counter fell to 10 remaining seconds. Helios and I moved to the center of the cathedral hall, accompanied by heavy growls and cheers from his companions.

"I am glad, that you accepted the duel! When I am done here, both you and that girl will be locked away with the rest! Who knows, maybe we find a way around that annoying harassment protocol and get some use out of that beauty?" His sharp eyes mustered Alice.

"Save your nonsense, until you actually win!"

5 seconds remained.

Both of us got serious, as we witnessed the last few seconds pass by with strained eyes. A last glance toward the entrance of the cathedral depicted to me an Alice, who pressed her hands together, as if she was praying in that moment. -Then, at last, the counter hit zero.

My arm stretched out in a flash, as I cast the spell Quick-Shot. The magic-circle manifested itself at my palm and in an instant; the familiar white energy-ball was summoned to attack the enemy.

Helios, on the other hand, had decided to charge at me head-on. His speed was remarkable, but he foolishly ran into the range of my spell. My Quick-Shot was about to hit him directly, when Helios suddenly managed to dodge to the side.

"Whoa there, that was a close one!" He commented with a joking tone.

*Was that magic? ...No, there was no sign of him using any!*

I concluded, that he must have skilled a lot of mobility then.

While you were able to spend your skill points on active magic spells, it was also possible to obtain passive ones. These usually boosted a certain parameter or granted other useful effects. On top of that, it was not needed to chant them, since they were active the whole time. Although, it needs to be said, that they were not fairly powerful in any sense. The effect was only small and they were simply meant to support your overall fighting abilities.

Helios avoided unnecessary movements and resumed to close the distance between us. A magic-circle decorated his right hand, while he made a fist, so I assumed he would go with a close-range spell similar to Stream.

Against all of my expectations, however, he reopened his hand and threw smoke into my direction.

*It wasn't a damaging spell?!*

There was no time for me to be astounded since I lost track of my enemy’s position as a result of the smoke.

Helios was not gone for too long when he sneaked up on me from behind. Luckily, I was able to recognize his presence and backed off him with swift steps, before he could land a hit on me.

"Oh? You got some good reflexes there! Not many have managed to dodge that move!" He praised me, though his tone contrasted that with intimidation.

I gritted my teeth, while I was able to feel the sweat from earlier returning on my face.

From that attack alone, it was crystal clear, that he was experienced in fighting other players. While most players focused on defeating monsters controlled by the system of Undral, people with combat experience against real humans were rare at the current time. This gave Helios a significant edge over me in this match.

When it came down to surprises in a fight, however, I had some of them up to my sleeve as well. Moments before I dodged the ambush of Helios, I had started to chant a counterattack. While Helios lowered his guard, the magic-circle I had cast now unleashed the Barrage spell with him as its target.

Naturally, Helios was not kind enough to let me hit him without putting up a struggle.

He dashed to the side, which made it hard for me to properly aim at his body. The first wave of the spell missed him and flew at his bystander stalkers. Undrals security system prevented them to get hit by my attack utilizing an impenetrable shield, on which the magic projectiles were nullified.

I had redirected the path of my attack, according to the position I expected him to be at next. More projectiles of my spell passed right by him, though they still missed their mark, until...

"-Gargh!" Helios cried out when the last instance of my Barrage hit him at last.

When the dust, which resulted as an effect from my magic, had finally lifted itself, I was able to recognize his figure standing motionless on the same spot. His arms covered the face, which he seemingly tried to use as a shield.

"Not bad, brat! I'm starting to enjoy this!" He sounded genuinely excited.

When Helios had lowered his arms, his fiendish grin came into sight. It was accompanied by an HP bar over his head, which lost a notable value. Our spectators began to growl and cheer once more at the sudden turn of this event. My enemy was far from being done and proceeded to create another magic-circle, which consumed much more of his mana.

*That one is going to be dangerous! Is he going to use his trump card already?!*

There were two options left for me to deal with it.

One was to counterattack it and the second, to try and dodge the spell. Defensive magic was not my expertise, so blocking the attack remained out of the question. Countering the attack would use up a lot of my mana as well and I wanted to avoid this to happen. In a duel, managing your mana properly could win you the match on its own, since you were helpless without it.

In conclusion, the best decision was to try and dodge the spell, thus creating an opportunity for a counterattack.

I analyzed his magic carefully, waiting for the completion of the chant. My feet felt like they pressed holes into the ground beneath me, ready to cover as much distance from his targeting area as possible.

Being able to keep my actual strategy a secret from the enemy was the sole factor that would decide the outcome of the match. Helios and I glared at each other, as if we tried to read the soul of our enemy, and waited for one of us to make the even tiniest mistake.

Then, Helios had finally moved a single muscle in his arm, as he was about to reveal his magic before me, when suddenly-

"-That's enough! Stop this fight in an instant!" An unknown voice interrupted our match.

Suddenly, a group of players stormed the cathedral. I counted around 14 of them, who carried a certain sword-shaped crest on their clothes. It was, without a doubt, the one of the First Legion guild.

When their leader -a man in his late twenties, who was bearing a distinguishable medal beneath his crest- had entered the hall and positioned himself in the center of his guild members, Hilbert and Elm followed him with heavy footsteps inside.

"...Hilbert and Elm?! How did you find us?" Alice asked.

"Elm and I roamed around in Sird, gathering information from other guilds. The First Legion guild mentioned, that a brown-haired girl of our group had asked them about the rumors of Helios. It was pretty obvious to us, that you two had been plotting some kind of mission on your own." Hilbert explained. His tone sounded like he was desperately trying his best not to scold her.

"We discussed this matter with their leader and had decided that if you two would not return home tonight, this whole rumor and the previous incidents intertwined with the cathedral will be thoroughly investigated in a large-scale operation." Elm added. For once, there was no warm smile decorating his face.

"Tch- And here I was, thinking about amusing myself once in a while." Helios snapped, glaring at the intruders.

The First Legion guild had outnumbered the criminals and while no one had resorted to violence yet, there was clear pressure on Helios and his companions. The leader of the guild, who I remembered to be called Wolfgang, had approached Helios and me fearlessly.

"We have informed players all over Undral of your actions, leader of the -Nightmare Greed- guild! There is no one left, who would fall for your devious schemes from now on!" Wolfgang proclaimed with a strict tone.

Helios, the proclaimed leader of Nightmare Greed, seemed to have no interest in his words and scratched the back of his head out of boredom.

"So what? It was only a matter of time until someone would get behind all this."

"You should watch your step when you leave Sird! There are many players, who want to pay you back for what you have done to them." Hilbert warned. There was no sign of actual sympathy from him toward Helios, though.

The criminal with orange hair grinned widely; entertained by the threats he was confronted with.

"Haha! Is that so? Well then, I think that his might finally be the beginning of something interesting! Grab your bags, men! Our guild is no longer welcomed here!"

Followed by unmotivated frowning from his guild members, Nightmare Greed left the cathedral with slow marching, until they had merged with the darkness again.

Helios, in the meantime, had opened a small window and selected an option within it. His interface closed and a transparent text appeared over our heads, confirming his decision and the outcome of our interrupted fight.

*Helios has forfeited the duel! Myst has been declared the winner of the match!*

"We'll settle this another time, brat! You should get a bit stronger, in the meantime!" He waved at me while heading for the exit.

The members of the First Legion guild led him pass through, knowing that they would reunite with him soon enough again.

"...By the way, if you guys are looking for our victims, they are locked in the basement. I have no use for them anymore, so do whatever you want." Helios smirked, before vanishing in the shadows of the cathedral.

A few silent moments have passed, hoping that they had truly left the place. With mixed expressions on their faces, my friends ran across the hall and joined me.

"What were you even thinking, when accepting his challenge?!" Alice shouted with tears welling up in her eyes.

"Good grief, isn't Yakima supposed to be the battle maniac of our guild?" Elm spoke like a jester.

"I am sorry, for my careless behavior."

With bowed head, I apologized to my worried guild members. Hilbert only shrugged, as relief settled in for everyone.

"All that matters is that you and Alice are unharmed."

Wolfgang and his guild began to search around in the cathedral for a basement, which Helios had claimed to keep his prisoners locked away in. Hilbert and Elm decided to join him in the rescue, while Alice only hesitantly fiddled with her legs. Her eyes darted rash around our vicinity.

"...Uhm, you know... about this duel against that criminal..."

"What about it? Are you still mad...?"

"...No, that's not it... I-I wanted to... argh, forget it!" She lashed out, before stomping away swiftly. Her face blushed reddish like a cherry.

*What's gotten into her, all of a sudden...?*

This concluded our personal investigation on the rumors about Helios. While we had involved ourselves in a fatal event, I was glad to have uncovered the treacherous activities of Nightmare Greed, preventing more innocent players to be fooled by false promises of freedom.

Even though we players should be working together in order to be freed from this game, there were people who preferred to prioritize their own wealth over cooperation. This freshly gained knowledge had made me realize, that there might be even more challenges awaiting us in the future, which did not involve beating the next boss of Undral.

CHAPTER 6

A Ray of Hope

Two weeks had passed, since the incident in Sird.

Within that time, the players of Undral made significant progress on beating the game. Not only did the scouting parties manage to locate the remaining two field-bosses of the first world, our guild had also faced them and claimed victory over the monsters.

We had learned our lesson from the Forsaken Forest Guardian and teamed up with another party for these occasions. In terms of level, I was able to raise my stats quite a bit. The skill trees for magic have expanded far enough by now, for every Night Owls member to be capable of creating an own constellation from spells to their preferences.

"«Spirits Blessing»...!"

An icon came into my sight of vision. Silke had chanted a supportive magic spell, to toughen my parameters. Whenever an unknown status affected a player, the system would provide an optional detailed guide to it.

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*Status: Spirits Blessing*

*Duration: 60 seconds.*

*Effect: Reduces up to 10% of incoming damage from nearby monsters, when the players HP are above 70% of its maximum health value.*

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"Thank you, Silke!"

Limited by a short duration, the spell would ease my mind if the enemy were to hit my virtual character. Seizing the most out of this minute, I charged at the monster before us. It was a two-tailed bull, featuring possessed red eyes, along with black furr. This type of monster was common around the mountain range of the first world, where our guild had been on a quest.

Envisioning «Shockwave» , a new spell of mine, a more advanced magic-circle, compared to the ones we used at the start, began to levitate above my palm. When I got within the required range, a medium-sized blast of energy had shot at the bull.

"Nice shot, Myst!" Silke applauded. As a result of her training with Yakima, not only did she get stronger, but Silke also became a bit more confident.

My attack did not deal enough damage, to act as the finishing blow. Just around the last digits of the monsters HP bar, the life decreasing animation of it had come to a halt. I thought about ending this fight with a Quick-Shot, when a different spell hit my enemy from above. A last cry could be heard from the bull, before it dissolved into nothingness.

"My bad! Was that one yours?"

Silke and I followed the direction of a mysterious voice from the upper hills, where a blonde-haired boy came into vision. His character was akin to the one, that I had hoped to create myself back then.

"Uh, to be frank, it was."

He mustered our appearance with strained eyes, as if he looked at someone familiar to him.

"Oh my, aren't you guys from the Night Owls?" He concluded.

"Yes, that is correct. Have we met before?"

The stranger jumped down the height from the cliff without a hint of hesitance. As if it was the equivalent of walking to him, he had landed right in front of Silke and me.

"The name's Kejin, member of the Trident guild! Sorry about stealing that monster from you, I was only able to get a glimpse of that bull from up there!"

"No worries, we just happened to run into it. My name is Myst."

"A-And I am Silke..." She avoided making direct eye-contact with Kejin.

The guild titled Trident had become well-known in the last two weeks. While there were no records of it before, they were the first guild to beat all 3 field-bosses. It was assumed that this guild was founded less than a month ago.

"What are you two doing up here, in the Ragged Mountains?"

"Our guild is on a quest, since we are a bit short on money. How about you? Are you all alone?"

"Yeah, I'm doing some grinding against monsters! I usually do that alone, because the others would always yell at me for getting them into trouble."

He really reminded me of myself. Character appearance aside, grinding all alone was something I also did from time to time. Even if it was not the best idea, when looking back at the "Lurking Wolves" quest.

Hilbert and our other guild members of the Night Owls found us in the middle of the mountains, after they had tried to acquire the quest item in another part of the area.

"Hey, Myst! Have you two had any luck?" Our guild leader asked in a hopeful tone.

"Not yet, just a few monsters. Did your search on the western side have any results?"

"Nothing but a pile of stones. ...Huh? Who's your friend here?"

"His name is Kejin, a member of Trident."

"Oh, the Trident guild? Pleased to meet you, I am the guild leader of the Night Owls! You can call me Hilbert! The lots behind me are all members of our guild!" He introduced our friends to him with a smile.

"Wow, the whole crew got together? What an honor for me! But I gotta' ask, Myst... what exactly are you guys looking for?"

"It's a rare item for the «Dust Bloomer» quest."

"Oh, that one? You won't find the flower just like that, you know? It's a loot drop from a monster of this mountain range."

Our guild members exchanged astounded gasps. It turned out, that we had been running in circles the whole time.

"You're kidding! Why didn't the dumb NPC say this from the get go?!" Alice shouted unnerved.

Elm had to grab her arm to prevent her from immediately heading toward the quest NPC in blind rage. Our leader did not lose his composure and informed himself about our target.

"What kind of monster is it, Kejin?"

"A «Petal Dancer». They are cute and harmless creatures, but quite hard to spot. They are most common in the northern parts of Ragged Mountains. Do you guys want me to help out?"

"Really? Are you fine with that?"

"Of course! I have some free time at hand! After all, us players should support each other to advance in this game!" Kejin offered his aid, while he grinned delightful.

His words made me feel elated. Having met players like Helios, who amused himself on the cost of other people, Kejin was a ray of hope for me. It was a sign that there were still players, who had cared for each other and wanted to fight back-to-back with everyone else in Undral.

"Then we will take you up on your offer! Let's split up in smaller groups, so we can cover the whole area breezier!"

"I want to pair up with Myst!" Kejin proclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Eh?! Why does he get to do that...?"

It was Alice, who protested against his decision. She pouted and darted at the cliffs to her side.

"He was kind enough to offer us his help, so we should at least return his favor." Elm tried to cheer her up.

Yakima sneaked up on her and began to whisper gloatingly.

"...Or could it be that you wanted to go on another date with him?"

A single sinister glare from her was enough to shut him up. Having learned from his past mistakes, Yakima had backed away from her slowly with cautious steps.

"Then the groups will be as following: Myst with Kejin, Silke with Elm, and Alice with Yakima will be going with me!"

*Did he deliberately put Alice and Yakima in a group...? I didn't know that Hilbert was actually a savage in disguise...*

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"...We have been marching for a while now."

"There's no helping it, Myst! The northern mountain range is far away, if you start from south."

I opened my menu and selected the "Map" option from the screen to check on our current location. Just like Kejin had explained, we had covered an insane distance by now. Normally, in the real world, people would have made multiple breaks along the way. That was not the case in Undral, however.

Fatigue did indeed exist in this virtual world, although it only regarded your mentality. You would not collapse from walking over 10 hours straight, even if you desperately wanted to, thanks to the systems pain-absorption for combat.

"Hey, Kejin! According to the map, we have already reached the northern mountain range!"

The blonde boy only shrugged at my commented light-heartedly.

"Well, I wanted to get us into the deeper parts of it, but if you insist we can rest over there!" Kejin pointed to a nearby cliff, which allowed us to overview the entire area.

I violently nodded, as our march had come to a pause. We sat down between some boulders at the edge of the cliff and I pushed my back against the one behind me.

"Aahh... Much better."

"Come on now, you couldn't have been tired from this." Kejin chuckled softly.

My gaze wandered across the panorama that unfolded before my eyes. A wide blue sky, countless mountains covered in giant trees and more rocks than you had seen in your life up until now. A magnificent view, other people only could have dreamed of enjoying themselves.

I reminisced about my first day in Undral. Back then, I was not able to believe all this to be a virtual creation of humankind. It felt far too realistic, too beautiful to be manmade. This fact had not changed for me, even after 3 months. However, I had not enjoyed this view in the past by myself.

As the memories of that day flooded my mind, I also remembered to have experienced all this together with Zen. His whereabouts were unknown to me. Was he still somewhere in Undral? Did he enjoy the same kind of view right now, as I did? No matter how many times I would ask myself the same questions; an answer was nowhere to be found.

"What are you staring at, with this gloomy expression on your face?"

"I just remembered something, that's all."

Kejin analyzed me with wide eyes and crossed arms.

"Hmm...is that so? ...Tell me about it! I love stories!"

"It wouldn't be interesting for you, Kejin."

"Come on! Pretty please?" He looked at me with puppy eyes.

I sighed and gave into his pitiful beg at last. There was no harm in telling Kejin about it.

"It's about an old friend of mine. We were buddies from school and would always play games together. Of course, both of us signed up for a copy of Undral Legacy as soon as it got announced."

I continued to recite the events of the launch day of Undral Legacy. From my misfortune in the character creation, to my first encounters of monsters, the moment that Zen had joined me - all the way to the Opening Ceremony.

"...Wait, hold on for a moment! You're telling me, that your character customization had been reset and this is how you look in real life?! Wow, talk about having bad luck!"

"I have gotten used to it quickly. After all, most players did not change their appearance too much, apart from the hair and height."

"And then? What happened at the end of the ceremony?"

"I don't... know it myself. Everyone was paying attention to Helios and so did I. When everything was over, Zen was gone. That was the last time, I have seen him." These last few words felt painful for me to convey.

When my story-telling came to an end, Kejin went silent for a minute. He glanced toward the horizon, as if it would reveal a secret to him. However, other than a few birds and small wyverns passing by in the sky, nothing of the sort occurred.

"You know, I have never met this Zen-guy, but from your story I can tell that he must be glad to have such a good friend like you!"

"...Huh? Why that?"

"Well, even though he abandoned you without a single word, you are still thinking about him. There is no sign of that guy still being in Undral, yet you hope to meet him again one day. To be honest, I envy Zen a bit!" Kejin smirked.

"I-If you say so..."

Kejin suddenly discovered something within his peripheral sight and instantly drew my attention to it.

"This might be a bit sudden now, but I think that this is a Petal Dancer over there!"

"What?!"

To my surprise, there really was a creature behind a boulder. It was playing around only a few feet away from us.

The monster looked like a tiny fairy, covered within cherry blossom petals. There was no sign of any aggression coming from it, so I was able to confirm its species by reading aloud the name written above its HP bar.

"«Petal Dancer»... It really is one! Quick, don't let it escape!"

I jumped back on my feet in an instant. Our break had come to an end, when the very target of our quest decided to reveal itself to us on its own. It seemed that the goddess of fortune had been smiling upon Kejin and me on that day.

The thought of harming this adorable life form made me nauseous. My mind was only assured by the fact, that this monster was nothing more than a mere program of Undral, unable to feel actual pain.

Closing the distance between the Petal Dancer and me might scare it away, so I decided to cast Barrage from my fixed point. It only took a short moment, before magic projectiles flew at the little fairy with high-speed.

"Fyah..!"

The Petal Dance shrieked when it had noticed being attacked by me. Thanks to its pigmy body, it managed to avoid most shots from my spell. Only a few of them decreased the HP of the creature, so it had decided to bail from this fight while it could.

"Damn! It's hard to aim at such a tiny body!"

"No worries, I am here to help after all!"

Kejin playfully stretched out his hand to form a magic-circle. His spell reminded me of Quick-Shot, but the casting of it was slower. In addition, Kejin aimed carefully at the flying Petal Dancer without letting it escape his vision.

Then- a familiar white energy ball shot at the creature, ripping even more hit-points away of its health bar.

"Fyih..!" It cried out, when the fairy crashed on the ground from mid-air.

Torturing the poor monster any more was uncalled for, so a last Quick-Shot from me brought the one-sided chase to an end. Nonetheless, this had left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

As a result of our successful hunt, a loot window had opened in front of me:

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*- You have defeated a Petal Dancer (level 10)! -*

*Rewards:*

*- 1x Fairy Blossom Flower*

*- 12 Gall*

*- 225 EXP*

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There it was! The item drop we had been looking for! After hours of continuous searching, our guild was finally able to finish the quest.

Normally, every member of the Night Owls had to find the item by themselves to complete it. However, the Dust Bloomer quest was a special guild related one, which meant the quest would be completed for everyone once a single member did so.

"Congrats, Myst! You've managed to collect an item that other guilds needed more than a day to obtain!" Kejin euphorically slapped my back.

"It was thanks to your help, though."

"Not willing to take all the glory yourself, huh?"

"...By the way, what kind of spell was the one you used there?"

"Oh that? It's called «Snipe Shot», an alternate version of the Quick Shot you like to use. It's much slower in comparison, but the range and power are increased, on the other hand."

"Huh... There are not a lot of people, who spend their points on the spell shot category."

"That's true. Besides me, I don't see anyone using these spells in my Trident guild. You could call us the shot twins!" Kejin laughed delighted.

Even I had to crack a chuckle. The name sounded absurd, although I somewhat liked it.

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Kejin and I had walked for about an hour since we obtained the Fairy Blossom Flower. Our guild had decided that after 3 hours of exploration, regardless of our success in that time period, we would rejoin together at the very edge of the northern mountain range.

A glance toward the virtual clock in my upper vision corner told me, that it was afternoon by now. We had set off on our quest in the early hours of the day, around the time the sun has risen on Undrals horizon.

Then, finally, I was able to make out members of the Night Owls nearby the foot of a mountain.

"Hey, Hilbert! We're back!"

He discerned my voice and waved us over to him. My friends had all gathered at our destination point, meaning Kejin and I were the last ones to return.

Alice and Silke began to smile, when they had noticed us. Apparently, our arrival had lightened their mood.

"Good work, you two!" Alice beamed with welcoming eyes.

"Has anyone been able to get the quest item?"

Hilbert and the others shook their heads in discouragement.

"None of us had any luck..."

"But that's alright; many players needed more than a day to complete the quest." Elm tried to comfort the exhausted Night Owls.

Kejin and I exchanged smirks. We felt like the saviors, who made their appearance at last.

"You know... Kejin and I were able to obtain a Fairy Blossom Flower!"

"On our first try, as well!"

"Wha-!" My friends gasped astonished in unison.

To assure them, that we were not pulling a prank on them, I swiftly opened my inventory and proved to be in possession of the Flower to the others by selecting the item details.

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*- Item Name: Fairy Blossom Flower*

*- Obtained from: Petal Dancer*

*- Location: Ragged Mountains - North*

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"I think my eyes are betraying me! They really got it!" Our leader exclaimed.

Alice and Silke cheered, while Yakima and Elm gave us thumbs up paired together with a wide grin.

"I think, if we get going right now, we might arrive in the village to complete the quest by evening!"

"Eh? Hey now, we've been on the run the whole day! How about a rest?!" Alice demanded from our guild leader in an annoyed tone.

Hilbert submissively raised his hands, giving into her temper. No one opposed her suggestion. We have been working since dawn, so a rest sounded charming to everyone.

"Oh, you're not going to travel to Laos?" Kejin asked surprised.

"No, we did not plan to. Is there a reason we should?"

"Haven't you guys heard about it, Myst?"

I shook my head in curiosity. Was there something we did not know about?

Kejin stared at us with crossed arms, as if he was not able to take a grasp of our ignorance. For him, it must have been cryptic that we lacked his knowledge and we were about to find out exactly why this was the case.

"...Well, after all, it has been announced yesterday by the scouting parties! They have found the entrance to the world-dungeon." Kejin explained and his tone became serious.

The World-Dungeon. That was the name of the labyrinth, which formed the final challenge of a zone in Undral. In order to advance to the next world, you had to collect the keys of the 3 field-bosses. They would unlock the path leading into the underground, a dungeon, which was home to the world-boss -the last obstacle to overcome in a zone.

Speechless, the Night Owls gawked at him. No one of us was sure, if we were supposed to be delighted or concerned about this discovery.

I was the first to break the silence.

"...So they found it, at last..."

"Yes, that's why you should head to Laos. In two days, there will be a discussion between many guilds regarding the boss fight."

So that was the case. A meeting of guilds to discuss our next steps for advancing in the game.

"But why us? Compared to Trident, we are just a small guild." Elm asked then.

"Now, don't say that! You guys were the first to beat a field-boss, so it would be fitting for you to be among the first to beat a world-boss! Our guild would be honored to fight with you on our side!"

That was an admirable offer to get. The thought of joining forces with Trident to fight the world-boss of the first zone made me excited to say the least.

*Fighting alongside Kejin against the most powerful boss of the first world, huh...*

My friends and I debated about this matter and had decided to attend the meeting in the Laos in two days. That also meant that we were unable to get a rest and had to set off for the nearby village to complete our quest first. After that, we would set sail for the capital of the first world of Undral.

Soon enough, we would be facing the final boss of the first world. This knowledge alone started to pump adrenaline through the veins of my virtual body, maybe even through my real one...

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As our guild had planned, two days after we had met Kejin in the Ragged Mountains, we arrived in the Laos. It has been a long time since I visited the starting city the last time. In fact, I did not set a foot into this place after I had joined the Night Owls.

While the capital had not changed much in terms of its appearance, the presence of players significantly decreased over the time in comparison. This was probably due to the fact, that people spread all across the first world of Undral around a month after the game had been launched.

Within that very first month, only a handful of people left the starting city and I was one of them. The reasons for that differed widely. Most people refused to play along the rules of Helios and rebelled against his command to reach the last world of Undral. Others were busy, trying to find an alternate way out of the game and neglected the intended route for us. I remember there being a dedicated group of players, who tested every possible idea that they came up with.

They would run around and suggest things like:

"Hey, let's invent a magic spell to grant us administrator permissions!"

"How about we pray to the Undral gods to free us?"

"Maybe, if we spook ourselves hard enough, we will wake up from the shock?"

Of course, none of these plans resulted in any form of success.

Now having returned to the Laos, our guild headed toward the Royal Courtroom -a popular place for guild-related events. When we had entered the Courtroom, many players were already assembled -deepened in various discussions. Some of them were drinking wine, while others feasted upon the available buffet.

It was not just the Trident guild present. A simple observation disclosed me that there were at least 6 different guilds in the same building and these were by far not smaller ones, like the Night Owls. At that time, bigger guilds consisted of approximately 20 members.

"Urgh, this place is cramped with people."

"Just bear with it please, Myst."

Hilbert knew that I disliked crowds. Although, there was not much in that situation he was able to do about it. Our only option was to try and pass through the masses of guilds, in order to reach the meeting room.

Around an hour after we had arrived in the Royal Courtroom, the guild leader of Trident called the attending participants to the meeting room. Although, I was certain that some had stayed at the foyer -unwilling to give up on the delicious buffet.

In the midst of the local participants, I noticed Kejin being present as well. He waved at me with grin, before returning his attention toward his guild-leader.

He was a young man, around the age of 23. He had short brown hair and masculine facial features. Especially, his eyes harbored immense fighting spirit.

"First of, as the leader of the Trident guild, I want to thank every player here for attending this most important meeting. My name is Ryukazen and I will represent my beloved guild on this special occasion."

A round of applause from all present players supported the introduction. His voice contained a strict, yet charismatic tone. To put it simply, it was befitting for a leader. Someone, you would respect and wanted to be in command of a group.

"I also want to thank the scouting parties, who have done a splendid job over the last weeks. It is thanks to their efforts, that we are able to be here and discuss about the world-dungeon discovery."

Another kudos from the guilds echoed through the room. Although, the scouting parties were not present at this event, it was still a generous gesture to appreciate their work.

"We have also been provided with the rules of the dungeon, as well as the world-boss. This information had been engraved on the outside entrance of the labyrinth."

Ryukazen clarified the system of each world’s final challenge. For instance, entering said dungeon was possible with multiple guilds. However, the limit to that were 3 guilds at the same time. This line-up of guilds would also later on challenge the world-boss in the deepest parts of the labyrinth. Once a player leaves the dungeon, he has to start from the beginning of it again, regardless of his guild still participating in the exploration. Other than that, the concept of the dungeon was similar to normal ones.

As for the world-boss itself, the following list of rules applied:

*- leaving the boss chamber during the battle is not possible*

*- item uses are limited to a single use every 2 minutes*

*- a maximum amount of 3 guilds can participate*

*- a maximum amount of 40 players can participate*

*- at least 2 different guilds, or parties need to participate*

*- only players -who survived the whole battle- can advance to the next world*

The concept was clear. You had two possible outcomes of a world-boss fight. Either coming out as victorious... -or being killed and have your character reset back to zero. Bailing out of the fight mid-battle -if things got out of control- was impossible for all players.

As for the player limit, if 3 guilds were to participate in the same line-up, some guild-members would be left behind and had to follow up later on. Of course, these players would be provided with a detailed guide to beat the world-boss by their guild. There were certainly perks to staying behind, such as a lower risk of getting annihilated by the boss.

"Now that we have all available information regarding the world-dungeon shared, I want to move on to the next topic -the participating guilds. The limit to the amount of guilds in a world-boss battle in set to 3, which means we have to decide on the brave players that want to fight in the frontlines."

It was an intriguing subject, to say the least. By now, the players had put lots of effort into leveling their character up. No one had a dying wish, so people would have doubts about taking the risk of fighting in a world-boss battle, without having any information about it. In the worst-case scenario, they might get wiped out and lose everything

The stakes were certainly high. There was no telling, what awaited us in the boss chamber. However, someone had to be the first and take the bullet. A frontline was in need.

"It would shame my guild, if I were to organize the whole meeting just to act as a coward in the end. That is why I declare the Trident guild to be the first participating guild for the frontline! Naturally, I will also attend the boss battle!"

His guild began to roar and cheer like fanatics. They were full of motivation and the resolve to face the world-boss.

*...Incredible, just like a commander of an army! Kejin has a great guild-leader.*

The sudden self-nomination of Ryukazen had left a strong impression on the other players. Moments ago, it seemed like no one was willing to join the frontlines. Now, they began to immerse into heated discussions among themselves.

-Then, a familiar face upraised from his seat at the giant meeting desk. It was Wolfgang, guild-leader of the First Legion.

"After hearing such an admirable proclamation, I do not intend to run away from this noble responsibility! Our guild -the First Legion- will join your mages and fight side by side!"

Wolfgang's guild supported his decision and saluted proudly, while other guilds applauded his bravery.

Ryukazen acknowledged his words delighted and both shook hands to seal their cooperation.

"This leaves us with one more guild being able to participate. Both of our guilds have enough members to barely fill the limit of 50 players combined, so joining our frontline is not mandatory anymore. However, we are contented to welcome a third one!"

Again, the room broke out into deepened discussions. They had met the minimum requirements of two guilds and were not short on manpower, so adding an independent party instead of another guild could be considered an option. Although, there were only official guilds present in the Royal Courtroom.

Someone raised his hand, when Ryukazen invited another group to join their forces. It was the blonde-haired Kejin from the Tridents.

"Leader Ryukazen, we don't need a lot of players for our line-up, right? I want to suggest to add the Night Owls to our frontline! Their member number is equal to a party and they are notorious for beating the first field-boss!"

*Thanks Kejin, I guess...*

The guild-leader of Trident nodded thoughtfully, before turning his attention toward Hilbert.

"My precious member here is certainly right! Having the Night Owls on our side against the first world-boss is a befitting thought! What do you say, leader of the Night Owls? Are you willing to give us the honor of entrusting our backs to your abilities?"

*Uwahh... All the attention is on Hilbert now... Hang in there, buddy.*

Just as I had expected, our leader began to sweat profoundly. While Kejin had suggested our participation once already, he seemed to have forgotten about it and was now left speechless. Even his assistance begging glances toward us did not help.

"U-Uhm... well- ...we would be overjoyed to be considered your allies in such a historical battle! My guild-members have been honing their skills for this exact purpose, which is why we respectfully accept your generous invitation."

*Good job, you managed to preserve our reputation in front of all these people. That's our Hilbert for you!*

Although, Alice was not in the slightest pleased with his decision and even Silke began to shiver nervously. Elm and Yakima -on the other hand- were enthusiastic about us participating, after they had listened to all the motivational words from Ryukazen and Wolfgang.

"Splendid! Everyone, please treasure your memories of this day dearly! This a monumental milestone for all players trapped in Undral, regarding our advance in the game! Tomorrow at dawn, our freshly found alliance will assemble before the world-dungeon and charge to the battlefield!"

A grand celebration followed his concluding speech. Drinks, meals, chatter and laughter... all players enjoyed themselves to their hearts content, until the sun drowned behind the horizon at dusk.

Hilbert had exchanged opinions with the other guild-leaders on a private round of wine-drinking, while my friends got to know the members of the Trident and First Legion guild.

I, on my behalf, fooled around with Kejin. We had gotten surprisingly close to each other in such a short amount of time. Whenever a Trident guild-member would ask about me, Kejin always introduced me as his "spell-shot twin".

At last, the day had come to an end and it was time to part ways for the night. In the very next morning, the 3 guilds of the frontline would join together in front of the world-dungeon to take on the final challenge of this zone.

Failure would result in the annihilation of 3 whole guilds and shatter the hope of many players, who dreamed of an end to the game. It was a heavy burden to bear, to say the least. As if all eyes in Undral were laid upon you, there was a constant feeling of pressure.

On our pursuit for an Inn to spend the night at, our guild happened to pass by the plaza of the Laos. 3 months ago -at this exact place- Helios had taken over Undral during the Opening Ceremony. The presence of the crowd from back then and all of our despair could still somewhat be felt. ...Maybe it was just my imagination.

I walked over to the monument -at the center of the plaza- and placed my hand gently on it. The sensation was cold, yet I did not expect anything else.

*Just watch me, Zen! I will defeat the world-boss at any cost and bring back hope of our freedom to everyone, who abandoned it long ago!*

Deep within my heart I had also believed -that if I were to advance further into the game- the day might come when Zen and I would finally reunite. Whether that would be in Undral or in the real world was uncertain to me at that time...

"What are you doing, Myst? We're going to leave you behind!" Alice yelled from afar.

"It's nothing! I'm on my way!"

I parted from the monument and chased after my guild-members in an agile sprint.

...What I did know, however, was that the next day would mark a decisive impact on our future in this virtual world. -Although, it made an unforeseen development concerning my life afterward...

CHAPTER 7

Advance! Frontline Alliance!

-Dawn of the morning, 7 AM-

Just like Ryukazen commanded, the temporary Frontline Alliance gathered right in front of the entrance to the world-dungeon. Among sleepy yawns and half-closed eye-lids under the 50 players, Kejin stood out as one of the few to be heated up for combat. Although, the same had applied to Yakima as well.

Both of them immersed themselves in practice swings and warm-up gymnastics. It goes without saying, that our virtual body had no need for these kinds of activities. However, this was an effective method for building up a steely resolve.

Ryukazen -together with Hilbert and Wolfgang- marched toward the entrance and lined up before the guild-members. Their profile was full of pride.

"All players, attention!" Wolfgang yelled.

In an instant, the tired faces spread among everyone vanished. Wolfgang glanced at Ryukazen, who assumed the role of the speaker from him.

"I am relieved, that all guilds assembled in full presence! You being here, is prove of your fighting-spirit!"

Tridents guild-leader disclosed the strategy for our frontline in the world-dungeon in detail. To maximize our exploration effectiveness, the guilds will split up in groups of around 5 members. Naturally, the Night Owls were exempted from that rule. Our guild-size consisted only of 6 members in total, after all.

Our focus was to find the boss chamber in the deepest levels of the dungeon and to avoid taking unnecessary risks for treasure hunts. Traps could be lying around behind every corner of the labyrinth, so proceeding with utmost caution was advised.

Once the boss chamber had been located, all players needed to be informed as soon as possible and gather in front of it. Entering the room on your own was prohibited and would be punished for endangering the whole operation.

"That summarized everything we needed to cover beforehand. Form your groups now and enter the dungeon accordingly!"

The guild-leaders rejoined their own members and the players began to split up into smaller parties. Our guild had already skipped this step, which led to us being the first group in line to descend into the world-dungeon.

As soon as the ancient and cold-looking entrance gate extended before our eyes, Silke began to tremble in fear again. She was not the only one, though. All members of our guild had a tense facial expression, including Yakima.

I had decided, to assist my members in putting aside their doubts. We were about to take on our most crucial challenge to that day, which meant delivering anything short of our maximum effort remained out of the question.

"Are you alright, Silke?"

"...Y-Yes. I’m just a bit nervous." She muttered almost incoherent.

"It's going to be fine. You've gotten a lot stronger."

"You think so...?"

"Of course! We all have! So if you face any danger, don't forget that I can protect you."

I placed my hand gently on her head and gave her an encouraging pat.

Silke let out a soft chuckle and her face brightened up. My mission was a complete success.

"Hey, what about me?!" Alice made a jealous pout.

With a smirk decorated on his face, Yakima instantly kneeled down in front of her. From an objective point of view, it seemed he was about to ask for her hand in marriage.

"You've called for your personal knight, princess?"

"...Get lost, before I shove something up your nose."

"As cold as ever, aren't we?" He took her warning to heart and left the thorn-covered princess alone.

This might have looked like one of his usual pranks on Alice, but even Yakima was deeply concerned about us and wanted to support our mentality.

*Don't worry, I acknowledge your good intentions, Yakima.*

"Okay, guys. Here goes nothing!" Hilbert declared.

A few steps toward the entrance were enough for a notification to pop up before us:

*- Warning: You are about to enter a world-dungeon! Do you want to proceed? (3 keys of field-bosses are required to enter) -*

I postponed my decision out of hesitation. It took a deep breath for the sake of mustering up my confidence, before my finger tapped on the accept button of the screen.

Within split-seconds, the system had confirmed every member to be in possession of the mandatory keys and our vision has been engulfed in a white beam as a result of it.

While we lost track of our surroundings, my body began to feel light-weighted -free from any mass. The cause of this was a teleportation sequence, which would bring us down to the deeper levels of the world. -In short, it descended us into the dungeon.

*...There's no turning back from now on!*

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When the bright light -which obscured our vision- had faded, the plains and the entrance to the dungeon had vanished. Instead, a rocky surface spread into every direction, filled with countless mazelike paths. There was no sun illuminating the area. The reason for that was a high ceiling above us, covered in sharp rock-spikes. A befitting theme for a dungeon.

Silke checked our vicinity with eager -yet hesitant- glances.

"Is this... the world-dungeon?"

"Yeah, no doubt about that."

A quick look at my map had confirmed my statement.

*- Location: Zone 1 World-Dungeon - Floor: U1 -*

From the description of the map it was safe to assume, that this labyrinth had been divided into multiple levels. My conclusion of it was that the sheer size of this place could not be compared to regular dungeons in the slightest.

We walked down the path in front of us with our ability to see in this dim light being reduced to the bare minimum. The goal for now was to get a picture of the whole area and to find a way for descending into the deeper levels of the dungeon.

Soon enough, we had encountered our first problem: a split-path. The massive wall before us featured three different holes, all being shrouded in darkness.

"What do we do now?" Elm asked.

"There are three options, so we could split up into 3 pairs to investigate them."

"That's no good, Myst. We don't know what monsters and traps lurk in this giant maze. We should stick together to raise our chances of beating enemies."

Our guild-leader refused my suggestions of splitting up. He had a point, so I agreed with him and discarded my initial plan.

Yakima, on the other hand, came up with his own idea quickly.

"Then we just choose one on a whim?"

"Are you trying to get us killed?!"

"Do you have a better plan, Alice?"

"...N-Not really."

"See? Going with our guts is the only option."

Alice was not comfortable with the idea to randomly choose a path, but no one was able to think of another solution for this problem. Even the map did not prove itself to be useful in that regard.

Revoltingly, we had decided to choose the left path. The middle and right one were probably the most popular choices, thus the risk of them being the wrong path were higher.

Whether it had been the right choice to make, or not, did not reveal itself for a long time. We were marching for half an hour afterward through the rocky surfaces with nothing noteworthy happening. Occasionally, a single monster would appear once in a while, but we dealt with them in a breeze.

Alice was the first one to speak out all of our thoughts loudly.

"Hey, I'm starting to think that this was the wrong path..."

"We don't have hit a dead-end yet, so returning to the split-path would not make sense now." I answered. Hiding my own doubts in that matter proved itself to be a challenge on its own.

"But we might run into the other groups then and figure it out together..."

Hilbert suddenly signaled us to be quiet, while staring into the distance of the dim room we stood in.

I checked for myself what he was looking at, though I was only able to make out heavy boulders in each direction. Then, my eyes fixed on a figure on the right side of the area. Behind multiple spikes -which penetrated the ground and pointed toward the ceiling- a monster roamed around with slaking stomps. It was different from any other one we had encountered in this dungeon before.

"Is this... an earth lizard?"

The appearance of the monster was unique. Covered in dark-grey scales and thorns around its neck, a lizard-like creature stomped its way through the labyrinth on two feet. It was taller than anyone of our group and the muscles paired with its tough scale-armor made it look intimidating to say the least.

I decided to get a bit closer to the monster, while hiding behind the boulders that we came across. After passing a few feet, the health bar appeared over the creatures head along its name tag:

*- Geo Lacertilia (Level 25) -*

Even when I saw its name first hand, my consciousness refused to accept the very existence of that monster.

*A level 25 monster?! This is by far the highest one we have encountered! Monsters in this dungeon have barely come close to be level 19!*

It was obvious, that this particular creature was special. Maybe this was a sign of having chosen the wrong path, after all. Although, the possibility of it guarding something important was remarkable.

Hilbert followed me to get a closer look at the creature and form an opinion on our next move.

"Let's leave this place, while we can."

"Huh? Are we not going to take it on?"

"Didn't you listen to Ryukazens warning? We should avoid getting ourselves in trouble for treasure hunting and focus on finding the boss chamber!"

"...But what if we actually have to pass by it to descend to the deeper floors?"

He went silent for a second and began to consider this as a valid option.

However, the monster was dangerous and most likely aggressive. Trying to get past it, while also avoiding a confrontation with the monster seemed impossible. The Geo Lacertilia had been roaming nearby the continuation of the road ahead, so a fighting it to advance further had been intended by the system.

We did not manage to come to a proper conclusion, as the monster had led out a battle cry for an unknown reason. Hilbert and I checked its position in an instant and the cause of this had become clear.

While we had been discussing on how to deal with this unexpected enemy, Yakima stormed at the Geo Lacertilia and rammed his magic-imbedded fist into its head.

"What is this idiot doing?!" Hilbert sighed and palmed his face in frustration.

"-Sorry! We weren't able to hold him back anymore!"

Elm apologized, while the rest of our members sprinted toward us.

We were at a loss for words, when Yakima came back flying by out of nowhere. However, he did not stop when passing us in the air and crashed right into the wall nearby.

"-Urgh!!"

Yakima let out a painful gasp, even though he should not have been able to feel any of it through the pain absorption system. His HP bar had lost a large portion of its value afterward.

"Great! Just great! We could have just turned around and went another way, but this jerk had to shut his brain down!"

"Calm down, Alice! You can scold him all you want later on! For now, we have to deal with this monster!"

Just as I tried to get her attention on our new enemy, the Geo Lacertilia stomped enraged toward my guild-members.

"Grrghhh!!!" A deep and mighty growl escaped the monsters reptile mouth.

Elm and I took matters into our hands and casted Barrage as soon as it got in our attacking range. Moments after the beginning of our chant, the magic projectiles had manifested and charged at the Geo Lacertilia. As a result, dust from the ground shot into the atmosphere.

When the dust finally lifted itself, the figure of the monster came back into vision -completely unfazed by our attack. Even when we checked its HP bar, only a small amount depleted of its maximum value. All we managed to achieve was to leave a small scratch on the lizard creature.

"Damn! How tough is that scale-armor of it?!"

I cursed astonished, when Hilbert dashed toward the Geo Lacertilia from behind. While the monsters vision had been obscured with dust, our guild-leader saw an opportunity and escaped its field of vision.

A completed magic-circle levitated above his right hand, which indicated the finished chant of his spell.

"Over here, reptile!" He yelled, while crushing his Stream spell into its back.

However, yet again, the creature remained unimpressed and shrugged it off as if it were a bug bite. Then, the same thorns that decorated its neck shot out of its back -mercilessly piercing his fist.

"-Argh!! You-!"

Hilbert was not even able to pull his arm out of the thorns of its back, when the Geo Lacertilia sent him flying toward a boulder with a powerful back-kick. It was the resembled the movement of a startled horse.

Our guild-leader crashed into the rock with full speed and got immobilized by the shock. His health bar had been more than halved with its combination attack.

"...No way."

"That thing did not even bother to look at him..."

Elm and Alice made terrified facial expressions, while they tried to comprehend what had just happened in this series of events. That was only natural, since the Geo Lacertilia removed two of our strongest members of the combat without breaking a sweat.

"...It's no good, we can't beat this thing!"

"Even if we wanted to, this monster won't let us go just like that, Alice!" I shouted. My tone sounded more aggressive than I wanted it to actually be.

"Then I'll leave the thinking to you and distract that reptile myself in the meanwhile!"

Alice sprinted toward the monster and gained its attention. Thanks to her evasion skills, I did not have to be concerned about her getting caught off guard. The Geo Lacertilia was powerful, though it could never match the speed of Alice.

We needed a plan to deal with the lizard. Although, none of our attacks managed to deal noteworthy damage to it and had only backfired at us.

*No matter which tactic we use to attack this creature, its defense is way too high! How can we make its health drop to zero, if it doesn't take damage?!*

There had to be an intended way to beat this monster. The reason for our failure was not, that we were to weak in terms of our stats. Even a level 25 monster could not be more difficult to beat than a field-boss.

-In that moment, a possible solution had been formed in my mind.

"That's it! Silke!"

"Y-Yes!"

"Use that spell you've learned a week ago aside from Spirits Blessing!"

"W-What...? Oh! Yes, just a moment!"

Silke picked up on my thought and started to chant a new spell of her collection. A beautifully drawn magic-circle shined on her body in an azure light, until she had finished the casting process and Elm and I were engulfed in the same azure color for a second.

"«Goddess Grace Spear»!"

A new icon flashed up in the corner of my vision alongside a description to its effect:

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*- Status Name: Goddess Grace Spear*

*- Duration: 75 seconds.*

*- Effect: Inflicts 25% piercing damage to monsters with attacks and reduces the players defense and magic resist by 50%. This effect gains additional 10% piercing damage, when the targets defense and magic resist are 200+% higher than the players.*

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This was our key to beat this monster. The effect was a double-edged sword; since we could be killed in one hit now -a high risk, high reward strategy. However, this reduction of our own defense meant that we would benefit from the 10% bonus -adding up to a total of 35% piercing damage.

Piercing damage was an interesting status, which had been invented to deal with high-defense targets. Its effect allowed you to ignore a large portion of the enemy defensive parameters, literally piercing through the armor to put it in simple terms.

"Elm! Let's do it one more time!"

"Right!"

Both of us chanted Barrage once more. When we had finished our casting, I signaled Alice to distance herself from the monster, before our spell charged at the Geo Lacertilia with our new status effect combined.

"-Gruughhh!!"

The enemy cried out in pain, when it got hit by two Barrages at the same time. The three of us stared unnerved at its HP bar. Would we be successful this time?

-Then, once the dust had settled this time as well, the health bar began to lose points as a result of our spells -and not just a few of them! Quite the contrary, it lost a huge portion -about 30% of the remaining value!

"Finally, it took damage!" I shouted in delight.

However, the fight was not over yet. The glare of the Geo Lacertilia became sinister and could have been interpreted as: *It's my turn, now!*

Shortly after, a magic-circle manifested in front of its mouth -indicating a breath-like spell.

My suspicion turned out to be true. When the chant had been finished within split-seconds, a wave of huge thorns shot toward Elm and me with incredible speed. They looked exactly like the ones on its back and around the neck.

Elm and I dashed in opposite directions as soon as we indentified the type of spell we had been dealing with. A strong jump to follow the dash up was enough, to avoid critical damage. Although, we have been hit by a few of the thorns in the process.

Our HP bar had lost a significant amount of its value, nonetheless. The cause of this was the reduced defensive parameters of the Goddess Grace Spear status effect. Compared to its damage that it dealt to Yakima and Hilbert, however, this was still a small amount -when taking into account that their parameters had not been altered.

Elm had checked on Silkes supportive spell and warned me about the duration of it.

"Our status effect will run out in a couple of seconds!"

"Then we'll wrap this up now!"

The Geo Lacertilia had been still recharging from its long-range attack, which created an opportunity for us. Since the third time is supposed to be the charm, Elm depleted even more of his mana for another Barrage. I decided to go with my strongest spell and began to chant Shockwave.

Alice, in the meantime, managed to distance herself unharmed from the enemy and regrouped with Silke.

The Geo Lacertilia had recovered and prepared another cast of his thorn wave. However, it was too late for him to finish it in time.

Both of our spells completed the magic-circle and we unleashed our final attack on the armored lizard monster. The combined power of Elms Barrage bombardment and my Shockwave blast caused it to let out a high-pitched cry, which we did not hear from its deep growls before.

"Griiiiiiigghh!!!"

Its voice filled the whole area along an exploding sound from our magic. After its cry had faded away, a loud thump caused the ground to tremble for a short period.

The beast had fallen. There were no signs of movements coming from the Geo Lacertilia anymore. A glance at its HP bar had confirmed, that its value had fully depleted and hit zero and last.

Alice began to yell out loudly, when the body of the monster began to dissolve.

"Y-You guys have beaten it?!"

"...Seems like it, I guess." My tone was hesitant, since I was not fully convinced of it myself.

"Indeed, we have! Thanks to Silkes supportive magic and Mysts quick thinking! Although, Myst being capable of that does not surprise me anymore."

Elm put his hand gently on my head and gave me an encouraging chuckle. His words made me flustered and I darted with my eyes around on the grounds surface.

Hilbert and Yakima were still stuck in the wall and boulder, so we had to free them ourselves. Silkes magic managed to heal both of our wounded friends, so they were able to recover quickly.

Of course, Alice gave Yakima a taste of hell as soon as she got the chance to do so. While he was at fault for getting us into this fight on his own, I felt bad to see him whining on his knees and begging her submissively for her forgiveness.

*I'm sorry, but you brought this upon yourself...*

I did not count for how long Alice had been scolding Yakima. It may have been 15 minutes... or 20... it felt like an eternity for all of us. Only when Hilbert had finally stepped in and decided that it has been enough, she let him off the hook with a grim glare.

Now, that this monster had been defeated, we were able to continue the path which was guarded by it. The possibilities of what awaited us at the end of the road were broad. Treasure, a trap, a dead-end... you name it.

However, the correct answer was something different than that. What truly lied at the end was...

"...a staircase?" Hilbert asked surprised.

Just like our guild-leader said, it turned out to be a staircase that led down into the darkness.

I nodded attentive.

"Seems like we were on the right path, after all. It will probably take us to the next floor of the dungeon."

"You mean, that there is more to this place?!"

"This is a world-dungeon, Alice. It will take more than just an hour to explore the area."

"I hope, that there are no more of these lizard creatures ahead..."

"We know how to deal with them now. It would be a problem, if there are more problematic monsters below."

"Speculating around will get us nowhere. Let's advance further into the dungeon." Hilbert concluded.

Thus, the Night Owls approached the staircase and descended to the deeper levels of the world-dungeon. Soon, the other guilds would catch up to us.

*It would be quite troublesome, if the Geo Lacertrilia were to respawn again for the other frontline members. That monster is fairly well capable of putting an end to your dungeon exploration...*

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- Zone 1 World-Dungeon - Floor: U4 -

9 hours have passed, since we had entered the world-dungeon. It had turned out, that the labyrinths size was significantly larger than we initially thought. Each floor had become progressively vaster and it took our guild 4 hours to map out the third level of the maze.

Nonetheless, we have made it at last. The fourth level of the dungeon afforded only 2 hours to navigate through and had been confirmed to be the final floor. The method we used to come to this conclusion was simple... we had discovered the boss chamber.

In that very moment, our guild stood before the cold iron gate, which had been engraved with strange symbols. It looked similar to the entrance of the world-dungeon itself, although I noticed something different about it.

*There is something engraved into the center of the gate along with the other symbols... are these supposed to be fangs? ...Maybe claws of an insect?*

A depiction of an inhuman body part acted as some kind of a mascot on the iron gate. However, I was not able to think of an animal or monster, that it might have resembled.

While I had been busy studying this peculiar layout of the chamber door, the members of the Trident and First Legion guild -slowly but surely- showed up one after another. Among these players, Kejin waved energetically toward our guild when he had noticed our presence.

"Hey, Myst! You guys got here before us, huh?"

"Yeah, we were the ones to discover the boss chamber."

"It's always you, who's first to find these places! Are you some kind of boss magnet?"

"We just had a bit more time to explore, since we entered the dungeon before all of you."

"Next time we go in a dungeon, I want to be part of your group again!" Kejin laughed and smiled brightly.

While all the other players were stressed out and nervous, he had managed to be completely unaffected by it. A quite handy personality-trait to have.

Wolfgang and Ryukazen made their entrance as well, which completed the assembling. The guild-leader of Trident did not waste time and started our final meeting before the boss fight with his motivational tone.

"As expected from the Night Owls, they were able to locate the boss chamber here! I want to express my utmost gratitude toward the members of the guild that worked with all their combined efforts!"

The members of the Trident and First Legion guild applauded boisterous, while we Night Owls were at a loss regarding how we were supposed to react in this situation.

Ryukazen signaled the players to tone their cheers down and continued with a more serious tone now.

"Up to this point, we have met the expectations from the players all over Undral. This also means, however, that it is up to our abilities to fulfill the whole purpose which we came here for! I humbly ask the Frontline Alliance to lend me your strength once more and join me in this fight against the world-boss! For the sake of our freedom!"

Another cheering -along with deafening roars and growls- rose from the players. Although, we had been continuously exploring and fighting in this dungeon for 9 hours, there was no sign of tired and exhausted faces. Quite the contrary, they were full of energy and fighting spirit.

"Then what are you waiting for?! The enemy is right behind these doors! Prove yourselves to be heroes!" Ryukazen shouted, as he pressed a button on an interface.

A transparent text manifested above our heads as a response:

*- Warning: You are about to enter the World-Boss chamber! Proceed with caution! -*

It turned out to be a notification window that popped up, when he touched the door to open it. With heavy trembling and intense screeches the gate had gradually opened to the inside of the murky room behind it.

The door did not even finish its motion, before all players had stormed toward the boss chamber. Their roars reached its peak, when they spread out in the spacious hall behind the Iron Gate.

Our guild entered the chamber as well. What immediately caught my attention was the substance that decorated the room -white silk-like strings. To be precise, the whole room had been covered in these strings.

A terrifying premonition formed in my mind. If this substance turned out as what I assumed it to be, this boss would invoke the greatest fear of many players.

*Please don't tell me, that this is...!*

With dooming screeching, the gate behind us closed and locked us into the chamber.

From this point, even if we wanted to, there was no possibility of escaping this room. In order to leave this place, you either had to be killed and lose everything you worked for, or survive the imminent battle and advance to the next zone.

"Wha- the light?!"

I exclaimed bewildered, when the whole chamber lit up in daylight as soon as the gate closed off. No matter how long I analyzed the hall, there was no light-source to be found. This illumination had been caused by the system, indicating the start of the boss fight.

However, there was no boss in this chamber. On the other side of the room, there was nothing else than more of the white silk strings -accumulated to the density of a wall.

Among the players, dumbfounded expressions and irritated comments spread extensively:

"...What's this?"

"Where is the boss?"

"Is this an error of the game?"

"How are we supposed to fight against nothing?"

Unfortunately, my premonition was about to realize itself. A single drop of liquid dropped on the ground, which caused even more confusion for the Frontline Alliance.

"What is that?"

"...Water?"

"No, this is not water... It has a disgusting smell."

Three players of the Trident and First Legion guild investigated the mysterious dropped liquid, when my brain abruptly comprehended what was going on here.

"Get away from it! Quick!" I yelled, using all the power of my voice.

"Huh? Why exact-"

But it was too late. In the brink of a second, a gigantic eight-legged monster -which hid in the forest of silk strings- jumped down from the ceiling on the oblivious players and obliterated them in an instant.

Just like that, we had lost three combatants of the Frontline Alliance. Gone, reduced to nothingness... back to zero. All the work they put into their character had been ripped away from them in a flash.

Furthermore, the monster took form of the life form that I hoped it not to be. The fangs engraved on the gate, all the white silk strings... no, all the webs in this room. The monster was a giant arachnid... -a monster spider.

With giant legs -longer than any tarantula-, terrifying fangs and speed as fast as lightning -it was clear, that this was a giant huntsman spider. A spider species, which is considered to be one of the largest ones on earth. On top of that, this was a mutation of its real world counterpart with much more hair covering the body and fiery red eyes. I estimated the height of this arachnid to be around 30 feet.

Giant huntsman spiders were renowned to stalk and hunt down their prey by themselves, instead of relying on something as webs. This was certainly what the world-boss just did. From the moment that we had entered the chamber, it observed our movements to their smallest detail and waited for an opportunity to strike.

The spider-webs in this room were nothing, but simple decoration that distracted me from searching for the actual boss. A devious and effective strategy, that bore fruits for the monster.

Multiple health bars lined up on top of each other over the head of the boss, revealing the name of our enemy:

*- Heteropoda Queen -*

Glaring at us with threatening eyes, the world-boss made a terrifying and thunderous cry.

*GIIIIIIZCHIIIII!!!*

All players, no matter which guild they belonged to, gasped with innocuous expressions on their faces at the nightmare of a monster. That included my friends from the Night Owls.

Especially Yakima -whom I was the most worried about- lost any strength in his legs and collapsed on the ground. In this place, there was nowhere for him to run and hide from the enemy.

"...A-A spider... no... this is not a spider... this is a hell spawn... a demon..."

Even though, I did not share the same fear of arachnids as him, I was able to understand his devastation. This was the first time in my life, when I had been afraid of a spider. No, Yakima was right... I was afraid of a true hell spawn.

*There is no way... who in their right minds designed this monster?! Did Helios do it?! Did he replace the normal bosses with abominations like this?!*

The Heteropoda Queen did not give us a chance to adjust to its shocking entry to the battlefield and threw one of its legs down in a sweeping arc at the group of players in her vicinity.

"-Gaarggh!!!"

Many members of the Frontline Alliance were sent flying by the force behind its stomp and crashed all across the chamber into the ground. Some were unfortunate enough to land right into masses of spider-webs, immobilizing their movements. In addition, two more players had been killed mercilessly through this event.

The Frontline Alliance had lost 5 players out of 50 within the first minutes of the world-boss raid.

*It is too strong...!! Are we not ready to face this boss, yet?!*

The Heteropoda Queen seemed to also be able to smell fear and read our minds, because it turned its attention toward our guild as this thought had crossed my mind.

Ignoring the players in front of it, the boss charged at us with blinding speed. There was even dust being thrown into the air from its movements.

"-Evade! This thing wants to kill us!"

Hilbert yelled with fear in his tone, while dashing to the side. We did not hesitate for a single moment and sprinted swiftly toward the other guilds.

...Except for Yakima, who stared bedridden at the world-boss, still being unable to find his resolve to fight.

"Yakima, move your damn legs!"

However, Hilbert’s words did not reach him. Ultimately, the monster had reached his position and ripped Yakima’s body in two halves with its fangs. The huntsman spider then proceeded to devour the upper half of his body down with a disturbing sound.

"...It... it ate him...?"

"Yakima has been... killed."

"How gruesome...!"

As if our spirits had left out virtual body, we froze in place and gawked at the remnants of his corpse. Instead of blood, red digital dust rose into the air from the wide-open wound of his torso -which soon dissolved entirely.

With this, 6 players had left the battlefield and lost everything what they desperately worked for.

*What a horrible way of dying... I don't want to imagine what he must have experienced there...*

It became evident, that the Frontline Alliance had entered the boss chamber with false expectations. Confronting the world-boss like a regular field-boss turned out to be one of the worst mistakes to be made.

The power-level between these different kinds of bosses should have been clear from the start, when you took the 50 player limit into consideration. We have been taught this crucial lesson on cost of the lives of our frontline members.

*If we can't figure out a way to keep up with this monster, our frontline will be annihilated along our hopes and dreams of advancing in the game...!!*

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The world-boss raid had been going on for almost two hours. Although, I might have lost track of time in the vicious circle of consuming mana potions and other medical items over and over again. At that point, I probably drank more than 10 mana replenishing potions.

We had adjusted to fighting the boss as the hours passed by and prevented the death count to rise into dangerous levels. Nonetheless, from the starting 50 players of the Frontline Alliance only 30 had remained on the battlefield. The First Legion guild suffered from the most casualties with their members.

"Argghh-!!"

*-Crash!*

This painful cry belonged to me, as I flew right into the sturdy brick wall. I got hit by a direct blow of the Heteropoda Queens piercing legs. My HP bar depleted enormous value and had entered critical health.

This was not the first time in this battle. I could have died around 8 times by now, so the cycle of drinking yet another health potion continued.

"-Blergh!" I blurted out in discomfort.

*They should at least have made these tastier... I'm getting sick of this bitter herb flavor...*

Players were wounded each second, so the 7 healers of our frontline were working relentlessly. Silke was one of them and her face had lost the sparkle which I gave her in the morning.

*GIIZCHIIIII!!!*

The deafening cry of the world-boss hallowed through the battlefield, as Kejin hit with a Snipe-Shot right into one of its eyes. Out of originally 4 health bars, we managed to reduce it to a single remaining one.

However -as the monster continuously lost health value- the attacking pattern of it became more aggressive and difficult to counter.

"Myst, we need your help!"

"On my way, Ryukazen!"

"Take the left side with Kejin! Wolfgang and I will focus on the front!"

"Understood!"

I forced myself back on my feet as the empty potion of my hand shattered on the ground.

The guild-leaders of Trident and First Legion, along with Kejin and me, were the most active remaining combatants of this boss raid. Other players either got themselves killed, or badly wounded and had to be treated by our healers.

Another group of players formed the backline of this raid and used long-distance magic to put constant pressure on the boss and its health. They also acted as a distraction or substitute, when one of the 4 of us had to take a short break.

Ryukazen and I would often switch the role of forming a new plan to deal with the world-boss. In that regard, he treated me as an equal.

"Alright, Myst! Ready for another round?" Kejin asked playfully.

"Hopefully one of the last ones."

"That depends on our abilities!"

Both of us charged at the Heteropada Queen, who was kept busy with defending herself against the backline magic spells.

Advanced magic-circles were created in our hands, while we stomped off the ground and I rammed my Stream spell right into its body from above. Kejin used a spell known as «Lions Palm» and -as the name suggests it- used his magic embodied palm to crash a shockwave into its muscles along an orange-colored glow that decorated his arm.

Against a player and normal monsters, this spell was able to cause a stun status effect. When something had been afflicted with this effect, it was rendered incapable of movements and spell uses for a short duration.

Unfortunately, a world-boss was immune to these kinds of statuses. The damage it dealt was still remarkable, though.

Ryukazen and Wolfgang were able to get a direct hit on its face, which caused the monster to cry out in pain along the decreasing HP bar.

-Then, the boss had finally snapped and used one of its legs to slash in a 180 degrees angle around itself. Needless to say, all 4 of us were blown away from the impact and nearly lost our entire HP in one go.

"Guergh...!!"

I coughed and instinctively gasped for air, when I got smashed into the ground. The surface had taken visible damage as well and countless cracks opened up beneath me.

"Myst! Get up, quick!"

"Come over here to us!"

My head refused to move just like any other virtual muscle of my body, though I identified these voices to belong to Hilbert and Alice from the backline. -Shortly after, I understood what they meant.

The fiery red eyes of the Heteropada Queen glared at me from high above with saliva dripping out of its mouth. The monster had been annoyed with me and decided that I should become its next meal.

However, I was not able to move an inch. The impact had stunned me and the only option left was to patiently wait for my incoming death.

*Seems like I am about to find out what Yakima has gone through earlier... ironic, isn't it?*

The world-boss hissed to convey its hunger and rapidly descended its head and fangs toward me. ...It was at that moment, where I started to feel light-weighted again. As if I had been sent flying through the air and the flow of time had slowed down.

*...Huh?*

I was not able to express my confusion with words, but the cause of this feeling was that I had -in fact- been flying. To be precise, I was thrown to the side by something other than the monster.

My head began to move almost on its own and I was able to look back at the scene that I had been involved in.

The reason of me being rescued from the fangs of the huntsman spider was a young man with a familiar cheerful smile on his face.

*-Elm?!*

I did not get the chance to ask him, why he had been here instead of the backline.

The Heteropada Queen did not care about its prey being cast away to the side and continued to dash down with its fangs toward the ground.

In an instant, the warm smile of Elm vanished, when the world-boss crashed its head on the surface and devoured his entire body. The speed -at which it had performed this action- was almost impossible to perceive with the human eye.

"...Elm? -Elm!!!"

My voice nearly cracked from the force that I had put it under.

Within a split-second, Elm had rescued me and chose to become the next meal of the huntsman spider.

*Why did you do this?! There was no reason for you to give up all of your hard work, because of my mistake!*

Mixed emotions began to dwell up inside of me. Such as -Confusion, sadness, anger... but most importantly: disappointment in myself.

-Suddenly, the Heteropada Queen cried out as it got bombarded with a new wave of long-range spells from the backline. This time, however, the damage dealt to it had significantly increased.

"How is that...?"

I directed my attention toward the backline and -to my surprise- Ryukazen had regrouped with them, along with Wolfgang and Kejin. Furthermore, the healers -that managed the wounded- had abandoned their duty and decided to put all of their remaining mana into supportive spells for the backlines magic.

Even Silke had been among them and tried her very best to help.

*So they are planning to risk it and go all out now...? I didn't expect Ryukazen to resort to desperate attempts like these.*

"Put everything you have into these spells! Our success depends on everyone of us!"

"...Hey, Myst! It's going to get a bit nasty, so I'd advise you to come over to our side!" Kejin shouted across the chamber.

I was not planning to let Elms sacrifice go to waste, so I sprinted agile over to our Frontline Alliance members and put a long distance between the monster and myself.

The frequency of spell waves had increased -in the meantime- and the HP of the boss began to drop even further, causing it to become more enraged.

*Giiigcchhhhh!!!*

The Heteropada Queen apparently understood that remaining fixed on its position could cost its life. Thus, it started to dash all across the room with its incredible speed and tried to avoid most of the attacks, while getting closer to our backline.

Despite that, the sheer amount of magic spells directed toward it was too much to handle and the players continued to hit their mark. As a result, the world-boss became gradually slower.

*-Does this mean...?!*

A glance at its health bar revealed to me, that the HP had reached critical health value at last.

"Ryukazen! It's weakened now, so switching to close-range spells would deal more damage!"

The Trident guild-leader nodded politely and signaled the players to pause their attacks.

"Now is our chance! Prepare the strongest spells of your arsenal and make sure to shove it up into its bones!"

Roars and growls sounded from the Frontline Alliance members, as they honed their fighting spirit once more. As countless magic-circles followed the cheering up, the storming stomps of more than 25 players filled the whole boss-chamber.

"-Roooooaarrrr!!!" They shouted in unison, as they approached the weakened world-boss.

Even if I tried to, there was such a vast amount of spells being cast that trying to name them remained impossible. This, on the other hand, flooded my spirit with the resolve to keep fighting.

*Gihzchiiiiiiii!!!!*

With its back against the wall, the Heteropada Queen tried to intimidate us with an aggressive cry, but its efforts were wasted.

The Frontline Alliance kept charging at the enemy and then-

*-BOOM!!!*

-An earth-shattering explosion -caused by the strongest magic spell of each player- blasted through the atmosphere.

Its last health bar had dropped to a bare minimum and the whole body of the world-boss collapsed on the ground. Victory was now within our reach of grasp.

"Myst! There's only one way to end this boss raid for the -Spell Shot Twins-!" Kejin chuckled.

"Please don't ever use that title again."

An involuntary smirk made its way on my face, nonetheless.

Just like Kejin had suggested, both of us began the chant of our final attack. Although, my spell had finished its casting in an instant, I delayed the magic for Kejin to complete his one as well.

"-This is the end for you!!"

We yelled at the world-boss, as both of our energy projectiles manifested themselves and rushed at the demonic-red eyes of the Heteropada Queen.

An ear-deafening screech emitted from the monsters mouth upon it getting hit by my Quick-Shot and Kejins Snipe-Shot.

Finally, the health bar of the world-boss began to drop for the final time, until...

*-Come on...!!*

"...!"

...it had hit zero.

EPILOGUE

Dawn of a New Tale

Intense roars boomed amid the Frontline Alliance survivors, when a humongous transparent quotation was summoned in the air of the boss-chamber.

*- Congratulations on defeating the -Heteropada Queen- World-Boss! You have successfully completed Zone 1 of Undral! -*

Players were laughing with each other and cheered for our victory over the first World-Boss of Undral Legacy. Although, there were also people like my guild -who drowned in sorrow.

It goes without saying, that we had been overcome with joy. The reason for our mourning facial expressions was the absence of Elm and Yakima. Of course, every guild had lost dear friends and members in this boss raid, so we were supposed to join in with their celebration. However, it was the manner they had been killed in by this monster -which turned our stomachs upside down.

Since Yakima was ripped in half in front of our eyes, Hilbert had been awfully passive throughout the whole world-boss fight. Elm being devoured later on did not contribute to improve on his condition.

Even Alice had only rarely left the rear and caused for a few distractions. Her snappy attitude was nowhere left to be found.

"Look over there!"

"What's that?"

"A portal...?"

On the other side of the boss-chamber -where the spider-webs formed a massive wall- an azure shimmering caught the attention of the Frontline Alliance. It turned out to be a portal, which had opened after the defeat of the Heteropada Queen.

Ryukazen realized the circumstances and conveyed his thoughts to the remaining Alliance members.

"All of you have done splendid in this raid! I am proud to call myself a fellow companion of the Frontline Alliance and share this historical victory with you!"

He then pointed toward the mysterious azure portal across the chamber with a proud profile.

"This is our hard earned reward for making the dreams and hopes of all players come true! The gateway you are seeing over there will take us to the next Zone of Undral!"

Wild applause and yells commented on Ryukazens proclamation.

"Follow me, players! A new world awaits us on the other side!"

Many heavy footsteps accompanied his marching toward the portal. After only a minute, the amount of players in the room decreased rapidly, as they left one by one for the next Zone of Undral. Soon enough, the Night Owls were almost the only ones remaining in the chamber.

"Let's go, guys. We will be left behind."

I forced myself to take the lead and broke our silence. However, no one of my friends made an effort to move -yet alone to answer.

"...We can't stay in here forever. The portal might close soon."

-Then, Hilbert was the first to look me into the eyes with a discouraged expression. He seemed to be at the verge of shedding tears.

"...You know..."

"-Hey, Myst! Are you guys coming, or not?"

I turned my attention to the azure gateway behind me and recognized that Kejin was still in the boss-chamber with us. His carefree and joyful smile sparkled across the hall.

"Sorry, go ahead without me! I'll catch up in a minute!"

"Got it, but I'm going to charge you waiting fees if you take too long!"

Kejin waved as a parting gesture and vanished within the bright shimmering light of the azure portal.

Hilbert sighed exhausted and apparently had a decision to make.

"...Myst, we are not going to leave for the next Zone."

"-What? What's gotten into you?! After this fight we have gone through, you want to stay behind?" I raised my voice.

Our guild-leader broke the eye-contact and glanced embarrassed at the ground. Alice and Silke did the same.

"...No way... you guys too?"

"...I'm sorry."

That was all, what Alice was able to say to me. An ashamed and quiet apology.

"Seeing our friends getting brutally killed has affected us all, Myst. Don't blame them, please."

"-But I don't understand you! Yakima and Elm came here to advance to the next zone, even if it meant to sacrifice themselves! Are you saying we should let it all go to waste?!"

I balled my fists together in frustration.

For the first time, I was not capable of comprehending the feelings of my guild-members. Their behavior had irritated me and this fact got me worked up. To be honest, this was the first time that I had been this emotional toward my friends.

"...I know that. -We all do! ...But we are not like you, my friend."

"Huh...? Not like me?"

"You are strong, Myst. The Frontline Alliance, these boss fights... you belong into this place! Everyone in our guild knows how talented you truly are! Without you, the Night Owls are just another small and insignificant guild."

"...I don't understand what you-"

"-We are at our limit! Our guild was never ready to face an opponent like this. The battlefield is just too cruel for us, it makes everyone anxious and even now I am scared for my life! Hunting some bears and completing simple NPC quests fits me and the others better."

My gaze had wandered across each member of the Night Owls. Everyone shared the same painful look in their eyes. It was clear, that the feelings of my friends were mutual.

"Then you are saying that we should return to the starting city and live a peaceful life?"

"...No, Myst. We are going to. You should go ahead with Kejin to the second Zone."

"What? But that would mean...!"

"Yes, it's alright for you to leave the guild. A strong one like Trident fits you best. I'm certain that Ryukazen will welcome you with open arms. After all, he had obviously taken a liking to you. Elm thought so as well, which is why he wanted you to move forward."

I was dumbfounded by Hilbert’s words. That was natural, since he straight-up told me to leave behind my friends for some other players. Not only was I shocked by his suggestion, it also made me feel heartbroken.

"Hey, Alice -Silke! Say something! Tell him, that he's gone mad!"

"...No, I think he's right. I like you a lot, Myst -very much. The idea of letting you go makes me want to cry... But in the end, all we are doing is to hold you back." Alice tone trembled.

She buried her face behind her hands, though I was still able to make out a sole tear dropping from her chin.

"I-I also think so. You are like an older brother for me and always cheered me up, when I felt down. It will become lonelier, but this might be the best for everyone..."

Silke forced a saddening smile. Her beautiful long hair had covered her eyes, so I was not able to read them.

*When did you grow up this much, Silke...?*

"See? Everyone thinks so. By the way, aren't you still searching for your friend, Zen? You said it yourself, that you need to advance in the game and find him."

"That's..."

This time, my own eyes studied the cold ground -averting them from looking into Hilbert’s face.

"Now, don't act like this is a farewell for eternity! We are just going to stay here a little while longer, until we can get a bit more used to this. That doesn't change anything about us being friends, Myst!"

All of them had thought the same. They came to the conclusion, that I should prioritize my own goals over them and find a new path for myself.

"And what do you guys plan to do now...?"

"We will leave the dungeon through the menu and search in the starting city for Elm and Yakima for the time being. They have to start all over again, so we will take it slow and live in a nice village."

Hilbert had finally managed to bring himself to smile softly again.

I realized that he was absolutely certain about his decision. Nothing I would have said was able to change his mind anymore. That was something I had learned, while being in a guild together with them.

"...I got it. I will head for the next Zone."

Hilbert nodded, pleased with my response.

"Good! We will root for you from the sidelines!"

I turned my back toward my friends and headed for the azure portal.

With a heavy heart, I opened my menu as I walked and navigated through the options. After pressing on the "Guilds" tab under the "Community" section, I was able to view the details of the Night Owls guild. Next to it, there was a small "Leave" function implemented -which my finger selected hesitantly.

*- Warning: You are about to leave a guild! Do you wish to proceed? -*

I took a profound breath, before I tapped on the confirmation button.

The system had instantly followed up with a notification for me about my action.

*- You are no longer a member of the guild: "Night Owls" -*

The portal -that connected the boss-chamber with the next Zone- swirled in front of me with a distinguishable and ominous sound.

"Well then...this is goodbye."

I did not dare to look behind me, as I spoke.

In that moment, I felt like I could become too emotional -if did so. That was not the way, how I wanted to part from my friends.

"Yeah... see you around. You should go, before Alice prevents you from it."

A last tiny chuckled escaped me from Hilbert’s comment, before I stepped into the gateway and left the boss-chamber behind.

My vision slowly faded and the azure light had swallowed my body whole.

On this day, my story with the Night Owls had come to an end. However -at the same time- a new one began for me, along the vast new worlds of Undral.

This was still only the opening to my journey through Undral Legacy. The conquest of exploring every Zone in order to regain our lost freedom had just started, as well as my own goal of reuniting with Zen.

The road ahead was seemingly endless long and full of challenges to be overcome. Nonetheless, I felt that it was my destiny to follow this path to the very end.

*Just you wait, Zen! I'm going to find you at any cost and put an end to this nightmare game! Even if it means, that I'll have to smack some sense into Helios himself!*

- The End -