

Reached Level 83!

5 Stat Points Gained!

Savage Warrior Level Increased! 81 → 82

Keira smirked as she withdrew her greatsword from the battered remnants of a Blightspawn. Last she'd heard, Seneschal Sylpeiros was Level 81. This should put her solidly ahead of him once more.

Not that she expected to fight the Leader anytime in the near future, but his forehead veins always bulged whenever he realized that multiple members of Riardin's Rangers were starting to outpace him. Keira was looking forward to updating him of her progress during the next radio meeting. Incensing authority figures was an old pastime of hers; one that had only been emboldened by the present company she kept.

Motion from the left. Danger Sense guided her body as she slipped between mandibles and claws belonging to two nascent abominations. She spent the least amount of movement necessary to dodge, letting both attacks miss her by a quarter of an inch.

An outside observer might have assumed she was being backed into a corner. For Keira, the near-misses were just standard procedure. Why bother throwing her entire body to the side when minor adjustments would suffice? Granted, this was an advantage unique to those rare few with Danger Sense, but she still believed that too many fighters wasted their own movement. It was the most important resource a frontline Warrior possessed, after all.

With years of practice combined with the fluidity afforded by 100 Dexterity, Keira casually twisted her arms to crush another Blightspawn under unforgiving steel. The creature's ally barely noticed, lunging forward with its claws once again, as if the same fate didn't await it as well. Survivor's guilt and survival instincts were traits that the Blightspawn seemed to universally lack. It made them an implacable foe in large numbers, like monstrous swarming insects, yet it also left them without strategy or guile.

Forward assault. Predictable. Danger Sense wasn't needed here. In one motion, Keira ended the creature's life and backstepped to avoid the customary spurt of blood and viscera. *I almost wish you*

posed a greater challenge, she mused, as a trickle of EXP flowed into her. *It took forever to go from Level 82 to 83.*

She knew full well how self-indulgent of a thought that was. Aside from how the lower-Level soldiers were struggling *much* more against the Blightspawn hordes...EXP gains slowed as a Combat Class user reached the upper echelon of Levels. Historically, Leaders could go decades without advancement, only making appreciable progress when a particularly strong Dungeon appeared. And here she was, griping that it had taken eight whole days of combat to gain a Level in the 80s.

In her defense, it was Rob's fault. He'd ruined her sense of normalcy. She'd been sharing his Fast Learner for so long that she'd almost forgotten what it was like to earn *normal* amounts of EXP. And her expectations had just skewed even further after Orn'tol learned Sharing Hand! How dare they gift her with Level growth that most Warriors would sell their soul for.

Keira's mirth faded as more Blightspawn burst up from the ground. Not because of the enemy reinforcements, which would soon be dead, but because it reminded her that the other alliance groups could be weathering a concurrent assault at this very instant. The Deadlands tended to launch simultaneous attacks, although no one knew quite why.

I hope everyone's doing alright. Vul'to and Meyneth seemed to be keeping casualties in their group to a minimum, which was something. Keira could only hope that a fully-grown Blight didn't take an interest in them. As for Rob's group – well, calling it a 'group' was generous. Just two people, alone in the Deadlands. Purge Corruption was the sole reason they yet lived.

She worried for the both of them. They'd caught wind of another Corrupted Locus. While that was ostensibly good news, she knew it would result in them plunging into peril yet again. Trouble invariably found its way towards Rob...and Elder Duran might not possess the fortitude to endure it.

With effort, Keira set those thoughts aside. The best she could do for everyone right now was to concentrate on slaying the foes before her.

They fell as quickly as they came, like a procession of Blightspawn dutifully lining up to be crushed under her blade. Blood flew in wide arcs, and she didn't allow so much as a drop to stain her garments.

Even outside of the Deadlands, where clothing *wasn't* limited, she'd done her utmost to minimize the Tailors' workload.

Unlike a certain someone else I know, she thought, with a warm smile. Reckless in the extreme. Foolish as well. Has his own backup clothing as a Bound Item, and still ends up in bloody tatters more often than not.

She missed him dearly.

The thought spurred her to check up on her friends nearby. Zamira, Orn'tol, and Malika were busy finishing up their own battles, having encountered little in the way of resistance. *Are you all faring well?* Keira asked. *The Party Screen would indicate 'Yes', but I just wanted to be sure...wait...shit. Not again.*

Embarrassment threatened to color her cheeks as she belatedly remembered that, without Rob around, they couldn't send Messages. That was another thing she'd grown accustomed to, especially after the months-long trek to the Harpy capital city, when they were always in a Party together. The fact that her friends had also admitted to doing the same thing didn't make her feel any less silly.

Keira sighed as one final Blightspawn emerged from the darkness. "Mind giving me a moment to my self-recrimination?" she grumbled. "You may be unspeakable, malformed horrors, but that doesn't excuse rudeness."

The beast gurgled in response, ambling forward on pulsating limbs, its several fang-filled mouths dripping acid.

"I see." With a shrug, Keira hefted her greatsword. The creature's attack path was obvious; one swing would end it. She pulled her arm back—

—And Danger Sense *howled*, as if a mountain was about to flatten her from behind.

Keira knew what the sensation was. She'd experienced it often before. It still served as an ill-timed distraction, like a spectral hand had closed around her heart, causing her to freeze in the middle of her sword swing.

The Blightspawn pounced, nearly taking a chunk out of her flesh. She managed to dodge at the last moment, reducing a bite to a nibble.

17 Piercing Damage Received!

15 Corruption Received!

Damnit. Keira pivoted into a retaliatory strike, demolishing the monster in a single blow. It did little to bolster her morale. Corruption damage was permanent – at least until their group reunited with Rob. She could feel its revolting essence slithering through her veins, like a small, insistent ache. It wasn't enough to hinder her yet, but tiny mistakes like these would add up over time.

Just as her frustration was beginning to rise, she received a series of system notifications that gave it pause.

Active Skill Learned!

Name: Not A Scratch

Prerequisite: Vitality 50, take damage from enemies 80 different times.

Description: Outright ignore the damage of a single attack from a single enemy. Physics still apply.

Consumes 50 Stamina upon usage.

Cooldown: 24 Hours

Not A Scratch Level Increased! 1 → 10

She blinked as a secondary wave of Experience flowed into her. EXP gained from increasing Skills was minor, barely worth anything at her Level, but going from Level 1 to Level 10 had actually felt noticeable. It was more than she'd gotten from killing that last Blightspawn.

Not a Scratch automatically increases in Level with every 5 Vitality after 50, Keira thought. So after I fulfilled the initial Prerequisites, and learned it at Level 1, it immediately boosted to fit my current Vitality of 98. That shortened the cooldown to...30 minutes. Hmm. It could–

"What did you learn?"

The voice spoke with far greater discourtesy than even the Blightspawn had shown. Keira schooled her features into something resembling amiability, then turned around to answer. "How did you know I learned a Skill?" she asked, lightly.

"This may shock you," Queen Ragnavi drawled, "but I am no stranger to battlefields. I've seen that contemplative posture more times than you could count. You were reading a Description and considering the implications." The Dragonkin tilted her head. "What Skill was it?"

Keira almost burst out laughing. This was why no one had tried to steer her towards a diplomatic position; she simply wasn't meant for it. Exchanges like these felt too absurd for her to keep a straight face for long.

How was she supposed to act cordially towards someone who'd been a hairsbreadth away from killing her?

At first, the sensation had come but once a day. Danger Sense would flare up, warning her that certain death was imminent, that some vastly powerful force was about to *eviscerate* her. Then – just as quickly – it would vanish. Like a trick of the fog.

She'd assumed it was the Deadlands' fault. Either its will was intentionally tampering with Danger Sense, or her Skill was merely attempting to warn her that traveling deeper into this place was...unwise. Both seemed plausible, and both were supported by how Danger Sense kept flaring more often as time went on. Now, on the eighth day after their alliance was separated, she'd felt that deadly sensation on no less than three occasions since morning.

Perhaps it would have been better not to learn the truth. Yet learn it she did – by catching Ragnavi eyeing her yesterday during one of those occasions, the Queen's glare filled with a vehement, bottomless hatred.

How close are you to killing me? Keira thought, aiming a carefully-neutral smile at the murderous Dragonkin. *How close are you to killing any of us? What did we even do to rouse your ire?*

From Keira's perspective, Danger Sense was flaring up at random. They never insulted Ragnavi or gave her reason to lash out. In fact, their interactions thus far had been quite cordial. Riardin's Rangers accepted her temporary leadership with grace, and the Dragon Queen did an objectively competent job at keeping deaths to a minimum.

Yet Ragnavi still felt erratic, intense urges to kill them. Intense enough to trigger Danger Sense – a Skill that only activated when real danger was imminent. She felt those urges again and again and again, always pulling herself back from the brink of a rampage.

It would've been an admirable display of self-control if it wasn't so horrifying.

"I learned Not A Scratch," Keira answered. She didn't want to give the Queen unnecessary information, but considering how unstable their 'leader' was, what choice did she have? "It will prove useful in the battles to come."

Ragnavi nodded. "Indeed. That is a Skill no Combat Class user should go without." She cast Identify, then hesitated, tapping her finger on her thigh. "Level 82 and just now learning it...well, I suppose that's not impossible. Some abilities have rather frustrating Prerequisites – the Vitality ones, specifically. Almost as if they're punishing you for fighting well. There are several extremely useful Skills that yet elude me, simply because I haven't met an opponent who could push me to an inch of my life."

Keira nearly asked "*What Skills?*", then thought better of it. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her friends watching the conversation from a short distance away, concern writ plain on their faces. They were ready to jump in if the Dragon Queen attacked...for what they would be worth, at any rate. Keira didn't like their chances with only four members of Riardin's Rangers present.

It might be different if Ragnavi was isolated, but most of her soldiers had ended up in this group. Keira needed time to ascertain their loyalties. While many of them were sycophants to the bone, a surprising number appeared more resentful of their Queen than she would've anticipated. If Keira could enlist that portion into helping overthrow Ragnavi – or even just sit out of the fight, really – then that changed things.

Because if the opportunity came...she would take it. Keira had already felt skeptical towards Rob's plan to use Ragnavi as a bludgeon against the Blight. Now, with the increasing flashes of Danger Sense? It was only a matter of time until someone died.

Keira just hoped it wouldn't be today.

Ragnavi raised an eyebrow. Apparently, the moment of distress hadn't gone unnoticed. "What are you thinking of, Elf?"

"She craves your demise."

A wintry chill fell over the air.

Keira, Ragnavi, and everyone else turned towards where the sound had originated. From out of the blackened fog, what could only be described as a floating head slowly emerged. The head was thirteen feet tall, drifting languidly, and missing the rest of its body. Its face was pale-white, smooth, and featureless, lacking any sort of identifying features. Empty holes resided where its eyes and mouth should be, like three oval-shaped gateways to a boundless void.

Ragnavi stepped forward to meet it – and Keira was glad to let her. Just from a glance, they could both tell that this *thing* was no mere Blightspawn.

"Identify yourself," the Dragon Queen commanded, with an imperious tone. Wings grew out of her back as she assumed a half-transformed state. "What are you?"

"#*\$&@#()*\$."

Pain. Like acid poured into her ears. Vision blurring, Keira stumbled, but did not fall. The same couldn't be said for most of their group, who collapsed to the ground with cries of agony. Only her Party members, Elder Alessia, Ragnavi, and a handful of soldiers remained upright.

"Apologies." The head's facial expression, which had been neutral until then, sagged into an exaggerated parody of contrition. **"Forgot that true nature of SOUND is beyond you. Abstraction necessary. You know us as the Blight. Acceptable moniker."**

The Dragon Queen said nothing, examining the Blight up and down. Eventually, she let out a scoffing noise. "You aren't as powerful as the abomination I killed outside Broadwater City."

"Irrelevant. Our core essence lies at the Prize. There, we will Ascend."

Keira wanted to focus on that point, get it to divulge more info – but before she could, Ragnavi spoke first. "Why have you come here?" the Queen demanded. "And why now, after days of sending the rabble to die at our claws?"

"Curiosity won." The head's face shifted to a neutral expression once again. **"Better to assist with Ascension. Hasten it. I will not. Fascination is here."**

Its expression changed to a parody of delight, with an excessively wide smile and dramatically upturned eyes. After a moment, Keira realized that these faces weren't actually meant to be parody. They were more like recreations performed by someone who wasn't used to expressing emotion, and wanted to make sure they got their intention across. **"You are here,"** it said, peering directly at Ragnavi.

The Queen narrowed her eyes. "In what ways do I fascinate you?" She sounded almost...petulant. "I thought you Blights were obsessed with your beloved Heartkiller."

"Heartkiller, anomaly. You, as well." The head shifted to express contemplation, with pursed lips and the highest brow-raise Keira had ever seen. **"Not as puzzling as Heartkiller. Still fascinating. Similar origin of discrepancy. Different name required."**

Ragnavi froze. Indecision warred on her face. She had the appearance of someone who knew they were being baited, but just couldn't help themselves. Finally, like a fish biting onto a juicy lure, she spoke.
"Go on."

"Coming here was worthwhile. Close proximity allows for detailed analysis. I have seen the crux of your soul." It smiled. **"You are the Hollow Star."**

The air seemed to chill even further. Keira took an instinctive step back from Ragnavi as the Dragonkin's claws extended. "Elaborate," said the Queen, in a deathly quiet voice.

"A star is radiant. It breathes fire, it IS fire, and its glow can be seen across unfathomable distances. Stars light the way for countless creatures. Stars act as guidepoints for entire worlds. Stars are eternal and inexorable. To others, a star is an existence intrinsically above their own."

The Blight's smile somehow deepened. **"Yet that is merely the surface. Your Star is Hollow. Although its radiance blinds others with envy and fear, inside, nothing of substance exists. There is naught but apathy and grief. As empty as the void – except, life once sprang from that void. No color will spring forth from the pallid core of your soul."**

A stilted laugh echoed from its lips. **"Also. Stars are not eternal. They only seem so. In time, like all else, they cease to be. Their end is an explosive conflagration of fire, ravaging everything in its vicinity. Indiscriminately. So wondrous to see. And afterwards, despite the star's former radiance, nothing remains to be remembered. Nothing except cold darkness."**

It nodded. **"The Hollow Star. An appropriate name, you would agree-"**

With an ear-splitting shriek, Ragnavi leaped forward and tackled the Blight. Her momentum pushed it backwards, the Queen transforming into her full Dragon state, claws digging deeper into pale flesh. The featureless head laughed all the while, pinpricks of light igniting within the center of its eyes.

Both monsters vanished into the fog.

It took Keira's group a good fifteen minutes to track them down. No matter how close the roars seemed to be, and no matter how badly the shockwaves rattled everyone's senses, Ragnavi and the Blight just couldn't be found, as if hidden from sight. Maybe their group could have searched faster...but no one was in any rush, least of all Keira herself.

Not when the sounds alone were so disturbing.

A scene of carnage awaited them when they found Ragnavi and her fallen prey. The Blight was torn to shreds, its pale flesh scattered about in chunks that oozed a viscous black tar. None of it moved. Keira mentally slotted together the pieces of its mouth and lips, like a grotesque puzzle, and determined that – even in death – the creature had been smiling.

The Queen, on the other hand, was very much not. She had reverted to her Dragonkin form, letting Keira see the volcanic fury twisting across Ragnavi's face. Her feet were planted on a particularly large chunk of Blight, and her claws were repeatedly sinking down, tearing out whatever they could grab hold of.

"WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?" The Queen snarled as she pulled up a slice of pale flesh. Black tar dribbled out from the fresh hole she'd made. "BARELY ANYTHING INSIDE! JUST PUTRID OFFAL AND UNDESERVED ARROGANCE!" She reached down again, ripping and slashing as if she was a feral beast. "AND YOU CALL *ME* HOLLOW! SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOUR LIPS SEALED **WHILE YOU STILL COULD!**"

With a trembling breath, Keira cast Identify. Her suspicions were confirmed: Ragnavi had increased from Level 95 to 96. No surprise there – even weaker Blights were obscenely powerful. You couldn't slay one and *not* Level up.

Nor could you fight one and come out unscathed. *The Queen is vulnerable*, Keira realized. Several injuries were visible on Ragnavi's form. They weren't numerous or deep, but they were present nonetheless.

Which meant she'd incurred a non-insignificant amount of Corruption damage.

Keira's hand twitched towards her greatsword. There might not be a better opportunity than this. If she just ambushed Ragnavi, right here and now, her friends would follow up, and then...

And then they would be fighting a bloodlusted Dragon Queen. Who was strong enough to defeat a Blight in single combat. With her elite, loyal soldiers nearby. With Riardin's Rangers cut in half.

In her mind's eye, Keira replaced the Blight's corpse with Zamira, Orn'tol, and Malika. She imagined *them* being savaged by those claws. Ripped asunder. Limbs scattered. Blood everywhere.

Unlike the Blight, they wouldn't be smiling.

She forced her hand back down to her side.

Everyone watched in silence as the Dragon Queen laid claim to her conquest. All of them – except for the Queen herself – were left wondering if they'd made the right decision.

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Current Status of the Alliance:

Group 1: Rob, Duran

Group 2: Vul'to, Meyneth, Diplomacy, Sylpeiros, all the coalition soldiers, a couple Dragonkin soldiers (minor casualties, increasing over time)

Group 3: Keira, Orn'tol, Zamira, Malika, Faelynn, Alessia, the Dragon Queen, most of the Dragonkin soldiers (minor casualties, increasing over time)

Group 4: Six soldiers (all deceased)

Changes:

Keira Level 82 → 83

Zamira Level 77 → 78

Malika Level 72 → 73

Faelynn Level 66 → 67

Alessia Level 46 → 47

Ragnavi Level 95 → 96