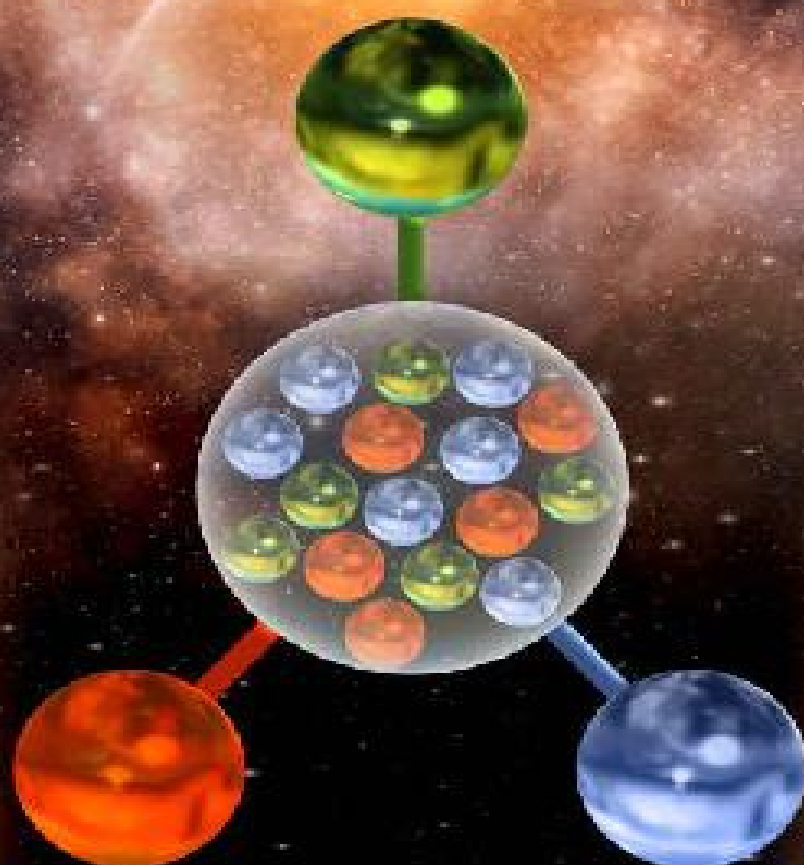


JONATHAN BROOKS

DUNGEON WORLD 2



Dungeon World 2

A Dungeon Core Experience
Dungeon World Series

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Dedication

To my wife, Melody, who encourages me to write better every day. And, for my daughter – who just recently “wrote” her own book with her 5-year-old drawing skills. It’s called “Dungeon of Kids and Unicorns” and I can already tell that it’s sure to be a classic.

I would also like to thank the many beta-readers who made this book even better!

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Quick Recap

Fredwynklemossering was born between the very unlikely – and thought impossible – pairing of opposing-element dungeon cores. Despite hiding out in the middle of the nowhere, far north of the Craytion Kingdom, Fred’s parents were found and killed as “traitors” to their respective alliances by the Supreme Council, a ruling body made up of the most powerful dungeons on the planet.

Left alone without supplies and just the burning need for answers, the young human-dungeon-core hybrid left the only home he ever knew and set out in a long year-and-a-half journey towards the south. His health and survival were maintained through the brand-new powers he had discovered, which allowed him to use the absorbed mana he obtained from various wild animals he killed along the way.

Fred knew that the only way he could succeed in finding his parents’ murderers was to enlist the help of some sort of allies. After finding a human settlement, he tried to Create clothing using his Mana-formed Object Creation skill so that he could blend in a little better; in the process, he accidentally created a sentient Dire Wolf that held the only two remnants of his parents’ cores. As a result, he was knocked unconscious, but was saved by a human named Regnark from the settlement he had found.

Regnark taught Fred a lot about the human world and how they interacted with each other in his short time with him, and it also allowed the blossoming dungeon core powers within him time to improve. However,

after Fred pushed his new human friend for information about the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, Fred was kicked out of the Regnark's house and was sent south.

Along the way, the dungeon core instincts inside of him picked out another dungeon core along the way – and so he went towards it to demand some answers about his parents' murder. Saving Fred from an untimely death at the hands of a dungeon, Deecy appeared – the sentient Dire Wolf he had inadvertently created months ago – and taught him a little bit more about himself, the world, and about cores in general. With her by his side, the young human-dungeon core set off for the closest human town – Gatecross.

In Gatecross, he acquired the ability to improve himself and gain a class, just as any other Dungeon Adventurer member of the Syndicate would be able to – though not without some temporary pain and suffering from an incompatible implanted Artifact. After meeting a woman with an unfairly-assigned bad reputation named Eisa – who was a Necro-healer – they delved through an “easy” dungeon together. Along the way, she learned that it was very difficult for her new “friend” to die, and also that he had the miraculous ability to conjure gold pieces out of thin air.

Seeing that his one dungeon delve had improved his human body already, as well as discovering that he could directly copy the spells and abilities that many of the adventurers had access to, Fred contrived a plan to create the Core Power Guild and journey through multiple dungeons every day, learning new spells and abilities along the way. And all the Guild members wanted in return was cold, hard currency – which he easily supplied as part of his special Dungeon Core powers.

At least, that was all they wanted at first; when Fred considered himself strong enough, he journeyed by himself (and Deecy, of course) to a

dungeon that he had picked out, leaving Eisa and the others behind so that they wouldn't be pulled into the mess he was about to make. However, Eisa wasn't about to let him go alone into potential danger; she was starting to have personal feelings for the strange Guild Leader. Along with three other members of the Guild – that appreciated Fred for *who he was* instead of just for whatever gold he could supply to them – they slowly followed him into a F-3rd-Rated Nature dungeon.

Eventually, with their help, Fred was able to fight through the dungeon and confront the dungeon core at the end. Unfortunately, during the ensuing conversation where he learned why his parents were considered “traitors” – and found out who had most likely arranged their assassination – the small Nature Core's personal attacks toward his mother prompted Fred to physically grab the other dungeon core.

After mistakenly taking too long to decide on whether he wanted to absorb the Nature Core, he inadvertently destroyed the small, green, floating, spherical gem-like core and absorbed its power into his body. Not only did he gain access to Nature Mana, but the absorption also unlocked his ability to create a dungeon.

After racing out of the collapsing rooms and hallways of the now-uncontrolled dungeon, Eisa and the others confronted Fred outside. They were fully aware of the ramifications of what he had done – if not the why or the how behind it. Regardless of the reasons, the nearby dungeon cores would most likely demand recompense for the death of one of their own; with no need of money or items that they could produce themselves, the only payment they would demand from the nearby settlement would be in the form of human life.

And not just the lives of those that did the deed; on the contrary, everyone in Gatecross – and perhaps beyond – were at risk of being held

accountable for Fred's actions.

I – Revelations

Chapter 1

Revinald checked, double-checked, triple-checked, and then – despite the strain on his Power to use his ability – he quadruple-checked his discovery before he sent a page to deliver a message to the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate’s Head Cartographer. He had only been on the job for a couple of months and he was afraid of making a mistake; he had heard about (and personally seen) Master Ptolem’s temper and didn’t want it directed toward him for wasting the Head Cartographer’s (or the HC as some of his subordinates tended to call him) time with something unimportant.

However, even well aware that what he was doing might cause some potential...issues...Revinald still reported the problem he was having to the HC. Because if he didn’t – and Master Ptolem discovered it – then he would lose more than his dignity getting chewed out: he’d lose his job. And there wasn’t much use for a Researcher-turned-Cartographer other than at the Craytion Kingdom’s Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Headquarters (or DASCK-HQ, as most people called it), so he’d be out of luck unless he went to another Kingdom – which may or may not need his services.

Of course, there was always the option that Revinald could change his class; if he did that, unfortunately, he would then end up losing *everything* he had worked so hard for – and he genuinely loved what he did.

He could tell when Master Ptolem came down the stone steps from his office on the third floor; the flap of sandaled feet was exceptionally loud in the silence that had fallen over the room containing Revinald and five of his fellow Junior Cartographers. As much as he would’ve preferred to bring this matter to the HC’s attention privately in his third-floor office, the

Master hated it when anyone other than himself was in there – the page he sent above was only allowed to knock on the door and call through it. In fact, now that he thought about it, Revinald couldn't remember hearing from anyone what it actually looked like in there.

“WHO DISTURBS MY WORK?” Master Ptolem shouted, causing most of those in the room to jump at the sheer volume of the question.

“This better be good, or you'll wish you were never born.”

Revinald got out of his chair and approached, bowing low in respect to the Head Cartographer's high office. “It was me, sir. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I found something that I believe you would want to see. If I may humbly show you to my station?” *Hopefully that was suitably meek enough.*

“Yes, fine, fine. Show me what you found so that I may get back to *important work.*” Master Ptolem didn't seem overly angry, so Revinald took that as a good sign.

He led the Head Cartographer over to his large workstation, covered with the various tools he used in his work. Revinald made sure that it was neat and organized while he was waiting for the page to deliver the message, so it was plain to see that everything was where it was required for “appropriate” Cartography. He sat down on the uncomfortable stool he had been meaning to replace, waiting for permission to demonstrate.

“Go ahead, show me what you did,” Master Ptolem demanded, always looking for mistakes to correct. Whenever there was an issue that came up from one of the Junior Cartographers on staff, this was usually the first thing evaluated because it frequently eliminated user errors.

Revinald placed his hands on either side of the large scrying table attached to his slanted desk, parts of the frame rubbed smooth where many a hand had slid over the aged wood. As soon as he had a firm grip, he

activated his Survey ability and concentrated on the extreme northern part of the Craytion Kingdom.

“As usual, sir, I had been Surveying the low-Rated Plant and Earth dungeons to the north to get an updated count and location of those dungeons up there. Everything looked fairly similar, with just a few minor Rating increases here and there – nothing too out of the ordinary. However, right...here—” he centered on a small town (not the northern-most settlement – that was the small village of Northend even farther north – but almost) called Gatecross— “is where I encountered my first anomaly.”

He left the Survey results zoomed into the town of Gatecross, feeling a small lightness in his head as he realized that he had spent quite a bit of Power over the last hour, and pointed to a section just to the north of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate-run town, where it appeared like there was a void.

“Yes, I see it – so what? Dungeons tend to move from time to time – we’re still not sure exactly how – and it is especially prevalent here when they Rate-up past the others nearby fairly frequently. It’s not uncommon to see one or two disappear every couple of years, only to be replaced with a brand-new one shortly thereafter,” the HC said, before scratching his head in contemplation. “Though, to be truthful, I wasn’t aware of any up there that were due to move yet. Still, this isn’t something that you should’ve bothered me with. If *that* was it, we’ll be having a separate conversation – elsewhere.” And then he turned away, already heading in the direction of the stairs.

Revinald nervously stopped Master Ptolem from leaving by loudly shouting, “NO, SIR!”

The Master stopped abruptly, and the young Cartographer hastily regulated his voice to a lower volume. “I’m sorry, sir – I didn’t mean to

shout. I apologize profusely, but that wasn't all I had to show you." He bowed his head again in supplication, hoping that he hadn't just lost his job from his outburst.

"Well, then, let's see what you have here," the Head Cartographer said as he walked back to the workstation. He bent down and got right into Revinald's face when he was close enough, before shouting right back at ear-splitting volume, "BUT IF YOU EVER SHOUT AT ME AGAIN, I CAN GUARANTEE THEY'LL NEVER FIND YOUR BODY!"

Revinald winced at the shout echoing through his ears and gulped, before whispering back, "Yes, sir. I understand, sir – it won't happen again."

He still had the Survey up on his scrying table, which allowed him to try to distract the HC from his mistake by finishing up his explanation of the issue he had encountered. "Um...like I was saying, when I checked the previous records, I saw that it was missing and didn't think too much of it – I had assumed like you said that it had moved elsewhere for some reason unknown to me. However, as I was recording the change on the map, I happened to glance at the town."

He pointed toward the town, still seeing the anomaly located right in the middle of the town's boundaries. The maps they used for recording and updating different sections of the Kingdom weren't very detailed when it came to villages, towns, and cities; it was enough to know that they were there, as it normally wasn't important to Survey them – only the surrounding land where the dungeons usually congregated.

Revinald had been Surveying, Recording, and Extracting as much information as he could on this particular section of the north for nearly a week. Not only was the process Power-exhaustive, but as he was still relatively new to the Cartographer Class, he could only progress so quickly

– and the information he received was bare-bones compared to some of the other Junior Cartographers. Master Ptolem was on a whole other level, however.

So after a week straight of Surveying the surrounding areas and the hundreds of dungeons located around there, it had come as a bit of a disbelieving shock to see one in the middle of the town.

“Boy, what did you do to cause that error? If you broke the scrying table, that’s coming out of what we’re paying you, you hear?” Ptolem pushed him out of the way and Revinald almost fell off the rickety stool; fortunately, he caught himself as he stumbled backwards, before he watched the Master at work.

Within seconds, it was plainly evident why the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate put up with the Head Cartographer’s idiosyncrasies and Junior turnover rate. Even given that Revinald was still fairly new at being a Cartographer, he had improved to the point in his Surveying that he could tell the type of dungeon he was looking at (Plant, Earth, Fire, etc.) and get a general idea of its Rating – for instance, seeing that it was a low-Rated G dungeon or high-Rated F dungeon. As much as he tried to focus on more specifics, he couldn’t get anything more than that.

Master Ptolem didn’t have that problem, however. When he grabbed the scrying table frame and exerted his Surveying skill on it, Revinald’s results were wiped away and replaced with a highly detailed map that included much more information than he thought possible.

When he looked over the Head Cartographer’s shoulder at the table, he could see almost every dungeon he had spent the last week locating and updating on the master maps. Not only that, but he could see the dungeon type, exact Rating, number of rooms, potential traps and other defenses, and even an approximate Essence range that could be expected to be gained

from an Adventurer completing it. *I wonder if I'll be able to do that one day?*

With how quickly he brought up everything with his Survey skill, Revinald briefly wondered why the HC even needed Junior Cartographers working for him; that was, until he realized that someone like Master Ptolem couldn't be expected to chart and update the literal tens of thousands of dungeons located all over the Kingdom. Based upon conversations with the others he worked with, he had already deduced that the supremely talented Head Cartographer probably spent most of his time looking at the A and S-Rated dungeons. Having better information on those more-difficult dungeons was probably the only reason their higher-Rated Adventurers were doing so well compared to what he heard coming from other Kingdoms.

"This doesn't make sense. My Survey says that there is a G-2nd-Rated dungeon right in the middle of town – but it has no rooms! Not only that, but it says that it's not only a Plant dungeon, which most of those around the area are, but it is also a Water *and* Fire dungeon. That's just not possible – I think you broke your scrying table, boy. But first, let me check on another."

Master Ptolem got up quickly from the stool he had commandeered from Revinald and strode over to one of the other Junior Cartographers' workstations. Fortunately, since everyone in the room had stopped to watch what was going on, the woman who was currently working there vacated her seat before she could be shoved out, canceling her own Survey beforehand.

"This is not good, not good. EDDARD!" Ptolem shouted, without looking away from the new scrying table he had commandeered. Eddard – the page that Revinald had sent to alert the Head Cartographer – quickly

showed up at the Master's side, so fast that it almost appeared as if he had been there the whole time.

“Eddard, run and tell Syndicate Master Theodus that I have urgent need of him here and now – Priority Alpha.”

“Yes, sir!” Eddard replied, already running at a full sprint up the stairs which would lead to the main offices.

Revinald had never heard of “Priority Alpha” before, but it didn't sound good. While everyone was waiting for the Syndicate Master to arrive – *I've never formally met him before, but from a distance I remember he didn't look too intimidating* – Master Ptolem went from scrying table to scrying table, reactivating his Survey ability each time to check whether or not it was a fluke. Although it appeared to be exactly the same on each table, Revinald noticed that there was a slight difference each time.

“Sir, I'm sure you noticed, but it appears as though the dungeon is... moving?”

The Survey ability was like looking at the current state of the dungeon locations at a certain point of time; not even Master Ptolem could update it fast enough to watch it in real-time. Not that there was normally any need of that, since it was relatively rare that a dungeon around the Kingdom actually moved – only about 3 or 4 every year.

“Yes, I saw that right away – which is why I sent for the Syndicate Master. Now, stay back and let me handle it from here...and good job spotting this, Revinald.”

He stood there in shock, his mouth gaping open in surprise. *Wait... was that...praise? And he knows my name?* The two things were so rare that he'd never heard of either happening before; most of the Junior Cartographers were either called “boy” or “girl” – he wasn't aware that the Master even knew their names.

Fortunately, his frozen state of shock wasn't seen by Ptolem, so Revinald was able to recover and move himself to the side of the room where his colleagues were huddled up against the wall, wisely staying out of the way. They looked both jealous at the attention he had received and worried about what he had potentially found.

He didn't have a chance to talk to them about it, because the Syndicate Master – an unassuming-appearing man that was small in stature, but extremely fast – practically flew down the stairs to end up at Master Ptolem's side. Although he didn't appear that powerful, that all changed when his eyes quickly ranged over the Junior Cartographers; Revinald literally felt the weight of the Syndicate Master's gaze as it fell on him. He almost felt like he was getting torn apart and put back together – all in the fraction of a second it took for the gaze to move on.

Revinald shivered a little as the feeling left him, and he noticed that his colleagues did the same thing; however, he ignored the strange sensation and concentrated on what was unfolding in front of him.

“Show me.”

The Syndicate Master's voice was soft but commanding; he was obviously one that was used to demanding and getting results, and Revinald almost jumped to obey even though he wasn't the one being spoken to.

“Right here, Theodus. See that? I've already checked on each scrying table and I get the same result. I'd check on mine upstairs, but I'll probably get the same thing. And, although you can't see it here – it's moving. Not quickly, but it isn't stationary either. Now, my Survey results are – without being modest – the most accurate you'll ever see, but even I'm stumped at this.”

They were both silent for a moment as they stared at the table, but then Master Ptolem updated the Survey – and even from where Revinald

was standing nearly 20 feet away, he could see that the strange dungeon had moved the slightest bit.

“As much as I don’t want to believe it, this looks like something I’ve only heard about. Long before I became Syndicate Master, I had heard stories of how someone illegally stole a dungeon core from a dungeon, hoping to utilize it in some sort of Power-amplification ability. He was only found out when the Cartographers at the time happened to see an Earth dungeon right in the middle of a village where it wasn’t supposed to be – just like you’ve found here. This could be the same, though if it is, it means that someone didn’t steal just one – but three different cores.

“I’m sending a group I trust to look into this – I have no doubt about your abilities, but I need someone to check it out in person. I’m hoping that this is just some sort of error on your part – as much as you don’t want to hear that – but the alternative might be worse.”

He turned to leave, but something in Revinald made him blurt out, “What happened to the one that stole the dungeon...core?”

The Syndicate Master stopped his departure and turned his attention back to Revinald; fortunately, it wasn’t the same soul-searching gaze as before. “Oh, he died...along with every resident of that village and two towns nearby when the dungeons learned of the offense. It would do you well to remember that the dungeons are, if not exactly ‘alive’, then at least intelligent and vindictive enough to know when they’ve been wronged and won’t hesitate to wipe out everyone if they decide to.”

And with that, the Syndicate Master left just as fast as he arrived, a blur speeding up the stairs.

Well, that sucks, he thought. Just what did I find?

Only time would tell the truth of what he had found, but Revinald tried to put it out of his mind when he and his fellow Junior Cartographers

got back to work.

I doubt they'll ever tell me, anyway.

Chapter 2

“I like what you’re thinking, but where are you going to put your dungeon?”

That’s a good question. Fredwynklemossering had made the decision to build his own dungeon, now that he had finally gained the ability to; he wanted to be able to protect both the members of his Guild, Core Power, and the citizens of Gatecross – the small northern town where he had first joined the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate.

And it was also where he had first met Eisa. The E-9th-Rated Necro/Healer was looking at him – along with Metch, Harriette, and Raspel, all low D-Rated members of his Guild – after he had gained all their attention with a hesitant throat-clearing.

“I have an idea that might work, but let’s go back to Gatecross first. I need to think some things through.”

“That’s an understatement if I ever heard one.”

Fred ignored Deecy, the Dire Wolf now pacing by his side as he started the journey back to town. Unlike the race to the dungeon, he walked quickly instead of running, mainly because he really *did* need to think about what he was going to do.

Amazingly – at least he thought it was – the others followed behind, somehow confident in his ability as the Guild Leader to get them through this. He wasn’t so sure if he deserved their confidence after he had caused the problem in the first place by destroying and absorbing the Nature Core

inside the collapsed dungeon behind them; nevertheless, Fred was going to try to keep them safe and alive by doing whatever he could – be it making a dungeon to protect them or otherwise.

He tried not to think that, if he had never been born, his parents would still be alive – and the people of Gatecross, and perhaps beyond, wouldn't be in danger. However, after communicating with the mean-spirited Nature Core, he realized that his parents probably would've been hunted down and killed as “traitors” no matter if he had ever existed in the first place. But that didn't absolve Fred of the responsibility of what he had just done to the humans that had put their trust in him.

“Just *who* is he? How was he able to do that to that dungeon core? And how was it he even knew where to find it? I swear I've been in hundreds of dungeons and never even found a hint of a hidden entrance,” Fred could hear Rasper – the D-1st-Rated Scout-turned-Infiltrator/Fighter – whispering to the others as they followed behind.

Eisa was the one who replied, though even she didn't have all the answers. “I...don't know. All I know is he is unique – I've never met anyone quite like him.”

“Yes, we can all agree that he is most mysterious, but what are we going to do about...you know...” Metch spoke up.

Fred blocked them out as he walked ahead of them, as they were just going back-and-forth between themselves about theories of who he really was and suggestions on how to survive the dungeons' retribution that they all knew was coming. *They'll find out who I really am soon enough.*

Instead of listening to their whispered conversations that really weren't all that silent, Fred looked around the forest with new eyes. As a result of the change that he underwent after inadvertently absorbing the Nature Core, he could now “see” the territories of the nearby dungeon

cores. Underground, it had appeared as a green glow infusing the walls of the dungeon – at least before it faded away at the death of the core.

Outside of the dungeon, however, whenever he looked in a direction where he felt another core close by, he could see a sort of green-tinted but otherwise invisible “dome” over everything. When he looked to the north where he knew that some Earth cores were located on the outskirts of the area, he could detect some small brown-tinted domes as well. It frankly amazed him that he could “see” the territories that far away, even if he couldn’t physically see them.

His curiosity must’ve been evident – or his increased Mana Communication skill allowed her to pick his thoughts a little – because Deecy interrupted his observations.

“Your Master Territorial Sight has something to do with that. Your senses have been sharpened, meaning that you can see the territories surrounding the area you are in; however, right now, you’re most likely limited to a certain distance away until your Core Structure Level has increased. Still, you’re probably going to be able to see territories up to a hundred miles away or more.”

Deecy was right; when Fred extended his senses out even farther, he was overloaded with information. It was so much that he tripped over a root and fell flat on his face.

“Are you okay?” Eisa asked, as she helped him back to his feet.

“Yes, thank you. I’m still getting used to some...changes. Hopefully it won’t happen again.”

She looked at him funny as he continued his walk, feeling his mana going to work fixing a few scrapes he had suffered from the fall. Fred

reined his senses in, focusing only on the territories he was close to. “Hey Deecy, how can I tell how strong those cores are?” he whispered to the Dire Wolf easily picking her way through some thick undergrowth.

“Their strength is usually indicated by the size of their territory – the bigger they are, the stronger they will be. From what knowledge I can scrounge up as part of the core shards from your parents, areas with these low-Rated dungeons are called ‘nurseries’; they are densely packed together because they don’t have large territories. When they grow stronger, they will move out to a place where they can expand without conflicting too much with each other as they grow.

“And the visible domes you are seeing at the various territories are actually part of a greater sphere that extends underground. It’s what allows them to build their dungeons under the surface.”

Hmm, makes sense. But then something horrific just occurred to him. “So wait, I just...killed...a child?”

“Don’t think of it like that. Dungeon cores are created as mature as they are ever going to get, they just don’t have the experience and knowledge they need from those first years with their parents. By the time they leave ‘home’, they are as adult as any other core.”

“I’m not sure that helps any, but thanks.” Now he felt even worse, despite Deecy’s attempts to ease the blow. *I didn’t mean to do it, but the result is the same – I killed one of my own kind.* Although he didn’t necessarily like what the dungeon cores were doing to the humans – such as

treating them like “livestock” – the fact of the matter was that they were all just doing what they were taught to do. To kill one for just doing what was in its nature was like punishing a wolf for killing a deer; granted, the wolf needed to kill the deer in order to eat and live, while cores used the ambient mana that humans gave off to increase their own power.

Ok, so not quite the same, but it is hard for me to blame every dungeon core for the fault of a few. And I wouldn't mind it if those few in power that ordered the destruction of my parents met an untimely end.

That thought made him pause in his perusal of the surrounding territories, one of which he was currently walking through after they had left the void created by his destruction of the Nature Core. *Am I being as vindictive as those in power? Is that my inner dungeon core coming out?* Although he wanted revenge, if he somehow – and that was a huge, massive, gigantic, enormous *if* – found a way to destroy the Supreme Council that allegedly arranged for their deaths, would that solve anything? Would it make him feel better, or would it make things worse for the world?

He was still trying to understand the ramifications of his actions – and how it would affect the humans he had befriended. Although he didn't grow up around them, the fact that he looked and “felt” like he was at least part-human made him feel at least a little responsible for their well-being – at least so far as he could do something about it. And, if he were being truthful with himself, he liked them and didn't want them all to die.

Let's say I did destroy the Council – what would happen afterwards? What if I took my own feelings out of the equation?

Chaos – that's what would happen. Just like Fred wanted to exact revenge for the deaths of his parents, the remaining – millions of – cores would want to do the same, which might lead to a war between humans and dungeon cores. Millions of innocent humans and possibly thousands of

cores would be killed or destroyed; he didn't want a repeat of the near-genocide that was visited upon the human population millennia ago, not to mention the loss of so many cores.

He was human and dungeon core – he couldn't stand the thought of both sides of his nature being so devastated because of his selfish need for revenge.

Nevertheless, that was a thought for the future; at that point in time, he didn't have either the capability or knowledge to go up against those Supreme-Rated cores. What he needed to concentrate on now was protecting those around him from the inevitable retribution that was sure to be coming.

And to do that, Fred needed to build a dungeon.

The problem was, other than the location of the now-collapsed dungeon they had just left, everywhere else he looked was already taken up by another territory. He instinctively knew that he needed to establish his own territory in order to build a dungeon – even if he didn't know exactly how to go about that process. Regardless, there wasn't anywhere nearby that he could do that.

There were two options he could think of, neither of which seemed like the right one. First, he could take over the previous territory of the core he absorbed, though that meant he would be cut off from the existing town of Gatecross and it would be difficult to fit everyone inside of his territory. Just as he knew he needed to establish a territory to do anything dungeon-wise, he also knew that it was going to be originally very small. There was every chance that the surrounding cores would easily locate him and find some way to expand their territory just enough to cut off any chance of him expanding his own. If that happened, he would be hard-pressed to build

anything large enough to both house every human and defend them at the same time.

The other option he could think of was to move everyone north, taking over the small village of Northend where he had met and learned so much from Regnark. Cautiously extending his senses up that direction so that he wasn't overwhelmed again, he found that very few dungeons were that far north, and not a single one was within a mile of the village. Based upon what his parents had taught him, the natural ambient mana was barely enough to survive on that far north, let alone enough to grow with; even the lure of potential humans venturing inside their dungeons wasn't enough to convince cores to move there.

The issue with that was any territory he established would have the same issues; if he wanted to grow and protect the humans near him, there wasn't enough natural ambient mana there to sustain him and help him grow. That, and the location was so cut off from the rest of the Kingdom that basic supplies like food would be hard to come by (other than what they could hunt, though needing to feed so many would quickly decimate the surrounding wild animal population).

And that wasn't the only problem, as Fred soon discovered when his mind continued to think of "What if" scenarios.

What if I just abandon my plan and have everyone flee to the next big town down south? With a better-defended settlement, more of them might survive an attack. It was tempting, though he knew if they did that, it would be putting even more humans in harm's way. But that didn't mean they couldn't alert the nearby communities of a potential attack and to ask for aid.

What if I do manage to establish a dungeon, move all of the people in Gatecross there, and actually succeed in fighting off an attack? Will they

just continue sending more or even more-powerful dungeon defenders to attack?

What if the cores, realizing that they would end up wasting lots of saved-up mana, then send their defenders someplace else not so heavily defended and exact retribution that way?

What if just by defending myself and the people, I start the war that I was just worried about starting if I enacted my revenge?

What if it would just be better to let the humans die, including myself, thereby saving thousands or even hundreds of thousands more?

Fred didn't have an answer for any of that, and neither did Deecy when he asked her as silently as he could. All he knew was that he couldn't just sit by and let everyone die – not if he could do something about it.

And just then, a break in the trees showed him a quick glimpse of Gatecross, before it was quickly obscured by more branches and tree trunks. However, it was enough to show him an option that for some reason he hadn't thought of before; he blamed it on his dungeon core nature for disregarding the possibility.

Because when he glimpsed the town, he realized that the large area was completely free of any core's territory.

Chapter 3

“Ok, now spill it – how are you going to fix what you’ve done?”

Fred wasn’t sure how everyone would react to his pending revelations, so it was just him and Eisa up in his room at the DAS building. He told Metch and the others to keep what they had seen quiet until he was able to figure out a plan, which they readily agreed to – they could only imagine the kind of panic that would ensue once word got out that a dungeon core had been destroyed nearby. While some people might not know about cores and the consequences for moving or destroying one, it was a safe bet that many in the DAS-run town knew at least a little of the lore – if not the complete truth.

“Well, first, we need to ensure that – when what happened becomes common knowledge in town – the residents of Gatecross don’t flee for their lives down south,” he began, before being cut off by the Necro-healer.

“Why? Wouldn’t that be the smart move – get everyone away from here as soon as possible?” she asked.

“Normally, that would be the best plan of action, but in this case, we would just end up putting even more people in danger. If we can keep the other cores around here focused on us, my hope is that they will leave them alone.”

“You can’t guarantee that they won’t go after others even if they do manage to kill everyone here.”

Deecy was right, but Fred was hoping that he’d – as much as it seemed counter-productive – be able to keep the attention focused on him,

especially. When he established his territory, he was sure that his multi-faction status alone would be enough to catch their attention. If they had anything like the ability that he had to sense the territories around him, his appearance would probably be like yelling at the top of his lungs in a crowded-yet-quiet gathering.

“Ok...I can kind of understand that. It’s *our* mess, so we should be the only ones that should suffer the consequences.”

What does she mean by “our” mess? “I appreciate you trying to share responsibility, but this was all my doing. If I could send you all away to safety, I would – but the truth is I don’t think I can defend this place without everyone’s help.”

“This is *our* Guild, if you remember – you made me co-leader. And what you do reflects on the entire Guild, no matter if you don’t intend it to; therefore, everything that happened was because of Core Power – and I can almost guarantee that everyone else will see it that way as well. Despite most Adventurers being loot-hungry fanatics, once they join a Guild it takes a lot for them to just give it up. We’re not just your Guild, we’re your family,” Eisa replied, placing her hand on his arm to somehow emphasize her point.

Family? That doesn’t make any sense.

Suddenly, Eisa pulled her hand away when something apparently occurred to her. “Wait a minute, what did you mean by ‘defend this place’? Although the buildings here are relatively well-constructed, I doubt they would stand up to even an F-Rated dungeon’s more-powerful monsters if they decided to send them here.”

“Well, that’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. There’s something about me that you should know—” Fred started to say.

“I knew it! You’re actually a really high-Rated Adventurer in disguise for some reason, aren’t you? You always seemed more than what I would expect from just a brand-new Adventurer; I bet you were just acting when you professed to know nothing about how classes and the DAS worked, didn’t you?”

Uh...what? Fred lost his train of thought at Eisa’s interruption, and it took a moment to get it back. “No...I’m sorry you thought that I was acting, but I was actually being truthful with my ignorance. The real reason I didn’t know about anything about Adventurers was because I grew up in —”

“An obscure foreign Kingdom that doesn’t have Adventurers!”

“Um, no—”

“A cave and was raised by Dire Wolves!”

“That’s getting a little closer, but—”

“Oh, I know! You grew up in some obscure, xenophobic noble’s household that kept you locked away from the world, destined to spend the rest of your days in obscurity, never seeing the sun except for on holidays, and studying secret techniques that allow you to—”

What is wrong with her? “NO,” he shouted, louder than he intended. She stopped in surprise, giving him the chance to get a word in.

“It was because I was born and raised in a dungeon!”

She just stared at him, mouth open in surprise at both his shout and his revelation. The silence went on so long that he was starting to get worried.

“I think you broke her.”

Fred was going to try to explain more, but something seemed to click in her head. Eisa's mouth closed and her head bent a little to the side as she looked him right in the eyes, searching for something. "You're not human, are you?"

How do I answer that? Fred was silent for a few moments as he tried to get what he wanted to tell her straight in his head. "You better sit down for this," he said, before sitting on the edge of his room's bed. There wasn't anywhere else to sit in the room, so Eisa sat down as well – farther away than she usually did, though. *I can't say I blame her.*

"Good luck."

"First of all, let me tell you a little bit about my parents. My father, Aquelsterico, and my mother, Pyrannelstencia, left their homes and factions behind because they fell in love – which was forbidden..."

Fred went on to tell her all about the nature of his parents as dungeon cores, a very brief recounting of his upbringing inside the dungeon they had created together out of love, and about their murder at the hands of dungeon defenders of all the factions. Then he told her of the year-and-a-half-long journey to the south, fighting frigid weather and wild beasts, and about his experience in Northend – and his friendship with Regnark.

"...and it was only my insistence on learning more about the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate that caused him to lose his temper and kick me out. I made my way down south, discovered Deecy here—" he pointed to her sitting on the floor, disinterested in his story— "and finally made my way here to Gatecross. And I'm sure you can probably deduce the rest of my story."

He left out some of the specifics about Mana-formed Object Creation and Mana in general, as he wasn't sure she would understand the foreign concepts; *he* barely understood it sometimes, so he wasn't sure if he would be able to explain it appropriately. He also left out what he considered unimportant details on dungeons and dungeon defenders in general, because he knew she had plenty of experience in that department.

All through his story, he kept expecting her to be...he wasn't sure – disgusted, maybe?...at his revelations, but she just sat there calmly listening to him. Then again, while she didn't outwardly react negatively, she didn't show any signs of approval either. When he was all done, she finally stirred a little and closed her eyes and tilted her head back for a few minutes – it was obviously a lot to take in.

“So...you're a dungeon core?” she finally asked, without opening her eyes.

“Yes and no. At a fundamental level, I'm a core; however, I have the shape and body of a human. I'm stuck between two worlds, and I identify with both.”

She seemed to either ignore or accept that, because then she looked him straight in his eyes and angrily asked, “And now...what? Do you even care about the humans here? Were we just a convenient stepping-stone on your path for revenge?”

Were they? He had barely asked himself that when he instantly knew the answer was a resounding “No”. He had never had *real* friends before, and he was already considering Eisa and the others that had come with him to the last dungeon as friends – if not necessarily family like she had said. And from the conversations he had overheard his parents having when he was young, he knew that good friends didn't deliberately hurt each other – also similar to family in some respects. Of course, his parents' own

families most likely approved of, if not orchestrated, their assassinations – *but that's a whole different thing*, he thought.

“Not at all, Eisa. I care about all of the friends I have made here in Gatecross and those in the Core Power Guild; which is why I need your – and everyone else’s – help in defending this place. I don’t want everyone to suffer for my mistake.”

Eisa considered him for a long moment, staring so long into Fred’s eyes that he was starting to become a little uncomfortable. “That’s what you meant about ‘defending’ this place – you want to build a dungeon.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, exactly! However, I’ve never had the ability to do it before now, so I’m not sure how to go about it; I have an idea, but I don’t know if it will work or not. If for some reason it doesn’t, then I would recommend everyone flee for the north, as there are very few dungeons located up there. I’ll try to keep their focus on me here, if I can, but I can’t guarantee they will be happy with just *my* death.”

“Don’t talk about dying like that – if we work together, maybe we can set up some sort of defense that will allow us to survive. Either way, I’m almost positive that at least the rest of the Guild will support you in your endeavors,” Eisa said. “At least, they will until they find out you’re a dungeon core – I can’t attempt to predict how they will react.”

“And...are *you* alright with my...origins?”

She didn’t smile and say yes, which was what he was hoping for, but she didn’t say no either. “I’m not sure yet, it’s still a lot to take in. Regardless, I will support you in whatever you do in defense of this town and the Guild; we can’t abandon them in their time of need.”

I’ll take what I can get.

“If you’re on board, I’m sure we can do it then. However, I need some advice. I apologize if I don’t put this delicately, but as one who has experienced a bit of a negative reputation—” she rolled her eyes at that— “how do you think I should break it to the Guild and the town about who I really am?”

And for the first time in what felt like days to Fred, Eisa genuinely smiled at that. “Don’t worry about that – I think I have the perfect solution.”

I’m not sure if I’m going to like this.

Chapter 4

“...and so, using the unique ability to connect with dungeon cores that he had miraculously acquired from his birth among the wild wastes of the previously unknown Corestrata Kingdom, our illustrious Guild Leader spoke with the Plant dungeon core. In his efforts to learn information about his parents’ murder – which was done inside of a dungeon – he inadvertently touched the small green floating gem; what happened next was a surprise to everyone – he ended up absorbing it into his body, destroying it in the process.”

Apparently, Eisa’s “perfect solution” was to lie to everyone, sprinkling in just the barest amount of truth in there to make it – hopefully – believable. She had told him that they didn’t need to know *exactly* who he was, only that he had some sort of ability that made him unique; they were much more likely to not only believe that but be accepting of it.

Instead of letting rumor ruin any chance of bringing everyone together for their mutual defense, Eisa had called every citizen of Gatecross and the Core Power Guild together in the town’s main square. Getting a completely accurate count of the town’s citizens from the top of the makeshift stage they had set up near the DAS building was difficult, but Fred already knew he had 146 Guild members in addition to himself and Eisa. When he subtracted them from his count, he estimated that there were an additional 175 people who comprised the town.

More than half of them were there to provide various services for the DAS members living in town: restaurants, a general merchandise store, stores selling weapons and armor, and those running the lodging for those who didn’t want to stay at the DAS building. The other half were

comprised of 12 high-E-Rated Craytion Kingdom guards and various family members, including a dozen children.

The crowd was silent after Eisa's proclamation for less than a second, before chaos ensued.

"We need to run!"

"...all doomed!"

"They'll kill us all!"

"...the children!"

The cacophony of voices trying to talk over each other was almost deafening, and Fred ached to hear many of those in the crowd talking about the children. *I've got to send them away – I can't let them possibly die here.*

One thing that was encouraging, at least, was there seemed to be no mention of disbelief in Eisa's story about him, nor were there any people calling for his death or sacrifice to the dungeon cores (which he was fully expecting). He was already known around town and this Guild as a little eccentric and stupidly rich, so they accepted the fact that he could talk to dungeon cores with little or no argument.

Fred could also see the three Guild members who had gone with him standing a little off to the side, not participating in the chaos; Metch, Harriette, and Raspel had been told the truth shortly after Eisa learned of it. They had seen and heard too much in the dungeon to believe the story the Necro-healer was going to spread. Fortunately, they took the news better than he had expected – much better than even Eisa.

Unfortunately, along with the encouraging fact that they didn't immediately call for his lynching, was the fact that most of those freaking out and yelling were talking about leaving. Eisa had had her opportunity to spin her tale and lay the groundwork – now it was time for Fred to take control of the situation before things got out of hand.

“QUIET, EVERYBODY!” Fred yelled at the top of his voice, as he stepped up beside Eisa and held his hands up in the air. It took a few minutes for his (as well as Eisa’s) repeated requests to filter through the panicked crowd, but when they saw him there patiently waiting for them to calm down, most of them focused on him enough for him to begin.

“Let me begin by saying that I am deeply sorry that I have put you in this position. It was never my intention to do what was done, and for that I apologize. However,” Fred began, as he started to pace back and forth along the makeshift platform. He was trying to keep his attention on the crowd while maintaining an air of confidence – which was extremely hard because he was uncomfortable with so many hopeful eyes looking at him.

“As many of you either know, or might have guessed, the destruction of a dungeon core is going to incite retribution from the surrounding community of cores. To put it bluntly, we’re in danger.”

A fresh set of calls for fleeing erupted from the crowd, but Fred didn’t let it pick up momentum.

“I can understand and sympathize with your desire to leave and hide behind the Kingdom’s stronger forces,” he called out, breaking through the continued shouting, “but leaving Gatecross behind is not the best idea.”

“What?”

“Why?”

“...crazy!”

“Does he want us all to be slaughtered?”

This is going to be a tough sell. “If we all left, do you think that the dungeon cores looking for retribution will just give up? Do you think they’ll just see the empty town and say, ‘well, no one’s here, let’s forget this ever happened’?”

That quieted some of the protesters, as they listened to what he said. “NO! They’ll then move onto the rest of the Kingdom, slaughtering innocent people that had nothing to do with this horrible mistake – all while we hide behind those stronger than us. I know for a fact that many of you have family in other parts of the Craytion Kingdom; would you want to run for your lives, knowing that *you* might be safe – but your family might be in danger because of your actions?”

A hush fell over the rest of the crowd as they finally caught on to what he was trying to convey to them. And then they eventually came to the conclusion he had been fearing – and expecting – when he started his little speech.

“You’re the one who destroyed the...the, uh, core – so what if you just stay here and everyone else leaves. That way they’ll have the one who did the deed and leave us alone,” one of the non-Guild townsmen pointed out in the silence.

Before that thought could pick up momentum with the rest, Fred was already prepared with an answer – it was essentially the same thing he had told Eisa. “I’m more than willing to sacrifice myself if it allowed everyone else here to live. It is my actions that caused this danger to everybody, so I should be the one that pays the price.

“Based upon the legends concerning dungeon cores, however, I’ve never heard of the retribution being less than *thousands* of deaths from the nearby humans; I doubt that they would be satisfied with just me. Are you willing to risk the lives of thousands of innocents from other parts of the Craytion Kingdom, in the hopes that they will settle for me alone?”

Eisa leaned close and whispered over the crowd’s murmuring, “What are you doing? We need them on your side – not leaving you here to be killed while they run!”

He was saved from having to answer when the crowd amazingly came to the decision he was counting on.

The same one who had mentioned Fred staying there by himself spoke up again. “I have two sisters living not that far to the south of here with families of their own; I don’t want to die, but I couldn’t live with myself if they ended up getting hurt because I chose to run and hide. I’m choosing to stay because if I leave, it’ll almost guarantee that *someone else* will get hurt – even if it’s not necessarily *my* family. But – I know that I speak for most everyone else—” he looked around at the rest of the crowd, who looked fearful— “there are *families* here that don’t deserve to be caught up with this. If you insist that they stay, I’m going to take my chances running so that they aren’t caught up in this.”

“I understand, and I completely agree. I’ve already made plans for getting those families with children out. I wish it could be everybody, but the more we have here, the better chances we have of surviving.”

Fred and Eisa had already cornered Jaymes, the DAS representative in charge of operations in Gatecross, and let him know the “abridged” version of events that the rest of the town knew of earlier. As much as having a B-5th-Rated Duelist/Spy around would help with the defense, he was also the only one Fred thought was strong enough to keep the families safe while they fled to the south.

He wasn’t sure how quick the local cores’ response would be, and it wouldn’t do well for them to be caught on the road without some sort of guard – and he needed his Guild to stay behind to help defend. Plus, he was hoping that the Syndicate rep would help with spreading the word about the danger and to prepare everyone in case they fell quickly.

“What do you mean about surviving? We don’t stand a chance against those monsters they’re liable to send!” Fred wasn’t sure if the man

– who he recognized as running the Weapons shop in town – had been elected the town’s spokesman or not, but everyone seemed to agree with his statement. Even the Guild members he saw looked grim, because they were all too well aware of the potential danger coming for them.

“Well, about that...when I absorbed the, uh, Plant dungeon core,” *it’s going to be hard keeping what the humans know as a Plant dungeon and what I know as a Nature dungeon straight*, “I think I gained the ability to create my own dungeon. And if it works, I’m hoping that it will help defend this place like nothing else could.”

“Wait, you’re saying you can just ‘make’ a dungeon out of nowhere? Are you suggesting we all huddle down inside whatever dark cave you create and hope for the best?”

“It’s a little more complicated than that, but essentially...yes?” Fred offered, not really sure how to explain what he had in mind. That was, of course, if he could do it at all.

He could see confusion and what appeared to be apprehension on most everyone’s faces, though he could see some smiles on a few of the Guild members. Metch unexpectedly came to his rescue when he saw Fred struggling, jumping up on the platform and addressing the crowd.

“Do you know what this means? We can turn the dungeons’ tricks against them; by using the knowledge *we* have on how to defeat them, they don’t stand a chance! Granted, it still might be a long-shot, but it’s the best we have. Besides, if we survive, you get to tell your grandchildren how a dungeon *saved* you – I think that alone is worth giving this a chance. Now, who’s with us?”

The acceptance wasn’t cheerful or resounding, but in the end, everyone agreed – even if it was reluctantly.

“Now all I have to do is build a dungeon,” he mumbled to himself.

“Good luck with that.”

Part II – Territories and Dungeons: A How-to Guide

Chapter 5

Gaelystromico focused on the humans currently in his dungeon, whom he had seen run through multiple times over the last week. They were only in the third of his seventeen rooms, but they were experienced enough with his layout that they easily defeated the Giant Spiders he had set up there; with a combination of flinging Fire spells at the thick webs, and some sort of other ability that caused the very vines hanging down from the caverns' walls (which he had added for a little ambience) to wrap up and immobilize his rushing defenders, Gael's defense was effectively destroyed within minutes.

But that was how it should be; the quicker the humans got through his defenses, while still having to fight at the best of their ability, the sooner another group could arrive and feed him more of their ambient mana. He had learned one important fact over the last two centuries, which had aided in his impressive rise to the 173rd District Nature Faction Leader: quantity was much better than quality.

It wasn't a new concept, of course; other dungeon cores had tried and had been marginally successful in getting streams of humans to run through their defenses quickly, but they were few and far between. Most Nature Cores were taught from a young Core Age that having stronger defenders, lots of traps to injure or kill the foolish humans invading their dungeon, and "just enough" rewards for their success was the proper way to construct their dungeons.

Which worked fine for almost every dungeon in existence, including those not of his faction, but Gael was impatient – he didn't want to wait for centuries to slowly build up his Core and Mana supply until he had more

freedom to do what he wanted. So when – after decades of experimenting with different configurations with very little success – he discovered the secret of his success, he kept the details of it to himself. He didn't want anyone else adopting the same strategy and stealing away his human livestock.

He had found that some humans went looking for what they called “loot”, while others concentrated solely on acquiring some mystical substance they named “Essence”. Gael couldn't see exactly what it was that they were talking about, but from the knowledge shared between most cores, he knew it had to do with their ability to fling spells around, enhance their bodies, heal themselves almost instantly, and even perform many of the feats that even dungeon cores couldn't perform.

There were very strict guidelines that each dungeon had to adhere to, passed down from the Supreme Council; if a core threatened to disturb the delicate balance ensuring equity towards all, they were usually dealt with swiftly and harshly. At each level in a Core's development, there were reward ranges, trap ranges, and defender ranges that they couldn't exceed or drop below, otherwise they would be considered too hard or too easy for the humans; however, if you were within that range, there wasn't much that the higher-ups could do if you weren't violating any rules.

And Gael wasn't violating any rules; in fact, he was right in the middle of the range he was required to be in. The main difference between him and others less-developed than his own C-9th-Rating, was his choice in defenders – because he catered to a specific type of human: the ones that wanted lots of “Essence”.

Most Nature Cores rarely ever used the not-so-deadly Flower Tripper; the innocuous-looking red-and-black flower was usually only good for what its name implied – tripping those unwary enough to approach with

a quick flick of its roots. From the derogatory stories he heard from other cores in his faction, the most any of them got out of it was to use it near a trap in the hopes that it would “trip” a human into a more-deadly trap or defender. However, during his experimentation phase, Gael learned one thing that the others didn’t realize.

The Flower Tripper was worth almost twice the amount of “Essence” to the humans compared to any other dungeon defender at the same Mana cost.

At first, when he had a pitiful little 5-room dungeon, it didn’t seem to make that much of a difference if he put an extra one or two lower-leveled ones inside. But when he started to see a difference in the number of humans repeating his dungeon day after day, he realized they were coming specifically to kill the Flower Trippers he usually had in the first room – and then leaving without continuing on. Upon that strange revelation, Gael experimented by slowly reducing the quantity of “harder” defenders in his other rooms, adding more of the Flowers instead, enticing them to continue on.

And it worked.

Gael never went so far as to fill his entire dungeon with the Flower Trippers, because that might bring more attention to him that he didn’t need or want. Just as he was able to observe and “see” that the lower-Rated cores under his care as the 173rd District Nature Faction Leader followed the rules, so too was he watched by those in even higher positions. He made sure to adhere strictly to the guidelines himself, so as not to arouse any type of suspicion.

The humans walked through the tunnel leading to the fourth room and Gael was excited to see how they would react; he had spent last night making some changes to his dungeon that they probably weren’t going to

expect. He never went out of his way to kill any of them, because a dead human – while giving him a nice boost at the time – meant that they couldn't come back the next day. And most of his success was based upon repeat business.

Instead of Dryads in this room, he had upgraded the trees they normally inhabited into—

“Gaelystromico – we may have a problem.”

It took him a moment to recognize the voice, but he quickly placed it as Area 1523's Lead, Avenlyrica. She was a D-8th-Rated core, had been in that position for almost as long as Gael had existed, and diligently watched over her “flock” of nearly 400 cores far to the north. He didn't understand it; she could've moved from there decades ago to find someplace with higher ambient mana and risen through the ranks to be where he was or even higher. But she seemed content to stay in that position – and that was okay with Gael, because it meant that he had someone he could rely on to keep everyone in line without him having to check them out every couple of years.

“Avenlyrica! It's good to hear your voice – how's everything going in your Area?”

“Like I said, we may have a problem. Two of my charges reported that they couldn't reach one of their friends, but they didn't think anything of it at first; the young core they couldn't reach was known to ignore everyone whenever there was a human group inside of his dungeon. However, after a few hours, they discovered they couldn't even reach out to him.”

“When they contacted me, I did a wider-range search – hoping that he’d just moved around when he wasn’t supposed to – but I couldn’t find him anywhere. Would you be able to check the District for him? I’m starting to get a little worried.”

Just what I need, a weak core running around undefended, looking for a “sweet spot”. It happened from time-to-time; a core would jump from location to location, looking for a previously unknown section in the Area that had much-higher-than-normal ambient mana. If they were able to find one, it would increase their growth exponentially, but most “sweet spots” were usually already meticulously charted and reserved for special cases. Like when they needed extra defenders along the border with opposing alliance factions or as a favor for an A or S-Rated core’s bratty spawn.

“I’ll check, Aven, give me just a moment.”

Gael turned his attention away from the pounding the humans were taking from his new surprise Treants, though he was relieved that they seemed to be recovering from the sudden change in his dungeon. He wanted them to come back, after all. Fortunately, he could feel more of the ambient mana they exuded as they fought for their lives leak into his room, where he eagerly gobbled it up. *Stronger defenders and traps do serve their purpose well.*

Pulling his focus away from absorbing more of the Mana, Gael reached his senses out. He concentrated on the specific core signature of the missing F-3rd-Rated core Aven imparted to him, scanning quickly through her Area to confirm she was correct – and found that he wasn’t there. Not that he didn’t believe her, but he had to make sure he wasn’t somehow hiding from her less-developed Territorial Sight. It took him

almost a half-hour to thoroughly scan through everything; he had to conclude that the young core wasn't there after there was no sign of him.

He extended his senses over the surrounding Areas, looking for any sign of the missing youngster. After a few hours of fruitless searching, he frantically went even farther, checking every possible location within his District's domain – and found nothing.

Aven's right – we may have a problem.

He went back to the spot up north where he was supposed to be, looking at the void where the missing core's territory once stood. His Territorial Sight couldn't actually "see" the void, but it was easy to pick out where it was; the territories in the nurseries tended to be squashed together so that they could fit as many of them as they could. It was only once the cores matured and outgrew the confining spaces of the nursery that they tended to move and stretch themselves by finding an unoccupied space away from others.

He'd heard about humans taking dungeon cores for their own nefarious purposes, but if he remembered correctly, it hadn't happened in nearly a century or more. And the human habitations where the Faction quickly exacted their retribution was still recovering today – which was why it was so rare. Livestock needed to learn its place, and Gael couldn't think of a better way to do that than to brand the consequences of their misdeeds on the very fabric of their society. It set back the development of some nearby dungeons for quite a while, but no core could deny its effectiveness.

The problem here was that even if some uppity human had decided to steal away the missing core from their dungeon, Gael would still be able to sense it; the territory would only be the size of its physical core, but it would still exist. It was how he was able to see if it was traveling

somewhere – it might be a tiny dot compared to the large territorial spheres he saw everywhere else, but again, it would still be there.

And the fact that he couldn't sense the core's signature even when he strained to the limits told him that it didn't exist anymore. And if it didn't exist anymore, then something catastrophic had happened to it.

Only the most powerful humans – the ones that frequently invaded dungeons of the Supreme Council, for instance – were rumored to have the strength and knowledge to actually destroy a dungeon core. There was an unspoken alliance of sorts between the two races, an agreement that neither of them would do anything to deliberately hinder the development of its people – and that included destroying cores.

It had been millennia since the last one was destroyed by a human; there was still plenty of attrition from the constant wars being fought over territory between Core alliances, however. If this turned out to be a human-led destruction of a dungeon core, it could cause unimaginable chaos; the last thing they needed to worry about was being vulnerable in the heart of their Factions.

He looked closer at the missing core's territory void, pumping in some of his valuable Mana to try to boost his Territorial Sight and Mana Sight skills. Once he did that, he could see a faint trail leading from the void and leading down south, growing noticeably fainter as it got closer to...the human habitation.

There weren't any territories inside of human habitations because it was grossly forbidden for any dungeon to approach within 200 feet from the border they shared with the humans. Over the years, cores would inch their way imperceptibly closer, but it was common practice to try to gain as much territory as you could without expressly breaking the rules. Because

of this rule, Gael usually didn't even look at where he knew the humans lived – it was a waste of time.

Therefore, when he looked at the human habitation where the faint trail led, he was shocked to see a faint, extremely odd territorial dot.

“Aven, you’re right – we’ve got a problem.”

* * *

“What do you mean? This could potentially be a disaster and... you’re telling me you can’t do anything about it?”

“Don’t take that tone with me, youngster. You may have had some success increasing your strength faster than most others, but you’ve still got a lot to learn.”

Gael tried to withhold the anger in his reply, and thought he was at least moderately successful. *“Yes, Mephistocle. I apologize for my outburst – but I don’t understand: why can’t you send any help?”*

He could tell that he was walking a fine line between trying to gain some simple information from the Regional Nature Faction Leader and showing outright disrespect. That was the last thing Gael wanted to do, because he had just barely gotten this position a decade ago and wasn't prepared to relinquish it anytime soon.

Fortunately – or unfortunately – his direct supervisor seemed too distracted by other concerns to take too much affront at his questions.

“Because, Gaelystromico, we don’t have anything to spare right now. We’re barely holding on to the border far to the south against those hot-

headed Fire Cores, and it appears as though the Light faction is creeping up on the eastern border of your own District. You probably won't have to worry about them for another decade or two, but that is just the start of the problems we're facing.

“What I need you to do is cover this up; I've already alerted the Supreme Council of what appears happened, and they are going to be extra-vigilant about any further misdeeds by the filthy humans, but they're all too invested in the wars to want to stop now. Especially for something that is so far out of the way and may or may not have actually happened. Have your Area Leader take care of the problem but limit her to just one human habitation; we can't afford to lose any more of our livestock, or we'll never recover in time.”

“But—yes, Mephistocle. It will be done.” Gael felt the connection between the A-10th-Rated Regional Leader and himself close without so much as an acknowledgement. *Things must be bad on the border.*

He had his orders, and he would follow them just as he followed every other rule and guideline he had to abide by. The creation of so many dungeon defenders with an extra infusion of mana would severely deplete the majority of the cores inside the nursery, not to mention take away the main source of “food” nearby them for a while, but it was necessary. They couldn't let the humans think they could get away with stealing or destroying a core and not suffer any repercussions.

And by limiting the scope of the retaliation to just those within Avenlyrica's Area, it wouldn't hurt their war efforts too much. Even though the Regional Leader hadn't expressly said it, Gael was almost sure that a majority of the mid-Rated cores (including him) would be called on soon to

send some sort of support, be it Mana they'd collected or even dungeon defenders. Typically the clashes between factions were waged between A and S-Rated cores, but in times of desperation they would take whatever help they could.

And even if every Nature Core was taken down in Gael's Region, there were still dozens of Nature Faction Regions around the world. Something like that could, of course, take centuries – but that was not a long time for entities such as dungeon cores.

Therefore, it was obvious that they were on their own. Even if another Nature Region wanted to send help, it would arrive much too late to make a difference.

And just like those other Regions leaving Gael's own to its fate, he was going to have to leave Aven to hers. *“Avenlyrica. I've got some good news, some bad news, and some very bad news...”*

Chapter 6

“All I know is that you need to establish your territory first, and then you can build your dungeon.”

“And you’re positive you have no idea how I actually do that?” Fred asked the Dire Wolf Pup, knowing the answer already – he had asked plenty of times and wasn’t expecting anything different. But for some reason, he asked anyway.

“Like I said, that knowledge was passed down from the parent/guardian to the newborn cores and is not in any of the information I can access. I would assume it is a Faction-specific procedure. Besides, I’m not sure it would do you any good even if I did know the proper steps.”

“Why do you say that?” *That was new.*

“Because you aren’t a single Faction anymore, Fred. What might work for a Water core, or a Fire core, or even a Nature core might not work for someone such as you – who is now all three.”

Maybe that’s why I’m not having any success. Fred was in his room, sitting on the bed and trying to relax; he’d been investigating his new dungeon core skills for the last six hours – and was getting nowhere. It wasn’t through lack of trying, though; he was mentally and physically exhausted, but he couldn’t rest until he figured it out.

He pulled up his status screens again, just to make sure he wasn't missing something.

Dungeon Core Status	
Fredwynklemossering	
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 2 Fire Mana: 102/128 Water Mana: 101/127 Nature Mana: 112/112 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 5012 Unconverted Essence: 3240	
Skills	
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Intermediate Mana Communication: 1% Intermediate Mana Absorption: 1% Intermediate Mana Conversion: 4% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 72% Novice Core Crystallization: 40% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 2% Novice Dungeon Creation: 1% Novice Defender Creation: 1% Novice Defense Creation: 1%	
Dungeon Information	
<i>(none)</i>	

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface			
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Combiner-Researcher	
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 57112	
Total Essence: 713888	Available Essence to Distribute: 32401		Unconverted Essence: 50120
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 160/160 Power: 6400/6400	
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 30/min	
Class Traits (Combiner)			
Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat			
Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind Stat			

<i>You are able to combine up to 3 spells or abilities into a single activation</i>		
Class Traits (Researcher)		
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind Stat</i>		
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>		
Class Abilities (Combiner)		
Combine 4 – 0/27000	Vampiric Stunning Fireblast 4 – 0/27000	Dark Rebounding Spike Shield 4 – 0/27000
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 1 – 0/1000
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 1 – 0/1000	Slamming Shout 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

Nope, same as it's been since I left the dungeon. Well, not completely the same; he had been using his Fire and Water Mana almost recklessly, trying to “Create” or “Conjure” a territory, push the mana out around him like an expanding bubble, and he even tried to direct it inside of him to where he thought the dungeon core within him. None of it worked; all that Fred managed to do was toss out his mana, only to watch it dissipate into nothing.

Fortunately, whatever had happened to him after he had absorbed the Nature Core had increased his Mana Conversion rate; the conversion speed turning Unconverted Mana into usable Fire or Water Mana was nearly 10X faster than it had been. So, while he wasn't going to run out of his Mana anytime soon, it wasn't doing him any good either.

The only thing he hadn't touched was the reserve of his new mana. The increase in the maximum amount he could hold had also sped up, gaining him nearly two more “max” mana every hour, bringing the total of Nature Mana he had up to 112. Despite now having access to it, he was

hesitant to even “touch” the strange new Mana; Fire and Water had been such a part of his life that he felt like he knew them intimately, even if he hadn’t been able to manipulate them before now. Nature Mana, on the other hand, felt foreign and almost...he didn’t know any other word than “icky”.

Whenever Fred worked up his resolve to use it, he remembered from where it had originated: the Nature Core that he destroyed. It was like touching glowing-green blood; Nature was slick and slimy compared to the cool refreshing feel of Water and the passionate heat of Fire. But it also felt like “life”, which confused him to no end – especially since he had gained all of these skills and abilities through the “death” of one of his kind.

“I think you’re going to have to use your new Mana in order for you to establish your territory.”

Can she read my mind now?

“I can’t read your mind, per se – but your increase in your Mana Communication skill has allowed me to glimpse a little of what you are unconsciously projecting. As your skill grows, you’ll be able to control and direct it a little better, but for now I suggest not thinking so loud – it’s quite possible that a nearby dungeon core could pick up on some of it.”

Great, just what I need – throwing out my plans of defense toward those wanting to kill me and all these people. He wasn’t exactly sure how he knew, but some instinct of his had “felt” something looking at him earlier; he wasn’t sure what it was (nor did Deecy), but he decided to err on the side of caution and figured that his horrid deed had been discovered.

The clock was ticking now. He had to figure this out – and fast.

“You’re probably right, Deecy. But it just feels wrong, somehow.”

“Get over it. What’s done is done and there isn’t anything you can do to change it. What matters now is that you do your best to keep your promise to these people to protect them. Push your feelings aside and get to it.”

Fred knew she was right, but he still hesitated. Instead of attempting to establish a territory anymore in his room, he instead decided he needed some fresh air to clear his head.

Walking out the door, he stopped himself just before he tripped over a sleeping Eisa lying across his threshold. *She must be exhausted; it’s been quite the eventful day so far.* He wasn’t exactly sure why she was on the floor and not in her own room, but maybe she couldn’t make it that far.

Gently picking her up with ease – he was still amazed at how much his body had improved through use of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface and his Sub-dermal Interface Artifact – he brought her over to his bed and set her down, thankfully not disturbing her sleep. *No reason to wake her up yet; I’ll do it when I have some good news to report.*

He closed the door behind him when he left, making sure Deecy had exited and was following behind, as he didn’t want her to be disturbed. Eisa had done a lot for him lately and she deserved the rest.

Fred walked down to the bottom floor of the DAS building and wasn’t surprised to find it empty. He was sure that everyone was already outside getting things organized for the upcoming defense; when he walked outside to the fading sunlight of the day, he saw that he was right.

Jaymes was finishing up preparations for transporting all of the families of those with children – a total of 27 women and children all told. As much as he wanted the fathers to leave as well, he needed as many bodies as possible for the defense, because even if they weren't Adventurers with SDIAs before – they were now. The Syndicate rep agreed to do it before he left, with additional payment from Fred. He also agreed to “forget” to bring the Class Selector apparatus with him – again, with some help from Fred's little gold friends.

He was honestly expecting some sort of pushback from Jaymes, as they hadn't always seen eye-to-eye on business matters; however, the representative running the DAS operation in Gatecross was amenable to everything Fred asked of him – after he cursed Fred out for half an hour, of course. He could take it though – he thought he deserved all of that and more.

Fred had never seen the B-Rated Duelist/Spy out from behind the counter, and it was obvious why; he stalked around the uncovered wagon and horse team bringing the evacuees like some sort of cat, exuding danger with each step. *That must be the Duelist portion of his class coming out.* He had a long, thin sword in a scabbard strapped to his waist hanging off his left side, with a small knife on the opposite hip – both of which appeared to have seen some use in the past, if not lately. In all, Jaymes looked like he could easily take apart anything that was ignorant enough to attack the soon-to-be traveling party.

“There you are! We're just about ready to go...are you sure about this?” Jaymes asked, lowering his voice so that those he was about to escort wouldn't hear him.

“Yes, I think this is the best solution and I'm hoping will result in the least loss of life. Just remember to let all your contacts in the Syndicate

know what's going on; if there are any *volunteers* who are willing to make the journey here, we will welcome them with open arms. And if there are any brave merchants willing to make use of that bag of gold that I gave you, don't forget to inform them about the danger here; then make sure they know to be very careful and hire extra guards if they're willing to run some supplies up here. I can almost guarantee that most of the focus will be on me and what we're doing in town, however – but you never know.”

Jaymes looked skeptical, but he agreed. “I don't know if there are any stupid enough to do it even for 100 times what the goods are worth, but I will try. For the record, though – I think this is a stupid idea. As much as I appreciate you trying to clean up the insane mess you made, you're dragging a lot of good men and women down with you.” He held up his hands when he saw Fred about to object. “I know, I know – they all volunteered to stay because of your equally insane logic, which – for once – I can't object to. As much as it pains me to admit it, if you really can keep the upcoming retribution centered here, you'll save thousands of lives.”

Fred didn't know how to respond to that, so he just nodded and wished him and his charges well. He didn't hold out a lot of hope that they would be resupplied anytime soon, but it was worth a shot. Watching them roll away out through the south end of town, he was just glad that they were out of harm's way.

Unlike the various Guild members, shopkeepers, restaurant workers, and guards who were busy tearing down houses and buildings all throughout Gatecross.

There was a tall stone wall around the town, of course, but it was just barely large enough that the old Fred would have difficulty scaling it; the new Fred with his upgraded Body and Brawn attributes would easily be able to jump high enough to get his hands on the top of the wall and pull

himself over. And compared to some of the dungeon defenders that would likely be sent against them, jumping or climbing over the walls was going to be a simple matter.

Which was where the materials from the buildings were going to go. Although it probably wouldn't end up stopping many for long, adding some additional height to the walls would help to limit the influx of defenders swarming inside. And, hopefully, they would be more inclined to enter through an easier access point – the northern gate.

They would have to leave it closed but undefended, because there was no way they would be able to hold it with the few-hundred defenders they had. Instead, Fred figured they would be defending his own dungeon against the invading dungeon defenders. *Strange turn of events.*

Now if I could only build that darn dungeon, we'd be set.

Chapter 7

Fred nodded towards some of the nearby Guild members who were dragging an entire building's wooden wall towards the outer stone wall; they nodded back with what appeared to be a surprisingly good attitude. *Maybe having some sort of plan gave them a sense of purpose.*

He walked to the exact center of town with Deecy keeping pace with his progress, and as he looked at all the activity around him, he couldn't help but think that he wasn't keeping his side of the bargain. He looked down at the Dire Wolf Pup and she looked back with a look that said, "You know what you need to do."

And now that he was out of his room with his feet flat on the trampled dirt of the town streets, Fred did. Maybe it was because he had been off the ground on the second floor of the DAS building, or it could've just been his previous state of mind; either way, whatever was preventing him from understanding how to establish his territory was gone – or at least much-diminished.

"Alright, Deecy – let's do this."

She didn't acknowledge that, but Fred wasn't expecting her to – it was more for his own benefit, anyway. As the sunlight was nearly gone, torches were lit, and a few Mages from his Guild created small floating orbs of light to see better. When he saw this, Fred reached down into his core, "grabbing" a single point of Fire Mana and connecting it to the blazing-red ambient Fire Mana in the torch nearest him.

With his Mana Sight, he looked around and saw a small cistern full of drinking water next to The Frigid Barmaid, the first tavern he had ever visited. He did the same thing as he had done before with the torch,

reaching down inside and connecting a single point of Water Mana to the cool blue of the reservoir.

With each connection, he could start to “feel” the ambient Water and Fire Mana around him until he thought he could close his eyes and pinpoint each and every source of water or heat within 100 feet or more. The connection was *almost* strong enough for him to reach out and start to absorb the ambient mana – but not quite. It was like he *should* be able to do it, but there was some sort of barrier in the way.

And he was pretty sure it had to do with the Nature portion of his core. Again looking around with his Mana Sight, he saw a small clump of green mana-tinged grass trying to poke up through the dirt underneath his feet. *There’s only a few, but maybe it will be enough.* Reluctantly, he reached inside of him and grabbed a single point’s worth of Nature Mana – grimacing at the slimy-slick feeling of it – and connected it to the few blades of grass underneath his feet with an inaudible snap.

And then he waited for something to happen.

“Deecy, I don’t think it’s work—”

Suddenly, his awareness of his surroundings jumped a hundred-fold. His mind was bombarded with sensations; he felt like he could reach out and “touch” the grass at his feet, the small tree growing just around the corner of another building out of sight, the slowly withering vines trying to crawl up the outside of the stone wall, and even a small houseplant inside one of the houses. He could feel “life” all around him and it connected with him on a deeper level than he thought possible.

Not only that, but he could sense every single drop of water in the town, from the small cistern he first connected to, to a pitcher of water left in someone’s kitchen, to the dirty water running through a few drains emptying into a large septic system he didn’t even know about just below

the surface of the town. Not everything had Water Mana infused inside of it; it appeared as if only the water “freshest” from its original source had even a small amount inside.

Fred could even pinpoint the water inside each and every person, though like he thought, there wasn’t *any* mana inside a human – but he knew that from his Mana Sight. And in addition to the water he could “feel” inside them, he could also feel the body heat they generated and emanated through his connection with his Fire Mana.

In the split-second between when he received all of this new information and when it became so overwhelming that it knocked him on his back, Fred realized that the times he had “hid” inside his parents’ dungeon was all a farce on their part – they could’ve pointed him out any time they wanted to. The fact that they played along and let him have his independence made him miss them even more...

“Whoa, Fred – are you ok?”

Fred opened his eyes and looked straight ahead, actually realizing and acknowledging that he wasn’t standing upright anymore. Metch stood over him looking down with concern on his face; even though it was dark outside now, the sheer amount of information that was constantly feeding into his consciousness from his new territory allowed him to “see” him through various inputs—

I did it! I have a territory!

Instead of trying to answer, which he didn’t think he could with the sensory assault his mind was undergoing, Fred closed his eyes again and tried to...compartmentalize some of it. He wasn’t exactly sure what was doing, but it felt similar to how he had to relax and embrace the change like he did when he got the SDIA implanted into him.

He started with Fire since it was actually a lot less information than he was receiving from the others; the body heat he could sense from Metch and a few others were the first sensation his mind converted from the “shout” they were giving off for his attention, to just a general awareness of their location. He reached out farther and “quieted” the shouts of the other sources of heat and fire around him, from the torches he had originally connected with to the heat from a stove in a nearby kitchen.

With a little less demanding his attention, he did the same with the Water in the people around him, only then moving onto the cisterns, drains, septic system, and random collections of the clear (and sometimes not-so-clear) liquid within range. With that done, reducing the clamor of information overloading his senses, he turned to the hardest of them all.

Nature was everywhere; now that he was able to filter out Fire and Water, he began to see that nearly everything had some sort of “life”. From the smallest bugs underground burrowing in their undetected communities, to the black mold along a small section of the stone walls in the DAS building’s basement (he wasn’t even aware the building had a basement), to the microscopic organisms inside the waste water in the septic systems. Even the humans around him gave off a “life” vibe, similar to the water and body heat they generated.

It felt like it took hours to reduce each section of his territory piece-meal into manageable sensations, but he knew in reality that it had probably only been a few minutes. Nevertheless, by the time he was done he felt himself sweating from the mental exertions.

He could also sense that Deecy was trying to communicate with him while he was doing all of this, but it was getting lost in everything else and he couldn’t quite make it out. By the time his mind had “quieted” everything, and he cautiously opened his eyes, it was almost like having

permanent Mana Sight activated but pushed to the edges of his vision. When he peered up at Metch again, his interpretation of what he was seeing was as if his “peripheral awareness” was actively filling in only whatever he looked at instead of trying to tell him the entire picture all at once.

“I’m...fine. I was just adjusting to something unexpected – I’m okay, now, I think,” he addressed Metch first, before turning his head toward Deecy, who was lying patiently on the ground by his side.

“Nice job establishing your territory! It’s...much bigger than I thought it would be.”

He looked past the crowd of people gathered around him and really saw the sphere that comprised his territory for the first time.

Instead of a single color like he had seen everywhere else – either green or brown for the Nature and Earth cores, respectively – his was a swirling conglomeration of red, blue, and green. It was a constantly moving mixture, but the different colors didn’t interact with each other; it reminded him of something Eisa had shown him about a month ago when she demonstrated a concept that some cooking oil and water wouldn’t mix together and would separate if given enough time. The three different types of Mana were joined together to create his territorial sphere, but they didn’t seem like they were actually “mixed” together.

And it was, indeed, larger than he was expecting; while he was walking back to Gatecross, he could see a few examples of what the low-G-Rated dungeons looked like and they were relatively small affairs – maybe 200 to 300 feet from edge to edge – and just barely big enough to place a few dungeon rooms inside. Fred’s, on the other hand, was at least three times that size or more – and it enveloped the entire town.

“She’s right, it’s much bigger than it probably should be.”

“Fred? Was that you?”

He froze as what he just did caught up with him. *“I think so. How is this possible?”*

“I think when you established your territory, you enhanced your Mana Communication with anything inside of it. I’m assuming you now have a deeper connection with almost everything near you, am I right?”

“You are definitely correct; it was so overwhelming at first that I had to figure out how to suppress most of it before I could even hear you. What was it you were trying to say?”

“Just that at the exact moment you established your territory, something was ‘unlocked’ in what was left of your parents’ shards inside of me. Here, let me show you.”

Suddenly, a familiar-looking notification popped up in his mind as his increased Mana Communication aided in Deecy’s transfer of information.

Congratulations on establishing your first territory!

While you might be apprehensive about leaving your parents/mentors after your initial development phase, this step is important for your future as a great and powerful Dungeon Core!

When establishing your first territory, there are a few pertinent items of information that may or not have been covered by your parents/mentors:

- *The size of the territory you can claim as your own is dependent upon your Core Structure Level – the higher the level, the more you can claim*
- *Everything located in your territory can be absorbed for a massive influx of their inherent natural mana, but be careful not to alter the landscape around your dungeon too much; natural elements such as rock formations, trees, water pools, lava flows, windstorms, holy geysers, and midnight voids in your territory can provide perpetual ambient mana that help sustain you during dry periods; occasionally, when humans are unable or unwilling to venture inside the depths of your dungeon, your feeding upon their natural ambient mana can be delayed – perpetual ambient mana through natural elements will still provide growth, at least, though on a much smaller scale*
- *Once established, your territory is inviolate and permanent as long as your Core is in residence; the only way to lose territory is to cede it to another voluntarily – this is frequently done in higher-core-concentrated faction-owned areas so that everyone has an equal chance for feeding*
- *Your territory is the area where you can start construction of your dungeon; be warned, however, that although you can technically construct outside of your territory, you will not be*

able to absorb or reabsorb mana inside those constructs – they will essentially be cut off from your Core

- *In the event of a friendly territory dispute with a nearby Core, please contact your local Area Leader for further information*
- *In the event of a hostile territory dispute with a non-Alliance Core, please contact your local Alliance Representative for further information*

Ok, that's interesting. What intrigued him the most was the fact that it said his territory size was based upon his Core Structure Level, which – when he quickly looked at it – was still at the same paltry Level 2 as he had seen it last time. *Perhaps the difference is the fact that I have three factions instead of just a singular one.* If he considered that, then it made sense for his territory to be three times the size it normally would be.

He was still lying on his back in the middle of the street, but most of the people that had come to see what the commotion was about were starting to go back to work repurposing the buildings in town. Only Metch, Harriette, and Raspel had been left behind to make sure he was ok; when he felt like he had gotten his bearings back and his senses settled, he was about to climb to his feet when he heard an angry voice coming from the direction of the DAS building.

“WHERE IS HE!?”

Chapter 8

Eisa was having a nightmare; the town of Gatecross was being overwhelmed by swarms of giant insects who literally buried the defenders under their numbers and mobile plants who grabbed screaming Guild members with tougher-than-steel vines, before bashing them against the ground with bone-shattering impacts. To top it all off, there were somehow dozens of those massive Woodmen charging the perimeter, using their giant wooden swords to topple the stone walls. And through it all, Eisa was in the center of town flinging out deadly Shadow Strikes to hold back the onrushing tide of death with just Fred and an undead animated deer by her side.

One-by-one, the residents of Gatecross fell beneath the onslaught, followed by their fellow Guild members until it was only the two of them left (her deer had become a casualty when it was ripped apart by two of the vine-wielding mobile plants). She could tell that they were both already exhausted from using their abilities almost non-stop and tearing through their Power like it was limitless. But it wasn't, which was made evident by the fact that she – followed by Fred – tried to send one more spell into the swarm and found she was out of Power. Given enough time, she'd regenerate enough quickly, but it didn't look like the invading dungeon monsters were going to give them that.

She pulled out her staff from her PIB, watching as Fred bravely whipped his knives out from the sheaths behind his back. As the horde closed in, they turned to each other and she stared sorrowfully into his eyes, knowing that this was the end.

“Don’t be sad, my love; we did all we could to survive and we’ve prevented the needless deaths of thousands. And there’s no better way I could think of going other than by your side,” Fred told her in a soft, loving voice, somehow carrying over the sound of the approaching tidal wave of death.

He slipped up close to her front and faced her, the heat from his body evident on her skin despite her own exertions. He bent his head down and she moved herself even closer to him, the passion in his eyes inviting her to drown in his lovely lips for eternity. As she stretched her neck to meet Fred’s lips with her own, she whispered, “I love you.”

Before their lips could meet, she felt a vine wrap around her upper waist, the sheer strength in it causing her to lose her breath in a whoosh as she was pulled backwards away from her love. The last thing she saw was Fred shouting her name and chasing after her, before everything suddenly went dark and she woke up, sweating and screaming.

She opened her eyes and didn’t move, just staring and breathing hard from the nightmare/fantasy; *it felt so real!* She was just glad that it wasn’t, because she had extremely mixed emotions about the whole thing.

She knew the nightmare portion of her dream was probably exaggerating the number of monsters that were likely headed their way – but maybe not by much. If it really did end up being that many, she doubted they could survive, even if Fred managed to do what he said he could and build their very own dungeon.

As for the rest...she didn’t know what to think. Before their Guild Leader decided to go solo a dungeon and talk to a dungeon core, she had to acknowledge that she was becoming more and more attracted to his mysterious persona, despite the fact that he looked and acted like a boy just going through puberty sometimes.

But after the revelations he just dropped in her lap – about his actual nature and about his parents being dungeon cores – Eisa didn't know what to think about him. *He's not even human!* Even if he looked like a real person, she was having trouble looking past the dungeon core somewhere inside his body and see him in the same way anymore.

Despite all that, however, he was still their Guild Leader and he appeared to be trying to do whatever he could to save as many human lives as possible. She couldn't abandon him now, especially after he had done so much for everyone he met, even if it was only providing them with gold coins so they could buy better gear. Even that little bit can go a long way.

Which was why Eisa agreed with his plan to build a dungeon for protection and went so far as to sway everyone to his cause. As much as she – and nearly everyone else – wanted to just run away as fast as she could, she had come to terms with the logic of his arguments. Doing it this way would save many more lives, even if it cost them their own.

And that was also why she had been guarding his door in the DAS building after he told her he needed to figure out how to establish a “territory” and to only disturb him in an emergency. Eisa spent hours fending away many of the townspeople and even some Guild members who had questions about the defense. They all knew what the basic plan was – tear down whatever structures they had and rebuild them atop the outer stone walls, increasing their height to prevent everything being an easy access point. That was all they really had at the moment; they were waiting for Fred to tell them what to do afterwards.

She must've fallen asleep while she was fending away the curious and insistent, which didn't surprise her because the last 12 hours had been exhausting. What did surprise her, however, was that when she had opened

her eyes after the nightmare/fantasy she had, she wasn't on the floor in the hallway – she was in a bed.

And it didn't look like her own.

Eisa sat up quickly and looked around, realizing almost instantly that she was in Fred's room – and in his bed. She felt herself blushing even though there was no one around to see her, as the door was shut. And then that turned to anger as she threw herself off of the bed – she couldn't help feeling slighted. *All this time I spent outside his room, making sure he was undisturbed while he did whatever it was that he needed to do, and he couldn't bother waking me up? Did he succeed and is now telling everyone else, leaving **me** – the one who stood by him through all this – the last to know? Is he placing me in his bed like he thinks I'm some sort of possession?*

She yanked open the door and looked down the second-floor hallway, seeing no sign of the inconsiderate young man/dungeon core. Stomping down the stairs to the DAS building's common room, Eisa looked around, expecting to see Fred or at least someone who could tell her where he was – and saw nobody. The frustration she felt towards the Core Power Guild Leader boiled over.

“WHERE IS HE!?”

Eisa wasn't expecting an answer and wasn't surprised when she didn't get one; instead, she raced outside to look for him. Fortunately, she didn't have to look long, as a crowd was still dispersing around a figure lying on its back in the middle of town. She saw Metch, Harriette, and Raspel still there – all hunched around the figure – looking sheepishly in her direction for some reason.

“Ah, there you are. Fred was just telling us he had left you asleep in his bed because you were exhausted, though he wouldn't expound on that.”

Harriette smirked in Eisa's direction as she hurried over.

Now that she was closer, she could see that – as she had suspected – Fred was flat on his back, appearing somehow both wiped-out and energized at the same time. He had a smile on his face, however, which only widened when he saw her.

“How did you sleep? I didn't want to disturb you when I left, and I tried to be as gentle as possible; all that activity we'd done today was enough to leave anyone exhausted,” Fred said innocently. Of course, the others didn't take it that way, as they sniggered at her expense, which only infuriated her further.

“How dare you—” she started, before Fred excitedly cut her off.

“It's amazing! I never knew that this was what having a territory felt like – I wish I had been able to do this before. I think all I needed to do was tap into the Nature Mana I now have access to, and everything is so clear, so vivid – it feels like I'm connected to everything! I can even feel you...why are you so hot? Are you sick? I've heard about the illnesses that humans can sometimes get, but I've never experienced any before.”

Eisa's thoughts came to a screeching halt as what he said crashed into her. Mixed emotions swirled around in her head as she stared at Fred lying there on the ground, her heavy breathing, flushed face, and clenched fists the only outward signs that she was close to exploding. The problem was, she didn't know which way the explosion would go.

He can feel me? What does that even mean? And not only that, but how come he only succeeded in his efforts when he was away from me? Am I holding him back? Does he think I'm holding him back? Did he really mean to insinuate that we had been doing exhausting “activity” in his bed? Or was he just being polite, thinking of me more like a friend or – even worse – a little sister?

Through clenched teeth, Eisa managed to take control of herself long enough to get out, “I’m fine,” before she turned on her heels and walked away.

From the strange nightmare/fantasy she had, waking up in Fred’s bed, the way he had abandoned her, and the insinuations her Guild Leader expressed about their relationship, Eisa was confused at how she felt. She wanted to strike out at something; a building that she thought was next on the demolition schedule took the brunt of her frustrations in the form of a flurry of Shadow Strikes until her Power was nearly empty.

It was a complete waste of her Power – which she belatedly realized she would probably need later when the dungeon cores attacked – but by the time the last wall fell under her onslaught, she felt better. *Fair trade, I suppose.*

“What did you do? That was my weapons shop – we were supposed to leave it up!”

Whoops. She turned to Marcaus, the owner of Gatecross’ weapons shop who was looking at the pile of rubble with a shocked expression on his face. “Uh...sorry, my mistake. But I think your goods are still fine... maybe?”

Eisa walked away quickly, her anger draining away faster than it had arrived – with supreme embarrassment taking its place. *I can’t deal with all this right now; I’m going to go see if I can help with the walls going up.*

She soon lost herself in the work, knowing that she was only delaying focusing on her feelings about Fred. *If we survive the next few days, I’ll think about it then.*

Chapter 9

That was strange.

Eisa's arrival and quick disappearance, followed by her destruction of Marcaus' weapons shop, was...different. He wasn't exactly sure what was going on with her; when he concentrated on the sense of Water, Fire, and Nature inherent inside of her, she appeared to be flushed with an excess of body heat. *She must be suffering from some illness – I'll have to remind myself to see if there is another Guild healer that can cure her.* He couldn't remember if Eisa had an ability that could cure herself; regardless of whether or not she did, she had used up most of her Power destroying the building and it was unlikely she could use it.

Metch helped him off the ground with a strong outstretched hand, slapping him on the back while chuckling. "Women, right? I know that this whole—" the large D-2nd-Rated Guild member waved around at the town—"thing isn't necessarily a laughing matter, but it's still nice to see you both trying to lighten the mood around here with your antics. Morale is pretty low right now – which is understandable, given the circumstances – and even a smile can go a long way with buoying everyone up."

"Uh, thanks?" Fred wasn't quite sure what he was talking about – he figured it was some human societal customs that he was still unfamiliar with – but he went with it because he was obviously doing something right.

"Alright, we're getting back to work on the wall; let us know if you need anything, Fred," Harriette told him, ushering the others away. "And try not to 'exert' yourself too much!" she called back with a smile on her face, which prompted him to nod like he knew what she was talking about.

“Just me and you now, Deecy,” Fred said to his companion, who was silent through the entire exchange with Eisa.

“Yes...just be cautious with that human female. Something smells off about her; if I didn’t know better, I’d say she was in heat – but I don’t think humans work the same way as Dire Wolves.”

“Yes, I agree something is wrong – I think she’s ill. Remind me to see if another healer can take a look at her later. But first, I need to start building this dungeon! And...do you have any idea how to do that?” Now that he had established his territory, he could sense almost everything around him with a deeper connection than he thought possible, but it didn’t extend to how to build a dungeon.

“Just as your establishment of your territory, I have no idea. However, from what little of your parents’ memories I can still access, I believe it is something that should come naturally to you. Why don’t you experiment with your mana and try to create a room under the ground?”

“I guess it couldn’t hurt,” he replied.

Fred planted his feet on the ground, now fully recovered from the sensory onslaught he had suffered at the development of his territory. He was about to start experimenting with his mana when he changed his mind, electing to sit on the ground rather than risk falling down again. Although he wouldn’t be permanently hurt by it, he didn’t want to knock himself out accidentally during a potentially important phase of the upcoming dungeon creation.

Now settled cross-legged on the dirt and stone ground in the middle of Gatecross, he reached inside his body for the reservoir of Mana he had there. Since establishing his territory required him to use all three of his mana types, Fred again grasped a single point of each using his mind and brought it out from his core, watching as they floated together a few feet in front of him in a ball that only he (and other dungeon cores, of course) could see. The blue, red, and green colors were separate in the hovering orb – similar to his territory sphere; he wasn't sure if he could ever actually *combine* them, but if this process worked, he didn't think it really mattered.

Fred then sent the floating ball straight into the ground and he watched as it disappeared from his normal eyesight; fortunately, he could still “see” it underground with his Mana Sight, and he directed it to bury itself another fifteen feet beneath the surface. As soon as the roiling orb of three types of Mana was far enough down, he focused on it and imagined it hollowing out the dirt and rock, creating the first room of his new dungeon.

And wonder of wonders – it didn't work.

The only thing that ended up happening was that the Mana orb broke apart and slightly infused the ground, like thirsty soil soaking up rainwater. Without manipulating any more of his Mana, he looked at it with his Sight and saw that the infusion into the dirt under his feet was, in general, the same shape he was looking to create; from there, though, it hadn't done anything other than just sit there.

“*What am I doing wrong?*” he thought, aiming his question toward Deecy.

“I’m not exactly sure – tell me exactly what you’re trying to do and what you’re thinking while you do it.”

Fred told the Dire Wolf Pup exactly what he was doing and what he was envisioning while he did it. It was only when he recounted it to her that he realized that something was missing; he couldn't figure it out – but Deecy fortunately came to the rescue.

“I think the problem is that you’re not directing the material to go anywhere. Try it again, but this time try something that you haven’t had an opportunity to do before now – absorb it like you would the mana from a slain beast.”

Hmm, that might work. He was marginally sure that the only reason he couldn't absorb any natural ambient mana before, was because he didn't have a territory. At least, that was what he told himself; if it didn't work now, he wasn't sure what he would do.

Fire Mana: 108/128

Water Mana: 107/127

Nature Mana: 109/114

Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 4994

Fred repeated the same thing with his Mana orb, but this time put three of each type instead of one; he wasn't sure if using more would make a difference, but now was not the time to skimp on his usage – he *needed* this to work. Besides, his Mana Conversion skill was working faster and faster to convert his Unusable Mana into his three usable types, meaning he didn't have to worry about running out anytime soon.

He directed the orb down to the same place, sending out the multi-colored Mana so that the 10ft cube “room” was completely infused with

color. There were the barest amounts of brown Earth Mana – inherent in the dirt itself – along with what he added, but it was miniscule in comparison.

Fred placed his hands down on the ground like he would normally do when he was absorbing the mana from a slain beast, concentrating on the cube of dirt underneath him. At first, nothing happened; after a few seconds of fumbling around trying to figure out what he was supposed to do, his questing Mana Absorption latched onto the Mana-infused section he had prepared and started “sucking” it up.

It started slowly, the Mana inside the dirt breaking it down by some unknown-to-him process, doing only a few cubic inches a second. After a minute, however, it was almost like his skill had figured out what to do; it started to disappear faster and faster until all of the dirt inside the “room” and the Mana previously there was gone. But then he felt an additional tug of Mana from his Core, reminiscent of when he had inadvertently created Deecy. Fortunately, the tug was short-lived and brief, stopping almost as suddenly as it began.

The Dire Wolf Pup suddenly backed up, some sixth sense of hers alerting her to some sort of danger. Before he could ask what was wrong, Fred was launched into the air as a massive – and crackingly loud – explosion of dirt rocketed up from below his sitting form. When he landed in a heap 20 feet away, he picked himself up (miraculously unhurt other than a sore wrist where he impacted the ground wrong) and tried to get his bearings.

“You could’ve warned me that would happen.”

The area above the room Fred had created was turned into a very familiar-looking dungeon entrance, similar to almost every other one he had seen in his – granted, not very extensive – travels. It almost looked like a

giant pile of rocks that had thrust up from the ground, forming an entrance that led down to the depths of the earth. It wasn't quite as large as he'd seen before (especially his parents' dungeon), but it certainly wasn't the smallest.

Four consecutive stabs at his core interrupted his jubilation at the creation of his first room of his new dungeon, prompting Fred to fall to his knees in temporary disorientation. It was gone quickly, however, and he watched as three small orbs of different-colored Mana shot out from him, joined by a slightly larger fourth that was colorless and barely visible. The three – blue, red, and green – went straight into the mouth of the entrance and down to the room below; he followed them with his Mana Sight and watched them smack against the walls, where they were absorbed instantly.

When he looked at the room as a whole, he could see that each facet of the cube he had created was infused with his multi-colored Mana; he didn't think he could tell by sight, but he was fairly certain that the entire room was now reinforced and wouldn't collapse. *This must be the mana that disappeared when it was removed after my parents and the Nature Core I absorbed died. No wonder the dungeons all collapsed after their deaths; I don't think I've ever seen any sorts of supports **anywhere** in all the dungeons I've been in. They must all be created and maintained by the Mana from the core.*

The colorless orb flew toward the up-thrusting pile of rocks above ground, impacting the entrance before being absorbed. *And that must be what Unconverted Mana looks like.* That thought made him check his Mana counts again.

Fire Mana: 106/127 (1)

Water Mana: 105/126 (1)

Nature Mana: 107/113 (1)

Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 4989 (5)

Not only had those orbs used up even more of his Mana – one per elemental type and five Unconverted – but for the first time ever, his maximum Fire, Water, and Nature amounts *went down*.

“Sorry, I wasn’t exactly sure what was happening; and besides, there isn’t much that can kill you – so I wasn’t too worried. As for your maximum Mana, I think—”

Deecy cut off abruptly, plopping down on her rear end and cocking her head to the side as if she had to think about something.

“Never mind, I was completely wrong. Here – this is for you. This will explain it a lot better than I could.”

“Wait, what—. Aaaah! Too much!”

Chapter 10

Congratulations on starting construction of your first dungeon!

While it is highly encouraged to move your dungeon from your starting location once your Core Structure Level has reached Level 20 due to future stagnated growth potential, this initial dungeon will still be your main source of growth for at least the next century or more. Starting out with a good foundation and following the rules set out by your faction is the best way to ensure that your dungeon is set up for success!

There are a few additional rules that you may or may not have been informed about from your parents/mentors:

- *Your dungeon acts as your primary defense against hostile parties; these parties can include wild animals, humans, and even hostile foreign dungeon defenders*
- *Based upon your Core Structure Level, your Rating in relation to other dungeons is determined by this table:*

Core Structure Level	Rating
1 – 10	G-1 st – G-10 th
11 – 20	F-1 st – F-10 th
21 – 30	E-1 st – E-10 th
31 – 40	D-1 st – D-10 th
41 – 50	C-1 st – C-10 th
51 – 60	B-1 st – B-10 th
61 – 70	A-1 st – A-10 th

- *There is technically no limit to the number of rooms your dungeon can contain, as long as it fits inside your territory; however, the more rooms that you have, the more mana upkeep it takes to maintain them (i.e. you can have 50 small rooms even when starting out, but you wouldn't be able to stock them with many defenses or dungeon defenders); this upkeep is temporarily taken from your maximum Mana Capacity and is returned when you eliminate or change the room in the future*
- *As you progress in Core Structure and Mana Capacities, it's not always recommended that you immediately add rooms; instead, you might be better served with upgrading your defenses and defenders, making the rooms you already possess more difficult for any invaders (though this is just a recommendation: experiment with different layouts and combination to discover what suits you best)*
- *The defenses you have access to at this time are based upon the faction-specific blueprints your parents/mentors supplied you while you were in your development phase; additional defense blueprints can be acquired through experimentation, though this is not recommended until you are at least Core Structure Level 40 and above as it takes an extremely large Mana Capacity to perform experiments*
- *The dungeon defenders you have access to are based upon the faction-specific blueprints your parents/mentors supplied you while you were in your development phase; additional dungeon defender blueprints can be acquired from wild animals who*

venture into your dungeon or from combining existing blueprints together, though this is not recommended until you are at least Core Structure Level 40 and above as it takes an extremely large Mana Capacity to combine existing blueprints; additionally, the results from combining dungeon defenders together can potentially destroy your original blueprints, so please consult with your local Supreme Council Representative before combining, as unsuccessful experimentation can lead to a hindering of your effectiveness

- *The “loot” or reward blueprints you have access to are both commonly shared rewards (such as copper, silver, and gold coins), and faction-specific; your parents/mentors should have supplied these to you in your development phase; additional blueprints can be acquired from humans as they drop objects – keep in mind, though, that you cannot absorb these objects until the invaders have left your dungeon or are no longer alive*
- *Based upon your dungeon Rating, there is a Strength Limit Range of how powerful or weak your dungeon can be; defenses and defenders count toward this total – each one is granted a value determined by their type and level*
- *Based upon your dungeon Rating, there is a Reward Limit Range; this range explains a recommended high and low amount of rewards that can be included as your dungeon is invaded by humans; if you require permission to fall below or above this recommended limit for certain reasons, please contact your Area Leader for approval on a case-by-case basis*
- *Blueprints to defenses, dungeon defenders, and rewards – as well as mana reserves – can be exchanged from Core to Core*

upon physical touch; these types of resources are unable to be transferred through Mana Communication

- *You cannot alter your dungeon while there are humans present inside, though this does not apply if they are just inside your territory; while their natural ambient mana that feeds you can be absorbed, it also blocks most attempts to manipulate your available Mana to enact changes*
- *Be aware that there is a limit to the amount of ambient mana that each human will emit upon their invasion of your dungeon; capturing and holding a human inside your dungeon is both forbidden and will provide greatly diminished returns*
- *Changes to your dungeon while there are foreign (not your own and not necessarily hostile) dungeon defenders inside is possible, but is limited to rooms where they are not currently present; this restriction is lifted for reproducing cores who share the same dungeon*
- *Always try to keep a reserve of mana available for emergencies, which you may need to use in the event that you are attacked by a hostile faction and need to defend yourself; or, less likely, if you are aware beforehand of a potentially hostile attack by humans*
- *In the case that you are in the midst of a core-threatening attack by hostile humans (again, this is very unlikely), please contact your local District or Regional Leader for assistance; although it is highly improbable that you can be permanently harmed by them, if you are removed from your territory be sure to stay calm and wait for rescue – and for the retribution upon those who dared to remove you from your dungeon*

- ***Last bit of advice: keep your harvesting of the humans to a minimum; it is much better in the long-run for them to survive and come back than to harvest them once without return visits; although not strictly prohibited, dungeon cores who show a high harvest rate will suffer penalties from the Supreme Council***

“Deecy, I’m getting really tired of being knocked flat on my back every couple of minutes.”

It took Fred a minute or two to fully adjust to the influx of information he just got slammed with from the Dire Wolf; and then another couple of minutes to read and assimilate that information until he had a better understanding of what he could and couldn’t do. Or at least what “normal” dungeon cores could and couldn’t do.

“Oh, you know you like it; plus, I didn’t want to spoon-feed you it when it was easier to just give it to you all at once. And – if you’ve forgotten – we don’t have a lot of time.”

Deecy had a point, even if it ended up hurting him a little. If he had to suffer through a little abuse to save as many people as he could, he would gladly do it – especially since he could heal pretty quickly. In fact, his wrist was already feeling better – the miraculous healing of modern Mana manipulation.

When he had recovered from being thrown halfway across town and the information overload, Fred opened his eyes to see that the eruption of the dungeon entrance hadn’t gone unnoticed. Surrounding the new access point to the singular room he had created, was every single inhabitant of

Gatecross in addition to his Core Power Guild. Awe marked their faces as they gazed upon the entrance, though Fred couldn't help but notice that some of them also looked at him with a little bit of fear as well.

“You did it, Fred! I have to admit, even though I supported you in this crazy plan, I wasn't sure if you could actually do it.” Metch walked up, his mouth hanging open at the sight before him.

“Is it safe to go in?” Rospel seemed to materialize out of nowhere, the darkness of the night lending plenty of shadows for him to hide in.

Fred was still a little overwhelmed with all that had happened, so he waved him ahead. “There's nothing in there right now, since I've just started, but you can check it out if you want,” he told the D-Rated Infiltrator.

The others watched as Rospel “bravely” ventured into the dungeon entrance by himself, disappearing quickly over the threshold. As soon as he did, another shock went through Fred's system as a portion of his mind shot to the room he created; fortunately for him, he didn't end up flat on his back again, as Eisa had come up behind him and caught him before he hit the ground.

“Are you ok? What was that noise—? Oh...” the Necro-healer asked, obviously before she had seen the entrance.

“I'm...ok. Hold me for a second, if you will,” Fred asked absently, his focus almost completely on what was going on in the dungeon. He felt her hands circle his waist as he leaned lightly back against her, feeling safe enough for the moment that he could turn his attention back to what was going on.

The fragment of his consciousness inside the room underground felt like he was looking at everything from the exact center of the space – except he could see every direction at the same time. That was what had so

disoriented him at first; the fragmenting of his “visual” sensations was bad enough, but this new vision inside his head was wild. It was almost as if his Mana Sense was combined with his Territorial Sight at the same time, allowing him to see everything that went on in the room as if he was right there.

I wonder if this is what the other cores see when humans enter their dungeon?

He watched as Rospel made his way down into the room from the entrance tunnel, stepping delicately and cautiously despite being told there was nothing down there. It was only when he could see him quite clearly that Fred realized that the room that he had created was giving off a suffusion of light, similar to how many of the other dungeon rooms he had seen had appeared. *I wonder if that's the default light setting.* He remembered seeing many rooms that were either nearly or completely dark; he “reached” out to the room and tried to see if he could change it, but he had no luck while Rospel was inside the room.

Warning!

You cannot change your dungeon while there is a human present!

Good to know. Although he had seen it in the notification, he still had to try; he still wasn't sure what was an unbreakable rule for *every* dungeon core, or only guidelines for normal cores.

There wasn't much for Rospel to see, especially since it was only a 10-foot cube, so he was done within moments. However, for even the brief time he was in there, something interesting happened.

A white “mist” expelled out from Rospel's body, drifting lazily around the air until it came in contact with the walls, where it disappeared

as if it was being absorbed. It wasn't a whole lot, of course, and it was only when the Infiltrator had finished and was heading back up the entranceway that Fred finally got a pleasant shock.

Most of the "mist" had been absorbed into the walls, and it had apparently hit some sort of threshold; when that happened, Fred could see a white spot condense on the wall, quickly become a colorless orb, and then shoot off through the entrance, passing right through Raspel as he traveled back aboveground. Before he could react, the orb hit him right in the chest, where he usually grabbed the Mana he needed from his core. That happened at the same instant the Infiltrator passed the threshold, which suddenly canceled his multi-angled sight inside the underground room.

He came back to himself with a rush, feeling a little light-headed; he was glad that Eisa was still standing behind him holding him steady. Before he did anything else, he quickly checked his Unusable Mana total on a hunch and was rewarded – it had gone up by one! It wasn't a lot, but what it ultimately meant was he now had a means to easily refill his Mana; based on what it took to make just the first room in his dungeon, he was pretty sure that it was soon going to be imperative that he had a steady supply at hand.

Fred firmed up his stance and hoped that the last of the shocks were over – at least for the day. He turned his head to thank Eisa for her help and discovered that she still had her arms around his waist. Before he could say anything, he was prematurely interrupted.

"It's still pretty small, but it is certainly a dungeon," Raspel reported as he approached, loud enough for everyone to hear. For some reason, he was smiling as he looked at Fred and Eisa, which ended up with the Necro-healer quickly removing herself from behind him with a startled exclamation.

“Thanks for the support, my mind was...elsewhere for a moment.” He finally turned around to thank Eisa and noticed that her face was even redder than he had seen earlier. *She must be really sick – she’s more flushed than earlier.*

Fred looked around at the assembled Guild, still looking at the dungeon entrance in the light of numerous torches and light orbs created by some mages. With them all assembled, it was easier to find another healer. “Merida, would you mind looking at Eisa?” he called out to the diminutive blonde-haired Cleric-mage standing with some others. “She’s all flushed and I think she might be sick.”

From what he remembered hearing, a Cleric was an advanced form of the Healer class; they supposedly had some sort of Cleansing or Cure ability, though he hadn’t ever seen it used before – it apparently wasn’t very often that it was needed inside of the nearby dungeons.

Fred wasn’t sure why what he had said elicited laughter, but those nearby who had heard him call out chuckled. Unfortunately, Eisa didn’t find anything funny about it; on the contrary, she quickly turned even redder in the face and stomped off toward the northern gate.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go check up on her,” Merida managed to get out between her own giggles, racing after the fleeing Necro-healer.

“You certainly do have a way with women, don’t you?” Metch asked, coming up beside Fred.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Anyway, I need to see about making this dungeon a bit bigger for our purposes. Does anyone have any suggestions?” he asked, looking at his Core Power Guild members standing nearby.

It turned out, delving into dungeons gave them a particularly good knowledge of what they hated going up against the most; if he used their

recommendations, he could almost let his dungeon do all the work for him.
Fred smiled as he got to work.

Chapter 11

Getting to work was easier said than done. Sure, he knew how to build rooms now, but he had no idea how to do anything else. He could easily make Mana-formed Objects, or even use his Adventurer Power to Conjure Objects, but that didn't extend to dungeon defenders or anything other than basic defensive traps he could manually construct for use inside the dungeon. *There has to be a better way.*

Deecy professed not to know any more information other than what she had already provided, so Fred checked his Status to see if there was anything new there.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 2 Fire Mana: 107/127 (1) Water Mana: 106/126 (1) Nature Mana: 107/114 (1) Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 4988 (5) Unconverted Essence: 3240
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Intermediate Mana Communication: 15% Intermediate Mana Absorption: 5% Intermediate Mana Conversion: 12% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 72% Novice Core Crystallization: 42% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 2% Novice Dungeon Creation: 2% Novice Defender Creation: 1% Novice Defense Creation: 1%
Dungeon Information

Maximum Dungeon Rating: G-6th Current Dungeon Rating: N/A (No Core Room) Current Mana Upkeep: 1 Fire 1 Water 1 Nature 5 Unconverted Number of Rooms: 1 Number of Defenders: 0 (0 Mana) Number of Defenses: 0 (0 Mana) Defender/Defense Range Limit: 250—300 Mana Reward Count: 0 Points Reward Range Limit: 250—300 Points (Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)
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Fred thought it was interesting to note that his Dungeon Core Status didn't consider his measly little room "Rated" yet because he didn't have a Core Room to house his "core". *I wonder if it will ever consider me Rated if I'm never in there.* It was also interesting to note that his Maximum Dungeon Rating was G-6th, despite his Core Structure only being Level 2. He figured that it was because he had three different Factions, therefore his "normal" Rating was multiplied by three.

It all didn't really matter to him, however, as he didn't really care what the system thought of his dungeon. That, and the Range Limits he saw on the Defenders/Defenses and Rewards sections didn't really apply to him – he didn't have to follow their rules, considering he was already breaking them by existing in the first place.

The most important thing he learned, however, was that – on the bottom of the Dungeon Information section – there was a Dungeon Creation Menu that he could access. He had never seen it before, but after being familiar with bringing up the Dungeon Core Status and Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface, he was fairly confident he could figure out a way to pull it up. It was actually easier than he thought; a simple mental command brought up a list that was similar but not the same as the Status screens.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Room – Pre-built

- Small – 20X20X20 feet (Initial Purchase – 20 Mana, Upkeep – 2 Mana)
- Medium – 50X50X25 feet (Initial Purchase – 50 Mana, Upkeep – 5 Mana)
- Large – 80X80X30 feet (Initial Purchase – 80 Mana, Upkeep – 8 Mana)
- Extra Large – 100X100X40 feet (Initial Purchase – 100 Mana, Upkeep – 10 Mana)

Create Tunnel – Pre-built

- Short – 20X4X8 feet (Initial Purchase – 10 Mana, Upkeep – 1 Mana)
- Long – 40X4X8 feet (Initial Purchase – 20 Mana, Upkeep – 2 Mana)

Custom Rooms & Tunnels

- (Initial Purchase and Upkeep requirements dependent upon size)

And that was just the menu detailing the sizes of the rooms and tunnels he could build, along with the knowledge that he could custom-build whatever he wanted. Everything appeared to have an initial “setup” cost and then an “upkeep” cost, which explained why he had some of his Mana Capacity diminish – though not completely.

“Deecy, in my Dungeon Creation Menu, it lists the upkeep of a room that’s more than twice the size of the one I made as only 2, yet it took away three of my Mana in total.”

“My guess is that because your territory – and now your dungeon – is made from three different elements, it requires all three to upkeep it. You could try making a room with just one or two types, but I have my doubts about that working.”

Fred did too, but that didn't mean he refused to try. Everyone else had left back to the work of preparing the walls for the upcoming invasion, which left him alone to apply his efforts to his dungeon. He walked through the entrance and down the tunnel connecting to his first – and only – room, noticing that it appeared exactly as it had in his fragmented vision. When he stood right in the center of the space, he noticed little wisps of white mist floating out from his body; almost the exact same thing that had happened to Raspel happened to Fred, with the mist being absorbed into the walls and then shot back at him.

The biggest difference, however, was that Fred was watching his Unconverted Mana totals while this was going on; the total dropped from 4,987 to 4,986 (and wasn't explained from his Mana Conversion process, which was still ongoing) as the mist leaked out from him, and when a single orb shot back at him from the wall, it jumped right back up to 4,987. *It's just cycling the Unconverted Mana inside my core— this must mean that all humans have Unconverted Mana inside of them!*

It would certainly explain why they were such a mystery to dungeon cores. Fred's parents had told him that humans weren't able to be absorbed for Mana as well as being unable to reproduce them as a dungeon defender; from what he had understood, cores couldn't process natural Unconverted Mana from an object. This wasn't normally a problem, as every other object in the world was made of either a singular or multiple elements.

“From what I can piece together, dungeon cores take the ‘ambient mana’ that humans give off and process it so that they can use it. My guess is that the upkeep requirement for the walls is what takes the Unconverted Mana from human visitors, and automatically converts it into their element.

“Their Mana Absorption skill works the same way, except instead of, say, converting a rock or tree into Unconverted Mana and then converting it into their own element, it’s all a one-step process. I don’t have proof, but I suspect that because you are human, you out of any other dungeon core actually has an Unconverted (Unusable) Mana pool.”

Deecy had followed him down into the first small room; he wasn’t sure if she could even see what he was seeing, but she definitely heard his unfiltered thoughts. *“So you’re saying that this is a handicap?”*

“Not at all. In fact, it gives you an advantage; your Unconverted Mana can be turned into whatever type of Mana—”

She cut off like she was going to say something, cocking her head to the side like she had before she had shoved his head full of information. Fred braced himself for another onslaught, but he needn’t have worried.

“I just thought of something; well, as long as you can get it to work. Do you think you can ‘reach’ inside your core and pull out just your Unconverted Mana?”

Now that wasn't something he had tried before. Since it was always labeled Unconverted or Unusable Mana, Fred hadn't even bothered trying to access it. Even when he created Mana-formed Objects in the past, he had only used his Fire and Water Mana. He wasn't even sure where it was stored, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to try to manipulate it.

Fred sat down in the middle of the smooth stone floor of the room – having learned his lesson about standing up when experimenting with new things – and closed his eyes. He started by “reaching” into where he always imagined his core to be, his mind easily feeling the familiar red Fire and blue Water Mana, as well as the still-slimy green Nature Mana he had recently acquired. However, that wasn't what he wanted or needed; he needed to find another reservoir of Mana he hadn't even suspected he could tap into before.

He backed away from his core for a moment, trying to picture what he was looking for. Even though he couldn't actually “see” any of the Mana inside of his core even with his Mana Sight skill, he began to imagine what they would look like if he could.

It took a little while, but as almost all of the sound from outside was muted inside his dungeon, the environment was peaceful enough to concentrate. First, he imagined his body as a large blank space, devoid of any color whatsoever. Fred shrunk his mind until it floated freely inside that void, able to zip this way and that without impedance; the only boundaries were distant walls that encompassed his physical body.

When he was comfortable in the silent void, he next imagined his core, picturing it as a conglomeration of every core he had ever seen – all three of them. While his parents' cores had been bigger than the Nature Core he had inadvertently absorbed, they all had the same general shape, a multi-faceted spherical construct that shone with an inner light.

Fred's core on the other hand, just wouldn't conform to the same shape. It was almost as if some inner knowledge prevented him from creating it the same way. He tried to see it as a single sphere, but he instinctively knew that was wrong; single spheres were for normal dungeon cores with a single element.

Using that as a stepping-off point, he "constructed" a core in his mind space that looked like three different spherical cores pushed together, touching in a strange three-sided triangle. Each sphere was a different color, which slowly pulsed a brighter shade in time with his heartbeat. He looked at it and realized that the structure felt a little better, but it wasn't quite what he needed...

And that's when he remembered why he was doing this in the first place – to find the Unconverted Mana. *What is it that makes me different from every other dungeon core on the planet?*

That's right – I'm also human.

That was what he was missing; even though he was a dungeon core, he was also human – and that wasn't represented anywhere in his imaginings. He scrapped the previous "triangle" of cores and wiped the thought from the void; in its place, he pictured small, multi-faceted, and spherical blue, red, and green constructs clearly separated in an equidistant triangle formation. In the center of the triangle, he placed another core construct, though this one he designed to be clear; it was similar in non-color to the small orbs of Unconverted Mana he constantly felt bombarding his body from the walls around him as it cycled the "mist" emitting from his body.

It was when he placed the clear sphere into the middle of the triangle formation – representing his human form – that he felt something click into place. His imagination must've been playing tricks on him,

because the entire construct started to vibrate in his mind, the three colored Elemental Cores pulsing in the same heartbeat rhythm as before – and he wasn't the one who imagined it. After a few moments, a line of glowing Mana stretched forth from each of the Elemental Cores, lazily snaking its way toward the center Human Core; when they finally connected – one after another – they pulsed brightly once and then pulled taut.

The Human Core then started to pulse with a soft glow at the same beat, alternating between each of the colors in a pattern: red, blue, green, red, blue, green, red, blue, green...

Fred wasn't exactly sure what happened; it was like his void and imaginings took on a life of their own. He opened his eyes and saw Deecy staring at him.

“What...what did you do?”

She looked both startled and amazed, and he had no idea what she was talking about. All he did was try to imagine what his core would look like, and—

He looked down at himself with his mana sight and saw the three Elemental Cores joined to his Human Core – right in the middle of his chest. They weren't exactly substantial; they weren't lodged inside of his organs or anything like that, but they blazed forth like they actually existed. *And now maybe they do.*

“I'm not sure – I was just trying to imagine where I was storing all of my Unconverted Mana, and this was the best solution I came up with,” Fred told the Dire Wolf Pup out loud, his shock making him forget that he could just speak with his mind.

“I’m not an expert or anything, but I’m pretty sure what you just did is impossible. Then again, your entire existence is an impossibility, so I guess it fits.”

“Yes, well – at least I’m pretty sure I can access my Unconverted Mana now. Let me try it out.”

Fred easily reached down into himself – aided by his Mana Sight – and dipped a mental “hand” into the Human Core; he pictured grabbing 10 units of Unconverted Mana and brought it out in front of him until it was sitting in his hand, marveling at how easy it was now.

“Is this what you wanted me to do, Deecy?” he thought towards Deecy, reverting back to using his Mana Communication skill.

“I assume so, though I have to admit that I can’t see what you’re holding. Now, try to use that instead of your other Elemental Mana to build something else.”

Without wasting time, Fred pulled up his Dungeon Core Status... and stopped, shocked at the increase of his Core Structure Level. It was now Level 6! *Apparently, whatever I did had a significant change on the dungeon core part of my nature.*

He wanted to pursue that more, but he was in the middle of something already. Therefore, he opened up the Dungeon Creation Menu and selected the Short Pre-built Tunnel; a blueprint of the new tunnel was filtered into his mind as he looked to the southern wall, detailing exactly how it needed to be shaped and constructed. He mentally snapped the construction into place and flung his hand holding his Mana out, watching as it impacted and seemed to melt into the stone.

Within seconds, the wall started to disappear as his Unconverted Mana did its job and hollowed out a new Short Pre-built Tunnel; when it was done, he felt another small orb of colorless Mana pop out from his chest and impact the tunnel, ensuring that it now had the upkeep it needed to maintain it. The whole process was marginally faster than the original room had been, but that could also be explained by the increase in his Novice Dungeon Creation, which now stood at 4%. What shocked him more than that, though, was that his Novice Core Crystallization was no longer even at Novice – it was now Intermediate-ranked at 1%. *I guess that whatever I did was beneficial – at least I hope so.*

“Was that what you had in mind, Deecy?” Fred smugly thought toward the astonished and pleased Dire Wolf Pup. Now that he had more options with which to build his dungeon, he was excited to begin.

Part III – Dungeon Training & Development

Chapter 12

Gaelystromico was getting frustrated with Avenlyrica, though he knew it wasn't her fault. The youth nowadays didn't fall in line like his and the previous generations did; violations from the humans were so foreign to most of them, that the mere thought of something happening to them was deemed ridiculous. They didn't grow up in a world – at least from what he was told by his own parents – where the threat of abduction or destruction was, if not necessarily a common every day or even an annual occurrence, then it was at least something that was a worrisome possibility.

Of course, it was nothing like his grandparents or great-grandparents day, when it was even worse. Dungeon cores were hunted down and used in strange experiments by the humans, if they weren't outright destroyed. There were very few cores left from that time, however, so some of the stories Gael heard he were, he thought at times, highly unbelievable – but he listened and took their warnings to heart, even if he didn't believe the entire tale.

Unlike those young fools in Aven's Area.

“Why should I waste my hard-earned Mana on something that probably didn't even occur? Harl is probably just hiding somewhere, and I'm not going to play his games. Besides, if we kill the livestock here, it's going to severely hamper my goal of having an S-Rated dungeon in the next century.”

This was only one of the responses he got from a dungeon core youth in the Nursery, when he started to investigate why Aven hadn't

mobilized all of her charges to take swift, decisive action against the nearby habitation. Not only was the thought of becoming an S-Rated dungeon in anything less than a millennium (even for Gael with his special growth tactic) a ridiculous, impossible, and unattainable goal, but very few of the cores actually thought there was any threat. In fact, there were quite a few that appreciated that this particular core was no longer there.

Harlingwarth, or Harl for short, didn't have many friends in the Nursery; from what he had learned over the last day, the F-3rd-Rated core had alienated many of his neighbors by playing tricks and pranks on them. He had been the spawn of two prominent figures in the Nature faction – one a low-S-Rated core and the other a high-A-Rated – and they had gifted their “son” with a large excess of Mana that he was to use to increase his Core Structure as quickly as possible. Of course, there was only so much a core could funnel toward increasing their Structure at one time, so the amount he was given should've lasted nearly a century and would've given him a massive head-start on the nearby dungeon cores.

Except that Harl decided it would be fun to squander most of it by pumping hundreds (possibly thousands) of his defenders full of Mana and sending them against his neighbors.

Most younger cores experimented with this process as they grew in strength, which was ultimately a good thing; it prepared them for later in their existence when they were going to be used to bolster the flagging defensive Regional line against the other Factions. It was even encouraged to at least practice it a few times when they had a little excess Mana that they weren't using to upgrade their Core Structure – but Harl had taken it to extremes.

Gael couldn't imagine the amount of Mana that would be needed to send out hundreds or thousands of defenders over the years to wreak havoc

on neighboring dungeons. For every hour that a defender could spend outside of your territory, you would need to spend three times the normal amount it would take to create it. For example, to create a basic Level 1 Vine Spider for the dungeon, it required 4 Mana; to make it last two hours outside of your territory – which was probably the bare minimum needed to make a trip to a dungeon that wasn't directly adjacent to your own – you needed to spend 24 Mana. And those requirements only increased as the Level of the defender you created went up.

To make it worse, when it was away from your territory, if it died – which almost always inevitably happened – you wouldn't get any of your Mana back, which you would if it returned. Of course, the opposing core would be able to absorb it, which was a benefit; however, for some reason Harl had an uncanny ability to send one of his pumped-up defenders into a neighboring dungeon and cause all sorts of destruction (killing defenders and springing defenses) right before a group of humans were set to invade. This meant that the livestock would spend less time inside the dungeon and complete it with a minimum of fuss, which in turn meant that the core received less in terms of ambient mana from them. It was a complete no-win situation all around, but as it was technically encouraged (if not necessarily on that scale), no one had thought to report Harl.

So, although it was probably a good thing for the rest of the Nursery that the mischievous F-3rd-Rated Nature Core was gone, that didn't mean that they could just let his abduction/destruction go unavenged. Unfortunately, except for a few actual friends that Harl managed to acquire during his reign of pranks, Aven was having a hard time convincing the rest that they needed to enact retribution – if only to make a statement regarding such things in the future.

“Avenlyrica, I don’t care what it takes, you need to get your Area organized for an assault!” Gael had been deliberately pushing the Area Leader gently for more than a day – especially after hearing about their reluctance to get moving – but now the time for gentleness was over. He needed results and for this incident to be put behind them.

*“Gael, I’m trying – nearly everyone is reluctant to part with even a few Mana for the cause. I’ve already assembled my forces, but they won’t do much good without support. I might need you to step in with your authority to **order** them to do this.”*

The fact that Aven shortened Gael’s name spoke volumes for the stress she was under – she was usually a stickler for proper etiquette. She was great during times of non-crisis, nurturing her “flock” and encouraging their growth better than most; however, she was starting to crack under the pressure. *I might need to see about having her move on to acquire her own growth territory and replace her with someone with a firmer...attitude. She’s too nice when it comes to dealing with wayward cores; we’ll see how she does through all of this, however – she could end up surprising me.*

But it wouldn’t end up helping to establish her authority over those beneath her if Gael had to step in and take charge. He wouldn’t hesitate to do so, though, if they didn’t start doing what they were told.

“Aven, I’m giving you one more day with which to get them working with you; after that, I’ll intercede if necessary. You can do this; make an example of one of them if you need to – you have my authority to see it done. We can’t allow this horrific occurrence to go unpunished for much longer, or else the livestock might be encouraged to strike again. And if that happens, it’ll be on you.”

It wouldn't really be on her if things went badly; Gael was the one ultimately responsible for those he oversaw, but he wouldn't hesitate to make sure that she suffered for any loss of standing he incurred. That was just the way it was.

"...Understood. We'll be ready in another 24 hours – one way or another."

Now *that* was what he wanted to hear. Gael severed the connection with Avenlyrica and looked over the rest of the Area briefly. Nothing much had changed, which was what he was expecting with the reports of the Nursery's reluctance to mobilize. He was about to leave and get back to watching yet another group of humans making their way through his dungeon, when he looked back at the human habitation in stunned disbelief.

The territory dot he had seen before had grown huge! It was now large enough that he thought that it probably covered the entire habitation, but it looked strange. He could detect traces of Nature Faction inside of it, which was shocking in and of itself; however, he could also see that it was mixed with two other Elemental Factions – Fire and Water if he wasn't mistaken. How such a thing was possible, he didn't know; regardless, it further convinced Gael that the humans were messing with things that could prove dangerous if it was allowed to continue.

He was tempted to pass this information up the chain of command, but he hesitated. Although it was important, Gael also didn't want to distract the higher-ups from the war they were facing amongst the borders – especially since he was counting on the problem being taken care of within the next 48 hours.

So, instead, Gael ignored his own dungeon and those within, watching the human habitation with his Territorial Sight, looking for any

changes. If things got really out of hand, he would have to intervene and send his own defenders, though the travel time alone would require at least 20 hours for them to get there.

He'd do it, but he was sincerely hoping that he didn't have to.

* * *

“Gaelystromico, we’ve got another problem.”

Gael had watched the new “territory” for a couple of hours, but as there had been no significant change in it during that time, he turned his attention back to his own dungeon. However, it was only an hour later when Aven contacted him again.

“What is it this time, Aven? I already told you that you have the authority to—”

“It’s not that...I’ve actually already made some progress in that respect, and I’m confident we will be ready to go by the deadline. The problem is that some of Harl’s friends have sent their forces prematurely.”

That wasn't good. The dungeon cores' strength against the humans when they needed to enact retribution was the fact that they could overwhelm them with numbers. If only a few dungeons sent their defenders – granted, it could still be hundreds – then the humans would have a much greater chance of surviving. Plus, if they attacked ahead of schedule and the livestock survived, it would give the humans advanced warning of the imminent larger attack force coming their way – assuming they didn't know

about it already. Which would allow them to prepare in ways he couldn't even imagine, as well as having the opportunity to flee from the habitation.

“Stop them, then! You're in charge there and they should listen to you!”

“I've already tried. And, unfortunately, I don't think you or even the Regional Faction Leader could stop them – they've already made up their minds and don't care about the repercussions of their actions.”

You're not trying hard enough, Gael wanted to scream at her, but refrained from doing it by the smallest margin. He had personally talked to some of the youthful cores in her Area and could understand how recalcitrant they could be.

“Fine. The way I see it, this could result in two different outcomes: either they get lucky and catch every human there unprepared and slaughter them, or they do minimal damage and have wasted their Mana for nothing. If it's the first, all the better; if it's the second, I need you to send out some of your forces to scout around the southern perimeter of the habitation. If they flee from us – I want to know. If they manage to escape to the rest of the human settlements, this could become a much bigger issue.”

Aven sent back an affirmative and cut the connection. Gael sent his attention back to the Area and used his Mana Sight to locate the forces Harl's “friends” had sent out. They were small little blobs of Nature Mana to his perception, and he was actually impressed at how many of them there were. At least, he was until he realized that they were all extremely low-level. Not necessarily Level 1, but close enough that he was almost confident that it was going to be a slaughter.

He wasn't sure exactly which side was going to be on the receiving end of that slaughter, but a sinking feeling in his core hinted at which way it was probably going to go.

Chapter 13

The Core Power Guild wasn't necessarily filled with experienced travelers who had seen dungeons the whole world over and knew the ins-and-outs of them like the back of their hands; however, they were almost all in agreement about what they *did* and *didn't* want to see when they entered a dungeon.

And even taking from his own experiences, Fred knew that Adventurers preferred a dungeon to be straight-forward with no surprises; to put it simply, just room-after-room of a variety of “monsters” they could slay, gain “juice” (Essence) and loot, and then easily leave. They also liked to be presented with – if they absolutely had to endure them – traps or “defenses” that were well-known and easy to either avoid or disarm if necessary.

These attributes, which many (nearly 85%) of the dungeons around Gatecross copied fairly regularly, made them relatively boring – but safe at the same time. They were the most common, and therefore the most visited; since it was likely that dungeon cores shared what worked for them or made them the most popular (as far as human visitors), there was a high probability that it was also why they were so common – it was a self-sustaining relationship. In his time around Gatecross, these dungeons were what Fred had visited while he was picking up his adapted abilities from the various groups he had tagged along with. Again, boring – but safe.

Another type of dungeon around Gatecross – a bit more uncommon – that comprised the majority of the rest that weren't “boring”, were ones that tried to mix up their basic strategy. There was one that had only two massive rooms, both filled with hordes of monsters and traps. Another one

had six rooms; the first five of which were filled with only small traps, whereas the final room had an oversized “boss” monster. And yet another high-Rated one had a normal-appearing layout but was poorly lit and filled with only one type of defender – hundreds of low-level Vine Spiders. And so on and so on – nothing extremely difficult, but since they were out of the ordinary, Adventurers had to be a little more careful to avoid getting killed.

And then, apparently, there was always at least a couple of dungeons that defied any of the previous conventions. They ranged from the plain – one small room, one boss monster, little loot – to the bizarre – which included anything from oddly shaped rooms and tunnels, to monsters that didn’t attack unless you stepped on them, and traps that either were almost impossible to bypass or disarm or, more likely, served no identifiable purpose whatsoever.

These types of dungeons were *usually* avoided by the adventurers; they were either too dangerous to delve into, or not worth the time in visiting – and there were plenty of normal, boring dungeons nearby. Occasionally they would be visited by a group looking for rare and unusual loot drops, but they usually left disappointed.

Now, while those dungeons were still visited – if infrequently – there was one type that *no one* delved into. It was one that was unaffectionately called, “The Labyrinth”. It consisted of upwards to a hundred or more very small rooms (sometimes barely bigger than the tunnels themselves), usually with just a single monster (if any at all) guarding it; this wouldn’t have been so bad, except that the tight quarters made attacking the monsters difficult with more than just whoever was up front. And if you could handle that issue, the maze-like interior of the dungeon made it extremely easy to lose your way.

Every tunnel looked *exactly the same*, every room appeared *exactly* the same, and the monsters were absorbed into the dungeon after they were killed, so that it was hard to determine where you were. The only difference in some of the rooms was that instead of just two directions you could travel (forward or back the way you came), sometimes there were up to *five*. No one had ever spent enough time inside of “The Labyrinth” to map it fully, and those that went in had a 50/50 chance of actually finding the way out again. Additionally, it was rumored that the layout of the maze inside the dungeon was changed (at least in subtle ways) after someone made it out alive.

And so – in honor of the most-hated and despised dungeon that his Guild had ever heard of or encountered – that was what Fred wanted to build. His logic was that if it made Adventurers crazy, it was bound to do the same for dungeon defenders. That, and he knew a little something about the incoming threat that he was pretty sure wasn’t common knowledge to his friends in the Guild – the defenders were on a time limit.

“Now that is something that I have knowledge of. In order to allow your dungeon defenders to venture out from your territory, such as your old ‘bodyguards’ Firbey and Frozzles, it requires you to infuse them with three times their base cost – per hour. When or if it returns, you get that Mana back, but if it dies outside of your territory, you lose it forever.”

“Thanks, Deecy,” Fred said, still sitting down in the first room of his dungeon, trying to figure out the best way to build his dungeon.

His ultimate goal, of course, was to design something that would keep his friends alive, while also killing as many of the invading dungeon defenders as possible. The way he saw it, there were two ways to go about

that: somehow trap the monsters heading their way in his own “Labyrinth” and let them run out of time trying to battle his own defenders and traps, or have the Guild and townspeople help whittle them down as they advanced through his dungeon.

Both of those options had pros and cons; the first assumed that they were going to stay trapped in the maze he was going to create and that they didn’t have a long time-limit before they expired. If they had the numbers and the time, they could explore all of it and eventually find where he was planning on stashing all the people in Gatecross, overwhelming them in an enormous tide of death. But if time ran out before they were found, there wouldn’t be any danger at all to either the Guild or the townspeople.

The second would be more dangerous for everyone involved, but it would also be the one that would ensure that even if the time-limit was extensive, they would be able to deplete the numbers of attackers little-by-little.

It was only after looking at what he had available to create for dungeon defenders and defenses that he realized that his plans might have to change.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (All Blueprints)

- Flower Tripper (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Rock Beetle (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)

Create Defense (All Blueprints)

- Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana)
- Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana)

“Deecy, what’s going on? Why do I only have a few blueprints for defenders and defenses? And why are they only Nature-based?” Fred mentally asked the small Pup who was pretending to sleep near his side.

“Normally, you would’ve received every blueprint from your parents as was stated in the information I gave you earlier. However, since you weren’t officially a ‘dungeon core’ before their deaths, you got nothing from them. You’re actually lucky that you received any from the Nature Core you absorbed.”

“And how do I get more? These won’t do me much good against what’s coming.”

“One of the ways I know of – again, according to that information I gave you – is to have another core give them to you, which I don’t see happening anytime soon. Another way is through experimentation, but I wouldn’t try that quite yet; from what it said, you’d need to expend a lot of Mana in order to do that. Also, it’s quite possible that you could manually try to construct a trap from various objects to create your own blueprint for something, but I honestly don’t know how well that would work and how long it would end up taking.

“Lastly, in the case of new defenders, if you absorb a wild beast in your territory, you’ll most likely be rewarded with a blueprint for it.”

That didn’t make any sense to Fred. *“What about all the creatures I absorbed over the last two years? Didn’t that count?”*

“No, because they weren’t in your ‘territory’.”

That’s not fair. “So, what you’re saying is that I have the ability to make rooms and tunnels for my dungeon, but I have next to nothing to put in it?” Fred asked out loud, frustrated with all his plans getting messed up before he could even start.

Suddenly, his Territorial Sight registered Eisa behind him, who had apparently been there long enough to hear him talk to Deecy because she inhaled sharply at his question. “Are you saying we trusted you to defend us, and you’re not going to be able to?” she asked in a shaky voice.

Fred whipped his head around to look at her, only to see what appeared to be tears falling down her cheeks. *Did she hurt herself? I wonder if Merida missed something when she helped to cure her earlier.* He stood up and went to her, trying to gather her up in his arms like he had occasionally seen humans doing together when they were trying to comfort someone. Fred wasn’t exactly sure if what he was doing was wrong, but from the way she seemed to pull back from him he knew he had failed in his attempt to fix her. *I wonder if I should try to learn more healing abilities.*

“I’m sorry, Eisa. I thought I would have access to more options when I started to build the dungeon, but I was wrong. However, that doesn’t mean that this still couldn’t work – I just need to rework my design —”

Eisa cut him off. “We don’t have time for that! I came down here to let you know that a couple of Scouts out in the forest saw a huge swarm of monsters heading this way. They’re coming fast, so by the time we get

up there they'll already be here," she unnecessarily shouted at him, before rushing back up the tunnel entrance.

Fred thought quickly; as soon as Eisa left the vicinity of his dungeon, he went into full panic mode and extended his Territorial Sight out until he could "see" everything underground in his territory. He didn't have time to strategically plan out everything, so instead, he put together a quick and dirty layout for a defense that may or may not work. He held the shapes of the constructions in his mind and started reaching into and pulling out Unconverted Mana from his Human Core, flinging different-sized colorless orbs down the tunnel he had already constructed, watching as they disappeared through the wall and started work on building the rooms and tunnels he wanted.

One after another, he flung the orbs with increasing speed, the blueprints filtering into his mind as he created one Pre-built room and tunnel after another. After about a minute of that, he started to feel a little fatigued; looking at his Mana Status, he realized that he had just drained a significant part of his available Unconverted Mana.

Fire Mana: 108/127 (1)

Water Mana: 107/126 (1)

Nature Mana: 108/114 (1)

Unconverted Mana: 1023 (26)

(Warning! If your Unconverted Mana drops below your upkeep total, you run the risk of cascade failure)

Small "upkeep" orbs were being yanked from him every couple of seconds, and the total upkeep for the rooms and tunnels he had made was slowly going up. He didn't wait for everything to finish however, because

he could already hear the sounds of battle erupting from outside his dungeon.

Still in his Territory Sight, he looked toward both entrances and saw that his Guild members were being overrun by...Large Wasps? Hundreds – or possibly thousands – of Large Wasps. Fred couldn't see far beyond the walls because his territory didn't extend that far, so he didn't know how many of them there actually were; in addition, he couldn't tell if this was just the initial force, or if there were more emerging from the forest right behind them.

He muted the Sight and raced up the stairs – Deecy at his heels, and his steel knives that never left his side in his hands in the blink of an eye. Even though he had spent a bit of his Mana, Fred was still full of Power, so he could easily use any of his abilities if he wanted to; the problem was that he wasn't quite used to using them effectively in a group yet and didn't want to inadvertently hurt someone.

He had seen that the southern section was doing fairly well holding their own, stemming the tide of Wasps floating over the gate. For some reason – even though they could *fly* – none of the enemy was coming over the walls, only over the gate. He wasn't going to question it, however, as it helped the defenders immensely.

Fred had also seen Eisa up north, so he rushed up and took in the scene, seeing where he could help. Although they had been planning for the defense of Gatecross, they weren't quite ready yet; despite that, his Guild – and even many of the townspeople – were doing an excellent job of holding back the tide of angry-looking flying insects. Unfortunately, even as he watched, he could see even more Large Wasps making their way over the gate and were starting to surround the defenders.

“Back! Everyone, retreat back to the dungeon!” he called out at the top of his voice toward them, before doing the same in the southern direction. He wasn’t sure if they heard him, but he was relieved when he saw them start to make a steady retreat, the “tanks” from the Guild out front, taking the majority of the abuse.

Fred looked back underground, the “upkeep” orbs continuing to be sucked from his chest every couple of seconds as they shot into the ground. Only about half of what he had thrown together was done, and it would be a race to see what would happen first – his impromptu dungeon being done, or the first human stepping into it. Either way, Fred hoped that it would be complete enough to afford them some protection, especially since the waves of Large Wasps didn’t seem like they were stopping.

I sure hope this works.

Chapter 14

Eisa dodged another stinger from one of the large flying Wasps, but ended up in the pathway of another one, who didn't hesitate to stab her in the back. Stab might be too intense of a word, however, as its stinger didn't pierce her skin. It felt more akin to being punched hard in the upper back; it didn't cause any permanent injury, but it still hurt a little and would leave a bruise if she didn't have it healed.

This is a little strange – why are these monsters so weak? For the majority of the Core Power Guild, other than possibly some of the newer members and a few who hadn't invested too much into their Body stat, the Large Wasps that were attacking them weren't too much of a threat. Of course, getting “punched” by a swarm of hundreds of angry insects would kill any one of them if they just let it happen – not to mention that if one of the stingers got in their eyes or mouth, it wouldn't end well. She thought that two or three full groups of Guild members could easily hold their own against even this many low-powered monsters.

The townspeople of Gatecross, however, didn't have the same type of advantage. Even though Fred managed to convince Jaymes – before he left with the families – to give them all SDIAs, they hadn't had a chance to acquire any Essence to improve themselves. As a result, they were as squishy as a normal person still; already, a few had been impaled by large stingers and had had to be healed. Nothing was life-threatening yet, but it was only a matter of time.

The smart move would be to order the townies back and take the brunt of the attacks with the more-experienced Guild members; it was quite possible that if this was just the first wave of attackers, they might need

everyone to pitch in later, and losing a few of them now would serve no purpose.

Eisa whipped around and threw out another Shadow Strike, hitting the large Wasp point-blank and killing it instantly. *These things really are weak.* She opened her mouth to call out for the townspeople to fall back, when she heard Fred interrupt her before she could even begin.

“Back! Everyone, retreat back to the dungeon!”

What good will that do? she thought. The “dungeon” was only one small room and a little tunnel leading to nowhere; unless it had somehow grown in the last minute, they couldn’t even fit a third of everyone there – and that was if everyone was standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Regardless, it was still a retreat – which was what she halfway wanted anyway – and perhaps they could at least get the people of Gatecross inside and everyone else could hold off the monster horde.

Eisa heard him call back to the southern side of town, informing them to retreat as well. She wasn’t sure if they heard him or not over the sounds of the buzzing drone from the Wasps’ wings and the sounds of stingers impacting armor and tearing the fragile flesh of the townspeople. She didn’t have time to investigate, unfortunately, because the tide of flying insects hadn’t stopped coming over the gate even as they started to retreat towards the center of town.

They were starting to get surrounded as more and more Wasps swarmed inside, flying overhead and sneaking up behind those trying to hold the line against them. She flung out a few more Shadow Strikes and hit three of the insects in quick succession, but there were just too many of them.

Eisa saw two heading toward a frightened-looking former general goods shopkeeper, who had only picked up a weapon just that morning. He

was waving around a long spear crazily, trying to keep them at bay; the spear-tip almost managed to catch one of them, but the Wasp flew upwards and over, safely out of range and danger.

She tossed out another Shadow Strike toward the one in the air and just barely missed, the dark bolt of restrained energy passing within inches of the Wasp. Before Eisa could try again, both insects dove toward the shopkeeper with their stingers extended in front of them – they were too far away to hit, and all Eisa could hope to try to was to hit one with a Lifedrain, in the hopes that it would do enough damage to kill it before it could inflict too much damage.

She needn't have worried, as out of the corner of her eye she saw a grey shape streaking through the air, catching the Wasp dive-bombing from up high in its powerful jaws. A quick crunch while the Dire Wolf was still airborne was followed by the now-crushed insect being flung away like refuse. Fred followed on Deecy's heels – though not as flashy – and impaled the other Wasp with his knives, neatly bisecting it before he pulled them in opposite directions. The two halves of the former flying insect fell to the ground and started to melt, disappearing within seconds just like every other dead Wasp.

“Glad you finally decided to show up!” Eisa shouted, quickly dodging another stinger heading for her face.

She wasn't sure how she felt about Fred now; the fact that she had heard him admit that he couldn't do anything to defend them inside his dungeon only made her confusion more adamant. Eisa had been pinning her hopes – and the hopes of everyone else in the Guild and Gatecross – on his ability to save them by building a dungeon, but if all he could build were empty rooms and tunnels, she wasn't sure how that would help.

Regardless, she didn't have time to think about any of that now – they'd all have to survive the waves of monsters she was sure were still incoming. She wasn't an expert at large-scale tactics, but she could see the benefit of throwing these low-powered Wasps in first to confuse and soften up the defenders before sending in the heavy-hitters. It was similar to how groups of Adventurers would address a particularly difficult enemy in a dungeon; they would use various spells and abilities that would soften it up without causing too much damage before their tanks went in and got its attention – and then they would unleash their full power on the unfortunate foe.

“How are you going to fit all these people in that one tiny room?” she asked, when she had a free moment – which essentially meant that she wasn't currently being bombarded from all sides.

“That's the reason I was late. I...changed a bit of the area underground, so by the time we get there, we should have plenty of room,” Fred responded in between his own attacks, working with the Dire Wolf to decimate anything that came close. In fact, they worked so flawlessly together that it was almost as if they could read each other's mind – which she belatedly realized that they probably could.

They were nearly to the opening of the dungeon and their retreat was starting to become a little ragged; Eisa saw at least a dozen bodies (she wasn't sure if they were alive or dead) of townspeople being dragged by Guild members and there wasn't really a defensive line anymore – it was almost every person for themselves. She knew that they had already killed hundreds of the Large Wasps – possibly thousands – and there didn't seem to be any end in sight.

“Alright, everyone but the tanks in the entrance and keep going when you're inside! Tanks, you're going to take some damage, but you

need to cover them while they file inside. Now, go, go, go!” Fred shouted, and looking around Eisa saw that the southern gate group was just as close as they were.

“Eisa, can you use your Skeletal Swords ability on me? I’m going to try to draw their attention while everyone else gets away,” she heard from right behind her and she jumped; the unassuming-looking Guild Leader had somehow slunk up close to her without her knowing.

Eisa wasn’t going to argue; she had seen him take quite a beating and come back from it in their first delve inside of a dungeon. It was even more powerful than it had been when she first received it; seeing how useful it was, she had upgraded it to level 3 soon after.

Skeletal Swords 3 – 0/9000

Using your Power, create a rotating circle of skeletal swords that surround yourself or another target, which attacks anything they come in contact with. Does not differentiate between friend and foe. Requires an upkeep cost and can be canceled at any time.

Power cost of Skeletal Swords 3: 300

Power upkeep cost: 5/min

of swords: 5

Base physical attack: 20

Eisa quickly cast it on Fred and he immediately ran out from the crowd, to the side of the dungeon where no one was fighting. She also saw a faint black sheen surrounding him reminiscent of her Shield of Darkness, though it looked...spiky. *I guess that means that I don’t have to worry about him.*

She stayed with the tanks and supported them with both Vitality Transfers and random Shadow Strikes, watching those behind her quickly filing into the dungeon. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a massive fireblast hit the side of the Wasp swarm, incinerating quite a few in the process. As a result of that massive damage, half of those attacking her and the tanks broke off and flew towards Fred – who was just finishing doing the same thing to the southern swarm.

It was extremely difficult to get an accurate count, but she estimated at least 200 Wasps started to envelop her Guild Leader; she almost broke off and helped, but she quickly saw her Skeletal Swords tearing the flying insects apart. Not only that, but every Wasp that got through hit his shield and bounced off, though it was obvious that even as they were flung away that they had died upon the initial impact with his shield.

The respite from the onslaught was welcome however, as everyone took off at a dead sprint for the entrance, and as the majority of those left outside were hardier Guild members, they ignored the stings and pokes from the still-increasing enemy. Eisa herself was one of the last to get inside and ignoring the “punches” her body was suffering from over a dozen Wasps, she called out to Fred.

“Fred – we’re in! Get inside!”

He took off at a run, but at that moment his shield failed, and he was battered back-and-forth by Wasp stingers impacting his body. The Skeletal Swords were still taking their toll, but there were so many flying insects that it was impossible to hit them all. Fortunately, Eisa hadn’t used her own Shield of Darkness yet, so she cast it on him – and he was finally able to move.

Instead of watching any more, she ran inside with the rest of the rearguard, hearing their complaints as their bodies were battered and

bruised along with her own. Fred entered soon after with a swarm of Wasps chasing after him. Amazingly, none of the enemy had followed any of the previous escapees inside, instead electing to continue to attack everyone outside first. However, once Fred crossed into the dungeon, they flooded in after him.

Looking around for the first time, Eisa saw that the first room appeared exactly the same as it had before, but now the tunnel extended into another room. She followed after the rest as they ran for the next room, Deecy in front of Fred while he was screaming, “GO! GO! GO!”

When she reached the next room, she saw that it was quite a bit larger than the first, but still not huge; however, there were at least two dozen Guild members waiting for them. Eisa ran past a line of heavily armored tanks who were right inside the entrance facing the tunnel, stopping soon after as she joined a few Healers (including Merida, whom she couldn’t look in the eye right now) and Mages arranged behind.

As soon as Fred and the others passed the line as well, they closed up and presented a stalwart wall of defense that the Wasps crashed up against. Eisa felt a healing wave wash over her, erasing the aches of the bruises and even a few small punctures that had gotten through her innate defense. She glanced over at Merida, but the Healer was already healing some of the others who had come with her and didn’t look in her direction.

Eisa then turned back to the battle and a feeling of...excitement... welled up in her; she wasn’t sure what it was about being in this dungeon compared to just outside of it, or even the hundreds of dungeons she had been inside over her career as an Adventurer. Regardless of the reason, she felt *comfortable* there; it was a familiar battleground and sometimes it was easier fighting surrounded by stone walls than out in the open world.

She could see some of the same feelings from her fellow Guild members; they were veterans of hundreds or thousands of dungeon delves just as she was. This place might be a dungeon, but it was something they were used to and here, at least, *they* were in control as opposed to some unknown dungeon core.

*Gatecross is **our** home, and you'll take it over our dead bodies.*

Chapter 15

Fred stayed out of the way of the Guild as they defended the second small room he had constructed just after the entrance. He was frankly amazed at how well they were working together to stave off the seemingly unending wave of Large Wasps that were swarming through the tunnel. He already knew that they worked well in groups together as a team during dungeon delves, but this was on another level.

The heavily armored Fighter-based classes including a few Sentinels like Metch, a Knight, and Soldiers aplenty (including 4 of the Gatecross town guards) were standing up front, taking the brunt of the attacks, doing their best to present a wall that prevented all but those nearest the ceiling from getting through. Behind them in the far back of the room, a few Healers like Merida the Cleric were slowly healing the small injuries the front-line fighters were sustaining, though they honestly weren't too bad as their natural resistance was enough to fend off the worst injuries. Their armor was getting dented like crazy, but that was fortunately something that Fred could repair if need be.

Directly behind the front line were Scout-based classes that had ranged attacks, such as a few Archers and even Rospel the Infiltrator that had a small hand-crossbow on his wrist. They were lobbing their projectiles over the heads of the tanks, and although the Wasps were fairly quick, it was hard to miss the massive influx of creatures trying to push past Metch and the others.

And behind those Scout-types were eight Mage-based classes, including Harriette the Elementalist and Eisa. They were all lobbing their spells either over the heads of the tanks, or expertly targeting just past them

to inflict massive casualties on the densely packed horde of angry flying insects.

All-in-all, they were practically decimating the enemy invaders. Fred wanted to try to participate as well, but the defense was going so smoothly that he thought anything he might try would end up just getting in the way. Besides, he was still trying to handle the massive influx of Unconverted Mana (UM) that was constantly bombarding him from all of the humans being inside his dungeon.

He had started the battle aboveground at just over 1,000 UM; five minutes after they had retreated into the dungeon, he was beginning to see why dungeon cores did all they could to entice humans to visit and spend as much time as they could inside their dungeons.

Unconverted Mana: 2584 (255)

Granted, he had over 300 people inside his dungeon, but he had already earned over 1,500 UM from them!

“As humans grow stronger, they will provide even more ambient mana to the dungeon—”

“Thanks for the info, Deecy, but perhaps this isn’t the best time,” he quickly thought back to the Dire Wolf, who appeared a little haggard after helping him beat back the swarm aboveground. *“And thanks for your help up there.”*

“No problem, but much more of that and I’m going to have to rest for a while.”

Fred, who took the time to access his full Territorial Sight input, was relieved when he used his Mana Communication to reply, *“You might be in luck – there’s no more Wasps coming into Gatecross. Either this is a temporary lull...or this might be it.”*

“At least for the moment.”

That’s for sure, Fred thought. He had been preparing for a massive horde to come and overwhelm them; although the swarms of Large Wasps were bad enough, it was nowhere near what he had expected. *Unless they’re just testing us to see what they’re up against.* From what he had pieced together from information by his parents and from Deecy, when dungeon cores sent out their defenders, they gave them specific instructions to carry out; when they left the vicinity of their territories, they lost direct control of the defenders – but could still sense what happened to them. When he had left home for the first time, he assumed that his parents had given Firbey and Frozzles commands to protect Fred, as well as following basic orders from him – but they couldn’t control the defenders themselves.

Therefore, when these Large Wasps didn’t succeed, the ones who had sent them would know what they were up against – or at least what was already set up in defense there. If this was indeed what they were doing, then it was likely that the major attack would wait until they had a strategy to defeat them. Of course, that all depended on if they thought that way or not; Fred was starting to worry over too many “ifs”.

Regardless, they still needed to defeat the hundreds of invading Large Wasps. Fortunately, the Guild members and few guards were holding their own splendidly against the pesky insects. From quick looks at their

levels both aboveground and down in his dungeon, he could see that the majority of them ranged from Levels 2 to 4, with only a few here and there at Level 5. For the veteran Adventurers, they were no match – even when outnumbering them by almost 10 to 1.

It took another 10 minutes of constant battle – with some reinforcements coming once from the room behind to replace tired or out-of-Power combatants – for the last of the Wasps to filter into the dungeon and into the grinder. As the last one fell to a sword-stroke from Metch that literally sliced it in half, there was relative silence as everyone just stared out the tunnel towards the entrance, most breathing hard as they braced themselves for any other attacks.

It was only then that Fred realized that the room looked slightly hazy to his vision, as if there was a dense fog covering everything. He was so intent on the battle that he had ignored it until now; however, as soon as it began to move toward each person in the room – as well as a large amount passing by him further into the dungeon – did he realize what it was. Essence.

He even saw huge clouds of it filtering into the dungeon from aboveground, as all of the “Juice” from the entire battle shot all over the dungeon, being sucked into everyone’s SDIA depending upon their whereabouts. For Fred, he ended up receiving his fair share, though because almost every one of the 305 people participated in the fight, he only ended up getting around 102 Essence. It didn’t make that much of a difference to him or most of the other Adventurers and Gatecross guards, but for those townspeople who had just received their SDIAs only half a day ago, they had already earned enough to become G-2nd-Rated Adventurers.

Added on top of that, now that the battle was over, his dungeon started to automatically absorb the Nature Mana that was essentially just a big giant blob blocking the tunnel leading out from the room. No one else could see it, and he had suppressed his Mana Sight during the fight, but it was overwhelming when he finally looked at it. When that started going, Fred looked with his Territorial Sight and started to absorb the blobs left behind aboveground; while his dungeon did it as an automatic function of the upkeep he had to provide to the rooms and tunnels, things in his territory had to be done manually.

The entire process was so much faster than it used to be; within a minute, he felt so much Mana infuse him from all over that he thought he was going to burst.

Fire Mana: 112/127 (1)

Water Mana: 112/126 (1)

Nature Mana: 118/118 (1)

Unconverted Mana: 37145 (255)

(Warning! You are now holding 17145 Unconverted Mana units over your current capacity. Containing extra Unconverted Mana can damage your core over time without the appropriate Core Structure Level.)

Would you like to use 20,000 Unconverted Mana Units to increase your Core Structure Level? Y/N

He barely read the notification before he cried out and bent over in pain, collapsing to his knees as it felt like something was going to explode inside of his chest. He quickly turned his vision inward, looking at the

Human and Elemental Core construction he had visually built earlier. The Elemental Cores looked fine, but the Human Core was pulsing at an elevated pace compared to the others, and tiny fractures started to appear all over its spherical crystalline structure. As he watched it, a larger crack spiderwebbed over one side and a bright light spilled out, which prompted another sharp pain in his chest.

Without caring about the consequences – whatever they might be – Fred mentally selected Y. As soon as he confirmed what he wanted done, he immediately felt a massive quantity of UM rush out of his core; he was still watching his Cores and saw the angry pulsing light slow down on his now-cracked Human Core, until it almost became dim. He felt his balance give out in his physical body and he collapsed as the pulsing slowed to nearly a complete stop.

But then an orb of condensed UM surrounded the entire Human Core, obscuring it as a rainbow of bright colors erupted from the clear orb. He had to shunt his vision away for a moment; within moments, however, the bright rainbow light disappeared, and Fred was able to look again.

Where his Human Core used to be was an even larger one, easily three times the size of its previous incarnation. There were no cracks, nicks, or imperfections; in short, it was a perfect, multi-faceted, crystalline sphere that pulsed normally along with his heartbeat, displaying the three different colors of his Core Factions. He wasn't quite sure, but he thought that even the lines running from the center Human Core to the Elemental Cores were thicker as well.

Although his eyes were technically open already, his focus had been turned inward; now that it seemed as though everything was going to be alright, he switched his attention back to his dungeon – to find that he was sprawled on his back and everyone in the room was staring at him.

Eisa bent down by his side and helped him to sit up. “Fred, are you alright? What happened *this time*?” she asked, putting particular emphasis on her last question.

Not only was Fred alright, but he felt great! It was like something that had been broken was fixed inside of him; which, considering the cracks in his Human Core, he guessed that was a good approximation of what actually happened. He was tempted to check out exactly what happened to him via his Status, but he needed to ease the evident worry of everyone in the room first. Especially since they seemed to still be tensed up for more invading monsters.

“I’m sorry, everyone – I’m fine now. One aspect of this whole ‘absorbing a dungeon core’ thing I wasn’t prepared for was the massive influx of...uh, ‘dungeon construction energy’ I would receive as a result of all those Large Wasps dying. I’m alright now, and if I’m not mistaken, I’m even better than I was,” he told them, belaying their obvious fears over his well-being. “And you can stand down for the moment, there aren’t any more incoming at the moment. Get some rest – I’ll be able to see when they...are—”

He cut off what he was saying, because he suddenly realized that his Territory had expanded. And not just by a little bit; it now encompassed the entire area around Gatecross leading up to the forest, as well as a little bit into the trees. He could almost feel that it was in actuality even larger, but the territories from the nearest dungeon cores were blocking him from expanding any more. Looking into it further, he realized that his limited outward expansion didn’t limit what was now belowground.

Fred now had twice as much space underground, going down so far as to reach a small underground river. It wasn’t large, but it was also a new source of Water Mana if he needed it. But the potential for an even larger

dungeon with which to help defend against the aforementioned retaliation was going to be extremely helpful.

Sorry again, everybody, I just discovered that I can detect things a bit farther out now, so I should be able to give at least a minute's warning before we are attacked. It's not much, but if our Scouts miss them initially, we'll have at least a little time with which to prepare."

Half the people in the room collapsed exhausted against the nearest walls, relief at surviving this first battle draining the strength from them. They didn't even question exactly *how* he was able to detect things farther out; the fact that he had stayed and helped to protect everyone – as well as physically sitting in the proof that Fred was a bit different – was plainly enough for them.

Fred shuffled himself against the nearest wall as well, and Deecy – in her Pup form, conserving energy – walked over and made herself comfortable in his lap.

"You know you just did the impossible again, don't you? Normally, upgrading a Core Structure takes years of slowly and painstakingly strengthening it with Mana, until it eventually grows large enough to advance to the next level. What you did, however, was unlike anything my memories – while still incomplete – had ever seen or heard of before."

"My mother always told me I was special," Fred communicated back to her with a smile on his face.

"You are at that. I wonder if—never mind, your lady friend wants your attention."

“What are you smiling at?” Eisa asked, sitting down next to him, her own back against the wall.

He let his smile fade away, thinking about the still-monumental task ahead of them. “Sorry, I was just talking to Deecy,” he replied. Then a thought occurred to him. “The townspeople! Are they okay?”

He was about to get up and find out – since his Territorial Sight still wasn’t great at identifying individual humans without visual clues – but Eisa gently put her hand on his arm, stopping him from rising. “They’re all remarkably fine; we have quite a few Guild members that have at least a modicum of Healing ability and they all got patched up good as new. Merida told me—” she said, before the same flush as before stained her cheeks again— “that they’re all a few rooms down recovering from the battle. Many of them had never been in a fight before, let alone what we just experienced, so it might take some time for their minds to recover. Come to think of it, I doubt anyone has ever seen anything like that before – or at least lived to tell about it; I think most of us need some time to recover as well.”

Fred hated to be the bearer of bad news, but he let her in on his suspicions regarding this advance “scouting” group of Large Wasps that had just attacked them. “So, unfortunately, I don’t think we’re going to have that much time to recover.”

She was silent for almost a minute, before she responded. “As much as I don’t want to agree with you – since it just means even worse things to come – I have to admit that this was too...easy. I think if we were wholly unprepared for the attack, things would’ve been much worse. However, even if it were the worse-case scenario, I highly doubt that – other than possibly the majority of the townspeople – many Guild members would’ve been killed by those Wasps. I think that you’re right – this was a

scouting army of some sort; which means that the real attack is still to come.” She rubbed her eyes, the strain of the last day obviously getting to her. “So, Mister Dungeon Core,” she whispered, “what do we do now?”

“Well, I’m not sure how long we have, but I suggest everyone get at least a few hours’ rest. After that, we’ve got some training to do.”

Chapter 16

Fred, instead of resting with the others, felt energized; he was pretty sure it was a side-effect of the increase in his Core Structure Level, but even if it wasn't it didn't matter – he wasn't tired despite not sleeping for the last almost 24 hours. The night had been long, starting with his establishment of his territory, the start of his dungeon, and the attack of the Large Wasps. It was almost morning already because the nights were short at this time of year, but most of the others – including Eisa – were sleeping while Fred was on watch.

He wasn't the only one watching for any threats, however; three Scout-type classes were taking shifts with another three to scour the surrounding forest for any sign of another army headed their way, but so far there hadn't been any evidence of anything. Which worked well, since Fred still wasn't done with his preparations.

There wasn't much he could do with the dungeon while the rest slept, as half of the residents of Gatecross and many of his Guild took his advice to rest to heart and slept where they collapsed after the battle. But the restriction on changing things in his dungeon while humans were present didn't apply to the rest of his territory.

He was limited on what he could “construct”, however; looking at the interior section of the town of Gatecross, for instance, it wasn't technically part of his dungeon so he couldn't make any Pre-built rooms or tunnels – which made sense because those were designed to be used underground. And even if he were able to create some “dungeon defenses”, he only had access to a Small Thorn Trap and Ensnaring Vines – which

would potentially work for some places in the dungeon he could think of but wouldn't do much good out in the open.

After most of the buildings had been deconstructed and the walls around Gatecross were built up taller, there was only a handful of buildings left standing. The walls were built in a rectangular shape, with only (theoretically) the northern and southern gates giving access to the town; the remaining buildings were all along the pathway leading from the two gates, creating a sort of funnel that led them directly towards his dungeon.

They still needed to close all the gaps between the buildings leading outside of this "funnel", but otherwise it was essentially ready for whatever Fred could do with it.

Shortly after everyone started to get some rest – both inside the DAS building and his dungeon – Fred walked out along the northern pathway with Deecy following behind. Here and there he saw dark spots on the dirt and stone of the main town thoroughfare, evidence of the blood that was shed in the last battle against the Wasps.

*"What **can** I do, then?"* Fred mentally Communicated with Deecy as he slowly walked toward the north gate.

"Your skills are very versatile. Even though you can't use your Dungeon Defense Construction Menu and the blueprints located therein, that doesn't mean you're limited by anything other than your imagination. I don't know it for the absolute truth, but I believe the blueprints that dungeon cores use were designed to streamline the automation process; your upkeep already converts ambient and other mana inside the dungeon so that it funnels directly to you, and the blueprints will allow you to set up defenders and defenses that, once they are destroyed or deactivated, will automatically be replaced once the humans leave."

“This was probably developed for the super-large dungeons, where replacing every single element of their dungeon would probably take hours if they did it manually, not to mention that they would have to remember what went where. But that doesn’t mean that it isn’t possible to create something entirely new; it’s just that it would probably take a lot of Mana in order to get something working the way you want it to. And I’m guessing that if you try to make anything too complicated, you won’t have the necessary experience with which to manipulate the Mana in a defense the way you want it to.

Fred got angry at that. *“So, what you’re essentially saying is that I’m not smart enough to make an effective trap? The defenses in my parents’ dungeon that are etched in my mind – in which I can recall exactly what they looked like, both when they were dormant and when they were activated – and you don’t think I could make one of them?”*

“I didn’t say that. I’m sure you could picture it exactly, but let me ask you this: do you know how the Mana inside was stored? Or how the switch or tripwire actually triggered the trap. Or how the Mana flows were directed to where it was needed. Or even the quantity of Mana that was used in the—”

“Ok, ok – I get it,” he said out loud, exasperated at Deecy’s logic. When he pictured the traps his mom and dad had painstakingly (he assumed) set up in their dungeon, he could remember *exactly* what they did and what they looked like, but he didn’t know the mechanics behind them. He had the same problem back when he was by himself trekking through

the north and tried to create a tripwire activated flame-jet trap and ended up making an amorphous blob – because he didn’t know how exactly it worked. He could vaguely picture what the Fire Mana inside the wall looked like, but he wasn’t sure how that was supposed to translate into shooting out a jet of flame.

All of which meant that, until he had some time to learn about the complex manipulation of Mana inside remotely activated dungeon defenses, Fred needed to concentrate on making traps that were simple, uncomplicated affairs. In order to do that, however, he needed to see what he *could* do.

Just as he had created the first room of his dungeon – though this time using strictly UM instead of all three Elements – Fred traced a small, 2-cubic-foot box on the ground with his Mana and instructed it to eliminate the dirt. In less than a second, probably due to his increased skill in Novice Dungeon Creation which was now at 46%, there was a perfect little hole in front of him. He didn’t feel anything else come out of his Core for upkeep, so he assumed that whatever he did that wasn’t directly connected to the rooms and tunnels he had already dug weren’t “officially” part of the dungeon.

Fred reached inside his Cores and pulled out 5 units of Water Mana, holding it in his hand before tossing it in the hole. It plopped down and sat there, looking like a deflating blob as it slowly spread out along the bottom – otherwise it did nothing. He hadn’t ever really used Mana before other than to create objects – and of course rooms and tunnels, but that was almost the same thing – so he wasn’t quite sure what the raw Elements could do. *How do I get it to do what I want?*

Although he didn’t specifically ask Deecy, he remembered her saying that manipulating Mana was only limited by his imagination. With

that thought in mind, he “reached” out to the blob of Water Mana inside of the hole, feeling a connection with it that he’d never felt before. Normally, when he saw Mana out in the wild or as part of a beast, it was just...there. He now knew that he could absorb it – if it was in his territory, at least – but that was all he could do. Now, however, this Mana was *his*, as if it were an extension of his will.

Using that connection, Fred imagined the Water Mana turning into actual water; in the blink of an eye, there was a big splash and the hole was filled and overflowing with water, the quantity produced much more in proportion to the size of the original Mana globules. He could still see the Mana inside the water, though it was diffused equally throughout the entire small pond.

The sides of the hole were perfectly straight, though unlike those in the dungeon, it was all dirt and a few rocks instead of stone walls. Within moments of Fred turning the Mana into actual water, the liquid started to seep into the dirt walls, soaking the surrounding ground and turning the original hole structure into mud. With a thought, he absorbed all of the Water Mana he had thrown out, sucking all of the water – and any existing there in the first place – up in the process.

The now dried-out ground was cracked and brittle; the moisture inside was the only thing keeping it packed together. *Hmm...that could be useful...*

To fix the issue with the water seeping into the ground, Fred used some of his Adventurer Power to create a thin stone “box” inside the hole using his Conjure Object ability; he had gotten a good feel of how the dungeon stone walls were constructed, so he was able to transfer that knowledge to the new construction. It only cost 5 Power to construct, which wasn’t too bad – especially since he regenerated that within seconds.

Repeating the process with the Water Mana, though with only 2 units this time, he found that the stone box easily contained the water inside. Now that it wasn't leaking out into the surrounding ground, Fred started to experiment with it.

Directing his thoughts toward the liquid in the box, he started to manually manipulate the Mana inside of it; by doing this, he was able to do things like swirl it around, divide it into different portions, lift it into the air, spread it out in a thick sheet, and he even learned how to compress it so that it squirted out at high speeds and with extreme force. It was easier than he thought it would be; Deecy was right, manipulating the mana to do what he wanted it to do was only limited by his imagination.

He began to see how the different elements of his father's traps used to work; however, despite being able to simplistically replicate the results, he needed full control and access to the mana in order to do it. The system that would store the Water Mana, trigger the trap, shape it to the desired effect, and deliver it exactly as it was designed was still beyond him. It was something that would probably take a while to study and experiment with, but that wasn't something he had time for now.

Fred reabsorbed the Water Mana and did the same thing with his Fire Mana, placing it inside the box to start with. He had to step back from the heat that the concentrated Mana produced when he converted it to actual fire, but he found that it was just as easy to manipulate as the Water. The biggest downside – which he discovered after a few minutes playing with it – was that fire consumed the Mana it was made up of at a greater rate.

Although there was a negligible amount lost to what he assumed was natural evaporation when he was using the Water Mana, most of it was still there; Fire Mana, on the other hand, was very slowly – yet steadily – consumed to keep the flames burning. He experimented with a spare piece

of wood from a demolished building he found nearby, and he found that when he set his undulating blob of fire onto the wood, he actually managed to produce a small amount of Fire Mana in the process, canceling any loss.

Overall, though, fire seemed much more useful to his purposes, as it would be the most effective against the Nature-based dungeon defenders that would be sent against them there in Gatecross. Fred was especially excited to see how much damage he could do to them when he remembered what Firbey used to do to heat up the air; he almost set an entire building on fire when he condensed half of his burning Fire Mana into a small ball and accidentally shot it forward into a corner of one of its walls.

The super-heated Fireball actually shot through the wooden paneling of the building like it wasn't even there, going so far as to emerge out the other side with barely any resistance. Fortunately, Fred was able to absorb all of the flames that resulted from his experiment, and there wasn't any major harm done. He even used his Repair Object ability to fix the head-sized holes he left in the building before anyone could see, so it was like it never happened.

Nature Mana was harder to manipulate. Fred intimately knew the elements of Fire and Water through his upbringing being surrounded by them, and even if he hadn't been able to manipulate them before, they were easier for him to comprehend. Plants and Nature-type things, however, were not necessarily his forte.

Fred was able to shape the Mana so that it produced some simple grass that sprouted along the bottom of the stone box, but when he tried to create a small tree, it turned into a misshapen blob of bark, branches, and leaves. He didn't know enough about the makeup of different plants and the like, so he gave up after multiple failed attempts. Fortunately, he and the others were going up against other Nature-based creatures, so he figured

that even if he were an expert, using the Nature Mana to produce his own defenses wouldn't be as effective as the other types. Still, he had some blueprints for a couple, so he would be able to use a few pre-made defenses at least.

Although his Intermediate Mana Conversion was steadily increasing in skill – providing him with a slow but constant recharge of his Elemental Mana – Fred was worried that he would quickly run out if he tried to do too much. To combat this, he attempted to use his UM like he had building the rooms and tunnels in his dungeon – and it did nothing.

“In order to manipulate it into the properties of an element, the Mana has to have that element as part of it. I’m sure there might be something else you can do with your Unconverted Mana other than build rooms in your dungeon, but as far as defenses and even defenders, you’re going to have to use your Elemental Mana.”

While that made sense, it further hampered all that he wanted to accomplish. Nevertheless, now that he had a basic understanding of some of the things that he could get the Mana to do, he could finally build some defenses.

Chapter 17

It was a good thing that the construction of his defenses wasn't a loud process, otherwise it would've woken everyone up with how much he accomplished. And, although it took him a while to tweak it the way he wanted it, it was all done by the time he forced everyone to wake up from their nap a few hours later.

The first thing he had done was build two giant square pits that were 20 feet on each side about 10 feet away from each gate – one per gate – and created a large stone box inside that covered the walls and floor, which cost him nearly all of his Power to construct. Next, he slowly dumped enough Water Mana into each pit to fill it up to the top, which ended up taking almost 100 all told.

After that, he infused about 20 Fire Mana into each stone box; he experimented a little with it and was able to condense it and heat the stone so hot that the stone was nearly at a melting point. As a result of the intense heat surrounding the water, however, it made the water inside so hot that it was bubbling and boiling – anything that fell inside was going to be cooked very quickly. After making sure that it would work, he deactivated the Fire Mana and added a little bit back that had “burned” off, waiting to start it up when the inevitable invasion began.

Because the water pit didn't extend all the way between the buildings – instead being in the middle of the “street” – on either side Fred constructed two wooden walls. One thing that he learned, after realizing he needed to create structures that weren't made of stone, was that his Nature Mana could create wood in large quantities. While he didn't have luck creating anything “alive”, wood was easy to form with the Nature element –

even in long planks, which was what he needed. Plus, when he needed to attach them to each other – like in the case of the wooden walls on either side of the water pit – they easily melded into each other.

These walls didn't do anything at the moment, but just like the stone box surrounding the water pit, every plank of them was infused with Fire Mana, waiting for Fred to activate them and create a massive bonfire. The thought was that, in order to avoid the flames, the attackers would choose the easier route and “swim” across the water, getting boiled alive in the process.

Past that, Fred also created three more staggered pits, though he didn't bother lining these in stone; instead, they all had a thick layer of Fire Mana-infused random planks of wood waiting along the bottom, ready to burn alive anything that dropped inside. There were very small pathways in between the pits that provided a visible means to get through them safely; he realized that if he made it *completely* impassable, the monsters heading their way might see that and turn around, looking for a different way across altogether. If that happened, all of the defenses he prepared might go to waste, because there certainly were easier ways to get through.

He just hoped that they were as single-minded as the Large Wasps had been and would continue along the perceived path of least resistance.

To aid in knocking them off the narrow pathways, Fred also set up a small stone reservoir along each side of the street, filled with as much Water Mana as he could supply. Sticking out of each square reservoir were long thin tubes pointed toward the pathways, which – when he applied his concentration to the Mana inside of them – were able to shoot a strong jet of water, hopefully knocking whatever crossed into the pit. They couldn't be aimed, and he had to concentrate on them one at a time in order to fire the water jets, but it was better than nothing.

Once past the pits, the invaders would be nearly to the dungeon entrance. Because all of the defenses he had set up were designed for ground-based monsters, he didn't have anything set up for flying creatures such as the Large Wasps from before. Therefore, over the dungeon entrance, Fred constructed a massive cube-shaped wooden structure that provided a solid wooden roof to prevent anything from attacking from above.

The sides were technically open, but he planned on adding the Ensnaring Vines defense that would hang down and capture anything passing by. They wouldn't do a lot of damage by themselves, but they would hopefully catch the majority of the flying creatures who were bypassing all of the other defenses – and would be quickly dispatched by the waiting human defenders lined up around the dungeon entrance.

He didn't want his Guild or any of the townspeople anywhere else in town, because they were entirely too vulnerable out in the open – which was obvious from the last attack. By having them in the relative safety of the wooden vine-covered structure, they would be able to defend a little better and retreat to the relative safety of the dungeon when they started to get overrun.

Despite all of the Unconverted Mana he had used to construct the pits, he was still receiving the ambient mana that his people were giving off who were still inside the dungeon. It had slowed down to a relative trickle after about an hour; he remembered seeing from the information Deecy sent him on dungeons that there was a limit to how much could be extracted from them at any given time.

Which was good, he supposed, because otherwise he wouldn't put it past dungeon cores to capture humans and keep them inside the dungeons in perpetuity. From some quick observation, he found that he was still

receiving a small amount from those who had higher Ratings, which made sense because stronger dungeons usually took longer to complete. If stronger Adventurers didn't provide more ambient mana and for longer, then there would be no reason for those higher-Rated dungeons to build larger dungeons.

Once he was done, Fred looked over his Status sheet to see that all of his activity, coupled with finally having established his territory, was doing wonders for his improvement.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 6 Fire Mana: 30/127 (1) Water Mana: 23/126 (1) Nature Mana: 60/123 (1) Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 21497 (255) Unconverted Essence: 3240
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Intermediate Mana Communication: 24% Intermediate Mana Absorption: 46% Intermediate Mana Conversion: 40% Intermediate Core Crystallization: 3% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 98% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 2% Novice Dungeon Creation: 52% Novice Defender Creation: 1% Novice Defense Creation: 1%
Dungeon Information
Maximum Dungeon Rating: F-8th Current Dungeon Rating: N/A (No Core Room) Current Mana Upkeep: 1 Fire 1 Water 1 Nature 255 Unconverted Number of Rooms: 15 Number of Defenders: 0 (0 Mana) Number of Defenses: 0 (0 Mana) Defender/Defense Range Limit: 1100—1300 Mana Reward Count: 0 Points

Reward Range Limit: 1100—1300 Points (Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)

As he had seen before, his Core Structure had tripled after he had figuratively “created” his Human Core/Elemental Core structure inside his chest. And however the dungeon core classification system worked, it now said he was considered an F-8th-Rated dungeon – but still didn’t classify as one because he didn’t have a technical “Core Room”. As long as his dungeon worked the way he wanted it to, he couldn’t care less what it said.

Fred couldn’t do anything in the dungeon proper right now, because there were humans in it; that was going to change fairly quickly, though, because whether they wanted to wake up or not, they had to clear out. There wasn’t a lot that he needed to do to the dungeon to get it ready, but he couldn’t do *anything* until they left.

It was with a smile that he walked down the sloping entrance into the first room; he turned to Deecy – who had stayed with him through all of his defense construction, offering helpful suggestions here and there – and said out loud, “Do you think you can howl as loud as possible?”

* * *

Eisa woke up in a panic, an ear-splitting wolf howl jerking her instantly awake from a blessedly dreamless sleep. She stood up as fast as she could, but the rest of her body wasn’t quite awake yet – and she only managed to get halfway to her feet before she collapsed on her face. Picking herself up, the howl finally ended, though she could hear it still echoing in her ears. Looking around, she saw that everyone else in the room – the ones that had decided that collapsing and napping where they

stood was the best idea – was fingering their weapons and looking around wide-eyed for potential danger.

A massive headache formed in the middle of her forehead – most likely from the abrupt wake-up – and she had a crick in her neck from sleeping awkwardly on the stone floor; she wasn't the only one, however, as she heard groans from almost every other Guild member and Gatecross guard that had just been rudely woken up. However, any concerns she had at her own well-being was pushed to the side as Eisa and everyone else tensed after hearing someone calmly walking toward them through the tunnel leading to the entrance.

Fred walked through with Deecy right behind, a big smile plastered across his face. Seeing him looking so happy at the misery of those who had just had their sleep rudely interrupted made Eisa want to yell at him and slap the joy out of his head, but he cut her off before she could say anything.

“Wakey, wakey, everyone. I need everyone to vacate the dungeon for a little bit while I work on adding some defenses to it. I’ve been really busy up top, and I need to finish down here before whatever attack is coming arrives – and I literally can’t do it while there are any people down here,” he announced to the room, loud enough that the people in the next room down could hear him too. “And watch out for the defenses – they’re not active, but they still might hurt if you fall into one of them.”

More than one person was rubbing their eyes at the short nap and starting daggers at Fred’s obvious pleasure at their misery. Despite that, however, not a single one of them dissented – and started to file out without more than a disgruntled comment or two.

“Why are you so happy?” she grumbled as she walked by him.

The smile faded a little from his face at her question, and for some reason Eisa felt bad.

“I’m sorry if it looks that way, I’m just excited to get everything started in here,” Fred said apologetically, before grabbing her arm enthusiastically. “Here, I’ll walk you up to the surface and I can show you what I did!”

Eisa was practically dragged ahead of everybody to be one of the first ones out of the entrance. The sun was just starting to peek out over the treetops, so the transition from the dark tunnel entrance to the outside world wasn’t overly dramatic. What awaited her eyes, on the other hand, was... interesting.

In the distance, she could see some wooden walls that had been constructed toward the northern gate, a small pond of water in between them for some reason. Closer to her, there were large pits dug into the ground, but from her vantage point she couldn’t tell how deep they were or what was in them. And then, above her and the up-thrusting rock of the dungeon entrance, was another large wooden structure that appeared to serve no purpose. When she walked around the side of the entrance, she could see that there was a mirror image of the same things leading to the southern gate.

She didn’t have the opportunity to gape at all the changes that had occurred over the last few hours, because Fred took her by the arm again and started to explain how all the defenses he had made were supposed to work. She had to admit that she was impressed, though she was a little worried that some of their people who didn’t know his exact origins might be a little more suspicious now.

She needn’t have worried, however, because everyone else either took it as just another aspect of his strange ability to build a dungeon or

kept their mouths shut in case Fred decided not to help any more.

“But Fred, I don’t see where *we*—” she asked, pointing to herself and waving her hands at a couple of gathered Core Power Guild members nearby— “are supposed to help out here.”

“Well, you’re not – at least not much. There will be just this area around the entrance that we’ll have teams killing whatever is caught by the ensnaring vines, but the rest will be down in the dungeon.”

“But I thought you mentioned that you don’t have any monsters for your dungeon?” Eisa asked, thoroughly confused.

“Technically, I have a few – but they probably won’t be much help. Besides, I already have my defenders: all of you.”

That shocked her for a moment. “Wait...you want us to be your dungeon’s monsters?”

“I prefer to call them dungeon defenders, but essentially...yes.” Fred smiled again like he had just granted them some sort of privilege.

“But don’t worry, I have a plan to get the new Adventurer townspeople up to fighting shape.”

“How?” Eisa asked, intrigued.

“It’s time to cheat the system,” Fred replied.

Ooh, this should be good.

Chapter 18

It wasn't exactly cheating the system – but it was close. Since Fred didn't necessarily “need” anything from the people going into his dungeon, there was no requirement for them to fight all the way through, facing dangerous defenders and defenses along the way. He had an idea he thought might work to help advance their Essence totals, but first he needed to find out what he was working with.

As soon as the last human left his dungeon – which he checked to make sure was accurate with a quick Territorial scan – Fred left Eisa and the others to continue checking out what he had accomplished defense-wise while he ventured underground. This was something that he hadn't tried to do before, and he didn't necessarily want any witnesses if he was unsuccessful.

“You should be able to create the different defenders you want from the blueprints you have. Just focus the blueprint where you want it and fill it up with the required units of Nature Mana.”

“Thanks, Deecy,” he Communicated back to her. He was a little nervous, because the last time he created something “living”, it was when he inadvertently created Deecy and almost died. Fortunately, he wasn't trying to create something sentient and intelligent; he knew for a fact that the dungeon defenders in every dungeon were essentially mindless applications of mana and weren't really considered “alive”. If there were supposedly millions of dungeons around the world, something as simple as

summoning defenders to help defend the dungeon shouldn't be too complicated.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (All Blueprints)

- Flower Tripper (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Rock Beetle (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)

Looking at his options, there was really only one that had any potential for his plan. While the Rock Beetle might be easy to kill once someone was either able to slice right through its shell or flip it on its back to expose its underbelly, it was too dangerous to the now G-2nd-Rated townspeople who needed to Rate-up – and fast. Therefore, the Flower Tripper was going to be the sacrificial defender for his little experiment.

Although he had seen them before in a few dungeons, the Flower Tripper wasn't a widely used defender. He could definitely understand it, however; from what he had seen, it didn't have any form of attack other than to extend its leaves and petals out to trip unsuspecting victims – and that was it. He supposed that if someone fell badly – or tripped into a deadly pit – then that might be considered attack, but otherwise it didn't really have any type of offense. To dungeon cores who wanted to make their human invaders spend more time and work harder to complete their dungeon, it didn't make sense to use them more than sparingly.

But Fred wasn't like those dungeon cores.

He pictured the blueprint in his mind and stared at a blank spot on the floor; a sort of green wire-frame image emerged in his mind, showing an outline of a flowering plant with long leaves extending out from its

sides. It wasn't fully formed, so he couldn't see any details, but it looked at least similar in shape to those he had seen in various dungeons.

To the right of the wire-frame were the words, "Flower Tripper Level 1" and a big green 2 next to it – which he guessed was the Nature Mana cost. Once he was sure it was where he wanted it, Fred started to feed it the required mana but stopped.

"Deecy, is there any reason why I couldn't put Unconverted Mana into this?"

"You can try it, but I have my doubts it would work."

I might as well, Fred thought. He kept the blueprint in place and fed it 2 units of Unconverted Mana; they floated out from his chest and filled up the wire-frame and...just sat there. It wasn't doing anything on its own, so Fred tried to will it to accept the foreign Mana – but apparently defenders needed the specific Elemental Mana that the blueprint was made for, unlike the rooms and tunnels which seemed universal between the different Factions.

Resigned, he absorbed the UM back into his Human Core and instead fed the Flower Tripper the two Nature Mana it was asking for. The wire-framed form slowly filled in with the mana he fed it, starting at the bottom and working its way up to the top. Roots spread out to either side of the forming Flower Tripper, leading to a thick stalk and long green leaves; on the top of the plant, a blood-red flower bloomed prettily, its petals looking soft and inviting – which he supposed was the whole point.

The whole process took over a minute to complete, which he thought was on the slow side compared to what he had seen his parents do. He remembered that the times when they needed to replace one of their

defenders, it was almost instantaneous: one second there was nothing there and next a defender had almost popped into existence. He was momentarily confused at this disparity, but then he realized that it was because his Novice Defender Skill was still at 1% – though it had bumped up to 2% after he had finished.

Something he didn't think about with plant defenders – they needed soil or dirt to survive. The Flower Tripper he had created stayed upright for all of half a second before falling over, nearly helpless. It didn't die right away, but he watched it wither and shrink for nearly 15 seconds before it “melted” back into the Nature Mana he had pumped the blueprint full of.

That was easily solved, fortunately; he had been working with lots of dirt aboveground building the pits, so it was easy enough to use his Power to Conjure globs of soil and throw it all around the room. A few minutes of tamping it down, and he was good to go.

He summoned another Flower Tripper and watched it form where the other one had just perished; it still took over a minute for it to form, but it almost felt like it was fractionally faster that time. Either way, it was successful – he had created his first defender and it didn't die within seconds.

He walked up to it and looked it over; since he was the “dungeon core”, it didn't attack him, which was a good thing – he didn't want to walk through and have everything try to kill him. Whether or not it would try to attack everyone else that came in, however, was the question he soon needed answered.

“Uh...more info for you.”

“What—”

Congratulations for creating your first Defender!

Defenders are considered to be the primary defensive mechanism that you will employ for the rest of your existence. While your selection of viable blueprints may be limited at the moment due to mana constraints, feel free to experiment with varying defender levels of those that you are able to use. Remember, do not exceed your Mana limits for defender/defense totals; failure to comply to regulatory standards may lead to unpleasant consequences.

Here are some things to consider while placing your defenders:

- *While you cannot control each defender individually, you can give them general commands that they will attempt to follow*
- *Be cautious of adding more than one type of defender per room, as it is possible that their inherent instincts may prompt them to attack each other; if this cannot be avoided, periodic reinforcement of the general command, “Do not attack other defenders”, may be required – especially after respawning occurs; be warned that this command may identify foreign or hostile defenders as those that they should not attack, as it is likely impossible for your defenders to know how to differentiate them*
- *Each defender will automatically attack all humans within its vicinity, unless given general commands not to (this is not recommended)*
- *You may eliminate any of your defenders at ANY TIME by absorbing them, including when humans are present; again,*

this is not recommended, but in some rare cases, this ability might be convenient

- *Once your defenders are in place, you may save your dungeon formation – as well as your rooms, tunnels, and defenses – so that when you locate to a different area in the future you can automatically recreate your specific layout; this also saves the placement of your defenders/defenses so that they are automatically respawned after humans leave the dungeon*
- *One last warning – be sure that the placement of all your defenses are in place before initially opening your dungeon to be invaded by humans; if you are not prepared, you cannot add or subtract anything from the dungeon while they are inside, though you may give orders to those defenders already present*

Fortunately, the information onslaught wasn't as bad as it was before; Fred actually assimilated the knowledge Deecy sent much easier when he wasn't overloaded. The main thing he got from the information was that he could give his new defenders orders to ignore the humans invading the dungeon (even though it was recommended that he shouldn't do that). *Luckily, I don't have to obey their rules.*

He looked closer at the defender he had created and really analyzed it for the first time. His ability to garner additional information came in handy, because it gave him a little more information than whatever the Dungeon Creation Menu gave him.

Flower Tripper (Level 1)

Vitality: 5

Attack: 0 (Tripping attack)

Defense: 1

Respawn: 2 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 2 units

It wasn't a lot of essence, of course, but considering that the Level 1 Flower Tripper was probably the weakest dungeon defender he had ever seen, it made sense. However, despite it not giving a lot of essence, something seemed odd about it.

Fred immediately created a Level 1 Rock Beetle – the only other defender he had available – for comparison. After a little over a minute, the hard-shelled beetle was sitting unnaturally still in the middle of the floor, looking as much like a statue than anything. Without hesitation, he looked closer at it.

Rock Beetle (Level 1)

Vitality: 8

Attack: 5

Defense: 2 (5 on shell and mandibles)

Respawn: 2 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 1 unit

I was right!

For some reason, even though it was clearly weaker both in terms of attack and defense, the Flower Tripper actually gave out twice as much Essence. Excited, Fred used the information given to him by Deecy to absorb the Rock Beetle, and he watched it melt into the floor within

seconds and he was able to gather up the leftover Nature Mana. Once that was done, he pictured the blueprint for the Flower Tripper again, but this time he waited to add mana to it; instead, he imagined it being a little bit bigger and “stronger” and he watched the label on the right-hand side increase to Level 2, along with a very slightly larger wire-frame shape.

It cost an additional Nature Mana – bringing it to a total of three – and he eagerly awaited the results when he infused the proper mana. Fortunately, despite being a little bigger, it didn’t take any longer to create the Level 2 defender. In fact, now that he had summoned a couple of defenders, his Novice Dungeon Creation was up to 4% – cutting the time down needed even more. It was probably still less than a second’s difference, but he knew that time and experience would only make it faster.

Flower Tripper (Level 2)

Vitality: 6

Attack: 0 (Tripping attack)

Defense: 2

Respawn: 3 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 4 units

It was better than he expected – not only had the Essence increased, but it had doubled! Instead of wasting any more time checking every Level to see if the increases continued at the same rate, he used the blueprints to create both a Level 10 and a Level 20 Flower Tripper. Although the 10th Level defender cost 12 Nature Mana (NM) Units, it appeared as though the cost started to increase quite a bit after that: the 20th Level one cost 42 – an average increase of 3 NM Units per level.

And, unbeknownst to him at the start, the higher-Level one took almost three times as long to form as the others. While he waited for the much larger one to finish, he looked at the Level 10 Flower Tripper, which was at least three times as large physically as the original Level 1 defender.

Flower Tripper (Level 10)

Vitality: 15

Attack: 0 (Tripping attack)

Defense: 10

Respawn: 12 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 1024 units

His suspicion was confirmed; it appeared as though the Essence it provided was doubling with every Level it increased. Fred waited with impatience as the larger Level 20 Flower Tripper completed, running through some simplified calculations in his head. He had always wondered why his parents had taught him at least basic math – and now he knew why: a lot went into the construction of a dungeon, what with managing resources and costs.

If what he hoped was true, then the Level 20 Flower Tripper would give out something like 1,000,000 Essence; the creation finally completed...and Fred was highly disappointed with the result.

Flower Tripper (Level 20)

Vitality: 45

Attack: 0 (Tripping attack)

Defense: 40

Respawn: 42 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 2044 units

While the Essence given out by the larger defender (which was substantially larger than anything else he had created, being almost as tall as a human) had definitely increased over the previous incarnation, it wasn't even twice the amount – and it was more than three times the cost. *There must be some sort of limit on the Essence increases after Level 10.* While he was disappointed at the result of his experiment, the Level 10 Flower Tripper was going to work perfectly for his plans.

He was essentially out of Nature Mana at the moment, so while he waited for it to slowly recharge with his Intermediate Mana Conversion skill, Fred concentrated on all of the Flower Trippers he had created – Levels 1, 2, 10, and 20. He attempted to give them a general command of “don't attack any humans”, but he wasn't sure if it worked or not because there was no reaction.

He ran back up the entrance tunnel, spotting Eisa and Metch standing nearby, with a few of the townspeople looking at the defenses and pointing fingers. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but the way they talked animatedly appeared as though they were excited about what they were seeing...or worried – he still occasionally had trouble determining exact social cues.

“Metch, bring those people with you and come down to the dungeon – I need you to try something for me.”

Chapter 19

Eisa was ready for anything as she followed Fred, Metch, and the two former shopkeepers-turned-Adventurers down into the dungeon. She wasn't exactly sure what she was expecting, but it sure wasn't as impressive as what he had done aboveground with the defenses.

“Alright, Metch – I need to see if these Flower Trippers will attack you. Go ahead and walk up to that smallest one right there,” Fred told the D-Rated Guild member.

She watched Metch walk up to the closest – and smallest – of the “Flower Trippers”, which were technically dungeon monsters, though she and most of the other people she had ever grouped with considered them almost like harmless traps. They didn't attack you to hurt you, but only stretched out their leaves or petals to trip you up. As such, they were more of an annoyance than a threat.

And these turned out not to even be an annoyance, as they didn't seem to react to Metch at all, even when he approached the largest one that she had ever seen. It was nearly as tall as he was, though not nearly as wide; despite that, it didn't even twitch as Metch got near and even touched it with his armored glove.

“Excellent! Now, Werne and Glint—” Fred said to the two shopkeepers, whom Eisa realized she didn't even know the names of before all this happened— “here are some weapons—” he continued, pulling two knives out from seemingly nowhere— “and I want you two to attack and kill these Flower Trippers.”

Fred turned to the two Guild members. “Metch and Eisa, stay back and don't engage – I want to see if only these two will get the Essence from

the kills.”

Werne and Glint looked unsure, holding the knives awkwardly in their hands. “Go on, and don’t worry; even if they attack you, the worst these monsters would do would be to trip you, they’re practically harmless,” Eisa tried to assure them.

With a little more confidence, the two townspeople clumsily attacked the smallest flowered monster, hacking it apart in seconds. It was really strange watching them do it, too; she had never seen a dungeon monster not react in any way. Usually, whenever they encountered these tripping monsters (which was rare), it usually tried to trip whoever attacked them; since it was usually the tank that eliminated them, the keyword there was *tried* – she didn’t think anything other than possibly the biggest ones could have any hope of tripping someone like Metch.

Once they were done with the first without any type of reaction, Werne and Glint moved onto the next and the next, dispatching them with ease. However, when they got to the largest one, they barely did any damage due to their low statistics.

“Alright, I think you’re needed here, Metch – otherwise we could be here all day, and that’s not something we can spare. I’m not planning on having any more of these largest ones in here, anyway,” Fred announced as only a few shallow cuts to the stalk of the flower monster were evident after about 30 seconds.

Werne and Glint moved back and Metch walked up, readied his large broadsword, and swung as hard as he could. His single stroke managed to hack three-quarters of the way through the flower, which was more than enough to end it instantly. The four flowers started to melt into the floor just like typical dungeon monsters, while at the same time the Essence mist flowed out of them and drifted around. Within seconds,

however, the “juice” flowed toward everyone in the room, including Eisa and Fred – who hadn’t technically participated in the fight at all.

“Well, I guess that’s the answer – we need to have just the newer townspeople Adventurers down here by themselves. It should be okay, though, because I won’t have that larger one here – the Mana Cost to Essence ratio isn’t worth it for the Level 20 Flower Trippers, anyway.”

Everyone – including Eisa – just looked at Fred in confusion, as most of what he had just said was incomprehensible. Nevertheless, it was obvious that providing Essence to their newest “recruits” was going to be a lot easier than trying to brave a nearby hostile dungeon – especially since they were probably all out to kill them. Of course, killing those easy flower monsters would probably take a while for them to get anywhere—

“Whoa! I’m already G-4th-Rated! That was fast!” Glint excitedly shouted.

What? How is that possible? She couldn’t remember exactly what her Essence count had been before, but when she looked at it now, she estimated that she had received at least 500 Essence, possibly 600. *And that was divided five ways!*

“How—?” Eisa tried to ask, but she was just so surprised that the words wouldn’t come out.

“I’m not quite sure, some special property of these defend—uh, monsters give out a lot more Essence than usual,” Fred answered, somehow knowing exactly what she was thinking. *Is reading minds one of his special abilities, too?* The thought of him knowing what she had been dreaming about lately made her blush and turn away.

“Anyway, everyone out, because I can’t respawn these while there is anyone in the dungeon. While that’s happening, let’s go get everyone

organized over at the DAS building – it's time to assign all the new Adventurers a class."

About time. She was wondering why they hadn't been assigned classes in the first place, but she supposed it originally didn't matter – they were all so low level that they couldn't do anything anyways. Now, though, since almost all of them had gone up a Rating during the battle with the Wasps, they could at least do *something*.

Fred walked confidently out of the dungeon, not even looking back to see if they were following. *In anyone else, I'd call that arrogance; when Fred does that, however, I'd like to think it's confidence and excitement more than anything.* And it was obvious that he was excited; his movements were more animated, the expression on his face was practically joyous, and the eagerness in his voice was so infectious that she couldn't help but be excited as well – despite the threat of death looming over all of them.

And she couldn't love him more.

Stop thinking about him like that! It's his fault that we're in this position! Eisa's feelings about him were still there, unfortunately, regardless of what she tried to do to suppress them. Just watching Fred work as hard as he could to save them all – to try to right the wrong he committed – only reinforced those feelings. It was more than clear to her, and she suspected that it was becoming clear to everyone else, that he genuinely cared about their well-being; the fact that only a few of them knew his real nature was beside the point. He was a powerful, driven, and caring individual, a rarity in the world as she knew it.

But he's not human! This is wrong!

She couldn't deny her feelings for him, but she pushed them down as far as they could go in her heart and her mind, anyway; it would only

complicate matters if she let herself dwell on them. Besides, she wasn't sure if he felt the same way about her – or if he even could. If they managed to live through the next couple of days, she might reevaluate their relationship; for the moment, however, she was content to wait and see.

Metch made an announcement for everyone to gather at the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate building using his strong, baritone voice. Fred hadn't stopped as the large gathering followed after him, crowding into the usually spacious but now-cramped Syndicate branch. Eisa saw him hop behind the counter and pull out the Class Selector, which he had somehow convinced Jaymes to leave behind. She suspected that a lot of gold had exchanged hands, but that was nothing to Fred – who could just conjure it up with a thought.

“Alright, everyone – thank you for coming so quickly. I'm just going to lay it all out here for everybody, so that there is no confusion or misunderstandings. You've all seen the defenses and traps that I've placed inside of Gatecross; however, my guess is that they'll be just a small part of our overall defense. I will be adding more defenses to the inside of the dungeon, but I don't have as many as I would like, nor do I have the 'monsters' to defend it the way I want to in order to protect you all. Since I'm short on what I can use, I'm going to have to rely on all of you to be my 'dungeon defenders',” Fred announced when the crowd had quieted down.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd, followed by a few exclamations of confusion and anger – from both the townspeople and Core Power Guild members. Fred held his hands up for silence, but no one was looking at him. “HEY! LISTEN UP!” bellowed Metch – which had the effect of shutting everyone up at the sudden outburst.

“Thank you, Metch. As I was saying, I need your help to defend my dungeon, but rest assured that I am going to do all I can to protect you all to

the best of my abilities. Many of you have a lot of experience inside dungeons—” Fred continued, looking at various Guild members in the process of his speech— “and our defense of it earlier was evidence that we can be an effective defensive fighting force. My goal is to make us even more effective, by using both the dungeon – and your abilities. Including all of the new Adventurers we have with us.”

“How do you expect us to do anything? We could barely hurt those Wasps from earlier, and they tore us apart – and your Guild said that they weren’t even much of a challenge. If anything stronger comes, we’ll be cut down so quickly we won’t stand a chance,” another townspeople shouted over the again-murmuring crowd, gesturing to his fellow shopkeepers, restaurant workers, and other assorted Gatecross townspeople.

“Ah, yes – that’s where I come in. Tell me, has anyone ever heard of an Instructor?” Fred answered calmly, with a slow smile spreading across his lips.

Eisa had heard of them before, but they were both rare and high-Rated – and expensive. In order for someone to become an Instructor, they had typically spent many, many years building their specific abilities for a class, and then sacrificing their other class to become a Researcher and then an Instructor. Most of them she had heard of were hundreds of years old due to their increased stats, having delved through countless dungeons, and were tired of the same old grind; they “retired” from Adventuring and instead taught their abilities to those who could afford it, living a luxurious life off of that income.

While she was sure Fred could afford their services – with his ability to conjure up gold pieces on a whim – she was quite sure there weren’t any nearby. Eisa didn’t know what he had planned; however, she started to feel the same infectious excitement Fred had been exhibiting.

This should be interesting.

Chapter 20

While everyone had filed into the DAS building, Fred jumped over the counter and pulled out the Class Selector, thumping the heavy apparatus down on the wooden countertop. Before he did anything else, he threw his mind out and saw that his dungeon was automatically replacing the dungeon defenders that had been slain. He stopped the creation of the Levels 1, 2, and 20, instead replacing them with an additional four Level 10s with an application of the few units of Nature Mana that had been converted from his UM. Five Flower Trippers would provide over 5,000 Essence in total; it wasn't a lot, but some was better than nothing. Once he had everything else placed where he wanted it in the dungeon, he was planning on making even more – when his NM count had been refilled.

For now, though, because he didn't know how much time they had before the angry dungeon cores finally attacked en masse, he needed to concentrate on the townspeople. They comprised a little over half of the people inside Gatecross, yet they were thoroughly ineffective in a fight; not only that, but many Guild members had been put in danger to protect them from being killed during the Large Wasp attack. It was time to do something about that.

People were still filing in, so Fred surreptitiously placed his hand on the Class Selector, and he activated it by pushing a few units of Power into a spot on the side. Because he was leaving it with Fred, Jaymes had shown him how it operated – which turned out to be extraordinarily easy.

Class Selector

Select Class: 0 Remaining

Remove Class: Combiner, Researcher

Easy enough, Fred thought. He selected **Remove Class** from the menu, and then selected his **Combiner** class.

Warning! Removing this class will lose all 39,300 Essence placed into the Combine, Vampiric Stunning Fireblast, and Dark Rebounding Spike Shield abilities.

Proceed? Y/N

Overall, he hadn't placed much Essence into the specific Combiner abilities – mainly because most of his available abilities were adapted through the rather-boring three months of delving through dungeon after dungeon, watching others do the work. Adapted Abilities, though, that would come in handy now.

Fred was a little disappointed that he hadn't adapted the two Combiner-developed abilities (as well as the Combine ability itself) he had developed, but he supposed that because it was part of his class, he couldn't do it – just as he couldn't adapt the Experiment ability from the Researcher Class. *There must be some sort of interference there.*

Either way, it was a minor price to pay; the 39,300 Essence he would lose wasn't that much in the long-run. He could see how changing classes caused some problems with most Adventurers who had spent hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of Essence on a class and then decided to change it; they would lose years and years of hard work and have to start over at the beginning with their new class.

He felt a little painful jolt to his mind when he mentally selected **Y**, but it was pleasantly bearable compared to most of the incapacitating

transitions he usually had to go through when dealing with the SDIA in his hand.

Class Selector

Select Class: 1 Remaining

Remove Class: Researcher

He was pretty sure he knew what he was going to select, as he had been thinking about it off and on for the last couple of hours. When he chose the **Select Class** option, he was presented again with the **Combiner** (which he had just gotten rid of), **Alchemist** (which he had no desire to do right now), and finally, **Instructor**.

Instructor

- **Allows for a chance to teach another Adventurer one of your spells or abilities.**
- **Success probability depends on multiple factors, including: Instructor Rating, target Rating, complexity of spell/ability, compatibility with class, and the Mind stat of both parties.**
- **If previous class was a Researcher, all Essence used in the Experiment ability is converted to the new Teach ability.**
- **Once activated, the Teach ability will drain all of the Instructor's Power and the Power of the target, regardless of success**
- **Teach can only be used once per spell/ability per target; if unsuccessful, that spell/ability will be locked from the target, though the Instructor may attempt to Teach another target that same spell/ability.**

- **At the highest level and with sufficiently high enough Instructor Rating, the Teach ability can teach ANY spell or ability the Instructor possesses to ANYONE.**

It was the same as he had seen it before, which was good because it was exactly what he was hoping for. He selected the **Instructor** class option and felt a small wave pass through him – the same as it usually did when he selected a new class. He quickly pulled up his Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface to check out what had changed, glancing at it while he started his speech to everyone crowding inside the DAS building.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface			
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Instructor-Researcher	
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 56395	
Total Essence: 714605	Available Essence to Distribute: 33118		Unconverted Essence: 215120
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 160/160 Power: 5100/5100	
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 25/min	
Class Traits (Instructor)			
Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat			
Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat			
You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)			
Class Traits (Researcher)			
Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat			
Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat			
You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications			
Class Abilities (Instructor)			
Teach 0 – 0/100			
Class Abilities (Researcher)			
Experiment 0 – 0/100			

Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 1 – 0/1000
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 1 – 0/1000	Slamming Shout 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

Changing his class took away some of the extra increases to his Power, but Fred wasn't worried since most of what he did inside of his territory was used with Mana; besides, the loss wasn't too significant – he still had over 5,000 Power when it came down to it.

Teach was the ability he was looking for, which he pulled up during an interruption in his speech where he held up his hands for silence. At first it was strange trying to juggle multiple things at once, but something in his inherent nature must've made it easier – and didn't break his mind. *I suppose that's the important part.*

He spent 100 Essence to unlock the ability to teach and looked at it closer to see if he needed to raise it even further to suit his purposes.

Teach 1 – 0/1000

The Teach ability attempts to teach another target person one of the Instructor's spells or abilities; success is dependent upon Instructor Rating, target Rating, complexity of spell/ability, compatibility with class, and the Mind stat of both parties. If the Teach ability fails, the target can no longer learn that specific spell/ability from the Instructor. Regardless of success/failure, both the Instructor and the target will have all of their Power drained.

Cost of using Teach 1: All Power for both subjects

Maximum chance of success using Teach 1: 50%

Minimum chance of success using Teach 1: 1%

Sounds straightforward enough, he thought. However, he was worried about the success rate; according to what it said, he only had a 50% chance to teach someone – and he figured that was the best-case scenario. He had some spare Essence, so he slowly transferred the required amounts into the Teach ability, watching the maximum and minimum success rates steadily increase until he saw what he wanted to see.

He reflexively answered the question from the crowd concerning what good the townspeople could do against the coming horde of monsters. “Ah, yes – that’s where I come in. Tell me, has anyone ever heard of an Instructor?”

He felt himself slowly smile at the results of spending 13,100 Essence to increase his Teach ability – *this might actually work*.

Teach 4 – 0/27000

Cost of using Teach 4: All Power for both subjects

Maximum chance of success using Teach 4: 80%

Minimum chance of success using Teach 4: 4%

It wasn’t a guaranteed success, but hopefully it would be enough.

Fred put away everything he was looking at, concentrating fully on his audience for the first time – and got a little nervous at all the people staring at him in confusion. He figured it was time to put them at ease and explain his plan to them all.

“Ok...so this is what we’re going to do. My class is now an Instructor – and before you ask, it’s a class that allows me to teach anyone one of my spells or abilities, though success is dependent upon multiple factors. My plan is to have all of the townspeople of Gatecross learn a

basic fire-based spell that they can cast from afar; there isn't enough time to build everyone up to the point where they can go toe-to-toe with the enemy. We have many in the Guild for that."

Everyone began talking all at once, asking a myriad of questions that he didn't have time to answer. "Shut it!" Metch shouted once again, silencing most of those in attendance.

"After the townspeople all receive a spell of some kind, I want them to practice on the Flower Trippers I have set up on the first floor of the dungeon. There will have to be a rotation set up so that everyone gets a chance – Metch, can you handle that, please?"

"Yes, Guild Leader," the D-Rated Sentinel responded with vigor.

"Good. While they're training, I want everyone else to start shoring up the gaps in between the buildings, closing off access to ways around the defenses outside," Fred ordered. "And while you're doing that, I'll be inside the dungeon making it just a little more deadly for our upcoming visitors," he added.

Now that there was a plan in place – if an unorthodox one – the murmuring was kept to a minimum. He beckoned to the first townspeople he saw, which just so happened to be Werne, the one who had just gained some Essence from inside his dungeon.

"Shall we begin?"

Chapter 21

Fortunately, the **Teach** ability (just like the Experiment and Combiner abilities) didn't make him flail around blindly, trusting that he *might* be able to teach someone; it had a convenient system that let him know his chance of success beforehand.

When Werne walked up to the counter nervously, Fred targeted him with his new ability and focused on teaching the Fireblast ability to him, he received an indication of what the results would be – as well as what he could do to improve his chance of success.

E-6th-Rated Instructor --> Fireblast --> G-4th-Rated (No Class Selected)

Maximum Chance of Success: 80%

Target Rating Too Low for Higher-Rated Spell: -35%

Low Mind Stat: -15%

(No Class Selected) Incompatible with Spell: -15%

Resulting Chance of Success: 15%

What he learned from that was three things: one, he needed to choose a less-powerful fire-based spell because Fireblast was an Elementalist spell, which you needed to be at least E-Rated to gain it “naturally”; two, looking at Werne's Mind stat – which was at 1 – it was much too low to have the Power to perform the spell even if he were to learn it; and three, he needed to assign a class first.

But which one?

The obvious answer was Mage, but from what he understood from looking at nearly 30 Mage or Mage-based classes, only the available Power

they had was increased by their Mind stat. The Researcher class, on the other hand, increased the Power *and* Power Regen – which could make all the difference for those that didn't have a lot of Power in the first place.

Fortunately, he had a Class Selector at hand so he could see which one would work the best for the Teaching ability. *I wonder if the “taught” abilities will stay in place even if they change their class.* It was something he could test really quick with the help of Werne.

“Ok, Werne – I need you to do a couple of things for me. First, do you remember how to pull up your Interface?” Fred asked. Werne nodded and he supposedly did so, staring a little vacantly into space. “Good. Now, add 310 of your available Essence to your Mind stat, bringing it to 6. When you have that done, place your hand on the Class Selector here, and when it asks you to pick a class, find and select Mage and accept your choice.”

Because of Fred's ability to see other humans' Interfaces, he could see that Werne had done what he had asked. His class was now Mage and had a Mind stat of 6, with a respectable total Power of 180 and a not-so-respectable Power Regen Rate of .5/min – a third of what Fred calculated it would be if he was a Researcher. *He's as ready as he can be.*

Instead of Fireblast, Fred chose Flamestrike to teach to Werne – a G-Rated Mage ability that was fire-based, though it didn't quite pack as much oomph as the other spell. It was more of a small thrown ball of fire, instead of a targeted blast – but he had to work with what he had.

E-6th-Rated Instructor --> Flamestrike --> G-4th-Rated (Mage)

Maximum Chance of Success: 80%

Low Mind Stat: -10%

Resulting Chance of Success: 70%

A much better result.

The low Mind stat was still a penalty, but not as much as before. *I suppose it might be relative both to the type of spell/ability being taught and our comparable Mind stats combined.* With the Chance of Success being at 70%, Fred didn't think there was more that could be done to improve it; therefore, he went ahead and confirmed the Teach ability.

Congratulations!

You have Taught target G-4th-Rated (Mage) the Flamestrike ability!

Fred barely caught himself on the edge of the counter as all of his Power rushed out of his body, a side-effect of the Teach ability. He'd never had that much just...disappear...all at once, and it was unsettling. Fortunately, his Power Regen kicked in and he could feel a little bit start to trickle back in.

Werne staggered a little as well, though the impact was a little less on his body because he didn't have as much Power in the first place. As soon as the G-Rated Mage recovered, however, he smiled as he learned the results of Fred's efforts.

"I can now use Flamestrike!" Werne exclaimed, to the amazement of everyone else in the room.

Even though Flamestrike was a Mage ability, the class didn't receive it until later G-Ratings; it was slightly different for every Adventurer, but normally it was "unlocked" around the G-8th to the G-10th – which meant that as a G-4th-Rated Mage, Werne shouldn't have it right now. The only abilities that he should have access to currently, were a simple element-less Magestrike spell (which did a minimum amount of damage at a distance),

as well as a low-cost, low-defense Barrier spell that temporarily protected the Mage from weak physical attacks.

Fred looked at Werne's Interface and saw that, indeed, the former shopkeeper now had those spells to choose from under his Mage Class Abilities.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Werne Frenkle		Class: Mage
Rating: G-4 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 783
Total Essence: 717		Available Essence to Distribute: 407
Body: 1 (0/10) Brawn: 1 (0/10) Mind: 6 (0/320)		Vitality: 5/5 Stamina: 5/5 Power: 1/180
Base Physical Attack: 1 Base Physical Defense: 1		Power Regen Rate: .5/min
Class Traits (Mage)		
<i>Your available Power is marginally increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You are now able to perform Mage-based Spells and Abilities</i>		
<i>You now take less damage from magical sources (2%)</i>		
Class Abilities (Mage)		
Magestrike 0 – 0/100	Barrier 0 – 0/100	
Taught Abilities		
Flamestrike 0 – 0/100		

But Werne also had Flamestrike under a new category, “Taught Abilities”, similar to Fred’s own “Adapted Abilities”. If it worked the same way, then it wouldn’t matter what class the new Adventurer was – he’d still have access to the ability. Now it was time to find out.

“Excellent! Now, Werne, can you place your hand back on the Class Selector here?” Fred asked. Werne looked confused but did as he was asked; Fred looked around and saw the same incomprehension on everyone else’s face.

“Right now, Werne has a lot of Power due to his Mage class, but almost no Power Regen. With his 180 Power, it would take him nearly 6 hours to fully restore it – which just won’t do as far as helping with the upcoming fight for our lives. Therefore, I need him to have both more Power and Regen, making him better able to maintain his defense without having to wait to be effective,” Fred explained to the assembled crowd, before turning back to Werne.

“Ok, now, can you select Remove Class, select Mage as the one to remove, and then choose Researcher as your new class?”

Shrugging, the former shopkeeper did as he asked and a quick shock to Werne’s body was the only indication that he was successful. Fred looked again at the new Researcher’s Interface and saw what he hoped for: more Power, Power Regen, and the “Taught” Flamestrike ability was still available.

“Very nice! Werne now has 300 Power, a 2-Power-per-minute Regen, and he still has access to the Flamestrike spell. He didn’t lose anything for changing his class, and he can change it to anything he wants to in the future without penalty – because he isn’t going to put any of his Essence into the Researcher class.”

The room was silent as they all absorbed what had just happened with varying degrees of comprehension. To the veteran Adventurers, what Fred had just done was nothing short of miraculous and their shocked and thoughtful expressions showed their wonder; the townspeople of Gatecross, on the other hand, looked either excited or apprehensive depending upon their personality.

“Uh...how did you know so much about Werne’s stats? Did Jaymes leave one of the Syndicate’s Interface Analyzers?” Rasper hesitantly asked.

Oh. He forgot for a moment that not everyone could see others' Interfaces, and he slipped up and revealed that he could. He didn't lie to them all, however, and pretend like he really did have an...Interface Analyzer?...because he was already stretching the truth with them as it was.

"It's...another ability I picked up when I absorbed that dungeon core. I can view anyone's Interface in much the same as I can my own, but I can't interact with them," Fred admitted. "I wish it was something I could Teach, but just like my ability to build a dungeon, it isn't something I can pass on to someone else."

They all seemed to accept that convenient explanation, fortunately, and Fred didn't feel too bad about deceiving them – it was fairly close to the truth, anyway. Before Werne moved out of the way to make room for the eager townspeople who were now rushing forward to take advantage of the Teach ability, Fred told the former shopkeeper to invest 100 Essence into the Flamestrike spell to gain access to it – and then to see Metch for a dungeon rotation schedule.

Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000

When used, the Flamestrike spell will send a small orb of burning flame toward a target, originating at the caster's location, and deals fire-based damage. Flamestrike also has a small chance to initiate a burning effect, causing a small amount of damage over a short period of time.

Power cost of Flamestrike: 5

Fire damage: 5

Burning effect chance: 10%

Burning effect fire damage: 1/second

Burning effect duration: 3 seconds

Range: 20 feet

Although his Teach ability drained his Power every time that he used it, it had no requirement that it be *full*. Therefore, Fred was able to spend the next hour Teaching all the new Adventurers the Flamestrike spell, watching his Power regen a little and then dropping back down to 0. It wasn't as bad as losing over 5,000 Power all at once, fortunately, so he barely noticed it after a while.

Most of the townspeople that needed his help hadn't had the extra Essence that Werne and Glint had received after his brief experiment in the dungeon, so they weren't able to increase their Mind stat past 4; as a result, the chance of successfully Teaching the Flamestrike ability dropped by 5% to 65%. While most still succeeded despite the lower probability of success, there were still 41 out of 173 that approached him that failed to learn the spell. It was much less than he was expecting because of the failure rate, and he considered himself lucky that so many had succeeded.

For those that were unfortunate enough to fail, Fred instead Taught 32 of those 41 the basic Magestrike spell, which did a little less damage than the fire-based spell everyone else had, but it was at least something that they could use to damage from afar. If they decided to pursue a Mage class in the future, they could always learn the Flamestrike ability through the class, so it wasn't a huge loss.

For the last nine that failed to learn even the Magestrike spell, he somehow managed to Teach all but one of them a very basic Heal Minor Wounds Healer-based ability, one of the few that he had adapted that could heal – and required very little in the “Mind stat” category, so the probability of success was 80%. It only healed 2 points of Vitality and it required them to be within two feet of their target, but they would be an emergency healing force in case the other Healer classes were overwhelmed.

For the last unlucky townswoman that failed to be Taught all three abilities, he instead asked and found that Ryven was no stranger to using a bow to hunt in the past. She informed Fred that she had learned how to shoot when she was a youth, helping her family hunt deer in a relatively quiet stretch of forest near her hometown – though, the seamstress that had worked at the Tailors Shop admitted she hadn't fired a bow in years.

He Conjured up a bow and some arrows for her when his Power regenerated a little bit, however, and asked her to change her class to Scout. When she did so, Fred took a chance and tried to Teach her Spike Arrows – which was a Ranger-based, minimum E-Rated ability that increased the damage of a fired arrow considerably. The chance of success was only 35% and he held his breath at the attempt...and it miraculously worked! *The odds actually worked in her favor on that one.*

She didn't have enough Stamina to use it more than once, of course, but once she worked into the Essence-gathering schedule in the dungeon she would quickly be able to increase her Brawn – which would increase her Stamina stat and, consequently, allow her to utilize it more.

When he was all done with Gatecross' townspeople, he was left looking at the confused and, strangely, hungry stares of the rest of the Core Power Guild.

“What?” he asked, himself confused at their expressions.

Eisa spoke up first. “Where...how did you learn all of those abilities?”

Fred chuckled as he finally figured out why they were all looking like that – they didn't want to be left out. With *most* of his secrets out in the open now, he figured it wouldn't hurt to tell everyone a little more.

He quickly told the stunned crowd about his ability to “see” how everyone outwardly manipulated their Power to perform their spells and

abilities and could “adapt” that information so that he could do it himself. And he also told them that his journeys through countless dungeons over the last three months weren’t just for Essence – but so he could see the different abilities in action, thereby copying them for his own use.

“And you can ‘see’ *any* ability or spell? And can teach them to anyone?” Eisa asked, just moments before the room erupted in chaos at his revelation.

Fred hesitated for a moment before answering, because it wasn’t quite that simple – and because no one would hear him over the commotion. Metch – who had been so good at calming everyone down with his powerful voice – had left earlier to get the new Adventurers started on their rotation. It took only a moment of Fred’s time to explain that it took about a minute for the Flower Trippers to respawn – and that it couldn’t be done if there was anyone inside. From there, it was easy to put everyone on a simple two-minute schedule with five-person groups; they would go in and have one minute to kill the Flower monsters and leave, and then they would wait another minute before sending in another group.

He waited until the room calmed down before he shouted out his answer to Eisa’s question. “I can’t ‘see’ every spell and ability – only those that are used outside of the body. Your physical shell masks what you do with your Power inside, so I can’t ‘see’ it. And the chances of success of my Teaching is dependent upon multiple factors, so even if I knew really powerful abilities, it’s unlikely that I would be able to Teach them to anyone.”

That calmed their excitement down a little, but Fred didn’t have any more time to waste. “If...no, *when* we survive the coming dungeon cores’ retribution, I will get with all of you to see what I can Teach you. Now, I need to get going – I’ve got a dungeon to finish.”

Chapter 22

Fred walked by another group of new Adventurer-townspeople left his dungeon, bored smiles on their faces as they had easily destroyed the Flower Trippers waiting for them with a quick Flamestrike spell each, before walking out again. They had been doing that for nearly six hours now, so it wasn't surprising that they were bored – but they were still happy at their progress. Deecy had been bored as well, and she was now sleeping in the last dungeon room after Fred was done with it – so he was planning on seeing her soon.

Rearranging the rooms in his dungeon was a little difficult at first, since he could only do so much in the minute when his defenders were respawning and there were no humans inside. Fred, of course, didn't count toward that limitation, but he had elected to sit down in the middle of town with his eyes closed, using his Territorial Sight and awareness of his dungeon to make changes from there. He wanted to both stay out of the way and be near when the inevitable attack came, so he thought it was the best of both worlds. That, and he didn't want to steal away a portion of the Essence that was going toward the development of the townspeople.

The small amounts of ambient mana – that the townspeople-turned-Adventurers gave off inside his dungeon – had fueled most of the changes he made to the rest of it. The constant conversion of human ambient mana into Unconverted Mana, along with the liberal use of his different Mana types, had done crazy things toward his skill improvements. For instance, with his Intermediate Mana Conversion now at 60%, he was changing that UM into one of his Elemental Mana choices at the rate of about one per minute. Not only that, but his Absorption skill was at 65% from the

constant absorption of his dungeon defenders, which made that process smoother.

He didn't have time to dig deeper into that, however, because now it was time for him to get a first-hand view of his dungeon – and to use his regenerated Power to create a few key items inside.

He walked past the respawning Flower Trippers in the first room, noticing that they were being re-created faster than they had at first, due almost entirely to the fact that his Novice Defender Creation was now at 87% – a massive improvement from less than half a day ago. It now only took about 30 seconds for one of his Level 10 defenders to reappear; even though they came back faster now, he still had the townspeople use the same schedule. He needed as much time in between their visits as he could for his changes to take place, and the regularity afforded by the previous schedule worked well enough that he didn't want to change it now.

The first thing that he had done before starting, was to remove almost every room and tunnel that he had panicked and constructed when the Large Wasps attacked. By absorbing his upkeep in the rooms, some attribute of the entire dungeon construction/deconstruction process automatically filled it back in with the same dirt and stone that was removed initially. He didn't receive any of the initial Unconverted Mana spent on it, however, but at least he now had a “blank slate”, so to say.

Passing through the tunnel leading into the first real “room” (he didn't count the first room with the Flower Trippers because it wasn't necessarily part of the defense), he saw that it was exactly as he had pictured it in his Sight. It was the only room that he had kept during his deconstruction of the rest of the dungeon, but it had expanded significantly since they had used it to contain the swarms of Wasps that had attacked earlier.

Whereas it was about 30 feet wide on each side before, it was now nearly three times the size – though the height of the room was even larger. A narrow, zig-zagging pathway led across the room, a bridge that was held suspended and strengthened by the upkeep he was forced to contribute toward its creation. It was only about 10 feet thick, but it was strong enough to hold even the hordes of rampaging monsters he was expecting to attack soon; which was fine, because it wasn't meant to collapse.

No, it was only there as a means with which to add more Flower Trippers.

Although they weren't necessarily the strongest of defenders, what they actually did, they did well – tripping. Which was important, because the zig-zagging bridge was suspended over a large pool of water, reaching down almost 80 feet deep all by itself. Fred had discovered, almost by accident (as he was playing with his water traps outside while waiting for the townspeople to finish inside the dungeon), that with an initial application of Water Mana to the pool, he could cause the water to rotate quickly around a central point. Anything that fell inside would be violently thrown against the walls, smashing them to pieces within seconds (or minutes if it was a particularly sturdy dungeon defender). It didn't last forever, but from a small experiment he found that only 10 Units of Water Mana was enough to last for up to a day's worth of the violent vortex.

For this room, he needed to add a layer of dirt to the bridge so that he could add in Flower Trippers. He didn't need them to be Level 10 necessarily, but he did make them Level 5; by reducing their Levels, he was able to essentially add twice as many. While he was building the dungeon aboveground, he had been adding Nature Mana to various places that were going to need it later, reducing his available Mana and ensuring that it got refilled. After using his Adventurer Power to Conjure a dirt layer five

inches thick all over the bridge, he used the Nature Mana he had stuck on the bridge earlier to create 20 of the Flower Trippers, spread out evenly over the entire structure.

His thought was that they would trip and knock off many of the invading monsters into the churning water, killing them with the violent force of the whirlpool below. At least, he hoped so; it was entirely possible that they would destroy his Flowers before they could harm a single invader. Either way, the bridge was narrow enough for a human to walk down it without too much difficulty, but if there happened to be anything wider coming their way, they would have trouble staying on.

With that complete, Fred carefully walked over the Flower Trippers in his way over the bridge, making a mental note to warn everyone to take the pathway carefully later and not to rush. It shouldn't be too dangerous for them if they took their time, but if they tried to navigate their way over it in a panic it could go very badly, indeed.

He made it to the end without incident, absently noting that another few groups of the new Adventurers had come and gone while he was still in the bridge room. He couldn't help but be amazed at how quickly they had progressed; each group of five that went in and gathered Essence had done it just under 40 times, netting them almost 37,000 Essence – which brought them to the G-9th Rating. Of course, most of what they had gained was placed into both their Mind stat and improving their ability they received from Fred; a few points in their Body and Brawn stats were also included to make them a little more resilient, but if they ended up needing to wade into the fight, they were already in trouble.

With most of them with a Mind stat of 12, 1,200 Power with an 8/per minute Regen, and with their Flamestrike (or one of the few others)

ability at Level 4, they were now strong enough to do a bit of damage, and keep doing so for a while, as well.

Flamestrike 4 – 0/27000

Power cost of Flamestrike: 15

Fire damage: 25

Burning effect chance: 40%

Burning effect fire damage: 4/second

Burning effect duration: 5 seconds

Range: 30 feet

They definitely weren't useless in a fight anymore, that was for sure. While they were going to work perfectly for the design of his dungeon, they wouldn't do as much good delving with another group of Adventurers in another one – they needed a better class and more abilities than just a fire-based spell. However, that was what they had to work with at the moment, so it was perfectly fine for now.

The second tunnel he found himself in formed a T-junction, with one pathway leading to the left, and another, smaller one, leading straight ahead. The smaller one was set up so that the humans could pass through, dropping a large block of stone (which he spent some more of his Power Conjuring into existence, along with two wooden pillars that could be easily smashed apart) after they passed by, sealing the passageway behind them. It led to another room that was prepared specifically for their defense, and it also let them avoid two other rooms designed to kill whatever invaded the dungeon.

After the stone block was in place, Fred took the left passage and shortly arrived at another room. This one was relatively small compared to

the bridge room, but it was that way on purpose; it was only 20 feet on each side, which held a good quantity of Mana – both Fire and Nature. He instantly turned the Nature Mana into scraps of wood, and let it pile up on top of each other haphazardly around the room, until there was very little floorspace that wasn't at least near some wood.

The Fire Mana he directed to disperse through the room, lying on or underneath the wooden scraps – and all just waiting for him to give the word to ignite. With the available consumable source in the wood nearby, the flames in the room should last a while and would create an enclosed space that would act like a wood stove; he was hoping to cook whatever made it past his bridge and deadly whirlpool. In the ceiling, he created numerous small holes that would allow the smoke created from the burning wood to escape; if he wasn't using wood, he wouldn't necessarily need to do that because Mana-fed fires didn't create smoke, but since he wanted the fires to last longer, he needed the wood in the room.

Fred carefully stepped over the wooden scraps and made it to the other side of the room, where a tunnel led about 10 feet ahead and then turned abruptly to the right. He followed it to the end, where it emptied out in another room similarly sized as the last. In this room, he had already set up staggered lines of Ensnaring Vine defenses, which were primarily there to target flying creatures who had managed to survive the defenses outside the dungeon and in the previous rooms.

Although the traps wouldn't necessarily kill the flying creatures, he was hoping that they would do enough damage to their wings by wrapping tightly around them. And then, when they couldn't fly adequately anymore, the vines would drop their victims onto the six Small Thorn Traps underneath, where they would be impaled on the sharp thorns at the bottom of six staggered pits. With enough care, any ground-based monsters could

bypass them, but the Ensnaring Vines also reached down far enough to grab them if they didn't have to contend with flyers.

Fred carefully made his way through the pits, emerging unscathed to the end of the small room and entered the tunnel there. There were two more rooms that he wanted to look at, though there was only one that needed his attention. The first room was where the primary Adventurer defenders would stay, with the last room just past it as the last-ditch fallback position. Fred quickly rushed to the spot where he needed to use his Power to Conjure another stone gate, because for some reason he was feeling anxious. As soon as he finished, he knew why he was starting to get a little antsy.

The attack that they were expecting – and dreading – had arrived.

Part IV – Retribution

Chapter 23

Gaelystromico was highly annoyed. And not a little bit frightened.

Not only had Harlingwarth's "friends" made a giant mess of their attack on the human settlement, but they were now asking to be reimbursed for the Mana they had spent to create the ridiculously ineffective army of Large Wasps. Why they had decided to use only that one dungeon defender, Gael didn't know, but they had done so poorly that it was almost a joke.

Most of Harl's friends were F-Rated, so it didn't surprise Gael that they were inexperienced, but they should have known that *quality* was much preferable to *quantity* – at least when it came to the assault on the humans who regularly invaded their dungeons. He had personally seen some of his lower-leveled defenders barely scratch some of the humans, as opposed to the devastating damage his stronger ones could inflict. Even being relatively young and inexperienced, the cores who had botched their attack should've know better.

However, Avenlyrica was doing her best to keep to the 24-hour deadline he had given her to ensure everyone else was going all-in on the next attack. As much as the unsuccessful attack had been such an abject failure, it actually had the benefit of stirring up the other cores. Seeing the humans completely decimating the relatively small army they had sent riled them up; not only were they prepared to contribute, but now many of them were angry and wanted to take that anger out on the humans.

As long as they did what he and Aven wanted, Gael didn't care what motivated them.

After using his position to personally interrogate each of Harl's friends after the sorely disappointing battle, Gael was able to get a fairly good picture of what the humans had going for them defensively. While he himself couldn't see the battle because he wasn't a part of it, each of those cores who had contributed to the Large Wasp army had been watching raptly, hoping to exact the vengeance they so craved.

The humans had fortified their settlement with wooden and stone walls, leaving two weak entry points to the north and south. Even though the Wasps hadn't needed to worry about them because they could just fly over, they would be the best place for their new, larger, stronger, and more-deadly army to attack and breach their defenses.

From there – and this was what both confused and worried Gael – the humans had retreated to the center of the settlement and went underground, where they had dug out some space where they were able to easily hold off the advancing Wasps, slaughtering them with ease. For some reason, Harl's friends didn't call the remaining ones back when they saw that they weren't making any headway; at their Core Structure Level and average Mana Communication skill, they should've had the ability to at least tell them to retreat, if not give them specific commands. Even Gael couldn't quite do *that* yet – such fine control was usually only available to Supreme-level cores.

Ignoring their stupidity regarding pulling back their army when continuing to attack would be futile, the other information they all seemed to agree on was disturbing. The underground rooms and tunnels that the humans had retreated down looked exactly like a dungeon.

And not just similar, but like some brand-new dungeon had decided to try its best to make a dungeon but hadn't really had any time or skill at doing it.

Then there was something that was potentially worse than that. When Gael used his Territory Sight to check over the human settlement to see if anything had changed, he was shocked and confused to see not just a small Nature territory, but a Water and Fire territory as well. Together. And overlapping – except it was more like they were meshed together.

He had been so amazed and confused at the development that he literally stared at it for about an hour, before getting another shock when the territory expanded before his senses so far out that it was bumping right up against the closest Nature Core's territories. He had never seen or heard about anything like that before, so in a panic he had reached out to the Regional Leader, Mephistocle, again.

“While that is indeed worrisome, we have bigger problems we need to worry about right now. I told you to take care of the problem, SO TAKE CARE OF IT!”

The fact that even this information didn't change the Regional Leader's opinion on the matter spoke volumes. *Am I going to be called on to provide Mana soon?* From a couple of other sources, he heard that their border war wasn't going too badly, but maybe his contacts didn't really know the big picture. Gael was more inclined to believe that the gruff manner he and his problems had been dismissed was more telling. *Things aren't looking good.*

There were a few Earth Cores nearby Aven's Area, but when Gael had initially asked about applying to them for “Alliance” help, he was shut down quickly. He wasn't to contact them in any way for help; in fact, he wasn't supposed to tell them about the issue they were having at all. *“It's Faction-only information,”* was what he had been told in no uncertain

terms. He knew that the Nature/Earth/Water Alliance wasn't that strong in their part of the world, so it was likely that if the local Earth Cores got wind of their troubles, they might pull what little support they were already providing elsewhere.

All of that meant that Aven and her Area were on their own to "take care" of the problem. While everyone in her Area were still assembling their armies in preparation of the retributive attack, Gael spent some time trying to figure out how there could possibly be a *territory* in the middle of the human settlement.

Since there was technically part of a Nature Core inside, he tried to Communicate with whatever was there – but he got no response. Either it was ignoring him, or it didn't have the Mana Communication skill to respond (which he thought unlikely, because all cores were at least at the Expert level in the skill before they ever left their parents).

Next, Gael thought Harl might somehow still be alive and was working with two other cores to fight back against the humans, but he dismissed that almost immediately. There was no way any Nature Core would work with a Fire Core on anything, even to prevent their death; added to that, the presence of a Water Core firmed up that dismissal – the Water Faction hated the Fire Faction even more than Nature.

With no other explanation that he could think of, the only other possibility was something that he had trouble even considering. It was so horrible, so dreadful, that even *thinking* it was true, made his crystallized core shiver and shake in his Core Room a little.

The humans have somehow learned how to capture and control dungeon cores, bending them to their will.

He tried to banish the thought, but over the next few hours it kept coming back to his mind. Each time it surfaced, it was stronger and more

forceful – and its arrival brought with it numerous logical reasons why it might be true.

How else would there be three different, opposing cores in one place able to make a territory on top of each other? Why else would it be in the middle of a human settlement, where even our enemies know that it is anathema to claim territory over it? It also must be why they chose this Area: it's far away from the main concentration of Nature Cores and they somehow know that we don't have the proper resources to fully commit to full-scale retribution. I bet this was just an experimental technique they are employing, and they don't care if this human settlement gets wiped out; it will be enough that they know it works. And now that they know it works, will the humans start targeting other cores near...me?

Gael knew better than to bring those concerns to Mephistocle again, so he kept it to himself for now. He knew better than to spread his theories around, causing a panic throughout their Region right when everyone needed to stay strong. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't start to get paranoid looking closely at every group of humans entering his dungeon. *Are they here to steal my core? How can I tell if they are or not? By the time they get close enough to be a danger, there's not much I can do at that point – what do I do? **What do I do?***

He spent the hours leading up to the deadline locked in his dungeon, paranoid thoughts running through his mind non-stop. No longer was he looking forward to seeing how the humans reacted to subtle changes he made in the layout; he was more intent on seeing if they were showing any signs of duplicity.

Gael wasn't sure how long Aven had been trying to reach him, but he assumed it had been a while by how frustrated she sounded when he finally answered.

“Gaelystromico! What took you so long? We’re ready to go here – I’m just waiting on your go ahead.”

“Fine, fine – you have my permission to advance. Good luck and may you bring glorious retribution on the filthy humans!” he responded, trying to muster up enough enthusiasm. Which was hard, because he honestly didn’t care anymore about the human settlement with the strange multi-Faction territory. In his mind, the damage had already been done and there was no fixing it – even with some much-deserved retribution upon the humans.

However, despite not caring overly much whether they succeeded, he took some time when his dungeon was empty of invaders to check on Aven’s new army. He hadn’t been a part of assembling such a massive host of dungeon defenders before, so it was with some curiosity that he at least observed their departure.

He was surprised at how many defenders there were, descending on the human settlement in their thousands from all directions. And they weren’t all Large Wasps either; no, this army was much more diverse, much higher-leveled, and infused with enough Mana to almost shine to his Territorial and Mana Sight. *If this doesn’t kill them all, it’ll take some intervention from higher-Rated cores to do it – which won’t happen anytime soon.*

He could tell based upon how much Mana must’ve been spent that this army was a one-shot deal – and so Gael rooted them on. Even Aven, who had been hoarding her reserve for years so that she could stay as the Area’s leader, had included a surprising – if mana-expensive – addition.

However, most of the Cores in her Area would probably be severely drained for the next fifty years...or perhaps the next century or so.

Not that he cared anymore about of it, of course.

Chapter 24

Fred rushed out from the room he was in, making his way through the collapsible shortcut leading toward the bridge/whirlpool room. He mentally Communicated with Deecy to stay where she was until he came back; he wasn't planning on being long and there was no point in her risking herself for no reason. After that, he sent his focus out aboveground, igniting the Fire Mana inside the wooden walls and pits – and the stone around the two large pools of water. That was the arranged signal to alert everyone that the enemy was incoming, and to prepare. Fortunately, no one was near any of the wood he just lit on fire, so no one was hurt from the sudden conflagration.

When that was done, he was already in the bridge room working his way to the exit. Fred activated the Fire Mana in the room with the wood scraps and started the whirlpool below him with the Water Mana already ready and waiting for him. Lastly, he absorbed the Flower Trippers inside the first room, wanting the extra Nature Mana available – just in case.

Fred had taken the opportunity earlier to quickly brief Eisa and Metch on the various defenses he had set up throughout his dungeon; they had spread the word for him to the other Core Power Guild members and townspeople on what to expect, how to take advantage of what he had designed for them, and what to do once the attack started. He left most of those decisions to them, as they had better ideas on how to arrange things so that there wasn't mass confusion. He was just glad that they had done it; if he or they had waited to plan it all out, it would've been pure chaos.

He finished prepping the dungeon just in time, too, as the first people started to file into his dungeon; Fred navigated through the zig-

zagging bridge and arrived at the tunnel just as the first of the townspeople filtered through. They all had a brief rundown of what they would be seeing farther into the dungeon, so that they wouldn't be surprised – but they were still shocked and froze at the sight of the churning whirlpool of death below the bridge.

“Get moving! We've got to get everyone into the first defense room. MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!” he shouted at the few frozen people staring down in fright, holding up the influx of those running inside. At his shout, they finally started moving, though at a slower pace than he liked; still, they were moving – it was better than them standing around.

I've got to get up there and help hold off the invading monsters until we can get everyone inside!

Fred pushed through the crowd, squeezing through the packed humans as he tried to get to the entrance. The 30 seconds it took him to get through and to the tunnel leading upwards meant that the outside gates were already being assaulted – and from what he could tell when he briefly glanced at them using his Territory Sight, they wouldn't last long.

He emerged into the bright sunlight so see that there were still nearly 200 people outside that needed to quickly enter his dungeon. Fortunately, most of the townspeople were already inside, so those that were left were mostly comprised of his Core Power Guild members.

“Fred, there you are – can you tell what we're up against?” Eisa was by his side as soon as he appeared.

“Yes, at least for what is already in my territory – but I don't see an end to them yet. We need to hold back the onslaught until everyone is inside; Metch, organize the teams that were originally going to hold the entrance so that they are a little more spread out. Five minutes is all we need to ensure everyone else's safety.”

Metch, who was nearby ushering people inside the dungeon as quickly as he could, nodded at the instructions and broke off, shouting for specific Guild members to follow him. They broke off in disciplined groups; the time they had spent waiting for the townspeople to accumulate Essence obviously wasn't wasted.

Loud banging could be heard from both gates, followed quickly by the sounds of splintering wood. Before Fred could answer Eisa's question about what was coming for them, the northern gate – followed soon after by the southern one – was destroyed as heavy blows bent and warped the metal bar holding them closed.

As the gates burst open, the reason they were broken open so quickly was obvious to all of those watching.

Juvenile Treant (Level 8)

Vitality: 450

Attack: 40, Branch Bash, Root Entangle

Defense: 45

Fred had never seen any of the 30-foot tall, leaf-less, walking trees with angry bark faces before, but he had heard of them from some of the other Guild members. They were apparently only seen in the slightly higher-Rated dungeons, which he assumed meant that they were expensive Mana-wise; the fact that it was here meant that the dungeon cores pulled out all the stops to send their best and strongest against them. No weak army of Large Wasps for them this time.

Especially since there were at least two dozen of them marching through each of the gates, moving surprisingly quickly using their roots as legs and feet. They didn't hesitate either; without missing a beat, the

Treants in the lead avoided the burning walls on either side of the now-boiling pools and walked straight into the water.

The sharp cracks and groans of the walking trees as they started to boil alive was only eclipsed by the high-pitched scream they emitted when the obvious pain Fred's defense caused them was audibly voiced. Although their outside bark protected them from most of the heat and scalding-hot liquid, the boiling water soaked in through their roots and started to cook them from the inside.

Not only that, but the Treants – despite having numerous roots and movable arms – weren't really adept swimmers. While they did indeed float, they more bobbed along in the boiling water instead of swimming across. One after another flopped down in the water, only to float most of the way across before dying, disappearing into motes of Nature Mana seconds afterwards. A few even fell sideways into the nearby burning walls, which lit them on fire before they perished, which made Fred wince at the sheer agony these burning, walking trees exhibited before disappearing into death.

But they kept coming, as if the sight of their fellow attackers dying a gruesome death did nothing to deter them.

By happenstance, the Treants at the south Gate bunched up before the boiling pool of water, causing one of the walking trees to fall over across the water. While the heat from the boiling liquid rising up probably wasn't the most comfortable, it also didn't seriously hurt the Treant – and the other attackers took full advantage of its temporary status as an impromptu bridge.

At least a dozen Treants were able to cross over the boiling water without harm, crushing the horizontal Treant's roots in the process, keeping it from being able to rise. Fortunately, they didn't make it much farther

than that, as the narrow pathways between the burning pits of wood just past the first defense weren't quite wide enough for them to navigate easily. In a matter of only a few seconds, they had all fallen into the holes of fire, their wooden bodies easily burning up in the intense heat and flames.

"Here comes the next wave!" Fred shouted, still watching the rest of the Guild filing into the dungeon entrance.

They were going frustratingly slow, but they were still making progress; however, the entire attack from the Treants had only taken about a minute, so there was still nearly 100 people outside – all of them Core Power Guild members. And all of them were prepared to fight, so if it came down to it, they would defend the entrance as long as they had to.

Which might happen sooner rather than later, as giant insects of all types and sizes skittered or flew inside the busted gates of Gatecross. Fred was watching toward the north, so he could see a swarm of hundreds of Large Wasps fly through in a tight formation, completely bypassing the defenses he had set up earlier. Only some of the Ensnaring Vines were active around the entrance because of all the people still there; as soon as most of them had evacuated, he was planning to construct the rest to help stop the onslaught of flying insects. Of course, it didn't help now, but he suspected that this first wave of Wasps was only the beginning.

While the Guild groups started to engage the flying swarms, Fred finally got a chance to look at them closer.

Large Wasp (Level 10)

Vitality: 65

Attack: 13, Slowing Poison

Defense: 14

These Wasps were definitely a step above the previous ones, which ranged between Levels 2 to 5. And all of them seemed to be the same Level instead of a range, which Fred reasoned that they were probably all created by the same core before being sent out.

“Watch out! They are two or three times as strong as the last ones!” he shouted, loud enough that every Guild member managed to hear him.

The difference in the damage inflicted and received was obvious from the start. Most of the Guild could kill the previous Wasps in one hit, but these ones seemed to take four or more due to their stronger defense and higher Vitality. In addition, when they got through his people’s defenses – which they did quite frequently, flitting around the separate groups with alarming speed – they actually managed to pierce and puncture their targets, doing a fair amount of damage. It wasn’t debilitating and was healed fairly quickly, but if it was one of the townspeople who got attacked, they would’ve died in a single hit.

“Watch out!” Eisa shouted, throwing out two of her Shadow Strikes above Fred’s head, followed up by a quick Inflict Pain on the pair of Wasps that were targeting him.

They both fell to the ground, wounded and suffering from Eisa’s Pain spell, and Fred tore his attention away from the rest of the battle to stab them both with his knives. Their insectoid bodies were surprisingly durable, so it took two additional stabs to inflict enough damage to kill them. He stood back up and looked over the town, grateful for Eisa’s help while his focus had been distracted.

Fred nodded his thanks in her direction, and she smiled before creeping closer to him for some reason. *Is she guarding me?* He honestly appreciated the help, because it seemed like his attention was getting pulled everywhere all at once.

At the southern gate, large Level 12 Rock Beetles scampered over the fallen Treant, who was still ineffectually roasting over the boiling pool of water. They had some difficulty crossing in between the flame-filled pits because of their wide size, but they also weren't made of flammable wood. As a result, while they were heavily injured by the flames, they managed to get to the side of the pit closest to the dungeon entrance – where they started to dig a way out and up using their sharp mandibles to scrape away the sides of the holes they dropped into. In hindsight, Fred regretted not creating full-stone boxes inside the pits, but he both didn't have the available Power nor the time to let it fully regenerate after each use.

To the North, Fred saw a massive cluster of Giant Webspinners enter through the gate and temporarily pause before the still-boiling pool of water.

Giant Webspinners (Level 11)

Vitality: 85

Attack: 9, Poisoned Venom, Flaying Webs

Defense: 10

That hesitation didn't last long, however, as they ran to the side and *jumped*, using their springy spider legs, trailing a long string of webbing behind them. He wasn't sure if it was intentional, but when over a hundred giant spiders essentially left behind super-strong rope-like webbing, it acted like a makeshift bridge. Which the Rock Beetles that entered directly after them took advantage of, as the web-bridge gave them fairly easy access to the other side. A few of them became unbalanced and were cooked in their hard shells as they fell in, but nearly 150 of them made it past unscathed.

The spiders didn't stop there, however, as they proceeded to jump over the fire pits, essentially doing the same thing and negating their effectiveness...for a time, at least. The webbing was flammable, which Fred knew from experience, so he manipulated the Fire Mana in the pits to produce higher flames – which would reduce the time it would burn for, but it couldn't be helped. When the Rock Beetles following behind tried to use the web-bridges, many of them fell into the pits when they burned through.

And not all of the Giant Webspinners made it through completely unscathed, either. His water jet contraptions he had set up along the side of the pits were able to shoot a few of them out of the air, where they promptly fell inside the holes and died as the flames washed over their legs and burnt them to a crisp.

While all of that was going on, Fred was busy adding more of the Ensnaring Vines hanging down from the wooden structure over the dungeon entrance. He left a single gap that his people could retreat down into, which – when he looked around – was just about now. He had never intended for them to fight that much outside of the dungeon, so it was time for them to get inside before it was too late.

“Everyone, inside! Abandon the initial plan – everyone needs to get inside now!” Fred shouted, again barely being heard over the sounds of battle and burning flames. He himself ran for the entrance, stopping next to it to allow everyone to pass by him. The ten groups of Guild members and a few Gatecross guards still outside started to trickle in, fighting off the Wasps that were still assaulting them, looking the worse for wear as they passed by. Eisa was still by his side and joined him in picking off trailing flying insects until the only group that was left was Metch's.

Along with Rasper, Harriette, Merida, and a Gatecross guard with a sword and shield by the name of Wilbor, Metch was busy trying to fend off

nearly 20 of the Large Wasps. Fred and Eisa threw some spells from their position by the entrance, trying to relieve the pressure on them so they could escape. Things were looking good, until one of the Giant Webspinners from the north got close enough to attack.

Three thrown webbing blobs smacked into Wilbor's legs, sticking them together so he couldn't move faster than a shuffle.

"Leave me! Save everyone else!" the guard suddenly shouted in a broken voice, as Raspel started to ineffectually saw through the sticky webbing with his knives.

Fred heard Raspel start to say, "Give me just a moment, I'll have you out—"

"NO, there's no time! Go now! I'll keep their focus on me," Wilbor's voice cut him off, before the guard suddenly used a wide-range taunt ability called – unoriginally – Taunting Yell, that the D-Rated Defender possessed. Every giant insect within 50 feet suddenly paused in what they were doing, before swarming in Wilbor's direction. Metch and the others looked at him with shocked expressions on their faces, before backing away as over 200 various giant insects (the Rock Beetles were now close enough to be affected by the taunt ability) converged on the brave sacrificial guard.

"There's nothing you can do for him! He's giving us this chance – so move!" Eisa shouted, breaking the helpless daze Metch and the others were suffering under.

Her shout prompted them to run for the entrance, looking forlornly over their shoulders as Wilbor started to go berserk, flailing his sword around at the incoming monsters. A rotating circle of skeletal swords suddenly appeared around him – courtesy of Eisa – and then two, three, seven, and a dozen Giant Wasps went down in the first two seconds,

followed by the bisection of three Giant Webspinners who tried to sink their fangs into his body. Fred almost thought he might make it and he stepped forward to help eliminate the webbing, but before he could take that step, two Rock Beetles came up behind the guard and closed their extremely sharp mandibles around his left leg. Within a second – and with the horrifically painful screams coming from Wilbor – they had managed to saw through his leg at the knee; unbalanced and in extreme pain, the guard fell to the ground on his back. Fortunately, he was able to keep ahold of his sword and shield in the process, which he courageously used to fend off the attacking monsters while on his back.

There were a few things that Fred instantly thought of that would save the guard's life, but all of them involved putting himself in danger, thereby adding additional danger to the rest of the people under his care. He wasn't afraid for his own life, but if he "died", he wasn't sure if the dungeon would collapse – even if he was healed automatically later by his Mana. And if he was *permanently* killed, then the dungeon was almost guaranteed to collapse on them, killing them just as quickly.

With a heavy heart and a silent thanks to the bravery of the Gatecross guard – which just so happened to be the same nice one that had first greeted him when he came to the town – Fred ran inside the dungeon, adding the last few Ensnaring Vines to the wooden platform hanging above the entrance. He used half of his remaining Nature Mana to add even more than what he had already planned on putting there, as he now had no teams aboveground to take advantage of those monsters caught in the trap.

The assaulting creatures sent by the dungeon cores were progressing faster than he thought they would, in some cases completely bypassing his defenses just as easily as the flying Wasps. He had figured it would take the

ground-based monsters longer to get to the entrance, so it was throwing his whole plan off.

And it had already cost the life of Wilbor.

Fred didn't have time for regrets and hindsight, however, as he raced through the dungeon, only seconds ahead of the horde behind him.

Chapter 25

Eisa couldn't believe that she just ordered their Guild members to leave Wilbor to die. She almost jumped in to save him herself, but she knew that she had a responsibility to the rest of the Guild; she wasn't about to let the rest potentially die to save one man. It pained her to leave him there with her Skeletal Swords helping out, but she couldn't help but respect the sacrifice he had made so that they could all retreat in safety.

She looked behind her through the tunnel to see if everyone else had made it safely inside the dungeon and didn't see Fred – and she instantly panicked. *He better not*— She saw him a moment later, running at a full sprint down the entrance tunnel and through the first empty, dirt-filled room. His face looked strained, which she could understand; he was trying to save everyone, just as much or more than *she* was. However, she could also see a sense of firm resolve in his glance in her direction, so she took heart in knowing that he was still going to do everything he could to ensure they survived.

They raced across the dirt and Flower Tripper-covered bridge, faster than they probably should've. Regardless, they didn't want to be trapped and attacked by flying Wasps above the swirling maelstrom of water – speed was a necessity. Fortunately, the first insect to arrive in the room was a Rock Beetle and it didn't arrive until they were feet from the exit. She stopped to wait for Fred behind her and watched the Beetle make its way unconcerned-but-speedily across the bridge. Fred stopped next to her and looked back, his eyes becoming temporarily unfocused for a moment.

The Flower Tripper nearest the entrance had been completely inert as Fred and Eisa had passed by, but when the Rock Beetle got near, one of

its long, thick leaves stretched out and flicked the giant insect. She knew from experience that the Flower was intended to be used to trip humans, which was most effective at about ankle-height on a person. She'd seen it perform the action only once first-hand, when one of the groups she had delved alongside recently hadn't noticed the Flower along some grass. It smacked their Mage in the ankle and directed their appendage up with a strong follow-through, being much more effective than just a straight smack.

In the case against a Rock Beetle, however, it hit the insect underneath the hard shell and flipped it end-over-end, sending it crashing against the far wall before it fell. Eisa watched in amazement as the largely undamaged Beetle rebounded off and landed in the violently rotating water below; it was instantly picked up and spun around the room, smacking into another wall so hard she heard and saw one of its mandibles snap off. It kept moving, though, so she couldn't see something else on it break off when it was out of her line-of-sight – but she heard it.

They didn't stay to watch anymore however, because the room's entrance was already starting to fill with other insects, including a Large Wasp that shot right in their direction. Fred pushed her ahead, where she ran down the tunnel before seeing a figure waiting just outside a shorter tunnel holding a small hand axe.

“Hurry, get in and I'll close it behind us!” Metch shouted at them.

Eisa wasn't going to argue as Fred was right on her heels. They ducked in order to get safely through the smaller tunnel and Fred kept his hand on her back, gently urging her forward. “Don't stop!” he shouted unnecessarily.

I wasn't planning on it.

They quickly emerged into a fairly large – and extremely tall – room that Fred had told her about but had never actually seen before. On one side, which she presumed was the entrance, the tunnel leading into the room was about twice as wide as a normal tunnel – about 8 feet wide – but the height was low enough that some tall people might need to slightly duck to avoid hitting their head. Arranged around the entrance in a semi-circle, a dozen Guild tanks equipped with shields were in position, elevated about a foot off the ground by a stone platform that reached the entire way across the room.

Behind the tanks, on a tiered platform that stretched up an additional foot above the heavily armored Guild members up front, there were a mixture of Scout classes that had short-distance attack capabilities, including Rasper, who was just making his way into position with his small hand-crossbow. There were a few she knew were Archers, and a few others she suspected were Rangers by the bows they wielded, as well as a few that had braces of throwing knives strapped to their arms, legs, and around their torsos.

Interspersed among the Scout classes were a few Healers, there to help with the front line as they took the brunt of attacks. There were only a few of them – much less than what they actually had – because she knew that the rest were waiting in what Fred called their “fallback position” in the next room.

Lastly, stretching above the Scout classes, was another tiered platform that contained about 20 Mage-class Guild members. From their position, they would have a perfect view of the incoming horde of creatures – a horde that was theoretically going to be held in place by the tanks up front. They could rain down their spells and abilities without fear of gaining the attention of the monsters, safe and protected from up high.

Running up the center of the tiered stone platforms was a crude-looking narrow staircase leading from the bottom platform up to the top, where everyone could retreat up if it was needed. As to where they would retreat – which Eisa hoped wasn't needed but knew deep down that it was probably going to happen – a tunnel at the top led to the last room where the rest of the Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross were waiting.

Eisa took in the room quickly before she turned around and let Fred pass her by. She watched as Metch entered the short, squat tunnel and started chopping at the thick wooden poles holding a large block of stone above the tunnel. In the gaps that she could see just past him, she saw the same Wasp that had been rushing toward her and Fred aiming straight for the D-Rated Fighter.

The stone block shifted a little bit as one of the poles was quickly chopped through, but Metch didn't have enough time to get the other one before the giant flying insect was on him. Before she or anyone else could react, Fred gestured toward the now-struggling D-Rater and a dark, see-through shield enclosed Metch in a protective bubble.

Did...did he just cast my Shield of Darkness on him? Even hours later, she was still trying to get over the shock that *her* Fred had learned countless abilities just by watching her and the other Guild members perform them. *Did I just think of him as **my** Fred?* She pushed those thoughts *far* away for the moment, as she prepared to help Metch finish the job. Fortunately, her hesitation wasn't costly as Metch ignored the Wasp's stabbing stinger and struck through the other wooden pole with five strong chops of his hand axe.

A loud snapping noise echoed through the chamber as the wood cracked in half, and the large, heavy-looking stone block slammed down, sealing the tunnel off from the monster horde sure to be on their way soon.

The Wasp miraculously flew farther into the tunnel, escaping death by squishing stone; unfortunately for it, there were over 50 determined people ready to finish the job.

“Nice job, Metch – that was a close one,” Fred congratulated the Fighter, clapping him on the shoulder once the Wasp was taken care of and was already melting away.

“You’re right – too close. Hopefully that should give us some breathing room, if those other rooms they need to go through to get here are as deadly as you hinted at,” Metch responded, before asking a question to everyone assembled. “Has anyone done a head-count? Is everyone here or in the other room?”

“I haven’t seen Wilbor in either room,” one of the other guards mentioned, and Eisa struggled to remember his name.

“Wilbor bravely fought off over two hundred monsters so that we could retreat in safety,” Metch responded after a brief silence. “I’m sorry to bring you the bad news, Garint – I know he was your good friend.”

Garint – *that’s his name!* – wiped away a quick tear and sniffed loudly at the news. “He loved this place...he’d rather be stationed here than anywhere else in the Kingdom – something about the trees, he said. I know he gladly gave his life to ensure this place survives.”

Those nearby him who knew him better than Eisa nodded at Garint’s statement, murmuring their agreement. Fred addressed the room – which she was glad for, as the mood was becoming a little somber. There would be time to mourn his death later; they shouldn’t start out being despondent and have a defeatist attitude while they were fighting for their lives. Besides, she somehow doubted that Wilbor would be the last one they’d have to mourn.

“We need to get ready – they’ll be here in a few minutes at the least, up to a half hour at the most. The defenses I set up are doing significant damage to their numbers; however, from what I can see at the edge of my territory, there isn’t a break anytime soon,” Fred announced, to the worry and consternation of those assembled. “However, I have faith that they won’t be able to break through our line here. Remember if we start to get overwhelmed, we need to make a fighting retreat to the last room. If that happens, we should be able to hold that for quite a while...”

Fred trailed off, looking off in the distance like he had been doing lately when he was concentrating on something...elsewhere. A worried frown flashed across his face, before quickly disappearing; if she hadn’t been staring at him, she might’ve missed it.

“There might be a slight...problem...in the future, but for now let’s stick to the plan. If you all can protect me for a little while, I’m going to try to lessen the problem – but I can’t concentrate on the fight in here at the same time. Eisa and Metch, you both know what to do, so you’re in charge,” Fred continued, before immediately sitting down on the floor with his back to the nearest wall. Eisa recognized it from when he was busy constructing things in the dungeon over the last few hours, so she knew he would be fairly out of it until he decided to “come back”.

Eisa could hear faint noises coming from up the tunnel the tanks were facing, but luckily it didn’t sound close. “Alright, you heard the man – stand down for a few minutes but stay in your positions. When they come, let’s show them they picked the wrong dungeon to delve!” she shouted, doing her best to rally the troops. They responded with a half-hearted cry, but she wasn’t going to complain; she couldn’t blame them for not being eager for what was to come, but they were going to do what was necessary anyway.

She ran up the stairs, taking her place among the other Mage-type classes, ready to rain death and destruction on the monsters heading their way. Eisa glanced worriedly at Fred one last time before putting him out of her mind. *I really don't want to know what he saw coming; hopefully he can take care of it before it gets here.*

The skittering, buzzing, and slamming sounds coming from down the tunnel were getting louder, and she saw the tanks in front start to tense up and ready themselves, only for the noises to be cut off abruptly. It was now a stress-filled waiting game, one which she ironically hoped ended sooner rather than later. Eisa – along with everyone else – tensed up again as a pain-filled screech came from down the tunnel again...before stopping as quickly as it started.

I don't think my nerves can handle a half hour of this, she thought as she looked around. *And I doubt anyone else's can, either.*

Chapter 26

This should be...interesting, Fred thought.

Resting his back against the nearest wall, he sat down and got comfortable; after hours of working on different things not directly adjacent to his point-of-view, he had learned that it was just better (and safer) for his physical body to not be standing up. He trusted Eisa and the other Guild members nearby to keep him safe – and it wasn't like he couldn't return his focus back to his body if the need arose.

He still had a few minutes before he could start tackling the “problem” he had noticed enter into his territory, so Fred used his Territorial Sight to work his way out from the dungeon starting from the room he was currently in. Shooting past the tank Guild members arranged in front of the tunnel entrance, he quickly drifted down the passageway and found that his Ensnaring Vines in the room before were doing exactly what he was hoping they would do: catch flying monster invaders.

At the moment, three Wasps were currently being squeezed hard enough that their wings were being marginally damaged; while he couldn't give his defenses detailed orders like he could his dungeon defenders, he found he could at least put a time limit on how long they were activated.

Case in point – he watched one of the vines release its victim after 20 seconds of constriction, dropping the Wasp onto the Small Thorn traps below. Given enough time, the Wasp would've probably recovered enough use of its wings to fly again, but that wouldn't help as it was impaled on a few sharp thorns and had no easy way to escape. Even if it did survive, it would be severely hurt and easy pickings for the Guild in the next room, so everything was working out well.

Fortunately, the Ensnaring Vines defense was perpetual; the vine that squeezed and released the Wasp went back to hanging limply in the room, along with all but two of the twenty Fred had placed in there. Unless they were damaged or disarmed (which he doubted would happen, since there wasn't likely to be any invading dungeon defenders who could disarm them), they would continue to snatch anything that came close to them.

Leaving that room behind, he moved down the tunnels again and came to the literal furnace he had made in the next space. He was glad that his Sight couldn't feel the heat, because he figured he might melt along with the various large insects dying by the dozens as they attempted to cross the room. Not only was the actual fire a danger, but the intense heat by the super-hot flames cooked the Rock Beetles inside their shells and turned Giant Webspinners' legs to ash within seconds – followed by the rest of them.

Fred was glad he had elevated the room a little in comparison to the others, as the heat was staying primarily inside the space instead of making the rest of the dungeon an oven. He had already felt a little bit of an elevated temperature in the room his body was stationed, but it wasn't incapacitating, at least.

The smoke in the room was another issue. Despite the small holes he had drilled through the ceiling, the sheer amount of smoke created from the burning wood was starting to fill the room and he could see it starting to drift through the adjacent tunnels. If it kept increasing at the same rate, there was a possibility that it could reach the last few rooms where all the humans were holed up.

Fortunately – or unfortunately – the super-hot flames were consuming the wood at an incredible rate. Over half of what he had created in the room was now gone – and it had only been about 15 minutes since

the start of the invasion! He knew from the start that it wasn't going to last forever but being in an enclosed space was speeding up the consumption even more than he had counted on. *At least I don't need to worry about the smoke killing everyone now.*

Seeing that the fire-fueled barrier was doing its job as well, he sped through the next tunnel to his bridge/whirlpool room. Over half of his Flower Trippers were already gone, though when he observed how crowded the bridge was with insects, he realized that they hadn't necessarily been deliberately destroyed. As he watched one Rock Beetle get flipped off the bridge by another Flower, a second just happened to want to get past his defender and almost "accidentally" cut into it with its razor-sharp mandibles. The Trippers didn't have much in the way of defense, so it was literally cut in half, only to melt and disappear. The glowing green globs joined the growing pool of other Nature Mana littering the bridge and the water down below – which was practically filling up the whirlpool so that, at least to his Sight, it was nearly more green than blue.

Fred left that room and moved his Territorial Sight up through the first, now-unused room, and through the tunnel leading outside. Streams of giant insects still swarmed past him inside, but he knew – from peeking through the outer limits of his territory – that their specific wave was going to come to an end fairly soon.

He emerged into the sunlight to see every single one of his still-existing Ensnaring Vines with a Wasp within their grasp. They too had instructions to release their prey after twenty seconds, so the ground was inundated with slowly walking, wing-crippled flying insects joining the stream of others making their way through the entrance. Of course, only about half of the Vines were left from the original batch he had put out,

which he thought was most likely the result of some Rock Beetles getting close enough to slice them – if accidentally – apart.

There wasn't much that Fred could do about that, however, other than add some more to the wooden structure still holding strong over the entrance. He held off on that, though, because the massive wave of giant insects was coming to an end – an end which he visually saw as he looked over to the north and south gates.

Although he wasn't an expert on battle tactics, Fred could also sense that whoever was in charge of leading the assault on Gatecross had learned from their Large Wasp army failure. If Fred hadn't fortified their defenses with traps and more, the defenders probably would've had difficulty stopping them the second time around.

Whoever was leading the attacking army had sent the Treants in first, knowing that there were gates that needed to be destroyed; second, they flooded the town with relatively “cheap”, disposable dungeon defenders in the form of Rock Beetles, Giant Webspinners, and Large Wasps to soften up and wear down the defenses of the humans; third (and he hoped there weren't more waves after this one coming up), they sent in the heavy-hitters.

The last couple-hundred insects were making their way over the still-fallen Treant and Webspinner webbing bridges at either gate. Fred let them continue without hindering them in the least; he hadn't had the necessary Mana to stop them earlier due to using almost everything he had to complete the dungeon, but he now had a small amount that had been Converted from his UM.

Fire Mana: 12/129 (1)

Water Mana: 15/128 (1)

Nature Mana: 88/128 (1)

Unconverted Mana: 14652 (85)

He had quite a bit of Nature Mana right now due to reabsorbing his Flower Trippers in the first room, plus he had oodles of green globs all over his territory, just waiting for him to absorb them. He didn't quite have a plan for it, however, because he was limited on his Nature-based blueprints – and he didn't know enough about Nature in general to use it creatively like he had with Water and Fire.

Thinking of fire, it was about time Fred destroyed the bridges made from the Treant and spider webbing. It took all of his Fire Mana, but he was able to heighten the flames in the pits to burn through the webbing, as well as extend the fire from the burning walls near the boiling water to burn through the webbing to the north. For the Treant, it required the most Mana because – while it was technically wood – the bark on the outside didn't ignite quite as quickly as what he had created. What he ended up having was just barely enough to get the job done.

And it was just in time, as the next wave of Nature creatures was beginning to flow in through the gate.

Boars, bears, wolves (normal and the larger Dire variety), and even some sort of elk with scaly-looking skin and sturdy pointed antlers charged into Gatecross by the dozens.

Charging Boar (Level 9)

Vitality: 100

Attack: 23, Charge, Gore

Defense: 18

Forest Bear (Level 7)

Vitality: 110

Attack: 25, Swipe, Maul, Bear Hug

Defense: 20

Pack Wolf (Level 12)

Vitality: 90

Attack: 17, Surround, Howl

Defense: 14

Dire Wolf (Level 6)

Vitality: 130

Attack: 26, Surround, Howl, Limb-snapper

Defense: 21

Scaled-hide Elk (Level 5)

Vitality: 150

Attack: 30, Impale, Rush

Defense: 35

Unfortunately for the Fred and the defenders, the higher intelligence of these new creatures made his defenses largely ineffective. Two boars on the north and a single bear to the south jumped into the water and boiled alive; however, their screams of pain before they perished made the rest pause and hesitate, stopping their advance. Fred began to worry that they would find a way to knock down the sturdy barriers located between the buildings and go around everything, but he was saved by the arrival of another wave of dungeon defenders.

Although, he couldn't really call it *saved*; Eisa or Metch would've probably used *screwed* as the more-accurate word.

Dozens of Dryads, accompanied by more Treants, arrived at the gates and the multitudes of beastly dungeon monsters reluctantly parted for them to make their way through. While the Treants were exactly the same level as they had been at the start of the assault while they destroyed the gates, the Dryads were different from what Fred had seen before.

Mature Dryad (Level 10)

Vitality: 180

Attack: 16, Root Constriction, Root Extraction, Root Burrow, Condensation

Defense: 16

Not only were they marginally bigger than the Juvenile ones he had seen in the Nature dungeon where he accidentally destroyed and absorbed its core, but the Mature Dryads were also twice as strong. Fred was just glad they didn't have any trees nearby to manipulate their roots...oh, wait – they did.

They just happened to be mobile.

The Treants planted themselves into the ground nearby the flaming wall and the Dryads used their special attacks to burrow their roots far into the ground. Fred watched with his Territorial Sight as the roots extended beneath and past the fire walls, eventually emerging on the other side. He watched in horror as they lengthened even further and started reaching for the sturdy – but not unbreakable – wooden barriers blocking either side of the boiling pool of water. *What are...wait! They're going to pull the walls down!*

Once the walls were down – and presumably pulled out of the way – there wasn't anything stopping the horde of powerful creatures from swarming down the entrance of his dungeon. With the giant insects before, they were at least limited by how many could cross their makeshift bridges at any one time and their entry was relatively regulated; without that regulation, the boars and bears and wolves would quickly overwhelm the human defenders down below.

In a panic, Fred tried to figure out what to do. He was free to use his mana outside of the dungeon as long as it was in his territory, but he was essentially out of Fire and Water Mana. He even tried to use his Unconverted Mana to make some more pits underneath the attacking Dryads and other beasts, but it didn't work.

Warning: *Dungeon room creation* cannot be used while your dungeon is under attack.

Obviously, the way he used his UM to create the pits aboveground were considered “dungeon rooms” even though they weren't connected to his dungeon. A quick experimentation of adding another Ensnaring Vine to the wooden entrance structure confirmed that this limitation didn't extend to defenses and defenders, fortunately. Additionally, if Fred was actually present up there, he could probably use his Adventurer Power to affect something, but he was – thankfully – safely still inside his dungeon.

Of course, like he had seen before, he had a plethora of Nature Mana, but he couldn't think of anything to do with it. He didn't think that creating more Ensnaring Vines would help – the creatures were just too strong to be held for long and were likely to be destroyed quickly. The Small Thorn Traps were just that – small; they might injure a few of the

creatures that passed by, but it was more likely that their greater bulk would just smash right through them.

As for his defenders, he still only had his two—

“Deecy, why do I still only have these two dungeon defenders? Shouldn’t I have unlocked the blueprints for the Large Wasps and Giant Webspinners – not to mention the Treants from earlier, not to mention the boars and bear that were just boiled alive? They were killed on my territory, after all,” Fred Communicated with the Dire Wolf, who was safely in the final fallback room in her Pup form. She said she was conserving energy for when she was needed; he couldn’t blame her, because when she was in her giant form, she was a force to be reckoned with.

“From what I understand, new defender blueprints cannot be acquired from foreign invading defenders. Because they are a Mana construct, they are more of a ‘copy’ than the real thing; only living creatures dying in your territory can provide those blueprints necessary to recreate them, unfortunately.”

It made sense, but it wasn’t fair. All he had were the Flower Trippers and a stupid, weak Rock Beetle. At Level 1, they would just get squished as quickly as Eisa’s animated bear had squished those he had encountered in his first-ever dungeon delve. Even if they were Level 12 like the ones that were still making their way down into the depths of his dungeon, they wouldn’t last long against the superior strength, speed, and general Vitality of the beasts arrayed against him. *Maybe that’s all I need – some way to at least slow them down so that they don’t overwhelm my friends inside.*

So that's what Fred did. With no other options he could think of, he started to create hundreds of Level 12 Rock Beetles using his blueprints. Their empty wire-frame blueprints surrounded the outside of the dungeon entrance; he even went so far as to start stacking them on top of each other to fit more. He didn't take the Nature Mana from his core, however – he pulled the necessary Mana from everywhere the invaders had died and started to fill the blueprints as quickly as he could.

He was just glad that his dungeon hadn't automatically absorbed all the mana yet; as it had done earlier after the Large Wasp attack, it was apparently waiting until there were no more invaders inside the dungeon to do that – the same as with all of the Essence floating around everywhere. He knew that he could manually absorb it if he wanted to – as he had seen most dungeons do as soon as their defenders were destroyed – but he had no need of it earlier and had chosen not to.

He was now glad that he hadn't.

Despite pumping almost 2,000 Nature Mana into his new defender blueprints, it had barely scratched the surface of how much remained both aboveground and inside his dungeon. He knew he could make hundreds or thousands more if he wanted to, but for the moment the area around the entrance was going to be overfull as it was. With the vast quantity still remaining, he also added a few dozen more Ensnaring Vines to the wooden structure, despite not believing that they would do much good.

All of his introspection, Communication with Deecy, blueprint forming, and Nature Mana transfer had only taken a few seconds – his panicked mind was working on overdrive. Unfortunately, even though it didn't take long to come to a defensive decision, the actual Creation of his defenders wasn't quite as quick. By the speed at which they started to form,

he estimated that it was going to take about 40 seconds before they were ready.

It was a time that seemed entirely too long as all four wooden walls of fire came crashing down one after another.

Chapter 27

Fred pumped the rest of his Water Mana into his boiling pits out of desperation. He quickly manipulated the Mana inside and caused the water to literally explode outward toward the waiting assemblage of Nature creatures. They weren't paying attention; their focus was entirely on the Treants' roots – which were on fire themselves – dragging the burning walls to the side so that they could pass by.

The wave of scalding-hot water enveloped over a hundred of the invading creatures at either gate, causing minor damage to every boar, bear, and wolf hit by it. The Scaled-hide Elks seemed to shrug it off, unfortunately, but damage wasn't his main intention for his desperation move. It was distraction more than anything.

Which amazingly worked; after the burning walls were dragged out of the way, the creatures – including the Dryads – were hesitant to approach the sides of the water pit where the largest pathway had been cleared. It didn't last long, as after a few approached without suffering another attack, they started to stream ahead in a rush. However, it was long enough that Fred thought that his new defenders would be ready to start “regulating” the beasts heading for his dungeon.

What worked in his favor again was the further hesitation by the beasts at the edge of the fire-filled pits. That, along with everything else so far with this wave, didn't last long as the Dryads and Treants again went to work. Roots plunged back under the ground to shoot towards the pits, using their strength to topple one side of the pits after another, pouring dirt onto the flaming wood scraps. Because the flames were Mana-fueled, they

didn't disappear completely – but being smothered by earth was enough to tamper them quite a bit.

His water jets were next to useless now, as even if he had hit something, falling into the pits was nearly harmless. Fred was sure that the beasts now running over the heated dirt clods that were clogging up the pits were taking at least a little damage, but it wasn't enough to deter them long enough to care about it. As a result of the ease of which both directions leading to his dungeon were now traversed, nearly two dozen total Charging Boars and the smaller Pack Wolves raced ahead of the rest and disappeared down the entrance before anything could stop them. His Ensnaring Vines managed to grab one Wolf momentarily, but it was quickly bit in half by the snarling beast within seconds.

Those seconds proved costly for the Pack Wolf, as all 254 of his new Level 12 Rock Beetles popped into existence at the same time, smothering the beast under their numbers and tearing it apart with their razor-sharp mandibles. It didn't even have time to fight back as it disappeared and melted into the ground, leaving behind a sizable glob of Nature Mana.

The rest of the Beetles didn't have quite as much luck.

It wasn't as though they didn't try to stop and delay the incoming beasts. They slashed at Wolf legs as they ran by, suffered under the smashing strength of Bear paws as they attempted to attack their fronts, sliced large gouges into the sides of Boars, and ineffectually blunted their sharp mandibles against the strong scaled-hide of the Elk – only to be shoved aside as the enemy dungeon defenders made their way to the entrance.

The problem – which at any other time would be a blessing – was that the attacks by his Beetles were *completely ignored*. Just as the Flower

Trippers in the Bridge Room were “accidentally” killed whenever one of the giant insects just happened to run into them, so too were the Beetles that managed to get injured or killed because they were “in the way”. Although it delayed and hurt the invading beasts, they didn’t stop to fight or otherwise eliminate the obstacle.

“Deecy – what’s going on? They aren’t even trying to stop and kill my Beetles.”

“Remember the information I provided you when you made your first defender? My guess is that they all have the general command to ‘not attack other defenders’. Because these creatures all came from different dungeon cores, as well as potentially being naturally hostile toward each other, this was probably the only way they could all work together.”

“Thanks,” Fred Communicated to the Dire Wolf Pup.

The first of the Boars and Wolves were already making their way across the zig-zagging bridge; after creating even more of the Beetles outside to replace those that had died – and to hopefully fill the space around the entrance so full that nothing could get by – he tried to direct some of the giant insects inside to fill up the first room, making it even more difficult for anything to advance.

Warning: Defenders inside your territory cannot enter your dungeon while there are humans present.

Darn it! The stupid rules instigated by whoever set the dungeon core system up was making things so much harder. While he didn’t have to obey the “Limits” and guidelines obviously set up to regulate the millions

of dungeons in the world, some permanent rules he couldn't ignore. Changing his dungeon while there were humans inside of it was one of them, which apparently even included bringing in defenders from outside the dungeon. Those rules benefitted Adventurers during normal dungeon delves, of course, but it was hurting him right now.

There was nothing else he could think of to do other than keep producing more and more Beetles aboveground. The streams of beasts were still flowing in through both gates in large groups, and – while it didn't stop them completely – his defenders were at least slowing them down, thereby regulating them as best as could be hoped for.

Instead of watching the futility of the Rock Beetles against such a massive tide of vicious beasts, Fred kept an “eye” above with his Territorial Sight and brought his focus back to his body. It felt weird transitioning from full-dungeon-creation mode and being able to “see” everything, to being back in his physical shell and partially limited to what he could visually observe with his two human eyes. Even after hours of practice while building the dungeon, the abrupt change was still thoroughly jarring.

He opened his eyes quickly, not even realizing that he had closed them. Looking around, Fred saw Metch and the other tanks finishing off the last wave of giant insects, which looked like some Giant Webspinners and Rock Beetles had finally made it through the previous rooms. Which didn't bode well for how well they would defend against what was now coming.

“Fred, you're back!” Eisa called out from above, before running down the crude set of center stairs and rushing to his side. She knelt down and hugged him for some reason, shaking a little as she did so.

“What are you talking about? I've been here the entire time,” he asked, confused at her manner.

She squatted back on her heels and looked strangely at him; Fred almost thought the look Eisa was giving him was one of anger or disappointment, but he wasn't sure why that would be. *Did I do something wrong that I don't know about?* He didn't have time to contemplate that, however, as he needed to let everyone know about what was coming.

"It's good to see you too, Eisa," Fred told her and patted her on the hand before climbing to his feet. The last of the giant insects were being dispatched with ease by the skillful combination of professional tanking defense and high-damage spells and abilities by those above. When they were all done, Fred addressed the whole room as relative silence fell, punctuated only by slightly labored breathing of all those inside the room.

"We have about a minute or so before the next wave comes. Send the word back for replacements," he said first, knowing that those that had been defending – especially up front – needed a little bit of a breather before they were hit by more enemies.

Fred saw Harriette jog over to the upper tunnel and yell, "Switch!", before running back and taking her place on the highest platform again. The sounds of movement coming from up above marked those tasked with providing relief rushing in to temporarily take the place of most of those that had been fighting. He couldn't afford to wait for them to finish the process, though.

"We've got Bears, Boars, and Wolves heading down here right now, so be prepared – they're all fairly strong. I didn't have much luck stopping them above, but I'm doing my best to make sure they aren't swarming in all at the same time. This is probably going to be tough, so Healers – get ready to bolster anyone getting slammed," Fred continued, though he knew that what he was telling them was unnecessary – they knew what they were

doing. Years of fighting and surviving through hundreds of dungeon delves had taught them how to work together.

Unfortunately, they were a bit unprepared for the sheer ferocity of dungeon defenders wholly bent toward the destruction of every human they laid their eyes on.

The first beast that appeared in the tunnel was a Charging Boar, who had coarse, singed hair all along its right side. Fred took a quick look toward the oven room and noticed that there was now a small gap through the almost-burnt wood-scrap piles, probably brought on by hundreds of giant insects crossing through the room on the exact same pathway. It was barely enough for a beast the size of the Boar – at around 4-feet tall and just as long – to fit through, but it also was obvious why it was still slightly roasted.

Despite the scorched hair, the Charging Boar lived up to its namesake and Charged toward the not-fully prepared company of tanks waiting for it. As the beast got closer, Fred could see that even their braced stances and angled shields wouldn't be enough to completely stop it. Metch hadn't been switched out with the reinforcements and he took the full brunt of the attack; his shield blunted the charge slightly, but the sheer force of it knocked him back out of line nearly five feet.

"Plug the hole!" Metch called out. Fred wasn't sure if it was from surprise or from pain from the impact, but his voice sounded a little strained. One of the tanks that had just been replaced was on standby near the line, and immediately jumped to fill the gap.

The Boar took advantage of the temporary hole in the line to strike out at Metch's neighbors with its sharp tusks, slightly goring one of the Gatecross guards in his leg, cutting through his leather leg armor. One of

the Healer classes used her abilities to heal the shallow wound; he was able to recover quickly and move his shield to prevent another attack.

Even if it wanted to attack again, however, the Charging Boar was quickly inundated by a dozen spells and no less than six arrows. Not much could live after that onslaught, and the beast fell to the ground in death, melting away moments later into Nature Mana – which joined the growing mass of Mana filling up the tunnel and entry area. Fred was glad that the green-glowing Mana couldn't be seen by his friends in the room, otherwise it would severely hamper their ability to defend; as it was, he had to consciously ignore it to be able to see everything.

Now that they were a little bit more prepared for the incoming beasts, the next couple of Boars and Wolves that made it through – after utterly decimating most of the Ensnaring Vine traps set up in the previous room – were quickly held off and killed with a minimum of difficulty. If they were in a “regular” dungeon, the powerful beasts might've been a bit of a challenge to a group of E-Rated Adventurers, especially if they attacked more than one at a time; with the forces arrayed in defense, though, they made short work of them.

That didn't quite apply the same way as they started to come in greater numbers. At first, two or three would show up together, attacking the tank line with uncoordinated ferocity; within minutes, however, they were showing up in an almost steady stream. Every single tank on the defensive line was engaged with their own beast as even more started showing up. Spells, abilities, and other ranged attacks rained down from above the line in an almost constant stream; the defenders were taking their toll on the attackers, but Fred could also see that his side was being steadily worn down.

In the back of his mind – almost an automatic ability now – he kept the creation of his Rock Beetles up, feeding them Nature Mana from inside the room he was currently in. As the Forest Bears, Dire Wolves, and Scaled-hide Elk started to show up, he “felt” the pressure aboveground start to lessen, so he temporarily transferred his focus back up top. The first thing he saw was a good sign – the flow of beasts trying to get into his dungeon entrance was coming to an end.

Everything else, though, wasn’t looking so great.

The Mature Dryads – who he thought were stuck outside because their Treant friends were too large to enter – were somehow shrinking their buddies down so that they could easily fit inside. And in the process, as they “Condensed” down in size, they changed. They lost a bit of their main attack power, but they also became tougher.

Condensed Juvenile Treant (Level 8)

Vitality: 450

Attack: 25, Branch Bash, Root Entangle

Defense: 65

Their exposed bark was now so tough that the Rock Beetles that Fred had outside could barely even scratch them. He wasn’t sure if it was a conscious decision or not, but the Dryads touched the outside bark and were absorbed into the middle of the Treants, protecting them from harm as more than three dozen walking trees with internal passengers passed into his dungeon essentially unscathed.

If that wasn’t bad enough, Fred groaned internally as he saw that the beasts and Dryads weren’t even the last wave.

Chapter 28

The fight against the oversized bugs earlier had been relatively easy, repetitive, and unexciting – not that Eisa needed or wanted it to be the opposite of that. The giant spiders, beetles, and wasps trickled into the room in ones or twos, making them easy to pick off with a few well-placed spells or arrows. They didn't have much in the way of defense, nor could they do much damage to the heavily armored front line; the only time they had any trouble was when one of the Large Wasps sped in so quickly that it was able to get above everyone's heads. Unfortunately for the flying insect, the defenders had no trouble blowing it out of the air with their long-range spells.

There was a healthy respect for the boar that had first charged into their midst after the insects had been cleared out, however. Eisa remembered seeing them in a few of the E-Rated Plant Dungeons, though they were few and far between – and were much weaker. They weren't too difficult, luckily, because their charges could be blocked by whoever was tasked with being their tank fairly easily (so much so, that it was somewhat humorous to watch their “charge” end up hurting themselves as they ran into a shield that barely budged as they impacted it).

The fact that Metch – a D-Rated member of their Guild that specialized in defense – had been knocked back so far made it obvious that the incoming creatures were no joke, however. The only thing that saved them after the first few hectic minutes of charging boars and leaping wolves was the fact that (ironically) more started to arrive. When there were so many of the enemy clustered up and attacking their shield wall, it was

difficult for any of the boars to find enough room to charge or the wolves to leap.

Eisa had been throwing out Shadow Strikes one after another into the slowly growing mass of beasts attacking them; she was already at less than half of her available Power, so she slowed down a little to conserve a little bit – just in case she needed to take over healing. They had nearly a dozen dedicated Healers already in the room, but they were already working at a frantic pace to keep everyone healed up.

We can't keep this up – these single-target spells, while highly damaging, just can't keep up with the massive influx of dangerous beasts entering the room. If I was in the middle of them, I could perform my Vitality Explosion, but there is no way I'm wading into there. What I need is some way to hit multiple targets without being there myself – but I don't have anything like that...wait. Maybe I do...

Eisa targeted another boar just exiting the tunnel and started to try to push through the growing numbers of other beasts around it to get to her friends down on the line. Casting Skeletal Swords, she was able to target the unsuspecting beast and five skeletal swords materialized in the air – and started to chop up the surrounding forest critters. It was a walking whirlwind of destruction, damaging its friends from behind and softening them up so that they were even easier to pick off; the best thing about it was that none of them fought back against the target boar or tried to avoid the swords – they just blindly took the attacks!

Eisa soon had to switch targets, however – the swirling sword circle was getting too close to the defensive lines as it tore through the opposition. It was the main reason she couldn't use the defensive spell in the first place – it didn't differentiate between friend and foe.

She was going to cancel and cast the spell again on another beast – a wolf this time – that was entering the room but held off for just a moment while she tried something. She never had a real need to switch targets before, because there was usually only one logical choice for the placement of the Skeletal Swords; now, though, she wanted it to move to another target. She knew the ability would automatically cancel if her target was no longer valid (i.e. dead), but she didn't want it to disappear.

Eisa had spent a lot of time with Fred while he was building the inside of the dungeon, just the two of them; she liked to think that he enjoyed that “private” time with her, sharing even more of his own secrets while his focus was elsewhere. Even though she had listened to Fred try to describe the process he took to manipulate his own Power and whatever “mana” was, it hadn't made a lot of sense to her. Regardless, it was fascinating to her how he seemed to see all sorts of different things around him all the time; and it was memories of what he had described that helped her now.

Eisa visualized the connection – in her mind – between herself and the Power that was sustaining the upkeep on her Skeletal Swords ability. Although she couldn't actually see it, after a moment she thought she could almost “feel” it; a small trickle of Power like a thin string shot straight out of her towards the rotating blades circling the boar below. Using that connection she tenuously felt, she “grasped” the thread and tried to shift it – to no effect.

Panicking – because the swords were starting to smack against one of their tanks' shields – she decided to just cancel the ability. Strangely enough, though, before she could do anything, the Power reacted to her distress all on its own; she “felt” a pulse of Power pump out from her and follow the invisible string connecting to the sharp skeletal swords below.

Suddenly, an inaudible *pop* sounded in her head and she felt her ability break free from her target.

Additional pulses of Power flowed down the thread connecting to her circling blades; when she looked at how much it was taking from her, she saw her available Power dropping quickly. She estimated that it was taking nearly five times the previous upkeep of 5/min – so about 25/min. But aside from that, what shocked her the most was that her ability was no longer attached to a target.

Congratulations!

New Ability Discovered!

Untethered Skeletal Swords 1 – 0/1000

By manipulating your connection, you have learned to detach the Skeletal Swords ability from your target, allowing it to float free and be directed using additional infusions of Power and is controlled at your will. Currently, only one Untethered Skeletal Swords ability may be used at one time. As in the previous ability, the rotating swords will attack anything they come in contact with and it does not differentiate between friend and foe. Requires an upkeep cost and can be canceled at any time.

Power upkeep cost/per Untethered Skeletal Swords: 25/min

Base physical attack: 20 (Dependent upon original ability)

of swords: 5 (Dependent upon original ability)

Maximum # of Untethered Skeletal Swords abilities active at one time: 1

I...discovered an ability? She had never heard of something like that happening before, at least not in the last century or two. Before they had SDIAs, of course, every spell or ability was dependent upon what you

could stumble through to find yourself; however, ever since the Interfaces' implementation, almost everything had been discovered and automatically recorded into the implant. The fact that she hadn't heard anything about people still discovering new things meant that it was either so rare – or no one wanted to give away their secrets.

In the few seconds that it took Eisa to discover how to “untether” her ability, the room was again flooded with beasts. Although, this time larger Dire Wolves arrived with massive bears in tow. Her inattention and hesitation cost her fellow Guild members; while the incoming beasts had ignored her swords when they were attached to one of their fellow invaders, they went out of their way to avoid and go around them while they were untethered.

Two of the large bears converged on Demyr, a low E-Rated Core Power Guild member that – while still being relatively new to Adventuring – had quickly risen to such a high Rating over the last three months while part of their Guild. The influx of coinage allowed him and his fellow group members to delve more often and purchase better equipment; unfortunately, only time and experience can aid in handling intense situations – like the one that was currently mauling his face.

Eisa stood there, nearly 15 feet above the battle ranging down below, and watched frozen as Demyr clumsily blocked a single swipe from the bear on his left, only to take a bear paw to his head and neck from the one on the right. He dropped his shield in pain, clutching his face in an attempt to ward off other blows, and so was unprepared to block the follow-up blow to his studded-leather chest armor.

The power and sharpness of the bear's paws were a deadly combination as his body took the swing of the bear paw without blockage. Eisa could hear a dull *snap* as Demyr's spine was broken and his entrails

were spilled all over the floor even as he was knocked backwards into the platform behind him.

He was essentially gone before he hit the floor; a Healer got close enough to check on him and left soon after it was discovered there was no need of his services. A resting replacement quickly jumped into the gap in the line, barely beating back the bears in an attempt to stem the tide.

And all the while, Eisa's swords rotated all by themselves, for the most part avoided by those beasts trying to get to the other guards and Guild members.

I killed him. I killed Demyr. Eisa knew deep down that it wasn't her that actually did the deed, but it was plain to see that it was her fault; if the bears hadn't been avoiding her swords, they wouldn't have ganged up on the only available human in their sights. She blamed herself for his death, but she wasn't going to freeze up in self-crimination – she had had enough of that already. And if she let herself get distracted even further, it was possible that even more people could die.

Instead, she got really angry.

Eisa quickly opened up her Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface and saw how much Essence she had available: 54,239. She had been saving up for when she hit the D-Ratings, but she wasn't likely to see that if she didn't use it now. Slotting 36,000 of it into the base Skeletal Swords ability, she brought it up to level 5 with an increase in its damage output. With another 13,000 Essence, she increased the new ability she discovered; as she had expected, that unlocked something that she was hoping for.

Skeletal Swords 5 – 0/81000

Power cost of Skeletal Swords 3: 400

Power upkeep cost: 7/min

of swords: 7

Base physical attack: 30

Untethered Skeletal Swords 3 – 0/9000

Power upkeep cost/per Untethered Skeletal Swords: 40/min

Base physical attack: 30 (Dependent upon original ability)

of swords: 7 (Dependent upon original ability)

Maximum # of Untethered Skeletal Swords abilities active at one time: 3

She could now control *three* of the spinning swords of death at one time – and so she took advantage of her new ability. *I'm not going to let my mistake cost any more lives.*

As soon as she had upgraded her skill, the rotating circle of swords materialized two more of the flying weapons, adding it flawlessly to the ones already there. She looked at another bear just running in and cast another Skeletal Swords spell on it – before ripping it off and letting it fly free. A third was used on a wolf toward the back of the pack and sent rotating right in the middle of the tunnel exit.

The other two Eisa controlled with her mind, sweeping it back and forth over the small semicircle of open space, slicing up anything they came into contact with. The spinning swords did a lot of damage, but they were all relatively superficial attacks; nonetheless, there were open wounds bleeding from hundreds of cuts made by her swords all over the place. While none died directly from her spinning horizontal wheels of destruction, the weakened beasts were easily dispatched afterwards.

The only beasts that she couldn't do much about were the tall Elk that pushed through the line; they had some sort of scale-armor hide that prevented her from doing more than scratching them. However, that same defense didn't last long against fire-based attacks – which the townspeople replacements that had been recently helping on the top platform were using to whittle them down quickly. She was impressed at how powerful they had become in such a short time; of course, if they went up against something that was immune to fire, they would be essentially helpless. Not to mention, a fly could sneeze on them and cause damage – but they were nonetheless quite effective as a long-range “firepower” force.

She only had enough Power for about three minutes total of maintaining all three spinning blade circles, but she used those three minutes to devastating effect. The pressure that was threatening to break the defensive line was eased considerably, allowing the scant few fresh reinforcements to help relieve them. It felt like hours had passed by the time she had to let her Untethered Skeletal Swords drop, but she knew from her own fairly accurate internal clock that only about 40 minutes had passed since the first giant insect had been seen.

The last twenty or so wolves, bears, boars, and elk she left to everyone to finish off without the benefit of her spinning swords as she collapsed to her knees after the massive expenditure of Power. She smiled as everyone gave it their all to finish those few left inside the room, barely seeing from her vantage point that there were no more coming.

We did it. We surv—

She could sense someone nearby walking up to her and placing a hand on her shoulder. Eisa looked up from her spot on the ground and saw Fred; her smile completely fell apart when she saw his face.

“That was quite impressive, Eisa! You’re going to have to tell me how you did that later, but it’s not over yet.”

More? But we barely survived this last wave! “We can’t take much more, Fred – most of us are starting to get tapped out of Power.”

“I know – we may have to fall back. That’s not the worst of it, either.” Fred paused, as if he couldn’t figure out how to tell her something. Finally, he shook his head in resignation. “There’s something coming that I have no idea how to stop.”

Chapter 29

Fred was frankly shocked when Eisa started to manipulate the Power linking her to her Skeletal Swords ability, targeting one of the boars trying to push through the crowd of beasts trying to maul, gore, and otherwise kill the humans in front of them. He could see what was done, but not the how – and it didn't get added to his adapted abilities. Either she could suddenly see the Power flying around the room like he could, or it was some instinctual reaction that she took advantage of. Either way, he wanted to talk to her later to see how she did it.

If there was a later.

The Condensed Juvenile Treants were making their way slowly through his dungeon, having been thoroughly outpaced by the other beasts that were just now facing the united wall of Guild and guard tanks that were looking a little ragged around the edges. Fortunately (or unfortunately, for the young Guild member that got mauled by two bears), they had only lost one more person through the entire fight. There were many wounds that hadn't been healed quite yet on the defensive line still, but none of them were life-threatening. The Healers were conserving their Power for the worst cases, which meant that many of the front line and replacements were surviving with at least a deep scratch or two.

There were only a handful of Guild members that had enough Power to withstand another concentrated attack, though there were still over a hundred Gatecross townspeople that hadn't even seen combat yet. Given enough time, they would regenerate some of their Power back, but the Treants weren't going to give them that time.

“We’ve got about three dozen shrunk-down Treants and Dryads coming up next. Their exterior bark is extremely strong – my Rock Beetles aboveground could barely scratch the surface. I doubt any of our weapons will be able to pierce through it – you’ll have to rely on the townspeople to whittle them down with their fire-based attacks,” Fred told Eisa, not wanting to reveal what had him really worried.

Eisa sighed, the exhaustion from the last day evident on her face – and in her nearly empty Power. “That seems doable. We’ll have to do what we can to hold them back while our new Adventurers blast them with their Flamestrike spells. It’ll take a while, though I think we can do it...so, why did you say you didn’t know how to stop—” Eisa trailed off as she looked at Fred— “but that’s not what you’re worried about, is it? What’s going on?”

He wasn’t sure how to break it to her, but she had a right to know. “One of the nearby, higher-Rated dungeon cores must have contributed to this attack – because there is something slowly coming this way that I have no defense against. It will be at the town in around 10 minutes – and I have a feeling that there is nothing I...no, *we*...can do about it.” Fred paused for a moment, before asking, “What do you know about Emerald Dragons?”

The look of horror on her face was enough of a confirmation that she had heard of them – and that they were, as she would probably say, screwed. “I...I...uh...how big is it?” Eisa asked.

“It’s...huge. It’s so massive that we’ll probably be able to feel the ground shaking pretty soon.”

Eisa hung her head. “That’s...not good. I don’t know a lot about them, but what I’ve heard is that they are very bad news. Normally, dungeon monsters won’t follow you through a tunnel leading to a previous room if you decide to retreat; apparently, though, Emerald Dragons are one

of the few dungeon monsters that can *and will* shrink itself down and follow you through the tunnels if you disturb its rest. And the only way to survive is to either kill it – which is difficult for even B and A-Rated Adventurers – or to outrun it to outside the dungeon.”

That’s...about what I thought. Fred looked again at the gigantic, green, winged lizard slowly advancing its way towards the town of Gatecross.

Emerald Dragon (Level 1)

Vitality: 80000

Attack: 3000, Poison Breath, Tail Whip, Rending Bite, Claw Slash, Wing Buffet, Shrink

Defense: 2000, (2500 on Emerald-scale hide)

He wasn’t sure why it was walking so slowly, but it might be because it hadn’t sighted any of its prey yet. Eisa had mentioned that the Emerald Dragon would chase humans out of the dungeon and implied that it was difficult to outrun it; it was entirely possible that it was some special attribute of the giant beast that would only allow it to run fast if it saw something worth chasing after.

It didn’t matter in the end why it wasn’t moving very quickly, however – it was just delaying the inevitable. Not only did Fred doubt that any of their weapons, spells, or abilities could even make a dent in the Dragon’s literally rock-hard Emerald-scale hide, but it was possible that it could come into the dungeon and wipe them out without breaking a sweat. He thought that even one whiff of its Poison Breath attack could probably kill everyone within seconds.

It was only a Level 1 Emerald Dragon, which indicated to Fred that whoever had sent it barely had enough to create it; if they had plenty of Mana to spend, they would've either sent more than one or made one such a high level that there would be no way anyone could hope to defeat it. Not that he expected that they would be able to defeat it anyway.

"My Level 12 Rock Beetles won't be able to do anything against that monstrosity. The only other thing I have access to create is that Flower Tripper the townspeople gained so much Essence on – and I highly doubt tripping that giant lizard would do much good. I couldn't make a pit large enough to contain it for long, and *it has wings*. I'm essentially tapped out of Fire and Water Mana, but I have so much Nature Mana I don't even know what to do with it," Fred forlornly mentioned to Eisa. "I'm sorry I got you all into this mess; I really thought we had a shot."

She was silent as everyone sat on the ground where they were after the last of the beasts had fallen, relief and exhaustion warring over control of their faces. With a quick look, Fred saw that the Treants were still a few minutes off – and possibly more, as they had to maneuver through the still-burning oven room without lighting themselves on fire. He wasn't going to ruin their last moment to take a breather before everything came crashing down on them.

"Why do you only have Level 12 Rock Beetles? Is that the limit on how powerful you can make them?"

A big slap to Fred's forehead was quickly followed by a glimmer of hope.

"Because I'm an idiot. I was thinking too much like a dungeon core and not enough like a human. I keep forgetting that some of the normal rules don't apply to me and I don't have to follow them. Thank you, Eisa – you may have just saved us," Fred said, before bending down and briefly

placing his lips against hers. He seemed to remember seeing humans do that before when they wanted to thank someone, so he thought it was fitting.

Now I just hope I have enough time. He turned away without waiting for a response from Eisa and sat on the floor again with his back against the wall. “Don’t forget to tell them what’s coming up next – I’m going to do my best to stop the Dragon. I’ll have my attention elsewhere, so if you get overrun have someone carry me to the next room – we’ll make our last stand there if necessary.”

Eisa was looking strange and he hoped she heard him alright, but he didn’t take the time to find out – he needed to focus aboveground and work quickly to pull his plan off. He looked at his Dungeon Core Status and saw that his Novice Defender Creation had at some point improved to Intermediate Defender Creation and was sitting at 12%. *Must’ve been those hundreds of Level 12 Rock Beetles I made.* He hadn’t consciously noticed it, but the speed at which his insectoid defenders had been spawning had increased significantly. They no longer took nearly a minute as they did at the start; they had been popping into existence at a quarter of the time – or possibly faster.

Let’s just hope it’s enough.

Chapter 30

Fred just kissed me.

Exhaustion, despair, and now the faint tingling of desire ran through Eisa's body – which was thoroughly confusing. However, as Fred's words penetrated her foggy head, she shook herself a little and blocked all thoughts of the strange kiss from her mind. They weren't quite done yet, and they needed to get ready for the next wave – as much as she wasn't looking forward to it.

She refused to even think about the fact that an Emerald Dragon was on its way to kill them all.

So, while Fred was dealing with that issue, the rest of them had to defend against the Treants and Dryads heading their way. Eisa stood up from where she had collapsed to her knees and made her way towards the center of the room. While she hadn't been injured during the last hour of defensive battles, her whole body still felt sore from the rapid expenditure of Power and from the fatigue of constant fighting. All of which made her walk like a frail, old woman – all hunched-over and shuffling her feet.

“Nice work, everyone!” she congratulated all of those who were now looking toward her. Eisa could see tired smiles on their faces, though some of them faded when they noticed Fred slumped up against the wall with his focus elsewhere. “I know you don't want to hear this, but it's not over quite yet. There is one more wave of monsters coming down and they will be here in a few minutes. Rest while you can, and let me tell you about the plan...”

She went on to describe what was coming and what they needed to do to survive. Fortunately, many of the townspeople were eager to

contribute, as the majority of the fighting so far had been done by the Guild and the Gatecross guards. *They'll definitely get their chance.*

It was almost ten minutes of rest before they heard the first sounds of the enemy monsters coming from the next room; with exaggerated groans, everyone got to their feet and faced the tunnel entrance. Eisa had moved toward the top of the rear platforms, near enough to help a little if she was absolutely needed, but also out of the way of those who had more available Power than her. She had regenerated enough that she could use one or two abilities, but she was saving them for an emergency.

Eisa saw the tanks on the front defensive line get into formation, their replacements on hand behind them ready to intervene if required. They were almost out of arrows and bolts for the Scout-class Guild members that relied on long-range weaponry – despite the extremely large stockpile that Fred had conjured up hours ago while he was developing the inside of the dungeon. While they had recovered quite a few from the vanishing bodies of those monsters that had been killed, many of the arrow and bolt shafts had been bent or broken from the extreme force of impacts.

Joining her on the top platform were a half-dozen Mage-type Guild members who had enough Power to be effective – the rest were in the fallback room resting and allowing their Power to be regenerated; just like her, they were almost useless without Power, so it was best to stay out of the way. Filling out the rest of the top – and half of the middle, Scout-based platform – were dozens of Gatecross townspeople, all crazily ready and eager to contribute.

She couldn't see inside the tunnel from her current perspective, so the first indication she had that the enemy Treants and Dryads had arrived was the defensive line up front tensing up. Suddenly, a large brown root snaked its way into the room – its origin hidden from her view – and

reached toward the nearest Guild member, which just so happened to be Metch. As it slithered along the ground, the root – which was about as thick as Eisa’s arm – crawled up the short wall leading to the tanks; when it was close to the top, it darted forward with surprising speed and quickly wrapped around Metch’s leg.

He – as well as everyone else – was ready for that, however; as soon as it started to coil up around his leg, he chopped down with his sword and bit through most of the Treant’s appendage. Along with those on his left and right, they managed to cut through the root within two seconds, causing a scream to emerge from the tunnel that sounded eerily like two rough wooden blocks rubbing together. The now-shorter and green-sap-leaking tendril was instantly retracted, and Metch shook his leg and kicked off the portion of the root still partially wrapped around his ankle – which almost immediately melted and disappeared.

And that was when the attack began in earnest.

One after another, the Treants maneuvered themselves inside the room, their roots wiggling around their bases allowing them to amble over the ground. They looked very similar to the ones that she had initially seen beat down the north and south gates, but these ones were much, much smaller – only about six feet tall. Four of them made it into the room, followed by an equal number of Dryads who seemed to emerge from the center of the trees. As they stepped out, the bark on the Treants seemed to flow like some sort of viscous liquid, the creepy humanoid-appearing figures looking like they had just stepped out of a wooden lake. When they finished emerging, the bark snapped back into place, creating an almost impenetrable-looking barrier.

“Dryads first! Now!” Eisa shouted, directing both the townspeople and the other spell-casters on the platforms to start using their abilities.

While the walking trees could use their lower appendages to attack, they mostly just acted on instinct and grabbed things nearby. She knew from experience that the Dryads made the Treants even deadlier, using their roots like an extension of their will to devastate Adventurers with semi-intelligent attacks.

Dozens of fire-based spells rained down on the Dryads, devastating them with an overwhelming barrage of damage. A few were mis-aimed and hit the Treants, which did little damage to the already-scorched trunks of the trees – which Eisa assumed came from the area still on fire a few rooms back. Three of the feminine-looking wooden figures burst into flame from the attacks, ending their threat quickly, but the fourth was saved by being toward the back and was only hit by a couple of Flamestrike spells.

The Treants who had lost their accompanying Dryads went berserk and started bashing at the nearby defenders with their upper branches, while at the same time entangling their roots between the legs of the tanks. The surviving Dryad started to utilize its Treant's roots with more precise strikes, sending roots up and over the defenders and attempting to grab them by their necks.

Fortunately, the replacements behind the front line were able to jump in and help slice up the incoming roots with precise strikes of their swords or axes, preventing anyone from being either tripped or choked to death. A few overzealous hits with the sharp weapons ended up minimally wounding the tanks up front, but the Healers on hand were easily able to heal the few that managed cuts that drew blood. Meanwhile, the shield-line was being battered by the heavy clubbing of tree branches, leading a few of the tanks to fall to one knee under the onslaught.

“Finish off the Dryad and aim for the roots on the Treants!” Eisa shouted again, barely being heard over the cacophony of noise the large

walking trees were creating as they beat on shields like crazy drummers beating on a multitude of drums. The spell-casters kept up the barrage, quickly targeting and eliminating the last Dryad in the room, while the rest started to burn up the more-vulnerable roots of the Treants – which worked surprisingly well. One, and then two, of the Treants went down in quick succession; the downed trees allowed space for two more fresh Dryad-Treant pairings to come in to take their place.

And that was when the entire room shook so violently that nearly everyone lost their footing and fell to the ground in shock.

Eisa had felt a bit of rumbling over the last few minutes and tried to ignore it, knowing that speculation about what was going on aboveground was better left alone. Everyone else had ignored it as well, focusing on the task at hand; now, though, they couldn't ignore the intense shaking that reverberated throughout the entire dungeon. A few Mage-types fell off the upper-tier platform and tumbled to the one below, but they were largely unhurt. The Scout-types on the middle platform held up surprisingly well, with a few of their number actually managing to keep their feet.

For the front line, however, the sudden jerk of the room upset their balance so far that they fell either to their backs – or right into the bashing arms of the Treants. Five defenders (she couldn't see exactly who they were, as everything was a mad jumble) pitched forward, where they were horrifically beaten by the largely unaffected walking trees. By the time everyone picked themselves up, it was too late for the – now that she could get a quick look – three Gatecross guards and two Guild members who had fallen victim to the savage destruction the berserk Treants brought upon them.

But now the line was a mess. Even with the replacements on hand, the loss of so many so quickly was demoralizing and the cohesion they had

before was lost as everyone struggled to stay alive. Eisa saw this and yelled for a retreat. “Full defensive retreat! Up the stairs – and someone grab Fred—”

Another powerful full-room jerk made many of the people stumble and fall, but they recovered much faster than before; none of the tanks on the front line managed to fall into danger again, luckily. However, it was obvious now that retreat was the best call, as there was mass confusion after the second room-shake. Metch quickly took control down below.

“On me! Defend the rear while everyone else escapes – don’t bother attacking, just block everything you can!” the D-Rated Guild member shouted over the chaos, rallying the flagging forces keeping everyone else safe.

That was all they needed, apparently, as everyone started to run up the stairs and stream into the room beyond. A half-dozen Fighter-types crouched behind their shields blocking the continuing branch bashes by the Treants, while those defenders still on the bottom tier slipped by and retreated toward the top of the room. The stairway leading upwards was only wide enough for one person to move up at a time – but despite that limitation, everyone was out within half a minute. Metch took the rearguard position as the others filed backwards up the stairs.

Just as the next-to-last person started to retreat, a large root suddenly snuck in from the side, grasping another guard by the name of Acetle by the foot and dragging him away toward the looming trees. Eisa saw this and popped her Shield of Darkness on him, temporarily preventing much of the branch-bashing damage that the Treants were already raining down on him as he screamed in terror. Three of the townspeople near her at the top of the platforms shot their Flamestrike spells toward the root grasping Acetle by the foot; two of them missed the wiggling appendage by a hair’s-breadth,

but the third hit it square in the center, burning through the root within seconds.

“Get up and run!” Metch shouted at the struggling guard, who stopped screaming in terror as he looked down and saw his foot was now free. Two other roots tried to grab onto him while he got up and ran for the stairs, but Eisa’s Shield prevented them from grabbing on. Just as Acetle got to the stairs and ran up them, her shield disappeared – but it had saved him.

I may have messed up earlier, but I’m going to do my darnedest to keep everyone else alive.

Metch and the rest quickly ran up the stairs as well, leaving behind the Treants and Dryads who were quickly starting to fill up the room as they managed to climb up the small rise to the lowest tier. Eisa knew that they probably had a little bit of time before they had to defend again, because there was no way the Treants were going to be able to fit up the stairway – they were just too wide. The delay was needed, however, as everyone collapsed in the next room, out of breath and out of energy after climbing numerous steps to safety.

She heard the gate that Fred had told her about drop as Metch knocked away the thin stone block that kept it elevated in the air. They were safe – at least for the moment.

A room-shake, followed quickly by another one, marked another battle waging aboveground. *I wonder if he’s having better luck than us—*

At the thought, she panicked and looked around for Fred; she relaxed as she saw him propped up against the far wall, where someone who had picked him up had set him. He still looked largely oblivious to his immediate surroundings, so she supposed he was doing ok. A third,

stronger quake sent those still standing to the ground, joining those that were already lying down exhausted.

At least, I hope he's doing ok...

Chapter 31

I can't believe I let myself be blinded by the way the other dungeon cores do things.

Fred transferred his focus aboveground and saw that the town of Gatecross was deserted of all foreign dungeon defenders. The only things up there were the still-burning walls that had been pushed to the side so that the beasts could go by, the boiling water pits, and – of course – his Level 12 Rock Beetles. Of which there were about 300 of them; they were all frozen in inactivity, since there was nothing left for them to attack.

None of which would do a lick of good against the Emerald Dragon monstrosity headed their way.

It took Eisa's innocent question for Fred to get thinking well enough again to figure out what he needed to do. From his few lessons about dungeon defenders from his parents – who taught him only a little about them because the knowledge was something that he couldn't do much with at the time, the defenders in most dungeons usually only ranged in levels between 1 and 19.

The reason for this – and he had seen it himself when he had created the level 20 Flower Tripper – was that the higher the level, the more expensive it was in terms of Mana requirements. Not only that, but the benefits of creating a higher-level defender provided diminishing returns. The jump in their strength was fairly proportional between levels 1 and 19; after that, though, the increase was only relatively small in comparison to the higher Mana cost. Therefore, it was preferable to just change to a different, more powerful defender with a higher initial cost than to continue increasing levels on an initially weaker defender. For example, it was more

cost-effective in terms of strength to have a Mature Dryad at Level 1 than to have a Juvenile Dryad at Level 20.

But that didn't mean that you couldn't still create a Level 20 Juvenile Dryad. Or even a Level 100 Juvenile Dryad if you wanted it. In fact, he wasn't even sure there was a max Level that could be reached; he doubted anyone had ever tried going that high because of the extraordinarily expensive cost of something like that.

Which Fred didn't have to worry about, because he had so much Nature Mana practically flooding his dungeon and territory that he didn't know what else to do with it.

To start his plan off, he looked at all 300+ Level 12 Rock Beetles and forcibly eliminated them, causing them to melt into the ground and leaving behind the Nature Mana he had invested into them – which turned out to be quite a lot. Next, he brought out the blueprint for a Level 1 Rock Beetle and placed the small wire-frame form about 30 feet from his dungeon entrance. Instead of filling it up with the nearby Mana, Fred started to mentally increase its Level; he watched it grow significantly as it reached Level 12...and then he shot past it. Level 20, 30, 50, 100, 200, 500, 1000...the Beetle frame grew and grew, expanding so much that it was no longer contained by the buildings on either side of the killing-street he had originally created.

He had to move it so that it was poised above the buildings, with its six legs draping over far edges. Its razor-sharp mandibles up front were now so long that they looked like giant trees sticking out the front of his own monstrosity. Once he neared Level 1800, Fred slowed down and stopped – and hoped he had enough Nature Mana available to fully infuse his blueprint. The walls of Gatecross barely contained it anymore and he

was worried that he wouldn't have enough Mana or time to fully bring it to reality.

Fred gathered up all the Nature Mana he could find and started filling up the blueprint. The amount outside filled up about a third of the wire-frame; fortunately, there was much, much more underground in his dungeon. He quickly siphoned every drop of Nature Mana he could find and pumped it into the form, watching it fill up until it was nearly to the top...and then he ran out. He pushed the nearly 100 points he had in his own Mana pool and watched the amount in the blueprint increase slightly. There were two Ensnaring Vines left on the wooden frame aboveground, most likely because they were in an area where the beasts hadn't been near, and he destroyed those to add it to the form...and he was completely spent – at approximately 99%.

No! I was so close!

He knew from his experiments trying to create defenders using Unconverted Mana that he would end up losing a small portion of the Mana he had infused into the form if it was unsuccessful, so Fred was wary of destroying the blueprint and starting over with a lower-Leveled Rock Beetle; instead, he tried to look for an alternative.

He knew that his Unconverted Mana definitely wouldn't work with it from his unsuccessful earlier tries because the blueprints required Elemental Mana. The fact of which gave him an idea.

Fred absorbed all of the Fire and Water Mana from inside the boiling pits and still-burning walls; since he had originally placed the two Elements inside the defenses, they came out in the same form – if significantly less than the initial amount. With the extra 85 total Mana added to his reserve, he had a total of 55 Water and 47 Fire Mana – which he immediately sent into the wire-frame form poised over the top of

Gatecross. The top portion of the blueprint filled with a mixture of blue and red colors, which was barely visible apart from the blazing green of the rest of it.

And it worked!

The giant legs of the Level 1800 Rock Beetle started to form from the ground up, progressing so quickly that Fred thought the entire thing would be done in the matter of a few moments if it continued the way it was. Unfortunately, as soon as the body started to materialize, the speed of creation was slowed considerably. It crept upwards, now moving so lethargically that he was worried that it wouldn't be done in time.

Another look at the Emerald Dragon showed that it was getting closer to the town; at its current speed, Fred estimated that it would arrive within a couple of minutes. Which, looking at his colossal Rock Beetle, would be much too soon – he needed to slow it down or delay it somehow.

Fire Mana: 1/131 (1)

Water Mana: 0/131 (1)

Nature Mana: 0/130 (1)

Unconverted Mana: 26009 (85)

He could try to make a giant pit with his massive amount of Unconverted Mana, but the creation of it would probably take even longer than the Beetle. The same went with trying to make anything else with his Unconverted Mana – he just wasn't fast enough with building dungeon “rooms” or anything the size that would be effective. Besides, the Dragon had wings and could fly, so a large pit wouldn't delay it long – or *at all*, which was more likely.

He was essentially out of options, so he did the only thing he could think of – burn the wooden “walls” on top of the stone walls. He wasn’t exactly sure what it would accomplish, but he was hoping that the sight of the flames would at least delay the Dragon a little bit. He had one point of Fire Mana and immediately used it to create a large flame inside the wooden structure to the north near the gate – which the massive beast was heading straight for.

Fortunately, the wooden scraps and exposed dry wood caught fire quickly, spreading over fifty feet in each direction within a couple of minutes – and perfectly timed for when the Emerald Dragon arrived. The massive winged lizard paused in its approach; after a moment, it ponderously headed for a spot on the wall that hadn’t caught fire yet. By the time it got there, however, the fire had spread far enough that the way in was now blocked by new flames.

It would’ve been humorous to Fred if it hadn’t been literally a life-and-death situation. The Emerald Dragon was at least 50 feet tall and twice as long; with a quick hop, it could’ve just jumped over the walls. Even better, it could’ve just flown over and been fine. Regardless of its reasons, by the time it had gone all the way around looking for a way in, the original spot where the fire had been burning had fallen and left a sizable gap that allowed the Dragon to pass through without having to contend with flames.

And the delay it caused was enough for Fred’s new Dungeon Defender to finish materializing.

Scorching Water Beetle (Level 1800)

Vitality: 62000

Attack: 2700, (50 Fire damage, 40 Water damage)

Defense: 1400, (1800 on shell and mandibles)

Not only had the Beetle grown to monumental proportions, reaching at least 100 feet long from rear to the end of the mandibles, but it had also changed its actual properties. The Scorching Water Beetle now had some Fire and Water damage applied to its main attack, though it was small in proportion to the amount he had infused into the blueprint. The fact that he could combine different Elements into his blueprint made him think about some interesting possibilities – but he had to live long enough to experiment with them, however.

The Emerald Dragon easily stepped over the burnt-topped stone walls, avoiding even a single ember from the still-burning walls to either side. Fred turned his new gigantic Beetle around so that it was facing towards the incoming dragon; its massive legs moved slowly but powerfully, demolishing three buildings – including the town's DAS headquarters – in the process like they were scraps of paper. When it was lined up with the Emerald Dragon, he instructed it to attack.

Unlike the other dungeon defenders that had attacked the people of Gatecross and invaded his dungeon, the Emerald Dragon was under no stipulation that it not attack other defenders. Fred figured this was because it had been sent out on its own and hadn't been expected to have to need that stipulation; regardless of the reason, the Dragon fought back.

His Beetle moved its body so that its mandibles sliced right up against the neck of the Dragon, slicing apart the Emerald-scale hide and sending flakes of rock-hard outer armor flying everywhere. A torrent of green-tinged red blood ran down the outside of the relatively shallow cut, proving that the powerful winged lizard wasn't invulnerable. Unfortunately, that was the only free shot his defender was going to get.

The massive lizard screamed out in pain, before quickly snapping its long neck forward. Fangs pierced deeply into the shell of his Beetle, allowing the Dragon to grab on and lift the gigantic insect into the air. Fred wasn't sure what its plan was; throw it, slam it into the ground, or shake it back and forth – all viable options. However, despite being the same size, the colossal Beetle was much heavier than the Dragon had realized.

About 20 feet off the ground, Fred's defender dropped to the ground, having snapped one of the Dragon's fangs off from the roof of its mouth; its weight was so great that it nearly tore the bottom jaw off, as well, but it was saved when the now-one-fanged winged lizard spit the Beetle out in reaction to the impromptu dental work it just experienced.

Fred could vaguely feel the ground shake around his physical body, though the experience was quite muted compared to either the humans in his dungeon or the monsters fighting aboveground. His defender stood back up after the fall – which was relatively unhurt from the sudden drop, though black ichor dripped out of the wound in its side. A few more buildings were squashed flat, but it was no big loss.

Scorching Water Beetle (Level 1800)

Vitality: 58200

The Dragon had backed up against the northeastern wall, trying to recover from the injury to its mouth, so the Beetle moved in to attack again – and destroyed two other buildings in the process, leaving just two still standing near the southern gate. Once it started actually moving, his defender began to scuttle quickly towards the winged lizard; noticing the incoming peril, the Dragon instinctively swung its body around and flicked

its Emerald-scaled covered tail toward his Beetle and hit it square in the forward mandibles.

His giant insect defender went spinning like a discus across the town, hitting and demolishing the western wall as it came to a stop. Fortunately, it hadn't been flipped over; Beetles like his defender were notorious for not being able to right themselves quickly – or sometimes at all. Unfortunately, there was a large crack in his defender's right mandible, and the impact with the wall severely injured its left middle leg. When it stood back up, it was still able to move, but had to correct its scuttling direction as it threw itself back into the fight.

Scorching Water Beetle (Level 1800)

Vitality: 46050

The Emerald Dragon actually ended up worse from its instinctual attack. Its tail had been almost completely severed halfway up from the tip, a few flaps of skin and Emerald-scale hide the only thing keeping it on as the same green-tinged blood poured out from the massive wound. More trumpeting screams erupted from its throat as it looked at its injured appendage in confusion and pain. Apparently fed up with all the injuries it had incurred while on the ground, the Dragon started to flap its wings frantically, rising off the ground before his Beetle could arrive.

Now unable to attack its airborne opponent, his Beetle stopped its advance. The Emerald Dragon took advantage of his defender's immobility and dove straight for it, intending to use its extremely sharp-looking claws to slash his Beetle up with impunity. Luckily for Fred, the lack of a full tail anymore ridiculously hampered the winged lizard's ability to maintain its balance during flight.

Instead of a deadly graceful swoop and slice like it was probably intending, the Dragon instead crashed into the top of Fred's Beetle claw-first and sent his defender slamming down from the impact. The lizard bounced off, broke a few claws on either hand, and snapped a wing in the process; it tumbled across the town to crash into the southern wall, where the fire was still going strong on the wooden portion of the wall. The disturbance caused some of it to fall right on top of the injured Dragon, including its still-bleeding tail; the fire caused even more damage that the massive winged lizard didn't hesitate to tell everyone about. As a result of the burning wooden wall, however, the heavily bleeding wound was partially cauterized.

Scorching Water Beetle (Level 1800)

Vitality: 24430

There were large slices along the back of Fred's Beetle caused by the claws of the Emerald Dragon, which were leaking even more black ichor all over. Worse than that, though, was the fact that the powerful impact managed to snap another leg, leaving his defender with only one good leg on its left side and three good ones on its right. It could stand up – barely – but when it tried, it just fell right over again. *This isn't good – he can't attack anymore!*

When he looked at the Vitality of the Emerald Dragon, he saw that it had sustained enough injuries to bring it down to a third of its health, and most of the damage was caused by itself. Regardless of its remaining Vitality, however, it was still mobile – unlike Fred's own dungeon defender.

The now flightless lizard had no tail to attack with, couldn't bite due to a missing fang, and couldn't slash with its now-mangled claws; the only

other attack it had in its repertoire was something that Fred was hoping he could avoid having used on his dungeon defender – but there was nothing he could do about it. Or was there...

The Emerald Dragon lumbered toward his struggling Scorching Water Beetle and got to within twenty feet of its mandibles. His defender made a mighty effort to throw itself forward, only to end up a few feet short of striking its target with its only viable weapon. The lizard, however, was another case entirely. After a lengthy inhalation, the Dragon blew out a fog of putrid-green-colored gas that fully encased his Beetle in a miasma of poison. The cloud of toxic death was so thick that it flowed into his dungeon, drifting into his whirlpool room, where the frantic movement of the water forced the air to circulate and stay put.

Fred watched his defender's Vitality steadily drop as the Poison Breath attack from the Dragon ate away at its outer shell. After a few seconds, the deadly poison started to eat away at its legs, forcing it to the ground in one final slam that shook the ground with finality. There was nothing he could do to move it away from the cloud of toxic breath, so it was with a heavy heart that he watched it succumb to the severe damage inflicted upon it.

It took less than a minute for the last of its Vitality to drain away; the entire time it was being eaten away by the poison cloud the Dragon inched closer and closer, getting a good look at the enemy that had damaged it so much. It was obviously immune to the toxic miasma it emitted, so it was no big deal for it to stick its head in the cloud and watch the final moments of the Beetle's life ebb away.

Fred couldn't help but remember his old bodyguard Frozzles and the poison he used to secrete along his back – and how flammable it was. He

wasn't confident that this poison had exactly the same properties, but he had nothing to lose by trying.

He had regenerated a grand total of 1 Fire Mana during the entire battle; however, there were still some smoldering ruins of the outer wall that had fallen outside the stone barrier. He quickly extinguished the few flames that remained and absorbed another 5 Fire Mana in the process. With the “hefty” quantity of flammable mana at his veritable fingertips now, he placed them right on top of the slowly melting remains of his gargantuan Beetle – only feet away from the somehow-pleased look on the face of the Emerald Dragon.

And then he held his breath as he forced the Fire Mana to become a giant fireball.

Chapter 32

The fallback room was a simple-yet-effective affair. The whole setup reminded Eisa of an arena she had seen in the capital; a large circular open area was surrounded by tiered platforms reaching up to the top of the room. However, unlike the arena she had seen before, the open area was at the bottom of a deep pit, accessible on one end by the tunnel leading from the previous room they just retreated from and by a winding staircase located behind a massive stone gate on the opposite side. Once that gate was closed, there was very little chance that they could escape themselves without jumping down the 60-foot drop to the bottom. Unless Fred was there to let them out, of course.

From atop the tiered platforms, a short wall separated the bottom tier from the pit, safeguarding those above from accidentally slipping and falling to their deaths. Lined up along that bottom tier was almost every townspeople that had gained an ability to use Flamestrike, as well as every Guild member that had any type of long-range attack abilities. By the time everyone had recovered from the massive shaking from above and rested a moment, the Treants and their Dryad “masters” had managed to make it through the previous room and entered into the tunnel.

It was only seconds after the first pair entered the room that the Treant began to grow. It shot up from 6 feet to topping over 25 feet – their original form that she had seen aboveground. Fortunately, even with that height boost, they couldn’t reach the defenders at the top of the pit – who quickly started raining down spells, abilities, and attacks on both the Treant and the Dryad.

The massive walking tree managed to shield the Dryad from many of the attacks by throwing itself in harm's way, but it took massive damage as a result. Without its smaller, condensed form, the bark along its outside caught fire and started to burn. The flaming Treant beat at the stone gate blocking the way up with its smoldering branches while the Dryad manipulated the now-larger roots along the bottom and attempted to reach the defenders up top. The roots couldn't quite reach the top of the 60-foot pit, luckily, though they did get close.

In its death throes, the half-dead Treant managed to smack the stone gate with one of its branches so hard that everyone could hear a large *crack* as a fracture in the stone appeared. Fortunately, that was the end of that particular Treant, and the Dryad followed it in death right afterwards. *Easy enough*, Eisa thought.

Of course, the damage to the stone gate *just had to* be seen by the six other Treant-Dryad pairs now filling the bottom of the pit. Almost as one, each of the walking trees expanded to their full height; with their larger and longer roots, the Dryads used them to start pushing and pulling against the gate, hoping to dislodge or crack the barrier even further.

"Concentrate fire on those roots! We can't allow them to get access to the stairway!" Eisa shouted. She was worried about the integrity of the only thing keeping the monsters at bay; if it was destroyed, it would be easy enough for the Treants to condense back down to a smaller size and make their way up to the defenders up top. The stairway opening could be defended by the recovering tanks for a while, but it would be hard to attack back from that position.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eisa saw Harriette next to her create a large wall of fire that covered the front of the stone gate, reaching nearly twelve feet high and preventing most of the roots from easily accessing the

barrier. Even from her position nearly 80 feet away, she could feel the intense heat emanating from it.

“I can’t maintain that for more than a minute,” Harriette told her in a strained voice, as she slumped against the half-wall in exhaustion.

“Hopefully that will be enough,” Eisa responded, flinging out a Shadow Strike at a Dryad. “Target the Dryads while Harriette’s Fire Wall is still active!”

The smaller tree-women were milling around, trying to figure out how to get around the wall of fire – and were perfect targets. Now that more time had passed, even more pairings had entered the large open area, until there were over a dozen all ready and waiting to destroy the stone gate. *If we can’t lessen their numbers, they’ll have the barrier down in seconds when the Fire Wall goes down.*

Eisa was nearly out of Power; even with what she had regenerated over the last few minutes, she had only one more Shadow Strike she could cast. Her last spell joined dozens of others as they slammed into the Dryads, utterly destroying five of them in a matter of seconds. Many of the others still had a little bit of Power to play with, and they ruthlessly slaughtered another four before the wall of fire sputtered and died away.

The Treants who had lost their Dryads went berserk again; however – without direction and a clear enemy to fight – they ran to the nearest walls and started to bash on them with wild abandon. Quite a few people were knocked off their feet at the crazy barrage, as it felt like the entire set of platforms were being shaken apart. Fortunately, none of the attacks did any actual damage; they were protected by some sort of force that she thought only Fred could explain.

The same couldn’t be said for the stone gate. By some lucky happenstance, none of the berserk Treants had targeted the barrier in their

rage; unfortunately, the shaking of the nearby platforms was enough to damage it even more, and Eisa saw the crack that had begun start to widen and lengthen considerably. When the remaining Dryads used their partner's roots to start grasping and pulling at it again, it didn't last more than a couple of seconds before a final, resounding *snap* echoed through the room.

"To the stairway!" Metch called out, pointing to a few of his fellow tanks as they ran and converged at the top of the platforms' accessway. Deecy, Fred's Dire Wolf companion, was there as well in her giant form, the first time she had a chance to participate in the battle; she wasn't really conducive to their plan of attack before this, because of the way things were set up to take advantage of the Guild's strengths. However, it was obvious now that she would do everything that she could to fight off whatever came up those stairs.

Eisa knew that once the monsters started to enter the stairway, it would be much harder to see and hit them. Once they made it to the top of the platforms, it would be easier to hit them – but the opposite was also true: the defenders would be vulnerable to attacks as well.

"Stop them from entering!" she shouted, hoping to rally the quickly depleting Power pools of the defenders to hold them off longer.

A fresh barrage of spells and attacks managed to take out the closest pairing to the doorway, but it wasn't long until the defenders' castings were slowed to the point where it was random and sporadic. It wasn't their fault, though; they didn't have the Power reserves to maintain a long fight. For the townspeople of Gatecross, being a Researcher helped with their Power Regen, but for most of them it meant that they might gain enough back to cast another spell every minute – which was just not quite fast enough to

prevent the first Treant from getting close enough to condense down and step into the entrance to the stairway.

Before it could move more than a foot up the stairway, the room suddenly shook so violently that everyone – including the Treants and Dryads – fell to the ground in a sprawling jumble. Eisa collapsed across the half-wall and nearly toppled down into the pit, but she was able to somehow hold on; unfortunately, a half-dozen townspeople couldn't stop themselves and plummeted down. From what she could see, they survived the impact, though they were severely hurt with at least a few broken bones. *If we can get them back up here, we can heal them—*

“EVERYONE GET DOWN BEHIND THE WALL!” a scream erupted from behind her.

She belatedly realized it was Fred as she clung to the wall still, confusion and disorientation slowing her thoughts. However, when she saw a fiery glow coming from the tunnel leading out from the room – followed by the eruption of a fireblast so large and powerful it was nearly incomprehensible – something *clicked* in her head and she flung herself down behind the wall along with hundreds of others.

A wave of roaring heat and light assaulted her senses and the air in the room was so hot it felt like her lungs were going to melt as she breathed in a panicked state. Luckily for everyone atop the platforms who had ducked behind the wall, the intense fireblast only lasted for a couple of seconds before it faded, disappearing almost as fast as it arrived.

Eisa lay there for a few moments, draped across Harriette who had collapsed to the floor as soon as Fred shouted for everyone to get down. When she figured the immediate danger had passed, she grabbed onto the top of the wall to help her up and immediately pulled her hand back in startled pain. *That wall is hot!*

Instead, she picked herself up without the aid of the wall and stood up cautiously. What she saw caused her mouth to open in pure shock – everything below the lip of the wall had been burnt to a crisp. She could see the remains of the Treants and Dryads, all black and charred, before they quickly started to melt away; the bodies of the townspeople who had fallen just before the fireblast were almost melted away as well, with just the barest hints of flesh still remaining on their burnt and charred bones.

Even the stone-made walls of the dungeon itself, which had withstood the berserk bashing from the Treants before without harm, were looking a little worse for wear. Black streaks leading into the room covered almost every inch of the walls, ceiling, and floors; not only that, but in a few places the stone almost appeared to have melted slightly.

Looking around at the rest of the upper platforms, she saw that everyone else along the bottom tier had survived whatever had happened, though there were a few that obviously needed healing from the burns they had sustained from the intense heat. “Healers! Let’s get everyone patched up!” she yelled out, coughing a little at her scorched throat. *I guess everyone probably needs a little healing, including me.*

Eisa could wait on her own healing, however; she wanted to find out what the heck that was all about – and what had cost the lives of six more townspeople. She saw Fred at the top of the upper tier platform, his clothes almost completely burnt off and his skin blackened all over. *He must have been almost completely exposed to the blast.*

Eisa rushed up the platforms, panicked and worried that he had died from the intense heat and flames. “Merida! I need your help!” she yelled out as best she could, which started a coughing fit that barely subsided as she reached his side. Relief washed over her as she saw his chest rise and fall, even if it was doing it raggedly; even as she watched, she could see the

barest hints of his charred skin miraculously repairing itself. *Fred really isn't human, is he?*

Merida arrived shortly after, with the left sleeve of her shirt completely burnt off. Whatever damage had been done to her actual arm had been healed, and the skin looked completely unblemished – which looked strange to see after seeing the still-blackened edges of her clothing.

“Oh my goodness! How is he still alive?” the Healer asked, shock at seeing Fred’s state written completely over her face.

“He’s...a bit special.”

“I’d say so! Anyone else should be dead from this and...wait—is he healing already? Did you have enough Power to start the process?” Merida asked, confusion mixed with wonder now warring with each other in her expression.

“No...like I said, he’s a bit special.”

The Healer just shook her head and got to work healing the burnt skin and charred lungs of the nearly dead Fred. After a few moments, most of the critical wounds had been healed and Merida sat back and sighed.

“That’s all I can do at the moment; he should be fine for now and I have to go see if anyone else needs my healing before I’m completely out of Power. Once everyone else has been stabilized, I’ll see if I can help finish the healing if I have anything left. Though, based upon his natural healing that I can still see at work, he may not have need of my services.”

Eisa thanked her and looked down at Fred, seeing that there were still a few places on his body that were still pretty scorched, but at least his internal systems had been healed up. It was only when she looked over his body, checking on the progress of his regenerative properties, that she fully registered that he was essentially naked – and that he was “fully exposed” to everyone.

She felt heat that had nothing to do with the fireblast rising in her cheeks as Eisa pulled out a spare blanket from her PIB (which she always kept in there in case of emergencies) and draped it over his still-healing form. He hadn't woken up yet, but when he did, she didn't want *her* Fred walking around completely naked.

As much as she wanted to stay by his side and speed up his healing when she regenerated a little Power herself, she knew that she needed to see how the rest of the Guild and townspeople were faring. Eisa – and maybe Metch – were as close to a form of authority as it was going to get right now, and she needed to make sure her people were taken care of. Therefore, she got up and started walking to the various groups of Guild members and townspeople who were looking shocked, confused, happy, sad, and a myriad of other emotions as they started to process what had just happened.

She could sympathize with them – she felt exactly the same way.

From personal experience, she knew Fred would heal on his own and what Merida had done had only sped up the process; and based on how selfless Fred had been acting lately, she knew that he would want her and the other Healer-classes taking care of the others first.

She just hoped that he had taken care of the Emerald Dragon problem; because if not, then none of them were in any sort of shape to stop it.

Part V – Crime and Punishment

Chapter 33

Celestius knew they had still made good time, despite their slow start, but his impatience was wearing his outward calm a little thin. One thing after another had come up to delay them on their trek north; a journey that should've taken only a few hours had instead taken almost a full day. If only two of their group members hadn't been out carousing the night before, they would've left as soon as he had gotten the word from the Syndicate Master.

Finally, though, they were on the road leading to the most-northern town in the Kingdom of Craytion – Gatecross. From the little information he had about it, the town consisted of less than 200 actual residents and there were usually even fewer regular Adventurers operating from there. In fact, it could be almost be considered a village if it hadn't been for the stone walls guarding the place – and the presence of actual Kingdom guards there, as well. There was also mention of a small hunting and trapping village called Northend even farther north, but it was so inconsequential that he was told to ignore it in his investigation.

When the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Master had contacted the S-2nd-Rated Holy Paladin a little over twenty-four hours ago, Celestius thought that his talents and Power were being wasted on a small errand. However, once the exact nature of the investigation he was in charge of leading was revealed to him, he realized that this could potentially be the most important thing to happen in the Kingdom in centuries. *Actually, “important” may not be the best word – more like “devastating”.*

Supposedly, the Head Cartographer had noticed that not just one, but *three*, different dungeon cores had been taken from their dungeons and

the one or ones responsible for the crime was in a backwater town up north called Gatecross. And a “crime” it certainly was; not only would the entire town of Gatecross probably suffer retribution from the nearby dungeon cores, but it was possible that the spread of the reprisal would spread even farther south – and into more-densely populated Kingdom territory. And that was just what was expected from the theft of a single core.

He couldn’t even imagine what was going to happen to the Kingdom when the nearby dungeons discovered that *three* different cores were stolen.

Celestius had the authority granted by the King himself to dispense judgment on those responsible for the crime, as well as permission to attempt to appease the nearby dungeon cores. If he could somehow acquire the cores before whoever had taken them disappeared, he was to try to return them to a corresponding type and beg for forgiveness. It was a little-known tidbit of information at the top of the Syndicate command structure that the dungeons they delved through on a daily basis were – if not completely alive – then at least intelligent enough to be able to understand human speech.

It was hoped that they could return the cores before any type of retribution was enacted on the town, but he was also told that – if need be – the entire town of Gatecross and even Northend (including any Syndicate members still there) were entirely disposable. The alternative was that the retribution they were expecting to fall on the thieves would spread to other parts of the Kingdom – which Celestius was tasked to prevent at all costs. Even if it meant the sacrifice of hundreds of theoretically innocent people.

Word had gotten to him along the road that the Syndicate member in charge of the DAS outpost in Gatecross had escaped the town and was spreading the word down south about preparing for a defense. Jaymes – the

Syndicate outpost representative – reported that someone had actually destroyed the Plant Dungeon’s core, but Celestius had his doubts about that; it was reportedly nearly impossible to damage a core, even for himself, and it was unlikely that someone that was reportedly a brand-new Adventurer could do something like that. He had wanted to question the representative himself, but he didn’t have time to track him down – he and his group needed to get to Gatecross as soon as possible before it was too late.

The defensive preparations every city and town to the north was undergoing had delayed them the most. Barriers to entry and exit had made navigating through the different settlements a chore, and eventually he made the decision to leave the road and travel across the countryside, completely ignoring any other villages, towns, and cities along the way.

If it hadn’t been for Rycky’s abilities as an A-4th-Rated Enhancer, the journey up north might’ve taken weeks instead of a full day. The speed enhancements their advanced Mage/Researcher class could bestow on them was priceless when it came to traveling quickly around the Kingdom. While Rycky couldn’t do much in the way of offensive attacks, the support he provided to “enhance” everyone else in the group was invaluable: quicker reflexes, boosted strength, tougher exteriors, and sharpened minds. Of course, it was all limited by the A-Rated Enhancer’s available Power pool, but his Power Regen was so great that he could maintain a single group enhancement indefinitely without having to wait for it to refill.

Still, having to maintain that single speed enhancement for more than 20 hours took a toll on a person. The constant expenditure of Power was draining, even if it was constantly being regenerated; Rycky was starting to look more than a little rough around the edges and appeared to be sleep-running his way down the road. Celestius didn’t think he would be much good in a fight if it came to that at their destination, but he doubted

they would face too much in the way of opposition. It was highly unlikely there was anyone nearby that could challenge a group consisting of an S-Rated Holy Paladin and four high-A-Rated others.

He looked at the others and saw that, while they looked a little tired from the long day of running and maneuvering through towns, they still looked up to a fight. None of them had been told the *exact* details about their mission, only that it was extremely important to the Kingdom's safety – and that it paid extraordinarily well for their future silence. And although Ratings and classes were usually kept relatively private, as the leader of their expedition, Celestius had been given specifics about each Adventurer on his team.

Annalyn was running behind the “sleep-running” Rycky, an A-9th-Rated Spellblade decked out in a full set of enchanted blood-red and black-accented leather armor that conformed perfectly to her slim, diminutive body. The speed and mind enchantments on the armor were an expensive addition by one of the top-tier Enchanters the Syndicate had access to, though she had acquired it even before she was selected for the mission. It was said – where she couldn't hear, at least – that the reason the color of her armor was blood-red was because she liked to slice up large, pushy men who thought that they could take advantage of her small stature.

Whether or not that was true, she was one of the best Spellblades the Syndicate had, other than a few S-Rated ones that were currently too far away delving through some difficult dungeons at the moment. Annalyn was as deadly with her short mithril sword as she was with her combination of elemental-type spells and was able to combine them flawlessly in combat. She was an excellent all-around handy person to have on his team.

Next was the A-6th-Rated Blood Monk, Goderik. Celestius wasn't a fan of Blood Monks, nor was he alone in his dislike of them, but they could

be extraordinarily useful in a variety of scenarios. As a Holy Paladin, Celestius could break off from his usual tanking duties to either marginally heal his groupmates or deal small amounts of holy damage to his enemies; the Blood Monk excelled in those two areas.

Goderik was their Healer and spellcasting fighter all rolled up in one: he could heal his group by using either the blood of their enemies or his own and could also use that same blood source to enact all sorts of different afflictions on whatever deadly monsters the group encountered. The only drawback to the class was that they were practically useless fighting against creatures that didn't bleed or have internal systems that could be disrupted by the introduction of tainted blood – like rock golems and certain elementals. Regardless, he would always be able to heal, provided he had relatively fresh blood around him.

Bringing up the rear of their little group, but definitely not last on his usefulness factor, was the A-7th-Rated Tracker-Sniper, Fletch. While he was a sharpshooter with his specially enchanted bow, the main reason he was along was his ability to track almost anything. His skills had never been used to track dungeon cores – since there hadn't been an incident like the one Celestius was in charge of investigating in recent memory – but there was only one way to find out. Even if he couldn't actually follow the cores, he could definitely track the ones responsible once it was discovered who had performed the theft.

It was a good team, though it wasn't his normal group that he frequently delved through dungeons in. It was just happenstance that he was in the capital because he had just finished visiting with some of his family; the rest of his group was far to the south, delving through a couple of easy C-Rated Water dungeons without him, trying to collect some hard-to-find ingredients for the Syndicate's Head Alchemist. They didn't need

him there for that, as there was very little that could harm them seriously in a C-Rated dungeon. He had promised to meet up as soon as his mini-vacation was done with, but now he wasn't sure when he'd actually get back to them.

"Did you feel that?" Fletch suddenly blurted out, causing them all to stop. Well, all but Rycky, who kept running blindly ahead, but Celestius caught him before he could get more than a couple of steps.

"What did you feel, Fletch?" Annalyn asked, unsheathing her short sword and looking around the sparse forest looking for threats.

Everyone else prepared themselves quickly for any danger as well; it was a good habit that had saved each of them more than they could count inside of a dungeon. Of course, they weren't inside of a dungeon right now, and there shouldn't be anything out in the forest that could hope to harm them.

"I...don't know. It felt like the ground shook a little."

Everyone looked around at what it could be, but the forest was quiet. "It could just be your imagination, Fletch. We *have* been running for—" Celestius started to say but was cut off by a distant roar of pain that they could plainly hear.

"Hurry! I'm not sure what that was, but I'm almost certain it was coming from that way." Fletch pointed down the road to Gatecross, and the Holy Paladin could see a slight rise in the landscape ahead. *Hopefully we can get a glimpse of Gatecross and determine what's going on. I hope we aren't too late, and the town isn't already destroyed.*

Although Celestius didn't care overly much about the safety of the people in the town (he liked to think he cared as much as any human being would), they were all disposable as far as he was concerned and was ordered. He only worried that those responsible for the theft of the dungeon

cores had either been killed already or had escaped. Either way, it would be harder to find out what ultimately happened to the cores – and the reason it happened in the first place.

They all ran quickly toward the rise in the landscape and Celestius saw that the trees were even thinner around the top of a small nearby hill. It gave them a relatively unobstructed view of the road farther north – and of a nightmare that he knew he'd have trouble getting out of his head in the future.

A massive green Emerald Dragon, in full-size and free of a dungeon, was assaulting what Celestius assumed to be the town of Gatecross. It was hard to tell, however, because half of it seemed to be on fire, while the buildings inside seemed to be stomped flat. He originally thought it was the Dragon that had done that, but a movement through the flames hinted that it was something else.

“Rycky! Do you have any enhancements that can improve our eyesight?” the Holy Paladin asked. The town was at least five miles away, and while he could see the Dragon and town in general terms, it was still too far away to make out any details.

“Yes, hold on,” Rycky responded with a tired voice, as he lethargically waved his hand through the air and Celestius suddenly felt everything he was looking at suddenly become clearer, sharper, and more defined.

When he looked back at the town of Gatecross, he could see it much, much better. It wasn't as if his vision zoomed in or anything, but he could see small details like the large crack in one of the stone blocks surrounding the town or the fact that what seemed to be burning was a makeshift wall of different wooden building parts placed on the stone walls

to make them taller. And he could now see major details, like the colossal Rock Beetle that was charging the Emerald Dragon.

Gasps of shock came from everyone else, including Rycky – who had decided to see what all of the fuss was about. *What in the world is going on?* Not only had Celestius never seen a bug that big, but for some reason it seemed to be *defending* the town.

He had never personally fought an Emerald Dragon, but he knew some that had tried; they had barely managed to escape the dungeon they were in before they were killed. Given that were only seen in higher A-Rated Plant dungeons, they were still rare and very, very dangerous. Despite that, the gigantic Rock Beetle – a lowly monster that he hadn't seen in decades – was holding its own against the winged lizard.

He could see greenish blood leaking from the Dragon's mouth and noticed a fang missing; its injuries were compounded when it struck out at the charging Beetle and practically sliced its tail off in the process. Celestius could feel the ground shake that time when the Beetle was thrown across the town, only to destroy what appeared to be part of the stone wall.

"Should we..." Goderik asked, his eyes alight at all of the blood leaking everywhere.

"Uh, no – I'm not going anywhere near that place. I don't care how much I'm getting paid for this; I can't spend it if I'm dead. And I can almost guarantee we'll be dead if we attempt to go over there right now," Annalyn responded, essentially echoing what Celestius was thinking.

So they just stood there and watched as the Dragon attempted to fly and crashed into the Beetle – crippling itself and the massive insect in the process. Once the now-one-winged lizard was able to move again, it expelled a putrid-green-colored fog toward the crippled Beetle and watched it get eaten away by the toxic poison with apparent satisfaction over the

next minute or so. It even went so far as to stick its head in the noxious cloud to watch the bug perish.

“Well, then. I’m not sure if anyone is alive over there, but there is no way I’m getting anywhere near that town while there’s still—” Annalyn broke the silence, before everyone had to shield their eyes at the gigantic explosion of flame that originated right in the middle of the town. A split-second later, a massive shockwave rushed through the trees, smacking into the group like a full-body punch. Everyone except Rycky was able to keep their feet, and the unlucky Enhancer knocked backwards and rolled about 20 feet away down the hill.

“What the—” Fletch started, before chunks of green-scaled flesh shot through the air nearby at tree-shattering force, barely missing the group as the remains of the Emerald Dragon cut through multiple trees before coming to a stop. The hunks of skin and flesh didn’t last long, however, as they soon melted into the ground, similar to the hundreds of thousands of dungeon monsters Celestius had killed over the years.

The entire group just stood there in silence and awe, as pieces of Dragon continued to rain all around them as they fell from the sky. By some lucky happenstance, none got close to hitting them, and soon enough silence reigned over the forest.

“Uh...” Celestius was slightly out of his comfort zone at the moment. He was expecting some possible resistance from whoever had stolen the cores, and possibly needing to fight against some dungeon monsters if they attacked while he was investigating, but he hadn’t expected anything like what he had just witnessed. Nevertheless, he had a job to do and an investigation to complete. It was even more important now than it ever was; if he could prevent another Emerald Dragon like that assaulting

another Craytion Kingdom town, he was going to do everything he could to stop it.

“Ok. So...that just happened,” Goderik stated unnecessarily.

“Yes, it did. Now, we still have a job to do, so let’s go.” Putting action to his words, Celestius marched ahead – but walking instead of running. He still needed to investigate, but that didn’t mean he wanted to run full-speed into danger.

It took a few seconds for the rest to follow, but they eventually gave in and quickly caught up to him.

“If there are any more dragons, I’m getting the heck out of there,” Annalyn said under her breath. “Or any giant beetles – whatever the case may be.”

Celestius couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 34

Even though they were casually walking, it still only took about an hour to get to the town of Gatecross. Or at least what used to be the town of Gatecross; there wasn't much left standing and it was only the fact that they could see where the original walls once stood that they knew they were there. That, and there were hundreds of people milling around like they were lost as they looked around at the complete devastation.

There were a few still coming out of a hole in the ground that looked similar to a dungeon entrance – if it weren't for the fact that there were only a few rocks scattered around instead of the typical entrance formation. *They must have modeled their escape hole after a dungeon – smart.* Celestius would've done the same thing if he had time; he was much more comfortable in a dungeon sometimes than out in the regular world.

There wasn't a single person that appeared unscathed, either still sporting some wounds/burns or clothing that had been burnt away in parts. Goderik motioned toward them and Celestius nodded, allowing their Healer to start healing the obviously beleaguered residents of Gatecross. Just because he was willing to sacrifice them to the nearby dungeon cores didn't mean he couldn't treat them humanely while they were still alive. Although, as it appeared that they had already survived an attack, he worried that the next one would target an even broader range of towns and cities in revenge for the humans living through the initial assault.

He needed answers.

Celestius saw a tall, heavily armored, Fighter-type class standing near the middle of the group. Many of those near him seemed to be paying attention to what he said and were taking direction, so the Holy Paladin

assumed he was the one in charge. *If anyone knows what happened here, it'll probably be him.*

He quickly strode past all of the curiously un-frightened townspeople and what were obviously DAS members, followed by all but Goderik who was using the still-bleeding wounds that quite a few people still had to start healing everyone he saw. They didn't give the usual reaction most people had to seeing a Blood Monk at work; the fact that they just placidly accepted the blood being gathered up from various people and converted to healing energy was telling – they had obviously seen and been through some serious stuff not to be surprised or frightened by it.

The closer he got to the man who seemed to be in charge, the more the faces around him turned hopeful at his presence. He knew that he looked impressive in his shiny, full-plate armor; he didn't wear it to deliberately impress people – it just happened to be some of the best that could be crafted and enchanted – but he didn't mind it if people took hope when they saw him. He was just sorry that he wasn't going to be that hope they so desperately wanted.

“Welcome to...Gatecross, sir. I'm Metch and this here is Harriette,” the man said once Celestius was close enough to converse, pointing to an apparent Mage-class Syndicate member to his right. He then pointed to his left and continued his introductions. “And over here we have Rospel and Merida. Are you here to help?” the Fighter-class asked with a hopeful lilt to his voice.

“It doesn't look like you need much help now, does it?” Celestius asked instead of answering the man's question. “So tell me, what exactly is going on here?”

The man – Metch – looked around at the remains of the town and appeared to be having difficulty responding. Finally, he looked back at

Celestius. “A Syndicate member found a dungeon core and accidentally destroyed it. This here—” he said as he pointed at the ruins— “is the dungeons’ retribution for killing one of their own.” And that was it, no other explanation was forthcoming from the Fighter.

Even though his group hadn’t known beforehand what exactly the mission they had been paid for was all about, they handled the revelation of a missing/damaged dungeon core like the veteran Adventurers they were. After the initial surprise they showed, they looked even more determined to see the mission through – they knew the stories behind inviting the dungeons’ wrath.

“I can see that. I have another question for you, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure, my day seems pretty free right now for some reason,” Metch tried to be funny, but no one seemed to appreciate his humor.

I still don’t believe that any Syndicate member would be so foolhardy as to steal a dungeon core, let alone “accidentally” destroy it.

“Who, pray tell me, was the one who supposedly ‘destroyed’ this core? Actually, better yet – how did they do it?” Celestius asked, and he couldn’t prevent the hard edge to his voice from coming out. He just couldn’t believe the stupidity of some people.

It was plain to see that Metch had not only detected the underlying threat in his voice but was probably more than aware of why Celestius and his crew were there. Despite the risk, the Paladin could tell that he was going to lie.

“He died early on in the battle, and his body was all burnt up. I have no idea how he did it, either – it just kind of...disappeared into dust.”

Celestius appreciated loyalty, but this form of loyalty was thoroughly hindering his investigation.

“Fair enough, though it’s a shame. If we could only find the one that ‘killed’ or took a core, we could probably negotiate with the dungeons to stop their attacks. But alas, it’s not to be.” Celestius shook his head in disappointment.

He suddenly perked up and asked, “Well, there’s no helping that now. So tell me, how did you all survive? When I saw the Emerald Dragon attacking the town, I was sure that everyone was already dead! If it wasn’t for that colossal Rock Beetle, followed by a tremendous explosion, I doubt it would’ve left you alone.”

Metch’s eyes widened at his mention of the Dragon and the Beetle – *apparently that was news to him* – and he quickly glanced away, so fast that if Celestius hadn’t been looking for it he would’ve missed it. The Paladin turned toward where the Fighter had briefly glanced and saw a woman and a young man just now crawling out of the hole in the ground. Nothing was particularly memorable about either of them, except for one thing.

The man was wearing clothing that appeared brand-new and didn’t have even a single scratch on him – unlike everyone else he had seen milling around.

“It must’ve been just luck—” Metch started to say, but Celestius was already walking toward the young man, completely ignoring the Fighter. Rycky, Annalyn, and Fletch followed after and – seeing his destination and correctly guessing his purpose – the Spellblade shot forward faster than most normal people could see and grabbed the man – boy, actually – from behind. Her sword was at his throat and it was coated in a perfectly controlled layer of high-intensity flame; it heated up the edges so that it could cut through practically anything with ease.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing! Let him go!” the blonde-haired woman at his side immediately protested and it appeared like she

was about to cast something.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Annalyn’s hand tends to slip when she’s surprised. We wouldn’t want anyone to lose their head, now do we?” Celestius tried to forestall what could end up being an unnecessary bloodbath – and the Paladin and his crew were definitely not going to be on the losing end of that.

“What do you want?” the young boy-man in pristine clothing calmly asked. For some reason, he didn’t look even the slightest bit frightened. Celestius actually thought it was a little unnerving, especially with the rather focused look in his eyes as he stared at the Paladin. Regardless of how strange the youngster looked and acted, he was done beating around the bush to get the answers he needed.

“Are you the one that stole the Plant-type dungeon core?”

The intense eyes stared at him for a few moments before their owner answered. “Yes and no.”

“What do you mean? You either stole the core or you didn’t – don’t play games with me.”

“I’m not playing games. I didn’t steal the Nature Core, which is what you asked. I just answered that and also the question you *should’ve* asked: did I destroy the core? And the answer to that is...yes,” their infuriating captive answered.

He actually destroyed it? How is that possible?

Before Celestius could refute the claim, Fletch interrupted the conversation. “I...think he might be telling the truth. I didn’t know exactly what this mission was before this, but now that I see this man—er, boy, I can detect the exact stench of a Plant dungeon on him. Though it’s more like a residue than anything else...” The Tracker-Sniper trailed off as he looked at the young boy-man.

“Do you think he might just have it on his person and that’s what you’re tracking?” Celestius asked, trying to eliminate any other possibilities.

“Eh...it’s possible, but I doubt it. He doesn’t look like he has anything on him...and there is something else strange,” Fletch mumbled as he got closer to the boy. The Tracker got up close enough to sniff his chest and took a big whiff, before backing up abruptly. “If I had to say what I’m smelling, I’d say he *also* destroyed a Water and a Fire dungeon core as well. I don’t know how even destroying one is possible, but that’s what my abilities are telling me.”

That fits almost exactly the information I was given. “I’ll take your word for it then, Fletch,” he told his group member. To their captive, he asked, “Why did you do it? Why did you destroy not just one, but *three* cores? Don’t you know that you put everyone around you in danger doing that? Hundreds of thousands of people could die!”

Celestius realized that all of the people who were previously milling around were now surrounding him and his group – including Goderik, who had broken off from healing when he saw where everything was leading – with hostile looks on their faces. The Paladin wasn’t too worried, however, as there wasn’t much that they could do to hurt them; from the information that was provided about the town and the DAS outpost there, it was doubtful there were anyone higher than an E-Rating, possibly even a D-Rating here and there. He knew that most of the town guards were D-Rated Fighter-classes, but even if they had pumped all their essence into their Brawn stat, they wouldn’t be able to do more than scratch his pristine shining armor.

“It was an accident with the Nature Core, and as for the others...I didn’t kill them – I discovered them after they were destroyed.”

All lies, but it really doesn't matter. He knew from the beginning what he was going to have to do; he was instructed to eliminate the threat to the Kingdom, and the surest way to do that was to dispose of the unique individual that had the ability to destroy dungeon cores.

He glanced at Annalyn and seeing that she was already looking at him; he stared at her eyes for a moment before he nodded.

The young boy-man's head popped off and hit the ground before anyone knew what had happened. There was complete silence as the crowd just stared at the blood leaking out from the decapitated body of the dungeon core destroyer, before its knees collapsed, and it fell to the ground in an undignified heap.

The woman next to him threw herself on top of him and cried out, "Fred! Fred! No! You can't be dead!" She repeatedly pounded on the back of the corpse like she was trying to wake it up for almost a minute as she cried, her tears mixing with the blood soaking into the ground. "Don't you know how much we love you for what you've done to save us and this town?"

"It doesn't look like he succeeded very well in saving the town, and all this was caused by—" Celestius started to remark, waving all around him at the destroyed rubble.

All of a sudden, her demeanor changed from one of sorrow to one of fury as the woman slowly turned her head and stared at Celestius with a vicious snarl on her lips. "YOU! You killed him!" she shouted, before she threw out what looked like some sort of Dark-element bolt that smacked against his chestplate and splashed off harmlessly.

As if her actions spurred the others to act recklessly, Celestius was soon inundated with spells flung at him from all sides, splashing against his armor and literally bouncing off the few pieces of bare skin – like his face.

A few almost hurt, but they were more like someone had jabbed him with a stiff finger than anything else.

Fortunately, the crowd had mostly concentrated on him, leaving the rest of his group for the most part unharmed. He held his hand out toward them as they looked to him for direction, indicating that they should hold off on any type of attack. It wasn't like he was getting hurt or anything, though he was starting to feel the temperature around him start to rise.

What was surprising to him was that almost everyone he saw – even the plainly dressed townspeople – were casting spells in his direction. Most of it appeared to be a low-Rated Mage fire-based ability, but it was the fact that they were obviously all *Adventurers* that shocked him. A few of the Fighter and Scout-based classes looked ready to charge in and attack as well – but they were held back by the sheer number of spells and abilities flung in Celestius' direction.

The barrage started to slow down, which Celestius was appreciative of since he was starting to sweat a little from the heat the spells were generating. “ENOUGH!” he shouted, using his Divine Voice ability to send out a shockwave that stunned everyone around him. On normal, non-Adventurers, the temporary stun would make them freeze in place for nearly 20 minutes or until any physical damage was inflicted upon them; on Adventurers, depending upon their Rating, it could last anywhere from a second to 15 minutes. Against the monsters that he and his usual group fought against, it might last 10 to 15 seconds – more than enough to take advantage of the momentary pause in the action.

For the townspeople and Syndicate members in Gatecross, he estimated that he had at least 10 minutes before his Divine Voice wore off.

“Now, I'll forgive you for attacking me and—” he looked down to see a few blemishes on his otherwise flawless armor— “for dirtying my

gear, because I realize that you just survived a horrific ordeal. An ordeal that was caused by that *man* there—” he pointed at the body of the boy-man, where the blood pouring out the neck had already stopped— “and you should be thanking me for eliminating him. He was a danger not only to you here, but the entire *Kingdom*. Can you imagine if he was allowed to survive and do what he did to other dungeon cores? Thousands or millions of lives were at stake and we were sent to eliminate any and all future threats to the people of the Craytion Kingdom.”

He let what he said sink into the stunned crowd of nearly 300 people, Gatecross townsfolk and Syndicate members. He could see horrifying comprehension dawn in a couple of their eyes, one of the few things they could move while in their frozen state; for the others, he clarified his speech so that they would all know his intentions.

“I’m not going to kill you, despite your hostility. However, as a result of what happened, and for the fact that it looks as though most of you somehow survived – I still want to know what that whole business with the Emerald Dragon and gigantic Beetle was all about – I cannot let any one of you back into the Kingdom. From this point on, you’re all to be declared *outlaws*, which will be proclaimed throughout the land – and we will also inform every dungeon the Syndicate delves within of your status. It is almost guaranteed that the Plant cores will still want to exact some retribution for the destruction of their brethren, and your denial of that retribution could have dire consequences for the Kingdom.

“Which is why you’re all to be sacrificed to the cores and we will do nothing to help you. In fact, if you show your faces in the Kingdom, you will be summarily turned away, if not be beaten to within an inch of your lives. The easiest thing would be to just kill you all, but then we would be

taking away the cores' opportunity for revenge – and then they would almost certainly shift their focus to the rest of the Craytion Kingdom.”

Celestius could now see the comprehension in everyone's eyes. Even though they had survived this attack, they couldn't escape their fate when the dungeons decided to send in another army of monsters to destroy them. They would find no help from the rest of the Kingdom, and if they did decide to attempt to sneak in despite his warnings to stay away, they could be responsible for even more deaths. Which was why he used what he did next.

Celestius spread his arms wide and a bright glow started to expand out from his fingertips, washing over the entire crowd. He mentally excluded his own group from the effects of his Judgement ability, as his intention was only to mark the people of Gatecross and the Syndicate members unlucky enough to have survived the attack by the dungeons.

Nearly 300 people were covered by his glow and Celestius felt a large drain on his available Power. Judgment bestowed a permanent effect on those within its influence – they would be marked with a large, yellowish-white glowing X above their heads until they perished; any elemental attacks against those targets with the mark did 30% more damage to them. Normally, he only used the ability on a few monsters at a time while delving through the dungeon, so doing that many at once took almost two-thirds of his rather considerable available Power.

The extra 30% damage to the people from elemental attacks was only secondary, however; the large glowing X would make them stand out not only to the people of the Craytion Kingdom, but to the dungeon cores still looking for revenge. By marking them this way, Celestius hoped to avoid a wholesale massacre of the north while the dungeons searched for those that wronged them.

He was breathing hard by the time he was done. For permanent effects like what he had done, it really took a lot out of him physically – not just in terms of Power. Regardless of how lethargic he now felt, Celestius knew they needed to go before everyone broke out of their stunned state. He didn't worry for his and his group's safety, of course; he was more concerned that they would be forced to kill some of them who wouldn't leave them alone. "Alright, we're done here," he told his group, before turning to the crowd again. "You are now permanently marked as outlaws; there is no removing this mark and it will be obvious to anyone – or *anything* – that sees you. I'm sorry that it has had to come to this, but the Craytion Kingdom appreciates your sacrifice even if you didn't intend it.

"Let's go – Rycky, if you would?"

The Enhancer obliged and increased everyone's speed. Now that he had a chance to rest, Rycky was looking a little more alert and easily kept pace while they sped away, leaving the stunned group behind them quickly.

"What's the plan now?" Annalyn asked, when they were far enough into the forest leading back down south that they couldn't even see what used to be the town of Gatecross anymore.

"Now...we spread the word."

Chapter 35

The Gatecross guards, Metch, a few other D-Rated Core Power Guild members, and Eisa all broke out of whatever stunning ability the Holy Paladin used on them around the same time. It was only a few minutes after the high-Rated Syndicate group had left, but the Necro-healer knew that they had no chance to catch them; they were able to move so quickly that it was next to useless trying to track them down. Not that it would do much good, as their spells and abilities barely even left a scratch – not only on that bastard’s armor, but on his exposed head as well.

She wasn’t sure exactly how powerful they were, but from her time with her former group, she had met a few B and a single A-Rated Adventurer; based upon how the Holy Paladin – which was obviously what he was and she knew was an A-Rated class at the minimum – shrugged off their attacks, it was quite possible he was S-Rated. As for the others, they were probably around the same Rating or possibly lower, but she hadn’t seen them in action other than when that blasted woman cut off Fred’s head like it meant nothing.

When she had climbed out from the rubble that partially blocked the entrance of the dungeon, Eisa and Fred had been the last ones out. Well, except for Deecy, who had stayed below after their Guild Leader and savior had warned everyone ahead of him that they were soon to have guests – and high-Rated Adventurers at that. He didn’t have time to expound on that, because it wasn’t long before they had been accosted by those same visitors.

The only thing he had said before he was taken captive was a quick-whispered, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this.” Eisa trusted him, but she

didn't think that having his head cut off was what he had meant.

When she was able to move again, she dropped again by Fred's side, noticing that his lifeless body had already stopped bleeding. Eisa's eyes filled with tears again as she reached out and placed her hand just over his body; she was hesitant to touch him because she still refused to believe that the man that had done everything in his power to save them despite the overwhelming odds, the man that had gone out of his way to arm the townspeople of Gatecross with effective abilities, the man she loved...was dead.

There was no denying it to herself now, even though it really didn't matter. He was dead and there was no bringing him back. Even his outrageous healing ability couldn't heal headless-ness. *This is why I shouldn't get close to anybody anymore. I'll just end up losing them in the end.* While she hadn't been romantically involved with any of her former group, she was still close to them all; when they died, it felt like a piece of her died along with them. And now she had lost another piece of herself.

Eisa firmed her resolve and got up from the ground near Fred's corpse. She looked around at the people who were gathered around, most of whom had broken out of the immobilization ability that they had suffered from. What didn't disappear, however, was the large glowing X over everyone's heads.

Silence echoed through the area where the town of Gatecross once stood; as she looked around, she saw that even the stone walls had been blasted apart and there was barely a scrap of wood to be found that wasn't on one of the distant trees. Fred hadn't really had a chance to explain what had happened after he had woken up completely healed in the dungeon; he was more concerned with getting everyone out so that they could witness the devastation for themselves and make plans for the future. Which was

what they did after Fred had conjured up some brand-new clothes for himself and peeled off his burnt clothing scraps.

“What do we do now? With Fred...no longer with us, we don’t stand a chance against another wave of dungeon monsters,” Metch asked, breaking the silence echoing throughout the ruins.

“And where will we go? The town’s been utterly destroyed – not that it hadn’t been gutted quite a bit before the attack – but now there isn’t even a single stone stacked on top of each other. No buildings, no walls... which means nowhere to live,” added Merida.

Eisa didn’t have an answer for them. All she had been thinking of over the last day was surviving the upcoming assault by the dungeon monsters; now that they had technically survived – at least with their lives intact – she didn’t have any plans for the future. And Metch was right, they had no real defenses against another attack; just as he and that Holy Paladin had insinuated, the cores were sure to send another force against them because the dungeons hadn’t gotten the retribution they had been expecting. When they would arrive, she was pretty sure no one actually knew, but come they would.

The only alternative was to run away. Since they now had these extremely obvious marks above their head (which she noticed most of the people doing their best to ignore as if they didn’t even want to acknowledge that they were even there), they couldn’t find help from anyone in the Kingdom. And trying to hide out there would only put more people in danger, which was what they were trying to avoid in the first place by staying in Gatecross. To run to the Kingdom now would be to negate all of the sacrifices the townspeople and Guild members had made defending the town – not the least of which was Fred.

She wasn't surprised that Metch and the others hadn't given their Guild Leader up to those high-Rated Syndicate members. She meant it on a personal level when she told the Paladin that everyone loved him for what he had done to save the town, but in actuality it was true; they might not "love" him on a personal basis as she felt she did, but they appreciated the abilities they had been taught, the defenses he put in place to protect the town, and the dungeon he had built to protect the people of Gatecross and his Guild.

"I don't...know. We can try to travel to another Kingdom, but that could take weeks or even months; unfortunately, with the town destroyed, we only have whatever food we have stored in our PIBs. I doubt we have more than a week's worth of food as it is, and even if we did somehow stretch it out to get to another Kingdom, there is no guarantee they wouldn't see our marks and deny us a place there as well. I wouldn't blame them either; it would be hard to accept a single person marked as an outlaw, let alone almost 300 people," Eisa told the crowd forlornly. "I'm willing to take suggestions, though, if anyone has an idea."

There was some mumbling as people started to talk to their neighbors, but no one seemed to have any idea viable enough to speak up. Finally, Raspel seemed to appear out of nowhere by her side and pointed toward the partially collapsed dungeon entrance. "We can at least use the dungeon for protection, right? It might not be the same as when Fred was alive, but we did pretty well holding off the monsters in there even without his special defenses. And our food situation may not matter too much if Jaymes comes through and finds a merchant crazy enough to bring us some food and supplies."

"That's true about the possible appearance of a merchant, but just like the dungeon Fred absorbed the Plant Core from, it was destroyed after

his death—”

Just then, Deecy popped up from the dungeon entrance and nonchalantly walked over to Fred and curled up by his side. For all intents and purposes, it almost appeared that Fred’s dead body didn’t mean much to her – as if it was just a normal occurrence that she saw every day.

Wait a minute...

Eisa ran over to the dungeon entrance tunnel and looked inside; the way was still partially blocked from the collapsed outer stones from whatever explosion destroyed the town, but it looked almost exactly the way it looked when they exited nearly 20 minutes ago. *Shouldn’t it have collapsed by now?*

She ventured inside and looked at the blackened and partially melted walls, which looked the same as it did throughout the entire dungeon because of the intense blast of heat. Crawling over the stone pieces littering the first room, Eisa got far enough in that she was able to see that the tunnel leading to the next room looked completely intact and so did the room beyond. While she wasn’t exactly sure how long it really took to collapse after the death (or destruction) of the dungeon’s core, she was fairly confident that it should’ve happened by now or at least show some signs of it.

As hard as it was to believe, there was only one explanation.

Exiting out the dungeon again, carefully maneuvering through the stone-filled rubble, Eisa walked right over to Deecy sitting calmly, staring at Fred’s body. She stared at the body and noticed that, miraculously (as Fred frequently seemed to do), the gruesome severed neck was already sealing itself over with fresh, new skin.

“He’s not dead, is he?”

Deecy looked up at her and Eisa could've sworn she saw the Dire Wolf shake her head.

I swear, the more I learn about Fred, the more...abnormal he becomes. I guess that means I have a thing for abnormal, because I can't wait until he's back with us.

Those nearest Eisa and Deecy had heard her ask the question, and most had witnessed the Dire Wolf's unnatural response. She supposed she should've been as shocked as they now looked, but she had seen him survive what would've killed any other person and be just fine afterwards. Of course, none of those times had included being decapitated, but she honestly wasn't surprised by anything he did anymore.

"I've got to tell them, Deecy. It looks like we're in this together for longer than we thought, and there's no point in keeping secrets anymore. Besides, they deserve to know after all we've gone through," Eisa spoke quietly to the Dire Wolf, who just stared at her for a moment and then went back to patiently waiting for Fred to "resurrect" from the dead. *I guess that's as much permission as I'm going to get.*

"Alright, everyone – gather close," Eisa spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. Once they had gathered close enough that she wouldn't have to yell, she continued. "I have some information for you all which might determine our next steps. First of all, despite what it looks like, Fred is not dead," she started, before being interrupted by most of the crowd all talking at once. She waited a few moments for them to calm down as she held up her hand for silence.

"I know, it seems impossible, but let me explain. I'm going to tell you a story about who and *what* Fredwynklemossering really is..."

Chapter 36

The first thing Fred saw when he woke up was the blackened, slightly melted stone ceiling of...somewhere. Confusion rattled his mind as he wasn't quite sure where he was or why he was lying on the ground; for a moment, he thought he was back to right after the massive explosion that rocked Gatecross. However, he distinctly remembered already healing and waking up from the massive burns he suffered as a result of that unexpectedly violent reaction. It was hard to forget how thankful and relatively happy everyone had been after they had been saved from extermination.

He remembered feeling bad about the additional townspeople and Core Power Guild members that had perished as a result of the explosion; but in the end, everyone had agreed that they had gotten lucky that so many of them had survived. The loss of even one person was hard for Fred, though, even if he had done everything that he possibly could to keep them alive.

He glanced around what he quickly realized was the very first room of his dungeon; he didn't see or hear anyone else, so he suspected that they were aboveground. As soon as that thought occurred to him, the arrival of the high-Rated group of Syndicate Adventurers came back to him in a flash.

Fred wasn't exactly sure why they were there, but he had his suspicions. He figured that they had somehow learned about his destruction of the Nature Core and had sent someone to investigate. Although he held out hope that they were there to help, he tried to think more realistically – it was more likely they were there to put a stop to those who had committed the “crime” against the dungeon cores. Eisa didn't like it, but he told her to

let him take care of it; if they were going to start killing people, he didn't want anyone but him to suffer at their hands. He figured that if he made it more than obvious that he was the one they were there for, they would leave everyone else alone.

Being held against his will with a sword against his neck was a new experience, but Fred didn't remember what happened after he had answered Celestius Whitehand's questions. The S-Rated Holy Paladin was frankly frightening, with his stats and abilities almost incomprehensible to the human-dungeon core; there was nothing he nor anyone else could do to fight against him or his A-Rated companions if they chose to kill everyone left in Gatecross. He was very tempted to create another giant Rock Beetle to try to combat them, but he ultimately decided against it because he worried that the gargantuan defender might inadvertently injure or kill one of the people that he just spent so much effort to save. That, and almost all of the Nature Mana that was contained inside his defender construct was somehow missing.

Fred rolled over and got to his knees, and as he did, he looked down at the brand-new clothes that he had conjured after being literally burnt to death and noticed that it was liberally covered with a red, sticky substance. He felt around the top of his shirt's collar and found that the origin point of all the blood was his neck. *That woman...Annalyn – if I remember her name correctly – must have sliced my head off.*

Before he could get to his feet, Deecy walked into the room from the tunnel leading farther into the dungeon and calmly sat by his side.

“It’s about time you decided to wake up. Your head grew back about an hour ago and everyone’s been waiting for you.”

That's very...strange to hear. Although Fred had experienced quite a bit of damage to his body – from a broken neck, being pounded to a pulp, and most recently burnt to a crisp – he hadn't officially lost a limb before, let alone his head. Nevertheless, he felt healthy, whole, and alive; he just hoped that no one else had suffered the same treatment from the high-Rated Adventurers as he had.

"It's good to see you, too. How long was I...uh, out?" he mentally asked the Dire Wolf.

"Not long, actually. Considering that you were literally decapitated, eight hours isn't too bad to fully recover and grow back a head. Looks exactly the same, by the way."

Fred didn't have a mirror handy, so he couldn't judge for himself, but a quick inspection with his hands indicated that she was probably right. *"Thanks, Deecy. Is everyone else safe?"* He supposed that he could just use his Territorial Sight to see for himself; however, he was still trying to get his bearings after the ordeal his body had just went through.

The Dire Wolf was silent for a few moments before she answered.

"As safe as they can be. No one was technically harmed...you'll just have to see for yourself. And, one other thing; I'm not sure how people are taking it, but Eisa ended up telling everyone about who you really are. I can understand why she did it, because your head was going to start growing back and that's apparently not normal with humans, but it might cause some problems in the future."

That was an understatement. Fred had kept his actual origins to himself and a very select few, mainly because it would potentially complicate the relationship with everyone if they knew the truth. To be one and the same as the dungeon cores that were going to attack them was something that was thought to be detrimental to the townspeople's resolve; now that they knew, he wondered if they would abandon all hope of defense and stay as far away from him as possible.

Before he got up and saw everyone again, Fred pulled up his statuses, wanting to get a better look at what had happened and where he was standing resource-wise. The last few times he had been seriously injured it had taken a bit of his Mana to bring him back to normal.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 6 Fire Mana: 78/139 (1) Water Mana: 77/138 (1) Nature Mana: 77/138 (1) Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 18497 (85) Unconverted Essence: 7122
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Intermediate Mana Communication: 46% Intermediate Mana Absorption: 91% Intermediate Mana Conversion: 83% Intermediate Core Crystallization: 17% Intermediate Defender Creation: 35% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 8% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 2% Novice Dungeon Creation: 64% Novice Defense Creation: 68%
Dungeon Information
Maximum Dungeon Rating: F-8th Current Dungeon Rating: N/A (No Core Room)

Current Mana Upkeep: 1 Fire 1 Water 1 Nature 85 Unconverted
Number of Rooms: 6
Number of Defenders: 8 (96 Nature Mana)
Number of Defenses: 16 (80 Nature Mana)
Defender/Defense Range Limit: 1100—1300 Mana
Reward Count: 0 Points
Reward Range Limit: 1100—1300 Points
(Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Instructor-Researcher
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 5197
Total Essence: 765803	Available Essence to Distribute: 71216	Unconverted Essence: 184970
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 160/160 Power: 5100/5100
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 25/min
Class Traits (Instructor)		
<i>Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)</i>		
Class Traits (Researcher)		
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>		
Class Abilities (Instructor)		
Teach 4 – 0/27000		
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 1 – 0/1000
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 1 – 0/1000	Slamming Shout 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

Fred had achieved increases in almost all of his dungeon-related attributes, including upgrades to his Dungeon Defender and Mana-formed Object Creation skills to Intermediate. Even though his Elemental Mana was only about half of what its limit was, with the speed at which his Unconverted Mana was now being converted, he didn't think it would be long until he was full again.

He hadn't made much progress on the Adventurer side of things, but he noticed that he had gained a little over 50,000 Essence from the entire battle – which probably meant that everyone else had gained around the same amount, too. With the 293 survivors, that meant that the total amount of Essence that had been generated was somewhere in the range of 15 million. An insane amount, obviously; he briefly wondered if his gargantuan Beetle had contributed to a bit of that. *No point thinking about that now, I need to see about the state of things and figure out what we need to do in the future to survive.*

Finally getting to his feet, he pulled up his Territorial Sight to get some insight on what was happening aboveground. It took an extra second for everything to come up for him; it was almost as if he was having to quickly relearn how everything worked again as a result of his “death” and his new head. However, once it came up, it was easy to navigate his way through his territory and see everyone there.

He despaired as he saw that there were at least 50 people missing. *Did those Adventurers kill them? Or did they leave on their own after hearing my story from Eisa?* A few seconds later, his worries were slightly alleviated as he saw a few groups entering his territory from the surrounding forest, bringing them with them a carcass of an elk (fortunately, a normal one instead of a scaled-hide elk that had attacked the dungeon) and some fallen trees. The explosion that tore apart all of Gatecross had

reached the bordering forest and blown apart quite a few trees, the scraps and remnants of which the survivors were making use of to build crude shelters.

Fred located Eisa right away; along with Metch, she was directing people on various tasks near the middle of what used to be the town, just twenty feet from the entrance to his dungeon. Which, when he looked at the tunnel leading up with both his eyes and his Territorial Sight, he could see that a lot of the rubble had been cleared away and repurposed to secure a small part of the impromptu settlement. It was already starting to get dark and everyone seemed to be frantically trying to build some semblance of security before night fully set in.

There was something strange about everyone, though, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was almost as if all of them were marked with something that stood out to his sight; Fred ignored it for the moment, however – he figured he would look into it further once he got himself together.

“Why didn't they just come back to the dungeon where it was safe?”
he communicated to the Dire Wolf.

“A few wanted to, but most were still not convinced that you weren't dead, and the dungeon wasn't going to collapse on them at any time. Eisa told them to bring your body down here so that you ‘could be closer to your dungeon and heal faster’, but I think it was more that it was disturbing watching your new head slowly emerge from your neck. And now that I watched it happen, I can't say I blame her and everyone else for not wanting to see it.”

Yeah, that probably was a bit...unnatural. Oh, well – at least he was still alive; if it took grossing out the humans that he had chosen to feel responsible for, then he was more than willing to do it if it meant that he could live longer.

Fred walked up the tunnel entrance and Eisa saw him the moment he emerged; she ran over and hugged him tight, a slight hitch evident in her voice as she said, “Fred! I can’t believe you’re alive! Deecy sort of hinted that you were going to be alright, but since anyone else would’ve died having their head cut off, I wasn’t entirely sure you were going to be alright.” She hesitated for a moment. “You *are* alright, yes?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you for moving me down there, I think it did indeed help me to recover faster. So...what happened after I lost my head?”

A crowd of Gatecross townspeople and Core Power Guild members had surrounded them while they had been reuniting, and Fred couldn’t quite tell if they were happy or...scared to see him. On the whole, their faces were relatively expressionless; he couldn’t exactly blame them, though, because now that he saw everyone – including Eisa – he saw that they all had a large glowing X above their heads.

His unspoken question was answered within moments as Eisa explained to him what had happened when everyone had attacked the Paladin, about the mark, and the Paladin’s announcement that they were all outlaws. Fred had expected something like that as soon as he saw the big X above their heads; he was just glad that they hadn’t all been summarily executed like he was.

Fortunately, the mark was a construction of Power and Fred could see the complex strings that connected the X to their bodies. He was fairly confident that, given enough time, he could find a way to eliminate the

mark – but there was more pressing business that needed to be addressed for their immediate survival. Although he was still holding out hope that Jaymes had convinced a merchant or two to deliver supplies, he was discouraged by the fact that they were all declared outlaws; since that was the case, it was likely that anyone assisting them would be branded the same – which shortened the list of potential merchants who would both go into danger and become outlaws themselves.

“So what’s the plan, Fred? Eisa here told us to stay and wait until you...came back...before we decided, but I have to tell you that many of us just want to run. Now that we are essentially cut off from the Craytion Kingdom, there isn’t much point in defending what’s left of this town—”

*“...put me back where you found me, you filthy humans! I can’t believe I let Avenlyrica convince me to use most of my mana to assault these savages; if I hadn’t been so depleted, I could’ve found some way to kill these **things** before they got to my Core Room. And now all of my hard work over the last decade has gone to waste! Not to mention that it’s going to take years for me to get their dirty paw-prints off my structure—wait a minute, whose territory is this?”*

Fred immediately ignored everyone else around him as he “felt” another dungeon core enter his territory from the southwest and turned that way to see what was going on. It didn’t take long for a group of five Guild members to emerge from the trees and make their way over to the center of “town”.

“Hey, boss – look what we found!”

He immediately recognized Raspel trying to look inconspicuous at the back of the group, as its leader – a Knight-classed woman named

Bushara – pulled out something from inside her chestplate.

Fred already knew what he would see when she held out a small, multi-faceted green-glowing Nature Core.

That can't be good.

Chapter 37

“Please don’t tell me you went into a Nature dungeon, snuck into the Core Room, and stole a Nature Core,” Fred asked. He couldn’t help his exasperated tone from coming out; they had just barely survived the last attack, and it would be a miracle if they survived the next. With theft added to their list of offenses, he wouldn’t put it past the cores to send something they couldn’t even think of stopping. Not to mention if word of this new theft reached the ears of the Syndicate.

“Of course not, sir. We went into a *Plant dungeon*, snuck into the Core Room, and stole a *Plant Core*. Big difference there,” Bushara countered, a smile on her face. Fred thought it strange that humans called Nature dungeons “Plant dungeons” instead, but they were the exact same thing.

Raspel finally managed to break away and slink off into the crowd, but he couldn’t hide from Fred – and especially not from his Territorial Sight. “RASPEL! Is this your doing?” he yelled out while facing the hiding Infiltrator, actually a little angry now.

Rather than try to hide anymore, Raspel boldly stepped through the murmuring crowd, who – instead of being scared or shocked at the presence of another dungeon core – appeared more interested than anything. The Infiltrator’s bold stance wilted a little under Fred’s withering stare. “Uh... maybe?” the unassuming man warily asked.

“And why, pray tell, would you do something like that? Aren’t we in enough trouble without inviting more? What I did before was an accident – not that the dungeon cores would see it that way – but I didn’t intend to destroy that core. But this—” Fred pointed unerringly at the core

still being held in Bushara's hand, despite it being out of his direct line-of-sight— “was a deliberate act of core theft! What were you thinking?!”

“Well...I figured we were screwed already, so why not see if we can't help our secret weapon a little bit.”

Fred was thoroughly confused now, and the berating he was going to unleash on Raspel went right out of his head. “Uh...what?”

The Infiltrator cleared his throat before he expounded on his statement. “Well, I remember you saying something to Eisa about not being able to create very many traps and monsters because you didn't have the ‘plans’ or something for them. I also remembered how much more powerful you became after you destroyed that last core, so I figured if you did it again you would maybe...gain some more plans?” he asked, a question in his voice.

That's...actually not that bad of an idea. However, if it meant destroying another core, he was completely against it. Not only would he be killing his own kind – and one that was only obviously guilty of following orders to send an army against him and the other humans – but destroying yet another core would almost guarantee swift action by the higher-Rated dungeon cores. Possibly even this “Supreme Council” he had been told about might intervene on something like this.

“He may have a point – and it might be a good idea to try, Fred. Now that you already have a ‘Nature Core’, you might be able to absorb only a portion of the other core and extract blueprints and possibly Nature Mana. I...think you can do it without utterly destroying it like you did before, but I can't guarantee it.”

The fact that Deecy thought it could be done without permanently harming the other core spoke greatly in its favor, but the risk was too great. If it didn't work and Fred inadvertently destroyed another one, then even their slim chance that they had of surviving another assault would most likely disappear.

And despite the Craytion Kingdom turning their backs on them, Fred could understand where they were coming from; if they limited the cores' retribution to just the town of Gatecross, it could be considered a win. If he destroyed another core, he could potentially put even more innocent lives in danger with his actions, as it was likely that the Nature Faction wouldn't stop at just him and his people.

"Here you go, boss!" Bushara suddenly spoke up, before tossing the Nature Core in his direction.

Fred instinctively reached for it, some inherent need to protect the core from damage – despite its near-invulnerability – causing him to ensure it didn't hit the ground. It was only as his hands closed around it that he realized that he might've just made a big mistake.

Do you wish to absorb: Nature Core G-6th-Rating? Yes/No

He immediately chose **No**, not wanting his choice to take too long like last time and end up doing it anyway.

Do you wish to absorb: (1) Blueprint and (30) Nature Mana? Yes/No

This was new.

*Is this what Deecy was talking about? Will I be able to absorb **just** a blueprint and some Nature Mana, without actually destroying the core?*

Fred felt that the timestream flowing around him was stopped, as frozen as it had been when he held the first Nature Core in his hands. He had a feeling he was still on a time limit, however, so he had to decide quickly.

Do I try it in the hopes that it doesn't destroy it, and then potentially unlock some additional options for my dungeon; or, go the safe route and outright refuse, telling Bushara and her group to immediately return it in the hopes that they won't incur even more retribution? Either way, removing this core from its territory has cancelled its territory and collapsed its dungeon, leaving it with little more than what it has inside of its core at the moment. "Harm" has been done regardless of my choice; now it just depends upon whether I want to risk compounding that harm.

He made his choice before it could be made for him; after considering how underprepared he was for the initial attack, and the realization that if he had had access to additional defenses and defenders, they might not have lost *any* people to the cores' assault if he had this option beforehand. The Emerald Dragon, of course, was a different thing entirely, but it was still possible that he might've had something that would've defeated it without having to resort to blowing the town of Gatecross up.

Therefore, Fred selected **Yes**.

Immediately, he could feel a connection form between him and the Nature Core. That was followed by a brief transfer of information and a slight infusion of mana – bringing his available Nature Mana to 108 – before the connection was terminated.

Absorption Complete!

You have absorbed (30) Nature Mana!

Nature Core G-6th-Rated has been left with the minimum (100) Nature Mana. Establishing a territory within the next (5) days is essential to its continued survival.

Transfer Complete!

You have absorbed knowledge of (1) Blueprint!

Blueprint absorbed: Large Wasp (Level 1 Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana)

It worked! He had absorbed a blueprint and some Nature Mana; even though he didn't necessarily need the mana, he was ecstatic over being able to make a Large Wasp now. Granted, it wasn't a very powerful dungeon defender, but the fact that he could acquire new blueprints without having to destroy a core was, frankly, extraordinary.

And in fact, the Nature Core was unharmed, other than being a little dimmer than it had been. Now that Fred had absorbed what he could from it, it sat harmlessly in his hand.

“Hey! What was that! Give me that Mana back – I need it! I lost most of my reserve after that stupid, pointless attack and I barely have enough to get another dungeon started!”

Fred decided to try something. “*Can you hear me?*” he tried to ask, using his Mana Communication to speak directly to it. He figured it might work now – since he could speak with Deecy mind-to-mind – though for a moment he thought it didn't work as there was no response.

“Who are you? What did you do to me?”

Fred was relieved, because he didn't want to have a one-sided audible conversation with everyone standing around listening to it; which, when he looked around, was exactly what was happening – time had reinstated itself after he was done with the absorption.

“I apologize for the rough treatment – my friends are a little overzealous in their attempt to help me out.”

“Wait a minute...you're the one who killed Harlingwarth! As much as I hated him, he didn't deserve to be killed by livestock. How did you do it? Actually, what I want to know is how you weren't killed along with every other human in this settlement. That army of defenders should've killed you a hundred times over.”

The male dungeon core seemed “young” in relative core terms, which was evident by his G-Rating – and the fact that he seemed to flit from subject to subject. *“That's a long story, but what you need to know is that it was an accident. I didn't mean to destroy his core; when I touched him, I inadvertently absorbed him into my body. It wasn't intentional – and I don't expect you to believe me – but I also don't mean you any more harm. I'm going to have my people return you back to where you were before.”*

“But what about my territory and my dungeon? I've already lost everything!”

Fred thought about it for a second. On the one hand, the Nature Core in his hand had participated in supplying dungeon defenders for the assault against Gatecross; on the other, it sounded as if he didn't really even

care for the other core that Fred had destroyed and was forced into doing it. *And*, if truth be told, Fred did take even more from the young core than just a blueprint.

Without thinking about what he was doing, he reached into his own core and pulled out the 30 units of Nature Mana that he had just absorbed and held it in his other hand. With a quick, instinctual action, Fred forcibly condensed it until it was just barely visible, before he moved the mana over to the Nature Core and willed it to infuse the smaller construct. Within a second, the core had absorbed the returned mana and started to glow a little brighter green. And, if he wasn't mistaken, it had grown minutely larger at the same time.

“What...what did you do? My Core Structure just went up a level! It took me nearly five years for it to go up last time, and you just did it in seconds!”

Huh. Not what I was expecting, but hopefully that was payment enough for the blueprint and for stealing it away from its territory.

Instead of answering the Nature Core – mainly because he wasn't exactly sure what he did or why he did it – he gave it back to Bushara. Though, unlike her, Fred handed it to her instead of tossing it recklessly through the air. “I need you to return this back to where you found it. The dungeon has most likely collapsed by this time, so if you can at least place it back on top of where the entrance used to be, that should work.”

The C-Rated Knight just stood there, looking at the core in her hand with a disappointed expression on her face. “So...did it work?” she finally asked.

Fred looked at her briefly as he glanced around at everyone else, all of whom were awaiting his answer with bated breath. “Yes...yes, it did. Nice job. Alright, off with you and your task,” he finally said to her without too much in the way of clarification. He didn’t really want to discuss what had happened while the other Nature Core could still hear.

Bushara walked away all-smiles with her group – all except Raspel, who Fred motioned to stay behind – and he had to stop the demands for explanations until the Nature Core was out of earshot. Even though the core didn’t have a territory with which to sense the world around him, he wasn’t going to take any chances that it would try to listen into his conversation – especially since it was still trying to Communicate with him and demanding answers about what he did.

When he figured it was out of range, he turned to the others who were looking at him with impatience and pulled up the blueprint for a Level 1 Large Wasp. After infusing it with 3 NM, it popped into existence within seconds right in front of Fred, which caused quite a few of those nearby to reach for their weapons or ready a spell or ability. He immediately manipulated its orders so that it wouldn’t attack *anybody or anything* – he didn’t need to cause even more of a commotion than it already did. Once they saw that it wasn’t moving toward anyone, most of those that had gotten ready to defend themselves relaxed – a little bit.

“As you can see, I gained access to another dungeon monster from that core. It’s not something that’s going to save us on its own, but it’s also an improvement over what I had before. With enough additions to my choices in terms of monsters and traps, my hope is to set something up that will help protect us indefinitely.”

Eisa spoke up first after that revelation. “But...how are you going to do that?”

“Well, it has come to my attention that there are hundreds of local dungeons that spent most of their resources on an unsuccessful assault against the humans lately, leaving them just ripe for the picking...”

Chapter 38

After an experimental test, Fred determined that he was more like a dungeon core than he expected. He made sure there was no one in his dungeon, fortunately, before he left his established territory; as a result, no one was hurt when he took a dozen steps past his boundary and the territory started to fade away – along with the upkeep on his dungeon. It collapsed in upon itself in spectacular fashion, eliciting a plume of dust as the entrance imploded and all access to it was completely cut off.

Not that there was anything to access anymore, since the rooms were now completely filled in as the ceilings collapsed.

He had hoped that it would exist independently of his presence, but it wasn't to be. It would limit his options in the near-future for his personal quest to achieve vengeance for his parents' murder – because once he set the dungeon up, he couldn't leave his territory – but Fred thought it was a small price to pay for the safety of his friends and Guild members. Besides, he had very little clue about where he was supposed to go, or even how, to ensure justice was done; he figured a few years was essentially nothing to him in the grand scheme of things, and the time would allow him to plan a little better now that he had gained some information.

So, instead of Fred going out and delving through the depleted dungeons nearby, thereby gaining access to the cores inside (he would've preferred to do this if he could, as it would disturb the cores a lot less), he was forced to stay in Gatecross and let groups of his Guild members venture into their depths and retrieve them. At least, that was the plan once they had fortified the town as best that they could before then.

It was extremely disappointing to Fred that, despite killing the Emerald Dragon and his gigantic Beetle perishing, almost all of the Nature Mana that comprised the two behemoths had been lost. He wasn't sure exactly where it went, but after finding small scattered pockets of mana around the edges of his territory, he suspected that the extreme force of the explosion had either destroyed it somehow (which he had never heard of happening before) or it had blown it so far away it wasn't anywhere near his territory anymore.

Fortunately, he still had some of the Nature Mana left over from the Treants and Dryad who had burnt to a crisp inside the dungeon. He hadn't absorbed it or tried to do anything with the large deposit of mana before he left his territory, but fortunately it was still present buried beneath the dirt when he reestablished his territory.

The first thing he did when he learned he was "stuck" in Gatecross was to rebuild his previous dungeon. He wanted something just in case another attack came, even though he couldn't supply much in the way of defense...yet.

Recreate Saved Dungeon? Yes/No

He assumed that the Dungeon Creation Menu had the option of recreating a dungeon so that when dungeon cores moved to more mana-rich locations, that they wouldn't have to spend long recreating what was already working for them. Fred couldn't imagine sticking with just the same dungeon for years or centuries without wanting a change, but then again – he was half-human. For now, though, in order to get some sort of defense up and running, he elected to just rebuild his dungeon the way it was before.

When he selected **Yes**, Fred felt a small *thump* in his chest where his Human and Elemental Cores were located, as a large chunk of mana erupted out of his body. When he looked at how much it was, he saw the same Unconverted Mana and every single drop of Elemental Mana that he had used before to create it originally (defenders and defenses included). But then the large chunk of mana just sat floating in the air as if waiting for something.

It turned out that it was him that it was waiting on. Fred saw something out of the corner of his eye while he was standing in the middle of Gatecross; when he looked down, he realized that he had instinctively switched to Territorial Sight and was now looking *through* the ground. He could see the entire wire-frame blueprint of his dungeon, complete with tiered platforms, hanging Ensnaring Vines, a large pool of water and a bridge covered with Flower Trippers, and even a room full of Fire Mana. Fred didn't have enough Nature Mana to completely fill all of the blueprints for the Vines and Flowers, so he expected that only a few of the wire-frames would be "filled" until he acquired more later. He also didn't see dirt in the first room and bridge, nor did he see the stone slabs he had set up to block entrances, but that was because he had set them up later using his human Adventurer Power. Since the Flower Trippers would perish when they didn't have dirt to anchor into, he selected those and eliminated them for the moment.

The issue with the suspended mana hanging in the air was the fact that he was literally standing right where the entrance wanted to go. The entire wire-frame was red instead of its customary green, which indicated to Fred that there was some sort of error that was preventing him from constructing it. He assumed that the same would happen if he were to try to create his dungeon in the middle of the air, or on the side of a cliff, or in a

river; there were multiple reasons he could think of why it wouldn't work, but in this instance...it was him.

Still using his Territorial Sight, Fred mentally moved the entire dungeon underground until the entrance wasn't going to erupt right underneath him. As soon as whatever standards the Dungeon Creation Menu required was met, he saw the red wire-frame suddenly switch to green. With another mental push, he again instinctively confirmed that that location was where he wanted to build his dungeon and then he "felt" rather than heard it *click* into place.

As soon as it *clicked* into place, the chunk of mana shot into the ground and spread out, filling up all of the blueprints he had snapped into place. As he had thought, his available Nature Mana wasn't quite enough to fill all of the Ensnaring Vines, so he moved a little of the leftover Dryad and Treant mana that was scattered around underground, until the defenses in that room were complete. He absorbed another portion of that same mana so that he could recreate the wood in the room with the Fire Mana; once that was done, he was still left with a sizable portion of Nature Mana to work with.

He absorbed and used about half of it to construct some basic wooden shelters where people could live temporarily if they didn't want to live in the dungeon. He couldn't blame them if they didn't as it probably didn't elicit the fondest memories, but he would leave the choice up to them. To furnish the wooden "houses" he constructed, he used a combination of his Power and Nature Mana over the next few hours to Create or Conjure up furniture and bedding, extra clothes, and – with varying degrees of success – food.

While he could recreate most of the food he had eaten since he had entered the "human" world, his previous existence in his parents' dungeon

had negatively impacted his sense of taste. Everything he Conjured up was at least nutritious, but it had a distinct lack of anything resembling delicious; it wasn't disgusting and inedible, but it certainly didn't cause anyone to crave it.

Regardless, with Fred in residence, they essentially had everything they *needed* to survive, if not necessarily all the comforts. Therefore, about six hours after he had woken up from his "death", everyone was so exhausted from the day that they fell asleep almost where they stood as soon as it was deemed safe enough to stop moving. And despite being out of commission for a while and literally flat on his back, Fred was so tired he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, either. He had been technically going full-speed for about 48 hours; although he had spent longer than that awake in the past – especially the year-and-a-half he spent on his own traveling through the forest, he had been expending so much Mana and Power that it was wearing his body out.

Therefore, after two dedicated Guild members volunteered to keep watch through the rest of the night and the following morning, Fred created a little alcove in his dungeon and slept the sleep of the dead – or at least the "recently dead".

And it was the most restful sleep he'd experienced since he left home.

* * *

As luck would have it, nothing attacked them that night, nor the morning after. It was a good thing, though, because the two Guild members tasked with staying awake as lookouts fell asleep an hour into their shift.

Eisa was highly annoyed, but Fred couldn't blame them too much – it *had* been a rough 24 hours for all of them.

Almost everyone slept late, which was fine with Fred, because he didn't want to start the day until everyone was good and rested. They had a lot to get done, and not a lot of time in which to do it.

First – when all of the vital members of his Guild were up and had eaten – he went over the plan with them.

“Remember, even though their ‘Power’ has been depleted, they can still try to mount an effective defense. Theoretically, that defense should be much less than it had been previously, but don't take any chances. If it looks like they have somehow found massive reserves of monsters and traps, get out and try another one. Even if they don't know what you're doing right away, it won't be long before the word gets out to all of them and they will try to stop you. Just be careful, be cautious, and remember one vital thing – once you step foot in their dungeon, *they cannot change it*. What is in there when you first go in is what you'll face; if you leave even for a few minutes for some reason, they can alter it quickly and make it even deadlier – so try to avoid that if all possible.”

Nods went all around the assembled group leaders, who were listening to Fred talk outside of their temporary shelters. When he was sure that he had gotten the point across, he continued.

“Second, when you reach the end of the dungeon, the Core Room will be well-hidden; utilize whatever Scout classes you have to search every inch of the wall in the last room. And once you find it, only send a single person inside.”

Many of them looked confused, and Metch asked the question on everyone's minds. “If I remember correctly, there was enough room for our whole group in there – why only one person?”

“Because there is one further defense that the cores can utilize if they think they have no hope of escaping or being returned; it would mean their death, but they can use whatever mana they have absorbed inside their body to explode – which would almost guarantee that whoever is in the room wouldn’t make it out alive if they get caught in the explosion.” Fred remembered the sheer destruction his parents had caused when they had exploded, killing all of the dungeon defenders sent to find them.

“Why...why would they do that?” Merida asked from behind him.

“From my understanding, and from talking to Deecy, it’s a last-ditch defense to prevent a core from being captured and used in a method that would be...unpleasant. I’m hoping that when the Nature Core that was returned last night tells the other cores about his good treatment, that none of them will resort to this; however, if you enter into a dungeon and there are *no traps or monsters*, this could be a sign that they sensed you in their territory and are ready to explode with as much ‘Power’ as they can put into the explosion. If this is the case, be very cautious and use your own discretion on whether or not you want to attempt to capture the core. I would much rather have you alive and unsuccessful than dead.”

To Fred, they looked a little grim after learning the news that the dungeon cores could explode at any time. Fortunately, they were used to walking headlong into danger – it was kind of their job.

“Two last pieces of advice. One, when you enter the dungeon and even when you locate the Core Room, talk out loud to the core and tell it what you are doing. The worse thing that could happen is to surprise it – though I doubt that anything we’ll be doing will be too much of a surprise at this point – but if they know you are only there to temporarily remove them, then they might be less likely to try to kill you or detonate in your face. They probably won’t be able to speak to you, but most of them can at

least understand you when you speak. And don't forget to remind them that I will 'increase their Core Structure Level' as an extra incentive," Fred told them, putting extra emphasis on that last part so that they got the phrasing right. He figured that he could probably do the same thing that he did to the first one, which would hopefully make the cores...if not compliant, then at least less willing to explode.

"And lastly, and this is probably the most important, don't put them in your PIB. From what I know, it will kill anything that's alive if you put it in there, and despite the core looking like little gemstones – *they are alive*. I don't know for sure that it will kill them, but I don't want anyone trying it to find out. This will only work if we don't invite *even more* wrath upon us than there already is. Alright, that's it – good luck."

He honestly didn't know what else to say, but they seemed to take their assignments well enough and they were soon off to their target dungeons. There was a total of twenty teams of five heading out, which was a bit of a risk sending so many defenders away, but Fred considered that they had at least a few days before another army arrived at their doorstep. Eisa was also included in the groups, despite her protestations about needing to be there to help lead, but he needed every high-Rated Guild member he had available delving on their dangerous assignments.

All 400+ dungeons around the area were most likely completely drained after creating the last assault force, so anything else coming their way would have to come from much farther out. Even though they would probably be stronger, tougher, and deadlier, they could only move as fast as their slowest defenders.

Therefore the risk was worth it – especially if he gained access to more blueprints. Everything he was able to absorb from the local dungeons

would contribute to that future defense. And from what he could tell, this plan was their best chance of surviving.

Chapter 39

While a good portion of the Core Power Guild was out fetching dungeon cores, Fred personally spent the rest of the day – and available Power and Mana – on shoring up the defenses of Gatecross. Having the town essentially as a blank canvas for him required him to think differently than before; even the defensive pits he had dug along the town’s main “street” had been almost entirely filled in from the explosion, so he had nothing existing to build his defenses around. Which was good and bad.

It was beneficial because he now had the freedom to design something that would both act as a defense, as well as potentially regulate the entry of enemy defenders into the actual dungeon. It was something that he had struggled with during the previous assault; even the introduction of hundreds of Rock Beetles only *slowed down* the massive influx of beasts trying to get into his dungeon – it did very little to ultimately stop them.

Therefore, instead of a large wall surrounding the town, which wasn’t all that effective in the first place against so many defenders attacking them, Fred started the process of creating a large stone enclosure that covered the dungeon entrance. It was essentially a large box with only one main way in and out – which he then turned into a maze of sorts. He didn’t get a lot done at first because the expenditure of Power to create just the stone enclosure and a few short hallways drained him completely.

His future goal was to have something that would slow the advance of an army, while at the same time allowing him the flexibility of adding and supplying Mana to different defenses and defenders during an attack – which was somewhat limited while there were humans inside. Most of his impromptu success during the last assault had been when he was able to

produce defenders topside when needed, which was impossible while they were actually defending the dungeon.

Although Fred didn't get a lot done as far as aboveground defenses went, his training program with the townspeople (though, it was probably more accurate to call them Adventurers now) had ramped up a bit. He still had plans to Teach them more spells and abilities, but for the moment it was more beneficial for them to work on increasing their Essence and get to the F-Rating – which was close. After the cores' assault, all of them had advanced to the G-10th-Rating and were knocking on the door of the next Rating. For instance, he looked at Werne's Interface and saw that he had made impressive progress – in just over 24 hours.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Werne Frenkle		Class: Researcher
Rating: G-10 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 13050
Total Essence: 89250		Available Essence to Distribute: 7650
Body: 6 (0/320) Brawn: 6 (0/320) Mind: 13 (0/40960)		Vitality: 20/20 Stamina: 20/20 Power: 1300/1300
Base Physical Attack: 6 Base Physical Defense: 6		Power Regen Rate: 13/min
Class Traits (Researcher)		
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>		
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Taught Abilities		
Flamestrike 5 – 0/81000		

Most of the other new Adventurers Fred had Taught looked very similar, with increases in their Mind stat to 13 and their Flamestrike spell to 5 – which was impressive in and of itself. Once they got to the next Rating,

he was going to have them use the Class Selector – that Eisa managed to stash in her PIB before the town was destroyed – and teach them some new things. The advance in Rating would help increase the success chances during the Teaching process, as well as giving them more possibilities for what they could learn.

And he didn't forget about his Guild members, either – Fred was still planning on teaching them all that they could learn, but it was going to have to wait until he had the time to do it. Every time he used the Teach ability, both of their Power bottomed out; not only did he need his Power to regenerate so that he could build more defenses but wiping out everyone else's Power at the same time wouldn't be the smartest move if they were suddenly attacked by the dungeon cores again.

So by the time the first Guild group came back with a dungeon core for him to absorb, Fred had populated the first room with Level 10 Flower Trippers again. He had added dirt to the first and second rooms soon after the dungeon was fully formed, though he hadn't added defenders to the dangerous bridge section quite yet. And instead of just five Flowers for the new Adventurers to gain Essence from, he was able to create twice as many with what was left over from the Nature Mana scattered around his territory.

And not only that, but he used the knowledge he had gained from making his gigantic Rock Beetle to experiment with Flower Tripper hybrids. By introducing Fire, Water, and a combination of both to the original requirement of Nature Mana, he produced some interesting results.

Flameflower Burster (Level 10)

Vitality: 10

Attack: 10, Flame Burst

Defense: 10 (15 against fire-based attacks)

Respawn: 6 Nature Mana, 6 Fire Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 1024 units

Frostflower Spiker (Level 10)

Vitality: 10

Attack: 5, Frost Spike

Defense: 10 (15 against water-based attacks)

Respawn: 6 Nature Mana, 6 Water Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 1024 units

The Flameflower Burster looked very similar in general shape to the original Flower Tripper, but that was where the similarities ended. Instead of long leaves that would allow the defender to trip unwary intruders, it instead emitted a long burst of flame out of its fire-red petals that – at least at Level 10 – extended out almost five feet and was about a foot wide. The burst only lasted about a second, and it took nearly a minute before the attack was ready to use again. It had better defense against fire-based attacks, so after creating a single one he got rid of it and used more of the other hybrid instead.

The Frostflower Spiker was again similar to the original, but instead of fire-red petals on the flower it had shades of light and dark blue. And like the other hybrid, it didn't have tripping leaves; as opposed to emitting a long burst of flame, the Spiker lived up to its name and shot three small-but-sharp ice spikes out of the middle of its flower at intruders. It also took about a minute to "recharge" the ice spikes before shooting them out again. He left a few of these variants in for fun – and to save on Nature Mana.

The third variant was comprised of an equal amount of Fire, Water, and Nature Mana. He wasn't able to even produce a Level 1 version of this type because the base only required 2 total mana; however, once he brought it up to Level 10, he was equally pleased and confused by the results.

Flametripper Spiker (Level 10)

Vitality: 15

Attack: 15, Frost Spike, Flame Tendrils

Defense: 15 (20 against water and fire-based attacks)

Respawn: 4 Nature Mana, 4 Water Mana, 4 Fire Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 60 units

Not only was it more powerful by the stats it showed (by at least 50%), but it also encompassed the best parts of each variant. It shot out the deadly ice spikes from the middle of its flower, had flaming "leaves" that it could whip about and burn its victims while tripping them, and also had higher resistances to *both* water and fire-based attacks. It was a deadly hybrid of three different elements that put the original Flower Tripper to shame.

Unfortunately – and this was the part that confused him – the Essence it provided was a very small fraction of the others. Whereas the others spat out over 1,000 when they were killed, the Flametripper Spiker only gave a total of 60 Essence. Fred wasn't sure why it was so drastically different; regardless of the reason, he knew that it would now be a formidable defender. And needless to say, he didn't include it in his training regimen for the new Adventurers.

It was at this point, when the first few groups of the former townspeople had ventured inside and gained over 10,000 Essence each trip, that the first – and closest – dungeon delving group returned with their prize.

“...best be telling the truth about raising my Core Structure Level, because you just cost me decades’ worth of work! I can’t believe how easily they tore through my dungeon; just the other day, I would’ve crushed them! Stupid human livestock...”

Ah, another grumpy Nature Core. Honestly, Fred couldn’t blame the female-sounding core; if he had just been ripped away from his home, he wouldn’t be happy about it either. The only thing that appeased his own mind at the “torture” he was putting them through was the knowledge that he was not only going to leave them alive, but also improve them a little.

Granted, they would be put behind in their mana-gathering and dungeon development, but in the long-run the increase in their Level would help them immensely. Of course, years down the road when they had gathered enough resources to strike back at Fred and his people, he was hoping that they would have more-than-adequate defenses to withstand nearly anything they could throw at him and the people under his protection.

Either that, or they wouldn’t even be there anymore; he still wasn’t sure of his own future vengeance plans.

“I’m sorry for my friends’ abrupt theft of your core, but I assure you that you’ll be returned to your territory as soon as possible. And hopefully, if everything goes well, you’ll be all the better for it,” Fred used his Mana

Communication to speak directly to the core while the Guild group was still approaching.

Just like the last one, this Nature core hesitated before responding.

“I can’t believe Stert was telling the truth! There really is a human that can talk to us. There were very few that actually believed him when he returned to his territory after his abrupt departure, and most thought he was just making up stories. This is...unheard of and just...wrong. You better not try anything funny.”

“Well, I can’t help me being the way I am, and I assure you that you are as safe as can be. This won’t take long and then you’ll be on your way,” Fred tried to assure her.

He saw that it was Merida’s group that had made it back first and he greeted her warmly, excited to see what this new Nature Core could bring him. Before the subject of his excitement could respond to his last statement, Merida was close enough to hand him the slightly-larger-than-the-last core.

Do you wish to absorb: Nature Core G-10th-Rating? Yes/No

Uh, No.

Do you wish to absorb: (1) Blueprint and (90) Nature Mana? Yes/No

It was over three times more mana than the last one contained, but his mana pool was large enough to contain it. Without more than a moment’s hesitation, he mentally selected **Yes**.

Absorption Complete!

You have absorbed (90) Nature Mana!

Nature Core G-10th-Rated has been left with the minimum (100) Nature Mana. Establishing a territory within the next (5) days is essential to its continued survival.

Transfer Complete!

You have absorbed knowledge of (1) Blueprint!

Blueprint absorbed: Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana)

Another defense! Although it wasn't one that he thought would be overly useful – as it was likely that many of the Nature-based defenders sent against him would have at least a little immunity to poison – the fact that Fred could start accumulating *defenses* in addition to *defenders* caused the weight he had been feeling on his chest loosen up a little. He had been a little worried that he would only be able to learn defender blueprints; while that wouldn't have been *bad*, he honestly appreciated having a better defense selection, since some of them might turn out to be much more useful.

“Thanks, Merida! Let me just do one more thing before you bring this core back to where you found it.”

“What did you just do—”

As he had done before, Fred pulled out the 90 Nature Mana he had just absorbed from the core and condensed it down into a tight little orb of concentrated mana. This time, however, the increased starting amount

seemed to struggle mightily with him – barely being contained within the small sphere of brightly glowing green mana – as it threatened to break out and do...something. Rather than wait and see what it would do, he immediately sent the concentrated Nature Mana right into the small crystalline object in his hand, instructing it to infuse the core's structure. Only after he was done, did he realize that it was very similar to what he did with his own Cores, during those times that it had originally formed and improved after the first Wasp attack.

This time, the Nature Core became noticeably larger. It still wasn't a huge change – especially in comparison to how much his own Human Core had transformed – but there was definitely an improvement.

“I...I just had my Core Structure improve by 2 Levels! How did you do that? What's going on? Who are you? Teach me how you did—”

Fred ignored the rest of the female core's questions, as he handed her back to Merida. “Thank you again, we're all done here – and it was definitely a success!”

She smiled and turned away from Fred, gesturing to her group to follow after her.

“Hey! Don't you ignore me! Fine, don't answer! It's a good thing you seem to be keeping your word at least, because otherwise I would've used my Mana Combustion skill to wipe all of you out!”

Fred froze in what he was doing as he watched Merida and her group walking back towards the forest. *So that's what it's called? This could've turned out much worse for everyone if that core had suddenly*

decided she didn't want anything to do with me. He may have gotten lucky on the last two cores he had absorbed, but there was no telling if another core might be willing to die to take both him and those around him out with the “Mana Combustion” skill.

Although he already knew it was a risk retrieving and absorbing the cores, the added danger of having it inside the town of Gatecross could potentially endanger even more lives. He wasn't quite sure if even he would survive a potential core explosion, but he was prepared to risk his life in order to get stronger; what he wasn't prepared to risk was everyone else in Gatecross. The groups delving through the dungeons were already facing danger just fetching the cores, but inside of the town there were many more that would be close enough to get killed by an explosion.

The next time the dungeon was empty of new Adventurers, Fred widened the alcove he had slept in the night before off the first room. It wasn't large, but it would also contain an explosion if something like that ended up happening.

I've got to be more careful about this. With that thought, he resolved to talk to the next group that came in and implement some new procedures for bringing the cores into town.

That should be safer...right?

Chapter 40

Eisa followed behind Metch, Raspel, Harriette, and one of the former Gatecross guards named Barbery, who – unlike most of the other guards that were stationed at the northern-most town in the Craytion Kingdom – was a Mage-classed D-Rated former Syndicate Adventurer. Unlike the rest of the Mage-type classes she was accustomed to, Barbery used most of his abilities to negatively affect the attributes of his targets. He could slow them down, reduce their attack strength, or even make them more vulnerable to attacks; of course, he still had a few direct-damage spells in his repertoire, which was what he primarily used when he was stationed as a guard.

Since they were one of the stronger groups around, they were venturing a little farther out from the former town, heading a little more east than most of the other groups. They were going this way for one main reason: the majority of the stronger Plant...or Nature – whatever Fred called them...dungeons were to the east. They had already been traveling for a few hours when they came upon what was formerly an E-2nd-Rated dungeon, so they assembled outside with high hopes that they would be successful.

Although Fred hadn't expressly said so, Eisa was hoping that the stronger the dungeon core they brought back, the more he would be able to "absorb" from it. And since the infuriating man/dungeon core decided that she needed to join the groups out fetching cores, she wanted to show up with the best, largest core that could be found.

It wasn't that she thought she needed to prove herself to him; no, it was more that she didn't quite know how to act around him anymore. She

wasn't about to throw herself at him, but everything else she tried to do to get him to pay even the slightest attention to her was met with a stony wall of indifference or confusion. Even though she felt a little selfish for trying to garner his affection during the crazy times they'd been experiencing, she also couldn't help but feel the way she did about him.

Which was confusing in its own right.

Eisa wasn't one to rush into a relationship; in fact, she hadn't been in anything serious...ever. Her negative reputation as an Adventurer aside, her lack of relationships wasn't through lack of trying – she just hadn't met anyone she liked enough. Well, that, and she never thought it was the right time to find someone and “settle down”. There was always time enough in the future later to find someone she loved and spend the rest of their lives together.

But the extreme stress following the death of her former group and the imminent danger of the last few days, coupled with the realization that death was hanging over their heads, made her rethink that assumption. There might not be a “right time” and, unfortunately, there might not even be a “later”.

Therefore, Eisa was left with two options that she could think of. One, she could profess her feelings to Fred and hope that he felt the same way. She was hesitant to do that, however; if he didn't feel the same, she wouldn't know what to do – it wasn't like she could move on and relocate somewhere else where she didn't have to see him. That, and he was the one in charge of keeping them safe; if she somehow alienated herself, she couldn't help but think – unfairly, she knew – that he wouldn't save her when they were attacked again.

The other option, the one which they were pursuing right now, was to acquire something that would hopefully impress him enough for him to

give some sort of hint as to his hidden feelings towards her. She knew it was pretty dumb as far as options went, but it was all she could think of at the moment.

“Raspel, can you run in really quick and check it out. We’ll wait just inside the entrance,” Metch told the D-Rated Scout. Without saying a word, Raspel nodded and ran in; Eisa and the rest followed after and stayed just inside the entrance.

It didn’t take Raspel long before he came running easily back, shaking his head with a quick gesture when Metch looked at him. “Well, that’s a disappointment – let’s go.”

Everyone had taken Fred’s warning very seriously. As soon as they had all left the dungeon, the Scout explained what he encountered.

“At first, I thought that the first room just happened to be empty. I’d seen it before on a few dungeons; it was almost like they had left nothing there to give you a false sense of security. When I ventured into the second, however, I knew there was something wrong when there wasn’t a single monster or trap to be found. The same with the third and the fourth; I didn’t go any farther than that, because I expected it to be the same. I can always go back and check, but I have a feeling it’s going to be like that the whole way through.”

“No, you did good getting out of there. There’s plenty more to choose from, so let’s try another one,” Metch told him.

Unfortunately, once they visited three more dungeons along the way, they encountered the same issue. All of them were empty of any type of monster or traps; it was only on their fourth one that Raspel got frustrated and ventured farther than he had done before.

And he found where all the defenses were.

Fred was wrong in at least one aspect of his warning. He had thought that the cores would hoard their “Power” so that they could explode and kill anyone trying to take them – which was still possible, but that wasn’t what Raspel encountered. In what he figured was the very last room after searching through six others, he found a room so full of monsters and traps he didn’t even step foot in it before running away.

“So, it was like every monster – and trap – were moved and placed in the same room, meaning that there were literally swarms of deadly creatures just waiting for someone to walk inside. When this dungeon was all broken up by the different rooms, we could’ve flown through this place; as it is now, though, I give it a 50/50 chance we’d all survive trying to go up against that nightmare. I’m sure we’d still win, but we might lose one or two of us.”

Either word had already gotten out to the other cores that they were at risk of being stolen away, or their own paranoia of the humans taking revenge after their unsuccessful assault was making itself known. Either way, they weren’t going to have much luck trying to force their way through and acquire a stronger dungeon core. Eisa resigned herself to settling for one of the weaker ones, which they shouldn’t have too much trouble getting to.

Barbery was looking through a break in the trees farther east, when he pointed out another pile of stones jutting up from the ground, denoting another dungeon. It was right up against the base of a large hill, which was sparsely populated by more trees. “What about that one over there? Shall we try one more before giving up?”

Eisa tried to picture the map of the local dungeons in her head. “I... think that’s only a G-Rated dungeon, which isn’t exactly what we’re

looking for. Besides, that's a—" She cut off what she was about to say as she thought of something.

"What? What's wrong with that dungeon?" Barbery asked, confused.

"Oh, nothing, actually. It might actually be a perfect alternative," Eisa replied, as she could feel a smile stretching across her face.

* * *

An Earth dungeon was quite different from a Plant dungeon, though a G-3rd-Rated one was quite easy for the experienced group. The entire dungeon was only three rooms long, in fact, so they quickly fought through without much trouble; which they were glad of, since it didn't appear that the Earth dungeon sensed anything wrong. Raspel didn't even have to walk farther than the entrance tunnel before he confirmed that it was as normal as it probably ever was.

Just after they walked through the entrance, and almost as soon as Metch stepped into the center of the first room, Eisa felt like everything that had occurred over the last few days never happened. As the small, eyeless Rockworms burrowed up from the stone below and surrounded their main tank, she felt the same thrill and excitement she always did when delving through a dungeon. Even though there wasn't much danger to the group in that particular place, that feeling of braving the unknown was intoxicating.

As the eight foot-long Rockworms attempted to bite Metch with very little success, Eisa and the others got to work utterly decimating them; she herself flung out a single Shadow Strike and took one out, Barbery tossed a pair of Mage-class Magestrikes out and took another two out, Harriette covered another three with a frigid fog that temporarily froze them

solid, and with two quick strikes of his knives, Raspel shanked the last two from behind.

Metch used his shield to smash into the three frozen Rockworms, shattering them into hundreds of pieces as he looked around for any more. All told, the entire battle took less than 10 seconds, and that was only because Metch took his time finishing them off. “Well, that certainly was easy,” their tank announced.

“Don’t get cocky, there could still be surprises in here,” Harriette admonished him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, without any type of sarcasm in his voice. “Raspel, you heard her – you’re up. Let’s make sure it’s safe.”

The little man acknowledged the order with his usual dungeon quietness, before ranging ahead. He gave the all-clear leading up to the tunnel heading to the next room, so they crowded into the passageway, letting their Scout continue his danger assessments. Which turned out to be the right move, as Raspel was forced to deactivate a trap a few feet into the second room.

When they walked through the deactivated trap area, Eisa looked up just outside the tunnel to see a massive boulder perched above, just waiting for something to trigger it to smash whoever was unlucky enough to get caught underneath it. *That...would’ve hurt.*

Fortunately, there weren’t any other traps in the second room, which was filled with a dozen small, 2-foot tall Goblin Gnomes bearing rusty-looking knives. They were an ugly greenish-brown color and were vaguely humanoid in shape – given that they had two legs, two arms, a torso, and a head – but they were as far from a human as one could get. They were more monster than anything, as they ran around naked with stones

imbedded in their skin, giving them a little bit more defense than the previous room's Rockworms.

And just like the previous room, the Goblin Gnomes surrounded Metch and tried to stab him in the legs, all the while making strange, guttural noises. Of course, their attacks were completely ineffectual; the rest of the group quickly finished them off one-by-one, until the last one was chopped completely in half by a single sword slice by their tank. Metch looked like he was going to say something again to the effect of it being too easy, but he held his tongue.

Unimaginatively, at the entrance to the third – and last room – there was another trap, which Raspel dutifully disarmed. They avoided the area he told them it was centered, because from his vast trap disarming experience he said that it was a pit trap filled with sharp stone spikes. It didn't sound fun chancing falling into the pit, even if it was disarmed; fortunately, it was relatively easy to walk around and ignore when they fought the last monster keeping them from the dungeon core.

Instead of multiple creatures, a 5-foot tall, human-shaped Stone Golem – made completely of, well, stone – appeared to emerge from the floor, blocking their way to the Core Room (though she highly doubted that was its actual purpose). Metch quickly switched his sword out for a massive all-metal double-headed hammer; one side was flat and was made for smashing, and the other conically pointed, allowing him to strike a point and transfer all the power behind his strike to a single point. Eisa thought it would've taken both of her hands to wield it properly, but Metch held it easily in just his right hand.

“Stay back, I've got this,” the tank shot back at them.

Eisa wasn't going to argue; many of her spells and abilities didn't work quite as well against elemental constructs like the Stone Golem. She

could still do some damage to it, but she'd rather save her Power if Metch figured he had it handled. The others seemed to think the same as they stood back and watched, Harriette even going so far as to fold her arms and mutter under her breath, "Show-off..."

When Metch got close enough to the Golem, it quickly swung its large stone fist toward the tank. His shield intercepted the blow, knocking him back an inch and prompting a slight grunt, before he swung his hammer down point-first on the top the Golem's head. A few cracks in the stone appeared around the point of impact and seemed to momentarily daze the construct. Metch took advantage of this to swing his shield around to his back with a practiced motion, grab onto his massive hammer with both hands, and rotate it until the flat side was pointed straight at the Golem.

With a savage yell, their tank swung powerfully downwards, hitting the place where he had started the cracks. Not only did he widen the cracks even further, but he had impacted the Golem so strongly that his hammer didn't stop, completely ripping through the stone like it wasn't even there, before smacking into the floor of the room and leaving a large divot. As was probably Metch's intention, the Golem was blasted apart into pieces that shot almost everywhere – including into the other four people behind him watching.

"Ow! Moron, you could've seriously hurt us with that stunt!" Harriette exclaimed, after being smacked in the chest by a fist-sized chunk of stone. Fortunately, everyone that was present had at least a 10 in their Body stat, which negated most if not all of the damage even being pelted by stone pieces would normally cause.

Metch didn't look apologetic in the least, however, though he did smile at the complete destruction of the monster. He slipped the hammer

back into his PIB and took out his more-comfortable sword, sliding it into the sheath buckled to his side. “So, we gonna do this or what?”

They all looked at each other as if waiting for something, and Eisa realized they hadn’t talked through who would actually be doing the fetching. With an internal sigh, she volunteered to do it since this was her idea to delve into the Earth dungeon. Rasper immediately started to look for the entrance to the Core Room once she had agreed to do it.

“Hello, Earth core? We’re here to...borrow you for a few hours, and then we’ll bring you right back. We don’t intend to do you any harm, but we need your help with something,” she spoke out loud to the room, feeling a little silly while doing it. She didn’t get a verbal response, nor did she expect one, but it felt like she was just speaking to the stone walls.

What was it we were supposed to say? “In return for your help, we have someone that will help...uh, ‘increase your Core Structure Level’ for you.”

She was saved from adding any more when Rasper found the entrance to the Core Room and waved her over. Even standing right next to him, she could barely see it; it was cleverly hidden between a jutting slab of stone and the wall, near-flawlessly hiding the narrow entrance that held the Earth dungeon core.

She slid inside the crevice, scraping along the edges as she did so, until she almost popped out when she got to the hidden room. Floating in the middle of the Core Room was a tiny, light-brown pulsing spheroid crystal, which seemed innocuous enough. She didn’t see any indication that it was going to explode, but she wasn’t exactly sure what it was going to look like when it did, either. Regardless, she approached cautiously and repeated what she had said before, trying to reassure the dungeon core that she ultimately meant it no harm.

Eisa reached out cautiously until she closed her right hand around the floating crystal, and she was surprised at how warm it felt. She hadn't actually held one before and she had expected it to be like the coolness of the stone throughout the dungeon, but she was wrong. Once she had her hand around it, she tried to pull it away from where it was floating but it didn't move.

I didn't come all this way to go home empty-handed.

With some effort, she pulled harder and felt the core almost tear away from where it was floating, as if it was being suspended there by an invisible web. She opened up her hand and saw it faintly pulsing the same as it had before, so she breathed a sigh of relief and exited the Core Room, her prize clutched tightly in her fist.

"Did you get it?"

"Was it there?"

"What does it look like?"

Eisa was bombarded with questions as soon as she stepped out of the crevice, so she flashed the core in her hand to them before covering it back up. "Yes, I got it. Now, let's get back to Gatecross so we can bring it right back like I had promised."

Fortunately, they were all still fairly refreshed from the sleep the night before and the day hadn't been particularly hard, if frustrating. As a result, they literally ran back to town, arriving within an hour after acquiring the core.

He is going to love this!

Chapter 41

After the arrival of Merida and her group, things hadn't gone exactly the way Fred was hoping. It wasn't necessarily bad, but the next few hours were met with one unsuccessful group after another; out of the twenty groups that came initially went out, only five had managed to acquire a dungeon core. Though, to be fair, he still hadn't heard back from Metch and Eisa's group, which should've been back already.

It turned out that increasing their Core Structure Level wasn't worth losing all of their invested mana inside their dungeon for most of the cores out there. He could kind of understand it; they had already lost a lot of their mana reserves from the unsuccessful assault and weren't willing to lose any more even with the promise of increasing their overall strength.

Fred was glad that his Guild members weren't pushing their luck, though. They had taken his warnings seriously, and any dungeon that had no defenders or defenses set up to prevent them from progressing were skipped. Already, the nineteen groups that he had heard from either came back empty-handed or with a low-Rated core that didn't bother rearranging their dungeon and were eager for a little help from the strange human that could increase their Core Structure Level. He figured that they didn't have much to lose in the first place, so it mattered naught whether they lost a little bit of mana in the process.

Even though he was hoping for more defenses to add to his dungeon, Fred instead absorbed four more defenders from those that were brought to him. Regardless of it being a bit different from what he wanted, he was still happy as he brought up his new and improved list of defenders.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (All Blueprints)

- Flower Tripper (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Flameflower Burster (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Frostflower Spiker (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana)
- Flametripper Spiker (Level 2 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Rock Beetle (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Scorching Water Beetle (Level 2 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Large Wasp (Level 1 Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana)
- Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Level 1 Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana)
- Vine Spider (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana)
- Am-bushes (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana)
- Charging Boar (Level 1 Base Cost: 15 Nature Mana)

His Flower Tripper and Rock Beetle hybrid variants were added to the list, as well as the other four that he had acquired through dungeon core absorption. It was a surprise to see the Charging Boar become available after he absorbed it from an F-2nd-Rated core; he hoped that it would prove useful in surprise situations or narrow corridors.

Fred wanted to experiment with more hybrids to see if there were any more powerful variants that would be more useful than their original forms, but he was busy using every drop of Mana that he Converted on creating additional defenses in and outside of the dungeon. Now that he

had much more room to work with, he wanted to fill it up with everything he could think of – and he even took some suggestions from their new Adventurers and veterans alike.

He was even beginning to think about his original labyrinth plan and make hundreds of small rooms until he filled up his entire territory. He had more than enough Unconverted Mana inside his Human Core to see it done, but it would take a little bit of planning to achieve his desired results.

For the moment, though, he added another two rooms after the fallback room, with various tiered-platform arrangements that had worked so well before. He even had a plan in place to hopefully take care of any more Dryad-Treant issues with a semi-sealed drop-ceiling filled with Fire Mana on a slow burn. He needed to perform additional tests to see if the air-to-fire-ratio was enough to keep it burning – and not a full conflagration – but even if it didn't work perfectly, it would still most likely be useful.

Fred did take the time out to see if he could alter one of the defenses he had with another type of elemental mana, but they didn't create variants like they did with the defenders. In fact, they wouldn't even activate at all, and the Ensnaring Vine he tried to create with both Nature and Fire Mana dissolved and the process ended up losing a unit of Nature Mana for the failure. He was just glad that that didn't occur when he was making his gargantuan Beetle – they probably wouldn't be alive if that had happened.

There were still hundreds of dungeons for the groups to explore, though, and he was still holding out hope that more defenses and even defender blueprints came his way. He had big plans and only lacked the resources to put them into action.

He was toward the eastern edge of Gatecross looking into the viability of making a series of low stone walls that would break up the flow of an army of dungeon defenders, when he sensed Eisa enter his territory.

For some reason, he always knew when she was near – without having to consciously look. *Must be because we've spent so much time together. In fact, it feels like I was missing something while she was gone; she hasn't been away from me for longer than a few minutes over the last couple of days, and even then, she was at least in town.*

Fred felt strangely glad when he saw Eisa and her group emerge from the trees. And his excitement only grew as he saw she was clutching something in her hand. *Nice! Of course she was successful!* He glanced around for Deecy, who was normally by his side; she was doubtful any others would be successful, and he wanted to show her that she was wrong. Unfortunately, he belatedly remembered that she had ventured out in her giant Dire Wolf form to help supplement the hunting of fresh game; although Fred could technically make food, most of the others preferred something with a little “taste” to it.

He waved to the Necro-healer and motioned her toward the dungeon. His new “protocol” – as some of the Guild members were calling it – was strange to them at first, but after he explained the purpose behind it, they applauded his actions. Again, the small alcove off the first room hadn't seen as much action as he had originally planned for, but it was a close, secure place that would ensure that only *he* would be hurt if the dungeon cores he was set to absorb decided that they wanted to explode.

“Let's go down to the dungeon, just me and you!” Fred shouted in Eisa's direction.

Without waiting for a reply, he walked toward the outside entrance, which had been slowly expanded – as he regenerated enough Power – with new stone corridors so that it took almost a minute to navigate completely. There was a group of new Adventurers just finishing up killing his Flowers

inside the dungeon and were headed back up the entrance tunnel; Fred waited for them to move out of the way before proceeding down.

Fred glanced at their Interfaces as they passed, and he was pleased to see that at least some of the Adventurer townspeople had finally reached the F-Rating. Over the next day, as time permitted, he mentally sketched in some time to Teach all of them more spells and abilities, which should be considerably easier now that they weren't the lowest of the low Ratings. "Inform the next group heading in that it will take a few more minutes – I've got another core absorption to do," he told their retreating forms.

"Will do, sir," the last in the group, a former restaurant server, replied.

Putting them out of his mind, he walked down to the first room and waited for Eisa to arrive. He didn't have long to wait, however, as she arrived within the minute.

"You've been busy, Fred – I have to say I'm impressed," she said as she smiled at him. "But why are we down here?"

He smiled back at her, as he was genuinely happy that she was back. *Maybe I can keep her back from the next round of delving?* He felt... vulnerable when she wasn't there. "It's just a precaution; I didn't want to put anyone else in danger in case something goes wrong, if you know what I mean," Fred told her, not wanting to put any ideas in the core's mind since he was pretty sure it could hear him. Though, now that he thought about it, he hadn't heard it saying anything since it entered his territory.

"It makes sense, I guess – though I don't know what I would do if something...permanent...happened because of something I gave you," Eisa said, a flush creeping up her cheeks as she spoke.

Hmm...I guess the dungeon delving took a lot more out of her than I thought. The fact that she returned hours after any other group was telling;

he would probably keep her and her group back in town until the next day at least.

Fred led her into his small private alcove located through a short corner tunnel off the first room; the space was only large enough to fit about six people at one time – and that was if they were all standing up. The ceiling was only a couple of feet over his head, so to most people it would've felt cramped, but he felt at home in tight spaces – especially if it was in a dungeon. Added to that, he didn't need a lot of room to complete the absorption; if there *were* an explosion, he figured the more contained it was, the better.

“It's pretty small, but I think you'll like it,” Eisa told him as soon as they were alone in what he was privately calling the Absorption Room. She held out her hand, which was still clutched tightly around the Nature Core she had “borrowed”, and Fred placed his hand underneath hers to accept it. He was ok with a small, low-Rated core – anything would be welcome after all of the unsuccessful delves. And every blueprint got him closer to safely securing the town of Gatecross against more core assaults.

“I'm sure I will,” Fred replied, as she opened up her hand and let the core she was holding drop into his hand. As soon as he caught a glint of brown instead of green, he instantly foresaw a problem – but he couldn't move fast enough to avoid catching what he figured was probably an Earth Core.

Do you wish to absorb: Earth Core G-3rd-Rating? Yes/Yes

Oh, no – this isn't good. Not only did it not give him a choice in absorbing the Earth Core, but it was almost a guarantee that it would destroy it in the process. *This isn't what I wanted!*

It was bad enough that he had accidentally destroyed a Nature Core; if he killed an Earth Core, he – no, *they* – would suffer the wrath of another Faction entirely. And from what he remembered the core he had absorbed saying, the Nature and Earth Factions were in an Alliance, along with Water. If they worked together to bring him and his people down, they didn't stand a chance.

All of that flashed through Fred's mind as he attempted to escape from the prompt about absorbing the Earth Core. Time had frozen again in the world around him and he knew he had a limited time to “decide” – not that there was much choice; there was no way he would voluntarily say *Yes*. Unfortunately, nothing that he tried could get rid of it. In the end, all he could do was wait and hope that it would just go away and not automatically complete the process.

Time elapsed! Now absorbing Mana from G-3rd-Rated Earth Core.

Time started again and Fred felt a familiar, intensely sharp pain radiate through his body starting with his hands. He started to involuntarily scream as he looked up at Eisa, who had a horrified look on her face. Looking back down, he saw the now-glowing brown core start to flash, blinking on and off faster and faster – eerily reminiscent of his previous experience.

Warning! Core Absorption paused due to activation of Mana Combustion skill.

No! The pain was still coursing through Fred's body even though the absorption was interrupted, and the flashing of the core in his hand

started to intensify – but not in a good way. He struggled with his involuntary screaming and managed to squeeze out, “RUN!”; the whole situation was already a mess, and there was no reason for Eisa to suffer for it.

“NO!” Eisa replied, echoing the same thought Fred had in his mind. “I WILL NOT let the man I love die again!” she continued, reaching for the core now gripped tightly in his fist. However, nothing she could do could pry his fingers apart, as they were literally frozen in a painful death-grip.

Fred’s body was locked up tight and he couldn’t manage to move her away or warn her off anymore. He watched helplessly as the Earth Core in his hand quickly rose in temperature with an intense heat and blinding light, before it shattered in a horrendous mana-fueled explosion. His closed hand managed to marginally contain the explosion for a scant fraction of a second, but it was so intense and expanded so rapidly that it broke out and literally blew the rest of his body apart.

The last thing he saw – as his second decapitated head in the last day was sent flying away – was Eisa being blown back from the shockwave and against the far wall, her dress shredded from the powerful force of the explosion and her skin instantly blackened from the heat. Before his vision faded to black, he thought she might actually survive if she got healing in time...

But that was before he saw the small hole in her chest, where a sliver of the Earth core that exploded had slipped through his closed fingers and easily penetrated her toughened skin, piercing her through the heart.

Chapter 42

Fred woke up an indeterminate time later to complete darkness. Well, physically it was complete darkness, but when he used his Mana Sight, he could see that he was still in the little alcove near the first room in his dungeon. At least, he thought it was, because it was even smaller than it had been before. And, for some reason, the normal lighting that illuminated his dungeon was gone.

He looked down at himself and saw that half of his left leg was buried underneath a literal wall of dirt. Fortunately, with a bit of effort, he was able to yank his leg out after a few minutes of pulling and stretching. The dirt above fell into the small space vacated by his appendage and he slightly worried that the wall was going to collapse even further. However, after a few seconds the tumbling dirt settled into place; which was fortunate, because in the wake of the dirt settling, a small sliver of sunlight poked through a hole in the ceiling, slightly illuminating the area he was in. Not only that, but he could feel a slight breeze as fresh air filled the previously stale room.

What happened? He vaguely remembered working in the outskirts of Gatecross, wondering if he could make some low walls...when he saw Eisa emerging from the forest. Suddenly, the memories that seemed hazy just moments ago firmed up in his mind, as he remembered bringing her down to the dungeon, the forced absorption of the Earth Core, and the resulting explosion.

Eisa! Is she ok?

His head whipped around to where he thought she should be, and it was only by the benefit of the sun peeking through the ceiling that he was

able to see that the bottom portion of her body was crushed by the collapsed room. The top half of her looked fairly intact; if it weren't for the fact that her skin was burnt past all recognition, she was otherwise whole. Other than the small hole in her chest that had dried blood caked around the entry point, of course.

Fred crawled over to her and tried to analyze her Interface, but nothing came up...*she's really dead*. He knew that he should be able to access it if she was still alive and the fact that he couldn't only confirmed what his eyes could plainly see. He figured it hadn't been that long since it had happened, however, because it hadn't started to rot...or the previous lack of airflow inside the room could account for that, too.

He felt lost. She had been by his side ever since he came to Gatecross all those months ago – it almost felt like years to him – and he wasn't sure if he could get by in the human world without her guidance.

But it wasn't only that; he genuinely liked her as a person, and despite their rocky deceptive start, he felt he could be himself around her without worrying about how she would react. Eisa was the only one that accepted him for who he was without wanting something in return. *Or did she?*

Fred remembered her last words: "I WILL NOT let the man I love die again!". *Love? Did she love me?* He wasn't sure if he really knew what that meant. His parents...he thought that he might have loved them, but sometimes he wasn't quite confident in that. Ever since he learned more about them and about who they really were, he wasn't sure if they were capable of loving *him*.

What he did know was that his parents loved *each other*. There was no other explanation for the lengths they went through to be together despite it being forbidden by the Factions. They had given up their

previous lives to run away to the back end of nowhere – just so they could live together in peace. Also, the way they provided and protected Fred as he was growing up...well, maybe they *could* love him after all, even though he was “human”. And given that they at least showed their love in the only way they could, Fred figured he could love them in return.

But now he wanted to know what love meant between two humans. Fred was well aware of the “lust” that could occur between people, but he hadn’t really seen any examples of love. And now, as soon as he learned that Eisa had “loved him” – and all that the that phrase entailed – she was gone. He was angry, but he didn’t know who he was angry at; at Eisa for bringing the Earth Core in the first place or for telling Fred that she loved him? At the Earth Core itself for deciding to sacrifice itself to kill him? Or was he angry at himself, for ultimately causing all that had happened over the last couple of days?

Overall, however, he was angry that the woman who had loved him...and whom Fred thought he might – just might – have loved in return, was dead. Considering his feelings about how much he missed her when she was gone, and how comfortable he felt with her around, he thought it might be love – but now he didn’t have the chance of exploring that further.

Why does everyone that I care about die?

His anger slowly leached away from his emotions, as it was replaced by a combination of despondency and acceptance. There wasn’t anything he could change about what had happened, but he was still sad and disappointed that it did.

The least I can do is give her a proper burial. Fred knew from talking with Eisa that it was human custom to bury their dead, but they hadn’t had the chance to bury any more than just some random leftover

bones from those that had died during the cores' assault. *I'll make sure that this is different.*

He went to pull up his Dungeon Creation Menu to remove some of the dirt over her half-buried body...but nothing happened. He tried again – to no success – and then a third time. When it didn't come up, something suddenly occurred to him.

His territory was gone.

And with his territory gone, so was his dungeon and Creation Menu. He was essentially trapped until he reestablished his territory and could dig himself out. He reached out with his senses and found the three different elements that comprised his core and connected to each in turn, sending a single point of each Elemental Mana to form a connection. With each connection, he felt his awareness of his surroundings increase a hundred-fold, allowing him to pinpoint every trace of Fire, Water, and Nature around him.

But his territory didn't pop into existence as it did before.

Confused, Fred pulled up his Status and had another shock.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklebossing
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: * Fire Mana: 15/139 Water Mana: 14/138 Nature Mana: 14/138 Earth Mana: 11/11 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 11258 Unconverted Essence: 7122
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 4% Expert Mana Conversion: 1% Intermediate Mana Communication: 62%

Intermediate Core Crystallization: 21% Intermediate Defender Creation: 67% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 28% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 87% Novice Dungeon Creation: 98% Novice Defense Creation: 79%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

Fred had thought that the absorption of the Earth Core had been completely interrupted and he hadn't received anything from it – but he was wrong. He was now classified as having *four* different factions: Fire, Water, Nature, and Earth. However, his Core Structure Level just showed an “unknown” quantity, which might explain why he was having difficulty establishing a connection.

He looked inward and realized that his inner Cores were a mess. The Elemental Cores were in a jumble; they looked okay as far as their structure went, but they weren't connected to the clear central core anymore. As for that, his Human Core was dim, cracked, and slowly leaking out Unconverted Mana at a very miniscule pace – so slowly that it would probably take a few hours to lose a single point.

That was troubling enough, but it could also explain why his dungeon and territory had collapsed; he wasn't exactly sure how many pieces he had ended up being blown up into, but the damage had been extensive enough that he was practically permanently dead. With him “dead” (or dead as far as maintaining a territory went), everything had collapsed.

Fred considered himself lucky and thankful that he had actually survived somehow, but now he worried about the rest of the Guild and new Adventurers under his care. Concentrating inside of himself again, he

slowly extracted and wrapped Unconverted Mana around his Human Core, instinctively instructing it to repair the damage that had been done. It was slow going, because he was worried that pulling too much out at once would further crack the structure – and he had a feeling that if it completely broke, he'd be snuffed out right along with it.

He sat down while he was at it, breathing shallow breaths because the airflow inside the room was limited to the small hole leaking sunlight in the ceiling. Hours and hundreds of units of Unconverted Mana passed, along with the sun aboveground. Finally, after what he thought was nearly half a day and almost 500 UM painstakingly cocooning his Human Core, there was a brief flicker from his center structure and the mana was sucked inside in an instant.

A bright flash preceded the sight of his Human Core safe and uncracked, whole and healthy again at the center of his Core system. Fred breathed a sigh of relief at the sight, only now taking the time to fully appreciate how close he had come to permanent death.

Shaking it off, he rearranged the Elemental Cores into a triangular formation again before he stopped abruptly. *Wait – I have one more.* Just as he had envisioned the others materializing, Fred imagined another spherical crystalline structure – though this time it was a light brown in color. It took him a few minutes of nothing happening before he realized what he was doing wrong.

Based upon his Status, the absorption of the Earth Core wasn't complete; when he had acquired his other three elements, he had started out with a base of 100 – but his Earth Mana was at only 11. He had been imagining the new light-brown Elemental Core as approximately the same size as the others.

Glad that he had figured out the issue, he envisioned the structure again – though this time it was about a tenth of the size of the others. A quick *pop* indicated his success, and Fred looked at the tiny little crystalline orb in contemplation. *I wonder if that is what newborn cores look like...*

Now that he had all four elements represented (and his fixed-up Human Core, of course), Fred arranged them in a square formation with the larger, clear core in the center again. He quickly started to attach the four smaller cores to each other, before connecting them to his Human Core. As soon as everything was connected and the glowing light flowing from one to another, he felt a small *click* in his chest and a tension he didn't realize was locking up his body oozed away in contentment.

Alright, let's do this.

Now that he was back in business, Fred quickly connected to the three previous elements again in his environment and reached inside for the fourth. Where Fire was prickly warm to the touch, Water was cool and smooth, and Nature still a little slimy-feeling, Earth felt...wholesome and gritty all at the same time. He had no reluctance to connect with the dirt all around him.

The territory established itself and Fred blacked out for a moment, falling sideways from where he had propped himself up against one of the walls of his earthy prison. When he came to, he spent a few moments toning down the information overload his established territory provided.

Not only did it feel stronger than it had before, but it was also larger; although he couldn't expand much farther because of the Nature dungeons butting up against his territory, he could feel it extend a bit more above and below the ground. When he rechecked his Status, he saw that his Core Structure Level was now 8 – an increase of 2 compared to before.

When he looked around his earthen prison, he felt a deep connection with the dirt and stone surrounding him and could “see” miniscule amounts of Earth Mana inside the walls and ceiling that he hadn’t even known existed. Without knowing what he was doing (but feeling like he needed to do *something*), Fred extracted and threw out a single point of Earth Mana at the pile covering Eisa and instructed it to spread out. When it spread thinly over a large portion of the pile/wall trapping Eisa’s lower body in place, it connected to and incorporated the tiny, miniscule orbs of natural Earth Mana nearby.

With a thought, he manipulated the large Earth Mana construction in the wall and *moved* it off to the sides of Eisa’s body. The dirt and stone pieces effortlessly flowed off and around her corpse, and Fred could finally see that, even if she had lived through the initial explosion, her entire lower half was practically smashed flat from the weight of the earth on top of her.

Unfortunately, that same weight, when moved, caused a stream of dirt to fall from above, signaling a full ceiling collapse. Fred quickly tossed out another five units of Earth Mana into the ceiling and *pushed* against it. He had only meant to stabilize it temporarily, but his *push* was more forceful than he intended.

With an explosion of dirt and stone, the whole roof of the room shot upwards and outwards, taking with it the earth that he had moved off of Eisa as well. He could feel his connection with the exploded dirt fade as it ventured past his territory, while a small portion that had shot generally upwards rained all around the hole Fred now found himself in. A few clods of dirt fell inside the now-exposed room again, but fortunately none of it hit him or Eisa’s deceased form.

The stars shone down from above, the day having receded while he had been repairing his Cores. But Fred didn’t need light in order to see – he

had his territory. With a quick look using his Territory Sight around the town of Gatecross, he realized that it was completely empty. Not only that, but the stone “maze” that he had constructed above the dungeon was smashed to pieces, as if some sort of giant had come by and took its frustration out on his construct.

A more thorough look through the ruins and emptiness that was his territory revealed – fortunately – no evidence of any more bodies. Fred reasoned that whatever happened there had occurred after everyone left. *But where did everyone go?*

“So you are alive! I thought you were too stubborn to die that easily.”

“Deecy?” Fred Communicated back, surprised to hear her.

“Who else would be hanging around for the last month, instinctively knowing that you weren’t dead? Of course, I couldn’t quite tell the others that, but—wait, why don’t you get out of that hole first and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Fair enough.

Chapter 43

Fred was tired of the room and hole anyway, so he used his small reserves of Earth Mana to carve his way up one of the walls, forming uneven-if-functional steps. He picked up Eisa's body, noticing right away how light it was, and brought it with him up the steps to find Deecy in her giant Dire Wolf form sitting patiently for him to arrive. As he placed the former Necro-healer delicately on the ground nearby, Deecy started to tell him what had happened.

“After your ‘death’ – which must’ve been horrendous if it took you nearly a month to be put back together – your territory and dungeon collapsed. I’m sure you already guessed that, and you can probably guess how the rest of your Guild members and Gatecross townspeople took it. With both you and Eisa gone, not to mention the dungeon, Metch and the others were conflicted. Some wanted to wait to see if you would come back to life like you did before, but since your dungeon disappeared with you, there were very few that believed you might still be alive.

“Therefore, the majority of the people voted to run away, which they finally did the very next day. From what I understood from their destination, they were headed far to the west, where apparently there’s a large section of Dark Faction dungeons around. Since you had told Eisa about the different ‘Alliances’ between the factions, she told everyone else; as I’m sure you remember, the Dark is not a fan of the Nature Faction.

“Leaving turned out to be the right call, as – and I’m assuming it was an Earth Core that was destroyed here based on the new aspect of your territory – an army of Earth-based dungeon defenders came calling the next day to exact revenge for the death of one of their own. Most of the destruction you see was caused by a massive Rock Giant nearly sixty feet tall that obliterated your little construction project above your dungeon entrance.

“And that’s about it. I’ve been roaming around the forest near here – trying to avoid calling attention to myself from the nearby dungeon cores – and waiting to see if you were going to come back. Which you did.”

Fred figured there was more to it than that, as she had mentioned before that she might’ve tried to convince everyone that he was still “alive”, but it was a concise enough explanation of events that he let it be. While she was finishing up her summation, she started to shrink down from her giant-sized form until she was in her recovery Pup form.

“Now that you’re here, I really need to rest. I’ve had very little chance to find somewhere safe around here, as I keep coming across random patrols of small Earth defenders roaming through the forest. Fortunately...I’m much...faster than...them...”

And the small Dire Wolf Pup was asleep before she even finished her thought.

Fred couldn’t even imagine trying to survive out there with hostile dungeon cores everywhere you turned. He left her alone as he tried to figure out what to do now. It was a little cool out in the open air during the

nighttime, so he brought a few Fire Mana out from his Elemental Core and started them burning in between him and the Dire Wolf; he could see that Deecy appreciated it as well, even while unconscious – her form shifted almost imperceptibly toward it once it snapped into existence.

He stared at her sleeping form for nearly an hour, watching her slowly breathe in and out as the thin, faded Fire and Water Mana inside of her body slowly started to refill and darken. While he wasn't exactly sleepy – which he supposed he should be after his near-death experience – he *was* starting to get hungry. He used some of his Unconverted Mana to create some of the tasteless food orbs like his mother used to make—

A stray thought flitted across his mind, so brief and unformed that he almost dismissed it. However, with nothing else to do, he brought it back to the forefront of his mind and let it rest there for a little bit while he looked back and forth between Deecy and Eisa's corpse. Little by little, his thought slowly formed into an idea, and then from an idea into a plan. Whether it was a good plan or not – only time would tell.

With a last look at Deecy's sleeping form and a brief look using his Mana Sight at Eisa's body to confirm that the sliver of the Earth Core was still imbedded inside her chest, he got to work. He had only done this once before – and unknowingly at that – but he had much finer control now than he previously had.

Fred brought forth an image in his mind of Eisa, of how she looked, sounded, smelt, and even felt in those few times that he had inadvertently touched her hand or her arm. He pictured her black dress covering her form and recalled how he had repaired it during their very first dungeon delve – to her astonishment. He remembered the way she used to jokingly make fun of him for giving away all of his money, and the way she used to laugh

at the way he would order his Guild members (who were sometimes much older) around like they were children.

He remembered all those things and more; he recalled everything he could remember about her – which turned out to be a lot since they had spent so much time together. Finally, he remembered the relieved smile she gave him when she saw him again after being apart for only a few hours.

Fred pulled out nearly 3,000 units of Unconverted Mana from his Human Core and held the concentrated orb of nearly invisible mana in front of him while he infused it with all the memories of Eisa he could remember. When he was as done as he thought he could be, he moved the orb over to her corpse and let it expand until it covered her entire destroyed figure, from her crushed lower half to her burnt upper body. But what he made sure to do was focus his attention on the Earth Core sliver in her heart.

When everything was in place, he activated his Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill.

Intense light assaulted his eyes and he had to throw his hands up to avoid being permanently blinded. Fred couldn't even use his Mana Sight to see what was happening, because the blinding light was affecting the mana inside his creation as well. And then he felt a tugging at his Human Core, as additional Unconverted Mana was sucked out from him.

Apparently, I didn't use enough. He watched his Status as 1,000, then 2,000, then just over 3,000 more UM was torn from him to feed his project; as soon as it stopped, there was an even greater explosion of light before it abruptly faded.

“What did you just—”

Fred lowered his hands from in front of his face and quickly blinked away the spots in his vision. When he could see again, Eisa was there – sitting up from where her corpse used to lie, looking as healthy and whole as he remembered. She stared at him and at her surroundings in confusion.

“Fred...what’s going on?”

* * *

Gaelystromico had been removed from his position as the 173rd District Nature Faction Leader after the debacle last month. It was bad enough that the army of dungeon defenders that Avenlyrica put together had been destroyed – including her Emerald Dragon, which was an expensive addition – but the actions from the humans afterward had been both confusing and frightening. With most of their mana reserves at an all-time low, many of the lower-Rated Nature Cores couldn’t put up much of a defense against the invading groups of “livestock” – and they weren’t there for loot.

They were there to steal away the cores from their Core Rooms.

Strangely, though, the cores that were stolen were returned exactly where they were taken from, albeit with less mana due to their dungeon collapsing and territory abandoned. What was even more hard to believe was those that had been returned had their Core Structure increased; they showed improvements that should’ve taken at least a couple of years to accomplish – all in the space of a couple of hours.

Reports from those that had this boost told of a human that was able to absorb mana from their core, only to return it to them somehow in a way that improved their Structure. Gael thought this was unlikely if not improbable, but either way, the end results were hard to argue with.

Regardless of the actual source and risk involved, many of the younger, lower-Rated cores were eager for a boost even if it meant they lost out on some of their mana.

Not so for the older, higher-Rated cores; they – like Gael himself – didn't trust this “human” that was reportedly stealing cores and improving them. As a result, they had concentrated their remaining mana into making their dungeons as deadly as possible, completely disregarding the guidelines. And Gael had allowed it, because he agreed with them.

When a young, confused Earth Core was taken and, in a panic, used its Mana Combustion skill – it was both a blessing and a curse for Gael. Immediately following the incident, all thefts of Nature Cores stopped – which was great; unfortunately, the Earth Faction somehow learned of the Nature Faction's knowledge of the danger and held them accountable for the death of one of their own – in addition to the humans, of course.

With their Alliance now in jeopardy of being dissolved, Gael (and Aven) were removed from their positions of authority for their failure. Honestly, that was fine with him, because all he wanted to do was concentrate on defending his core; with the strange goings-on with the humans nowadays, he couldn't be too careful.

Even without his position, Gael still heard some chatter regarding the hunt for the humans responsible for the deaths of not just one, but at least two dungeon cores. Rumor said that the other livestock in the nearby larger habitations had “marked” the ones who had done it and claimed to have no dealings with them. Such claims *might've* been accepted by the leaders of the Nature Faction, but now that the Earth Faction had been wronged, he doubted they would settle for just a handful of humans to exact their retribution on.

Gael wasn't sure if the destruction of large swathes of human settlements was the right move in this situation, but he had no say in anything anymore. Regardless of what happened, however, he resolved to sit back and not get involved; while it would most likely be entertaining, he didn't want to be anywhere near when the livestock decided to fight back.

Hmm...maybe I should think about moving far, far away...

End of Book 2

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Dungeon World 2!

I had fun writing this book, as I really enjoy the ins and outs of dungeon construction, traps, and dungeon monsters!

Look for the next book, in which Fred, Deecy, and the newly reborn Eisa follow after the remnants of the Core Power Guild into the Dark Dungeon territory, at some point in the next few months!

Again, thank you for reading and I implore you to consider leaving a review – I love 4 and 5-star ones! Reviews make it more likely that others will pick up a good book and read it!

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Dungeon World 2