

**JONATHAN BROOKS**

# DUNGEON WORLD 5



# Dungeon World 5

A Dungeon Core Experience  
Dungeon World Series

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# Dedication

To my daughter, who has just recently started playing video games with a passion that makes me a proud gamer dad.

In addition, I want to thank all of my beta-readers and Patrons! Your help is greatly appreciated, and you've made this book even better than I could've made it on my own!

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# Quick Recap

Fredwynklemossering was born of the very unlikely – and thought impossible – pairing between opposing-element Dungeon Cores. Despite hiding out in the middle of 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.

After journeying south on his own and 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 of the creation process, Fred was knocked unconscious; he was later saved from freezing to death in the frozen northern wilderness when he was found by a human named Regnark from the nearby settlement.

Regnark taught Fred a lot about the human world, and about how humans interact with each other, in their short stint together; and the time he was there in Northend 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 Regnark’s house and sent south. He met Deecy – the Dire Wolf he had inadvertently created – along the way to Gatecross, the nearest human town.

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. Fred soon created the Core Power Guild – along with a woman named Eisa, who seemed to be a friend of sorts – to delve through multiple dungeons every day, where he learned new spells and abilities along the way. The only thing the Guild members wanted in return was cold, hard currency – which he easily supplied by using his special Dungeon Core powers.

Eventually, however, he needed some answers. Along with Eisa and three other members of the Guild, Fred was able to fight through an F-3<sup>rd</sup>-Rated Nature dungeon to confront the Dungeon Core at the end.

Unfortunately, during the ensuing conversation, 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.

Faced with the need to protect everyone from the nearby Cores' retribution for the destruction of the Nature Core – Dungeon Cores tended to take something like that *very* personally – Fred went back to Gatecross, with the intent to build a dungeon underneath the town for defensive purposes. Through trial and error, Fred was able to figure out how to establish a territory around the town, as well as create a simple dungeon underneath the ground.

When the main attack, inevitably, did come, Gatecross was assaulted from both the north and south gates, though Fred's traps managed to whittle down quite a few invaders before they were able to reach the dungeon proper. While his Human defenders did their best to fend off waves of giant insects, beasts, Treants, and Dryads, Fred fought his own battle against a massive Emerald Dragon – with an equally massive Beetle that he was able to make inside Gatecross. Fred was forced to use every bit of Fire Mana he could get his hands on to ignite a cloud of poisonous

breath, which the Dragon used to kill his Beetle. Igniting the cloud of poisonous breath caused the cloud to explode in a gigantic fireball, destroying everything above the ground – and “killing” himself in the process.

Fortunately, being a Dungeon Core, his fragile, Human shell was rebuilt, over time, and he “came back to life” – only to emerge from the dungeon as a party of high-Rated DAS members arrived to see what was going on. Shortly after he recovered from being burned to death, Fred was killed – again, temporarily – during an interrogation when he had his head chopped off; in addition, the Guild and townspeople were marked with a highly visible yellow “X” above their heads – which told everyone that saw them that they were outlawed for destroying a Dungeon Core.

Later, when Fred found that he could absorb blueprints for his dungeon from Cores without destroying them in the process, Eisa and her group decided to bring back an Earth Core, which Fred unexpectedly took from her inside a safe room located in his dungeon. While he tried to figure out what to do about absorbing the Earth Dungeon Core without actually destroying it, the brown-colored, gem-like Core initiated its Mana Combustion skill, which was the same thing his parents had used when they were killed inside their own dungeon.

Fred “died” – again – as a result, but there was enough of him left after the explosion for his Core to put him back together again. When he revived, he found the desiccated corpse of Eisa nearby, half-buried underneath a collapsed wall and with a shard from the exploded Earth Core inside her heart. With Eisa dead and Fred at a loss for what to do, he had an inspiration when he remembered how Deecy had been created. Using the Earth Core shard in her heart as a primary focus, he used his Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill and imagined Eisa as she used

to be, pumping thousands of Unconverted Mana into the process. After a blindingly bright flash of light, Eisa was alive.

Shortly after her revival, Regnark – who was apparently a B-Rated Adventurer – stumbled upon Fred, Deecy, and the recently “reborn” Eisa, after fleeing from the destroyed village of Northend. During a fight to escape the destroyed town of Gatecross, which was necessary to evade Dungeon Defenders sent by the ticked-off Earth Cores nearby, they discovered that Eisa had essentially been sent back to a G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rating, without access to her previous classes or Essence. However, she also acquired some interesting abilities, along with a new status.

Eisa was now something called an Earth Shard; not only that, but Deecy was apparently one as well, though she was a Fire and Water Shard. Both of them found that they could use the elemental Mana they were reborn with to do amazing things like create Earth-based Defenders, Fire and Water-based Defenses, or even change their natural forms.

Running to the west – to find his Guild and the Gatecross townspeople that had fled – Fred and his friends were forced to dodge more Earth Defenders looking for them, as well as survive a harrowing night along the Plains of Grass. Void creatures that were extremely hard to kill and tended to suck all of the Mana – or Essence – out of their victims roamed it at night, and only through the lucky intervention of their pursuers were they able to survive.

Eventually, they arrived at the Deadlands, which was full of Dark dungeons and their Dark Cores. After having very little success with finding the Guild members, and having been chased out of a local town, Fred met up with a group of Adventurers who were delving through a local Dark dungeon. With their assistance, they were able to infiltrate the dungeon to the Core, where Fred was able to absorb just the ability to use

Dark Mana and some blueprints from the Core. However, due to unforeseen stupidity on behalf of the Core, it exploded, destroying a good portion of the dungeon and collapsing its territory.

Regnark also lost his life during the assault on the dungeon, and Fred, Deecy, and Eisa were forced to flee southwest with his body. When they arrived at Allroads – where the Core Power Guild and the Gatecross townspeople were reported to be – Fred used a sliver of the Dark Core that exploded to “resurrect” Regnark. His large friend had been reset back down to G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rating, just as Eisa had been, but he had also acquired the “Shard” status.

After asking too many questions and calling attention to themselves inside the tightly controlled city of Allroads – which sat in the middle of an element-rich environment that Dungeon Cores reportedly called a Convergence – they were captured and questioned. While in the prison, the Guild and the others were found, and Fred was able to break everyone out by creating a very basic dungeon underneath the city.

Just as he and the others were about to be recaptured by a scary-strong Inquisitor, who wanted to get to the bottom of who Fred was and what he was doing there, the city was attacked by the angry Nature, Earth, and Dark Dungeon Cores nearby. Using Mana sent to them from other Cores in their factions farther away, they had sent an army of Dungeon Defenders to attack the city of Allroads – all for the intent of getting to Fred and killing him. Their sudden assault was easily repelled by the resident Syndicate members and Governmental representatives, without loss of life, though it required Regnark and Eisa to contribute to the defense.

That attack led to Fred and his Shards being called to account for his presence there by the Allroads Council, where they were allowed to live as long as they helped with the future defense of the city. The problem with

that, however, was that the Convergence where Allroads was located was surrounded by Cores from every faction. Soon after its establishment, his extensive territory was, itself, assaulted by something called Territorial Warfare.

In an attempt to slow down the advance of at least one of the elemental factions, the powerful Inquisitor who originally captured Fred and his friends, Chareese, along with many high-Rated DAS members and Governmental representatives, went south to where thousands of Light-based Defenders were contributing to the shrinking of his territory border.

To help with the fight, Fred discovered how to combine Defender Blueprints together and created a massive Shield Net Limb Giant Spider that towered over the battlefield. While it helped to save dozens of the Humans fighting the Light's forces, it was ultimately destroyed in the battle. Using the Mana from its death, Fred created large "Mana Bombs" that devastated the enemy – but also ended up killing Chareese. Nearly 60 high-Rated Adventurers were also captured and brought back to the nearby Light Core's dungeon, where they were kept in a state of perpetual pain and inability to defend themselves while the Core sucked in the Mana they provided to the dungeon.

Luckily for the deceased Inquisitor, Fred had also been experimenting with his different types of Mana and had created a small, condensed Nature Core-like object. Using this object, he was able to bring Chareese back as a Shard with a Nature emphasis, as which she was able to grow and control plants and create special poisons.

After the attack on the Light border – disastrous for both sides of the conflict – the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores decided to step up their assaults. By tunneling through the ground, using their Defenders, they were able to bypass the city altogether, meaning that they were able to easily

reach Fred's dungeon directly. To combat the upcoming incursion, Fred reconfigured his current small dungeon, added more rooms, and used his Shards and their abilities as the main focus of defense.

When The Graveler – an extremely powerful Earth Boss-type Defender – arrived, there was very little they could do other than slowly whittle away the thousands of small rocks of which it was composed. After surviving the defensive dungeon rooms intact, though much-diminished, The Graveler managed to get close to Fred in his Core Room, where the Human/Dungeon Core hybrid fought back. During the fight, Fred accidentally created a Mana *Implosion* that sucked in and destroyed the rest of The Graveler, leaving behind a condensed stone of Earth Mana in its wake.

With that crisis averted, Fred was contacted by Elder Hood, a member of the Allroads Council, and she told him how her husband was one of those captured by the Light Core. A hasty plan was enacted to rescue them, but Fred was going to need to come along; he was the only one who could negotiate with the Core, so that the captives weren't killed out of hand immediately – and so that he could locate them, in the first place. Unfortunately, he couldn't leave his territory, or it would collapse.

At least, his need to remain present to protect his territory was the case before Fred created a stand-in, multi-element Core that was linked directly to him, which would operate almost exactly like his internal Cores. Once that was created, he was able to leave the Convergence with Elder Hood, along with his bodyguards while away from his dungeon, Agelstein, Roady, and Ravenne. After escaping through the tunnel left by the Earth Defenders in their unsuccessful attempt to invade and destroy Fred, he and his entourage made their way to the Light Core's dungeon. Elder Hood, a S-9<sup>th</sup>-Rated Arcanist, was able to make her way through the dungeon almost

all by herself, and Fred was able to “negotiate” the safe return of the captive Adventurers.

While the “negotiation” had to do with him acquiring the Light element from the Dungeon Core, Fred left the Light Core alive, afterwards, and sent all of her Mana back to her Core. Not only that, but he managed to increase the Crystallization of her Core Structure, also enhancing her Rating in the process. Afterwards, the Light Core’s territory collapsed, which also included the dungeon. As they raced out of the crumbling dungeon, they encountered hundreds of powerful Light Defenders outside – so Fred created a large Mana Implosion and condensed them all into a large Light Mana stone that stood half of his height.

On the way back to Allroads and the Convergence, Fred was “called” by the Supreme of Air to meet in a hidden negative space between the Air and Light territories. After a detailed conversation and a Communication Link which transferred a lot of information in the form of memories, the Supreme of Air offered to provide Fred with the last of the elements he was missing, and he took it from her – before giving the Air element and her Mana back with an increase in her Core that brought her up to the S-12<sup>th</sup>-Rating.

Now, armed with all seven elements – Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, Dark, Light, and Air – Fred must find a way to protect his friends, his Shards, his Guild, and the city of Allroads, plus its inhabitants, all while figuring out how to save the world...

# **Part I – Homecoming**



# Chapter 1

The Supreme of Air was still reeling from the massive change in her current state when the inevitable Mana Communication came from the Supreme of Dark.

***“Convene. Now.”***

She didn't bother to respond, because she knew exactly what he meant with the summons. Air wasn't too worried, however, even with the curt Communication; that was how Dark always sounded, and there wasn't any particular malice directed towards her. *None of them know about what happened between me and the Dualborn, Fredwynklemossering*, she assured herself. She had taken a large gamble, even speaking to him like she had; but giving him access to her element had been the biggest risk of all. Regardless of the danger involved, she instinctively *knew* it was the only way for them to all to survive – and hopefully prosper – far into the future.

Of course, the aftereffect was nice, too. The Dualborn had somehow managed to affect her Core, despite being thousands of miles away, advancing her from a S-10<sup>th</sup>-Rated Dungeon Core into a S-12<sup>th</sup>-Rated one! Air still had no clue how that had been accomplished, but from her temporary Link with the Dualborn, she knew that he seemed to be able to do some...interesting...things. Such as turning dead Humans into something he called Shards with pieces of destroyed Cores, for instance.

The downside of the changes in her Core, however, was that she now had very little Mana. It was almost as if all of the Mana that went into

her avatar, as well as a good portion of her reserve, had been immediately converted into increases in her Core Crystallization – even though that seemed impossible. Normally, all that would mean was that she would have to wait until the ambient Mana around her territory helped to refill her Mana; unfortunately, she didn't have the time to wait decades or even a century to gain all of that back. She needed to attend the meeting with the rest of the Supreme Council *now*, or else they might start to suspect something.

Without a vast quantity of Mana available to create a new avatar, which was usually not really an issue, she was at a loss of how to accomplish that. Looking around her territory, she didn't see any powerful Humans around – as had been usual as of late – so she wasn't going to get any Mana from that source anytime soon. In fact, there weren't *any* Humans around; there was just her and her dungeon—

*Wait...*

It was something that she never would consider, usually; but she was out of options at that point. Over thousands of years, she had spent vast quantities of her Mana stocking her dungeon with the best Defenses and Defenders that were available; so much so that she was sitting on a literal mountain of Mana. Some quick calculations told her that if she absorbed almost every one of them, she would have enough to create an avatar.

There were two problems with that, though. First, her dungeon would be largely undefended, if an Adventurer came along; she didn't see too much to worry about there, as she hadn't had an invader in a long time. Second, and most importantly, if *this* avatar were to be destroyed, it would take her thousands of years to recover her lost Mana with just what she would get from her territory. If some Humans came along to invade her

dungeon, naturally, that would help speed that recovery up, but that didn't seem likely at the moment. *And if that Dualborn doesn't fix things soon, that may **never** happen.*

So, going against everything she knew to be proper for the defense of her dungeon, the Supreme of Air absorbed all but a few dozen of her weakest Defenders near the entrance; she figured that it would be better to keep the beginning of her dungeon stocked, delaying whoever decided to come pay a visit – if anyone ever did again. All but the few Defenses set up in those rooms had to go as well, and by the time she was done, she was starting to feel almost back to normal, with the amount of Mana she now had at her disposal.

Then again, it required most of her Mana, at that point, to create an avatar and send it to the Council's hidden meeting place. As her consciousness arrived and inserted itself inside her construct, she saw that she was the last to arrive...and that she had popped in during the middle of a heated argument.

“—not my fault! How were we supposed to know that Cursedborn could somehow leave its territory? I agree that it could've been handled better, but Cryllaxinata did the best that she could!”

The Supreme of Air recognized the name of the Light Core whence Fredwynklemossering had stolen the Light element, before shoving that same element back into her and changing her from a B-2<sup>nd</sup> to a A-6<sup>th</sup> Rating; while Air, herself, had *only* gone up two Ratings, with (she assumed) the same procedure, the fact that she was S-Rated already was a massive factor. Based on the quantity of Mana that had been changed and shoved back into her own Core, the amount probably would've boosted the other Light Core up to an S-1<sup>st</sup>-Rating – at least – if she had been the recipient of that much.

“Light, it seems that you’re missing the point here. The Cursedborn now has access to *another* element, which makes them all that much more dangerous,” Dark said to the room. Suddenly, she could feel his attention swing in her direction. “Nice of you to join us, Air – especially as your faction is the only one he doesn’t have yet.”

*Good; he doesn’t know.*

He went on. “Make sure your nearby Core is ready; if they see *any* Humans around, kill the Humans *immediately*. It should go without saying that we can’t afford this Cursedborn to gain access to every element, but there is something that you probably aren’t aware of. I know that we all remember what it was like when the last vile Cursedborn almost destroyed every Dungeon Core; however, what you *don’t* know was *why*.”

Air was confused. *Of course I know why; the Dualborn at that time had destroyed hundreds of Cores to gain their Mana so that he was as powerful as any one of us in this room.* She didn’t voice that, though, because she would rather not call attention to herself at this point by speaking up.

Light wasn’t averse to showing her ignorance, though. “What do you mean? That Cursedborn had absorbed the Mana from—”

“Yes, yes – that’s true. But there was something that happened when it had finally gained all of our elements; whereas it had been dangerous enough before, there was a *significant* jump in the power it could wield afterwards. None of you were quite aware of that change, mainly because you weren’t even near the Cursedborn when they first became a major threat – but *I* saw it. The difference was...frightening, to say the least.”

The room was silent, and Air felt the curious urge to disappear. Earth finally spoke after a few moments. “What was it that changed,

exactly?”

“None of us really knew. The eldest and most powerful of us at the time tried to figure out how the Cursedborn had gone from barely being able to defeat – what we would classify as today – an F-Rated dungeon by themselves, to being able to utterly destroy an A-Rated dungeon in the timespan of a few months. There was no explanation of exactly *what* had happened, but the results of the change were devastating, nonetheless. One-on-one, none of the Cores – even the most powerful – could withstand the might of the Cursedborn when it came after them. It was only through a joint effort by *all* of the surviving Dungeon Cores that the vile creature was overwhelmed and defeated.”

Air remembered that quite vividly. Every Core had practically emptied out all of their dungeons – *hmm, sounds familiar* – and sent every speck of Mana in the form of powerful Defenders to swarm and overwhelm the Dualborn. While she had memories of watching as hundreds of thousands of Defenders flooded around the area in which the dangerous individual was located, she couldn’t actually picture what they looked like. She couldn’t even say whether it was a male or a female – not that it would’ve made much difference at the time. All she remembered was that even the massive horde of Defenders hadn’t actually been the reason for its downfall; the thought at the time was that it had absorbed *too much* Mana from all of the Defenders it had destroyed.

What she didn’t remember, like Dark had indicated, was any massive rise in the power and destructiveness in the Dualborn. *It’s probably because I only became aware of the situation when they were already a danger to us all; that was the problem back then – poor Mana Communication among all of us Cores.*

“So, as you can imagine, it would be imperative to ensure that doesn’t happen. Fire, Light – I need to make sure your Cores are willing to send their Defenders into the nearby Air territory to help defend the border if there is another attack.”

Fire and Light were a little hesitant, Air could tell, but they agreed. Air herself made sure to pass that on to Whislycenedray, the B-7<sup>th</sup>-Rated Core who was currently nearest the Convergence, so that she would be aware and not to overreact. None of her faction knew what she had done, so it was essential to maintain her normal Communication with her fellow Cores. She was sure that it would be known eventually; but hopefully, by that time the Dualborn will have figured out some sort of solution. *Or... I’ve doomed us all by giving him my element.*

“Good; with that settled, how are we coming along underground?”

“We’ll be through in approximately 30 hours,” Nature chimed in.

Water was next on the list of nearby factions. “We’ll be there in approximately 48 hours,” she offered, with a bit of disappointment directed towards Nature. The others were days behind them, and Light was at a stand-still as the nearest Core who had taken over the territory recovered. Her own faction was the furthest behind by far, and she barely even updated the others before Dark continued.

“Ok; based on the recent unfortunate circumstances—” he said, directing his attention briefly towards Light— “I think we need to...alter... some of our plans. Nature, have your Core speed up their progress by throwing everything they can send down there; there’s no reason to take it slowly anymore, since this Cursedborn is probably already expecting another attack. Once they get to within an hour of breaking through, however, have them stop and wait for Water to catch up – which needs to speed up as well.” The two named seemed to want to argue, but Dark

overrode their protests. “You’re the closest ones, and I think your Cores will have a better chance of succeeding if you work together. If that isn’t enough to kill the Cursedborn, Fire and my own faction will be there within a couple of days to finish the job.”

Any hesitation was immediately gone in Nature and Water’s demeanor at the mention of Dark and Fire teaming up to “finish the job”. While Alliances didn’t really matter too much to the Supreme Council, they were ingrained so much in the rest of their faction that some of the pride they associated with their multi-faction relationships tended to leak through. With Earth – the third member of their Alliance – basically defeated for the moment, it was up to Nature and Water to save their pride; letting the Dark and Fire Alliance come in and succeed if they were to fail would probably be embarrassing.

Air was tempted to suggest that they should all just send their Defenders through the already-completed Earth faction tunnel – which would be the *smartest* move – but she didn’t really want Fredwynklemossering to die, especially when he finally had the tools to enact their salvation. *Or destruction.* After hearing Dark talk about the former Dualborn, she wasn’t so sure anymore.

Regardless, she withheld her suggestion, though it most likely wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Pride was still at stake, but instead of just a single faction succeeding, it was the Alliances that were now in the spotlight. Not that Air cared overly much at the moment, because her own Alliance near the Convergence was so far behind the others that they weren’t even really considered.

“Before you all go to get everything set up for that, there’s one last thing that I need *all* of you to do,” Dark said seriously, his voice deeper than usual. *Uh oh.* “Have every Core within two thousand miles of the

Convergence that hasn't sent any Mana yet send most of their reserve to the second-closest Core."

"Why? Why wouldn't they send it to the closest one?"

Dark answered Water's question, though Air was curious, herself. "Because I want them to start creating another force...a force of Defenders that can and will carry out Plan B, if it comes to it."

That wasn't what Air wanted to hear, nor did any of the others; however, it was now a distinct possibility that they would have to carry out their last option. Destroying the entire Human City inside, and potentially harming the Convergence, itself, was a drastic measure; she could see the sense of it, though – or at least she *had* seen the sense of it, before she met the Dualborn via her avatar. If Fredwynklemossering had been the psychopathic destroyer of Dungeon Cores that the last Dualborn had been, then she would've agreed wholly with the Plan; they couldn't allow someone like *that* to grow even more powerful when they had the chance and opportunity to kill them.

They all reluctantly agreed with Dark, though, because they knew it might be necessary. *I just hope he figures something out before that happens.* It was inevitable that they would find it necessary, especially when they discovered that he *already* had the Air element as part of his repertoire now.

She left soon after, bringing her avatar back to her dungeon and dispersing it, before starting the process of repopulating her Defenses and Defenders. As she had thought, no Humans had tried to invade her, but she felt extremely vulnerable when her dungeon was so empty. While she did that, she Communicated with a half-dozen Regional Leaders and sent them orders to pass down to those closest to the Convergence. They weren't



happy about it, but an order from the Supreme Council wasn't something they could ignore.

When that was done and she could concentrate again, she turned her Territorial Sight back to where everything was happening – for good or ill.

\* \* \*

Dark watched all of the others leave the small Council room until he was all alone. It was only then that he felt safe to let the madness that was always at the back of his consciousness break free; his anger, fright, and worry combined in a visible form as the ground shook all around his Core. Theoretically, it wasn't possible to shape and manipulate the ground away from his territory, but his S-11<sup>th</sup>-Rating came with a couple of quirks that he had just recently discovered – this being one of them. Another was the release of the madness that he had long thought buried, which at first wasn't that big of a deal.

However, at the discovery that there was a Cursedborn back in the world, the incessant ramblings at the back of his mind was a constant reminder of how scared he had been during the last incursion. In fact, contrary to every other Core in the world, *he* hadn't fought the Cursedborn; his shame at collapsing his territory and hiding in the darkest and deepest depths of an ocean stayed with him to this day. His madness brought back the feelings of those days with stark clarity, and it was all he could do to keep it at bay.

When he finally reigned in control of his mind, he brought his avatar back to his Core Room and dispersed it. For some reason, inhabiting his Mana construct seemed to amplify the madness, so he was relieved to get rid of it for the moment. When the Mana used in its creation flowed back

into his Core, his concentration cleared even more – and that was when something occurred to him. Something about the meeting had been off, and it was only now that he pinpointed what it was.

Obviously, Air being the last one to the meeting had been strange – she was usually the first, or one of the first, to arrive. That wasn't what had caught his attention, though. Strange as it seemed, her avatar looked *bigger* than he remembered it being; in fact, it was as large or possibly even larger than his own. *How did that happen? What is she hiding?*

There was no readily available answer to those questions, but he could sense that she was up to something. He didn't have any idea what that something was, but he was going to get to the bottom of it before it became a problem. Before he did that, however, he turned his attention to his dungeon, where a couple of his demons up near the entrance were ripping some livestock apart with their sharp claws.

He smiled. *It's the little things that make me happy...*

# Chapter 2

Fredwynklemossering, known affectionately to his friends, Shards, and the Core Power Guild as Fred, ran to catch up with the others as they raced for the border separating the new Light Core's territory and his own in the Convergence. He stumbled and nearly fell over a slight change in the ground's elevation, but he was fortunately caught by the arm by Ravenne – who seemed to appear out of nowhere to save him from eating dirt.

“Thanks—”

The S-2<sup>nd</sup>-Rated Assassin-Spy cut him off and practically pushed him forward. “Don’t thank me yet; we need to get moving before the way through is cut off.”

She was right; the detour – as beneficial and unbelievable as it turned out to be – put them far behind Elder Hood and the rescued Adventurers. It was likely that they had busted through the line of Light Defenders without any problem; whether or not that would be the case for Fred, Ravenne, Agelstein, and Roady was still unknown.

It wouldn’t be unknown for long, though.

Fred was just glad that Defenders hadn’t been popping up to interrupt their journey back to Allroads and the Convergence. He could only guess that the Light Core that had taken over the territory was still unfamiliar enough with their new acquisition that they didn’t think to look for the Humans – and one Human/Dungeon Core hybrid – running through their territory. Or, what was more probable, they were concentrating on the larger group with Elder Hood and the others. If that was, indeed, what was happening, then he wasn’t worried; the S-9<sup>th</sup>-Rated Arcanist and the S-

Rated Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate and Allroads Governmental people were more than enough for whatever was thrown their way.

Especially seeing as Fred had just wiped out *a lot* of the local Core's Defenders and essentially stole the Mana from them in the form of a giant Light Mana crystal. That wasn't entirely what he planned on doing, but the Mana Implosion technique he used on them had some beneficial side-effects. While it was more possible that the new Light Dungeon Core had been able to recover from that loss so quickly, Fred would bargain that the way was relatively clear for the moment.

Another couple of minutes saw them climb to the top of a rise, where they saw the large valley of the ultra-concentrated elemental Convergence spread out in front of them. The small mountain range in the center of the valley that was hiding the city of Allroads looked near, but he knew they were a few miles away. In opposition to that, the relatively invisible border separating the two territories – the Light faction's and his own – was much closer...and practically empty, towards the center. Fred could use his territorial sight to see exactly where they needed to get to, certainly; at the moment, he didn't, because he was too exhausted to think straight enough for that.

Fred had thought that the process of returning the Light element and Mana to the (originally B-2<sup>nd</sup>-Rated) Light Core had been difficult – but it couldn't compare with doing the same to the Supreme of Air. While the near-mythical Air-faction Dungeon Core hadn't actually been there, its strange physical construct it was using had enough of a connection that his element-acquiring technique didn't care. He had almost passed out with the amount of Mana that was fed into him, which would have been disastrous; if he had lost concentration for even a brief moment, the sheer quantity of elemental force entering his Cores probably would have killed him – and

possibly everyone else with him. Not to mention that his territory would have likely collapsed as a result of his death, and everyone in Allroads would have perished...including Eisa, his Shards, and all of the Core Power Guild.

For some reason, the thought of losing Eisa for a *second* time made his chest hurt; regardless of the fact that he would be dead in that scenario, *her* potential death because of *his* actions – *again* – was something he didn't want to consider.

Fortunately for everyone involved – *including the Supreme of Air*, he grudgingly thought – he had managed to contain and condense all of the Mana without dying, before returning it down the connection Air's destroyed construct had with her real Core. He did end up collapsing afterwards, and all he could do was stare blankly at the notification he had received as a result.

***Element Integration successful!***

***You have acquired access to the Air element!***

***Current Air Mana: 100/100***

***You have absorbed knowledge of (8) Blueprints!***

***Defense Blueprints absorbed:***

***Invisible Floor (Base Cost: 5 Air Mana)***

***Whirlwind (Base Cost: 15 Air Mana)***

***Forceful Push (Base Cost: 30 Air Mana)***

***Sharpened Air Blade (Base Cost: 50 Air Mana)***

***Defender Blueprints absorbed:***

***Screeching Hawk (Base Cost: 4 Air Mana)***

***Haggard Harpy (Base Cost: 20 Air Mana)***

***Scaled Wyvern (Base Cost: 100 Air Mana)***

***Devastating Wind Elemental (Base Cost: 500 Air Mana)***

It was quite an impressive collection of additional Blueprints that he had received, especially when he added it to the six he received from the Light Core previously.

***Defense Blueprints absorbed:***

***Blinding Flash (Base Cost: 10 Light Mana)***

***Prism Spike (Base Cost: 15 Light Mana)***

***Focused Beam (Base Cost: 60 Light Mana)***

***Defender Blueprints absorbed:***

***Glow Sprite (Base Cost: 4 Light Mana)***

***Bright Lynx (Base Cost: 10 Light Mana)***

***Winged Pegasus (Base Cost: 50 Light Mana)***

To use any of them, however, Fred would need to get back to his territory – which was unlikely to happen on his own, directly after his confrontation with the Supreme of Air. He literally could not move anything after he collapsed, and it took almost five minutes before he could even speak, as his Mana went to work fixing his exhausted and strained body. His “bodyguards” didn’t wait for him to recover, fortunately, as Rody picked him up and ran with him until he stirred, where he then was able to walk and stumble along on his own.

It probably would have been faster if the big S-4<sup>th</sup>-Rated Knight Commander had carried him; but with Fred ambulating on his own, it was easier for Rody to defend himself if they were attacked. Luckily, they hadn’t had the need for that, as they had been largely ignored, so far; if their

luck held, then they wouldn't have to fight anything as they made it across to his territory, either.

As they raced across the grass of the valley, heading towards the break in the Light Core's defenses, the fog of exhaustion that had been plaguing Fred since his recent collapse started to lift. *Something doesn't seem right...why aren't there any Defenders here?* The trampled grass leading towards the border was evidence enough that the Elder, her husband Mikel, and the former captives had gone that way and killed whatever got in their way – but they weren't anywhere in sight. The detour had taken quite a while, and with the proper motivation – such as the thought of being behind the safe walls of Allroads again – the other group had probably torn up the distance between the border and the city in no time at all.

The closer they got to that same territory border, with the nearest Defenders – who were, admittedly, at least a 1,000 feet or more away – not paying them the slightest attention, Fred began to suspect that something was wrong. *Even if they had been killed previously, there's no reason the Light Core couldn't use the Mana from destroyed Defenders to create some more right away.* Of course, creating a Blueprint and filling it with Mana took a little bit of time, especially with some of the larger, more powerful Defenders...though it usually didn't take nearly as long as his massive Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider had taken.

In most cases, as far as he could tell, it only took between 5 and 30 seconds, depending on how much Mana was placed in the Blueprint; with Cores that had a better Defender Creation Skill, that time could be reduced even further. So, the fact that nothing had refilled the gaps, when it was obvious that enough time had passed to create more, was confusing. He could understand why nothing had accosted them while they were running there, as it would be hard to predict where they were going – if they could

even be located in the first place; since Fred didn't have a large Mana signature, and the others had none, then being found by the new Light Core wasn't a guarantee. Despite that, his Mana Sight showed no large quantities of Light Mana floating around where the previous Defenders were destroyed by the Elder and the former captives, so the Mana had most likely been reabsorbed by the Core. *But where is it and what is it all being used for?*

Either it had been funneled away for some other purpose, or—

Throughout his entire existence, including in his parents' dungeon, he couldn't remember ever *seeing* a Defender being created by another Core – only by his own. Replacing Defenders was very rare for his parents to need to do, and it was usually done when he wasn't around; then, when he was in a foreign Core's dungeon, they weren't actually able to create any while he or any other “invaders” were there. Any other Defenders that he had seen outside of a dungeon were sent from somewhere else, so he hadn't seen them being formed.

That being said, as they approached within 300 feet of his territory, he immediately identified the hazy distortions he could see in the air lining the border on the Light side. Whereas – to his Sight at least – his blueprints looked like wire grids that quickly filled up with whatever color of Mana was present, what he was seeing looked like blurry shapes that were rapidly firming up to create something that was much clearer and less distorted.

“It's a trap!” was all he got out, as he stumbled to a stop, just as the first Sleek Unicorn “popped” into existence as the Mana filling its Blueprint finished. Granted, it wasn't that much of a threat, by itself; but four more identical Unicorns appeared right next to it, as they all charged horn-first towards Fred and his companions. Still, that wasn't much of a hardship for Rody, who immediately stopped, planted his feet in a battle stance, pulled



out his massive sword larger than Fred off his back, and used an Ability called Concussive Sweep.

### **Concussive Sweep 8 – 0/2187000**

*When used in conjunction with your melee weapon, Concussive Sweep sends out a powerful blast of force in a wide arc in front of you. Does non-elemental damage and creates a knockback effect that varies based on the weight of targets hit by the Concussive Sweep.*

***Power cost of Concussive Sweep 8: 400***

***Non-elemental attack: 80***

***Knockback chance: 100%***

***Knockback magnitude: 30 feet (-1 foot per 150 pounds)***

***Knockback physical attack: 2 per foot of magnitude***

***Maximum effective range: 10 feet***

Fred watched as an opaque wave shot out from the tip of Roady's sword with a deep, chest-shaking thrum, before slamming into the Unicorns and sending them flying backwards. Three of them didn't even hit the ground as they were killed from the concussive blast of force coming from the Knight-Commander; the fourth slammed down on the grass and dirt almost 20 feet away with a painful-looking impact, which finished that Unicorn off, as well.

The stoppage of their progress towards the border was unfortunate, because it allowed more Defenders to finish their creation process. Two large and intimidating Crystal Golems popped up in their path, followed by a Distortion Behemoth, and then a Warp Dragon on either side.

"We have to break through to the other side of the border; they can keep coming back as soon as you kill them on this side!" Fred shouted, as

he watched the Light Mana from the slain Unicorns shoot to an open area near the four Adventurers and the wavy forms of more Defenders appeared.

The others were already on it. Everyone kept advancing forward as Ravenne pulled out her bow and shot deadly arrows towards the Golems, where the impacts shattered pieces of the fully crystalline constructs. The Assassin-Spy instinctively shot towards their legs, where they shattered and brought one and then another crashing down as they tried to walk forward; unfortunately, the large Light-based Defenders could “walk” on their hands as they dragged their bodies within range of Fred and the others.

Roady immediately stepped up and crashed into the Golems with his sword, shattering even more of the hard crystal of which they were composed with powerful sweeps of his weapon. Within seconds, they were reduced to piles of unanimated crystal chunks, which rapidly disappeared... and the Mana was immediately sent to create some more wavy distortions to replace them.

Agelstein contributed his own Necro-Wizard prowess by sending Power Blasts towards the Distortion Behemoth in rapid succession, while pulling a pile of bones out of his PIB at the same time. Only one out of every three of the neon-blue Blasts actually hit the Behemoth, however, because the creature seemed to *distort* the area around its body; two out of every three of Agelstein’s Blasts passed through the distorted area without harming the Behemoth. Damage to the massive Defender wasn’t necessarily the point, though, as every time it *distorted*, it stopped momentarily; this delay was apparently Agelstein’s main objective, because it allowed him to use the bones he had pulled out to create a weapon to combat the Behemoth.

*Weapons*, actually; similar to Eisa’s old Necromancer-based Skeletal Swords spell that created a rotating circle of bone swords around her or

another target, Agelstein took the bones he dropped out of his bag and used them to create a swirling storm of sharp bones.

### **Bone Storm 7 – 0/729000**

*Using your Power, create a whirling maelstrom of sharp bone shards that you can then direct towards a target or targets. Does not differentiate between friend and foe. Use of real bones increases damage and reduces upkeep cost; destroys bones in the process.*

***Power cost of Bone Storm 7: 500***

***Power upkeep cost (Power-formed): 30/sec***

***Power upkeep cost (real bones): 5/sec***

***Bone Storm diameter: 15 feet***

***Base physical attack (Power-formed): 50/sec***

***Base physical attack (real bones): 100/sec***

The swirling storm of sharp bones immediately drifted over to the Behemoth and surrounded it as it started to charge towards the beleaguered Adventurers. For the first few seconds, the Bone Storm didn't do anything as the Defender distorted itself and managed to avoid being hit; however, when it was forced to come back to its "normal" state, the sharp bones were partially *inside* the Behemoth. The spell didn't stop, of course, and it started to literally tear apart the beast for a second or two between distortions.

While that was going on, Fred made his own contributions. Since he had a bit of Adventurer Power at his disposal, he hadn't really had a chance to use it much lately; most of his development had been on the Dungeon Core side, and he had sort of been neglecting that side of his

nature. Now, however, he didn't have access to his territory, to create any Defenders: so, he might need to rely on it, now.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
<b>Name:</b> Fredwynklemossering		<b>Class:</b> Instructor-Researcher
<b>Rating:</b> E-7 <sup>th</sup>		<b>Essence Needed to Rate-up:</b> 20888
<b>Total Essence:</b> 907112	<b>Available Essence to Distribute:</b> 164425	<b>Unconverted Essence:</b> 835400
<b>Body:</b> 14 (0/81920) <b>Brawn:</b> 13 (0/40960) <b>Mind:</b> 16 (0/327680)		<b>Vitality:</b> 180/180 <b>Stamina:</b> 70/160 <b>Power:</b> 5100/5100
<b>Base Physical Attack:</b> 13 <b>Base Physical Defense:</b> 14		<b>Power Regen Rate:</b> 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 5 – 0/81000		
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Shadow Strike 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 3 – 0/9000	Vitality Transfer 3 – 0/9000
Light Explosion 4 – 0/27000	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	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

Fred quickly upgraded his Shadow Strike 1 Adapted Ability to Shadow Strike 5 using 40,000 of his Essence, and then started tossing Strikes out towards the encroaching Warp Dragon that was swooping down on them from the air. He figured that using his “Dark-based” spell on the

Light-based Defender would inflict the most damage – not that he expected to finish it off himself. Each time a Strike was about to hit, however, the Dragon would disappear and appear somewhere else a second later. After the fourth time, he began using his Mana Sight, to see a faint outline of where it was going to appear next. This helped his next spell hit the Defender right in the middle of its chest, doing a little bit of damage and knocking it backwards. That only seemed to infuriate the Dragon, though, and it swooped down even faster towards Fred.

It took the next Strike he lobbed with just a little flinch, but then it started to disappear again; by that time it was nearly upon him, and he flung out another Strike where the Dragon was about to appear, only 10 feet away. His spell hit, and the Dragon was knocked out of the air – but not by his measly spell; an arrow shot by Ravenne impacted it just as it appeared and impaled it through the throat. As it crashed down hard and broke one of its wings and possibly one of its legs, Fred turned to the Assassin-Spy and asked, “How did you—?”

“I saw that you could predict where it would warp to, so I just matched your aim,” she quickly responded. “We don’t have time for an explanation, let’s go!” she continued, grabbing his arm again and shoving him forward.

The Golems, Behemoth, and Dragon were all dead, but Fred could see them re-forming rather quickly. The Sleek Unicorns, in fact, had already formed and were charging them; a quick use of Roady’s Concussive Sweep took care of them on the run, at least. Unfortunately, looking at the Knight-Commander’s Power, he wouldn’t be able to do more than four or five more of those before he was out and was relegated to using his normal – if still powerful – physical attacks.

They were assaulted three more times by the collection of Golems, Behemoth, and Dragon on their way to the border in the matter of a couple of minutes. Every time they would fight their way forward, they would get pushed back a little; so, it took much longer than it should've. To top it off, the nearby Defenders along the border were starting to converge and join the fray, which caused even more delay, as they had to be killed to advance any farther. Fred quickly ran out of Adventurer Power and was forced to use his small store of Mana to keep going.

**Fire Mana: 0/540**

**Water Mana: 0/540**

**Nature Mana: 0/540**

**Earth Mana: 0/540**

**Dark Mana: 0/540**

**Light Mana: 20/103**

**Air Mana: 100/100**

**Unconverted Mana: 81302 (647)**

He first used his Air Mana in small quantities – since he had more of it – to create some Mana Implosions. While it looked like it might work if he used 5 units of Air Mana with 500 units of Unconverted Mana, the result was less than spectacular. As in, it did essentially nothing. *I wonder if it only works on things that are of the same element...*

Seeing that, he switched up his technique and used relatively small Air Mana Explosions and a few Light Mana Implosions to kill one Defender after another on their way to his territory, but the toll it had on his body and mind – to create so many Implosions and Explosions in such a short time – was literally painful. He thought that, if he hadn't just

recovered from the traumatic experience with the Supreme of Air, he wouldn't have been as affected – though there was no point in complaining about it. He had to force his way through the pain and push on.

A cut-off scream from behind him caused Fred to turn around, where he saw Ravenne on the ground; a closer look showed what appeared to be a smoking hole burned through the back of her leather chestpiece and deep into her skin. She immediately picked herself up with a grimace of pain on her face, where she turned around and looked up to see what had attacked her.

It was the largest Light Elemental Fred had ever seen.

# Chapter 3

It wasn't precisely a Light Elemental – it was something worse.

## **Celestial Orb (Level 1)**

**Vitality: 40000**

**Attack: 2000, Sunray, Blinding Light, Solar Flare, External Combustion**

**Defense: 3000**

Fred likely hadn't noticed it before because it was approximately 100 feet off the ground – and he hadn't been looking up. With Fred more focused on what was in between him and his territory, the wavy distortion in the air had gone unnoticed. Now, his inattention might result with them all dying.

“Run! Don't stop!” Roady screamed, returning to step in front of Ravenne just as another bright streak of light erupted out of the 50-foot wide glowing sphere; he caught it on his shield just before it hit the Assassin-Spy in the face, though the force of the intense light knocked him back a few wobbly steps. It was the first time that Fred had seen the Knight-Commander a bit unsteady in a fight, as he was usually a pillar of strength, extremely formidable in battle.

“It's a high S-Rated boss – *we have no chance! Run, fools!*”

Fred realized that he was just standing there in awe and comprehension; he had been wondering why there weren't more Defenders on the border when there probably should've been more. He had not, for a second, thought that the entirety of the Light Core's Mana had been used to



stop him, Elder Hood, and the others from escaping the dungeon, even if it was quite a lot; the Light Core would've maintained at least a relatively sizable force along the border, just in case. At least, that's what *he* would've done, especially since they had no reason to believe that Fred was actually down there – because his territory was still intact.

Therefore, he reasoned, there should've been enough of a force to make punching through a bit more difficult, though with Elder Hood's group that wasn't necessarily a problem. His much smaller group was having a harder time, yes, but it should've been even more challenging – and now he knew what else was bothering him: On the edges of what he could actually see of the Light territory bordering his own, the allotment of Defenders was even more sparse. Obviously, they had been absorbed and used to create this S-Rated Celestial Orb that was currently bent on their destruction.

Fred ran for his territory, which was only a dozen or so feet away, all the while using the last of his Light Mana – all 6 units of it – to create another condensed Mana Implosion ball. Turning around just before he crossed over the threshold, he saw Agelstein walking backwards, using his Bone Storm to fend off the rest of the Unicorns and another Behemoth, while Ravenne hunched along and shot at two Crystal Golems that just appeared. Roady took another shot from the Celestial Orb and was knocked flat on his back, though he looked largely unhurt.

With a thought, Fred shot the condensed orb of Light Mana he was working on towards the massive glowing Defender in the sky. Before it got within five feet of the Celestial Orb, however, the S-Rated boss flashed brightly, and Fred had to look away, because it was painful. In doing so, he lost control of the Mana Implosion he had flung towards it. When he could see again, he saw that his last-ditch effort was just ending, the Implosion

having consumed about a quarter of the Orb before collapsing into a large Mana stone, where it fell to the ground with a \*thunk\*.

Roady scrambled to his feet as the Defender started to fall out of the sky, aiming directly towards the Knight-Commander...and thus, at Ravenne, behind him. “Agel, you know what you have to do!” Roady shouted, before bracing himself behind his shield.

Agelstein, shocked for some reason, dropped his Bone Storm in response. “NO! You don’t know what you’re asking—”

The Assassin-Spy looked around, upon hearing this proclamation, and Fred could see her stiffen up as she saw the 50-foot-wide Orb almost upon them. Ravenne tried to run, but it was too late; her previous injury was too debilitating, and she only made it a couple more feet before the world exploded.

Fred could only see the first part, because he was flung backwards by the force of the explosion as well. As soon as the Celestial Orb touched Roady’s shield, the Orb must have used the External Combustion ability to essentially self-destruct. Another blinding flash of light originated from the center of the three-quarter-sized Orb, followed by a wave of force that flowed over the field of battle. Fred opened his eyes just long enough to see the broken form of Roady and Ravenne being flung to either side of him, though Agelstein was standing his ground with a shield of dark-colored Power, which the Orb’s External Combustion was rapidly shredding apart. Of the other Defenders that were preventing them from getting to the border, there was no sign.

He took all of that in within a half-second before he felt many of his ribs snap from the impact of the force wave, along with bending both of his knees backwards; luckily for Fred, he didn’t feel much in the way of the pain while he flew through backwards at tremendous speed. Just as the first

spikes of horrific agony began to engulf him, he landed head first and felt his neck wrenched awkwardly with a wet \*crack\*...and then darkness.

\* \* \*

The first thing Fred saw, when his vision returned, was the ground rushing by beneath him, and a discomfort in his stomach. He shook his head a few times and groaned when his neck felt more than a little sore; fortunately, a few moments later it started to feel a little better. *My Mana must still be healing me... What happened?*

Raising his head, Fred looked around and saw Agelstein jogging along the grass, tears running down his face as he stared stonily ahead. To his other side, he saw the figure of Ravenne, her scorched and otherwise destroyed black leather armor showing more than a little skin underneath – which skin, when he looked a little closer, had large swathes of it missing, and what was still there appeared charred and thoroughly damaged. In fact, it looked like downright agony, and he shivered at how much pain she had to be in. He couldn't believe she was still upright; he wasn't ashamed to admit that, in her same condition, he probably would've collapsed long ago and refused to go on.

Something was bothering him about her appearance, however: Despite burnt skin, and the exposed flesh and muscle beneath, she wasn't bleeding. There was dried blood visible on patches of her skin and armor, but as far as new or even recently clotted blood...there was none that he could see. Either she had been healed just enough to stop all of the bleeding, or—

One glance at her face, at her sunken and lifeless eyes, and he knew. Ravenne had died and had been reanimated by Agelstein. *And if **she***

*died and was reanimated, Roady had been even closer to the explosion...*

It didn't take more than a cursory glance below him to see the missing pieces of armor and relatively destroyed flesh beneath, to confirm that Roady had, indeed, perished as well. What he couldn't understand, though, was why their dead bodies had been reanimated by Agelstein, especially if they would just crumple into dust when the Necro-wizard canceled his spell.

"W-Why?" Fred croaked out of his extremely dry throat.

At Fred's words, their journey stopped, and Fred felt an additional pain in his stomach as it compressed against what he could only assume was the hard plate armor of Roady. The Knight-Commander – *former* Knight-Commander – pulled him forward and roughly let him drop to the ground. He collapsed in a heap from the unexpected movement, before he picked himself up with another groan. It seemed as though his knees, which had been bent backwards, were not altogether healed quite yet, and they protested his standing.

Fred looked around and saw that they were just approaching the mountain range at the center of the Convergence, which was a bit farther than he expected. *Then again, I have no idea how long I was out—wait a minute! I'm in **my** territory now...but why can't I **feel** it?* Before he could investigate what that was all about, Agelstein came around to him from behind the literally dead-still form of Roady and spoke.

"Believe me, I didn't want to. Unfortunately, it wasn't up to me; we all had special orders, from Elder Hood, to ensure you returned here alive and in one piece," the Necro-Wizard said, his voice shaky. "No matter what it took."

"And that meant...this?"

“It isn’t something that I wanted to do, believe me. In fact, this is the first time that I’ve used my Animate Dead ability on a person before... and I never want to again.” Agelstein seemed very choked up about the whole thing, but Fred supposed he could understand. Roady and Agelstein weren’t only his co-workers for the Allroads Government; they were his friends, too. “We all knew going into this mission that we might not all make it back, and plans were set into place to animate any that fell; it’s not ideal, but even as they are now, they were the only reason we made it this far, after more of those Light monsters followed us into your territory.”

As Fred felt the rest of his injuries finally heal, he looked at Ravenne and Roady and their blank expressions; despite being dead, they looked...powerful. *That’s right, Necromancers can imbue the bodies of those they reanimate with special properties.* If he remembered right, Eisa had mentioned that – even though she would never use it on a person – animated people couldn’t access their own Power, necessarily; but all of their enhanced attributes, such as strength, were still there. Not only that, but Necromancers had Abilities that could enhance those attributes artificially.

They could also use Repair Animation to “heal” their animated bodies, which didn’t seem to have been used quite yet; a quick look at Agelstein’s Interface, however, revealed that the Necro-Wizard was low on Power and all that he was regenerating was being used to maintain both corpses in their current state. Another glance at Fred’s own Interface showed that his Adventurer Power had regenerated by about 750, which meant that he had been unconscious somewhere around a half-hour. *Much less time than I thought; I guess that the fact that my body is not missing any severed parts this time probably helped with my recovery.*

Using his Power, he used his Repair Animation Adapted Ability to seal up some of the disturbing open wounds on both of them – to Agelstein’s consternation.

“Why are you doing that? As soon as I get to the city, I’m going to have to...let them go. The Allroads government doesn’t allow reanimated people inside, even if it’s one – or two – of their own.”

Fred had kind of expected that, which had got him thinking as soon as he learned about Roady and Ravenne’s fate. “How long can you maintain them as they are?”

The Necro-Wizard seemed confused by his question. “Uh...well...I guess I can keep them animated until I’m forced to sleep; as soon as that happens, I lose all connection with anything that I’ve animated. Otherwise, I’m maintaining the upkeep on them right now with no loss, but I’m almost useless for anything else, right now; I already drank a potion that helps to restore some of my Power, but it only works once every 24 hours.”

That was good to know, though that knowledge didn’t really help at the moment. What might help, on the other hand, was whether or not the Necro-Wizard knew anything about the small mountain range they were about to pass.

“Tell me, Agelstein – what do you know about any caves near here?”

\* \* \*

“What are we doing here, Fred? We should really get back to the city.”

Being enclosed in a dark cave again was somehow comforting, which was what he needed right now. The entire time Agelstein had been

leading him to one of the caves near the base of the mountain, Fred had been trying to access his territory through his Territorial Sight...and nothing was happening. He'd never had that problem before, and it was starting to frustrate him.

While he could technically access the Sight to see that his territory was still around him, he couldn't look farther away, like he used to be able to do; he could *physically* look towards the border of his territory and see how the nearby Light, Air, Earth, and Fire faction territories were, but any more than that was seemingly impossible. What was worse, he couldn't access his multi-element Core that he had set up to essentially take his place when he left with Elder Hood earlier that day, despite checking multiple times as they were leaving that everything was okay. If he couldn't access his Core there, and by extension his territory, that meant that he couldn't access *his dungeon*.

Until he figured out what the problem was, he doubted that even walking inside the dungeon would change anything. As far as it – the multi-element Core – was concerned, he wasn't even connected to it anymore, except only marginally. He doubted that anything would attack him if he were to travel through it...but he couldn't be sure at that point.

Fred had more important matters to take care of at the moment, anyway. “We’re here because we need a place where we’re out of sight of any faction Defenders along the border of my territory, as well as out of view of Allroads. I don’t want to take the chance that they’ll see the animated corpses here and make you get rid of them, even if you’re not close to the walls.”

“Ok...I can understand that...but why?”

Why indeed. That was the question, and Fred was actually surprised that Agelstein hadn't figured it out yet. *Granted, he's probably still in*

*shock over having to reanimate his friends in the first place.* “You’ve seen what I can do, Agelstein; do you really have to ask?”

“Are you saying—? B-but, you don’t even have a Dungeon Core to use to bring them back!”

That was true, but he had *made* the one used with Chareese, so it was more than likely that he could do the same for these two, as well. “I know. That’s why I’m going to *make* the Cores; it’ll take a while, though, which is why we needed to find a place to ‘hole up’ for a while.”

“Why don’t you just dig straight to your dungeon, then? I’ve seen you do that before, back when we accessed that tunnel leading out to the Earth side.”

He didn’t know exactly how to explain his inability to sense either the tunnel he had made, or where exactly the dugout Earth tunnel was located. Not only that, but he had no way to sense if there were any Defenders moving around underneath there – which was entirely possible, now that they had time to replenish a little of their Mana, after the faction’s unsuccessful invasion of his dungeon. “I...am having trouble accessing things right now, so that option is not available. Once we get this done, however, we should all be able to walk in the front gates.”

“What do you mean, trouble?” Agelstein asked suspiciously.

*There’s no point lying to him, especially if I need his help to maintain Roady and Ravenne as they are.* “I believe it has something to do with the additional elements I gained access to, but I’m not quite sure exactly why. My territory and dungeon are still there, at least, though I can’t...*interact* with them, I guess is what I’m trying to say,” he explained. “Enough of that; I’m sure I’ll be able to figure it out when I get back. In the meantime, let’s transform these two into Shards and be on our way.”



While Fred wasn't particularly attached to either Roady or Ravenne, there was no way he would let them fall to dust without at least giving them his best effort to bring them back as Shards. The brief thought that maybe their cohort could appeal to Elder Hood and ask for an exception, for permission to bring the two animated corpses inside the city had crossed his mind, but he had a feeling that the general population wouldn't be overly happy if they were granted permission. Necromancers already had a bad reputation – Eisa had taught him that – and they were just barely tolerated, already; something such as letting animated corpses run around the city might push their already-strained psyches over the edge.

Also, if he didn't at least *try* to save them, he'd never hear the end of it from Chareese.

Looking at his Dungeon Core Status, he saw that his available Air and Light Mana had increased during his “downtime” of unconsciousness – enough that he thought he could start right away.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth-Dark-Light-Air
Core Age: 2
Core Structure Level: 28
Fire Mana: 0/540
Water Mana: 0/540
Nature Mana: 0/540
Earth Mana: 0/540
Dark Mana: 0/540
Light Mana: 101/103
Air Mana: 101/101
Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 71540
Unconverted Essence: 12443
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100%
Master Territorial Sight: 100%
Master Mana Conversion: 3%
Expert Mana Absorption: 98%
Expert Core Crystallization: 82%
Expert Mana Communication: 85%

<b>Expert Defender Creation: 57%</b> <b>Expert Mana-Formed Object Creation: 21%</b> <b>Expert Dungeon Core Absorption: 5%</b> <b>Intermediate Sentient Mana-Formed Object Creation: 95%</b> <b>Intermediate Dungeon Creation: 98%</b> <b>Intermediate Defense Creation: 95%</b> <b>Novice Essence Conversion: 13%</b>
Dungeon Information
<b>Maximum Dungeon Rating: A-6<sup>th</sup></b> <b>Current Dungeon Rating: E-9<sup>th</sup></b> <b>Current Mana Upkeep: 647 Unconverted</b> <b>Number of Rooms: 42</b> <b>Number of Defenders: 2 (500 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Number of Defenses: 87 (450 Fire Mana, 480 Water Mana, 500 Nature Mana, 510 Dark Mana)</b> <b>Defender/Defense Range Limit: 65000—72000 Mana</b> <b>Reward Count: 0 Points</b> <b>Reward Range Limit: 43000—50000 Points</b> <b>(Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)</b>

He now had a Master Mana Conversion skill, so that probably contributed to how quickly he had accumulated the Light and Air Mana. Not only that, but his Core Structure Level was at 28, now, up from the 20 it had been just that morning. *It's hard to believe that all of this happened in less than a day.*

The only problem he saw with his idea of turning Rody and Ravenne into Shards was his lack of large amounts of Unconverted Mana; the last time he used the Nature “Dungeon Core” he created to bring Chareese back, it took almost every drop of his Mana – nearly 50,000. There was no way he could afford to do that twice, if it even stopped at that point, again; for all he knew, it could take even more to bring either one of the two back. Fortunately, he was reasonably sure that he had worked out *why* it had been so difficult last time.

The “Core” he had created before was like a blank slate, with no place for a consciousness to be shoved into it; the pieces of real Dungeon Cores that he had used on his other Shards had a place for a “Dungeon

Core” consciousness, which required approximately 5,000 Unconverted Mana to *convert* to a Human’s – but even then, it hadn’t been a perfect fit. That being the case, what Fred needed to do was somehow create a place for the consciousness to fit in *while* he was forming the Core, in the first place.

Without another word, he sat on the cool floor of the cave...and noticed, for the first time, that his clothes had been essentially shredded from the explosion. With a use of his automatically regenerating Adventurer Power, he used his Repair Object Ability to mend his clothes, so that he wasn’t shivering with cold; the last thing he needed was another distraction while he was controlling and condensing volatile forces such as his Mana. It was still a little chilly in the cave, however; so, he used even more Power to Create a few large warm blankets, which he spread on the floor, draped over his shoulders, and gave to the shivering Agelstein.

After creating some Mana-formed food, and offering some to the Necro-Wizard, who refused the relatively tasteless orbs, he ate quickly and settled back against the nearest cave wall. When he was as comfortable as possible, Fred got started on bringing back to life Chareese’s half-brother and Ravenne, both who had given their lives so that Fred could continue living his.

# Chapter 4

First, Fred closed his eyes and looked inside of himself for the first time since he acquired both of the new elements, only to find that his entire Core organization was a bit of a mess. His Human Core, in the center, was fine; but – as he had seen immediately after creating the multi-element Core to maintain his territory and dungeon – his Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, and Dark elemental Cores were empty vessels. His new Light and Air elements were swirling around everywhere in a scattered mess; it was so bad, in fact, that it was amazing that he had managed to manipulate enough Mana to marginally survive the Light border crossing.

*Maybe this is the reason I can't access my dungeon and territory?* He quickly formed two more elemental Cores, one white and one yellow, and gathered up all of the scattered elements of Mana – so that they were concentrated in those places – before trying to connect them with the rest of his internal structure. *Trying* was the right word, unfortunately, because everything he attempted, to combine his two new Cores with the rest, ended up in failure.

Just like the Mana was inaccessible to him, so, too, were the Cores; it was almost as if they didn't exist, other than as placeholders – and placeholders without any “substance” to them. After some experimentation, Fred found that he could connect the Light and Air Cores, first to each other, and then to his Human Core; so, that was eventually what he did. They had no interaction with the other elements, though, which he was hoping to be able to fix once he somehow resolved the issue with his territory and dungeon. Which, apparently, wasn't going to be

anytime soon, because as soon as he opened his eyes and tried to reestablish a connection, nothing happened.

“What were you doing? You were sitting there for nearly an hour with your eyes closed,” Agelstein abruptly asked, a few seconds after Fred opened his eyes.

He didn’t realize that he had been looking inside of himself for so long. “I was attempting to organize my internal Cores,” he finally revealed, after trying to think of how to convey what he had been doing. “I got it looking a little better, though I’m still having some of the same issues I explained earlier. It shouldn’t matter for this, however.”

Fred hesitated to start the next step, because he was considering whether or not he should try to create a Core with both of his available elements. He knew that a dual-element Shard was possible – Deecy was evidence of that – but she was also created from two different Dungeon Cores (Fred’s parents). While he knew he could probably do it, and knew that he *had* done it with his multi-element Core down in his dungeon, he wasn’t sure if it was the best idea.

For one, he wasn’t sure if the Sharding process would actually work with two elements combined in a single Core, and time was already ticking away to experiment with something that might not work. Second, as strong as Deecy was as a Dire Wolf, and while the different Defenses she could create were effective, he had to admit that she was...*weaker* than Eisa, Regnark, and Chareese. He wasn’t sure if it was because she had two elements instead of one, like the others, or if it was because of the different way she was created; but the fact remained that any of the others had more utility with their specializations.

Therefore, deciding against that move (for now, at least), and with nothing else stopping him, Fred pulled out 100 Units of Light Mana and

sent it out to hover just in front of him. The brightly glowing Mana was invisible to normal sight in its current state, which was evident in the way that Agelstein didn't even seem to notice it was there. That all changed when he started to compact it with his mind, followed by his hands squishing it down as tight as he could manage; as it shrunk, the Light condensed into a super-bright spot that immediately caught the attention of the Necro-Wizard's, who stared at it, mouth agape.

Before long, though, both Fred and Agelstein had to look away, as the condensed light became too bright to stare at, though the Human/Dungeon Core hybrid managed to see what he was doing through his Mana Sight instead. Surprisingly, the smaller the condensed ball of Light became, the warmer it became, until it almost felt like it was going to burn his skin. *I wonder if that's how those Light Elementals and the Celestial Orb were able to shoot out rays that could burn through armor like it was nothing?*

Regardless of the reason, the heat was uncomfortable enough that it was distracting. Luckily, the orb of Light Mana had been condensed to the point where he could wrap it in 200 units of Unconverted Mana. When the layer of clear Mana enclosed the sphere of Light, he felt a dramatic drop in the heat, though it didn't disappear altogether. It was only when he then condensed the Unconverted Mana that it eventually faded entirely.

*This is easier than I remember it being...*

All of his recent practice with creating multi-element Cores and converting massive influxes of Mana into a form that could be returned to their original owners had made what he was doing relatively trivial in comparison. That was not to say that it wasn't still difficult; but it didn't strain his mind and body, as it previously had.

Before he completed it, Fred considered the whole “consciousness slot” problem he had thought of before. *How do I create one of them... knowingly?* What he had done with Chareese had essentially been a brute-force creation of that “slot” in an already formed Core, which was obviously *extremely* inefficient. He considered it sort of like his Defenders or Defenses; while he just recently discovered that he could easily alter their blueprints in certain ways *before* he actually created them, trying to alter them *after* they were created seemed impossible. *Though, I think with enough Mana at my disposal, I could do it...*

Regardless, making changes at the source – the blueprint, so to say – seemed like the way to go, to make the whole thing cost less Mana and be safer for Fred during the Sharding process. Of course, knowing the smart way to do it and actually getting it done were two different things.

So, taking 10,000 Unconverted Mana (UM) from his Human Core – which was hopefully much more than he needed – Fred had it surround the condensed orb of Light Mana. He wanted to make sure he had enough there for what he had planned; anything that wasn’t used, he could easily reabsorb.

Using that UM blob, he did what he did with Chareese’s situation: He shoved everything he knew about Dungeon Core systems and screens, all of the information that Deecy or his parents had told him about Dungeon Cores, and even everything he could remember from the Newborn Dungeon Core Initialization Program, into the formless chunk of Mana. When everything Fred could think of was added therein, he condensed it around the brightly glowing orb, like an extra-thick coating keeping it solidified. He could almost feel the memories worm their way through and incorporate his previous 200-UM layer, before injecting themselves into the Light Mana in the center. After a couple of minutes, a large hunk of the 10,000

Unconverted Mana broke off and floated off separately, and he immediately absorbed it; a quick check showed that 6,200 units had returned to him. So, *overall, it took a total of 4,000?*

If his method worked, then he was saving *a lot* of Mana, compared to what he had expended before – at least 90% less, so far. The real test would come when he applied what he was creating in the actual Sharding process, of course.

When all of that was done, the Core – now nearly the size of Fred’s fist, instead of being marble-sized – felt...*right*; he couldn’t really explain how it differed from the Nature Core that he had created before; but when he held it in his hands and looked at it with his Mana Sight, it felt *complete*, for the first time. After checking it for any flaws – not that he would know what they would look like, even if he saw them – he let go of the pressure he was holding on the new Core, which had been keeping it compacted and floating in the air in front of his face. There was an even brighter flash of light, which blinded even his Mana Sight and caused Agelstein to cry out in temporary pain; a half-second later, he felt his creation drop into his open hands.

He opened his physical eyes and looked down to see a brightly glowing – but not blinding – white-colored Core in his hands. *This is certainly bigger than the Nature-based Core I used for Chareese; but hopefully, size doesn’t matter.* In fact, the size of his newly formed Core was larger than anything he had used before on any of his Shards, including Deecy.

“Is...that it?”

Fred shrugged at Agelstein’s question. “Yes...maybe? Let’s see if this will work.” So saying, Fred got up with briefly stiff joints and walked right up to Roady. Fred needed to choose between Roady and Ravenne, for



the Light Core he had just created; some instinctual part of his mind thought that the former Knight-Commander seemed like the better option, for some reason. The only problem, however, was that he couldn't access the chest of the big man, given the plate of armor in the way.

That was easily solved, as the Necro-Wizard had his animated corpse remove his chest plate; what wasn't so easily solved was getting inside the chest, though, because Roady's skin and bones were so strong that Fred didn't have the strength to pierce through them. Self-harm was also hard for the former Knight-Commander, because his sword wasn't really suited to being held against his own chest.

Fortunately, a couple of arrows shot from Ravenne's animated corpse did the trick.

When there was a big enough hole, Fred shoved the newly made Core inside the chest cavity, right at the heart. When the Core was in place, Fred activated his Intermediate Sentient Mana-Formed Object Creation skill and pumped another 5,000 units of Unconverted Mana into the area around the Core. Into this blob of UM came all of the memories of what he could recall of Roady, which was a surprisingly large amount, compared to his prior Sharding processes; he had actually spent more time with the large man than he had with Chareese, so that probably contributed to many of those memories.

When the UM blob was full of those memories, he let it spread and settle over Roady's entire body. Within a few moments, he felt another large chunk separate itself, and he absorbed 4,000 units of Mana; that meant that only 1,000 units were being used for this step in the process – for a total of 5,000 UM. *Much better – and strangely comparable to the amount I used to create Eisa and Regnark.* A soft glow quickly engulfed the animated

corpse, which rapidly increased in brightness; it wasn't as blinding as before, but it did make Fred close his eyes and watch with his Mana Sight.

Suddenly, a streak of black Power shot out of Roady and smacked into Agelstein, which made him stagger and clutch his head in pain. As soon as that dark force left his body, the corpse of the former Knight-Commander sagged and flopped to the floor of the cave, like a puppet that had its strings cut. As soon as Roady hit the stone surface, Fred could see the lower half of his body start to collapse into dust – which was what happened after a corpse was freed from the control of a Necromancer.

Fred was beginning to panic, and he worried that it wasn't going to work; luckily, even as the lower half was completely gone, the dissolution suddenly stopped, and the glow around his body flashed again, so brightly it was blinding. Agelstein yelped again in pain, before screaming, “Why does all of this have to be so blasted bright?!” Fred couldn't help but chuckle at his complaint; *we're performing miracles here, and he's complaining about the light?*

When he was able to see again, Roady was back – completely whole, breathing steadily, and with skin a healthy color – though he was still in a crumpled-up position, where his corpse had fallen just moments ago. “Roady—?” Fred started to ask, taking a step towards the big man at the same time.

He stepped back in shock as a scream erupted from the new Shard, higher pitched than any he had heard before...coming from a man, at least. “Aaaaahhhhhh!” Roady screamed, as he looked around with wild eyes, and waving his hands around like he was trying to move something away from him. Fred was suddenly glad that Agelstein had mentioned moving the large man's sword and shield away to the other side of the cave; otherwise,

the Human/Dungeon Core hybrid might have been cut in half, had Roady still been holding a weapon.

“Hey there, buddy...” Agelstein greeted their resurrected comrade happily, though he was still holding his head in pain. The backlash from his Animate Dead ability being forcefully returned to him appeared painful, but the smile on the Necro-Wizard’s face showed that it was probably worth it.

The sound of Agelstein’s voice shut off the scream immediately, and Fred could instantly see a change settle over Roady’s face as his eyes stopped their wild spinning. “How...how am I alive? I thought I was dead after that massive Boss was crashing down on top of me,” he recounted slowly, recognizing Fred standing in front of him and Agelstein to the side. “And I remember shouting for you to do what needed to be done....”

The newly restored man’s eyes drifted over the cave and saw Ravenne standing there, literally dead-still and staring at the far wall. He twitched once in surprise before he slumped down. “Oh.... So, this is what being animated by a Necromancer feels like? And this is all some sort of hallucination?”

Fred laughed and explained what had happened, while he really looked at Roady and pulled up his Shard Status. Fred was slightly surprised, though relieved, when Roady’s Shard Status came up; he had tried to access Chareese’s, earlier – which he had previously been able to access at any distance – and that hadn’t worked.

Shard Status
Winston “Roady” Rodabaugh
Elemental Origin: Light
Shard Level: 2
Next Mana Threshold: 250 Light
Light Mana: 100/100

<b>Form Projection Options (Current Command Threshold: 5)</b>
<b>Glow Sprite (Base Cost: 2 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 500 feet)</b>
<b>Bright Lynx (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 450 feet)</b>
<b>Winged Pegasus (Base Cost: 25 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 300 feet)</b>
<b>Special Abilities</b>
<b>Reflective Aura (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Light Mana per hour)</b>
<b>Healing Circle (Base Cost: 15 Light Mana, Base Upkeep cost: 5 Light Mana per hour)</b>

Just like Chareese, Roady had enough Light Mana to see his Shard Status, though what it reflected was slightly different than his half-sister's abilities. Besides the obvious Light element difference, instead of growing plants for Defenders and Defenses, his said something about "Form Projection". Fred could guess at what that meant, but until he saw Roady actually use it for himself, it would remain a mystery.

The big man took the entire situation much better than could be expected, though it was probably having seen his half-sister come back to life the same way that made it easier for him to transition to his new status. Nonetheless, the reduction of his physical attributes from his loss of Adventurer Essence was a bit of a hassle; despite his large size and more-than-decent muscle mass, moving in all of his heavy plate armor – as well as swinging his massive sword around – was quite difficult. He ended up taking most of it off, so that he could move around comfortably, revealing a threadbare padded shirt and pants underneath.

"What is this? A Sprite, a Lynx, and a Pegasus? Healing Circle? I've gone from being a Knight-Commander to a...what? A healer?" Roady asked disparagingly as soon as he was able to see his Shard Status himself.

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing; besides, you, of all people, should know how important having a healer of some sort along can be. And you might be surprised at what you might be able to do in the future.” Fred tried to reassure him, but he knew that the change was dramatic, to say the least. Still, despite the massive difference in his current state compared to what he was before, Fred thought he had made the right decision.

“Fine, we’ll see. I guess I can’t complain too much, since I’m still alive.... Thank you for that, by the way.”

“No, I need to thank *you*; if it weren’t for you, Agelstein, and Ravenne, I wouldn’t have arrived here safely. Even if you were a walking corpse for half of the walk back,” Fred’s attempt to lighten the mood with humor caused Roady to shiver in obvious discomfort at the mention of his having been an animated corpse.

“Speaking of that, can you...do...what you did to me...with Ravenne? As much as I appreciate what you did—” Roady said, looking at Agelstein— “I can’t help but feel a bit disturbed looking at her like that. It just feels...*wrong*.... Sorry, Agel.”

“No apology needed,” the Necro-Wizard responded, waving his hand in dismissal. “I didn’t want to do it, but without you two *helping*, we probably wouldn’t have made it back in one piece. Well, *I* was in one piece; Fred, here, was all smashed up from the explosion. Luckily, he has that crazy ability to heal himself; so, he was all good within a half-hour.”

Fred had already sat down on his blanket again and was gathering himself for another round of Mana condensing; he responded to both of them at the same time with a snort. “It still hurt me, so it’s not like I get away without feeling all of the damage done to me. Anyway, I’ll work on Ravenne, right now. It’ll take a little bit; so, why don’t you practice using

your new abilities...a little further inside the cave, though, if you don't mind."

"Sure; I've got nothing better to do. Why does it seem so bright in here?" Roady asked, moving a bit down the dark cave. While Fred and Agelstein had set up near the entrance so that light could filter in, deeper down it was so dark that Fred would need to rely on his Mana Sight to see, unless he used a Magelight spell or something equivalent. Roady, though... well, Roady wouldn't have that problem.

"It's because *you're glowing*, buddy."

So he was; there was a faint glow emanating softly from his entire body, and it wasn't just the Light Mana he could see infusing his whole body. There was a sort of aura that hovered just over the surface of his skin and clothes that gave off just enough light to see at least 15 to 20 feet ahead quite well.

Fred blocked out any of the comments the big Shard had about his new glow, as he concentrated on creating another Core similar to the Light one he had just seen work with Roady. It still took approximately the same amount of time to fully create it, but it felt easier, because he knew exactly what he was doing, this time. In less than an hour, he had an Air-based Core in his hands, and he was prepared to work on the other animated corpse hanging out with them in the dark cave.

Therefore, he didn't hesitate to get started; Roady was back from his practice with his new abilities – after hearing Fred stir, he supposed – and Agelstein looked like he was ready to be done with the whole walking-dead-friend-thing. Getting through her skin and into her heart was a bit of a challenge, but Roady had enough strength, still to use his sword to carve his way through her tough skin. It took about five minutes, and the new Light Shard had tears running down his face by the end of it; but it was done.

Placing the Air Core inside and making sure it was secure, Fred stepped back and repeated what he did with Roady earlier – though he only pulled out exactly 1,000 Unconverted Mana this time. Additionally, instead of a bright white light engulfing her, she was covered head to toe in a faint yellow glow...at least until a streak of black Power shot out and smacked into Agelstein again, causing him to scream out in pain and hold his head. Just like the former Knight-Commander, she collapsed straight down when the Necromantic Power left her body, though her torso was still upright despite her sprawled state. In fact, her grip on her bow hadn't even slackened any—

*Oh, no...*

“Her bow!” Fred shouted, but it was too late. The glow surrounding her brightened considerably and blinded them all, but he still tried to stagger forward to wrestle the bow from her hands. That proved to be a mistake; as the process completed and Ravenne opened her eyes, she took one wild-eyed look at him stumbling towards her and, mid-scream, she pulled an arrow from the quiver on her back. In one fluid motion – her skill not much diminished from her loss of her Adventurer Essence – she nocked the arrow and shot it straight at Fred's chest, piercing through his ribcage and into his heart. The impact was so strong that it caused him to step back, where he tripped over some imperceptible deviation in the stone floor of the cave.

As soon as he landed on his back, the pain from the arrow shot hit him, and he cried out in shock; his cry was overshadowed, however, by the slowly decreasing scream coming from Agelstein from his Power backlash. Fred lifted his head, even as he was suffering from the long projectile in his chest, only to see Ravenne firing at the Necro-Wizard, hitting him in the throat. Agelstein's scream was interrupted by the arrow in his throat, and

he collapsed with a gurgle and lay on his back, his hands attempting to stem the flow of blood.

The next moment, he heard Roady yell with a semblance of his previous battlefield voice, “Ravenne! Stand down!” When she didn’t seem to hear him, Fred saw a few streaks of light emit from the big man, and five Bright Lynxes popped into existence in front of the now-kneeling Air Shard. Less than a second later, they jumped towards her, though Ravenne was still able to get one shot off that went through the eye of one of the Light Defenders, where it immediately disappeared, and a small blob of Light Mana appeared.

The remaining four managed to tackle the former Assassin-Spy with their bulk, sending her onto her back and clamping down on her arms with their jaws. Ravenne still struggled, though, and it was only when another Lynx appeared and wrapped its sharp-toothed mouth around her neck that her flailing ceased.

During all of that, Fred was attempting to pull the arrow out of his heart, but his movements were sluggish, and his strength almost completely gone. He knew he would eventually heal with his Mana, but unless the arrow was removed, it would become...complicated. His head rolled to his side to see Roady looking around almost in shock. “Roady... \*cough\*... arrow... Healing...” was all he was able to squeeze out of his throat before darkness crashed down on him – for the second time that day.

*This is getting ridiculous.*



# Chapter 5

*What...just happened?*

Despite the massive changes that encompassed his life over the last few hours, nothing had prepared Roady for Ravenne to come back from death and start killing everyone. Fortunately, his practice of his new abilities, a session that he just ended a few minutes ago, was already coming in handy.

In the back of his mind, he was directly connected to the five Bright Lynxes that held Ravenne down and immobile; from what he could remember of what Chareese had told him, he didn't think that his level of control over them was exactly normal, however. From what she – as well as Eisa and Regnark, the other Shards who had traveled with Fred – said, Shards gave their monsters (or Defenders, whatever they were called) orders, those Defenders fulfilled their orders. For Roady, though, he didn't just give orders – he *was* the monster.

It was a bit confusing, at first, because he had trouble reconciling, in his mind, how to directly control one of his monster “forms” (as they were called in his Shard Status), while still maintaining his individual presence as a human. However, with some practice – and letting go of some preconceived notions of what was right or wrong – he learned how to *become* a Glow Sprite, at first, and then one of the Bright Lynxes. It was a frightening and wonderful experience all wrapped up in one, and he had started to think that his new existence wasn't all bad.

Especially when he found out that he could use his centuries of experience in combat to enhance the fighting prowess of his monsters. They didn't have the same strength or abilities that he was used to, but

knowing how to control and take advantage of the flow of battle and identifying weaknesses to exploit wasn't something that came with Ratings or Essence – it came with experience and knowledge. In fact, he had just started to control two Lynxes at the same time and had them fight each other – both controlled by him, of course – which was an amazing application of tactics and preservation of movement that couldn't really be achieved when sparring against someone...nor when fighting against relatively “dumb” monsters who attacked with the same methods over and over and over again.

That was when he had heard Fred stirring and he hurried back to help. He now wished he hadn't taken the time to tear her chest open, though, because she had just killed Fred and Agel. She was obviously scared and confused, just like he had been when he was brought back earlier; but she wasn't responding to his voice. Five of his Lynx Forms did the trick, and he could see the frightened craziness start to leave her eyes.

That didn't really help his other friend...nor Fred, he supposed. He knew the strange little man could heal himself over time, but Agelstein had been shot through the throat and was dying. Despite Ravenne likely being sent back to the G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rating, her enchanted arrows were just as powerful as they had been before she died. He had been told that they even pierced through *his* skin while he was an animated corpse, which just went to show how deadly they were.

*We need a healer! Maybe if I rush back to the city I can fetch one before he dies.*

“Roady... \*cough\*... arrow... Healing...” he suddenly heard from Fred's direction. He looked over to see what he was talking about, but his eyes closed, and he seemed to be asleep. Or temporarily dead. *Yes, I know he needs healing—wait.*

He still wasn't used to his new status as a Shard, and one that had *healing* in fact: so he had completely forgotten about his Special Ability. Crouching down next to his feebly struggling friend, he gripped the shaft of the arrow and pushed it through, while at the same time activating his Healing Circle ability. He felt the white light that characterized his new "Mana" stream out, and a large circle – about 15 feet across – appeared on the floor, encompassing everyone in the cave. It glowed with a soft, pulsing brightness, and he could feel an energy pass through him.

Roady immediately saw a change in Agelstein near him, as well; the blood almost immediately stopped pouring out of his neck wound, and the torn edges of skin started to knit together quite rapidly. In less than 30 seconds, the wound was completely healed, though his friend still looked quite pale. *Probably from the gallon of blood that poured out of him.* Regardless, he was alive, if not fully recovered quite yet.

Looking over at Fred, he expected the strange dungeon man to have healed and woken up, as well; but there was no change that he could see, other than a stoppage of blood leaking out from his chest wound. *Ah!* Roady didn't know what was wrong with him since his...death...but he was forgetting the obvious things now. He scrambled over to Fred and rolled him onto his side, before pushing the arrow through and out of his back; the arrows that Ravenne shot were designed to cause major damage if they were *pulled* out, so the only way to get them out was to *push* them through.

Roady's Healing Circle, coupled with Fred's natural regenerative powers, was enough to fix the smaller man quickly; twenty seconds after the Light Shard pushed the arrow out, eyes that were cloudy with anguish opened and looked at him. "Did you...save him?" Fred whispered; his strength was obviously still low, but returning quickly as the pain from his wound faded.

Glancing at Agelstein, Roady saw that he was looking much better already; so much so that he was sitting up and glancing around in shock. “Uh...what happened?”

“Ravenne shot you because you were entirely too loud with all that yelling about your head. I can’t say I blame her, because it was a bit over-dramatic; you’re just lucky that I’m a healer now,” Roady replied, trying to lighten the mood from the near-tragedy that just happened.

“Thanks—”

Another voice cut his thanks off, however. “Uh...can someone tell me why there seems to be some large cat with its mouth around my throat?”

*It sounds like she’s back with us, finally.* With a thought, Roady got rid of all of his projected Forms, and all of his Bright Lynxes disappeared. The Light Mana of which they were composed shot back into him, and he felt his reserve of the strange power fill back up. His ability to make his monsters—*Defenders*—disappear upon command was another difference compared to some of the other Shards, who needed to touch or be near what they created to reabsorb them. *Despite only having a couple of these Forms, the whole thing with them seems a bit overpowered.*

When he thought about controlling more than five of his Forms at once, though, he instinctively balked at the idea. *That must be what the “Current Command Threshold” is on my Shard Status.* That, he assumed, was the downside of his new abilities: He could only control up to five of his Forms at a time.

“Sorry about that, Ravenne. You were a bit...distressed as soon as you came back to consciousness. You nearly killed Agelstein and Fred, in fact,” Roady told the Assassin as soon as she sat up, now that she didn’t have one of his Lynxes at her throat. *Actually, **former** Assassin is probably more like it.*

“Oh, no – I’m so sorry! I didn’t know what I was doing, I swear!” she apologized, before crawling over to Agel and checking him out. She continued to apologize incessantly while the Necromancer told her he was fine, despite blood being everywhere: on his skin, clothes, and all over the floor.

Fred finally stopped her apologizing with an apology of his own. “It’s not your fault, Ravenne – it’s mine. I forgot to take your enchanted bow away from your animated corpse before I brought you back as a Shard. If anyone is to blame, it’s me.”

“I’m...a Shard?” she asked, confused. Roady – along with Fred and Agelstein – explained what had happened, including her whole stint as an animated corpse courtesy of their resident Necromancer. Fred then explained the same sort of things that he had told Roady about her Shard Status and what exactly it meant to be a Shard; she wasn’t as intimately familiar about the whole situation as he was because of Chareese, so she had a little more to learn.

“So, just like Roady, and Chareese before him, you should already be holding enough Air Mana to access your Status. All you have to do is think ‘Shard Status’ and it should appear,” Fred told her. Roady could see her eyes widen as her new Interface appeared, and then—

Shard Status
Ravenne Florens
Elemental Origin: Air Shard Level: 2 Next Mana Threshold: 250 Air Air Mana: 100/100
Defensive Options
Air Barrier (Base Cost: 2 Air Mana per 10 seconds) Wind Tunnel (Base Cost: 7 Air Mana per 10 seconds)

<b>Swift Atmospheric Compression (Base Cost: 15 Air Mana per 10 seconds)</b>
<b>Sharpened Air-row Barrage (Base Cost: 25 Air Mana per 5 seconds)</b>
<b>Special Abilities</b>
<b>Flight (Base Cost: 5 Air Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Air Mana per hour)</b>

*What?* For some odd reason, he could see Ravenne's Shard Status. "Your surname is...Florens?" Roady asked, surprised at how...pretty it sounded. The Assassin was always so reserved about her personal life that only a few people likely knew even that much about her – and those people were, in all probability, his half-sister and the Allroads Council. *"Florens" doesn't really sound dangerous and suited to an Assassin, I guess; I can understand not wanting to spread that around. Just like "Winston" doesn't really suit my own personality.*

Her mouth formed an "O" shape, before she hastily asked, "How do you know that?"

"You can see her Status, can't you?" Fred mused, already knowing something about it. "I think it might be because you're both...connected... to me at some deep-down level, as well as with the new technique I used in constructing the Core I used to bring you both back as Shards. I can see Chareese's, as well, so it's more than likely that you'll be able to see hers if you think about it hard enough."

Roady tried, but nothing happened. "I don't think it's working."

He could see Ravenne scrunching up her face in thought, before she shook her head in defeat. "I can't see it either, though I was able to see yours, Roady. So...you're a healer now, huh?" she asked with a slight chuckle. Roady snorted and didn't deign to answer; the evidence was plain to see on his Status.

Fred sighed. “It might be the same issue I’m having with accessing my territory and all that, so don’t be too concerned at the moment. The important part is that you’re both alive and well, if changed quite a bit, so now we can head back to Allroads to get all of this figured out.”

The thought of going back to the city was slightly frightening to Roady. *I was always there to protect Chareese from everything, but being kicked back down to a G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rating means that I can barely even protect myself.* He hadn’t really thought about his loss of Rating and his superior strength and confidence that went with it, but the prospect of facing his half-sister without being that bastion of strength was unsettling, to say the least. *What will she think of what I’ve become?*

That wasn’t even considering all of his friends inside the DAS and the Allroads Government. He wasn’t being modest when he admitted that he had been a well-respected leader amongst them; but now, most of the qualities that made him that leader were gone. *Who follows a **healer**, anyway?* It wasn’t as though he didn’t think they were important, because they were; his own life had been saved plenty of times in the past by a timely heal from hundreds of different healers, of course. It was probably his former Class talking, but he didn’t really respect those who didn’t get into the thick of battle like he did...*or like I used to.* Even Chareese, who had many healing spells in her repertoire, frequently fought alongside him on the front lines, despite the danger; some healers, however, stayed out of direct combat as much as they possibly could.

Roady resolved not to be one of *those* healers. His ability to project and control Forms already helped to ensure that he wouldn’t be like that, but he needed to work on his Adventurer Rating to build himself back up to what he used to be, as well. There was no reason he couldn’t be another Knight-Commander, even if it took a couple of centuries.

There was no point in delaying the inevitable, however, so he got everyone moving; despite his death and miraculous resurrection as a Shard, he was still the *de facto* leader of their little group, and it was time to get back to the city.

The walk to the southern gate took less than a half-hour, because everyone was eager to get within the relative safety of the walls. He used the term “relative”, because he knew that if all of the monsters along the border were to attack at the same time, the walls of the city wouldn’t do much to prevent a slaughter of millions of innocent people. There were so many monsters that could fly over or burrow underneath those stone barricades that the walls were practically useless. They were designed to hold back armies of *humans*, not massive hosts of *monsters*. Regardless, even if the defenses were “paper-thin”, the *illusion* of security was still there – and important to the millions of people inside.

“Commander Roady! You’re back! We were told to expect you, but you’re a lot later than we figured you’d be,” heralded one of the Allroads Guards atop the wall (Gheric, he thought his name was), before he spoke behind him to someone Roady couldn’t see. The doors started to open just as Gheric called again. “Commander? You look different; are you... glowing?”

*Great, they can see it even in the bright light of day.* While he didn’t respect healers like he supposed he should, he usually applauded their typical choice to be as inconspicuous as possible, so as not to call attention to themselves. *How am I supposed to be inconspicuous when I’m lit up like a Magelight?*

“Yes, well, there were some...difficulties...getting here, which led to our delay – as well as some interesting developments. Did the Elder and



those with her make it safely back?” he asked, waiting for the door to finish opening so they could get in.

“They arrived hours ago, though many of them appeared a bit injured and exhausted. Alive, though. Glad you made it back alive, too, Commander.”

*I mean, technically I’m alive, even if I died earlier.* “Me too, Gheric, me too.”

After they got inside and the door closed behind them, it was a whirlwind of activity. They were whisked away to the Governmental Quarter and the familiar compound within, though for some reason it didn’t have the same...connection to him, he supposed...as it did before his new state of existence. It was almost as if his death freed him up from any of the bonds he had with his old life, as he wasn’t exactly the same person. *This must be exactly what Chareese felt, and why she spends so much time down in Fred’s dungeon.*

Regardless, he had a job to do. While Fred went to the Governmental Prison, and presumably down to his dungeon and to the other Shards down there, Roady, Ravenne, and Agelstein needed to report to the Council about what had happened. It took a little bit for the Elder to show up to the Council chambers (word was that she was ensuring her husband and the other captives they brought back were recovering safely somewhere); but when she did, she immediately sensed that something was wrong. She was the Syndicate Elder, after all.

“What happened to you?”

Roady looked at the others, but they indicated with their glances that they would rather he told the story. He sighed heavily before he began. “Well...it all began when Fred went to go meet what he said was something called the Supreme of Air....”

# Chapter 6

Fred was glad that Roady had managed to save Agelstein from death, despite the fact that he could probably bring him back as a Shard. Thinking about doing so, however, made his mind temporarily stutter; some instinctual part of his Human *and* Dungeon Core nature indicated that creating similar-element Shards could be disastrous. He wasn't sure why that was, or even why it would be a bad idea; but that reticence was there, all the same. What that essentially meant was that he shouldn't make another Shard whose Core Mana was strictly Light or Air, or any other element like most of the Shards already present. That didn't mean he couldn't create multi-element Shards, such as Deecy, for instance; only that it would be inadvisable to repeat anything already present.

While the reasoning for the reticence was a mystery, the Dungeon Core/Human hybrid had learned to trust his instincts before this; so, he wasn't going to stop now. It just meant that he wouldn't be making many more Shards anytime soon unless he was forced to; and that, even then, he had to be cautious about it. It appeared that the number of Shards he could create was finite; so, unfortunately, he had to be choosy as to whom he brought back.

That was all for another time, though, as he entered the Allroads Governmental Prison on his route to his dungeon. It felt strange being so close to everything he had built below the Prison without being able to see it, let alone *interact with it*, however. *I have to figure out what's wrong – and quickly, at that. I don't know how close the next incursion by one of the other elemental factions is, nor do I have a way to check right now.* Another thought occurred to him. *Any or all of the elemental factions might*

*have even revised their plans entirely, if they've learned of my little foray outside my territory to acquire the Light element...if not Air at the same time.* While that wasn't the sole purpose behind the expedition, that development was probably the one that would matter the most to the Cores around the Convergence, as well as to the Supreme Council.

It felt like it took forever to walk all the way to his dungeon, with Fred feeling more disappointed and worried by the minute. He had been hoping that proximity to his multi-element Core stand-in might fix the problem, and it was quite worrisome that such didn't seem to be the case. By the time he arrived, he was almost in a state of panic; fortunately, most of that worry evaporated when he saw Eisa there waiting for him by the entrance, and he was almost knocked down when she threw herself into his arms and started kissing him all over his face.

"I was so worried! Don't ever leave like that again!"

He chuckled and kissed her back, before extricating himself from the tight hold she had on him. "Sorry about that, but it had to be done. And I was gone for less than a day, so I wasn't gone *that* long."

She shook her head and looked sad. "I know that. At some point, though, the connection I have with you – that I didn't even know was there, honestly – disappeared, as if you had died or something. The other Shards said the same thing, though Deecy said you were still alive because the Core you have in your room was still functioning," she said, before frowning at him. "Even now, when you're standing here in front of me, I still can't...*feel*...you like I used to. What happened?"

Fred could start to see why there were limitations on how many Shards he could create. Each one was apparently *connected* directly to his elemental Cores in some deep way, and if he created another one, he thought it might *replace* that connection. At best, it might just mean that

the original Shard – Earth/Eisa for example – would lose some of the abilities to which she currently had access to; at worst, she might simply cease to be. He had to assume that his previous thought about making multi-element Shards would be similar, and he couldn't take the risk that he might kill one of the existing Shards by bringing someone else back to life.

All in all, it meant that he had essentially hit his limit already.

Which was more than disappointing, because there was – if he remembered correctly – one of his Guild members who had perished during the attack on his dungeon by the Earth faction the day before. Unless there was some way to prove that creating another Shard wouldn't kill one of the others, then Fred was unable to resurrect him. There could always be another solution, of course, but he couldn't figure it out at the moment; he had time, though, because his body was being stored away somewhere in the dungeon for the time that Fred could get to him. Which wasn't going to be right now, because he had other problems to deal with.

Fred told Eisa that, when everyone was all together – the other Shards in the dungeon, the Core Power Guild – he would tell everyone everything; all the while, he kept assuring her that he was fine, as they walked through the tunnels leading through the outside of his dungeon. Because the tunnels avoided all of the Defenses and Defenders set up throughout the rooms, and Fred didn't know if he would be classified as a threat, they were the safest way through to the barracks and the Guild members. It was also where Eisa told him he would find the other Shards, so, he went there first.

“Regnark, I'm back—oh!” Fred called out as soon as he walked into the big guy's room. He quickly backtracked at the scene before him, bumping into Eisa behind him as Chareese's scream echoed through the room and out into the tunnel.

“Ouch, what—oh.” Eisa asked the question before she caught a glimpse of Regnark and Chareese in an awkward position on the Dark Shard’s bed. Eisa led him a little distance away with her face blushing almost crimson. “Uh...meeting at the barracks in five minutes?” Eisa called out towards the room behind them, before leading Fred away.

*Another reason I need my dungeon senses back, if only to avoid that kind of situation again.* Fred could feel his own cheeks heat up as he remembered what he saw; it was one thing to briefly see that sort of thing, using his Territorial Sight in a sort of detached state; it was another to see it with his own two eyes. *And Eisa wants to do that with me?* The thought of that actually happening was intriguing, and now he was really starting to look forward to it.

He stopped daydreaming, however, as a voice popped into his mind.

***“Fred, is that you causing all of those screams? Welcome back; I assume your little expedition was a success?”***

Deecy’s voice was welcome, mainly because it confirmed that he wasn’t cut off from *everything*; he just needed to figure out how to fix everything else, now. The Dire Wolf, in her normal form, walked out of the next room in the tunnel leading to the Guild barracks, where she stood looking at him with a wolfy smile...before it turned into a frown, head cocked to the side in confusion.

***“You seem...different. What happened?”***

That seemed like a very common question, that day, from everyone – and Fred didn’t exclude himself from that. A lot was going on, and he

didn't want to explain it more than once. *“Meeting in the Guild barracks in a few minutes; I'll explain everything I can there. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that I'm okay – but there are some strange difficulties that I'm having.”*

That was an understatement, but it was all they got for now. Entering the large room, with all of the Guild members hanging around and resting, he felt more than a little pride at how far they had developed in such a short time. As they all greeted him warmly and told him how happy they were to have him back, he couldn't help but look at all of their Interfaces and be impressed at their progress.

They had obviously been practicing in their downtime, after getting some sleep from the excitement from the day before, and it showed in their Ratings – and additional taught Abilities. *I really need to set up some sort of training program for the entire Syndicate, here...or have Eisa and Metch set something up. If everyone can learn how to do all of this, the benefits to them all could be immense.*

It wasn't even five minutes later when Regnark and the former Inquisitor rushed inside, looking flushed...and clothed, fortunately. He didn't say anything to them, just smiled an apology their way, before he launched into a description of what had happened and what exactly was going on now. *“...and now I need to figure out what's wrong; if I don't, then we're going to have some problems with expanding and defending the dungeon in the future.”*

The one positive note was that when he passed by his “Core Room” – otherwise known as his bedroom – earlier, he had been able to sense the Core inside. Fred wasn't sure if that meant anything specific, but it was encouraging.

“What about Chausser? Are you able to bring him back?” Metch asked, and many of the other Core Power Guild members nodded their head at the question.

Fred sighed, hating what he needed to say, but he wasn’t going to lie to them. “Unfortunately, no. I can only have a limited number of Shards dependent upon my accessible elements, and right now, I’ve hit that maximum,” he lamented, solemnly. As a few protested, he held up his hands to stop them. “That doesn’t mean I’m not going to look for another way to bring him – and anyone else who may still perish – back. I promised that I will take care of you all, and I intend to do just that.”

That seemed to mollify them a bit. Fred really did intend to keep that promise, but it was going to have to wait until he understood what he was contending with. As well as keeping everyone alive from potential invasions by the other factions. *Oh, and somehow figuring out how to save both Humans and Dungeon Cores from extinction – can’t forget that.*

***“I can’t be sure, but I think it probably has to do with the fact that you’ve changed, in some fundamental way, since you created that Core that’s maintaining this territory and dungeon. If I understood what you did correctly, you had it mirror your elements, so that it was essentially a copy of what you represent; but when you came back, you’re basically locked out from interacting with your own facsimile, because you’re unrecognizable.”***

“That’s precisely what I was thinking; if that is indeed the issue, the problem now is figuring out how to interact with it again. Any thoughts on that?” Fred responded to the Dire Wolf mentally, as he watched the others go back to what they were doing before he came back.

***“That’s all on you, I’m afraid. I barely even comprehend what you did in the first place; so, I have no idea how to fix it.”***

“Thanks for nothing,” he said with a tired smile in her direction. He imagined it was something that he’d have to figure out himself – and he had no idea how to go about it.

Before he tackled that problem, Fred turned to Chareese, who was leaning on Regnark, looking thoroughly shocked. “I think you need to go see your half-brother, as soon as you can. He’s not quite adjusted to his new situation, yet, and he could probably use your help.” She just nodded and dragged Regnark behind her.

“Eisa...would you mind going with them? Ravenne could probably use someone to talk to, as well; from what I gather, there isn’t anyone in the city who might help her adjust, like Chareese can with Roady,” Fred asked, before holding up his hands at her protest. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere, and I’ll be here when you get back. I know I just got back, but this is really important; besides, I’m going to be holed up with the Core in my bedroom for a while, trying to figure out how to fix the situation I’m in – so I probably won’t be much company for a bit.”

“Eh, you’re probably right. That does kind of take priority...as long as we’re not expecting an attack right now?”

Fred honestly had no idea, but from what he remembered when he could still check on his territory that morning, the Nature faction was still about a day away from reaching his dungeon. “I’d say we have at least twelve hours before we need to be ready for anything. I can’t guarantee that, though, because I can’t see what’s going on underground. Regardless, if there is an attack, I’ll have some Guild scouts out near the entrance; I’ll



also have Deecy contact you, so that you're alerted, if it happens ahead of time."

She gave him a long kiss before she turned around and ran after the other two Shards, catching up to them before they got too far. When they were gone, Fred turned to Deecy – who was sitting next to him, looking for all intents and purposes like she was bored – and asked, "Are you ready to figure this out?"

***"Lead on; I'm looking forward to you doing the impossible again."***

"You might be right – and this might really be impossible...though I have to try, don't I?" The Dire Wolf didn't say anything to that, but he felt her following close behind as he walked down to his Core Room. Just as he had left it, the multi-element Core, composed of Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, and Dark Mana was in the adjoining room right next to his bedroom, floating serenely as if it was planning on staying there for countless years to come. He could *sense* it there, just like he could any other Dungeon Core he got near; but it didn't feel *familiar* anymore. It also didn't feel *unfamiliar*, as much sense as that made. It was almost as if the Core was like a long-lost family member that he thought he *should* know, but *didn't*, at the same time.

*Well, maybe it's time to introduce myself.*

## **Part II – Invasion**

# Chapter 7

The first thing he attempted to do, in order to solve his problem with his territory, was to touch the Core, hoping that some recognition or memory would kick in and his Dungeon Core system would ask him to absorb it...or something along those lines. Of course, it couldn't be that easy, because nothing happened when he put his hands on it. He even tried – feeling foolish as he did it – to press his chest up against it, in the hopes that it would transfer all of his missing elements back to him, with no success.

Nothing seemed to happen when he was touching it; so, he reverted to full Mana Sight mode, looking at it to see if he could figure out what was wrong. The Core looked exactly how it appeared before, with the five elements all squished together in a single sphere comprised of Unconverted Mana. There were two major differences from the last time he had seen it, however. One, it wasn't pulsing along with his heartbeat; instead, it held a steady glow that was just bright enough to indicate that it was completely full of all its elemental Mana. Two, the near-invisible lines that had connected his internal elemental Cores with the ones in the floating, multi-element Core were essentially *cut*.

Looking hard enough, he could see the tendrils of those “lines” floating free around the Core; when he approached, he saw them shift in his direction, as if waiting and wanting to be reconnected. Looking down at his own chest, he could feel the same sort of tendrils emerge from his chest from *all* of his elemental Cores, including his new Light and Air ones. They tried to reach out to the ones that were coming from the multi-element floating stone. Yet, both sets almost seemed to repel each other.

*Hmm...it's like the tendrils coming from the Core I created are a sort of lock, and my own tendrils are a key. However, my key...changed. First when I acquired first the Light element, and then again when I obtained the Air element.* It hadn't really made a difference before, when he had gained access to Nature, Earth, or Dark because he either didn't have a territory set up at that point, or it collapsed when he "died" temporarily (such as what happened with the Earth Core that blew itself up). When he left his territory, though, it was almost like he locked the door to his house – and the key he brought with him was now a completely different one.

*What was that expression I've heard before? Trying to fit a square peg into a round hole?* If he remembered it correctly, that pretty much summed up the situation. Fred didn't expect it to work, but he still attempted to brute force the correct tendrils to line up by concentrating on them, only to give himself a headache. It wasn't something that he could manipulate, which seemed strange because the Cores he was trying to match up were technically composed of Mana; nevertheless, a method of connecting them together completely eluded him.

Fred slumped down in the little stool he had left in the room, staring at the floating Core with his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. *There has to be a way to do this...what am I missing?* He stayed there for a while, his thoughts drifting off onto wild tangents and theories; in the end, he thought he might try a couple of the ideas he thought up, though he suspected that they wouldn't work.

*Maybe I'm looking at this the wrong way. What is the easiest way for a Dungeon Core to take over another's territory?* The answer to that was easy: Destroy the other Core. The problem with doing that to the multi-element Core in front of him – if he discovered a way to do it, which would be problematic in itself – the likely result would be a massive

explosion that would demolish most of Fred's dungeon, would kill him (possibly permanently), and would get rid of the territory, at a time when the borders were constantly contracting. Worse than that, it was entirely possible that he might lose all access to the five elements contained within...and that he might, thereby, end up killing the Shards associated with them.

*But I'm not a "normal" Dungeon Core; I never have been. So, how do I take over another Core's territory? By absorbing the element of another Core, obviously.* The problem was that he'd already tried that, and it just wasn't happening. *But there has to be another way to do it...*

As he scrunched further onto the stool, the exhaustion of the entire day finally catching up with him, he felt something digging into his skin. Sitting back up, he reached into his shirt pocket and felt around for a moment, before pulling out a round, brown stone. Exhausted, it took him a few moments to remember that it was the stone left behind by The Graveler when Fred accidentally used a Mana Implosion on it the day before. *I'm surprised it's still in my pocket after my clothes got shredded near the Light border.*

How it both survived and was still on his person was a mystery, but he was too tired to wonder about the fortuitousness of it. Fred held it in his hand and really looked at it for the first time; he had been in a bit of hurry earlier and had just stashed it away for later. He hadn't managed to pick up any of the stones he had created near the border made from Light Mana... though if Elder Hood had followed his request, there was a massive stone somewhere near made from the Mana of hundreds of Defenders that got sucked up outside the Light Core's dungeon. If he needed it, he could probably ask for it; at the moment, though, he wasn't sure what it could be used for.

Using his Mana Sight, he looked at the much smaller brown stone in his hand. Like he thought it might be, it was essentially highly concentrated Earth Mana. While he couldn't necessarily *manipulate* it without access to the element (which was currently locked up a few feet away from him), nothing had changed with his ability to *see* it.

What surprised Fred about the stone, which he saw as he rotated it in his hands to get a better look, was that it seemed to have – or at least looked like – Unconverted Mana sprinkled throughout the internal structure of the gem-like stone. Actually, that wasn't very surprising, since he used UM during the Mana Implosion process; no, what was actually surprising was that, upon closer inspection, it wasn't *Unconverted Mana* at all...

It was pure, *crystallized Essence*.

*What? How is that possible?* Essence was something completely unconnected to Mana...wasn't it? Human Adventurers killed monsters to gain the precious substance, which they then used to improve their physical attributes or enhance their abilities; that much was obvious, because Fred used it, himself, to do just that. *So where did this Essence come from?* The only explanation – again, obviously – was from The Graveler, which must have released it as it was compacted in the implosion. Instead of it being released into the air, however, it was trapped and crystallized, a part of the concentrated Earth Mana that made up the stone in his hands.

That made him start to question exactly what Essence was made from. It wasn't Mana, exactly...but it could be converted *into* Mana for some reason. Or at least, *Fred* could convert it; so they had to be related in some way. The more he thought about it, as he slowly spun the brown Mana stone in his hands, the more it started to come together in his mind. *Mana and Essence are like two sides of the same coin, separated only by... what? The metal making up the coin? No, that doesn't seem right...*

The way they seemed to mesh together so well in the Earth Mana stone seemed to indicate something else. For some odd reason, he was reminded of the Horrorlings in the Plains of Grass – which felt like years ago, albeit though, in reality, less than a month had passed. At first, he had thought that the bizarre – and frightening – monsters were some freak of Mana that spawned far down below the surface and manifested that way every night. Then, after discovering the Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization program that allowed him to create the massive Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider, the program had mentioned that it had inadvertently created them.

***Note 2: Testing abandoned after the near-disaster which resulted in the unintentional creation of the Horrorlings and Greater Horrors; the perpetrators of this near-disaster are now charged with maintaining the Horrors' secure once-daily nocturnal creation, though all knowledge of their actual origins has been eliminated.***

The question that he hadn't really had time to consider before, however, was how that could possibly happen in the first place. The Horrorlings and Greater Horrors were insatiable creations that consumed the Mana of whatever they touched, and when there was no Mana at hand, they consumed Essence. As far as anyone knew, the two substances were entirely different from each other; if that was the case, though, then how could monsters feed on *both* of them? Nothing else he had seen in his life – or heard about, even – mentioned anything that affected both Mana and Essence, so it didn't make sense.

Unless...they were actually one and the same.

*That actually makes a lot of sense.* When he thought of it that way, the creation of the Horrorlings was a little more explainable. Dungeon Cores (at least the older, more experienced ones) obviously knew that Humans were acquiring Essence in addition to whatever rewards they stocked their dungeon with; Fred could only assume that some of them had used the Hybridization Program in the past to try to eliminate the Essence given off from their Defenders. That obviously backfired, because by trying to eliminate “Essence”, they eliminated the “Mana” that was inside the blueprints.

As a result, what they instead created was a Horrifying monster that craved and hungered for either Mana or Essence, but could never consume enough of them because they were a bottomless pit of absence – a *void*, if it were. Which was exactly what he thought they were when he encountered them in his Territorial Sight, and later when he had to fight against them. Presumably, the Cores that had accidentally created them had started a chain of events that led to their constant production; Fred wasn’t sure exactly how it was tied to the steady stream of elemental force bubbling up from the center of the world near the Deadlands, though. He could guess, but in the end, it didn’t really matter.

What did matter was that he *thought* he figured it out. *Mana and Essence are the same substance. Of course, Humans are only **allowed** to use one aspect of that substance, while Dungeon Cores are only **allowed** to use the other.* Why that was, or who (or what) made that determination – Fred wasn’t sure; he was just aware that somehow this new knowledge was important...somehow.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t going to have a chance to find out exactly *why* it was so important, because he heard Metch calling out in the hallway. “We’re under attack!”



Fred didn't hesitate and immediately reached out to Deecy, who was resting on his bed in the other room, but she was already on it.

***“They’re here already.”***

*“Which ones?”*

***“All of them. They got back a few minutes ago, just before the scout reported a rumbling coming from one of the walls in the entrance cave. I just found out about it myself.”***

*I really need to get this fixed; not being able to see when we might be under attack could potentially be disastrous.* Deecy further explained that Eisa, Regnark, and Chareese had taken their places already; Roady and Ravenne, however, weren't sure where they could be of the most help.

*“Let’s go; we’ll figure it out on the way.”*

Fred was up and out the door of his bedroom in seconds, leaving the mystery of how to reconnect to his dungeon for another time. He figured he could either sit there for another couple of hours with nothing to show for it, or he could directly participate in the defense. He might not be able to control things the way he used to be able to, but that didn't mean he was useless. *In fact, that might be something our new Shards can assist me with.*

He was just thankful that he had imparted instructions to the multi-element Core he had created that would automate many of the things he would normally do, such as portioning out new Mana to each of the Shards to keep them supplied with plenty for the defense. Other than that, it was

essentially up to all of Fred's Defenders: his Guild and the six Shards that were with them.

They joined in the stream of Guild members rushing to take their places through the tunnels, and Deecy stopped at the fifth room, where she had been in charge of during the last attack. Fred kept going, with a couple of others who were heading to the first room with Eisa, though he passed by Regnark first. "What's the situation?" he asked.

"I'm not quite sure; I haven't seen anything in my rooms, yet, though I've heard some fighting from Chareese's already. Don't worry, I'm ready," the big guy said. Fred just nodded and moved on at a jog. It didn't take long to get to the Nature Shard, where she was intently observing a scene down below.

She took a step back and sighed, smiling when she saw Fred coming. "There you are! Roady and Ravenne are up front; I was going to give them orders, but I thought you might have a better idea where they could be of use."

"I have an idea, though it would probably be good to know what we're facing."

"Don't you—that's right," she asked, before cutting herself off. "You can't see it. It looks like some monsters I've seen in some Water dungeons before, but only a few of them have gotten through to me yet. I'm sure you'll be able to see more when you see Eisa up there."

*Water? But I thought the Nature faction was the next-closest?*

It didn't make sense, and now Fred really wished that he could see all of his territory. Something had obviously changed, which was not a good sign of things to come. As he rushed to find Eisa and the two new Shards, Deecy finally had some information for him.

***“Apparently, there are both Water and Nature Defenders coming through, right now. Eisa and the others up there are holding many of them back, but they’re already struggling.”***

He could see that for himself in the next few seconds, as he arrived near the first room, where Guild members were casting spells through the small windows in the walls looking into the room. The Darkfire Portal Pits, repurposed into “Viewing Portals,” kept them safe from any retaliation, fortunately, though it might not protect them for long, based on the beating they were currently taking. First, the ends of lengthy vines smacked against them, as two-dozen Vine Crawlers flailed their appendages all over the room. These Nature-based Defenders appeared to be a bundle of vines emerging from a green, central, ovoid sphere approximately a foot wide, and their eight vine-limbs were at least a dozen feet long, making them look like very flexible green spiders.

Ominously, as Chareese and Deecy had mentioned, the Vine Crawlers weren’t the only invaders; accompanying the Nature-based Defenders were some Giant Toads that reminded Fred of Frozzles, his former companion and bodyguard his parents has assigned to protect him when he was still living in their dungeon. These ones were about half the size and more numerous than the Vine Crawlers, however, and they hopped down the tunnel in what appeared to be in their hundreds.

Many of them were being torn up by one of the two Golden Sphinxes that were in the room, because their sticky tongues couldn’t seem to grab a hold of Eisa’s Earth Defender. The Toads weren’t wholly ineffective, though; the highly acidic poison that they secreted from their backs was eating away at the paws of the Sphinx, though it would probably take some time for it to suffer any debilitating damage.

The other Sphinx was having major problems, however; despite the relatively small size of the Vine Crawlers, their vines were amazingly strong. At least 40 vines were wrapped around the large Earth Defender's limbs and torso – pulling it in different directions – to the point where it could barely move. Even as Fred watched, he heard a *\*crack,\** and a large break in its left hind leg could be seen. *They're literally going to rip it apart.*

Before that could happen, though, the townspeople-turned-Guild members watching through the Viewing Portals were finally able to utilize what, to at least most of them, was the first Ability that Fred had been able to teach them: Flamestrike. Logically, their practice and experimentation over the last few days had improved their personal repertoire of spells and Abilities; but most of them had been trained on their basic, low Power-cost attack spell for months. Flamestrike previously had been relatively ineffective against the Earth defenders, who didn't really burn all that much; the Vine Crawlers, however, were perfect targets.

Fred heard Eisa shout, "Now!", and streaks of flames shot out of the walls and impacted the Nature Defenders. They immediately caught fire, as the Power-laden flames were much more effective against plants than normal fire would be; within seconds, the flames were spreading to the long vines wrapped around the struggling Golden Sphinx, and one-by-one they snapped and freed the larger Defender.

Flames couldn't really hurt the stony exterior of the Sphinx, so it immediately went to work smashing apart the burning Crawlers with its massive paws. The battle on that front appeared to be wrapping up, and Fred expected that with two of the powerful Earth Defenders tackling the Giant Toads, they would easily destroy them all without too much difficulty. That, inevitably, was when everything went wrong.

As the last burning Vine Crawler was being hunted down, the Golden Sphinx batted it to the side instead of smashing it to the ground. It flew across the room and landed right in the middle of a group of Giant Toads.

*Oh, no...*

# Chapter 8

Eisa was watching her Golden Sphinxes struggle against the strange vine and frog monsters, and she knew it was only a matter of time before one or the other of them would suffer from the overwhelming numbers. As soon as she heard one of her Golden Sphinxes being assaulted – the vine monster ripping it apart – she ordered the Guild members in the side tunnel, who'd been detachedly watching the entire battle, to go on and send their spells out. She had been using them conservatively, ever since she saw that the invasion of the dungeon wasn't just one element, but two. After the initial wave of beetles and little lizards had been smashed apart or burnt by an initial wave of Flamestrikes, she told them to hold off until she gave the order.

While she could reform her Sphinxes – who seemed like the best choice, based on their speed and strength – if they were destroyed, she needed to have enough room to do so. As it were, there were entirely too many monsters inside the room to do that easily; smaller Goblin Gnomes, Rockworms, or even Stone Golems would likely fit, but they would be much less effective. Therefore, she had to ensure that what she had created in there already was kept alive as long as possible. Also, given that these weren't Earth-based monsters, she likely wouldn't be getting large amounts of extra Mana in the future, so she would need to conserve what she could at the moment.

Everything was coming together, though, as the last of the vine monsters was being destroyed by her slightly injured Sphinx. Eisa watched it bat the last one away with a powerful swipe of its paw and bound after it,

looking like a large cat playing with a ball of yarn. Suddenly, she heard Fred's voice coming from down the tunnel.

“Everyone, get do—”

Before he could finish, a flash of light, followed by intense heat, came from the room and slammed into her even through the Viewing Portal, sending her flying backwards. She slammed into the back wall of the tunnel with a painful impact, sending flares of agony running up and down her body. Luckily, it didn't seem to be a debilitating injury, though there were more stabs of pain as the stone blocks near their viewing windows crashed to the floor and shook the tunnel, sealing them off from seeing what was going on inside the room.

Eisa could already feel her Mana going to work repairing her body, and she was able to roll to her side and look down the tunnel – and at all of the injured, dying...and *dead* Guild members laying on the floor in jumbled piles. Those who weren't moving – the unfortunate deceased – were those who had somehow ended up crashing headfirst into the tunnel wall, snapping their necks in the process. Pushing down the sorrow she felt at their lives being snuffed out so suddenly, Eisa reached for her Mana and used her Earth's Renewal Special Ability on everyone she could see who was still alive; some were so hurt, however, that she wasn't sure if they would survive, even with her healing.

At least, not until she saw Rody, one of their newest Shards, stand up from where he had fallen nearby; he looked around at the injured people, and he mimicked making a circle with his hands in front of him. He started small and then made the circle wider, and before long, Eisa saw a glowing, white circle spring up that encompassed the entire room. *So that must be that Healing Circle he told us about earlier...*

Almost immediately, Eisa felt some temporarily painful pops in her back, as her body started to heal even faster than she had been, overriding the normal numbness that accompanied her healing due to her Mana. *I guess I was hurt even worse than I thought; I guess I can take a little more pain if it means I heal faster.*

All around her, the other Guild members also screamed out in further pain as they were healed, though it soon faded as their broken bones, burns, and other injuries were soothed away. When everyone looked to be as well as they could be, picking themselves up off the floor, a series of loud snaps startled her and the others. Looking down at the dead body of Varlen, one of the former innkeepers from Gatecross, she saw that the woman's neck – which had been horribly bent at a highly irregular angle just moments ago – was straight and undamaged. Everywhere else there were corpses – or where she had thought were corpses – there were now freshly healed bodies...and they were starting to stir.

Animated corpses didn't really frighten her, but she couldn't figure out how – or *why* – Roady seemed to be the one doing it. When a moan – and then a frightened, “What happened?” – came from Varlen, however, she realized she wasn't an animated corpse – because the undead revived by Necromancers couldn't talk. She helped Varlen stand, she saw the other Guild members helping everyone else up, their faces matching her bewilderment.

The Healing Circle Roady had created faded a moment later, and Eisa saw Fred coming towards her; without thinking, she ran towards him and jumped into his arms, glad that he, along with everyone else, was okay. “Fred, what happened? Not that I'm ungrateful, but how is everyone here alive? There's no healing that I know of that can bring someone back from the dead.”



“First of all, they were only mostly dead,” he said. She gave him an incredulous look. “Oh, sure, they would’ve died if given another minute or so, but their... ‘life force’ hadn’t left yet, I guess. Roady has a very potent heal, however, which apparently transcends the normal limitations that Adventurers have with their Power.” Fred stopped talking and looked at Eisa with a strange expression on his face.

“What?”

He visibly shook himself as if he was having some sort of hallucination. “Sorry, something just occurred to me. Never mind that, though, because we have to move the next room to lend a hand if we can.”

Everything that had occurred over the last few minutes was almost too much for Eisa to immediately understand what he was talking about. “Uh...why? Oh! The monsters!” She couldn’t believe she had forgotten them so quickly.

“Exactly. I can’t see what’s happening, but I doubt that explosion kept them away for long.”

She followed the rest as they raced down to the next room, where they saw Chareese in the distance focused on looking out of her window into the room below. “Why did that happen, Fred?” Eisa still wasn’t exactly sure why they had all been essentially blown up. She was glad that those “Viewing Portal” traps that Fred had set up had been there, because otherwise they might have all died; she was pretty sure that they had absorbed a good portion of the explosion before it hit everyone in the tunnels. It was so strong that she thought Golden Sphinxes had been completely destroyed, as well, because she couldn’t feel them anymore.

“The acidic poison that those Giant Toads secrete is a flammable substance. Normally, lighting one on fire would just cause a quick flare up that would probably be dangerous, but not overly so; when there were so

many bunched up together, though, it caused an explosion not unlike the one that the blew up Gatecross.”

*Ah, that makes sense.* She was aware of the poison on their backs, but explosions had never really been a problem she was aware of; her prior groups’ encounters with the toads had not noted more than a handful together. Before she could ask anything else, they arrived near Chareese. Fred immediately started to question the Nature-based Shard, while Eisa looked down into the room.

The plants that acted as monsters and traps hadn’t come through the explosion from the first room unscathed. The first five feet of each pathway in the divided room had been scorched and destroyed beyond repair, though the density of the foliage inside had evidently stopped the blast from progressing any farther. Either that, or the blast only had enough power behind it to reach that far. Regardless of the reason, a significant portion of the defenses that had been set up to stop the Nature and Water monsters streaming into the room had been destroyed.

The frogs and vine monsters weren’t there, either, having obviously been killed from the explosion in the previous room. The next wave of creatures was up, in fact, and they were already trying to force their way through many of Chareese’s remaining plants. For each of the massive Nature-based spiders that were being ensnared by vines or wrapped up in a bush, two more were squeezing through tight quarters. It also didn’t help that the horde of small, two-legged, fish-looking monsters wielding rusty spears were stabbing at anything they came across in their desire to progress further.

“Pygmy Merlarks; my father had some of them in the dungeon I grew up inside. Not...quite this many, though,” Fred said as soon as he saw the strange monsters, answering her question before she could ask. Eisa

had only been in one Water dungeon before, and it hadn't had anything like what she was looking at.

There were already dozens of each type of monster inside the room, which filled up the majority of the empty space; the two massive Flower Trippers that were normally on either side of the entrance to the room, however, had been killed during the explosion – and there was room in each of the alcoves they normally sat in. Overall, the room was bigger than the one she normally fought in, and she had a little room to create some larger Defenders of her own; they had been caught a bit flat-footed, originally, when the attack started, and Eisa hadn't been able to Create as many in her first room as she had wanted. Now, though, she could look towards using some of the new options she had obtained from the last attack.

<b>Shard Status</b>
<b>Eisa Howells</b>
<b>Elemental Origin: Earth</b> <b>Shard Level: 5</b> <b>Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Earth</b> <b>Earth Mana: 1410/1980</b>
<b>Defender Creation Options</b>
<b>Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Pebble Snake (Level 1 Base Cost: 5 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Rockworm (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Stone Golem (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Boulder Troll (Level 1 Base Cost: 50 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Shifting Sand Elemental (Level 1 Base Cost: 60 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Iron Sentinel (Level 1 Base Cost: 150 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Crevice Spider (Level 1 Base Cost: 200 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Golden Sphinx (Level 1 Base Cost: 250 Earth Mana)</b>
<b>Special Abilities</b>
<b>Earth Elemental Form (Activation Cost: 15 Earth Mana, Upkeep</b>

**Cost: 2 Mana per minute)**

**Earth's Renewal (Activation Cost: 5 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1-5 Mana per minute)**

**Stone Barrier (Base Activation Cost: 50 Earth Mana, Cooldown: 10 minutes)**

For some reason, it appeared as though she hadn't received the Mana back from the Golden Sphinxes that had been destroyed earlier, so she was down to 1,410 out of 1,980 – which was almost to the next Shard Level. She wished she could create one of those powerful monsters that had almost killed Fred; for some reason, it hadn't dropped any Earth Mana when it had died. She never had a chance to ask about it, but right now she couldn't worry about that.

She had plenty of other options, fortunately. She started with three-dozen Level 3 Pebble Snakes for 266 Mana; as they appeared, the small snake-like Defenders made up of small pebbles went right to work against the Merlarks. The Water-based monsters couldn't do much against Eisa's Defenders with their spears, and large swathes of the Merlark horde were quickly overwhelmed and practically torn apart by the sharp-stoned mouths of the Snakes.

That wasn't the only threat that had to be dealt with, though. She also created four Level 5 Shifting Sand Elementals and sent them against the large spiders flowing into the room. Against other Earth Defenders, sand wouldn't do much; against the biological components of the spiders – and the few Merlarks that got in their way – sand could be both irritating and painful. Eisa remembered going to a small beach near a large lake, back in the Craytion kingdom, when she was smaller, and the sand had gotten everywhere and was extremely irritating; needless to say, she never went back – but she remembered it vividly.

Sand that could move on command, however, proved to be deadly. As she ordered her Elementals to flow into the faces, mouths, and even soft leg joints of the attacking spiders, the sand burrowed into whatever crevices it could find...and kept going. With no way to fight back against sand, over a dozen spiders died in the first minute of Eisa's contributive attack, though it wasn't without loss on her Defenders' part. The spiders apparently had some sort of acidic venom or blood inside of them, which ate away at the sand; luckily, it didn't happen all at once, so they were able to move on to the next target with minimal damage.

She was about to create two Iron Sentinels to continue stemming the tide of Defenders entering, but something was happening at the entrance to the room. The spiders and Merlarks were being picked up and tossed backwards up the tunnel, smashing against each other with tremendous force. Cocking her head to the side, Eisa thought she heard the whistling of rushing air as if there was a focused windstorm inside the room; looking off to the side, she saw Fred standing next to Ravenne, speaking softly to her about what she was doing.

"...don't maintain it for too long, because you will start to become extremely fatigued; after a certain point, you're going to be essentially tapped out, and it'll shut down anyway. I would advise that you don't let that happen, however, because your Mana is now your 'lifeblood'. Without your Air Mana, there's no surviving for long. Fortunately, you'll probably see that you regenerate fairly quickly, because we're inside the Convergence, here – but don't push yourself too much right now."

It was good advice, she had to admit. She remembered what it was like right after becoming a Shard, and using a large portion of her Mana made her really tired. It was good that Ravenne was already figuring out her new abilities, which seemed powerful; from what she was told, they

were similar to spells, in a way, though instead of Adventurer Power, they took her Mana. Her Earth's Renewal and even her Stone Barrier were similar, but completely defensive; Deecy had traps that were offensive in nature, but they were also limited in that they were largely stationary. Ravenne could, on the other hand, use her abilities in any direction, and for as long as she had Mana. Oh, and she could fly, too – though she hadn't tried that out quite yet.

Most of the monsters that were violently pushed back up the tunnel didn't die, though many of them *were* wounded; the spears wielded by the Merlarks tended to do a bit of damage at high speed, it turned out. The spiders took the majority of the damage, as they impacted against each other and the tunnel walls, where there were multiple \*snaps\* as legs were broken or lethally impaled their Merlark friends. While dozens of each invader died, it was only a fraction of what was trying to advance.

Still, Ravenne's windstorm gave the rest some time to recover and catch up. A few of the Water and Nature monsters made it through Chareese's plants, but she wasn't too worried about that; Regnark in the next room would finish them off without too much trouble. The rest of the room was essentially clear, except for a few stragglers – and her Pebble Snakes and Shifting Sand Elementals, of course, which were looking a little smaller than they had before.

As one of her Elementals hunted down one of the remaining Merlarks, they both got a little too close to Ravenne's rushing winds. The spear-wielding walking fish got pulled into it and was shot up the tunnel to join the others of its kind; her Shifting Sand Elemental, which was – at its base structure – basically a pile of sand, did something different. Each sand particle was sucked up and shot at high speed up the passageway, where they hit the struggling Merlarks and spiders, causing horrific damage. The

invading monsters were literally blasted with tiny rocks, scouring their scales or chitin away from their bodies with shocking speed. She felt her Defender perish in the process as it was separated from its original mass, but it ended up killing dozens more of the enemy.

“I guess that’s one way to do it,” Fred said, smiling at Eisa and giving her a hug. Then he got serious. “You’re going to have to set up more of your Defenders in that open area; Chareese is already regrowing her plants, but it’s going to take a while. Roady’s going to chip in a little, as well; but the Guild is going to have to move on to Regnark’s room, because most of their spells and abilities are likely to hurt the plants in the room.”

Eisa nodded and got to work, creating two Level 2 Crystal Scorpions and two Level 3 Iron Sentinels to add to what was already in the room. She stopped there, however, as she was starting to get a little bit low on Mana; unfortunately, she wasn’t getting massive influxes of Earth Mana from the deaths of the invading monsters, though she was sure Chareese and Deecy were enjoying the extra Nature and Water. That was proven as she saw a green glow surround her Defenders; the Nature Shard’s Natural Growth ability was making her low-Level creations even stronger.

“I had a bit of extra Mana flowing into me, so I wanted to shunt it off somewhere,” Chareese said to her, giving her a quick smile before turning back to the room with a serious and focused look in her eyes.

“Thanks, I think this might work to hold them off for a bit,” Eisa replied. Just as she said that, a brief flash of light from the room caught her attention, and she tensed up; soon enough, however, she realized the flash just heralded the appearance of five brightly glowing large cats. *Those must be from Roady. This could work out better than I expected.*

Turning to Fred, though, she saw him looking worried. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed deeply, just as Ravenne seemed to sag and the whistling of rushing wind faded. “I’m not sure if we’re going to be able to defend against both Water and Nature coming at us at the same time, in the long run. We’re doing okay, now, but we were also doing okay against the Earth forces at first; now, though, we’re going to have to protect the dungeon against twice the amount. Not only that—” he shook his head in what appeared to be regret— “but I happen to know that there’s *at least* one Emerald Dragon heading our way, from what I remember of the Nature tunnels; what the Water faction is going to bring against us, I have no idea.”

Eisa felt herself go cold at the mention of the Emerald Dragon. To ensure their survival in Gatecross, she knew, had taken a bit of luck – as well as Fred’s having a massive amount of Mana to draw upon, to create his equally large Beetle above his dungeon. Granted, they had a lot of resources in this current dungeon and many ways to cause damage, but she was also realistic enough to know that it might not be enough. She could just imagine the Dragon ripping through the dungeon as quickly as that multi-stone monster Fred said was called “The Graveler” or something like that. It had almost killed her in the process and *had* killed Chausser.

“I have some plans, though, but they might be dangerous; for one, I think my Mana Implosion technique might work on whatever’s coming, but I have to be careful not to destroy any of the dungeon walls in the process. I repaired the tunnels that were destroyed near my bedroom, but any other damage would invite digging straight into the rooms from those points, since I can’t exactly repair them properly at this point.

“Also, at the moment I have to have line-of-sight to do it, which could be extremely dangerous against these powerful monsters. Still, it’s doable – and it might be our only chance. In fact, once Roady and Ravenne regenerate some of their Mana, I’ll have them start feeding me Mana, so



that I can experiment with using the technique to thin out the incoming hordes. As long as I don't overdo it, I should be fine."

Eisa was worried about Fred; the fact that he mentioned not overdoing it meant that he was already a bit strained. After what he had just gone through, she could certainly understand him feeling that way. "Ok, but only use it when necessary; otherwise, let us do our jobs."

Giving him another hug, she turned back to the room, where the survivors of the windstorm and accidental sandstorm were already swarming down the tunnel.

# Chapter 9

The Shards and Defenses inside of his dungeon were doing well enough, but Fred wasn't sure how long that would last. If the same trend continued, similar to the Earth faction invasion, then they would start to see more and more difficult Defenders streaming into his domain. Normally, he thought they could handle almost anything that was sent against them – one way or another – except for some of the most-powerful threats; the loss of the first room where Eisa and the Guild members could work together to thin out their numbers, however, was a huge blow.

Fred was just glad that no one had died, even though five of the Guild members manning the Viewing Portals had their necks snapped from the explosion and the resulting impact with an immovable wall. While he couldn't see the first room – with no Territorial Sight at his veritable fingertips – he was sure that it was still largely intact. Even the massive explosion above his dungeon back in Gatecross hadn't managed to actually damage what he had built, other than some burn marks; the Core Combustion event by the Earth Core managed to do some damage, but it was also composed entirely of Mana, rather than of fire and flames.

That didn't mean that Fred didn't have to be careful, because whatever *he* did could potentially damage the structure of the dungeon. That had already been proved when he was defending against The Graveler down by his bedroom/Core Room. As the first wave of Pygmy Merlarks and Giant Spiders started to get slaughtered by Eisa's created Defenders, Fred decided to experiment with Mana Implosions.

He already knew what one composed of 5 elemental Mana looked like, but he hadn't tried anything smaller. Therefore, he took out only a

single unit of Air Mana and wrapped it thinly over 10 units of compressed Unconverted Mana, condensed it down briefly, and then shot it down through the Viewing Portal high up in Chareese's room towards the entrance tunnel. Just as the next wave hit, it impacted the lead Spider and imploded; a small sphere approximately 2 feet across expanded outward rapidly, consuming the entire body and part of the legs of the Defender, before collapsing into a tiny Mana stone, which fell to the floor of the tunnel. The sound of it landing on the floor was lost within the cacophony of the other battle sounds, but he imagined that it was a tinny \*clink,\* because of its small size.

What he did notice, however, was the color of the Mana stone: green. Although he used yellow Air Mana for the Implosion, it consumed the Nature Mana inside of the Giant Spider and condensed it down to a tiny stone. He hadn't really noticed a color difference, before, when he used the Mana Implosion technique, mainly because, for the most part, he had used the same element as what he was destroying. During the escape over the Light territory border he had used Air Mana for some of the Implosions against the Light Defenders, he recalled; it had been so chaotic, though, that he didn't even remember what they looked like as they dropped.

Eisa and Chareese looked at him funny, and the Earth Shard appeared to want to ask what it was that he did; but she just shrugged and went back to directing her Defenders. They, along with Roady's Bright Lynxes, were doing a remarkable job of holding back the waves of Nature and Water-based invaders. Chareese's plants were still growing and maturing, though they wouldn't be really ready for at least another ten minutes or so.

*That was effective; though, if I can only kill one at a time, then I'm not sure **how** effective it will be in the long run. However, if a single point*

*of elemental Mana was that size, let me see what three will do.* Fred created another Implosion using three Air Mana and felt a temporary stab of pain after it went off; he hadn't really recovered fully from all that had happened that day, and he thought that even concentrating on condensing the Implosion down enough was a bit taxing. Fortunately, it only lasted for a second at most, so he wasn't too worried. At least, not yet.

His new Implosion hit right in between a Merlark and a Spider, catching them both in the four-foot radius of the blast. As they got sucked up, the Implosion increased in range a tiny bit more...and ended up touching the small green Mana stone from his previous experiment. In a strange chain reaction, the first small stone exploded, propelling chunks of his dungeon's stone floor in all directions. Another half-dozen Merlarks nearby were smashed apart by the stone projectiles shooting up the tunnel, but an equal number of chunks went into the room; a few of Chareese's plants that were in the process of growing were smashed apart, undoing a portion of the progress she had made. In addition, a piece of the floor hit one of her Pebble Snakes and smashed its weaker stone head to dust, killing it instantly.

"Fred! What was that?" Eisa and Chareese called out together, sounding both shocked and a little angry. He couldn't blame them; he was a little angry, as well, though at himself.

As much as he had been telling himself to be careful, he had gone and damaged his dungeon, anyway. Of course, he had no way of knowing that something like that would happen; he wasn't *too* mad at himself, however – it was just another obstacle in his way to chipping in with the defense. He had planned on just using Implosion after Implosion on the incoming invaders, while being replenished by Roady and Ravenne (since they had a much higher Mana regeneration than he did). That didn't seem

to be an option, now, unless he spread out his actions into different parts of the dungeon, because the risk of compromising the structure of the room (and the dungeon in general) was a real possibility otherwise.

“Sorry!” he apologized quickly, distracted by the results of his “oops” moment. While the smaller green Mana stone had been destroyed in the explosion, the two Defenders that were sucked up into the Implosion had ended up creating two Mana stones – one green and one blue. They were still tiny in comparison to others he had created as a result of the technique, but it was interesting to note that condensing the Mana from the Spider and Merlark had created two stones, instead of a single, multi-colored stone.

For some odd reason, that seemed significant. Just like his thought, earlier, about the limitations of Adventurers and their Power, and how Rody’s Healing Circle was much more potent than anything Fred had ever heard about before. Different things were starting to come together in his mind regarding his dungeon, his territory, and the multi-element Core he had created to operate it all. While he didn’t have a solution to his problem quite yet, he felt himself getting closer.

Rather than get in the way of the defense already underway in Chareese’s room, Fred took Ravenne and retreated down the tunnel to where Regnark and the Guild members from the first room were set up and waiting. Since he had some time to kill, the Dark Shard had summoned nearly a hundred Lesser Imps and a dozen or so Succubi for an initial defense. Regnark was smartly saving most of his Mana for later, when the defense of his trapped-stair-and-pit rooms became more difficult. Added to that, the Bone Club traps in the walls to push invaders off were of limited use, mainly because Fred couldn’t reset them himself. His multi-element Core was set up to do that, but for some reason it wasn’t; he had tested it

before he had left with Elder Hood, which was baffling, as to why it wasn't working now. He was determined to look into that later if there was time.

“...like I was saying, the entire goal of this room is to knock the monsters off of the stairs so that they fall far down below and either get impaled by the traps down there or die from the impact. There's no need to get fancy, or to use something that is designed to do a lot of damage; rather, find something that will allow you to push them off.” Fred and Ravenne came up just as Regnark was finished explaining how the Guild members could help.

“But...I'm not sure if we have anything like that,” one of them said, which was confirmed by the others a moment later. Looking at their Interfaces, Fred could see that she was right; they had many fire-based spells and abilities, as well as healing, and a few other utility ones like Magelight, but nothing really air-based. *Wait a minute, I think I have something that might work...*

The Guild members there were all former Gatecross townspeople, so they excelled at learning new things; he was about to see how adept they actually were. “Alright, I've got a solution for that. Now, I'm going to try to describe to you how to perform a spell called ‘Windbreak’, which is basically like a powerful punch of air...”

Fred began by describing the characteristics of the Power they needed to pull from their pools, the amount they would need to use, and then the precise way they had to shape the Power to perform the spell. It didn't require a lot of Power to cast the weakest Windbreak spell – only 30 Power total – but it could turn out to be very valuable...if they could learn it.

The whole process probably would've been easier – and more successful – if he had just used his “Teach” ability from his Instructor Class

on them, but then they would all be entirely drained of Power, which they didn't need at the moment. It was different enough from what they already knew how to do that they didn't really catch on...except for one.

"This is actually quite easy," Ravenne remarked with an amazed tone to her voice. "I just learned a 'Taught Ability' all by myself." Indeed, when Fred checked, the former Assassin-Spy had Windbreak as her only ability – and it was unlocked automatically. *That's right, she hasn't even had the chance to choose another Class yet.*

"It's probably because you're extremely comfortable with air-based spells and effects, so it came naturally to you. I just wish everyone else could learn just as quickly—"

"Is there any way you can create some very fine dirt?" Ravenne abruptly asked.

Confused, Fred did as she asked and used his Conjure Object Adventurer Ability to create a pile of almost powder-like dirt on the floor.

"Ok, when I say, pick some up and toss it into the air." Shrugging, Fred bent down and picked up two handfuls and waited. As soon as she said, "Okay, go!", he tossed it up and away from him. The powdery consistency of the dirt caused it to spread out and float through the air, clouding up the tunnel fairly quickly.

Fred watched Ravenne use the Windbreak spell, and he could see the outline of the "air punch" as it shot through the dust-like dirt, creating nearly exactly how the Power needed to be shaped in order to cast it correctly. He knew it wouldn't work for every spell, but most of the air-based spells and abilities that Adventurers could use followed the air flow as part of their construction; so, it was a good way to learn those particular skills. Within a minute or two, and with a few more repeated casts from

Ravenne – who quickly ran out of Power at her much-reduced Rating – the Guild members got it.

In fact, by the end she actually did run out of Power...but then she somehow instinctively used a tiny amount of Air Mana to repeat the same action. She didn't even seem to realize what she had done, and Fred didn't mention it for fear that doing so might cause her to fumble with the process. In a quick experiment, Fred pulled out a single unit of Light Mana and formed it in the shape of a Magelight off to the side – and it worked.

“What's with the light? It's plenty lit up in here right now,” Ravenne asked.

“Oh, nothing, just experimenting again—oh, looks like we're up!” Fred replied, seeing that there were more foreign Defenders entering the room.

It wasn't Giant Spiders and Merlarks, however; that wave must've been finished, because it was something else that came through the entranceway. An old, familiar sight from the siege at Gatecross, the Charging Boars that initially came through at a run kept their charge going...and right off the stairway into the pit far down below. The ones behind weren't stupid, though, as they slowed down after seeing those in front fall off into someplace unknown. They were quickly picked up or shoved off by dozens of Lesser Imps; even the handy whips of the Succubi hovering nearby wrapped around their bodies, allowing them to be pulled off and deposited far down below.

A few that got past Regnark's demons were immediately pushed off by a couple of Windbreak spells tossed out by the Guild members, and a final one managed to get shoved off by a Bone Club trap. Of course, that wasn't the end, as their next Water-based invader showed up about then,



obviously delayed by the defenders in the previous rooms. Or they were just slow, which was evidently more the case.

### **Savage Walrus (Level 7)**

**Vitality: 500**

**Attack: 62, Impale, Rend**

**Defense: 38**

Fred's father didn't have any Savage Walruses in his dungeon when he was growing up, so the Defender was...unique, to say the least. It was the size of a large horse, except that it walked forward through the use of flippers on the front of its body, with a wicked set of spikes on its back end. It had two massive tusks that appeared to be extremely sharp coming out of its mouth and pointing down and a little outwards, with tips that looked like they could easily pierce and tear apart thin metal.

The Walrus out front waddled its way into the room, and Fred could see that it was bloody and obviously injured, though that didn't seem to slow it down...any slower than it normally was, at least. It turned out that most of what Fred assumed was skin and muscle around its body was actually fat, which – apart from protecting the Defender from most serious injuries to its vital organs – caused it to weigh *a lot*.

The Imps and Succubi couldn't even shift it more than an inch or so, even working together; Regnark had to pull them back, though, as a dozen Imps were impaled by the sharp tusks or by its spiked rear end. "I'm gonna bring in some Pit Fiends; that should do it," the big man said after the Guild member's Windbreak spells didn't seem to do much other than irritate the Walruses. Some threw out some fire-based spells that scorched the skin of the Defenders, but nothing really hurt them much. Even a Bone Club trap

was ineffective, as it snapped all of the bones as soon as it hit the heavy Defender.

“Hold on, let me try something,” Ravenne interrupted him. Fred was expecting her to use her Wind Tunnel ability again, but she did something else entirely. He watched as a large portion of her Air Mana flowed out of her and appeared near the walls of the staircase leading down; it took him a moment to figure out what she was doing, though when he finally figured it out he smiled.

“Smart thinking there, Ravenne.”

The Air Shard had created a long wall of air, using her Air Barrier along the staircase where the Walruses were walking, which she then *pushed* out towards the ledge. Since she was moving the entire wall at the same time, and she had pumped at least 70 Air Mana into the Barrier to make it stronger and larger, it had enough force behind it to push all of the Walruses off into the pit. As a dozen of them fell to their deaths, Fred caught Ravenne as she partially collapsed.

“Remember what I said about not overdoing it,” he gently counseled, as he lowered her to the side of the tunnel. She looked extremely pale, but that wasn’t surprising; a quick look at her Shard Status showed that she was down to 4 Air Mana, though it was increasing steadily. Taking out 20 of his own Air Mana, he sent it into her body, speeding up her recovery.

“Thanks, that feels...wonderful.” Her eyes appeared a little unfocused for some reason, but at least her color was back, and she was able to pick herself back up with no problems. Fred realized he should’ve been exchanging Mana with Rody and Ravenne as soon as they were both brought back as Shards; their development he saw as his responsibility, and he had been failing at that.

“Just...try not to go under 15 or 20 percent of your maximum Mana; otherwise, you’ll keep doing this to yourself,” he warned her, before explaining the Mana exchange program he had been doing with the other Shards. Actually, it should *still* be partially handled by the multi-element Core with Chareese and Deecy, from the Nature and Water Mana that was being left behind by the dead invaders.

It was a little late right now to start that, as everyone had to concentrate on defense rather than exchanging Mana. Plus, it was hard to do that, with everyone scattered like they were, and him without access to his territory. Regardless, he knew he needed to start it as soon as they had some breathing room with the invasions; though when that would likely be was still unknown.

When Ravenne recovered well enough to be left alone – with another warning to take it easy – Fred saw that the others had the defense well in hand. The next wave of invaders was already sporadically entering the room, some having gotten past the first line of defense in Chareese’s room. First were some large River Pythons, which were a foot wide and at least 25 feet long – and *fast*; despite the speed at which they entered the room and slithered down the stairs, they were much lighter than the previous Walruses, and a dozen Imps grabbing and yanking on their tails was enough to send them plummeting. A couple of the Pythons managed to turn around and strike at the grabby demons, killing them with one bite of their fangs – though they got pulled down, anyway.

Regnark eventually summoned one, and then another Pit Fiend, especially when some Forest Trolls showed up. Similar in size to the Boulder Trolls of the previous attack, the Forest Trolls were heavy and strong enough not to be pulled or pushed off by Imps or a couple of Windbreak spells. The large Trolls, unlike their Earthen cousins, weren’t

stupid, and they used their wooden clubs they wielded to good effect, knocking Imps and even a Succubus out of the air with their enormous reach.

Rather than Ravenne stressing herself unnecessarily with another Air Barrier, Regnark's two summoned Pit Fiends used their larger strength, size, and maneuverability to dive in close and ram into the Trolls, putting them off balance – where a half-dozen precise Windbreaks from the Guild were able to topple them off the stairs, one after another. One Pit Fiend ended up getting smashed against the room's wall with an unexpected strike by one of the wooden clubs; however, Regnark was able to unsummon it before it actually died, thereby refunding all of the Fiend's Mana used in its summoning.

The hits kept coming, however, with no break or time to recover either Mana or Power. More familiar Treants arrived with Dryads in tow, though instead of pushing them off, the Guild used their expertise in fire spells to light them up. Bombarded by a dozen or more spells, with very little way to fight back, the Guild soon had them burning up before they made it halfway down.

Groups of strange, 12-legged Burly Turtles arrived next, which looked like normal turtles but with 12 limber feet and an outrageously large head with a powerful beak; they also had a very low center of gravity and didn't want to be pushed or pulled off. The team had difficulty killing them, because their shells were extremely hard to pierce, and flipping them over was the only real way to hit their vulnerable parts. A few lucky Windbreaks from beneath the Turtles managed to knock them off, but even then, half of those who fell landed on their backs, protecting them from most of the harm. Half of their 12 legs were able to bend to the point where they could flip themselves over, so their vulnerability didn't last long.

Some of them actually managed to make it through the entire two rooms that Regnark was in charge of, though only a few. Fred figured that Deecy or the others near The Oven would be able to take care of them without too much trouble.

A group of Dire Wolves came in next, which reminded Fred to check in with Deecy. *“How are things going in there? Any word from Eisa, Chareese, or Roady in the first room?”* He supposed that he could have checked with Chareese or Roady himself, since he had a stronger connection with them, but Deecy was used to relaying messages.

***“They’re fine, though Eisa says that the constant stream of Defenders coming in are starting to wear them down a bit. I suggested that they start picking off the stragglers and sending the rest through, so that they don’t use up all of their Mana too quickly.”***

*“That’s probably a good idea,”* Fred Communicated back to her, telling her to spread the word. Deecy and the rest of the Guild weren’t doing much right now, so it might be better to spread out the defense. As the Dire Wolves were either knocked or dragged off the stairs, he turned to Regnark and let him know that he was moving farther back.

*“I’m going to go join the rest of the Guild back in the Oven room; don’t be afraid to let some through, so that you and the others can conserve your Mana and your Power.”* Fred told Ravenne to stay there, as she was in the best position to utilize her new Abilities, with a further caution to take it as easy as possible.

He left the room just as a horde of small Otter Warriors that were armed with tridents entered the room. The Imps flying around had trouble getting close to them because of the three-pronged weapons, and there were

so many that the Guild members couldn't knock them all off. Many of them made it down the stairs unharmed, though not through lack of defense; an equal number of them were killed as they fell to their deaths through the efforts of the team Fred had in place. By the time he jogged down the tunnel and arrived where Deecy was handling the next room, they were already entering and getting burnt by her Raging Inferno, which was essentially a large block of flames that extended all the way up to the ceiling. Needless to say, there was no getting through that without harm.

She had everything set up there and didn't need his help, so he continued on to the sixth room – The Oven. This was where they had a maze of sorts set up inside of a large room that was extremely hot and just on the verge of igniting on fire. He found the rest of the Guild there, looking down from the ceiling into the room, safe from the ravages of the heat by the Viewing Portals on the holes. They looked tense and bored at the same time.

“Metch, are you all ready for what's coming?”

The Defender-Classed Guild member nodded in his direction. “Yes, we've been waiting patiently, but just like last time, the waiting is the hardest part of this. We haven't really had word of what we're up against, though – care to explain?”

Fred felt bad that he hadn't had a chance to inform them all of what was happening, though he blamed it on the sheer speed of how everything seemed to happen. He took the time over the next few minutes to explain how two different factions were currently invading, what happened in the first room that ended up shutting it down to defense, and how the Shards and other Guild members were handling things. As soon as he finished telling them that they were going to start letting more of the Defenders through to conserve their Mana and Power, the first of the invaders finally

made it to The Oven – which he was prepared for by a timely Mana Communication by Deecy.

# Chapter 10

A large mass of green and brown slid into the room, larger than most Defenders that he'd seen so far. Fred checked it out and saw that it was called a Mossy Hulk, which perfectly described it; the Hulk was made from a large quantity of moss and dirt, and it moved by just rolling forward and extending tendrils ahead of itself. It looked like it was nearly impossible to kill, because hitting it with any weapons would probably have very little effect – it would be like trying to slice up dirt.

Very soon after the Hulk entered the room and triggered The Oven, however, the moisture in the moss and dirt started to evaporate away. Thirty feet into the maze, the foreign Defender started to crumble apart as it dried out, becoming smaller and smaller quite quickly; twenty additional feet saw it crumble away completely, without the Guild needing to do anything.

Then came an Ice Elemental, an 8-foot-tall humanoid construct made entirely of blue-ish ice; Fred wouldn't have wanted to face the Defender in battle, because the ice it was composed of was cut in sharp angles, reminding Fred of a mobile Ice Spear Barricade. Regardless of its dangerous nature, the Elemental didn't last even half as long inside the room as the Hulk, as it melted away faster than its innate Mana could refreeze it back into shape.

That was followed by a Venomous Landshark, which was another “monster” that Fred had never seen before. Many of the larger Water Defenders turned out to be new, mainly because Fred's father, Aquelsterico, didn't have enough Mana to create them back in Fred's home dungeon. The Landshark was a 12-foot-long fish with hundreds of sharp teeth in its



mouth, dripping a clear, venomous substance, four legs that helped it move on land, and scales along its outer skin that appeared quite resistant to melee attacks.

For all of that, the oppressive heat slowed down the Landshark considerably, but didn't kill it outright. The Guild had to rain down dozens of spells and long-range abilities on the Defender to take it down, but it didn't seem to be too much of a problem.

Next up was an Enormous Bear Warrior, bigger than any he had seen before. It was a 10-foot-long, 4-foot-wide, and 6-foot-tall monstrosity of a bear, with hard fur surrounding its body that practically acted like armor. Its claws were each at least five inches long and looked capable of shredding any type of protection with ease, though fortunately none of the Guild had to go up against it directly – because they likely wouldn't last long.

The heat from The Oven didn't do much other than make the Bear pant excessively, so it was upon the Guild to do their best to take it down. Fire spells blasted into it, wind buffeted or sliced into its face, and even some rocks formed out of nothing via Adventurer Power slammed into the Bear Warrior, damaging it little by little as it navigated its way through the maze. Eventually, about three-quarters of the way through, the invading Defender fell over on its side, the heat and damage finally combining to kill it.

Unfortunately, there was a second already halfway through, so Fred felt it was time he chipped in to help. He created a 5-Light-Mana Implosion and tossed it towards the Bear Warrior, which expanded enough to swallow it up completely, leaving a small green Mana stone behind. That was great – until it made Fred double over in sudden, intense *pain*.

“Fred! What’s wrong?” Metch asked as he set Fred down against the far wall. There were only a few spells that the Defender had been able to learn from all of the training that could help from long range, so taking a moment to check up on Fred wouldn’t compromise the defense all that much.

The pain in his chest faded after a couple of seconds, but it was worrisome. Looking inside of himself, Fred saw his Human Core throbbing erratically, before settling back down to normal a moment later. *I wonder why it’s doing that?* He had originally thought that the stress of the last day had been the cause of the pain from before, but now he wasn’t so sure. There was obviously something about the whole Implosion process that was straining his Cores, but he had no idea why.

Actually...that wasn’t quite true.

Everything he had learned lately about the relationship between Mana, Power, and Essence – especially inside of a dungeon – pointed to a reason that was hard to contemplate, but had to be true. What he was doing was negatively affecting the dungeon, for some reason, and since he still had a very tenuous connection to the multi-element Core that was operating it, it was “negatively affecting” him as well – in the form of pain and strain on his Cores. The exact *why* of that eluded him for a few moments as he recovered, however.

Then suddenly, the reason hit him like a punch to the face. Fred wasn’t just trapping the Mana from the *Defender* inside of the stone, he was also consuming the nearby Mana used in the upkeep of the dungeon! If that was, indeed, the case, then the Core he had created would automatically distribute its resources to replace the Unconverted Mana used in the upkeep. The problem with that, though, was that it didn’t have access to

Unconverted Mana anymore – so, it was using *elemental* Mana to make up the difference.

Using his Mana Sight, he looked through the nearest Viewing Portal down to where he had just used the Mana Implosion to kill the Bear Warrior. *Yep, there it is.* Normally, the upkeep of his dungeon looked like a very thin barrier of nearly clear Unconverted Mana surrounding the walls, floor, and ceiling of the rooms, keeping it from harm both outside and inside the dungeon. Where the Mana Implosion had taken place, however, there was a thick, flat, green circle of what was obviously Nature Mana there to fix the damage Fred had caused.

This situation wasn't something that he thought would ever need to be addressed by the Core on its own; thinking back, he realized he hadn't given explicit directions to his facsimile as to what to do in this situation. As a result, the created Core was obviously using its instincts to plug the gap in upkeep – and it wasn't using the minimum amount of Mana needed to fix the damage. If he had to guess, the amount of Mana being used to patch the floor of The Oven was enough to cover the entire room. If he used the Mana Implosion technique again a few times, the Core could end up using *all* of its Nature Mana to make “repairs”, which would be catastrophic.

“I'm okay now, Metch. I don't think I can do any more of what I just did, though; it's up to *you* all now,” Fred told the worried Core Power Guild member hovering by his side. Metch nodded and got back to his spot around the Viewing Portals, tossing out a small Flamestrike spell he had learned towards another Enormous Bear Warrior that had entered the room.

*This isn't good: The Mana Implosion technique, which I was going to use to kill the powerful Emerald Dragon whom I'm expecting later, might destroy my Core.* Draining his Mana from one of his elements would not

normally hurt him, because it was contained inside of his body and was bolstered by his Unconverted Mana being there. However, each of the elements inside of the Core he created was like a separate entity of themselves; and if *they* ran out of Mana, it would likely be destroyed, just like a normal Dungeon Core would be if that happened.

*However, that doesn't mean that I'm entirely out of options...*

The next Bear Warrior that appeared, Fred created a very small sphere of quickly condensed Light Mana, surrounded by a thin layer of Unconverted Mana; as soon as that was ready, he sent it towards the enormous Defender...and his Mana Explosion sphere detonated right in the Bear's face. The damage was extensive: Half of its face was blown away, its eyes were burnt away, and large patches of its fur were just gone – yet, the explosion somehow didn't kill the creature. What it did do was send the Bear Warrior into a blind frenzy, where it was quickly picked off by a few damaging spells thrown out by the Guild in its newly vulnerable front end.

Best of all, there was no damage to the dungeon, either physically or upkeep-wise. Of course, if he had wanted to kill the Bear outright, it would've taken a larger Mana Explosion – which might then have caused some damage. If Fred was careful and took it easy, then it shouldn't be a problem. The Implosions, apparently, consumed some upkeep, no matter how large they were. Its presence inside of the dungeon was all that was needed for the consumption, but Explosions were on a different level. Fred was sure that, if it was a big enough explosion, then it would be harmful to the dungeon, just not *as* harmful as his other technique.

Over the next six hours, Fred used his Mana Explosion every few minutes, using the smallest amount of Mana that he could and still be effective against the Defenders coming into The Oven. Not once did he feel a spike or stab of pain, and his Mana Sight showed no damage to the

dungeon or upkeep of said dungeon, though he did notice that his Explosions did less and less damage to some of the more powerful invaders that soon arrived. Either they were a large Defender of a higher level that had a significant natural defense, or they were so small that he risked damaging the floor of the dungeon if he tried to hit every single one. Still, his efforts helped to thin out the flood of different (and sometimes repeated) invaders that managed to get that far inside.

Then came the Communication from Deecy that he had been dreading.

***“Eisa says they’ve got a problem; you might want to head up there... quickly.”***

He could guess what it was – an Emerald Dragon, or another Defender of such magnitude. With a large sigh that the entire Guild could hear, he told Mitch nearby, “Gotta go up front and take care of something.” Without waiting for a response, he ran through the tunnels without stopping, passing Deecy, Regnark, Ravenne, and the other Guild members, who were still effectively killing Defenders as they came through. He slid to a stop when he got to Chareese’s room, though he immediately fell flat on his face when it felt like the entire dungeon shook underneath him. He quickly picked himself up and looked around, only to see that Chareese, Rody, and Eisa were also on the ground on their backs; they struggled to their feet, just as another earthquake shook the room and he saw the Viewing Portals over the windows disappear.

“Everyone, get back! Retreat!” Fred called out to the others, who took his advice and ran past him. Before he left, though, he pulled himself up to the nearest window and looked down into the room. He pulled his

head back just in time to see a massive green shape slam against the walls and windows, shaking the room again and knocking him down on his rear. As he picked himself up again and ran back down the tunnel, he thought about what he had seen in the brief moment he was able to look down in the room.

Not just one, but *two* Emerald Dragons had appeared, and they had expanded to the point where they both took up nearly half of the room each. The stone walls and dirt that had divided the room into different pathways had been obliterated. Barely recognizable pieces of them were scattered all about. Since they were something that Fred had built and weren't technically part of the dungeon, there wasn't any Mana upkeep maintaining their structure; a few well-placed tail smashes were enough to clear the way for the massive Dragons.

That wasn't the worst of it, though. Making its way through the entrance, something large, dark-blue, and multi-headed was starting to appear. Fred didn't have enough time to see exactly what it was, but it didn't look good.

Roady had another Healing Circle around him, Eisa, and Chareese when Fred arrived in Regnark's pit room, as they had been slightly hurt from the impact of a Dragon tail against the wall where they were standing. Eisa's arm was bent in an abnormal way, though it quickly straightened itself out, with an audible \*pop\*. Chareese had a broken wrist, while Roady had a nasty gash on his forehead that disappeared within seconds, leaving only a bit of blood on his skin behind.

Eisa rushed into his arms as soon as she was well, pleading, "What do we do? Those things literally tore the room apart, and our Defenders were practically useless."

“I know, I saw it just before I left. The only thing we can do is throw everything we have at them; I’ll do the same, though I’m limited in what I can do without risking the destruction of the entire dungeon,” Fred said. He didn’t bother to elaborate, however, as the head of one of the shiny green Dragons stuck its head in the room.

For the first time, Fred really looked at the others and saw that they all looked exhausted and were relatively low on Mana. He was drained, himself; he also hadn’t been constantly using Mana all day, as it had only been in short spurts and limited amounts at a time. Although tired, he didn’t feel like he was about to drop to the floor, like the others appeared to be close to doing. *Hopefully, these are the last of the threat, and we can recover a bit before the next invasion.* Of course, his hope depended on them surviving the next few minutes, which wasn’t a guarantee when there was a single Emerald Dragon, and at this point there were two – plus whatever Water-based Defender was coming in after them.

Before it even fully entered the room, Fred quickly sent a Mana Explosion towards the Dragon’s head sticking out; he had gotten a lot of practice, over the last few hours, creating small Explosions rather quickly; so, it was created and gone before anyone else could really react. It exploded only a few inches away from the Emerald Dragon’s snout, detonating with such force that it blew the head and the neck it was attached to back into the tunnel. Fred lost sight of it for a moment, and he fervently hoped that he had luckily killed it, or that he had at least damaged it so badly that it would be easier to kill.

No such luck – on either count.

When the head poked back in, it barely even looked scorched from the explosion. *Wait, I think it might be missing a single small scale on its nose....*

That was when everyone else started in with their attack. Two Iron Sentinels appeared on either side of the entrance, courtesy of Eisa, who immediately chopped down with their large swords, causing the head to fall downwards, but who ultimately did very little damage. Roady created two Winged Pegasi and had them swoop in and pummel the head with their hooves – again, doing very little or no damage to the nearly impervious scaled hide of the Emerald Dragon. Ravenne let forth a Sharpened Air-row Barrage, which was a series of dozens of sharp, largely invisible slivers of hardened and sharpened air, which remarkably hit something vulnerable; two separate slivers slid into the Dragon’s left eye, blinding it on that side.

Of course, that just angered the invading Defender even more, and it sucked in a breath...Fred knew what that meant. “Get back! I’m not sure if the Viewing Portal will stop this attack or not!”

As the Emerald Dragon breathed out, a purplish mist was exhaled, flooding the room with poisonous and acidic fumes. Everything that came in contact with the toxic mist almost immediately died, including the few remaining Imps, Succubi, and Pit Fiends from Regnark, as well as the Pegasi that Roady had formed. Eisa’s Iron Sentinels survived initially, though even they were affected by the purple mist; the Iron they were made of started to swiftly rust, making them fragile – if still technically alive. However, when they went to strike the neck of the emerging Dragon, they basically shattered from the force of their own attacks.

The Guild members there didn’t have any chance of knocking the Dragon off as it emerged onto the landing platform, so Fred could see them getting ready to try their hands at burning it. “Wait! Hold off on anything with fire!” he shouted, but it was too late. One of them managed to get a small Flamestrike off before he could be stopped. “Everyone down!”



Fortunately, they all listened to him, because they all dropped to the floor underneath the windows just as an explosion tore through the room; the purple mist was flammable, and just like the backs of the Toads from earlier, it ignited. A memory of the explosion that destroyed Gatecross flashed through Fred's head, as he felt the heat of the explosion on his back, but it wasn't nearly as bad as he thought it would be. Jumping up after the flames disappeared, he looked into the room and saw that the Emerald Dragon was still there, though it was obviously burnt badly over half of its body, including its left wing.

But it was still alive and just as dangerous.

### **Emerald Dragon (Level 1)**

**Vitality: 61240/80000**

**Attack: 3000, Poison Breath, Tail Whip, Rending Bite, Claw Slash, Wing Buffet, Shrink**

**Defense: 2000, (2500 on Emerald-scale hide)**

The Emerald Dragon jumped down into the pit voluntarily and expanded its size as it fell. By the time it reached the bottom, it stretched almost all the way across the room, and with a quick flap of its undamaged right wing, it was able to land its forelegs a bit awkwardly – though safely – on the stairs nearest the tunnel leading to the second pit room. Just then, a second Emerald Dragon entered the room and saw all of them staring at it from the now-unprotected windows, as the Viewing Portals had been destroyed from the explosion.

Fred didn't need to tell anyone to run, because it was more than obvious they were now in danger. They ran to the second room and looked down the pit to see the first, injured Dragon already climbing up the stairs.

“I’ve been saving a little bit of my Mana in case of an emergency; I’d say this qualifies,” Regnark suddenly revealed, before a large chunk of Dark Mana left his body and went to the extremely large Summoning Circle set up near the top of the second room.

There was barely enough room for a giant demon to emerge and step onto the staircase nearby; it probably would’ve flown, but its wings were so large along its back that it wouldn’t be able to fully spread them in the room. The five-horned, red demon, covered in black plate armor with sharp steel spikes sticking out of it in several places, was at least twenty feet tall, eight feet wide; it was also carrying a night-black sword that was ten feet long and seemed to suck in all of the light around it.

### **Demon Lord Laziren (Level 1)**

**Vitality: 35000**

**Attack: 1700, Void Slice, Hellfire Strike, Dismember**

**Defense: 2000**

It was an impressive Demon, though it couldn’t quite compare to the Emerald Dragon...yet. Chareese chipped in what she could to change that, with her Natural Growth ability surrounding Lord Laziren with a green glow. The next moment, strangely enough, the Demon was surrounded by a faint white light, as Rody used his Reflective Aura on the wicked-looking, summoned Defender. Not to be outdone, Regnark’s Demon was encased in a transparent coating of brown as Eisa’s Earth’s Renewal surrounded it.

### **Demon Lord Laziren (Level 5)**

**Vitality: 55000 (+50 per second regeneration)**

**Attack: 2100, Void Slice, Hellfire Strike, Dismember**

**Defense: 2400 (20% of damage is reflected upon attacker)**

“Why didn’t you summon this Demon before, if you had access to it?” Chareese asked, as confused as everyone else looking at the now visibly larger and stronger Demon.

Regnark was on his knees as he panted from the rapid expenditure of Mana. If Fred calculated it correctly, the big man had used 1,200 Dark Mana to summon the Lord and was now dangerously low, at only 90 Dark Mana. “Because one does not simply *summon* a Demon Lord, every day; there’s literally a 48-hour cooldown on his summoning, and it requires an additional upkeep to maintain his presence here. At the moment, I can only keep him around for about 3 minutes before he’s banished back to... wherever he came from. And that’s with canceling both of my Summoning Circles.”

Indeed, Fred saw the Circle disappear from the room, and he assumed the one in the first room was gone, as well. *I guess that makes sense; he’d have been out of Mana so much quicker than normal, and the Demon Lord probably wasn’t really needed before this.*

Regnark’s summon didn’t wait for permission to attack, as it immediately jumped off the stairs and plummeted towards the Dragon, sword held pointing downwards. The Emerald Dragon saw it coming and tried to fly out of the way, but the damage to its wing prevented it from drifting far. The little it did end up moving was countered by a quick extension of the Demon’s own wings, bringing it back on its deadly course.

The light-sucking black sword impaled the back of the Dragon with such force that it sunk down to the hilt, with the Demon landing astride its back. The rear end of the flying lizard immediately collapsed as its spine was severed, cutting off all control of that portion of its body, but for all of

that – in addition to the damage it took earlier – the Dragon didn't die. Nor was it helpless; a quick rotation of its neck and the lizard latched onto the back plate of the Demon's armor as it was facing the other direction, and even from that distance Fred could hear as the Dragon's Rending Bite tore into the hard armor.

A smack delivered by the Demon's backhand knocked it loose, and the slaughter was on. The Dragon looked stunned from the blow, which was followed by several others, and the Dragon could never recover from the initial attack; Lord Laziren was a frenzy of mundane blows, and what Fred could only assume were Hellfire Strikes, as they left burn marks wherever they landed. After nearly ten seconds of a horrendous beatdown, the Demon turned to the left front leg of the Dragon and used all of his strength to rip it off – and then proceeded to beat the massive lizard with it.

That was all the Nature Defender could take, it appeared, as it died moments later from one too many blows to its head, and the Demon's void-black sword was released from the disappearing Dragon's back. Lord Laziren caught it as it fell out of the now-dead giant lizard, just in time to defend against the other Emerald Dragon that was coming through the tunnel down below.

Even a Demon Lord with regenerating Vitality, a reflective aura that returns 20% of the damage to the attacker, and a large void-sword was just barely able to survive for more than a few seconds against a healthy, uninjured Emerald Dragon. With two working wings – as opposed to the previous massive lizard – the Dragon launched itself towards Lord Laziren and slammed into him at tremendous speed. Fred watched as half of the Demon's Vitality was taken from it from the impact alone, though because of the Reflective Aura the Dragon didn't come away unscathed.

As soon as they broke apart from the collision, however, the Demon Lord was able to defend itself a little better; even with his sword at the ready, he was still barely able to fend off claws that would otherwise slash apart his armor, bites that nearly took chunks of his exposed skin off, and strong wings that would extend and try to knock the Lord off of the stairs. He was a spectacular fighter even for a Demon, though, and ended up slicing through quite a bit of the Dragon's emerald-scaled hide, causing it to bleed from horrific-looking wounds. He even managed to get a lucky Void Slice off – which was only indicated by a strange pulsing in the black sword just before contact – that cut cleanly through its left front leg when it was extended a bit too far.

It seemed as though any major injuries to the Emerald Dragons – at least from what he saw there and what he remembered in Gatecross – caused the Nature Defender to fall back into relying on its Poison Breath; after it got its leg chopped off, it started to inhale as it backed itself down the stairs. “Everyone, hit it now before it can get that Poison Breath off!” Fred warned.

They had all been watching the battle from high above the pit, which was fairly easy to see because of the sheer size of the combatants; it also helped to ensure a large target for all of the spells that were flung out, in which Fred also participated. He tossed two quick Fireblasts down in its face, which were joined by over a dozen other fire-based spells, since those were the most effective against the Nature Defender.

As he was hoping, as soon as the purple mist started to emerge from the mouth of the Emerald Dragon, the flames hit it, and the dangerous Breath ignited, blowing up in the invader's face, not doing much damage other than blinding it momentarily. That momentary lapse in its concentration was all that the Demon Lord needed, as it activated its Void

Slice again and launched itself towards the chest of the Dragon sword-first. At the last moment, the massive lizard's sight came back, and it struck out at the incoming Demon with its fangs, catching Lord Laziren's head in its jaws – but not before the sword impacted its chest, the activated Void Slice effect allowing it to slide through the Dragon with ease.

A few seconds later, and with some straining to bite down hard enough, the Demon's head popped like a grape and disappeared, along with its body as it died. It had the last laugh, however, as the Reflective Aura did nearly 5,000 damage to the Dragon's Vitality from the Demon Lord's decapitation, as well as the sword disappearing along with the corpse. As soon as the weapon was gone, a fountain of blood shot out of the Dragon's chest, as the sword was the only thing keeping all of the vital liquid inside of its body – and its heart. It tried to drag itself up the stairs, but in less than 30 seconds, the Emerald Dragon dropped to the ground as its life bled away...and then it disappeared.

Cheers erupted in the tunnel far above, as everyone slapped Regnark on the back for the Demon Lord he had summoned, who had killed not just one, but two Emerald Dragons before perished as a triumphant hero. Fred joined in the celebration for one glorious moment; then he noticed something strange: Water was pouring down the tunnel from the previous room. It was slightly around the corner, so he didn't have a straight shot to see where it was coming from, but the fact that it was there was definitely not a good sign.

*Oh, no; what's next?!*

# Chapter 11

Fred cautiously tiptoed down the tunnel, splashing through the thin layer of water flowing down towards him. The others finally seemed to realize something was off with the water being there, and they stopped celebrating; a quick hand signal to them from Fred stopped them from following, as he stuck his head around the bend in the passageway.

A powerful jet of water burst into his face, knocking him backwards from the painful impact. He hit the floor, and the jet of water seemed to follow him, pushing his body backwards until he was out of sight from the source of the water.

“Fred! What was that? What attacked you?”

Eisa was by his side in a moment and helped him back to his feet. While he was only hit with water, it had been so powerful that wherever it had hit him felt like it had been pounded with a hammer. He didn’t have to look in any type of mirror to know that his face and body would likely be red and bruised – at least temporarily, until his Mana kicked in and healed him automatically. He shook his head to clear it from the unexpected attack and tried to answer Eisa’s questions.

“I’m not precisely sure; all I saw was the head of something sticking through the tunnel window on a really long neck, before I was knocked backwards. Whatever it is, I need to block this tunnel off so that it doesn’t drown us,” Fred told them, before using his Adventurer Power to Conjure large blocks of stone to start sealing the passageway. Blocking it off meant that the Guild and his Shards wouldn’t be able to escape that way, if they needed to for some reason; since they had forgotten to close off the viewing

windows in the first pit room, though, he needed to ensure nothing could get to them from the relative safety of the tunnels.

After the flow of water stopped, they all waited by the Viewing Portals in the second pit room to see exactly what they were up against. It didn't take long to find out, fortunately; within a minute, Fred and the other saw what looked like small dragon heads on extremely long necks entering through the tunnel far down below. He counted eight heads that immediately inspected the area in odd, swaying gyrations atop their necks that reminded him a little of the hypnotic motion of snakes' heads.

The rest of the Water-based Defender finally entered the room and started climbing up the stairs at a fairly quick pace. Though, to be fair, *climb* wasn't quite the right word; *slither* might be a better one to describe the legless bulk of its body. As he had noted just moments prior, the lower half of the monster was at least fifty feet long, and wide enough that Fred thought that it was barely able to fit through the tunnels; even then, it probably scraped the sides, though the scales covering the sides of the Defender kept it from any harm.

While the Emerald Dragon was a large, winged lizard, the Azure Hydra was an eight-headed snake.

### **Azure Hydra (Level 1)**

**Vitality: 80000 (10000 per head)**

**Attack: 3200 (400 per head), Water Jet, Deluge, Strangle**

**Defense: 1600 (200 per head), Cranial Regeneration**

The Water-based Defender seemed to be on par, Vitality and Attack-wise, with the Emerald Dragon, though its Defense was a little lower than that of the Nature-based invader. The thing that worried Fred, however, was



that the information he had about the Azure Hydra referenced its heads, almost as if they were separate entities.

“That’s a Hydra,” Roady and Chareese said woodenly at the same time, looking down at the eight-headed snake slithering up the stairs. The two veteran Adventurers looked at each other without saying anything, and Fred started to get worried.

“Why does that make a difference?” Fred asked.

Chareese was the one who answered. “Hydras are notoriously hard to kill. In fact, unless I missed it happening lately, the last time one was killed was over fifty years ago.”

The invading Defender continued to progress up the stairs as they talked, but Fred was hesitant to attack until he knew more. “Why are they so hard to kill?”

“Because the only known way to kill one is to destroy every single head, and while they aren’t particularly strong by themselves, the heads will freakishly regenerate rather quickly. If I remember correctly, it only takes about a minute for a head to regrow; therefore, destroying all eight heads within that time frame is *very* difficult,” Roady contributed, while looking at his half-sister for confirmation. She nodded and turned to Fred, as if asking him what they should do.

The easiest and most obvious solution would be for him to use his Mana Implosion technique to swallow the entire Hydra in one swoop, even if there were a risk to his Cores; it shouldn’t be too bad, considering that the Core would hopefully use its Water Mana to replace whatever upkeep Fred consumed during the Implosion. He didn’t want to wait too long to do that, so he immediately started making one that he thought might work; after a few seconds, he dropped it down the pit and kept it towards the middle, where it would do the least damage to the surrounding room.

As soon as it became level with the advancing eight-headed snake, he set it off...just as a second Hydra entered the room from down below. The 10 Light Mana he placed inside the Implosion did its work, expanding quickly to consume half of the heads and necks of the Hydra already on the stairs, as well as almost all of its body. The remaining heads fell into the pit, now disconnected from anything, though they disappeared before they hit the bottom. *I guess that proves that destroying all the heads isn't the only way—*

A massive pain erupted inside of Fred's body, and he collapsed to his knees as he instinctively clutched at his chest. His vision went a little blurry as he felt himself start to pass out, but he powered through and managed to stay conscious. Time passed, which felt like hours, until he felt the pain faded enough to look around without wanting to throw up. The first thing he noticed was Roady's Healing Circle surrounding him, which made him feel a little less exhausted, but did absolutely nothing to diminish the pain. *Because it's not my body that's hurt; it's my Cores.*

Eisa was by his side, looking concerned, and she helped him to his feet – just as a powerful jet of water impacted the Viewing Portal covering one of the windows looking down into the second pit room, followed by a second jet of water, and then six more in rapid succession. The defenses were holding for the moment, but it didn't look like they would for long. *If the Hydra is still inside, then I guess I wasn't out for hours – more like less than a minute.*

"Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," Fred said, giving Eisa a hug... and using her to steady himself at the same time. "I'm not sure why it hurt so much, this time; I'm worried I'll shatter the Core down below, if I do that again. We're on our own for this one; I don't have any more tricks to use." He was confident his Core hadn't shattered already, despite the horrible

pain, mainly because the territory still stood, and the dungeon was still together. It was a close thing, though.

The others just nodded resolutely, though instead of appearing defeated, he could see a look of determination cross their faces. Fred was normally the strong one, the one with a plan to see them through; with him out of commission, essentially, they were going to have to step up and get it done without his help.

“Fine, Let’s move on back to where Deecy and the rest of the Guild are and form some sort of plan. We’ve got to figure this out, or else this was all for nothing,” Chareese told the others.

Fred’s head still felt a little fuzzy as Eisa supported him down the exterior tunnel to the next room, and he slid down the wall when he got there to rest on the floor as the others discussed what they could do. Deecy saw him, though she didn’t move from her position near the Viewing Portal looking into the room. The Dire Wolf Pup hadn’t left that spot since the attack had started, mainly because she had been busy almost the entire time with defending the room against all the invaders.

***“Are you alright? I keep feeling some major disturbances in the Mana around here; is that your doing?”***

*“Yes, though it strained my Cores more than a bit to do my Implosion. The rest of the defense is up to you all.”*

***“Wait...I thought you said you didn’t have any connection to your Cores anymore, which is why you can’t access your territory and dungeon. If that’s true, how are you affected by what you’re doing, then?”***

Fred was saved from having to answer that, as the other Shards had started to include Deecy in their plans, and he didn't want to get in the middle of that. Which was fine for him, because he didn't really have a good answer for her; in fact, the more he thought about it, the more it *didn't* make sense that he was being hurt, if there were no longer a direct connection between him and the multi-element Core down below. *Obviously, there is more going on than I thought. I'm missing something important, though I don't know what that could possibly be.*

Fred barely paid attention as Eisa, Regnark, Chareese, Roady, and Ravenne huddled around Deecy's low-to-the-floor Viewing Portal as the Hydra entered the room. From his vantage point, he couldn't see what was happening, though it appeared as though all of them were chipping into the defense, somehow, despite their low Mana levels. He still couldn't freely see Deecy's, Eisa's, or Regnark's Shard Status, but if those were anything like the other three, then they were running on empty. There wasn't much that Fred could do, in the fragile state he was in, to help; at the least, he was able to take out approximately 50 units of Light and Air Mana from his internal Cores and transfer them to the two Shards, so that they would have a little more to work with.

Even doing that seemed to strain him a little, but it wasn't anything near like what he had experienced before. Regardless, it was about all he could do at the moment, so he took the discomfort without complaining. It didn't seem to do much good, however – at least according to the disappointed noises coming from the Shards. The Guild members who had been with them had already moved on to The Oven room, which appeared to be where they were heading next.

Regnark helped to pick him up and carry him, because standing up seemed beyond Fred at the moment. When they got to the last defensive

room, they were greeted tiredly by those already there, though they at least didn't seem as exhausted as those coming in obviously were. The Shards had given their all, working together to defeat the Hydra, but clearly fell short; looking at them made Fred start to worry for them, because they all looked as drained and unsteady as *he* felt.

In fact, Regnark stumbled and fell, sending Fred tumbling from his arms; the Human/Dungeon Core hybrid hit the ground and rolled a couple of times, ending up near Metch and some others huddled around one of the Viewing Portals. It hurt a little bit, but he was too internally beat up to care much.

"Are you alright?" Metch asked, bending down to check on Fred, before he was waved away. "Alright...what are we up against now? We finished the rest of the previous group off about 15 minutes ago, so we're slowly getting our Power back—what's this?"

Fred looked up from where he had fallen to see Metch holding something green in his hand. Recognizing it instantly, he realized that the Nature Mana Stone that was in his pocket had clearly fallen out at some point when he fell. "It's one of the stones that generated when I use my Mana Implosion technique. Unfortunately, I can't use that, anymore, to kill this Azure Hydra coming our way; otherwise, this would be over in no time."

Metch nodded and handed the stone back; however, Fred's tired hand fumbled the handoff and it dropped from his fingers. Metch went to catch it before it hit the ground, but his hand was turned the wrong way, so he ended up hitting it with the back of his hand. Fred thought that it might bounce away...but he was wrong. Strangely – and miraculously – wrong.

The Nature Mana Stone touched the spot where Metch's SDIA implant was located and stuck to his skin, like a pair of magnets coming

together. Before his eyes, the stone started to visibly shrink and then stop, losing maybe 5% of its previous size.

“Whoa! What is this doing to me?!” Metch called out, stepping back in surprise and then easily pulling off the Mana Stone from the back of his hand. He looked confused at first, and then a look that Fred could only guess was an expression of wonder and amazement crossed his face.

“Wait...*I’m completely full of Power, again!*”

Something finally clicked in Fred’s head. *Of course! How did I miss that?* There was no time to dive into what was now making sense to him; they had to survive the next few minutes, first. “Metch, share that around so that more of you can utilize your spells and Abilities,” he quickly said to the C-Rated Adventurer with excitement in his voice. “Where is the large white Mana Stone that the Elder brought back?”

His question seemed to break Metch from his state of amazement. “Uh, I think it’s in your bedroom to the side of your bed,” he answered, as the Defender passed the Stone to those nearest him, miming putting it on the back of their hands where their SDIA’s were implanted. Fred asked him if someone could go get it, and Metch asked two former Gatecross townspeople nearby to run. “It’ll take a couple of minutes, but they should have it here soon.”

The Nature Mana Stone didn’t last long before it was used up, but approximately a dozen Guild members – including Metch, Harriette, and Rospel – were now completely full of Power again. When Harriette had used it, the size of the stone dropped dramatically, but that made sense to Fred; she had a larger pool of Power, so it took more to fill hers up. “When they get here, have everyone recharge their Power from the Stone, and give this Hydra all you’ve got. Take out their heads to kill them, but don’t take

too long: You need to have all of them destroyed within a minute; otherwise, they'll regenerate."

Fred could hear some murmuring from the Guild as they looked down into the room, so it likely meant that the Water Defender was already there. Metch turned to the others, who had their Power recharged. "We need to delay it as much as we can, until Tharn and Dormal get back with the Stone. Send everything you have that will slow it down, and don't worry about damaging it."

Around three different Viewing portals, the Core Power Guild members sent a variety of spells or attacks at the Hydra, all designed to slow, stun, or otherwise stop the eight-headed monster from advancing further into the room. "It doesn't look like the heat is doing much to it—" observed Harriette, as she slung another spell down, before jumping back in surprise. The Viewing Portal she was looking down had been visibly hit by something, and despite its protection, Fred could observe heat waves coming from the area.

"The heat from the room is making the water jets that it's shooting out boiling hot as it hits the traps," Metch shouted, looking towards Fred. "Can you shut off The Oven?"

"No, I—"

Another two jets of water impacted the other Viewing Portals whence the Guild was attacking, which caused them to step back from the heat coming through. Fred estimated that they had approximately 30 seconds before the Portal Defenses failed on those who were being shot, and then they'd have to cover them up. The team of Guild members attempting to slow the Hydra down went to three other Viewing Portals and were able to cast another few spells; but those were quickly hit with boiling water, as well, causing them to step back.

From where they were looking, Fred estimated that the massive Water Defender was already halfway through the maze by that point, though the efforts by the Guild were obviously daunting it. Either that, or the heat was causing it to slow down, even if it didn't physically harm the massive snake. Fortunately, by that time Fred glanced over, from where he was laying (he hadn't moved from where he had fallen), to see the two Guild members sent to fetch the large Mana stone hurrying inside, straining to carry the massive chunk of Light Mana between them.

"Alright, everyone touch that thing with your implant and recharge your Power—" Metch called out, just as the first Viewing Portal was destroyed and a boiling stream of water shot into the room, splashing a few Guild members nearby. In fact, the water stream was so powerful that it hit the ceiling of the room they were in and spread out like a fan, reaching even more people – as well as drenching the spot where the Light Mana Stone was placed. "Cover that hole!"

As a few brave people started to move the block of stone nearby over the hole, the Shards were watching everything happen with lethargic numbness from their depleted Mana stores. They had even used almost every drop of their Power, as well; they were basically helpless at that point. Roady, however, crouched next to Fred and asked, "Will that stone give me more of my Light Mana?"

Fred thought about it for a few seconds, before deciding – based on what he thought he knew – that it *should*. "I think so, but what are you going to do?"

Rather than answer, the large man sprinted over to the stone just as two more Viewing Portals burst and superheated water entered the room, soaking and horribly burning a dozen Guild members. "Cover those holes —" ordered Metch.



“Wait! Keep fighting and try to ignore the water and heat; I’m going to keep healing you all!” Roady shouted, overriding Metch’s command with his own battlefield shout, which, thankfully, was still much louder – despite losing his Rating and Commander Class. The big man pressed his own implant against the stone, and it started to shrink even faster than it had been before, as other Guild members had continued to recharge their Power. Fred looked at Roady’s Shard Status to see that he was now full of Mana, though it didn’t appear as though refilling his Mana that way would increase his maximum Mana. Still, from what Fred had given him earlier of his own Mana, he was at a total of 165 Mana.

The next moment, a massive Healing Circle appeared around the entire room and encompassed everyone; Fred saw that all but 1 of Roady’s Mana had been used to construct the Circle, and the Light Shard almost collapsed. Luckily, the back of his hand was still stuck against the Mana Stone, and it quickly refilled; every second or so, his Mana would drop by a few units before being refilled, as the upkeep of the Circle took its toll. It was fortunate that there was a source of Mana nearby, because otherwise, Fred estimated, that even at full Mana – and the natural regeneration due to being in the Convergence – Roady could only maintain that size of a Circle for a couple of seconds.

The Guild didn’t hesitate, once their burns were being healed by the Light Shard. They went in small groups to all of the Viewing Portals, casting spell after spell, alternating to open Portals as the ones they were on were shot with another jet of boiling water. At one time, eight of the Portals were being assaulted – one per Hydra head. By moving fast enough – and recharging their Power via the rapidly shrinking Mana Stone – they were able to stay ahead of the next blast.

In less than a minute, ten more Portals had burst, and the room was probably just as hot from the blasts of scorching water as it was in the Oven – perhaps even more so. The humidity level got so high that, to Fred, it felt like he was inhaling fire...but the Guild kept fighting. Eventually, they must have started destroying heads, because the groups of Adventurers stopped having to move around so much as fewer Portals were being attacked.

“Ok, one last push! Hold where you are, no matter what!” Metch yelled, though his voice sounded hoarse and ragged – likely from the heat. Fred was frankly amazed that any of them were still standing, because Fred felt like he was going to melt, and his eyes burned every time he blinked.

Two groups got completely covered in water as they held their position at a Viewing Portal rather than seek another one, and even through their screams, they indefatigably continued to fight. They were being healed soon after they were burned, but the experience must have been torture; Fred didn’t envy them, but he also felt proud that they were part of his Guild. *No, not just because they’re in my Guild; I’m proud of them because they are fighting not for themselves, but for each other.* He wasn’t sure why that made such a difference, but it did.

Finally, the water jet stopped smashing against the last Viewing Portal, just as it was on the verge of collapsing, and seconds later, everyone fighting dropped to their knees in startling synchronicity. They were tired, hot, and continuously being hurt and healed from the water that was spread all around the room...but they looked happy.

“We...did it.” Metch said, before slumping down on his side in exhaustion. Roady was still touching the shrinking Mana Stone, keeping his Circle running, which meant that everyone was still being cooked by the heat rising up to their room from The Oven. Eisa and the other Shards saw

that and immediately started covering all of the holes not protected by the few intact Viewing Portals, until a couple of minutes later, the heat in the room dropped dramatically as the last one was covered. Another few seconds went by as the last of the heat injuries were healed, and then Roady dropped to his knees, himself, and fell flat on his face.

Chareese ran to his side, looking at Fred at the same time. “What’s wrong with him? Is he going to be alright?”

“He’ll be fine; keeping that large Healing Circle going just drained his strength considerably. I figure he’ll be out for an hour or so before he wakes up; honestly, I’m amazed he kept it going for as long as he did.”

In fact, it was phenomenal that they had all survived. All because of the strength and perseverance of all his friends, his Shards, and the Guild members, who were all now lying on their sides with traumatized looks upon their faces. Fred gingerly got to his feet, feeling a little better than he had earlier, albeit still a bit fragile.. “Everyone!” he beckoned, getting everyone’s attention. “I’m very proud of what you accomplished today; I’ve never seen anything like that before. However, we’re not quite safe yet. If you can, get yourselves to the Guild Barracks and get some rest; we’re going to have more unfriendly visitors at some point, and you need to be in top shape before that happens.”

There was no protest, which wasn’t surprising, though he could see the smiles start to fade as the Guild members thought about what was still to come. “Same thing with you all,” he encouraged his Shards. “Get some rest and regain some of your Mana.”

“But what if—”

“Don’t worry about being attacked again; while It’s logical to predict that they are on their way, they aren’t here yet. Besides, I doubt we could hold back even a Goblin Gnome right now.” That got a chuckle from

nearly everyone, because that seemed absurd – and frighteningly accurate. This defense of the dungeon had been the hardest thing most of them had ever done in their lives, and it clearly showed. Even though they weren't injured – thanks to Roady's Healing Circle – the experience was certain to cause some nightmares.

“What are *you* going to do?” Eisa asked, walking up and putting her arms around him. She rested her head against his chest in her own display of exhaustion, before looking up at him when he didn't answer after a couple of minutes.

He smiled down at her and kissed her, letting his lips linger on hers for nearly a minute before he pulled back. “Me? Oh, I think I'm going to go do the hardest and most dangerous thing that I can think of.”

Eisa immediately stiffened her body at his words, looking at him with worry. “What do you mean? What are you planning to do?”

“A simple thing, really,” he said offhandedly. “I'm just going to go get my dungeon back.”

# **Part III – Restructuring**

# Chapter 12

Fred was able to walk on his own to his bedroom, where Eisa said she wanted to stay and rest while he did...whatever it was he was planning on doing. He almost joined her for some rest of his own, but he knew he was on a deadline, and he needed to solve his problems before anything got worse.

Looking at Eisa lying on his bed, already passed out and snoring lightly, he began to think it wasn't a good idea for her to be so close to him while he worked. There was a real possibility that what he was going to try might cause the multi-element Core to explode and kill anyone nearby, including himself. Extrapolating from that thought, he soon reasoned that if there were an explosion, the quantity of Mana condensed inside the Core would probably result in most of the dungeon being destroyed; a portion of the city above would collapse on top of them from the void it created; and his territory would be dissolved.

Essentially, if the explosion itself didn't kill her and everyone else down below, and if a city crushing them with thousands of tons of dirt and stone wasn't enough to end their lives, then the thousands of vicious Defenders from the surrounding elemental factions would finish the job.

So Fred left her there, though he did walk over and give her a soft kiss on her forehead, hoping it wouldn't be the last one he ever gave her. He didn't want to lose her by doing something stupid, but unless he did *something* soon, they might not survive the next assault on his dungeon. Not only was the dungeon a mess, with Chareese's room entirely destroyed and many of the rooms inaccessible because they were sealed off; but every single Defender, and most of the Defenses, had been destroyed or used up.

He thought that the Core would eventually replace them, because he had “programmed” it to do that; unfortunately, he had noticed earlier that it wasn’t happening, adding another mystery that needed to be solved.

Now, he thought he could see what might be the reason why.

Floating around the room – and even inside the walls – were thousands of tiny, clear bubbles, bouncing against each other and sometimes combining together for a few moments before dividing again. It took him a moment to figure out what it was, though the answer was obvious when he easily determined that it was all Unconverted Mana. Still, the fact that it was there was extremely confusing...for all of a second.

Normally, the Core was instructed to gather up the Mana leftover from the invading Defenders that were killed, and then it would keep half of what it gathered and give the other half to whatever Shard had access to that element. Something Fred must’ve done caused something to go wrong with those instructions, however; because soon after he started to use his Implosion technique, he hadn’t noticed any extra Mana going to Chareese, nor to Deecy, for that matter. Whatever he had done to cause this had resulted in Mana not being distributed properly and Defenses not being reset; therefore, there was an overabundance of elemental Mana inside the Core.

What happens to extra elemental Mana when it gets absorbed? It turns into *Unconverted* Mana, Fred reasoned. Since he wasn’t directly connected to the multi-element Core anymore – at least not in any recognizable, productive way – the UM had nowhere to go. So, that Unconverted Mana was released and was, now, just floating around free.

He was tempted to absorb it all. Instead, Fred looked at the floating object in the middle of the room. The Core looked a little smaller than he remembered, which he quickly determined was due to the fact that the

green and blue orbs, smashed up against the others, had diminished quite a bit, in size. In fact, the green one – Nature – was so small that it was almost lost, as it was squished against the others, creating an extremely unbalanced look to the whole thing. *No wonder I'm feeling...odd.*

Fred pulled up his stool again, sitting down on it with a relieved sigh as he stared at his multi-element Core. It was *indeed* his, which was something that he hadn't really considered when he was trying to reincorporate himself into his territory and dungeon. Sure, he knew they were his Cores floating there; now that he could think about what he had tried before, he had been going about the entire matter all wrong.

Fred had learned a lot over the course of the last day, and it was as if the aspects of Mana, Power, and Essence – and how they interacted with each other – suddenly made more sense, for multiple reasons. First, Roady had used his Light Mana to heal the Guild members with their broken necks; no healing spells of which he'd heard mention could do something like that. Second, Ravenne had instinctively used her Air Mana to perform an "Adventurer" action that required Power. Third, his Mana Implosion technique had touched another Mana Stone and caused it to explode. Next, there was the pain and fatigue that Fred was experiencing as he used his techniques inside of the dungeon. Lastly, those same Mana Stones could be used by not only Adventurers, but his Shards as well to recharge their Power and Mana.

Everything was connected, and it wasn't until they were fighting for their lives against a massive Azure Hydra that everything came together. He now saw that all of the different forces – Mana, Power, and Essence – weren't *just* the same exact thing, but that they all came from the same source, as well: *the Convergence.*



It had been there in front of him, all this time, and he hadn't seen it. Fred could only imagine that if he had done all of this – building a dungeon, creating a multi-element Core, and using Mana-condensing techniques as a form of an attack – somewhere else, then he probably wouldn't be experiencing as many issues. While that was true, he also likely wouldn't have figured this all out, either.

The Convergence wasn't a blessing upon the land, like the Dungeon Cores seemed to think. Instead, it was the evidence of a gigantic *wound* that the world they lived on had sustained at some point in the distant past. It seemed strange to think of it that way, but that was the only thing that made sense to him; *the Convergence, as much as it seemed natural, was abnormal.*

The primal energy source that welled up from this “wound” wasn't just Mana, nor was it just Power or just Essence, but a combination of all three. Fred didn't know what, exactly, to call it except for “primal energy”, though that didn't really matter. What did matter was that everyone – *everything*, in fact, was comprised of this source; he remembered seeing his first sight of the forest far to the north in his first – and only – outing from his parent's dungeon, and being so amazed at how *vibrant* everything had looked to his starved Mana Sight.

It was nothing, though, compared to what he had seen since then. He realized that he had fallen into the same trap that the Dungeon Cores apparently had. *What was that expression? Can't see the forest for the trees?* He hadn't really comprehended that when he had first heard that back in Gatecross, but he understood it now. There was so much primal energy in the world that he eventually became blind to it, until his Mana Sight filtered out most of it, as if to not overwhelm him. *Sort of how my*

*Territorial Sight overwhelmed me, the first time I used it, with all of the information I was seeing.*

So, with a conscious decision, he concentrated on his Mana Sight and instructed his Dungeon Core skill to see *everything*.

The sheer amount of primal energy racing around him knocked him off of his stool, and he was very close to shutting down his Mana Sight completely. It looked to Fred like he was almost drowning in Mana, Essence, and even *Power*, when he discovered what it actually looked like – freed of a Human body or their manipulation of it. It was very similar to his Unconverted Mana, in fact, though there were some subtle differences; for one, it wasn't contained in little bubbles or globs, but rushed through the room in a constant flow that appeared to never stop. It looked as infinite as the Mana he could see permeating the air, though even *that* was different than he expected.

Instead of a kaleidoscope of different colors of Mana, there was only one; more accurately, it was an *absence* of color. Just like his Unconverted Mana and Power, it was clear and the only real reason he had seen *any* of it was how it moved through the air in swirls and eddies. In fact, the more he looked at it, the more he realized that the only real difference among the energies he could see was the peculiar shape of each. Like different keys to separate locks, they could all be used only in particular ways...or by particular people. Mana for Dungeon Cores, and Power and Essence for Humans, to be more precise.

Except that Fred was the sole anomaly – *he could use both*. The title, “Dualborn,” started to make sense, now; he had access to both types of “primal energy”, which obviously meant that he wasn't limited in his choices. Only...he *had* been limited by the systems that were in place, though he had learned how to sidestep some of those limitations, through

experimentation and by doing things that no one else thought possible. What had surprised him, however, was that the SDIA – the sub-dermal implant under his and all of the other Adventurers' skin – had also acted as a “key”. It was a way to get around the restrictions that were in place, though it could only be used in certain circumstances – such as having access to a Mana Stone.

*I wonder if there's a way to change that...*

He was distracted from continuing that thought by his Mana Sight; as soon as he looked closer at the Core and himself, he could see the obvious ties between the two that extended past the normal Sight to which he had become accustomed. On a fundamental level, there was no distinction between Fred and the Core he'd manufactured – they were both the same bundles of primal energy. Fred was pretty sure he could also see the unbalanced flow of that primal energy inside of the Core in greater detail, which to his newly awakened Sight, showed plainly why many of the things he had set Core up to do had malfunctioned.

His use of the Mana Implosion, and his subsequent replacement of the dungeon's upkeep with elemental Mana, had thrown the fragile balance among all five Cores out of whack. Looking inside of his body and his Light, Air, and Human Cores, he could see how it was *supposed* to look – with its straight and efficient pathways connecting them all together. In the Core, everything was twisted up, tangled, and changed from how it was before. Those differences, similar to how he was different from the Core, now, and therefore couldn't reestablish the connection with it, were enough to mess up the instructions he had previously given to it.

All of which meant that he had to change his approach to regaining his territory and dungeon again. Previously, he had been trying to *take* everything back and absorb what he had created. Upon a closer look at

what was going on, however, he realized that what he should've been doing was *giving* himself to the Core, in order to become one again.

Essentially, Fred was going to force the Core to absorb *him*.

That was going to be a lot harder – and probably a lot more painful – than it sounded. However, it was the only way he could think to do it; all of the other avenues of reconnection were basically closed to him, so it was either this or nothing at all. Based on the sight of the unbalanced Core, which was growing incrementally worse as he looked at it, doing nothing at all would eventually result in the Core's destruction. He wasn't sure if that would kill him straight-out, but it certainly wouldn't be good for his health, nor for the health of the dungeon, the people inside of it, and the city of Allroads.

Fred scooted his stool a little nearer to the floating Core and thought about what he needed to do. The problem he had to tackle was how to get himself absorbed, mainly because he had never been on the receiving end of something like that before. He instinctively knew that convincing the Core to absorb brand-new elements wouldn't work; the only reason that Fred had been able to do that – or so he thought – was because he had his Human Core to make sense of the new elements. Adventurers used their Power in different ways, naturally altering the way their Power appeared and operated, to perform different actions; it was as if they could access *every* element, but they just didn't have the knowledge to do so.

The SDIA helped with that, however; though, it also limited them, dependent upon their Class. The Artifact gave instructions particular to what Class they chose. For instance, if they chose a Healer, then they would be given access to "Light" Power, and to a few spells or Abilities that coincided with that element. They had to develop their skills and enhance their bodies in order to unlock more spells, because Humans' minds and

bodies were more...*fragile*...than something like a Dungeon Core. The Ratings were just a way to ensure they didn't stress themselves unknowingly before they were ready for it.

As they developed and changed Classes, including multiple Classes, then they would acquire access to different elements. Some Classes, such as Mages, already had access to a few different elements, though their knowledge of different spells was limited, so as to not overwhelm them. Then there were non-elemental spells and abilities, which weren't really element-less; they used raw Power or "primal energy" instead.

All of this knowledge seemed to stream into his mind as he thought about it, though he wasn't sure where it was coming from. It certainly wasn't from Deecy, who had done things like this before, so at the moment it was a mystery. Fred was tempted to discount it, at first; everything he was learning seemed just too accurate to be false, however – and it just kept coming.

The elements, in fact, were designed as a way to focus the "primal energy" as it was being applied. For instance, when an Adventurer used their Power on a non-element spell like Magistrike, it was far less damaging to its victims than a Flamestrike, despite them costing approximately the same amount to cast; by "focusing" the Power with a specific element, it tended to be more effective. The same thing applied to Mana, as well, as his Unconverted Mana was only useful in specific situations.

So, if Mana was essentially any and all elements, then why was there so much designated elemental Mana floating around? Well, because Mana also had a sort of memory to it; as soon as it was used in a particular manner (such as Light or Air Mana), then it would tend to stay that way – unless an external application changed it to something else. It explained why the extra Nature and Water that Fred's manufactured multi-element

Core had absorbed had changed to Unconverted Mana – the Core changed it to something it couldn't process or hold onto and sent it away. The Dualborn's Mana Conversion skill did just the opposite, converting his UM into elemental Mana – though at a much slower rate; apparently, it was much easier to revert Mana to its original state, rather than focus it into something more usable.

Dungeon Cores, as a general rule, only specialized in one element, which – coupled with their greater strength of body and mind, compared to a Human – allowed them to contain *all* of the knowledge associated with that element from day one. Fred could only assume that this made them more effective by concentrating on that singular element for their entire existence; he was beginning to suspect that it was for a different reason entirely. Unfortunately, no knowledge was given to him as to what that reason might be.

The stream of knowledge ended, finally; and Fred knew exactly what he needed to do. Right now, he was so different from the multi-element Core that floated in front of him because of the new Light and Air elements in his internal Core structure. The simple and obvious solution was to get rid of them...at least temporarily.

Mana was Mana, after all, and the knowledge of how each element worked was ingrained in his mind; in the past, even when he was completely drained of all of his elemental Mana, he still knew how to use each of them – even when they weren't later organized into Cores. Using that assurance of knowledge, Fred looked inside of himself, and he focused on his Light Core, which was just starting to become full of Mana again. With a thought, he emptied the entire Core – all 98 units of Light Mana – and immediately reverted it back to Unconverted Mana. It was much easier

than he thought it would be; it was as if the Mana *wanted* to be in that unfocused state.

When it was just a blob of UM floating in his body, he placed it in his Human Core and then turned his attention back to the Light Core. He could practically feel his normal Mana Conversion skill trying to create more Light Mana to fill it back up, so he had to do this quickly; he hadn't figured out how to turn his automatic Dungeon Core skills off, quite yet. Holding the Light Core in his mind, he *willed* it to go away; not necessarily shattered and destroyed, but more simply dissolving away. The Core fought against him for a moment, and Fred worried that it wouldn't work; but eventually, it just...faded away.

There was a temporary spike of pain in his chest as it disappeared, but it was nothing compared to what he had experienced earlier. Better yet, even with the Core "gone", he intuitively knew that he'd be able to create it, again, if he wanted to in the future. With that done, he did the same with the Air Core in his body, until he was left with just his Human Core.

That was exactly what he needed; he looked at the multi-element Core again and he felt those little tendrils he had noticed before reaching out and grabbing hold of his Human Core. As soon as that happened, Fred felt a jolt go through his body as the connection was made; and instantly, he could feel the access to his missing elements available again. That wasn't really the important part, because Fred realized he could technically create more elemental Cores if he wanted to; what he really needed was to gain control of his *territory* again.

As he had suspected, even being reconnected to the multi-element Core again wasn't enough to give him access to the territory and dungeon again. Fred was still too different from what he was before, even if he didn't have the Light and Air Cores anymore, to have it be that easy. He

did find that he would probably be able to absorb the multi-element Core, now and bring the entire thing back into his body; he also intuitively knew that doing so wouldn't give him his territory back. Just as he thought before, the only way to ensure that he acquired it was to become part of the Core, itself.

He knew that it would mean that he was no longer a "Human" with a body that could walk around; if it meant saving everyone, though, including everyone in the Human race, it was something that he had to do. It was possible that there might be another solution that would prevent the collapse of his territory, but for the literal life of him, he couldn't think of it.

Looking back into his bedroom, he frowned as he saw Eisa sleeping peacefully on his bed; disappointment and a little despair surged through his entire being as he realized he'd never be able to do those...things...that she'd flat out told him that she wanted to do. *Is saving the world worth missing out on her happiness? Or **my** happiness?*

There was only one real answer to that.

Sighing, Fred turned back to the floating object in the middle of the room and clasped his hands around it tightly....



# Chapter 13

The process of being absorbed by a Dungeon Core was extraordinarily easy. All Fred had to do was imagine sending his entire self into the multi-element Core: mind, body, and Human Core. Just like the elemental Cores inside of his body that he removed, there was some initial resistance, though it was only temporary; a Dungeon Core, even one that he created to act as a separate part of him, *wanted* to absorb Mana, after all. Except instead of just Mana, however, the rest of Fred was essentially using the Unconverted Mana that was being sucked up as a way in – a back door, as it were.

Unfortunately, the multi-element Core couldn't use – or as it turned out, even *store* – all of the UM it was being fed and tried to spit it back out, but Fred forcefully kept it inside, using all of his skill at manipulating Mana. His efforts weren't enough; it wasn't long before he realized that he wouldn't be able to transfer his Human Core inside of the colorful Core he was connecting with, as it was entirely incompatible. Abandoning that thought, and as he didn't want the whole thing to explode, he ended up, instead, condensing a lot of the Unconverted Mana to reinforce the outer shell, thickening it up considerably.

Before that finished, however, Fred felt his knees give out as horrendous pain suffused his entire being; it was so incredible that all he could think about was how he wanted it to end, making the suffering he had experienced earlier from using his Mana Implosion technique seem like a papercut. He wanted to scream and break contact with the multi-element Core, but his body was frozen in agony; his normal bodily functions even

stopped, as he couldn't feel his lungs breathing or his heart beating in his chest.

What felt like a decade later, his feet started to go numb – or at least he couldn't feel them anymore. With an enormous effort of will, Fred physically made his eyes move downwards, until he could see that they hadn't gone numb...they were just *gone*. It didn't take long for the rest of his body to be consumed, moving up the legs, waist, and chest. He wasn't sure at first how he was even staying upright anymore, but then some part of his mind identified the feeling he got when the world seemed to stop around him. *Am I going to be frozen like this forever?*

It wasn't forever, in fact, but only another few seconds, as his arms and then his head started to disappear. It was strange, but even when his vision cut off as his eyes were consumed by the multi-element Core, he could see everything happening to him with what he thought was Mana Sight. The biggest difference, however, was that the origin of the Sight wasn't where he was used to it being – his own head; instead, he was fairly certain that it was coming from inside the Core.

The pain lasted until the last fingertip touching the Core disappeared, and then there was a complete and absolute numbness of physical feeling that he had never experienced before in his entire life. Even when he was healing from some sort of injury or other and was partially numb, he was aware of feeling *something* – even if it was only a slight pressure. Now there was...nothing.

*Is this what a Dungeon Core feels? Or should I say, doesn't feel?* If that was the case, then Fred could see why many of the Cores he had met or heard about seemed to be so distant from the problems around them, as well as disparaging towards Humans. If one couldn't *feel* the world around them, if they couldn't experience the way Humans lived their lives (for

good or ill), then are they really *living*? He could see how easy it would be to become callous towards Human life when you couldn't relate, to see them only as "livestock" that were there to provide sustenance and the opportunity for personal growth.

Luckily, Fred didn't have that problem, because he had experienced life as a Human; even if he couldn't feel anything now, he had the knowledge of the difficulties, challenges, and frailties of the race to fall back on. To be vulnerable was to be alive, and only by surmounting those vulnerabilities would one grow and become stronger, only to face more trials along the way. That was why – for the most part – millions of Adventurers around the world did what they did: to get stronger and challenge themselves. Otherwise, what was the point of living?

Dungeon Cores, on the other hand, hadn't had those vulnerabilities in a long, long time. From the information Fred had received from the Supreme of Air, he knew that it was rare for a Core to be destroyed, even when the factions attacked each other; so, the threat of destruction was a relatively distant one. *There has to be a way to change that; from what she said, the Air Supreme wants something along that line, as well.*

It took Fred almost an hour to discover that – even having sacrificed his Human body, as well as sacrificed a life of love with Eisa – he *still* did not have access to his territory and dungeon. Time seemed to pass at a different speed as a Dungeon Core, which made sense; Cores tended to live for a *long* time, and if they had to experience every second of it, then he could see many of them going crazy from boredom. *Why didn't this work?*

Looking at the object he now inhabited, he could see the reason right away. Even though he had been sucked up into the multi-element Core, nothing much had changed; it still looked the same, though the Unconverted Mana he had condensed around it had made the outer shell

much thicker, but that was about it. That was actually the least of his worries, however, because now he couldn't even pull up his Dungeon Core Status nor his Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface. The second one was obvious enough, and not really a major cause for concern, because the sub-dermal implant was no longer in his body; looking down on the floor he saw it lying there, where it had likely fallen when his body had been absorbed.

It was the first one that he was a little worried about. True, the Dungeon Core Status was really just a way to quantify the different aspects of the current condition of his Core, but it was also useful to know exactly what was going on. The thing that he had used it for the most was to see how much Mana he possessed; as it was, he could sort of *feel* the Mana to which he now had access again, though he did not have enough experience to know exactly how much it really was.

What he did know was that the process wasn't complete. Fred's consciousness might be inhabiting the multi-element Core that he had created to act like a "normal" Dungeon Core, but it didn't match who *he* was at all. Now that he had a means and ability to change that from the inside of, instead of outside of, the Core, it was time to change that.

Keeping Mana condensed, or changing it from the form it was currently in, turned out to be exceedingly easy as a Dungeon Core. Fred thought it was the fact that he wasn't torn between two forms of existences, as well as a Core's expertise in Mana, that made the difference. Breaking the outer shell covering the entire structure was as simple as a thought, and he let the Unconverted Mana from which it was constructed float free to join the rest bobbing around the room. At the same time, he kept the Mana Cores condensed together in the jumble they were already in, so that they

wouldn't come apart – because they had already started to do that, even before he removed the shell.

The next part was the hardest, mainly because it felt like it took a while; again, time's passing didn't affect him quite as much as it used to, but he was conscious of the need to hurry. There was another potential army of Fire and/or Dark Defenders out there – followed by Light and Air at some point – burrowing underground, and he needed to be done before they arrived.

Fred wasn't exactly sure how long he spent converting little blobs of Unconverted Mana into Light and Air, as well as additional Nature Mana to bolster the tiny green sphere, but he estimated that it was nearly a day's worth of time. At one point, he saw Eisa enter the room and find his SDIA on the floor; she picked it up in a panic and raced out with a distressed look on her face that he wished he could do something about, but he was too entrenched in his work to interrupt. The only thing he took a moment to do was to answer Deecy when she communicated with him shortly after Eisa left.

***“Fred? What did you do? Where are you?”***

*“I’m...fine, Deecy. I can’t Communicate for long, because all my concentration is on holding the Core I’m now a part of together. Please assure everyone that I’m doing all I can to save us...and tell Eisa that I’m sorry. This was the only way.”* Fred realized that it was a lame excuse, especially for someone that he thought he was in love with, but it was the only way...or so he told himself. He was positive that if Eisa had known about it beforehand, she would’ve tried everything she could to prevent him from doing what had to be done. The betrayed look in her eyes when she

came back after Deecy passed on his message was bad enough; he didn't think he would have had the strength and fortitude to deliberately go against her wishes, had she tried to stop him.

"Why, Fred? Why did you leave me?" she asked, repeating the questions over and over as she sat on the stool near his Core, tears running down her face. As much as it pained him, he did everything he could to ignore her, because he couldn't afford to become distracted from what he was doing. He was conscious of how heartless, cruel, and inconsiderate of her feelings it was, but he had to hope that she would understand the why behind the sacrifice he had made. While it certainly was that in part, it wasn't only his body that he had sacrificed; it was their potential future as a couple that he had sacrificed. Even though it was a bit pretentious to say that he had given up their life together to save the Human race, that didn't mean it wasn't true.

Finally, he created a large Light Core and an Air Core of the same size through the use of their particular Manas, with a shell of condensed Unconverted Mana that he pulled from the air. He also broke the UM covering the green sphere in his structure and added condensed Nature Mana to it, bringing it to approximately the same size as the others.

This next part was going to be tricky. The territory that he had originally set up had been done using only five of the elements, but now, of course, he had two additional ones that he knew how to use. That knowledge made it part of his identity, so it had to be included in the structure that he had originally used to create the territory – otherwise he couldn't take control. To do that, he had to break the current structure apart and add the two new elemental Cores; it would only be Light and Air, and not a Human Core, unfortunately, because that wasn't part of the original multi-element Core he had created. His experience being absorbed into the

Core made it plain that he really needed a body in order to have a Core made from Unconverted Mana – so that was, sadly, not going to work in this case.

Cautiously, Fred broke apart the Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, and Dark spheres that comprised his current multi-element Core and had them drift away from each other. At the same time, he continued to envision the connection that existed between them, as well as attempting to strengthen that bond at the same time. It worked to keep the structure intact as the elemental Cores created a two-dimensional pentagonal shape, though the process of doing so was stressful on his concentration for the first time since he had been absorbed.

Slowly, he separated the existing elements, moving them apart so that he could insert the two new ones – Light and Air – that he had created. He wasn't sure whether there was a correct order in which they had to be placed; therefore, he ended up just using the same order of faction territories surrounding the Convergence, for lack of a better idea. On top was the green Nature Core, followed by Dark on the right. Next was Fire, then Light, Air, Earth, and finally Water, next to Nature. When they were all in place, Fred started to connect them together using small tendrils of each type of Mana, just like the previous ones had been constructed.

Everything was going splendidly, if he said so himself, despite the intense concentration the process required. Every elemental Core was connected to each other, crossing over and under tendrils until there was only one more that had to be placed. As he ran the last line connecting the Light and Fire Cores, all of the tendrils flashed once, signifying that the entire structure was complete. But just as Fred suddenly felt his access to the all-important Territorial Sight come back – *his territory collapsed*.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, similar to those moments in the past when time seemed to stop – though this time, the world continued to move. Fred was looking around the Convergence with his Sight when his territory fell; he could tell right away that it disappeared for the same reason he originally couldn't reconnect to the Core – the elements his current state was in weren't compatible. As soon as he connected everything together, there wasn't a Fire-Water-Nature-Earth-Dark Dungeon Core in charge of it anymore – because he now had all seven elements together.

In the slowed state of shock Fred was experiencing, hours seemed to pass before the first of the factions started to expand its territory farther into the Convergence, though in reality it was only a few seconds. The release of the pressure pushing against their assault was probably as much of a surprise to the surrounding Dungeon Cores as it was to Fred, and it obviously took them a little time to recover and continue to advance without hindrance. After the Dark faction started moving, the others followed immediately afterwards – as if they were waiting for some sort of signal to start.

With nothing preventing them from coming closer to Allroads, the borders were expanding at a tremendous pace. Fred quickly estimated that he had less than five seconds before the entire Convergence was covered, so he had to act fast.

Establishing a territory in the middle of so many concentrated element sources was far easier than anywhere else, so it didn't take Fred long to send out his mind to each of the seven elements – including his two new ones – to establish the territory again. Within seconds, he felt his territory spring into existence, stopping the foreign borders from advancing any farther. His response was actually fairly quick, though he could feel



that he had lost connection with the dungeon as a whole. Before he did anything else, Fred needed to take care of that particular connection before the entire dungeon collapsed, so he used small amounts of his elemental Mana to essentially *replace* the Unconverted Mana that was being used previously as upkeep.

Since he didn't have a store of Unconverted Mana in the shape of a Human Core, he was forced to use elemental Mana, which ate into his maximum Mana for each, but only by approximately 65 Mana. He found that if he matched up the Mana element with who was defending them in each room, it only took about half of the Unconverted Mana that it had before; it was either that, or his new form had some advantages over his previous Human state that he hadn't expected. It still ate into his maximum Mana for those elements, but it was more than worth it to ensure the dungeon didn't collapse.

His dungeon and his people safe, Fred finally looked to see how bad the situation was outside...and found that it was not good. Even though it had only taken approximately three seconds to reestablish his territory, the factions had come very close – too close for comfort, in fact. All but Dark was now only 150 feet from the walls of Allroads, which meant that if they kept up their assault on Fred's territory, they'd be touching it within two weeks; Dark, since it had reacted faster than the others, was only about 75 feet away or so, and would be at the walls in a week.

While he had obtained the elements necessary to slow down Light and Air's faster contraction of his territory, the process of upgrading his territory had unintentionally made everything worse. Whereas he had something like a month and half to prepare previously, Fred had disastrously doomed them all that much faster.

***“Chareese! Roady! We’ve got a problem...”***

Fred used his Mana Communication skill to contact the two Shards, which he found was much easier to do now that he was a full-fledged Dungeon Core. He didn’t have time to look at what exactly had changed, but he would certainly do that when he wasn’t trying to organize some sort of defense. He told the Nature and Light Shards about what had happened, and they immediately ran to alert the Allroads Government as to the change and what it meant. Guards and DAS members taking their turns along the wall were already panicking, as the Defenders pushing against the borders miles away were disappearing and popping up near the new line to resume their push. To the Humans, it probably looked like they were about to come under an assault, because they couldn’t actually see the territorial borders.

Fortunately, that wasn’t what was happening, despite appearances. This was still a siege, and there was no reason to attack right now when they were so close; all the factions had to do was wait another few weeks, and the city would fall, as their territories crossed over the stone walls. *If Dungeon Cores are anything, they’re certainly patient.* Even though he was extremely new to the whole “crystallized” state of being, Fred could tell that a week or two was practically a blink of an eye to those of who had already lived for centuries.

Of course, now that the battle lines were so close to the city, the people of Allroads weren’t going to let their city fall without a fight. Neither would Fred, as he was planning on using everything he could to keep them away until he figured out how to save everyone. After what he had learned and discovered lately, he had some faint ideas on how to accomplish that, but it was going to take some time. They were slowly running out of that time, unfortunately, so it was going to take a group

effort; he couldn't do it all on his own, and his Shards and Guild members had shown through their defense of the dungeon that they were more than capable of doing the impossible. With an entire city full of thousands of Adventurers, he couldn't even imagine what they could accomplish.

Before that could happen, though, Fred and his friends had to protect themselves against the Dark and Fire Defenders coming from underground. A quick look at their progress showed that the Fire faction was already within his territory underground, which meant that the Dark faction was probably close to that as well. At Fire's current rate of progress digging through the dirt and stone underground, he estimated that they would be there within six hours.

*It all just keeps getting better and better, doesn't it?*

# Chapter 14

The Supreme of Air was caught off-guard when – all of a sudden – Fredwynklemossering’s territory collapsed in the Convergence. She worried, for a moment, that the Dualborn had been killed...or *destroyed*, if that was the correct term for someone like him...as the factions took advantage of the absence of the Dualborn’s territory to expand further into the area. It took them a few seconds to recover from the shock that Air was feeling; as soon as the factions got over that, however, they raced for the center. The Dark Core there took a commanding lead, and it appeared as if he was going to reach and cover the entire Human habitation before all the others could get close. Just outside the Human’s defensive wall, though, it stopped as another territory sprang into place, halting the expansion immediately.

After the previous Supreme Council meeting, the Supreme of Air had been wondering why the Dualborn hadn’t used his new elements, yet, to prevent both Light and her own faction from contracting his territory border. The “Cursedborn” was reportedly still alive, at least from reports that she had from some sources in the Light faction, as he had been seen escaping over the border after the initial group of captives had been seen fleeing. She knew that he was almost killed at that point, but that he had somehow managed to survive, and Fredwynklemossering had even destroyed one of Light’s stronger Defenders during the crossing.

The Light Defenders’ attack at the border hadn’t been all for naught, however, as two of the Humans who had come with Fredwynklemossering to his meeting with her avatar had been killed, just before reaching the relative safety of the Dualborn’s territory. She only knew about that

because the Light Core defending the border was one who liked to brag about his accomplishments...and gloss over his failures, of course. Failures such as *letting the “Cursedborn” escape*.

Air had expected another Council meeting after that; yet, other than some non-critical Communication passed back and forth, nothing had come of it. Even after the Nature and Water factions had teamed up to attack the Dualborn’s dungeon – and had failed spectacularly – there hadn’t been a call to convene together. She supposed that Dark had probably expected (or even hoped) that they would fail, so that he and his Alliance partner could finish the job.

Information about what exactly happened inside of the dungeon was only trickling out, as the Cores near the Convergence probably didn’t want to advertise their failures so openly. That, and they probably didn’t want Dark and Fire to have any advantages over the others with information; if those two ended up being defeated, as well, then they’d all be equal losers. It really wasn’t the time for those kinds of petty, factional pride games; but it was too ingrained in their nature for most of them to ignore a chance to one-up the others. Especially when it came to Alliances, despite the fact that the Alliances, themselves, were artificially created by the Supreme Council for reasons completely unrelated to pride.

For a moment, the Alliances had forgotten their fear of the Cursedborn, for which the Alliances were originally formed. They’d forgotten, as there weren’t any visible and overt threats to the Dungeon Cores’ way of life. While Fredwynklemossering was destined to be even more of an issue, in the future, to the others, the seeming fact that he was trapped and would eventually die let them think that they could play their games. When they discovered that the Dualborn now had access to the Air

element, that nonchalance would be guaranteed to change, especially when Dark found out that fact.

***“AIR!!!! WHAT HAPPENED?”***

Dark’s Communication wasn’t a surprise, though the anger and hostility in his tone certainly were. She couldn’t figure out why he was yelling at her. When she looked closer at the territory that had sprung up in the middle of the Convergence, though, it all made sense. *I guess it was probably a good thing that Fredwynklemossering didn’t reveal his extra elements until now.*

*“I have no idea what you’re—oh. How did he get my element?!”* she Communicated back to Dark, doing her best to effect ignorance, surprise, and incredulity all in the same question. *“I haven’t had any reports of any Air faction Cores being destroyed—”*

***“NO! This is all your fault! I knew there was something off about you during the last meeting, and now I know what it was. You betrayed us by giving that Cursedborn your element!”***

She tried to deny his accusation, and to even sound affronted...but she barely even got the chance to speak before she was cut off again.

***“Don’t think for a moment that I didn’t hear about how that Light Core had her element stolen, before getting it back – along with an increase in her Core’s Crystallization! Your avatar was larger than mine last time I saw you, which could only mean—”***

*“I think you’re delusional, Dark. You’re letting this Cursedborn get to you, and your fear and irrationality is clouding your reason, making you see things where there isn’t anything. I didn’t give this **thing** my element; I know better than most the danger it represents. Besides, how in the world would I be able to do that, being thousands of miles away?”* For once, cutting Dark off in the middle of his speech actually had some kind of positive effect. A moment or two went by as Air watched the Convergence without Dark responding; all of the factions were absorbing their Defenders where the old border used to be, and they were slowly creating them again where that border was now.

When Dark finally spoke again, his tone was much less combative and more grudgingly accepting of her argument. In fact, if she wasn’t imagining things, he even sounded...terrified.

***“Fine. I will admit that you may have a point, because I am scared. I’m afraid that letting this Cursedborn become too powerful will see the end of all of us, this time. Regardless of whether or not you were the one who gave this creature your element, that’s in the past, now; we need to work as a united Council in the future. To that end, I’m calling another meeting to discuss our next step, since the additional element changes things.”***

Air was speechless – shocked, even. Dark had gone from hysterically raving at her to conciliatory toward her, within the space of a few moments – and it worried her. *I wonder if he’s finally starting to lose his grip on reality?* There was an occasional Core who would start to go a bit insane, after a few millennia, either from supreme isolation or from just frailty of their minds, but fortunately, it was a rarity. Having the

responsibility of being on the Supreme Council, Air thought, with so much to do and regulate, saved those on the Council from such a fate; one lacked the time to go insane.

*Maybe all one of us needs is some sort of trigger and we'll snap, though; it's entirely possible that the introduction of a Dualborn was Dark's trigger.*

Regardless of her thoughts on the matter, however, Air knew it was the wisest course of action to go along with him, for the moment. *"I'll be there in just a moment, Dark; and you're right, we need to stop blaming each other and come up with a solution to end this Cursedborn threat once and for all."* She didn't really want that to happen, of course, but she wasn't about to say that.

Luckily, Air hadn't spent all of her Mana on reequipping her dungeon with more than a few token Defenders and Defenses towards the beginning, because a thorough check a few miles around her entrance showed no threats anywhere near. In fact, just like it had been lately, there wasn't anything within 15 or 20 miles; even then, there weren't any Humans who appeared as though they were interested in or equipped to invade *any* dungeon, let alone hers.

*This is why I did what I did, right? Because of reasons like that?* The Supreme of Air sincerely thought that this deal with the Dualborn was the only chance both races had to survive...she just hoped that it wasn't too late.

Assembling enough Mana to create her avatar was easy enough, therefore, and after only about thirty seconds after ending her conversation with Dark, she materialized inside the small cave they used for their meetings—



Where she found herself immediately surrounded by every Supreme Council member. Bands of different Mana elements quickly wrapped themselves around her avatar, creating a cage whence she immediately tried to escape from by transporting back to her dungeon and territory. She felt herself start to dematerialize, but only by the barest amount...she was too late. Caught by surprise, the bands of Mana had been able to trap her avatar there; unfortunately, she was now at the mercy of those surrounding her.

“What’s the meaning of this?! Let me go! You have no right—”

Air cut her indignant speech short as she realized that the Mana surrounding her wasn’t just Water, Fire, Earth, Nature, and Dark; to see Light’s element there was a betrayal that she didn’t see coming. That wasn’t the worst of it, however, because a band of yellow Air Mana trapped her in her avatar as well. *What? How?*

Her question was answered by Dark a few moments later, as he moved his own avatar from in front of Air and revealed another yellow Dungeon Core behind her. “See, didn’t I tell you she’s larger than I am? There’s only one way that could’ve happened that we know of; your Supreme betrayed not only your faction, but the entire Council, as well,” Dark explained to the new Core. The Supreme of Air recognized him immediately.

“Aethrojaxxer, I don’t know what these others told you, but there’s been some misunderstand—” Air started, before she was cut off by the glowing, yellow S-9<sup>th</sup>-Rated Core.

“I didn’t want to believe it, when the Supreme of Dark called me here, but it’s more than obvious by looking at you that you’ve grown larger. We’ve all heard about this Human – which I’ve been just recently told is something called a ‘Dualborn’ or ‘Cursedborn’, whatever that is – who can somehow increase a Core’s Core Structure Level through some arcane

means in exchange for something. I still don't understand everything, but I'm inclined to believe them, because I can see the result with my own senses."

The Supreme of Air couldn't believe what was happening, nor what she was hearing. "I would *never* betray our faction or the Supreme Council – you should know that! We've been friends for longer than I can remember—"

"—Which is why this is so hard for me. I never wanted this position; now I feel duty-bound to take your place and do what I can to fix the problems you've created," Aethrojaxxer told her solemnly. Air knew exactly what he was talking about; she had asked the other Core multiple times over the years if he wanted her spot on the Council, though he had always turned her down, stating that he didn't want the responsibility.

"We still don't know how she did it, of course. But the evidence is too great to ignore," Dark took over the conversation again, drowning out Air's protestations of innocence. "What she's done will have *dire* consequences, which could even – if not stopped now – lead to the destruction of our *entire* race. This Cursedborn was enough of a threat before; now that it has access to *every* element, this whole situation could evolve from a major annoyance into a potential disaster that could change the face of this world for centuries to come."

The Supreme of Air peered at the other Cores in desperate hope. Sadly, despite their appearance as different-colored glowing stones, she had been around them long enough to sense that none of them were on her side in this. Not much could be done when Dark's accusations that they all, to her unfortunate surprise, believed were essentially true.

Now that Air's Core had been trussed up in Mana from all of the elements and fundamentally trapped in place, the others separated into their

normal areas of the room, with Aethrojaxxer near her – but not too close, of course. She hadn't stopped trying to break free from her cage, though she knew it was hopeless as she finally identified what exactly was keeping her there. The Chains of Servitude were usually used on influential – though much lower-Rated – Dungeon Cores during Territorial Warfare, to capture and transport the Core somewhere else. Normally, it took five Cores working together of a single faction to create the Chains, and that was for a much lower-Rated captured Core; it didn't work on those Cores who were near the same Rating or higher.

The conspiracy among seven powerful Supreme Dungeon Cores, embodying every single element, clearly bypassed those restrictions; the former Supreme of Air was as trapped as those lower-Rated Cores would've been. Fortunately, the Chains only lasted for about a week before they started to fade, and could only be replaced when they faded altogether; if they did decide to keep her avatar that long, then she would have a chance to break free at that point. She could already tell that Aethrojaxxer's Chains were a bit weaker than the others, either through his reluctance to actually use them on his Supreme or because of his lower Rating; regardless of the reason, that would be the first point in her prison that she would attempt to break through when they weakened even further.

Any chance at escape was going to take a while, though; despite it being weaker, the new Supreme of Air's Chains – as well as the others' – performed their purpose quite well. Thus bound, The Supreme of Air was unable to manipulate even the very small pulse it would have taken to dematerialize her avatar, to initiate the return to her actual Core. Nor could she Communicate or observe through Territorial Sight anywhere else, because that also took the tiniest sliver of Mana to do that. A quick inventory of what she could do revealed that she was only able to speak to

those in the room, and that was it. Air was well and truly stuck where she was.

Threats, protestations of innocence, and pleas for being let out of the Chains were, as she expected, entirely ignored, though she could tell that at least Aethrojaxxer heard her. Really, though, it was all a cover to learn what they were talking about without seeming too interested.

“...we’ve already dispatched some of our forces to take care of that. They should be in position within a few weeks, to finish the job,” Earth was offering, responding to something that Dark had asked. Air had missed the question, and she had no idea what he meant. She had a feeling that if it had to do with the Convergence, then a few weeks seemed like a long time for something to happen there. Unfortunately, no one expanded upon that statement from Earth – though she sensed that her replacement was doing everything he could to ignore her – as they had moved on to other matters.

“Now, with the revelation that this Cursedborn now has access to all of the elements – thanks to a certain *someone* – we need to change our plans. Our borders are now extremely close to the livestock living above the creature’s dungeon, so *now* might be the right time to attack,” Dark continued, leading the Council where he wanted.

“But if we bring in the larger Defenders, there’s still the Convergence to think about,” Water mentioned, which was a good point.

“We’re going to have to take that risk, because we can’t allow the Cursedborn to get any more powerful than it already is. Now that our territorial borders are closer, we should be able to navigate our way through the elemental concentrations with a minimum of disturbance.”

The Supreme Council was relatively quiet for the next minute as they considered what Dark was saying. Finally, Light broke the silence. “That makes sense. But what is stopping this Cursedborn from doing what

he did to our Defenders? That thing destroyed hundreds of Defenders within seconds, trapping all of the Mana inside of them so that the Core currently on the border couldn't reuse it."

"Exactly," Water added, surprising them all. "That's what happened when my faction of Defenders invaded this Cursedborn's dungeon along with Nature's faction; one of our Azure Hydras was completely consumed by whatever was done to it, as well as quite a few of the less powerful Defenders. If that same thing is used on our forces, then they won't last long."

Nature added his confirmation to that, saying essentially the same thing. It gave a little more information to Air about what had happened during the failed assault on Fredwynklemossering's dungeon, though *how* poorly they actually did was still a mystery. Regardless, the danger of what the Dualborn could do was real, so they all took it seriously – even the former Supreme of Air. She was still convinced that Fredwynklemossering was going to somehow be their savior, but that didn't mean that she wasn't a little scared at what he had accomplished so far.

"I'm well aware of that; I think we should continue our attack underground—"

"Why should we do that? This Cursedborn is evidently too well-defended to fall to an assault from below, especially if it's just your faction along with Fire – no offense," Aethrojaxxer spoke for the first time during the meeting, hesitantly interrupting their *de facto* leader.

"As much as I'd like to refute that, because our Alliance is obviously stronger—" Dark said with a tone of superiority, before he continued more subdued— "I have to agree with you. Now is not the time to let pride stand in our way. So, I propose that we work together. It won't just be Fire and my faction attacking, but all of your factions, as well. We'll

keep this Cursedborn busy underground while we destroy the livestock above; that way, it won't have an opportunity to defend them. If everything works out, we'll have this over within the day, and we can all go back to what we were doing before. Well, *most* of us will," he finished up, Dark's words clearly meant for Air.

The former Supreme of Air listened to them plan the attack, which was going to be in just over twelve hours. That gave them all enough time for the digging of the tunnels to be accomplished, and for the larger Defenders to get into place...and then it would be time for the largest cooperative attack in the last 15,000 years.

# Chapter 15

Unlike the extremely slow state of Fred's mind during the collapse/reestablishment of his territory, the next few hours seemed to pass by entirely too fast. After letting the Allroads Council and other Governmental contacts hear about the situation outside the walls, Chareese and Roady were back down in the dungeon, where Fred was just finishing up the replacement of all of the Defenses around the dungeon, as well as all of the theoretically permanent installations. This included Chareese's room, which had seen all of its walls and dirt destroyed by the two Emerald Dragons, a little earlier in the day.

*I have to say, there are some benefits to being in this Dungeon Core form.* While Fred missed his physical body and the sensations it had imparted – both good *and* bad – he appreciated the fact that he didn't need to rest. He was exhausted after the invasion by the Nature and Water factions, and it wasn't only because of the defense itself. It was also because he couldn't remember the last time he had actually slept. Now, though, he didn't feel tired at all; *rushed*, but not tired.

Another unexpected benefit was having retained his ability to use his Human Adventurer spells and Abilities, even though he wasn't technically Human anymore. While he didn't have a "Human" Core inside of his new form, he could still gather up some of the Unconverted Mana floating around his Core Room and manipulate it in the same way as he would when he had a body. It took him a little to figure out how exactly to do that, and he found that all he had to do was pull the UM into his main Core and have it pass through one of his elemental Cores, changing it into the type he needed for the spell or Ability. The key was imagining what

came out as “Power,” instead of Mana, because it turned out that he couldn’t do the same for creating large quantities of elemental Mana.

That wasn’t quite accurate, though, because he theoretically *could* create large quantities of Mana – though it would take a while. The change happened just as fast as his Mana Conversion would handle it, but he had to do it manually, instead of letting it handle the process itself. It made sense, he supposed, because he didn’t have a store of UM to convert, anymore. The benefit was that now, he could *choose* which element he needed at the time, instead of it just filling up whatever was the emptiest first.

Fred regretted not trying to create and integrate a Human Core when he was recovering his territory. He still wasn’t sure if it would have actually worked, but now he wouldn’t really know if it would have succeeded or not. At the time, he was convinced that it was the right choice, since the Core didn’t seem to want to accept it; now, after finding that he could still use Unconverted Mana just as easily as he could when he had a Human body – he wasn’t so sure. Unfortunately, now he was afraid that trying to add it in at this time would cause him to lose even more territory to the surrounding factions.

Fred’s Adventurer spells and Abilities yielded yet another benefit: longer range. Normally, using Power to create something far away was impossible, as he needed to be within visual range to use it. Now, though, his “visual range” included the entire dungeon *and* territory; therefore, he could, for example, cast a Flamestrike spell at anything he could see. Or use Conjure Object to create an extremely heavy block of metal above the head of an attacking Defender and let it drop. The potential was nearly endless, though it was still limited by how much Unconverted Mana was available. That, and as he no longer had an SDIA implant – and therefore



he didn't have a Dungeon Adventurer Interface – he had to access his memory to shape the spells and abilities he wanted to use.

Also, because he didn't have a SDIA, Fred found that he couldn't see anyone else's, either. That was disappointing, naturally; fortunately, he still had a Dungeon Core Status.

Dungeon Core Status
<b>Fredwynklemossering</b>
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth-Dark-Light-Air Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 28 Fire Mana: 515/515 (65) Water Mana: 503/503 (65) Nature Mana: 502/502 (65) Earth Mana: 509/509 (65) Dark Mana: 511/511 (65) Light Mana: 561/561 Air Mana: 561/561 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 0 Unconverted Essence: 0
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Master Mana Conversion: 45% Master Mana Absorption: 15% Master Core Crystallization: 12% Master Mana Communication: 5% Expert Defender Creation: 57% Expert Mana-formed Object Creation: 46% Expert Dungeon Core Absorption: 94% Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 95% Intermediate Dungeon Creation: 98% Intermediate Defense Creation: 95% Novice Essence Conversion: 13%
Dungeon Information
Maximum Dungeon Rating: S-5 <sup>th</sup> Current Dungeon Rating: E-9 <sup>th</sup> Current Mana Upkeep: 65 Fire, 65 Water, 65 Nature, 65 Earth, 65 Dark Number of Rooms: 42 Number of Defenders: 2 (500 Earth Mana) Number of Defenses: 87 (500 Fire Mana, 480 Water Mana, 500 Nature Mana, 510 Dark Mana) Defender/Defense Range Limit: 65000—72000 Mana Reward Count: 0 Points

Reward Range Limit: 43000—50000 Points  
(Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)

Some other things had changed for the better on his Status, as well. The most prevalent of those was his ascension to the Master Mana Communication skill. Fred could tell it would allow him to Communicate across much longer distances; though, until he completely mastered the skill, it would take a bit of Mana to sustain a conversation with anyone outside of his territory. Not only that, but it wasn't as limited as it used to be; before, he could only use it to communicate with nearby Dungeon Cores, or with those whom he was deeply connected to, such as Deecy, Chareese, Roady, and Ravenne. Now...well, now he could mentally speak with *anybody* – Dungeon Core, Shard, or Human.

*“I’m so sorry, Eisa, but this was the only way I could see to take control of my territory again.”*

“I don’t believe that, Fred. There had to have been another way,” the Earth Shard lamented, gently stroking his Core at the same time. Although Fred could not experience that intimacy physically, it seemed to make Eisa happy, and didn’t really interfere with what he was doing elsewhere in the dungeon. “Couldn’t you have just waited until...*you know...*”

It took him a moment to comprehend what she was saying, but based on their relationship lately, as well as his promise to spend more alone time with her, it was fairly obvious. *“I think...no, I **know**...that if we had done **that**, I probably wouldn’t have had the courage to sacrifice myself in the way I needed to. I hope you can understand what I had to do to save, not just you and the Core Power Guild, but everyone in Allroads. And, if we manage to survive the next few weeks, this could end up saving the entire **world**.”*

“I...understand that. But my world won’t be the same without you in it.”

An ache of sorrow and longing for the woman sobbing onto his Core stabbed deep into his non-existent heart; he might not be able to *physically* feel anything, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have emotions. *It’s amazing, actually; even without being able to hold each other, to touch one another physically, this love I’m feeling must’ve been what my parents felt for each other. It had to have been: Otherwise, they wouldn’t have disobeyed their factions and hid out far to the north, away from anyone and anything.*

In that moment, Fred felt like he would give up everything, just to be somewhere safe alone with Eisa. Theoretically, he could see himself accomplishing, if he put his mind to it. Unfortunately, his leaving would nearly guarantee that no one else in Allroads would survive. There was so much more responsibility on his figurative shoulders than his parents had when they left, so it wasn’t really a good option for him. Being selfish like that would cause so much irreparable damage that it was silly to even consider it.

“Do you think you’ll ever have...a body again?” she finally asked, her sobbing tapering off as she attempted to compose herself.

Now *that* was a good question. “*Honestly, I have no idea. The fact that I was already a half Human/half Dungeon Core means that it could be possible to become that way again. I haven’t a clue how to go about that, though; I don’t want you to get your hopes up. Rest assured: As soon as we’ve survived the coming days, I shall explore what is possible. I certainly don’t **want** to spend the rest of my life with you as a floating Dungeon Core, if I can help it.*”

That seemed to mollify her a little, and as she wiped her tears away, she said, “You do that, Fred. Now, I better go and start replacing some of my Defenders throughout the dungeon. How long did you say we have until the next wave gets here?”

Fred was originally thinking that the Fire faction would arrive with Dark in about six hours, but they seemed to slow down rather than speed up. Now, three hours into fixing up his dungeon to prepare for them, it appeared as though it was going to be a little less than ten hours before they broke through to his dungeon entrance. It was perplexing, but he wasn’t going to complain, since it gave him some additional time to reinforce what Defenses he already had, with perhaps some time to create new ones.

Creating new Defenses was rendered *much* easier by the last major change that had occurred when he had become a full-fledged Dungeon Core. For the first time in his short life, Fred was able to absorb the ambient Mana drifting up from the Convergence; no longer did he have to rely on the deaths of foreign Defenders or the slow accumulation of converted Mana to refill his elemental Cores. The best part of it was that, when a Core was full, most of the Mana that he absorbed over his maximum was released into the room as Unconverted Mana; there was a small portion of the absorbed, ambient Mana that helped to increase that maximum gradually, though it seemed to progress more slowly than what he was used to during his previous Conversion process.

*“I think we have at least eight hours before we’re invaded again – though be prepared to speed up your work, if they change their digging speed again on us again,”* Fred told her, relieved that she seemed to be mostly recovered from the crushing heartache of losing him to his form of a Dungeon Core. *“Oh, and I’ll be creating some more rooms after the Oven, as well as feeding you some more Mana.”* She already knew about the

change in his ambient Mana absorption, though he had been concentrating on using it to complete his dungeon instead of improving his Shards. Now that nearly everything was back to the way it needed to be, he could afford to start the enhancement process again, even while he constructed a few more rooms.

“I’ll take whatever personal...*attention*...I can get from you,” Eisa said, before giving him a smirk as she left his Core Room. “I don’t even mind if you occasionally send a little more Mana my way than normal.”

Fred was finally catching on to what she was meaning by that, especially as she associated it with more intimate matters. He didn’t deign to respond to her other than a brief chuckle through his Mana Communication, because he didn’t want to mention that he was going to be doing the same with his other Shards. It was going to be highly beneficial to their development, because most of them were just on the verge of increasing their Shard Level, which always seemed to come with a significant strength boost. *I’m just glad that I can see all of their Shard Statuses now*, he thought, grateful that had also changed for the better due to his Mana Communication skill increasing.

Enthused, he began a continuous regimen, sending each of his Shards 50 Mana at a time, in 10-minute increments, matching its rate of regeneration; though, he occasionally upped that amount to Eisa, as she wished. The first time he did it he had to warn Roady and Ravenne, because they had no idea what he was doing; the others were used to it by then, and they eagerly awaited his Mana infusions. Once an hour, they would all stop by his Core Room, and they would exchange even more Mana, in a rapid transfer of nearly 500 Mana within a couple of minutes, but then they would each resume their individual projects, while Fred sent his concentration elsewhere.

Right now, immediately after The Oven room, there was just a long tunnel leading to the Guild barracks and some bedrooms, including his Core Room. There was plenty of room to add more to his dungeon, fortunately, because he had made sure to leave enough space to include more defensive room in the future. It was his plan to create two more rooms for his new Shards to take advantage of their unique abilities; while Rody and Ravenne had already been helpful during the last attack, if there had been a specific place, tailored toward their specialties, Fred could only imagine how effective they might be. Especially when he was able to place his own new Light- and Air-based Defenses and Defenders inside.

To get started, he expanded the first section of tunnel to create a relatively large rectangular room, with the slightly longer, 150-foot side perpendicular with the tunnel itself, making it essentially wider than it was long. He did this for a specific purpose, because the entrance was in one corner, and the exit was in the opposite corner; that wouldn't normally mean much, but getting to the exit was going to be much harder than just walking the distance.

Using his Conjure Object Adventurer Ability, he converted about 100 units of Unconverted Mana into 1,000 Power with an Earthen color to it; as Fred had observed in Ravenne even before he had become an official "Dungeon Core", the exchange rate between Mana and Power was much more favorable for Power than the other way around. It was almost as though Power was more diluted in substance, which could account for how Humans were able to use it so proficiently, whereas a normal Adventurer would likely be ripped apart by the sheer power of Mana, were they to wield it casually.

Fred used this Power to create large blocks of stone throughout the room, creating a variation of a maze that was similar to the one in The Oven

– and yet, oh so different. From the start, he essentially created passageways that were the same height and width as the connecting tunnels throughout his dungeon – but then he made them change in elevation. For instance, the first section traveled approximately 20 feet before coming to a stairway that led, at a ninety-degree angle, to the left; from there, it continued another dozen feet before it led to some stairs leading down – and then it turned left again.

Fred made the twists of this pathway meander through the room, turning in circles and going over and under each other, as well as creating a couple of dead ends which would cause one to have to retrace their steps. Overall, it wasn't that difficult, and he thought that just about anyone would be able to progress through it within a minute, if they hurried. Naturally, that was before he added some changes to make it unique.

With the stone created externally, rather than as part of the dungeon, it was vulnerable to being destroyed – as had been seen when Chareese's room was destroyed by the Emerald Dragons. While, technically, he could've made the meandering pathways as part of his dungeon from the beginning, he found that the upkeep required to maintain them would be almost as much as the rest of the dungeon. He couldn't afford to give up that much maximum Mana to maintain what was going to be a room for Roady and his Light-based attributes.

To protect the stone, Fred turned to something he had seen in the Allroads Governmental prison above his dungeon: Magisteel. At least, that was what Chareese called the ultra-durable and extremely strong metal from which the cells were made, and that was precisely what he needed. He remembered that it was horrendously expensive, in terms of Unconverted Mana, to create the metal: When he had used his Mana-formed Object Creation skill to Create a bar, which had essentially sealed

the doorway while they made their escape, it had required over 8,000 UM alone.

There was no way he'd be able to afford that expense for long; his new knowledge about the nature of Mana led him to believe that he was simply doing it wrong. To create the powerful metal, he should've been using *Earth* Mana, instead, since it was suited for that purpose already. Therefore, Fred pulled out five units of the brown-colored substance from his Core, spreading it very thinly over the first section of his multi-elevation maze. When it was in place, he used his Mana-formed Item Creation Skill to turn it into Magisteel; not just any old metal, however, but Magisteel that was shiny – like a mirror.

When the nearly paper-thin sheet of mirror-like Magisteel was in place, the five units of Earth Mana enough for the entire 20-foot section, Fred tested it out with a few Defenders that had fairly powerful attacks. The stone's metal coating worked perfectly, with only the slightest of scratches despite being slammed into by a Golden Sphinx at full speed, or one of Regnark's Pit Fiends. There was no real way to test whether it would hold up against an Emerald Dragon or other powerful Defender without expending a lot of Mana, of course; given what he had seen so far of the results, even if the Magisteel was damaged by something, it would take a long time to smash the room apart – longer than it would take to get through the maze normally.

With that test a success, he covered the rest of the room with the thin, mirrored Magisteel, until looking at everything from a perspective from the inside of the passageways was difficult. The mirrors covering every surface were disorienting and highly confusing, and trying to see where the correct route was located was difficult, even when it was right next to where a potential invader was standing. Granted, many of the



potential invading Defenders were probably going to have some innate senses that could allow them to travel through the dungeon and sort of “home in” on his Core; therefore, Fred didn’t think that it would confuse too many of them. That wasn’t necessarily the purpose behind the mirrors, though; it was mainly just a set up for the next phase of his construction.

# Chapter 16

***Blinding Flash (Base Cost: 10 Light Mana)***

***Prism Spike (Base Cost: 15 Light Mana)***

***Focused Beam (Base Cost: 60 Light Mana)***

Fred had three different Light-based blueprints he had the potential to use in the room, so he looked at each of them individually. Blinding Flash was exactly what it sounded like; a brief flash of light would occur when the Defense was triggered, doing a very small amount of Light-based damage to anything near it. Most beings near the triggered Flash would shrug off the Defense, but eyes were particularly susceptible to Light-based damage; enough damage would blind an individual, either temporarily or permanently (though healing usually took care of blindness, luckily).

The second Defense was the Prism Spike, which was a colorfully glowing prism of what appeared to be some sort of hard, clear-ish crystal; the prisms varied in height and size, depending on how much Light Mana was used in their construction, and they tapered to a very sharp point that looked deadly enough to pierce through just about anything. Unfortunately, a few quick tests proved that the hard, clear-ish crystal was a bit delicate, and that it would break apart if hit with anything but bare flesh; armor, stone, and even hard scales would withstand being punctured and would shatter the prisms quite swiftly. Fred wasn't sure if he would be using them, because there was a good chance they would be ineffective against many of the invaders that were likely to come.

The last was a Focused Beam Defense, which – along with the Blinding Flash – was what he was the most excited about. The Beam was

what he had seen in the Light dungeon from which he had acquired the element, though it hadn't been very effective against such powerful Adventurers in the form of Roady and Elder Hood. He was hoping that it would be different here, mainly because the Defenders they would see weren't likely to take the same precautions as Adventurers.

Essentially, the Focused Beam created a straight, small-diameter shaft of concentrated white Light, which did large amounts of Light damage to anything passing through its field. It was so concentrated that it even burnt flesh, hide, or hair with which it came into contact, despite there not being any Fire Mana involved. Normally, it would just project in a line towards a wall, where it could be avoided if you knew where it was; in his mirrored passageways, though, the Focused Beam would reflect and bounce down entire sections of the maze, creating an obstacle course through which it was extremely difficult to navigate safely.

He had to make sure not to activate them for too long, however, as he discovered that a Beam that was focused on a particular section of his maze for more than thirty seconds would start to melt even the Magisteel. Luckily, Fred had experience with altering his Defenses via the Defense Alteration Program.

### **Randomized Invisible Beam Pattern (Base Cost: 250 Light Mana)**

*Beams* 1 [ ] 2 [ ] 3 [ X ] 4 [ ]

*Beam 1 Angle* 0 [ ] 180 , 0 [ ] 180 Random [ X ]

*Beam 2 Angle* 0 [ ] 180 , 0 [ ] 180 Random [ X ]

*Beam 3 Angle* 0 [ ] 180 , 0 [ ] 180 Random [ X ]

*Beam Diameter* [ \* ]

*Intensity* [ \* ]

*Duration* [ \* ]

*Interval* [ N/A ] Random [ X ]

*Opacity* [ \* ]

*Trigger Sensitivity* [ \* ]

*Trigger Area* [ \* ]

As a result, Fred created a whole new blueprint that he called the Randomized Invisible Beam Pattern; again, the name wasn't overly original, but it described what he had designed quite well. First, he discovered that the Defense (which was placed along a flat surface such as a wall, floor, or ceiling) could have up to four different beams, though each additional beam increased the Base Cost substantially; he settled on three as the best cost-to-result ratio, as four would be just barely possible for him to create, and would take most of his Light Mana. Four weren't really needed, either, as three would be plenty for his purposes.

He also was able to randomize the angle at which the three beams emerged from the Defense, which helped, in a strange way, to reduce the Base Cost – necessary, because at that point, it was over 400 Light Mana for a single Defense. That amount went up, too, because he increased the duration during which the entire Defense would continue to operate, though a random Interval was also included to reduce the Cost; from his experiments, the Interval turned on the beams for a period of time lasting from 1 to 15 seconds, before turning off for another random amount of time. Just to pile on to the Base Cost, he brought the Opacity all the way down, turning the brightly visible white beam to the point where it could barely be seen.

To reduce the cost to more manageable levels, Fred made the Beam Diameter much smaller, though he kept the Intensity the same. It was now just barely as wide as the shaft of a nail used to build houses, but it didn't

lack any of its damaging properties. With enough of the beams set up inside the passageways, along with some Blinding Flash Defenses, he really didn't think it was going to matter. *Size doesn't matter, right? As long as it gets the job done, I can work with this.*

After making sure there were multiple windows looking inside the room from the outside, connected to his exterior tunnel, placed in cleverly angled places so they would be hard to initially spot, he covered them with Viewing Portals and called Roady down to check it out.

"Wow! I've never seen anything like this before; what are those mirrors made from?" asked the Light Shard, moving from window to window on either side of the maze, which was made easier through some connecting tunnels underneath the entire room.

*"It's Magisteel—"*

"What?! That's impossible! The amount that we needed for the construction of the prison took years to create and millions of gold pieces' worth of materials; are you telling me this entire room is full of Magisteel?"

*"Well...not completely. There's only a very thin sheet of the metal covering the basic stone, which should help protect it from being destroyed."* Fred had not known that it was that difficult to create; to him, it was fairly easy, now that he knew how to utilize Earth Mana for its creation.

"That's still amazing; do you think you could create weapons or armor made from Magisteel?" Roady asked, a hopeful lilt to his voice.

Fred thought it was possible, but not something he could do right now. *"Most likely, but I'll need an example of a weapon or piece of armor made of Magisteel to understand how it looks in those shapes; I know what iron and steel weapons look like, but this material is...different, in a*

*fundamental way. Right now, I can make sheets, bars, and probably pointy sticks, but that's probably about all."*

"Hmph...well, I'll see what I can dig up as far as that goes. Still, I'm impressed at what you've created here. Is this...*my room?*"

*"Exactly. Here, let me show you what Defenses I have available to set up in here, and then you can figure out how to best utilize them to coincide with what you can do."* It didn't take long to explain everything, and Fred left Roady to contemplate the best strategy; he found that he could split his concentration as a Dungeon Core much more easily than he could in his Human body, so he was able to follow along and place Defenses where he was told – all while starting to dig out the next room.

Fred knew that Ravenne needed her own room to defend, even though she had been fairly useful during the last attack, chipping in where she had the greatest effect. To that end, he built a room much longer (around 300 feet) than wide (around 10 feet), though it was taller than it was wide (30 feet high, in fact). As opposed to having the entrance at the bottom of the room, however, the entrance was about two-thirds of the way up the wall.

That originally caused an issue with his dungeon system, however, as it wouldn't let him create that without a "safe" way down; apparently, anything over a five-foot drop from the entrance was considered unsafe, and, therefore, couldn't be created. It was one of the reasons he couldn't just create a 500-foot-deep pit and let everything that invaded his dungeon just fall to their deaths, or at least be trapped down an inescapable pit. There always had to be a way to get to the exit, even if it was convoluted or difficult; it was something – even with his new-found knowledge of Mana and Power – that couldn't be altered, as much as it would help him right now.

The solution was easy enough, as he remembered that he had done something similar back in Gatecross. At the time, he had built a winding bridge, which crossed a large pit that was filled with a maelstrom of water, where Flower Trippers had done their best to knock invading Defenders down below. In that instance, he had created the bridge first and then the pit, so there was no real difficulty there – so, all he needed to do now was repeat that...sort of.

Instead of a winding bridge, Fred's new creation was completely straight, tied to the Air Mana upkeep of the room, and only 2 feet wide on each side. When it was all created, and he finished digging out the rest of the room, it looked like a thin, stone pillar that was laid on its side, floating without any supports of any kind – the upkeep kept it intact. He briefly thought about using some of his Adventurer-based Abilities to eliminate the narrow walkway after it was constructed (thereby making it even more difficult to cross to the other side); some mysterious Dungeon Core intuition told him that, if he succeeded, his entire dungeon upkeep would disappear until it was fixed. That was the last thing that he wanted; so, he left the walkway alone.

That didn't mean he left the rest of the room alone. First, he used more Earth Mana and – inspired by his conversation with Roady – he created sharp, pointed sticks made from Magisteel. They were literally needle-thin and only 2 feet long, because he needed a lot of them and it would've cost a lot more Mana to create them much thicker or larger; nevertheless, the set of 7,000 of them he was able to make with 270 Earth Mana was enough to attach them over the over the floor, walls, and ceiling of the room, sticking straight out. This only left a three-foot gap on either side of the walkway, and anything traveling down the path would have to be careful not to fall off.

This, naturally, was the crux of the design behind the defenses of the room. Ravenne had multiple Options she could use, to knock invading Defenders off the walkway; and even as she was still increasing in Shard Level, she was gaining some...interesting...Abilities. Combined with the Blueprints that Fred had obtained from the Supreme of Air, this final area of his dungeon was going to be *extremely* deadly for anything that tried to break through to his Core Room.

Before he set up anything else other than a few small Viewing Portals along the side, he called Ravenne to check it out. To say that she was impressed was an understatement.

“I love what you’ve done with the place! I know that if I ever saw this when going through a dungeon, I’d be hesitant to even set foot in the room! It makes me squirm, just thinking about accidentally falling on those spikes.” She looked around for a moment and then frowned. “The only thing is...it seems too easy. What is supposed to be the major danger here, other than obviously accidentally falling off?”

*“Ah, that’s actually why I called you here. This is your room to defend, and I need your input in how you want to go about that,”* Fred requested, before telling her what types of Defenses he had available to set up. They talked about it for a little while, but right around that time, Fred found that he had finally obtained enough Air Mana, after paying for the upkeep of the room to create a Defender unlike anything else he had in his dungeon – at least one that he could create himself.

At the end of the walkway, just in front of the exit leading to his Core Room and the Guild Barracks, Fred pulled out one of his newest Defender Blueprints and filled it with Air Mana. He felt extremely drained after using a total of 500 Mana, leaving him with only ten extra Air Mana in his Core; but it was worth it. Finally, after all this time in multiple



dungeons, Fred had a “Boss Monster” of sorts. A Devastating Wind Elemental.

The Elemental was huge: It fit in the 10-foot width of the room – just barely – and extended down and around the walkway at least 30 feet. It was wider on top, looking almost conical-shaped, and it consisted of rapidly circulating air, with a very faint, pale-yellow color to it; Fred had to stare at it before he realized what it was supposed to be: a tornado. A miniature whirlwind that was inside his dungeon, floating up and down the end of the room like it couldn’t stay still. *I guess that makes sense; moving air rarely stays in the same place, after all.*

For all that it was a *tornado*, the Devastating Wind Elemental didn’t look overly dangerous. Sure, Fred supposed that being in that wind would probably knock quite a few smaller invaders off the walkway; something as simple as – for example – a Stone Golem would have no problem staying on, because it was heavy enough. To test that theory, Fred expended 25 of his Earth Mana to create that Defender and ordered his Wind Elemental to stop it from going through.

As he had suspected, the Golem was buffeted a little from the wind raging around it; other than sliding a little to the side as it got closer to the Elemental, nothing much happened. Suddenly, two bulges of darker yellow air appeared on either side of the tornado, looking like, if anything, arms. Faster than he could easily follow, one of the arms punched out and the end solidified upon contact with the Earth Defender, hitting it so hard that it practically shattered as it flew off the walkway. The chunks of the Golem crashed into about a dozen of the Magisteel needles, where they were broken apart into even smaller pieces before fading away.

The Magisteel needles held up remarkably well, despite their thin nature; unfortunately, more than half of the ones that were hit had broken

off of the wall. *“It looks like I’ll have to attach them with something a little more durable.”*

“Probably a good idea; we can’t have this whole place falling apart after the first few dozen monsters roll through here. Watching that thing gave me some ideas, though...” Ravenne mused, a thoughtful look on her face. After that, they continued their lively exchange of ideas on defense that they had started earlier, trading ideas back and forth.

Eventually, Fred and his Air Shard developed a plan that seemed like it would work, and when she helped him, with a little more Mana from her growing pool, he was able to set them up without too much difficulty.

All of that took time, however; when they were finished, it seemed like the time was rapidly approaching when the Fire and Dark factions would arrive. From what he could observe, they would both arrive in about an hour and a half, so that didn’t really give him enough time to create another complete room for defense. *Well, technically I could, but then I might be a little low on Mana at that point, and I wouldn’t have time to absorb enough Mana from the environment to fill up again.* Instead of designing a whole new defensive room full of traps and unique characteristics for defense, all he did was create a large empty room that had more Viewing Portals along the left and right sides; it would be a last-ditch fallback area if it came to that.

After that – which didn’t consume too much in the way of his Mana at all – he thought it was a good time to ensure everyone and everything else was prepared for the coming assault. He kept up his constant transfer of Mana to the Shards, while they rested, along with the Core Power Guild members, ready for him to call for them to take their places. They all had a general idea of when they were going to be needed – courtesy of Fred’s

ability to finally see his territory again – so they were going to take as much time to rest as possible.

An hour before Fred estimated their visitors would arrive, he was absently looking through Allroads and was just about to wake up everyone in his dungeon...when there was a commotion along every section of the city's walls. At first he thought that the factions were finally sending in their Defenders along the border, but when he looked, they continued to sit, basically motionless, along his territory. It was when he noticed that the Adventurers and the guards along the wall weren't looking down at the forces along the border – they were looking farther out.

*Hmm...I guess that means they don't want to wait anymore.*

# **Part IV – Advancement**

# Chapter 17

Agelstein raced toward the walls within minutes of the alarm going up; he just happened to be nearby in the DAS Headquarters, checking up on something, when a commotion outside caused him to walk outside to see what was going on. Instructing the squad of Allroads Guards that had come with him to follow, he rushed through the crowd of residents, merchants, and even some low-Rated Adventurers who were fleeing from the northern walls. He couldn't help but think, *Is this it, finally? Is this the attack we've been preparing for?*

Ever since Fred's territory had suddenly shrunk, half a day ago just before dusk, everyone in the city had been on edge. Possessing the knowledge that there was a vast army of monsters somewhere in the distance, that you might or might not be able to see from the walls – depending on your vision, of course – was vastly different than seeing that same army appear within a few hundred feet of the walls. To say that the residents – and many Adventurers, to tell the truth – were freaked out was putting it mildly.

Luckily for everyone, Agelstein and other members of the Allroads Government had been informed, fairly quickly, of what had happened, so they were able to calm most of the populace so that there wasn't rioting. In the last ten hours, the Government also started to take matters into their own hands, since it appeared as though Fred the Human/Dungeon Core had failed to keep his end of the deal and stop the monsters from reaching the city. Agelstein knew for a fact – through his own experience with the man, and information from Roady and Chareese – that Fred was doing the best he could. But that didn't look like it was going to be enough.

So, that was why the Government had opened *all* of its coffers and started buying up everything they could get their hands on from the Merchant Quarter. They weren't hoarding it, either; they were distributing weapons, armor, and other important items that were necessary to survival to everyone willing to help with the fight that looked destined to come. The Council had also convinced the DAS to start handing out all of their SDIAs free of charge, which was part of the reason Agelstein had been at the DAS Headquarters building, instead of overseeing the deployment of guards along the border.

Getting a promotion tended to add to his list responsibilities, somewhat.

He didn't really think that he deserved a promotion, especially after what he had done to Roady and Ravenne, but he guessed that the Government losing two of their most trusted and powerful members meant that someone had to step up and take on more responsibility. Agelstein didn't really mind the extra duties, but he just hated that it came at the expense of Chareese, Roady, and Ravenne getting demoted to being junior members.

It made sense, unfortunately, because they were now tied to Fred and his Dungeon Core self inexorably, and that kind of thing tended to affect loyalties just a bit. Not that he expected them to do something that would hurt those they had sworn to protect decades ago, but he could see how it might be difficult to follow orders from the Council that might deliberately hurt Fred or those with him. Especially since Agelstein had doubts that *he* would be able to go through with something like that, given that Fred had risked his life to bring Chareese, Roady, and – of course – Ravenne, back to life.

He was just glad that the Council had allowed them to live down in the dungeon underneath the city, instead of locking them up or exiling them, which was usually what happened with members of the Allroads Government who had divided loyalties. Those were a bit extreme in measure, but examples of it being the correct procedure was seen throughout history, including the secret histories of the city that not many were able to peruse at leisure. From what he was able to read as Chareese's second-in-command, it didn't *always* work out for the best, but most of the time it did.

Their loyalty wasn't really a big deal right now, though, because he had to get to the walls to see what was happening. He was being apprised of the situation down below, and supposedly, within an hour, they were going to have another attack; they were reportedly better prepared for this next attack, however. He wasn't exactly sure what had happened when the Plant and Water dungeon monsters attacked; all he knew was that it was a close thing, and they all barely just survived. He had been down there periodically checking on the large team of Governmental Guards, preventing anything from coming up into the city, and from what little he saw of the monsters heading down into the dungeon, he didn't envy those inside.

*But that shouldn't affect us up here...right?*

When he got to the top of the wall, he was relieved to see that the monsters surrounding the city were still where they had been when they arrived the day before, though they did appear to have gotten incrementally closer. Orders had been issued not to attack them, because provoking them when they weren't ready wasn't the best idea, given everything else going on. That, and from what he had learned from Fred, it really wouldn't make a difference if they killed swathes of them as long as they were on the other

side of his territory border, because they could just be remade without too much trouble.

It would also be a waste of Power to do so, and a risk they didn't need to take, in light of how bunched up against the invisible border they were. The disastrous attack on the Light-based monsters where Chareese had died was an experiment to see if they could delay the spread-out forces along the border; so *that* had a purpose, at least. Doing the same here would be both suicide and unlikely to do much, even if they were to concentrate all of their spells and attacks in one place. Sure, it might clear out dozens of the monsters within a few hundred feet; that wouldn't be very effective, though, because there were enough monsters around to fill in any gaps fairly quickly.

So, obviously, no one had attacked the assembled monsters outside the walls – but that wasn't what had caused the commotion. When he looked up and followed the gaze of one of the guards already on the wall, he immediately saw what the problem was. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before, but that was probably because seeing gargantuan monsters that were nearly a quarter of the size of the city was difficult to comprehend, unless you saw them regularly. They were still quite a distance away, but they were closing in fast.

Directly to the north, Agelstein identified three different kinds of what he would define as “Boss” monsters from Plant dungeons; only one of them he had actually seen in person on a dungeon delve, and the two others were identifiable by simple descriptions he'd had of them from S-Rated Adventurers in the past. The one that he knew by sight was a Treehemoth, essentially a giant walking tree that made Treants look like tiny infants in comparison. He'd never seen them as large as what he was seeing, however, because the one time he had helped face off against a Treehemoth,



it had been *only* 100 feet tall and half of that wide, if that. The ones that were heading towards Allroads he estimated at being a little over 300 feet tall. Basically, they were large enough that they could nearly walk over the walls of the city with their root “legs” if they really wanted to.

Accompanying the Treehemoth on its trudge towards the city were two other Plant Boss monsters: an Emerald Dragon and a massive walking mushroom. Agelstein thought the mushroom was called a Room Shroom, because it normally encompassed an entire room in a dungeon, but this one was about two-thirds of the size of the Treehemoth – far larger than just a single room, even in the largest dungeons he had heard of.

If it were just those three, that would be bad enough, but there were at least *four* of each Plant monstrosity, making a total of twelve stomping or gradually crawling their way from the north. He couldn’t tell if there were more behind the line of gargantuan monsters, but he sure hoped not – especially considering that the Plant monsters weren’t the only kind heading towards them.

To the northeast, from where the Dark dungeons were located, came equally as frightening Boss monsters. There were massive demons wielding dual swords longer than the walls of Allroads were tall, a formless, shadowy mass that practically swallowed the light of the early morning sun shining down on it, and a 200-foot-tall, undead monstrosity, made from a jumble of bones and skulls, that was vaguely humanoid in shape. Despite the danger they represented, Agelstein had to admit that he wished he could construct something like that last one using his Necromantic abilities.

To the northwest, Water-based monsters slithered, walked, or *flowed* over the ground on their journey to the city, some of whom he had never even heard of before. Gigantic, dozen-headed Hydra slithered forth, their necks reaching at least 75 feet above the ground, which was more than

enough to reach the top of the walls around Allroads. What appeared to be some sort of turtle was walking on its hind legs instead of being parallel to the ground, with even the bottom portion of its shell appearing nearly impervious to normal weapons. Then, of all things he'd never thought he'd see, there was a shark with blue scales that had to have been 150 feet long, with six legs, and somehow brought a literal lake of water with it that stayed in a perfect circle around the monster as it moved. If he had been told about it by someone else, he would've said it was impossible – but he couldn't deny what his eyes saw.

Massive Rock Giants standing 200 feet tall were shaking the ground as they moved towards the west, so enormous that even Agelstein could feel slight vibrations from their movement, through the wall surrounding the city, even at the distance of nearly five miles. Along with the Giants, enormous Stone Crabs with claws 50 feet across scuttled sideways across the landscape, clacking their natural weapons together as if in anticipation, the sound like two boulders smashing together. The third type of Earth-based monster was something that had attacked the dungeon below Allroads a few days ago, which he was told was called The Graveler. The four Gravelers that Agelstein saw were much larger, however. They seemed to stretch 350 feet into the sky, in a thin tower of stones, as they rolled across the ground, coming inexorably closer to the city.

Coming from the east and the Fire dungeons, a 100-foot-tall pillar of flames in the form of Blaze Elementals burnt a swath through the grassland of the valley as they floated five feet above the ground; the heat coming from them was so intense that – fortunately – it turned everything below it to ash almost instantly, preventing the spread of fire to the entire valley. Next to them were the smallest of the monsters he'd seen so far; they

looked like dogs that were approximately 30 feet tall at the shoulder, but they glowed underneath their rock-like skin as if they were made of lava.

“Lava Hounds...” an Adventurer next to him whispered in fright as he was staring in the same direction as Agelstein. *I guess that’s a good name for them.*

The last Fire-based monster was another dragon, though unlike the Emerald Dragon coming from the Plant dungeon’s direction, the Ruby Dragon seemed larger, if that was even possible. Instead of walking, like the green-colored Dragons, the red-scaled monster was slowly hovering nearly a half-mile over its compatriots, the wind from its wingbeats causing the Blaze Elementals to flare up and the Lava Hounds to briefly glow brighter.

Looking to the southeast and southwest, Agelstein couldn’t see anything, due to the mountain range blocking the view, and he could only assume that there were more monsters coming from the Light and Air dungeons off in those directions. Even if there weren’t anything behind the mountains coming for them, the 60 insanely powerful Boss monsters already present were bad enough.

“Boss...what do we do?” Agelstein heard the panicked voice coming from behind him, and he briefly thought it was some resident who had come up to the wall and was freaking out. Turning to where the voice derived, he saw that it was one of his guards who had been accompanying him, shaking so much in fear that his knees were knocking together.

That was a good question, and it wasn’t one for which he had a ready answer. While he wasn’t showing it on the outside, his mind was basically gibbering inconsolably in the corner of his head. He had to say something, however. “I...don’t precisely know, but I’m sure someone... somewhere...has a plan.” It was a lame answer, and it didn’t seem to help

reassure anyone around him; honestly, he was having enough trouble keeping his own feet from carrying him into the heart of the city while screaming in panic to really care at that point.

*We're all going to die.*

Agelstein knew it was always a possibility, especially when they had learned about the nearby dungeons trying to reach them in the city; nonetheless, it had always felt like a *distant* threat. Even when the monsters started to appear close to the city yesterday, the danger they represented was still *in the future*, and it was something that they could and would handle when the time came. With the introduction of the gigantic, city-destroying monsters, however, things were looking bleak.

“Agel! There you are!” he heard from behind him...and from above.

Looking in that direction, he saw Ravenne flying awkwardly through the air with no visible means of support. Her leathers were pressed against her body tighter than he remembered, though, and her hair was flying around wildly as in a windstorm. *I'm assuming this is that “Flight” ability she told me about.*

She landed awkwardly on the wall's walkway, only to be surrounded by guards and Adventurers who threateningly pointed weapons at her. “Whoa, hold up, everyone! She's one of us!” Agelstein shouted, which didn't seem to do much to assure the guards as to her status as a non-threat. Their fear at the encroaching monsters was going to cause them to lash out, unless he did something to stop it.

Ravenne, bless her heart, could see that as well, and took care of the problem herself. “Rogerre, Grafe, Drewer – how are you doing? It feels like I haven't seen you in years,” she asked, smiling at the three guards closest to her. They obviously didn't recognize her, because she did appear

a little different than she used to. For starters, she looked a lot healthier than she used to – not that she was sickly appearing before – as her skin practically glowed from some sort of internal energy; she was also a lot more confident-seeming and personable than she was before, which made sense when she was an Assassin. They tended to stick to the shadows and didn't really get the chance to get close to anyone...as disappointed as that made Agelstein. For years he had hoped that she might show some sign that she enjoyed his company as much as he enjoyed hers, but she had been unfortunately closed off from everyone, not just him.

*Maybe death was just the thing she needed...*

He put all those thoughts out of his head as he witnessed the normally taciturn woman charm the guards with a whole new side of her personality that he didn't even know existed. She laughed and joked with them, putting them at ease and getting them to lower their weapons in embarrassment. It was strange, hearing laughter on the walls when there was almost complete silence from those atop the fortifications, but it was infectious; before long, Agelstein could see dozens of those closest to them start to relax and even shake themselves, like they were awakening from a dream. As those broke the paralyzing effects of their fear, they encouraged their neighbors to do the same thing, spreading the influence of Ravenne's bubbly and dare he say, "airy", personality all the way down the walls.

It wasn't exactly confidence in success or victory that he saw in their eyes; no, it was more like acceptance and determination. He had been worried that even the hardened DAS members up on the walls would start breaking and fleeing in the face of what was coming for them; but now, even the Governmental guards looked ready to lay down their lives so that others would survive...at least a few minutes longer.

*How does she do that?*

Just moments ago, even Agelstein had to lock his knees to keep his legs from fleeing into the city; now, with Ravenne there, most of those panicked thoughts were gone – or if not gone, at least deeply buried in his mind. “Ravenne, you were looking for me?”

The woman broke off from a conversation with guardsman Grafe, apologizing all the while, and turned to Agelstein with a brilliant smile. What she had to smile about was something of a mystery, but he had to admit that he felt better seeing her do that. “Fred sent me to tell you that it appears as though those Defenders out there will probably attack at around the same time that the Dark and Fire dungeons will attack from below. He’s going to help as much as he can from down there, though, so you won’t be alone.”

That was good news about the help, though even after seeing what Fred could do, Agelstein was worried that it wouldn’t be enough. Still, he was appreciative and told her so. “Thank you; I know the Council will be grateful for any help that he can provide. What are *your* plans, Ravenne?” He was secretly hoping that she would stay aboveground with him – and the rest of the defenders along the wall, of course – to keep up morale in the face of danger. His hopes were dashed as she explained her role in the dungeon.

“...and he even made me my own room to defend! One of these days, you’ll have to come and see it, Agel,” she said, before sliding up next to him abruptly. In a much softer voice, barely audible over the faint murmur coming from those on the walls and the screams of panic in the city, Ravenne told him something that made his blood run cold. “Fred says that the appearance of these monsters means that the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores has probably decided that Fred is too dangerous to take any more chances. Even if we kill all of these, there will just be more, sooner

rather than later. Apparently, the potential destruction of this Convergence is less of a worry than letting him live.”

She must’ve seen the despair on his face, then, because she continued in a confident voice. “Don’t worry. Fred is working on a solution, though I have no idea what that might be. As strange as it is to say, I have confidence in him even though he’s a Dungeon Core. I never thought a dungeon would be our potential savior, but then again, I never thought I would die and come back to life, either. Odd world we live in, huh?”

“Uh, yes...odd. Are you sure you don’t know what he has planned?”

“Nothing definite. All I know is that if you see additional monsters pop up on *this* side of his territory—” she replied, pointing to the area in between the walls and the border, where thousands of smaller monsters were still staring vacantly at the city— “then they are *Fred’s* – so, if you can pass the word not to attack them, that would help a lot. You’ve already seen some of the other things he can do with his Mana, so please try to spread the word around about that, as well; we don’t want everyone to panic, if possible.”

He assured her he would, because it was a good idea. He didn’t want to hamper the defensive efforts after all, and waste precious Power on killing monsters that were on *their* side. She nodded and said she needed to get back so that she could get into position for the upcoming attack from down below. Before she left, however, she sighed heavily before leaning close, her breath tickling his ear. “A lot of people are probably going to die, Agel. Promise me that you’ll try not to be one of them; I’d miss you more than you think.” Then she smiled again and kissed him briefly on the cheek, before lifting straight up into the air; he watched her as she shot back

towards the center of Allroads, flying over all of the buildings on her way to the Prison – and from there, to Fred’s dungeon underneath the city.

*I promise I’ll try to stay alive.*

Agelstein held his hand up to his face, somehow feeling the warmth of her kiss despite the rest of his body being ice cold from her words and warnings. As she disappeared, he glanced around at those nearest him on the wall, noticing that many of them were grinning at him. *I’m very glad that she didn’t announce that last part out loud.* The guards and Adventurers were, if not in good spirits, then at least not looking like they were just about to be fitted for a noose. Not that they hung extremely dangerous criminals anymore; decapitation via axe stroke was much more efficient and humane, even if it tended to make a mess. Even that kind of execution was rarely done, because exile tended to be a better deterrent.

“Alright, everyone; eyes to the front! We don’t want these other monsters to sneak up on us while we’re distracted,” he shouted, wishing he had the same sort of battlefield voice that Roady had to reach half of the wall. “Those in charge are developing a plan, but they need time; it’s up to us to give it to them. I’ll be coming around to discuss specific strategies with you, so be prepared with some suggestions.” Agelstein didn’t have a clue what they could possibly do to prevent the city from being destroyed within minutes, but he was willing to see what others thought.

He didn’t feel too bad about lying to them about those in charge having a plan, because everyone needed hope, sometimes. That might not even be a complete lie, either, if Fred figured out how to save the day. It was nearly a certainty that a lot of people would die, however, so it was his job – along with various other representatives from the Allroads Government – to ensure that those numbers were kept as low as possible.



Selfishly, Agelstein hoped that he was one of those survivors, because it seemed as though Ravenne might miss him if he was gone.

# Chapter 18

Fred looked at the approaching army of gigantic Defenders and was suddenly glad he didn't have a body anymore, because he probably would've had a panic attack. Either that, or his heart wouldn't have taken the stress from the sight and killed him...temporarily, granted, but it still would've been inconvenient. As it was, he could still *feel* shocked, stressed, overwhelmed, and panicked, but it didn't *affect* him physically.

He had sent Ravenne out to the wall to help inform them of what was going on, as well as to calm them down a little. That might seem a little strange, but from changes in her Shard Status, and from observations of her recent personality, it seemed like a good idea to try.

Shard Status
Ravenne Florens
Elemental Origin: Air Shard Level: 5 Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Air Air Mana: 930/1320
Defensive Options
Air Barrier (Base Cost: 2 Air Mana per 10 seconds) Wind Tunnel (Base Cost: 7 Air Mana per 10 seconds) Swift Atmospheric Compression (Base Cost: 15 Air Mana per 10 seconds) Sharpened Air-row Barrage (Base Cost: 25 Air Mana per 5 seconds) Gale-force Whirlwind (Base Cost: 50 Air Mana per 5 seconds) Cyclonic Confusion (Base Cost: 100 Air Mana per 30 seconds) Temporary Zephyr Projection (Base Cost: 125 Air Mana, Time Limit: 30 minutes)
Special Abilities

<p><b>Flight (Base Cost: 5 Air Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Air Mana per hour)</b></p> <p><b>Locational Vacuum (Base Cost: 10 Air Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Air Mana per minute)</b></p> <p><b>Calming Effervescence (Base Cost: 15 Air Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 10 Air Mana per hour)</b></p> <p><b>Mist Form (Base Cost: 500 Air Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 50 Air Mana per minute)</b></p>
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Ravenne's new Calming Effervescence Special Ability was something unique even for a Shard, as it was unlike anything Fred had seen before. She could exude a large cloud of calming air, invisible to Humans, which could extend quite a distance, depending on how much Air Mana was spent. Ravenne spent a little over 400 Air Mana to encompass the entire city of Allroads, which helped to calm them down from their panic a couple of stages. There were some residents who were so far gone that her Special Ability didn't seem to do much; for the majority of the residents, Adventurers, merchants, and Governmental representatives, though, it helped to clear a lot of the fear and panic they were experiencing.

Fred really couldn't blame them, though; it was a nightmarish sight out there.

Ravenne's other assignment was to let townsfolk know that Fred was well-aware of the imminent arrival of the gigantic monsters, and that he had a plan underway. While that wasn't completely true – because Fred really had no specific idea what he was going to do quite yet – he had a few thoughts about what he could do when they arrived. First and foremost, defense was going to be key, before he could even attempt to implement anything more permanent. His most potent weapon was his Mana Implosion technique, followed by Mana Explosion; the problem with those,

unfortunately, was the risk to the people of Allroads, if he allowed them to grow out of control.

He had already seen what a Mana Implosion could do when there were massive sources of Mana, such as what had happened outside the Light dungeon; while he had used a large quantity of Mana there, it had expanded almost out of control, as it consumed all of the Mana from which the Defenders waiting for him were made. Just recently, inside of his dungeon, he was able to control it a bit better by using much smaller initial amounts, and limiting the Implosions to only consume a single Defender, even if it was a Mana-rich one, such as an Emerald Dragon.

Because, inside of Regnark's Pit room, the Dragon had been forced to become much smaller, the Mana was contained in a smaller section, and the Implosion didn't expand out of control – fortunate, as would've been extremely dangerous. It still expanded and sucked out a lot of the upkeep Mana from around the walls, which was what caused him so much pain in the previous assault. Fred could only assume that it would be much worse, if he used it against one of the incoming monstrosities.

For instance, if he used an amount large enough to kill one of the massive Dragons, it might consume the Defender and expand enough to start consuming another large attacker, suck that one up and expand again, and so on. It was only a theory, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to risk trying to consume an entire one of them. Smaller Implosions might work better, to take them out piece-by-piece; and if he targeted vital areas, he could see it being more effective. He had already seen what a smaller Implosion did to the Celestial Orb on the border of his territory the day before, so it was obviously something that could work if he didn't go too crazy with it.

Then there were the Mana Explosions, which were potentially even more dangerous. Again, small “bombs” set up to explode when he released them would be better able to be contained, as he wouldn’t want one to accidentally hit a large blob of Mana and grow out of control, similar to what happened when Chareese had been accidentally killed. True, it had wiped out a large portion of the Light Core’s forces, though he couldn’t help but think that if an explosion like that happened too close to the walls, it could destroy half of the city.

The last thing that he had to consider with using those techniques was that they *consumed* Mana, one way or another. One method produced Mana Stones, which were handy for the city’s *Human* defenders to have, but they were next to useless for Fred. He had already tried to obtain some of the Mana from the few Stones that had been left in the dungeon after the last assault, but nothing he tried seemed to work. The other method just used whatever Mana was near to create a bigger explosion; granted, it would be extremely effective in hurting – and hopefully killing – quite a few of the large Defenders, but then the Mana would be lost.

True, if the Mana became lost, then it wouldn’t be available for the other Cores to use, either, but Mana was the lifeblood of Dungeon Cores – including himself. He could use his own Mana quite rapidly, especially if all of the enormous “monsters” attacked jointly. Even his relatively fast regeneration from the ambient Mana of the Convergence couldn’t keep up with his pace.

Thinking of the Convergence made him pause for a moment, as a new worry slid into place. *If one of my Implosions or Explosions touches one of those elemental concentrations...it could set off a chain reaction that might destroy **everything** within five miles. Maybe even more; there’s no way for me to accurately guess the extent of the damage it would cause.*

Still, not using those techniques would hinder his protection of the city above his dungeon, because otherwise all he could do would be to build Defenders and Defenses. None of the Defenses to which he had access – even if he were to change them – would likely do more than annoy the massive creatures headed their way, though creating his *own* Defender was a real possibility. Now that he knew how to create unique Blueprints with the Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization program in his dungeon system, he could probably come up with something that would be effective even against such threats. His Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider that he used before was evidence enough of that.

The problem there, unfortunately, was that Fred didn't have nearly enough Mana to create a new Defender large enough to make a difference. He had quite a bit of Unconverted Mana floating around his Core, but he couldn't use that for creating Defenders. True, he was completely full of his elemental Mana, and his Shards could pitch in to bring that amount to a total of, perhaps, 7,000 total Mana of various elements – but that was barely enough to create a Defender that could match even the smallest of the behemoths heading their way.

It was quite a quandary, and Fred wasn't exactly sure what the best solution was...so he decided to ask the others. He was beginning to realize that he didn't have all of the answers, and between his Shards, there were centuries of experience fighting "monsters". Setting up Defenses in a dungeon was one thing at which Fred thought he excelled; fighting against "Boss monsters" that could stomp the city flat in a matter of minutes was something else entirely.

*"Everyone, would you be able to come to my Core Room for a moment? We have some time before the next wave of attackers come, and there is something about which I need some advice."* It didn't take too long

before everyone arrived, with Ravenne getting the hang of her Flight Special Ability enough that she shot down the tunnels on her way back faster than anyone could run.

“Is this about the giant monsters heading toward the city?” Ravenne questioned, as soon as everyone was assembled.

The others were clearly shocked by Ravenne’s inquiry, because Fred had only told the Air Shard because he had needed her help. “What?!” Chareese and Roady asked at the same time. “Why weren’t we told of this?”

*“I wasn’t sure exactly what to do about it, at first, and I sent Ravenne up to the walls to help calm those defending the city. I didn’t tell you all about it, yet, because it really doesn’t change our job down here; it appears as though the Dark and Fire factions are going to time their attack on the dungeon at the same time that there is an attack from above.”*

“I should really be up there—” Chareese offered, before turning for the exit.

Roady caught her arm and shook his head. “No. You know better than most what kind of people we have up there to help defend the city, and the Council – despite asking your advice on certain matters – has shunted you down here because of your divided loyalties.”

“What?! But...but...” The former Inquisitor appeared to be shocked and confused, before epiphany graced her face. “That’s why they let me stay down here, isn’t it?”

Roady didn’t mince words; instead, he simply confirmed what she hinted at. “Yes, that’s right. We figured it was better than exile, especially at a time like this; however, that also means that Ravenne and I are in the same situation. We can’t go back to the Government, not officially, though we can certainly help down here, which we’re probably better suited for,

anyway. We're not S-Rated anymore, so we probably wouldn't be too much of a help."

Fred thought that being a Shard was probably better than some S-Rated Adventurers, but he didn't say anything about that. *"Yes, you can be much more effective down here, with how your abilities work. We are still going to be attacked, and keeping my Core intact – as much as it sounds selfish – is just as important; without my territory, as small as it is now, the other Dungeon Cores around the Convergence can repeatedly create Defenders **inside** the city."*

Chareese didn't look happy about not being able to help aboveground, which made sense. The Nature Shard had originally volunteered to help defend Fred's dungeon because the city wasn't being directly threatened; now that they were both in danger, her original loyalties to the city of Allroads were being tested. Eventually, she seemed to realize that what Rody said was the truth; looking at Regnark, her new lover, standing close to her out of the corner of her eye, she seemed to realize that this was exactly why the Government wanted her in the dungeon instead of in charge of the city's defense.

She didn't say anything, but the tension that was nearly visible in the room seemed to lessen as Chareese slumped her shoulders. Fred figured that it was time to move on with his conversation. *"While we're fighting down here, I'll also be helping with what I can up above...the problem is that I'm not sure of the best way to do that."*

Seeing confusion in his friends' faces, Fred explained what his options were and the benefits, dangers, and downsides to them all. As he was listing them off, it felt to him like the situation was hopeless, no matter what he did; even if he managed to kill the initial wave, that wouldn't stop the factions from sending even more Defenders, especially now that they



wanted him dead and didn't care if the Convergence was destroyed along with him.

They were silent for nearly a minute, before Eisa asked a question. "Is there any way to save the people up above? Perhaps find a place belowground where it might be safer? No matter what you do, I have a feeling that a lot of people are going to die."

Fred didn't deny that it was likely to happen, as much as he didn't want it to. *"You're probably right, and there isn't much that I can do about that. Digging out new rooms, even if I were to start now, would take entirely too long; I might be able to find a way to support up to 10,000 in short notice, but how would we choose who gets to live? Not only that, but it would only be a temporary measure; before long, the entire city would be destroyed, and those Defenders up there would do everything in their power to make their way down. That's the entire goal of this, remember – to destroy me. Killing all of the Humans is just a bonus to them, at this point."*

It didn't feel good talking about the people in danger like that, but it was unfortunately the truth. Everyone looked sad, suddenly, which matched what he was feeling.

Regnark muttered, "It's too bad you can't make the entire city your dungeon; that way those walls should be able to hold up against even massive monsters."

That was too bad, because that would at least solve the problem of the city being destroyed. Dungeons were extremely resilient against attacks by Defenders, because of the Mana infusing them; they prevented something else made from Mana from damaging the structure of the rooms and tunnels, themselves. It also prevented Adventurers from damaging anything, either, because Power and Mana were basically the same thing.

There was no way he could maintain the upkeep of something that large, anyway, especially since he was limited to using elemental Mana, now. He mused: *If I were able to use the gobs of Unconverted Mana floating around for upkeep, I would have more than enough. But of course, I couldn't...right?*

Granted, Fred had already tried that with his dungeon; Mana was Mana, though, even if it didn't have defined elemental characteristics. While the rooms he had constructed underground adhered to different requirements, that didn't necessarily mean that *everything* was that way. *I don't have a Human Core to pay for upkeep in my dungeon anymore, but what if I was able to tie Unconverted Mana to my entire Core, sort of how my Shards are tied to me? They are technically separate, and they are not necessarily associated with my dungeon, just my Core, so it might work!*

The thought was intriguing, so while the others proposed some ideas of what he could personally do to aid in the defense of the city above, Fred experimented a little. Taking a very small blob of Unconverted Mana, he mentally brought it up to the city and found a tiny house in the Residential Quarter. Actually, it was more of a shack than a house, but he thought it would serve his purposes.

Spreading the blob out thinly, Fred *infused* the shallow stone foundation and wooden walls/roof of the shack with Unconverted Mana, ignoring the contents of the small building for the moment. He was focused on protecting the shell of the tiny house, instead, like he would a room of his dungeon. At first, nothing happened when he released the Unconverted Mana; it stayed where he placed it in the materials, but he could feel that it didn't actually do anything.

*That's because it's not connected to me in any way, is it? My rooms and tunnels are connected to my dungeon, the Shards are connected to my*

*elemental Cores, so...where can I connect this?* The answer was simple when he thought about it; he didn't have an actual Unconverted Mana/Human Core, but there was still some UM associated with his multi-element Core: *the shell*. Just like the shell of the house, it protected everything inside and kept them together, safe and sound.

Imagining a small tendril of invisible Unconverted Mana, he connected one side of the tendril with his own shell, with the Mana infusing the tiny house. As soon as the connection was made, he saw the UM inside the shack firm up and snap into place, and there was a mental *\*click\** inside of his mind. Fred pulled up his Dungeon Core Status, to see if anything had changed, but he didn't see anything. That didn't mean much, however, since many of the "impossible" things that Deecy accused him of performing weren't reflected there either. The problem was he didn't know if it had worked or not.

*Simple enough to check, I suppose.* Taking a little more Unconverted Mana, he turned it into Adventurer Power and started casting various spells at the side of the tiny house. He hit it with Fireblasts, Shadow Strikes, Light Explosions, and even Conjured some heavy rocks above it to see if he could damage the roof. He knew for a fact that there would've been at least *some* damage to the shack – if not a complete demolition – from his attempts...and nothing happened. There wasn't even a scratch on the entire building, though there were some scorched areas on the dirt next to it, which hadn't been protected.

So intent was Fred on his experiments that he didn't even notice that the nearby neighbors were screaming and running away from the area. Fred felt bad about scaring them...and then he chuckled at what had probably been a strange sight to see: spells being flung at a house out of nowhere; the shack not being damaged in the slightest; and then a complete cessation of

all of that activity, with no warning or reason. It was only when the rickety door of the tiny house opened that Fred realized that he hadn't checked whether it were empty, before he tried his experiments; a little girl peeked out with a scared expression on her face, before she sprinted away with another scream, leaving her door open behind her.

*Whoops.*

Fortunately, the Dualborn's unique idea had worked: He couldn't make the entire city his dungeon, but he *could* protect it. Non-living materials at least, which he discovered a few moments later, when he attempted to do the same process on one of the guards up on the wall. He could infuse the woman with Unconverted Mana, but attaching a tendril had no result, nor did it work on the few animals that were kept as pets inside the city or any plants. It was better than nothing, however, so he started gathering up a large portion of the Unconverted Mana (there was more available than he actually expected) and explained what he was doing to his Shards...who were arguing over how Fred should help to defend aboveground.

"...that's my entire point! He can't use those...um...*implosions*... without risking it killing everyone in the city! His other method would be more destructive, of course, but it would technically be *safer*," Regnark argued.

"Safer overall, perhaps, but we've all seen what those implosions can do to kill just about anything; the explosions are powerful, obviously, as Chareese and I can attest to—" Roady countered, gesturing to his half-sister in the process— "though they are quite volatile. From what Fred said earlier, they can't be directed exactly where he wants them."

Something about that caught Fred's interest, and he let a sudden thought rattle around in his mind while he listened to the others go on with

their discussion.

“What if...we *preempt* the attack, and provoke the monsters already on the border to attack right now, so that the defenders on the wall can kill them? That way, the Mana that Fred will obtain from their deaths will allow him to create something large enough to fight off even all of those behemoth monsters,” Eisa ventured.

That was actually a good idea, though it meant starting the battle early and, therefore, potential casualties. Casualties couldn’t really be helped, though, and as Fred continued to infuse the walls surrounding the city – and then all of the buildings of Allroads – he mentioned to the Shards that it was definitely a possibility. “*We’d have to start soon, but I can see that working; it would also start clearing out a lot of them before the larger Defenders arrive, so that the Adventurers on the walls won’t have to contend with so much at once.*”

“That only takes care of your Mana problem; it doesn’t address the issue with your special attack techniques. In fact, killing all of those monsters right now will just complicate the issue, unless you use all of that Mana right away; leaving it out there is essentially what happened on the field against the Light forces, if I’m understanding that correctly?”

Chareese was absolutely right; unless he used, or at least moved, the Mana immediately, it could end up being fuel for the fire. Mana Implosions would just suck up the free-floating Mana and expand their spherical destruction even farther; his Explosions would consume the Mana, depending upon where it was, and extend the explosion in the direction the Mana was, continuing in a chain reaction that could consume everything in its path, if left unchecked. *If only there were some way to contain it...or to direct it where it needs to go.* That thought linked up with his earlier one he had a moment ago, after Roady had spoken. As Fred finished up with his

infusion of the entire city with Unconverted Mana – using an estimated 100,000 units – and then connecting it to his Core's shell with another \*click,\* he thought he might have a solution.

Dangerous and potentially catastrophic, but a solution, nonetheless.

# Chapter 19

Plans started to go wrong soon after Fred sent Ravenne up to Agelstein again, who was one of the few people, among the Allroads Government – or anywhere, really – whom he trusted unreservedly. Their harrowing journey back from the Light Core’s territory showed Fred that Agelstein was trustworthy and willing to follow orders, even if they seemed strange at the time. The Necro-Wizard was also committed to doing whatever it took to get those orders done, even going so far as to animate a dead body.

That wasn’t to say that there weren’t other members of the Government whom Fred could trust, though other than Elder Hood, he really didn’t know anyone else all that well. As to her, the Elder liked to keep her secrets – as evidenced by her secret marriage to Mikel, whom they rescued from the clutches of a Light Core – so he didn’t trust the Council member fully. He couldn’t really blame her for keeping a secret like that to keep him safe, but it made her a little less trustworthy in Fred’s mind.

Agelstein was hesitant to attack the monsters lined up along the border prematurely, but after Ravenne explained the reasoning behind it, he started to come around. He – and some Adventurers nearby who were unabashedly listening in – eventually agreed that trying to fight the smaller monsters while they were being attacked by the much, much larger ones wasn’t the best idea. If they could thin them out, at least, it would reduce the job of killing the massive Defenders from *impossible* to *nearly impossible*. It wasn’t a big change, but “nearly impossible” at least offered the chance that some of them might actually survive.

They were also happy to know that the walls wouldn't crumble around them, nor would the city be instantly destroyed when it was attacked. It didn't protect *them* from being killed, of course, but they didn't have to worry about being crushed under collapsing walls or buildings.

Agelstein passed the word to attack down the line, which was helped by the Calming Aura that Ravenne projected; it wasn't designed to influence their minds or actions or anything sinister like that, but it definitely helped to smooth over orders and put their minds at ease. However, before it could be fully transmitted around the entire defensive wall, the same person about whom Fred was thinking stopped the process.

"That's insane! You're putting all of our lives at risk!" Elder Hood shouted at Ravenne as soon as she touched down near her. Fred had discovered the hold-up and had the Air Shard fly over, so that he could communicate with the council member via Ravenne, and she seemed somewhat immune to her Calming Aura. Whether it was because she was such a high Rating or because she didn't want her husband and the other captives they had rescued – who were in a cluster close by, looking determined yet accepting of the situation – he wasn't quite sure, nor was he convinced that the reason really mattered.

On Fred's behalf, the Air Shard relayed Fred's thoughts on the matter quite succinctly to the Elder, who still looked unconvinced. "...and that's why we have to do this *now*, before it's too late. It will help the defense when those *things* get here." The *things* were getting closer and starting to worry the folks up on the walls; they were already in the Convergence and seemed to be taking their time walking, slithering, or flying. The slow pace was probably worse than if they had all arrived quickly; this way, the defenders on the wall had time to think and work



themselves up, which was never a good thing when watching their impending doom travel towards them.

“It’s a stupid and wasteful idea; more than half of those monsters down there can’t even reach the top of the wall, so they are no danger to us. In a dungeon, it would make sense to eliminate the smaller, weaker ones first before you tackle the stronger enemies; this situation is completely different, however. Doing what you ask is a waste of resources, and if we’re still embroiled in conflict with them when those others arrive, we’re going to be at a disadvantage.”

The Elder didn’t appear as if she was going to budge anytime soon, and Fred had to admit that she had a point; an irrelevant point, but still a point. “Yes, but by killing them, Fred will have access to the Mana left from their deaths and will be able to use it to—” Ravenne started to argue, but was cut off by a hand to her face by the Elder.

The Air Shard looked shocked and offended, but the Council member wasn’t being intentionally rude. In fact, she wasn’t even looking at Ravenne; she was looking outside the walls.

*That’s...not good.*

There was still about a half-hour before the attack was to start, and for the Defenders along the border to start doing something then was unexpected. They weren’t streaming forward in an attack, however, but doing just about the complete opposite of that: They were disappearing. One by one, all down the line encompassing the border with his territory, the Defenders were obviously being reabsorbed by the Core controlling them. Not just Dark and Fire, which would make a little sense if they were going to start their attack soon and needed extra Defenders to send in; but no, it was *all* of them.

The Human defenders along the walls started to cheer, then, which carried over to the city and the residents within. The residents looked shocked and cautiously optimistic, though none of them actually joined in on the impromptu celebration. Looking back at Elder Hood, she appeared to be grinning, with a look that screamed “vindication,” if nothing else.

“See, if we had attacked, then we would’ve wasted our Power on nothing. Your Fred must’ve done something else to get rid of all of those monsters, which will make the next challenge a little easier. We might not even need his help, now, to defeat these giant ones, though help is always appreciated.” The Council member now just looked smug, even though doom was quickly approaching, and it wasn’t likely that they would be able to stop what Fred assumed was 84 of the massive Defenders – if Light and Air turned out to have the same number as the others.

Ravenne only looked shocked, though not for long; despite her relatively new introduction to the world of Shards and Mana, she was a quick study. She probably realized that the Defenders along the border would only be absorbed for a few reasons. One, which Fred thought was the least likely, was that the Cores were getting rid of them so that the larger Defenders wouldn’t walk up and squish them when they started their attack. This seemed unlikely, because Cores really didn’t care too much about their Defenders dying like that, and it was easy enough to just reabsorb them all at once, anyway, instead of piecemeal like what was happening.

The second reason, which was a little more possible than the first, was that the Mana being reabsorbed was to be used to make *even more* of the giant monsters that were heading their way. Fred didn’t think this was really the reason, either, again because the Defenders would need to all be reabsorbed around the same time, in order to fill such a large blueprint. From his own experience with such matters, the massive wire-grid blueprint

for any of them would need to be filled completely before it even started to materialize; even if it didn't take the Defender nearly as long to actually pop into existence for a Dungeon Core with a better Defender Creation skill, it still couldn't be started until the blueprint was filled.

Lastly, at least as far as Fred could guess, was what he considered the actual reason. The Defenders along the border weren't being removed so they wouldn't get in the way of their larger brethren, and they weren't being absorbed to create more of those enormous monsters; no, they were going to be used for another purpose: a distraction. The factions knew by now how powerful the "Dualborn" was: Fred had proved it, with his escape from the Light Core's territory. So, they were going to try to keep him too occupied with defending his dungeon to help aboveground.

Essentially, if he was looking at things right, *all* of the factions were going to attack his dungeon, directly. It was going to be easy enough for Earth, Nature, and Water; all they had to do was create their Defenders inside of the tunnel that they had dug out, which was relatively near his dungeon, now that their territories were much closer. Dark and Fire were almost there, as well; it was entirely possible that Air would use Fire's tunnel since it was only one territory over, with Light doing the same with Earth. It was what Fred would've done from the start, if he were in charge, so it appeared as though they were finally being sensible.

*Darn them; why'd they suddenly start being strategic about everything?*

*"Ravenne, I figure you know what this means?"* he asked the Air Shard.

She nodded slowly as her only response to Fred, but then she addressed the Elder. "I've got to go; those monsters are being moved down below, where they'll attack the dungeon together and try to overwhelm us.

Fred might not be able to help much, but I was told earlier that there will be some things coming to the walls that will help take those things down. Keep an eye out for them, because that may be the only help you're getting."

The Elder and those around her went pale, and she started to stammer an apology. "I-I didn't mean it wh-when I said we wouldn't need his help! W-we can't do this without him!" For the first time since Fred had met the Elder, her composure was completely broken; fortunately, it also seemed to break whatever immunity she had to Ravenne's Calming Aura, and she quickly settled down, sounding even normal after a few seconds. It was odd and a little strange to see such swings in mood from the normally stoic Elder. "We'll be ready. Have him send what he can, and we'll make do. We can't hold out forever, though, so unless he figures out some way to stop all the attacks on the city, we're going to be in trouble."

Fred wished he had a long-term solution, but all he had right now were plans that would hopefully help them all survive the next few hours. Even that survival wasn't guaranteed, and it was quite possible that thousands or tens of thousands of people might die as a result of this initial assault. If there was anything they had going for them, it was that when the attacking Defenders died within his territory, *he* would get the Mana from their deaths, instead of the factions rallied against him.

Overall, that didn't mean that much, because the Convergence would help to replenish that Mana fairly quickly, and they also had hundreds of thousands of different Dungeon Cores out there that could send them Mana. The fact that they weren't seeing hundreds or thousands of the giant Defenders right now meant that the Supreme Council was still hoping to keep the Convergence intact, while killing Fred and the "livestock" protecting him; he didn't think for a moment that they wouldn't blanket the

valley and sky with an overwhelming force, if they chose to do so. Granted, it would require more than a bit of Mana on their part to do so, and it would virtually guarantee that the Convergence would be destroyed; he knew from what he had seen in the Supreme of Air's memories about the previous Dualborn, though, that they would gladly pay that price, if it meant they didn't have to worry about him going crazy and killing them all.

Not that he'd ever do that, though other than the Supreme of Air, Fred had to assume that most of the Dungeon Cores around the world – once they learned about exactly what he was – wouldn't be inclined to believe him.

The main part of his “temporary” solution was already starting to arrive on the walls, carried there by some Allroads resident volunteers from his dungeon, and Ravenne was saved from having to respond to the Elder. Instead, she took one of the large objects and held it out to the Council member.

“What is this—? Is this Magisteel? This is amazing, but what are we supposed to do with it?”

The Elder was holding the large, heavy, shiny, hollow sphere of Magisteel in her hands like it only weighed as much as a loaf of bread, instead of the nearly four hundred pounds it actually weighed. *I guess if you have a lot of Essence to spend, like she probably does, being S-9<sup>th</sup>-Rated, she can afford to increase her Brawn Stat quite a bit, even if she doesn't use it regularly to attack.* Fred seemed to remember that it had been abnormally high for someone of her type of Class – who preferred to stay out of the way of physical confrontation and attack from afar – when he still had access to seeing Interfaces, but hadn't really seen that much evidence of it.

Magisteel, as it turned out, was extremely dense for its size, which was in part why it was so durable. Fred had never actually handled it when he was in his Human body; he had only eliminated and Created it someplace else without lifting it. As a result, he wasn't really aware of that aspect of the material, though it shouldn't really matter for the purpose he had for them. He wished that he could use his Mana-formed Object Creation Skill outside of his dungeon like he could now with his Adventurer spells and Abilities, but that wasn't to be. Entirely too much Power was required to create even a sliver of Magisteel, so that was why he had been forced to use Earth Mana to create the hollow spheres, which were approximately the size of a Human's head, and have them carried out, one-by-one.

Luckily, he could still use his Mana Explosion and Implosion techniques outside of the dungeon, as they weren't one of his Skills with their ridiculous limitations.

"All you need to do is have some of our tanks throw these balls into the mouths of the approaching monsters," Ravenne stated, which got a chuckle from those who heard her statement.

"Oh, is that all? Just...throw it in? Like it's that easy." Mikel snorted beside the Elder, shaking his head. "Some of those things are hundreds of feet tall, and that will be more than a bit difficult. Not only that, but some of them don't even *have* mouths; what are we supposed to do there?"

Ravenne's face turned red, though Fred wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment. "*Just tell them to stick it as far into any available orifice as they can; the important part is that the Magisteel balls penetrate their bodies as much as possible for the plan to be effective.*"

***“What?! There’s no way that I’m telling them...THAT!”***

Fred didn’t see what the problem was; he thought that he had stated fairly clearly what was required for the Magisteel balls to work. It was fair to say that getting the spheres into some of the mouths of the Defenders would be difficult or an impossibility; he had only suggested it because it seemed like the easiest and most open part of their forms. *“I don’t understand; what part are you having difficulty telling them?”*

Ravenne didn’t bother answering Fred, which was fine with him, because she figured out a way to communicate the gist of his plan to everyone without using his exact words. “Forget what I said; the important part is to get these...*spheres*...inside those things one way or another. The farther they are inside, the more damage they will do – and they might even kill those monsters immediately.”

The Elder looked suitably impressed, there was a shadow of unbelievability in her expression. “Fine, we can do that; Mikel, would you and the others help me spread the word?” The Council member’s husband and all of the former captives started to disperse through the defenders along the top of the wall, sprinting to make sure everyone was informed of the plan before it was too late. There were nearly a thousand of the Magisteel balls—*spheres*—already being handed out amongst the physically strongest of the defenders, but that was the limit of what he could produce at that time. Each sphere cost him a single Earth Mana to produce, which added up after a while; he even had to beg for some Mana from Eisa to get enough to distribute to the walls, and he hoped it was enough.

Mainly because they were Fred’s solution to the “directional” and “containment” issues associated with his Mana Explosion techniques. As

he had reasoned before, when it exploded outside of a Defender, therein laid the danger; it could expand to Mana nearby and consume that in an even larger explosion, which made it dangerous for everyone on the walls, as it might not stop.

Maneuvering an Explosion so that it detonated *inside* of one of the Defenders would be ideal to solve that, but it was impossible for Fred to do that himself; just like the upkeep of his dungeon kept it from being destroyed by Defenders and Defenses, the Mana that comprised Defenders acted as a barrier to entry. Even trying to sneak one in through an open mouth or other orifice wouldn't work, as it would be repelled; that wasn't conjecture, either, as he had quickly experimented with some of his own Defenders on a very small scale.

Luckily, if he placed some "charged" Mana, ready for an explosive release, inside one of the Magisteel spheres, it could "hitch a ride" through the barrier. Just as that barrier kept Mana from penetrating through from the outside, it would – theoretically – prevent the explosion from growing out of control when it detonated from the inside. The damage would be intense, however, just like it was when it exploded along the exterior of a Defender. His small-scale test proved that, as well, though he was planning on using more than just a single unit of elemental Mana on the gigantic monsters getting closer to the city.

It also meant watching the battle from as many directions as possible, because he had to place Mana Explosions in the spheres before they made contact; even if he had enough Mana to fill up every single Magisteel ball, there was no way he could mentally keep them in their "ready-to-explode" state for longer than a second or two. Even thinking about trying to keep them all from exploding prematurely made Fred's Core shudder involuntarily in a facsimile of a Human physical response.



With that taken care of – as much as it could be at the moment, at least – Fred called Ravenne back to the dungeon so that they could prepare. Because as much as it would be difficult for everyone aboveground to both survive and kill the threats coming their way, there was a whole other fight ready to start in his dungeon.

# Chapter 20

Despite the tremendous danger heading their way, in the form of nearly a hundred gigantic “Boss”-type monsters attacking Allroads, Roady was a little bored. He probably shouldn’t be, but he was all by himself in the tunnel surrounding his mirrored maze room; Fred had told them all to prepare for the incoming assault on his dungeon from the Fire and Dark monsters, and apart from sitting on his butt for the last half-hour, there wasn’t much for him to do. Brief thoughts about venturing towards the entrance to see if any of the others needed his help or advice popped into his mind, but he realized he would probably just be in the way. He wasn’t the one in charge of their defense, now; he was only one part of the whole strategy. None of them were necessarily more important than the other, and they each had their role to play.

Considering his previous Knight-Commander Class, to say it was an unusual experience for him was an understatement.

He had always thought of himself as being “born” to lead and be the center of the defense of any party in which he had participated. Whether it were a small, five-person group delving through a dungeon, or a group of hundreds of Adventurers fighting against a horde of Light-based monsters, he was the one who would lead the charge and direct the others in their common objective. He had been *strong*, he had been *respected*, and he had been *confident* – sometimes *too* confident, but everything had always worked out well enough to protect his friends and those he loved.

Chareese’s death had shaken Roady more than he could accurately portray to anyone who asked; he hadn’t even come to terms with the fact that *he* had been the one to inadvertently kill her when she was

miraculously resurrected by Fred, even if she was a bit changed from the process. The entire ordeal had still weighed on his mind afterwards, though he tried not to let it show. Rather, it was all internal, making him doubt his ability to do his job and protect whom he was ordered to. This, in part, was what led him to convince Elder Hood to instruct Agelstein to reanimate his body, if he were to fail in his protection, so that he would continue to serve as long as possible.

Roady thought that would've been the end; he hadn't been expecting to be resurrected into being a Shard just the same as his half-sister. It was disappointing to see all of the progress in his Adventurer development disappear in what was basically the "blink of an eye", but he had gained so much more. For one, his new abilities to manipulate Light Mana were unique, and they were turning out to be much more versatile than he had expected. Even his new status as a "healer" of sorts was growing on him, and despite his previous personal disdain for those who chose the non-melee "healing" Classes, he could barely imagine something different for himself.

He had looked down on them because if they couldn't *fight* like he could, they couldn't *protect* in the same way – and Roady was all about protection for his friends and loved ones. Granted, he had known their worth; he would never have gone into a dungeon or a battle without a healer-type around, but that didn't mean he respected them like he knew he should. Now, with how "frail" he was, compared to how he was before, he realized that it took much more courage and confidence in both their abilities, and in those of their *group* for a healer to be brave enough to venture into a dungeon in the first place. When a blow or two from a powerful monster could potentially kill them, it took a lot of mettle to face dangerous situations, day in and day out.

Therefore, regardless of his former feelings of wanting to be the leader and in charge of his people's physical defense, he was content to settle back into his own piece of the dungeon-defense puzzle. Whether it was a conscious change, due to circumstances and his own reflection, or because his new form as a Shard had fundamentally changed him, Roady didn't really care too much about his personal importance in relation to everything. If—*when*—they survived this assault on the dungeon, he figured he might feel differently; for now, though, he was happy to leave the decisions and strategies regarding the dungeon's defense to those more knowledgeable about it – at least more knowledgeable about *this* side of things.

***“It appears as though the assault on the dungeon is starting a few minutes early, compared to the larger Defenders attacking the city itself, so I’ll try to help where I can, down here, at first. I have a feeling they want me to concentrate on my dungeon, rather than help defend the city; it’s the way most of the other Dungeon Cores would think, so it makes the most sense.***

***“By the way, it appears as though I was right; there seem to be Defenders from every elemental faction streaming through the dug-out tunnels right now, so get ready for an attack unlike anything you’ve seen before. This...will be extremely difficult, but I have respect, confidence, and faith in all of your abilities. Not only in your powerful abilities as Shards, but also in the burgeoning capabilities of our Core Power Guild; they can’t hear me right now, but I’m proud to see that – despite the adversity they have experienced over the last couple of months – they have blossomed into some seriously versatile and valuable members of this dungeon.***

***“In them, I can see the way of the future of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, even if that governing body cannot see it themselves. So, let’s give them a chance to prove it; do your best, and let’s change the world!”***

As far as a rousing speech, it was...decent. Not what Roady would’ve necessarily chosen to say, but it worked.

Fred had mentioned earlier that he suspected that all of the elemental dungeon “factions” would be sending their monsters, though he didn’t know for sure. It appeared as though they really were *all* coming – which meant that they were all in for a fun time. They had barely survived after the last assault, and that was only against *two*. Luckily, they were more prepared this time with two additional rooms – Roady’s own being one of them, Ravenne’s being the other – and better-equipped as far as Fred himself went. While his body had been essentially *sucked up* into the Core floating next to his bedroom (which he obviously didn’t need anymore), he now had control of his territory, his dungeon, and the Mana contained within.

This meant that, as Mana dropped by the monsters as they died, Fred could continue to funnel it into the Shards, giving them a better ability to defend the dungeon. Roady himself had felt that influx of Mana dozens of times already, over the last half day or so; simply judging by his Status, he could see that it would be extremely beneficial.

Shard Status
Winston “Roady” Rodabaugh
Elemental Origin: Light
Shard Level: 5
Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Light

<b>Light Mana: 1860/1860</b>
<b>Form Projection Options (Current Command Threshold: 20)</b>
<b>Glow Sprite (Base Cost: 2 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 500 feet)</b>
<b>Bright Lynx (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 450 feet)</b>
<b>Winged Pegasus (Base Cost: 25 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 300 feet)</b>
<b>Sleek Unicorn (Base Cost: 30 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 275 feet)</b>
<b>Juvenile Light Elemental (Base Cost: 100 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 200 feet)</b>
<b>Warp Dragon (Base Cost: 650 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 150 feet)</b>
<b>Crystal Golem (Base Cost: 900 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 100 feet)</b>
<b>Special Abilities</b>
<b>Reflective Aura (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Light Mana per hour)</b>
<b>Healing Circle (Base Cost: 15 Light Mana, Base Upkeep cost: 5 Light Mana per hour)</b>
<b>Swords of Illumination (Base Cost: 50 Light Mana, Base Upkeep cost: 10 Light Mana per hour)</b>
<b>Environmental Brilliance (Base Cost: 100 Light Mana, Base Upkeep cost: 15 Light Mana per hour)</b>
<b>Searing Radiance Net (Base Cost: 150 Light Mana, Cooldown: 30 minutes)</b>

Mana, he was learning, was the lifeblood of a dungeon; with more available, they could do more for longer periods of time. The same could be said for Adventurer Power, but the difference was that a dungeon used Mana for *everything*; a Human, even if they were completely out of Power, could still probably kill every monster in a dungeon with enough weapons and armor. The same couldn't be said for dungeons, and by extension – Shards like Roady. When he got really low on Mana, he felt really sluggish; whereas that hadn't really happened as much, even when he ran

out of Power completely. The biggest difference, however, was that if he ran out of Mana, he would probably die.

***“Alright, here they come! They’re all coming in a swarm of different elements and Defenders, all at once, so you may need to adjust specific strategies accordingly. Enact any general defenses that you deem appropriate for attackers of all types, as that seems like it will be the most effective. Fortunately, it appears as though the factions are continuing with their gradual ramping up of strength; the first ones that arrive should be relatively easy.”***

That seemed like good advice; if they were all swarming in a mixture of all different elements, then specific strategies wouldn’t be as useful. For instance, if there were a lot of Plant-based—actually, *Nature*-based—monsters, then it would make sense to use Fire-based attacks to do the most damage; using those same attacks in a room when there were Flame Elementals present, though, would actually make those Elementals stronger. “General defenses”, therefore, was code for using spells and abilities that were non-elemental in nature, or else melee attacks. Since none of them were stupid enough to try to face down the incoming horde themselves, that meant filling their rooms with their own monsters – or in Roady’s case, *Forms*.

He had increased his Shard Level to 5, over the last few hours, and with it had come some great benefits. Not only did he have access to additional Forms, but he could also control up to 20 of them, at the same time. At first, doing that kind of thing seemed like it would break his mind: Controlling 5 was hard enough, but 20 seemed nearly impossible. However, after experimenting with some Glow Sprites, he found that it

*wasn't* impossible, though it *was* difficult; with some practice, he could control them at the same time, though only with some basic moves.

Each Shard Level that he had increased had added an additional 5 to his Command Threshold, which seemed like an odd number; when he experimented a little, however, he found that it was for a specific reason. He could control groups of 5 together like the fingers on his hands, or even his toes; he found that if he divided his attention into 4 groups of 5, he could direct them like extensions of his arms and legs. That comparison wasn't the most precise, but it was accurate enough to suit his purposes.

Roady's mirrored dungeon actually contained 20 of his Forms right now, though they were lying dormant. Using what he had discovered about controlling them, there were 4 groups of 5, and each group was a different Form. One was comprised of Bright Lynxes; another was made up of Sleek Unicorns; a separate one, Juvenile Light Elementals; and the last group was one he had finished last, as it took the most Mana to bring into existence: Warp Dragons. Costing 650 of his Light Mana, the Dragons weren't the most powerful of his options, but the Crystal Golems for 900 wouldn't even fit inside the Magisteel-lined passageways.

That was alright, though, because what he had was perfect for his defenses. Fred asked why he didn't just create 20 Warp Dragons, instead of the variety he had now, which was a perfectly reasonable and simple question; the answer, however, was a bit complicated. He found that if he had more than one group of the same Form, his control over them seemed to be hampered a bit. Using his analogy from before, it was like having two left hands; he could get the job done, but not as well as if he had a left *and* a right, which was accomplished by having different groups of different Forms.



That, and having less-powerful Forms that helped secure the entrance to his room did two things for him. First, it helped him to assess the threats as they arrived, so that he could plan out a strategy as the monsters advanced farther into his room; he'd much rather lose a Lynx or two to something a bit more powerful or an unexpected attack than risk one of his Warp Dragons, for instance. That led to the second reason, which was all about conservation of Mana. It was much easier to replace an entire "squad" of Lynxes, or even Unicorns, than one of Dragons, with the amount of Mana he had and his natural regeneration rate. If it turned out later that Fred was gaining vast amounts of Mana from the deaths of the incoming Defenders, he was planning on increasing the base Levels of each group, but for now, they were at a good spot.

Speaking of influxes of Mana, it wasn't long before he started to get small amounts of Light Mana slamming into him from all sides, as Fred parceled it out. It was steady enough that Roady replaced one and then another of his Level 1 Warp Dragons with Level 2 Dragons, by eliminating one of his Bright Lynxes to free up a Command slot, bring in the new upgraded Form, then absorb the extra Level 1 Dragon. He then replaced the Bright Lynx, and he found that he had done the whole process in less than five seconds.

It appeared as though Level 2 was going to be the limit for his Warp Dragons, though, because they now were barely able to fit in the mirrored passageways. His Juvenile Light Elementals were very similar; even at Level 1, the large and slow balls of light were barely able to fit inside the tunnels. Fortunately, he thought that his other Forms were able to increase their Level quite a lot before they became too big to fit in the passageways, especially if the Unicorns kept their heads down and their horns pointed at the enemies.

Before he expected it, the first monsters shot into his room – a small group of Plague Rats if he identified them correctly. It made sense that the Rats made it through all of the other rooms, mainly because they were so small and were hard to hit accurately when they were swarming. When they were accompanied by dozens of other types of monsters, they were probably able to slip through quite easily; either that, or the original group of Rats was *much* larger, and these 20 or so were all that were left. Thinking about “The Oven” from the previous room, this was likely the answer, as the Rats were known to travel in massive piles; the undulating bodies on the outside protected those on the inside of the mobile pile from harm.

Roady easily commanded his Lynxes to attack, controlling their movements as they struck together and scattered the Rats, their paws batting them aside and slamming them up against the mirrored sides of the passageway. He didn’t have any of his Lynxes bite the enemy, however, despite how easy it would’ve been; they were called “Plague Rats” for a reason, and he wasn’t sure those kinds of diseases translated to his Forms.

Within seconds, half of the group had been killed by his Lynxes, while the rest kept going, slipping a little on the shiny and slippery Magisteel with which Fred had lined the room. That was still incredible to Roady, that the strange human/Core man had managed to do that in what seemed like no time at all, when the material usually took days to create even the smallest amount and required absurd quantities of Power; regardless, it seemed at least partially effective, as it prevented the Rats from quickly scrambling through the rest of the maze.

In fact, by the time they managed to get to the top and to the next section around the corner, Roady had managed to maneuver his Sleek Unicorns into place, where they stomped their hooves onto the Plague Rats,

snapping their backs and killing them easily. One Rat managed to avoid an initial stomp and launched itself at the leg of one of his Unicorns, and his Defender was too slow and cramped in the passageway to react in time; the monster bit his Form's leg, and a black spot immediately appeared at the bite's location and started to spread, even as the offending Rat was skewered by the horn of another one of his Unicorns.

It seemed as though his Forms were a bit more vulnerable to the attacks from a Dark dungeon monster than normal, because the spot expanded and spread much faster than he ever remembered it doing when he was delving through dungeons. Normally, the "plague" that was transferred upon a bite took hours to really affect someone, though it usually didn't stick around that long; a simple heal was enough to eliminate the disease, and everyone was fine. Therefore, Roady used his Healing Circle to heal the quickly dying Unicorn, and it took *far* longer than it really should've to eliminate the disease left behind by the Rat.

It was something he would have to consider in the future, though it unfortunately made sense; the most successful campaigns through Dark dungeons in which Roady had participated in the past usually had at least one member of their group who had a significant repertoire of spells that had to do with what he was considered Light-based. Elementalists, Illusionists, Channelers, Holy Paladins, and even his half-sister's former Class of Inquisitor were all great to have along in a Dark dungeon. The Class that could practically tackle a dungeon by themselves, though, was the Exorcist.

Exorcists were practically walking arsenals of Light spells and abilities, and they could tear through Dark monsters fairly quickly, though there were some drawbacks. Since they specialized in destroying the Undead and Demons, they were practically useless anywhere else. As a

result, they were very rare to see on their own as a Class; the Exorcist Class was usually paired with another that made up for their inability to survive in most other dungeons. The point, though, was that the strengths behind using Light spells and abilities against Dark monsters went both ways: While Roady's Light Forms might be able to do a lot of damage to those from Dark dungeons, they were capable of reciprocal damage to his Forms.

Luckily, he didn't have to test that out, as the next wave of monsters arrived not long after: some snake-like monsters made from what appeared to be rocks. *Pebble Snakes, If I remember their name correctly.* There were only two of them, as the rest were probably killed in the previous rooms; their overall strategy was to let a few monsters get through to the next room, if necessary, so that everyone conserved their Power, Mana, and overall physical energy.

Roady backed his Bright Lynxes off, as they wouldn't do much good against the Snakes; instead, his Unicorns had more fun smashing what they could of the Earth-based monsters with their hooves, shattering a couple of their segments in the process. It didn't take long for the Pebble Snakes to wiggle through the defenses, however, and they managed to get around a corner to the next section without getting too hurt in the process.

Roady calmly walked over to the next window looking inside, and looked away when the first of Fred's traps was triggered: Blinding Flash. The entire maze of mirrors lit up so brightly that anything that had eyes would've been blinded, perhaps permanently; the reflection of the Magisteel mirrors seemed to amplify the light in a way that was almost painful even to himself, despite behind a Viewing Portal and partially immune to Light spells and effects. His own Forms were completely immune to the Flash, luckily, so it didn't harm them in the least.

The trap also did absolutely nothing to the Snakes, though. Unfazed, they kept rolling along, oblivious to the intense light that lasted for a few seconds before fading. They were made of rocks and didn't actually have actual eyes, so that made sense, at least; however they actually sensed the world around them, Roady didn't know, but it obviously wasn't affected by flashing lights.

What they *weren't* immune to, though, was the concentrated light, 5 beams of it, that shot at them at the same time from his Juvenile Light Elementals squeezed into a slightly wider section of the maze; the section was a modification that he had asked for from Fred, so that he would be able to fit more of his Forms inside the same area. It worked out perfectly, as 5 intensely focused rays of pure light slammed into the head of one of the snakes, shattering it into hundreds of pieces as it followed the Snake down the passageway.

The other Pebble Snake was able to slither out of the line of fire, however, as it rolled past the Light Elementals, who had trouble focusing on its head. They managed to destroy two of its trailing tail rocks, but it didn't hamper the Snake all that much, as it managed to get to the next section without too much trouble – where it was gobbled up by the waiting Warp Dragon and crunched to pieces in its powerful jaws. Some of the sharp and jagged pieces of the Pebble Snake's destroyed form managed to cut up his Dragon's mouth a little, but that was easily fixed by a quick Healing Circle. Simple as that.

Heading back to the entrance, a movement in the passageway leading to his room indicated that the next volunteer to be slaughtered by his Forms was on the way. However, before it entered, there was a slight rumble in the exterior tunnel in which he was standing. It was almost imperceptible, but his reactions and perceptions – despite losing all of the

Essence that went along with his increased physical attributes – had been honed over hundreds of thousands of fights, so he noticed it.

Not a second later, there was another rumble, though it was more pronounced this time...followed by another, and then another, until the entire tunnel started to shake just a little. As he looked around to make sure everything was alright, he realized he wasn't *too* worried about it collapsing, even though there wasn't anything visible keeping it intact; Fred told him it was kept together due to Mana.

A quick shot of pain rolled through Roady's mind, though it wasn't physical – it was more of a flare of his conscience and perceived dereliction of duty towards Allroads. *I should be up there with them, protecting the walls of the city!* He couldn't really change what had happened, though, and in his heart he knew that he was where he needed to be.

Then a flash of guilt tinged his next thought. *It's probably safer down here than it is up there, anyway.*

# Chapter 21

It didn't take Fred long to get back into the minutia of passing out the different types of elemental Mana to his Shards when the invading Defenders were killed, resetting traps when possible, and adding a few Defenders of his own here and there to help with the defense of his dungeon. Even though it was quite a bit more work than when only the Earth faction had attacked, it wasn't as hard as he thought it would be; he put that down to the fact that he didn't have his Human body to contend with at the same time, and he could think a whole lot faster than he used to. He still wouldn't have given up his body if he'd had a choice in the matter, but that didn't mean he couldn't make use of some of the advantages of his new state.

The insane rush of Defenders flooding his dungeon was originally extremely daunting, as it seemed the factions were doing all they had in their power to overwhelm his dungeon with numbers. The first wave included thousands of small Plague Rats (from Dark), Goblin Gnomes (from Earth), Rock Beetles (from Nature), Glow Sprites (from Light), Pygmy Merlarks (from Water), Drifting Sparks (from Fire), and tiny Sylphids (from Air). Eisa had learned from previous attacks and had devised a strategy beforehand; the Earth Shard was as prepared as she could be for the worst, and Fred was also hoping that the same strategy the factions had used before stayed the same.

It was a simple, yet effective plan, and it worked excellently to kill hundreds of the little buggers in the first few seconds of the attack. All it took was 6 Level 20 Shifting Sand Elementals that would swarm over the invaders as they entered, digging their sand components into the vulnerable

areas of the foreign Defenders; the attackers didn't have much in the way of defense, so they fell fairly quickly. In fact, the only thing that hurt the sand at all was the Drifting Spark Fire-based Defenders, which were essentially small flames that drifted slowly through the air.

Despite how effective her strategy had been, it wasn't enough to stem the tide for long. Her Elementals were pushed back by the weight of the Defenders scrambling through the entrance, so much so that they practically disappeared underneath the flow...and that was just from the ground-based monsters. While her Shifting Sand Defenders could reach up with tendrils made of sand – and *did* a couple of times – most of the Glow Sprites, Drifting Sparks, and Sylphids floated right on past them in the first room. Dozens of relatively inexpensive Magistrikes leapt out from the Viewing Portals along one side of the room, however, taking out an equal number of the flying invaders in the process.

Even those efforts barely made a dent in the number of airborne attackers, but that was okay; the Shards had already discussed and adopted a strategy of letting some through so that the other rooms could share the load. As the first defender of Fred's dungeon, Eisa was trying to pace herself as well – though she did start to utilize some of the Mana she was receiving from Fred on her new Special Ability.

Shard Status
Eisa Howells
Elemental Origin: Earth Shard Level: 6 Next Mana Threshold: 4000 Earth Earth Mana: 2115/2510
Defender Creation Options
Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Earth Mana) Pebble Snake (Level 1 Base Cost: 5 Earth Mana)



<b>Rockworm (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Stone Golem (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Boulder Troll (Level 1 Base Cost: 50 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Shifting Sand Elemental (Level 1 Base Cost: 60 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Iron Sentinel (Level 1 Base Cost: 150 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Crevice Spider (Level 1 Base Cost: 200 Earth Mana)</b> <b>Golden Sphinx (Level 1 Base Cost: 250 Earth Mana)</b>
Special Abilities
<b>Upgraded Earth Elemental Form (Activation Cost: 300 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 30 Mana per minute)</b> <b>Earth's Renewal (Activation Cost: 5 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1-5 Mana per minute)</b> <b>Stone Barrier (Base Activation Cost: 50 Earth Mana, Cooldown: 10 minutes)</b> <b>Shattering Schist (Base Cost: 200 Earth Mana)</b>

Every fifteen seconds or so, a large sphere of rock, otherwise known as Schist, would appear in the middle of the room for just a moment, before shattering into hundreds of pieces in an impressive explosion. Eisa's Shattering Schist Special Ability tore through large swathes of the flying invaders, as well as hitting some of those along the ground, while getting hit with rocks was harmless to her Shifting Sand Elementals.

Again, despite those efforts and the savage destruction of invading attackers, *thousands* of foreign Defenders managed to make it through Eisa's defense and on to Chareese's room full of plants. This was the first time her defenses got a chance to be tested against Fire-based monsters, and they performed remarkably well. It helped that the Drifting Sparks weren't all that powerful, so her Am-bushes and Ensnaring Vines were able to grab them and snuff them out by enclosing them completely, blocking any air from getting to them. They ended up thoroughly scorched, but Chareese also had a Special Ability that she took advantage of.

Shard Status
Chareese Alonties
<b>Elemental Origin: Nature</b> <b>Shard Level: 6</b> <b>Next Mana Threshold: 4000 Nature</b> <b>Nature Mana: 2575/3260</b>
Defender/Defense Growth Options
<b>Flower Tripper (Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 1 min)</b> <b>Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 2 mins)</b> <b>Am-bushes (Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 2 mins)</b> <b>Vine Crawler (Base Cost: 25 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 13 mins)</b> <b>Treant (Base Cost: 100 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 50 mins)</b> <b>Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 3 mins)</b> <b>Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 5 mins)</b> <b>Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 10 mins)</b>
Special Abilities
<b>Natural Growth (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Nature Mana per day)</b> <b>Mother Dryad Form (Activation Cost: 150 Nature Mana, Upkeep Cost: 25 Nature Mana per min)</b> <b>Poison Recombiner Module (Activation Cost: 100 Nature Mana)</b> <b>Flora Animation (Activation Cost: 1500 Nature Mana, Cooldown: 3 hours)</b> <b>Rapid Sprouting (Activation Cost: 500 Nature Mana, Cooldown: 5 minutes)</b>

Her Rapid Sprouting Special Ability was essentially a way for her to rapidly regenerate the Vitality of her Defenders and repair damage on her Defenses. It encompassed her entire room, and at 500 Nature Mana per use, with just a five-minute cooldown period, it worked extremely well. The Ability only worked on plant-based Defenders and Defenses, though, otherwise, she could've rivaled even Roady with her healing prowess.

In addition, as her plants started to be destroyed from the sheer numbers of invaders passing through, she was able to replace them much more quickly than previously; with her new Shard Level, the Base Maturation Times for each of her Defender/Defensive Options were reduced significantly. Somehow, Chareese said that she felt an even deeper connection with them when they were growing, which Fred believed was the reason for the decreased times.

Regnark hadn't had an increase in his Shard Level, but his available Mana had increased to the point where he could summon over 1,000 Lesser Imps if he wanted to – which is what he did for the start of the assault on Fred's dungeon. There were five hundred Lesser Imps in each room, which swept hundreds of invaders off of the stairs down into the pits; since his Lesser Imps were flying, as well, they were able to easily destroy the Sylphids, which were basically just tiny forms in the general, blurry shape of a transparent, unclothed, female figure, with claws instead of hands. The Drifting Sparks were able to be sliced apart by the Imps' own claws, scattering the floating flames easily while only suffering only the slightest bit of damage.

The most difficult opponents for the Lesser Imps were the Glow Sprites, because of their opposite elemental faction. They were equally matched, as far as attack and defense went; after a dozen or so were

mutually destroyed, Regnark left them alone for the most part, instead concentrating his efforts where it would do the most good.

Deecy was next up on the defense, and of all of his Shards Fred had concentrated on raising her Shard Level the most. Because the Dire Wolf had access to two elements, it was a bit harder to increase her Level than it was the others'. Fred knew that she was a valuable member of their team, though, so he concentrated most of his Mana Conversion over the last half-day on Fire and Water, when it wasn't needed for some other project.

Shard Status
Deecy Greymane
Elemental Origin: Fire-Water Shard Level: 6 Next Mana Threshold: 4000 Fire, 4000 Water Fire Mana: 2065/2065 Water Mana: 2066/2066
Defense Creation Options
Fire Wall (Base Cost: 20 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Fire Mana per hour) Spinning Flame Wheel (Base Cost: 30 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 2 Fire Mana per hour) Raging Inferno (Base Cost: 50 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 3 Fire Mana per hour) Focused Blaze (Base Cost: 100 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Fire Mana per hour) Reactive Conflagration (Base Cost: 500 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 30 Fire Mana per hour) Ice Spear Barricade (Base Cost: 20 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Water Mana per hour) Water Geyser (Base Cost: 30 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 2 Water Mana per hour) Drowning Pool (Base Cost: 50 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 3 Water Mana per hour)

**Icicle Rain (Base Cost: 100 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Water Mana per hour)**

**Grasping River (Base Cost: 500 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 30 Water Mana per hour)**

### **Special Abilities**

**Giant Dire Wolf Form (Activation Cost: 5 Fire and 5 Water Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1 Fire and 1 Water Mana per minute)**

**Dire Wolf Form (Activation Cost: 0)**

**Dire Wolf Pup Form (Activation Cost: 0, Ambient Mana Absorption increased)**

**Fireball (Base Activation Cost: 40 Fire Mana)**

**Localized Combustion (Base Activation Cost: 200 Fire Mana)**

**Icicle Explosion (Base Activation Cost: 40 Water Mana)**

**Ferocious Downpour (Base Activation Cost: 200 Water Mana)**

**Create Steam Elemental (Base Activation Cost: 1000 Fire and 1000 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 150 Fire and 150 Water Mana per hour)**

**Pack Hunter (Activation Cost: 200 Fire and 200 Water Mana, Cooldown: 2 hours)**

Needless to say, their efforts had paid off handsomely. Deecy was now Shard Level 6, with four additional powerful Defenses she could place, two new direct effect Special Abilities, and the ability to create her first Defender. The two direct-effect Special Abilities were interesting: Localized Combustion was similar to Fred's Mana Explosion, except that the combustion was entirely contained within the room and only utilized Fire Mana to create a fiery explosion. The Ferocious Downpour created a pounding waterfall of rain mixed with ice crystals that slammed anything underneath it into the ground, doing both physical and Water damage.

The Defender she could now create was one she hadn't had the opportunity to test quite yet, because the Steam Elemental cost 1,000 of each of her elemental Mana and required 150 of both Fire and Water to

maintain every hour. It was enough to know that she could make *something*, at least, even if it required more Mana than she would've liked to spend.

Two of Deecy's newer Defenses – Focused Blaze and Icicle Rain – were relatively “normal” Defenses that expanded on doing Fire and Water damage in different ways, but which were comparable to the previous Options she already had. The newest Defenses, however, which were what she had inside her room when the first of the invaders arrived, were almost a combination of a Defender and a Defense.

The Reactive Conflagration was a simple-looking column of flames that sat just inside the entrance of the room, reaching up to the ceiling, and was only about three feet in diameter. When Fred first saw it, the Defense didn't look very intimidating; he figured that it would be easy for invaders to avoid it completely by going around it. That turned out to be the furthest from the truth, though, as he observed when a pack of Goblin Gnomes entered the room and scattered to either side of the flaming pillar.

A half-dozen tendrils of flames lashed down on the Gnomes from the blazing column, reaching out and pinpointing them as they tried to run past. The tendrils whipped at the foreign defenders as if they had minds of their own, reacting to the presence of something near it like a Defender would. The biggest difference between this Defense and an actual Defender was that Deecy couldn't directly control where the Defense attacked. This was obvious to see, as a few Goblin Gnomes managed to squeeze past the Defense because of the simple fact that they were farther away than closer targets – despite being well within range of the Defense.

They didn't make it that far, however, as they were swallowed up by the Grasping River Defense. A second column – this time, made entirely of ice-cold water, with chunks of sharp ice running quickly in a looping circle

suspended in the air – sent out its own tendrils of water that picked up the Gnomes as they ran past. When they surrounded each foreign Defender with a loop of water, the liquid solidified and contracted, breaking their backs even as they were brought back to the looping river. Before they actually reached the fast-moving river, all but one Gnome was slain by the grasping tendrils; the one that managed to survive was pulled inside the water, drowned, and then battered by the sharp chunks of ice suspended in the icy river.

Extremely effective, to say the least.

Even as powerful as those impressive new Defenses were, the flood of small Defenders at the entrance didn't stop for nearly five minutes, and eventually large numbers of invaders slipped past Deecy's two Defenses. She used a few of her least expensive direct-effect Special Abilities, such as Fireball and Icicle Explosion, every once in a while, though she was saving most of her Mana for later; the upkeep to keep the two Defenses going was enough that she was barely getting a trickle back every hour, so it was better if she just maintained them until a larger response was needed.

Of those that managed to get past Deecy, more than half were destroyed by the dozen Crystal Scorpions and half-dozen Golden Sphinxes from Eisa, which constituted the rest of the protective detail in the large hallway, with stone spikes lined up along the sides. Fred had augmented their company with a dozen Rockworms in there, as well, to help protect underneath some of the spikes, so that they couldn't be used as an avenue for progression.

That lasted all of about a minute before the first waves of foreign Defenders managed to make it to The Oven, where they started to perish by the dozens without help from the Guild members watching from above. The first to get through the maze was a small group of Rats that had used

each other as shields against the heat, but they were easily dispatched by Roady in the next room.

When the initial tide of numerous Defenders subsided, there was barely a moment to pause before the next wave of invaders started. This one contained slightly larger and tougher Defenders – such as Pebble Snakes, Giant Spiders, and Hellhounds – though they weren't nearly as numerous. One in particular, though, devastated Eisa's Shifting Sand Elementals: the Fire-based Lava Salamanders. They weren't all that large – only about three feet in length – but they put off so much heat that they literally melted the sand particles of which the Elementals were made, and the Lava Salamanders destroyed half of Eisa's Shifting Sands in less than a minute. To protect her remaining Elementals, Eisa withheld them from the room until all of the remaining Salamanders had passed; doing so allowed the rest of the invaders from that group to make it through, only suffering damage from Shattering Schist explosions and spells thrown out by the Guild members behind Viewing Portals.

That wave lasted for another five minutes, and by the end of it Eisa was able to create two Golden Sphinxes to support her remaining Sand Elementals when there was a momentary lull in the wave of foreign Defenders roaming through. It was obvious that she needed some extra defense that could survive longer against a Fire-based monster, and the Sphinxes were a better fit for the larger Defenders coming their way.

Of course, the next wave of attackers included something called a Contained Cyclone, which was basically a whirling mass of super-quickly spinning air that was entirely contained within an invisible cylinder three feet across. As soon as it hit one of the Shifting Sand Elementals, the Cyclone tossed the Sand everywhere, scattering it so much that the Defender must've lost cohesion and dissipated soon afterwards. Worse than



that, the shrieking winds of the Cyclone managed to tear one of the legs off of a Sphinx when it got too close to it.

Air and Earth were opposing elements, and these violent displays really showed how much damage they could do to each other – at least compared to the previous Defenders that had been battling. Luckily, the Sphinxes weren't outmatched by the Cyclones – they just had to go about their attack differently. Something she hadn't seen them do before worked wonders to destroy the Air Defender, and it seemed to surprise Eisa as well.

"I didn't know they could launch their claws through the air! Why haven't they done that before?" she asked, after watching each of her Defenders rear up on their hind legs, point their forepaws – or whatever paws remained – and the sharp stone claws they had were shot through the air, shredding the Cyclones apart. After a few seconds, the claws "grew" back, and they were able to do it again.

*"I'm not sure, but it's good to know. I wonder if any of our other Defenders have hidden Abilities that we don't know about?"*

Fred was about to mention this occurrence to his other Shards, but everything happening aboveground finally demanded his attention. The attack on his dungeon had started about 15 minutes early – which was fortuitous, as it gave him time to adjust to the changes down there. In addition, the Mana from the destruction of so many foreign Defenders was starting to pile up; after filling all of his own Cores, he had been splitting the incoming Mana: some dispersed among his Shards; the rest stockpiled the rest about 200 feet below his Core Room. He theoretically could've just had it pass through his Core and turned it into Unconverted Mana, but he figured he might want to use it for something else—

Such as destroying some gargantuan monsters outside of Allroads...

# **Part V – Devastation**

# Chapter 22

Precise coordination didn't seem to be a strong consideration by the Dungeon Core factions when coordinating their attack by their "Boss" monsters, which made Fred's allies' defense *a little* easier. Maintaining the exact speed of gigantic Defenders in relation to nearby factions was probably difficult, so Fred could understand: It took some precise concentration to focus aboveground and largely ignore what was happening in his dungeon, after all. That, and many of the monstrosities headed their way took care to avoid trampling on any of the elemental concentrations as they got near Allroads, which delayed them considerably.

The first faction to arrive, approximately two minutes or so before any of the others got close, were the gigantic Defenders from the Dark faction coming out from the northeast. There were four Demon Prince Zelphin's, which were essentially 200-foot tall, red-skinned demons with leathery-looking wings folded against their backs; each of them looked identical to each other, dual-wielding swords that were at least sixty feet long and six or seven feet wide. They put Regnark's Demon Lord Laziren to shame.

## **Demon Prince Zelphin (Level 10)**

**Vitality: 550000**

**Attack: 32000, Crosscut Slice, Hellfire Explosion, Decapitate,  
Dismember, Summoning**

**Call, Portal**

**Defense: 30000**

The fact that the Demon Prince was a Level 10 Defender was telling, as it hinted to Fred that the current size and state of the massive Demon wasn't normal. He could only imagine that a Demon Prince was something only found in S-Rated Dark dungeons, and it was likely that it wasn't created very often at a higher Level than 1 or 2 for obvious reasons – it couldn't fit, otherwise. A smaller version would certainly be capable of being housed inside of a room, but to make one that would allow the Prince not only to fit inside but to move and swing its swords was asking a lot. That's not to say that it couldn't be done, but Fred also couldn't imagine a group of 5 Adventurers – even those at a high S-Rating – would want to try to tackle something like this without a death wish.

There were also four Shadowy Goliaths, which were gigantic, formless masses of light-sucking darkness. Fred couldn't actually see what they were supposed to be, as looking at them for long – even though his Territorial Sight – was difficult: The shadowy masses almost seemed to suck his mind up, along with all of the light around them. He found that he had to tear his gaze away before he lost himself in the recesses of the strange Defender. The only thing Fred could really tell was that, as far as Vitality, Attack, and Defense, each Shadowy Goliath had stats comparable to those of the Demon Prince. In fact, with slight fluctuations here and there, almost all of the gargantuan monsters coming towards the city were all Level 10, had at least a half-million Vitality, and possessed anywhere between 30,000 to 40,000 Attack and Defense.

Considering that the highest Base Physical Attack and Defense Fred had seen on some of the highest-Rated Adventurers in Allroads was just under 500, it was astonishingly impressive. Of course, those stats on Adventurers were different than what they could actually damage or sustain safely, based on weapons, armor, enchantments, and Abilities; still, he

doubted that any but the very strongest spells, wielded by Syndicate members – such as Elder Hood – would be able to do more than irritate the giant Defenders.

The last of the Dark monsters were four walking jumbles of bones of all different sizes; they had a vaguely bipedal form to them, not *quite* human-looking, and they were also wielding bone clubs that seemed impossible to exist. The Bone Lords appeared to be holding the femur bone of something even larger than their 200-foot-tall form, which had to have been just the result of their size scaling up, because nothing in the world would have a bone even close to that size. There weren't 800-foot-tall beasts roaming around, after all.

At least, he didn't think so. Fred pictured his former Human body shuddering involuntarily at the thought.

As soon as the first of the Demon Princes came into range, the Adventurers and Allroads guards along the wall opened fire with their long-distance weaponry, spells, and Abilities. Fred watched as a multi-colored wave of Power shot towards the Demon, slamming into its center mass with an explosion of flames, light, icicles, arrows, and even what appeared to be some sort of acidic poison that coated the outside black leather chestpiece covering the front of the massive Defender. The sheer ferocity of the first attack actually caused Prince Zelphin to rock backwards a step, the armor protecting its chest disintegrating in a 30-foot wide circle where most of the attacks had slammed into it. The flesh underneath was bleeding blackish blood with multiple wounds that appeared shallow but painful, and the Demon bellowed out loud enough that some of those on the walls needed to cover their ears so that they didn't lose their hearing.

The fact that they had managed to damage one of the monstrosities was encouraging, and Fred could see that knowledge bolster the courage

and morale of those defending the wall near the encounter. There was even a slight cheer, albeit one that was quickly cut off as they pressed their defense, sending out spell after spell, arrow after arrow, attempting to strike the same place on the Demon. Unfortunately, even with the lumbering pace and exaggerated slowness that all of the giant Defenders seemed to possess because of their size, the first initial attack had been their only success, as the Demon Prince turned or dodged sideways, being hit only by glancing blows. Even direct hits didn't do more than scorch its armor.

As the second, third, and fourth volleys were unsuccessful, they gave Prince Zelphin the chance to attack. Leaning forward against the spells and projectiles battering against its armor, the Demon raised both swords above its head and began to swing downwards. Before it could do more than move it in a downward motion, Fred took the small Mana Explosion full of ten units of Light Mana he had been holding and stuck it in the face of the Prince.

If it hadn't been such a dire situation, Fred would've laughed at the shocked expression on the Demon's face when the condensed ball of Light Mana appeared in between its eyes. The detonation wasn't overly large – only about the size of its head – but it was large enough that it caused the Prince to stagger backwards, its wings extended to catch its balance before it fell. As it stepped back, the massive Defender removed itself from Fred's territory, meaning that he couldn't follow up his attack with another. Fred wasn't sure if it would even matter, though, because when he looked at the Demon's face, he could see that he had only managed to mangle its nose, puncture one of its eyes, and leave multiple lacerations over its skin.

And, he supposed, he made it *angry*.

He didn't have time to wait for it to recover and attack, however, as the other 11 Dark Defenders were attacking at nearly the same time, all

along the northeastern wall. Blasts of light, bursts of flames, and anything else they could throw at the Demon Princes, Shadow Goliaths, and Bone Lords slammed into the monstrous Defenders, slowing them down temporarily – but not stopping them in the least. The one thing that they *didn't* throw at the attackers were any of the Magisteel balls he had made, which he was waiting for, doing everything he could to send another small Mana Explosion here and there, in the meantime. He eventually had to stop after an accident almost caused him to kill or severely wound an entire section of Adventurers on the wall. As it was – well, they would recover... *if* they survived the next few minutes.

It seemed that Fred was right to be cautious about using his Mana Explosion and Implosion techniques, because unbeknownst to him – though he should have realized it earlier – they reacted to Power in the same way, even if not as severely. Fred had set off a Light Mana Explosion right in front of one of the Shadowy Goliaths, which turned out to be extremely effective; unfortunately, those on the walls had attacked at the same time, and as the Power of their spells and Abilities slammed into his Explosion, the effect was multiplied, as if it were Mana, instead of Power. Knowing that they were both essentially two sides of the same primal source, it made sense...*now*...but at the time it had not yet dawned on him.

Granted, the bigger explosion managed to shear off about a third of the dark mass that comprised the Goliath, which was a good thing; what was bad, though, was that the explosion traveled back up the tiny trails left behind by the use of Power, leading to the Adventurers. It happened so fast that they didn't even have warning; the only thing they knew was that there was a large explosion that occurred in front of the large, formless mass of the enemy, before another smaller detonation occurred in front of them, knocking at least half of them off of the wall and into the city.

Fred felt bad that he had caused that to happen – however inadvertently; at least no one died, though many of them had broken bones. That wasn't true for long, unfortunately, as when Fred paused to assess the damage and its cause – and to evaluate whether to continue with his attempts to hold back the charge of the Dark Defenders – the other monstrosities recovered enough to attack.

Swords wielded by Demon Princes slammed down on the wall, smashing and killing those unlucky enough to be caught underneath the massive weapons, though there were a few high-Rated tank-Classed Adventurers who managed to barely survive, hanging onto life with broken – but alive – bodies. A thick cloud of Unconverted Mana emerged from the dead, which shocked Fred a little; normally, when Humans died outside of a Core's dungeon, they received little to no Mana from their deaths.

That was the reason why they wanted Adventurers to die within their dungeons, because the walls of the dungeon were what absorbed and converted the ambient Mana they gave off...*the upkeep!* The strengthened walls he had infused with Mana had to have been the reason he was seeing it now, or else something had fundamentally changed since he became a full-fledged Dungeon Core. Before he did anything else, he started funneling the Unconverted Mana from their deaths down below his Core Room, joining the rest of the elemental Mana he was storing down there.

Speaking of those walls, the Princes' swords also hit them so hard that even though they were reinforced with Unconverted Mana the stone walls were still damaged, though not nearly as much as they would've been had he not done the infusions earlier. Large gouges were taken out of the top of the walkway, several feet wide and deep in places; the force behind the attacks was such that Fred thought an entire section of the wall probably would've been demolished, had he not helped to protect and strengthen it.



That wasn't the end, however, as the other Shadowy Goliaths flowed forward and slowly swallowed up entire 100-foot sections of the wall, killing those unlucky enough to be caught inside within a matter of moments. The Bone Lords weren't to be outdone, as they smashed their humongous femur bone clubs against the walls, and then used great sweeping strikes to knock hundreds of Adventurers and guards off the wall. Not all of them died, but very few of them could move after being tossed hundreds of feet through the air to land in front of the wall.

Fred managed a quick response of Light Mana explosions – regardless of the danger – that managed to set all of the Dark Defenders reeling backwards again, but he was beginning to run out of the Light Mana he had been storing. He was still getting a bit from the invaders assaulting his dungeon, but he couldn't keep this up for long at the rate it was going; Fred just wasn't doing enough damage, and he feared that any larger explosions would just end up killing even more of the people of the city arrayed for defense.

*Why aren't they throwing my Magisteel balls?!*

As if that was some sort of cue to actually do what he asked of them, Fred saw the reeling stretch of the northeastern wall pick up the Magisteel spheres and aim them at the attacking monstrosities. He was eyeing them all as his Magisteel spheres flew through the air in – fortunately – sporadic timing; unfortunately, the first six smashed against either the front of a Demon Prince or one of the bones that comprised the form of the Bone Lord. The seventh, however, was thrown almost recklessly at the Shadowy Goliath; as soon as he saw the ball heading towards the Defender, time seemed to slow down as Fred quickly brought forth 50 Light Mana and lightly wrapped it in 500 Unconverted Mana, condensing it just enough to fit inside the sphere.

The Shadowy Goliath was relatively unsubstantial, so the Mana Explosion hiding inside the Magisteel ball passed through the exterior of the dark form until it was lost to sight. Fortunately, Fred didn't lose hold or even the location of his Mana Explosion he was holding tightly inside the sphere; when he estimated that it was approximately in the center of the formless mass, he let the Explosion detonate.

The first indication that anything was actually happening was a rapid lightening of the center of the Goliath, until it looked like a lamp covered by a thick sheet. The light increased in intensity so quickly it was nearly imperceptible, until the Shadowy Defender seemed to burst apart from the inside, shards of the Magisteel ball flinging in all directions – including impaling the side of the Demon Prince a few hundred feet to the east. Luckily, none of the sharp pieces hit anyone on the wall, though they did end up somewhere deep in the city after smashing against a few buildings. As for any of the Mana that the Goliath would've dropped upon its death, it was consumed to fuel the explosion since it originated inside the Defender, leaving nothing for Fred to utilize later.

The entire battlefield seemed to pause in shock – even the Dark Defenders for some reason – directly following the explosion, as both sides tried to figure out exactly what happened. Fortunately, the Humans on the wall recovered faster and started chucking every Magisteel ball they had at the remaining Dark Defenders. The remaining Goliaths were easy enough to destroy once the spheres penetrated their forms, but the others were much more difficult. The problem was that Fred had to wait and guess whether one of the balls would enter a mouth or open wound on the Demon Princes, or whether the Magisteel would slip through an opening of bones on the Bone Lords before he inserted the Mana Explosion. Finally, one got through

the defenses of one of the Demons, and it slipped into an eye socket of one where he had blown out its eye – and that was enough.

The resulting explosion blew the entire top half of the Demon Prince apart, flinging fragments of bones and flesh everywhere, knocking off a half-dozen Human defenders on the wall and unfortunately killing one of them. Soon after, a Bone Lord was destroyed when one of the Magisteel spheres managed to squeeze through two bones, and Fred barely got his Explosion inside in time. Those nearest the explosion had seen what had happened with the Demon Prince and lay flat against the wall, preventing them from being swept away by the pieces of bone flying in all directions.

With half of the attacking Dark Defenders already down – four of the easier Shadowy Goliaths, one Demon Prince, and one Bone Lord – the situation appeared as though it could be handled without too much more loss of life. Fred tried to ignore the horrific sight of over a thousand dead or dying Adventurers and guards, and concentrated on defeating the rest of the attackers as safely as possible.

The Demon Princes didn't appreciate the death of one of their own, however, and they backed off a hundred feet. They weren't retreating, though, because they immediately crouched down, opened their wings, and launched themselves into the air. Flapping their wings to gain altitude, they were quickly out of range of even the longest-distance spells – as well as Fred's own Mana Explosions; it wasn't for long, unfortunately, as they all dove down as if they had choreographed the move, heading straight for the walls, swords outstretched in front of them.

Even though they were bombarded by spells, Abilities, and even a tossed Magisteel Sphere by the Human defenders, none of that mattered as the swords impacted the wall and an explosion of dark hellfire erupted from the site of the impact, killing dozens of Adventurers and blasting hundreds

of others off of the wall. The Princes seemed a little dazed from their attack as they hovered where they had made an even larger dent in the wall, but unfortunately, none of those that could've taken advantage of that hesitation were close enough. As a result, a few seconds later, a large, flat, circular, black hole opened up below the Demon Princes, and they dropped into it after folding their wings to their backs. They immediately disappeared, emerging from what had to be another portal back on the field in front of the walls, landing lightly on their feet, safe from most other attacks from the walls.

They didn't move from there except to cross their swords in front of them in an oddly strange position, before thrusting both arms into the sky. Immediately, a dozen more portals – much smaller this time – appeared next to the Demon Princes, 36 in total. Nothing happened for about a second, and then a single Level 5 Pit Fiend flew out from each portal, which closed immediately behind them. The Pit Fiends weren't extraordinarily powerful, but they were more than enough to cause confusion and panic on the walls as the Human defenders tried to rally after all of the devastation they had endured already.

Fred couldn't even help them, because he was concentrating on finishing off the last of the Bone Lords; two lucky Magisteel spheres managed to make it inside the "bodies" of the Dark Defenders made of bones, and two more of the monstrous creatures were destroyed. The third and last Lord was being difficult, however, and was staying far enough away that it would just dart in and slam its club down on the wall, killing dozens each time before withdrawing it. Finally, just as the Pit Fiends attacked the other sections near the Demon Princes, one brave Adventurer jumped on the tip of the bone club after it crashed down near him, holding a Magisteel ball in his arms.

The Bone Lord didn't notice, and raised its club back into the air. When the club was upright over the Bone Lord's "shoulder", the Human dropped from the club and plummeted 150 down to the Lord below, his back cracking painfully as he landed awkwardly on what Fred would consider the head of the Lord. Whether or not he was dead already, the Dungeon Core didn't know; what he did know was that the Magisteel sphere managed to fall directly through one of the gaps in the bone form of the Lord. While the brave Adventurer was falling, Fred had already prepped the ball with a Mana Explosion, in the hopes that the man would succeed in implanting the Magisteel within the Bone Lord. If the Adventurer did not succeed, Fred hoped, at least, that where the ball fell would be far enough away that the explosion would not kill everyone still alive on the nearby wall.

Fred didn't have to worry about that, fortunately, as he successfully detonated the sphere inside of the Bone Lord, sending bone shards everywhere. Three chunks of bone luckily managed to hit Pit Fiends as they were swooping down to attack the wall, killing them instantly, but the other pieces flew off harmlessly elsewhere.

Elated, Fred felt triumphant as he turned back to see what could be done to help the surviving Adventurers against the Pit Fiends and the again-encroaching Demon Princes...but the rest of the gigantic Defenders from the Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, Light, and Air factions arrived.

# Chapter 23

*“Deecy...uh...things aren’t going so well up here.”*

What Fred Communicated to his Fire and Water Shard was a bit of an understatement.

When the other factions arrived at Allroads, Fred immediately set to work delaying them so that the Human defenders could help get the Magisteel spheres where they needed to go. He could tell that they had been watching the battle along the northeastern wall with more than a little worry and trepidation; now, however, they had also seen that the monstrous Defenders *could* be defeated – though with a heavy toll.

Unfortunately, the Dungeon Cores had been keeping an eye on the competition as well, and they didn’t give the people of Allroads many chances to deliver the surprise package in the form of heavy balls. Not only that, but those that could attack from afar stayed just outside of Fred’s territory, meaning that he couldn’t even use any of his special techniques on them, even without the Magisteel delivery system.

From the north, the Treehemoths stayed away, using their long root systems to sweep Adventurers off of the wall, crushing them against the stone as they slammed their 150-foot-long appendages down on the relatively helpless massed defenders. The Mega Hydra, the larger, twelve-headed older brother of the Azure Hydra that Fred had seen inside of his dungeon, shot out powerful jets of water from the northwest; only the strongest of tank-Classed Adventurers could withstand the jets of water, while the rest were knocked backwards off the wall.

To the west, The Gravelers that seemed much larger than their previous brethren were actually the same size – they just liked to travel

stretched out, for some reason. When they arrived at the territory border, they started chucking their individual rocks at the Adventurers on the wall with unerring accuracy. It wasn't as deadly as at the other parts of the wall, at least not once the tanks got out front and blocked most of the missiles with their bodies or shields, though it also prevented anyone from attacking back. Whenever someone would pop their head up to aim a spell at one of the Rock Giants or King Crabs scuttling closer, a rock would ricochet off their head a second or two later.

To the east, the wall was being devastated by the Blaze Elementals, who were apparently able to throw streams of super-hot flames from hundreds of feet away, diminishing their size in the process. Hundreds burned to death in the first few seconds of the fight, until the few living Adventurers were able to cast some sort of blanket protection spell that reduced the severity of the damage coming from the flames. It was still unbearably hot, though, and dozens collapsed from heat exhaustion or oxygen deprivation as the flames continued to blaze over their positions.

The Light and Air factions did, indeed, send their own friends to play with, which Fred hadn't really gotten a good look at until they rounded the mountain range. From the Light Dungeon Cores, there were 4 more Celestial Orbs, bigger and more dangerous looking than the one he had seen on the border; strange Reflective Constructs, which were comprised of thousands of mirror-like objects, constantly rotating around a central pulsing light; and 4 Crystalline Atrocities, which essentially were a taller and wider version of the Crystal Golem.

Both the Celestial Orb and the Reflective Constructs stayed outside of Fred's territory, attacking from afar. The Orb shot out wide beams of concentrated light – which were probably its Sunray attack – which blinded everyone unlucky to be looking in its direction. The Reflective Constructs

stopped their constant rotation of mirrors, and half of them formed into a complex, half-spherical arrangement, facing towards the central, pulsing light; the other half were arranged almost like a tube – with mirrored sides facing inwards – connected to the spherical arrangement, and pointed towards the walls. As Fred watched, the light inside of the formation pulsed brighter, reflecting off of the half-sphere of mirrors thousands of times, growing stronger, somehow, as it bounced around; at some unknown signal, a subtle shift in the mirrors caused a large beam of the concentrated light to fire out the tube.

Every living thing the beams of light touched burst into flames almost instantly, which turned out to be thousands of Adventurers who had been blinded by the Celestial Orb. The beams only lasted about ten seconds before they shut down, but it was enough to ruin the defenses up on the walls.

Arriving through the sky to the southeast, the forces of Air made a dramatic entrance. First there were 4 Twisting Tornadoes, which were 500-foot-tall funnels of circulating storm clouds, complete with thunder and lightning inside their cyclonic revolutions; they touched down outside of the walls and steadily made their way towards the Human defenders, throwing up dirt and grass as it was ripped up from the ground. They were accompanied by a flock of 4 Roc Queens, which were 75-foot-long monstrous birds with 300-foot wingspans; they swooped down on the walls in a dive so quick that the Adventurers didn't really have time to react as dozens were scooped up in their giant beaks. Fred could hear crunching as the beaks closed on legs and other body parts, before they were basically spat out when the Rocs climbed to about 1,000 feet in the air. Not many of those who fell survived the drop, unfortunately, as they crashed into the buildings below.



The last Defender from the Air faction stayed across the territory border and attacked from long range. The Djinnish Champion was something Fred had never heard of before, and it was quite possible that many of the Adventurers hadn't either; it appeared to be a large fluffy white cloud ridden by the upper half of a blue-skinned humanoid-shaped figure. The figure had a head and two arms, but there was no face or other distinguishing features – it was, Fred decided, a bit creepy-looking. Deadly, too, as the arms of the Champion raised, pointing at the defenders on the wall, and lightning bolts shot of its shapeless “hands”; they slammed into the wall, blasting small chunks of it away despite the Unconverted Mana strengthening it, and the bolts traveled along the walkway, electrocuting anyone within twenty feet.

Most didn't die from the electrocution, but for the most part, they were rendered unconscious; the bolts of lightning were then replaced by horizontal, condensed, crescent-shaped slices of hardened air, 30 feet wide, which flew through the air at those who had fallen, slicing most of them apart when struck by the Wind Sickle attacks from the Djinnish Champion.

People were dying by the hundreds upon the walls, and there wasn't much that Fred could do about the invaders staying out of his territory. Those only comprised about a third of the ones attacking the city, however, and he contributed to fending off the attacks of those he could reach – and killing some of them, as well.

The Ruby Dragons coming from the Fire faction swooped down over the city, ignoring the defenders on the walls completely, and started bathing the entire city in flames. Fred wasn't sure if it was luck or not that most of the people of Allroads were huddling safely inside their homes, so very few were burned up in the attack; his upkeep on the building protected them from being directly destroyed by the powerful flames, but it didn't

prevent the environment from heating up. Soon enough, portions of the city were as hot as The Oven inside of Fred's dungeon, and tens of thousands died from being cooked alive in their homes or businesses.

The Emerald Dragons from the Nature faction looked ready to join in on the fun inside the city, which would literally be explosive if they decided to breathe their poisonous – and highly flammable – breath attack. The Adventurers and guards along the wall were being systematically taken down by long-range attacks; the massive Defenders that couldn't attack from a distance were closing in on the depleted fortifications; and from his hasty count, there were less than a dozen Magisteel balls in the hands of those who could actually use them.

That was when he contacted Deecy.

***“Well then, you have a choice; you can either let them all die, or you can do something about it.”***

*“Thanks, it wasn't like that was obvious or anything.”* He couldn't blame the Dire Wolf for her flippant response, because she – like everyone else helping to defend his dungeon – was constantly fighting to keep the flow of increasingly difficult invaders from overwhelming them. The good part of that was that they were succeeding and hadn't been too stressed yet, though the day was still young; Fred still had confidence in them, that they would be able to succeed, with or without his direct intervention.

Unfortunately, the battle for the city above was a whole other story; despite it only starting a couple of minutes ago, they were already losing. Badly.

*I guess, like Deecy said, I better do something about it before it's too late.*

If he didn't do something now, the rest of the city would be destroyed, and all of its inhabitants killed; from there, it wouldn't be long until the massive Defenders dug down to his dungeon. He had already seen that they could chip away at his Mana-enhanced upkeep of the city, so it would only be a matter of time before they reached his Core Room below and destroy his Core. Not to mention his Shards and Core Power Guild.

So, Fred did something that he had not been planning on doing, because it was entirely too dangerous, before; but now, there wasn't a reason to hesitate. Taking 25 units of the Water Mana he had been conserving from the destruction of his dungeon's invaders, he combined that with 250 units of Unconverted Mana and created a Mana Implosion right in front of one of the swooping Ruby Dragons, 200 feet above the city (which was just about the limit that he could reach inside his territory)... and he let it activate.

As he had hoped, the Implosion started small and rapidly expanded to a relatively safe 50 feet across, just as the Fire-based Dragon flew headfirst into it, unable to stop itself in mid-flight. In less than a second, the head and a good portion of the upper half of the Ruby Dragon were consumed, killing the massive flying Defender. As the Mana was released from its death, it *too* was sucked up into the Implosion, almost immediately, giving Fred no time to try to move it away or absorb it into his Core.

What he feared would happen occurred then, though it wasn't as bad as it could've been. The Fire Mana consumed by the Implosion was so great, and it expanded the diameter so quickly, that one of the Emerald Dragons starting to swoop above the city was caught by the now-100-foot-wide Implosion; half of the green Dragon was basically eaten up by the blue-colored reverse explosion, killing it. When that Defender dissolved into green Nature Mana, that, in turn, was consumed; the Implosion grew

exponentially larger, as if the combination of different types of Mana had a doubling effect. The Implosion grew to almost 200 feet across in the matter of a couple of seconds, until it caught a second, unsuspecting Ruby Dragon that was just finishing its latest Firebreath attack on the city and was starting to rise again.

The addition of another source of Mana doubled the size of the Implosion again, though this time it took much longer to expand; the ten seconds that it required to expand to 400 feet across gave the rest of the Dragons, and other massive Defenders trying to attack the city directly, time to vacate the area. Unfortunately, the building underneath the Implosion couldn't move, and his out-of-control technique started to consume the Unconverted Mana infused inside of the structures. The massive, spherical-shaped Implosion expanded another 20 feet, taking a few top stories of buildings with it – though fortunately without anyone in them – before it stopped growing.

In the blink of an eye, the Implosion disappeared, and two Mana Stones – the largest was red; the smaller, green – dropped from the sky, falling into the middle of the city. Fred breathed a sigh of relief that the Implosion hadn't caught another Defender, because that would've expanded so out of control that the entire city would've been destroyed.

The show of force caused the factions' assault to take a momentary "step" back, as they paused in what they were doing, allowing the surviving Adventurers and guards to counterattack. They couldn't reach those outside of Fred's territory, of course, but those that were attacking the walls under the covering fire of their long-range compatriots were fair game. One of the Rock Giants off to the west suddenly exploded into thousands of pieces, as Elder Hood and a few others did *something*, though they passed out

shortly after expending all of their remaining Power in one spectacular showing of might.

The remaining dozen Magisteel spheres about were tossed with great accuracy, which allowed Fred to kill 2 of the Landshark Kings in the northeast (the six-legged giant sharks pushing their own lake of water); 3 of the Twisting Tornadoes that couldn't help but suck up the balls into their funnels; 2 Lava Hounds that absorbed the metal of the ball through their skin; all 4 Room Shrooms, because they had mouths that seemed to take up half of their bodies; and a lucky shot into the open beak of a single Roc Queen swooping down to gobble up more Adventurers caused it to explode when it rose back up in the air. The people who were inside its mouth were killed along with the explosion, but they probably wouldn't have survived the drop from that height, anyway. At least, that's how Fred consoled himself.

Even with all of those successes, they had only eliminated 27 of the 84 gargantuan Defenders attacking the city, and the temporary pause as they assessed the situation was soon over. There were a few more Magisteel balls floating around on top of the wall's walkway, and there were even more inside and outside of the city where they had fallen, but it didn't look like the Humans would or *could* rally enough to finish the job – especially since they couldn't even reach the ones outside of Fred's territory, which were once again pounding the defenders from long range.

Therefore, it was all up to Fred.

The destruction of the Rock Giant, by some means other than Fred's Mana Explosions or Implosions, produced a lot of Earth Mana; a brief thought to create his own large Defender was cut short when he realized that it would take entirely too long to fill up a blueprint of that size with Mana, even with an increased Defender Creation Skill. Every minute that

he waited for a new Defender to materialize was one in which where thousands of Adventurers and residents of Allroads would die, and there was no guarantee that whatever he Created would even survive long enough to kill one or two of the invading monsters, especially if it were attacked by more than one at a time.

Ideally, Fred would've preferred to create a Defender much, much larger than even the city, where it could squash all of the attackers with ease. Unfortunately, he had neither enough Mana, nor enough time: The Humans appeared ready to break at any moment, and as soon as that happened there was very little preventing the destruction of the city. Using the Earth Mana to create a series of massive Mana Explosions was an option, though in order to seriously damage the humongous Defenders, each Explosion would have to be quite large.

As a quick test, he used approximately 200 units of the Earth Mana to create another Explosion in front of a Roc Queen, as it banked around for another run at the walls. The explosion was the largest he'd seen, apart from the one near the Light border during the failed attack by Chareese and Roady; even though it was approximately 150 feet away from the wall and was only about 50 feet wide at its center, the shockwave from the detonation killed a caster-type Adventurer when she was blown off the wall, knocked off three-dozen others, and produced large cracks in the stone of the fortification.

If it had actually succeeded in killing the Roc, then it probably would've been a fair trade; as it was, the Air-based Defender was missing the lower half of its beak, one of its eyes had been blown out along with a small portion of its skull, it was missing many of the feathers along its head and neck – but it was essentially intact. A second, 200-unit explosion, centered along its back, managed to injure its wing slightly and likely

caused some internal bleeding – along with blowing off more feathers – but it could still fly well enough that it ignored the damage, other than to screech so loudly that it caused hundreds of nearby Adventurers to go deaf, at least temporarily. The second explosion was also slightly closer to the wall, and as a result, killed just under a dozen of the defenders on there, as well as breaking off a chunk of the wall itself.

Fred just couldn't do enough damage to the massive monsters without destroying the city itself, which kind of defeated the purpose. That, and even if it had worked, he *still* couldn't reach the dozens of enormous Defenders outside of his territory attacking without opposition for the moment.

*If I had some of my own Defenders, I could send them out to kill them, but I don't have enough Mana for that. Well, enough **elemental** Mana; the unfortunate deaths of so many in the city and on the walls has given me an unimaginable amount of Unconverted Mana.*

As he watched a Rock Giant start to slowly pound a portion of the western wall into rubble – which took at least 10 times as long as it would normally, because of the infused Mana inside of the stone – Fred struggled to come up with a solution to everything. *Mana Explosions are out, because something large enough to kill one of these things **from the outside** would level half of the city, most likely; the same goes for my Mana Implosions, especially if I use one as close to the walls as where this Rock Giant is. It could kill the Giant, of course, but then it would consume half of the city as the infused Unconverted Mana was sucked up, not to mention killing and consuming whatever Power is inside all of the Humans—*

Something about the Rock Giant and Humans clicked in his head; Fred had a sudden memory of his journey across the Plains of Grass with Eisa and Regnark. They had been chased by Earth Defenders, at that point,

including many Rock Giants and other powerful monsters; it was only the appearance of the Horrorlings and the Greater Horrors that had saved them. Fred had no doubt that, if they hadn't arrived, the Earth Cores would've had their revenge then and there, and there probably wasn't anything that could be done about it.

It hadn't been without danger, however, as many of the "void" creatures had invaded the impromptu dungeon he had created, including the tentacled lower half of one of the Greater Horrors. When that had occurred, just before dawn's light eliminated the frightening abomination, it had drained him of a large amount of Mana, as well as Regnark's Essence. That meant that the two things were connected just as much as Mana and Power were linked, which gave him an idea.

It was about time he made some Defenders of his own.



# Chapter 24

Time seemed to slow down again as he pulled up his Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization program.

## **Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization v.0.1:**

### **Current Blueprints Merged:**

- **None**

**Do you wish to add more blueprints? Y/N**

Fred didn't exactly have a Blueprint for Greater Horrors, let alone Horrorlings, which is what he thought he wished to create. However, in the extremely slowed-down time around him, he had a chance to think about that for a moment. *Even if I could make those Horrors, I doubt that I'd be able to control them. The Dark Dungeon Cores in the Deadlands couldn't control the ones that emerged into the Plains of Grass, after all; besides, those ones disappeared because of the light of the day, which hinted that they were originally based on some sort of Dark-based Defenders, if they were that vulnerable to the sunlight.*

He couldn't have something that was vulnerable to a certain element, because he was pretty sure he was only going to have a single shot at making a Defender – not seven different opportunities. That meant that it had to be non-elemental, and the only thing that Fred had that was technically non-elemental was...Unconverted Mana. The only problem

was that there weren't any blueprints that he had access to that could utilize Unconverted Mana to create it.

Therefore, he'd have to make Blueprints of his own.

Logically, the blueprints must've been created, somehow, by either a single Dungeon Core or a group of Cores in the past, so he figured that it had to be possible. While he didn't know exactly *how* he was going to do it, he was determined and experienced enough to know that it *could* be done.

He tried to imagine some sort of ferocious beast that would just absolutely tear the attackers apart...but after a moment, he realized that he just didn't know the ins and outs of a creature like that, without seeing it himself. Even the other Blueprints he had were intrinsically filled with little details regarding size, fur/skin color, attack strength, how many toes they had or *if* they had toes, and even the precise distance between each eye on its face – plus a lot more he couldn't even think of. He just didn't have the current imagination to design something completely new, and borrowing from some of the other Blueprints he had would most likely end up with having an element attached to it.

In fact, the only thing he knew well enough were Humans, especially after being one himself for nearly 20 years. Not only that: Fred instinctively knew nearly as much about Eisa, Regnark, and the rest of his Human Shards. As far as Deecy went, since he hadn't consciously created her Dire Wolf form, she was something with which he wasn't as familiar.

As a result of that realization, he visualized a blueprint of his old body, down to the smallest detail, and a familiar wire-grid form appeared in his mind. Then, because he needed two Blueprints to actually utilize the Hybridization Program, he imagined another wire-grid form in the shape of Eisa, as he probably knew her body better than he knew any other body in

the world. It seemed odd to him that he thought that, but it was the truth; he had spent the longest imagining what she looked like, when he made her into a Shard, so the details were imprinted in his memories more than anything other than his own former form.

As soon as he imagined them merging together in his mind, the world slowed down to a complete stop, and there was an abrupt wrenching of his consciousness, followed by the disappearance of the Program he was using. Fred worried that he had done something to break his entire dungeon system, but he calmed down when the speed of the world resumed its crawl, and the Hybridization Program reappeared.

### **Current Blueprints Merged:**

- **Human (Male)**
- **Human (Female)**

**Do you wish to add more blueprints? Y/N**

*Aha!* He selected N and the next notification popped up.

**Please select which blueprint characteristics to focus on during Hybridization:**

***Caution! Preliminary tests have shown that the more characteristics that are chosen for focusing, the higher the chance of failure!***

**(Note: Unselecting already selected characteristics could result in Hybridization failure at the best, or, at the worst, severe unintended consequences.)**

- **Enhanced Intelligence [ ]**
- **Superior Agility [ ]**
- **Heightened Physical Strength [ ]**

- **Durable Exterior [ ]**
- **Post-mortem Energy Release [ X ]**
- **Automatic Regenerative Energy Absorption [ X ]**

**Confirm selections: Y/N**

It was interesting to note that the characteristics listed “Energy” release and absorption, instead of Essence and Power. Seeing that made Fred wonder if whoever had messed up before and created the void-ish Horror creatures had used some sort of Human blueprint crossed with something. From what he understood, they were originally designed to be Defenders that didn’t release Essence when they died, either as just an experiment or for a specific purpose – like combating the increasingly powerful Humans who roamed around, far in the past.

Fred also deduced that the perpetrators had likely unselected that characteristic, as well as the Automatic Regenerative Energy Absorption; they wouldn’t want one of their own absorbing their Mana, after all, so it probably made sense at the time. However, taking out those two characteristics created the resulting “void” Defenders; they didn’t release any energy when they were killed, and they couldn’t maintain themselves without a source of energy – which made them hunger uncontrollably.

If they couldn’t release any of the energy they consumed, then that energy didn’t go away; their reemergence every night meant that they couldn’t be permanently killed, as their creation was tied to what was obviously a large concentration of permanently converted Dark Mana emanating from deep underground. If they had any type of consciousness behind them, Fred would’ve felt bad for them; they were never satisfied, no matter how much energy they consumed, and they could never really die – only come back every night and hunger for more.

It was just an assumption regarding the characteristics, but it made enough sense that Fred took it as fact – because he didn't really have a choice. He had spent too much time already, working on the Blueprints and considering the different characteristics; he could sense the world already beginning to speed back up. Quickly, before the nightmarish scene taking place in Allroads crashed back down on him, he unselected Automatic Regenerative Energy Absorption, selected the Superior Agility and Heightened Physical Strength, and approved his choices.

**Last Warning: Unselecting already selected characteristics can have unintended consequences! Do you still wish to proceed? Y/N**

*This is it!* Without hesitation, Fred selected **Y**.

**Cost to create Hybrid Blueprint (#2): 500 Unconverted Mana and 500 Unconverted Mana**

After mentally confirming this, he gathered up a large amount of Unconverted Mana and imagined it feeding into his new Blueprint, which appeared in his vision like a genderless Humanoid shape, like a cross between a male and female, but also missing the *unique* characteristics of either.

**Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization Success!**

**@\*##\*\*#\*\*@#\*\*\* Warning: Blueprint Corruption**

**Please rename this new Corrupted Hybrid Blueprint: \_\_\_\_\_**

“*Corrupted Hybrid Blueprint*”? Fred figured that was due to the insatiable hunger it would likely possess for “energy”, though he was hoping that it was still something that he could control because of the Release characteristic he had left alone. There was only one way to test that theory, though, which was to name it and create one.

As easy as that, the Bottomless Pit of Hunger was born.

*I think I’m getting better at naming things, I have to say.*

\* \* \*

Agelstein fell back as he narrowly dodged the massive root that crashed down on the wall, sending another Flamestrike towards the Treehemoth’s appendage as it was retracted from the semi-destroyed walkway. The entire northern wall was practically in shambles, and it was only due to whatever Fred had done to strengthen it that it was still standing, at all. It wasn’t just his own opinion that thought that, either, but everyone else along his portion of the wall marveled that everything wasn’t a pile of rubble yet – though if this kept up much longer, it was bound to be.

Their spells and other attacks on the roots were having some effect on the massive tree trying to smash them all; regardless, Agelstein was losing fellow Governmental guards and Adventurers at an alarming rate. Everyone there was used to death – being an Adventurer or former Adventurer meant that you lost some friends along the way, unless you were extremely fortunate – but there was only so much they could take, before they broke. Already, Agelstein had turned a blind eye to a few who snuck off the wall and retreated into the city, but there were sure to be a lot more, soon. Not that the city appeared much safer, because half of it was on fire as everything not connected to a structure was in flames; various

airborne monsters such as red and green Dragons only added to the confusion.

The northern wall wasn't even the hardest hit; everywhere he looked around the vast city wall, he saw even more devastation caused by the enormous monsters, and tens of thousands of bodies lying lifeless on the walkways, as well as inside and outside of the walls along the ground. His section had gotten lucky by eliminating the massive Room Shrooms with those Magisteel spheres supplied by Fred, but they still had the Treehemoths to deal with, which only a couple of those left could even reach with spells because it was so far away. That was the reason they were trying to kill them by attrition, by targeting their roots as they slammed into the wall, but it appeared to be a losing battle.

"Another one coming towards the center!" Agelstein shouted, after crouching and looking through the low battlements for the next attack. Everyone by now knew what that meant and approximately where the root was going to land; if they didn't, then they would probably be joining the hundreds who had already fallen because of the attacks.

Agelstein tripped over an uneven part of the walkway as he ran to avoid the root, falling flat on his face, just as an explosion detonated from inside the city, the shockwave washing over his back. Some of the others weren't so lucky, as they were blown from the wall onto the ground outside. Agelstein turned his head and looked just inside the city to see what had happened. *That didn't seem like one of those explosions from Fred...*

Indeed, it wasn't. The Emerald and Ruby Dragons were apparently working together, with the green winged lizards coughing up some purple-colored smoke, before the red ones lit it on fire, creating an enormous explosion. *Great, so now we have to contend with attacks from behind us in addition to—roots!* Agelstein suddenly remembered that there was an

appendage still descending towards the wall from the Treehemoth, and he scrambled forward.

He almost made it safely out of the field of danger; he felt and heard the wind of the roots passing right behind him, and he was slammed to the floor of the walkway as the tree's appendage caught his lower legs; he didn't know what had happened, at first, so he looked around and saw that his legs were...gone. Well, not gone, but they were crushed under a massive 10-foot wide root; they were *technically* still there, but he couldn't feel them.

The root lifted up, a long moment later, and that was when the shock of the injury faded, and the pain of his destroyed lower half hit him, full force. He couldn't help but scream as he looked back at his legs – or what used to be his legs. He forced himself to tear his eyes away as duty helped to dull the pain, somewhat; it didn't really dull the pain, but it gave him something to concentrate on during his last moments.

Fortunately, even on the ground, he was able to lift himself enough to gaze out past the battlements and see the enemy getting ready to crush the other half of his body. “To the cent—!” he started to shout hoarsely, his voice apparently ragged from screaming in pain. He stopped, though, as he saw something unusual near the Treehemoth.

*I must be delusional from pain*, was all he could think, after seeing what appeared to be a naked man...or *I suppose it could be a woman, it's too hard to tell from this distance*...appear out of nowhere about 20 feet from the Treehemoth. He was further baffled as the...person...didn't seem to have any kind of weapon, nor use any abilities, as far as he could see; instead, they ran up to the base of the Treehemoth, and started bashing at the enormous monster's roots with their fists.



That, contrary to anything he would've believed possible, got the giant tree's attention, despite there being absolutely no visible damage to the monster. Agelstein would've equated it to himself punching a sturdy stone block; while he had a decent Brawn Stat, he'd probably break his hand before he broke anything made from stone with his fists.

The roots that were aiming for the wall stopped and reversed course, and the Treehemoth literally scooted backwards a couple of feet, as if to get some distance away from the annoying person punching its appendages. As Agelstein had expected would happen, a branch "arm" extended from the upper foliage of the giant tree and smashed into the unidentifiable man/woman, smearing them into the ground with ease. When the branch was brought back up, he looked to see how deep they had been pounded into the soft ground...but the body was gone.

*What the...?*

He didn't have time to wonder about it, however, as in the next second, two more of the people popped into view out of nowhere, followed by a half-dozen more. They all looked *exactly* alike, not just similar; he wasn't exactly sure what they were, but there was only one explanation of where they came from: Fred.

*What in the world did he do?* More and more of the mysterious... not-people appeared and joined the previous ones racing for the Treehemoth, swarming over the roots of the massive monster with mindless purpose. He didn't see how it was possible, but it didn't take long before he realized that they were *really* hurting the giant tree, doing more damage to it in seconds than anything Agelstein and his compatriots had done over the last fifteen minutes. *Has it really only been that long since this fight started?*

A horrifying scream of obvious pain came from above his head, and Agelstein flinched in further pain as he turned to see whence it came from. He didn't think he could be any more shocked after the day so far, but he was wrong: One of the Emerald Dragons that had been attacking the city appeared to be covered, body-to-wingtip with those same strange people that Fred had likely created, and it looked to be on a crash course towards the ground outside the walls. He followed it with his head, only to see that he was right; seconds later it slammed into the ground, killing half of the naked people on its body in the process, but injuring itself severely at the same time. More naked bodies popped into existence above the downed Dragon, piling on top and practically covering it until he couldn't even see green anymore.

Looking past the Dragon, he could see that the lower roots of the other Treehemoths lined up along the northern wall seemed to be covered in the pale flesh of naked people, as well; to the west of his position, he saw the same thing happening to the massive six-legged sharks, the enormous turtles, and the Hydras that had been knocking around the wall's defenders in that section since the start.

A painful tingling shot through Agelstein's lower extremities, and he whipped around to see Harla, of their Blood Mages, hovering over his legs. He hadn't even known that she had survived; then again, he hadn't really been trying to pay attention to who had died very much – it was entirely too painful to think about.

"Thanks, Harla," he croaked out, his voice still hoarse. "Hey, at least there's plenty of blood around for you to use." His attempt at gallows humor fell on deaf ears, however. Any light that might have been in her eyes before the battle was completely gone; she barely acknowledged his words and appeared dead inside.

As blood flowed over his legs from all directions, Harla continued wrapping them up until it looked like he was wearing large casts of the red, sticky substance. It didn't take long for full feeling to come back to his legs in a painful rush, and the healing was complete less than a minute later.

"Thanks again, Harla—" he tried to say, but she was already moving away to the next injured person nearby, her movements stiff and automatic. *I can't say that I blame her for being a bit impersonal, after everything that happened.* Now that he could stand up on his recently healed legs, he bounded to his feet and collapsed against the battlements; *they might be healed, but I'm a bit weak, right now.* Healing his kind of injury tended to do that, though, as certain types of healing took a lot out of the person being healed.

Just as he returned his gaze to the field of battle, one and then another of the Treehemoth disappeared, as the naked people ran back towards the city before disappearing completely. The downed Emerald Dragon was gone – as well as the pale people who had been covering it – though he could see a furrow, in the dirt and grass, where it had crash-landed. Looking around to as much of the wall and surrounding areas as he could, he saw more and more of the massive monsters being destroyed, one by one, and there wasn't a single Dragon or giant bird still in the air.

*We...did it? We won?*

Looking around at Allroads still on fire, with hundreds of thousands of dead on the walls and in the city, he shook his head sadly at the sight. *Not really what I would consider a victory.*

Agelstein looked around at the northern portion of the wall, with the realization that he – as well as everyone else in the city – had narrowly escaped complete annihilation. Minutes alone probably stood between

keeping up the meager defense that they had and a full rout, and it was only through the timely intervention of...*whatever they were*...that saved them.

As he started to lend his aid to those hurt by the attack, he also was happy to know that he had kept his promise to Ravenne by staying alive.

*Wait a minute—the dungeon! What’s happening down there?* As much as he wanted to rush back to the Governmental Quarter to find out, he knew he would likely have to wait; he was needed on the walls to help with cleanup and recovery of those too wounded to walk. That, and if they were still being attacked down there, it wasn’t likely that he’d even be able to get inside.

*I hope you’re staying safe, too, Ravenne!*

# Chapter 25

The Bottomless Pits of Hunger – or as he was thinking of them, just “Hungers” – were strange-looking when he created one of them for the first time. Each appeared as a naked Human with odd facial features devoid of any expression whatsoever, with shoulder-length black hair on its head (though it was hairless all over the rest of its body), an average-sized overall frame, and no genitalia. It had no actual gender, and looking at it for an entire second, Fred realized that it reminded him of what he used to picture adult Humans looking like, back when he was living with his parents in his dungeon, as a child. Descriptions of the different genders from them helped at the time, but he only had himself as a frame of reference to go by; as a result, until he actually met Regnark and some of the others in Northend, he always sort of pictured all Humans looking like his new Hungers, for some reason.

He didn’t have time to contemplate their appearance for long, because he had to test them, to see if they were capable of what he needed. An initial test against one of the Treehemoths proved that, when placed near a source of “energy”, they would immediately target it and start to “eat” the Mana from their target upon touching them. He also found that he could absorb them when they were no longer needed, which was something that he wasn’t sure would actually work; the Horrors that had accidentally been made before obviously couldn’t be absorbed by the Dungeon Cores who had created them, so it was a valid concern.

The downside to getting rid of them was that he didn’t receive any Unconverted Mana back from their creation; when they died, they released the UM, but unless he was quick, the other Hungers nearby would consume

it before he could reuse it. It was necessary to absorb them, though, as the Hungers didn't differentiate between Mana and Essence as a source of energy; while it appeared as though they typically gravitated towards the greatest source of energy, he found that a couple that fell off an Emerald Dragon onto the city's walls immediately attacked some of the Adventurers still alive there.

Each Hunger required 1,000 units of Unconverted Mana to create, but the Dungeon Core/Human hybrid had *millions* stored far underground from the deaths of so many people in the city; as a result, it was easy enough to supply thousands of the unusual Defenders. Fred didn't do it by half-measures, either, but blanketed each attacking, enormous monster with Hungers, which quickly consumed all of the Mana inside them rather quickly. The factions' Defenders that were inside of his territory were the easiest to destroy, as he could drop Hungers on them from just about anywhere; the ones attacking long-distance outside of his territory, however, took a bit more work.

Some were elevated off of the ground – such as the Celestial Orbs, Reflective Constructs, Blaze Elementals, and Djinnish Champions – were a bit trickier, but the Hungers weren't going to let something like that stop them. With their Heightened Physical Strength, they *threw* each other up to the floating Defenders, using their natural intelligence to solve the problem quite handily. Hundreds of Hungers still died in the attacks, especially when they tossed each other into Blaze Elementals, but attrition was the most important part; even a momentary touch was enough to gobble up some Mana and weaken the enormous Defenders.

All in all, his Hungers were a success; he just wished he had thought of them earlier. *Then again, even if I had, I wouldn't have been able to create nearly as many without the Unconverted Mana gained from so many*

*Human deaths.* As each enormous attacking Defender died, Fred absorbed all of the Hungers and sent more to finish up killing the rest, until there were only a few left surviving just outside of his territory. They wouldn't last long, though, as his little naked Human Defenders were already swarming over them; once they were done, Fred could work on—

***“Fred! We’re in trouble here!”***

Eisa's voice in his head shocked him; he had been so intent on saving everyone in the city above that he hadn't been paying attention to anything happening down in his dungeon. A portion of his mind automatically sorted out all of the elemental Mana being released at the deaths of so many invaders, but he hadn't really *looked* for a while.

Apparently, while he was distracted with the happenings aboveground, his dungeon was falling apart. He wasn't exactly sure what all had happened, but Eisa's Viewing Portals had been blocked off by the stone blocks placed there for that very reason, and Chareese's room was in shambles again, though only about half of it was destroyed, as opposed to the previous assault. Regnark's Pit rooms were empty of friendly Defenders, as well, and there were no Summoning Circles present, either; the Viewing Portals had been destroyed at some point, and blocks were now covering the windows.

Deecy's room was likewise destroyed, the large stone spikes along the sides of the room shattered and scattered all over the place, and there were both small pools of water and scorch marks over the walls and ceiling. It appeared as though the battle in the room had been fierce, but even the two different windows looking into the room from the outside tunnel were closed off, by more slabs of stone.

The Oven, for the most part, looked undamaged, but when he looked above to see where the Guild was, he only found a dozen still forms, with large portions of their bodies missing – as if they were blown off by a large explosion. There weren't any still alive in the room, however, and the windows all looking down into the room were all covered up, preventing anything from coming through.

*What happened here?*

He got no answer when he checked out Roady's mirrored maze room, which was also closed off at the Viewing Portals. The Magisteel covering the stone passageways was beat up and *scratched*, meaning that something highly dangerous had been through there, if it was powerful enough to warp even the thin layer of material he had placed earlier. All of the Defenses were still in place in the room, like they had been throughout the rest of the dungeon; his automatic replacement of them had worked just fine – they just hadn't been enough to stop whatever had come through there.

It was when he got to Ravenne's Room that finally saw what the problem was – and where all of the invaders had gone. Along the bridge connecting the entrance and exit were two large Defenders that just barely fit – an Azure Hydra and a much smaller version of the Reflective Construct that he had seen outside the city walls. They were near the exit where the Devastating Wind Elemental that Fred had placed earlier had been, but now the powerful Air-based Defender was nowhere to be seen; nearly half of the long, sharp Magisteel needles that had been stuck to the walls were knocked over, as well, as if a few large and heavy somethings had landed on them. All of the windows looking into the room were closed, as well, so there was no one attacking the two invaders on the bridge.



His Defenses were still active in the room, but even when activated, his Forceful Push did very little to shift the Hydra where it was at. The Sharpened Air Blade he had near the exit shattered a few of the mirror-like objects rotating around the Reflective Construct, but overall, it didn't do much. What was strange, though, was that the two powerful Defenders weren't moving to the exit – they were staying put right where they were.

The answer to that was plain to see a moment later: They were waiting in line. The tunnel ahead of them was full of additional invaders squeezing through on their way to Fred's fallback position room, which was currently being utilized by his Shards and the remains of the Core Power Guild along the side Viewing Portals. Except...every single one of his Shards was *inside* of the room, instead of contributing to the defense from the outer tunnels like the Guild were – and they were fighting for their lives.

*“What are you all doing?! Get out of there!”*

Deecy, in her Giant Dire Wolf form, was facing off against a smaller version of the Lava Hounds that used to be outside of the walls as she answered.

***“We didn't have enough Defenders that we could create to block the invaders from advancing any farther! We had to tackle this ourselves!”***

She and the Lava Hound were pretty evenly matched in size, and since Deecy had Fire as one of her elements, she didn't take nearly as much damage from the heat coming off of the molten lava-filled invading Defender. However, the rocky exterior of the Hound prevented much of the damage the Giant Dire Wolf would normally inflict with her teeth, so she was already being pressed backwards.

To her left, however, was what Fred could only assume was a Steam Elemental that Deecy had created. It looked like a white cloud that was given a shape and solidified, appearing to be nearly identical in size and appearance to Deecy's Giant Dire Wolf form – it was uncanny, actually. It was facing off against an Emerald Dragon, which, fortunately, had not expanded to fill the entire room; in fact, it seemed to be, if not winning, then holding its own against the vicious Nature-based Defender. The Dragon seemed to have burns all over its body – likely from superheated steam – and couldn't seem to do any damage to the Steam Elemental; every bite or claw strike just passed right through its form.

Eisa was in there too, though he didn't recognize her at first. She had received an Upgraded Earth Elemental Form during her last Shard Level increase, but they had both not thought much about it; she was protected behind the Viewing Portals and the walls of the dungeon, after all, so they figured that she wasn't going to need it. The Earth Shard was showcasing it now, however, as she appeared to be a miniature Rock Giant; the word "miniature" was a bit deceptive, because she was still 20 feet tall, 8 feet wide, and was essentially her original Earth Elemental shape, but with hard, jagged stone skin.

She was facing off against something called a Djinnish Conjurer, which was a smaller version of the Champion that had attacked the city – but still plenty powerful. Lightning bolts shot out of its blue-skinned "arms" as it floated on a small thunderstorm cloud, and wind was buffeting Eisa as she tried to close the distance between them...and losing, as pieces of her body chipped off as the bolts slammed into her.

Regnark was difficult to see, but that was only because he was using his Shadow Meld ability to hide in the shadows. There was a Summoning Circle in front of him, though, which kept spitting out Pit Fiends, one after

another, which were being picked apart by another Reflective Construct similar to the one waiting in the previous room. Multiple small beams of concentrated light were reflected off of the mirrors in seemingly random intervals, but they punched through the Pit Fiends as though they were made of paper. A few beams managed to hit Regnark behind the Circle, but he used his Siphon Unlife Special Ability on his Pit Fiends to heal himself when that happened.

Chareese was going root-to-undead-toe against an Arch Lich Magus, a slightly larger – and apparently more powerful – version of the Lich King he had seen in the Dark Core’s dungeon back in the Deadlands. The Lich floated above the ground and sent out blasts of dark necrotic energy that slammed into the Nature Shard in her Mother Dryad Form, withering the long appendages that tried to reach the Dark Defender. Fortunately, the withering was only temporary, because she forced them to grow back; nevertheless, Fred figured it must have hurt quite a bit. A few impacts of the black-colored bolts slammed into her bark-covered chest, which knocked her back a few feet every couple of seconds; otherwise, she probably would’ve been all over the Lich.

Roady was unrecognizable, mainly because he had apparently increased his Shard Level when Fred wasn’t looking.

Shard Status
Winston “Roady” Rodabaugh
Elemental Origin: Light Shard Level: 6 Next Mana Threshold: 4000 Light Light Mana: 210/2025
Form Projection Options (Current Command Threshold: 20)
Glow Sprite (Base Cost: 2 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 500 feet) Bright Lynx (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 450 feet)

**Winged Pegasus (Base Cost: 25 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 300 feet)**  
**Sleek Unicorn (Base Cost: 30 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 275 feet)**  
**Juvenile Light Elemental (Base Cost: 100 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 200 feet)**  
**Warp Dragon (Base Cost: 650 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 150 feet)**  
**Crystal Golem (Base Cost: 900 Light Mana, Projection Distance: 100 feet)**

#### **Special Abilities**

**Reflective Aura (Base Cost: 5 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Light Mana per hour)**  
**Healing Circle (Base Cost: 15 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Light Mana per hour)**  
**Swords of Illumination (Base Cost: 50 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 10 Light Mana per hour)**  
**Environmental Brilliance (Base Cost: 100 Light Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 15 Light Mana per hour)**  
**Searing Radiance Net (Base Cost: 150 Light Mana, Cooldown: 30 minutes)**  
**Celestial Elemental Form (Activation Cost: 700 Light Mana, Upkeep Cost: 30 Light Mana per minute)**

The Light Shard was currently appearing as a being of pure light, a ten-foot Humanoid-looking shape wielding an object that looked very like a massive sword. It was hard to tell, because it was all so bright; when Roady swung the object against The Graveler across from him that was shooting rocks in his direction, it certainly seemed like it. The Earth-based invader was slowly losing its stones, as they were deflected and shattered by the sword Roady was holding, but it had literally thousands to spare. Not every flung stone was destroyed, unfortunately, as the holes in Roady's Celestial Elemental Form were plainly evidenced. They slowly closed up on their

own, but the process obviously kept the light being from walking forward at the same time. He was also accompanied by a Crystal Golem on his right side, which was losing badly against another Azure Hydra; the heads of the Hydra were starting to shatter the crystals that composed its body, up apart with powerful blasts of water, and it was all the Golem could do to weather the deluge – but it couldn't gain any ground to get closer to the Water-based Defender.

Ravenne was also in the room, though she wasn't facing off against anything; instead, she floated around the room in her Mist Form, completely untouchable and essentially unsubstantial. She couldn't physically do anything to attack the invading Defenders at that point, but that didn't mean she couldn't contribute. They had previously discovered that she could drape her Form over a target and temporarily block it from sensing all Mana, which basically blinded those that didn't have physical eyes to see. This included The Graveler, the Reflective Construct, and even the Arch Lich Magus.

There was danger to her, though; the longer she stayed blinding them, the more substantial she became – which meant that she could be harmed. Anything over a few seconds was dangerous, so Fred saw her moving from invader to invader, blinding them temporarily while the Shards and their own Defenders moved in to strike, before floating off to a different one. It took twice as long to completely “mist-ify” again after becoming partially substantial, so she couldn't flit from one to another as quickly as would be beneficial.

The Core Power Guild members were sending out every spell they could think of to damage the powerful invaders, which was helping; in fact, they were probably the only reason everyone had survived as long as they had, because although their efforts weren't necessarily hurting the monsters

significantly, it was a distraction and an annoyance they couldn't completely ignore.

Overall, the Shards were holding their own, but Fred could see that they were losing. As the invaders started to push his friends back, he could see another Emerald Dragon struggling to get itself inside the room; if that happened, it would be the beginning of the end for everyone. As it was, most of the Shards were getting low on their Mana; each time they took serious damage in their forms, a small portion of their Mana was being used to repair them. It wouldn't be long before they would be forced to start dropping their protective shapes.

Fred couldn't let that happen. He might've been unable to save the hundreds of thousands of people that had died in the city above, as well as the dozen Guild Members back above The Oven, but there was no way he would let anyone else die when he could do something about it.

Theoretically, using a Mana Implosion inside of his dungeon was "safe", as he wouldn't have to worry about killing himself if he had to replace some upkeep, if it was consumed from the room; however, there was always the chance that one of the Shards would inadvertently be caught up in it as well. The same went with his Mana Explosions – the danger was too great to his friends.

Fortunately, Fred now had another option: Hungers. Without waiting any longer, he started creating Hungers, while also feeding all of the extra elemental Mana that he had been accumulating over the last ten minutes to the Shards, so that they wouldn't run out before he could save them. The naked Humanoid Defenders dropped down onto the attacking invaders, surprising everyone at first; it didn't take long for those being drained of their Mana to fight back, however, which was actually much more effective than the gigantic monstrosities outside.

His Hungers started dying by the dozen as they were attacked and dispatched quickly, until Fred began to worry he wouldn't have enough Unconverted Mana to kill them all; he had already used approximately two million units of UM to destroy the massive Defenders outside. He was already getting low, and the fighting was so densely packed that it was only about 10% of the Unconverted Mana from his Hungers' deaths that he was able to whisk away, before it was gobbled up by the insatiable Humanoid Defenders.

Luckily, the distraction they caused allowed his Shards to finally fight back effectively; before they got too close, however, Fred warned them to keep a bit of distance between them, if possible. *"Don't get too close; my Hungers can and will hurt you just as easily as they do these other Defenders. They're like those Horrrolings from the Plains of Grass, that way and I can't directly control them, though at least I can absorb them so that they don't run amok afterwards."*

That description was all the information they needed; Deecy, Eisa, and Regnark had fought against them firsthand, while Chareese, Roady, and Ravenne likely knew about them after being around for so long. They stayed back and fought as much from a distance as they could, attacking and then pulling back before one of the Hungers could get close to them. Regnark had the best luck, though, because now there weren't any beams of light destroying all of his Pit Fiends; they swarmed over the Reflective Construct along with the Hungers, smashing mirrors with abandon. They didn't last long against the naked Human Defenders if they turned on them, but it was worth the danger to them, nevertheless.

The Emerald Dragon fell first, as it had already been a bit damaged from the Steam Elemental, and the other one that was pushing in from the entrance was immediately accosted by the Hungers finished with the

previous one. It didn't take long for the others to be killed, as well, but then even more made their way through the entrance to replace them. It felt like it was going to go on forever, and Fred was getting so low on Unconverted Mana that he needed to wait for more of them to die so that he could snatch up the Mana before it could disappear into another Hunger.

After half an hour following his first introduction of the Hungers to his dungeon, the last two invaders – the Azure Hydra and Reflective Construct he had originally seen in Ravenne's room – were swarmed by the fifteen remaining naked Humanoid Defenders, as well as all of the Shards. The Guild had run out of Power long ago, and they collapsed in exhaustion behind their Viewing Portals; most of them appeared to be sweating profusely from the insane fight that had taken place, despite it only being a little over an hour since they arrived in the first place.

Fred made the last of the Hungers disappear just as they turned on Eisa and the others, which got the Earth Shard's thanks. "You're a life-saver, Fred," she said, as soon as she dropped her Upgraded Earth Elemental Form and he assured them there was no more threat. He couldn't guarantee there weren't more invaders filling up the underground tunnels in the Convergence, ready to attack; as far as he could tell, though, there were no more threats.

***"I don't know if it was in response to your attacks on those bigger Defenders outside, but almost immediately after you did that, the smaller, weaker invaders disappeared, and we were inundated by those you saw in this room. We...were not prepared for that."***

Deecy's words made sense to Fred, mainly because it revealed that the factions weren't as ignorant as they had seemed at first. The factions



had made it seem like they were following the same method they had used before when invading Fred's dungeon, which had given him and his friends a false sense of security; when Fred was distracted in helping the city above, that was when the factions ramped up the attack faster than he expected. Even if their strategy didn't work completely, he probably would've been torn between helping both places at the same time, and therefore would have lost both.

They probably weren't expecting him to succeed at coming up with a viable defense.

Now that he could create the Bottomless Pits of Hunger, he had a method to defeat the factions if they sent another giant army, or even a more numerous army to attack his dungeon. Of course, he needed to accumulate more Unconverted Mana for that to happen...but the surrounding Cores didn't know that.

At least, he hoped not.

# Chapter 26

The former Supreme of Air couldn't help but feel a little smug when all of the other Supremes arrived within moments of each other, already complaining about something; she was still wrapped up tightly in the Chains of Servitude in the Supreme Council's meeting place, and they completely ignored her, as if she weren't even there. Although she was starting to make a surprising amount of headway with the Chains of Air that the new Supreme wrapped around her, it was barely enough to Communicate with anyone or anything more than half a mile away. Even doing that much was the result of constant internal pressure against the yellow-colored bands of Mana binding her; without loosening all of the other Chains, however, she wasn't going to be escaping anytime soon.

"How could you let that happen?!" screamed Nature, directing all of her vehemence towards Dark. "*You* said that, if we followed your plan, this problem would be dealt with once and for all. Look where that's gotten us —"

"I don't know why you're complaining, it isn't like *you* personally provided the Mana to enact that horribly planned attack on those livestock," Fire cut the other Supreme off abruptly with just as much heat in his voice. The former Supreme of Air hadn't heard them all talk like that to each other for a long time; she had been beginning to suspect that intense emotions like anger had been dulled after so many years of relative "peace" throughout the world. Now, it seemed as though she was wrong.

"Well, the plan would've worked, if your Defenders weren't completely worthless—"

“ENOUGH!” shouted Dark, and something happened to his avatar that Air had never witnessed before. It started to shake, while it was floating there in his accustomed place, and a couple of cracks started to form along the side. *That’s...not good. If he Combusts, that’ll destroy all of our avatars; as much as that would finally allow me to send my mind back to my Core, I’ll lose all of the Mana contained inside of it. It’ll take me half a millennium to get all that Mana back, which means I’ll be almost entirely undefended for at least a few decades. The first group of Humans that came by could reach me without too much trouble and potentially destroy me. Or, worse, I’ll be sitting defenseless when the other Supremes decide to get rid of me.*

She’d rather die than wait years for the inevitable to happen without being able to do anything about it. It was bad enough that she was held captive right now, but she knew that was only temporary – and extremely short-term in comparison to sitting around for decades for death to claim her.

“Now hold on, Dark. You can’t speak to us like that; we’re all equals here on the Council—” Air’s replacement spoke up in the silence following Dark’s outburst.

“Shut up, Air,” Earth warned him, but it was already too late.

“I WILL SPEAK TO YOU HOWEVER I WANT!” The vibration and shaking only increased in the black-colored avatar as the entire Council shrunk back from his shout. There was silence again as they waited for Dark to speak, but nothing happened right away. It was only a few minutes later when the former Supreme noticed the shaking start to diminish and eventually stop altogether.

“I’m sorry, please allow me to apologize for my outburst,” Dark finally spoke in a voice that she had never heard before from their *de facto*

leader. It was stilted and seemed polite on the surface, but Air recognized the underlying tone because she had heard it in some of her subordinates over the years; none of them were around anymore, because *madness* had taken over their minds, and the Council had been forced to eliminate them before they became a serious problem. She wasn't sure if this was a new madness she was detecting in the Supreme of Dark, or if it was something that he had been hiding for a long time; either way, it was obvious to her that he was more than a bit unsound of mind.

Not that anyone would believe her if she mentioned it, so she didn't even bother; if they couldn't see it and do the right thing by removing him from the Council, then that was on them. She doubted it would help *her* situation, even if they listened to her, because the sight of her increased size was evidence enough that something untoward had gone on.

Shockingly, no one seemed to realize that Dark was mad.

"That's ok, Dark; this is a high-stress situation, and I have to admit that even I wanted to take out my frustration with everybody in here, as well," Light said, and all of the others quietly agreed with her.

"Yes, well, I apologize again. That was unnecessary at the time, and it doesn't help us solve this problem."

Water spoke up finally. "Precisely. What exactly happened? How were our Defenders defeated by...naked livestock?"

The former Supreme of Air was now really curious. Since she couldn't see anything past a few hundred feet of her avatar's current position using her Territorial Sight due to the Chains – which showed her nothing but dirt and stone, since they were deep underground in a relatively secret location – she had no clue what had happened. The only thing she knew, and was secretly happy about, was that they had failed to kill Fredwynklemossering.

There was a discussion about the battle at the Human's city, and how they had managed to damage a good portion of the fortifications that were there, but by some unknown mechanism, those fortifications had been reinforced against attacks. There were also estimates that put their kill count anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000, which meant that they were only partially successful in killing them all; from the reports she had before, she was trapped in the Council's meeting place, there were reportedly between three and five *million* Humans living in the city at one time. That number seemed impossible, but she had seen the city from a distance, so she had to admit that she was inclined to believe it.

Some of the strange explosions she had heard about and seen herself had been used – probably by Fred – against the large Defenders that had been sent, which reportedly had varying degrees of lethality, but that wasn't what interested her the most. It was the mention of *naked livestock* that caught her attention, as well as being a source of confusion for almost all of the others; everyone except Dark, for a reason that soon became apparent.

“Those weren't just livestock; they were Defenders that the Cursedborn created.”

Nature was having none of that nonsense, however. “Not possible. There aren't any *Human* blueprints out there for this Cursedborn to use,” she said matter-of-factly, before her tone turned questioning and a bit hesitant. “At least, there shouldn't be; they were all destroyed after that fiasco by some of *yours*, weren't they...Dark?”

*He* didn't hesitate to answer, though. “Of course they were; however, once something like that is in the system, they can still be recognized.” Dark sighed heavily and continued, seemingly with regret – but the former Supreme wasn't fooled. “I have to agree that some of my... constituents...were a bit overzealous and ended up creating those

Horrorlings and Greater Horrors, but they've been suitably punished with overseeing them for eternity."

His tone quickly changed again, to one that was more curious than anything else. "My best guess is that this Cursedborn has somehow created this *livestock* Defender and used the Hybridization program to change it to something similar to a Horrorling. We already knew this abomination was doing that – remember that giant, unprecedented Spider that attacked Light's border – so, that shouldn't come as a surprise. What *is* a surprise is that the Cursedborn was able to alter it enough that they can absorb these Defenders without having to worry about them getting out of control."

"That seems impossible, if what I understand about those experiments concerning the Horrors is correct," Fire noted.

"I would agree, but I think we've all seen the evidence of that being the case here. If that is *indeed* what is happening, then I don't think I need to tell you all what this means."

None of the older Supreme Council said anything, because they all – including the former Council member trussed up in bands of Mana – understood. The new Air Supreme, however, wasn't quite in the loop. "I don't understand, what exactly does all of that mean?"

"What it means—" Earth responded after a moment— "is that we're all in danger. I'm sure you know what the Horrorlings and Greater Horrors are, correct?" At the new Supreme of Air's affirmation, he continued.

"Well, we can't control them, as you probably know; what you might not know is that we can't even absorb them, if we were to create them. The Blueprints for them are lost to time and deliberate destruction, but the ones that were made never *really* go away – they are just banished during the daytime, only to be set free from the concentration of Dark Mana along the border of the local Dark Core's territory.

“The difference with these new Defenders is that this Cursedborn has somehow seemed to be able to absorb them, which is a type of control in its own right. This means that they can be set on a path to seek out the nearest concentrations of Mana; right now, the Convergence itself is the largest concentration of Mana around, but if the Cursedborn were to escape and get farther away from it, they could potentially release thousands of these things to seek out the nearest concentrations of Mana. I’m sure you’re smart enough to know what those would likely be.”

“I’m assuming it would be any local Dungeon Cores,” the new Air Supreme said slowly.

“Exactly. If these are similar to Horrorlings and Greater Horrors, then they will consume *anything* with Mana attached to it, including a dungeon’s upkeep, their Defenses, and Defenders. Once those are consumed, the Core doesn’t get them back, either – all that Mana is basically lost forever. I’m scared to admit that if a couple thousand of those were to get into *my* dungeon, I don’t think I would survive it.”

The former Supreme of Air internally lamented that a couple-dozen would probably suffice to do her own dungeon in.

“And I’m assuming that, because this Cursedborn can ‘control’ them somewhat, it and its allies have nothing to fear from them,” the new Supreme of Air said, before he had another thought. “I’m also guessing that’s why the Blueprints to the Horrorlings and Greater Horrors were destroyed; if they were ever used in Territorial Warfare, then there would be no stopping them. Since they never really go away, then they would roam the land forever, destroying all of the Cores around the world.”

Earth seemed pleased at his leap in logic. “Precisely! The problem here is that, whether or not this thing that created these naked livestock Defenders knows it, they could just start creating whole armies of those

things, releasing them to the wild, and then stay hidden while they swarmed over the world, destroying every single Dungeon Core in existence. Once that was done, they could just absorb them all again and walk away without consequence.”

That was a nightmare scenario, alright, and the former Supreme of Air was starting to have some serious doubts in her confidence about Fredwynklemossering. *Is he planning on doing that? What have I done?*

Unfortunately, there wasn't much that she could do about her doubts at the moment, because she was essentially powerless right now. She briefly thought about admitting her guilt to the Supreme Council so that they might be able to use the information she had about the Dualborn to combat whatever he had planned. Before she could do that, however, Dark proposed a plan that would settle the matter once and for all, and she didn't think there would be anything that Fredwynklemossering could do about it.

“The time has come to make a choice. Do we try again, using half-measures to try to kill this thing, protecting the Convergence at the same time? Or, do what *I* think we should do, which is to completely wipe that entire place off the face of the world once and for all. I think we can all agree that eliminating this Cursedborn is more important than saving the Convergence, at this point; we need to do this before it ends up destroying us all. It will mean some hardship for the nearby Cores for years, until they can relocate, centuries perhaps, but we have to be willing to sacrifice the well-being of some for the good of all. What say you?”

There was only the slightest hesitation before the remainder of the Council agreed. It wasn't absolute agreement, as the former Supreme could detect more than a little reluctance in their affirmations, but it was enough to go ahead with the plan. They spoke for a couple more minutes before disappearing, their plan solidifying as they all agreed to have their *entire*



factions behind it. Such a thing hadn't happened in the entire time the Supreme Council had been around; the last time the entire population of Dungeon Cores in the world had come together had been when the last Dualborn had gone crazy and started killing every Dungeon Core they got near.

*I wouldn't want to be anywhere near that Convergence in about twelve hours.*

# **Part VI – Integration**

# Chapter 27

The cleanup from the attack on Allroads was horrendous, and Fred did what he could from his position down in his Core Room, which wasn't all that much when it came down to it. While he probably could've done a lot of repairing, using Adventurer Power and his Repair Objects Ability to fix the heavily broken sections on the walls, he also needed to conserve what Unconverted Mana he had left, in case there was another attack anytime soon. It didn't seem too likely, though, because a lot of Mana had been lost from the failed attack by the factions, and Fred didn't think they'd want to try again until they had a chance to rebuild their reserves.

In fact, there weren't even any Defenders along his borders, anymore; he took advantage of that fact and started to pop out hundreds of little Rock Beetles and Plague Rats to push it back a little, using the same Territorial Warfare techniques that had been used against him. A nice surprise was that it started to push the border back at a significant rate; he estimated that it was approximately 2 feet per minute, which was much faster than the contraction caused by the factions. In fact, in a couple of weeks he might even be able to push them back enough to take over the entire Convergence again. That process was just about all that he wanted to take the time and the Mana to do to help, though, and he felt a little bad about it.

His Shards, though, did more than their fair share of helping with the cleanup – so he didn't feel *too* bad.

Instead, he spent time rebuilding the parts of his dungeon that had been destroyed or damaged, which turned out to be not a whole lot when it came down to it, as well as helping to preserve the bodies in a wall of those

Guild Members that had fallen during the last attack. Fred still wanted to be able to do something with them, but he wasn't exactly sure what could be done quite yet. Once that was all done, he did use some of his slowly refilling Unconverted Mana for Power and the Adventurer Conjure Object Ability on creating thick stone seals on the dug-out tunnels leading to his dungeon entrance. It wouldn't stop any additional invaders for long, but it would give Fred and his Shards time to react and get back down to help defend the dungeon again.

After that, while those aboveground worked on recovering bodies and dragging them outside to a spot where they would be digging a mass grave – he overheard some say it was disrespectful, but Fred thought that it was actually very practical because of the numbers involved – he looked around to see who had *lived*. First and foremost, Elder Hood and her husband Mikel had miraculously survived, though more than half of the Adventurers that they had rescued from the Light dungeon had sadly perished. *It takes more than an army of gigantic Defenders to kill that woman*, he couldn't help but think.

Agelstein had also survived, which Ravenne was extremely happy to learn about; she practically tackled him when she emerged from his dungeon, while he was helping to locate the wounded and bring them to the bevy of healing Classes that had survived. Following their reunion, she used her Calming Effervescence to help chase away the cloud of horror and depression that even Fred could see on the faces of the survivors.

When he looked at their stunned and sad expressions, he couldn't help but be reminded of something that Eisa had told him long ago, shortly after they had just met. He brought it up to her through his Mana Communication.

*“Yes, I can see some indications of it right now, though it’ll probably hit them a lot more later: Survivor’s Guilt. I remember thinking, ‘Why was I the only one to survive?’ for months following the deaths of my original group members. I was the weakest of them, I’m not ashamed to admit, and yet...I lived, and they died.*

*“I think what you’re seeing is more likely shock and horror at what happened here – and who could blame them? This is the most gruesome and appalling thing that I have ever seen, or ever want to see again. What’s strange is that I feel a little of what they’re feeling, but it’s not affecting me nearly as much; do you think it has something to do with my connection with you?”*

*“That’s quite possible; the death and destruction I witnessed makes me feel sad and disappointed at myself for not coming up with a solution sooner. However, it definitely doesn’t feel as strong as I think it should; it’s almost as if I’m insulated against too strong of emotions for some reason.”*

He hadn’t really noticed it until then – probably because there hadn’t been anything as horrifying as what had just happened – but everything emotion-wise felt just a little muted. *Or maybe I’m becoming callous to the loss of Human life like most Dungeon Cores seem to be?* He really hoped that it wasn’t that, because that was the complete opposite of how he wanted to feel. *It seems as though not everything is great about my new form, after all.*

The non-combative residents of Allroads, despite not being on the walls of the city during its defense, turned out to have suffered higher casualties than the defenders. Fred assumed this was due to the flames that had come from the Ruby Dragons, as well as the random clouds of

poisonous breath from the Emerald Dragons – and the few explosions where the two interacted and detonated. The buildings, themselves, were damaged in places, though because of Unconverted Mana infused in them, there wasn't nearly as much damage as there could've been.

Because of all the death and small-scale destruction that had happened, Fred was expecting to be vilified by the population of Allroads; he had been the one to cause the attack, after all. Listening in to conversations, among those that actually knew all of the details of his arrival there, his creation of his dungeon, and the reason why the city was being attacked by horribly large monsters, his “vilification” was only partly correct. Some few blamed him entirely for all the deaths, which was only fair because of the truth behind it; on the whole, though, what he heard from them was that he was their savior, someone that was looked upon as some sort of higher power, or something along those lines.

Fred wasn't quite sure what was worse: being thought of as a villain – or being thought of as a God.

He didn't want either of those things, and neither had been his ultimate goal when he came to Allroads. First, it had been just to find and rescue his Core Power Guild, which he had essentially done – even if they were confined to the dungeon for the moment. After that, everything had just been reactive to what the surrounding factions were doing, or helping with the recovery of captured Adventurers, or protecting his dungeon from invasion by hostile Defenders. Overall, however, his *ultimate* goal had changed from revenge against the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores, to saving Humanity from extinction in the not-so-distant future. How he was supposed to do that was still a mystery, though his experiences over the last few days had given him some kernels of hope.

Strangely enough, the absence of any other foreign Defenders along the borders of his territory and the absence of sightings of any more gargantuan monsters heading towards the city from a distance, worried Fred. It should've made him thankful that he and his friends had managed to hamper the attacks so much that the factions couldn't gather together enough Mana to strike back; however, the fact of the matter was that they were near enough to the Convergence that the nearby Cores would've been able to create at least *something* along the borders to keep up the pressure on his territory. That there wasn't anything at all hinted that there was another plan being hatched, and Fred wasn't sure he wanted to discover what that was.

Nearly half a day passed, and most of the dead had been brought out of the city by that point, shortly after night fell over the convergence. There wasn't a precise count of how many had perished, unfortunately, because not all of the corpses had been in one piece, nor could be completely found, but the estimates put it somewhere in the range of 360,000 people in a large pile outside of the city. They still needed to be buried, but that was going to have to wait until the next day; the Adventurers, volunteers, and general population needed to rest before anything else happened. To say that the last day had been distressing, overwhelming, and exhausting would be putting it lightly.

The wall had been slightly repaired by the efforts from a combination of Elementalists, Wizards, and even Naturalists, who were able to use their unique abilities to shape stone to replace what had been damaged. It would still take weeks to finish everything, however, because the destruction had been extensive over the entire fortification. With everything that was repaired, Fred infused small amounts of his accumulating Unconverted Mana to strengthen it; while the wall wouldn't

keep out determined attacking Defenders for long – especially if they were gigantic, like the last ones were – it had proved to hold up well enough to prevent the complete overrun of the city and allow the people inside time to mount a defense.

“Does Fred have a plan? Should we expect another attack in the next few hours? The next few days? Do we have weeks, or months, before we need to be ready? How is he going to stop this siege? We can only hold out like this for so long.” After most of the cleanup was done, the Allroads Council called in Chareese, Roady, and Ravenne to ask questions; while they were asked of the three Shards there, Fred knew that they were specifically directed to him.

He had been contemplating that, as well, over the last half a day, so it was at the forefront of his mind. The problem was that he didn’t have an answer; he was still trying to figure out how exactly Mana, Power, and Essence worked together, and how they came from the same source. Fred felt like the answer was right there in front of him, and that it was the solution – not only of their immediate problem, which was the survival of everyone in Allroads – but also a long-term solution. Another mystery Fred yearned to solve was the origin of the knowledge he had been given earlier, as well as how he intuitively *knew* that as soon as he answered all these questions he had, everything would be all right.

Of course, Fred could not confide his ponderings to his friends; to inform them that all he had was conjecture, at the moment, might make them lose confidence in him, and that was the last thing he wanted right now. He needed their support if they were going to get through these hazardous times.

*“Tell them that there is no way to know when the next attack will come; I’m working on something right now, but it needs time. Now that*



*we're not operating under an immediate attack, I may have that time to finish it."*

It was a deliberately vague answer, but that was because Fred only had some vague ideas of how they could succeed in first eliminating further threat to the city, and then arranging some sort of deal with the Supreme Council that would encourage *cooperation* between Humans and Cores in the future, instead of Humans being considered as livestock. Unfortunately, both solutions usually ended up with giving himself up in exchange for the lives of everyone in the city. He now had something unprecedented at his disposal that would give him some leverage, at least: his Hungers.

Fred wouldn't want to do it, but he knew that creating a large force of them near a Dungeon Core would cause the Hungers to do everything they could to strip the dungeon of Mana, before hunting down the Core itself and destroying it. The factions had to have seen how effective they were, and the threat of him abandoning his territory and journeying across the land, destroying Cores, was a valid one. Not that he had any desire to do either of those things, because that wouldn't accomplish what he wanted for the world; that, and abandoning his territory and running, would almost immediately doom the remaining three and a half million people still inside the city.

Even with the muted emotions in his new form, just thinking about allowing that kind of mass devastation to happen made him not only uneasy, but he was pretty sure it would devastate him mentally. It was entirely possible that something like that had happened to the Dualborn that went crazy in the Supreme of Air's memories, because Fred was almost positive that an occurrence like that would send him over the edge of sanity.

"Ok, I get that, but what kind of timeline are you thinking of—"

Fred stopped listening, as something caught his attention outside of his territory. He had been monitoring everywhere he could, in a relatively paranoid switching of perspectives all day, waiting for the inevitable response from the factions to their newest failed assault. It was night already, so the land around him was dark, but that didn't matter too much to his Mana and Territorial Sight skills; while it didn't exactly light up everything, the landscape was clearly visible for miles around, though it appeared a bit washed out.

Added to that, his Mana Sight showed what Mana there was around, which inside the Convergence was just about everything; however, the sensory input wasn't overwhelming, because there were only relatively faint traces of Mana everywhere: in the grass, in the dirt, and even in the air, when he looked. Most of that had been partially filtered out before he instructed his Skill to show him everything he had been missing, but now he was used to seeing it all.

None of that could prepare him for what he saw now. Far to the north, farther than he thought he could even perceive, he saw a column of greenish Nature Mana hovering over where he had earlier estimated the nearest Nature Dungeon Core was located on the border of the Convergence. The fact that he was seeing it – at a little over fifteen miles away – meant that it had to be *huge*, larger than anything he'd seen before. He wasn't sure exactly what it was, because there wasn't any shape to it at first, but he knew it couldn't be good.

*“Everyone, I think we’ve got another problem—”*

He cut himself off as he looked around, seeing a similar column of Dark Mana where he assumed the Dark Core was to the northeast, then another towards the Water faction to the northwest, the Fire faction to the east, and the Earth territory to the west. Going to the top of his territory

“dome”, he was just barely able to look over the mountain range to the south, and could see the tops of a similar column in the Air faction’s territory. He couldn’t see anything towards the southwest with the Light, but that was probably because – if he assumed correctly about the columns being directly overhead of the Dungeon Cores in those territories – the Light Core that had taken over had been a bit further south and likely out of range.

“What’s going on, Fred?” Eisa asked sleepily from his bed, where she had gone to rest for the night. She had been helping to carry bodies and even repair parts of the wall with some of her Defenders earlier, and that – atop to the previous battle inside the dungeon – had exhausted her. Most of the city, in fact, had gone indoors to get some rest after the harrowing day, though there were still thousands of tired Adventurers and guards on the walls, in case there was another abrupt attack.

*“Honestly, I don’t know, but something tells me that this isn’t good.”* He described what he was seeing to all of his Shards, so that they would know about the potential danger. None of the Humans on the walls reacted to what Fred could plainly see, though with it being pitch-dark outside, it wouldn’t be likely that they’d even be able to see more than a mile away.

***“What you’re describing is tickling a memory from your parents, but I can’t lock it down. I’m going up to check it out myself.”***

Deecy immediately ran out of his dungeon, up through the Prison complex, and somehow made it to the city in less than a minute. About 5 minutes later, and after running full speed through the streets, she finally arrived at the walls. Those on guard there barely even blinked an eye at her

appearance, but that was probably because she had been helping with the clean-up earlier and was probably thought to be one of them now.

***“I see them now. You’re right, those have got to be the largest gatherings of Mana that I’ve ever seen before, including these elemental concentrations here in the Convergence. I have no idea what those could be—”***

Suddenly, the ground shook just enough that Fred could feel it – and so could Deecy with her instinctual senses that he was told some animals possessed when it came to earthquakes. This wasn’t an earthquake, though, but something a bit more ominous. Staring at the column of Nature Mana in the distance, he saw it change so that it appeared to shrink into a large sphere of Mana, before two shorter columns appeared below it, sinking into what he could only assume was the ground. Then, two shorter columns shot out of the top of the sphere pointing downwards sharply – almost as if it had grown two arms.

Looking at it again as a whole, he realized that was exactly what he was seeing: a glowing ball of Mana with two arms and two legs. It wasn’t exactly Humanoid, other than having those appendages; it more resembled some of the Golems he had seen from a few of the elements instead. There was more faint shaking of the ground afterwards, feeling similar to the first but somehow gaining in intensity; he couldn’t see where it was coming from at first, until he looked up above the mountain range and saw the smallest hint of Light Mana coming into view towards the southwest.

***“Ok, I finally have some information about these things, but it isn’t much. Since your parents were Supremes, they were given some***

*knowledge about certain safety measures that could be instigated, if their faction were ever in danger of being annihilated. By utilizing most of the available Mana from either the majority or all of that faction's Dungeon Cores all over the world, they could create something that could turn the tide of battle. From what they remember, it had never been used before, though, because it was dangerous to drain all of the Cores of their reserves; well, that, but there had never been a reason to use it before. From what I can piece together, these things were called—"*

*"Defender of Nature, Defender of Dark, and so on. I can see them now."*

**Defender of Nature (Level ????)**

**Vitality: ?????????**

**Attack: ?????????**

**Defense: ?????????**

The question marks weren't a good sign, but he assumed that it was because there wasn't a way to actually evaluate what they actually were. They were so far away still that it was hard to make out any finer details of them, though he doubted that he would be able to even when they were closer; they practically blazed with Mana even at that distance, so they would certainly be overwhelming when they came nearer. Shutting his Mana Sight off didn't help either, as he couldn't actually see the impossibly large elemental Defenders in the dark of night without it assisting, just like the Humans on the walls couldn't see them.

A minute or so later, though, they all could *feel* them.

As soon as the Defender of Light approached the same distance away from the Convergence as the others, they *all* started to move. The first step they took in unison was enough to slightly shake the wall, and it was enough of a shake that even the least perceptive of those on the walls could feel it. Deecy whined loudly, the first time Fred could remember the Dire Wolf being so scared that her natural animal instincts vocalized her feelings like that. She recovered enough, shortly thereafter, to Communicate with him, though.

***“You...know what this means, don’t you?”***

It didn’t take long for him to respond, because it was all pretty obvious at that point. *“Unfortunately, yes. The factions have obviously figured that I’m enough of a threat that they are willing to deliberately sacrifice the Convergence to kill me. Once those things get close enough, even their steps will start to destroy the elemental concentrations around here; when they actually attack the city, nothing can stand up to them, and this entire place will be demolished in a matter of seconds.*

*“I doubt I can kill even one of them before it’s too late; I’m afraid to say that even if I had a **billion** units of Unconverted Mana right now, it wouldn’t be enough.”* Fred was silent as he watched the elemental Defenders rapidly get closer, eating up the distance between them and the city with slow but gigantic steps that easily stretched a mile and a half. The ground was soon shaking so much after each step that people were starting to fall down from the shocks running through the ground. *“This is the end, I’m afraid; I don’t know if I can do the impossible again. I’m sorry, old friend.”*

Deecy didn't say anything, she just sat down and started to whine again, louder this time. It was a bit heartbreaking to listen to, and he wished he had a body again so that he could be there physically to sit beside her. She was technically his oldest friend, even if he had met Regnark first; Fred had unknowingly created her before that, so she got the top honors. Therefore, he placed his viewpoint right over her shoulder, watching their end approach.

# Chapter 28

Even though the Dire Wolf sitting on the city wall – watching as their inevitable end walked closer and closer – didn't say anything more to Fred, she was the exception.

***“Fred, what’s going on? What is that shaking?”***

***“Fred, are you doing that?”***

***“What is happening?”***

***“Are we under attack again?”***

The rest of his Shards bombarded his mind with Communications, and he quickly and sadly explained the doom heading their way. “...we may only have about five minutes left. I’m sorry, everyone...I’ve failed you.”

***“NO! I refuse to give up! There’s got to be something we can do—”***

Fred cut Chareese off, because he didn't want to give her any false hope. “*Not this time, Chareese. Fighting these Defenders is like a G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rated Adventurer with no Class, weapons, or armor trying to kill a S-10<sup>th</sup>-Rated Boss monster **by themselves**. And there are **seven** of them. I can't see a way we can win, and I'm out of 'impossible' things to try. The only thing I could think of that would kill them would be my Mana Implosions, but there is so much Mana Concentrated in each of them that it would expand so large it would likely kill **everyone** within twenty miles...and that's*



*a safe estimate. It could be even worse; I have a feeling that is what the factions want me to try, so that they ensure that I die from it.”*

That got her to protest futilely even more, though he could tell that he had gotten through to her. Fred listened to her explain what was happening to the Allroads Council, and they also insisted that he do something...but there was nothing he could do. Hundreds of potential ideas ran through his mind and were quickly discarded.

*If I could create a large enough Mana Explosion, that might kill one; it would take all of my Mana as well as everything I could get from the Shards, though. Even if it worked to destroy one, there are still six others; I think it's possible to make an Explosion large enough to hit two or three at once, but that would probably end up killing everyone in Allroads and possibly even destroy my dungeon at the same time.*

*I can try to create another Blueprint similar to the Bottomless Pit of Hunger and make it much larger, but I don't have enough Unconverted Mana for that. At the moment, I think I can make about 300 Hungers if I really stretch everything; even if they all attacked the same giant Defender, it would probably take hours for them to actually kill one of those things. Even if I did have enough UM to make something around the same size as those gargantuan harbingers of our doom, it would still only be able to deflect one of them while the others destroyed everything.*

*I don't see any types of orifices on them, so I doubt that the trick with the Magisteel balls would even work. Even if one was able to get inside their forms, the amount of compressed Mana needed to actually destroy them wouldn't fit in the sphere.*

*Maybe I can get them to fight each other? From what I remember, there's always been a little bit of animosity between the factions, though I*

*highly doubt they'd be willing to forgo destroying me to fight amongst each other, at this point.*

*I could always get Deecy, Eisa, and Regnark to try to smuggle me out of the dungeon and make a run for it, but I don't think we would make it to safety in time by this point; it would mean leaving everyone else to their fate – including my Guild, probably – which doesn't set well with me one bit. I really wouldn't want to do that anyway, even if we were to escape successfully, because I'm confident that, the factions wouldn't just let me go after this; I'd be running from them for the rest of my life, and that's not what I would want for my friends. This has to **end** now, regardless of what happens.*

“Fred, is this the end, then?” Eisa asked softly, holding onto the Core even as another shockwave ran through the ground. Looking at his territory, he could see that the elemental concentrations that his Territorial Warfare expansion had brought back into his purview seemed fine at the moment, but he knew that would last for long. He was still looking at them through his Territorial Sight when he answered her.

*“I think so, my love. I'm sorry I couldn't save everyone...I'm sorry I couldn't save...you...”*

Tears ran down her face as she squeezed his Core tighter. “I just wish...” Eisa started to say before she got choked up. After clearing her throat a couple of times and sniffing loudly, she tried again. “I just wish... that you had your body back...so that I could spend my last few moments in your arms,” Eisa finished sadly, sighing loudly against his crystalline form.

“Me too, Eisa; me too,” Fred told her consolingly...but then he had a crazy thought. It was risky, but at that point, anything he did probably wouldn't even matter anymore.

*What if I form another Human Core? I hadn't done it before this because it would almost certainly collapse my territory, which would've been bad. Now, though, I don't think that it'll really matter, will it? We're all going to die either way, so why not try?* He wasn't in the least sure that it would create a body for him again, but he wanted to at least make an effort; it was the physical sensations that he missed the most about his previous form, and it was what made him Human – at least in his own estimation. That was part of what he was at heart, and he didn't want to die without embracing it one more time if he could help it.

As another step from the elemental Defenders slammed down on the ground near the outer edge of the Convergence, he whisper-Communicated to Eisa. *“Eisa, step back for a moment; I want to try something.”* She let go of him reluctantly and moved to the other side of the room, tears running down her face as she crossed her arms against her chest like she was cold. *“This might kill everyone down here, but I have to try; at least this way, if I fail, the end will be quick instead of drawn out and frightening,”* he told her with an obviously poor attempt at humor, judging by her face. *“I love you, Eisa.”*

“I love you, too, Fred...but try not to explode prematurely,” she replied with a quirky smile threatening to appear on her lips.

Confused at what she seemed to mean by that, Fred didn't answer. Instead, he quickly pulled together all of the Unconverted Mana he had been storing underneath his Core Room, which he estimated to be around 300,000 units. It was a lot – and more than he had ever tried to condense all at once – but all of his practice lately, as well as his increased concentration since becoming a Dungeon Core, allowed him to manipulate it all at the same time. He wanted to use it all because he wasn't sure how much it was

going to take, and failing because he used just a tad too little wasn't something he wanted to contemplate.

*Who would've thought that condensing 300,000 units of Unconverted Mana would be this difficult?* He struggled to contain it all with his mind, squishing and condensing it down until it was a clear-ish orb a little less than half the size of the large Light Mana stone he had made outside the Light Core's dungeon. Another step from the massive Defenders heading towards them made the room shake and he almost lost his concentration as Eisa fell down with a small cry, but he managed to focus enough to keep it together.

He took a brief look out of his territory to see that their doom was only about four steps away from reaching the elemental concentrations outside of Allroads. *Not a lot of time.*

With renewed focus – and a little panic mixed in – Fred used every iota of his Mana manipulation expertise to condense the Unconverted Mana orb down even further. Faster than he thought possible, but not fast enough to finish before another step shook the entire room; fortunately, Eisa hadn't bothered to get up after falling from the last one, so she just cried as she stared at Fred with hope in her eyes. *I'm trying, my love.*

Another few seconds went by as he struggled with the UM orb, with it starting to shake nearly uncontrollably with the pure energy being concentrated in such a small area; finally, after what felt like years, the Mana stopped trying to seriously escape and expand, settling in place with an inaudible \*click\*. It stopped shaking and looked like a clear crystalline sphere, very similar to what he had envisioned inside of his body back in Gatecross; bigger, but essentially the same.

The Core still wanted to explode, though; it was acting like a really tightly condensed Mana Explosion, which meant that he still had to apply

pressure to it, or it might blow up. Very carefully, while still maintaining his control over the new creation, Fred dissolved the Unconverted Mana covering his current multi-element Dungeon Core, allowing it to float free in little globules; when that was done, he separated his seven elemental Cores, before placing the new “Human” Core in the middle of them. He could still see the nearly invisible tendrils connecting the Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, Dark, Light, and Air Cores together, which meant that he had to add to them so that they were connected somehow to his new Core.

To do that, he was about to use extremely small amounts of UM, but he stopped himself; *I already have Unconverted Mana inside my Human Core, but what about the other forms of this primal energy that seems to be the source of it all? It isn't just being able to access and manipulate element-less Mana that makes me unique; it's also the ability to use Power and Essence.*

*“Eisa, do you think you can pull out a small bit of unused Essence from your SDIA? I don't know if it's even possible, but I think it would help.”* Fred had to hope that she hadn't used it all yet on strengthening her stats or Abilities; he couldn't check, himself, because he couldn't see them anymore – lacking an implant of his own, now. Fortunately, it seemed as though she still had some that she hadn't used.

“I'll try.” While she stared down at the back of her hand and another step shook the room, creating a tiny crack in the corner of the ceiling, Fred took a tiny bit of the Unconverted Mana that had just recently arrived via his absorption of ambient Mana (all of those processes were still working, luckily) and ran it briefly through his new Human Core, turning it into Adventurer Power without any element affiliated with it. He then wrapped it around the existing tendrils connecting his elemental Cores; when that was done, some internal intuition told him to create and attach

seven additional lines extending out from his new Core to connect with the elemental ones...but he didn't connect them just yet.

A grunt of exertion from Eisa was followed by a small wisp of a white misty substance emerging from the back of her hand, before she collapsed to the floor in exhaustion. Before it could get sucked back up automatically, Fred tried to grab the Essence, but it slipped right through his mental "fingers".

*NO!*

Just as it was starting to float towards her SDIA again, Fred grabbed the first thing that came to mind (which just so happened to be some leftover Power) and quickly wrapped it around the Essence, forming a sort of cocoon. Fred paused for a second to see if it worked and was relieved when it seemed as though it did; he could see the Essence trapped inside the invisible Power cocoon, weakly pressing against it in the direction of Eisa's implant. Before it could make any headway, he brought it over to his project and sent the center Power tendrils through the Essence trapped in the cocoon, connecting them to the elemental Cores. The Essence acted as a sort of glue, solidifying the connection and making it much stronger than normal. *How did I know to do that?*

He ignored the questioning doubt in his mind at what he was doing, and instead kept going. *There's no point in being cautious now, right?*

Fred paused just before connecting the last one, because he was pretty sure he knew what was going to happen: he was going to lose his connection to his territory, and it would collapse. With a quick prayer to whatever – or whomever – seemed to be feeding him information, he connected the last tendril just as the room around him seemed to jump with the completion of another step by the Defenders.

As he had predicted, his territory collapsed like a popped bubble, and he felt his Territory Sight suddenly go away. At the same time, the familiar slowing of the world gave him some time to react and correct that. Before the factions could take advantage of his missing territory and expand their borders to encompass the entirety of Allroads, Fred reached out to the elemental concentrations and tried to establish a connection with them to establish another territory...but nothing happened. He quickly looked at his multi-element Core and saw that everything looked fine, but they were still all spread out; *maybe that's the issue?* He brought them all together again and squeezed them all together, quickly wrapping the entire conglomeration of Cores with the free-floating Unconverted Mana.

As soon as he started to condense the entire group together, solidifying the outer shell, things started to go wrong. One after another, the inner shells keeping the elemental Cores together shattered, leaving the elements to escape and mingle together, creating a multi-colored maelstrom of Mana that rapidly swirled around each other and the Human Core that was still intact in the middle. There was no point in trying to reform them all, because it would take entirely too long, and releasing that much energy by removing the outer shell would cause a significant explosion. Therefore, he doubled his efforts and condensed the shell even further, keeping everything intact while hoping that it would work in the end.

The same shaking and pressure fought against his condensation of the Core, and for a moment he thought he wasn't strong enough. However, looking at Eisa lying on her side in the middle of the air – the shaking having been so bad during the Defender's last step that she was tossed upwards – he knew he couldn't give up now. If only for the *chance* that he could touch her again with a Human body before they perished, he needed to fight with every crystal of his being.

With a monumental effort, he pushed one last time at his shell and it audibly \*clicked\* into place.

And then, unexpectedly, he exploded.



# Chapter 29

The hot sun beat down oppressively on the remainder of his people, all that had survived the apocalyptic rise of the one known as Darnak. Though, when he looked beyond his people and at the great tears on the planet's surface, releasing and perverting the Soulforce in unforeseen ways, he didn't see a way they could survive for long. At least, not long if they stayed the way they were right now.

***What is this? What is going on?***

"Father, what are we to do? I can already feel my power fading..." his daughter asked, looking just as tired as he felt. The last decade of their terrible war had worn Hierolynk down, with the constant struggle against Darnak and his creations, and he was too tired at first to respond. All he could think of was all that they had lost, the dead that would never rise again to greet the day, and all of the horrific things that Hierolynk and his other people had to do to stop the death and destruction caused by his brother.

He couldn't believe their population had gone from over ten million spread out across the planet to a sad two thousand, all gathered here as their world collapsed around them. Technically, the world wasn't *collapsing*, but it had been so damaged from the destructive war that no Soulkeepers could live like they used to anymore. It wouldn't kill them anymore, but the Soulforce emerging from the center of the planet was almost non-existent, meaning that they couldn't use it to repair it.

***Soulforce? Soulkeepers? I don't understand; what am I seeing?***

Just a few years ago, any Soulkeeper could've used the natural power of Soulforce to do just about anything they could imagine, including fixing the wounds that had been inflicted on their world. Unfortunately, his brother – *may his soul be forever lost to the ages* – hadn't given up his mad campaign for ultimate power, to wield Soulforce in a way that it should never be used. Instead of living harmoniously with nature, using their power to nurture and commune with the planet, Darnak wanted to dominate it and shape the world in ways that were perverse and *wrong*.

The resulting conflict lasted for nearly a century, and in that time his brother's monstrous creations had torn across the world unimpeded, killing Soulkeepers wherever they were found; his people were intrinsically gentle and caring in nature, and using Soulforce to defend themselves was an entirely foreign concept. Darnak's twisted monsters tore through them like they were nothing, because they didn't fight back – it went against their nature to kill, even when it was his brother's horrifying constructions attacking them.

At least, at first they didn't fight back; it was only when Hierolynk gathered as many of his people together as he could, learned how to wield Soulforce to defend themselves and to kill, and then went after his brother to end the senseless violence, that they managed to survive. *If losing 99.9% of our people is what one would call surviving, that is.*

***This is...interesting, I suppose, but what is going on? Who are these people, and what is this all about? What's happening back in Allroads?***

Now, they were faced with a decision that would be one of the hardest they would ever have to make. *Yes, even harder than choosing to forgo our basic nature and kill.* “Daughter...my people...we are all that are left, and the remaining Soulfence that we’ve used all of our lives to make this world a better place to live in is almost gone. There is a choice to be made, and it is one that I cannot make for you. Do we stay as we are, living out our last few months until we perish from the lack of sustaining Soulfence?”

“Or, will you join your remaining energy with mine to change ourselves into something that can and will live on in this different world that we find ourselves in? The wounds inflicted all over the planet cannot be fixed as it is now, but perhaps in the future we will learn how to right the wrongs brought about by my brother. We have to decide soon, before we run out of time, however. I will let you all discuss what you wish to do, and I will abide by whatever consensus you reach.”

He stepped away from the gathering of his people then, turning to give the last remaining Soulkeepers anywhere in the world the privacy they needed to decide. It was really just the illusion of privacy, of course, because he could still hear them; regardless, it was the symbolism of the act that mattered most, some sign of “normalcy” that they would all remember from better days.

A hand caught his arm and stopped him from walking away any farther. “Father, is this really all we can do? Can we not fix the damage that was done?”

“I wish it were otherwise, but...no. The damage is too extensive; even fixing a small portion of these rents leading down to the source will take all of our remaining Soulfence and wouldn’t make a difference in the end. I’ve seen firsthand what Darnak – in his misguided ways – has done to

pervert the energy flowing out from the source; if we had more time, more Soulkeepers, then perhaps we could change it back...but as it is, there is no other choice for us. I'm sorry," he told her sadly, placing his hand over hers.

***Wait a minute...is he talking about the Convergences? As well as the various pockets of elemental concentrations found all over the world?***

He bowed his head in silence, and his daughter did the same, her gesture showing understanding regarding how hard it was for him to force his people to decide their own fate collectively. It was how they had always done it, so there was no reason to change it now. Especially since this day may or may not be their last as Soulkeepers.

The sun was just beginning to set when Hierolynk asked the assembled crowd for an answer. Theoretically, it might be possible to enact the changes he had in mind if he waited until the next day, but he didn't want to take a chance that the rate of energy loss would speed up unexpectedly. If that happened, they wouldn't have any choice but to suffer and waste away, when their Soulfence eventually drained completely.

"Have you made a decision?" he asked, looking at the front of the group to see two familiar faces standing as representatives.

"It's not much of a choice, Hierolynk: 'Live or die', is essentially what you're telling us," remarked Havarn, sadly. He had been one of the best defensive fighters to have come out of the war, and he and some of his followers had started to design their own constructed defenders, using Soulfence, towards the end of the fighting to protect entire communities. While they had really made a difference in saving lives, Hierolynk inwardly worried that they were much too close to what his brother had created for

himself to feel entirely comfortable about it. “Needless to say, we don’t want to die.”

“We agree with that as well, but we *strongly* disagree with the approach that Havarn is pressing for. It is our duty as Soulkeepers to prevent something like this happening again in the future, as unlikely as that might be. The extreme power of Soulfence, while it is supposed to be used for good, is what allowed Darnak to commit these atrocities; there has to be some way to divide up this changed energy leaking out of the planet, to prevent someone from being able to do this kind of thing. I’ve looked at it extensively, and I think it can be done.” That was Farna, who seemed to speak for the majority of his people who had been at the forefront of the fighting. They had been on the frontlines, using various methods of supporting each other to beat back the vast armies his brother had sent out into the world,

As for dividing up the perverted energy, it was a great idea – and one that he had contemplated himself. If he changed everyone so that they could utilize and manipulate every part of the newly changed energy, then something like what had happened with his brother might occur again. Considering how the majority of Soulkeepers still alive had intrinsically changed their normal, peaceful natures because of Darnak’s overwhelming need for power, such a thing was not only possible, but inevitable. There needed to be some sort of balancing factor, so that one person or group of people would not be capable of destroying the world if they acquired enough power.

***Balancing factor? Is he talking about what I think he’s talking about?***

It would take a slight change to his original plan, but overall, it wasn't that different from what he was already going to do – if they chose to go that route, of course, which it seemed that they did. “I'm assuming that you've all decided on this change?” Hierolynk asked, receiving guarded nods in response. “And if I were to divide up access to this new energy, would that be acceptable?” This was directed to Havarn, who was for the change, but somehow against the division of power.

For his part, Havarn turned around and looked at the others who were like him, being protectors at heart and fighters only at need. Silent communication occurred between them all, which was a slight waste of their remaining Soulforce, but Hierolynk didn't say anything; *let them work it out among themselves*. Finally, after a few minutes of discussion, Havarn turned back and slowly nodded.

“Very well. What I plan to do is to change you all into two different species; one, which will utilize small but vital portions of this new energy, will be relatively physically fragile, though they will have the freedom to become strong enough to fight against any threats to the world—”

Hierolynk gestured to Farna's group, before looking at Havarn and his compatriots— “while the second will be in charge of protecting themselves and others from those same threats. They'll have access to a more potent form of this perverted energy, but they'll also be limited in what they can accomplish with it. No longer will any one person have access to all of the power and flexibility that we are accustomed to with Soulforce; by working together, though, you'll be able to keep this world safe and stop those willing to destroy it to increase their own power.”

***This can't be right; this has to be some sort of hallucination that my shattered mind is making up. Maybe I'm dead and this is what the***

### *afterlife looks like?*

There was some grumbling, but on the whole, everyone seemed to be fine with the plan. Not that they had much of a choice, at that point, especially if they wanted to save themselves while saving the future world. He had no doubt that working together would be hard, but they would have to learn how to do it, if there ever were another threat like what his brother had been. He raised his hands to the sky, ready to begin the process before they ran out of time.

Almost as if they had practiced it, Hierolynk felt each Soulkeeper remove all but the smallest portion of their Soulforce from their bodies and then sent it to him, where they collapsed to the ground, literally drained of most of their energy. He surged with Soulforce and he basked in all of its glory for a few moments; it had been years since he had felt this much at his disposal, and it was a bit overwhelming. Still, after taking the time to become accustomed to it, he started to shape the powerful energy so that it could follow his intentions.

Soulforce, unlike the changed energy now flowing from the source inside the planet, was extremely versatile; with enough of it, one could do just about *anything* that could be imagined. There were very few limits to the power, in actuality, though very few used it for anything other than mundane tasks, or – more lately – to fight with; the normal lives of Soulkeepers didn't require it to be used for anything else, after all, nor did they have any desire to abuse the power.

Surprisingly, the limitations of Soulforce were few: It couldn't be applied to bend the flow of time; it couldn't destroy matter – only change it; and it couldn't be used to directly influence the minds of any sapient beings (which included Soulkeepers). Other than that, the uses were essentially

endless; in fact, it could even extend the lives of his people perpetually, and even bring those back from the dead who had perished in an untimely matter.

***Wait...what? Why does that sound familiar?***

Unfortunately, to use Soulfence to resurrect someone, the soul of the individual needed to still exist in the world. Historically, that was never a problem; his brother, however, in the pursuit of power, had instilled in his monstrous creations the ability to devour the souls of their victims, which meant that they couldn't bring anyone back from the dead. Not that they could at that point, even if the souls were still around, because it took a significant amount of Soulfence to do something like that. There were more important things to do with what they had remaining, after all.

It didn't take long for Hierolynk to recover from the rush of energy coursing through his body, and he quickly brought it forth for his Shaping. He had to be quick, because it seemed as though the more Soulfence he had possession of, the faster it drained from him as the world changed. Fortunately, he had already envisioned the course of this part extensively over the last few days, and it only took a few minor alterations to make it fit with the new plan of dividing the power between the two groups.

Holding the Soulfence between his hands, he pictured exactly what he wanted in his mind as he split the orb of powerful primal energy in two. The larger portion was for the fighters, whom he imagined to be much smaller than they currently were at 20 feet tall, as well as being weaker physically. However, they would adapt to using a portion of the changed energy flowing from the source to enhance themselves, as well as applying it for a relatively limited number of uses.



Unlike Soulfence, though, it couldn't create anything permanent, and when used it wasn't quite as potent; not only that, but it would take a lengthy adjustment period for their new bodies to become accustomed to using the new energy, as it was extremely volatile in comparison to what they were used to. Those weren't restrictions that he deliberately placed upon Farna's group, though; it was just the nature of the new energies.

The second, smaller portion of Soulfence was for Havarn's group. For them, he pictured a much larger race of people, who specialized in using their more potent form of the new energy for protecting everyone. They would be able to use the energy to establish defenses and create the special defenders that they had already started using to protect their homes. There were some limitations on how they could use that energy, and they, too, would have to build up their tolerance for using large quantities of it; once they established themselves in a few hundred years, they would be fine.

### ***Is he talking about Humans and Dungeon Cores?***

It was a fairly simple division of powers between the two, but it would serve to ensure that they would have protection against any further calamities in the future. They needed to work together to survive the changing world, though, but that had never been a problem in the past; despite their new forms, they would have all of their previous memories and personalities. They had existed for countless years in harmony before this, and he had every reason to believe that they would continue that trend. *And maybe, just maybe, they can eventually work together to repair the planet and heal the wounds inflicted upon it by my brother.*

His people all looked up from where they had fallen after they were drained of all but the last spark of Soulforce, seeing Hierolynk drifting the energy over their bodies. His daughter was near him, looking up at him with tired eyes from Havarn's group; she had spent the war learning how to protect their people, and she obviously wished to continue with that goal. Without wasting any more time, he settled the Shaped Soulforce – the last amount in any significant quantity remaining on the planet – over their forms and initiated the evolution with a thought.

Almost immediately after the transformation was catalyzed within them, Hierolynk looked up as the sound of something caught his attention. In the far distance, one of the nearby rents along the planet's surface exploded, sending up a fountain of dirt into the air; he didn't think much of it, though, because they had been doing that every so often, all over the world, as the pent-up energy was released, making the world's wounds a little larger. He intuitively knew that they would eventually calm down and stabilize, until they were nothing more than common fixtures, but at the moment they were still volatile.

This initial explosion, which was relatively minor in size, was then followed up with one even larger; indeed, it was probably one of the largest that he'd ever seen. *Uh oh.*

***That doesn't look good.***

*This doesn't look good.* Hierolynk collapsed to his knees as a shockwave rippled out from the explosion, as a large portion of his own Soulforce was depleted as well. He looked down at the writhing forms of his people, undergoing their change. Hierolynk couldn't stop the process now, because then he wouldn't have enough energy to try it again; all he

could do was hope and pray that the transmutation from Soulkeepers to their new forms would finish before it arrived. He had no idea what the introduction of such volatile and perverted energy would do to them during the change.

Unfortunately, he was able to find out.

The shockwave rolled over his people, not as a physical force, but rather one of an energizing nature. The new, perverted energy altered the Shaping he had done on them, changing the original intent behind it enough that when they stopped morphing into their new shapes – a few minutes after the shockwave passed – they were only partially what he had envisioned. Farna's group appeared much physically weaker and shorter than he had planned, and looking at them closely, with his failing strength, he could see that they were no longer semi-immortal. It hadn't been possible, given the new energy, to make them entirely immortal, but now their life expectancy was tragically short. He could only hope that, by using their allocation of the altered energy source, they could extend it.

Havarn's group, on the other hand, was so different from what he pictured that they were basically unrecognizable. Instead of a larger version of the people of Farna's group, they had shrunk down to the size of his fist. Worse yet, they weren't people, at all – they were glowing, floating, spherical crystals, in an assortment of colors. Hierolynk thought he had killed them until when he looked closer, using more Soulfence than he should: He saw that they were miraculously living beings, with most of the abilities that he had planned to assign them. There were some other things as well, but what alarmed him the most was that both groups of people seemed to have had their memories entirely wiped.

None of them knew who they were, what they were doing before they became like they were now, and what they needed to do to keep

themselves safe in the future. He intuitively knew that they likely would not work together to safeguard and eventually heal the planet, as there was no obvious reason for them to do so. In other words, he had failed.

*No! This is a disaster! And there's nothing I can do...wait.* He glanced over and looked at the new form of his daughter next to him, her yellow crystalline sphere pulsing with an inner glow like a heartbeat. *Perhaps...in the future...there might be a way to fix everything again. I don't know if it will ever be the same as it was before, but maybe I can do something to get them working together.* His quick examination of Havarn's people – not *Hierolynk's* anymore – showed him something that might make that a possibility, though there was a slim chance of it actually working. However, there wasn't anything else he could do at that point, as he could feel the Soulforce remaining in his body draining even faster.

With the last of his strength, he used it to transform portions of his mind into a memory...which he then implanted into the core of his daughter's new form, hidden until such a time when there would be one that could make proper use of it.

***Whoa...that was some deep—***

# Chapter 30

Unbelievable pain infused every corner of his mind, which Fred didn't think was possible. It was like he could feel every miniscule part of his Core exploding, and then each one of those exploding again and again in a cavalcade of endless torture. His sense of time was distorted in part by the strange memory he just experienced, as well as from the pain, so the experience felt like it went on for years.

As horrible as it was, though, it turned out to only be a fraction of a second.

His awareness of the world around him came back suddenly, and all the pain was gone from his mind; he found his viewpoint to be along the side wall of his Core Room, looking towards the center of the room where his multi-element Core used to float – which should've been impossible, since he didn't have a territory anymore, and therefore couldn't use his territorial sight to see outside of his present form. That didn't seem to matter though, because he was now looking at his Core...but it looked nothing like what it had just a short time ago.

Instead of his multi-element Core, there was a floating sphere of approximately the same size, with a clear exterior. Instead of having a color or *colors* inside, though, it appeared to be filled with...the night sky? He wasn't exactly sure how to describe it; the interior wasn't a void, absent of anything. In fact, it looked like someone had tried to envision *everything* and placed the source of it inside the sphere.

Slight movement off to his left caught his attention, and he saw Eisa still floating in the air from the step made by the Defenders attacking Allroads, but she was starting to move slightly, indicating to Fred that time

was starting to speed up again. *All of that occurred – my Core exploding, the memory of some person named Hierolynk, and that unbelievable pain – while the world was frozen?* Though, technically, the world wasn't frozen, and time hadn't stopped; his mind had just sped up so quickly that it just seemed that way, he supposed.

*What...exactly happened?*

Before he could react, Fred felt his viewpoint start to really focus on the strange sphere floating in the middle of the room; of its own volition, the sphere started to move towards him at a rapid pace, growing larger in his vision by the moment. It was only after it encompassed his entire view that he realized the object wasn't moving towards *him* – he was moving towards *it* and he felt like he was shrinking at the same time. A sense of awe and wonder infused his thoughts, then, as the vastness of what was contained within the orb overwhelmed him as he got closer. Suddenly, his consciousness slammed into the side of the sphere, punctured the thin outer coating, and was absorbed into the impossible-looking object.

Then he knew...everything.

Well, not *everything*, though it felt like that at first. A flood of knowledge and memories poured into him, so quickly and powerfully that he thought his mind would break from the deluge, as it was much more than even Deecy had sent to him those few times. After an initial shock to his consciousness, instead of shattering under the onslaught, his mind instead *flexed* with the information, absorbing it like a sponge. A really *massive* sponge, because there was a lot there.

Fred received an impossibly exorbitant quantity of memories from Hierolynk's life, though there were certainly holes where long periods of time were missing. He replayed the vision of the accidental creation of Humans and Dungeon Cores again, and then went backwards in time. He

witnessed firsthand the devastation wrought by Hierolynk's brother Darnak; the vast armies of soul-destroying monsters against whom his people had fought; and the courageous defense by his Soulkeepers, even if by the end it was almost too little, too late.

Then he saw snippets of what life was like before the war that almost destroyed the planet. It had been a peaceful existence, where the Soulkeepers lived in harmony with the world, shaping it to encourage growth and coordinating their actions to promote the best possible existence for everyone. Fred experienced thousands of years of manipulating Soulforce, using it in an inconceivably unlimited number of ways, to do just about anything that could be imagined. It was almost too easy to manipulate, as well; Soulforce acted like a lump of clay in your hands, and you were only limited by your skill in "Shaping" it to do whatever you wanted.

Hierolynk had been a master at Shaping Soulforce, which was why he had been chosen by his people to lead them; that masterful skill and his perceived power over the Soulkeepers was what led to the war that his brother had started, which had culminated in the destruction of nearly everything. Jealousy and greed were relatively unknown emotions to Soulkeepers, because of their simple nature and their ability to do just about anything they wanted to with Soulforce; Darnak, however, had always been in the shadow of his brother, because he was almost – but not quite – as good at Shaping Soulforce.

Somehow, a freak accident with an experimental Shaping performed by his brother led to a small rupture in the planet's surface. Hierolynk never did find out what he had been trying to do, but the end result was that his experiment perverted the Soulforce welling up from the rupture. Unbeknownst to Hierolynk at the time, Darnak had learned to use and

manipulate this changed energy, deploying it in conjunction with normal Soulforce to render Shapings much easier, faster, and with more power behind them than even his brother could do. When Hierolynk told him that they needed to repair the rupture, to preserve the sanctity and purity of the source inside the planet, Darnak refused to let them; violence, which was previously unknown to the Soulkeepers, ensued – and the rest was literally history.

All of those memories would have been fascinating by themselves, but what they really provided was knowledge. The skills of a master Soulforce Shaper weren't exactly passed to him, but he began to see the similarities between how he manipulated Mana *and* Power to how Soulforce was Shaped; the newer, changed energy that Fred had been using for the last year was a bit more structured than the primal energy used by Hierolynk, but they both had one thing in common: Intent.

Essence, on the other hand, was a by-product of the creation of Defenders and Defenses made by Dungeon Cores; the energy of Essence was intrinsically combined with the creations, and would only be released when they were destroyed or nullified. That also explained why Essence wasn't released when the Shards created their own Defenders and Defenses, but those made by Fred did; his were created by an actual Dungeon Core, while theirs weren't.

Humans' life forces, bolstered by the addition of Essence, created a natural Mana inside of their bodies that they couldn't access. Just like Essence was linked to "monsters" and "traps" which couldn't be used by Dungeon Cores, that Human Mana (otherwise known as Unconverted Mana to Fred), was unable to be used by Humans; it was powerfully potent, though, which was why it was absorbed by dungeons when they were invaded. It also explained why they released so much upon their deaths, as



all of that natural Unconverted Mana...or *Human Essence*, perhaps?...was released all at once.

Hierolynk had succeeded in one thing, even if it wasn't exactly the way that he had planned: The Soulkeepers' leader had ensured that the two species were reliant on each other to get stronger, to protect the world from another catastrophe from happening, and to thrive and grow to become the saviors of the planet. It hadn't really worked out that way, of course, as the two groups were at odds with each other, but the underlying principle of the entire setup was there.

Lastly, the entire point of Hierolynk sacrificing himself to insert his memories into his daughter's new form of a Dungeon Core was made plain to him. The Soulkeepers' leader had foreseen the potential, in their new crystalline forms, for someone to be born in the future who could help merge the two species together, to work in harmony to repair the damage done to the planet – and to prevent something like what had happened from occurring once again. That person would be born with access to both sides of their new forms, and would either be a powerful leader – or a tyrannical horror unleashed upon everyone.

Hierolynk, as his last attempt to prevent that latter event from happening, in hopes that the destruction of his beloved world could be reversed, had infused his life's memories into what remained of the person he loved and trusted the most in the world – his own daughter. As she had become a yellow Core, she was the progenitor of the entire, new Air-faction Dungeon Core lineage.

*So, am I supposed to be this “powerful leader”...or am I destined to become a “tyrannical horror”?* When Fred considered those choices, he found that he really didn't want to become either of them; however, since it seemed as though he had the choice, he'd rather be drafted into power than

be a tyrannical anything. Contemplating what the Supreme of Air had sent him via the intrusive Mana Communication link she had instigated, he realized that the previous Dualborn – and potentially any before that – had chosen to be just the opposite, for some reason; death and destruction on that scale, to both Humans and Dungeon Cores, were the last things he wanted out of his life, despite the anger that still smoldered in his heart at the deaths of his parents.

*Is that anger enough to send the entire world into a terrible war that would probably only end with either my death or the deaths of countless Humans and Dungeon Cores? I think not.*

So the obvious answer was to become a “leader” of some sort, though that wasn’t likely to happen – he, as well as millions of Humans, his Shards, his Guild, and the Convergence, were about to be obliterated from the area. He couldn’t even watch as it happened, either, since his territory was now gone; he couldn’t even sense the different elements that made up his Core anymore—

*Wait...that’s not entirely true.* Fred explored the sphere that he had been sucked up into, while the world around him slowly started to speed up. The orb that seemed to contain the vastness of space, of everything, wasn’t exactly a recognizable Dungeon Core – but then again, it was; instead of being an amalgamation of Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, Dark, Light, Air, and Human Mana separated into different Cores, they were all merged into one. Not only that, but he could detect hints of Human Adventurer Power and even Essence running through it, merging together to create an energy that was entirely new.

Except that it wasn’t *new*, per se – just new to Fred; the memories from Hierolynk that had now merged into his consciousness identified the base part of it immediately: **Soulforce**. Fred’s own knowledge identified

parts of it that could only be explained by the presence of Mana, Power, *and* Essence, which didn't *change* it so much as *enhance* the energy that seemed to pulse within the new Core and make it stronger.

*Was this what Darnak had done? Or, at least, what he was trying to achieve?*

For the first time since his multi-element Core had exploded, it occurred to Fred that this wasn't just some random sphere filled with Soulfence enhanced by other energies – this was his new *Core*. He didn't even classify it as a Dungeon Core, though, because when he reached inside of himself – his new Core – the sheer power at his disposal scared him; it wasn't limited to building dungeons, Defenders, and Defenses, but it could do almost *anything*. He thought back through Hierolynk's memories and intuitively knew that he was only limited by his imagination and intent; in fact, the previous limitations that Soulfence had – inability to mess with time, destroy matter, and influence the minds of sapient beings – were, for the most part, eliminated.

He didn't think he could reverse the flow of time, though he had already seen some evidence of it slowing and stopping – which he had previously thought was entirely due to being able to think at a high rate of speed, though that was probably true as well. He could destroy matter, which he had seen with his Mana Explosion techniques, as the Mana was consumed and destroyed after detonation. He also realized that he had influenced the minds of his Shards – however inadvertently – when he created them, so that they were more inclined to follow his suggestions and leadership. It was subtle, but when he looked at Eisa slowly falling to the floor, the signs of his influence in her mind were all there. *And all of that was due to the enhanced properties of the “perverted” energy working in conjunction with each other.*

*That*, more than anything, terrified him. His memories of his brother – **Hierolynk's** brother...*these memories are confusing me somewhat* – showed him that this was exactly why Darnak was so dangerous, as there were very few limits on his power, once he learned how to manipulate the new energy. From what he understood, though, the power-hungry Soulkeeper hadn't managed to fully integrate the two types of energies together as flawlessly as Fred had.

The problem for Fred, however, was that there weren't really any sources of Soulforce left on the planet. He thought that he could Shape it like Hierolynk used to – if not with the same masterful skill – but there wasn't any but the small amount that was contained in his new Core already. All there was were the pervasive amounts of ambient Mana, Power, and Essence floating around; which, when he attempted to use it to establish another territory – or anything, really – practically spilled through his grasping “fingers”.

He was a powerful new Soulforce Core with unlimited potential... and no energy in which to do anything. Fred had changed so much that he couldn't even pull up a Dungeon Core Status screen, nor even seen any of his Shards' screens; he was just so different now that he felt even more useless than he had been when he returned from the expedition to Light's territory the day before.

Time sped up rapidly while he was exploring his new form and sadly discovering its limitations, and it didn't feel like it was long before Eisa finally hit the floor, her head bouncing slightly as she hit the hard stone of the room. There were multiple cracks in the rest of his Core Room, which was more than alarming; if Fred's small room, pretty far underground, was already starting to fall apart, then the city of Allroads above was probably in much worse shape. If he remembered correctly, the

giant Defenders sent by the factions had just stepped near or on the elemental concentrations and were a short step away from attacking the city directly, so those that were still alive probably wouldn't be so for long.

"Owww... Fred? What happened to your Core? Is that even you, still?" Eisa asked, looking up from where she had awkwardly landed, holding her head in her hands.

*"Yes, it's still me; I went through a transformation and learned some things. Unfortunately, I don't think it's going to help. I'm sorry..."*

Luckily, despite most of his other abilities being unavailable, his Mana Communication still worked...though Fred marveled that any type of Communication was available to him, as he had presumed he could not manipulate Mana anymore. He had spoken with her instinctively and automatically, however; obviously, it could be done.

Seeking to identify exactly what he had done, he realized that he had reached *outside* of his Core and grabbed ahold of a bundle of energy leaking from the Convergence, containing Mana, Power, and Essence together; he then passed it through his Core like he had been doing with Mana to convert it to Power, but this time it came out as *something else*. It wasn't exactly Soulfence, but it had many of the same properties – only modified because of the presence of the new energies; in light of those changes, he was thinking of calling it Modified Soulfence.

While he couldn't use free-floating Soulfence that welled up from the source inside of the planet, he could produce a variation of it – perhaps a *better* variation of it, though that was still to be seen. In short, his Core was acting as an instant Modified Soulfence generator.

*"Never mind what I just said, Eisa; I think I may have a way out of this,"* Fred told her, watching as his Core automatically converted the energy and used it to Communicate with Eisa – it was more like *Soul*

Communication rather than *Mana* Communication, though. The Earth Shard looked confused and stared at his new Core with her mouth open in shock; he could see the influence he had inadvertently placed on her mind kick in, though, and her face changed enough to say that she had full confidence in him.

First, he quickly pulled from the environment a handful of energy and passed it through his Core, where it changed into a small blob of Modified Soulfence. Then, using his knowledge of how the establishment of territories worked and his fledgling skills in Shaping, he created 7 different facsimiles of elemental Mana and sent them out into the world around him, connecting to the sources of each element to his Core. He paused in consternation as nothing seemed to happen...when he suddenly felt his territory flare into existence.

It was just in time, too, as he looked outside to see that portions of the wall and quite a few buildings had caved from the destructive force of the Defenders' steps. Not only that, but the other factions had started to expand their own borders back towards the city, now that there wasn't anything in the way; though, fortunately, they didn't make it that far. His territory still encompassed half of the elemental concentrations in the Convergence, which appeared to be collapsing as he watched – being stomped on by an impossibly large foot would do that, he supposed. The release of Mana, Power, and Essence from them was already creating an enormous cloud of volatile energy that could potentially explode, were there a “spark” of something to set it off; it was tempting, but it would likely destroy everything within 20 miles – completely defeating the purpose.

The other foot was already in the air and getting ready to either stomp on the city itself or land right outside; either way, landing that close

would probably kill the rest of the people in the city at that point. If not, then they would be destroyed when the massive Defenders actually *attacked*.

“What are you going to do, Fred?”

Strangely enough, when he looked at each enormous monster, reaching at least a thousand feet or more up into the sky, the answer was pretty simple. All Defenders – even the ones that he and his Shards created – were basically just Mana constructs; they may look, feel, bleed, and even die like “real” creatures, but ***they were all just instructions for how the Mana inside of them should react.*** It was the *intent* behind their creations that made sure they kept their forms and acted the way they were supposed to; in the end, though, they were just Mana – and, looking closer, it was *Essence* that was being used to hold it all together. *That’s what Blueprints are! It turns out that Dungeon Cores were unknowingly using it after all...*

Rather than let himself be distracted by that revelation, Fred got to work; deadly feet were descending rapidly, and he and the people above were seconds away from complete destruction. Therefore, as Fred now had unparalleled access to manipulating Mana and Essence, it was easy enough to reach out with his mind and find the complex wire grid that comprised each Defender and...yank it out.

One-by-one, the Defender of Fire, the Defender of Water, the Defender of Nature, the Defender of Earth, the Defender of Dark, the Defender of Light, and the Defender of Air fell apart, the structure keeping their Mana together disappearing. Fred was greeted by seven massive blobs of each type of Mana floating free above the Convergence, now without a purpose and intent behind them.

As easy as that, the immediate threat to himself, his friends, and Allroads was gone.

The Mana, however, was still there; being mostly inside of the factions' territories, Fred saw them all start to pull the Mana back to their Dungeon Cores so that they could be used again. It was so quick that all of them were able to whisk them away from being anywhere inside of his territory, but they moved rather slowly; moving that amount of Mana all at once was difficult because it was hard to keep it together, after all.

Without thinking, Fred reached out and grabbed the Fire Mana blob floating away – *outside of his territory!* He grasped it firmly within his mental grasp and it stopped; he felt a tugging on it and realized that the Fire Core was still trying to absorb it, but the effort behind it was extremely weak. It felt like he was an S-Rated tank-Classed Adventurer being accosted by a G-Rated Mage; in other words, it was no effort whatsoever to keep hold of the Mana and even bring it back to his own territory.

He immediately did the same for the other Mana blobs, even though some of them were already more than a mile away; distance really didn't seem to matter, though, as he brought them towards his Core with ease. He thought about trying to absorb it all, but he instinctively knew that he couldn't; his new Modified Soulfence-converting Core was powerful, but he couldn't actually store anything inside of it.

He'd have to find something else to do with it eventually, but for the moment there were other problems to take care of. Even beyond the horrendous state of the city and the many, many wounded and dead from the enormous earthquakes caused by the elemental Defenders, half of the Convergence had been crushed, and the other half was collapsing at an alarming rate, releasing clouds of energy that were increasingly unstable. He may have found a way to defeat the factions – for the time being – but they might all end up losing, if the Convergence exploded.



# Chapter 31

*“I’ve stopped the enormous Defenders, but there’s another problem,”* Fred Communicated to his Shards.

***“What? How?”***

***“How did you...?”***

***“I see that; I should never count you out, I suppose. You’ve done the impossible...again.”***

“What is this other problem you mentioned?” Everyone Communicated back to him without issue, either, even though the method of Communication had changed; he wasn’t sure exactly how that worked, but he didn’t have time to investigate it at the moment. He was fortunate that none of his Shards had died, though Chareese and Roady had been hurt by some falling stone blocks; they had endured serious wounds, it was discovered, once they were dug out beneath them, though their Mana was already working to restore them. The same could not be said for a few of his Core Power Guild; they had also been crushed and killed, because they didn’t have Mana to help heal and restore them.

*“Let’s just say that I’ve changed a little bit of how I can manipulate all of the energy around me, and I was able to eliminate the Defenders that way. Never mind that, however; most of the Convergence is either destroyed or collapsing as we speak, and it’s releasing all of the concentrated – and highly **explosive** – energy trapped within. That, and I have more Mana around than I know what to do with.”*

“Can’t you just, I don’t know...absorb it?” Eisa asked, getting to her feet. She was echoed by the others, and Fred briefly explained his predicament. He couldn’t absorb it, he couldn’t let it just drift free, and it was too much to make into something. Not that he didn’t get some suggestions to do just that from others.

***“Why don’t you just make some monsters of your own and start destroying the other Dungeon Cores. It would only be fair payback for all of the deaths they caused here.”***

That was Chareese, but it was echoed by everyone except for Deecy and Eisa. He could understand their desire for revenge, but that would really get them nowhere in the long run except for a protracted war that neither side really wanted nor needed at this time. *“As valid a point as that is, that’s not going to help. We don’t need to extend this fight across the world, which is exactly what would happen; the Dungeon Cores, in their desire to get stronger and fight against me, would start slaughtering Humans all over the world, hastening our decline prematurely. No one would win, if that were to happen, even if I hunted down and killed every Dungeon Core; I won’t be part of a genocide that could be avoided. I’d rather everyone die here than for something like that to occur.”*

Fred could tell that the Shards who had suggested it were, if not happy with his decision, then at least smart enough not to bring it up again. That still brought him to the original problem, though: too much concentrated Mana and energy within a half-mile radius of his Core. Theoretically, he could attempt to shove all of the actual Mana into his Shards, but unless he took it extremely slowly, the process would probably

kill them given how much it was; he was fairly certain that he didn't have time for that before things became entirely too volatile.

“It's a shame that you can't make any more Shards; that always seemed to drain you of quite a bit of your Mana in the past.”

*That's true, but I can't see that happening—* Eisa's comment spurred something in his mind; there were still connections to his Core from the other Shards, which meant bringing some people back as additional Shards unlikely, though potentially possible. He was different, now, and that might allow him to add more people, but he wasn't willing to risk it; instead, something he recalled from Hierolynk's memories occurred to him, and he thought it was worth trying, at least.

Fred might not be able make more Shards, but that wasn't the only option.

Moving the large blobs of elemental Mana – which, when left in their original globular state, almost completely filled up his territory by themselves – through his Core, he converted it all to Modified Soulforce, which ended up being a massively large clump of energy that was approximately half of the size of the Mana that was sent through. He then sliced an extremely tiny portion of it off with his mind and Shaped it according to his memories – *Hierolynk's memories* – before moving it down to his dungeon. He immediately found one of the recently deceased Core Power Guild members and...recoiled in shock when he realized that it was Raspel, the Infiltrator who had accompanied him and a few others into the Nature dungeon where all their problems had started.

Fred only hesitated a moment before he laid the Shaping over Raspel's half-crushed corpse, as unbidden memories returned of the snarky Adventurer; *he deserves much better than to be killed, after making it all the way here.* As soon as he released the Shaping, it settled over Raspel and

seemed to disappear into his body. From outward appearances, it didn't seem to do anything, but Fred was looking at the process with "new" eyes granted to him by his changed state; inside of the Infiltrator's body, vast forces were at play, slowly rebuilding the bones, muscle, and flesh from the inside out.

The whole process wasn't visible physically from the outside, but it was definitely working; better yet, something that Hierolynk's memories said would happen occurred. Coalescing out of seemingly empty space, a misty, white form appeared above Raspel's corpse and gently floated down, settling over it like a transparent bubble. Again, aided by foreign memories, he instinctively knew what it was: Raspel's *soul*.

It would take time – the memories said days or weeks, depending on the damage, though it could be much faster because of the Modified Soulfence – but Fred had no doubt that it would succeed. He had essentially done the same thing with the creation of his Shards, though it had required tying them to his Core to do that so quickly, and the process had changed them into something different from what they used to be. This, though, with the Modified Soulfence, would bring them back exactly as they were before.

With that success, he immediately went to work creating more Shapings by the thousands, placing them on all of the older corpses of his Guild – after opening up their wall chambers where they had been stored – as well as the newly perished, and then started on all of the people he could find above throughout the city. He started directly above his Core Room in the Governmental Quarter and moved out from there, sending the Shapings out in a wide spread, until he covered every single body in or outside of the walls – including the massive pile waiting to be buried. *I'll have to have*

*my Shards tell everyone not to panic, and to help move the bodies so they're not crushing each other.*

Fred was about to ask his Shards to spread the word, when he realized that might not be necessary. Taking another tiny portion of the still-large clump of Modified Soulforce, he spread it out to the entire city, connecting it to everyone still alive.

*“Do not be alarmed. The massive monsters that were attacking the city have been vanquished, and I have used a new energy to start the process of resurrecting all those who died over the last few days. Please keep in mind that this is not an animation of undead, but a real resurrection. I’m not too sure of how long this will take, but please ensure that no one is buried underneath anything that will end up killing them again as soon as they come back.*

*“.....That is all.”*

He really didn't know exactly what to say, but he thought that it got the point across fairly well. The citizens and Adventurers around Allroads, however, didn't react to his message in the way he was expecting: Hearing his voice in their heads, they panicked even more than they had when they saw that they were going to be attacked by the enormous elemental Defenders. He was going to try to calm them down with another message, but Deecy cut him off.

***“Don’t bother; anything else you say will probably make it worse. Let them deal with their own panic, first, and when they come to their senses, they’ll hopefully see your instructions through. Did that take care of your...energy...problem?”***

Looking at his massive glob of Modified Soulfence, he saw that he had maybe used half of it. He thought that he could use a little more of it to help rebuild the city and portions of his own dungeon, but that would hardly make a difference. While he was at it, he took another small portion of the energy and infused his dungeon with it, which helped to reinforce and protect the parts that were starting to crumble; his upkeep had disappeared, earlier, along with his territory; it was only now, when he saw it starting to collapse, that he worked to stop and reverse the damage.

That still did very little to affect how much energy was floating around; in fact, it was even worse, now. The Modified Soulfence, possibly because it was even more powerful and versatile than normal Soulfence, was apparently even more unstable than “normal” Soulfence. Even as he felt it with his mind, he could tell that it was nearly ready to fall apart, and the result wouldn’t be pretty; he didn’t think it would necessarily explode, but the effects it might have on the surrounding area might be just as catastrophic.

*I could always send it far away from here, but I’m not sure if I can move it farther than I can see from my territory. Also, if I did that, it could be considered a direct attack on one of the Dungeon Cores, which I want to avoid.* Fred also found that he couldn’t just cycle it through his Core again to help stabilize it; once it was made, it needed to be used – or *it would use itself*, in unpredictable ways. Coupled with the explosive properties of the volatile energy leaking out from the collapsing elemental concentrations, this was turning from bad to worse—

*Wait! The Convergence!*

*“Deecy, what do you think would happen if I repaired the Convergence?”*

***“What? Do you mean fix the damage that those massive Defenders caused to the elemental concentrations—?”***

*“No, I mean repair the **entire** Convergence, seal up the massive rents underneath the surface, and set this back up to how it was before.”* Fred didn’t have time to really explain it, so he did something he’d never done before, but the Dire Wolf had done to him plenty of times – though not necessarily in image form. He sent her, through Communication, a brief montage of memories from Hierolynk, detailing the war that had caused the wounds upon the planet’s surface.

Fred watched her through his Territorial Sight – or whatever it was called now – as the memories hit her while she was on top of the wall; he felt a strange mixture of satisfaction and a hint of regret when she immediately fell over on her side and spasmed for a few seconds. Eventually, she stopped and spoke back to him.

***“Ok, I guess I deserved that, after all that I sent to you; that was a bit much, though, don’t you think? Regardless, yes, I think that might be a good idea; it will at least prevent many of the threats that could be coming this way from succeeding, if there isn’t so much ambient Mana pouring out of the ground.”***

*“Sorry, Deecy; I was trying to save time, and didn’t rightly think about what it would do to you, sending that much info all at once.”* He meant it, too; he hadn’t been intending to do *that*, and sending that info was so much greater than what the Dire Wolf had sent him that it was hard to compare. Still, he was running out of time, so he didn’t fully regret what he had done – it was for a good purpose, after all.

Given that she had thought it was a good idea, Fred followed Deecy's advice and began a Shaping to fix the damage that had originally been done by Darnak and the war that he caused to happen countless years ago...but Fred stopped when he realized he didn't really know *how* to fix it. That had been one of the problems Hierolynk had run into when the damage started to occur, if he was reviewing the memories from the Soulkeeper leader correctly; every time Hierolynk had tried to dive into the maelstrom of perverted energy rising out of the ground, he couldn't mentally dive deep enough to figure out what the problem was. Trying to use Soulfence to push through the deluge of energy was largely ineffective; attempting to look at it from another direction was difficult, as the energy tended to infuse everything around it like some sort of shield.

Luckily, Fred didn't really have to worry about that; the Mana, Power, and Essence that flowed from the Convergence were known to him, and he was quite adept at manipulating it; therefore, he didn't think it would prove too much of a challenge. The whole process turned out to be much easier than he thought, especially when he used the same method of inspecting the gigantic wound that Hierolynk had used. The difference between his failure and Fred's success was that the Modified Soulfence adapted to the energy spewing out – because it *was* the energy.

Fred created a Shaping that acted like a far distance viewer, sort of what he would picture a telescope would be like; he had heard of them when he was in Gatecross, but had never seen one in person. The one he created, he had to imagine, was much more versatile, though, as whenever he looked through it, he could direct his vision wherever he wanted it to go, including through solid ground and outside of his territory. There wasn't a lot to see, at first, when he directed it down below, just a whole lot of dirt



and rock, until he found a major channel of pure energy rushing upwards, being pushed by something down below.

Above, he could clearly see where the energy had gradually eroded away the ground as it passed through, despite it being largely insubstantial, as well as where the elemental concentrations had ended up. Thinking back on Hierolynk's last day as a Soulkeeper, when the rent in the ground exploded, Fred could see how that had likely happened in this Convergence, as well. The ground underneath those that still barely existed was almost hollow, like a lake of some sort, which he assumed eventually pooled with enough segregated energy to form the visual manifestations of those elements.

While he could certainly see how to fix those and even seal them up, it wouldn't fix what damage was done far underneath the surface, and it wouldn't do anything but deny the surrounding lands of ambient Mana. As Deecy had said, that was a good plan, overall, if Fred wanted the attacks to stop – or at least lessen, hopefully – but he felt a driving *need* to fix the *root* of the problem. He was pretty sure that Hierolynk's memories were influencing him a bit, there, but he agreed with the notion in principle; if he found that he couldn't repair the original damage, he could still at least fix the surface.

With that in mind, he turned his Shaping to see far underground, following the channel of rushing energy down...and down some more...and then down even farther, until it felt like he had traveled halfway around the world. He hadn't known exactly how deep the ground went, but it was much deeper than he ever expected; he passed through layers of dirt and rock, at first, then other layers of differing kinds of stone, before seeing some unusual and unique types of stone that he had never seen or heard of before. If he hadn't been on a mission to repair the damage caused by

Darnak thousands upon thousands of years ago, then he would've spent more time looking at it all – but he didn't have time for that.

Even though all of that took just seconds, Fred could feel that he was running out of time; he forced his Shaping to look even deeper, going hundreds or thousands of miles underneath the surface, until he saw the stone changing once again, becoming darker and darker in color, until it was like the darkness of a void. Then, all of a sudden, he broke through even that – and there was a layer of clear stone, nearly resembling glass, though much, much harder. It took almost a second of focused gazing before he realized that it wasn't just a clear stone – it was an entire layer of what he could only assume was *diamond*, approximately half a mile thick.

Beyond that, which he could see clearly, was a roiling layer of molten rock; looking at where the molten rock met the diamond layer, he could sense a faint hint of a different type of energy emerging from the superheated center of the planet – which his Hierolynk memories immediately identified as pure Soulforce. Somewhere along the diamond layer, Fred intuited, was where the energy from the source, this molten core, got changed and perverted.

It was remarkably easy to find the damage, luckily; the clear-as-glass diamond layer was cracked just a few feet up from where the source pumped Soulforce into the channel leading upwards, which was also unnatural in the way it was formed. It zig-zagged back and forth through the layer, as if it really were glass that had been cracked and the energy was allowed to squeeze through. The origin of the crack was obvious to Fred, as well, with the spot nearest the source appearing as though someone took a gigantic hammer to the diamond, creating both the crack and an empty space. This empty space, large enough to hold a reservoir of Soulforce, was

where the energy was changed or “perverted” before it was pushed up to the surface.

It was so obvious that this was done deliberately – especially when he looked around and found two other locations within a few miles of the diamond layer that had nearly identical-looking damage – that none of them appeared to be an accident caused by the fighting between the Soulkeepers and Darnak. The damage was done methodically and systematically, as if Hierolynk’s brother had used his march over the planet to cover what he was really doing; that Darnak’s war against the Soulkeepers was basically just a pretense so that he could damage and corrupt the Soulfence all over the world made Fred more than a little angry.

Granted, he hadn’t actually been there, but Hierolynk’s memories were integrated within his own mind so deeply, at that point, that they were practically his own, now. It didn’t take long for him to figure out how to fix the damage done by Darnak, and an additional Shaping was all it took to repair the point of “impact”, sealing up the reservoir that instigated the change in the energy. Then, for good measure, he applied even more Modified Soulfence to seal up the rest of the crack, going all the way to the surface; it didn’t dissipate what was already there, but no more would be forthcoming from that particular wound to the planet anymore.

Unfortunately, even repairing miles’ worth of damaged channels only used up a tiny fraction of what he needed to use as far as his giant clump of Modified Soulfence, not to mention the accumulated energy from the elemental concentrations. *That’s easy enough to get rid of now, I guess.* He had easily seen the damage that had been done through the diamond layer far beneath the surface, after all; so, without thinking about it too much, since he was on a time crunch, Fred started to search through the entire layer and repair all of the deliberate damage.

There were literally tens of thousands of spots all around the world that needed to be fixed, though the majority of those were much smaller than the first. These smaller ones, when he followed them up to the surface, were right in the middle of a confluence of powerful Dungeon Cores of a particular element; they weren't Convergences, because each one was more of an area where, for example, the Nature element would be particularly strong in ambient Mana. There were a handful of other places where the damage was extensive, which he found led to other places where there actually were Convergences around the world.

Strangely, Fred found that there were other cities in the middle of those places, very similar to Allroads. Perhaps that wasn't so strange, given the Factions left the Convergences alone, for the most part; also given that these cities were so scattered across the world, it was likely each had never heard of the others. Yet, Fred supposed it made sense for the people living there to have established living spaces where there were no Dungeon Cores around.

In addition, while Fred augmented his restoration of the Convergence by fixing areas near it, he ventured to the spot directly beneath the Deadlands. From his underground vantage point, Fred could see exactly what was going on with the Dark Mana rising to the surface – and how it was intricately interwoven into the perpetual Creation of the Horrorlings and Greater Horrors that roamed the nearby Plains of Grass. The original Blueprints that designed the void creatures were no longer tied to a particular Core; he has assumed such, since the creatures weren't able to be absorbed. Witnessing their direct connection to the upwelling of changed energy, Fred now understood them.

The various channels of Dark Mana, rising upwards in an odd way that defied sense, appeared to have been deliberately tied to the Blueprints

of the Horrorlings and Greater Horrors. Rather than closed wire-grid Blueprints, theirs had a small break in the pattern, attached and connected to the scattered concentrations of constantly supplied energy. That meant that, even when their physical forms were destroyed, they would return the next night, when their Blueprints were refilled. Fred could only assume that the Cores that had accidentally Created them in the first place had panicked when they couldn't control or absorb them, and when they killed the creatures they would just reappear at random when the ambient Mana refilled their forms the next night. Breaking their wire-grid Blueprint would've been difficult at that point, but by altering them and trapping them in a specific place outside of their territories, they were able to "manage" them.

It obviously wasn't the smartest thing for them to do, but at the time it was probably considered the best and safest solution. Now that Fred was there, however, he could fix their mistake. He quickly repaired all of the damage underneath the ground and watched to see what would happen. As soon as he did that, the Horrorlings and Greater Horror wire grids seemed to deflate as their Mana was released, though their Blueprints still remained. When they were empty, it was easy enough for Fred to pick them apart, eliminating them entirely.

He was completely unaware of the passing of time as he repaired every single wound and rent all across the world, rapidly consuming his giant glob of Modified Soulforce. The damage was so extensive that he even started taking large clumps of the free-floating elemental energy from the damaged concentrations, passed it through his Core to turn it into even more Modified Soulforce, and used it to repair the rest of the world. By the time he came out of his intense focus and concentration, he found that at least half a day had passed, as the sun was high in the sky.

It was worth it, though; all around the planet, as far as he could tell, the damage caused by Hierolynk's brother, Darnak, was completely repaired. As he let that thought sink in, Fred suddenly realized what that meant.

He had just cut off all access to Mana, Power, and Essence to Dungeon Cores and Humans everywhere, not just there in the Convergence.

# Chapter 32

Nearly everyone in Allroads was in a panic again, though this time it wasn't because Fred had spoken to all of their minds out of nowhere. In actuality, the panic derived from a couple of reasons, all of which were caused by something that her love had done either inadvertently or deliberately. Eisa was one of those who was panicking, as well, even though she was trying to keep a calm demeanor for appearances.

Sometime after Fred destroyed the impossibly massive monsters that were just about to kill everyone in Allroads, he had announced that everyone who had died was going to be resurrected, which Eisa and the other Shards had thought meant he had figured out some way to make them all Shards, despite earlier saying that he couldn't do that. Regardless of what he really meant, the residents, Syndicate members, and Governmental people of Allroads freaked out.

“Resurrection” had never been something that had ever occurred before in the history of the world, at least as far as the Earth Shard knew – other than what Fred had done with his Shards, of course. Given that a very, very small number of people in Allroads actually knew that Shards even existed, most of them thought that “resurrection” meant animation, despite Fred's denials; as a result, people started to toss corpses from inside the city over the walls, even as some of them started to show some few signs of their bodies being healed.

Even with the walls being as damaged as they were, having a horde of undead trapped outside of the city was something townsfolk generally imagined would be preferable to having them inside. There were even a few residents who had begun chopping up or burning the bodies, but that

was quickly halted, when the former cadavers were found to bleed fresh blood and scorched skin was healed as soon as it was burnt. It was eerie, but after about an hour of panicked reaction, things calmed down enough that people really began to consider that what Fred had said was actually true.

It was shortly after this recognition that they discovered their Power Regeneration had dwindled to practically nothing. When Eisa checked herself, she found that it was true; worse, for the Shards at least, was that their Mana wasn't regenerating anymore. Actually, that wasn't entirely true – for the first few hours after that was discovered, Eisa regenerated a total of 3 Mana, but it soon stopped regenerating altogether after that.

She tried to get Fred's attention to warn him about what was happening, thinking it was some sort of new attack from the Dungeon Cores, but he wouldn't respond.

***“He’s off doing something right now; I’m not sure I can really explain it, but suffice it to say that it will have world-changing implications when he’s all done. This isn’t an attack on us from the factions; this is – even though I don’t think he’s intending it that way – an attack on the elemental factions all around the world.”***

Deecy wouldn't explain any more than that, but Eisa and the Shards (other than the Dire Wolf, who couldn't really communicate with anyone but her and the others) had their hands full trying to calm as many people as they could throughout Allroads. The panic from the recognition that Power was not regenerating was more intense than the prior fear of the potential animation of hundreds of thousands corpses, and it was all the Governmental guards and those in charge of the Syndicate could do to keep



order among the Adventurers. The change didn't really affect 80% of the population, however, because most residents and merchants didn't have an SDIA and access to Power, anyway; that was probably the only thing that helped the situation from becoming a full-blown riot.

Approximately 8 hours after Fred's announcement before going silent, the first person woke from their previously long sleep of death. The lucky woman was actually a resident whose neck had broken from a nasty fall during one of the earthquakes caused by the gigantic monsters, so the damage to her body overall wasn't too severe. She woke up inside the city near her family, who had dared to keep their loved one nearby instead of throwing her outside the walls.

Granted, they had kept weapons near them, in case she really did turn out to be an undead, but that wasn't needed; when she woke up, she screamed for a moment, before her eyes cleared and she spoke to her family with a confused tone to her voice. "What happened? I just had the strangest dream..."

At least, that was what she was told, when the news was shared around the city. It was telling, because everyone – even non-Adventurers – knew that animated corpses couldn't speak, and a joyous-yet-cautious vibe spread through everyone. It wasn't enough to eliminate the worry over non-regenerating Power, unfortunately, but it stopped the increasing panic that was suffusing the stronger population of Allroads.

The next few hours saw more rise from the dead outside of the city (where everyone had still kept most of the bodies, in an abundance of caution), which were mostly residents; when the first Adventurer who had been killed came back to life, the Syndicate was there to see the miracle in person. Eisa just happened to be there on the walls as a young man woke,

with the scream of the resurrected (for which none could blame them), just below the fortifications.

“Lowwell! You’re alive! How do you feel?” Someone who apparently knew the young man from the Syndicate shouted down from above.

“What? Was I dead?” After affirmations and a few smiles from those watching on the walls, the man, whose Caster-type clothes were drenched in blood and torn in a few places, stood up on shaky legs. “I feel fine, just a little confused. I think I’m okay—WHAT HAPPENED TO MY RATING!” he screamed out in horror. “I...I don’t have any Essence...”

Eisa knew exactly how he felt.

It turned out that while they were brought back to life, any progress they had made as an Adventurer was entirely gone – just as with Eisa and the rest of the Shards. Again, other than Deecy, who hadn’t really been... *anything*...before she was created. They were alive, though, which most of them were pretty happy about.

After that, the large piles of bodies outside the walls were spread out so that they weren’t covering each other, and already there was evidence that even the worst-looking bodies were starting to heal up. There were quite a few that were literally in pieces, however, but even they were visibly growing missing body parts; at the rate they were growing, though, it was estimated that it was going to take several weeks for them to be completely healed, and hopefully, they would come back to life at that point.

Agelstein had apparently died during the quakes that had killed thousands, and it was with a happy heart that Eisa watched Ravenne tackle him to the ground and cover him in kisses when he came back to life (after his obligatory scream, of course). It couldn’t really dispel the internal panic she – along with the other Shards and Adventurers – still had about her

Mana not regenerating, but the reunions and happy feelings definitely helped to ease it a little.

Then again, it also deepened the hurt, regret, and emptiness inside of her at Fred's physical absence. Sure, he had a very strange-looking Core now, but without a physical body for her to touch...to hold or be held by... it wasn't quite the same. Deep down in her heart, she knew that he had done what he had for the good of everyone in Allroads – and potentially everyone around the entire world – but that didn't mean she personally liked the outcome.

*And now he won't even speak with me.*

After a particularly long night full of hope and panic – two emotions wreaking havoc on her psyche – Eisa escaped from the world above and retreated to Fred's bedroom to get some sleep. More and more people were waking up from death, but she couldn't stay awake long enough to watch anymore; there would be more over the next few weeks, most likely, as those who had awoken first were originally the least physically damaged of all the dead.

Just as she was laying her head down for some much-needed sleep, she heard Fred's voice.

\* \* \*

*“Eisa? What's been happening since I've been...distracted?”*

Fred watched Eisa jump up out of the bed, stumbling as she flailed her legs over the side, landing on the floor as she practically fell into his Core Room. “Fred, where have you been? I've been trying to call you?”

*“Sorry, I've been...fixing things, I guess you can say. Now, what's going on in Allroads?”*

He couldn't believe he had been so focused on repairing the damage all over the planet that he had completely blocked out the Shards calling him, as well as everything else that was going on in Allroads. Fred hated to say it, because it seemed insensitive, but the work he had been doing was more important than anyone there; it was more important than himself, when it came down to it, because what he did was for the planet, which included *everyone*.

While he was repairing all of the diamond-layer's wounds, he had begun to sense the purpose behind the entire thing. The clear, diamond layer acted like a shell, keeping the roiling, molten source of Soulforce inside of it, similar to how Fred had made his elemental Cores before. The shell he had made was created from Unconverted Mana, while the one containing the "core" of the planet was – at its heart – crystallized stone in the form of diamond. Regardless of the differences, they both served the same purpose: to protect *and* contain the volatile nature of their Cores.

What had frightened Fred a little bit was how close to failing the planet's "shell" had been. The wounds, at first, hadn't done much other than release the Soulforce inside in concentrated ways, changing it so that it could be used differently. Over time, those "cracks" in the shell had widened, and it was on the cusp of shattering completely; it wasn't necessarily going to happen the next day, the next year, or even the next century. What couldn't be ignored from the evidence he saw was that it *was* going to happen, eventually.

If that happened, it would be like a Mana Combustion on a global scale. The entire world would explode, leaving no survivors – and potentially no life anywhere, as pieces of it drifted off into space.

Therefore, his work had been more important than anyone could really comprehend; he didn't feel too bad that he had ignored his friends

and the state of Allroads. Fred was just glad that the nearby factions hadn't attacked at that time, though with how much Mana they had used and just lost to Fred, he had a feeling that they were hard-pressed to make a few couple of middling-strong Defenders, let alone an entire army. Especially since he had stopped all of the Mana leaking out of the planet.

"People are doing...alright," Eisa told him, before explaining about a mass panic after he had Communicated with everyone (which he knew about), and about the miraculous resurrections of people who hadn't been too damaged when they had died (which was good news, because it meant that his Shaping had worked).

"...and now, Deecy said you were doing something important, but also that it would change the world dramatically. Does it have anything to do with the fact that not only has our Mana stopped regenerating, but Power, as well?"

Fred had suspected that was going to be the case when he completed his repairs of the planet's shell. When he looked around, he couldn't see any of the changed energy drifting up from below – not Mana, *nor* Power, *nor* Essence. There was still some of the mixture out by where the elemental concentrations were destroyed and then fixed by Fred, but it was maybe only 5% of what had been there before, and not really a threat of potential explosion anymore. Other than that, the only Mana he could see around him was contained within his Shards – and even that was a limited amount. He never was precisely sure what would happen if Eisa or one of the others ran out of Mana, but it was now a real possibility.

At least, it would be, except that there was another energy slowly emerging from the depths of the planet. Fred had felt it, as soon as the last of the damage had been fixed, drifting out of the planet's molten Core: *Soulforce*. It was pure and un-"perverted" energy that seeped to the surface

evenly, all over the world, ready to be utilized however anyone who could Shape with it wanted. Unlike the concentrations of changed energy that used to make up the Convergences and thousands of other saturated areas all over the world, the Soulfence was evenly distributed over the entire planet; areas of previously low ambient Mana, such as where his parents had hid out, far to the north – and even in the middle of numerous scattered oceans he had found during his virtual journeys around the world – were now treated equally.

Granted, that didn't really help the Dungeon Cores or Humans around the world who couldn't make use of the new energy – *well, the **old** energy, actually...*

To them, it didn't even exist; even if it had been around earlier, it still would've been both invisible to either species *and* be completely unusable to them. In fact, unless there was a Soulkeeper who had survived the war in the past, then hid out for an unknown number of thousands of years, Fred was likely the only one in the entire *world* who could manipulate Soulfence. It was an unintended side effect of fixing the planet, but maybe it was a good thing; the Dungeon Cores wouldn't have to fight over territories anymore, since there weren't places that were any better than another, now.

*“I fixed the areas around the planet that were damaged from a very long-ago war, which were leaking out a mixed energy that was composed of Mana, Power, and Essence. The result, which was not my original intention, is that there will be no more Mana, Power, and Essence coming into the world. I did it, however unintentionally; the Dungeon Cores won't have to fight, anymore, for the concentrations of Mana everywhere. Humans should be safe, now.”*

Eisa looked a little scared and skeptical at the same time. “But, how will the Syndicate delve through those dungeons without being able to regenerate their Power?”

*“Well, I’m sure they’ll figure something out. It might mean that they’ll have to stop altogether, but that might be a good thing.”*

“I have a hard time believing that would happen, though,” she responded doubtfully. “Besides, you’ve said that Cores get Mana from Humans being inside their dungeons, right? What happens when they realize they aren’t getting the normal ambient Mana anymore – just like the Shards and I – and then their other source of Mana just stops visiting? Granted, around this area, that would make sense, because I’m sure none of the people in Allroads would visit a nearby dungeon, even if they could, at least for quite a while; that doesn’t mean that everyone around the world would know that, though; correct?”

. . . . .

*Hmm...well, crud. “That’s...a good point. The Dungeon Cores will seek out Humans, in that case, either capturing them or opening up their dungeons underneath their towns or cities, swallowing them up until nothing is left. I have a feeling it’ll be a race among all the Dungeon Cores to hoard the ‘resources’ before there’s none left. I thought I was protecting them, but now I have to wonder if I’ve just doomed the Humans all over the world.”*

Eisa just stood there, silently, for a few moments, before she walked over and hugged his Core, laying her cheek against the top. Strangely enough, contrary to how his old multi-element Core used to be, he could feel the warmth from her arms and face, and it comforted him more than he could express...especially given that he had just doomed an entire species. Worse than that, as he thought about what would happen when the Humans

all died, was that the Dungeon Cores would probably start attacking each other; he could see a way for victorious Cores to absorb the mana from another Core, if it were brought back to their dungeon, which would probably tear the world apart, with the limited resources being captured and sucked dry by the strongest of Cores out there. Without having to keep their dungeons stocked against potential invasions by Humans, they could use all of that Mana to do a lot of damage.

Fred didn't know what to say to Eisa or any of the other Shards about what he had done, because although what he had done was good *for the planet*, he had essentially killed everyone living on it. Not today, nor tomorrow, but it seemed inevitable, at some point. The only thing he could think of was to possibly go out and destroy all of the Dungeon Cores before they could start slaughtering Humans with abandon, but Hierolynk's memories got in the way; he had seen the original creation of the Cores firsthand, and knowing that they were originally *people* who preferred protecting their fellow Soulkeepers, he couldn't bring himself to commit his own genocide against them.

He was technically a Dungeon Core, even after everything that had happened. Human, as well.

So, who was he to choose which species would live, and which would have to die? He had been protecting his friends and the rest of the people in Allroads because they were victims of his own mistake, and without his help they would've perished. But now that they weren't in as much danger, what gave him the right to kill an entire people? That was the ultimate goal he had been striving for, after all: to prevent the loss of an entire species.

That he was even contemplating it was a change from just a day ago, when it was just the people in Allroads that he was trying to protect.



Now, though, he was entirely sure he could use the same technique he had used for fixing the diamond shell underneath the planet to seek out every other Dungeon Core in the world, locate every drop of Mana inside of them, and then pull it out, shuttling it off to somewhere else. The power of such a thing scared him, because it felt so much like what Darnak was striving for when he started his experiments so long ago; fortunately, he hadn't succeeded in reaching that level of strength, otherwise none of the last thousands of years would've happened.

To distract himself, he started to recount many of Hierolynk's memories to Eisa, describing what the world used to be like before there were Humans and Dungeon Cores. After a while, he realized that the rest of his Shards had entered his Core Room, presumably summoned by Eisa, and he expanded his explanations so that they could all hear them. He then went on to describe the war against Darnak, the reasons behind it, and the creation of the two new species – as well as the accident that changed them into what they were today. Finally, he explained what he had done to fix the damage that had been done to the planet, and why it was imperative that he had done it.

“So, let me get this straight; this big, bad guy, long ago, did something to change this...*Soulforce*...into Mana, Power, and Essence? So, why can't you just do that again, maybe in a better controlled place, to bring it all back?” asked Ravenne, who – Fred just noticed – was sitting on Fred's bed, with Agelstein lying next to her, apparently asleep. Eisa had mentioned, at some point, that Agelstein had been killed and had woken up earlier, so Fred didn't blame him for being tired; it was probably a big shock to his system, after all.

*“Because then we would have the same problem in a couple thousands of years as we are having now, with all of the same underlying*

issues. *Besides, I don't want to destroy the work I've just done to fix—*"

*Wait...shock to his system? That's it!*

"Fred, are you alright?" Eisa asked when he cut off his Communication abruptly.

He was silent while he worked out what he thought he needed to ask. Rather than try to explain his thoughts, he asked, *"Chareese? Do you know if there are any Artificers in the city that help create the Sub-dermal Interface Artifacts?"*

If the change in subject shocked the woman, she hid it pretty well as she looked up to the ceiling in thought. "Yes, I believe there should be at least two Artificers stationed in the DAS Headquarters here; most cities and towns don't have even a single one, but we're a major hub here, so we need to be able to produce more SDIA's on demand. At least, they should be up there; the Headquarters building took some major damage during the quakes the night before – and they weren't likely to be on the walls – so hopefully they survived."

"What do you need with one of them, anyway?" Roady asked, curious rather than accusatory.

*"I don't want to get your hopes up, but I think I might have a solution to our problem."*

# Chapter 33

It turned out that one of the Artificers had perished violently, and was still probably a couple days out from resurrecting, but the other, a woman named Plartha, was called down to his dungeon. Fred noticed immediately that she was a bit skittish when she was asked to come down to a dungeon, which he thought was only prudent, considering all that had happened in the city earlier. However, surrounded by Chareese and Roady, and accompanied by Elder Hood and her husband Mikel (how she found out about his request, even Fred never found out), she seemed to feel more secure.

Luckily for her, she only had to pass through a series of boring tunnels and didn't even see a single "monster", so she was relatively calm when she arrived at his Core Room – before looking shocked at his appearance. "Oh, wow! Is this what all Dungeon Cores look like? I've never seen one in person before, and the complexity in your structure is... unbelievable!"

That took Fred aback a little. He had originally called for an Artificer so that he could talk face-to-face – or at least face-to-Core – but he hadn't expected that. "*What do you mean by 'complexity in your structure'? You can see inside my Core?*" That was highly unusual, because no one else had ever mentioned being able to see anything strange about his Core before. Then again, very few had actually seen him in either of his Core forms before, so maybe it wasn't unusual.

All of the nervousness on Plartha's part seemed to disappear as she approached and stared deep inside of his Core with an excited expression on her face. "Oh, yes; it's a special skill all Artificers have to analyze the

structure of complex magical constructs, so that we can apply certain principles to create our own unique Artifacts.” Her face fell for a moment. “Of course, most of the work I’ve been doing for the last few years has been copy work, creating SDIAs for the Syndicate, but I hope to create something of my own in the next decade or so!”

*“So, is my complex structure something that you think you can copy?”*

“Oh, heavens, no!” she laughed shortly. “I don’t even think any of the Master Artificers I’ve studied under could create anything as complex as you are. There are parts of your construction that are created with something I can’t even identify; it’s almost like half of your entire form is being held together by something largely invisible to me. I can *sort of* see something there – or at least what *should* be there; like I said, I have no idea what that is.”

*It almost sounds as if she has some form of Mana Sight or something similar— Enough of that speculation, it doesn’t help me in the least. “Plartha, would you be able to tell me about how the SDIA is built?”*

That shut her up immediately, and she looked to Elder Hood instead of saying anything. The much older woman looked at the Artificer and nodded; Fred had been broadcasting his Communication to everyone in the now-cramped room, so she had been following the conversation. “Go ahead, there’s no point in keeping it a secret now, especially if our Power doesn’t regenerate soon.”

Permission granted, Plartha turned back to Fred’s Core and took a deep breath...before explaining, in exact detail, how the SDIAs were made, how they interacted with the world around them, how they transmitted details to their “hosts” (otherwise known as Adventurers), and how they

handled all of the resources passing through them (in other words, Essence and Power). A few days ago, it would've completely gone over his head, and for a good portion of the finer details of Artifact construction, it still did; but his practice, lately, with manipulating Power and Mana – coupled with Hierolynk's memories in his mind – got him through with a fairly good general understanding of how it all worked. *Hopefully.*

*“Thank you, Plartha; that was very educational. I think I understand what I need to do now...if you don't mind waiting for a moment, I would love your input when I finish my project.”* The explanation had taken nearly 2 hours, even from the excited fast-talk coming from the Artificer, who appeared to really enjoy talking with someone who seemed to understand what she was talking about. Other than the one other Artificer, the woman probably didn't have many she could really talk to on the same level, at least intellectually.

Because it had taken so long, most of his Shards were lounging around the Core Room or were on his bed, taking a nap with Agelstein. When he announced that he had a project, that got their attention and perked up. “What is this project going to do? Is it going to make all of the Power and Mana come back?” Chareese asked.

*“Not quite; my hope is to work with the system already in place in every Adventurer via their implants and Interfaces, only...well, we'll see if it actually works, first. I don't want to get ahead of myself.”*

So saying, Fred got to work. He pulled a small amount of Soulforce from the environment – it was everywhere, though it wasn't nearly as thick as the ambient energy used to be in the Convergence – and passed it through his Core, turning it into Modified Soulforce. He had worried, for a moment, that it wasn't going to work for some reason, because he had been using pure Soulforce to Communicate with everyone, earlier. Luckily, it

worked perfectly, gaining him a small clump of altered energy, approximately the size of Eisa's fist.

Then, he portioned off ten equally sized balls from the clump and pressed his intent into each of them, changing them into something else. First, there were the seven elements that everyone knew: Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, Dark, Light, and Air; the eighth one he turned into Unconverted Mana, as that was going to be a vital part of the construction. The ninth ball he turned into Power, and the last into Essence.

With all of them being held together by his will, he started a Shaping with them. That they were still partially Soulfence, even though they contained the characteristics of the other energies, enabled such bold action; otherwise, Shaping them probably wouldn't have been possible. He formed them into a seven-pointed star, with each elemental Mana forming the points; he then connected each one with pure Soulfence, before taking the Unconverted or "Human" Mana, the Power, and the Essence spheres inside of the star. He arranged them in a triangle formation, before connecting those points together with pure Soulfence, again, to each of the star elements.

When all of that was done, he used his skills in energy manipulation and brought them all together in a group, keeping their structure largely intact – and then condensed it down until it was approximately a tenth of the size as it was before. While he was doing that, he focused his intent on the condensed structural arrangement, melding them together at the same time. He could feel the bonds among all the spheres start to strengthen and change, based on what he wanted from them, until it was almost too complex for him to follow; that was alright, though, because as long as it did as intended, it didn't really matter if he could entirely explain it.

After a few seconds, he could tell that it was done; whether or not it worked was something else entirely. He moved his mind away from it, and it fell towards the ground; Mikel was there to save it from hitting the floor, though Fred doubted that it would break from anything short of a mountain falling on it – and possibly not even then.

“What is this? A colorful rock?” he asked, as confused as everyone else was – except for Plartha.

“No, not just a rock...” the Artificer said, picking the stone out of Mikel’s hand without asking for permission and examining it closely. “It’s an extremely complex arrangement of instructions and particulars that would probably take me a few weeks to untangle – if I could see more than half of it, that is. Like I said about your Dungeon Core, before: There are some things that I can sense are there, but I can’t actually see them.”

*“Can you divine the purpose of it?”*

“Not...exactly. Parts of the design look similar, for some reason, but for the life of me, I can’t remember where I saw it before. Regardless, I think it’s worth a shot; rarely do Artifacts work in their first iteration, but you could get lucky,” Plartha said, shaking her head at the stone in her hand. It took him a second to realize she wasn’t shaking her head *at* the stone so much as shaking her head *at herself* for not remembering where she saw the design before. He didn’t want to mention that it was probably borrowed from the design of the SDIA because it was supposed to mesh with it; she’d figure that out soon enough.

“So, if I’m reading it right, all I need to do is place it on my implant —” the Artificer said, before four different people in the room shouted, “No!” and tried to stop her. Fred knew that they weren’t really doubting his creation, but Plartha had mentioned that not all Artifacts worked right away, and risking the life of one so respected and needed in the Syndicate

probably wasn't the best idea. He was going to suggest someone else try it, but he guessed that one person was as good as any.

None of them got there in time to stop the process from starting, anyway, so there wasn't anything to do but see if it worked. As soon as she placed the multi-colored stone on her implant, it was almost immediately absorbed into her skin, disappearing completely in less than a second. No one moved as they stared in shock at Plartha, who appeared unharmed...for all of two seconds.

The Artificer's body jerked around uncontrollably as her muscles spasmed, and she would've flopped to the floor if Mikel and Roady hadn't both caught her. They quickly brought her over to Fred's bed and laid her down next to Agelstein, who swiftly woke up because of her thrashing. "What's going on?" he slurred, his words still affected by sleep.

"She's using something that Fred created, and I think something went wrong—"

As soon as Roady started to explain, Plartha stopped twitching completely and sagged down onto the bed. Fred could see that everyone was holding their breath as they stared at the woman, waiting on some sign that Fred didn't kill her, but before they could worry too much the Artificer opened her eyes. "Whoa...that was...intense."

All but Elder Hood sagged in relief at her words; the Syndicate's leader turned to Fred with a furious expression on her face. "What did you do to her?!"

"Hey, hold on, don't worry; I'm fine. I still have some experimentation to perform, but I think it connected perfectly with my Interface; it even came with instructions, if you can believe that! Well done, Fred, well done!" Plartha said, cutting Fred off from responding. He



didn't even have to explain exactly what it did, because the Artificer was already fielding questions.

"Yes, but what does it *do*?" asked Ravenne impatiently, and Agelstein patted her on the shoulder, calming her down.

"Well, if this does what the instructions claim it does, then this is ingenious – though it's something that only Fred can make, unfortunately. Basically, all around us is a new type of energy called 'Soulforce' that we normally can't even see or access. This new energy replaced the Power and Essence and...Mana?...that used to spew forth from the center of the world, which obviously does us no good.

"What is this stone...Soulstone? Sounds like a good and catchy name to me; I wish I had been around when they named the SDIA – it's such a mouthful," Plartha explained, before a few looks from those listening to her got her back on track. "Anyway, the *Soulstone* interacts with our existing SDIAs as a type of converter – that's where I've seen that design before!" she shouted, before continuing her explanation.

"So, this converter pulls in the ambient Soulforce around me and changes it into Power, just like we are all used to. However, it also does something else, which had me worried at first, but it makes sense in a way; apparently, the reason that Dungeon Cores wanted us to delve through their dungeons was because they got something called *Mana* from us being there...and from us dying.

"Now that they don't have ambient Mana to absorb from the environment – like we used to do with Power – the dungeons have to rely on us to give them some, otherwise they will stagnate, but we don't have any inside of us...until now. This Soulstone also has the SDIA convert a portion of the Soulforce that is absorbed into something called 'human' Mana, which is then changed again when within the confines of a dungeon,

matching the elemental affinity exactly, with some of the human Mana and even Essence mixed in – and it doesn't come from me, either. It's amazingly adaptive and responsive to changes in environment, and I have to admit that I'm a little jealous that I haven't thought of something like that before in my designs."

There were smiles all around at the mention of Power regeneration, which instantly changed at the mention of Mana. "How is that a good thing, having this 'human Mana' stuff? Why would we want to help out the dungeon?" Mikel asked for the group, though Fred was pretty sure that Eisa, Deecy, and Regnark understood it a little more than the others.

"Oh, well, that should be obvious. If we don't provide some sort of incentive to the dungeon, then there's no reason it would put loot inside, and it would probably just try to kill us even more than they already are. And if they aren't allowed to grow as we do, then what's the point of even having a dungeon open? Would you go into the dungeon if you weren't going to get Essence and loot?"

That question seemed to mollify Mikel and the others who weren't clued in to the reasons quite yet, but Fred needed to explain the next part, because Plartha seemed to be taking her time with the explanations and going off on tangents. He didn't blame her, however, because there might be some outrage, which he was more than ready for. They all turned toward Fred as he started Communicating with them.

*"Look, I know most of the Adventurers in Allroads may be a little hesitant to start delving through dungeons again after all of this, but as soon as it's safe, they're going to **have to**, if they get this 'upgrade' to their SDIA."*

"Why is that? Are you going to force them to?" the Elder asked, her attitude back.

*“No, it’s because if they don’t, the Mana inside of them will build up to a point where it will have to escape, somehow. Before you ask, this... Soulstone...will automatically set up this Mana within the chest of the individual; if it’s forced to escape, I can nearly guarantee that it will be lethal. It will take a couple of months for it to get to that point, but it **will** get to that point – unless it is expelled.”*

The room was silent at his revelation, but he wasn’t done.

*“This Mana also won’t automatically emerge from a person when they enter a dungeon; the only way to expel it is to touch a Dungeon Core, and the transfer will be automatic. Plartha, if you look at your Interface, hopefully there will be a new section called, simply, ‘Mana’? If there is, you should hopefully be able to see some numbers there that relate to your current Rating, indicating how much Mana you are currently holding – as well as the maximum of how much you’ll be able to hold in total.”*

This information was all passed to Plartha when she absorbed the Soulstone – *not a bad name I have to say* – so it shouldn’t have been a surprise...but apparently she hadn’t looked too far into the repercussions of what she had just done. She sat, staring at him for half a minute, before she visibly shook herself and looked off toward nothing, which Fred thought indicated she was looking at her Interface. “Yes...I see that now. It says one of twenty-five thousand; I’m assuming that means I have one Mana and I can hold up to twenty-five thousand...before I explode?”

*“Essentially. The actual limit is a bit more than that, but for safety, I wanted it to be a little lower, so that we wouldn’t have people panicking as they got close and made some rash decisions in the middle of a dungeon. For now, you can touch my Core here and expel the Mana.”* Without waiting for any other permission, Plartha got up off the bed and hurried over to his Core, touching him briefly before pulling her hand away. He

saw and felt the single unit of Unconverted Mana leave her and travel through him, before ending up as Modified Soulforce. He didn't really need it, so he turned it into Earth Mana and shot it towards Eisa, who smiled at him.

"Wait...this other section here, I don't totally understand what it means..." the Artificer continued with a confused look on her face. *The whole "you better delve through dungeons or you're going to die" thing probably doesn't sit too well for her; I have a feeling that it's been decades, if not more, since she's been in a dungeon.*

"So, the other section under 'Mana' is for your elemental affinities that you can develop over time. I didn't want this just to be a way to force everyone to go through dungeons; I rendered it an opportunity for Adventurers to improve themselves as well," Fred explained. "When an Adventurer delves through a dungeon, they will also collect a very small portion of the elemental Mana contained within any monsters they are part of defeating, or traps that are disarmed. This elemental Mana, when returned to the Dungeon Core at the end of their delve, is converted into an extremely tiny elemental Core inside of them. This in no way hinders their health, and it will never grow large enough to cause a problem in that respect; nor can it be taken out or broken.

"What this Core does is give the Adventurer an elemental affinity with whatever type of dungeon they had delved through, and they aren't limited to a single one – they can develop an affinity to all seven of the types of dungeons out there. At first, there is no real benefit to Adventurers, but at a certain point they will develop the ability to do some of the things you've no doubt seen or heard about what my Shards do. It is different for everyone, however, so there is no definite list of what that could be; it could be something as simple as being able to create a Large Wasp to help in a

*fight, using a Nature affinity, or being able to control an enemy Undead monster for a limited time, despite not being in any way a Necromancer. It could even be something even more powerful over time, if an affinity is developed sufficiently.*

*“The Cores have a limited amount of Mana that they contain, a portion of which is used when these abilities are used. They will regenerate over time, though a bit slower than Power will regenerate; still, it would be enough that some abilities could be used multiple times during a delve. I will tell you that they will never be quite as powerful as what the Shards can do, but given enough development, they can and will be a valuable ally in our fights.”*

The Elder, Mikel, and Plartha still seemed unsure, but the Shards – and strangely enough, Agelstein – were nodding along with what he was saying. Chareese had a good question, though, which he was about to address. “I see what’s in it for the dungeons, but couldn’t they just make their dungeons easy, so that they can get more Adventurers to come give them more Mana?”

*“Remember how Plartha said that my Soulstone was adaptive and responsive? I designed it so that it would evaluate the difficulty of the monsters a group faces through their delve, and adjust the ‘rewards’ for both the Adventurers and the Dungeon Core. If, for example, a group of A-Rated DAS members stroll through a F-Rated dungeon, then they won’t be able to transfer over more than a portion of the Mana they had accumulated; this hurts both the Adventurers and the Core, so there really would be no point to doing something like that. The same goes for elemental affinities, as they will gain very little benefit from such actions.*

*“There is also something that I failed to mention earlier – the Dungeon Core will gain **nothing** if someone dies inside their dungeon. The*

*Adventurer needs to be alive to transfer Mana, and there is no way to absorb it from their corpse; there will be an adjustment period, I would imagine, so that the Cores can determine what is hard but not **too** hard for Adventurers to delve through, in order for both species to benefit fully.*

*“Because that is the entire point of this Soulstone. It’s a way for Humans and Dungeon Cores to work together to prosper, and not have it be another situation where your people are considered nothing but food. There is absolutely no benefit to killing a Human, but there will, of course, be accidents – and deaths that will undoubtedly occur from those; however, that should no longer be the primary focus of a Dungeon Core and their dungeon in the future.”*

Even Elder Hood seemed to come around a little after his little speech, which was hopefully a good sign. “I...can see how this might work,” she finally said after a few moments, with everyone looking toward her. “I can’t say I agree with your methods, but I guess it’s a fair trade. Nevertheless, how in the world are you going to get these dungeons to follow those rules?”

*“Ah, that’s simple enough. I just need to visit the Supreme Council and give them an explanation of how things are going to work, now.”* It sounded a little heavy-handed, but he wasn’t going to take “no” for an answer; he had come this far and designed this to benefit both species, and he wasn’t going to let a little thing like obstinate Dungeon Cores ruin the world.

*“Why do you think they will listen to you?”*

*“Because, if they don’t, I’ll just have to destroy them all.”*

*I really wouldn’t do that, but it sounded good.* He wouldn’t destroy them all, but he might need to demonstrate his abilities to get them to fall in line.

*Now all I have to do is find them.*

# Chapter 34

Finding them was easier said than done.

While Fred could create a Shaping that allowed him to look all around the world, that didn't really help him all that much; the planet was so large and there were literally *millions* of Dungeon Cores to search through. He immediately found quite a few very large Cores that were probably S-Rated, but actually identifying which ones he needed was a bit more difficult. The Supreme of Air had mentioned that the Supreme Council met together somewhere using the same sort of "avatar" she had created when she met him, but the actual location remained a mystery...for the moment.

While he searched with one part of his mind, Fred split his concentration between a few different things closer to Allroads. First, Plartha tested out his Soulstone, to make sure it was working; Fred used Created some simple Flower Trippers for the Artificer to kill inside of his dungeon, and it worked flawlessly. Nature Mana was released from its death, a tiny portion of it – not even a single unit, in fact – was sucked up by Plartha, and she also received the same amount of Essence she would have, before all of the changes happened in the world.

The hardest part of that testing was on Fred, actually, because he didn't have access to his dungeon system anymore. That meant he couldn't pull up the Blueprints for Defenders or Defenses, but his memory was good enough that he could recall what they looked like. It just meant that he had to create them manually – which took an extra few steps, but wasn't all that hard, overall.



The second thing that Fred did, while that testing was going on, was to look more closely at his Core Power Guild. The members of his Guild had grown much more powerful over the last few weeks, with the former Gatecross townspeople improving the most from the fighting and the experimentation with their Power. Unfortunately, all but the members who had died and had been (or were still being) resurrected from Fred's Shaping still had their large, glowing "X" mark over their heads, signaling that they were outlaws of the Craytion Kingdom.

Now that he had learned how to manipulate Mana, Power, and Soulfence quite adeptly – or at least he thought so – he was able to look at them and immediately identify the source of the Mark. It was actually a relatively simple looping of Power tied to the Guild members' own Power pool, which was self-sustaining in perpetuity. There were some other things tied to the mark itself, but the key to removing them was a simple interruption of the flow between the effect and the pool of Power.

After experimenting on Metch, who volunteered to go first, Fred inserted a temporary, thin bubble of Soulfence around the Mark, isolating it from any external sources of Power. After about 5 minutes, the energy running through the glowing "X" started to dissipate, now that it wasn't being recharged; after another 5 minutes, the Mark was entirely gone, and Fred could feel the entire effect fade away. When that proved successful, he did the same for everyone else in the Guild, removing all of their Marks within the next 15 minutes – to their thankful appreciation.

Next, Fred helped with the rebuilding of the city above his dungeon. The Adventurers had gotten a fairly good start, at first, by using their Power to repair some of the damage, though that pretty much stopped as soon as it was found that their Power wouldn't regenerate. Some simple Shapings with the ambient Soulfence around the former Convergence was

more than enough to start the process, though it would take a little bit to finish; while Soulfence was amply available, the damage was so extensive, and there were so many people around, that it was hard to fix the things that needed fixing without endangering more lives.

For the most part, he was using the existing stone that had broken off of the walls and buildings, because it was the most efficient Shaping, compared to creating brand-new material. Fred could've spent some time urging people to move out the way via his Communication – since they all seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time – but he found, after the first few, that he was still causing a panic from his unexpected words in their heads. He was able to get a bit more done the following night, when there were less people about; otherwise, he just took it slow and concentrated on his last project.

The project was extensive and required a bit of his focus to achieve. The assessment of the Soulstone had proven as successful as it was going to be without a full-scale test in a dungeon elsewhere, so Fred started to mass produce Soulstones. Since he had a working prototype, the process was relatively easy. He first started to create them in batches of first 10, then 50, and finally 100 every 2 minutes he reached his limit. He thought it might be possible to create even more at a time, but his concentration was still split between repairing the city and looking for the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores; nevertheless, 3,000 Soulstones every hour was a good number to start with.

His Shards were the first ones – other than Plartha, of course – to get his Soulstones, and he was pleased to see that it helped to regenerate their Mana, as well. It was relatively slow, in comparison to how the Convergence used to be, though; instead of a unit of Mana every few seconds, it was more like 5 or 6 every hour or so. The rest that he made

were then given to his Guild first, and then given to Elder Hood and the Allroads Council to distribute however they saw fit.

Fred made sure that, when they were distributed, there was someone there to give whoever wanted them warnings about what taking it would entail, and that they were under no obligation to actually use it. There were surprisingly few that refused to utilize it – less than 1% – which was fine with him and perfectly reasonable; not everyone was willing to go delve through dungeons again, after what had happened to the city. Fred had a feeling that some would eventually change their minds, which was also okay; he was going to make sure there were enough Soulstones for everyone that wanted one.

Which *also* meant that, once he found the Supreme Council and worked things out with them, he was going to have to make *millions* of Soulstones to distribute around the world. Allroads wasn't the only Human habitation center, after all, and there were billions of people all around the planet that needed to be informed of the changes. Not all of them would need Soulstones to go along with their SDIAs, just like the majority of the residents in Allroads wouldn't need them, but it was still a significant enough number that Fred worried that he might not get them all done in a timely manner.

He couldn't really worry about that now, though, as almost a week passed while he was repairing the city, creating Soulstones, and searching for the Supreme Council. While he had made enough Soulstones for the Adventurers inside Allroads, he kept producing them regardless; it required creating another room in his dungeon for storage, but that was easy enough to accomplish. What wasn't so easy to accomplish was tracking down the correct Dungeon Cores that were part of the Supreme Council, as he was having absolutely no luck on that front.

It was only when he started to think about the Supreme of Air that he realized that there might be a way to at least find *her*. It was something that he should've probably realized at first, but he could only blame being distracted by other matters closer to "home" that he didn't think of it. He had already tried to reach out and Communicate with her and had gotten no response, so he had originally abandoned that avenue of access...but there was potentially another way to contact her.

Stopping all other projects – at least temporarily – he turned all of his focus to the south of Allroads. Fred quickly found the small dip in the land between the Light and Air territories where he had met briefly with the Supreme of Air less than two weeks ago. There was no evidence of the small faux territory she had set up for herself to hide from being observed, but there *was* a faint signature of Mana there. In reality, it was more like an echo of something that had occurred there at one point than anything else, but it was enough; since he had been involved in creating it – by absorbing all of the Mana inside the Supreme of Air's avatar and then returning it to her – it was easy enough for him to find.

What he had done was to send the condensed Mana back to her actual Core through her connection with her avatar, though; it was that connection that he was hoping still existed. He looked at everything around the area, examining everything he could detect, and he finally found it. A faint line that was fading, bit-by-bit, as it led off into the distance – broken up in places, so that it wasn't completely whole anymore – was visible to his Sight. Using that as a guide, he sped off with his focused Shaping, following it thousands of miles away. Eventually, the line led right into the middle of a massive mountain, which contained hundreds of different dug-out rooms that were obviously part of a dungeon.

*This had better be it.* It didn't take long for him to move his Shaping through the exterior of the mountain and find the Core Room, flying through suspiciously empty rooms. Looking around before he looked in on the Supreme Dungeon Core, he saw that it wasn't *completely* empty, as there were some Defenders and Defenses set up towards the entrance, but the majority of the dungeon was missing any other types of protection. It was highly unusual and wasn't something he had seen in any dungeon thus far, throughout all of his searching over the last week.

Fred finally focused on where the fading line was going and found the Core Room without much trouble, but that was when things got a little strange. The Supreme of Air's Dungeon Core was floating in the middle of the room, looking even larger than he remembered, though it was barely even glowing. From his own experiences, that meant that she didn't have very much Mana inside her Core as a reserve; that could've meant any number of things, but what he thought it most likely meant was that she was off somewhere else with her avatar.

*Perfect!* He tried to Communicate with her again, though she didn't respond. He hadn't been entirely sure it was working before when he tried it, because he wasn't that accustomed to speaking long-distance to Dungeon Cores. Now he could plainly see that he was directly connected to her via Communication; yet, there was still no response, for some reason.

Luckily, there was another, stronger line leading off from her Core in a different direction, which he assumed was her current connection to her avatar. *Maybe I can't Communicate with her if she's using her avatar?* That seemed like a ridiculous limitation, but he had to admit that he wasn't that knowledgeable about the whole "avatareing" process, so it was entirely possible.

Following the better-defined connection line was much easier this time, and Fred directed his Shaping deep underground to a small, cavernous void, in the middle of nowhere. *No wonder I didn't find this place; it would be nearly impossible to find this cave unless you knew where to look.* As he entered the small cave, he identified the Supreme of Air right away, though she seemed to be trapped in some sort of cocoon of banded elemental Mana.

She wasn't the only one in the room, though; there were seven other Dungeon Cores approximately the same size, with another yellow Air Core, being slightly smaller than the Nature, Water, Fire, Light, and Earth Cores. There was a Dark Dungeon Core as well, though that was larger than anyone but the wrapped-up Supreme of Air. Fred moved his Shaping to the middle of the room and looked around, trying to make sense of what was going on.

There were indications that there was some short-distance, audible Communication going on between the Cores, but he couldn't hear anything; he had already discovered that his long-distance viewing Shaping couldn't actually hear anything, just observe. He thought it *might* be possible to Shape something different and listen in, but instead he decided to try something a little different.

Reaching out to the ambient Soulfence around his own Core, Fred pulled in a large chunk of it and fed it through his Core, Modifying it for use for a specific purpose: an avatar of his own. After analyzing one of the elemental Core avatars in the small cave room he was still looking into, he began a Shaping that mimicked some of the same designs and structures he observed inside of their forms. In all, it was basically like making a duplicate of his Core without all of the functions; it looked exactly the

same, but it didn't have the same "weight" to it (in effect, it had no real substance).

The other avatars appeared to be filled with Mana, though, which was what he expected; what he didn't expect was how much of their consciousness seemed to be transferred to their avatar. *That's probably why Air didn't respond to me when I tried to Communicate with her; she wasn't really "there" in her original Core, anymore.* Fortunately, Fred didn't think that was necessary to utilize his own avatar; it acted more as a conduit of his will than anything else.

When the Shaping was complete, he took another little amount of pure Soulfence and Shaped it with intent, wrapping it around his creation. As soon as he let the Shaping go, the avatar disappeared from his Core Room and instantly appeared inside of the small hidden cave deep underground where he assumed the Supreme Council was meeting.

"...don't know if the ambient Mana will ever return—what?!" Fred heard as soon as he started to listen to the short-range Communication through his duplicate. It was interesting how they accomplished it, because it sounded like actual audible words outside of his Core; *I'll have to remember that trick so that I can speak out loud, back in my Core Room.*

"What is this? What is going on, Dark?" said the green Core, which Fred could only assume was the Supreme of Nature. He also thought it was interesting that they didn't refer to themselves by their names, but as their elements.

"It's the Cursedborn! Quick, wrap this vile thing up!" what could only be "Dark" responded, and Fred hesitated at the sound of a somewhat familiar voice. He wasn't exactly sure where he had heard it before, because he was almost positive he had never Communicated with any of the other Supremes other than Air before.

Fred's pause caused his Core – which had appeared in the middle of the room – to be swiftly wrapped in bands of elemental Mana, exactly as the Supreme of Air appeared. He could tell what they did as soon as the first one touched him; they were designed to cut him off from his actual Core, from his Mana, and from Communicating more than a few hundred feet from his position. Luckily, none of that really mattered, as he was using Soulforce primarily, which was unaffected by anything they did.

He briefly thought about just removing the bands within a little application of his own energy, but he eventually decided to leave them on since they weren't really harming him. *I can always remove them later.* Besides, he thought it might make an impression on the Supreme Council when he needed to prove that he was serious in his ultimatum.

“Now, is that any way to greet a guest? And what is all this about Cursedborn? I thought you called my kind a Dualborn; *Cursedborn* just sounds so...vile.” Fred told them, all while Shaping something else with Modified Soulforce around the entire cavern. He was pretty sure it would be undetectable to the others and wouldn't harm them...unless they tried to leave. Even then, it wouldn't hurt them, but the transparent shield he Shaped would prevent them from traveling back to their original Cores while he was talking to them. He didn't want to have to track them down one-by-one, especially since they were already assembled nicely for him.

“How did you find us? Did you come to grovel and beg for mercy?” the Supreme of Light asked, her voice hard – but there was a telling undercurrent of fear underneath it. That was understandable, because his appearance there was probably more than frightening – it was *impossible*. Or, at least, it would've been – in the old world.

“Quite the opposite, actually. I'm here to give you an ultimatum—”



“NO! We won’t be listening to you, *Cursedborn*! We have you trapped and at our mercy; with you stuck here, we’ll destroy your precious livestock *and* your Core when we dig you out of your hole!” If the Supreme of Dark had a physical mouth, Fred thought it would be sputtering with spit at his raving words. That, and the feeling that he’d heard the voice before came back even more strongly, but he still didn’t know why that was.

“I highly doubt that any of the nearby Cores in the Convergence – I’m sorry, *former* Convergence – has enough Mana in reserve to send more than a token army against the city or my dungeon. Besides, even if they did, I think they might just defy you and keep their precious Mana in reserve...since there isn’t any more ambient Mana coming their way,” Fred said calmly, which was in complete contrast to the others in the room. The other Cores didn’t say anything, but he could practically *feel* them shrinking back in horror – all but Dark, of course; that particular Dungeon Core seemed ready to physically attack him.

“Lies! There is no way you can prevent all our Mana from coming back! We *will* kill you, *and* all of your precious *Humans*!”

There it was again – a hint of recognition ran through Fred at the Supreme of Dark’s voice, but he still couldn’t place it. *Why does he sound so familiar?* Instead of trying to figure that out, he focused on the other Supremes, since it seemed as though the black-colored Core was going to be a problem. “Look, I know this change has you worried – how could it not? – but I have a solution for you, one which will be beneficial to all Dungeon Cores...as well as Humans. That has been my goal, one of which the Supreme of Air shares: to save both of our species from dying out in the future.”

“*Former* Supreme of Air, I’m afraid,” came a faint voice from behind multiple bands of elemental energy. *Ah...I guess that makes sense*

*why there is another Air Core here.*

“What exactly are you proposing—” started the Water Supreme cautiously, but as Fred expected, she was cut off by Dark again.

“NO! Do not listen to the Cursedborn! It is only trying to trick you, and this will lead to our destruction! I am the leader here, and I make the decisions; no one else! I HAVE ALL THE POWER!”

Fred’s mind felt like it got knocked around inside of his Core as full recognition of the voice slammed into him. *Darnak!*

A scene from Hierolynk’s memories of an earlier time, where he was talking in a friendly tone with his brother took over his focus; it wasn’t even a scene that was very profound in any way – it was concerning the development of a barren land early in their lives as Soulkeepers – but it gave him a pure sample of Darnak’s voice. Other than the obvious raving mad tone to the Core’s voice, it was practically identical. *This can’t just be coincidence; how did he survive? Better yet, how did he become a Dungeon Core?*

Putting together some things in his mind from the memories he had, it was easy enough to figure it out. Hierolynk hadn’t been in the group of Soulkeepers that had eventually killed his brother after a protracted battle, and they had obviously not destroyed his soul when the deed was done. Either that, or they had botched the process; he couldn’t blame them, though, as it wasn’t something that they normally did – only Darnak had really done that to the rest of his people. When the Dungeon Cores were created, his soul probably invaded and took over one of the new crystalized spheres; the explosion that had wiped their original memories probably even made that much easier to accomplish.

Obviously, Darnak had been gaining in power, ever since; he appeared to be the leader of the Supreme Council, so he was arguably the

most powerful Dungeon Core on the planet. Looking back at the *former* Supreme of Air, he realized that *she* was probably the most powerful Dungeon Core in the world, if they were going by pure size and Rating, which could explain why she was wrapped up like she was. Darnak never liked being second-best, which was what led to the war and wounds to the planet in the first place.

All of that ran through his mind within a few seconds; when he came back to focusing around his Core copy, he found that not much had changed. The other Cores seemed a little more confident, when he didn't respond to Dark's accusations and ravings, but that was about to change.

"Tell me, *Dark*...what is the real reason you're scared of the Dualborns? Is it because you think they'll be more powerful than you? Is that it? You've always wanted to be the most powerful being on the planet, and when you see a threat to that, you have to destroy it, don't you? What was it that caused the other Dualborns to go crazy and want to kill everyone? Did you...do something to make that happen, knowing that you weren't powerful enough to kill them yourself? You used the other Dungeon Cores to destroy your potential rivals, didn't you?"

It all was starting to make sense now. Fred couldn't comprehend how someone, born out of the love between two Dungeon Cores, could want to destroy all of the Cores in the world. Well, actually, he *could* comprehend it, as that had almost happened to him; it was only through interactions with friends and learning about the world outside of his parent's dungeon that caused him to change his mind. To *forgive* the Supreme Council for what they did to his parents, even if he never *forgot*.

"What is he talking about, Dark? What did you do?" the Supreme of Earth asked, incredulously.

“What did I do? Nothing that shouldn’t have been done as soon as those Cursedborn were discovered. We couldn’t allow them to become powerful enough to take over control, which is exactly what *this one* is trying to do!” Dark screamed out, and every time he spoke, Fred was more and more sure that the black Dungeon Core was Darnak.

“Wait...are you saying that *you* caused the almost complete destruction of every Dungeon Core in the world? Why would you do that?” the Supreme of Fire asked with more than a note of fiery anger in his voice.

“BECAUSE NO ONE IS SUPPOSED TO RULE THIS WORLD OTHER THAN ME!”

That brought a silence, as an aura of madness and death spread out of the Dark Dungeon Core, a visible manifestation of the enormous anger, jealousy, and hate that encompassed Hierolynk’s brother. Fred wasn’t exactly sure what the aura was supposed to do, but he didn’t want to take the risk that it would harm the other Cores; with a quick application of a Soulforce Shaping, he gathered up the spreading aura and condensed it back into the Dark Core, keeping it from spreading.

“WHAT? That...Soulforce? How?” Darnak stuttered out, his aura starting to eat away at his own Core. Fred felt his consciousness try to leave and go back to his actual Core, but he rebounded off of the Modified Soulforce shield he had placed over the entire cave. “NO! We’re trapped! Kill this Cursedborn now before it’s too late!”

None of the others did anything, but Fred did; he picked at the Mana inside of the bands surrounding him and tore them apart, emerging from the cocoon wrappings unhurt and unhindered. “Darnak! You’ve already caused so much damage to the planet; you never seemed to know when enough was enough, big brother.”

The Dark Core stopped trying to get away, and the aura that he had been projecting quickly faded at Fred's words. "What? How..... Hierolynk? I saw you die!"

"You were supposed to be dead too, Darnak. Hierolynk isn't really here with me, though his extensive memories make it seem that way sometimes. Do you know how close this planet came to being entirely destroyed by what you did? I repaired all of the damage you caused during your war among the Soulkeepers, which is why there is no more ambient Mana emerging from the source. Soulforce is now back in the world, as it should be."

"B-But...you'll kill us all! We can't survive without Mana!" the new Supreme of Air broke into the conversation to complain.

"Not necessarily true, but I can see how you would think that. It's why I came here today to propose to you all: a way for you to get the Mana you need to survive and prosper. In fact, I've developed a way for Dungeon Cores not only to obtain Mana, but slightly *enhanced* Mana as well." Fred explained the Soulstones he had created, how they worked for Humans, the benefits Adventurers would gain from it, and how the Mana that they would provide to Dungeon Cores was slightly different.

"...and you've probably heard how I was able to improve the Core Structure and Rating of some of the Cores I've interacted with before. The Mana that the Humans will transfer to you will have a certain quality to it, allowing you to raise your Core Structure faster than normal. It won't be a rapid improvement, but it'll cut the time you would need to do it normally by about 60%. You'll need that, too, because the Humans are about to become much stronger, as well."

He then detailed how their dungeons would have to change a little, to become a little less lethal, and he suffered their protestations when it was

revealed that killing any Humans wouldn't benefit them at all. "That's ridiculous! You can't do that!" the Supreme of Nature protested, which was echoed by everyone but Darnak – who had been remarkably quiet since he had been revealed.

"It's already been done; there are going to be some major changes to the world, and this is just one of them. Both species were designed to work together, to improve themselves to protect the planet, and this is, I believe, a step in the right direction," Fred told them in no uncertain terms.

"SEE! I told you, this Cursedborn just wants to control us!"

Fred ignored Darnak, instead addressing everyone else again. "This world *needs* protection, to stop people like Dark here from destroying it. Truthfully, I know this will be a bigger change than what you've been used to over the last thousands of years, but this is necessary – both for *your* survival, as well as the survival of the planet."

"Why should we even do that? I have a feeling that if we just expand our territories into Human lands, we can harvest the Mana inside of any of these livestock that don't have this *Soulstone* you've been touting," asked the Supreme of Water with confidence in her voice.

"That's...actually quite accurate. However, I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The voice coming from the blue Dungeon Core actually scoffed at him. "What are you going to do about it? Whine until you get your way?"

It was evident that his removal of their bands of Mana wasn't proof enough that he was powerful enough to back up his ultimatum. "Fair enough; what you have to understand is that I don't want to rule or control the world, I don't want to be the leader for either the Dungeon Cores or the Humans on the planet. What I want to do is keep the people of this world from destroying it, and I'll do just about anything I can to ensure that

happens. Which includes, if you haven't figured that out by now, proving that I am more than capable of doing just that."

Without saying anything else, Fred reached out to each of the Cores in the room – except the still-bound former Supreme of Air – and grabbed ahold of the Mana that made up their avatars. After a few exclamations from his targets, he *yanked* out most of their Mana and sent it back to just under his dungeon in Allroads. He left just enough that their avatars wouldn't collapse from the lack of Mana, but it was obvious to them all what he had done – and the ease with which he had done it.

"NO! Not my Mana!" Darnak wailed, which was followed by a string of incoherent screaming. The other Cores he could sense were shocked, as well as being much more afraid of him than they were just moments ago.

"Now, I've laid out this very generous plan, and while I can't *force* you to adopt it, if you don't, you'll be missing out on all of the benefits. That, and I'll be very disappointed – and I won't hesitate to make my disappointment *known*," he said, trying to seem as confident as he could. He hated having to act tough, when all he wanted was for all of them to just get along and follow his directions, but it seemed as though most Dungeon Cores didn't respond to much other than shows of force. Looking weak in front of them was a foolish way of getting them to fall in line. "I'll be honest with you; I don't *want* to kill any Cores...but don't believe for a second that I will hesitate to do so if necessary. There's nowhere in the world that you can hide from me, and my reach is boundless. Think about it for a moment; I found you *here*, after all."

They all seemed to be cowed by his words – and the removal of a large chunk of their avatar's Mana...except for the Supreme of Dark. "You won't get away with this! I will hunt you down and kill you! I've worked

too long and too hard to have some *Cursedborn* take it all away from me  
—”

“Ok, I lied,” Fred smiled grimly as he stared at the black-colored avatar. “There is one Dungeon Core that I *want* to kill: the one that caused this entire mess in the first place,” he stated. “Darnak, you’ve been a plague on this planet for longer than anyone else still alive, and I can’t allow you to risk the world in your selfish desire for power. Goodbye, brother.”

Fred reached into the Dark Dungeon Core and pulled out the rest of the Mana inside, causing it to collapse and dissipate. He immediately shot down the visible connection line that had been the conduit linking the Core and the avatar together, and before long he homed in on the dungeon belonging to Darnak. Just before he entered through the ground on his journey to the Core Room, his Shaping was shattered by an unexpected explosion.

Quickly reforming his long-distance viewing Shaping, he had it spring into existence where his previous one had just been destroyed. What he saw confused him at first, before he understood what had happened. The dungeon had been underneath a swamp-like area that stretched out for miles in all directions; now, however, the water that filled a large portion of the swamp was now emptying into a massive hole in the ground at least 250 feet deep, possibly more.

*He used his Mana Combustion before I could get to him...*

Frantically, Fred looked around with his viewing Shaping to see if he could find Darnak’s soul, which he had been planning on destroying; memories from Hierolynk showed him how it could be done, even if the Soulkeeper hadn’t ever done it before. Unfortunately, no matter how much he looked, he didn’t see the soul of Hierolynk’s brother.



*Maybe it was destroyed along with the explosion?* Reasonably, he didn't think that was the case; it took more than an explosion due to Mana to destroy a soul – it had to be a deliberate act at the time of death. Rather than waste time futilely looking for something that was probably long gone, he turned his attention back to the remaining members of the Supreme Council hiding in their small, *previously* hidden cave.

“So...where were we?”

# Chapter 35

It didn't take long after that to convince the Supreme Council to agree to his ultimatum; he would've felt bad for forcing the issue, had it not been in their best interests to do so – and he wasn't just saying that because if they refused he might have to resort to some things that he'd rather not. This was a win-win situation for them, because they would get their Mana, improve their Cores much faster, and not have to worry as much about Humans trying to steal or destroy their Cores. In fact, he was hoping there would be a good – if not friendly – relationship between the two species, if only to prepare the world in case another planet-destroying situation came up.

He warned them, though, that he would be watching to see that they played by the rules; he was planning on monitoring the entire world for a few years, to see that there weren't any wholesale slaughters of Humans going on, and that the Adventurers and Dungeon Cores were working together for their mutual benefit. Fred also assured them that they wouldn't be taken to task if Humans died in the dungeons, unless it was obvious that it was a common occurrence; there would always be overconfident or ignorant individuals, and accidents did happen.

The destruction of their Supreme Council leader shook them a little, even after it was known that he was the one who had caused such slaughter of Cores in the past. He let them know that Darnak had seemingly destroyed himself, rather than wait for Fred to do it, and that his soul was still out there somewhere, and to be on guard; he doubted Hierolynk's brother would try to take over another Dungeon Core, but anything was possible. Now that there was Soulfence back in the world, the possibilities

were unfortunately endless as to what danger might arise from the dangerous and mad Soulkeeper.

“Would you like me to remove those bands, Supreme of Air—sorry, *former* Supreme of Air?” Fred asked the still-wrapped Dungeon Core once he allowed the rest of the Supreme Council to leave.

“Yes, that would be most welcome.”

It took the work of a couple of seconds to remove the elemental Mana bands from her Core, and he was surprised to see that she had been close to breaking the yellow Air band before he even arrived. “I’m guessing that they found out about our little meeting and trussed you up like this?”

“Thank you. Yes, something like that; really, knowing what I know now about Dark...or *Darnak*...I have a feeling it was more about the fact that I was an S-12<sup>th</sup>-Rated Core and more powerful than he was, than anything else,” she said. She made a good point, as Fred couldn’t imagine he had liked that much.

“What are you going to do now? I’m assuming they might not want you back on the Supreme Council anymore, am I right?”

“Probably not,” she replied, though she didn’t sound disappointed. “I think I’d rather someone else do it now, anyway.” The former Supreme paused for a second, before going on. “I’m not sure I’ll be around for much longer, however, because from what I gathered after listening to them talk over the last week and a half, there was a massive army of Earth Defenders coming to destroy me. I have to tell you, my defenses aren’t quite equipped to deal with that, especially as I’m still missing most of my Mana reserves.”

That was news to Fred, but he assumed that was his fault when he took her element and then condensed all of her Mana before giving it back.

It helped increase her Core Structure, but robbed her of most of her extra Mana. “Hold on, let me check.”

He immediately turned his viewing Shaping back to her dungeon and didn’t see anything happening there; after circling around, he found the army of Earth Defenders she was talking about, a day and a half away from her dungeon at the current rate they were moving. Fred zoomed in on them and spent the next few minutes picking their wire grid Blueprints apart, releasing the Mana into the environment; he collected it all up and sent it back to Allroads, where he planned to gift Eisa with it over time.

“You were right, but I took care of them. It’s the least I could do for your help during our little meeting; we wouldn’t be where we are today if you hadn’t been willing to sacrifice yourself to let me acquire your Air element. I know that the other Dungeon Cores probably don’t appreciate what I’ve done, but I’m hoping that you understand it.”

The large yellow Dungeon Core floated in front of him without speaking for almost a minute before she finally responded. “I do understand it, even if it will take some time to adjust to. Regardless, I think it was probably the only way to get the current situation to change for the better, for Dungeon Cores *and* Humans. I’m just glad that my faith in you was well-rewarded. So long, Fredwynklemossering; and thank you again for destroying those Earth Defenders – I really appreciate that.” With that, she disappeared, and Fred made his avatar fade away just as quickly.

It was time to hold up his end of the bargain.

Fred spent another night working on fixing Allroads’ defenses up to the point where they could finish the rest, especially after most of the Adventurer population had access to regenerating Power once again. After that, however, Fred spent the next week creating Soulstone after Soulstone; when he was completely focused on creating them, without any other

distractions, he found that he could make them in batches of a thousand every two minutes.

Soon enough, his dungeon was fairly overflowing with Soulstones, and convoys of merchants – with hefty Syndicate guards – started to leave from the city, paid by a little bit of Fred’s Conjure Object ability and the gold he could create, heading off to nearby lands to deliver massive loads of Soulstones and describe what they were to the local DAS branches. Some of the artifacts that had allowed a little faster communication inside of the DAS Headquarters building had been destroyed along with half of the city, so it was going to have to be word-of-mouth communication for the closer towns, cities, and kingdoms.

That still left 95% of the world unreachable by foot within sufficient time, so that access had to be acquired in a different way. Ravenne was recruited by Fred for a portion of that, given her ability to fly; with the change in his Core, all the Shards were no longer fully tied to him as they had been previously. That meant that they could travel wherever they wanted to go and didn’t have to stay near him, anymore. He ended up using Modified Soulfence to create a large ultra-lightweight storage box, bolstered by a heap of Air Mana; even filled with half-a-million Soulstones, it didn’t weigh more than a few pounds and could be pulled behind the Air Shard on a lead with ease.

That covered another 5% of the world’s population; so that just left 90% for Fred to take care of. After some serious thought about the logistics of an avatar of himself flying around and delivering Soulstones like Ravenne, he realized that doing such a thing could take years – which wouldn’t be the best for the Adventurers in faraway places, *nor* for the Dungeon Cores near them. Instead, he experimented and discovered a way

to utilize the way he transported his avatar to the Supreme Council's hideaway to do the same with large shipments of Soulstones.

First, he spent three full days using his viewing Shaping to rapidly looking around the world at every single village, town, and city, identifying the DAS building there (which took some doing in some parts of the world, as their construction was sometimes *wildly* different from what he was used to), and making a mental note of what they looked like. Luckily, everyone seemed to use the same language; otherwise, there may have been some issues with the following steps of his plan.

Clearing out another massive room underneath the city of Allroads and connecting it to his dungeon, were easy enough – it was the next part that was the most difficult. It took him 2 full days of manipulating Modified Soulfence to create a complex transportation delivery system. First, he delineated the walls of the room into 12 different sections, each one containing up to 12,000 different villages, towns, and cities where there was a DAS building in a specific part of the world. Each section had their own Shaping associated with them, which – if he did it correctly – would use his intent and focus on a specific place.

When he activated the finished Shaping, it would pick out a designated number of Soulstones from the gigantic pile in the center of the room and send it through a small portal, which would appear near the section *and* in the DAS building of his choice, depositing the Soulstones there. As soon as that happened, at least the first time it happened, he would look at the building, using his viewing Shaping and then announce via Communication what they were, what they would do, and how they should be used – very similar to what he had told Plartha when she had first used it. Also, he warned them that they should be lying down on a soft surface when they first used the Soulstones; otherwise, they might hurt

themselves when the intense effect first kicked in. Then he would leave them be.

Predictably, people around the world freaked out when they heard his voice in their heads. After monitoring some of the first populations he approached that way, however, he found that, in less than 24 hours, there was always one Adventurer who would be brave enough to try it first – and it didn't take long for the others in the area to follow along. He made sure to deliver plenty of them to each location, so that they would have enough for years to come, and not to charge for them; the Soulstones were supposed to be used in conjunction with the SDIA, so it *should* be free.

After the first few hours of doing that one town or city at a time, all around the world, he found that he could speed up the process by splitting his concentration and doing one delivery and explanation a minute for each section there. Once every hour, he would take 5 minutes and quickly look around and monitor the deliveries of Soulstones around his immediate area by merchants and Ravenne for problems, as well as spot-check the rest of the world to see if there were any Dungeon Core territories overextending themselves and moving into Human habitations. There was no point in doing that unless they were planning on capturing some Humans and bringing them back to their dungeon; fortunately, other than one that he found halfway across the world trying to do just that, there hadn't been any problems in that respect so far. It was entirely possible that he missed some, because it was hard to be in all places at once, but he made sure to make an example of the offending Core....

He didn't *destroy* the Nature Core that had tried to capture some stray Humans roaming outside of their village, though; no, all he did was *drain* the Core of all but just enough Mana to survive on, eliminate all of the Defenders but a single Flower Tripper near the entrance, and leave a

single Ensnaring Vine Defense as protection. It would take *a long* time to recover from that, because even a single G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rated Adventurer wouldn't find that much of a challenge; consequently, any Mana that was transferred to the Core afterward would be the barest amount.

All in all, Fred managed to get Soulstones delivered to every DAS building across the planet in just under two weeks, which he had to say was impressive. He had needed to spend almost a full one of those days just creating more Soulstones, because he had been getting low, but on the whole, it was a successful endeavor. There were already groups of Syndicate members delving through dungeons again elsewhere in the world, and there was an obvious learning curve that needed to be addressed, but that was to be expected.

Some Cores had created dungeons that were so easy that any group of Adventurers would be hard-pressed to hurt themselves, let alone there being the possibility of dying. Others had created an almost endless procession of middling-strength Defenders, in an attempt to get around the difficulty stipulations Fred had set up; the thought behind that was that, the more Adventurers killed, the more Mana the Core would get. Unfortunately for them, Fred had designed his Soulstones well; they determined the difficulty of the entire delve, and adjusted appropriately from there. He was sure there would be some additional exploits tried in the future, but for the most part, the majority of Dungeon Cores seemed to be following directions.

Closer to Allroads, his Shards started to drift off and do their own things, now that they weren't tied down and constantly protecting Fred's dungeon. They were still mildly connected to his Core, so he could pinpoint them wherever they were – and the Shards could do the same – but they weren't hindered by much of anything, anymore. This was especially



true when he altered the faint connection he had with them to remove some of the mind-altering effects that he had unknowingly put inside their heads when they were created; when they were removed, not much outwardly changed, though Fred could tell that they acted a lot more independently from that point on.

The entire set of Mana stipulations that he had designed for the rest of the Adventurers (where they had to expel Mana by touching a Core) also didn't really apply to the Shards, because they used that Mana for their own purposes; however, that didn't mean they couldn't still join a group to dungeon delve if they wanted – they could choose to transfer Mana from themselves to the Dungeon Core at will.

He cautioned them to tone down the use of their special Shard abilities while they were fighting through a dungeon, of course, because it was a little unbalanced, otherwise; still, he didn't say they couldn't use them at all, because even used sparingly, they were like really advanced affinities that most Adventurers could eventually acquire. Unfortunately, due to their nature as Shards, most likely, he found that they couldn't develop additional affinities, but that didn't seem to bother them.

Regnark departed to head back to the Craytion Kingdom, to meet up with some old friends from when he had been fairly active within the Syndicate. He promised to come back and visit from time to time, though he also hinted that he might end up heading back up north to rebuild the small village of Northend eventually. He didn't say he'd actually *stay* there, but he said he wanted to do it to honor those who had died.

Chareese went with him, as she said she hadn't been traveling the land in decades. The both of them were talking about getting married eventually, though they said that they would definitely come back to Allroads first for the wedding, if that was what they decided to do. It was a

big decision to make, however, as both of them would live...well... indefinitely, unless some sort of accident ended their lives. Fred thought that it was a difficult choice, because they would never actually “grow old together”, or whatever the expression was for that.

Roady wanted to go with them, at first, so that he could take care of his half-sister, but then he realized that Regnark could do that just fine without him. Instead, he stayed in Allroads and rejoined the Government – after some extensive deliberations within the Allroads Council regarding his loyalty – though he still took the time out every couple of days to delve through a dungeon. It wasn't technically required to expel his Mana, like it was for the rest of the Governmental employees who had SDIAs (which was pretty much all of them); he was determined to raise his Rating up, though, so that he could become a Combat Medic Class – of all things.

Ravenne, after she was done delivering Soulstones and speeches on their use to nearby towns and cities, took Agelstein and disappeared off to the west. Fred looked in on the two quite frequently to see how they were doing, and he was amazed to see that Agelstein, the former Necro-Wizard, had eschewed his previous Class and was looking to be something under the Scout line of Classes. It paired well with Ravenne, actually, as she could handle a bit of the long-range spells with her Ability to wield Air the way she could, and as she had opted to take more of a hybrid tank-caster Class compared to her former Assassin-Spy Class.

Deecy got bored almost immediately, being in Fred's dungeon, and the city was entirely too odorous for her delicate nose; therefore, she frequently spent days or weeks roaming through the forests surrounding the former Convergence, hunting the few natural beasts that still traveled through it periodically. Fred told her that she could leave and head off to wherever she wanted, but she refused.

***“Where would I go? There’s really nothing out there for me, and I have no real desire to travel if I don’t have to. Besides, who would be here to get you out of trouble?”***

She had a point.

His Core Power Guild started to recruit additional members, and half of the townspeople-turned-Adventurers became instructors at a new school that Fred set up for them near his dungeon. He had to make another entrance from another part of the city, because the Government was frankly tired of so many people having to traipse through their Prison to reach his dungeon. The walls of the new Core Power school were reinforced with Mana *and* Soulforce, so that they would be nearly indestructible against whatever was tossed at them day after day. After a month of being open, Fred had to expand it not once but *twice*, as word had gotten out among the Syndicate members that they could develop their Abilities in new and unusual ways. It could now hold up to 1,000 people, all at once, comfortably, with over 100 rooms of varying size making up the entire layout – and was twice the size of his own dungeon.

That just left Eisa, who spent her time – along with Fred – teaching at the Core Power school and providing targets for people to use their new skills and abilities. She worked extremely hard, herself, learning additional spells and Abilities from her students, in fact, though she excelled – as she should, as an Earth Shard – on almost any spell or Ability that had to do with Earth, up to and including extremely high-Rated ones that some of the S-Rated Syndicate members showed her. Some were even powerful enough to cause a little damage to the floor of the school, such as the Earthquake

Shock she was able to perform after being taught only a couple minutes later.

She didn't use that one much, though, because it brought back some bad memories to many of the Adventurers who came to learn. Eisa also participated in delving through some dungeons with some random groups that wanted her help, but she always came back disappointed.

*"What's wrong? Did the delve not go well?"* Fred asked one day after she came back looking dejected.

*"What? Oh...no, it was fine."*

*"Come on, I think I know you better than that. I can tell that something's been bothering you lately."*

Eisa sat on the edge of his bed—*her bed, really, since I don't use it anymore*—and sighed, looking away from his Core for a few minutes. Fred was patient and didn't want to rush her, so he took the time to create another batch of 100 Soulstones inside his storage room for the future. He had been creating them whenever he had some free time, because eventually most of the towns and cities around the world would need some more; it might be another 20 or 30 years, but eventually they'd need them — so he figured it would be smarter to get them ready instead of having to rush later. It wasn't as if they really cost him anything other than time.

*"It's just...I miss the way we used to be able to delve through dungeons together, you know? These groups that I'm going with are fun, and even nice for the most part, though they look at me with awe sometimes —"* she smiled slyly as she looked up at his Core— *"which I have to admit is much better than the scorn I used to garner, and it feels good. But none of it really compares to having you there with me."*

Fred was silent for a few seconds as he processed what she was saying. It was actually along the same lines of what he had been thinking

lately, though he was hesitant to try just in case...well, just in case something went horribly wrong. At that point, though, with the Dungeon Cores falling in line – even seeming to enjoy the added benefits of concentrated Mana they were being given by Adventurers – and most areas around the world having enough Soulstone stock to last them for quite a while, he thought it might be a good time to try.

*“It’s funny that you say that, because I was thinking the same thing. I think...I’m ready to try making myself a body again.”*

Eisa’s eyes opened wide, and she jumped off the side of the bed. “Really? That’s amazing!” she said excitedly, before her face fell. “Is it dangerous, though? Is that why you haven’t done it before this?”

*“Uh...I’m not actually sure, which was why I was holding off until now. I don’t **think** it’ll be too dangerous, but really, anything could happen. I’ve already had a body with a Core in it before, so it can’t be that hard, right?”* Fred joked, because he already had a plan for it. Whether or not it would work still remained to be seen, however. She didn’t say anything, just nodding at him with her hands clasped tightly together.

*“Alright, here I go!”*

Pulling in a large portion of the Soulforce around the Allroads area to him, Fred passed it through his Core to Modify, giving it the qualities he needed. The quantity he had was probably a little more than he really needed, but once he started his Shaping he didn’t want to interrupt it to get more.

First, he started to mold it into a Shaping similar to how he had produced his avatar before, though this time he held off on imaging it as he was now. Instead, he pulled up the “Human (Male)” Blueprint – which was essentially his old body – he had created for use on his Bottomless Pits of Hunger and arranged it to surround his Core. The large, clear, star-filled

night sky appearance of his Core stuck out of it a bit, making it appear that it wouldn't fit. However, with an additional intent in his Shaping that would condense his current form in order to squeeze it inside, he filled the Blueprint up with the Modified Soulforce...and let it complete.

At first, nothing seemed to happen, as he watched from outside of his Core; the wire grid stayed intact, but the Shaping just floated there, not doing anything. He thought that it had completely failed, but then his external senses cut off and he *felt* a physical pain that rivaled almost anything else he had ever experienced before – including when he sacrificed his body in the first place.

An inconceivable amount of time later, he finally heard something; it took him a moment to realize that it was the sound of his own voice screaming at the pain that was slowly fading all over his body. *Wait... body?* That thought made his screaming stop, even as he opened his eyes and grimaced from the pains still wracking his body, as he flopped around on the floor. Eventually, his eyes focused enough as the pain receded, to see Eisa's face above his own, looking down with a half-worried and half-happy look on her face.

“Fred? Fred? Is that you in there?” she asked with concern.

It took a few swallows to wet his dry and cracked throat – *screaming tends to do that* – to speak, but he finally managed it. “Uh...I think so?”

He was looking at her with his eyes alone, which worried him more than a little bit. *Did I lose access to my abilities as a Core?* A quick second later, he found that he was able to check his territory, Shape a long-distance viewing, and still turn the Soulforce around him into Modified Soulforce by passing it through anywhere in his body. When he looked inside of himself, he didn't see an actual Core anymore; it was, instead,

spread out through his entire form, like the veins and arteries that carry blood throughout his entire Human body.

“Good,” she smiled shyly, before grabbing his arm and pulling him upright. Looking down as he got to his feet, he realized he wasn’t wearing any clothes. Rather than be embarrassed like she usually was, Eisa looked down at him as well, and her smile turned from shy to...something else he couldn’t identify.

“We’ve got a date, if you didn’t forget,” she said, before dragging him to his bedroom and pushing him down on the bed.

*What? Oh...that’s right. I’m sure glad to have a body back; new experiences are always fun!*

# Epilogue

*“Are you sure you’re ready? Going on your first dungeon delve can be a frightening experience.”*

His mother’s words echoed throughout his mind as he hefted the fine-looking steel sword that his father had...*acquired* for him. He wasn’t exactly sure where he had gotten it from, as he had never seen his father actually work a day in his life, but he didn’t *think* he had stolen it. The same went for his brand-new leather armor that seemed to be made specifically for his large frame; after making sure it was still tightly secured against his body after the long trek to the G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rated Water dungeon, he glanced at his companions to see if they were all right.

They looked just as anxious as he felt, unfortunately.

Wynk nervously adjusted the PIB on his waist as he ensured it was secured tightly; it wouldn’t do to have it fall off in the middle of a fight, and losing it in the middle of a dungeon might mean it was gone for good. Ghericah, the diminutive girl with short blond hair, wearing her Healer-Class robes, did the same thing next to him, and she smiled weakly at him as she realized what she was doing. None of the others were fidgeting with their equipment, but there was a sense of anxiety around them, nevertheless.

Rolard, their Scout, was eyeing everything around them like he was expecting something to jump out and attack them while flipping his shoulder length hair out of his eyes; it was ridiculous at that moment, of course, because they weren’t even in the dungeon yet! He had a white-knuckled grip around his two knives in their sheaths around his waist, which appeared to be just about the only thing keeping him from running off.



Just behind him was Penga, their Mage, whose expression was relatively blank on her dark-skinned face, as she stared at the dungeon entrance ahead of them, her mouth moving constantly but with no words coming out. She held onto her wooden staff with a relaxed grip, though Wynk thought it might be *too* relaxed; he could see her dropping it, if she wasn't careful.

Just behind the others was the final member of their group, Tralce, who was their Healer. The large man looked like he should be a Fighter, based on size alone, but he was quite reserved and didn't talk much – and he seemed to flinch away from weapons; at least, that was the impression he got when they were training to work as a team, though he had a small, simple, iron mace at his side, for protection. Whether or not he would actually use it was another thing altogether.

Lastly, bringing up the rear, was their Syndicate guide; he was soft-spoken and was the only one who appeared relaxed, though Wynk supposed that was because he had nothing to really fear from the dungeon. He wasn't sure exactly what Rating their guide was, but he wouldn't be surprised to find out the large man was at least C-Rated; it wasn't likely that anything inside the dungeon would even be able to hurt him, if that were the case. He wasn't there to fight, but to answer questions and to bail them out, if it looked like one of them were going to die.

Which Wynk desperately hoped wouldn't happen, because as their Fighter, it was up to him to prevent that, if he could. Still, it was nice to know they had a safety net of sorts, if only for this first delve; after this, they were on their own. The Syndicate took their responsibility for new members quite seriously, and through a series of positive changes – so he was informed when he joined up – over the last few decades, they did

everything they could to ensure that initial training and ongoing development was their priority.

It was even possible that he might be able to attend the new Core Power school that had just opened up in Juniton, the closest town to their village with a population large enough to warrant a Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate outpost there. His mother had hinted that she might take up teaching there, though he had never seen or heard her do any dungeon delving in her life; *honestly, it was a surprise that she was an Adventurer in the first place*. He had been told that all Adventurers, no matter who they were, *needed* to delve through dungeons in order to expel the Mana that built up in them after a while, but as far as he knew, she hadn't ever had to do that. *She must be one of those that hadn't taken a Soulstone when they were created about thirty years ago*.

How she expected to teach, if that were true, he didn't know, but he also hadn't asked. His parents were a bit shady about their past, and the few times he asked about it, he was shut down immediately; it was polite, but it was also obvious that he wasn't going to get any of that information. No one else in their village seemed to know anything about them, either, but he had grown accustomed to not knowing after a while, so it didn't bother him. At least, not *too* much.

"So...shall we do this?" Wynk asked the others, trying to sound confident for his party. While he didn't know any of his group members from before he had joined the Syndicate, he had heard and was hoping that their shared experiences would eventually lead to a close friendship. It was something they were told during their Syndicate orientation, at least; you had to trust in those you delve with to have your back, and nothing helped to secure that trust than friendship.

“Might as well; it would be a shame to have walked all this way and not actually go in,” Rolard said, taking the lead. He was their Scout, so that was kind of his role in the group, but Wynk followed close on his heels; they didn’t know what to expect, and being close enough to gain the attention of any attacking monsters was the key to survival. Just before they passed through the stone entrance that seemed to jut up from the ground, Wynk checked his Interface to make sure he was ready to go.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
<b>Name:</b> Wynk Howells		<b>Class:</b> Fighter
<b>Rating:</b> G-1 <sup>st</sup>		<b>Essence Needed to Rate-up:</b> 373
<b>Total Essence:</b> 0		<b>Available Essence to Distribute:</b> 0
<b>Body:</b> 3 (0/40) <b>Brawn:</b> 3 (0/40) <b>Mind:</b> 3 (0/40)		<b>Vitality:</b> 30/30 <b>Stamina:</b> 30/30 <b>Power:</b> 15/15
<b>Base Physical Attack:</b> 3 <b>Base Physical Defense:</b> 3		<b>Power Regen Rate:</b> 0.1/min
Mana		
<b>Current Mana to Expel:</b> 12/100		
Elemental Affinities (Current Available Mana)		
<b>Fire:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Fire Mana: 1) <b>Water:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Water Mana: 1) <b>Nature:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Nature Mana: 1) <b>Earth:</b> 10% Stage 2 (Earth Mana: 16)		<b>Dark:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Dark Mana: 1) <b>Light:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Light Mana: 1) <b>Air:</b> 1% Stage 1 (Air Mana: 1)
Elemental Abilities		
<b>Earth:</b> Stoneskin (2 Earth Mana/second)		
Class Traits (Fighter)		
<i>Your available Vitality is minorly increased by your Body Stat</i>		
<i>Your Stamina is minorly increased by your Brawn Stat</i>		
<i>Your pain threshold is minorly increased</i>		
Class Abilities (Fighter)		
Double Strike 0 – 0/100	Block 0 – 0/100	Taunting Shout 0 – 0/100

Everything looked normal – or as normal as he thought it was going to be. When Wynk had applied to join the Syndicate and received his SDIA

and Soulstone upgrade, he had been told that it was *highly* unusual for anyone to have Elemental Abilities already, let alone *any* Elemental Affinities. The fact that he had Affinities with *all* the elements already made them a little suspicious, but apparently having an affinity in something before joining wasn't entirely unheard of. Not to the level that Wynk was, but a report was apparently sent up to the higher-ups on the DAS; it wasn't enough of a problem to cause him to be barred from training and delving, though.

He had originally thought about being some sort of caster Class, but after discovering that he had an Elemental Ability called "Stoneskin" – which basically covered his skin with a thin layer of hard stone, protecting his body from most simple attacks – he chose to become a Fighter instead. He'd never actually used it against a monster, however, only in some of the basic combat training they went over at the DAS outpost where he signed up.

With nothing preventing him from entering the dungeon, he practically shook with excitement and nerves as he walked down the entrance tunnel, watching it grow darker than it was outside, but not *too* dark. There was an ambient light that seemed to infuse the room, and there was plenty of illumination to see perfectly fine, once his eyes adjusted to the change in environment.

At the bottom of the entrance tunnel, they passed a small alcove that he was told was in every dungeon nowadays, though it apparently didn't used to be that way. Inside, Wynk saw the blue glow of a tiny gem floating in the middle of the alcove, waiting patiently for them to finish their delve. *The Dungeon Core is a lot smaller than I would've thought; makes sense, though, because this is only a G-1<sup>st</sup>-Rated dungeon.*

It was his first sight of a Dungeon Core, however – which was *amazing* – so he had to force himself to move on as they entered the first room. He caught his breath as soon as they entered, though it wasn't due to the pool of clear water in the middle of the room, or the pretty waterfall that seemed to rain down over the side wall. No, it was because when he caught sight of his first monster, ever, something invaded his vision for a moment.

### **Tidepool Toad (Level 1)**

**Vitality: 4**

**Attack: 1**

**Defense: 1**

*Whoa! Is this another feature of this SDIA I wasn't told about?*

With a thought, he was able to dismiss the information about the “Tidepool Toad” in his vision, just like he would his Interface, as he readied himself. As he advanced cautiously, he sensed the rest of his party start to fan out and take their positions. A memory of his father, whom he had thought had not known much about dungeons, talking to him – just before he left for this first dungeon delve – suddenly came to his mind.

*“Don't rush into a fight; take your time to discover the dangers inside every single room before you attack, and don't be afraid to retreat from a dungeon if it seems as if it might be too dangerous. I can imagine that you might be excited to get started and rush ahead, but you have a **long** time to learn all you want about dungeons and there is no hurry. There's a whole wide world for you to explore and enjoy out there; I know this, because I've seen it.”*

It didn't really make sense at the time, because his father, Fred, seemed like one who hadn't traveled all that much. Now, though, when he

strode forward to intercept the first Toad, he felt the thrill of excitement that his father had mentioned as he started on his journey to become an Adventurer.

An Adventurer...in this wonderful Dungeon World.

**The End of Book 5**  
**...and the end of the Dungeon World series**

# Author's Note

Thank you for reading the final book in the Dungeon World series!

I hope you enjoyed the entire journey through Dungeon World as much as I enjoyed writing it! It's a little bittersweet ending the series, as I had so much creating this world and the characters within it...but I certainly left some possibilities for a second story arc somewhere down the road. Is Darnak going to come back to threaten the planet again? Will we hear more about Wynk and his group? Will I go crazy and expand on my Station Cores crossover that I started at the end of my Station Cores Compilation and have fun with it that way?

Who knows?

Whatever it turns out to be, I'm sure it will be as awesome of a ride as this has been!

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 or series and read it!

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