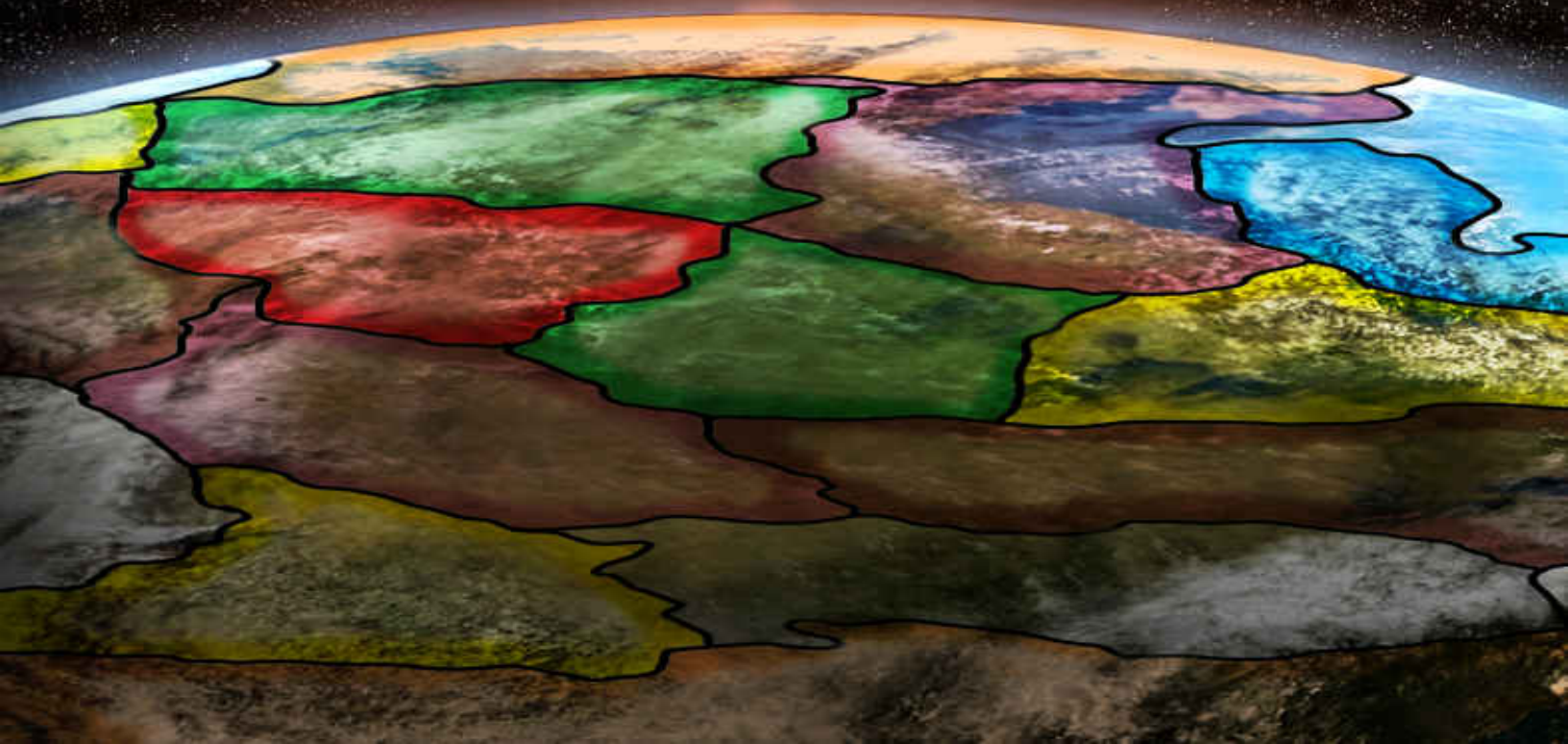


JONATHAN BROOKS

DUNGEON WORLD



Dungeon World

A Dungeon Core Experience
Dungeon World Series

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Dedication

To my wife, Melody, who encourages me to write better every day.
And, for my daughter – who is always coming up with weird combinations
of creatures in her head.

Thanks always to my beta-readers! Without your input, my stories
wouldn't be nearly as good!

Grant Harrell

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I – Newborn

Chapter 1

“Do you seriously believe they gave up looking for us?” a light, feminine voice tinged with a bit of heat invaded his mind.

“No, but it’s been a long time since we’ve seen any sign of them,” a deeper, calmer voice responded.

“That doesn’t mean anything – you know that.”

“True, but what’s the alternative? Move somewhere else? This is the backend of nowhere – there isn’t anywhere else to go.”

“I’m just worried about the safety of our son.”

“There’s no safe place anywhere, Pyra. Especially with...his condition.”

Fredwynklemossering, otherwise known as Fred to his friends (or, at least he’d like to think that if he had any), listened to his parents talking in what they thought was a super-secret mode of communication. It had been years since it had been secret, though; as soon as he turned eight years old, he had gained some sort of ability which allowed him to eavesdrop on their conversations pretty much from anywhere. He had been slightly confused at first at what he had started hearing, but being a mischievous (though reserved) child when he was younger, it didn’t take long for him to figure it out. And, of course, he never told them he could hear them talking; he’d learned a whole lot more than he would’ve otherwise.

But that was half a lifetime ago; he had just turned sixteen last week and was looking forward to their promise that he could finally explore outside. He would, of course, have an escort of sorts, though he was so used to being chaperoned by his bodyguards that he rarely noticed their

presence anymore. Not that they were necessarily needed at home, but his parents could be a bit...ok, very...overprotective of their only offspring. It was rare that he was ever truly alone, not even when he slept; there was also a silent guardian or two watching over him when he had to relieve himself.

In fact, the only times he had felt truly free was when he had managed to slip away when their attention was distracted and hid somewhere for a couple of minutes or (less likely) hours. His parents, especially his mother, always reprimanded him whenever he was caught – but it was worth it for even the illusion of privacy. And, even though he would still have some supervision, the promise of finally “leaving the nest” – as they liked to call it – far outweighed the extra witnesses to his freedom.

Don’t get him wrong – he loved his parents. It was only that they could be stifling at times, warning him off from exploring the more dangerous parts of his home; not that that stopped him – he knew every inch of his residence like the back of his hand. He could even navigate the “dangerous” parts with ease, aided by a few of his skills he had picked up over the years. His bodyguards either didn’t care that he was taking risks, or they knew he could take care of himself; either way, he could essentially explore his place with impunity – at least from his “shadows”.

Right now he was heading toward his own place, a basic shelter made from scavenged materials; it wasn’t large or pretty – with just enough room for a small mat made of reeds he had gathered from around a nearby pond – but it was his. After Fred had finally left the “nursery” he had spent more than half of his life in, he wanted his own place made with his two hands and without help from his parents. He knew they could help immensely in making whatever he wanted (and they had offered to help); however, it wouldn’t be the same as doing it himself. Even at a young age,

he had learned how to fend and provide for himself – this was just another aspect of his illusion of independence.

Grabbing his hand-made bag from the peg it was hanging off of, he proceeded to stuff it full of supplies: extra food (mana-formed and tasteless, but it was all he had ever known), a small coil of rope, a few concentrated Fire Stones his mother had created for him to help build fires, a waterskin containing a Water Stone that would provide fresh water for longer than he would be gone, and a few other odds and ends he thought he might need. And, of course, he grabbed his two most precious possessions – two steel knives that were wickedly sharp and could cut through almost anything with ease. Or, at least, everything that he had come across in his explorations.

Quickly slinging the now-full bag on his back and attaching his two knives to his belt sheaths, he raced toward where he knew he would find his parents. It was early, but he was eager to get the day started; it was his first time venturing out from their home and he didn't want to waste a minute of it. Not that the time of day seemed to mean anything to his folks – they were always awake and alert for danger whenever he saw them. He didn't know if they **ever** relaxed; they were constantly on the lookout for... something.

They never told him or mentioned exactly what they were afraid or nervous about, nor did they reveal anything in their “secret” communications; they obviously both knew what they were referring to and didn't need to restate it. There were many times when he wanted to ask them directly what they were so paranoid about, but then he'd have to reveal his skill in listening to their hidden conversations. It had been so long that he had kept his own secret that he worried disclosing his ability would create an awkwardness between them he didn't want.

One day I'll ask about it – but not today! Today was all for him; he didn't want to spoil it by souring the mood, which he was sure would happen if he broached the subject. *Another day*, he promised himself.

It didn't take him too long to get to where his parents were located; although he had permission to live off by himself, they only allowed him to do so if he were still “*near*”. *Near* meant within 200 yards of their own abode – just out of sight, though easy enough to contact if necessary, in an emergency. Not that they'd ever had an emergency (as far as he could remember), but Fred agreed to the stipulation to appease them.

He had to carry his bag as he walked through a hidden opening at the far end of the cavern wall, which was cleverly obscured in between the shadowed rock formations. He squeezed through the crack, rubbing his body through the familiar (and slightly worn) entrance. If this had been his first time there, he would've been hard-pressed to find it; fortunately, he had traveled through it so many times he could find the spot with his eyes closed if he needed to.

He barely fit through the last few feet – *have I really grown **that** much over the last week?* – but he eventually tumbled out into a small circular cave that was largely devoid of any ornamentation. Floating in the middle of the room were two brightly glowing spherical-shaped gems the size of his head: one blue and one red.

“This isn't right, Aquel, I just can't let him go – can't we just keep him here for another century or two?”

“We've talked about this; he's not safe here and...with his condition... I don't think he would last that long. Remember, this isn't goodbye – he's just leaving for a couple of days and then he'll be back. He's got to learn the ways of the wider world; we can't keep him cooped up here forever.

Eventually, he'll end up leaving, but it will be up to him. You know just as well as I do that he doesn't belong here – this is for his own good."

"I know that, but it doesn't seem fair. Why couldn't he have been born normally..."

I don't belong here? What's he talking about? Fred had heard them talk about him behind his back for years, always referencing how different he was – he was used to it by then. But the talk of him leaving permanently was new; all he wanted was a little freedom to explore outside of their dwelling – not to leave forever. *And why would it be for my own good to leave behind the only home I've ever known, not to mention those that I love?*

The confusion on his face must not have been evident, as his father spoke to him. "Son, there you are! I see you're packed and ready to go, early and eager, huh?" If he hadn't heard the inaudible conversation only moments ago, he probably wouldn't have noticed the slight hitch in his voice. "Let's see, do you have enough supplies for your 'adventure'?"

"Oh, yes – let me make you some more food; don't want you going hungry now, do we?" his mother interjected, and before Fred could say a word, a pile of small, white, and (he knew from personal experience) tasteless orbs appeared at his feet.

"Uh...no, I'm good – I've got everything I need right here," Fred responded absently as he patted his bag. He was still trying to make sense of what he had overheard and missed some of what his father was saying.

"—and just wanted to tell you how proud of you I am," he said, before continuing. "I know we've been a little overprotective of you over the years—" *you could say that*— "but I promise you – it was for your own safety. You've seen how dangerous it can be in here if you're not careful;

the world out there can be even worse. I want you to be careful over the next couple of days and don't do anything foolish – I know firsthand how much you like to explore and poke your nose into things that you have no business messing with. And I'm not just talking about the incident two weeks ago..."

Fred felt himself blush at his father saying how proud he was of him; he had rarely known him to express his feelings so...plainly before. His father, Aquelsterico (or Aquel for short), was usually quite reserved – to hear him open up so much was a pleasant experience. His embarrassment at the mentioning of his "oops" moment a few weeks ago only made his blush deepen even further.

"I want you to have a good time, though like your father said, try to be careful. Just remember that we love you and you'll always have a home with us here."

Finally, a way to ask about what they were talking about. "I love you both too, but what did you mean by that? Are you kicking me out?"

They both seemed flustered by his question. "Uh, no – nothing like that. Just, you know, who knows what the future may hold. Besides, have you thought about what you want to do when you get a little older? I don't expect you'll want to hang around this place forever, do you?" his father asked, recovering his composure.

Nice job, Dad, turning it back on me. "N-no, not necessarily. Maybe when I've explored a little bit outside, I'll have a better idea."

"Well, then, we'll talk more about what the future has in store for you when you get back. I love you, son – now give your mother a hug before you go."

Why does this feel like a final goodbye for some reason? With small tears threatening to cloud his eyes, he walked up to the floating, red-

glowing gem and placed his arms around it, hugging it to his chest. He could feel the warmth increase against his threadbare shirt as his mother “hugged” him back.

He left after a few more farewells and promises to be careful, squeezing through the entrance/exit crevice again, dragging his bag behind him. Before he left completely, he looked back at his parents floating next to each other, their love obvious in the way they hovered close to each other – their glow fading in and out together in perfect harmony, just like his own heartbeat.

The last thing he caught a glimpse of before he left was the small mound of extra food his mother had created melting into the ground, the mana used in its creation being reabsorbed into the dungeon.

Chapter 2

Fred picked up his two bodyguards, or shadows as he liked to call them. They hadn't had to actually protect him from anything in a long, long time; they were more like his flickering shadow he saw reflected upon the dungeon walls as he passed a few torches steadily and inexhaustibly burning throughout the hallways – present, but not really serving much purpose. They weren't originally given names or any type of personality, though he did end up naming them in his head and giving them their own genders.

Always behind his left side, Firbey was a small fire elemental that bobbed along the air behind him, a condensed ball of flame no larger than his own head at her core. He had seen her become larger, though, as she expanded her flame to create whatever form she wanted to; however, her power would be dispersed through her new form as well, diluting the heat of the flames she created as she grew larger. Essentially, she could grow large enough to fill a large cavern, but instead of being able to burn anything, she would end up just making the place slightly warm.

Which was great on those nights during the supposed “winter” (which he had never actually seen, as it was only evident outside the dungeon) when the nights grew much colder; he had learned that his bodyguards could follow simple requests – including growing larger and warming up his shelter – as long as it didn't endanger him.

The reverse was also true; she could condense even more and become much, much hotter. When he was really young, he had even seen Firbey become so small and hot that she was able to crack and liquefy small sections of the cavern wall. The action scared him at first, but she had only

been doing that to kill an invading wild beast that had ventured into the dungeon. He couldn't remember exactly what the beast looked like – other than having fangs nearly the size of his head – but he did remember its screams and howls as it was burned alive. *Not exactly the best dream material for a four-year-old.*

On his right side and behind him, a giant mottled-green frog that came up to his waist hopped along, his vacant stare belying the attention he focused on the dungeon they passed through. Frozzles (he came up with their names when he was very young) didn't look very threatening, but Fred had seen him snatch a hostile bug out of the air nearly 20 feet away with his tongue – which was uncomprehendingly sticky. In addition, the massive amphibian could squirt an acidic poison from his back, which could and did cover anything that came within five feet.

Strangely enough, the acidic poison also acted as an accelerant; he had seen a few creatures covered in the gooey substance screaming out in pain, only to scream louder when Firbey lit it up with an accelerated boost of flames. Things like that didn't happen *all the time* inside the dungeon, but they happened frequently enough over the years that it didn't faze him anymore. *Ah, the memories.*

Firbey and Frozzles were two of the strongest defenders his parents' dungeon held, though they didn't really need much; the only threats that really existed were from wild beasts who sometimes ventured into the joint-element dungeon. The traps and lesser creatures defending it were more than enough to hold back anything he had seen before – which, he had to admit, hadn't been a lot. Being located in the “backend of nowhere” (as his father called it) didn't lead to many other threats around those parts, evidently.

He jumped over a small thin line of fire placed along the ground, barely visible but placed where you could see it if you knew to look for it. He did it automatically with hardly a glance at it, however; he had traveled so many times through the tunnels that he didn't have to pay it too much attention. If he had stepped on it, though, it would've caused a curtain of super-hot flames to cover the entire hallway – which would burn him terribly if not kill him outright. He had seen it demonstrated once when his mother, a Fire Element dungeon core, instructed Firbey to trigger it. The fire elemental was unharmed of course, but the heat Fred remembered feeling from the trap was enough of a warning.

Farther down the current hallway, powerful jets of water were spraying out of the wall in a pattern that he had memorized long ago; wait two seconds – jump forward two feet – stop for three seconds – jump backwards one foot – immediately turn to the side – jump to the side four feet...and so on. It only took five minutes to make it through, but Fred was so impatient to get outside that he nearly got hit by the very last jet, missing blasting his face off by less than an inch. He could feel the spray from the jet still on his skin as he left the trap behind. *I've got to calm down – freedom isn't going anywhere.*

His father's trap wasn't designed to kill anyone straight-out like the fire trap he had bypassed; instead, the powerful jets of water would send whatever it hit flying into some spikes set up against the wall. That wasn't to say that the water itself wouldn't hurt, as the pressure behind the jets would take your skin off if you stood in front of it for too long – but that wasn't its main purpose.

Frozzles passed through the jets of water as if they weren't there; the giant frog almost seemed to absorb the high-pressure liquid as it hit his body. As he was a water-based creature, the element could only *enhance*

instead of *hurting* him – hence, the absorption. By the time he got through, the giant frog looked just a bit larger than he had when going into the trap. Fred knew the effect wouldn't last long, as Frozzles' mana-fueled body would reduce the amount of the water element inside of it over time, releasing it back into the dungeon for reuse by his father.

As for Firbey, it was simple enough for her to shrink down and float over the jets, passing through a small channel cut into the ceiling above. The heat that the fire elemental gave off produced a bit of steam in her wake, but not enough to detrimentally affect her progress.

Fred bypassed or expertly maneuvered through nearly a dozen more traps on his way to the dungeon entrance. Most of it was done through muscle-memory or just memorization, as he had made the trek to stare outside his home many a time over the years – which freed up his mind to think about the conversation he overheard between his parents.

What are they so afraid of? Who are they hiding from? Why is it safer for me outside this dungeon? All these questions and more sifted through his mind, urgent enough that he almost turned back and demanded answers from his parents. His enthusiasm for finally being able to leave the dungeon overrode this thought, though he promised himself that nothing would stop him from demanding answers from the two dungeon cores once he got back. That didn't mean he couldn't speculate while he had the time.

His parents were fairly hesitant to freely share details about their past and about their relationship, including how they met. Nor would they talk about why they were in hiding (though he hadn't understood that they actually *were* until the last year or so), or if he had any other family. He could get over not having those details, but the one thing he wanted to know was why he was different and suffering from his...condition.

It wasn't long after he had learned how to talk when he asked his parents about his origins and why he was different from them. They were all too happy to explain the mating and procreation practices of dungeon cores. Approximately every 100 years, a dungeon core that identified itself as female (it was dependent on their personal feelings) was able to "mate" with another core that identified itself as a male. Since they didn't have any reproductive organs, their identification was entirely of their own volition, though once they chose one – they stuck with it for the rest of their existence. Which could be centuries or millennia, as there wasn't a limit on their lifespan.

When they mated, they combined their mana signatures in a commingling of powerful forces; their "joining" usually took anywhere from days up to weeks or even months, depending on the innate power of those that joined together. Once the act was complete, a much smaller, weaker dungeon core was born. His parents were unique in the fact that they were both present in his life; newborn dungeon cores usually stayed with one or the other parent, learning how to construct a dungeon and manipulate the mana within, creating traps and forming defenders from their available resource pool.

After the "baby" dungeon core had grown and learned enough – usually after half a century or so – it was released into the wild, to take control of a territory that was usually set aside for it before it was even born. And then, after it hit a century old, it could choose its "gender" and could procreate.

"How many dungeon cores are there out there? Hundreds or thousands?" he remembered asking at the time.

His father had laughed at his naivete. "Thousands? You're thinking too small, son – think *millions*! Alone, the Water faction has over half a

million itself, and we are one of the smallest—” He didn’t continue, shutting up abruptly as if he had said too much already. He refused to expand on his comment, stating that he didn’t want to talk about it.

Regardless of his parents’ reluctance to talk about their past and about those “factions”, he had learned more over the years as they let things slip. The most important thing he learned (though **suspected** was probably more accurate) was that the mating between two opposite factions was not only unheard of and frowned upon, but also forbidden. He didn’t know why, especially when two dungeon cores were in as much love as his parents obviously were, but that seemed to be the case. *That’s the only reason I can think of why they are hiding out here.*

It could also supply a valid explanation as to what happened with his birth. Instead of a tiny, gem-shaped dungeon core, **Fred** materialized in its place. Supposedly, he was shaped exactly like a human, which he never seen before – but they obviously had. After a thorough exploration of his body and internal biological systems, they determined that there was no dungeon core inside of him. They still had no idea why that was.

Apparently, even brand-new dungeon cores were “born” with the ability to do everything they needed to in order to survive: absorb and manipulate mana, create their own dungeon, fill it with traps and defenders, and even communicate with other dungeon cores. Of course, as a newborn dungeon core, their ability to do all of that was at a very, very limited level; the dungeon that they could create at day one could encompass all of a couple of inches around the core, with the traps and defenders in proportion. And despite being able to actually *do* everything, they didn’t know what they *needed* to do.

Therefore, while absorbing mana over time and growing larger both in terms of size and power, they learned how to properly defend themselves

– which was why it usually took over fifty years for the new core to be able to survive on its own. Although the transfer of mana to another core was possible and was used frequently during its training, the growing process couldn't be sped up; it took time to fully absorb and restructure the primal energy so that it could be incorporated inside the cores.

All of this essentially meant that new offspring were born being able to take care of themselves, as they didn't need to be fed, clothed, cleaned, and kept warm – but not Fred. Whereas cores only needed at least the smallest amount of ambient mana to survive, his parents had to learn how to feed and raise a small baby that they couldn't communicate with right away from a different species altogether. The fact that they didn't shy away from the challenge made Fred love them even more.

While he learned all about the history and initial formation of a new dungeon core, they didn't teach him specifics on dungeon management, trap formation, defender creation, or any of the other myriad things they would normally teach their offspring. He was sure that they *would've* taught him, but there was no way for him to learn.

Although his parents were dungeon cores – he wasn't.

It wasn't until he was older and could really understand the differences between them that he was also able to see the similarities. Being the spawn of two dungeon cores wasn't for nothing; while he couldn't build and run a dungeon, he did have access to a lot of the same benefits that they had. He couldn't manipulate mana as they could, but he could see/sense it and – almost – touch it; it was always tauntingly out of reach, in his face and yet he couldn't grasp it. He tried – many, many times – over the years, but there was obviously something missing.

He had also learned how to sense the traps inside their dual-element dungeon, both through years of practice and by sensing the particular mana

signature they contained. Just being able to sense them didn't make him immune to their deadliness, but it definitely helped him navigate his way through them safely.

The dungeon defenders were also something that he had information about; he could look at them and instinctively know what type of defender it was, their current "level" (he had learned that the higher their "level", the more powerful they seemed), and some basic stats about them. These stats included values for their current health, how strong they were, how fast they were, what kind of defenses they had, etc. None of the dungeon defenders in his parents' dungeon had a level higher than 5 (other than Firbey and Frozzles, who were both level 10); however, they really didn't need anything more powerful than that because even the strongest wild beast he had seen venture inside was only level 4.

But that was about all he could determine about the wild creatures that he had seen – their name and their level. Everything else was either hidden from him or was unknown.

And, of course, he had the skill that allowed him to listen to his parents talk to each other. He didn't try to communicate back to them – because he didn't want to reveal to them that he could hear them – and because he had a feeling that it wouldn't work. From what he understood of his ability, he needed to be able to manipulate mana in order for it to work; because he could at least sense and see it, he could *hear* the communication – but not talk back.

But that was fine, because since Fred wasn't a "core", he now had the freedom to come and go as he pleased. While dungeon cores *could* move their entire dungeon, they could only do so at a rate of about 500 feet a year – and the space they needed to move to had to be currently unclaimed by another dungeon. Or, they could abandon their current dungeon and have

one of their defenders carry them away from it to establish another one somewhere else.

However, they needed to be desperate to do that because they would end up losing the concentrations of mana that they might've spent centuries building up inside their previous dungeon. He suspected that this was what happened to his parents, though they never told him that outright.

And that freedom that he now would enjoy was at hand. He skirted by the water snakes near the entrance, careful not to step on their tails. They would never attack him – all of the defenders were instructed not to – but he didn't want to push his luck. Plus, there was no reason to accidentally hurt them; they were just doing their job.

He stopped just inside the entrance, looking out at the cold barren wasteland outside; day after day he remembered staring at the world out there, hoping and dreaming that one day he would be able to explore every inch of it just as he had explored every inch of his home. He was always forbidden from leaving the dungeon in no uncertain terms; despite his mischievousness and penchant for breaking the rules, this was one that he didn't dare break. He wasn't sure if it was some sort of innate instinct, but he always had the feeling that if he did disobey, it would be a monumental mistake.

And so he had never stepped even one foot outside the dungeon, his home for over sixteen years.

Until now.

Chapter 3

A blast of frigid air nearly knocked him over after he took his first few hesitant steps outside the entrance of the dungeon. *It's much colder out here than I thought it would be.* Fortunately, he had taken his mother's advice and bundled up, his layers of clothing keeping almost all of the wind away from his skin. It was a cloudy day, the sun that he had caught glimpses of now and then hidden somewhere behind the light-grey cover. He looked up in wonder at the sky; it was just so...big. He was used to being enclosed in small spaces and the sight of such openness excited and – admittedly – scared him.

Turning back to what he was doing, he walked further out. Once he stepped far enough away from the opening to the dungeon, the gusts died off until it was only a gentle breeze. Still cold though.

He turned around, getting a look at the outside of his home for the first time. Rising out of the ground stood a small hill made out of jagged rocks about 50 feet tall and twice that wide. The entrance to the dungeon was only a small arched portal just short of twice his height; it was cut into the rock face in smooth lines, the only evidence that it wasn't a natural cavern inside. He knew that the bulk of the expertly crafted and designed tunnels and rooms that made up his parents' place was located underground; nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel disappointed at how... plain and boring it looked from the outside.

There was so much life and color inside the dungeon that to Fred it was more of a fantastical wonderland than a dangerous defensive system. But looking at it from the outside, even with a view of the cave inside the entrance, he wouldn't have believed that all of that could exist just below

his feet. *I guess that if you're hiding out, you don't want to advertise your location to the world.*

Looking at his “shadows”, he could see that the cold air was having an effect on Firbey; the fire elemental had shrunk in upon herself, creating a blast of heat that wasn't unwelcome. Frozzles didn't look like he had been affected, though sometimes it was hard to tell with the blank stare he usually sported.

Freedom! From looking out the entrance all those years, all he could see was a simple view of a bare expanse that stretched out into the distance, where it ended in a wall of brown and green that his parents told him were trees. He had never seen one up close, as the dungeon didn't have – nor had any need of – them, so he was excited to finally get the chance to see one.

But surely there are other, more exciting sights to see out here! He always imagined that new, wonderful things were just out of the range of his view, hiding behind the entrance to the dungeon or off to the left or right. He turned his body away from the dungeon behind him and circled around, anticipation and excitement running through his head as he took in the full splendor of his new world.

Disappointment flooded him as all he saw was the same... sameness...he had looked at forever. He knew from his lessons with his parents that the entrance faced south, the trees in the distance part of a northern “forest”. His father warned him that they were far to the north and that there wasn't anything of note near them; he had *heard* him but didn't really *understand* until now.

To the north, as far as he could see behind the hill that held the topmost portion of his home, there was nothing except the flat expanse of gently rolling hills of semi-frozen dirt and patches of vegetation that somehow could survive the harsh temperatures. In the far, far distance, he

could barely make out the tops of what appeared to be massive, white-topped mountains; they were so far away, in fact, that he couldn't accurately tell that they *were* mountains, but that seemed like the only explanation he could come up with by their appearance.

When he looked to the east, he could see that the forest to the south gently drifted north before gradually petering out; it extended much further than his current location, though it stopped almost parallel with the dungeon. After that...more barren expanse.

It looked almost identical to the west, as if his home had carved out a sizable portion of the forest in their location, leaving it bare of any sort of vegetation. He knew his parents were powerful, but he didn't know if they could do anything like that; the mana concentrations in the surrounding air and land were so miniscule that he doubted they had the available power to do it. His mother once told him that it had taken decades for them to acquire enough mana from their surroundings to form even the most basic of dungeons. Based upon what he was seeing, he thought it might've been more like a century or more to get to the power levels they were at currently.

And that was all before Fred was born.

No wonder there isn't anything else out here; nothing could live in a place like this for long. It was actually astonishing to him that his parents had not only managed to survive but thrive, though even the slightest bit of ambient mana was enough to sustain them. Even so, the work and dedication involved in creating a dungeon of the size they now had was impressive. *Love has no limits, apparently.*

Shoving down his disappointment with his surroundings, Fred looked around and tried to figure out what he wanted to do now. Without a reason to go another direction (as there was nothing of note anywhere else), he

headed south toward the trees he had constantly envisioned being able to one day see, touch, feel, and smell.

He wasn't a good judge of distance, because what he thought was going to take no more than an hour, ended up being a six-hour journey across the barren wasteland. What had thrown him off was the sheer size of the trees when he finally got close enough to them to make out finer details; he was expecting them to be two or three times his height – but these were more than ten times that! They were so tall that he had trouble comprehending them at first – they were literally like nothing he had seen before.

When he was close enough to the line of trees (which stopped/started abruptly, like they had been trimmed back like a knife), he could see they had small lines of green-tinged mana flowing through them leading into the ground below. It wasn't a lot, but it was definitely more concentrated in them than he had seen so far outside of the dungeon.

I wonder if they absorbed all the mana from the trees they could reach – killing them – and that's why there isn't any nearby. He thought that might explain how they were able to initially establish some sort of defenses without falling prey to the wild beasts nearby – he had always wondered about that. He had been told that the reason that they occasionally saw the creatures trying to get inside their home was because most of them were attracted to large concentrations of mana; dungeon cores were essentially big bundles of super-concentrated mana.

Fred moved closer and cautiously touched the outside of the tree, feeling the rough skin of the giant plant in wonder. They had a few water-based plants inside the dungeon that floated on top of the ponds scattered around the rooms, but they were nothing like this. He craned his neck to look up, making out the branches and leaves that blocked most of the view

of the sky. He just couldn't believe how...large...everything seemed to be out in the world.

He started to rethink his plans to explore; the more he learned and experienced outside the dungeon, the more he was starting to worry that he wasn't ready for it. While he was ready and eager less than half a day ago, the sheer foreignness of everything was a bit overwhelming. He almost turned around right then and headed back home, abandoning his adventure before it had barely begun.

"Firbey, Frozzles – what do you think? Should I turn back?"

They of course didn't answer (or even acknowledge in any way that he had spoken to them), but he never expected them to. He frequently talked to them, even though they never responded; however, they were the closest he had to "friends" as there was in his little world. While he loved the Fire and Water dungeon cores back home more than anything in the world, they weren't necessarily his "friends" – they were his parents. He only knew about the term when he overheard his mother arguing about some that she apparently used to have.

"But they're my friends – surely they wouldn't give up our location to my father."

"They might be your friends, or at least they were, but that doesn't mean they might not let something slip. And who knows what the situation is like since we left; for all we know, they might have turned against you by now."

"I doubt that – we've been friends for so long that there's very little that could break that bond between us."

*"Be that as it may, it's not **our** safety that I'm worried about..."*

"...fine. I know you're right, but I don't have to like it."

He knew that they had been talking about him, but there was nothing he could do about it. They had sacrificed so much for him that he didn't know what he could say or do to make up for it. *Maybe going away is the best thing that I can do. Then they can go back to their previous lives without worrying about my safety all the time.* However, he just couldn't imagine living without them in his life; he pushed the thought to the back of his mind, content to think about it at a much later time.

No matter what he eventually chose to do, he knew he couldn't squander this opportunity to experience something other than the confines of his dungeon home. He had a feeling that if he went back now, he would be hard-pressed to convince himself to venture back outside. *I have to do this.*

Making the difficult decision for his bodyguards since they didn't seem to have an opinion, he let go of the tree (which he didn't realize he had started hugging at some point) and moved further into the forest, his companions in tow. While the fire elemental and giant frog were essentially extensions of the mana inside his home and normally couldn't venture more than a couple of feet beyond the dungeon's influence – otherwise they would fall apart and disperse – his father had told him that they were infused with an extra helping of power that allowed them to travel up to a week before they had to return. If they expended some of their inherent mana in a battle or used it to heal themselves, then that time limit could be shortened considerably, however.

Fortunately, he was only planning to be gone for two days; that gave them plenty of time to explore and get back. If they were attacked at some point, he promised his parents that they would immediately return once it was safe – he just hoped that he didn't get attacked right at the start.

Not that he hadn't learned how to defend himself, but he didn't want his largely untested skills to get in the way of his adventure.

The further he ventured into the forest, the darker it became as the treetops overhead blocked out what little light there was streaming through their leaves. That didn't bother him too much, however, as his low-light vision was superb; dark dungeon caves with only intermittent torches made it a necessity. He wasn't born with it, but he had adapted well to his environment – and had the skills to show for it.

Fred traveled for another four hours before he called it a day, looking for a suitable place to stop for the night. He was apprehensive at first, thinking that (similar to back home) there were beasts around every tree, just waiting for him to appear before striking. After an hour of cautiously venturing from tree to tree, looking for traps that might be set along the ground or somewhere in his path – and finding nothing – he relaxed just the slightest bit. It was enough of a relaxation that he was finally able to enjoy his exploration, and he noticed a multitude of interesting plants growing along the bases of trees he passed. He had left a little room in his bag for anything he might come across, so he took samples of everything he found.

But he didn't see a single wild animal. Which he was grateful for... and a little disappointed. Based upon the number of attacks to the dungeon over the years (which, when he really thought back to them, only amounted to just shy of 30), he had for some reason expected the forest to be teeming with life, even if it wasn't full of some of the dangerous monsters he'd seen before. Which – don't get him wrong – he appreciated not having to run for his life, but the absence of *any* type of life was strange to him. He was used to being surrounded by his bodyguards, dungeon defenders, and even his parents; the silence put him on edge.

He had brought some supplies with him, but now that he was out in the middle of a forest that showed no signs of an end, nothing that he brought with him – other than the mana-formed food – was beneficial. Eventually, he found a relatively open space in between four trees, giving him ample space to lay the only thing he had brought that *was* useful: a thin blanket. He pulled the blanket out of his bag, dislodging some of the plant samples he had collected (which he immediately shoved back in), and laid the thin fabric along a clear stretch of ground that was free of roots.

Sitting cross-legged and eating a few of his food orbs, he held a “conversation” with his bodyguards:

“So, Firbey, what did you think of our first day out in the wide world?”

He responded to himself with a higher-pitched voice. “Well, I’d have to say that it was exciting and boring at the same time.

“Fair enough, fair enough. I can’t say I disagree – I just hope that we come across something interesting by midday tomorrow, because we’ll have to turn back after that.”

Now with a lower tone. “But I don’t want to go back yet, we just got here!

“Now, now, Frozzles, we told Mom and Dad that we would only be out for two nights. We can’t go back on our word – otherwise they might not let us leave again for years!

“Ok, ok, I hear you – but let’s stay out as long as we possibly can.” Frozzles was almost always the one that convinced Fred to do things that got him into trouble.

Satisfied that neither of them was going to try to convince him to stay out longer than he had promised to, he finished his tasteless-yet-nutritional

meal and lay down on his blanket. “Firbey, can you make it a little warmer, please?” *It never hurts to be polite.*

Firbey got a little closer to him, which was a bit too hot, but she eventually expanded until she was twice her usual size, dispersing the heat in a larger area. He closed his eyes, confident that his two bodyguards would watch over him in his sleep. Although it wasn’t as comfortable as his hand-made bed back in the dungeon, the warmth suffusing him from the fire elemental was enough to make him feel right at home. Even the cold ground underneath his blanket was starting to warm up by the time he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 4

Waking up out of the close confines of his dungeon home was slightly disorienting, though Fred quickly adjusted to it with the resilience of youth. Firbey and Frozzles were still there, keeping watch over him while he slept; they never had to sleep – being dungeon-created constructs – so they were the near-perfect guards. *If only they could hold a conversation or two, then they **would be** perfect.*

He quickly packed up his blanket and prepared to leave, the eagerness spurring him on to hurry. He just knew that there had to be *something* out there – he just had to find it. The forest was barely brightening up from the sun that seemed to want to appear that day, though he doubted he would be able to see it for the trees. The darkness still didn't bother him, as he was used to finding his way through darkness, and the mana flows he could still see all around him inside the trees were more than enough to avoid running into them.

Two hours into his journey, he was getting more and more concerned that he wouldn't find anything of note; that was, until he found a small pond surrounded on all sides by more trees. If he hadn't been paying attention to the mana flows, he would've fallen straight into the water. Fortunately, he recognized the tell-tale blue-tinged power ahead and stopped before he took an unintended dip.

His father's ponds inside the dungeon were filled with deadly defenders, ranging from flesh-stripping fish with razor-sharp teeth, to water snakes that injected their victims with a paralyzing poison. Despite the fact that they were relatively simple constructions (at least, that's what his dad

told him) created from pure mana, they – along with the fire-based creatures filling the dungeon – made his home feel...alive.

This pond, however, did not.

He could see that the pond was fed by a trickling stream coming from the west, the mana flows into the small reservoir constant yet weak. The blue Water Mana was much, much less concentrated inside the water here than what he normally saw in the dungeon; he wasn't sure what the difference was, though it could be because it was purer as it was filtered and refined through his father's dungeon core.

While the mana in the pond in front of him was present and visible, it was weak; in fact, it was mixed in with brown-tinged mana splotches he had learned belonged to the Earth element, along with the green shade similar to the trees around him that denoted a Nature element. There were a few other elements he had been taught about, though he didn't see any of them here – other than the very faint traces of Air flowing everywhere through the forest.

From seeing a few of them invade his home, he knew that wild beasts/creatures were also infused with mana; though, since they weren't formed entirely from mana like dungeon defenders, the amount was much less. Still, it was enough to strengthen his parents' dungeon cores when the beasts were slain – which they immediately absorbed once the mana was released upon their deaths.

So, knowing that he would see even faint traces of mana inside of any nearby creatures, he was disappointed when he didn't see anything inside the pond. No fish, no snakes, no crabs – nothing. There weren't even any insects that he had been told existed, though he had never seen any; he was told it was because they were located so far north that very few lived nearby.

Ignoring the empty and now-uninteresting pond (he had seen plenty of those in his life), he looked around for anything else; but there were just trees, and then more trees. He took off south and a little west, knowing that he only had another four or five hours that he could travel before he had to turn back. Fortunately, he didn't have to worry about getting lost; his sense of direction was so finely tuned that he could accurately point out which direction he needed to go to get back to his home. *Those years of navigating dark corridors and rooms were more beneficial than I thought.*

Even with the direction change, there was nothing to see. By the time he reasoned that it was time to head back, he hadn't seen anything more than a couple of interesting plants and...more trees. The massive monoliths of the Nature element seemed to go on forever, as he didn't see any end in sight. *It feels like I could spend years walking and not get anywhere.*

"How 'bout it, guys – time to head back?"

They, of course, still didn't answer – nor did he answer for them. With a big sigh at his unproductive first outing, he turned around and headed straight for his prior night's resting place. Since he was cutting straight to it instead of retracing his steps, he was hoping that he might've just missed something by going a different way initially.

And, lo and behold, he did find something! It wasn't a wild beast or anything as interesting as that, though; it was a small plant hidden behind a non-descript tree. He probably would've walked by without even seeing it if he hadn't been paying close attention to the various mana signatures all around him.

When he worked his way around the tree, he found a small bush with tiny red flowers growing all over it; the color reminded him of his mother's dungeon core, and so did the mana element. A small amount of the Fire element was circulating through the entire bush, just barely visible over the

Nature – and the petals were warm to the touch. He ripped off a bundle of the tiny flowers and shoved them in his bag, thinking that his mom might like to see them. *At least I found **something** interesting.*

The rest of the trek back to his campsite from the night before went by quickly without interruption. Unfortunately. Fred wasn't exactly hoping to be attacked every step of the way, but he was hoping to utilize some of the skills he had acquired over the last couple of years mock-fighting against his parents' dungeon defenders.

They were the perfect training partners; they were instructed not to hurt him severely (though there were a few close-calls a couple of times), and when he inevitably killed them – they were absorbed into the dungeon and remade almost instantly. And, fortunately, the limitation that dungeon cores usually had to abide by that kept them from changing anything inside the dungeon while a “foreign” entity was present didn't apply to him; apparently, he was considered part of the dungeon. Otherwise, his parents wouldn't be able to respawn the defenders unrestrictedly.

Of course, without the real threat of death, there was only so much he could train for. That, and most of the defenders he trained against had been low level, meaning that there wasn't too much danger from them. If they ganged up on him, he would've been in trouble, but his parents didn't want to risk having too many away from their posts at one time. They, instead, only wanted him to do one thing when presented with an actual threat: run.

While he could understand the sentiment behind this, running away had never been in his plans. He wanted to prove himself to his parents, show them that he could help defend the dungeon just as well – or even better – than their own defenders. Fred loved them with all his heart, but sometimes their precautions felt just a little too much sometimes. He just wanted a chance to prove himself to them.

Well, maybe next time I'll stay out longer and finally show them that I can take care of myself. By the time he arrived at his campsite and rolled out his blanket, he was already thinking about the next time he could get out of the dungeon and explore the world again. He fell asleep – after having Firbey warm the air up again – with visions of him leading a defensive force, bravely beating back a tide of wild beasts hoping to invade his home.

* * *

The biting cold wind coming out of the north woke Fred up, the previously warm-enough clothes no longer helping against the frigid air. At first, he didn't know why his teeth were chattering, but as he sleepily opened his eyes...he saw the reason.

Firbey wasn't there. Neither was Frozzles.

Fred's guardians had been such an integral part of his existence that his mind couldn't process what he was seeing. It was as if at some point in the night, his left and right arms had been cut off without him knowing it. He was literally paralyzed with confusion and uncertainty; this had never happened before.

He lay there, unmoving, for almost 10 minutes; the forest was quiet all around him, so he listened to see if maybe they were just out of sight for a few moments and would be back soon. *It's not like I know what they do while I'm sleeping – maybe they do this every night and it's just today that I woke up before they got back. Maybe they have a secret relationship like my parents and are sneaking away to be alone.* The thought made him smile a little, before realizing that they probably didn't have the intelligence to do anything like that. He was about to get up and start looking for them when they came back.

However, two things shouted out to him that everything...wasn't quite right.

For one, they didn't approach him and take up their places as his bodyguards, stationing themselves behind and to the sides. Fred was so used to them being in their places that to see them anywhere else was highly abnormal.

For the second, they were involved in a full-scale battle between themselves, doing their best to kill each other.

Firbey condensed for a moment before a fireball launched from her center towards Frozzles, who narrowly avoided the projectile by hopping to the side. The giant frog retaliated with a quick spurt of water from his mouth (he didn't even know his bodyguard could do that), which impacted the fire elemental full on, dimming the flames a miniscule amount.

As a counterattack, Firbey shot forward, moving faster than Fred had ever seen her move before; nearly teleporting to Frozzles' side, the fire elemental extended a tongue of flame out from her essence, touching the giant frog's back – which ignited the acid pustules. With his entire backside on fire, Frozzles let out a horrendous croak and turned to the elemental, lashing out with his own tongue.

This one was much stickier, however, when compared to the flames of Firbey; it somehow latched onto something at the fire elemental's core, scorching itself in the process, but it didn't let go. A tug of war commenced between the long, sticky tongue of the giant frog and the flaming ball of fire – which, despite shrinking down and becoming uncomfortably hot, couldn't get free.

Fred watched the fight between his two bodyguards with rapt attention; he was so shocked and confused by the developments that he couldn't even move. In fact, his mind was so focused on the fight that he

didn't realize he was in danger until it was almost too late. Their struggling was so fierce that they were inadvertently moving toward him; he could feel the skin on his face start to become uncomfortably hot and dried out, bordering on pain. This finally spurred him to escape the battle by quickly crab-walking backwards, fleeing from the immediate danger.

They were so focused on killing each other that they didn't even see him. If he had stayed where he was for another few seconds, he would've been set on fire just as his blanket now currently was. *Oh, no! My bag!* In his haste to escape the fight, he had left his bag full of supplies next to where he was sleeping, which was now burning along with his blanket.

This finally knocked some sense into him. "Firbey, Frozzles – stop fighting! What has gotten into you! Stop this right now!"

Without even acknowledging his orders, the two deadly bodyguards fought even harder, with squirts of water erupting from the giant frog's mouth, dimming the still tongue-caught fire elemental. Firbey wasn't going to take that lying down, however; the sticky appendage attached to her seemed to be coated in a layer of fire, causing black scorch marks to appear all over the tongue.

Fred continued to try and order them to stop, all the while backing up and staying away from the increasing heat infusing the small clearing where he had camped for the night. *What's going on? Why are they fighting each other – and why won't they stop?*

Fortunately, or unfortunately (depending on how you looked at it), the fight didn't look like it was going to last much longer. Frozzles appeared to be literally melting from the heat, his struggling hops getting weaker and weaker as the fight went on. Finally, after another weak fireball launched from Firbey (who was weakening along with him), the giant frog collapsed, burnt and scorched tongue still attached to the fire elemental.

Fred watched in horror as his friend died, something that he never thought he would see; he had always been there, as far back as he could remember. To be brought down by his other friend was even worse – such a thing would’ve been unimaginable even a few minutes ago. *Why? What is going—*

His confusion and brief mourning were interrupted when a weak fireball hit the tree next to his face, flaming bark hitting him unexpectedly across the cheek. He flung himself backwards again, shock and anger replacing his former feelings. “Hey! What are you doing? Stop it right this instant!” His pleas reached deaf ears, however, as Firbey continued to advance; she was much smaller than usual, though it wasn’t from condensing to become hotter – much of the mana infused in the fire elemental had been spent already.

She moved quickly, crossing the distance between them in a flash, and Fred instinctively unsheathed his knives and held them out in front of him. He knew that fire-based defenders could be hurt by his weapons just as much as the water-based ones, though he would end up getting burned (or worse) in the process. *They’ve all gone crazy! What am I supposed to do?*

With no other option (since she seemed not to be obeying orders anymore), Fred prepared to engage the fire elemental. He poised to strike, hoping to hit his former friend with a direct hit to the primary core of her mana, reducing the amount of heat exposure. However, another fireball formed on the exterior of the corona of flames, which was launched straight at him from only a few feet away. He saw it forming and was barely able to dive to the side in time; still, it passed only an inch over his left arm, leaving a painful line of scorched flesh in its wake.

Fred hissed in pain as he struggled to rise from where he threw himself, but he quickly realized he wasn't going to be fast enough. The fire elemental was right over him, descending to engulf his body in flames, its proximity enough to finish the job. He put his arm up holding one of his knives out front, but he didn't have the leverage to properly defend himself, let alone attack. He braced against the intense heat and struck out ineffectively, as the fire elemental seemed to dance out of the way of his attack effortlessly.

Just as he felt the heat become unbearable, Firbey was yanked backwards toward Frozzles, the attached tongue retracting toward the – apparently, almost-dead – mouth of the giant frog. Caught by surprise, the fire elemental couldn't react in time to pull against the powerful appendage; she was swallowed whole, the mouth closing around her entire essence. With no air nearby to fuel her flames, she was snuffed out quicker than a torch falling into a pond.

Frozzles tried to stand up, whether in victory or in an attempt to go after his former charge, Fred didn't know; it didn't matter though, as the giant frog fell to the ground again, strength spent on his last attack. Seconds later, the giant frog appeared to quickly deflate, becoming a formless blob that soon evaporated, leaving a small blob of mana behind.

Chapter 5

Fred – still on the ground and in the process of rising – froze as the events of the last few minutes processed in his brain. *What the... How... Why...* His muscles started to shake as they struggled to keep him in a half-risen position; he finally completed the action he had started and rose unsteadily to his feet. He stumbled back over to the clearing, absently noting that the place where his bag and blanket used to be was a still-smoldering pile of unburned scraps and ashes.

As for his former bodyguards, he knelt by the side of their demise, the steady hum of power emanating from the formless mana on the ground. He had never seen mana like this before; normally, when one of his parents' dungeon defenders was killed or needed to be replaced for some reason, it instantly melted into the ground, absorbed by either one of the dungeon cores to be reused. Hence, this was a new experience for him.

The small gathering of raw mana was a mixture of blue and red, denoting the different elements that had infused the two “defenders” that had died. *Though I would have to say that they failed at their defending job, here.* At first the two colors were equally mixed together, but as Fred watched, the two colors started to segregate themselves, moving around until there were two relatively equal blobs sitting right next to each other.

He knelt down at the edge of the pools of mana, staring at them in fascination. While he had seen a lot of mana used for different purposes inside his home, as well as the miniscule traces of power obvious in his surroundings (such as the trees, the earth below, and even the very air around him), the raw nature of this mana was quite unique to him. For some reason, he even felt a tiny connection to it, as if it was calling out to

him; the feeling was so foreign that he focused on it, shutting out his other senses until he isolated it within himself.

Unbidden, the same part inside of him that was able to see and sense the mana around him reached out toward the awaiting conglomeration of power on the ground, using his left hand as the conduit. As soon as he touched the red pool of mana, his fingers almost seemed to suck the goo-like substance into his body, disappearing instantly into his skin but leaving a pleasant warmth behind.

Before the red mana was all absorbed, Fred placed his other hand on the blue, feeling the refreshing coolness of the water-based power flow into him from his other side. Within seconds, both of the mana blobs were gone, effortlessly absorbed into his body; Fred could feel the two powers inside of him, rushing through every part of his body. The feeling was strange, as if there was something crawling right underneath his skin, powerful and yet...restrained.

Or at least, he *thought* it was restrained.

A sudden spike of pain in his stomach knocked the wind out of him, and he collapsed on the ground, writhing in torment. The agony slowly spread out from his torso, traveling to his limbs, causing them to twitch and spasm uncontrollably. *What is this? What is it doing to—*

The pain reached his head, and suddenly he knew: the opposing elements of fire and water were fighting against each other inside his body. It was as if Firbey and Frozzles were continuing their fight from earlier – they had just chosen a new battleground. The torturous battle threatened to rip him apart and he almost blacked out from the suffering his body was going through; an unknown part of his mind wouldn't let him off that easily, however.

Do not fight it...embrace your element and infuse it into your structure, covering each facet as if you are trying to build upon your existing self. Reach into the core of yourself and hold onto the power, making it a part of you; you are the mana and the mana is you.

That made absolutely no sense to him, but the words and intent behind them did help to distract him from the pain. *Embrace the mana? What is that supposed to mean? Am I supposed to give it a hug?* The idea of trying to hug either of his bodyguards was so ludicrous to him that it forced him to smile a little, even as his body was wracked by the intense battle being waged inside of him.

The humorous thought seemed to have an effect on the elements, however; they didn't stop their assault on each other, but Fred could definitely feel a lessening of the intensity. *Maybe I just need to show them that they don't need to do this – they can get along without fighting.* Fred pictured in his mind his parents; the way they were able to incorporate both of their elements in harmony inside the dungeon, their sharing of their limited resources to achieve something together that was better as a whole than as separate defenses, and – of course – their eternal and endless love of each other.

He remembered the love they extended to him; regardless of his form, they raised him, took care of him, and protected him as best they could. Eternally grateful for the caring and gentle attitude of his parents, he was also awed at the kind and thoughtful way they raised him – by not making him feel like an anomaly, an outcast, an outsider, or even a defective dungeon core. To them, he was their son, no matter what he looked like... and that was all that mattered.

As those memories and thoughts ran through his head, he could feel the warring elements start to calm, their fighting scaling down until it was no more than small jabs at each other. He didn't even feel any more pain by the time they stopped, settling down as thoughts of love and peace suffused his mind and the muscles in his body relaxed, sore from the intense workout they just received. Eventually, the opposing mana elements had stopped moving throughout his body, settling in tranquility alongside each other in a harmonious joining of peaceful communion.

Fred lay on the ground where he had fallen, gasping out breaths that were slowly returning to normal; his body relaxed as well, his tortured muscles feeling like jelly. Gradually, everything seemed to normalize: his body, his mind, and the power infusing both. As soon as that happened, he heard a faint *click* in his head.

Newborn Dungeon Core Initialization Program Commencing...

What—

Congratulations on absorbing your first mana from your environment, newborn! Learning how to absorb and manipulate the ambient mana around you is an important and fundamental requirement for being a productive and successful part of the ** faction! You are on your way to becoming a mighty and powerful dungeon core! Make your faction proud!***

This initialization program is designed to help all newborn dungeon cores acclimate to their new existence, by doing the following:

- ***Introducing you to your new Mana Manipulation menus***

- *Presenting your Creation options*
- *Exploring your Status Menu*
- *Basic Dungeon Management guidelines and rules*
- *Growing your core and expanding your territory*
- *Absorbing and converting foreign mana into ***** mana*
- *And more!*

While this initialization program provides a basic understanding of what you – as a dungeon core – will need to learn, please don't hesitate to ask your parents about faction-specific questions on the dungeon development process. Not everything is covered here, and your parents will be your prime mentors and guides for the foreseeable future, so they should have the answers you seek.

If you are more of the independent type of dungeon core, you can also visit the help section in your menu.

Now, after your parents' congratulations on your initialization, please visit the course guide for suggested learning topics...

The words came unbidden to his mind, running across his vision but not impeding it. He found that he could recall them whenever he wanted to, running through the entire thing over and over again. Each time he did, he understood a little more of what it was trying to say; it didn't make much sense at first, because the meaning behind the words was unknown and yet familiar at the same time. His sluggish mind – still overcome from the sudden awakening, fight between his bodyguards, and the absorption of their mana – finally caught up, though.

This says I'm a dungeon core! I can finally be what my parents always wanted me to be!

Fred knew his mother and father loved him, but he knew that they had wished he had been born...normal. *I may not look the same, but I'm a dungeon core now!* His parents were going to be so surprised and, hopefully, excited!

He mentally *shoved* the message away, curious to explore everything it had to teach, yet wanting his parents to share in the joy and exploration of his newfound status. They wanted so badly to be able to teach him all about running a dungeon that he didn't want to deny them that experience.

Scrambling to his feet, he felt full of energy now. In the corner of his mind, he noticed that the level of mana infusing his system was slowly dropping; at the same time, his burnt arm was starting to heal, and his stomach was starting to feel full, like he had just eaten a meal. Those feelings were secondary, though, as he raced through the forest in the dark, using his ability to sense the ambient mana around him (which seemed to have strengthened with his new discovery) to navigate his way home.

A few hours later, the sun was just starting to rise behind the clouds filling the sky when he burst out of the trees, running full-tilt without slowing towards home. He felt a little tired, even though running through the forest should've exhausted him long before; nonetheless, he still felt as if he could run for days. The dual mana in his system had dropped a bit, but it didn't feel like it was a significant amount. *I wonder why it's going away? Is there a way to see how much I have left?*

Fire Mana: 88/100

Water Mana: 88/100

He tripped and fell, skidding along the semi-frozen ground and ripping open big gashes on his face and hands. *Where did **that** come from?* He slowly picked himself up, wary of damaging anything further and checking for anything broken. The stinging pain started to hit him as he got up, though it immediately dulled and started to fade. Fred watched in amazement as the skin on his scraped hands started to slowly mend together, itching slightly while it was fixing itself. It wasn't instantaneous or quick...but it *was* healing.

He stood there in amazement for nearly an hour, feeling the same pain then itch then tingling happen on his face, sealing up the wounds he had suffered. Eventually, they were as healthy and unblemished as newborn skin – though the blood that had covered the injuries was still there. *I've got to take a bath when I get home, Mother is going to freak when she sees all this blood. I wonder if this healing is just part of being a dungeon core?*

Fire Mana: 80/100

Water Mana: 80/100

Ah, so that's how it is. Although his mind had registered it at the time, Fred really hadn't looked at his arm that Firbey had burned; now that he looked at it, he could see that the scorched part was healed as well, a few blackened flakes of skin that were easily brushed aside the only evidence that anything had happened.

He smiled, even more excited to show his parents what he could do now. Starting to run again, he could only imagine how shocked they would be when they found out about the change in him. In the distance, he could see the small mountain of rock that indicated home, so he ran even faster,

too excited to fully wonder about the real reason behind **why** his bodyguards had attacked each other.

Chapter 6

As Fred got closer to home, running with his head in the clouds, his awareness came crashing back as he noticed a patch of torn-up dirt. It was so out of place on the largely featureless expanse of the northern wasteland that he immediately stopped and looked at it closer. The footprint – for that was what it looked like – was huge, bigger than his head, even. Although it wasn't clear, it appeared as if whatever had caused it had long, sharp nails that had ripped up the semi-frozen ground like it was the softest earth.

And it was headed straight for the dungeon.

As he looked back along where it came from, it appeared as if it came slightly from the west, intersecting and following his path that he had taken from home two days before. He wasn't a good judge at how old the tracks were, but he knew they must've occurred at some point between when he left and now, though when he bent down, he could see that some frost from the frigid northern temperatures was already starting to form even on the deepest indentations in the earth.

Worried about such a powerful creature getting near his home (he'd never seen anything that could rip up the ground like that before), he doubled his speed, pulling out everything he had to get there in time to help possibly defend the dungeon. *I can do so much more now! Please let me get there in time!* He didn't know exactly what he could do, since he hadn't taken the time to read up and learn about his new status, but he was hoping that it would come naturally.

Fred's worry only started to grow as he approached the entrance, passing by more and more tracks from different beasts (he assumed) leading to the dungeon, though none of them tore the ground up like the first one he

had seen. He tore through the entrance without stopping, only slowing down once he was inside, and shock tore through his whole being.

There was no mana...anywhere.

As he started to run through the inert dungeon towards his parents' core room, he could see a few faint signatures of where the dungeon defenders used to be – as well as the trap placements – but it was more of a film left behind with no actual mana inside it. He recognized the “film”, however; it was what the defenders left behind for almost a day after he had mock-fought and killed them. The mana was reabsorbed right away, but there was always the barest trace of them left behind.

Halfway through the rooms – which he traversed faster than ever due to the absence of defenses – he saw his first sight of something unfamiliar. There used to be a fire trap that would shoot out jets of scorching-hot flames toward whoever stepped on the wrong piece of flooring; now it was as dead and lifeless as the rest of the dungeon. However, just past it, he noticed a faint green signature on the ground that he instinctively knew was originally mana from the Nature element.

That was it, though; Fred couldn't determine any more than that *something foreign* had been there and was most likely killed by his mother's trap. Leaving it behind, he ran through the rest of the dungeon, his breathing ragged as worry swamped his emotions and he started to panic. He flew by and absently noted a few other foreign signatures strewn all over the place: a few brown ones here, a yellow there, two more green ones near another fire trap, and even a white one. He ignored them, though, as his panicked state could only focus on the hope that his parents were still alive and waiting for him.

He blew past his own dwelling, built with his own two hands long ago, and made his way to his parents' abode. He flinched slightly when he

saw that the crack leading to their room had been enlarged, the large gouges around the opening hinting at what was responsible. He didn't even have to squeeze through, at least, so he was quickly able to get inside.

Utterly devastated – both the room and his world were completely destroyed.

The walls and ceiling appeared to have suffered from some sort of explosion, as whole chunks were missing here and there, ending up on the floor of the room strewn all around. The rest of the room didn't fare any better, with scorch-marks marring the previously smooth and pristine look of the cave. His mother did like to keep a neat and tidy home – at least in this room.

All along the floor – and even plastered along one of the walls – there were concentrated blobs of mana scattered everywhere, some very small while others were huge. They came in every color he had ever been taught about, and he instantly knew what they were without having to think about it. The black ones were from the Dark element, white from the Light, yellow from Air, brown and green from Earth and, of course, Nature.

What surprised Fred the most, though, was the presence of blue and red foreign mana. He thought he might've been able to tell even if just their signatures were there, but with the entire mana blob there it was more than obvious that the half-dozen of each color didn't come from his parents' dungeon. He had lived with them so long – had, in fact, interacted with them every day – that he intimately knew the signature of every single defender that had been inside his home. And these were unrecognizable.

Near the center of the room – and where the blast that had destroyed the room and killed everything in there originated – were a few small slivers of blue and red crystallized mana. Fred walked over in a daze, tears running down his face as he collapsed to his knees next to all that remained

of his mother and father. Through his blurry vision, he reached down and picked up a shard of each color, holding and squeezing them in his hands as if by sheer force of will he could bring them back.

Maybe I can! What if I give them all of the mana I had absorbed?

Through the sobs and shaking his body was involuntarily doing, he reached into himself, holding with inexperienced “fingers” the mana inside of him. At first, it just flowed through his grasp, feeling like water flowing away from his open hand. However, that analogy helped focus his efforts, as he imagined the mana inside of him as a pool of differently colored liquid, and his attempts to grasp it like cupped hands.

The efforts paid off, as he was able to “hold” a portion of his mana in his mind, though it was constantly trying to escape. He envisioned pouring some of the blue-colored liquid into the blue sliver; he felt his heart lift in joy for a moment when the mana poured out of him but was dashed back to pieces when it just seemed to flow off of the lifeless crystal in his hand. A small pool of blue-colored mana formed below him, the results of his attempt an obvious failure. *That doesn't mean that I can't try again. I'll keep trying and trying until I bring them back. Maybe all I need is more mana.*

Fred looked around at the room full of lifeless mana blobs, a plan forming in his mind. However, before he could even get off his knees, there was a loud *crack* that echoed through the room, followed by a stream of pulverized rock flowing down from the ceiling. *Oh, no...*

He was barely out of his parents' destroyed core room before the ceiling collapsed, burying everything inside. The ground shook from the impact of multiple tons of rock against the floor, causing Fred to stumble to his knees outside of the room, the differently colored shards still clutched in his hands. When he recovered, he looked back at the wall of rock where he

had just been seconds ago, wondering if he could dig it out given enough time.

Fate – or whatever you wanted to call it – didn't feel obliged to give him the time, unfortunately. Another, larger *crack* occurred overhead, dropping a fist-sized rock down from the ceiling onto his shoulder in the process. The impact, followed by the sharp pain in his upper shoulder, told him that something had broken inside; that was all secondary, however, as he took off running, yelling at the top of his lungs to help ward off the intense torture his steps along the ground was having on his shoulder.

Fred didn't know how he did it – though he suspected that the mana still present inside of him was helping somehow – but he ran faster than he ever had before; racing just barely ahead of the collapsing ceiling behind him, he jumped over ponds, ducked under inert trap blocks, shimmied along edges that were barely wider than his foot, and hurdled a few walls of cooled lava rock. The entire dungeon shook as the ceiling fell, making it harder and harder for him to keep his footing as he literally ran for his life.

Finally, out of breath and heart pounding so hard he thought it would break right out of his chest, he saw the dim light of the breaking dawn through the entrance. *Has it only been a few minutes?* So much had happened in the last little bit that it felt like he had been down there for days, and not less than an hour. *I'm going to make it!*

Just as he thought that, the entrance collapsed in front of him, chunks of stone in all sizes piling up and blocking all but the smallest space right in the middle of the rockpile. With the rest of the dungeon collapsed or collapsing behind him, he couldn't stop; with a final yell, he dove through the only place still open, hoping that it would stay there long enough for him to escape. The pile blocking the entrance shifted a little, closing the

hole by a slight bit, but it was enough to feel like he had ripped off his arm as he shot through.

He somersaulted uncontrollably as he hit the fresh – and shockingly cold – air outside the dungeon, the pain in his shoulder almost impossibly agonizing. He rolled to a stop on his back, looking up at the grey sky that was just barely touched by the rising sun. He closed his eyes at the pain – both at the injury in his shoulder and at the sudden and devastating loss of his parents. Fortunately, his mana was still able to help with his wound, though it took much longer than just a few scrapes along his hands and face.

He lay there on the ground, freezing and in agony as the mana inside of him was steadily drained as it went to work on his injury. However, he didn't care; he looked over at what was left of the dungeon he had grown up in, seeing it as little more than a big pile of rocks now. His whole world had collapsed just as much as his home had; he had no direction to his life now that his parents were gone.

Fire Mana: 12/100

Water Mana: 7/100

When the pain finally left from his shoulder, he barely noticed. He was growing a little numb from the cold, although he could tell that the little power that he still had inside of him was doing its best to keep him warm. It was a good thing that no wild beasts had come by while he was incapacitated, because he didn't think he had the energy or drive to fight them off. Although, his convalescence did allow him to think a little.

Who did this to them? Better yet, why did they do this? He knew it wasn't a collection of wild animals/beasts/monsters that had invaded and

killed his parents; although that would be extremely strange, it wasn't out of the realm of insane possibility.

However, that wasn't what happened – if they were wild beasts, the small amount of mana inside them would've been released upon their deaths, but their bodies would remain. He had seen it multiple times over the years, so the fact that they didn't leave corpses behind was evidence against that fact. In addition, there weren't any bodies of “humans”; which, granted, he hadn't seen before, but if they looked anything like himself, he thought he might recognize them. Therefore, that left only one option.

They were mana-formed dungeon defenders – from every element.

The fact that they all arrived at the same time couldn't be coincidence; the coordinated attack must mean that someone had planned for them to join together to essentially assassinate his mom and dad. He still didn't know *why* they were killed – of all dungeon cores apparently out there – but he was determined to find out.

And exact revenge for their deaths if he could.

He thought about trying to look for another dungeon core nearby, one that might know a way to contact his parents' relatives, but he thought better of it immediately. Even though not every dungeon core might be part of the plot to kill his parents, he had no way of knowing if one was safe to approach or not. Eventually, he was going to have to do a little investigating face-to-core, so to speak; however, in his condition he wasn't ready to attempt that.

He was well aware that his goal was fraught with danger, because whoever or whomever decided that his parents had to die had to be extraordinarily powerful to track them down in the northern wasteland. Even from the small glimpses he had in the forest to the south, he knew that the land around there was very, very poor in terms of ambient mana – which

was the primary focus of most dungeon cores. This meant that extreme measures had to be employed in order to find them, where they had retreated to be alone and have their privacy.

In light of that, he knew that he needed help. With other dungeon cores out of the picture, and his own abilities as a “newborn” dungeon core barely enough to keep him alive, there was only one place to turn.

He was going to have to find some humans.

II – Humans

Chapter 7

Fred perched precariously on a sturdy branch, slowing his breathing; the last year and a half journeying alone through the wild had taught him to make as little noise as possible to avoid drawing unwanted attention. He waited until his body settled into a comfortable – and balanced – position before he looked down at the huge...he actually didn't know what it was called. *I wish I had asked more questions about humans, though I guess it wasn't as important at the time.*

Regardless of the name of whatever he was looking at, Fred looked down on a collection of fifteen structures, most with some sort of smoke emerging from the top of them. At first, he thought they might all be on fire since they seemed to be made primarily of wood, but after watching for almost an hour he realized that there might just be a fire inside of the... dwellings?

It was midday and the sun was shining brightly against the snow, nearly blinding him in its intensity. His parents had told him of the different seasons, though he had never really experienced them before inside his dungeon home – it was the same all year-round. Apparently, it was in the middle of winter right now, which didn't really matter to Fred; although traveling through the deep snow was harder than without it, the cold didn't really touch him. His mana provided all the warmth he needed.

Despite the cold, there were human people moving from building to building, trudging their way through the snow and making paths as they went. Since he wasn't affected by the severe cold temperatures, he didn't know how cold it actually was; however, judging by how much the humans

were bundled up under multiple layers of clothing and furs, he assumed that it was life-threateningly cold.

The strangest thing about the humans, however, was that when he looked at them – albeit from afar – he received none of the information he usually received when he looked at a beast or even a dungeon defender. Normally, he would see the name of the creature, followed by an approximate “level”; the dungeon defenders in his former home usually provided more information, of course. But when he looked at any of the humans, there was...nothing. It was like they didn't exist.

If I'm going to try to gather some allies, I need to be able to blend in and make them believe I'm one of them. Fred looked down at his own clothes; they were unwashed, shredded, and bloodstained – with scraps missing from various places where they had been lost during the many fights he had endured to get that far.

He had thought about just ditching all of his clothes, since they served no purpose anymore; however, he was reluctant to part with some of the last pieces of his former life so easily. The pants, shirt, coat, socks, and shoes (along with his dual knives) were all created by his parents, and to just throw them away just seemed like sacrilege to him. His shoes had worn away and fell apart almost a year ago, along with the pair of socks underneath; his coat had been lost a couple of months ago when it ripped apart after he fell from near the top of a tree that he had climbed to get a better look at his surroundings. There was nothing he could do to fix them, so he had to leave them behind.

He still had his pants and shirt, as decrepit and torn apart as they were. Nevertheless, they reminded him of home; even if he ended up having to replace them, he planned on keeping at least a few scraps to

remember where he came from. Though, when he really looked at his shirt, for instance, it was pretty much just a bunch of scraps already.

Where the left sleeve and a portion of the shoulder used to be, he could see the tears and bite marks left over from when a massive wolf had ambushed him; it had clamped down on his arm and nearly ripped it off, though in the end the only lasting damage had been to the shirt – especially after he stabbed it in the eye repeatedly, trying to get it to let go. The mana inside of him took more than a day to repair the damage to his body, but it did nothing for the cloth. Fortunately, the giant wolf had provided a substantial amount of mana to recharge his dwindling mana resources.

Knowing that walking into the human dwelling-place with very few clothes probably wouldn't be the best idea if he wanted to blend in, he stayed watching the people moving back and forth. Fred was close enough that the few times he heard someone shouting to another, he was relieved that he could understand them; he had been worried that he wouldn't be able to. It was a reasonable concern, since he couldn't talk to the animals and beasts inside the forest, he wasn't sure if the humans he looked so similar to would be able to communicate intelligently. Fortunately, his worries were unfounded.

His observation also provided him the opportunity to get a better look at their clothing, though it was difficult to make out the specific pieces being so far away. Luckily, on two different occasions, two humans walked a little way into the forest – once, almost beneath the tree he was scouting from – and urinated into the snow, turning it bright yellow. It was only then that Fred realized that he hadn't had to do the same since he left home; without having to consume any food or water now, he had no need. Again, just as the mana kept him warm, it also provided sustenance.

Unfortunately, the constant need for his mana to sustain his health meant that it was constantly being drained, though he had quite a bit stockpiled in his body, which meant that – unless something drastic happened like a severe life-threatening injury – he could probably survive for another couple of months. Fighting and killing so many beasts over the last year had allowed him to absorb the mana in their bodies, though it wasn't nearly as much as a mana-formed dungeon defender. There had been some close calls, too; the huge wolf that nearly ripped his arm off was just one of them.

He didn't personally know all of the creatures he had attacked or been attacked by, but he recognized most of their names from his lessons with his parents. Now that he looked back, they were surprisingly knowledgeable about the different beasts in the world, though it made sense – they used some of those same animals as dungeon defenders (or at least, a tailored version of them). *I guess knowing examples of what you can create can lead to better and better defenders; I just wish that vast knowledge had extended to humans.*

All his parents knew (or deigned to share) about humans could be summed up in a few statements. First, they were a vital part of dungeon core success by providing large amounts of ambient mana when they entered a dungeon, as well as providing even more when they were killed inside of one. However, the more that were outright killed inside of a dungeon, the less likely it was that future humans would visit – there needed to be a balance established, something that would normally be taught to newborn dungeon cores.

Additionally, cores tailored their dungeons to entice humans to come to their dungeons, providing them with mana-formed precious metals, weapons, and armor as they invaded and “conquered” their domains. It

seemed counterintuitive, but the mere presence of humans inside the dungeon more than made up for the mana expenditure.

Lastly, humans were the only lifeform that dungeon cores couldn't replicate inside their dungeons, leaving them with a vast lack of knowledge about the beneficial species.

Thus, his parents told him about the benefits that humans provided to dungeons cores, as well as their knowledge about human language, clothing, weapons, and food; essentially, everything that they could see and observe about the species while inside their dungeons. Apparently, nothing much was known about them outside of their domains, as no dungeon cores still in existence had ever seen a human in their natural habitat.

Until now.

Fred needed to get closer, though – to integrate himself into their society without calling undue attention to himself. Therefore, after watching the inhabitants of the large dwelling-place for more than a day, he climbed down from his perch in the tree, grateful that he hadn't fallen again and broken his ankle like he did a month ago. Although his mana had healed the bad break within half a day – it still hurt.

He had experimented a little with the system he now had access to over the long, lonely months of his travels south. The forest which he journeyed through seemed endless, which only punctuated the fact that his parents had hidden so far away that it was almost incomprehensible how they had been found.

Seventeen months of cautiously making his way south, fighting bears, wolves, giant snow rabbits, and even strange monkey-like creatures; recovering from those fights for sometimes a day or more until his wounds had healed – and the occasional period of sleep meant that he didn't move

very fast, but he made progress. The presence of this human dwelling-place was proof of that.

He didn't necessarily get tired like he used to after exerting himself for long periods of time, but he did see a dramatic increase in his mana consumption if he didn't take short rests every couple of hours. In addition, he needed to sleep for at least a couple of hours every couple of days, otherwise the expenditure of mana from his system would get so bad that it was counterproductive to push on. All of that meant that he had plenty of time to investigate his new status as an actual, bona-fide dungeon core.

He had learned quite a bit, actually, though most of that knowledge he couldn't do anything with – it required being inside the presence of a dungeon. It either had to be one that had given permission for him to manipulate it (like his parents would've done for him) or his own dungeon. Unfortunately, with his parents' dungeon destroyed, he only had the last option – but even that was closed to him.

The initial creation of a dungeon is faction-specific and, therefore, is restricted information. Please consult with your trainers/mentors/parents for specific instruction on how to establish your first dungeon. Once that is complete, you can continue to use the course-driven learning plan to successfully manipulate...

Fat lot of good that does for me, he remembered thinking sarcastically. There *were* a couple of things he could do, however. One, use his long-known-but-never-used **Mana Communication** skill, which allowed him to listen to dungeon cores. Two, he could now pull up his **Dungeon Core Status** that showed him his current stats, most of which didn't mean a lot to him – at least not yet.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 1 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 97/112 Water Mana: 84/111 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 1342
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 1% Novice Mana Absorption: 32% Novice Mana Conversion: 12% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 3% Novice Core Crystallization: 4%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

He wasn't sure why he didn't have a Core Faction, though he suspected that it was because his parents were part of two different elemental factions. His Core Age used to count up by the day, then weeks, and then months; after a year, however, it had stayed at right at 1. He assumed that it would tick over to 2 when he hit that benchmark. He had no idea what Core Structure Level meant, nor was there anything in the system he could pursue for the information.

As for his Fire and Water Mana, it had originally been stuck at a total of 100 for each one, even after absorbing the mana from a few beasts that he had finally found after a week of exploring. Only after nearly a month later did he see an increase – by 1 Fire Mana. After that, every couple of weeks or so another point would be added to one or the other, but the

progress was slow. He did notice that his ***Core Crystallization*** skill was slowly increasing, so he suspected that the two were connected somehow.

He thought his Unconverted (Unusable) Mana total was quite high, though it made sense when he considered it. Whenever he absorbed the mana from a creature he had slain, the elements they usually released (at least in the forest, he wasn't sure about anywhere else) weren't Fire or Water; instead, they were made up primarily of Nature and Earth, with a particularly nasty large spider infused with a little Dark as well.

He was able to absorb it just fine, but since he couldn't "use" that type of mana, it had to be converted first – with, presumably, his ***Mana Conversion*** skill. It was done automatically, as far as he could tell, but it was very, very slow. Normally, he would see five or six of the Unconverted mana tick away every day, switching over to whatever element had the least amount of mana available. He had seen it speed up a little over the last couple of months, though he thought it might be because of the increase in the skill itself.

The third, and last, thing that he was actually able to do anything with was the ***Mana-formed Object Creation*** skill, which was what he was planning on using to blend in to the human collective he had been spying on. He had only used it a couple of times, since it was very mana-intensive – much more than just sustaining his health. He didn't dare use it too much while he was out in the forest, because anything he made was permanent.

While he had seen his parents create and absorb objects within their dungeon with ease, the only thing he could seem to gather was the mana released from the beasts he had slain. Even the straight Water mana from the pond he had seen on his first foray out from his home was just...there – he couldn't extract it (or any other type of mana from anything else). From his perusal of the system guides provided to him, he knew that dungeon

cores *should* be able to do it, but he thought it might be part of the dungeon creation aspect of his training – which he had no access to.

Therefore, he had to make sure he got it right the first time.

Chapter 8

He started slow, being cautious of his mana expenditure; if he used too much to create something, he could risk dying from hunger or the cold (or even an injury) if his mana ran out. Although his available mana was constantly being filled by the conversion of his Unconverted Mana, it was barely enough to maintain his life. Only during the few times when he was injured – and stopped to make a relatively warmer temporary shelter – was he able to let his mana build back up significantly.

Even now he had some options of what he could do: go farther south, wait until the season turned to warmer weather, even taking the risk of going into the place where the humans dwelt looking like he was. However, none of those options seemed likely to produce the result he was looking for; more than likely, he would face the same kind of issues down south, and walking into the middle of the strange humans appearing as he was might cause them to mistrust him – or more likely, want to kill him.

So, he had to do this, no matter what it cost him to do it. He hadn't ever made anything as big as clothing before, and certainly not in the quantity and bulk he needed it. The most practice he had was a successful attempt to create another knife, exactly like one of the knives he had brought forth from his home. He had ended up snapping the blade off during the encounter with the Level 6 Dire Wolf that had almost taken his arm off, and he knew he would fare better with two knives instead of just the remaining unbroken one.

According to the system lesson plan on Mana-formed Object Creation, he needed to intimately *know* what he was trying to create...

...and keep the thought of what you want to create at the forefront of your focus, concentrating on every single detail of it until you can almost reach out and touch it. Once you have that focus, locate a spot in your dungeon in which you would like to place the Mana-formed Object, and push your mana into the form, infusing it with your power and intention. With a sufficient application of mana, your object should appear where you designated as its location.

If this process doesn't work, please consult the troubleshooting guide or ask your teachers/mentors/parents to demonstrate...

The troubleshooting guide didn't help, as it only gave different exercises for him to try to achieve Creation – and it assumed that he had near-limitless mana by reabsorbing any failed objects he tried to make. Fortunately, his first attempt had gone splendidly; the new knife, exactly like the one he had carried around for years and knew down to the tiniest detail, materialized on the ground where he had envisioned it lying. When he had picked it up, it was an exact match to the one that had been broken, even down to the chips and scratches in it – but it was at least whole.

Fred ended up having to make a couple other knives over time, as wear-and-tear broke one or the other, and he eventually learned how to make one with subtle changes. The most dramatic change he was able to enact was the elimination of the previous damage that it had sustained over the years; with his latest Mana-formed knife, it appeared brand-new, looking as if it hadn't ever been used. He was eager to see if he could do anything else to it, like make it sharper or longer, but he didn't have the mana to waste on experimentation.

His one botched attempt at creating something (and which put him off from trying to create anything other than knives) was when he was trying to make a trap he had seen at home, one which he had bypassed or seen in action countless times over the years. It looked like a simple wire attached to opposite walls, and when it was triggered by something touching it, a large gout of flame shot out of each wall – burning whatever was unlucky enough to be standing there.

However, he didn't know *how* it worked, despite seeing it triggered before. Since it was more complicated than the relatively simple knife he had made, and not knowing all of the moving parts inside the trap, all that emerged was an amorphous blob of wire and stone blocks. His Fire Mana level dropped precipitously toward empty as well, using more than 80 of the precious resource, and almost half of that in Water Mana. As opposed to the 12 mana he spent on each of his knives he had created, the unsuccessful attempt at creating a trap cost ten times as much.

And all he wanted was a way to protect himself from the wild beasts in the forest while he slept.

It was only after making his fourth knife that he realized that if concentrated enough during the initial creation process, he was able to get an estimate on how much mana it was going to require to create each object. However, it only worked on things he had made before:

Simple Steel Knife: 10

Simple Flame Trap w/ Tripwire: 100

He assumed that because he was still inexperienced with using the Creation system, his actual cost was more than the estimate. Also, it didn't specifically say what kind of mana it would use, though he had noticed that

each knife used an equal amount of each, while the trap used twice as much Fire as opposed to Water. With more experimentation, he might learn more about it, but he didn't have that luxury; besides, he had more important things on his mind.

Like making some clothes as a disguise.

Fred envisioned what he saw the humans wearing and thought about his own clothes that his parents had made for him over the years; in addition, he remembered the Dire Wolf that he had repeatedly stabbed in the eye, thinking that its pelt would make a great addition to his ensemble. He had seen many of the people in the dwelling-place wearing the furs of bears and even a smaller wolf over their already-bulky clothes, insulating them from the biting cold – so why not a Dire Wolf?

The first thing he created was a new pair of pants, which looked like the ones he was wearing – before all the damage done to it. He followed that up with another pair of socks, a shirt, and a coat, all of which he had possessed before and were relatively easy to recreate. He quickly dressed in them after stripping off his old clothes (which tore them even further), noticing that they were a little oversized compared to his frame. *Oh well, maybe I'm not too good at getting the size right; either that, or I've lost a lot of weight.*

Fred was also pleased to see that he had only ended up using a total of 10 mana for all of that, well below his conservative estimate of 30. *I wonder if it has to do with the materials the final object contains?* Regardless of the reason, it meant that even if he screwed something up, he might have enough to fix and create another one if he had to.

Next up were some taller shoes, ones that would fit along his leg, ending right below the knee. He had seen the humans wearing them to keep out the cold while trudging through the deep snow, so he knew that he could

go in wearing a pair of his old shoes. He had no idea what they really looked like up close, so all he ended up doing was envisioning his previous shoes and extending the top so that it covered his leg up to his knees. When the new tall shoes materialized on the ground, they looked...passable. Hopefully.

But at least they fit well.

With most of that out of the way, he steeled himself and summoned up what he remembered from the fur and general shape of the Dire Wolf he had slain, pairing it with what he saw the people nearby wearing. Thoughts of his parents drifted into his mind, his desire to find a way to utilize his new status as a dungeon core to either bring them back somehow or find a way to get revenge. It all relied on whether it he was successful here, though, so he tried to push those thoughts out of his head. Once the Dire Wolf was firmly in his mind, he pushed mana into it. And then some more. He began to worry when instead of *pushing* the mana towards the vision, it instead started to grasp at the power and *pull* it from him.

The mana was draining from him at an alarming rate and he tried to stop it, panicking so much that he cut all connection with his ***Mana-formed Object Creation*** skill, doing his best to think of nothing. The flow eased and eventually stopped, which prompted Fred to heave a great sigh of relief. *Phew, that was close. I thought it was going to pull out everything—*

All of a sudden, he felt more mana spilling out of him, though it didn't feel the same. In fact, he was starting to feel really...cold? And weak, as if he hadn't eaten in days – or years. He quickly pulled up his Mana supply as the rush of power flowing away from him increased.

Fire Mana: 0/112

Water Mana: 0/111

Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 824

What? How is this possible? He watched the accumulated Unconverted Mana total plummet rapidly, in correlation with what he felt like was his life-power being sucked out of him. *What do I do? How do I stop this?* Nothing he tried had any effect on the loss of mana; it was reaching 300 by the time he felt his knees give out, his strength completely drained, barely feeling it as he fell forward.

The last thing he saw before his vision gave out was the cold snow on the ground rushing up, inviting him in to give him a hug.

Chapter 9

Fred gradually woke up, feeling the stifling heat from a fire nearby. *Firbey must be turned up a bit more than usual. That's ok, though – I don't mind sleeping in a little bit today.* He started to drift back to sleep, when a loud pop curtailed any hope of rest.

Everything hit him at once: the fight between his bodyguards, the death of his parents and their dungeon's collapse, his fight through the woods to the south, his exploration of his new status, and finding the human dwellings in the middle of the forest. Finally, he remembered creating his new clothes, along with the big Dire Wolf pelt—

He sat straight up quickly while opening his eyes at the same time, confused at where he was. It took a moment for him to focus on his surroundings, before he saw he was inside a large wooden box with a roof atop it, arched on top and sloping towards the sides. Smoke from a fire located on the side wall drifted mostly out from the box through some hidden tunnel, while a bit drifted up towards the top of the roof, trapped with nowhere to go.

Looking down, he could see that he was dressed in his clothes he had thrown on before he passed out, though his boots were across the room near the fire and not next to...the bed he was halfway lying on. It was much better built than the one he had made for himself back home, with large, expertly cut wooden logs making up the majority of the frame. The pad underneath him was softer as well, filled with something unknown but making it feel as if he was sitting on fluffy air.

Some other wooden pieces of furniture were scattered around the room, things that he had no name for but looked like they were practical.

Along the walls, sharp metal implements longer than his knives were tacked up alongside long pieces of slightly curved wood that had a string wrapped around to top of it. He also saw a few gruesome beast heads displayed in what he assumed had some sort of significance, though he couldn't guess as to the reason. Everything else in the room was a complete unknown to him.

Fred crawled off the side of the bed, expecting the ground to be right next to him; he wasn't prepared for the flooring to be a few feet below and he fell off, smacking his head painfully against the hard, wooden floor. His head made a loud hollow sound as it hit the wood, and his vision went blurry for a few moments before it cleared up.

What happened to me? He lay on the colder floor, trying to get his bearings again while he pulled up his Status.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 1 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 2/112 Water Mana: 3/111 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 15
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 1% Novice Mana Absorption: 32% Novice Mana Conversion: 13% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 8% Novice Core Crystallization: 4% Novice **** Mana-formed Object Creation: 20%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

All my mana is gone! Now he knew why he passed out, though he was surprised that he had at least a little bit left over from the power-sucking Object Creation gone wrong. The fact that 5 mana had already been converted meant that he must've been out for almost a day before he woke up. He also saw that he had a new skill, though he wasn't sure what it meant or why it was different from the other Mana-formed Object Creation – nor why it was missing a word.

However, he put that aside until he could figure out where he was, as well as investigating how he got there. He stood up on shaky legs, the previous weakness he had felt still affecting him. That was okay, though, because he would rather be a little weak than have his mana try to fix everything wrong with him; the Object Creation process had literally sucked him dry.

And it didn't even work.

Instead of bemoaning the fact that he had very little mana left to him, he started to look for a way out of the large wooden box he was placed in. Before he could take more than an unsteady step, however, he heard something coming from a large hole in the wall he only now realized existed near the opposite corner of the room.

Out from the hole walked what he assumed was a man (though he couldn't be sure, as he hadn't seen anything yet to compare the sexes), with long hair covering the bottom of his face. He had on the same bulky clothing he had seen on the other humans in the dwelling-place – along with a large bear pelt complete with hollow head laid across his shoulders. He also had on a fur-lined hat on his head that covered the sides of his face, exposing very little to the cold outside.

What the most interesting thing about him, however, was the fact that he had no mana inside his body. Fred had grown accustomed to seeing

mana everywhere; there were even faint hints of it in every object in this strange wooden box. It had been in the beasts in the forest, the earth beneath his feet, in the snow that covered that earth, the air around him, and even the trees. Most of the time it was only a small amount, but it was there and visible to his mana sight. The only thing that he had seen not have any mana before this was himself, though he thought it was because he was looking at himself and figured it didn't work like that. It turned out he wasn't the only one.

A gust of cold air accompanied the large human on his way into the large wooden room, along with a few flakes of snow, leaving Fred glad of the formerly stifling heat. The man was also covered head to toe in snow – which, considering he probably just came from outside, meant that the sun had gone away, and a new storm had blown quickly in.

Over one shoulder, the man had another one of the long, curved wooden sticks Fred had seen on the wall, though this one had the string connecting either end. On his other shoulder, there was the corpse of a large light-brown deer, head hanging down the man's back while he held onto its hind legs in front.

The man must not have seen him standing there, because he quickly racked the curved stick on the wall, followed by a bag full of feathery sticks, before he swung the deer carcass off his back and onto a large flat ledge jutting out from the wall. Once that was done, he turned around toward Fred and jumped back when he caught sight of him. “Ack! Whoa, child – you almost killed me right then and there! What are you doing out of bed, young'n? I would've thought you would sleep for another couple of days at least.”

Fred was confused at how he almost killed the man – he hadn't even touched him. His confusion must've shown on his face, though it was taken

the wrong way. “I’m sorry, let me introduce myself,” he said, as he started to take off snow-covered layers, placing them on a peg on the wall near the fire, “I’m Regnark, and welcome to my humble home here in Northend. Contrary to what it sounded like before, I’m glad that you’re up and around. You looked to be near death when I found you out in the forest a couple of days ago.”

A couple of days? That can’t be right – how long was I out? He didn’t get a chance to think about that anymore, however, as Regnark had finished hanging up most of his clothes, the melting snow dripping off onto the floor as the heat from the room did its work. Even without the bulky outerwear, the man was as big as a bear, though he was more graceful as he practically glided across the room and approached Fred, looking him over.

“You’re looking better, too; I thought for sure you’d have frostbite on your face and hands, at least. I’m not sure how long you were out there without any serious cold-weather gear, but even a couple of minutes can freeze the skin right off you during this season. And I haven’t seen it this bad in...oh, almost a decade I’d say.”

Now that Fred could see the man without all his gear, he saw that Regnark’s hair was a very dark brown, almost black, though there were grey streaks running through it all. The weathered-looking face had lines around the eyes and mouth, which deepened with the big full-teeth smile he was flashing.

“You’re lucky to be alive, in fact. I wasn’t expecting you to make it, in all honesty; even *I* would have difficulty surviving even an hour out there with the clothes I found you in. At least you had some boots on, otherwise I’m sure your toes would’ve fallen off,” Regnark observed, before he seemed to remember something. “What am I doing? You’re probably starving – sit over at the table and I’ll see if I can get you something to

eat.” He waved in the general direction of the other wooden furniture in the room.

Fred, still a little disoriented about what was going on, didn’t see any reason to refuse. Once he got closer, he realized that the flat piece of wood on top of the pedestal must be the “table” the man had been talking about, so he pulled out one of the two wooden...things...placed around the table so that he could climb up top.

“I know the chairs aren’t the most comfortable, as I made them myself, but they get the job done. Just plop on down on one and I’ll get you something in a moment.”

The statement caught him right as he was raising his foot to climb, so he set it down quickly and sat down in the “chair”, his slow brain finally catching up as he figured out how everything was supposed to work. He had never had a need of a table or a chair back home, nor had his parents told him about them; the only reason he had a bed of some sort was because they had seen (or heard about) humans camping in the middle of a dungeon before. They probably didn’t bring the heavy and bulky furniture with them into the trap and defender-filled dungeon, where the cores could see them.

Regnark kept talking and asking questions while he fiddled with some things in another part of the room, though he didn’t seem to want to wait for an answer. “Yes, it sure has been a cold one this year – game is a little scarce, that’s why you’re lucky I had to go farther out to find some. It was the strangest thing; I literally tripped over you – which I thought was a corpse at first – on my way back. You were so covered in snow that if I hadn’t found you when I did, I doubt we would have found your body until the spring thaw. Not that the snow ever *completely* goes away this far north, it always seems to stick around the nooks and crannies of the forest even in the dead of summer.

“I brought your body back, thinking that I’d bury you when the ground thawed, but surprise, surprise – you were still warm! I didn’t know if you were still *alive* or not, but I thought I would at least give you a chance; I’ve seen those who’ve been stuck out in the cold so long that it was almost as if their mind froze along with the rest of their body. Anyway, what were you doing out there? And wearing nothing but a thin coat and pants? Not even a hat or nothing. Those are some strange-looking boots, I’ll tell you that – you must be from far to the south, right? I hear they make some odd fashion choices, but to each their own, I say.

“I haven’t seen you around here before, and I thought I knew everyone. Not many people come up to Northend anymore, too cold for most folks. So, what brings you up to my neck of the woods? You running from something? No, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Your business is *your* business, I know how it goes. Most of us are running from something now and again, so I’ll leave it to you. Unless your being here is going to cause problems for me?”

The constant stream of his monologue had been so rapid-fire and confusing that it took a moment for Fred to realize that Regnark had stopped and was looking at him for an answer.

“Uh...no...I don’t think so.”

“He speaks! So, I guess that head of yours isn’t too far gone to be able to talk; that’s usually the first thing that goes. Hopefully, you’ll be able to answer a few more questions and then I can figure out what to do with you. Here, eat up!”

A square piece of wood that had some sort of hard shiny coating on it was pushed in front of Fred, filled with a slab of what looked like burnt beast flesh and a small pile of something green and leafy. It was strange

and odd, but for some reason it smelled fantastic; his stomach agreed with him by gurgling loudly.

“Sorry I don’t have any of your fancy forks like I’ve seen you southerners use, up here metal is precious, and we’d rather use it for something practical. Although, I guess I could make a wooden one...but there’s no point – my hands are made for shoving all this food in.” He put paid to his words and picked up the burnt flesh with his hands, tearing off a chunk of it with his teeth.

Fred immediately did the same and tore off a smaller bit; the moment it hit his tongue, the taste of it almost made him choke – he had never tasted anything that delicious. Ever since he could remember, he had to make do with the tasteless-yet-filling mana-formed food orbs his parents made for him, which he was thankful for – but he didn’t take any pleasure from eating them. After he had left his destroyed home behind, he never had to eat anything because the mana he had absorbed took care of sustaining his health.

This, though...this he would enjoy eating. And he did.

Faster than he thought possible, he had cleaned the wood plank of all the food on it and greedily looked for more – even the green, leafy stuff was tasty, though not as much as the burnt flesh. He looked up at Regnark and saw him sitting there with his mouth open in surprise, staring at him in shock.

“I...I guess you were hungry; do you want some more?” the man finally asked. At Fred’s nod, he pushed the rest of his barely touched meal over, still looking astonished at how quickly he had finished. *I should probably eat a little slower...but this is way too good!*

“By the way, I didn’t catch your name.”

Fred froze with his hand halfway to his mouth with another large chunk of flesh, thinking the question over. *I guess it couldn't hurt.*

“Fredwynklemossering...but my friends call me Fred.”

Regnark laughed, though Fred didn't know why. “Well, Fred, tell me – do you have any family I can inform about your whereabouts?”

At the mention of family, Fred's mood darkened, and he worriedly reached up to the pouch tied around his neck, feeling it for the shards of core he had kept safe all the way from the north. *Phew, it's still there—* As soon as he touched it, he knew something was wrong. Where there was supposed to be long, sharp shards of dungeon core crystal, it instead felt squishy, as if the bag had been filled with pond sand.

Opening it up with shaking fingers, he looked inside and saw that the last hope he had that he might bring his parents back somehow was crushed, ground to dust like the small particles of blue and red his bag now held. As far as he had been told, core crystals were nearly indestructible; although his parents had been destroyed, the shards they ended up as had been largely intact, as though something inside of them had exploded. But they hadn't been smashed to pieces like this.

Whatever happened to me must've done this to them, as well.

He looked up at Regnark, a firm look on his face and resolve in his heart.

“Not anymore.”

Chapter 10

Regnark turned out to be a bit of an anomaly for a human; he kept to himself, rarely ventured to socialize with any of the others in Northend, and was much stronger, faster, and more agile than Fred had initially assumed. He didn't talk about his past much, but Fred was ok with that because he didn't want to share anything either. Either way, though, he got the impression that something tragic had happened to the large man in his former life – which only cemented their friendship even more.

It was apparently hard to travel between towns during the winter, which meant that Fred was essentially stuck there; he didn't want to arouse suspicion by leaving when very few were capable of it. That was fine, though – he wasn't in a huge hurry, and, besides, he had to the opportunity to learn more about the human world.

Regnark thought he might have some sort of brain damage, as there were things that he asked Fred to do that Fred had no idea what the other man was talking about. Over the next three months though, he learned the names of “common” everyday items he had never seen before, how to prepare and cook food (including the delicious meat), sharpen his knives, build a make-shift bed out of wood scraps, light a fire, and a myriad of other simple tasks that he had never had to do before.

He was beginning to like doing things for himself; although he appreciated everything his parents did for him, they essentially handed him everything he needed – even when he got older. The little independence he enjoyed and pleaded for turned out to do nothing for the skills he would need to have to be a successful human. To be fair, though, they didn't really

know what he needed, so he didn't blame them for using their love for him to make sure he got everything he wanted, and not just needed.

What he took greatest pleasure in, however, was when they went out on hunts; the scarcity of the beasts nearby meant that they sometimes had to spend a couple hours looking for any sign of one. He learned how to track game by following the trails they left (he understood the principle, but still wasn't too good at it), how to shoot a bow (he could hit a large tree at 50 paces, but any type of accuracy beyond that was beyond him), and even how to clean/gut/skin/dress the kills Regnark made (he actually excelled at that, due to the experience he had using his knives).

In addition, he was able to absorb the mana from beasts they killed (although, *they* wasn't completely accurate, since Fred was only able to hit a deer once in the leg with an arrow). With a few simple innocent-sounding questions, he also learned that Regnark couldn't see the released mana like he could, so he was free to soak it all up without worrying about sharing it with him. He thought that that might be the case, since he was at least in part a dungeon core, but it was nice to have a confirmation to that fact.

Although learning everything was highly beneficial if he wanted to blend into the human society, that wasn't what he found the most enjoyable. It was the friendship and bond he felt with the large human; being able to accomplish even the simplest tasks with the help from someone else was a new and awesome experience. His parents didn't have hands with which to "help" him, to teach him, and to demonstrate how to do things; occasionally they had one of their dungeon defenders do something for him they couldn't do themselves, but most of the time he had to figure it out for himself.

He began to think of the talkative man as a bit of a substitute father-figure, though Regnark could never eclipse the love between Fred and his

real father. It was just...different, that was all.

As a bonus, as if the experience learning so much about the human world wasn't enough, the regular meals – along with being warmly clothed all the time – meant that his mana wasn't being used to keep him alive.

Fire Mana: 116/116

Water Mana: 115/115

Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 3128

He was full up in his Fire and Water mana, and his “stockpile” of Unconverted Mana grew larger whenever they went out to hunt. *If I stay here for a couple of years, I can let my mana capacity increase gradually, while maybe also practice using my Creation skills.* He was a little hesitant to do that – due to how that ended up last time – but figured if he did it under “supervision”, Regnark would be there in case something happened.

When the weather warmed up a little and the snow began to melt, a merchant came up from the south, braving the nearly impassable roads to bring much-needed supplies to the small village. Fred learned that Northend was, indeed, just a small village – and not the huge dwelling-place he thought it first was; the thought of a larger “town” or “city” boggled his mind a little, and he couldn't picture it.

The travel-worn merchant brought along with him some beasts-of-burden Regnark called “horses”, loaded down with bursting-full bags of supplies. Three other men accompanied him, and it was the first time Fred had ever seen anyone attired in something other than heavy coats and furs; these individuals were wearing a combination of leather and metal pieces over the vital parts of their bodies and were equipped with an extensive combination of different weapons.

Fred was currently waiting in line for the merchant alongside his new friend/companion/mentor, so he thought he would continue his education.

“Regnark, who are those men there?”

His new friend/companion/mentor glanced over to where he was pointing, grunting in what Fred now knew was disdain before saying, “Those are the merchant’s guards, who are charged with protecting the goods while they travel from place to place.”

That didn’t make sense to Fred. “What do they have to protect against?”

“Well, although the risk of a wild beast attack is fairly low – even up here in the north – they are mainly there to discourage bandits from attacking. Not that they would do much good; most bandit groups would make mincemeat out of those DAS dropouts. The only reason they probably made it here safe was because no one wants to be out in this weather if they have another alternative.”

DAS? What is that? Fred was about to ask his friend when he saw one of the other residents of Northend bring over a huge stack (though not as big as their own) of furs, using them to barter for things that the merchant brought up from the south. Regnark had tried to explain the trade system to him, but now that he could see it in action – it made more sense.

Here in the north, so far from “civilization” (or at least what Regnark called it), they didn’t have easy access to things like spices, cloth, tools, weapons, or even basic metal implements. They had fur – and lots of it. So they had to trade it for those things they didn’t have, where the merchant would bring the furs back down south and sell it down there for a profit, whereby he/she/whoever would buy more supplies and bring them back up north. It seemed like a simple system to him, but until he saw it working it had been beyond him.

He hadn't really "met" any of the other Northend men (apparently, there were no women in the village), but they all looked very similar to Regnark: large, fur-covered, and hairy. What he did find out was that they weren't as friendly as his new companion; they were gruff in their dealings with each other, and doubly so with Fred. Regnark said it was because it took a certain type of person to live so far up north (Fred briefly wondered what he would think about Fred coming from even farther north), loners and outcasts, usually – who didn't "play nice with others".

If that wasn't enough to display their attitude, they also kept calling him a little girl because he didn't have any facial hair – like, any at all. He had a head full of straight dark-brown hair on the top of his head, which, according to his memories, had grown until he was about 4 years old and had stopped. It grew down to his shoulders, but it was almost as if it decided that it didn't want to grow longer than that; he remembered scorching off a portion of it back home in a mock-fight with a small lava salamander, and when it grew back it stopped at the previous length.

Their demeanor toward him meant that he didn't seek to befriend them; it also showed itself when the man currently doing some bartering with the merchant roared out, "You're a greedy bastard! Just six months ago, the same amount of furs would've gotten me ten times what you're offering me!" Big, meaty hands reached out for the blank-faced merchant (who was dressed warmly if plainly, though without the furs), but were stopped when the three guards pulled their swords from their sides faster than Fred thought possible.

With three sharp pointed pieces of metal surrounding his neck, the man lowered his hands and froze, eyes bulging out of his head as he tried to stare down at them.

“Thrax, that’s enough; this gentleman was just expressing his frustrations about supply and demand, which I completely understand. With the coming spring and summer down south, the *demand* for your furs has dropped off precipitously; along with the mild winter, the *supply* of furs of all types is a bit heavy still. In opposition to that, the *supply* of my goods here are finite and in high *demand*; added to the extreme hardships I encountered on my travels through the waning winter season, I think the price is more than reasonable for you fine folks here.”

That was a lot for Fred to take in, but it did explain a lot. The guards lowered their weapons from the Northend man’s neck, though they did keep them at the ready should he turn out to be “unreasonable”. However, having been sufficiently put in his place and realizing that there was nothing he could do, the man only grumbled as he received in return a few small packages for his own trade goods.

After that, there wasn’t anything more than disappointed looks and dissatisfied rumblings from the rest. When it came time for their own transaction, he could tell that Regnark received much less than he was expecting, as well. However, they were able to get the supplies they *needed* with their furs even if they couldn’t get what his friend *wanted*: a few new skinning knives and odds and ends.

Regnark ended up having to break out some of what he called his “reserve fund”, a small pouch filled with discs of different sizes and metals. “If it keeps up like this, the people of Northend will suffer in the future. We can *survive* without the different things that merchants bring here, but things break and wear out over time. It’s not a glamorous life, but it’s comfortable; if we can’t afford to pay for the small luxuries every once in a while, it won’t be even that,” he told Fred, once they had gone back to their house and put their purchases away.

“What are those little discs you gave the merchant?”

“You don’t even remember money? Boy, you’ve really got to go see a healer down south sometime to see if they can fix your memory.”

Regnark shook his head in astonishment, before bringing out the pouch again. “See here, this is a copper piece – the most common and, therefore, worth the least,” he said, while showing Fred a flat circular wafer that was a tarnished light-brown color. At some point, it must’ve had some sort of picture of a head on it, though it was so worn that only the barest hint of it remained.

Next, he brought out a silver piece, slightly larger than the copper piece and with less wear, showing even more of the still detail-less head. “It’s worth 100 of the copper pieces, so it is much more valuable.” From what Fred could see, Regnark had about a dozen of the silver pieces, which he thought was impressive; the extra supplies they had paid for with the metal pieces only cost a little over a single silver piece.

However, he was even further impressed when Regnark brought out a single, shiny, barely worn gold piece. “This is all I have left from...before I came here. It’s worth 100 silver pieces; it sounds like a lot, but even this won’t help if we get too many years like this last one. And I’m the lucky one here, because most of the others in Northend probably don’t have more than a couple of silver to their names.”

He saw Regnark quickly put the gold piece back in his pouch, as if having it out in the air might endanger it. *I wonder if I can Create more of these?* Although he didn’t really care for the others in Northend, he didn’t want his friend to suffer; he knew he would have to leave eventually to get on with his quest to find out who killed his parents and why they did it. *If I left him with a bag full of gold coins, however, I think he’d probably be alright.*

He remembered seeing something in his Dungeon Core System guide that referred to something called “Rewards”, which he had glossed over before since it dealt with the “loot” that dungeons placed around to entice humans to visit. These metal pieces were in there somewhere, but he didn’t know what they were or what they looked like, so he had ignored it previously.

He hadn’t pulled up the learning plans and courses since before he arrived in Northend, because he both didn’t have time or the need; since he was learning about the human world, he didn’t think it had anything to contribute. He had pulled up his Dungeon Core Status many times – but that was it. When he tried to open the menus now – to look at the “Rewards” section again – it wouldn’t work.

It was just...gone.

Chapter 11

A month later, Fred hiked along the road to the south – though calling it a “road” wasn’t quite what he had been told they were normally like; it was more like a slightly larger than normal game trail. If he didn’t have to follow it to find the next closest village, he would’ve felt better just traveling through the forest – he was much more comfortable with that. However, as he didn’t know exactly where he was going other than “south”, he felt it was better to stick to the known path.

It had grown warm enough that he felt comfortable making the journey without the fur around his body, though it was still cool enough to need his coat. Theoretically, he didn’t need *any* of it, but he didn’t want to use any of his mana up when he didn’t need to. Especially since he had used a sizable chunk of it just before he left.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 1 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 32/118 Water Mana: 31/117 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 4119
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 1% Novice Mana Absorption: 61% Novice Mana Conversion: 19% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 22% Novice Core Crystallization: 14%

Novice **** Mana-formed Object Creation: 20%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

He had been frantic when he found out that his whole system guide had disappeared, and it had taken a better part of a day to calm down enough to really investigate what had happened. Fortunately, Regnark just thought Fred was demonstrating one of his weird “quirks”, so the hysterical and desperate look he was sure he was exhibiting passed by with barely a note. Especially when he learned that his skills were all still working.

The only thing he hadn’t done since he woke up in Regnark’s home was to attempt to create another mana-formed object; he hadn’t done so out of fear, but now he needed to do it to fight back the concern that he had lost everything. He wasn’t so foolish as to try to make another fur like the one that caused everything to go sideways; instead, he made the only thing he *had* been repeatedly successful at: his knife.

He did it while Regnark was asleep that night, knowing that if something went completely wrong – he’d at least have help nearby. And if it killed him, then that’s just the way it was supposed to go; he couldn’t live life being too scared to find out it would work or not.

Fortunately, he was successful! The process went as flawlessly as it had before, perhaps even smoother because his mana wasn’t being strained to help keep him alive at the same time. With that success, he decided to go ahead and try to make a gold piece. And was met with a very unsuccessful result.

The vaguely circular hunk of light-yellow metal that he held in his hand after his first attempt didn’t appear to resemble a gold piece in any way, shape, or form. He not only thought that it wouldn’t pass for the real thing, he figured it couldn’t even be considered valuable. It didn’t look to

have the same weight to it as the real one, it had a dull sheen to its appearance, and the head and face that had been detailed on it was a formless blob.

What am I doing wrong? Everything he had created successfully before had been made with only slight variations to their look, even the strange-looking “boots” he had cobbled together (which Regnark had conveniently misplaced, making him a better pair as a replacement). Then he remembered from the system guide that the way to successfully create something was to really *know* what he was making; he mistakenly thought he just needed to see an object to get an idea of what he wanted to create, and it would be done.

The ones that hadn’t worked so well, for instance the trap and the Dire Wolf pelt, were things that he had seen before, but didn’t know exactly how they worked or how they felt in his hands. Although he had seen the gold piece, it was only a brief look and he hadn’t really gotten a good “feel” for it. *I wonder if I need to actually handle it to “know” it.*

He experimented that night with a couple of things on Regnark’s walls that he had never touched or handled before: a purely decorative wooden figure that the burly human had carved with his own knife, a short sword that was about three times as long as Fred’s knife, and a couple other random things that he hadn’t ever had the need or inclination to touch before.

He first tried to make the wooden figure, that he had seen every day, without touching it – which ended up a shapeless hunk of wood. A failure, though it was unmistakably wood. *Since I’ve handled wood before, does that mean I can replicate the material, just not the exact shape I want?* He was going to try some of that later, but he wanted to continue his experiment.

Taking down the figure of a small, realistic-looking bear, he held it in his hands; he ran his fingers over every inch of it, feeling the grain of the wood and noticing a small chip that had been knocked off of one its paws, leaving it with only one toe on its left hind leg. A few minutes later, he put it back on the wall shelf and stepped back.

He visualized it in his head and pictured not only how it looked, but how it felt and even smelled. When he thought he had it in his mind, he pushed his mana into it, holding his hands out to appear. When it materialized whole and complete inside his cupped hands, he almost yelled out with joy! He restrained himself, however, since he didn't want to wake Regnark up.

Both attempts had only taken 2 mana each, and since he was essentially full of mana – other than the 12 he had used on making another knife – he decided to attempt something else with the bear figure. Instead of making a whole new one, he took his copy and visualized what it would look like if the chip hadn't been on the hind leg. He had been able to fix the damage on his knives over time by visualizing them gone, but he had made an entirely new one – not altering what was already present.

With the visual based upon what the other toes looked like in his head, he poured some mana into it and was surprised that it shut off almost as soon as it began. Before he could even wonder if something had gone wrong, his figurine had gained some extra toes – right where the damaged section had been! When he looked at his mana, it hadn't even used a single point.

He tried the same with everything else he picked up that night, including the short sword which took nearly 30 mana to initially create – though the wear-and-tear he repaired on it took a whopping 1 point to fix. *So repairing things take much less mana to fix, but it's not free.*

Over the next month, Fred practiced using his skill to repair *everything* he could see inside and out of Regnark's house. Not only was it all good practice, but it made him touch everything – which he then knew he could recreate at any time he wanted. The only thing he wasn't able to touch was the pouch containing all of the copper, silver, and gold pieces – Regnark always kept it around his neck, even when he was asleep and during his weekly washings. Fred might be new to human society, but even *he* knew that asking to see something that was obviously so valuable to the man was probably not the best idea. So, he waited.

He finally got the chance to see some of the copper “coins” weeks later, though it wasn't exactly the way he was hoping for.

After arriving back at Regnark's house a day of hunting, Fred was helping to prepare dinner when he saw that their salt was running low. Thinking about the merchant who had promised to be back in a few days hence with more supplies, he remembered the guards who had protected him and about Regnark's disdain and comments about them.

“Regnark, do you remember those merchant guards that were up here about a month ago?”

The big man was cleaning up the rest of their gear they had deposited on the floor after getting back with a big buck, which took most of their strength to carry (well, at least most of Fred's strength – Regnark never looked to get tired even if he were to carry it himself). “Yes, what about them?”

“I remember you said something about them being ‘dropouts’, or something like that. What does that mean?”

There were a few times when Fred was asking questions that it was obvious the burly man didn't want to talk about something; he usually paused for a few seconds before answering, and when he finally did, his

tone usually made it plain that he would answer only what he wanted to and wouldn't answer any more along those lines again. It came across so clear that every time Fred heard the tone, he knew better than to dig deeper.

Unfortunately, after hearing the answer, this was *not* one of those times.

After waiting a few seconds, as if he was trying to figure out what to say, Regnark reluctantly said, "I'm sure if you ever head south, you'll probably learn all about the DAS, so I might as well tell you now." He then took on a lecturing tone, one that Fred remembered hearing from his parents so many times when they were trying to teach him something that was important for him to learn.

"The Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, otherwise known as the DAS, is an organization that recruits, trains, and *encourages* its members to delve into any of the – reportedly – millions of dungeons, looking for precious loot. When they then bring that loot or treasure back, the DAS takes a sizable cut of the total treasure found inside whatever dungeon they had looted, thereby lining their pockets as a result of the blood, sweat, and tears the 'adventurers' shed to get the hard-earned riches."

This sounds exactly what I need! I bet I could find some of these DAS people to help me get into a dungeon, so I can find out who killed my parents! Fred's excitement was a little too obvious when he asked for more information about the organization.

"NO," Regnark roared out, "I've told you enough – that's all I'll say about them."

Fred couldn't let it go though, as it was the first lead that he had on obtaining allies to further his objective. Therefore, his brain ignored Regnark's tone and warning signs about venturing too far in his questioning. "How is it I can go about joining this Dungeon Adv—"

“I will NOT be party to ANOTHER young man going to their death, looking for a way to get rich quickly. In fact, I want you out of here tomorrow, if this is your goal. You can stay the night, but in the morning – you’re gone. I’ll pack a bag of food for you that should last a couple of days and I’ll even give you a couple of my precious copper pieces; I don’t want you telling everyone I left you on the side of the road without anything to your name.” He threw on his coat again and slammed the door on the way out, ignoring Fred’s apologies and pleas for him to stay.

Regnark didn’t come back that night, at least not while Fred was awake, but there was a bag sitting in the middle of the table in the morning. *This was not what I intended...I need to watch my mouth in the future.* There were any number of places the burly man was probably located, and Fred thought he might be able to track him down if he really tried; he felt really bad about the damage he had caused to their friendship, especially since he didn’t have a single other friend in the entire world. However, he wasn’t experienced enough with social interactions to know how to fix it. *There should be a skill on my status that says Extreme Novice in Relationships.*

Fred opened up the bag, noticing that the food inside it was carefully wrapped to preserve its freshness, and most of the meat was salted – which helped to preserve it even further. He looked in the small kitchen space, noticing that the small glass jar that held the salt was now completely empty. *He used the last of it...for me.*

At the bottom of the bag was a small pouch, looking very similar to the one around Regnark’s neck, including a neck strap. He quickly slipped it around his own neck, feeling a surprisingly hefty weight to it. Opening it up, he saw ten copper pieces...and one precious silver one. He picked out the silver coin, holding it in his hand and running it through his fingers.

Throwing the bag strap around his shoulder, he walked out the door, looking back one final time at the house where he learned so much...and realized he still had a lot to learn. The table now held a large gleaming pile of silver coins, containing almost 500 pieces, which covered the majority of the surface.

Exhausted from the mana expenditure, he softly closed the door to the wooden house – and closed the door to that portion of his life.

Chapter 12

Two hours into his journey south, Fred felt a strange sensation tugging at him. Although, it didn't feel like it was pulling him toward something; it was more like it was someone or something was poking at his chest. The impression he got wasn't insistent, like he needed to go wherever it was indicating...but it was slightly familiar.

It was off to the southeast, off the "road" he was following; he wasn't sure what it was at first, but as he continued to travel southward and got closer to whatever it was, he suddenly knew.

It was a dungeon core.

It was the same thing he felt when he had originally traveled outside his home; the feeling back then was a lot subtler, though that might be because of his familiarity with his parents' dungeon cores. The sensation he felt back then was more natural, as if it belonged there; this new one, however, felt very *unnatural* and stuck out like a sore thumb. He wasn't sure why that was, but he wanted to find out. And maybe even acquire some information in the meantime.

He left the road, angling his path for what he was sure was a dungeon and dungeon core. The trees this far south were shorter and weren't grown so close together, so it was easy to navigate his way through the slowly melting snowdrifts and made increasingly good time. As he got closer, he ran faster, wanting to dive right into the dungeon and demand answers. Reason and rational thought left him as he neared the dungeon, replaced with revenge and retribution.

In the distance through the trees, he spotted an unnatural formation of rocks; it was unnatural, at least, for the fact that it was in the middle of the

so far rock-less forest. It didn't look exactly like his parents' dungeon, but it was similar enough with a small opening in the front that he recognized it for what it was.

Fred's feet pounded over the ground, rushing full speed without a care or a plan toward the entrance. He was 50 feet away when a large grey blur shot out in front of him, stopping right in his path. At the last moment, he realized that it was a massive Dire Wolf, at least twice the size of the one that he had barely killed to the north.

????? – Level ???

That was all he got a glimpse of before he ran straight into it, a humongous paw batting him into a nearby tree. His head hit the tree at an angle, and he heard a few distant *pops* and hollow *cracks* – before his vision went dark.

* * *

Fred woke up slowly, confusion marring any of his attempts to figure out where he was. *Am I back at Regnark's place?* He felt the cold seeping into his back and legs through his clothes. *On second thought, I doubt it would be this cold.* He opened his eyes and noticed that it was dark, the night sky full of little points of light just barely visible. He could see just fine, of course, because of his enhanced dark vision – but the confusion only deepened.

He sat up gingerly, memories of the last few moments before unconsciousness filtering through his mind finally. Where he was expecting to feel some pain in perhaps his neck or head, there was instead

nothing. A quick look at his mana totals showed that they hadn't increased at all, which meant that anything converted had been automatically used to do something else. *I'm going to guess healing me.*

How long was I out? He looked around, expecting to see the entrance of the dungeon he had been heading for nearby, but he saw nothing of the sort. Just more trees. The worst part, at least apart from being swatted aside by a giant Dire Wolf like a cat playing with a mouse, was he couldn't "feel" the dungeon core anywhere near him.

His bag was fortunately right next to him, placed with what looked like care; the opening was neatly closed and facing upwards, so that nothing would come out. Fred went to grab it when he saw something in his peripheral vision.

Walking out from behind a tree, the Dire Wolf he had seen so briefly before he was so casually brushed aside strode forward, strength and deadliness echoing through every inch of its 15-foot height. Another 30 feet from nose to tail, the massive wolf looked like it could swallow him up in its jaws but only provide it a brief snack.

Where did it come from and why did it bring me here? Thoughts of being brought back to its den as some sort of meal for its giant children ran through Fred's head, causing him to quickly look around for anything else coming for him. Not seeing anything, he turned his head back toward the advancing wolf, coming face to face with it. *How did it move that fast?* Even he knew that was a stupid question, considering it didn't really matter at that point. What did matter was how he was going to get out of the situation.

I'm not going down without a fight, at least. Since the Dire Wolf (which still displayed all ???'s on its name and level) wasn't attacking right away, he slowly – and with a steadier hand than he thought he'd have

considering the situation – moved his hand down to his belt, sliding his knife out little by little. It was halfway out of the sheath when he paused, a curious sight finally registering to his mind.

Whereas most wild beasts he had seen – including the prior Dire Wolf that almost killed him – sometimes had two or more mana types inside of them, it was usually 98% of one element and only a smattering of others. Dungeon defenders, of course, were all one element; it was only the wild creatures that sometimes had two or more – and were usually Earth and Nature-based mana. This Dire Wolf, however, was different: it had two *equal* elements comprising its makeup.

Fire and Water.

“Very good, Fredwynklemossering. It’s about time you used your head; your parents taught you better than that.”

He sat there, frozen in shock as he heard an obviously female voice inside his head. He was pretty sure there was nobody else around – including any dungeon cores – which didn’t make any sense, because he could’ve sworn that he just heard the voice the same way he used to hear his parents speaking between themselves. He looked the Dire Wolf straight into its eyes, which was hard because its head was so big and the eyes so far apart.

“D-Did you just talk to me?”

“Yes, Fredwynklemossering, I did. I’ve been trying to contact you for months, but I haven’t been able to get close enough to initiate contact. You just happened to leave when I wasn’t expecting it, otherwise I would’ve met you outside of that village.”

What? “Uh...who are you? And when did a Dire Wolf learn how to communicate?”

“I thought that was obvious – I’m the organically converted NDCIP you Created four months ago.”

“Whoa, hold on there – back up for a moment. What are you talking about?” Fred was thoroughly confused, which was only somehow mirrored in the face of the Dire Wolf, who tilted its (her?) head to the side.

“You don’t remember Creating me as an exact duplicate of the Dire Wolf you killed 5 months, 4 days, 3 hours, and 16 minutes before? And then directing your Newborn Dungeon Core Initialization Program to inhabit my new form, using the shards from your parents’ dungeon cores to power the transfer? I do have to apologize for not materializing right away, but it took nearly a week to convert the system into organic form, as it had never been done before and there was no protocol for it.”

Fred felt like passing out again; this was too much for him. He barely understood a word she was saying, but he got the gist of it. “So, wait – you’re saying I Created you? How did I do that – especially since I don’t even remember doing it?”

“The exact details of how you accomplished it is unknown even to me, though I can hazard to guess that you were thinking too many things at the time of Creation, leading to this result. I’m sorry if you are unhappy

with my presence. If you like, I will deactivate this body and you can reabsorb the mana inside of me at your leisure.”

“Wait, what are you talking about? Are you saying you’d kill yourself if I wanted you to? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I was originally Created by your wish for help to understand the system and for you to somehow bring back your parents. Unfortunately, since they had destroyed themselves in the process of eliminating the remaining dungeon defenders that had invaded, their resurrection was not possible. However, by incorporating both of their crystalline shards you had in your possession, some of their consciousness was transferred to this form.”

He hoped that meant what he thought it meant. “Does that mean I can talk to my parents?”

“Not...exactly. Their presence in my systems is more like an echo or shadow of their former selves; it’s as if they are present and can experience everything this body does, but they cannot take control. Perhaps if you upgrade this form, they may be able to do more.”

He latched onto that last part. “So, you’re saying there’s a chance to talk to them again?”

“Theoretically, though I don’t want you to consider it an option at the moment. I’m not currently powerful enough to handle that kind of

consciousness conversion without destroying both myself and any part of them that might be left inside of me.”

I’ll take that as a yes. “With what you can do, do you know who killed my parents and why they did it?” Maybe it won’t be so hard to find out, after all.

“I’m sorry, it doesn’t work like that. There are brief flashes of memory that I can access, but they mean nothing without references. Perhaps something you find in the future may help with adding appropriate context.”

And I’ll take that as a no. At least not yet. Now that he knew he wasn’t going to have his head bitten off, Fred relaxed a little and stood up, grabbing his bag at the same time. “Ok, say I buy all of this...what am I supposed to call you?”

“I don’t really have a name, though I suppose you could call me NDCIP, since that is essentially what I am.”

“Uh, that’s a little bit of a mouthful, just like my full name. How about you call me Fred, and I’ll call you...Deecy? How does that sound?”

“Deecy? Dee-cy. I think I like it. Thank you for bestowing a name upon me...Fred.

“You’re very welcome, Deecy. Now, before we go on our way, I need to ask you one more tiny question.”

“Absolutely, Fred – I am here to help you by providing any knowledge you may require, as well as do what I can to protect you from danger.”

Fred smiled at the thought of *another* bodyguard following him around. *I thought I’d never feel nostalgic for Furbey and Frozzles, but here I am.* He tried to keep the smile on his face when he asked the next question. “So, if you’re here to protect me, why in the world did you try to kill me?”

Chapter 13

Fred wasn't expecting the answer Deecy gave, but he hadn't been expecting a lot of things over the course of the last few days – so it wasn't that big of a surprise.

“Because you were uncontrovertibly stupid. I may have been...a little heavy-handed with my reaction, but it was the only way I could think of to stop you in the short amount of time I had. Besides, you're fine.”

“But you tried to kill me!” He couldn't believe that Deecy was acting so casual about the whole thing, like it was *his* fault that he almost died.

“You're much harder to kill than you think you are. Due to your dungeon core heritage, as well as your Core Structure, any normally fatal damage to your body can be healed. If you lose limbs, they can be regrown. Diseases and illnesses won't touch you, nor will many effects that deal with aging, flesh rot, or bone brittleness. Even if your head is detached from your body, it will grow back – but it will take a while.”

“So, you're saying I can't die?”

“I didn't say that; you can still die in many, many ways. If you are burned to ash in a fire, your Core Structure won't have enough solid material to work with. If you are sliced up in enough pieces and your remains are scattered far from each other, there won't be enough

cohesion to sustain regeneration. If you are squished between two walls, your remains—”

“Ok, ok – I don’t need to hear all that. Essentially, you’re saying I should try to stay away from anything that will do massive damage to my body? I can do that.” He felt a little relieved that he wasn’t as fragile as he once thought he was.

“Yes, it would be advisable to stay away from any activity that would result in that. Aside from that, though, the most likely way you could die is if you were to run completely out of mana. If mana is required to maintain your body – and you have none – it will start to consume itself, which, if you haven’t guessed, is not the most pleasant way to die.”

Until he heard that.

He thought about his botched attempt to create the Dire Wolf fur for his “disguise”; if he had ended up using even another 20 or so mana, that would’ve been it for him. He doubted that he would’ve survived long enough for Regnark to find his body, bring him inside, and nurse him back to health.

“Ok, say for a moment I believe that you didn’t try to kill me *and* knew I would survive the hit without permanent damage. Given that, why did you stop me in the first place?” That was – after every other revelation at least – the most important question on his mind.

“I told you, it was because you were being uncontrovertibly stupid. Going into a dungeon in your state – and by yourself – would be a death sentence. That was an Earth-element dungeon, which frequently likes to

employ rock-crushing or spiked pit traps, either of which wouldn't go well for you. You might survive falling down into a pit full of spikes, but if you couldn't get your impaled body off of a spike, your mana would slowly drain away keeping you alive and in unimaginable pain until there was nothing left. And I already told you what happens after that."

That stopped him cold. He had been so sure that he could just walk right in and easily bypass all of the traps, get to the dungeon core in charge of the dungeon, and demand answers. He was an expert when it came to his home dungeon's traps and would probably be able to identify where the traps in a new dungeon were by looking at mana signatures. However, he couldn't be sure that he would be able to successfully navigate them even if he saw it was there. In fact, when he thought about it, there had been a couple of traps back home that he had spent weeks or months memorizing the patterns for before his parents even allowed him to attempt them.

She was right – Fred was being stupid.

He was so blinded by rage and revenge and the *need* for the answers he wanted that he hadn't stopped to think – he just reacted. In the end, he was actually fortunate that Deecy had stopped him before he made a colossal mistake. He wasn't ashamed of telling her that, either; he was well aware he still had a lot to learn and wasn't about to turn away a friend... especially since he had just lost the only one that he had.

"I've thought it over, and I agree that I needed to be stopped before I got to the dungeon, even if I don't necessarily agree with the methods used. Nevertheless, I want to thank you. However, next time, try to be a little gentler with your approach – you don't necessarily need to knock me out to get my attention."

“You are very welcome, it’s what you Created me for. And I didn’t just knock you out; I actually ended up breaking your neck, your back in three places, and crushed the back of your skull. Fortunately, there wasn’t major damage to your skin, so there was no major loss of blood – it was all kept internal. I would, of course, have been able to defend your recovering body from all the predators smelling your blood from miles away, but I’d just as soon not have to.”

“You’re not helping by telling me that.”

* * *

They continued Fred’s temporarily aborted journey down south, traveling through the trees instead of by road. Deecy had brought Fred’s body back up north while he had been recovering from the damage it had sustained – just out of range of the dungeon core he had sensed previously – so it wasn’t long until he felt the now-familiar sensation. Tempered by the knowledge that going into it would be suicide at this point, he acknowledged its presence but ignored it after that. However...

“Deecy, what about if you came to the dungeon with me? You would certainly be a match for anything in there.”

“Again, it’s not the dungeon defenders I’m worried about, even though many of them are probably much more difficult to kill than the ones in your old home. It’s the traps inside – those would be much deadlier than anything I could handle.”

Fred supposed that it made sense; if he fell down a spike pit and couldn't get out, he couldn't see her enacting some sort of rescue – especially with her lack of hands.

“Well, then, if we're heading toward the next town, can I ride on your back?” A tired and blank-faced look (for a Dire Wolf) answered that question.

“I can't maintain this larger form for very much longer, and my normal form cannot carry you. In fact, I may need your help to carry me, as I think I've overextended my mana reserves to ensure your protection.”

What does that mean? When he looked at her closer, however, he could see what she was talking about; while her entire body was still divided by red and blue, the saturation of the colors was almost non-existent. He hadn't noticed it before, but it had been fading ever since he had woken up. It had been so subtle, though, that it wasn't until he really paid attention to it that he finally noticed.

Without another word, Fred watched, astonished, as Deecy started to shrink rapidly; ten seconds later, the formerly giant Dire Wolf was the size of a small cub, little enough that she could easily fit inside his bag if he wanted.

“Ah, that's much better. This form requires much, much less mana to maintain, and will allow me to absorb and convert the raw mana from the environment at a rapid pace, even with you absorbing at the same rate. However, I won't be able to protect you while I'm like this; it will take at least a day before I'm able to take a larger form, though not quite as large as before without more time.”

That certainly explains it – she can change her size depending upon how much mana she uses. I was wondering how she got that big when I’m pretty sure I didn’t imagine her that size when I Created her. Deecy, now in her Dire Wolf Cub form, lay down and curled up as if she was planning on going to sleep. *I guess I can carry her, she doesn’t look too heavy. But wait, what was it she said...* “What did you mean about being able to absorb mana from the environment? The only mana I’ve been able to absorb was from the beasts that I’ve killed.”

Fred had put his bag down while he asked her this, picking her up so that he could place her inside. Her head perked up and her eyes opened, however, when she heard him.

“What? That’s not right – dungeon cores should instinctively know how to do that! Even I can do this, though it is limited to the ambient mana in the air and the earth, and not from objects or beasts. Have you even tried?”

He felt a little indignant at her question, as if she was questioning his intelligence. *To be fair to her, though, I was acting stupidly earlier.* “Of course I’ve tried – many, many times over the last...nearly two years. I have a feeling it has to do with the absence of a dungeon of my own; at least, that’s what I gathered from what I had been able to understand from the system guide – which *you* now have inside your head.” He stared right into her eyes, projecting her accusations back on her.

Deecy actually seemed flustered for the first time, tearing her gaze away and laying it back on her body – which was now in his arms.

“Yes, well...I don’t have all the answers. Especially for a problem that has never existed before. I’ll...think about it for a while and see I can come up with a solution. For now, though, I need to rest – it will speed up my mana regeneration.”

So saying, she closed her eyes and was soon sleeping soundly, barely shifting even when Fred placed her in his bag on top of his food supplies. He pulled the drawstrings – closing up the top a little bit – but not so far that she couldn’t breathe or get out if the occasion warranted it. Though he didn’t know if she even *needed* to breathe to stay alive; come to think of it, he didn’t even know if she could be killed, and if she did die – could he bring her back?

She was asleep (or at least pretending to be as she regenerated her mana), so he couldn’t ask her about it, though he promised himself that he would make it a priority once she awoke. Even though she looked nothing like them, she embodied the closest thing he had to getting his parents back, and he didn’t want to lose her so soon after finding her.

*Even if she **did** try to kill me.* He smiled, adjusting the bag on his shoulder as he got accustomed to the extra weight. *Well, no time to waste – I need to find the next town. And see what this Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate is all about.*

Part III – The Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate

Chapter 14

The journey through the forest took much less time than he thought it would – just under three days to reach Gatecross. It was also boring and uneventful, though it did allow him plenty of time to talk to Deecy once she woke up; she never did figure out an answer to his issue with being unable to absorb anything but recently deceased beasts, but everything else she had to tell him was informative, if unimportant. Additionally, when he asked about if she could die and be brought back like a normal dungeon defender, she had no clue.

“I know that I will perish if I take too much damage, but I am not sure if you can recreate me like you did before. It could be that you could Create my form, but whether or not I would have your parents’ memories inside of me – I don’t have enough information to tell for sure.”

Most of the other information she imparted to him was more of what he had read previously, though it was expanded upon. *And* – most of it was useless to him since he didn’t have a dungeon.

What he *did* learn, however, was a little bit more about humans and the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate; his parents had known much more about them than he had realized. He wasn’t sure if it was personal knowledge – because Deecy still claimed that a lot of his parents’ memories she had were still fuzzy – or if it was ingrained somewhere within the incorporated system inside of her. Either way, he was confused at why they hadn’t told him all they knew.

“A lot of the information they had was compiled over centuries and millennia of observations from every dungeon core; they probably only taught you the things you needed to know, leaving out things that seemed unimportant. I’m sure if you knew what questions to ask, they would’ve shared it with you. The one thing that I can 100% confirm from their memories was that they loved you, and anything that you needed to be a successful human – and dungeon core – they would’ve given you without question.”

He considered her explanation for a while, finally agreeing with her. He had learned so much over the last four to five months from living amongst the humans; it was hard to believe that he would’ve thought to ask about it, or even that his parents would’ve thought it was important to tell him about.

However, the one thing he couldn’t understand was why they didn’t tell him about the power within the humans that allowed them to manipulate themselves, as well as the world around them. From what Deecy “knew”, they didn’t manipulate elemental mana the way dungeon cores did; in fact, she didn’t think they could even see it. Instead, they used some innate power within them to do many of the things a dungeon core could do (and many things that they couldn’t). Dungeon cores couldn’t see this power, necessarily, but they definitely observed the effects – which was what made them powerful enough to invade their dungeons.

They could fling around various elemental attacks, increase the strength and/or speed of themselves and others, heal grievous wounds almost instantly, raise the dead and have it fight for them temporarily (but not dungeon defenders, fortunately), and even permanently enhance their own bodies in different ways. By some unknown method, these

“Adventurers” got stronger the more they visited their dungeons, which was well documented as different dungeon cores saw the same humans become more powerful over time.

These different power “ratings” were talked about constantly by the humans as they made their way through dungeons, so it wasn’t long until the dungeon cores had adopted the same rating system. Deecy explained it thusly:

Rating G: --> Least powerful

Rating F-A: --> Increasingly more powerful as the rating moves up a letter

Rating S: --> The most powerful

Each alphabetical rating had a “strength” rating to it – numbering 1-10 – with the smaller the number, the less powerful. So a rating of G-1st was the least powerful of dungeons, which were frequently seen with juvenile dungeon cores that were just released from their parents’ protection. Newborn cores didn’t even rank, usually, as they were so weak that they could barely defend themselves, let alone create a large enough dungeon to challenge even the weakest human. The accumulation of mana and the strengthening/development of their core crystals were what increased a dungeon core’s rating, though it could take years or decades to increase even one point in the rating scale.

A human with a G-1st rating was usually just starting out as an “Adventurer” and didn’t pose much of a threat, but they could advance in power much more rapidly than a dungeon core. Groups of humans invaded the dungeons together, so that even four or five G-1st-rated Adventurers

were typically more than a match for the defenders and traps inside the weakest of dungeons.

On the other end of the spectrum, S-10th-rated dungeons and Adventurers were the best-of-the-best, the strongest of the strong, the most powerful in the world. Deecy didn't have specific numbers, but from what she had access to she believed that there were very few on either side that were even at the S-rating, let alone at the 10th level.

Therefore, dungeon cores and humans had a symbiotic relationship; cores accumulated more mana – which was called “spiritual” or “free-floating” mana as it wasn't attached to any specific element – by the mere presence (and deaths) of Adventures inside their dungeon, and those same Adventurers got stronger and more powerful somehow from being inside those dungeons.

Additionally, each group had a long-standing non-verbal “treaty” in place with the other; dungeon cores wouldn't go out of their way to destroy every single human that invaded their dungeons, and Adventurers wouldn't attempt to acquire or destroy dungeon cores.

On the core side, it made sense – the more humans they killed, the less would be willing to come to their dungeon and provide spiritual mana to provide for the dungeon's growth. Simple and obvious.

On the Adventurer side of things, it had been centuries since anyone had attempted to steal or otherwise acquire a dungeon core; the reprisals from other dungeon cores in the area – when the last one was destroyed – was so severe that more than half of the local human population was wiped out. Just because they had dungeon “defenders”, didn't mean that they couldn't be sent out with an extra helping of mana to become dungeon “attackers”. Fred knew this firsthand very well, unfortunately.

Which all meant that Fred had to be careful with what he did in the near future. He needed to become a part of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, despite his old friend Regnark's misgivings about the organization; he needed their help to be able to both get to and talk with a dungeon core. Based upon the warnings from Deecy, it definitely wasn't something he wanted to try to do by himself.

As he got closer to where he thought the town might be, the number of trees filling the forest started to decrease in number drastically; in opposition to that, the nearby dungeon cores he could sense rose exponentially the closer he got. His effective "detection range" was only a couple of miles, but at a few points he could pinpoint at least 20 cores surrounding him in every direction. With Deecy's help (who had continued to stay in her Dire Wolf Pup form to absorb and conserve mana), he was able to chart a course through the various dungeon entrances, which eventually ended up with them on the road again.

"Dungeons and dungeon cores typically set up around human population centers; the greater the density of potential Adventurer presence, the more dungeons are present. Also, there's typically better ambient mana nearby major human settlements, which is beneficial to dungeon core development and advancement. As you visit larger and larger cities, the dungeon concentration will increase exponentially."

He couldn't imagine what a larger city would look like, since his first glimpse of the town he was heading towards on his fourth morning out from the village of Northend was overwhelming. He had thought that the grouping of fifteen houses in the village was a lot; the town of Gatecross had nearly ten times that amount! What really caught his attention,

however, was the sheer number of humans walking around on the stone-paved pathways in between the houses and...other buildings. His brief education from Regnark didn't cover anything other than human residences, as Northend was essentially just a conglomeration of people living so far up north for the sole purpose of hunting and collecting furs and pelts.

Deecy was no help either, as she had no specific knowledge about human population centers other than the fact that they existed. *I need to find someone who can teach me like Regnark did.*

There was a stone wall surrounding the entire town, tall enough that he would need some help to climb over it; fortunately, there seemed to be openings on opposite sides of the town, which were protected by two humans in metal and leather-covered armor. Fred was reminded of the merchant guards he had seen in Northend; these town guards, however, looked to be better-equipped and...more dangerous. Sometimes he wished that his ability to see the level and stats of humans worked the same way as it did with dungeon defenders and wild beasts. He had a feeling that the town guards would be a much higher level than everyone else.

From his slightly elevated vantage point, Fred could see that the southern opening had quite a bit of traffic leading in and out of it; the northern one, however, didn't have anything except the town guards, standing at attention but appearing bored. He hadn't seen anyone traveling along the road on his way down south, so he supposed it made sense that he didn't see anyone using it.

With eagerness in his step and the slight pangs of hunger itching at him (he had finished all of the food Regnark had prepared for him the night before), he walked down to the northern wall opening. When he approached closer, the two guards somehow seemed to straighten up and pay more attention to their surroundings.

“Halt! State your business in Gatecross or begone,” the left guard barked out as soon as Fred was within 20 feet.

That’s strange, I wonder why they need to know. “Uh...can I ask why you need to know?”

They seemed to stiffen at his question and Fred began to worry that he said something wrong. “Drop your weapons and—” the one that spoke shouted angrily, before the other one interrupted him in a calmer voice. “Please excuse my partner here, he *obviously* can’t see that you’re new here and don’t understand normal protocol. The roads around here have been plagued with various bandit groups lately, so everyone’s a bit on edge. We’ve had three caravans from the south already overdue, and the only one that went north more than a month ago hasn’t come back, either.”

A month ago? That sounds like the merchant that visited Northend. I wonder if he and his guards were attacked along the road? Most of Fred’s journey south had been through the forest, and it was only within the last half of the previous day that he had been actually on the road. Now he was doubly thankful for Deecy’s arrival, since it probably meant that he had bypassed whatever trap the bandits had in wait for travelers.

But that also means it’s unlikely that any more merchants would be willing to head to Northend, essentially cutting them off from the rest of the world. There has to be something I can do about it. As if reading his mind, Deecy butted into his thoughts from her spot in his bag.

“There’s nothing that you can do about it. You’ve got a bigger objective; don’t allow yourself to be distracted from that.”

While it was good to be reminded that he needed to keep his thoughts focused on his ultimate goal, Fred couldn’t help but think about Regnark

and the rest of the humans up north. He knew they wouldn't starve or anything like that, but the lack of merchants coming up from the south might cause a few of them (or even his friend) to investigate why. He had a feeling that they would fall to the same problem the merchant had: bandits.

"Well, I can tell you honestly that I'm not with any of those bandit groups. I'm just here to see if I can...join the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate. Yes, that's what I'm here for."

The guards didn't look like they believed him, but they passed him through anyway. *I guess I don't look like much of a threat.*

Before he got too far, however, the one that seemed a little nicer stopped him and asked about the road to the north. "No, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, nor did I see any signs of these bandits. Sorry."

"Fair enough, just stay out of trouble yourself, young man. Gatecross's DAS building is two streets down and to the left next to the blacksmith – it's the biggest in town and you can't miss it." As if he was done with him, the guard turned back to the opening, looking once more to the north.

Fred thanked him (to no response) and followed the directions as well as he could, even though he didn't know what a "street" was. He took his best guess and luckily found what he was looking for – a massive building that was at least ten times the size of Regnark's house, with a big sign over the door that said, "Adventurers Welcome!" *I guess that's it.*

Chapter 15

Fred had naively thought that he'd be able to go inside, sign up with the Syndicate really quick, find some human allies to invade a nearby dungeon, and be done with his objective before the day was done. Once he had the requisite information, he would then recruit some more powerful humans to exact revenge on whichever dungeon cores killed his parents, and then be done with it. Easy and straightforward.

When he walked inside, he was almost bowled over by the sheer noise being made by the massive number of humans in one place. *There must be at least 30 humans just in this room!* Most were sitting around tables in little groups, talking loudly to be heard over everyone else, while others were looking at little slips of something attached to a giant wall. No one paid him any attention when he walked in, which he thought was a good sign; he smiled as he thought, *this will be easy – I shouldn't have any trouble finding some help here!*

His plans hit a hitch as soon as he approached the bored-looking DAS person behind a counter along one wall. He was dressed in a not-so-practical-for-the-outdoors outfit that included a shiny blue vest and a thin short-sleeved white shirt; his beard was trimmed and neat, cut close to his face – a sharp contrast to the facial hair he had seen on every other person he had ever met.

“In order to become a new recruit with the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, you need to have a sponsor that is Rated F or above to vouch for you, along with the 20-silver-piece application fee – which will cover your initial starter gear and supplies, as well as what we require for your SDIA,”

the representative told him in a flat voice, as if he had recited those same words every day. *Well, maybe he has.*

The silver pieces weren't a problem, as he could easily Create them; the "sponsor" could pose a bit of problem, though. That, and he didn't know what a "SDIA" was, but he didn't want to express his ignorance any more than he had to – the Syndicate person was already looking like he wanted Fred to leave him alone. "Ok, I have the silver...but if you don't mind me asking, where would I find a sponsor?"

The man waved around the room. "Check with any of the other members here, most of them are at or above the requisite Rating. Be warned though, most will only sponsor you if you shell out a little extra coin for them; if you end up not making it to an F Rating within a year, the sponsor gets charged the remaining balance of whatever you owe for the SDIA," he said, then *really* looked at Fred for the first time – and apparently didn't like what he saw.

"Based on your appearance, however, you'd probably have to give them the entire amount." In a lower voice, he continued, "Look, I'm not supposed to turn away any potential recruits, but you're in *way* over your head here, boy. Come back in a couple of years, preferably when you're old enough to shave."

Rather than be indignant at the man's comments, Fred smiled and told him, "I appreciate your concern, but I will take my chances. Thank you for your advice."

Before he could walk away completely, the Syndicate man grabbed his sleeve. "Ok, if you're dead set on joining, then I can't stop you – it's your funeral. One piece of advice though – stay away from that one." He nodded his head at what Fred assumed was a woman, as she didn't have a beard like nearly everyone else in the room. The hair on the top of her head

was longer than anyone he had seen before, hanging loosely down her back until it ended just above her knees. Also unlike most of the room's occupants, she was wearing a long piece of black cloth that covered her from her neck to her feet – practically clinging to her body – and looked impractical for the northern climate.

He turned back to ask why, but the man was already engaged with another person, who was handing him one of the slips from the giant board. Shrugging, Fred faced the crowd and steeled his nerves; it was one thing asking for help from allies that were already part of the same Syndicate as him – it was another trying to convince those same people to vouch for a stranger in the first place. Judging by the Syndicate man's initial impression of Fred, he was worried it was going to be an uphill battle.

He was right – every group he approached took one look at him and rejected him. Even offering to pay them more silver pieces wasn't enough; they said it wasn't about the money and they didn't want to be responsible for a young kid going and getting themselves killed. A few even laughed at him and told him to “go home to mommy”, which made him angry. A warning from Deecy – who had been listening intently to everything – was enough for him to hold his temper.

“Ignore them – they don't know your story, nor are they the ones responsible for their deaths. Concentrate on your objective and leave your personal feelings out of it. At least...for now.”

It was easier said than done, though he managed to restrain himself from doing something that he would probably regret. When he had asked every human that had been in there when he arrived, he moved on to the few that had arrived afterwards. By the time he had gone through every

single Adventurer inside the building, most of them had left after giving a slip to the same Syndicate man he had talked to earlier.

Well, almost every single one.

He had avoided the lone woman in black the entire time he had been asking and pleading for sponsorship from the other members; she had ignored him running around as well, though Fred thought it was more the fact that she ignored *everything* around her except for the giant board she was staring at.

With the room essentially empty, he glanced again at the man behind the counter, receiving a pitying look in return. Which quickly turned into a shake of his head as he saw Fred start towards the woman at the end of the room. Ignoring the man, he walked up behind her – intent on asking for her help right away to get it over with – but then he looked at the board for the first time.

Hundreds of slips were pinned to it, covering the entire surface. Here and there, empty spots were present where some of the members had grabbed one off the board, though compared to how many were still there, it was still a vast minority. Thankful that he had learned how to read at a very young age (his parents thought it was imperative for him if he ever *did* somehow become a dungeon core someday), he read the descriptions on each slip he could see.

He was so lost in his perusal of the board that he completely forgot about the woman standing right in front of him.

Chapter 16

Eisa looked at the job board, hoping to find something lower-rated that she could do by herself. Coming to the backwater town of Gatecross seemed like a good idea a month ago, since the area was known for its lower-rated dungeons nearby; however, the reality of the situation was that even doing what she could solo, there was small likelihood that she could complete one of the jobs – let alone complete a dungeon by herself. Being a Necro-healer allowed for a lot of flexibility, but there was only so much she could do alone.

While she was an E-6th-Rated member of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate (which was fairly impressive for a 22-year-old), most of the jobs she saw required at least a party of three or more to complete. Even if they were in a G-1st-Rated dungeon – the easiest of the easy – getting caught by a trap or overwhelmed by a swarm of monsters without backup was a real possibility. Though she doubted it would be enough to kill her, having to retreat and fail the job would damage her reputation even more than it already had been.

The jobs still on the board were variations of the ones she had seen there all month long, with only differences in location and item retrieval. There were even ones that were repeatable, such as the one she had her eye on.

Dungeon Name: Frostwood Forest #23

Dungeon Rating: G-2nd-Rated

Dungeon Type: Plant

Recommended Party Members: 3 or more

Reward: 85% of Dungeon Loot Received, 10 Copper Pieces per Job Item Retrieved

Job Description (Repeatable): Delve into the Frostwood Forest #23 dungeon and retrieve as many of the rare Flearantha Flower as can be found. Only intact flowers with stem are acceptable for job completion.

DAS-provided Equipment: 1 Minor Health Potion per Party Member

Penalty Upon Failure: If less than 1 Flearantha Flower(s) are turned in, any equipment given at the start of the job must be returned or reimbursed at 30 copper pieces each.

It was a crap job, since there wouldn't be great loot to be found in such an easy dungeon, and the Job Item reward was so low that it was barely worth most parties' time to journey there and complete it. On top of that, 15% of whatever she found inside the dungeon would be taken as a fee by the DAS. While that might seem excessive, it was usually a great deal when you considered what they provided to would-be parties taking those jobs. Not so much this one – as a single Minor Health Potion was worth maybe 10 copper pieces – but on the more difficult jobs they might provide special equipment, higher-grade potions, or even a monetary advance so you could equip yourselves however you wanted for the expedition.

Additionally, the Flearantha Flower (the item the job tasked those who took it to retrieve) was worth – if you were to sell it in the market – five times what the DAS was paying for it. Every once in a while, there would be someone stupid enough to try keeping what they found inside the dungeons they explored, refusing to give the DAS their cut and selling Job Items on the side, but they were inevitably found out...and never seen

again. Therefore, the thought of crossing the powerful organization never even flit across her mind.

Overall, it wasn't a *bad* system; the DAS trained new recruits – if they wanted it – and provided some basic gear to start them out with. Along with the job-specific “equipment” they provided for each job, they actually helped a great deal. But the lure of rewards from both the dungeons and what the DAS was offering in exchange for certain items led many to their deaths – a fact that Eisa knew all too well.

A job like this, fortunately, didn't have a “fail” issue: it was entirely dependent upon how many of the flowers were turned in. Because the flower was rare, it was entirely possible that even a full group of Adventurers going through might not find any at all, though the chance of that was very low. Either way though, it wouldn't penalize her for not bringing anything back, though she would just have to turn in the Minor Healing Potion they would give her at the onset. Which was fine, because she had other, better potions that she could use if she really needed to use one.

But it would allow her to get back out there and earn a little coin, as well as a little “juice” – the slang term for the energized spiritual essence that defeated dungeon monsters and discharged/deactivated traps gave off. She had been stagnating in her personal development lately, and she was so close to the E-7th-Rating; even an easy dungeon-delve or two would probably get her there. The increase in her available power alone from “rating-up” would be worth the possible danger. Of course, she'd have to be very careful by herself – which wasn't exactly her strong suit.

Eisa was a lot more reserved and cautious when she was in a group; she had to be, otherwise everything might fall apart since she was usually the designated healer. But when she was by herself...that was an entirely

different issue. If she didn't have to worry about healing anyone but herself, she tended to go all out, taking risks she probably shouldn't. But as things stood, it was probably her only option, since her reputation had preceded her even in Gatecross; there wasn't a DAS member within 500 miles that wanted to group with her.

Being the only member (and the only healer) of a 5-person party to come back alive from a dungeon tended to make most people think not-so-nice things about you.

Not that she did anything wrong, but that didn't matter to the minds of many of the members who heard about the disastrous delve. As a result, she was destined to spend as long as it took going it alone until people either forgot about her or there were enough new recruits that didn't know who she was. The thought of just abandoning her chosen profession as an Adventurer never even crossed her mind – it was just who she was and there was no going back.

Eisa grabbed the job posting off the board with a quick jerk, committed to finally getting started on her new solo Adventurer career. She wasn't broke *yet*, but the day was soon coming where her savings would run out; she needed to find a steady income to sustain at least her room and board at the local inn.

She looked down at the job posting in her hand, sighing in resignation as she glanced past it at the travel-stained, tight-fitting black wool dress she was wearing. *Is that a tear near the hem? Where did that come from?* She didn't have enough coinage lying around for such luxuries as laundry and repairs at the moment – and she couldn't sew if her life depended on it. She had another, nicer blood-red colored dress, but it was much thinner than the one she was wearing; despite it being spring already, it was still so cold this far north that she'd freeze if she didn't wear her warmer wool outfit.

Her long, loose-flowing, straight black hair swirled around her face as she turned toward the Syndicate's counter, intent to get started on the job as soon as she could. She was eager to get out there and finish it quickly, so that she could come back and repeat it; dungeons of this Rating were usually able to respawn and restock their monsters and loot within a couple of hours. It was still early enough in the day that she might be able to finish the job twice if she hurried and it wasn't too far away.

She took one step without looking where she was going and smacked hard right into someone behind her; it was such a surprise that she rebounded backwards and lost her footing. She would've hit the ground if a hand hadn't reached out and grabbed her wrist with a bit of strength, checking her fall and giving her enough leverage to re-right herself.

"Sorry about that, I didn't mean to get in your way." A young man's confident voice overrode her surprise at the sudden impact, and the hand that helped her from being sprawled over the ground let go of her as soon as she was steady. Her hair had fallen in her face after the impact, so she reached up quickly and pushed it aside, looking at who she had bumped into.

A country bumpkin, fresh off the farm and looking to get rich by living the "glamorous" life of an Adventurer. At least, that's what he looked like with his freshly shaved face (*or maybe he isn't even old enough to shave – I can't tell*), unadorned basic coat and pants, and dirty tattered boots. Even the bag over his shoulder looked plain and home-made, most likely filled with food and little mementos from home. The only thing going for him were the two knives at his waist, though even those looked like they were brand-new and had never been used before.

She had seen thousands like him come and go; the few lucky ones learned early enough that it wasn't as "glamorous" as they thought and went

home within a couple of weeks. On the flip-side, a few actually proved to be suited for the life and moved up the ratings rapidly. As for the majority – some 95% or so of the ones she had seen, at least – the promise of riches was too much of a temptation; as a result, they strived for more-difficult jobs than they were prepared for and usually didn't survive longer than a few months.

Not that that discouraged anyone; if anything, it only encouraged more to try their luck at dungeon delving for profit. Added to that, there was never a lack of willing recruits since their vast population was slowly growing too much to easily support. Not that she was an expert in the matters, but she once heard from a drunk government official in the capital that the slow attrition of willing delvers was the only thing keeping them from having food riots. He said that the dungeons surrounding most of the population centers encroached on their farmland year after year; which, as a result, reduced the food they could produce to feed the growing population.

And when she took in this young man's appearance and apparent enthusiasm on his (granted, fairly attractive) face, this potential recruit looked like he was going to join the extensive line of rookie Adventurers not long for the world. Not that it was any of her business; he could throw his life away if he wanted to, though she hated to see such wasted youth and potential.

"Hi! My name is Fredwynk—er...Fred, and I was wondering if you could help me out with something," the young man – *older boy is more likely* – asked her hesitantly before she could extricate herself from the situation. She took a few quick glances around the lobby of the DAS building, which had been fairly full when she arrived that morning; it was empty now except for the Syndicate representative behind the counter.

Everyone must've cleared out earlier after getting their jobs – I guess I was daydreaming longer than I had thought.

“I’m sorry, I’ve got to get going and start this job before it gets too late in the day,” she responded, before adding with a nervous chuckle, “no rest for the wicked...or so I’ve heard them say.” *Why did I say that?*

While it was true that she needed to get going on the job if she wanted to complete it a couple of times before the day was done, the real reason she tried to blow him off was because she didn’t *want* to help him. That would inevitably lead to getting to know him, knowing him would lead to caring what happened to him (even in a distant way), and when she ended up hearing about his death – like she expected she would – then she would always wonder if there was something that she could’ve done to prevent it. She was done caring about people like that...at least so soon after...

But the man didn’t seem to care about what she thought, as he pleaded with her. “Please, it’ll only take a moment of your time, I swear. And I can give you some silver pieces if you help me out here.”

Now *that* caught her interest; she needed the funds the job would give her, but if she could earn that (or more) in less than half that time – she would take it and ignore the consequences to her psyche later. As long as he didn’t want her help to do something illegal, illicit, or dangerous of course. She decided to see what he needed help with first; if it didn’t suit her, she’d still have plenty of time to get the job done that she was already planning on doing.

“Ok, you have my attention, but you better make it fast – I don’t have all day. What is it you need help with?”

Chapter 17

Partly relieved that she wouldn't have to help him after he explained what he wanted, Eisa was also disappointed because it meant that she'd still have to delve into the dungeon alone. *Oh well, it only took an extra minute to hear him out, so no harm done.* She'd still have plenty of time to do what she needed to.

Knowing that there was no way this rural bumpkin could possibly have that much coin on him, she gave him her answer. "Ok, I'll help you out, but it's going to cost you. First, you need to have the 20 silver pieces for the Syndicate application fee, and then you're going to have to pay for the SDIA up front – there's no way I can afford to be on the hook for it if you d—...uh, *don't* reach an F-Rating within the timeframe. And then, of course is my fee for helping you out – my reputation would be on the line if you didn't work out." *Not that it could get much worse,* she thought resignedly.

He didn't even bat an eye at that as he asked, "Okay, and how much are those?"

Here's when his jaw hits the floor at the cost and then he leaves me alone. "Well, for my fee – that'll cost you 50 silver pieces. I know, it's a lot; but believe me, I'm worth it if you want me as your sponsor. As for the SDIA, that will cost you a whopping 2 gold pieces, or 200 silver pieces if you don't have any gold on you. Normally, by the time you reach the F-Rating, your loot fees that you've paid at the end of completed jobs would cover most of this cost; like I said, though, I don't want to be on the hook for it if you aren't successful in reaching the Rating in time."

He smiled. He actually smiled at the cost she just told him, as if it was nothing. If she was lucky, Eisa might earn that much in a year going solo; when she had been grouping up before this, however, it probably would've only taken a month or so. Either way, it was a much greater amount than almost anyone in the town (other than the few merchants) had to their name.

Does he really expect me to believe that he has that much money?
She decided to call his bluff.

“Well, then if you’re ready, let’s get this done and be on our way.” She marched over to the counter where Jaymes – the Syndicate representative at that particular branch – waited with a derisive sneer on his face at her appearance. *Does everyone know?* She caught the look of pity he shot...*Fred?*...and ignored it, just as she ignored the look he gave her.

“Alright, Jaymes, I’ve got a new recruit for you here. I’m sponsoring him, so go ahead and fill out the paperwork. He says he’s good with the fee.”

Jaymes hesitated for few seconds, looking at the two of them, before he said, “Are you sure you want to do this, Eisa? I mean, I *personally* don’t care about *you*, but are you sure you want to send him out there – so young? I can’t refuse you, but I advise you to reconsider – for his sake. I mean, considering your reputation and everything...”

Rage suffused her entire body and it was only through a supreme effort of will that she was able to contain her anger and power. *How dare he judge me like that – and out loud in front of a recruit!?* It was bad enough that she got all of the looks from everybody, but none of them had the guts to say anything to her face before this. She gripped the wooden counter to stop herself from “accidentally” throttling the insufferable man, and she heard it creak from the strain. Through gritted teeth she managed

to somehow squeeze out “Yes” without it sounding like she was constipated.

“Oh, and I’ll be paying for the entire...S-D-I-A thing up front, so that she won’t have to worry about anything if something goes wrong,” Fred interjected happily, thankfully breaking the tense mood.

Jaymes looked shocked at the pronouncement, though Eisa was excited to watch that change when Fred failed to produce the required amount. *I bet he thinks he can get away with some sort of promise to pay for it later.*

Fred slung the bag off of his shoulder and turned around, fumbling – seemingly ineffectually – inside his bag for the payment. A few seconds later, he turned back around with a fistful of silver pieces – just enough for the initial application fee. *Well, he’d **better** have that, as it would’ve been stupid to come here without it.*

Placing the silver on the counter, he turned back around and rummaged inside his bag again. *Alright, here we go – time to end this farce so I can get back to work—*

She heard the sounds of coins jingling around, followed by a low-pitched growl. Fred whispered, “Sorry,” to something, before he pulled a cloth sack filled with what sounded like coins from the bag. *I bet it’s all copper—*

He placed the sack on the counter and a stream of silver pieces flowed out the top, running all over the counter; Jaymes was knocked out of his stupor in time to catch them before they tumbled onto the floor. “Phew, sorry – those were heavier than I remembered. Go ahead and count – there should be the full amount there.”

Eisa and Jaymes both looked back and forth between the sack full of silver pieces and Fred, strangely united despite their dislike for each other

in their amazement. Unthinkingly, Jaymes started arranging the silver coins in stacks of 10 as they watched, finally coming up with 20.

“Uh...that’s more than enough, actually. It rarely happens and isn’t advertised, but there is a 50% discount for anyone paying the 2 gold SDIA fee up front, so you can keep half of this. The other gold is for overhead; keeping tabs on fees collected toward total payment, and, of course, collection fees. Here, let me get you something that’ll be easier to carry around.”

Jaymes grabbed half the stacks (and the original application fee) and put them in a drawer on one side of the counter, which she knew from experience was the application and loot fees depository. On the other side of the counter, he pulled out a smaller drawer that had a multitude of different coinage, including gold pieces – which he immediately pulled out one of and placed it on the counter, depositing the remaining stacks inside the drawer at the same time.

“Thank you – I’ve never held a gold piece before.” Fred picked it up and immediately started eerily staring at it, rubbing it all over with his fingers, and testing its weight. He even brought it up to his nose to smell it and, even stranger, licked it briefly. *I have no idea what is going on here – today is not turning out the way I thought it would.*

“This will make...a lot of things much easier. Thanks again!” he told Jaymes, before turning to her. “And here you go, your fee for your sponsorship. I really do appreciate your help – I couldn’t have done this without you.” And he dropped the heavy gold piece inside her left hand, which she reflexively held out in front of her when he prompted it. *What the? He just gave me a gold piece like it was nothing to him.*

“What sponsorship fee are you talking about? There isn’t a fee for sponsoring anyone,” Jaymes asked in confusion, before turning to Eisa with

a thunderous expression on his face. “Wait, you charged him a *fee* to sponsor him? Of all the low...”

“Hold up now, it’s not against the rules to charge a fee – just frowned upon. And I only did it because I didn’t think he had the money for it. Here, I can’t take this – it’s too much.” She tried to give it back to Fred, but he wouldn’t take it.

“I appreciate you owning up to the way you tried to take advantage of me, but I don’t care about the gold piece. Keep it. I just wanted to get into the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate so that I could get some help going into some dungeons.” He still had a smile on his face.

She didn’t know what to say. *Why would someone not care about money when that was a major part of dungeon delving?* She wasn’t going to argue, though; she needed whatever coin she could get. She quickly pocketed the gold piece into the hidden slit in her dress, knowing it was safe there until she could exchange it later for some smaller coinage and get everything into her bag.

“As much as I don’t agree with what Eisa did, she’s right that it’s between the two of you and not against the rules. Now, down to business – let’s get your paperwork filled out and your SDIA that you’ve bought and paid for,” Jaymes said while frowning in her direction. He pulled out a few sheets of paper and pushed them over to Fred, along with a magical pen. “If you’ll just fill those out, I’ll be right back with your Artifact.” And he was gone almost before he finished his statement.

Now more than slightly interested in this young man – purely because he was an anomaly – Eisa stuck around to find out a little more about him. The fact that he might not be interested in money struck her as odd – *obviously* – but he also had an innocent-yet-confident aura surrounding him

that was...intriguing. Fortunately for her curiosity, she ended up learning a lot more about him in the next few minutes.

Fred stared down at the pages in confusion, before turning to her. “Can I use your help again? I can read, but my parents never taught me how to write. Do you think you can fill this out for me?”

Literacy was a requirement for every citizen of the Craytion Kingdom, though Eisa knew that in some of the more rural sections some people slid by without being able to read *or* write. Being able to read was an absolute necessity to do most things in the sometimes overly bureaucratic world of the DAS, though he could probably get away with not being able to write. The fact that he *couldn't*, said something about his origins, as well; *he's obviously from some rural farm somewhere*.

The Craytion Kingdom was huge, representing millions of people – and they were only one of hundreds across the entire world (at least, that's what she was taught). She had never visited any other Kingdoms, as they were usually separated by long distances, but she expected they would be similar to her own: large tracts of populated areas and farmland, surrounded by dungeons of every variety. No one knew how many dungeons there were in the world, but someone once put the estimate in the millions – 1 for every 500 or so people (give or take 100).

So, to be able to pinpoint where Fred may have come from was difficult; for all she knew, he could've come from another Kingdom entirely.

“Sure, I can help you fill it out. Let's sit over at that table and get it done.”

She grabbed the forms and the magical pen – a thin, pointed metal stick that used magic to transfer whatever she wrote to the paper – and led the way to a table, where they immediately got to work.

“Ok, full name?” she asked.

“Fredwynklemossering.”

“Fred—what? Is that for real?”

He seemed perturbed for some reason. “Yes, that’s what my parents named me.”

“O...k...Fredwynklemossering it is. Now, age?” *My guess is 13.*

“Uh...17 – I’ll be 18 in about a month.” *Horsesh— He’s got to be lying, though when Jaymes runs this through the codex array, it will definitely point it out.* To prevent someone from reporting falsehoods, applications and job completions were run through a magical codex array with a sample of their blood, which would pick out the truths from the lies. It wasn’t foolproof, but with something as simple as an age, it would easily find it.

“Alright, then – preferred class?”

Fred looked confused. “Class? I have no idea.”

“That’s ok, I can put down undecided for now. Later on, when you figure out the class you’d like to register for, you’ll have to come back here, and have it inputted into your SDIA. Otherwise, any of the juice you acquire won’t allocate correctly.”

More confusion, though she was expecting it by now. *He obviously didn’t prepare for this other than acquiring a buttload of money...which I’m still shocked at.*

She asked another few questions that he answered easily, about his starting physical characteristics and weapon knowledge. As she thought, he had some experience fighting with his knives – despite the fact that they looked like they were brand-new.

Finally, she asked one that she expected him to fail, as she couldn’t think of another way that he could’ve gotten his coin honestly.

“Last question. Have you ever committed a crime, either knowingly or unknowingly, including, but not limited to: theft, kidnapping, or murder?”

Fred thought for a moment. “No.”

Fat chance of that being true.

It didn't matter too much to her, though, as she had done her job and it was Fred's problem if he had lied on the application. She walked back up to the counter to find that Jaymes was back with an unlinked SDIA. She handed the forms to him, smirking at his confused stare. “He needed some more help, that's all.”

He took the papers and looked them over, raising his eyebrows as he read over a couple places. Looking directly into Fred's eyes, Jaymes asked him, “Do you swear that everything on this paper is the truth?”

“Uh, yes I do.” *Such naivete.*

“Ok, let me just run it through the codex array for accuracy and we'll get you your Artifact. Hold on.” He placed the forms along an inscribed box behind the counter and waved his hand over it for a few moments. *If* everything was deemed to be true, the entire thing would light up green; if anything was false, it would light up bright red, with the falsehood plainly highlighted. She'd only seen it light up red once before, though fortunately not for her. Very few were stupid enough to try to cheat the system.

Less than ten seconds later, a light erupted from the codex array that was a bright...green. *How? I could've sworn half of what he told me was a lie.* She didn't know how he got away with it, but she wanted to find out. *Unless...it could all be the truth?*

Either way, she was going to stick by him; she now had a large reserve of coin that would allow her to live relatively comfortably for the

next few months at least. She hadn't been this excited since she first joined the DAS.

“Ok, looks like we're all good. Here's your SDIA, and once you get it linked up, we can discuss what kind of training you would like – or if you wish to jump right into dungeon delving. Normally we don't allow new recruits to venture out until they are at least moderately trained, because we have an investment in them. However, since you've already paid for the Artifact, you can do what you want.” Jaymes pushed over the box that held the SDIA towards Fred, and Eisa unconsciously rubbed the back of her right hand. It didn't hurt and she couldn't feel it, but she knew that's where her own Artifact was.

Fred picked up the small black square, turning it over in his hands while he asked, “Ok, so what am I supposed—”

The Sub-dermal Interface Artifact *melted* into his skin, which Eisa remembered was strangely uncomfortable for a couple of seconds; after that, she could feel it move to the back of her right hand underneath the skin, where it faded away and became a part of her. Essentially harmless, it was a tool to help track progress and allocate juice to wherever they wanted it.

Fred's eyes rolled up into the back of his head and he collapsed on the floor, where his body started to convulse and twitch. White foam mixed with blood spilled out of his mouth and a scream that shook her right down to her soul erupted from his lungs, prompting her to cover her ears in pain.

And then from his bag that he dropped, a small Dire Wolf Cub crawled out the now-open top and crawled over to his face, staring at him intently with old eyes.

Well, that's new.

Chapter 18

As soon as the strange black-colored square melted into his skin, it was as if his mind lost all control of his body. Unimaginable pain coursed through his entire system: it felt like his blood was boiling, the skin was being slowly peeled back over every inch of his body, his bones were all being broken-set-broken over and over again, and two knives were being shoved through his eyes into his brain and then *twisted*. He had no idea what was happening, nor did he have any sense of time during that maelstrom of agony; it could've been a few seconds of torture, or an eternity of suffering.

It felt like the latter.

He couldn't move or do *anything* to prevent the misery, even if he knew what was causing it. Added to the pain from everywhere else, his throat and ears started to hurt; it was only when he felt himself catch a breath that he realized he was screaming uncontrollably. But he couldn't even stop *that* involuntary response – so he kept screaming.

Something poked at his consciousness; he hoped it was the end coming for him because he couldn't take the torment anymore. He thought that only the sweet release of death would be able to stop it; it turned out that he was wrong.

“...op screaming! Calm down – that’s the only way to get through this. I can’t do anything to get rid of the foreign system in your body, but there may be a way to incorporate it into your existing Dungeon Core Initialization Program. Hold on...”

Hold on? To what? I'm dying here, I can't hold on! He grasped at the slim branch of hope that Deecy extended to him in his flood of pain; however, everything was so intense that he could barely concentrate, let alone try to calm down. He *was* able to stop screaming, though he wasn't sure if it was because he completely destroyed his throat and lungs, or if it was a conscious decision. Or he was deaf now; either way, it was a small victory.

Suddenly, he felt a substantial shift in his body, like he had been punched in the stomach by a bear. There was a split-second pause in the pain suffusing his body, which made the return of the torture all the worse. Added to that, it now felt like something was trying to rip all his vital organs from his belly. His heart was beating so fast he thought it might burst.

“Sorry about that. I had to force my way through using the Mana Communication pathway, which may have hurt a little bit more than I had expected.”

You think?

“Now, this part is all you – I can't help you any more than I already have. I've connected the foreign system to the Initialization Program, so as long as I did it right, you should be able to run it through that to stabilize and accept it. It's a good thing that you transferred the majority of the Dungeon Core guides and coursework to me, otherwise you'd already be dead.”

Not important to know!

***“Ok, that information probably won’t help you. What am I forgetting?
Oh, yes – to run it through the Program, you need to relax and—”***

Deecy? Relax and what? Are you there? He called for her another couple of times, even though he wasn’t sure if she even heard him in the first place. He felt like screaming again as the pain intensified again, ramping up even more than before (he didn’t even think that was possible, but he was wrong again).

What do I do, what do I do? Ok, Deecy said that I need to relax and...do what? Relax and fight the pain? Relax and imagine the pain away? Relax and dance with it? He could feel himself starting to get delusional with his guesses, but he tried to do it all anyway.

To very little effect on the torturous agony.

He was eventually able to “relax”, though that was debatable given the pain inside his body. It was at least an approximation of relaxation, though, but he couldn’t figure out what he needed to do next. *Wait a moment, what was it she said? I need to “stabilize and accept” it; but what does that mean?*

The only thing he could think of was to give it a hug, but that seemed ridiculous. *How can I accept pain? Why would I **want** the torment I’m going through?* It seemed like an impossible task; he couldn’t stop fighting the pain enough to relax and...

Accept the pain. In essence, he needed to surrender to it, allow it to wash over him without resistance.

It was harder than he thought; he had been fighting the pain for what felt like years or centuries now, and it was hard to let everything go. Little by little, limb by limb, he started to let go of the fight, accepting the pain for

what it was and letting it just be what it was. As if it had a cascading effect, as soon as he was able to shut down all the resistance in his extremities, the rest of his body relaxed, surrendering to the pain and drowning in the sheer agony of what it was.

He drowned in the sea of anguish for another decade or two, before something **clicked** inside his head, echoing across the recesses of his mind. That **click** was followed up by the quick draining of the pain, flowing down through his stomach before it was released to the outside world.

The absence of torment felt nearly as bad as the pain itself, as every part of his body felt scraped raw. He could almost physically feel his mana going to work to repair his destroyed body, and it felt like years had passed before he was finally together enough to open his eyes.

Light from a candle overhead blinded him for a second, and he squinted until his vision adjusted. *How many years was I out?* He lifted his head, expecting there to be some lingering pain, but he was surprised to feel healthy and...well.

“What the...what happened to you?”

Who? Is that Eisa? How long was she waiting for me? Time didn't seem to affect her too much over the years.

A growl reached his ears coming from across the room, where two guards were cornering Deecy, trying to either catch her or kill her; it didn't matter to Fred though, as he immediately got up (again, amazed that he wasn't stiff and fatigued from his ordeal) and nearly flew across the room. “Stop! Put away your weapons – she's my friend!”

His outburst caused both guards to pause in the process of attacking, giving Deecy the opening she needed to escape through the legs of the

rightmost one. She immediately ran over to Fred – who was now nearby – and jumped into his waiting arms.

“Thanks, Fred. I didn’t want to hurt them, and I thought changing my form inside this place might do more harm than good. I’m glad to see you’re doing better.”

The guards – who were different from the ones by the northern wall opening – looked at the scene confusedly, and eventually turned to the man behind the counter. “Jaymes, do you still need us?”

Jaymes, which was apparently the Syndicate man’s name, was still looking shocked at everything – and his face had gone beyond pale. The guard’s words, however, caused him to shake a couple of times, regaining some semblance of composure after a few moments. “No, I think we’re alright here, thanks for coming so quickly.”

Fred ignored the guards as they left, grumbling about crazy screaming farmhands, as he concentrated on the Dire Wolf Pup in his arms. Barely audible, Fred whispered, “What happened? And how long was I out?”

“You were only out for about 30 seconds, which is actually fortunate; if you had gone on much longer, there might’ve been some permanent damage. As it is, I think you’ve successfully integrated whatever foreign system into your body, though I’m not sure what the long-term effects are. I’ve never heard of this SDIA thing before, so I don’t know any more than that.”

*Wait...she **thinks** I’ve successfully integrated it? And only 30 seconds? I could’ve sworn I was being tortured for years...*

His thoughts were interrupted as Eisa approached him and again asked, “What is going on? What happened? And what are you doing with that wolf? Don’t you know they’re dangerous?”

Fred wasn’t exactly sure what to say, and Deecy wasn’t helping either. He didn’t know how to explain what happened, as he was still trying to figure it out himself; what he did know, however, was that there was no way he was going to mention anything about his dungeon core abilities. Fortunately, he was saved from having to provide an answer.

“I’m so sorry, sir – I have no idea why the Artifact would do that. I’ve never seen or heard about it doing that before, it is supposed to be completely harmless; you have my word that I will be sending this to the Artificers who made this particular one – it’s entirely possible that they made a mistake somewhere. If it is completely damaged, you may need another one. I can go get you one now...” Jaymes apologized, before turning away to supposedly grab another one.

“NO,” Fred shouted, before lowering his voice. “That’s not necessary. I *think* it ended up working, despite the intense pain it caused me. I’m just not sure how to check...”

Jaymes looked relieved though still pale as he instructed Fred on what to do. “That’s easy enough to figure out, all you need to do is think, “Adventurer Status”, and you should see something pop up in your mind. It will be your Interface, which allows you to see all of your pertinent information. Go ahead, try it out.”

Fred looked down and shared a look with Deecy, the same thought going through both of them: *the humans have a system set up like dungeon cores?* She gave a quick nod of her head without saying anything, so he took that as a go-ahead. He thought, “Adventurer Status”, and then his

head felt like it had been split open with an axe – not unlike the one he had seen Regnark use to split firewood.

D***** **v***** *y***** *****e	
N***: *r*****	**a**: U*****
*****g: *_***	**s***** ** *****-u*: *0*
***** E*****: *	***** *****c* ** *****: *
*r***: * (0/**) S***: * (*/*0) ***d: * (*/*4*)	**d*: *0/** *t*****: 1/*0 ***e*: **/*2*
**** P***** *****: * B*** *****a* *****: 2	*o*** *****n *****: **/*i*
(*****)	

While the pain was excruciating, it was nowhere near the level of agony Fred had just experienced. He stumbled a little at the sudden onset of it but was able to keep his feet – as well as keeping ahold of Deecy. And he didn’t even scream.

“What is it with you and your enjoyment of self-inflicted pain. Just a moment, I’m going to see if I can make this better for you.”

Gradually, the searing pain faded until only an echo of it remained – which ended up fading after another couple of minutes. On the bright side, though, he was finally able to read his Adventurer Status.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface	
Name: Fredwynklemossering	Class: Unselected
Rating: G-1 st	Essence Needed to Rate-up: 100

Total Essence: 0	Available Essence to Distribute: 0
Body: 2 (0/20) Brawn: 2 (0/20) Mind: 4 (0/80)	Vitality: 10/10 Stamina: 10/10 Power: 20/20
Base Physical Attack: 2 Base Physical Defense: 2	Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>	

He tore his concentration away from looking at the unfamiliar words, as he felt someone holding his arm. Closing the Status similarly to his Dungeon Core Status, he looked down to see Eisa at his side, worry and distress plainly written across her face. He realized that he had ignored her questions earlier – and despite the fact that she had tried to take advantage of his ignorance – he truly *was* grateful for her help. Even if it caused more problems for him.

Fred placed his hand awkwardly over hers (since his hands were still quite full of Dire Wolf) in an attempt to reassure her, while he told her, “I’m ok now, I think. I can pull up the Interface, there was just an initial pain at the onset, but it’s better now.”

She smiled at him just as awkwardly and extricated her hand, retreating a couple of steps away once she saw he was good. Fred added a thanks for her concern, before his attention was diverted again.

“That thing has got to be defective; unfortunately, it can’t be removed except by an Artificer, though a brand-new Artifact would hopefully override your current one. If you want, we can try that—” Jaymes waved his hands in a shooing motion— “free of charge, of course. Or, if you don’t want to do it now – so soon after that horrific-looking experience – I completely understand; you can always come back later, and we’ll try again.

“Either way, though, by the authority granted to me by the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, I wish to apologize for any harm done to you and to offer six months free of loot fees as recompense,” he added apologetically, with a nervous look on his face. *Seems good to me, no permanent harm done. And I don't really care about the loot anyway. However, maybe I can help out the one who helped me...*

“I accept your apology and I will see about getting a new Artifact later, if this one seems to not be working right after this. As for the recompense, however, I have a different proposal for you...”

Chapter 19

Eisa was still in shock from everything that had happened, though she was starting to become numb to it all. Not only had her day not turned out the way she thought it would, but she now had a group again. Granted, it was only a group of two, but it was still technically a group.

She had essentially sworn off grouping up with *anyone*, though it wasn't necessarily her choice in the first place. Circumstances being what they were, she couldn't blame anyone for not wanting to group with her; she had a feeling that if Fred knew about her reputation that he'd drop her faster than when he had collapsed as the SDIA bonded with him. She was just glad that the situation was still so outrageous inside the DAS building that Jaymes didn't get a chance to tell him any specifics. In fact, he was probably hoping that they would both perish in the near future, so that he wouldn't have to worry about the wrong kind of information leaking out.

Three months loot-free free! She still couldn't believe that Fred had managed to work out a deal with the Syndicate man; of course, the stipulation was that she had to be in a group with him doing jobs in order to take advantage of the kickback. Which was essentially what it was: a bribe to keep their mouths shut. If word got out that bonding with a SDIA potentially had the "side-effect" of an unbearably painful experience that might kill those less prepared for it, they would have a lot fewer recruits looking to sign up. Which meant less confidence in the Syndicate, less jobs being fulfilled, and less revenue.

And while the Sub-dermal Interface Artifact wasn't absolutely essential to the Adventurers themselves, it nevertheless helped immensely. On the other hand, it *was* essential to the DAS, who used it to keep track of

their members somehow; while she wasn't quite in the know, she suspected that the Syndicate could access someone's Interface whenever they wanted – though she doubted they could directly influence it. Then again, without the Artifact that was first created over a thousand years ago, the difficulty of Rating-up would be ramped up exponentially. So, it was a trade-off.

With a written promise made out and verified by the magical codex array, they both agreed to hold the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate un-responsible for any past or future pain/defects in the Artifact (with a promise of “replacement” for Fred if he chose to get it). In return, they (and any additional group they joined of three or less) received three months of no loot fees, contingent on at least Fred and her grouping together to complete jobs. While it didn't sound like a lot, the fact that it would extend to those they grouped with was literally incalculable. If they were to group with a few higher-rated DAS members, they could earn so much that the gold piece still in her hidden pocket would literally be “pocket change”.

Then again, her reputation would still probably hinder their ability to even find anyone willing to work with them, even with the extra loot incentive. Either way, though, even if they just stuck together, they would still be able to rake in much more than Eisa would've been able to procure herself. Even if Fred turned out to be as inept as he seemed.

Which was why they were traveling to the Frostwood Forest #23 dungeon, on the same job she was planning to do by herself. Since she already figured it would be “safe” enough for her to do it by herself, bringing Fred along to get some juice, or Essence, to help him increase his rating and figure out what he wanted to do. Since he was currently without a class, Eisa was hoping that he would get a feel for what kind of Adventurer he wanted to be; with the easier dungeon, there would be plenty of opportunity to learn.

And Fred was eager to get going as well – him and his strange Dire Wolf Pup. He had denied any type of training from the Syndicate, which Eisa was glad of because training could take up to a month, which would eat into their fee-less time period. She figured that his first outing to complete a job would be training enough.

“Have you ever been in a dungeon before?” she asked while they were walking, knowing he probably hadn’t. While it wasn’t unheard of for non-DAS groups to delve through some of the lower-rated dungeons, it was extremely dangerous without an Artifact to facilitate personal growth. Those groups didn’t usually survive long, because the risks far outweighed whatever rewards they might earn. Added to that, the Syndicate didn’t take too kindly to those who operated outside of their purview.

They were nearly to the dungeon, with a little less than half a mile to go; Fred took so long to answer that Eisa thought they might arrive before he did. “Yes, I’ve been in a dungeon before. A long time ago,” he finally replied, in a neutral voice.

She shouldn’t have been surprised, given everything else that had happened – but she was. “Really? What kind of dungeon was it?”

“It was a Fire element dungeon, as well as a Water,” he responded absently, as if he didn’t want to think about it too long.

*Now I **know** he’s lying; there’s no such thing as a dual-element dungeon, let alone two opposing elements like Fire and Water.* “That’s strange; I’ve never heard of Fire and Water being together in a dungeon before. Where did you say it was?”

“Uh...I didn’t say. It was up north, quite a way up north actually.”

*I don’t even know what to believe coming out of his mouth anymore. There aren’t any Fire **or** Water dungeons around this area – mostly Nature*

and Earth – and this is about as far north as you can go before you hit the northern wastes. And there aren't any dungeons up there.

“Anyway, enough about me, tell me a little bit about yourself. How many dungeons have you been through?” Fred asked, with an obvious ploy to change the subject.

Fine, have it your way. She played along, telling him all about the different dungeons she had visited and how she had traveled all across the Kingdom (not everywhere, but almost). She specifically avoided any mention of her last disastrous dungeon delve, and he thankfully didn't ask about it.

“What does a Necro-healer do?”

The question caught her so off-guard that she literally stopped in the middle of the forest and stared at him. *How did he know my class? Maybe Jaymes told him when I wasn't listening – which is supposed to be against the rules.* Most people didn't like to group up with “Thieves” or “Assassins” or any other unsavory classes, so you didn't have to share what class you were with anyone unless you wanted to. Groups usually didn't care what you were – as long as you got the job done.

She wanted to answer him, but she was afraid that he would run away when he heard what she really was. *Oh, well – better get it out of the way, otherwise it'll hang over my head.* She started walking again after he had paused to look at her in confusion.

“Uh, well, I usually operate as a healer in groups that I'm a part of; essentially, I can transfer and amplify a portion of my own vitality to heal those I group with. Additionally, on the flip side, I can drain the vitality from dungeon monsters, transferring a portion of that back to me. Apart from that, I can also...temporarily, mind you, animate the corpses of wild

beasts to fight for me,” she told him, speeding through the last part as if it were unimportant.

Now **he** stopped, looking back at her with a strange look on his face. *Darn it! That didn't take long for him to want to leave. How the heck did he learn about my Necro class?!*

“That sounds...interesting. Can I see it in action? Hold on, I'll have Deecy look for something to use.”

Interesting? That was the first time she'd ever heard of Necromancy being called “interesting”. Usually she just got looks of fear or disgust from people – as if she wanted to use her power on them, or something. Not that she ever would, even in a life-or-death situation; she would rather die than reanimate another person. It was *possible*, but she had nightmares even contemplating it.

Fred brought the Dire Wolf Pup out from the bag he had placed it – her – back into before they left the DAS building earlier. “If you really want to see my necromantic powers, I don't think a little pup will help—”

“Just a moment, and don't worry – she's perfectly harmless to you or me – but it's better you see this now rather than later. However, don't tell anyone else, otherwise someone might want to hurt her. And I don't want any humans...uh, other people...to die needlessly.”

That's a strange turn of phrase. And what is he talking about—

Seconds after Fred placed the pup on the ground, she started to grow; and not just a little bit, but to gigantic proportions. Within moments, the Dire Wolf was three times Eisa's height and nearly twice as long as she was tall. She could easily imagine herself being eaten in one bite inside the jaws of the wolfine monstrosity. Eisa had seen a lot in all her years of delving into dungeons, but she had never been that close to something that large and intimidating.

She peed herself just a little bit and was not ashamed to admit it.

Before she could scream or use her Lifedrain spell to defend herself, the giant Dire Wolf bounded off into the forest, its massive legs propelling it so fast it was gone before she could react.

“Deecy’s a bit intimidating at first, isn’t she? Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it; plus, she can’t maintain that form for too long, so once we’re done, she’ll go back to being lazy in my bag,” Fred said absently, while he was looking in the direction the humongous wolf went. “Oh, that was good luck, she found a small bear nearby! She’s bringing it back now.”

She didn’t use her Animate Dead spell that often, but when she did, it was usually a half-rotted carcass of some unfortunate deer, elk, or moose. Only once was she able to snag a wolf that had crossed paths with what she assumed was a bear, since it had been sliced up from throat to hindquarters. Predatory animals were always better, but they were in short supply. At least until now.

Deecy – she might as well think of the gargantuan Dire Wolf by her name since they were in a group together – swiftly ran back, after only being gone for about a minute. She was carrying the corpse of a bear in her mouth and it barely looked like its weight inconvenienced her. Oh, and *small* didn’t quite describe one of the largest bears she had ever seen.

“Can you control more than one at a time?”

She just stared at the bear corpse that had to have weighed seven or eight times her own weight that was now lying in front of her, after it had been gingerly placed by the mammoth wolf. “Uhhhhh...no, I’ve only raised the effectiveness of my animations, not the quantity. I...usually don’t get the chance to reanimate more than one of these at a time, so there was formerly no need to worry about it. And I’ve never had such a... pristine corpse either.”

“Ok, that’s fine – wait! Before you do anything, let me absorb...uh, do something first.” In the background, Eisa saw Deecy start to shrink, reverting back to a small, cute little Dire Wolf Pup that immediately curled up on the forest floor and watched Fred. Who was touching the bear corpse as if he was trying to commune with it or something.

Eisa finally moved a little, her muscles and joints stiff; once she started moving, she realized that her body had been paralyzed in fear ever since the sight of the initial transformation. Now that Deecy was a small little pup again, Eisa relaxed and watched Fred finish up whatever he had been doing to the dead beast.

He was finished within a minute, taking his hands away with a smile on his face as he looked over at her expectantly. *Ok, here it goes.* She hadn’t ever reanimated anything this large before, but as they say in the necromantic world – size doesn’t matter. Or, at least, she *thought* they would if she ever had the occasion to talk to another Necromancer.

Pulling on her innate power, which was actually bursting at its limits within her since she hadn’t used any in a while, she mentally invoked the Animate Dead spell inside her mind, waving her hands over the corpse of the bear for dramatic effect. Neither of which was strictly necessary to use her spells, but they helped to focus her mind.

She felt a small trickle of black-colored power flow out of her and into the still form of the bear, spreading out and suffusing its bones, muscles, skin, and fur. By the time the power stopped trickling out, it was like a thin transparent film that only she could see was wrapped around the entire corpse. With a mental *push*, she instructed the bear to stand up.

She got a small boost of pride when she saw the amazed look on Fred’s face as the massive bear struggled to its feet, swaying in place as it finally stood on its four feet. She absently noted that it must have had its

neck snapped to kill it, which was why its neck was bent at a strange angle. She walked closer to it and hovered her hand over its misshapen neck, using another small trickle of her necromantic power and her Repair Animation spell to fix it.

When she was done, she stepped back, marveling at how *alive* it looked; as stated before, she usually found corpses that had been rotting or mauled before she got to them. The undead bear in front of her looked like it had just wandered over – unless you looked at its eyes, of course. They were still as lifeless as she expected, but at least they hadn't been pecked out.

She felt a small pulse of power transfer from her to the bear, the upkeep cost of maintaining her animated corpse a small price to pay for its use. Since she was full, she could maintain the animation for more than a day before she was forced to sever the connection due to lack of power. Of course, that was only if she didn't use a single other spell – which was unlikely. At best, she thought she could get it to stick around for a few hours before the spell ended and it collapsed into dust, unusable as a walking animated corpse for a second time.

“That’s amazing! So, all you do is send your power into the corpse, let it cover every part of it in that transparent stuff, and then...what? Tell it to get up?” Fred asked, his expression gone from astonishment to excitement.

“What? Have you seen this done before? Or...are you saying you saw my power enter it?”

She knew that seeing another's power was impossible; the results were always apparent, but her (and everybody else's) power was invisible to other people. Even the greatest Adventurers couldn't actually “see” another's power, though it was rumored that the best-of-the-best could use

some sort of high-rated spell to magically see it for a limited time. She wasn't sure if she believed that, though.

Still excited at the animated bear corpse in front of him, he ran his hand through its fur on its back, before remarking, "Its skin feels still a little warm, but I suppose that's because it wasn't dead for long. I'm sure it will be cold soon though." He looked over at Deecy briefly, apparently remarking to the pup for some reason, "Isn't that amazing, Deecy?"

The wolf made no response, and Fred turned back to her. "Uh, no – I haven't seen this before. This was actually the first time I've ever seen a hum—person cast a spell before. And of course I saw your power enter it; it was hard to miss, even though it was a dark black color. Why, was I not supposed to see that?"

Chapter 20

Apparently not.

Fred watched as Eisa threw her hands in the air and scoffed at him, the words trying to leave her throat but not succeeding. He had no idea why she was so bothered by what he said, but it wasn't really a concern of his. Instead, he was excited since he had learned a little more about the power and abilities that the humans had as a part of this new system that he just had initialized inside of him.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a guide or courses to study or learning plans associated with the Artifact that had caused him so much pain and distress back in Gatecross. However, it appeared as though everything that he needed to know came automatically to his mind, *when* he needed it. He couldn't rummage through it all to find something, but it could react to him and pick out things to "show" him when he required it.

Case in point: the necromantic spell he had just observed. He couldn't see a reservoir for Eisa's power like he could see something that was full of mana, but as soon as that power was used to do something – he could see everything it did! And not only that – he thought he could replicate it.

If he had another corpse. Oh, and much, much more power than he currently possessed. Even the small drain on her power every minute or so was more than he could supply for more than a few minutes, and it was only a fraction of how much she had used to initially reanimate the bear. He pulled up her Adventurer Status again, just to see how she was holding up.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Eisa Howells		Class: Necro-healer
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 450
Total Essence: 770,850		Available Essence to Distribute: 0
Body: 8 (0/1280) Brawn: 8 (0/1280) Mind: 16 (326370/327680)		Vitality: 80/80 Stamina: 72/80 Power: 2085/2200 (-5.0/min Upkeep)
Base Physical Attack: 8 Base Physical Defense: 8		Power Regen Rate: 4.0/min
Class Traits (Necromancer)		
<i>Your available Power is increased greatly by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You can see slightly better in dark places</i>		
<i>You and your animated corpses take less damage from Dark magics (15%)</i>		
<i>Your targetable spells deal more damage to Light monsters (10%)</i>		
Class Abilities (Necromancer)		
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 2 – 0/3000	Invoke Fear 0 – 0/100
Enhance Animations 3 – 0/9000	Lifedrain 4 – 0/27000	Shadow Strike 3 – 0/9000
Class Traits (Dark Healer)		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is increased greatly by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You and your group take less damage from Dark magics (10%)</i>		
<i>Your healing spells will damage any Light targets, including allies</i>		
Class Abilities (Dark Healer)		
Vitality Transfer 5 – 0/81000	Painful Purge 2 – 0/3000	Bind Soul 1 – 0/1000
Shield of Darkness 3 – 0/9000	Inflict Pain 5 – 0/81000	Vitality Explosion 3 – 0/9000

It wasn't until they were already on the road to the dungeon that he learned that if he concentrated on Eisa, he could see her Adventurer Status like he could his own. Hers, as expected from someone who had been part of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate for as long as she had been, was much more detailed and had representations of her class traits and abilities. He couldn't tell what the abilities did, necessarily, which was why he jumped at the chance to have Eisa show him one.

It was obvious from her power regeneration – which he assumed came from *something* inside her body – that she could maintain the animated bear for almost a day and a half before she ran out of power. Of course, he wanted to see some more spells, so that wasn't likely to happen.

“I can’t deal with you right now, so let’s just go to this dungeon and get it done. Hopefully you’ll Rate-up quickly and have some ideas for a class by the time we’re through.” She marched off in the wrong direction, followed by the lumbering steps of the animated bear.

Fred was ignoring the dungeon core pounding at his consciousness the whole time they were heading toward it, but he was entirely aware of where it was. “Hey, you’re going the wrong way – it’s over here.” He unerringly pointed behind him.

She didn’t say anything or even look at him as she turned around and walked past him, the bear still following in her wake. He quickly scooped up Deecy and put her in his bag, slinging it over his shoulder and trotted after the fast-walking Eisa.

Fred caught up to her quickly and asked, “What do you know about this dungeon?”

She didn’t answer right away, and he was beginning to think she was angry at him – for some reason he couldn’t fathom. He was going to ask what was wrong, but he was too busy trying to ignore the almost overwhelming aura of the nearby core. By the time they finally arrived at the entrance, however, she seemed to calm down enough to answer.

They stopped right outside the dungeon entrance, which was essentially a pile of rocks in the middle of the forest, 30 feet high and the same wide, with an opening just barely large enough for the animated bear to squeeze inside. *Any bigger, and it wouldn’t have fit – would’ve been a waste.*

“This is a G-2nd-Rated Nature dungeon, which means we’ll probably find traps that are nature-related, such as: trees that will try to bash you with their branches, large thorn spikes, poisoned bushes, and the like. I haven’t been in this particular one and they’re all different, so it could be all of

those, none of those, some of those, or even ones I didn't list. We'll have to be careful still, even though most of these easier dungeons aren't too deadly – unlike their bigger brothers, who have something that can easily kill you and me around every corner.

“The Syndicate provides a basic informational pamphlet – for a fee – on each and every dungeon they've explored, though it's a bit pricey for even these starter dungeons. It's usually only good to buy them for the higher-rated ones, as walking into those without some sort of advanced warning can be deadly. And they're not always correct...” She trailed off and stared ahead, apparently lost in thought.

She shook her head after a moment and continued, her voice a little tight-sounding. “As for the monsters inside, it'll probably be some sort of large insects, if I remember correctly. You don't usually find anything much more substantial than that, though I've been surprised before. Only thing we can do is explore and find out.”

“Sounds good to me, I'll go first and check it out,” Fred told her, impatient to get started now that he was finally there. He went to squeeze past Eisa, but she grabbed his arm before he could.

“Hold on, Fred – you're what we call in the business, ‘squishy’. It means that an unlucky hit or two could take you out sooner than I could heal you. If it were just us two, you might have to risk it, but we've got my fine furry friend here to soak up the blows for us. We'll go in first, and you bring up the rear.”

I guess that makes sense, even though I could probably take more than she thinks. He reluctantly agreed, and the short wait while they went ahead of him actually made him a little nervous. *This is going to be strange walking into a dungeon that's not my home. I wonder if it will look and feel the same...*

When it was his turn, he started to step over the threshold when Deecy “shouted” in his mind.

“STOP! I just realized that if I go in there, the dungeon core will recognize me for a version of a dungeon defender, even if there’s never been one like me before. You’re going to have to leave me out here while you go in; you should be safe from detection, at least. You’ve got no actual core inside of you and you’ve integrated the human Interface, so nothing should look out of the ordinary.

“A word of caution: don’t attempt to talk with this dungeon core! I can tell that it is a weak one, just like Eisa said; it probably won’t have the information you seek, and tampering with it could be problematic. That, and it may not be able to actually understand you. I can sense that, while your parents weren’t unique, not every dungeon core will have learned the human language...at least not yet. And since you apparently can’t use your Mana Communication skill, it won’t do you much good.

“I can and will monitor incoming and outgoing mana communications, which I can now do since I’m close enough; just set the bag down outside the entrance and I’ll try to let you know if anything out of the ordinary comes up.”

All of that entered his mind between one step and the next, which was extremely helpful for relaying long messages. He immediately turned around and took his bag off his shoulder, gently dropping Deecy down outside the entrance. As he turned to head inside, he felt a fluttering in his stomach.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks – see you soon, Deecy.” Fred walked through the rocky entrance, the intense feeling in his chest at the proximity of the nearby dungeon core pounding away at him. As soon as he entered the first room, however, the nearly painful sensation faded until it was only a vague awareness of the dungeon core’s location.

“There you are – what took you so long?”

Chapter 21

Finally inside the dungeon, Eisa got herself together and put all her other concerns behind her. Whenever she walked into a dungeon, she always felt the outside world melt away, while she focused on the job at hand. She immediately had her animated bear take point – sometimes a dungeon might surprise any delvers with something right inside the entrance, so she wasn't going to take any chances.

Now that she got a good look at the first room, Eisa found that she was right in her assessment of the Plant-based dungeon: floor-to-ceiling plants, trees, vines, and other assorted foliage. Overall, it was a large assortment of green, green, and more green; the smell alone felt like she had just shoved a few leaves up her nose. A few small trees grew around the perimeter of the small room, probably only 50 feet square and twenty feet high; she felt as if she was in one of the famed jungles she had heard about to the far south, which she hadn't visited, but wanted to at some point. But she imagined that the room was what she had heard described.

Every dungeon looked very similar on the outside: a large protrusion of rocks from the ground with an entrance passage contained within. The older, larger, and more difficult dungeons had a bigger pile of rocks, but she hadn't seen or heard of any that looked fundamentally different. To the southeast of the Kingdom, the rocks and stone native to that area were reddish-colored, which affected the coloring of the dungeon entrance – but it *looked* the same.

On the inside, on the other hand, *every* dungeon was different. Even between Plant-based dungeons – like the one she was currently inside – the layout of the entire place, the plants used to both “decorate” and entrap

delvers, the monster composition, and even the general “feel” of the dungeons were at least marginally different from each other. There were always similarities, like potential traps or frequently seen monsters, but each one was a new experience.

She didn’t see anything threatening right away, so she turned back to Fred to coordinate their plan – but he wasn’t there. A few seconds later, he walked through the entrance, looking around in open-mouthed wonder at the room. “There you are – what took you so long?”

Fred snapped out of his perusal of the room and seemed to remember she was there. “Oh, sorry – I had to leave Deecy outside of the entrance. Let’s do this!” he replied, unsheathing his knives in one smooth motion. He was holding them like he knew how to use them, at least.

Huh, I wonder why that wolf is staying outside? I was kind of hoping she would come with us to make this even easier than it’s most likely going to be. “Ok, I’m sending my bear in first, and I need you to pick up anything that it misses. If you find yourself overwhelmed, fall back and I’ll help out. And be careful, there may be traps anywhere in here.”

Fred looked around the room, taking everything in; Eisa was just glad that he was taking her advice and watching out for himself. She moved her bear further into the middle of the room, hoping to draw out whatever monsters were in there lying in wait.

“I don’t see any traps, but there looks to be some...beetles, I think... waiting around the edges of the room.”

She stopped her animated bear, turning toward Fred with confusion running rampant through her mind. “How could you possibly know that? Or is that just a guess?”

He hesitated a moment before he answered. “It’s...a talent of mine, I guess you could say. I can...see the location of most of the dangers inside

the dungeon, though what those dangers are or how to bypass or defeat them isn't something that I can see."

He's just full of surprises...or full of something. We'll just have to see. "That would've been nice to know beforehand. If you think of anything else impossible that you can do, don't tell me – I don't think I can handle any more shocks today."

Fred just smiled back at her. "Sure thing."

He's infuriating, but if he can really do what he says...

She left that thought and continued her original intent to send her bear forward. Her Enhance Animation ability toughened up the physical defense and strengthened the brute-force attacks of her reanimated corpses, so she didn't worry too much about it getting hurt – or about it destroying everything in sight. It was pretty much overkill for the dungeon, but she wasn't complaining.

Just as Fred had guessed, as soon as her bear neared the center of the room, a dozen thick-shelled black beetles slightly larger than her head scuttled out from the plants around the perimeter of the room, where they had been successfully camouflaged. They had long, vicious-looking mandibles that looked capable of inflicting severe harm – on novice Adventurers at least. She wasn't worried about her bear – or herself for that matter; her Body stat was high enough that she might get deeply scratched if she were unlucky enough to be attacked by one, but nothing life-threatening. Fred, being a new Adventurer without a single point of Essence to his name, might lose a limb or worse if he was caught flat-footed.

Since it was out front and was what attracted their attention, the bear was soon surrounded by the beetles, who ineffectively tried to slice into her animation's legs, barely even scratching its dead skin underneath all of the

fur. In opposition, each stomp of her bear's feet was flattening the large insects, as green fluid and other unpleasant bodily parts were squished out. Neither the beetles or her bear was quick, but her undead animation was fast enough to catch over half of them unprepared within the first few seconds.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Fred move in from the side, creeping up on one of the beetles attacking her bear from the rear. She almost called out for him to leave the work to her animation, but she wanted to see if he was any good in a fight. It was the perfect opportunity, as well, because this fight was probably the easiest that he'd ever be a part of.

Hopping the last few feet toward his target, Fred brought both of his knives down on the back of the beetle...which skidded off the hard shell, leaving deep grooves but inflicting no actual damage to it. In fact, the only thing it did do was cause the beetle to turn its attention to Fred, who recovered remarkably fast from the ineffectual attack and retreated a couple of steps.

Eisa still didn't do anything to help, but she was ready just in case.

While her bear stomped on another beetle and swiped away an eighth one, where it impacted so hard against the wall it was nearly obliterated, Fred was engaged with his own monster. Rightly guessing that he had to attack it in a more vulnerable spot, Eisa watched as he attempted to kick it on its back, getting his foot underneath it before taking a painful-looking slash from the beetle's razor-sharp mandibles on his shin. She could tell that it was just a glancing cut, but it cut deep enough that blood spilled from the wound immediately, soaking his worn-looking (and now sliced-up) pants.

"Back up and I'll heal you!"

Rather than step back and wait until he was healed, like any sane individual would do, Fred instead shrugged off the injury and tried again with his other foot, this time managing to flip it over just as he was sliced up again. Unlike the smaller cut on his shin from last time, however, this one went from his ankle up to his knee, gouging deep enough that Eisa could see bone beneath the tattered fabric of his pants.

Again ignoring the wound, Fred practically fell on the exposed underbelly of the beetle before it could right itself, his knives stabbing deep and true enough that his victim stopped moving within a couple of seconds. He tried to stand up, but his critically wounded leg couldn't support his weight and he collapsed back on his butt.

She used her Vitality Transfer ability to heal him, knowing he was in trouble if one of the other beetles decided he was easier prey. Fortunately, while her bear was fully engaged with the last two, she didn't have to worry too much about that happening.

She felt a little snippet of pain cycle through her body as the spell took effect, taking some of her vitality, sending it to Fred, and amplifying it into a healing wave that covered his entire body. It was now powerful enough that it could mend broken bones and reattach limbs, though with something as severe as that she would need to use the ability more than a few times. For his "simple" cuts, one spell should be enough – especially since he didn't have a lot of defense. More defense meant a lot more had to be repaired, which meant more healing needed to be done.

She commanded her bear to throw itself to the side, instantly squishing the last beetle – which had been annoyingly avoiding all of the powerful attacks thrown its way. Once that was done, she had it stand back up and join her and Fred, who was just getting up from the ground, looking down at his legs in astonishment.

“Wow – that is so much faster than if I were to heal on my own. Did it hurt much when you did that?” He seemed fairly nonchalant about the fact that he had just been sliced open, but that was probably a point in his favor; if you couldn’t handle a little pain, then the life of an Adventurer delving through dungeons probably wasn’t for you.

“A little bit, but I’m used to it by now. Don’t worry about me, are you okay?” she replied, only slightly worried about him. Fred had killed his beetle, sure – but he almost lost a leg in the process. *Maybe next time he’ll learn to be more careful.*

“Absolutely! I’m ready for some more.”

The sounds of some muffled coins hitting the ground came from the bodies (or splattered remains) of the beetles, which started to rapidly melt into the ground, disappearing within moments. As well, from where they disappeared, wisps of “juice” drifted out and toward her; she lifted her hand and watched the spiritual essence funnel into the top of her hand where the SDIA was located, until the Artifact had “sucked up” all the remaining wisps in the room. She knew that Fred was experiencing the same thing when he looked at his hand as well, along with the feeling of the essence pooling inside of his essentially empty vessel.

As soon as it stopped however, the strange man went all crazy again, with his eyes rolling back into his head again, and collapsing back onto the greenery where he had just gotten up from.

“Fred! What’s wrong? Are you going to collapse like this anytime you absorb some ‘juice’?” He didn’t look like he was necessarily in pain this time, fortunately, but he was unresponsive when she bent down and tried to get his attention. She tried her Vitality Transfer spell again – to no effect – followed by her Painful Purge ability, hoping that that would do the trick. The Purge did what it sounded like: purged the body of toxins or

poisons; however, as a result of it being her part of her Dark Healer class, it also caused incredible pain at the same time. Fortunately, it didn't last long, and most would rather take a little pain than have to suffer from a debilitating poison for an undetermined amount of time.

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to have any effect, either; in fact, he didn't even seem to feel the pain from it. Out of options, she waited for him to recover, which she hoped was sooner rather than later.

Chapter 22

Fred was getting really tired of the stupid Artifact in his hand incapacitating him. The only upside to the current one that knocked him flat on his back was the fact that it didn't hurt. Truth be told, he couldn't feel anything – let alone pain. Instead, it was as if his body had shut down, adjusting to the strange-looking misty smoke that had entered both his and Eisa's hands.

Unfortunately, Deecy wasn't there to help with the adjustment; even if she was, he was so disconnected from his body that he didn't think he'd be able to hear her anyway. For the second time in less than a day, he felt helpless as the foreign *thing* in his body and system took over and did things to him that he hadn't planned on.

Time meant nothing in the dark void he found himself, but this time he tried to adopt what he had learned from the last time he had lost control of his body; instead of fighting to feel something – *anything* – he instead surrendered to the void, willing it to become a part of him, inviting it in and embracing it.

After an indeterminate amount of time of complete submission... nothing happened.

But then he *felt* something; something distant but recognizable – pain. It didn't last long nor was it overly severe, but it was enough to jumpstart a cascade of torture around his entire body. This time, however, the torture was on the opposite side of the spectrum; instead of pain suffusing his existence, he was subjected to unbearably sweet pleasure as his cells adapted to the presence of the...*essence*...he had absorbed.

Fred opened his eyes with a smile on his face, staring up at Eisa, who was looking down on him worriedly. He was free of the void; not only that, he felt better than he ever had before. It was as if only now had the full potential of his Artifact and the Interface it provided been activated. What he (with Deecy’s help, of course) had done before at the DAS building was just the start; the foreign system was adapted successfully, but it had been largely dormant.

However, when he absorbed the spiritual essence, or what he had heard Eisa call “juice”, from the dungeon defenders – he ended up *turning it on*.

With a quick mental check, he was confident that everything was working just fine, and in addition, he wouldn’t have to worry about the Artifact “malfunctioning” anymore. It was a part of him now.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 1 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 78/120 Water Mana: 77/119 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 3735 Unconverted Essence: 1
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 9% Novice Mana Absorption: 70% Novice Mana Conversion: 23% Novice Essence Conversion: 1% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 24% Novice Core Crystallization: 16% Novice **** Mana-formed Object Creation: 20%
Dungeon Information
(none)

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface

Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Unselected	
Rating: G-1 st		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 88	
Total Essence: 12	Available Essence to Distribute: 12		Unconverted Essence: 37350
Body: 2 (0/20) Brawn: 2 (0/20) Mind: 4 (0/80)		Vitality: 10/10 Stamina: 9/10 Power: 20/20	
Base Physical Attack: 2 Base Physical Defense: 2		Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min	
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>			
Adapted Abilities			
Animate Dead 0 – 0/100		Repair Animation 0 – 0/100	
		Vitality Transfer 0 – 0/100	

The biggest changes he saw from his two different status screens – his Dungeon Core and Adventurer ones – were his Adapted Abilities and his Unconverted Essence on his new Interface. The first was easily explained; he had seen Eisa perform those spells and abilities, and since he could see the way she manipulated her power, he could do it as well. They still seemed to be locked, though, and he thought that by slotting some of his available essence in them, he would then be able to actually perform the spells. Whether or not he had the required power to actually complete them was a whole different matter.

As for the Unconverted Essence, he mentally reached inside of him and could “*flip a switch*”, allowing the normal mana conversion process to do whichever one he wanted to do next. And, for some reason, each point in his Unconverted Mana was worth 10 Essence – which would be highly beneficial for his development. He decided to wait on doing that for the moment, wanting to refill his Water and Fire mana – just in case.

On the other end of that, it also appeared as if he could convert Essence into Mana if he chose to do it, which he could think of a couple of situations where that might come in handy.

Eisa smacked him on his upper arm, hard enough for it to actually cause some discomfort. “You have got to stop doing that! You scared me there.”

“I’m sorry – but I think everything is fixed now! I don’t think anything will happen like that from now on; you can stop worrying about me.” Fred thought it was nice that someone was worried about him – something he enjoyed about his friendship with Regnark.

“I wasn’t worried...I...I just didn’t want to have to carry you back to Gatecross. You look heavy, and they probably wouldn’t appreciate me bringing a walking corpse into the town,” she promptly responded, finishing up in a rush. *Well, never mind then.*

“What did I miss?”

Now that the crisis was over, Eisa was all back to business – which Fred greatly appreciated. Since he was still *technically* new at all this, he preferred to defer to her experience and judgment. He found that he learned better when he had the opportunity to see things in action, instead of just being told; as a result, he thought he was learning much faster than he had when he was back home. It was nothing against his parents, but it was hard to learn by just verbal instruction – since that was all they could realistically do, there wasn’t really an alternative.

“The beetles left behind some copper pieces, just one each, but every little bit helps. That’s about it— oh, I had my bear walk around to see if there were any traps inside the room, and you were right – there weren’t any.”

He was starting to understand the levels he had seen on the beetle a little better, and what he should theoretically expect as a reward from them – both in terms of “loot” and the essence they gave off. On the dungeon defenders inside his own home, the information was a lot more detailed; on

the wild beasts out in the forest, there hadn't been anything but an approximate level. Apparently, while he was inside a foreign dungeon core's dungeon, he got something in between. *I wonder, if I were to visit a Water or Fire dungeon, would I be able to see everything again?*

He looked at the mana signature left by one of the deceased beetles, where it had been absorbed at the end of the fight:

Rock Beetle (Level 1)

Vitality: 0

Attack: 5

Defense: 2 (5 on shell and mandibles)

Respawn: 2 Nature Mana

Loot: 1 copper

Essence: 1 unit

The last three hadn't been there before the fight, only appearing after the battle was over. Still, it was nice to know how it worked – and how much he could earn in essence when he came back or saw one of the beetles somewhere else.

With the room as complete as could be, and with the bear essentially uninjured and Fred back in fighting shape, Eisa had her animated servant lead the way into the next room.

Fred followed behind them as the Necro-healer had instructed, staying out of the way as they passed through a rocky passage that led onward. He took a quick look ahead of them to see if he saw anything out of the ordinary in the tunnel, but it was as clear and lifeless as the rest of the rock walls. He wasn't sure why the overall rock structure of this dungeon (as well as his parents') didn't contain even a speck of mana inside of it, but

he assumed it had to do with the dungeon creation process or was just a normal feature. Either way, it allowed him to easily see where traps might be present.

After only about 20 feet, the tunnel opened out into a room slightly larger than the last; although it was obviously bigger, it almost felt the opposite because the entire floor was covered in flowers. Every size, shape, and color seemed to be represented, though Fred wasn't an expert by any means. And zipping around the room, going from flower to flower, were giant bees bigger than his head.

Large Wasp (Level 1)

Vitality: 10

Attack: 2, Slowing Poison

Defense: 3

“This is probably where we'll find the flowers we're supposed to collect. Once we take care of those couple of bees, we should be able to easily find some in there,” Eisa remarked, after looking at the scene before her.

The mana content in the room was a little overwhelming, as some of the flowers had an extra helping of mana contained within them, unlike the nearly manaless plants from the room before. The bees had mana inside them, of course – and he counted 20 of them. Once he was able to concentrate, though, he was able to see what looked like intense concentrations of the green Nature mana in two different places underneath the field of flowers – right underneath two small patches of the higher mana-infused ones.

“Does the flower we’re looking for have a pure white center and...uh, six deep purple petals?” Fred asked, after looking closer at one of the special flowers.

“Yes, I believe those are the ones – why? Do you see one?”

“I see...let me see...I count 16 of them, though they are growing in two different sections, right above what appears to be traps. I’m not sure of what kind of trap it is, but we’ll have to be careful. Oh, and I count 20 of the Large Wasps – and watch out, their stingers probably have a slowing poison inside them.” Fred pointed out the different patches as best he could, though it was a little difficult as they were on the far side of the room.

He could see his companion look at him strangely, as if she didn’t believe him. However, Eisa shrugged again, as though not caring how he knew everything he was telling her and ordered her bear forward.

“Hopefully it shouldn’t matter too much, as my animated corpses are immune to poison. You be careful, though – if you get swarmed, there might not be anything left of you to save.”

He took her warning to heart, as he didn’t want a repeat of the first room. “Thanks, I think I’ll hang back and see if I’m needed.”

The reanimated bear shuffled forward, trampling over the flowers in his way toward the middle of the room. The act of floral devastation must’ve annoyed the wasps, as every visible one swarmed the bear, as well as a few that were hiding underneath the flowers.

They were fast, much faster than the bear, who had trouble rearing up and swatting them out of the air, though he got lucky early on with a quick swipe of his claws. With the remaining 19 still hovering around, dodging relatively clumsy swipes, and attacking incessantly, however – they were at a stalemate. The stingers on the wasps couldn’t penetrate the bear’s fur, let

alone its skin, so nothing much was getting accomplished. Fred thought that a few of the large flying insects would eventually get caught, but it would probably take a while.

“Shall I go in?” he asked, unsure because he didn’t want to get swarmed like she said. Although he wasn’t afraid of dying – because his mana totals were still fairly high, and he would regenerate – he was tired of feeling pain for the day and wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

“No, hold on, I have something for this. It’s a bit painful and uses a bit of power, but it will get these guys gone in no time. Stand back here at the entrance – it will hurt you too if you’re too close.”

Hmm, I wonder what spell she’s going to use?

Fred didn’t have to wonder long, because she was moving even before she stopped talking, following the same path as her bear. He almost cried out in alarm when – instead of just casting whatever spell she was planning on using right away – she whipped out a shiny black staff and smacked one of the wasps from behind, killing it instantly. *Where did that staff come from?*

Sooner than he could blink, the bees were all focused on her, stabbing her with their stingers; he could see that it caused her a little discomfort from the impacts, but none of them broke the skin. *So that’s what the Body stat does...hmm...*

She closed her eyes and held out her hands, where a ball of power – that looked like it was literally ripped from her body – formed between them; now he could see real pain on her face as the sphere of power seemed to shrink and condense, growing smaller and smaller over the course of 10 seconds. Really looking at her, he pulled up her Adventurer Status and was relieved that she was still fine, even if it didn’t look like it. Concentrating

even further, he exerted his will on the interface, making it so that whenever he looked at her for more than a second, a brief description came up.

Eisa Howells

Vitality: 55/80

Stamina: 60/80

Power: 1440/2200

As soon as the spell was ready, the power she held in her hands seemed to explode, creating a shockwave that rippled outward from her, shredding everything around her except her animated bear, who stared at her with dead eyes. The wasps were flung away from her, some now in literal pieces; fortunately, the explosive wave ended before it reached Fred, though he felt a pressure push him backwards a little.

Unfortunately, her spell also destroyed many of the flowers around her, ripping a few out of the ground altogether, while others survived but had all their petals blown off. As he regained his balance, Fred looked around the room using his mana sight and saw that there was only one of the special flowers they were looking for still standing, though it had lost two of its petals.

I guess we're not turning any of those in today.

Chapter 23

Fred saw three more things that happened as a result of Eisa's spell. First, the shockwave was apparently strong enough to trigger the two traps he saw earlier, thrusting a small square area of giant thorns the size of his leg up through the ground, where it would impale anyone unlucky enough to walk over it. Second, Fred checked his own Adventurer Status and saw another "locked" spell named Vitality Explosion on there. And third, Eisa fell to her knees afterward, panting as if she'd been running hard.

Fred immediately ran over in concern, but the stubborn Necro-healer waved him off. "I'll be fine – that spell always takes a lot out of me."

A few more seconds went by and – sure enough – Eisa was already looking better. At the same time, the corpses of all the wasps that were destroyed had started to melt into the ground as the mana inside of them were reabsorbed by the dungeon core. *I wonder if I can absorb them before the dungeon core does? Better not try – that would definitely alert it to something being wrong.*

Now that the traps had been sprung – at least from what he could see – Fred started safely gathering up what he could find of the coins that had fallen out of the Large Wasps, while at the same time experiencing the rush of more Essence as it was funneled into his Artifact. Additionally, the traps that had been sprung added to that same deluge, which was a surprisingly large amount in comparison to the deadly flying insects.

He gave all of the copper pieces (still 1 per defender) to Eisa to hold, since she seemed to have a way to hold everything easily. She pulled a small, non-descript pouch off her belt, opened it up wider than it should be

able to, and placed the coins inside – where they disappeared *without making any noise*.

“What is going on with that pouch? How is it able to hold all of those coins? And, a better question – where did that staff come from?”

Eisa was leaning on the black staff, still recovering from the use of her spell. “What are you talking about? You should’ve gotten one of the Pocket Interface Bags from Jaymes – it comes with the SDIA...but I guess a lot did happen, so he must’ve forgotten to give you one. We’ll get you one when we get back. To answer your question, though this small pouch acts as a large ‘pocket’ that can hold a nearly unlimited number of things, accessible by your Interface. If you can at least fit a portion of whatever you want to store inside the opening, it will automatically be slotted inside. Here, watch,” she responded, before opening the pouch as wide as she could.

Taking her staff, which she fortunately didn’t need to lean on anymore – as she was seemingly fully recovered – she placed the end of it inside...and it disappeared from her hand. One moment it was there, and the next it was gone; he couldn’t see Power (or even Mana) at play, so he couldn’t determine how it worked. *Very interesting – I can’t wait until I get one of my own.*

“You can place essentially anything you want in there, except for anything living. Time will essentially stop somehow for everything you put in there, so if you put a hot meal in there – it will still be hot when you bring it back out. There’s no limit that anyone has ever discovered, though if it is stuffed full of junk it can be harder to find what you need. It’s a marvel of Artificery that is actually what the main cost of the payment of the SDIA covers, so we should definitely make sure you get one when we get back.”

I definitely want one of those.

Eisa looked at the remaining flower they were supposed to gather and sighed, leaving the damaged item there instead of attempting to harvest it. With everything else in the room complete, she had her bear lead the way to the next room, following closely behind it through the tight passageway.

Before he followed, however, Fred pulled up his Adventurer Status and looked at what he had gotten from clearing the room – at least as far as Essence was concerned.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Unselected
Rating: G-1 st		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 18
Total Essence: 82	Available Essence to Distribute: 82	Unconverted Essence: 37350
Body: 2 (0/20) Brawn: 2 (0/20) Mind: 4 (0/80)		Vitality: 10/10 Stamina: 9/10 Power: 20/20
Base Physical Attack: 2 Base Physical Defense: 2		Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 0 – 0/100	Repair Animation 0 – 0/100	Vitality Transfer 0 – 0/100
Vitality Explosion 0 – 0/100		

Although he could save some of his Essence to unlock one of the Adapted Abilities he had acquired, or even wait until he had picked a class, Fred knew he wanted to spend at least some of it on improving his ability to withstand attacks from the dungeon defenders. Judging by the way both the bear and Eisa had weathered the attacks from the Wasps as if they were nothing, it was something that would help him not die – or at least not get hurt enough that he'd have to rely on his mana to save him.

Fred had asked about what the different stats such as Body, Brawn, and Mind meant before he had left the DAS, as well as the numbers next to

them. Body was a measure of how durable your body was; most “normal” humans apparently only had a 1 or possibly a 2 in this statistic, which made sense because they were quite vulnerable. He figured he had a 2 due to his status as a dungeon core, but it was hard to tell because he was still so vulnerable to many attacks.

The Body stat also affected how much Vitality you had, which was apparently a basic measurement of how much pain and damage your body could sustain before you died. Of course, Fred figured even if you had a 1000 Vitality, you’d still die if someone cut off your head; at least most humans probably would – he was just a special case.

Brawn had to do with how strong you were, and it affected how much damage you could inflict with your physical attacks. This was obvious when he had attacked the beetles in the previous room; his base physical attack, even aided by his knives, was not strong enough to pierce the outer shell of the insect. On the other hand, the bear had originally been a level 3 wild beast, but it had obviously been enhanced once it was animated by Eisa; which, in addition to having a durable exterior, allowed it to utterly destroy the comparatively weak beetles.

Stamina – which was also correlated with Brawn – was a measure of how much you could do before you got tired and had to rest; he was told that some abilities from primarily physical attack-based classes used Stamina instead of Power to execute.

His Vitality and Stamina stats were ones that he didn’t have to worry so much about reaching zero, since his mana would sustain him; he suspected that, although he couldn’t actually *see* it before, when he was traveling through the forest for a year and a half, both of them had been hovering around 1 the entire time. He now knew why he was burning through his mana so fast to keep him alive.

The Mind stat was not necessarily a measure of intelligence, but more about how well you could think and process information coming from the world around you. His starting stat of 4 was seemingly much higher than most people's, which he definitely knew came from his dungeon core background; having his mind and body able to process the raw unconverted mana in his body most likely had a lot to do with it.

And, of course, Power was directly linked to the stat; different classes could affect how much power you had access to (which was obvious by looking at Eisa's status), though those traits that boosted her ability to cast spells also precluded large gains in her physical stats. He suspected that if the Large Wasps had been level 3 or 4, she would've been a pincushion.

There were other stats that would only become available when he took a class, as well as possible additional traits that would become evident when he raised his Rating. Again, he wasn't worried about those right now – he was more concerned with not dying.

Therefore, Fred mentally moved some of his available Essence into the Body stat until he reached **Body: 2** (20/20). As soon as it hit the threshold, he instinctively braced for more pain...but all he felt was a strange and slightly ticklish tightening of the skin all over his body. Placing his hand on his arm, he tried to see if it felt any different – as if it might be rougher or something; either it was too small of a change, or he couldn't feel it himself. Thinking about the few brief times that Eisa had touched him with her hand, however, he couldn't remember thinking it was anything but soft.

It must just be evident when something tries to break the skin.

Once the sensation faded, he looked back at his status and saw that it now read **Body: 3** (0/40). Since he still had more than enough to raise it again, he threw another 40 Essence points into his Body stat again. This

time, in addition to a slight tingling of his skin, a slightly painful creaking of his bones radiated throughout his body, which fortunately ended after only a couple of seconds. In addition to his status now reading **Body: 4** (0/80), his entire body felt denser, as if he might weigh a little bit more than he used to.

Since he still had 22 Essence left, he slotted 20 of them into Brawn; he both wanted to see what it would do to his body, and to hopefully be able to do a bit of damage to whatever was still coming up in the dungeon. As soon as the total reached 20, he felt the muscles throughout his body spasm uncontrollably for just a moment – like he had just been jolted by a lightning bolt – causing him to faceplant inside the rock-filled passageway.

Due to his increased Body, however, he didn't take any damage. Getting to his feet after the muscle spasms ended was easier than usual, as he felt like he had a literal spring in his step; stretching his arms above his head, he could feel the change inside his muscles. It wasn't drastic, but it *was* noticeable.

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Body: 4 (0/80) Brawn: 3 (0/40) Mind: 4 (0/80)		Vitality: 20/20 Stamina: 14/15 Power: 20/20
Base Physical Attack: 3 Base Physical Defense: 4		Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 0 – 0/100	Repair Animation 0 – 0/100	Vitality Transfer 0 – 0/100
Vitality Explosion 0 – 0/100		

Now out of any other options, he sped through the short passageway after Eisa, arriving just as her bear was triggering a trap.

Chapter 24

Fred saw large dark-green vines extended from the ceiling right inside the entrance to the room, four of which were wrapped around the torso and neck of the reanimated bear. Even though Eisa's undead creature weighed almost half a ton, the long vines were just strong enough together to lift it into the air, where it flailed around ineffectually.

Although it wasn't getting hurt or choked – since it didn't have to breathe – it was nevertheless out of the fight. Unless, of course, someone was to cut it down.

Eisa was calm, however, looking over the rest of the room before she reacted, so Fred did the same thing. Past the other half-dozen or so vines still hanging down – waiting for another victim – the room was actually fairly dark. The previous rooms had been lit by a bright ambient light that his parents explained was an inbuilt feature of the dungeon; as the dungeon was originally constructed, the mana used to create it was infused permanently into the rocks, consumed completely – but allowing the dungeon core to adjust the ambient light level in the room with just a thought. Just like any other changes to the dungeon, however, it couldn't be done while there were invaders inside, so Fred didn't have to worry about everything suddenly going dark.

Granted, that wouldn't necessarily matter too much to Fred, since all he had to do was use his Mana Sight to pick out danger even in complete darkness. He knew Eisa had a trait that allowed her to see a little better in the darkness, but it probably wasn't nearly as good as his own perception.

“You probably can't see it, but there are a few more of the vines surrounding my bear, so don't rush out there yet. I can see...something

moving around out there as well, though I can't make it out," Eisa whispered to him, once he was close enough to her.

Even though *she* couldn't see what it was, Fred could. High up near the ceiling, 15 giant spiders were rappelling down from what he assumed were webs; as soon as they hit the ground, they skittered forward on legs that were the size of his arm. Their bodies were nearly the size of his torso, though without the room being a little brighter, he couldn't see exactly what they looked like.

Vine Spider (Level 1)

Vitality: 15

Attack: 3, Acidic Poison

Defense: 4

"There are 15 large Vine Spiders descending from the ceiling and heading this way."

Eisa turned to him with another shocked expression on her face. "How could you possibly...you know what? Never mind – I'll take your word for it. I hate spiders..." she mumbled, while looking back into the room, squinting as if she could see something if she tried hard enough.

Within a few seconds, fortunately – *or unfortunately, since she apparently doesn't like spiders* – the room's defenders arrived and immediately *jumped* on the bear, covering it until Eisa and Fred could barely see it struggling beneath them. For the first time, it appeared as if the bear was being affected, as they could hear a faint sizzling; the acidic poison the spiders were ineffectually trying to inject inside of the bear was instead staying on the outside and slowly dissolving its fur. It probably

wasn't going to look great once they finished the fight, but it wasn't actually getting hurt.

"I really don't want to get any of that acid on my dress..." His companion seemed to be talking to herself.

"I put some of my Essence I received from the previous two rooms into my Body stat, do you think they could get through my skin?"

Broken from her detached perusal of the fight, Eisa looked at him in concern. "You already did that? Normally you want to wait until after the dungeon delve, so that you can get used to the changes in your body. Well, no harm done it appears; though, I would advise against doing any more of that until we get out of here – and for when you pick a class to start out with."

Makes sense I guess – if I had fallen flat on my face in the middle of a fight or fell into a trap because I lost control of my body, that probably wouldn't have ended well.

Eisa continued. "As for whether they could hurt you – absolutely. Even with a stronger body, they can still probably at least pierce the skin and inject that nasty acid inside of you. They might not be able to rip off chunks of skin or even your arm now, but it will still hurt. Immensely. As for me, I doubt they would seriously injure me; however, my dress would fare just as well as my bear's fur. I knew we should've gotten you some better armor before we left..." Her mumbling trailed off at the end.

"Well, it's too late for whatever that is now – what do you think we should do?" he asked.

She thought about it for a moment, before replying. "Ok, here's what we do..."

* * *

Eisa watched Fred jump onto the back of her animated bear, kicking two of the giant spiders out of the way in his efforts. The semi-transparent Shield of Darkness she had cast on him shimmered faintly as the spiders nearby turned their attention to their new target, biting at him but being repulsed by the barrier. She could only cast the defensive ability approximately once an hour – which was how long it took her to recover from the soul-draining depression it caused – so she hadn't used it earlier; things being as they were, however, she thought it was appropriate in this instance.

It wouldn't last long, but it was time enough for Fred to go to work on the vines holding the bear. They were tough, but with a determined two-hand approach, he sliced through the first one within ten seconds. She saw them both drop a little when the vine parted and Fred almost slipped and fell off; luckily, he was able to snag one of the other vines and hung on.

With his feet steady underneath him, she watched the pair of knives flash again, hastily sawing through another of the strangling vines. She was starting to get worried that her shield would wear off before he finished; when he only had about fifteen seconds left, the second vine split, followed by another drastic drop. This time, the jerk of the sudden drop snapped the last two vines, freeing the bear – who suddenly fell and rolled over two of the spiders that were trying to reach Fred, squishing them flat with a squelching sound.

Fred almost got caught along with them but was able to turn his sudden fall into a clumsy roll to the side. Eisa watched him as he got to his feet just as the shield disappeared, bracing himself for the inevitable swarm of monsters. Fortunately, he was saved from the pain and misery of acidic

poison when her animation was able to swipe at a passing spider, pulling all of their attention back to the greater threat.

Now that it could move, her bear was able to land a few glancing blows, but the spiders were so quick – as compared to the lumbering bear – that they were easily able to skitter out of reach. It didn't matter too much, though, as he was there more to grab and try to keep their attention while Eisa and Fred did their own work.

Her Lifedrain spell was extremely effective at singling out monsters; it worked on them from the inside, meaning that there was no way for its friends to see who was attacking it. This meant that when she used the ability, the others wouldn't attack her unless she gave them a reason to; unfortunately, the ones she targeted somehow always knew who was attacking them, so she had to be prepared for retaliation.

The downside of the spell was that it was channeled – so it wasn't just a single shot. The time it would take to kill even these easier monsters was still a few seconds, more than enough time for one of them to reach her with its dress-ruining acid.

That was where Fred came in; once they headed toward her, he would intercept them, stabbing down and damaging them. If he ended up not being able to do enough damage to kill them, the delay would be more than enough for her spell to finish them off.

For the first five – everything went perfectly to plan. He was barely strong enough to pierce the bodies of the spiders with his knives – strong enough, however, to finish them off quickly. She felt her own Vitality swell as the spell siphoned a small portion of the spider's life force and added it to her own. After a while, she was as well and healthy as could be, and everything else that came her way was wasted. Her Power was steadily going down, unfortunately, but she was still sitting at a little below half.

But when the sixth horrific monster was intercepted by Fred, the remaining seven spiders seemed to grow wise to their strategy and broke off from her bear; her companion managed to finish off the spider he had stopped but went down under an onslaught of jumping monstrosities.

He started screaming as they bit into him, the acidic poison they injected eating away at his insides. From what she could see, she was correct in her estimation: they could pierce the skin but couldn't do much more than that. That, though, was enough to finish him off quickly unless she intervened.

"Hold on, Fred – I'll heal you in a moment!" With a quick instruction to her bear, she started firing out Shadow Strikes, not caring if it drew their attention or not. She wasn't going to risk Fred's life just to save her dress; there was no way she was about to let *another* person die on her watch.

The quickly flung bolts of pure darkness impacted one after another, most destroying them immediately. Three went down in as many seconds, but the remaining four turned their attention toward her and jumped toward her, crossing the distance in one hop. Her reanimated bear managed to catch one in the air, slamming it down beneath its paw and ending its attack with finality. The last three, however, impacted her so hard she fell onto her back, covered just as similarly as Fred was just a moment ago.

The difference was she wasn't getting hurt by the acidic bites the spiders inflicted on her. She could hear sizzling and feel the pressure against her skin, but it was her dress that got the worst of it. *Stupid spiders! I loved this dress!*

With anger at their disrespect for her fashion choice, she shot one of the spiders assaulting her point-blank in its face with another Shadow Strike, causing it to explode into hundreds of disgusting fragments. She hadn't been hurt before, but the explosion caused a chunk of spider chitin to

cut a thin line across her cheek; taking a more cautious approach, she used Lifedrain on another one, healing herself at the same time. By the time it was dead, her bear had gotten close enough to smash the unaware spider into the ground, causing its guts (as well as its ruptured acidic poison sac) to flow all over her dress, destroying even more of it.

She lay there, stunned at the sudden turn of events; the spider corpses around her started to melt into the ground, which also had the fortunate side effect of cleaning off all the goo from her body, clothes, and even the bear's paws. She could see and feel the Essence flowing into her hand, as well as what sounded like a greater amount of coins hitting the floor.

Fred!

Eisa couldn't believe she forgot about her companion for a moment, while she was complaining about her ruined attire. She pulled herself off the floor and stumbled across the space between them, only now noticing that it was quiet – his screaming had quieted and stopped completely at some point.

Arriving at his side, she saw that he wasn't breathing, though that didn't necessarily mean he was dead. He probably wished he was, as a good portion of his clothes had been burned away by the acid and his skin was black and pocked where the poison had eaten away at his skin and muscles – and even his internal organs.

She felt for a pulse and could detect the smallest flutter; *he's not dead!* She immediately used her Bind Soul ability, creating a transparent spiritual bubble around him that would keep his soul inside his body for about a minute until she had a chance to heal him. She'd never had to use it before, but she had unlocked it...just in case.

After that, she chain-casted Vitality Transfer, ignoring the pain it caused her as it went to work healing his body. Thirty seconds later, she

stopped as he had been fully healed, taking nearly a third of her Vitality to do it. He had been so far gone that she was amazed that he was still alive when she got to him; as a result, she ended up having to heal him as much as someone with twice or three times how much Vitality he probably had.

He opened his eyes, staring at her through the slowly fading Soul-binding bubble (that she was sure he couldn't see – because only she should be able to see it), before a smile lit his face. “Phew, thanks – that was close! By the way, aren't you cold?” he remarked, looking past her face.

She looked down and she could feel the heat filling her cheeks; there were the barest scraps of her dress left on her, none of which really covered anything.

This man is infuriating.

Chapter 25

Fred looked up (and down) at Eisa, noting the extreme damage done to her dress. *She must've taken the attention of all the rest of the spiders, pulling them off of me so that I wouldn't die.* He had already passed out from the pain and didn't know when it had happened, but he didn't think it would be a good idea to tell her that he wouldn't have died. *Well, not right away. Given enough time, I'm sure that having most of my body destroyed would probably have fulfilled one of the requirements for permanent death that Deecy had mentioned.*

At his comment about the cold, which Fred thought was entirely appropriate because even he could feel how cold it still was in the dungeon, Eisa turned away, covering herself up. He remembered Regnark mentioning something about “modesty”, and how it wasn't appropriate going around naked – which he had done one night when the fire had been exceptionally hot. He assumed this had something to do with it, though when it came to clothes Fred thought of it merely as a way to fight off the cold air.

He had figured that if he was ever far enough south that the weather was nice, he wouldn't be wearing any at all – though he was beginning to suspect there were things he could wear for protection. Something about “armor” that Eisa had mentioned.

Fred was grateful for her timely “rescue” and the healing, which – looking at his own destroyed clothes alone – he figured probably would've taken his mana more than a day on its own to heal. However, he didn't know what to do other than say thanks; suddenly, though, the answer came to him.

Making a decision that he was slightly worried might come back to haunt him, he stood up and approached the back of Eisa, who was currently pulling a dark-red dress out of her little magical pouch at her hip. “Before you put that on, I want to do something that will show my appreciation for saving me.”

She stiffened at his approach and again at his words. “Don’t worry about it, you’d do the same for me.”

Probably. But it’s more for a selfish reason. He was beginning to like Eisa and would like to consider her a friend, but he also remembered how she had tried to take advantage of him so soon after they had met. Her continued safety and presence by his side was beneficial to his own advancement, which would lead to his being able to get some answers from a dungeon core one day. That being said, he didn’t want anything bad to happen to her because of him.

“I would, but I’d still like to do something for you.” Before she could say or do anything, he touched a scrap on the back of her dress that was barely attached, gathering it up in his hand and closing his eyes.

She yelped at the sudden touch, even though he hadn’t actually touched her skin or hurt her. “What do you think you’re doing—”

Fred blocked her out, quickly concentrating on the feel of the soft woolen dress beneath his fingers, and picturing what it looked like before, he *pushed* some of his available mana into the image. He let go of the scrap, feeling it pull away from him as he opened his eyes, watching the black dress suddenly form back into one, complete piece; from the back, he critically looked at his handiwork and noticed that it wasn’t perfect – the bottom was an inch or two shorter than it should be. *Oh well, next time I’ll get it right.*

Instead of being thankful – like he thought she would be – Eisa ended up screaming in what he assumed was either excitement or fright; he couldn't tell which one it was. She frantically felt all over her dress, running her hands over the fabric like she couldn't believe it was whole. Eventually, she turned around to look at Fred with wide eyes; it was only then that he determined that it wasn't the excitement that he was hoping for: it was fright.

He put his hands up, cutting her off from saying anything. "I didn't mean to scare you, it's just another one of my...skills. Here, watch – I'll do it to myself as well." So saying, he looked down at his own ragged clothes, pushed mana into their familiar "whole" image in his mind, and watched them form and coalesce into what appeared to be a brand-new pair of pants, shirt, and warm coat. It wasn't fancy, but it was warm. And modest he supposed.

"How...who...*what* are you?" she asked, and Fred was happy to see that at least some of the fright from her face had faded, only to be replaced by what he suspected was curiosity.

"I...can't tell you right now, and besides – you probably wouldn't believe me. Just...keep this only between *us* if you can," he replied hesitantly. *I can't tell her I'm a dungeon core; in her world, I'm the enemy – or, at least, I'm the embodiment of all the pain and suffering she had to go through to get where she is today. One day I might tell her if it helps me with my objective in the future...but not today.*

She looked unconvinced and looked like she wanted to ask some more questions despite his obvious reluctance to answer. Instead, she shoved the dark-red dress back into her pouch – where it instantly disappeared – and said, "Fine. But we're having a long conversation once we get out of here."

Whatever suits you. He didn't respond either way, but she must've taken it as an acceptance because she walked toward the far side of the room, her patchy-furred animated bear leading the way. Once the dungeon defenders in the room had been eliminated, the mana had drained from the remaining vines that were part of the initial trap, leaving the rest of the room safe. He wasn't sure how she knew that was the case, but he assumed it was common knowledge that she had gained over time – and from “delving” into countless dungeons.

Before he followed, he took a look at his Adventurer Status and his available Mana, to see how much had happened in the last room.

Fire Mana: 57/120

Water Mana: 56/119

Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 3734

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Unselected
Rating: G-2 nd		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 123
Total Essence: 177	Available Essence to Distribute: 97	Unconverted Essence: 37340
Body: 4 (0/80) Brawn: 3 (0/40) Mind: 4 (0/80)		Vitality: 20/20 Stamina: 9/15 Power: 20/20
Base Physical Attack: 3 Base Physical Defense: 4		Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i> <i>(Rating bonuses visible once class is chosen)</i>		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 0 – 0/100	Repair Animation 0 – 0/100	Vitality Transfer 0 – 0/100
Vitality Explosion 0 – 0/100	Shield of Darkness 0 – 0/100	Lifedrain 0 – 0/100
Repair Object 0 – 0/100		

It appeared as though some of his mana had been spent keeping him alive long enough so that Eisa could heal him, with even more being used to repair their clothes. He still had quite a bit, however – and more than enough Unconverted Mana to last a while too.

He had received a total of 95 Essence from the room; a quick glance at one of the spiders' mana signatures broke it down for him.

Vine Spider (Level 1)

Vitality: 0

Attack: 3, Acidic Poison

Defense: 4

Respawn: 4 Nature Mana

Loot: 2 copper

Essence: 3 units

They had both gained 45 Essence from the Vine spiders, so that must've meant that the discharge from the strangling vine trap had given them 50. *I wonder why that is worth more?* He didn't have an answer to that, nor could he ask Eisa, as she was already almost out of sight.

Before she left his vision completely, he again quick-checked her status.

Eisa Howells

Vitality: 50/80

Stamina: 40/80

Power: 312/2200

She had spent quite a bit of her power, but Fred hoped she'd still have enough to finish the dungeon. He could tell that he was getting very close to the dungeon core inside the dungeon; an itching at the back of his mind hinted that if he got closer, he might be able to "hear" it use its mana communication.

He left his available Essence alone – for now – so that he could save it for when he got a class, which was becoming more important by the minute. He had reached the next Rating – G-2nd – but whatever benefits that was supposed to give him was delayed because he didn't have a class. He suspected that the class traits that he had seen on Eisa's status were increased or added to as she "rated-up", so he didn't want to miss out on whatever he might receive.

He also saw that he had adapted another couple of Eisa's spells – Shield of Darkness and Lifedrain. He knew that she had used a few other spells while he was unconscious, but as he hadn't "seen" them used, he couldn't copy what she had done.

What was the most interesting addition to his adapted abilities, however, was the Repair Object one; apparently, his use of his Mana to repair their clothes was something that could be adapted and used with his Power in the future. *I wonder if I can Create Objects as well?* He'd have to experiment later.

With everything looking as good as it was going to get, he followed Eisa, hoping that her bear wouldn't run into another trap right away like the last room. Fortunately, they had both stopped right at the entrance to what Fred now knew was the final room; when he looked at the far corner, he could pinpoint the dungeon core right behind the rock wall. He couldn't see the entrance to its Core room, but he was sure it was cleverly hidden somewhere.

The majority of the room was relatively plain compared to the rest of the dungeon, though it was clearly lit unlike the spider room; only one large dark-green, deep-red, and light-brown plant nearly 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide was sitting in the middle of the room. When Fred looked at it with his Mana Sight, it fairly blazed with green Nature mana running all through the entire thing.

Bludgeoning Fly Trap (Level 2)

Vitality: 250

Attack: 5 – Bludgeoning Arms, 7 – Thorn-filled Mouth Trap

Defense: 6

“Well, I have some good news and some bad news – which one would you like to hear first?” Fred asked as he came up behind the Necro-healer.

Eisa turned around to look at him with her eyebrows raised. “Why does it seem like *I’m* the new recruit sometimes? You seem to have all sorts of information about this place that you shouldn’t.” Fred just shrugged, not wanting to explain anything. “Fine...give me the good news first.”

“This is the last room in the dungeon.”

“Ok, that’s about what I expected; these easier dungeons aren’t usually more than four or five rooms deep,” Eisa remarked knowingly.

“What’s the bad news?”

“That big plant there is all one...monster, I think is what you’ve called them. And it’s pretty powerful – even *you* might get seriously hurt from it.”

Chapter 26

Eisa listened to his description, surprised at the presence of what she figured was an actual dungeon boss.

“Sounds like the boss of the dungeon, which is unusual in lower-rated G dungeons. They usually start around G-5th-Rated dungeons, but it isn’t unheard of for one to be in a lower one. This might be a bit more difficult than I had originally suspected; we can turn around and leave if we want to – there’s no penalty for not completing the job, which is why I chose this one in the first place,” Eisa informed Fred.

*I could **probably** do it by myself, but I don’t want Fred to get killed; this is a little much for a new Adventurer that doesn’t even have a class yet.* Not that he acted like a new recruit; on the contrary, he seemed to have some sort of innate knowledge of the dungeon – even though he had said he’d never been there before. It was also obvious that many of the aspects of being a dungeon delver was new to him, even though almost everyone in their kingdom grew up hearing tales about the greatest Adventurers in the past – and present. He was quite the mystery...and she still wasn’t sure what to think about that.

“We’re already here, so why don’t we try to finish this?”

Because you might die, you greedy moron. She didn’t say that, of course, but she really wanted to. She’d already lost one group to greed and she didn’t want to lose another...

“Well, how about I send my bear in and see what we’re up against? If it’s too much, we can bail, and we’ll be none the worse for it. I won’t be able to maintain its animation for too much longer anyway, so there wouldn’t be any harm.”

Fred thought about it for a moment, before giving the go ahead. *When did I suddenly consider him to be the leader?* She was the most experienced and higher-rated, but she had been constantly deferring to him in the last couple of rooms. *No matter; as long as we get through this, we can define our roles better later.* She didn't necessarily *like* being in charge, but she would do it if the need arose.

She sent her animated bear ahead, staying far enough back in the tunnel that whatever happened wouldn't be able to touch her. As soon as its paw touched the floor of the room, the plant monster in the middle of the room came alive.

Four long tentacle-vines emerged from the center stalk, long enough that they could reach every corner of the room. In the center of the stalk, a large...*mouth?*...opened wide, the blood-red-colored tongue inside surrounded by massive "teeth" that were made out of wickedly sharp thorns. She *did not* want to get "eaten" by that.

On the end of each vine (though arm would be the better description) a large, bulbous shape was waving around, the green tentacle extended over it like a snake that was in the process of trying to swallow a mouse. It was ridged and almost shaped like a walnut; one look at it and she knew she didn't want to be hit by it.

Her bear had no choice, however, because as soon as it was fully inside the room, four snaking arms smashed down right on top of its back. Her passive Enhance Animations ability essentially had the same effect as increasing her own Body and Brawn stats; despite increased strength and more-durable skin and bones, Eisa could tell that her bear was starting to get injured for the first time. It wasn't much yet, but the initial impact probably caused some hair-line fractures in its skeletal system.

She immediately recalled her bear into the passageway before the slowly ascending arms could smash down again. “I think we should turn back – there’s no shame in beating a strategic retreat,” she said, after quickly looking over her animation.

But Fred was staring at the plant, who was basically frozen in place, waiting for them to enter the room again. “Before we do that, a quick question for you. If we were a ‘regular’ Adventurer team of say...three or four members around my Rating or higher, what would be the safest and most effective way we that they would be able to defeat this def— monster?”

She thought about it for a moment, curious as to what he meant by his question. *Is he planning on finding some other members to come back and help to defeat this thing? There are many other dungeons around here that we can visit, earning just as much coin and Essence, so there would be no point.* Despite the futility of it, she answered what she thought would be the best-case scenario.

“Hypothetically, at least in this instance, the ideal team would consist of at least four members: a tank – who would be able to keep the attention and withstand the blows of those bludgeoning arms, a caster of some sort – preferably one that could sling fire spells at this thing, a ranged damage-dealer – that could attack from afar and avoid being smashed to a pulp, and a healer to maintain the Vitality of the tank and anyone else that might inadvertently get hurt.

“As it is, my bear could theoretically act as a tank and I could do my best to repair it, but my normal healing spells won’t work on it. *And* I’d have to get close to my animation to start the repair, which I’d rather not do too much as it would put me in harm’s way. I might not die straight away from getting hit from one of those arms, but it might break some bones.

You'd probably survive a hit or two as well, but I couldn't guarantee much past that.

"I have some long-range spells like Lifedrain, Shadow Strike, and even Inflict Pain, but I doubt I have enough Power to take it out. Plus, I would have to be a little closer – probably at least a couple of feet into the room before I could reach the plant. Everything I did would cause it to want to attack me because the bear isn't suited to keeping its attention. I can try though, if you'd like." Eisa was exaggerating a little bit about her lack of remaining Power, but she wasn't too far off the mark. She thought she *might* be able to kill it if she was lucky, but at the moment the likelihood of it would probably be around 50/50.

"Hmmm...ok, how about this. If I had a ranged weapon, like a bow and some arrows, do you think that would be enough extra damage to finish it off?"

Since he obviously didn't have one, she didn't think it harmed anything to answer truthfully, "Yes, I think if you were able to do even a little more damage from afar, I could make up the difference."

"Ok, then I think that now *I* have a plan..."

* * *

Fred rolled out of the way of another vine-arm that slammed down so close that he could feel the wind from its passage; the ground shook a little at the impact, reinforcing the need to be careful. He wasn't very fast, but he found that – once committed – the arms didn't adjust their downward course even if he shifted out of the way. There was a very small window that allowed him to avoid being hit if he was watching for it.

He Created another arrow and fitted it to the bow he had Created earlier and aimed at the “mouth” of the plant before him. Watching out for another arm attack, he fired at the plant and...hit the side of it, piercing just deep enough to cause some green sap to bubble out of the wound. He forgot to mention to Eisa that he wasn't that accurate with the weapon he had made appear out of thin air. In fact, the only thing he said was, “Remember – you didn't see anything.” Time would tell if she kept that promise, but he figured that he had already showed her some of his abilities by fixing her dress, so what was the harm in showing a little more?

Each arrow cost another Mana to Create; although he was still sitting at over 50 total usable Mana, it wouldn't last long if he couldn't hit what he wanted. He was hoping that he'd somehow be able to tap into his inner Fire core and light the arrows on fire after he released them – but that was a big fat no. It didn't seem to be something he could do at the moment, but that could always change in the future once he learned a bit more about his new abilities and Power. Of course, he had to live long enough to get there.

“I thought you said you could shoot!” Eisa called out after he missed his mark – *again*.

She was running around as well, flinging dark bolts of Power at the mouth of the plant, dodging the single arm that was trying to flatten her. Two other arms were keeping up a constant barrage on the bear, who was trying to close to mauling distance on the main stalk. The arms were too fast to attack easily; even the one time that the bear had managed to swipe at one of the bulbous “fists”, it only managed to score some deep grooves that didn't seem to do much to stop it.

“I said I could shoot – I didn't say anything about actually hitting something!” he called back as he aimed and fired again, putting the lie to

his words as he finally hit the thorn-filled mouth. A small screech emerged from the plant, showing for the first time that he had actually really hurt it.

“Nice! Do that again!”

He barely dodged the arm again as he reveled in his accomplishment. Creating another arrow, he took careful aim as he tried to copy the feel of what he had just done. The *thwap* of the bowstring rebounded in his ears and he knew it was going to fly true. Unfortunately, his success from before had unintended consequences; unseen until the last moment, one of the arms that had been battering the bear broke off and attacked him when he was still concentrating.

Fred saw it in his peripheral vision but couldn't move himself fast enough to avoid it entirely. Instead of getting pile-driven into the ground, he was able to shift his upper body out of the way; his lower half, not so much. The “fist” came down on his right leg, snapping every bone inside of it and essentially turning the entire thing into jelly.

His horrendous scream of pain caught Eisa's attention and she shouted, “Hold on, I'll be there in a—”

Fred shook off the pain long enough to shout back (which was an enormous feat of will all by itself), “NO! Finish it off! Trust me, I'll be fine!” He collapsed back on the ground, the pain too much for him to try to sit up. Realizing that he had somehow still kept ahold of his bow, he fought through the haze of agony radiating up his leg and Created another arrow. He pulled back the string and let it loose...and watched it skip along the ground before burying itself along the base of the plant creature.

Oh well, I tried. If Eisa finishes it off, I'll be fine. Any shock that his body had been experiencing from his demolished leg wore off and a new wave hit him, threatening his fragile hold on consciousness. Fortunately,

the pain stopped when another arm smashed down on his chest, knocking the air and everything else right out of him.

Chapter 27

Eisa hesitated just long enough at Fred's shout that her last few Shadow Strikes – which included the one that finally killed the giant plant monster – came only a moment after he was hit again, this time in his chest. She cried out in surprise and anger; her new strange companion looked like he had had his entire upper torso caved in and blood was pooling underneath him.

She had been conserving her Power during the battle both to maintain her animated bear and for emergencies – just in case one of them had been seriously hurt. With Fred's instruction, however, she ended up using the last of her Power to finish off the boss, which was currently collapsing in on itself and melting into the ground. She ignored it, however, as she ran over to Fred, her bear collapsing into dust behind her. She didn't have anything left to keep it going, and it wasn't needed anymore anyway.

His discarded bow – which she had seen him conjure out of nothing – had been cracked in half at the last hit, and Eisa kicked it out of the way before she knelt down at his side. He looked worse than she thought up close, and she couldn't imagine *anyone* living through the utter devastation his body now displayed. In a couple of minutes, she'd have enough to try to heal him, but she didn't think it would matter.

However, as Eisa sat there staring at him, she saw something miraculous happen: his flesh started to knit back together! It was subtle at first, and she thought she was only seeing something she wanted to see, but a few minutes of intently watching was enough to prove her initial assessment correct. Somehow, unbelievably, he was self-regenerating! She had heard about a few healers being able to cast a spell on someone that

would act similarly, though it usually required that person to still be alive. She would've sworn that Fred was dead (and from the looks of it, still technically was), but his body was healing, nonetheless.

She only had to wait another two or three minutes before she had enough Power to use her Vitality Transfer, which she immediately used on him when she got the chance. Despite the “regeneration” evidence to the contrary, she still thought he was dead, and it wouldn't work; the spell wouldn't activate if she targeted an undead or a corpse. To her astonishment, the spell took...and his torso started to reshape itself into a semblance of normalcy. Moments later, she saw his lungs feebly inflating, as well as felt a pulse when she pressed her fingers against his neck.

This is insane!

Over the next 10 minutes, Eisa waited for her Power to regenerate and used Vitality Transfer, healing the body next to her. After the last cast of her spell, his body was in as perfect health as could be; moments later, he opened his eyes and smiled at her.

“I'm guessing you killed it?”

That's all he has to say? “Yes, you big idiot. But *you* died too, or at least you *should've*; I have no idea how I was able to heal you. Who...no, *what*...are you?”

He ignored her question as he looked at something that only he could see. “Wow! That thing was worth 150 Essence! How much coin did it drop?”

We're not done with this conversation. She wanted to ask more questions, but she was exhausted from all of the surprises of the day and, if she was honest with herself, she didn't care too much about it. The fact that he was *alive* when he should be dead was enough to satisfy her. For the moment.

Fred stood up, his clothes slightly torn where it had been smashed earlier, but the rest of him appeared pristine. He held out his hand to her, so she took it and he pulled her to her feet. She looked over at where the giant plant once stood and saw two silver pieces flashing in the ambient light of the dungeon.

Eisa walked over to grab them, excited that the day was turning out to be rather profitable. Aside from the gold piece she had received from Fred – which she still felt a little bad about – she had accumulated nearly 2 silver pieces from the dungeon run as her cut. Not only that, but she wasn't going to have to pay any sort of fee to the Syndicate. A silver would let her live frugally for about a week, so knocking out two weeks' worth of room and board in a single dungeon delve was a great start.

She picked them up and shoved them into her pouch, knowing that Fred didn't really have anything to carry his portion in quite yet. Looking around for him to tell him the good news, she saw him standing over by the corner staring at the wall. "Hey, are you ready to go? We're all done here."

Fred stood there for another couple of moments before he seemed to forcefully tear himself away from whatever he was looking at. His face when he turned around was perfectly neutral; if she didn't know better, she would've said he was trying to hide his anger. *Why would he be angry? We just finished his first dungeon as an Adventurer, and he should be happy! He makes no sense to me sometimes...actually, make that **always**.*

He loosened up a little on the way out, finally smiling again when he picked up the bag with the Dire Wolf Pup, Deecy, outside. "Yes, it was a success. Yes, we finished the dungeon. No, I didn't do anything like that..." He was whispering to the pup, which was now in his arms as they walked along.

He's talking to her like she understands him. Thinking back at the Dire Wolf's dramatic transformation before they entered the dungeon, she realized that it was entirely possible that the beast actually did. *And maybe even communicates back.*

There were just so many things about Fred that she didn't understand; the least of which was his talking/not-talking animal companion. She was more concerned about who or *what* he was, because she was sure he wasn't human. She heard snippets of his whispered conversation with Deecy as they walked along the forest; they went on so long that she started to get frustrated.

"Alright! I can't take it anymore! Before I go anywhere else with you, I need some questions answered," she practically screamed out, stopping in between two trees in their path.

Fred was startled for a moment at her outburst, but then he looked at Deecy in his arms again and looked thoughtful. Looking back at her with the smile back on his face, he said, "Fair enough – what would you like to know? I can tell you some things, but others are better left unspoken."

She wasn't expecting him to capitulate so quickly, as he had been relatively tight-lipped inside the dungeon – but she wasn't going to let the opportunity go to waste.

"What I want to know is who you really are. No, forget that question; what I really want to know is *what* you are, because you aren't human – or at least none that I've ever seen or heard of before. And don't deny it, I've seen too many things today that don't make sense."

He only hesitated for a second before replying. "Yes, I'm a bit different, but I am a human, at least in shape and form. That's all I can say about that, though; it's better for you and your safety that you don't know."

How would I be safer not knowing? She was confused by the answer, but she was glad that he was answering questions, even if it wasn't exactly to her liking.

"Fine, I can respect keeping some secrets. But then how do you explain what you did repairing my destroyed dress? And your clothes as well?"

Before he could answer, she pressed the issue even further.

"Then there was the part where it looked like you conjured a bow and some arrows out of thin air – how do you explain that?"

She vividly remembered him doing that and knew for sure that he didn't have a Pocket Interface Bag – since she had practically seen him naked after the spiders' acid had destroyed most of his clothes. In fact, the only bag he had was the one he carried Deecy in. She looked at it again on his shoulder, seeing that without the small Dire Wolf inside, it was completely flat, like there was nothing else inside. *Was the money he pulled out of there earlier all he had?*

But then something clicked in her head.

She started talking hesitatingly, working through her thoughts as they coalesced into something resembling a question. "Did you... 'conjure' up that silver at the DAS earlier? Was it real? Or will you walk back in there and be arrested for making illusionary copies of the real thing?"

Fred looked back down at Deecy for a few moments, as if he was having some sort of mental conversation with her. "No, I really think it's for the best if I'm as honest as I can be. Trust me..." he whispered so softly that she could barely hear it.

He then held out his hand, palm up, in front of him. Less than a second later, a gold piece that looked eerily familiar *materialized* above his

hand, dropping the last inch or so when it fully appeared. It had a very small notch on one side of it that was very distinctive...

Eisa quickly opened her pouch and took out the gold piece she had stashed in there after grabbing it from the Syndicate's storage. Sure enough, it had the *same exact notch in the same exact place!*

"Here, you can have this one too. In fact, you can keep everything you picked up in the dungeon, because I can always Create more. And don't worry, it's permanent; it won't disappear on you tomorrow – or ever, for that matter."

He can conjure gold out of thin air! She took the proffered coin wordlessly. The possibilities of having an unlimited source of funds raced through her head, but there was something about the entire thing that was bothering her.

"You obviously didn't become an Adventurer for the money, so... why? Why go through all this?" she asked confusedly.

"You're right, I didn't come to Gatecross looking for more copper, silver, or even gold pieces. I have no need of money, to tell you the truth; instead, I came to your town because I'm looking for allies in my... endeavors."

Well, that wasn't cryptic or anything. "What kind of endeavors are you talking about? Trying to take over the world or something?"

Fred laughed at that initially, but his face turned all serious-like. "Not to take over the world, no. Too much responsibility, I would think. I originally just needed help to investigate something, but now that I know that I can make myself stronger, that's my focus for now. Once I'm strong enough, I might be able to finish my...investigations by myself, so that I won't put anyone else in danger."

"And what would these investigations do for you?"

His face turned neutral again, similar to how he appeared staring at the wall inside the last room of the dungeon. “Ultimately...answers. And when I get those answers, I can get revenge on the ones that murdered my parents.”

His parents were murdered? That might explain how messed up he seems sometimes. Although orphans weren’t a rarity in the Craytion Kingdom, they usually sprung up because of a dungeon delve gone wrong or some other sort of accident. But rarely murder; there were too many ways for royal inquisitors to find out the truth to be able to hide a crime like that.

“Does that satisfy your questions?”

Not nearly, but it will do for now. “No, I have thousands more – but they can wait. Let’s get back to town and get some rest. I was originally planning on going out again, but I don’t think I could handle another delve today.”

Chapter 28

Fred watched Eisa turn back to their previous heading, snaking her way through the trees in the direction of Gatecross. He hurried to come up behind her and eventually got the chance to walk next to her; having finally put Deecy back into the bag so that he could have his hands free, they walked in companionable silence, each thinking their own thoughts.

“Why do *you* do this, Eisa? It is just because of the money?” he had to ask after a while, needing to know her motivations.

He could tell that his question startled her, though he thought it might be just because they hadn’t spoken for a couple of minutes. She didn’t respond right away, nor did she in the next quarter-mile of traveling. Finally, with what looked like a lot of thought had gone into it, she answered.

“I’m not going to say that the money isn’t an important part of it, otherwise it would be much more difficult to live and survive outside of the dungeons. Weapons, armor, and other items all increase in price as you get more powerful; money provides a way to keep up with your own abilities. Imagine yourself with another few points in Brawn and using a simple iron knife: one strike with that and you’re liable to snap the blade clean in half *by yourself*. So, yes, it is important, but it’s not everything.

“I grew up without many friends in a town so far to the south that you’ve probably never even heard of it. The allure of joining an organization that fostered the formation of familiar groups of like-minded members was too tempting to pass up; as soon as I joined when I was 16, I never looked back. Grouping up with other people, becoming more

powerful as time went along – these were all great, but not necessarily what has kept me looking forward to the next dungeon delve day after day.

“I much prefer to use my wits to figure out how to keep my group alive, solving the sometimes-puzzling traps hidden throughout the dungeons, the challenge and high I felt from successfully completing an entire delve, the comradery of the groups I’ve known for so long...” She trailed off toward the end and didn’t continue.

Fred stayed silent for a while as they walked together, respecting her obvious need for silence. Something about her last statement about comradery, however, sparked a memory.

“Does this have anything to do with why Jaymes told me to avoid you before I even met you?”

She stopped, looking shocked. “HE SAID WHAT? How dare he! It’s bad enough that my reputation is what it is, but he can’t just go around blocking all my attempts to find another group!” she said furiously, before thinking it over. “Well, I guess he *can*, technically, but it’s just not fair because it’s not my fault!”

Obviously, this is what he meant – she’s a bit touchy on some subjects. He let her rant and rave a little longer, and eventually she calmed down enough to continue their journey back.

“Leave it alone – she obviously doesn’t want to talk about it. I’m not sure if you picked the right one to put your trust in; she seems like she’s got some issues that have nothing to do with you.”

He knew he should probably heed Deecy’s advice, but he just couldn’t leave it like that. He had to ask; if he wanted to put his faith in her,

that was his prerogative – though he wanted to make sure it was for the right reasons.

“What happened?”

He thought she might be reluctant to speak about it; on the contrary, she seemed eager to tell someone her side of the story.

“You might not believe me – just like everyone else – but I didn’t do anything wrong, I swear. Just because I was the only one to come back alive from my group doesn’t make it my fault that they died. However, no one seems to believe that...” Eisa trailed off again – but only for a moment.

“Being a healer is hard. You have to watch everything; not only do you have to make sure that you know who has gotten hurt, you have to guesstimate how much damage they’ve taken *and* be willing to make the hard choice on who to heal and when. It’s tough sometimes, and there have been some mistakes made and close calls, but I’d never lost a single person in any of my groups. I love the challenge being a healer class brings with it; I may not always be doing the actual fighting against the many dungeon monsters that I’ve been a part of taking down, but without me – they wouldn’t have survived to tell the tale.

“I had been with my group for almost 2 years. They were all a Rating above me – all D-Rated – and I felt privileged to be able to be a part of their team. Finding a healer for your group is sometimes hard; because they tend to be uncommon in the first place – and the fact that most of them tended to be a bit squishy in the defense department – most groups have to make do without one, relying on spending large amounts of their hard-earned coin on Health Potions.

“Everything was going great; we were smashing through dungeons like they were nothing. We were an up and coming group, and even the higher-Rated groups were noticing. A few guilds—” she noticed Fred’s

blank-faced stare— “uh...guilds are small communities within the Syndicate that can be chartered for a fee, though that fee is so outrageous that normally only high C to B-Rated and above can afford them. They offer a lot of benefits that you can't get just anywhere – but that's not important,” she said, before switching back to her story.

“Anyway, some important people were looking at us to become a part of their community in the future. I knew that if we just kept the way we were going, we'd get there eventually; however, my groupmates didn't want to wait. They wanted to impress those that were looking at us even more, so they convinced me to go with them to a low C-ranked dungeon. They were so confident in their abilities that they didn't even buy the map for it from the Syndicate.

“It might not seem like a big jump from where they were in the high D's to a low C but let me tell you – it is. Not only are the monsters harder to kill, but the traps start to become even more deadly. We were actually doing fine until we encountered a trap we'd never seen before. One second, we were walking along – with me bringing up the rear – and the next a wall dropped in front of the group, blocking the passageway. Nothing happened so we all started to back up, thinking it was just a detour; unfortunately, it was a diversion.

“Unbeknownst to us, the ceiling started to slowly, silently collapse. I saw it out of the corner of my eye and shouted a warning, but another wall made of stone cut me off from the rest of the group.” Eisa paused for a moment and collected herself, as she was starting to become emotional. Angry or sad, Fred couldn't tell.

“I pounded at the wall until my fists were starting to get bloody, but to no avail. I threw the rest of my Power into spells trying to break through, but nothing I could do affected it in the least. I couldn't see or hear what

happened to them, but every night I imagine their screams as the ceiling smashed them into the floor...” She paused, lost in her memory.

*So having nightmares of finding my parents’ remains at home for the last two years seems pretty normal now. Maybe I **am** human.*

“Ten minutes later, the walls retracted into the ceiling. I found the remains of my group smeared across the floor near the rear wall; their bodies, weapons, and armor were pushed so far into the hard stone that I couldn’t even begin to extricate them – let alone bring them back with me. Upon further inspection of the area, I found two small switches along the wall, which I suspected would’ve stopped the ceiling from collapsing if they had used their heads and not panicked.

“And that’s essentially it; I had to go back to the city we were operating out of without them, or even a single item of theirs. All everyone knew was that I was the only one to come back – unharmed at that – so they all concluded that I either abandoned them there like a coward, or deliberately left them there to die. A high-Rated group went to the dungeon later to look for their remains, but every trace of them was gone.

“Soon afterwards, someone somehow found out I was a Necromancer – which is supposed to be privy information – and the rumors circulated that I had killed them so that I could raise their corpses for my own sick ends. After that, my reputation as a healer was ruined, and no one wanted to risk grouping with me. I moved to Gatecross hoping to run from my reputation, but it appeared to get there even before I did. A month later, I was going to try to solo a low-rated dungeon – and that’s where you found me.”

I guess that makes sense why Jaymes told me to stay away; if no one believed in her innocence, it is more than understandable why someone wouldn’t want to group with her. Hmm...would I have thought the same

thing if I had heard the “story” before meeting her? Would I have decided not to even trust her enough to ask for her help? He didn’t have an answer; his prior world living in a dungeon with his dungeon core parents didn’t lend itself to many social situations and complications. Most of what he had learned was from overhearing his parents talk, though that was what he guessed was primarily dungeon core-related politics.

Not necessarily the best of educations, but it was what he had to work with.

“For what it’s worth, I believe your story. You used your Power to help me survive in the dungeon, when you could’ve left me to die; if that isn’t enough, you also helped me out back in Gatecross when no one else would even consider it. I can’t see you doing what they are accusing you of – your recitation of events seems much more plausible.”

He could hear her sniffing a little and he thought she was crying for some reason, but when he looked at her face it was completely dry.

“Thanks for believing in me,” she replied, her voice slightly choked-up, “but I don’t think it will matter if you believe me or not – no offense. As a relative newcomer to the Syndicate, no one would care what you believe; nor would you be able to convince anyone else to help me either. To the other Adventurers, you’re just a nobody without any influence, reputation, or power – so why would they listen to you?

“Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate your faith in me; though I’m afraid that faith is misplaced. With what you can do, you could become so much more than if you were to stick with me. Heck, if one of the guilds got wind of your abilities, they’d snatch you up in a heartbeat; if that were to happen, you’d reach your goal of becoming more powerful even faster. Don’t let me hold you back – I’m just dead weight holding you down.”

What she said made logical sense and was entirely accurate; with the help of higher-Rated Adventurers, they could help him become so powerful so fast that he'd probably be able to accomplish his wish to interrogate a dungeon core before the month was out. However, that also meant that he'd have to share his abilities with more than one person – he was risking everything already by telling Eisa. If more people knew, Fred feared it wouldn't take long for them to connect his abilities with what a dungeon core could do; he shuddered to think what would happen if they discovered his origins.

His parents told tales of humans long ago, before dungeon cores were the dominant species in the world. Everything was more primitive back then – including dungeon defense and construction – and many dungeon cores were lost to the insatiable destructive tendencies of the humans that tended to want to destroy anything they considered a threat. Every core was on their own against the humans and very few cores lived long enough to create dungeons large and defended enough to survive for more than a few centuries – and even that was rare.

It was only when the different elements grouped together to create factions – such as the Fire and Water ones his parents originally belonged to before they went into hiding – that they were able to properly mount a defense. Whenever a dungeon core would be destroyed – or even taken from their dungeon against their will – whichever faction they belonged to would invest a significant portion of their available Mana into their strongest dungeon defenders and send them to attack the humans nearby, wiping out entire villages, towns, or even small cities in their retaliation.

Of course, that was apparently so long ago that very few if any dungeon cores still existed from that time, but the stories told of a veritable war with the humans that lasted nearly a century before the cores claimed

victory by sending the human population into hiding. After that was a time of slow growth and slow expansion of territories; it was only after the humans were sent running that the remaining dungeon cores realized that they had relied heavily on the mana they acquired from the humans invading them to grow rapidly. Without them there, they could still grow – but the growth was very, very slow.

And that was when they developed the process of adding loot to their dungeons to entice the hesitant humans back, which worked extraordinarily well. Over time, of course, they had to “reinforce” the ban on core-harassment quite a few times, until it rarely (if ever) happened any more. From what Fred understood of what his parents had taught him about humans, they were thought more of as a precious resource than anything else; though they were dangerous, they provided much more in the way of mana growth than what the cores had to provide for rewards and loot. The humans had either learned their lesson or were too greedy to upset the balance again.

Either way, maybe I can take advantage of that greed to help us both.

“We can talk about that later, Eisa. For now, I’ll stick with you; however, if you don’t mind, I’d like to learn a little bit more about these ‘guilds’ you were talking about...”

Part IV – Gatecross

Chapter 29

Apparently, most Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate buildings doubly acted as a part-time inn in addition to the business already conducted there. Syndicate members who were just starting out (or were exceptionally frugal) could stay on the upper floors at a much-reduced rate when compared to the other inns in the town or city they were located within.

Gatecross was no exception, though the DAS building was smaller than most – which Eisa assured him was because the northern town of Gatecross was considered to be out in the middle of nowhere and didn't have an enormous Syndicate presence, unlike most other towns and cities in the Craytion Kingdom. As a result, there was only a second floor that contained a dozen rooms, only half of which were ever used for long.

Instead of making Fred Create more coinage to pay for it, Eisa volunteered to pay the next three months' rent for him, which totaled a whopping 12 silver for the privilege. *Well, that was easily covered by the extra gold piece I gave her on the way back.* He argued at first, since he could always get more, but she refused.

"It's the least I could do – plus, you can spend all that you conjure on whatever plan you're cooking up." Fred wasn't sure exactly what cooking had to do with it, but he understood what she was trying to say, nevertheless.

It was surprisingly only a little past midday by the time they got back; with everything that had happened over the last day, it felt like it had been days or even weeks. Despite having had a massive breakfast that morning of mana-formed food just outside the town, Fred felt ravenous. Eisa seemed to feel the same way.

“Let’s go to the tavern down the street and get some early dinner, then I’m probably going to turn in for the night. My treat.”

Fred had never been to a tavern before; Northend didn’t have much other than log houses for its residents. So, of course, he agreed.

The Frigid Barmaid was a wide, one-story building that looked a bit weathered, dirty, and rundown on the outside – which Fred didn’t think looked overly enticing for a place that served food; however, when they walked inside, he was surprised at the clean, well-lit, open, and inviting atmosphere. At least, it appeared that way until he saw the disgusted expressions on the faces of the dozen or so people sitting around a few tables. He recognized most of them from the DAS building earlier in the day – it was hard to forget the ones that had (in some cases) so harshly shut down any hope of help from them.

Fortunately (or unfortunately), the disgust wasn’t aimed toward him; Eisa had preceded him into the room and had drawn the attention of everyone in there. A hush fell over the crowd as she proceeded to an empty table on the opposite side of the room from everyone else; she ignored the stares and looks with what appeared to be practiced obliviousness, though her straight-backed walk was evidence enough that she saw it – and was still affected by it.

They sat down and another woman came up to their table with the same look of disgust on her face, though it faded a bit when she caught sight of Fred. She was wearing a stained, plain brown dress and appeared rushed; he wasn’t sure why she was there – but that question was answered within moments.

“Can I take your order?” she asked in a hurried tone.

“Yes, we’ll take some of your delicious stew and some of your fresh-baked bread. And two ales, please,” Eisa added in a polite, enthusiastic

voice before Fred could say anything.

Eisa's polite tone must've been different from what she normally heard, because her attitude changed...slightly. She didn't smile, but her disgust was mostly gone from her face as she left them, saying that their food would be out soon.

When the woman who had taken their order was gone, Eisa turned to Fred. "It's unfair that even non-Adventurers see me in a bad light; I can't blame them, however, as they get all their information from the members of the Syndicate – they don't know any better. I try to treat everyone with the respect that *I'd* like to see, though it usually falls on deaf ears. Sometimes it works..."

She seems like she's a genuinely nice person – it's a shame that this all happened to her.

"I may not completely agree with your decision to share so much information about yourself, but I have to admit that this woman is probably the best-case scenario. If she tells anyone about us, it seems like no one would believe her; despite my reservations, I think you made a good choice."

Deecy was still in Fred's bag, slung over the back of his chair. He had to agree with her assessment, though he was beginning to like her for *her*. Granted, Eisa – and anyone else he managed to convince to help him – were a means to an end, but that didn't mean he couldn't sympathize with their own plights.

He had begun his journey of answer-seeking and revenge almost two years ago with the thought that it was only him against the world; the more time he spent amongst the humans, however, he realized that it wasn't just

him that the dungeon cores had affected so deeply. True, Fred's case was different and probably unique, but the death of loved ones and friends seemed to be a common theme amongst the human population.

In a curious symmetry with his own situation, though, was the fact that they didn't care as much when the cores ended up killing them – only when they thought that another human had caused their deaths; if his parents had been killed by humans, he would still be angry and, truthfully, would want to get his revenge on those who did the deed – but it would make more sense to him. However, as they were killed by other dungeon cores – *and* apparently by those within their own elemental faction – it left him highly confused and betrayed. It felt like they had been killed by their own *family*, and not just some random strangers.

“I can now see what you were talking about; believe me, I can understand what being an outcast feels like and how it feels not quite fitting in.”

Eisa didn't look like she believed him, but he was being truthful – he did know what it felt like, probably better than anyone else. Before they could talk any more, however, the woman from before came back with the two glass mugs filled with some sort of amber-colored liquid. Realizing that he was extremely thirsty after the long walk back from the dungeon, he took a big drink and downed almost half of the mug – and almost spit it out. *What is this disgusting liquid?!*

“Whoa, no need to drink so fast – especially on an empty stomach. The food will be here soon and then it won't affect you so much.” Eisa smiled at his perceived eagerness.

Fred wasn't sure what she meant, but within moments he could feel a tingling in his stomach and a loosening of his muscles as his body processed what he had just ingested. It felt good...until his Mana went to

work clearing out the toxin that he had just drunk. Less than a minute later, the feeling was gone.

“What is this? It doesn’t taste like any water I’ve had before.”

The smile from her face faded as she instead looked shocked. “Are you telling me you’ve never had ale before?”

“No, I’ve never had this ‘ale’ before – I think I’d prefer some water,” he replied truthfully. And that *was* the truth – it tasted like dirty water (which he’d had the occasion to drink back when he was staying with Regnark) and he’d rather not drink it if he didn’t have to.

“O...kay. We can get you some water when the food comes.” Eisa looked confused, but that confusion was replaced by the licking of her lips as their food finally arrived.

It was as delicious as Eisa had told the woman; the stew was filled with hearty chunks of vegetables and meat, and the “bread” – which he had never had before – was a hunk of soft, warm, and fluffy goodness that complemented the stew remarkably well. Before he knew it, he was done and asking for seconds – as well as some water.

While they were waiting for their second helping (Eisa put hers away almost as swiftly as he did), Fred decided he needed some information – namely, about which class he should choose. He had a general understanding of what they were based upon Eisa’s own classes, but he didn’t know what exactly they did and what he had to choose from.

“Your class, huh? Well, most people learn about them from a young age, which means that by the time they’re 8 or 9 years old – and desire to be an Adventurer, which most do at that age – they already have their whole class progression picked out ahead of time. As you’re obviously not like most people—” she looked sideways at him with a small smile tugging at her mouth— “I’ll try to give you a quick history and rundown of them.”

She cleared her throat like she needed to gather her thoughts. “Before the Sub-dermal Interface Artifacts were created, Adventurers delving into dungeons haphazardly collected Essence and it was infused into different parts of their body usually without their control. Over time, however, most were able to influence where they want the ‘juice’ to be used – either to improve a certain physical characteristic, or to develop an affinity for certain spells. Of course, it was all mostly random what kinds of abilities people would learn depending upon a lot of different factors.

“Eventually, Adventurers were categorized into 5 main categories, which are still used for the starting classes: Fighter, Scout, Healer, Mage, and Researcher. As they would improve and grow stronger, they would specialize into different areas – which led to the first Artificers who created the SDIA. They then organized the process of accumulating Essence, trapping it inside the Artifact inside your hand, and then allowing you to allocate it where you chose in an easy to understand process. Don’t ask me how they developed it, because I have no idea – I’m not an Artificer.

“Anyway, they evaluated thousands – possibly millions – of different Adventurers, breaking down and categorizing their spells and abilities; they then separated those into ‘classes’ – hundreds, maybe thousands of them – and placed them into the Artifact, allowing anyone to choose whatever they wanted. Most people are instinctively pulled in one direction or another, but the freedom to choose means that you could fulfill any role you desired. That doesn’t mean that you’ll be *good* at what you initially want to be, though; which was why they also provided a way for Adventurers to *change* their class to something that would work better.

“At the beginning, you can choose from the generic classes I told you about earlier: Fighter, Scout, Healer, Mage, and Researcher. A Fighter is self-explanatory: they are primarily the ones that are in the thick of the

battle, holding back the dungeon monsters with their weapons and – usually – heavier armor for defense.

“They are essential to any group so that the rest of the members can use their spells and abilities without being overwhelmed; my reanimated bear kind of acted as our Fighter – or ‘Tank’ as they are affectionately called sometimes – though he wasn’t very good at keeping their attention, which normal Adventurer Fighters excel at. Some of the special traits and abilities they receive are based upon defense and enhancing their Vitality and Stamina based upon their Body and Brawn stats.

“A Scout is usually a ranged attacker, sort of like how you acted during the final dungeon room earlier today with your bow. They are also better at throwing objects – like throwing knives or other reusable projectiles – and determining the location of traps within the dungeon. Later, they also obtain the ability to deactivate those traps, but if I remember right, it is usually available to advanced Scout classes.

“Typically, for defense, they utilize leather or light-weight metal scraps so that they can move easily, which allows them to dodge many of the attacks headed their way. They are also the only class that obtains a Perception bonus stat, which is how they can see the traps so easily.

“Healers are also fairly self-explanatory, as they use their Power to heal the injuries of other group members. They can also cure things like poison, as well as ‘buffing’ other members of the group with temporary increases in their stats or even providing damage-nullifying shields. To defend themselves, healers – at least at higher Ratings – are able to employ spells that can damage monsters, though not nearly at the amount that a Mage can.

“In order for their spells to be able to flow more easily from their body, Healers normally wear non-constrictive clothing such as robes and

dressess. When they try to wear anything with more protection, their spells tend to be less effective. Also, as a Healer, you would be able to store and access more Power based upon your Mind stat.

“Mages, although the opposite of Healers in that they inflict damage as opposed to healing it, are very similar. They wear the same type of non-constrictive clothing and are able to store and access more Power. The main difference is that their Power is used to create non-elemental-based attacks that can inflict massive damage upon dungeon monsters. They also have a few utility spells for defense and temporarily nullifying large groups; most of those, however, are largely ineffective until the specializations are unlocked.

“Researchers are the last class you can choose, though it is essentially worthless except as a second class later in your career as an Adventurer – so don’t choose that,” Eisa finished her explanation without explaining it further.

I don’t know if any of those suit me. He immediately crossed Fighter off the list, as he was tired of getting hurt, and getting up close and personal with the dungeon defenders was something he’d like to avoid if possible. Barring the fact that he could heal from almost any injury – given enough time – the Fighter class didn’t really...feel right. *I wonder if that is what she was talking about? Maybe I’m only suited to one class?*

Healer was also out, since – again – he could heal himself and Eisa (given that she stayed grouped with him) was already a healer-type class. She did an awesome job before, even considering he was almost killed multiple times – though he put that down to his own inexperience and low Rating. If he had known what he was doing, he was sure the threat to his life would’ve been much less...or so he hoped.

Scout was tempting, but it was obvious already that he could barely hit anything he aimed at, even with a few months' practice with Regnark in Northend. That, and he could already see the traps inside the dungeons with his Mana Sense dungeon core skill, so the advantage of the class would be wasted on him. The only thing that he saw as beneficial was being able to actually *deactivate* the traps that he saw, but even that wasn't until later.

Being a Mage was the only thing left, and he thought it suited him alright; he already technically had access to some spells through his Adapted Abilities, but he lacked the Power needed to successfully use them at the moment. That, and staying out of the way of danger and being able to attack from afar appealed to him; he thought it was his innate dungeon core nature that thought that way. Since they employed traps and dungeon defenders to "attack from afar" and didn't actually do any fighting themselves, it seemed like the perfect fit for someone like him.

Except it didn't exactly *feel* right to him.

However, as there weren't any other choices...or were there?

Chapter 30

There were still more questions to ask, but their second helping of stew arrived, and they dug into it immediately. Towards the end of it, Fred was finally feeling full enough to slow down; the last couple of bites he was actually able to savor, noticing for the first time that it had a pleasant flavor (which was probably due to a blend of spices he had no name for). Regardless, it was still delicious.

Eisa took her time finishing it, as well, which gave Fred time to get his thoughts in order. When she was about finished, he finally asked, “What is that last class – the Researcher, you said it was?”

Chewing her last bite, she swallowed and took a large swig of her ale before answering, “Oh, it’s primarily used for the classes who want to utilize their spells and abilities in the formation of new applications. The classes seem relatively structured, but in reality, they are more fluid; more of a framework and guide than a pure cut-and-dry rulebook. However, discovering new ways to use your abilities within that framework can be very difficult and most people don’t have the patience, time, or initiative to practice and experiment with them.

“For instance, if I had the time and patience, I *might* be able to find some way to alter, say...my Vitality Transfer healing spell so that could be used the opposite way on a monster, damaging it a little and healing myself. However, I don’t know any way to do that other than by trying to do it over and over, hoping to figure out the exact way to do it without healing them in the process.

“Now that I really think about it, I’m sure it could be done – but there isn’t really a point for me to do it; I have the Lifedrain spell that essentially

does exactly that. Now, if I was only a *Healer* and not a—” she dropped her voice to a whisper— “Necromancer, then I wouldn’t have that spell and it might be worth trying to figure it out. With the Researcher class, it would be so much easier and take less time, plus that class would boost my Power even more – I think it is to offset the Power needed to experiment and discover new things.

“Then again, if I was a Researcher instead of...the other thing...then I wouldn’t have access to all of the spells and abilities that that class has. Most people who go that route are more suited to crafting things with their abilities, which is what the Researcher class can choose to be as more-advanced classes, such as: Enchanters, Artificers, Alchemists, and the like. Not really my idea of a fun time.

“Whatever you choose to do in the future is up to you, but don’t even think about taking that class now; since you don’t have any abilities or spells to experiment with, you’d have a great amount of Power...with nothing to use it on. While you could still attack like you did during that last dungeon, in higher-Rating ones you’d essentially be useless because everything would be too powerful for you to do much against.”

Despite her warning, the Researcher class almost *pulled* at him, reaching out its tendrils until it planted the thought in his brain that it was what he wanted to be. Fred knew instinctively that it was what he was born to be, what he *needed* to be; there wasn’t any alternative.

Luckily, because of his Adapted Abilities, he *did* have something to use the Power on – which, unlike anyone else who might think of becoming a Researcher at such a low Rating – made it the *perfect* class for him. At least, he thought so.

Without giving away his decision yet, he asked a couple more questions to firm it up. “How do the advanced classes work, and what

about getting a second class – like you did?”

“That’s a little more complicated; essentially, every time you reach the next major Rating – such as an F or an E-Rating – you are able to choose what you’d like to do: advance your current class or choose a second one if you don’t already have one. In addition, you can change one of your classes at *any* time, though unless you’re still in the G-Ratings, it isn’t recommended. The reason for this is because if you do change your class, all of the Essence you have used on unlocking and improving your spells and abilities is lost. Forever. Your stats won’t be affected, unless you have something like the Perception stat that Scouts receive – and then that would disappear as well.

“I actually had to change my class very early, based upon need; I started out as a Mage and switched to a Healer almost immediately, as there were very few groups needing a G-1st-Rated Mage that couldn’t cast any spells – but they were willing to get help from a Healer – even though I couldn’t heal *right away*. Halfway through the first dungeon, however, I was able to perform a weak heal spell, so it was worth it in their eyes.

“When I reached the F-Rating, I chose Mage as my second class – because it was what I really wanted to do. However, I soon realized that my healing skills were in higher demand, so I stuck with it as my main class and only worked on my Mage abilities on the side.

“It took a while, but when I finally reached the E-Rating, I was able to advance one of my classes. I had always been fascinated with life and death, and being a Healer only reinforced this fascination. So, I chose... you know...because I thought it would give me greater insight into the mysteries I was so fascinated about. It did...just not necessarily in the way I had imagined.

“When I advanced the class, it *changed* all of my previous spells and abilities so that they suited my new advanced class. Some were better...and some were things that I didn’t see a use for. An unexpected consequence of my advanced class – that I didn’t realize would happen – was it changed my Healer class to a Dark Healer; it wasn’t necessarily an advanced class...just a different way to heal. It was hard to adjust to at first and I thought I’d made a huge mistake, but that was years ago, and I’ve learned to love it – and I wouldn’t change it for anything.”

Interesting. “One last question – is there any reason why someone couldn’t choose to become, say, a Scout at first, and then advance the class to something else, and then choose Scout again for a second class?”

“Oh, sure – but you’d be limiting yourself. Being able to do many different things inside the dungeon is vital to rounding out your group; an Assassin who is great at dealing close-range damage that can also heal in a pinch is much preferable to having an Assassin that can also shoot a bow like a Ranger. Or a Fighter that can cast low-Power spells to gain the attention of the monsters from long range. Or, in my case, a Healer that can also do a respectable amount of damage if the need arises. Do you understand?”

“Yes, thank you for the information – I think I have made my decision. However, there is something else that I’d like to try right now as an experiment; it might seem strange, but I think it will greatly benefit my class choice,” Fred said, as he was eyeing the woman who had brought their food approaching their table. Although he was largely ignorant of a lot of the human world, he was pretty sure he knew what she was walking over for.

“I hope you enjoyed your food. As you probably know, we offer a slightly discounted rate to members of the Syndicate, so the total for your

meals will be 8 copper pieces.”

Not as much as I thought – though I don’t really have a good frame of reference. As Eisa reached into her pouch to pay, Fred put his hand on her arm to stop her. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

She looked confused when he reached for his own Pocket Interface Bag – which he finally got from a shame-faced Jaymes when he asked about it – and Created another gold piece, though he spent an extra second to make sure it was perfectly round, without the little notch that Eisa had identified earlier. He didn’t want to raise too much suspicion by having every single one looking *exactly* the same.

He lifted his hand up, covering the gold piece until he placed it in the woman’s hand. “Here, this should cover our meal. Actually, can you do me a favor? Before that, though – what was your name again?”

The woman in the stained clothes looked dumbstruck at the gold piece in her hand, as if she’d never seen one before – only answering absently when he prompted her for her name a second time. “Maresca, my lord.”

Eisa looked almost confused as Maresca but hid it quickly. Fred was confused at the title; he had never heard of a lord before, nor was it ever mentioned by either Regnark or Eisa. *Different part of human society, perhaps.* “I’m no lord, Maresca – you can call me Fred. Anyway, can you do me a favor?” At her nod, he continued. “First, like I said, this should cover our meal. With the rest of it, I want you to go around to all of the other people in here and tell them that because of Eisa here doing such a great job helping a new Syndicate member out, I’m celebrating by paying for all of their meals. For the next week.”

He “pulled out” another gold piece from his pouch and handed it to her, putting it right next to the other one in her frozen-stiff hand. “This

should cover it, but if it doesn't, let me know and I'll make up the difference. If it is more than enough, you can keep the remainder. Do you understand?"

Maresca just stood there, her mouth open like she was trying to say something but couldn't get it out. Suddenly, she snapped her mouth shut and said, "Yes, my lord."

"I'm no lord..." he tried to say, but ended up speaking to empty air, as she was already gone. He saw the woman walking from table to table, talking in a low voice to those sitting there. After a few moments at each table, each person looked their way and, grudgingly, raised their mugs toward him in what he figured was thanks.

Once Maresca had made her rounds, she looked back over at their table in what looked like worry, before she disappeared behind a door. He wasn't sure what that was about, but he was glad to see that the looks of disdain he had seen earlier were gone from most of the humans inside the tavern. They didn't exactly look happy, but he thought it was an improvement, nonetheless.

Eisa looked even paler than usual as she grabbed his arm with that surprising strength again, and Fred could feel his bone creak under her grip. "Do you have any idea what you've done?" she whispered.

"Sure, I've started the process of getting the members of the DAS to appreciate you again, which will lead to them wanting to group with you – and extension – me in the future. It's a mutually beneficial development."

She shook her head slowly, her eyes wide as she stared at him in incredulity. "While it *might be* a little beneficial to me in the long-run, it's not me that they're looking at anymore. Take a look."

He did as she said and looked around the room. He couldn't see what she was talking about at first, but after a moment he realized she was right:

they weren't looking at her at all. They were looking at him, though not in disdain...it was something else.

“That's right, they think you have lots of money and they want it. You've just put a big target on your back.”

Oops. Well, that might mean I have to move my plans up just a tad.

Chapter 31

Back in his room, Fred sat on his surprisingly cushy bed in contemplation. He supposed that the extra fluff on the mattress was for comfort, but he thought it might be *too* squishy to sleep properly. *Well, I will see later.*

After the early dinner at the tavern, Eisa had explained in a quick whispered conversation on the walk back to their rooms why what he had done was monumentally stupid. She told him that while inside the DAS building he was perfectly safe, as the Syndicate treated the safety and well-being of the members staying there as a top priority. On the street, or outside the town, it was a different story.

While the original application to become an Adventurer was strict when it came to crimes, very rarely were current members subjected to any type of interrogation. It didn't happen frequently, because if they were somehow found out that they had stolen from or killed someone else, the penalties could lead to severe consequences – including death. Eisa said that she had undergone an interrogation after what had happened with her old group and was deemed innocent in their deaths – but that didn't stop people from thinking what they wanted.

The fact that Eisa was worried about him made him feel good; it felt like he mattered to someone else. He felt the same way with Regnark, but this was different – and he wasn't sure why. Regardless, he had told her that he would be careful, which seemed to satisfy her only a little bit. She had breathed a sigh of relief as they entered the DAS building, where she left him to go upstairs and rest. After agreeing to meet again tomorrow morning, he watched her retreat upstairs for the night.

“Ah, back so soon? I apologize again for forgetting to give you your PIB earlier – with so much happening it slipped my mind. If you’d like, you can store it while you’re in town in our secure facility here. Most of our members do that, just in case; you never know when thieves will strike!”

Since he didn’t actually have anything in his pouch yet, he declined the service. “No, I’m good for now – but I *would* like to get my class now.”

“Oh, absolutely! Hold on, let me get...this...here,” Jaymes said while he lugged over a heavy-looking apparatus to the counter. “Ok, all you have to do is place your hand right...here,” he continued, placing his own hand in the middle of a dark square on the top of the apparatus, “and say the class you’d like to choose – and it’ll take it from there. I’m curious – what did you finally decide on? Scout? Fighter? No, wait – Mage! Am I right?”

Fred placed his hand on top of the square and he felt a small tingle on the back of his hand where the Artifact was supposedly located. “Actually, none of the above,” he told Jaymes, before saying clearly, “Researcher”.

For almost two seconds it had felt like someone had jabbed a knife into his hand and then twisted it repeatedly – but then the feeling was... gone. He felt a little light-headed for about ten seconds after that as well, which was why he missed the first part of Jaymes’ comment.

“...choose that? You know you’re not going to be able to do anything with that, don’t you? While I’ve already got this out, why don’t you change it to something practical? C’mon, put it back on and pick something like Mage – you seem like the type to me.”

“No, I’m good with my selection,” he replied, while leaning on the counter to get his balance back. “Though, I do have another question – but it doesn’t concern classes.”

Jaymes still looked concerned over Fred's choice of class, but then he shrugged his shoulders and moved the class-changing apparatus back to where he had taken it from. "Well, it's up to you, of course, but don't say I didn't warn you when you're back in here tomorrow complaining that you can't do anything in one of the dungeons. Fortunately, it's free to change your class anytime – just don't put any Essence into a Researcher ability! It'll just be wasted!"

With that off his chest, he asked, "Ok, class assignment is over – what was it you wanted to ask me about?"

"I was curious about these guilds I heard Eisa talking about," Fred asked. At the mention of the Necro-healer's name, he could see Jaymes' face drop into the now-familiar scowl of derision.

"I don't know why you're hanging around with her, don't you know she'll get you killed? No amount of money is worth your life, you know?"

I'm getting a little tired of his negative attitude. "I'll have you know that she saved my life multiple times in the dungeon, and you don't know anything about her."

"Well, I know what I've *heard*—"

"And what you've heard is probably wrong. She's not who you think she is." He wanted to add, *I'm not who you think I am, either*, but held his tongue. His anger was starting to get the better of him and he needed to calm down.

Jaymes was silent for a moment, before asking in a controlled voice, "Then we can agree to disagree. What do you want to know about guilds?"

"I need to know how they are formed and how to go about doing it."

Apparently, by interrupting him earlier, Fred had gained the animosity of the Syndicate branch leader. A sneer smeared across his face as he answered, "I'm not sure if you ever need to know about them, since it's

unlikely that you'll ever be invited to join one – with your Researcher class and your...associates. But I'll explain it to you, since it's my job to answer any questions Syndicate members might have.

“Guilds are organizations within the Syndicate that are focused on working toward a single goal, such as crafting, exploration, and delving through high-Rated dungeons. Some even concentrate on developing new classes to add to the SDIA and using what they learn to further our understanding of Essence and Power. They take care of their members and are allowed to keep a very small portion of the loot fees for themselves to further their guild development. They are important to the success of the Syndicate in this Kingdom, as well as all of the others – without them, we wouldn't have the same knowledge we have today.

“As far as how they are created, there is only one major requirement – gold. Five hundred gold pieces, to be exact, with a yearly upkeep cost of another one hundred gold. Easily obtainable by those who are in the upper Ratings, but I doubt you'll ever see those with the choices you've made.” Even his voice had dripped contempt somehow.

“Ok, thank you for your time,” Fred said, before turning away and heading upstairs to his own room. He had to restrain himself from attacking Jaymes, but after Fred looked at his Adventurer Status, he didn't think that he would fare that well against a B-5th-Rated Duelist-Spy – whatever that was.

Now in his room, he had calmed down enough to concentrate on what he was doing. The anger that he experienced was abnormal to him; he wasn't sure exactly where it came from, but he knew it was similar to how he felt when thinking about getting revenge on those that killed his parents.

Shaking it off, he brought up his statuses, to get a better look at where he was at and what he wanted to accomplish in the future.

Dungeon Core Status		
Fredwynklemossering		
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 1 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 21/120 Water Mana: 20/120 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 3728 Unconverted Essence: 2		
Skills		
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 9% Novice Mana Absorption: 70% Novice Mana Conversion: 40% Novice Essence Conversion: 1% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 30% Novice Core Crystallization: 16% Novice **** Mana-formed Object Creation: 20%		
Dungeon Information		
<i>(none)</i>		

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Researcher
Rating: G-3 rd		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 373
Total Essence: 327	Available Essence to Distribute: 247	Unconverted Essence: 37280
Body: 4 (0/80) Brawn: 3 (0/40) Mind: 4 (0/80)		Vitality: 20/20 Stamina: 6/15 Power: 32/200
Base Physical Attack: 3 Base Physical Defense: 4		Power Regen Rate: 1/min
Class Traits (Researcher)		
<i>Your available Power is adequately increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is adequately increased by your Mind Stat</i>		
<i>You have a heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>		
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 0 – 0/100	Repair Animation 0 – 0/100	Vitality Transfer 0 – 0/100
Vitality Explosion 0 – 0/100	Shield of Darkness 0 – 0/100	Lifedrain 0 – 0/100

He was low on his Mana at the moment from using so much in the dungeon, but he knew that all he had to do was wait a couple of days without using too much and he'd be fine. When it wasn't being used to keep him alive from the cold or starvation, the converted Mana was increased by 10 to 12 points a day now. Even the gold pieces that he had made had barely put a dent into his available Mana; it apparently took less than 1 Mana to make one of the coins. Either his ability to Create the objects was increasing, or "loot" was much easier to make compared to everything else.

As far as his Adventurer status went, he was now G-3rd-Rated after finishing the dungeon. It seemed like a quick advancement, but Eisa had told him that it was going to take more and more Essence to get to the next Rating – which he could see by the fact that he now needed more than he'd already earned just to get to the 4th Rating.

He was also glad to see that his Power was much more useful; whereas the maximum he could hold was previously five times what his Mind stat was, it was now fifty times the same stat. In addition to that, he now had a reasonable 1/min Power Regen Rate, which he thought was decent in comparison to what he had before: 0.1/min. Overall, he was happy with his choice; the fact that he only had one ability from his class didn't bother him. He still had his Adapted Abilities to choose from, so he wasn't too limited.

While he couldn't find out any other information from the abilities that he had adapted (at least while they were still locked), he *could* see what the new ability did.

Experiment 0 – 0/100

Use this ability to experiment with different ways you can apply your existing spells and abilities in different ways. Chance of success is dependent upon Experiment level as well as the complexity of the spell/abilities used in the experiment.

Cost of using Experiment 0: 0

Base chance of success using Experiment 0: 0%

Reduction of cost of used spells/abilities in the Experiment: 0%

As he hadn't unlocked it yet, it probably didn't have an accurate representation of its costs, but the fact that it appeared to reduce costs (eventually) was encouraging. He could see some interesting possibilities for this ability in the future – but it wouldn't help him much now.

Instead of unlocking that, however, he needed something else. He thought about everything that had happened that day: his integration of the Syndicate Interface with his system, the dungeon exploration and completion, his actions at the tavern, his choice of class, and his plans that he had developed for the future. It was all leading up to something in his mind, but he couldn't quite grasp it.

Closing both statuses, he sighed and lay on the bed, deciding to put off the decision for the next morning, or even the next day. As he closed his eyes and settled down, he realized he was wrong about the mattress being *too* squishy to rest in – the bed was more than comfortable enough to put him to sleep almost immediately.

When he woke up the next morning, he knew exactly what to do.

Part V – Core Power

Chapter 32

Eisa could barely comprehend the changes in her fortunes from only three months ago. Back then – before she met the mysterious and powerful Fred – she was at her wits' end, committed to being alone and soloing dungeons without a group for barely enough to live on.

Now, as co-leader of the guild, Core Power (based out of Gatecross), she had almost everything she could want: money, power, and personal growth. The only thing she didn't have yet was a cleared name by the rest of the Syndicate, though she was making small strides in that direction. Then, of course, she still had very little idea who or what the mysterious man who turned her life upside-down actually was. With the constant time they spent together, she found herself wanting to get to know him a little more every day – but he was sometimes infuriatingly secretive.

She had met with Fred the day after they had met and, instead of telling her what class he had chosen, he instead announced that he was going to form a guild. Not only that, but he was going to make her the co-leader of it.

To make matters even stranger, he said that he was going to invite every Adventurer in Gatecross to be a part of the guild – which he ended up naming Core Power, for some reason she didn't understand. But it was catchy and clear (which was all that really mattered, she supposed). Regardless of what he named it, the purpose behind it was clear.

He was going to use his “wealth” to fund dungeon delves.

And not only that – he was going to make it a stipulation that Eisa and him had to be brought along.

So, that part made a sort of sense, because of the special stipulation that Jaymes and the Syndicate placed upon their “keep-your-mouth-shut-and-don’t-talk-about-what-happened” deal. They needed to be in the party for the loot fee to be waived, but Fred was going to go above and beyond that. Instead of just the loot fee being waived, he was going to *double* whatever loot they received, or at least the monetary equivalent.

It seemed outrageous and insane...but it worked. The warnings she had given him about other Syndicate members trying to steal his gold turned out to be accurate; however, the end result was nothing what she – or those trying to do the stealing – could’ve predicted. Instead of running, fighting, or trying to go to the authorities (which were nearly non-existent in Gatecross), Fred ended up *inviting them to join their guild!*

With promises of a signing bonus of a single gold piece, he convinced all 146 DAS members operating out of the small town of Gatecross to join. Not only that, but with fully paid meals and lodging, guarantees to pay back the fees collected by the Syndicate even if Eisa and him weren’t in their group, and the *doubling* of loot when they were – no one could afford not to become part of the guild.

The influx of money might’ve had a detrimental effect on the local economy, if it weren’t for the fact that the town wasn’t anything more than an outpost designed to cater to the local DAS branch set up there (and were, in fact, regulated by them as well). There wasn’t much in the way of luxuries there, and even the local merchants didn’t have anything fancy and expensive, though they did start to run out of products when most of it was bought up by the “local rich” members of the guild.

She had a feeling if the influx of coinage kept up, then even basic commodities would start to become a bit expensive, though that might be in

the distant future. As far as the rest of the Kingdom was concerned, what they were doing was probably barely even noticeable.

True to his word, Fred kept every member of their guild supplied with coin; if he wasn't there when they had to turn in their loot fee to Jaymes at the DAS, he only asked for a record of what they had to give up and he reimbursed them later. Because of this deal, Eisa thought the Syndicate representative would be mad; on the contrary, he was happy because no one grumbled about the fees and – with so many Adventurers delving through the local dungeons – the Syndicate was still making money hand-over-fist. She never did find out how much it cost him to set the guild up in the first place, but she was sure it was quite the hefty amount.

As for herself, she was now E-9th-Rated and about a third of the way towards the 10th Rating. It was taking exponentially more Essence to Rate-up, though she knew that once she reached the D-Ratings she could start to breathe a little easier. Once you achieved a new Rating tier, the amount needed to increase your rating was initially much lower and only increased in the later stages of the tier.^[1]

Due to the increase in her Rating, she also received access to a new spell and a new ability. For her Necromancer class, for the first time she had something that used her innate Power to create something that didn't require a corpse to work: Skeletal Swords.

Skeletal Swords 1 – 0/1000

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

Power cost of Skeletal Swords 1: 200

Power upkeep cost: 3/min

of swords: 3

Base physical attack: 10

The big downside to it was the fact that it would hurt anyone standing around her if she used it on herself; to get around that, she had started to cast it on whoever was acting as a tank for their groups. It wasn't quite powerful enough to harm many of the higher-Rated monsters, but since what damage it did do was "coming from" her target, it helped to keep their attention where they all wanted it.

The other thing she had received access to, was a new ability for her Dark Healer class that was proving to be invaluable. Since she had to essentially hurt herself to heal someone, she was constantly running low on her own Vitality. Absorb Shadows helped with that.

Absorb Shadows 2 – 0/3000

Once activated, the Absorb Shadows skill will siphon the energy inherent in the nearby shadows, converting it to Vitality for yourself. Costs nothing to initiate but requires a Power upkeep cost to keep activated.

Power cost of Absorb Shadows: 0

Power upkeep cost: 2/min

Vitality restored: 2/min

It wasn't a massive restoration of her Vitality, but it made a difference when she was required to heal in longer fights. It wouldn't do much to help her if she was being attacked directly, but that rarely ever happened anymore.

As wonderful as her own advancement was, it was nothing compared to Fred. For the Essence required for her to advance a couple of Ratings, he had shot through the G-Rating, the F-Rating, and was halfway through the E-Ratings. Of course, he was far behind her in total Essence and wouldn't catch up to her unless she stopped improving herself.

His meteoric rise through the Ratings was impressive but not unheard of; the stronger guilds based out of the larger cities would frequently run their lower-Rated guildmates through stronger dungeons to increase their Ratings faster than they normally would. Then again, she had never heard of someone blowing through two entire tiers in less than a year – let alone three months!

While she healed during their dungeon delves, Fred was content to stay back and let everyone else do the work of clearing out the monsters or deactivating/bypassing the traps. Only a few times had he actually attacked, casting spells that looked familiar – but were unlike anything she had ever seen before. When she asked about them, all he said was, “Just a little something I’m working on.”

Because he was casting spells, and wearing loose-fitting lightweight clothing, she assumed he had chosen a Mage as his class. However, something about that didn't seem right; none of the spells he was casting looked anything remotely like what she remembered the starting Mage class received access to. Some of the more enterprising members of their guild had actually started a betting pool that made guesses on what his actual classes were. For herself, she thought he was some sort of Scout/Ranger/Beastmaster hybrid she hadn't known about – based upon his Dire Wolf pet, Deecy.

Regardless of whether he was a Mage/Beastmaster or not, he was improving just as fast (or faster) than she was, growing stronger not only in

his casting ability – but his strength as well. Although she had increased her own Brawn and Body stats a few times to improve her survivability, his had surpassed her own. He wasn't nearly as beefy as most of the melee and defense-oriented guild members they grouped with, but he wasn't going to be killed in one shot anymore either.

Altogether, they had made major strides in their power – both personally and socially. However, she still remembered that Fred had started his path as an Adventurer with a purpose in mind; she wasn't sure when he was planning on pushing forward with his plans and objectives, but she knew she would be there for him when he was ready.

She just hoped he wasn't going after someone high-Rated – otherwise they might all wind up dead.

Chapter 33

Embracing his “inner dungeon core” was turning out to be easier than Fred thought. They used their Mana to create their dungeon, place traps, and “employ” defenders to guard against invaders. They didn’t actually do any of the heavy lifting themselves; they only had to wait for some humans to arrive, where their minions did the work for them and they raked in the extra Mana from their presence. He was essentially doing the same thing – it just looked vastly different.

Instead of Mana, he used his “wealth” to dictate what he wanted done. And while he couldn’t control his guild members like the cores did their defenders, they could be guided by the promise of more coin. At times, it felt like he was taking advantage of their innate greed, but when he looked at the big picture it was a win-win situation; they were getting what they wanted, and he was getting what he wanted: power.

And not just the Power he used to fuel his spells and abilities he had picked up from watching so many different humans flexing their skills, but his own personal power. He was stronger and more durable than ever, not to mention his new abilities. From where he was only a few months ago to now, he could probably solo that first dungeon without even getting hurt.

Fred was just glad that he had chosen to be a Researcher that first day – the increase in his Power was what made the ultimate difference. When he had woken up that next morning, he realized that he was too caught up in what a human would do to get stronger, almost completely ignoring his “other” nature.

Sure, he could spend a few years delving through dungeons with Eisa – and possibly other Syndicate members if they changed their mind about

her enough to group up with them – and become stronger over time. That was what a human would do if they were intent on getting more powerful; he wasn't human, though – he was a dungeon core. At least on the inside.

Therefore, he spent his (relatively small) accumulated Essence that morning on something no normal human would do if they wanted to be any bit effective in a dungeon: he unlocked the Conjure Object adapted ability. While it would probably be next to useless while delving through a dungeon, it was perfect for his own purposes. With a little practice, he could essentially convert 1 Power into a single gold piece – and it was permanent, just like his dungeon core Creation skill!

Using all of his Power that morning, as well as a small amount of his available Mana, he was able to Conjure or Create enough gold pieces to pay for the initial guild setup fee as well as paying for the first year – at a total of 600 gold pieces. He then shoved it in his pouch so that he didn't have to carry it downstairs, meeting Eisa in the common room and telling her his plan.

The look on Jaymes' face was worth every drop of Power and Mana he had spent.

It might've been knowing that Fred was "rich" or maybe he just had a change of heart; either way, the Syndicate representative treated them both with respect after that, even when he announced that he was going to be paying the loot fees for anyone that joined his guild and wouldn't take any percentage off the top. That alone meant that the DAS would still be making plenty of money off of them, which in turn made Jaymes happy.

Initially convincing the other Syndicate members in town was slightly difficult, though once he proved that he could deliver on his promise, they practically flocked to his new guild, Core Power. He thought the name might get him in trouble with anyone who connected him with a dungeon

core, but instead most of them thought he was being vain thinking he was the “core” of the guild and held all of the “power”. He didn’t dissuade them of that.

Since then, it had been one dungeon after another, three or even occasionally four a day with different groups. Sometimes Eisa would have to heal, but most of the dungeons they were “delving” through were in the high G-Ratings or low F-Ratings. As most of the guild members were in their high F’s or low E’s, they were relatively simple affairs to go through. He rarely had to use any of his slowly accumulating bank of spells, and when he did, it was more because he wanted to try out an experiment he had been working on.

Most of the dungeons surrounding Gatecross were Nature-based dungeons, though there were a few Earth ones here and there; the Earth-element dungeons were an experience in themselves, as they tended to have sucking-mud traps, falling rock traps, and defenders like small dirt golems and rock worms. Since the Earth dungeons were in the minority in the region, they were all fairly low-Rated – which meant that they were relatively easy to complete.

Initially, Fred concentrated on using his accumulating Essence to unlock most of the adapted spells and abilities he picked up along the way. After he had nearly reached the F-Rating, he had unlocked nearly 100 different ones, so then he concentrated on increasing his Brawn, Body, and Mind stats. While relatively easy to increase at first, they started to cost so much Essence to improve that he then saved the rest of his Essence for when he Rated-up to the F-Rating.

As soon as he reached that milestone, he immediately went to upgrade his class – and was immediately disappointed by his lack of choices: Alchemist, Combiner, and Instructor. Unlike the first time when

he picked his class, when he placed his hand on the apparatus Jaymes provided him, he received some information about his choices.

Alchemist

- **Allows for the production of defensive potions imbued with the effects of certain spells and abilities.**
- **All potions are single-use and single-target, usable only by Adventurers.**
- **If previous class was a Researcher, all Essence used in the Experiment ability is converted to the new Concoct ability.**
- **At its highest level, the Concoct ability can mix up to 3 different spell/ability effects and can replicate 90% of the power of the original spell/ability.**

Combiner

- **Drastically increases the success probability of combining spells or abilities together to create something new.**
- **If previous class was a Researcher, all Essence used in the Experiment ability is converted to the new Combine ability.**
- **At the highest level, the Combine ability can allow the combination of up to 8 spells and/or abilities.**

Instructor

- **Allows for a chance to teach another Adventurer one of your spells or abilities.**
- **Success probability depends on multiple factors, including: Instructor Rating, target Rating, complexity of spell/ability,**

compatibility with class, and the Mind stat of both parties.

- **If previous class was a Researcher, all Essence used in the Experiment ability is converted to the new Teach ability.**
- **Once activated, the Teach ability will drain all of the Instructor's Power and the Power of the target, regardless of success**
- **Teach can only be used once per spell/ability per target; if unsuccessful, that spell/ability will be locked from the target, though the Instructor may attempt to Teach another target that same spell/ability.**
- **At the highest level and with sufficiently high enough Instructor Rating, the Teach ability can teach ANY spell or ability the Instructor possesses to ANYONE.**

Alchemist wasn't something he wanted to pursue; being able to make potions didn't appeal to him in the least. On the other hand, the Instructor class seemed interesting because he could possibly teach someone like Eisa how to cast non-Necro or Healer spells, though he suspected that with his Rating so low, the probability of actually succeeding at that might be next to nothing. And, if it didn't work – which he thought might be the case most of the time – he couldn't try it again.

With those out of the running, his only choice was the Combiner class. He initially thought it would just be a copy of the Researcher class, which he liked for the Power bonus – but that was it. He was excited at first to try out the Experiment ability...but it was horribly unproductive. Even after spending some more Essence to upgrade it to level 2, the probability of success was less than 1%. After hundreds of tries using different spells, he ended up with not a single success.

However, the Combiner class turned out to be a major step in the right direction. When it converted his Experiment 2 ability to the Combine 2 ability, the base success was at 10%. After spending another 12,000 Essence to upgrade it to Combine 4, he was able to increase it to 20% – a much more likely endeavor.

At that level, as well, he was able to combine up to three different spells/abilities to produce something, though the probability of success dropped by 75% when he added in another – down to 5%. Still, it was enough of a chance that he spent many a night in the nearby forest experimenting with different combinations.

His ultimate intention was the same as what he had initially told Eisa; he wanted to be powerful enough that he could single-handedly make his way through a dungeon and interrogate a dungeon core without endangering anyone else. Although he had been embracing his own inner dungeon core lately, he still felt and looked like a human; as much as he told himself that he was only using them as temporary allies in his investigation and revenge against those that killed his parents, he was starting to care for them as something other than an “ally”.

Some of the guild members he was starting to get to know better than just acquaintances – not necessarily friends, but they had a respectful relationship. On the other hand, Eisa he thought he might consider as a friend; she was always there for him to go through dungeons, did her part to protect the group through her healing, and additionally made sure that he survived.

He did what he could to protect her as well – both inside the dungeon with a well-placed spell here or there and by doing his best to change the perception of those who had heard about her reputation. It was rare lately

that someone looked at her with derision, and those were normally just by someone passing through. The rest of the town had accepted her.

Lately, though, she had been giving him funny looks that he couldn't decipher. During their "delves", she tended to stay a lot closer to him than before, sometimes brushing up against him for no discernable reason. It was thoroughly confusing, but he put down her behavior as something about her personality that he hadn't seen before. *Maybe it has to do with her own increase in power or about her improving reputation. Either way, it hasn't affected our relationship any.*

So, again, his original intention to leave his human allies out of the way of danger still stood; he didn't want any of them – but especially Eisa – to get in the way of any retaliation he might incur from his investigations. With going solo into a dungeon on his mind, he cobbled together two main spells after hours of Combining that he planned to use to achieve that goal.

Vampiric Stunning Fireblast 4 – 0/27000

A combination of the Lifedrain (Necromancer), Sudden Shock (Wizard), and Fireblast (Elementalist) spells, this spell will stun the target, drain a portion of their Vitality and convert it to increase the caster's own Vitality, and create an explosive fireblast that damages the target with the element of fire. Depending on the target, the fireblast may cause the target to be lit on fire, causing additional damage-over-time.

Power cost of Vampiric Stunning Fireblast: 150

Stun duration: 10 seconds

Vitality drained/restored: 30/10

Fire damage: 90

Blast radius: 8 feet

Dark Rebounding Spike Shield 4 – 0/27000

A combination of the Shield of Darkness (Necromancer), Slamming Shout (Knight), and Spike Arrows (Ranger) abilities, this spell creates a transparent shield made from darkened shadows that surrounds the caster and prevents most damage for a limited time. Additionally, any potential enemies impacting the shield will be violently rebounded backwards after taking damage from the sharpened shadowed spikes protruding from the outside of the spherical shield.

Power cost of Dark Rebounding Spike Shield: 250

Duration: 15 seconds

Rebound distance: 15 feet

Spike damage: 40

Cooldown period: 1 minute

With those spells, as well as having access to a plethora of smaller, less expensive spells, it should be enough to tear through anything that stood in his way. Especially since he took Researcher as his second class when he achieved his E-Rating. As he had hoped, the bonuses to his Power was cumulative with his other class, meaning he had more than enough Power to see him through.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: ***** Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 1 Fire Mana: 128/128 Water Mana: 127/127 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 2965 Unconverted Essence: 3075
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Novice Mana Communication: 52%

Novice Mana Absorption: 71%
Novice Mana Conversion: 56%
Novice Essence Conversion: 8%
Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 72%
Novice Core Crystallization: 21%
Novice **** Mana-formed Object Creation: 20%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Combiner-Researcher
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 58755
Total Essence: 712245	Available Essence to Distribute: 30758	Unconverted Essence: 29650
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 160/160 Power: 6280/6400
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 30/min
Class Traits (Combiner)		
<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 are able to combine up to 3 spells or abilities into a single activation</i>		
Class Traits (Researcher)		
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind Stat</i>		
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>		
Class Abilities (Combiner)		
Combine 4 – 0/27000	Vampiric Stunning Fireblast 4 – 0/27000	Dark Rebounding Spike Shield 4 – 0/27000
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 1 – 0/1000
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 1 – 0/1000	Slamming Shout 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

Communicating with Deecy every day had dramatically increased his Mana Communication skill – even if he couldn’t actually speak back to her using the same technique. The one side-effect of the increase in the skill was that he could now “hear” the dungeon cores speak while inside the dungeon.

“The time is getting near where you might be able to implement the next part of your plan. While I don’t necessarily think it’s a great idea overall, I know you’re set on seeing it through. And...truthfully, I’d like to see some answers, too. There is too much inside my head that doesn’t make sense – and I don’t like that.”

She was right, as much as Fred wanted to continue strengthening himself a little. Already, Eisa and some of the other guild members were talking about moving their base of operations to somewhere with higher-Rated dungeons (and therefore better loot). He understood it from their perspective, but he was right where he needed to be; more powerful and higher-Rated dungeons would only make his task even harder.

Not only that, but he was pretty sure he already found the dungeon he was going to interrogate.

Chapter 34

“I’m coming with you.”

Fred told her for the fourth time that he was going alone, but she wasn’t listening. “No, I need to do this alone – I don’t want you or anyone else to get hurt.”

If she only knew what I was planning to do, she’d be running the other way. Since he didn’t dare tell her, on the chance that she’d try to stop him herself or get some of the other members to help do the deed, he had been close-lipped about his intentions until that morning.

He handed her the key to his room that he took from his Pocket Interface Bag. “Look, if you’re worried about me dying and leaving you in charge of the guild, I’ve left a bag with over 1,000 gold pieces in it in my room; that should be more than enough to run everything for a couple of months – or you can pay everyone off and dissolve the guild.” He had prepared it so that if something *did* happen to him, he wouldn’t be leaving her without any money.

She looked offended at his comment for some reason, staring at the key in her hand as if it would bite her. “I don’t care about the money – or the guild for that matter. This was never about money for me,” she said, though with a look from Fred she blushed and corrected herself. “Well, at *first* it was. But *now* it’s not – it’s all...changed. I...I...don’t think the guild would be the same without you,” she finished in a rush.

He thought about it from her perspective and had to admit she was right. “That may be true, but this is something that I need to take care of myself. I can’t put you in harm’s way for my own selfish purposes.”

“But that’s what you’ve been doing for the last three months! I...no, we...have been delving through dungeon after dungeon in your pursuit of getting stronger. I...we’ve been risking our *lives* to see that you got what you wanted. Granted, you paid handsomely for the service, but that wasn’t why *I* did it.”

Now he was confused – after a moment, though, he realized what she was talking about. She had mentioned that she was looking forward to getting stronger herself (which she had), as well as trying to clear her name and improve her reputation; she was worried that without him there, any of the progress she had made toward changing people’s minds would be wiped out. *There might be some truth to that.*

“I think I know why you are so worried about me, but I’m still planning on coming back to you. I severely doubt that I will be in any major danger, so I suspect that I’ll be fine.” *There, that should hopefully ease her mind a little.*

“But—”

“No, and that’s final. I’m leaving this morning and I should hopefully be back tonight. If you don’t see me by nightfall, then don’t forget the bag of gold in my room – you might need it. Farewell, Eisa...until later.” He walked out the door without looking back, headed for the F-3rd-Rated Nature dungeon he had gone through with a group the week before.

Based on what he had overheard the core saying – to another core nearby, obviously – he could tell that it was experienced enough that it could at least understand the human tongue, if not actually speak it. There were a few times when he heard the dungeon core respond directly to something one of his guild members said, so it was obvious that he (at least it sounded like a he) would be the perfect one to...provide some answers to his questions.

One way or another.

* * *

Eisa waited until he was out the door before she found Metch in the common room of the DAS, seated around one of the tables eating some delicious-smelling food someone had fetched from the tavern down the street. He was sitting with two others, Rasper and Harriette, who were almost always seen together; the three of them had reportedly been friends since before they joined the Syndicate and complemented each other well as a dungeon-delving group.

In addition, they just happened to be the highest-Rated members of their guild in the low D-Ratings. They had reached that Rating the week before and were some of the ones who were urging Fred to move the base of operations someplace where there were harder dungeons – and more loot. She couldn't blame them; the land around Gatecross didn't have anything Rated higher than an F-9th-Rating – great for those in the E-Ratings trying to get to the next tier, but not so good for the now-D-Rated Adventurers.

“Metch, can I see you for a second?”

He looked surprised for a moment, but then excused himself from the table and walked with her toward the counter where Jaymes was finishing up with another Syndicate member. When the other man was gone, she approached and pulled out the key Fred gave her earlier.

She handed the key to the Syndicate's representative, noting the confused – and then sly – look on his face. “What are you doing with a key to Fred's room, huh? Did he loan it to you for some reason?” She wanted to wipe the smirk off of his face, but she didn't have time.

“Haha, very funny. Look, I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll make this quick. Jaymes, can you hold this key until either Fred, or I, come back tonight or even tomorrow. If you don’t see us in...five days, I would like you to give the key to Metch here. Can you do that for me?”

“Well, sure, but what is this about—” Jaymes started to ask.

“No time for lengthy explanations – I need to go. Metch – and Jaymes, if you can witness this for me – if you don’t see or hear from us by that time, I would like you to take over Core Power for us. Inside Fred’s room is a bag of...supplies...that you can use however you see fit; I trust you enough to do whatever you think is best, even if it is parceling out the...supplies, and dissolving the guild. I think that’s it, I’ve got to go catch up with Fred.”

Eisa left them standing there with their mouths hanging open, desperately trying to get some sort of question out. She ignored the stares of the other members hanging around and rushed outside, desperately looking around for Fred.

Where is he, where is he? She was expecting him to take the road south, as there was a slightly larger town about a half-day’s run away in that direction; with his increased Stamina, he could run all day and barely get tired. However, looking in that direction, she didn’t see him there; in fact, she couldn’t see him anywhere.

She caught the barest hint of movement in the forest to the north, which she almost ignored because she thought it was implausible that he would be going there. *Why would he be going there? I thought he needed to investigate something so that he could get answers; I assumed he meant investigating or even interrogating someone. There’s nothing up there except forest and dungeons.*

She dismissed the movement as a trick of her eye, but then she saw it again a little deeper into the trees. Sure enough – it was Fred, with the same bag over his shoulder that he brought Deecy around everywhere in. She hadn't seen the Dire Wolf except on random occasions, and never again in her giant form; it wasn't a surprise now, though, when she saw him stop and bring her out. Moments later, she was in full-size giant mode – and then they started running. Faster than she could reasonably keep up, but they left a surprisingly easy trail to follow – which she could see all the way back in town.

Well, I better get moving.

Eisa trotted to the trees and followed the trail that was blazed through the forest – by a strange-yet-wonderful man and a giant 20-foot-tall Dire Wolf behemoth.

Chapter 35

“You do realize that human is following us, don’t you?”

“Yes, but there isn’t anything we can do about it right now, Deecy. I have a feeling if I tell her to go back, she’ll just keep following us. And her name is Eisa,” Fred replied.

“Eisa, Elsa, Elmo – whatever. Regardless of what she’s called, you can’t afford to let her know your intentions.”

“Then we better keep ahead of her, right?” He thought it was amazing how fast he could move – and without breathing hard. His body had not only gotten stronger and more durable, but he found he could do a lot more without worrying about getting tired. He was sure that if he ran all day that he might feel it, but even the quick pace he had to maintain to keep up with Deecy was easy enough for a couple of hours.

Fortunately, he only had to run for about an hour before they arrived at the entrance to the dungeon. It looked familiar – as it should, because he was just there a week ago; however, he looked it over to make sure it was the correct one before he – actually, they – entered. It was the first time Deecy was going to join him, but not for the reason some might think from looking at her giant, deadly exterior.

“Are you sure you can do it? We’ll probably only get one shot at this before he figures out what you’re doing.”

“I told you before, I’ll handle scrambling the outgoing Mana Communication. It won’t stop the incoming, but that won’t matter, and it will hopefully defer suspicion for a little bit of time. Of course, as soon as he sees me, he’ll instantly know something’s up.”

He knew she was right – seeing a foreign dungeon defender-like construct like Deecy inside of the dungeon was sure to set off a lot of alerts in the mind of the dungeon core. Fred was just glad that he checked earlier with her to confirm there was nothing the core could do to change the dungeon once he was inside. He was slightly worried that he would be considered a “part” of the dungeon like he was in his parents’; she explained that since he was “created” there, their cores considered him belonging to it – which wouldn’t be so in any other dungeon.

Fred checked his status to see if he was ready; a quick look indicated that he was full on both Mana and Power – and as good to go as possible. His Pocket Interface Bag was full of low-grade Health potions, which were there for an emergency only; he wasn’t planning on getting hurt, but it was better being safe than sorry.

Deecy had shrunk down to a normal-sized Dire Wolf – which was still larger than him – so that she could fit through the entrance and tunnels much easier; staying on his heels, she followed him inside after he looked around to make sure no one else was watching. Not that it would stop him since he was committed, but he wanted to make sure Eisa hadn’t arrived yet (though he was sure she would eventually).

The first room looked exactly the same as it did last time, which wasn’t surprising; from what he had seen and heard from the other Adventurers, dungeons typically kept the same layout, traps, and defenders for years at a time. They didn’t know why they eventually changed, but

Fred did: when they finally gained enough Mana from invaders, they would change it up to make it harder, therefore getting even more Mana from higher-Rated humans. *It's amazing how the two species rely on each other so much for their growth but don't really understand why.*

A strange *pop* echoed throughout his mind; he looked at Deecy behind him walking the last few feet into the entrance. She gave him a wolf-y nod of the head to indicate that her interference was working – which was a good thing.

“Hey Merthenbrizzlelathe, I've got a dungeon defender in the shape of a dire wolf entering my dungeon with...a human? This is really strange – is someone messing with me? Merth? Is this your doing?”

Fred ignored the voice of the dungeon core in his head just as Deecy was, though hers was for a different reason. While she was busy disrupting the core's outgoing communications, she had to keep all her focus on maintaining the disruption and couldn't fight or even talk to him. Knowing that she was safe enough toward the back of the room, he instead concentrated on defeating the room's defenders.

He knew that this was only the first of seven rooms in the dungeon – and the easiest. From his previous visit, and with a quick look with his Mana Sight, he knew there wasn't any traps nearby; starting with room two, however, he was going to have to watch out. That didn't mean there wasn't any danger, of course.

In addition to this dungeon being able to understand human speech, he had also picked this particular one because many (but not all) of its defenders were plant-based. And the one thing that plants really don't like? Fire.

Three castings of his Vampiric Stunning Fireblast was enough to wipe out the eight deadly poisonous walking mushrooms that started slowly walking toward him as soon as he entered the room.

Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Level 6)

Vitality: 60

Attack: 8, Poison Spores

Defense: 8

Respawn: 9 Nature Mana

Loot: 1 silver

Essence: 22 units

They were clumped together enough that his castings were able to hit more than one at a time; added to that, the blast caught some of the surrounding vegetation on fire, although it didn't burn as much as he was expecting. *Probably because it's not dead and dry.* Regardless, the first room was clear and complete within 20 seconds of him walking in – and only 450 Power spent!

He saw and felt the additional Essence he earned from killing the mushrooms enter his hand and the SDIA embedded inside it. *Hmm... soloing is a good way to acquire it quickly, since it isn't split up between a whole group. Though, of course, it's much more dangerous.* He put the thought behind him because he wasn't there for Essence – he had another, loftier goal.

“Why aren't you answering me? Oh, now he's just leaving the loot on the ground – completely ignoring it! Who is this guy and why's he all alone?”

Fred tried to hide his smile as he walked through the tunnel to the next room, checking it first for any potential traps; it wasn't common, but there were a couple of times when a group that had been leading him through a dungeon had found one here or there. He didn't remember there being any in this particular one, but it didn't hurt to check.

He entered the second room without trouble and stood on the threshold. Similar to the first dungeon he had gone into with just Eisa, the room was dark – and full of spiders. Different from the previous ones, however, these ones didn't have any acidic venom; instead, they utilized their webs to both incapacitate and damage their victims.

Giant Webspinners (Level 7)

Vitality: 65

Attack: 9, Poisoned Venom, Flaying Webs

Defense: 10

Respawn: 10 Nature Mana

Loot: 1 silver, 10 copper

Essence: 25 units

Dried fallen leaves lined the dirt floor of the room, which was boxed in on all sides by trees lining the edges. Toward the middle of the room, Fred could see what appeared to be a pit trap lined with giant thorns (which he assumed were poisonous, as many things in Nature dungeons tended to be); it wasn't visible to his visible sight, so he knew it was something that was triggered somehow.

In between the trees, large webs were strung, which held another eight defenders: the Giant Webspinners. Unlike their cousins from the first dungeon, these were twice the size and three times as deadly. From his

vantage point, there wasn't a way through the room without spending some time cutting through the webs and defeating the spiders one-by-one – all the while avoiding the trap in the middle. At least, that was how most groups of human Adventurers would do it.

He had found that every group that he had been a part of had some sort of “fairness” to them that they employed throughout the dungeons. They usually sent their “tank” forward while their Scout or Thief or other type of Perception-boosted member looked for traps, and then waited until the “monsters” were engaged before attacking with their long-range damage attacks. It worked, but it also gave the enemy (in this case the dungeon defenders) a chance to attack and deal some damage before they were taken out – i.e. giving them a fair chance. He hadn't ever seen them really alter this method, which was fine for them...

But he thought it was ridiculous.

Four shots – and 600 Power spent – of his combined Fireblast spell was enough to light every single web on fire, burning the spiders in the process. He had to wait a few minutes for the fire to finish burning everything, which also allowed his Power to regenerate enough for another full Fireblast.

“What?! He didn't even give my defenders a chance! Just boom, boom, boom, and they all died! Ok, guys – this isn't funny anymore. Merth? Nisda? Why aren't you responding?”

Once everything was clear and safe (at least according to his Mana Sight), he walked unhurriedly to the next room, Deecy following right on his heels. *This is going even better than I thought.*

The next room was a strange one; it was a fairly open room with a dozen large bushes set apart equidistant from each other, but close enough together that it would be hard to walk by without brushing up against them. Along the perimeter, there was a clear pathway on either side that led around the bushes, which eventually led to the exit to the next room.

Unfortunately, those “clear pathways” were right next to the wall, which were heavily trapped with what appeared to be some sort of thorn spikes that would emerge from the wall, impaling whoever decided to walk by. Although it was possible to disarm the traps and take that path, it would take a while and would cost more Power than he was planning to spend.

Instead, he was taking the more direct route.

Am-bushes (Level 7)

Vitality: 70

Attack: 11, Constricting Razor Branches

Defense: 12

Respawn: 11 Nature Mana

Loot: 1 silver, 25 copper

Essence: 27 units

The drawback of using these dungeon defenders (at least for the dungeon core) was that they weren't mobile. If they were, it would've been much harder to make his way through because the Am-bushes were actually quite resilient; as it was, standing safely near the entrance, it still took six special Fireblasts to damage and ignite the bushes, burning them down to the ground within a couple of minutes. It took a little while for them to fully perish, but it was worth it to Fred to avoid any type of dangerous combat.

“Ok, this isn’t fair – he’s just standing there and casting some super-powerful fire spell and watching my poor defenders burn! He’s gotta be running out of that soon, though...is there even anyone there? Guys?”

The dungeon core was sounding more and more desperate, frightened, and...juvenile. Although he knew from his parents’ lessons that it was probably at least a century old – but most likely twice or three times that age – its “voice” sounded very young. And scared. *Good – maybe it will be more willing to talk, then.* While his intention wasn’t to necessarily scare the core – just to get to it with a minimum of fuss – if what he was doing would help with his investigation, he’d take it.

Power: 4350/6000

He looked at his available Power as he was finally able to walk safely across the room, watching it slowly tick up as his regen kicked in. *Three rooms down and looking good; hopefully the rest of the rooms work out the way I want, too.*

Leaving the loot on the ground behind just like the two previous rooms, Deecy followed behind Fred on silent padded feet as he walked through the tunnel and emerged into a room full of knee-high green grass.

Chapter 36

With his Mana Sight, Fred could see five long, sinuous forms hiding inside the grass, completely invisible to his physical eyes. They were approximately 15 feet long and at least ten inches wide at its widest; deadly killers waiting to strike from the relative safety of camouflage.

Large Venomous Grass Snakes (Level 8)

Vitality: 80

Attack: 15, Constriction, Venomous Bite

Defense: 14

Respawn: 16 Nature Mana

Loot: 2 silver

Essence: 35 units

In addition to the snakes hiding around the room, there were also five separate areas of the grass which were infused with high concentrations of Mana. He wasn't sure exactly what they did – because they were never triggered on his previous trip, only deactivated – so he was going to take care to avoid them.

Also on his previous trip through the room, the snakes only attacked one at a time, waiting until someone came near before striking unexpectedly. With that in mind, he used his Fireblast on the nearest snake and killed it in one hit.

“I’m not sure why he’s here, but I’ve got to stop him – let’s see how he likes this!”

The communication he overheard confused him for a second; he knew for a fact that dungeon cores couldn't change anything inside their dungeons while there were invaders inside, so what the core said didn't make any sense. What he apparently didn't know, however, was that it didn't apply to dungeon defender behavior.

Because the rest of the snakes all attacked at once.

He hadn't realized they were so fast; by the time he figured out what was going on, he was only able to blast one more before the rest got too close. Because they didn't move much when he saw them before, he hadn't seen them effortlessly glide through the grass at high-speed – and without even disturbing it!

He couldn't use his Fireblast again when they were so close because it would hurt him too; instead, he activated his Dark Rebounding Spike Shield and a translucent shadow surrounded him a half-second before the first snake impacted it – and the spikes thrusting out along the outside. It flew backwards 15 feet, landing awkwardly and bleeding in the grass before getting its bearings. A quick use of his special Fireblast spell, however, finished off the already damaged defender.

A second snake arrived as soon as he fired off his spell, hitting the shield still active and rebounding away. Fred braced himself as the third attacker hit his shield, readying his Fireblast to take out the second snake – but it wasn't needed.

Fortuitously, the second attacker had been repelled right into one of the patches of Mana-infused grass, where it was immediately impaled by hundreds of needle-sharp blades of grass, practically cutting it up into pieces. Knowing that the threat was eliminated from that quarter, he turned his attention back to the one who had attacked last.

It had only rebounded a few feet away into the wall nearest the entrance. Fortunately, he still had his shield up for another couple of seconds; he tossed his final Fireblast at it and braced for the impact from his spell – and collapsed on the ground as the secondary effects of his Vampiric Stunning Fireblast weren't stopped by his shield in the least.

Not only was he stunned for a couple of seconds, but he had lost a small amount of Vitality due to the vampiric effect of the spell. Fortunately, there were no other defenders nearby, otherwise he probably wouldn't have fared well. *That was closer than I would've liked – I better not take anything for granted during the rest of this place.*

“How in Nature did he see my snakes? They should've been completely invisible to him! There is something very strange going on – and I don't like it! Guys? Why aren't you answering me?!”

Deecy had retreated inside the room's entrance tunnel as soon as he had started his attacks, so she was unharmed even from the too-close use of his spell. She did give him a look that said she disapproved – which was hard to do considering she was a wolf – and he smiled back. “Sorry, I didn't know they would all attack at the same time. I'll watch out for any other...surprises.”

“Surprises? I'll show him surprises...”

Uh oh...

With no other option but to press on (he didn't even contemplate for a moment retreating – he had already gone too far), Fred let his Power regenerate a little bit before crossing the now-empty field of grass. While

he took care to avoid the other spots filled with Mana along the way, he pulled a Health potion out from his PIB and drank it quickly, ignoring the nasty aftertaste it possessed.

There was a small patch of the same deadly grass right in front of the tunnel leading out; the last time he was there it had been disarmed by the Thief-based class they had with them. Fortunately, it was an ability that extended power outside of the body to “shut down” the trap – so he was able to Adapt it for his own use.

Through a little bit of research, he had learned that he had needed to upgrade it to the 3rd level in order to deactivate stronger traps; he just hoped it worked just as he had thought it would. Squatting down next to the corner of the Mana-filled area, he spotted a small, extra-concentrated swirling mass of Mana; it was that swirling concentration that he had seen his groupmates extend their power and shut off the traps. Doing the same thing he had seen countless times, he formed a spike of power and *shoved* it into the mass, piercing through and shattering it until it dissolved into the ground.

Looking at the rest of the grass, he saw that the Mana had drained from it – just like he was expecting. Extra cautious, however, he tentatively ran his hand through the now-inert stalks – and it was just normal grass. As this was the first time that he had actually used it in a dungeon, he wasn’t sure if it would work the same way and be as successful; fortunately, he was successful, and he stopped worrying about it.

Boldly stepping through, he led Deecy through the tunnel – again checking for any surprise traps along the way – and arrived safely at room number five. *Only three more to go and I’m at just under 3,500 Power.*

The room was filled with dozens of trees; they weren’t large, but they managed to fill the rather large space fully. He knew there were some

defenders in there hiding inside the trees, but it was hard to see everything fully even with his Mana Sight. Again, when he was there before, the group would walk through the trees and they'd be attacked one-by-one, with two of them attacking at the same time near the exit. Knowing what he knew now about the ability of the core to change their orders, however, he was sure they would probably all attack at the same time.

“Stay here – this could get ugly,” he whispered to Deecy, even though volume wouldn't matter to the core; Fred was told that cores could hear and see *anything* within the dungeon at all times (which made trying to mess around inside his home as a kid difficult, if not impossible). She stayed inside the tunnel leading to the previous room as he slowly walked through the first few trees, relying on his Mana Sight to see the defenders.

The first half dozen he passed were clear...and so were the next dozen. He kept walking, growing increasingly worried that he couldn't see anything; suddenly, he saw one of them emerge from behind a tree, the nature of the tree somehow blocking it from even his Mana Sight until it was actually physically visible.

Juvenile Dryad (Level 8)

Vitality: 90

Attack: 12, Root Constriction, Root Extraction

Defense: 6

Respawn: 20 Nature Mana

Loot: 2 silver, 50 copper

Essence: 40 units

He never had that problem before, and he was worried that the core had somehow learned how he was able to see them. The core hadn't said

anything lately, either; Fred figured that since he wasn't getting a response from any other cores, he had no reason to communicate anymore. *Which means he probably thinks I'm coming for him now and is doing everything he can to kill me.*

He was about to cast his Fireblast at the glimpse of the form he had seen when a noise behind him caused him to whip his head around; arrayed along the pathway he had just come down were six forms staring at him. Slightly shorter than him, they were the same color as the bark of the trees around them; the only color they had on them was their large oval-shaped and glowing-green eyes. With willowy thin limbs on a body that was only in a general sense shaped like a human, the lower half of the dryads seemed to melt into the ground as if they were more an extension of the dirt and grass than a tree.

Everything felt frozen for a moment as the two sides stared at each other; but then the dryads all lifted their arm-branches out in front of them and the ground underneath Fred exploded. Large roots from the nearby trees shot out of the ground and surrounded him, and it was only a quickly activated shield that prevented him from being ripped apart.

He hadn't been idle during the standoff, however; as soon as he saw them raise their "arms", he activated his shield and started tossing out Fireblasts where he remembered they were standing. Three blasts seemed to be direct hits as some of the roots seemed to lose all life within them after each cast; unfortunately, the shield's rebounding feature didn't seem to affect the roots too much as he was quickly enveloped in a writhing mass of brown and green tentacles.

He could tell his spikes were doing damage to the roots, but it wasn't nearly enough; with his vision impaired, he could only try to visualize where he needed his Fireblasts to go. Another hastily cast spell seemed to

miss, though the second apparently hit something as some of the roots fell away. With a little more ability to see through the gaps now, he was able to hit another dryad before they closed up again.

Another miss prompted him to concentrate in his mind's eye where the last one was before he released his spell...and he got it! Even more roots fell away until there was only a writhing set of two left. He quickly turned around, searching for the first dryad he had seen but his shield failed at the same time.

With nothing preventing them from reaching Fred now, they quickly wrapped him up and started to constrict. He frantically searched around for the last defender – but couldn't see it anywhere. It would be easy enough for the dryad to blend in behind a tree and keep attacking from safety; since his Mana Sight was apparently being blocked by the trees, he had no idea where to attack. There were so many possibilities that he might end up using all of his Power up before he found it – there had to be another way.

He felt like he was being squeezed to death as he lost the ability to breathe; worse yet, he felt his Vitality starting to drain as the roots surrounding him started to suck it out of him like a plant extracting the nutrients from dirt. With only seconds to live, he wracked his head for a solution but came up with nothing; he thought about using the Fireblast near enough to him to destroy the roots but feared it would kill him too. Well, not necessarily “kill” – as his body would stay alive as long as he had the Mana – but he would be helpless against the dryad that was still loose.

He almost just started tossing out Fireblasts everywhere when something his parents once told him popped into his mind. He remembered asking his mother how the dungeon defenders knew who and when to attack, especially since some (like his fire elemental Furbey) didn't have eyes. She told him that most of them relied on detecting movement one

way or another: either through the ground, through the air, or through water using extrasensory receptors. Once they had detected something out of the ordinary (as in, not part of the general dungeon's mana signature), they were instinctually instructed to attack it.

He hadn't really understood it then – nor did he understand it now – but the *principle* behind it he understood. Hoping that the core hadn't overridden that instinct, he used his Power on his Conjure Object ability, focusing it on where he *thought* the last dryad might be, but wasn't sure. A featureless – and lifeless – naked human body appeared in the air and slammed into the ground, coming to a stop in a jumble of limbs where he had envisioned it.

His vision started to go dark as he strained to see some sort of reaction; he thought it was a failure and was about to start the process of slinging out as many Fireblasts as he could before he passed out when he saw an arm appear out from behind a tree lifting toward the body he had created. If he hadn't had Mana Sight, he probably would've missed it; as it was, the blazing green mana inside the arm was nowhere near where he thought the dryad was. With his last thoughts, he flung out another Fireblast right where he saw the arm and blacked out.

He came to moments later as something soft and wet was assaulting his face. He ineffectually tried to get his arms up to ward off the attack as he opened his eyes – only to get another face-full of Dire Wolf tongue. As soon as she saw he was awake, Deecy stepped back and nosed at his pouch by his side.

Huh? What happened? He was confused for a split-second – but then the pain of a nearly squeezed-to-death body sent shockwaves of agony all through his upper body. Fortunately, even though his arm was bruised

and battered, he was still able to move it enough to grab a couple of Health potions from his PIB and bring them to his mouth.

A few minutes later, he was as healthy as he was going to get; his wounds had been healed, though he still felt a little stiff. He looked around, noticing for the first time that all of the roots that had fallen around him were all gone.

He looked at his Power, curious to see how long he had been out.

Power: 2000/6000

Based upon what he thought he had used during the fight and his Power regeneration rate, he didn't think he had been out for more than a few minutes. Getting up and moving around, he started to feel better; with a quick thanks to Deecy, he preceded her into the tunnel heading toward the next room.

Chapter 37

The sixth room was actually almost as easy as the first few: all Fred had to do was walk in, toss a few Fireblasts, and retreat to the safety of the connecting tunnel while he waited. There was no hiding for the giant Fly Trap.

Bludgeoning Fly Trap (Level 12)

Vitality: 750

Attack: 20 – Bludgeoning Arms, 30 – Thorn-filled Mouth Trap

Defense: 20

Respawn: 210 Nature Mana

Loot: 10 silver

Essence: 300 units

It looked almost exactly the same as the one inside the first dungeon he had visited – if you were to double its size, at least. And add another six arms. And then add some traps around the room that would drop large thorn spikes on your head from the ceiling if you stepped wrong.

However, Fred didn't have to worry about any of that. His Fireblast did a bit of damage by itself, but that wasn't what he was relying on – it was the continuing damage that he caused the monstrous defender when it was lit on fire that did the trick. He ended up stepping just inside the room two more times to reignite the fire, but after ten minutes it was burnt to a crisp and unmoving. He thought for a second that the core had done something to make it fake its death, but soon enough it was melting into the ground and he received a rush of Essence.

And, considering his Power regenerated while he was waiting, it only cost 300 Power all told. Going into the last room, he was sitting at 1700 – more than enough. Or so he thought.

* * *

Five minutes later, Fred was rushing back through the tunnel, bruised, bloody, and out of breath. He barely avoided smacking right into Deecy in his rush to relative safety, and as he grabbed two more Health potions from his pouch, he apologized to her with his eyes as he caught his breath.

Well, that didn't go well.

The last room was supposed to be full of Woodmen, tall soldier-like figures that resembled walking trees that would attempt to swarm the invaders in overwhelming numbers. He had planned on letting them group up to attack and then take out large numbers of them with his Fireblast, which would've ended the threat quickly enough.

And, truth be told, he hadn't seen anything to contradict his thought when he went in. Arrayed in lines ten across and six deep, the Woodmen looked primed for his attack, steadily holding their sharp wooden swords pointed in his direction. Sixty Juvenile Woodmen seemed eager to fight – and so he gave them a fight.

Juvenile Woodmen (Level 7)

Vitality: 60

Attack: 12, Sword Attack, Assembly

Defense: 10

Respawn: 14 Nature Mana

Loot: 1 silver

Essence: 20 units

As only a dozen of them attacked him from different places in the line, he waited until they had grouped up a little bit nearer to him before using his Fireblast, taking out half of them in the process. The last half-dozen got closer and he was able to wait until four of them had gotten close enough together to catch them all in the same blast, flinging their burning bodies halfway across the room in the process. The last two got close enough to attack so he activated his shield, and he watched as they were impaled by his spikes and then launched backwards.

It didn't outright kill them, which he didn't really expect it to; strangely, though, instead of running straight back to him, they instead ran back to the waiting "army" of Woodmen. In all honesty, though, they couldn't really be called Wood "men" anymore – more like Wood "man".

The dozen that had rushed him were apparently just a distraction; while he wasn't looking, the remaining forty-eight wood soldiers had all jumped into an enormous pile, melting into one another to form a large undulating wooden hill. As the two remaining Woodmen reached the hill, they threw themselves on top and melted into it.

Fred was so shocked that he couldn't react, only stare in open-mouthed confusion. *What are they doing?* He hadn't seen them do this before; they had only attacked in squads of increasingly larger numbers, straining their tank at the time with trying to keep everything focused on him. He had seen the other "attack" in its stats when he looked at it, but as he hadn't seen anything come of it the first time, he had ignored it.

Unfortunately.

Now, he was left flat-footed as a shape emerged from the top of the hill and rose into the air, the wood flowing easily into the new form of a

colossal woodman. Once it was done forming – at almost 40 feet tall – he concentrated on it to get a better idea of what he was up against.

Giant Mega-woodman (Level 16)

Vitality: 3000

Attack: 50, Sword Attack, Stomp, Disassembly

Defense: 50

Respawn: N/A

Loot: 50 silver

Essence: 1000 units

Now at least I know why the ceiling in here is so tall. The Giant Mega-woodman didn't quite brush the top of the stone room with its head – but it was close. It held a massive wooden sword that was about a dozen feet long and two feet wide; looking at it made him wonder if his inner core would be able to bring him back if it sliced him in half from head to crotch. *Probably not.*

It took a step and he could feel a small reverberation through the floor. Another step closer and the shaking was a bit worse, almost enough to unbalance him. Snapped out of his self-imposed stupor, he started flinging Fireblasts toward it, attempting to light it on fire; although he could see that he had inflicted some damage, it didn't continue as the area he had hit *ejected* itself. The burning piece that fell to the ground looked like it was a single Woodmen that had taken the brunt of the attack and fallen off. After three relatively unsuccessful attacks, he concentrated again on the monstrous defender.

Giant Mega-woodman (Level 16)

Vitality: 2820

Attack: 47, Sword Attack, Stomp, Disassembly

Defense: 47

Respawn: N/A

Loot: 47 silver

Essence: 940 units

It appeared as if the attacks that should've done major damage to the Giant had instead only "killed" one small Woodmen each, though they did obviously weaken it some. Compared to what it was before his last few attacks, though, it was still a walking tree of death. Which was getting a little *too* close.

He looked behind to see how far away the entrance tunnel was, and he realized that he had initially come out a bit too far in his earlier confidence. It was only about fifteen feet away, however – so he made a run for it.

He heard a high-pitched *wooshing* sound and instinctually dived forward, slamming his face into the hard ground. He felt the wind batter his body as the massive wooden (but obviously extremely sharp) sword barely missed him, easily slicing a large groove into the rock. Fred got up quickly and attempted to finish crossing the distance, but he saw the sword coming back for him out of the corner of his eye.

Jumping backwards, he again narrowly avoided being sliced in half as the sword crossed in front of his face. With that way out an improbability at the moment, he instead ran back *toward* the huge woodman, hoping to outrun its attacks while he tried to figure out what he was going to do.

He was down to only enough Power to fire off another five Fireblasts; thinking about it logically was a bit tough in the current situation, but he

figured it was a pretty good bet that he wouldn't get any better result than he already had. Fortunately for Fred, his decision to run *at* the Woodman was a good one; although it was quick with a sword, the colossal mobile tree wasn't very fast with its feet. He was able to run right through its legs while it tried to readjust and turn around.

Another high-pitched whine of the giant sword swinging down again stopped him in his tracks – he wasn't going to be able to run behind the behemoth. Instead, he turned to the side for a few steps and then ran back under its legs as quick as he could, hoping to confuse it enough that he could finally escape and come up with a better plan.

It worked...kind of.

Although he managed to confuse the Woodman, the side-effect of that was a shuffling of its feet – right when he was passing through its legs. An enormous wooden foot slammed into him and launched him across the room, landing only about 20 feet away from the tunnel. He stumbled to his feet despite bruises (and possibly a few broken ribs) up and down his body, rushing to get into the safety of the tunnel before the sword came back and sliced him in half.

He managed to stumble inside without mishap, barely missing Deecy, who was taking up most of the passageway all by herself. After downing two more Health potions, he leaned up against the rough stone of the tunnel and thought about his options.

I don't have enough Power to kill that thing right now, nor can I think of anything else I have access to that would do any better than what I have right now. Maybe I can wait for my Power to refill? It will probably take a couple of hours to get enough to finish it off, but it's the only thing I can think of.

However, less than a minute later of watching the Giant Mega-woodman stand stock-still in the middle of the room staring at his location in the passageway, Fred saw a small part of the massive defender fall off. *Is it falling apart—nope.* A Juvenile Woodmen stood up from what had fallen off and trotted in his direction. He didn't want it to get too close, so he popped off his special Fireblast spell and destroyed it before it was halfway across the distance.

He now had only a little over four more casts of the offensive spell before he was out of Power; every five minutes he would regenerate enough to cast another one, but he didn't think he'd have that long. Another minute went by and then two more Woodmen fell off the giant, coming toward him in staggered formation so that he couldn't get both at once.

In desperation, he attempted to use the lower-cost original Fireblast he had adapted from the Elementalist a month or so ago, but it barely made the sword-wielding mobile tree pause as it shrugged off the attack. With another four or five casts of it, he thought it might do damage to kill it, but then he would end up spending more Power than for his one-shot kill special Fireblasts. Quickly, he slotted 4,000 Essence into the original spell to raise its level and effectiveness...only to find that it *did* do more damage, but also cost more at the same time. It was now powerful enough that it would ultimately cost the same at the end, however.

Before it was too late, he finished off the two Woodmen with two of his combined Fireblasts and then looked at his available Power:

Power: 420/6400

Soon he would have enough to cast another three Fireblasts, but what then? He looked down at Deecy with resignation and said, "I'm sorry,

Deecy – it’s time we turn back and try it again another day. As much as I want – no *need* – to continue, I think it’s better that we retreat—”

“Who said retreat? We’re Adventurers in the Core Power guild and we don’t retreat – unless there’s good gold in it!”

The voice coming from behind him startled him for a moment, but then he smiled as he turned around.

Standing inside the tunnel behind him were Metch, Raspel, and Harriette – all D-Rated members of his guild. And behind them, naturally, was a sheepish-looking Eisa.

Chapter 38

“Hi Fred. I’m sorry, I had to find out what you were doing here, though I only intended for just *me* being here,” Eisa found herself apologizing. “The others followed after, however, and caught up just before I got to the dungeon.”

Fortunately, he looked like he was happy to see them, especially since he had just been talking about retreat. She had warned the other three about the Dire Wolf companion that Fred had, but they were still startled at her docile appearance as she walked out from behind him.

“Whoa – that’s a big wolf – are you sure it’s tame?” Harriette asked in an aside to her, but it was so quiet that Fred obviously picked up on it. He looked down at Deecy and his smile disappeared.

“Yes, she’s... ‘tame’, I guess you could say. As much as I appreciate seeing all of you, you really don’t want to be here right now. There’s something that I have to do that you shouldn’t be connected to in any way.”

She had heard that same thing that morning – and it still didn’t deter her. “I told you that I was here for you no matter what. And these three didn’t want their guild leader to go into danger alone.”

Raspel was usually close-mouthed, but the small man suddenly spoke up in a quiet voice. “My much-older brother is in a guild near the capital; he says that the requirements to join were quite extraordinary and expensive. Not only that, but they don’t work together nearly as much as everyone in this guild does. And that doesn’t have anything to do with them – it’s *you* that has brought them together. Actually—” he cleared his throat as if he was embarrassed— “it might have a lot to do with the crazy amount of coin they are earning, but that is all because of *you*. I’ve never

heard of another guild *paying* its members – they usually just take and give back as little help as possible in exchange. But with you and your guild, it feels like we *belong* to something greater than what we could do for ourselves.”

The little man closed his mouth with a snap, looking like he had just exhausted an entire year’s worth of words in those few sentences. Metch and Harriette looked fairly shocked as well, so Eisa figured it wasn’t a common occurrence for their friend to talk so much at once.

“Uh, yeah – what he said,” Metch lamely followed up with, banging his fist against his high-quality steel chestpiece as if to emphasize his point.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself, Raspel.” Harriette tossed her flaming red hair out of the way so that she could look Fred right in the face.

The man of the hour looked between them all with a serious look on his face, before he stared down at Deecy as if trying to communicate with the Dire Wolf. Finally, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Ok, if that is your wish, but don’t say I didn’t warn you – hold on a moment.”

Turning around again, Fred looked into the room he had obviously come out of a few minutes ago and she saw one of the wooden “men” she remembered from their visit before running toward their tunnel. Metch slung his massive shield off his back and started to step forward; however, the wood man exploded into pieces as a giant fireblast erupted right where it was a moment ago.

She was about to ask Harriette why she did that but stopped when she saw a confused expression on the Mage’s face. Although she didn’t know for sure, she thought that the red-haired woman was an Elementalist, but it was considered overly rude to ask – so she always thought of someone as their base class no matter what. It helped to prevent any confusion and hurt feelings if she were to guess wrong.

Anyway, the look on her face stopped Eisa from asking; now that she had a moment to consider it, the Fireblast didn't look anything like the ones she had seen Harriette cast. It had streaks of black and even blue running through the red, orange, and white colors of the fire – completely abnormal and thoroughly unlike anything she had seen before...anywhere.

“Sorry, but if you *are* determined to help, we need to start soon because I'm almost out of Power. Soloing this place wasn't hard, necessarily, but it sure used a lot of my reserves up.”

The fact that he had defeated the other six rooms all by himself was impressive; since he hadn't really shown his class abilities before, she had no idea how powerful he was – especially since he said it wasn't hard. *Come to think of it, I can't think of a single class that could do this all by itself.* She didn't have time to ponder or ask about any more, as they all rushed into the last room in the dungeon following Fred.

She had just finished this dungeon about a week ago with a different group and knew exactly what they would find – more of the wooden soldiers. At least, that's what she was *expecting*, but it wasn't what they found.

She stood next to the other guild members who had come with her, their mouths as agape as hers. *How...what...where did this thing come from?*

The giant wooden man took a step forward that shook the ground, finally prompting Metch and the others to get moving. “What did you do to piss this thing off, Fred?” the fully armored Fighter asked over his shoulder, as he broke ahead of the others with his shield out in front of him.

“I don't know – I wasn't expecting this either. Be careful, that sword is really powerf—” Fred began to say. Metch wasn't listening, however, as a single sword swipe was enough to launch their tank halfway across the

room. He hit the ground and flipped end-over-end, eventually rolling to a stop; fortunately, he got up fairly quickly – though he was limping a little on his way back.

Eisa immediately used her Vitality Transfer spell, wincing a little at the pain as it was transferred and amplified into healing energy inside of Metch. By the time he got back to position in front of the wooden behemoth, he was walking normally again.

Everyone else had stayed back, waiting for Metch to fully engage and get the monster's attention before attacking – though she couldn't see Raspel. Which wasn't very surprising, as he was adept at disappearing and reappearing at the most convenient moments; it was what his class was known for, after all – surprise attacks from unexpected quarters.

“We need to whittle it down using our spells – that's the only way I can see to defeat it. With more damage to it, it should get weaker,” Fred told her and Harriette.

“We need Metch to get its attention first—”

“There's no time for that – he won't last long under the onslaught unless we weaken it; that first blow was only a glancing one. He probably won't be able to take a full-on attack.”

She and Harriette wanted to argue, but the next moment Fred turned out to be correct. Even holding his shield over his head to protect himself, an overhead chop from the enormous sword was enough to crumple Metch's defenses, sending him to the ground in a heap of broken bones. Eisa immediately sent a few more healing spells his way, relieved that it was taking – and that their tank wasn't dead.

With delay being an obvious death sentence for Metch, Harriette immediately sent Fireblasts toward the monstrosity, followed by a few larger (and different-colored) ones from Fred. *I still want to know how he is*

doing that. As for herself, once she had sent as many healing spells toward Metch as she could, she started throwing Shadow Strikes toward their large target.

With their tank recovering slower this time, he wasn't able to get up fast enough to prevent the massive wooden man from walking past and targeting the spellcasters stationed near the entrance. With burning pieces falling off of it as it moved, she thought she could see it visibly shrink after every attack.

Still, within two ground-shaking steps, it was already close enough to attack them; they broke off their attack and started to run when Rospel appeared out of literally nowhere and stabbed his two long, high-quality steel daggers into one of the wood soldier's legs, slicing off a sizable portion of wood as he pulled the daggers toward him.

That attack pulled its attention away from the spellcasters – which was fortunate for them – but then the slowly shrinking-but-still-deadly sword swung straight down at Rospel as the giant wooden man twisted to attack behind him. Their Scout managed to perform a very fancy acrobatic maneuver as he flipped backwards to miss most of the attack, but even he wasn't fast enough to avoid his boot being clipped from the sword stroke.

It didn't look like it initially hurt him too much, but it threw off his backflip and he ended up landing in a heap with something snapping somewhere in his body with a hollow-sounding **crack**. Shock must've been dulling the pain, because it wasn't until he stood up and tried to put weight on his left leg that it collapsed beneath him and he started to scream. Eisa ran a few steps closer in order to get close enough to use her Vitality Transfer spell, but she knew it would be too late as the sword came down again.

Which was deflected into the ground as Metch threw himself over Raspel with his shield protecting them both. The impact was enough to jostle the injured Scout, but Metch fared much better this time with only a grunt from him and a single large dent in his shield. *That thing really does look smaller now.*

The rest of the fight went as smooth as possible, as Metch was able to get to his feet and actually stay there as he was battered from multiple sword strikes – which became weaker as Harriette and Eisa kept casting spells to whittle the wooden soldier down. Fred was eventually able to cast another one of his special Fireblasts, which shrunk it even further. Eisa had healed Raspel fully by that time and he added his own damage to theirs, speeding up the process.

When it was only twice the size of a normal wooden man, the not-so-giant-now monstrosity seemed to fall apart, breaking into six individual wooden men that she was used to seeing. They tried to run towards the spellcasters to attack them, but two were picked off by a Fireblast and a Shadow Strike; the rest were gathered up by Metch. Fred even stepped in and sliced apart one of them with his now-upgraded steel knives, explaining that he was out of Power.

Finally, as the last one fell quickly under the onslaught of five determined Adventurers, Eisa tried to relax as she realized that she was breathing hard. *That was insane – I've never seen anything like that.* Everyone else looked tired as well, though she could see smiles on all of their faces. Well, everyone but Fred.

There was a small treasure chest along the far wall, which was a common sight in the final room of most dungeons after a certain Rating. It usually contained some sort of weapon or armor – or even more than one; before the large influx of coin from Fred, it probably would've been an

upgrade to most of the guild members. Now, however, they could afford to buy something better.

While the rest of them were now looking at the treasure chest with interest (even if it wasn't something they could use, it would probably fetch a bit if they sold it) – as well as at all the coin on the floor from the melting wooden soldiers, Fred was frowning at something in the opposite corner. “Thank you all for your help – I couldn't have gotten this far without your timely intervention. However, there is still something that I have to do.”

“What are you talking about, Fred? You finished the dungeon – wasn't that what you wanted?” Metch asked, his confusion apparent in his face.

That's what I want to know. She originally thought it was strange that Fred hadn't gone toward another town to do his investigation, but she figured he was stopping by this dungeon for a different reason. Now she wasn't so sure.

“Finishing the dungeon was never my...main priority. It was necessary, yes – but only to get to my objective. Now, if you don't mind, I need to do what I came here for.” He walked toward the opposite corner where the treasure chest was situated, completely ignoring it.

With just a slight hesitation, they all followed after him. He stopped and looked confused for a moment, before saying, “I really don't think you want to see this or be a part of this.”

She still had no idea what he was talking about, but she was in it for the long-haul. “We're not leaving until you finish what you came here for – right, guys?” she said, looking at the other members.

They all added their assent, confirming their intentions to see it through. Fred looked at all of them with an unreadable expression on his face, before glancing at Deecy. He looked back at Eisa again, before

saying, “Fine, it doesn’t look like you’ll leave this alone, so you might as well follow. Just...try to forget everything you see and hear in there.” He turned back to where he was going before.

See and hear in where? They trailed him as he walked toward the corner of the room and watched him look around for a second like he was searching for something. Suddenly, he grunted and walked forward – through the wall! They all stood staring open-mouthed as Deecy followed in his footsteps, disappearing as if she was somehow *merging* into the solid stone wall.

Fred popped his head out of the wall – *just* his head – and said, “If you’re coming, let’s go.” Raspel immediately stepped toward where Fred’s head had just been pulled back into the wall. It took him only a second before he exclaimed excitedly, “There’s a passageway here!” That got them all moving, especially as their Scout disappeared just as quickly as Fred and Deecy had earlier.

Harriette and Metch followed quickly, leaving Eisa to bring up the rear. Once she got close enough, she could see the passageway they were talking about; however, when she took a step back, the hidden opening seemed to disappear! It was almost as if there was some sort of illusion magic covering it, but upon close inspection she could see that it was just cleverly constructed in a way that made it hard to see unless you were right on top of it.

She had to turn sideways down one part of the...“crevice” would probably be a better word, but within less than 30 seconds she had reached a place where it opened back up into a slightly larger space. Metch was standing frozen right in front of the opening, so she couldn’t see anything; she pushed him gently out of the way so that she could both fully enter...

And to see some sort of crystal floating in the middle of the room.

Chapter 39

The Core Room was a lot smaller than the one his parents had, though that wasn't surprising; they had told him that they had expanded it to accommodate them both – and to accommodate Fred. In fact, this one was just barely large enough to fit everyone comfortably.

“I...is that...?” Metch asked, obviously unable to complete his thought.

That's right – I doubt that many humans actually know that a dungeon core controls the dungeons they “delve” through – and even less have actually seen one in person. “Yes, this is a dungeon core. A Nature-faction dungeon core, in fact.”

“How in the world does he know that?”

“Ah, there you are! When you went silent a few rooms ago, I thought something might've happened to you! Anyway, I'm guessing that you aren't able to verbally speak human; that's ok, though, because you can obviously understand it well enough.”

There was silence, both from the core and from the others in the room who were staring at him in confusion. *This probably looks like I'm having a conversation with myself – but there isn't anything I can do about that.*

“Now, now – don't be shy. I know you can hear me just fine and I can hear you. I just have some questions I need answered and then I'll leave you alone.” There was another few moments of silence, before the core finally decided to communicate.

“You...you can hear me?”

“Yes, I think I have already established that I can hear you. Now, I apologize for barging in here like this, but it couldn’t be helped. Let me introduce myself: my name is Fredwynklemossering. I came to get some answers to some questions, and this was the only way I could think of to accomplish that.”

“I don’t know who you are or what game you’re playing, but I’ve already alerted my friends and they are sending their defenders here now. You better leave now before you and those filthy human scum are overwhelmed and killed!”

“No, I don’t think so. My friend here—” Fred indicated Deecy with his hand— “has cut off any outgoing Mana Communications, so no one knows what’s going on here. Now, like I’ve said, all I want is some information; I don’t want to harm you, but I will if I don’t get what I need.”

“Why should I listen to some sort of freak human livestock – you’re all worthless other than as a source of Mana for me! Besides, you can’t hurt me – I’m invulnerable.”

This guy is really annoying; this is going to take longer than I thought. I guess being reasonable isn’t a common core trait. “I may or may not be able to actually physically harm you, but I can definitely pick you up and move you away from your Mana source and territory before you could do anything. By the look of this place, I’m sure you’ve invested at

least two centuries' worth of time and Mana into it – it would be a shame for that to go to waste.”

“How dare you threaten me, you worthless—”

“Ok, I’m done with your own threats and name-calling. I said I didn’t want to harm you and I meant it. However, I’m not leaving until I get some answers – or I can bring you with me and we can get some answers... elsewhere. What will it be?” There was an even longer pause as he figured the core was thinking it over.

“You’re bluffing. If you touch me, every dungeon in this sector will send defenders to avenge me and destroy every human within 100 miles. I’m not answering any questions, but I’ll be lenient; leave now, unblock my Mana Communication, and I’ll let you live. I promise not to attack you or the nearby human dwelling-places.”

Stubborn. Fred leaned close, just barely above the floating pulsing-green crystal, as he whispered so low that he was sure that even the core had to strain to hear. “I don’t care about the humans...because I’m not one of them.” Looking around at the other people in the room, he was relieved that none of them had heard, despite the boosted Perception that Raspel possessed. If they had heard, it would’ve...complicated matters.

The silence was even longer this time, though it could be just because the room was so quiet at the same time.

“What...are you?”

“That’s not important. What *is* important is that you answer some questions for me, otherwise you’ll be seeing a lot more of me than you probably want to. So, what’ll it be?”

“Fine. Ask your questions and then begone! After you’re done, I don’t want to ever see you in here again.”

Finally. “Ok, just a few simple questions and then I’ll be out of here. First, what do you know about Pyannelstencia and Aquelsterico?” Fred felt that getting straight to asking about his parents would be the best idea in the situation. He could sense a little hesitation on the part of the dungeon core in front of him, though he didn’t think it was from not wanting to answer.

“I...think I’ve heard at least one of those names before, but I’m not sure where or why. I need more information.”

I figured that might be the case. “Pyannelstencia was a Fire-faction core and Aquelsterico was a Water-faction core—”

“What do you mean by ‘was’?”

“Dungeon defenders from every faction that I’ve ever heard about hunted them down and killed them around two years ago—”

“TRAITOR! Now I know where I’ve heard the name before! Aquelsterico was a traitor to his faction and his alliance – he got everything he

deserved! Pyrannelstencia too! I'm guessing that the Supreme Council finally tracked them both down..."

Fred didn't like to hear his parents called traitors, but at least he thought he was finally getting somewhere. "What do you mean by traitors and who or what is this Supreme Council?"

"For someone who seems to know so much about dungeon cores, you seem to be awfully ignorant of the most important matters."

"My education was...lacking in some areas. Now, answer the question."

"Fine, I guess it couldn't hurt – especially if you are planning to go against the Supreme Council. In fact, I hope they hear about you – because you won't last a month before they find you and kill you wherever you try to hide!"

Fred was starting to get really annoyed. "Enough with the threats – answer!"

"I told you I would, so calm down, you freak. The Supreme Council is an assemblage of the highest-Rated Supreme dungeon cores from every faction; not only are they the oldest and most powerful, but they also oversee the entire world – including the cultivation of human territories. They don't take sides in the ongoing wars between alliances, but they do take the regulation of the factions and dungeon construction very seriously. And when an S-Rated Fire and Water core fled together and disappeared,

that type of forbidden arrangement doesn't go unnoticed. I didn't have anything to do with it, but I've been visited by their roaming bands of rogue core hunters a few times over the last decade or so. I'm glad they finally found those traitors!"

My parents were S-Rated? They must have given up a lot to be together. Now that he thought about it, he realized that the dungeon core in front of him was really tiny in comparison; whereas his parents had been the size of his head, this Nature core was barely larger than his thumbnail. "Thank you for telling me that, but that doesn't exactly explain why they were 'traitors'."

"Wow, you really are ignorant. They were traitors to both their factions and their alliances, as well as potentially being rivals to the Supreme Council. The Fire-Dark Alliance was led by Pyrannelstencia at one point in their war against the other two: the Air-Light Alliance, and the Nature-Earth-Water Alliance – which was at one point led by Aquelsterico. For our alliance, when 'Aquel the traitor' disappeared, it left a huge void in our defenses that the other two alliances took advantage of all over the world. I can't speak for the Fire-Dark Alliance, but I'm sure the same thing happened there when "Pyra the traitor" left as well.

"That would be bad enough, if it weren't for the fact that they were both so highly rated cores. The Supreme Council keeps an eye on every single one of the S-Rated ones around the world; if enough were to break away and form a rival Council, the war between the factions and alliances could potentially be catastrophic. Think about what is happening right now on the front lines and multiply that by at least a hundred."

That...sort of makes sense. Although he knew that what his parents had done was forbidden, he never understood why it was or why they had to hide. Despite that knowledge, he couldn't forgive this "Supreme Council" for what they did; they weren't hurting anyone, only enjoying their "forbidden" love together – not forming some sort of rival Council. *But what was he saying about some sort of war?* The core was silent for almost a minute after Fred asked about it.

"I think I've just understood how stupid you are. How can you not know about the war? It's only been going on for the last millennium or so."

"I think we've already established that I'm ignorant—"

"It's not ignorance if you're blind! Can't you see that every dungeon has been competing over resources for years? Not only access to human livestock, but Mana-rich environments; along with the most-dense concentrations of Mana, the front lines of the war see dungeon cores sending their Mana-fueled defenders against dungeons not of their alliance every day."

"In addition, despite warnings from the Supreme Council, many cores have started to creep closer to the human dwellings in order to gain more territory to get stronger. This, in turn, leads to less that we can harvest from them for the ongoing war. It's a cycle that has to stop soon or there won't be anything left. We were getting so close to ending it with our Alliance; if it weren't for that damned Aquel the traitor leaving, we would've been victorious!"

Angry at the core calling his father a traitor, Fred unthinkingly yelled, “Hey, stop talking about my parents like that!”

“Your...parents? What are you talking about? You’re a stinking, filthy, waste of a human if I ever saw one. Just because you’re some freak of nature doesn’t mean that you can claim to have dungeon cores for parents!”

He figured he wouldn’t be getting anything else useful from the Nature core, so he held his anger in as he looked around the room at Eisa and the others. They all had wide eyes and open mouths, standing stock-still as they watched him converse with the core. “I think I’ve got the information I need, let’s get out of—”

“You want to know how I know you’re lying? Because it is impossible for two different factions to produce an offspring. Regardless of whatever spawned you, I’m sure your worthless excuse of a mother is sickened by the sight of what you’ve beco—”

Before he could stop himself, Fred reached out and grabbed ahold of the floating dungeon core; he just wished the crystal had some sort of a throat so that he could strangle it. “I told you to stop talking about my MOTHER!”

Do you wish to absorb: Nature Core F-3rd-Rating? Yes/No

Time seemed to stand still as the strange question flowed across his mind. *What does that mean?* He had no idea what would happen if he said

yes, but his curiosity was piqued; he had never had something like this happen before. He wished he could ask Deecy, but she was still blocking the Mana Communications from reaching outside of the dungeon. Not only that, but he couldn't move even his eyes to see if she was still there.

He – and everything else – was completely frozen for some reason.

Fred wasn't sure if it was only temporary but guessed that the dungeon core system inside of his body and mind was speeding his thoughts up so that he could make the decision. The problem was, he didn't know what to do.

The smartest thing to do would be to say No; as he didn't know what it would do – good or bad – he shouldn't risk it since he had just found out the information he had been searching for. On the flip side of that, maybe absorbing the Mana from the core would prevent it from having enough to communicate with to other cores? If it did that, it would give Fred time to figure out what he wanted to do next before he had to worry about retaliation for his little...interrogation. With that consideration in mind, he thought *Yes*.

***Warning! This will destroy the F-3rd-Rated Nature Core! Proceed?
Yes/No***

Well, that puts a bit of a twist on things. Fred didn't want to actually destroy the dungeon core, since it hadn't actually been a part of those that had killed his parents. Sure, it had tried to kill **him** – but it was just doing what it would naturally do against invaders to its home; he couldn't blame the core for that. But then he thought about what the core had said about his parents and the way it gloried in the fact that they had been destroyed. Added to that, they considered humans as nothing more than “livestock”

that they fought over like precious resources. *Are they all like this? All so...blood-thirsty?*

Even though Fred was a dungeon core, he was also human; *but does that mean I have to embrace one over the other?* His dual nature was hard to come to terms with sometimes, though more on a philosophical level than an instinctual. The fact that dungeon cores seemed to actually *like* it when they caused the humans pain or even killed them wasn't something that he wanted to pursue; he had *enjoyed* his time with the Syndicate and his guild – and especially Eisa. Without her, he didn't think he would be where he was today, both strength-wise and knowledge-wise.

The fact of the matter was he identified with humans more than dungeon cores; if he were to destroy this core, he wouldn't be any better than they were. With just a little reluctance, he thought N—

Time elapsed! Now absorbing Mana from F-3rd-Rated Nature Core.

No! That's not what I wanted! Fred felt an intensely sharp pain radiate through his body starting with his hands. Looking down, he only barely registered that time had seemed to speed up again; the green-glowing core and the pain it was causing him the only things that concerned him.

His throat started to feel raw and he realized that he had been screaming for some time. The glowing core started to flash, blinking on and off faster and faster, increasing the agony suffusing his body. With his vision starting to fade from the overwhelming pain, Fred saw the core flash so quickly that it was almost steady, before it...stopped.

And with the flashing went his pain.

Legs that had been locked in the upright position folded beneath him, and as his knees hit the floor, all he could do was stare at the inert green

crystal in his hands. Within seconds, it started to break apart and crumble beneath his fingers, turning to dust as any Mana that had been inside of the crystalline structure was now gone.

With lungs that were heaving like he had just run for three days straight, and with the memory of the pain suffusing his body just a short time ago, all he could do was stare at the green dust in his hand while listening to his own labored breathing.

“Oh my Gods, Fred – WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?!”

I...I don't know.

Chapter 40

Eisa was right to be concerned; Fred had invaded another dungeon core's domain and Core Room and essentially held it hostage while it answered his questions. If he had been alone, that kind of thing would probably be bad enough that some of the nearby dungeon cores would've sent some of their defenders to hunt him down. It would not be the best outcome, but he had figured that might be the case and had planned to move on afterwards out of their range.

But now he had actually destroyed a dungeon core; from what he remembered of his parents' teachings, the dungeons would take swift action to ensure that the humans knew their place. The retaliation might be only centered on him and possibly his guild members – but he doubted it. He thought that the entire town of Gatecross would be in danger – and possibly more.

“What happened, Fred? How did you destroy that core?”

He hung his head as he considered what to tell both Eisa and Deecy. The fact that the Dire Wolf didn't really know what had happened wasn't encouraging; he thought she might have some answers to questions that *he* had.

“I...don't know. I didn't mean to do that.”

“YOU DIDN'T MEAN TO DO *WHAT?* DESTROY A DUNGEON CORE?” Eisa was apparently quite mad.

“Yes, that was not my intention—” he started, before his mind finally kicked into action— “but there isn't anything we can do about that fact,

now. We need to get out of here before another core comes to investigate.”

“And where do you think we can go, Fred? You just destroyed a dungeon core; from the legends I’ve heard, they don’t take that kind of thing very well. They’ll kill us all! You’ve put everyone in Gatecross in danger – maybe even the rest of the Kingdom!”

Fred stood up and looked at everyone, who had varying expressions ranging from complete astonishment to frightened anger. Over their heads, he looked at the wall of the Core Room and saw a slight tinge of green highlighting the stone he hadn’t seen before. Looking around the room, ceiling, and the floor, he saw the same highlight everywhere he looked.

“That’s the dungeon territory you’re seeing for the first time. I’m actually surprised that you can see it, as only full dungeon cores – and me, apparently – are supposed to be able to see them. The different factions will have different colors, so you can see even from off of their territory what kind of dungeon core they are.”

But that wasn’t the only change. Back in the recesses of his mind was some knowledge he hadn’t had before. It was small, but very significant: the precise process of creating a dungeon. And not just a Nature dungeon – a Fire and Water one as well. He wasn’t sure why it was only now that he gained access to the knowledge; it was like it was locked away in his head and the introduction of a Nature core had unlocked *everything*.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature
Core Age: 2
Core Structure Level: 2
Fire Mana: 128/128
Water Mana: 127/127

Nature Mana: 100/100 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 5265 Unconverted Essence: 2802
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Intermediate Mana Communication: 1% Intermediate Mana Absorption: 1% Intermediate Mana Conversion: 1% Novice Essence Conversion: 9% Novice Mana-formed Object Creation: 72% Novice Core Crystallization: 40% Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 20% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 2% Novice Dungeon Creation: 1% Novice Defender Creation: 1% Novice Defense Creation: 1%
Dungeon Information
<i>(none)</i>

Fred was a little overwhelmed with what he was seeing. Not only did he now have access to Nature Mana, but his faction had changed to Fire-Water-Nature – which didn’t make sense, but there it was. He also had quite a few new skills that had to do with dungeon creation, as well as being able to see core territories like Deecy had said.

“Something has obviously changed about you, but we don’t have time to do anything about it right now – we have to go. Now!”

He tried to understand what she was talking about – he didn’t see anything dangerous around. And then he noticed that the green highlight around the room was quickly fading. *I wonder what happens when a dungeon core is killed or leaves its dungeon.* A sharp crack from above answered that question for him as he remembered his flight from his home after he discovered what happened to his parents.

“You can yell at me later – we have to leave! Everybody, RUN!” he yelled, pushing past them and to the crevice leading to the dungeon proper. He squeezed through as fast as he could, hearing Eisa say behind him, “Why are you run—” before another crack of the stone ceiling reported inside the small room.

He didn’t have to worry about them following after that, as they didn’t stop for anything while they passed through room after room. Behind them, they could hear and feel the dungeon collapsing, which only served to spur them on even more.

Fortunately, as they all sprinted out of the entrance, they had stayed far ahead of the collapse. With everyone safe outside, they stared at each other with wide eyes as they caught their breath, the danger of being buried alive – or being squished to death instantly – getting their blood pumping.

They moved back as the entrance started to collapse before their eyes, sinking into the soft ground until there was little more than a small pile of rocks to denote where the dungeon used to be.

“Oh, man! We left all that loot in there!” Rasper exclaimed as he watched all hope of getting it disappear just as quickly as the dungeon. His greed seemed to break the tension of the others as they chuckled a little at his words – all except Eisa.

She still looked angry.

“Here, Rasper – for a job well done. I wouldn’t want you to say that I don’t appreciate your work,” Fred told him, Creating a gold piece and pretending to pull it from his pouch – which appeared to be missing. *Oops.*

“Where did that come from?” the small man asked, taking the proffered piece without hesitation.

Eisa saved him from having to answer. “Actually, the better question is: what are we going to do now?”

“What do you mean ‘we’? It was only I that did this, so all I have to do is go into another dungeon and announce that it was just me that did it. They will only search for me, therefore leaving you all alone.”

A scoff from the Necro-healer was the response he got. “Ok, so I don’t know as much about dungeon cores as you seem to—” she narrowed her eyes at him— “but if they are anything like what the legends say, they won’t care that it was just you that did this. They are going to retaliate to send a message to *everybody* – meaning that hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of innocent lives are on the line.”

Hmm...good point. He was hoping that he could take the blame, but she was accurate in the way dungeon cores thought. His conversation with the Nature core proved that; humans were considered livestock, so was it out of the realm of possibility to think that they would punish a whole herd for the mistakes of only one human to keep them in line? He had to agree with her on this one.

“So what do you suggest we do then, Eisa?” Harriette butted in, causing all eyes to turn toward her.

I think I know what to do – but is it smart? It could turn out worse than what they are already expecting. Fred cleared his throat hesitantly, trying to decide what to do – which had the effect of gaining everyone’s attention again. Their eyes – including Eisa’s – looked curious instead of accusatory. And he thought he saw a glimmer of...hope, he’d like to call it...in his friends’ eye.

Glancing at Deecy, he came to a decision.

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

End of Book 1

Author's Note

I love dungeon core stories, and previously I published a few that were either video game-based (Glendaria Awakens Trilogy), Sci-Fi-based (Station Cores series), or even a modern-day Earth setting (Core of Fear). However, I haven't had a chance to write one set in a pure fantasy world, where magic and the different aspects of dungeons were normal parts of the world. I introduced a LitRPG aspect to it with the different statuses because...well, I love stats (if you hadn't guessed from my other books).

While I thought about introducing Fred and his own dungeon in this book, I realized that – at least what I wanted to happen – would end up at least doubling what I had already written. Instead, I will be focusing that part of the dungeon-building and defense aspect of Fred's journey starting in the next book – and beyond. This was more of an introduction of the world, some of the main characters and their motivations, and explaining some of the mechanics.

Look for Dungeon World – Book 2 soon!

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Children of Fear (Coming Soon)

Dungeon World Series

Dungeon World

[1]

Adventurer Rating Advancement							
Rating	Essence Required to advance	Rating	Essence Required to advance	Rating	Essence Required to advance	Rating	Essence Required to advance
<i>G-1</i>	100	<i>E-1</i>	2,500	<i>C-1</i>	62,500	<i>A-1</i>	1,562,500
<i>G-2</i>	200	<i>E-2</i>	5,000	<i>C-2</i>	125,000	<i>A-2</i>	3,125,000
<i>G-3</i>	400	<i>E-3</i>	10,000	<i>C-3</i>	250,000	<i>A-3</i>	6,250,000
<i>G-4</i>	800	<i>E-4</i>	20,000	<i>C-4</i>	500,000	<i>A-4</i>	12,500,000
<i>G-5</i>	1,600	<i>E-5</i>	40,000	<i>C-5</i>	1,000,000	<i>A-5</i>	25,000,000
<i>G-6</i>	3,200	<i>E-6</i>	80,000	<i>C-6</i>	2,000,000	<i>A-6</i>	50,000,000
<i>G-7</i>	6,400	<i>E-7</i>	160,000	<i>C-7</i>	4,000,000	<i>A-7</i>	100,000,000
<i>G-8</i>	12,800	<i>E-8</i>	320,000	<i>C-8</i>	8,000,000	<i>A-8</i>	200,000,000
<i>G-9</i>	25,600	<i>E-9</i>	640,000	<i>C-9</i>	16,000,000	<i>A-9</i>	400,000,000
<i>G-10</i>	51,200	<i>E-10</i>	1,280,000	<i>C-10</i>	32,000,000	<i>A-10</i>	800,000,000
<i>F-1</i>	500	<i>D-1</i>	12,500	<i>B-1</i>	321,500	<i>S-1</i>	7,812,500
<i>F-2</i>	1,000	<i>D-2</i>	25,000	<i>B-2</i>	643,000	<i>S-2</i>	15,625,000
<i>F-3</i>	2,000	<i>D-3</i>	50,000	<i>B-3</i>	1,286,000	<i>S-3</i>	31,250,000
<i>F-4</i>	4,000	<i>D-4</i>	100,000	<i>B-4</i>	2,572,000	<i>S-4</i>	62,500,000
<i>F-5</i>	8,000	<i>D-5</i>	200,000	<i>B-5</i>	5,144,000	<i>S-5</i>	125,000,000
<i>F-6</i>	16,000	<i>D-6</i>	400,000	<i>B-6</i>	10,288,000	<i>S-6</i>	250,000,000
<i>F-7</i>	32,000	<i>D-7</i>	800,000	<i>B-7</i>	20,576,000	<i>S-7</i>	500,000,000
<i>F-8</i>	64,000	<i>D-8</i>	1,600,000	<i>B-8</i>	41,152,000	<i>S-8</i>	1,000,000,000
<i>F-9</i>	128,000	<i>D-9</i>	3,200,000	<i>B-9</i>	82,304,000	<i>S-9</i>	2,000,000,000
<i>F-10</i>	256,000	<i>D-10</i>	6,400,000	<i>B-10</i>	164,608,000	<i>S-10</i>	4,000,000,000