

JONATHAN BROOKS

DUNGEON WORLD 4



Dungeon World 4

A Dungeon Core Experience
Dungeon World Series

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Dedication

To my wife, who has stood by me through all of my writing endeavors, believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

In addition, I want to thank all of the beta-readers who looked over this book and gave me their all-important feedback!

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Quick Recap

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

After journeying south on his own and finding a human settlement, he tried to Create clothing using his Mana-formed Object Creation skill so that he could blend in a little better; in the process, he accidentally created a sentient Dire Wolf that held the only two remnants of his parents’ cores. As a result of the creation process, Fred was knocked unconscious; he was later saved from freezing to death in the frozen northern wilderness when he was found by a human named Regnark from the nearby settlement.

Regnark taught Fred a lot about the human world and about how humans interacted with each other in their short stint together, and the time he was there in Northend also allowed the blossoming Dungeon Core powers within him time to improve. However, after Fred pushed his new human friend for information about the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, Fred was kicked out of Regnark’s house and sent south. He met Deecy – the Dire Wolf he had inadvertently created – along the way to Gatecross, the nearest human town.

In Gatecross, he acquired the ability to improve himself and gain a class, just as any other Dungeon Adventurer member of the Syndicate

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

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

Unfortunately, during the ensuing conversation, he inadvertently destroyed the small, green, floating, spherical gem-like core and absorbed its power into his body. Not only did he gain access to Nature Mana, but the absorption also unlocked his ability to create a dungeon.

Faced with the need to protect everyone from the nearby Cores' retribution from the destruction of the Nature Core (because Dungeon Cores tended to take something like that *very* personal), Fred went back to Gatecross with the intent to build a dungeon underneath the town for defensive purposes. Through trial and error, Fred was able to figure out how to establish a dungeon territory around the town. From that jumping-off point, he was further able to manipulate his innate Mana to create a dungeon entrance and a room underground. During that period, he also learned how to organize the Mana inside of him into a three-sided structure, with his Unconverted Mana (which turned out to be the Human portion of his existence) in a large Human Core in the middle, connecting his three Elemental Cores: Fire, Water, and Nature.

When the main attack did come, the town of Gatecross was assaulted from both the north and south gates, though Fred's traps managed to whittle down quite a few before they were able to reach the dungeon

proper. While his human defenders did their best to fend off waves of giant insects, beasts, Treants, and Dryads, Fred fought his own battle with a massive Emerald Dragon.

During the titanic battle between the Dragon and a massive Beetle Fred was able to make inside Gatecross, the town was practically leveled from the devastating attacks; in addition, Fred's high-level Beetle didn't fare too well against the strong attacks and deadly grace of the Emerald Dragon. Fred was forced to use every bit of Fire Mana he could get his hands on to ignite a cloud of poisonous breath the Dragon used to kill his Beetle and caused it to explode in a gigantic fireball, destroying everything above the ground – and “killing” himself in the process.

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

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

The process of absorbing the Earth Core started, but before it could finish, the small gem exploded with violent force, releasing all of the Mana inside of it and shattering to pieces. Fred “died” – again – but there was enough of him left after the explosion for his Core to put him back together again. When he revived, he found the desiccated corpse of Eisa nearby, half-buried underneath a collapsed wall and with a shard from the exploded Earth Core inside her heart.

With Eisa dead and Fred at a loss for what to do, he had an inspiration when he remembered how Deecy had been created. Using the Earth Core shard in her heart as a primary focus, he used his Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill and imagined Eisa as she used to be, pumping thousands of Unconverted Mana into the process. After a blindingly bright flash of light, Eisa was alive.

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

Eisa was now a Shard.

Using the Earth-based powers inherent in the shard of Earth that was absorbed into her during the resurrection process, she was able to use the same Earth Mana that Fred could use to turn her body into a sort of Earth Elemental. Later on, she also found that she could heal using that same Mana, as well as create Earth-based Dungeon Defenders. In short, she was now a bit less human than she used to be, but that didn’t seem to bother her

too much. Deecy also soon found that she was very similar, with the ability to create Fire and Water-based defenses, as well as her normal ability to change her size.

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

Eventually, they arrived at the Deadlands, which was full of Dark dungeons and their Dark Cores. After having very little success with finding the Guild members and being chased out of a local town, Fred met up with a group of Adventurers that were delving through a local Dark dungeon. With their assistance, they were able to infiltrate the dungeon to the Core, where Fred was able to absorb just the ability to use Dark Mana and some blueprints from the Core. However, due to unforeseen stupidity on behalf of the Core, it exploded and destroyed a good portion of the dungeon and collapsed its territory.

Regnark also lost his life during the assault on the dungeon, and Fred, Deecy, and Eisa were forced to flee southwest with his body. When they arrived at Allroads – where the Core Power Guild and the Gatecross townspeople were reported to be – Fred used a sliver of the Dark Core that exploded to “resurrect” Regnark. His large friend had been reset back down to G-10th-Rating, just as Eisa had been, but he had also acquired the “Shard” status.

After asking too many questions and calling attention to themselves inside the tightly controlled city of Allroads – which sat in the middle of an

element-rich environment that Dungeon Cores reportedly called a Convergence – they were captured and questioned. While in the prison, the Guild and the others were found, and Fred was able to break everyone out by creating a very basic dungeon underneath the city.

Just as he and the others were about to be recaptured by a scary-strong Inquisitor that wanted to get to the bottom of who he was and what he was doing there, the city was attacked by Dungeon Defenders. Ironically saved by the vengeance of the nearby Cores because of his establishment of a territory inside the forbidden Convergence, Fred had to figure out what to do next...

Part I – Higher Powers

Chapter 1

The Supreme Core of Air experienced the normal displacement of her awareness as the replica of her own S-10th-Rated Dungeon Core coalesced into existence far from her own dungeon. She looked around at the empty, naturally formed room she found herself in – one that she knew so well; it was where the Supreme Council did their business, after all. It was a relatively small space located almost a mile underground in an out-of-the-way place, where it would never be discovered unless one knew exactly where to look.

It had been this way for thousands of years, ever since she could remember. Because conversations through Mana Communication could theoretically be intercepted, the Supreme Dungeon Cores on the Council had been meeting “Core-to-Core” like this ever since they discovered they could project their consciousness into what they deemed to be an avatar of sorts. She could insert her consciousness inside of the avatar, with a – very safe – link back to her actual Core; nothing could actually harm her, though the avatar could be destroyed, taking the large chunk of Mana used in its creation with it.

In reality, it was just a Mana-based construct not unlike a Dungeon Defender, though it was a little bit more complex and dangerous for those unprepared; for that reason, it wasn’t really available or accessible to any Dungeon Cores until they reached S-3rd-Rating and beyond. Since it had been thousands of years since she achieved that Rating, it was second nature to her.

As a 10th-Rated Supreme, her “avatar” reflected her actual size; as much as the others despised the comparison, her size – and any Core the same as her own Rating – was comparable to the height of an average mature human, though with her width being the same as her height it was unlike all but a very few of the humans she had seen before. Despite the large size, she always felt a little dwarfed by the intense personalities of her fellow Supreme Council members.

Not that she disliked them, necessarily; their relationship was a working one, and not one based on friendship or anything like that. Being the strongest, most powerful, and largest Dungeon Cores in the world tended to bring inflated egos, however. She’d be the first to admit that she fell into that same trap, but she also thought she was a bit more open-minded than the others. Whether it was because she liked to spend a lot of her time up in the clouds above, looking down on the world from up high, or because her general nature was a little more...buoyant...than the others, the Supreme of Air saw things a bit differently.

Take this new crisis, for instance—

She was interrupted in her thoughts as the others appeared, one after another. First, the Supreme of Fire popped into existence, then Light, Dark, and so on, until the room felt a bit more crowded. Technically, they all still had names, but they had all been on the Council so long that very few of them actually remembered their own, let alone anyone else’s. That included the Supreme of Air, who could vaguely remember that her actual name started with a “C”...but that was about it. It didn’t really matter, of course, since no other Core would dare try to call them by their names, so they had been lost to time.

“I demand retribution! They destroyed my grandson, and they deserve to PAY!” shouted the Supreme of Earth (or, as they just called

themselves, Earth). Earth was righteously incensed; there hadn't been any Cores that had been stolen or damaged by humans in decades, and the last time one was actually destroyed was centuries ago. For him to be a bit mad at the situation was understandable.

"I think you mean your great-great-great-great—whatever, but since you're pretty much related to nearly every Earth Core out there, don't make this about family. And you're not the only one who lost a youngster, so stop making this all about you," the smooth and distinctly feminine voice of Nature snidely retorted. The green-glowing avatar floated over to Earth's Core and almost touched him, as if inviting him to debate her; it was a common enough occurrence between the two – even if it was usually just posturing – so Air and the others paid it no mind.

Dark spoke up to break up the tension, though his gravelly voice was grating as usual. "I lost one as well, and it wasn't no juvenile; this is becoming a serious problem, and your silly antics aren't helping the situation." He paused while Nature and Earth separated, the glow in their avatars dimming in what Air could only surmise was embarrassment.

While there technically wasn't a leader of the Council, Dark was older than every other Core there – by just over 1,000 years. He was also the only one that had progressed past the S-10th-Rating, though since they had created the Rating system to mirror the humans' one, they hadn't designed anything new after her own Rating. He said that he was just S-11th-Rating, but it was possible that the secretive Dark Core had access to something none of them had ever seen before.

But that wasn't important right then; what *was* important was that Dark had a point – which he expanded on when the others were quiet. "Now, I'm not disparaging the deaths of those Cores – *my* faction included – but there is a more serious problem. Earth and Nature, know that you are

already informed of this, but for the others this might be news.” *Hmm... that’s cryptic – what is he talking about?*

Fire, Water, and Light seemed to be out of the loop just as much as she was, so she wondered what had happened. She had heard about the destruction of the three Cores as a rumor, and the confirmation of those rumors was bad enough; if there was some human that had learned to destroy Dungeon Cores – which was *very* difficult, but not entirely impossible – then it was entirely possible that it could share that knowledge with others, putting them all in danger. *What could possibly be worse than that?*

“The livestock that somehow destroyed three of us has somehow set up a territory in Convergence #3. Local forces from our nearby Cores – Earth’s, Nature’s, and Dark, of course – have already been dispatched, but with the safety of the Convergence being the priority, none of the defenders sent are large enough to damage the elemental sources there.”

Air was stunned. *The human set up a territory in the Convergence?* There were two alarming things from that statement. The first was the Convergence itself was in danger; there were only a dozen total Convergences left on the planet, which supplied the majority of the ambient Mana for literally thousands of miles around their location. Throughout all of the passed-on history of the Dungeon Cores – which spanned many thousands of years, even past her own 13,000-year-old age – only three Convergences had been destroyed in that time, usually as a result of Cores fighting over it.

It had been a long time since they had established their Convergence Accords, which prevented any Core from establishing a territory too close to the Convergence, and it was so ingrained in every Core’s mind that it was almost unthinkable to do so now. Given that, it was also understandable

that there were Cores nearby that were already on the move to eliminate the one who had violated those Accords, though why she hadn't heard about it yet was—

She thought too soon, because she soon had Mana Communications directed towards her Core and rerouted to her avatar, and she took a few moments to acknowledge their concerns and let those closest to Convergence #3 know that she would get back to them very soon. Air looked around to see Fire, Water, and Light occupied with their own Mana Communications, so she finished her previous thought.

The second alarming part of the entire situation was the fact that a human had figured out how to establish a territory. That should've been impossible and was unthinkable, as it was something that only Dungeon Cores could do. The Supreme of Air portioned off a part of her attention to focus her Territorial Sight onto Convergence #3; it was fairly easy to reach every part of the world after the S-6th-Rating, and millennia of practice made the process very quick.

She saw exactly what the others were probably looking at as well; thousands of smaller Earth, Nature, and Dark Defenders were streaming around the human...city, if she remembered what their domains were called correctly. That was what Dark had described, but what he failed to mention was the territorial faction the human had established; in addition to the sheer impossibility of a territory in the first place, the one she was looking at had *multiple* elemental factions.

She saw Earth, Nature, and Dark – which improbably corresponded to the three Cores that were destroyed – but in addition to those, Fire and Water were represented. She, as well as every other Core in the room, looked at the blue and red-glowing cores for an explanation.

“I’ve had no reports of any Cores being taken or destroyed, so I have no idea what happened,” Fire answered, his voice rough but not as gravelly as Dark’s. Water said essentially the same thing, her tone even smoother than Nature’s voice, though somehow cold at the same time.

The room was silent as they all considered what had happened and what they had seen; Air for one was extremely confused. Either the human had somehow destroyed five different Dungeon Cores and then somehow figured out a way to utilize their elements to create – and somehow maintain – a territory, or...

“Cursedborn! How did this happen?” Light shouted out, quickly coming to the same conclusion that Air was working on. Earth, Water, Nature, Fire, and Light all erupted in a cacophony of accusations and denials; Air herself was silent as she contemplated how a Cursedborn could possibly exist, and so was Dark – though apparently he already knew.

“Quiet! This isn’t anyone’s fault but our own.”

Water asked the question that was on everyone else’s mind. “What do you mean? How is this *our* fault?”

“Because we shouldn’t have kept the origin and potential creation of the Cursedborn a secret. We thought that keeping the factions warring against other alliances was enough to prevent it from happening, but we were wrong. It could be that we’ve grown so numerous that it is hard to keep track of everything anymore, or what most likely happened was—”

“Aquel and Pyra!” Air shouted out in her usual breathlessness, interrupting Dark in the process. Instead of being mad, he only confirmed what she said.

“Yes, Aquel and Pyra. That’s the only explanation I can think of.”

“But there was no sign of a Cursedborn when we sent our Defenders after them,” Fire said.

“Obviously we missed it, because it would easily explain the presence of this...abomination. That’s why it’s *our* fault for keeping what would happen if they reproduced a secret from everyone – including the other Supremes,” Dark explained.

Cursedborn – I can’t believe it. Actually, if memory served Air right, their historical name was “Dualborn”, but since the last one – that existed over 15,000 years ago – had wiped out 90% of the Dungeon Cores on the planet, they were only known as Cursedborn. They only had a very small chance of being created as a result of certain combinations of opposing factions: Light/Dark, Earth/Air, and Fire/Water. Any other combinations resulted in failure to reproduce; it was why the faction alliances had been formed in the first place, and warring between them was encouraged. It was thought that if a Core was fighting against an opposing faction, it wouldn’t be inclined to try to reproduce.

Air couldn’t help but think Dark was right; if Aquel and Pyra – two up-and-coming leaders in their respective factions – had known about the danger of creating a Cursedborn, they might not have run away together in the first place. If the potential threat of creating such a being – all because of the reproduction process between opposing factions – had been explained to those two, then it was almost a given that they wouldn’t want it to happen.

Cursedborn were so dangerous for a few reasons; not only could they manipulate more than one element – and could eventually acquire the ability to handle *all* of them – but they could also absorb and basically “steal” all of the Mana from another Core, shattering it in the process. This was what happened 15,000 years ago, in fact; a Cursedborn had gone mad with the sheer influx of Mana and powerful abilities they had gained from a few Dungeon Cores it had stumbled upon – including its parents.

Walking around in the shape of one of the humans that were just starting to explode in population, and with the ability to establish a territory and build a dungeon itself, the powerful being was able to subdue anything sent against it; the Cursedborn eventually became strong enough that it could send waves of powerful Dungeon Defenders to wipe out anything nearby. Added to that, since the Cursedborn was “mobile” – as in, not confined to a specific place and able to move sparingly and only with help, it could move faster than the nearby Cores could plan for. The Dungeon Core Mana Communication system was very primitive at that time, and by the time the warning was given (if there was any warning at all), it was usually too late.

After absorbing and destroying over two dozen smaller Cores in a relatively short amount of time, it then went on a rampage all over the planet for more than a century, killing her kind indiscriminately. No Cores were safe, even the most powerful ones; Air herself was of middling power at that time, and she watched as all of her mentors – and her parents – were systematically absorbed and destroyed, barely even putting up any type of challenge to the Cursedborn.

Even the few times that nearby Cores banded together to form a line of defense had been ineffective; in fact, it hadn't even been anything that the dungeons had done that had eventually killed the Cursedborn. The consensus at the time was that *too* much Mana was absorbed in such a short amount of time that it pushed past the limit of what the being could contain within itself; based upon how much she thought that would have to be in terms of modern Ratings, Air estimated that the Cursedborn had been far above S-10th-Rating, and had hit its limit somewhere past that.

Essentially, the same thing that made the Cursedborn so powerful was its eventual downfall.

In the end, there had only been dozens – or perhaps hundreds – of scattered Dungeon Cores left in the world (it was hard to tell in those days), of which the current Supreme Council were the largest. The Cursedborn had made the larger, more powerful Cores a priority, so when it had eventually destroyed itself by absorbing too much Mana, those few that were left (like Air) were approximately of mid-C-Rating and far below.

Throughout the years since that time of fear and near extermination, of all the Cores that had survived the wrath of the Cursedborn, only the Supreme Council was still alive. Attrition in the ranks of Dungeon Cores over the years of constant warring between the factions accounted for 99% of them; a few had been stolen and mortally damaged/destroyed by humans, though fortunately that number was *very* small. It was difficult – but not impossible – for the human livestock the Cores cultivated to actually harm their crystalline shell, so more often than not they would survive being stolen, unless they used their Mana Combustion skill to destroy themselves if they thought it was more prudent for some reason. Air couldn't ever see a time where that would be an option for her, but every Dungeon Core was different.

Dark didn't need to explain any more, because even if the others sometimes sounded and appeared dense, they were still the oldest and most experienced Dungeon Cores in the world. "Fine – it's *our* fault; we can try to do better in the future and spread the word about the risks that reproducing with certain other factions can have, in the hopes that nothing like this will happen again," Light said, answering for everyone else – to which Air agreed. "But what do we do about *this* Cursedborn? And how powerful is this...creature...now?"

"The *creature* you're talking about has already absorbed a C-Rated Dark Core, a G-Rated Earth Core, and one of my F-Rated Nature Cores,"

Nature explained, which – while that was bad in general – it probably would make the Cursedborn no more powerful than a high C-Rated or low B-Rated dungeon. Not too powerful yet, fortunately; however, with it able to manipulate five different elements, it would still be quite difficult to destroy.

“That doesn’t seem so bad yet—” Water said, before Nature cut her off.

“I wasn’t finished. If some of my younglings are to be believed, then this Cursedborn was able to handle their Cores, *extract Mana from them*, and then return it immediately afterwards for some reason. Not only that, but in the process of returning the Mana it had absorbed, the Cursedborn also somehow strengthened the crystalline structure of the Cores it didn’t absorb outright.”

Now *that* is something different and unexpected. Air wasn’t the only one that appeared to be at a loss of words; what was described was not only impossible, but completely unlike anything she had heard of concerning Cursedborn before. Granted, there had only been a bare handful that had existed – according to ancient memories – prior to the one that had gone mad with power, but the actions of this one seemed...odd...in comparison to the others.

“I highly doubt those stories,” Dark said skeptically, to which Nature only repeated that it had been some of the younger Cores and they may have been exaggerating for attention. “Anyway, regardless of whether or not that is true, we still have to eliminate this problem. Like I said, Earth, Nature, and of course my own faction have already started to attack this human city that the Cursedborn seems to be hiding in – under, actually.”

“What good is that doing? Without being able to bring in any of our larger Defenders to prevent the destruction of the Convergence, the livestock there is more than capable of holding them back,” Light asked.

Dark replied quickly, as if he was waiting for someone to ask that. “It’s simple. You’re all probably thinking about this Cursedborn like a filthy human or worthless livestock – but that’s incorrect. Despite its disgusting nature, this creature is half Dungeon Core, as much as we don’t want to admit that. And I’m pretty sure everyone in this room knows how to fight another Core, right? In fact, if I’m not mistaken, each and every one of you had a hand in teaching your subordinates *how* to fight, if not having destroyed a Core or dozen yourselves over the years.”

That was very true. Air definitely knew how to war against another Core; there were some rules of engagement that every faction and alliance had to abide by, of course – though they wouldn’t necessarily apply here. The lack of larger and more powerful Defenders would hinder the process – as well as the presence of so many powerful humans nearby – but with all of them acting together, it could (and would) get done.

“And if for some reason this creature survives that, we’ll have to resort to Plan B. It won’t be beneficial for the surrounding Cores, but we can’t allow this Cursedborn a chance to grow any stronger,” Dark added.

Air had to agree – up to a point. Again, she had witnessed firsthand how the previous Cursedborn had practically destroyed every single Dungeon Core in the world, and it was something she couldn’t forget.

However...

This Cursedborn seemed...different. She was still withholding judgment until she had a chance to watch this...*human with Dungeon Core powers*...personally, but it could just be the answer to their long-term issues.

Of course, it could all resort to Plan B, where they would just destroy everything there and then live with the loss of another Convergence. She hoped it didn't come to that, but she – and the others – were willing to make that sacrifice to prevent the Cursedborn from destroying them all.

Chapter 2

Fredwynklemossering, known affectionately by his friends as Fred, turned over organizing the former residents of the now-destroyed town of Gatecross and his Core Power Guild to Metch and a few others; they were crowded together in the relatively small room he had dug out of the dirt underneath the city of Allroads, adjacent to his dungeon but not created through his Dungeon Creation system. Fred had quickly gone inside and used his Adventurer Power and his Create Object skill to quickly coat the room with stone, as it wasn't maintained by the normal Mana upkeep infused in the rest of his dungeon's walls. After that, though, he retreated to the entrance of his hastily dug refuge and practically collapsed against the wall.

"Are you okay, Fred?" Eisa asked gently, kneeling by his side with concern on her face.

Honestly, he was exhausted from everything that had been going on over the last few hours; the joy of finding his Guild and the townspeople, the stress of escaping from the governmental prison, the showdown with Chareese, and now the danger he had – intentionally or not – brought to Allroads was almost too much for him. He sighed and closed his eyes, just before he felt Eisa's hand on his cheek in some sort of Human gesture of affection he still didn't understand. Nevertheless, he appreciated the touch from the woman he *thought* he was in love with, but still didn't understand what that meant.

Leaning into her hand, he answered, "Yes, I'm okay, Eisa. I just need a minute to figure out what we're going to do now."

Her hand – which was gently rubbing his face – stopped. “Wait... you...don’t know what we’re going to do?” she asked, confused. “I thought you said, ‘It’s time the “livestock” fought back’?”

“Well, yes...but I wasn’t quite sure how to go about that yet. I have a few ideas, but I *know* that something has to change. That’s the only way everyone is going to survive in the future – Humans *and* Dungeon Cores.” He opened his eyes and looked Eisa, Deecy, and Regnark in the eyes with what he hoped was determination – even if he lacked the confidence and knowledge of how to go about that change. “All I really know is that I’m going to need your help to accomplish all of that – once I figure out how to go about it.”

They all nodded in affirmation – or at least acceptance – but the three Shards weren’t the only ones.

“I can’t speak for everyone here, but the Core Power Guild is with you, Fred,” Metch said, coming up behind Deecy. Behind him was Harriette, Raspel, and Merida – some of the most loyal members his Core Power Guild possessed; they didn’t appear any worse for wear after their incarceration, though they did appear to have lost a *little* weight – likely from their difficult journey all the way to Allroads from Gatecross. And, of course, all of them still had a large, glowing “X” mark above their heads, signaling that they had incurred the wrath of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate and the Craytion Kingdom.

I’m still going to have to figure out how to get rid of that.

“I’m very glad you’re all still alive and together, and I’m doubly glad we ended up in the same place despite the head start you had,” Eisa said for Fred, which he was appreciative of. He was starting to get distracted by other things and couldn’t keep all his attention on the conversation. However, he did want to make sure that they weren’t

obligated to stay in a place of danger now that they were freed – especially if he was able to figure out how to remove the mark above their heads.

“Things here are about to get a bit...hectic; I would like your help, but you aren’t obligated to stay. I’m going to try to remove that mark above your heads, and when I do, there won’t be anything holding you back from finding somewhere relatively safe to go.” He really *would* like their help, but he was concerned with their safety. The situation was a little different from what it was before in Gatecross; there, they had no choice but to work together to survive, as they were on their own. Here in Allroads, though, there were other...options.

“Nonsense. You came for us, your *Guild*, and freed us from that prison; even if our lives are only temporary from here on out, it’s much better than the guaranteed execution we could all feel coming from the Allroads government. We wouldn’t – and couldn’t – abandon you after coming all this way to save us.” Harriette threw her own opinion into the conversation, only to be joined by a chorus of assent from the others.

“I’m almost positive that most of the Gatecross townspeople still with us will join you; the few that were opposed to working and traveling together left while we were still heading here. Most of those here have nothing left to go back to: no real family, no real friends outside of those in town, and no prospects back in the Craytion Kingdom – even if you *are* able to get these marks off of us.” Metch followed up Harriette’s statement with one of his own.

Fred had noticed that their count did seem to be less than he remembered, though he was somewhat glad that they hadn’t necessarily *died* as a result of the journey. Of course, leaving the group halfway through their travels to Allroads in the middle of unfamiliar territory probably wouldn’t amount to a long life unless they were extraordinarily

lucky; it was entirely possible that they were all dead now, but there was nothing Fred could do about that – even if he knew where to look. Mainly because he was kind of stuck in one place for the foreseeable future.

“Thank you, Metch, Harriette,” Fred said, nodding at them and the others – and he felt a little better knowing they had his back. Despite the fact that everything that had happened to them was largely his fault, they were still willing to stick by him. He wasn’t sure if it was all because of misplaced confidence in his own abilities or not; regardless, Fred’s own confidence was boosted as a result. He sat up a little straighter and closed his eyes, finally taking the time to concentrate fully on what was distracting him for the last few minutes.

Though, *distraction* was a bit of an understatement – especially considering that his territory was about to become a warzone.

When Chareese – the Allroads Government Inquisitor that had imprisoned them – had been chasing after Fred and his friends, the half-Human/half-Dungeon-Core had *hoped* that the nearby elemental Core factions (that he had annoyed by inadvertently destroying a few of their Dungeon Cores) would attack and move some of the pressure off of him. As far as that went, he had been successful; however, the army of Dungeon Defenders descending on the city was...impressive, to say the least.

Fortunately, the land around Allroads was something that the Dungeon Cores called a “Convergence”, and there were large elemental concentrations dotted all along the landscape for miles around. This meant that the Nature, Earth, and Dark creatures heading for the city were funneled through them as they streamed towards Allroads’ walls. While their numbers were quite impressive, they couldn’t converge on the city all in one mass, so in effect, their advantage was cut down quite significantly.

Of course, that didn't seem to matter to the thousands of Humans on the walls, who were looking at the incoming horde of dungeon monsters with horror and fear on their faces. That was entirely understandable, unfortunately, because of one particular side effect of gaining the nearby Cores' attention that he didn't even think about: the people outside the protective walls of Allroads.

Most of the people caught outside the city when the monster forces attacked were wiped out almost immediately; there was a single group of about a dozen higher-Rated Adventurers that were near the western edge of his territory that managed to beat back the rushing tide of Earth-based Dungeon Defenders heading for the center of the Convergence, and were able to escape without any casualties. Once they were out of Fred's territory, the Defenders seemed to ignore them, even going so far as to cross in front of their party a few feet away without even acknowledging them. There were also just under 400 people near enough to the city that they were able to rush inside before the massive gates were closed and locked tight.

The rest of the travelers – Adventurers, merchants, and normal people alike – were wiped out by the tide of Rockworms, Stone Golems, Goblin Gnomes, Golden Sphinxes, Shambling Skeletons, Decaying Zombies, Undead Bears, Spectral Revenants, Butchering Ghouls, Bone Wights, Defiled Goblinoids, Lesser Imps, Succubus, Hell-touched Bear Demons, Desecration Devils, Giant Webspinners, Large Wasps, Charging Boars, Rock Beetles, Dryads, Dire Wolves, Scaled-hide Elk, and even a few smaller ones he had never seen before. A few of the Adventurers were strong enough to withstand almost a minute or two of the oncoming onslaught, but the sheer number of Defenders soon overwhelmed them.

And they kept coming, though the flow tapered off to a trickle after a while. To the northeast, the Dark-based monsters flowed from the Deadlands; from the north, the Nature-based creatures streamed out of the dense forest located there; and coming in from the west, the Earth-based Defenders made their way towards Allroads and the convergence. From his Master Territorial Sight dungeon skill, Fred was able to see everything, but there was no handy function to it that would allow him to count how many beings were in his territory at one time: Humans or Mana-formed Defenders. If he had to guess, though, he would put the amount of attacking creatures at nearly 100,000, and the defenders on the wall at only a tiny fraction of that.

There were hundreds of thousands of people inside Allroads, of course, but not all of them were any type of Adventurer; sure, most could probably pick up some sort of weapon to defend themselves, but if they were needed...then the defense probably wasn't going that well. Those that *were* Adventurers (either currently, or in the case of many of the government employees, former members of the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate), fortunately, were quite high-Rated; the city of Allroads was a major hub of Syndicate activity, and there were hundreds of B-Rated, dozens of A-Rated, and more than a handful of S-Rated adventurers currently in residence.

Not all of them were on the wall at the moment, of course, but the scattered few that were there bolstered the ranks of the two-thousand or so C and D-Rated Allroads guards and DAS members that reported to the defense of the city. There were thousands of lower-Rated Adventurers ready and willing to lend a hand as well, but the tops of the walls were kept for the more powerful, higher-Rated individuals who would be better utilized in defending there.

Whoever was in charge of the defense knew their business, too. From the brief looks Fred had at the wall defenders' composition, they were broken up into large 10-person teams that had two Healer-types, two Fighters of some type, four Mage-based classes, and two long-range-weapon-wielding Scouts of various types. Since they were on top of the wall and the enemies were down below, it made sense; the majority of their attacks would be long-range, and if something *did* make it to the top of the wall, the Fighters and Healers would have their jobs cut out for them defending the Mages and Scouts.

Of course, that didn't really consider the great mass of flying monsters that were accompanying the ground forces. The Large Wasps, Spectral Revenants, Desecration Devils, Lesser Imps, and even the Succubi were floating along above the others, and something like a wall wasn't likely to hinder them in the least. However, just like the Nature-based army that had attacked Gatecross, those creatures capable of flying high above stuck close to the others, though for how long that was going to last once the clash started wasn't something he could predict.

Fred thought that the city of Allroads was fortunate that nothing too large – and thereby dangerous – was sent their way; he put it down to his assumption that the nearby Cores didn't want to risk destroying the elemental concentrations in the Convergence. Fred had seen firsthand what something like an Emerald Dragon could do to a town like Gatecross when it was attacked, and he couldn't imagine a Rock Giant trying to delicately tiptoe around the formations outside the city without harming them.

Still, it was quite a lot of Dungeon Defenders unleashed upon Allroads, and he found it hard to believe that the nearest dungeons for each of the attacking factions – which, granted, were all B-Rated – could afford the Mana cost for so many. And the quick response to his establishment of

his territory meant that the dungeons farther out probably hadn't had time to get their Defenders there before the attack began.

"Deecy, how did the Cores get so many of their Defenders here so fast? It seems impossible," Fred used his Intermediate Mana Communication to direct his thoughts toward the Dire Wolf Pup he could sense through his Territorial Sight nearby.

His longtime "guide" picked her head up and snorted in his direction. Then she paused and cocked her head to the side, as if realizing something; Fred figured it was something he *should've* known, but obviously didn't.

"I forgot that you don't have Master Mana Communication yet. When you unlock the Master level of that skill, you are able to transfer large amounts of Mana from one Core to another; the stronger your skill, the more you can transfer using the skill and the farther away you can be from the recipient. There is a cost involved in the transference from one to another, which only increases as the distance increases.

"From what my memories tell me, most Cores acquire at least the basics of Master Mana Communication before they ever establish their own dungeon; most of their communication throughout the 50 or so years they are growing and learning is done using the skill, so it's only natural that they have advanced it that far.

"What likely happened was a nearby heavy-hitting, higher-Rated Dungeon Core or even Cores sent over a massive influx of Mana for the sole purpose of building an army of Dungeon Defenders to attack Allroads, and ultimately, you. You've done it yourself, creating hundreds

of Defenders all at once when we were in Gatecross – this is just a scaled-up operation with a lot more Mana at their disposal.”

“Then why didn’t the lower-Rated Nature Cores near Gatecross get the same massive influx of Mana from others – we probably wouldn’t have survived, if they had.”

“I have no idea. I was wondering that at the time, but I didn’t want to mention it; we were lucky to walk away with our lives, even if the town was destroyed. It could be that the seemingly perpetual war between the dungeons got in the way and there were no Cores close enough to lend any aid. Or it could be for some other reason, one that we may never know.”

That knowledge was...disturbing. He didn’t count on the fact that the nearby Cores could get Mana transferred to them from elsewhere, thereby reducing the need to send Dungeon Defenders from far away. That meant that, if there were enough nearby factions that had plenty of Mana and were determined enough – which was almost guaranteed, seeing that Fred had destroyed some of their Cores – then the assault on the city of Allroads could continue for...who knows how long. He was hoping that they would give up after a while, as the cost to the nearby dungeons would start to take a toll, but with this new ability he just found out they had, things might not go the way he wanted...

The leading edge of the monster army was finally nearing range of the walls...but then it paused just out of all but the longest-ranged attacks, spreading out past the elemental concentrations in all directions until they completely surrounded the city. Fred wasn’t the only one holding his breath

as the encirclement completed...and then the attack on Allroads began in earnest.

Chapter 3

Chareese rushed up the stairs of the governmental prison, her thoughts going off in multiple directions – which caused her to miss a step. The resulting fall against the staircase leading up didn't actually hurt, but it made her concentrate on one thing at a time; and the one thing she needed to focus on was getting up to the surface before the city fell down around her ears.

Logically, she knew that even without her there, Allroads was more than prepared for any type of attack; thousands of years of combined Adventurer experience from all of the governmental guards and leadership – not to mention the DAS members in the city – had instilled a sense of caution in their preparations. They were ready for anything from an incursion by outlawed bandits, to small-scale rescue of DAS groups in trouble by a nearby dungeon, to even a large-scale invasion by a nearby Kingdom. It was why there were so many rules inside the city; many people chafed at the restrictions on everything, but they were there for a reason: safety and security.

Of course, never in a thousand years did she think they would have to fight against a horde of dungeon monsters.

“Report!” she called out, as soon as she raced up the stairs and barreled through the Prison's exit doors, finding various guards rushing around the governmental building in the center of Allroads. Although she wasn't the strongest or most “important” person there, she was one of a handful of S-Rated governmental employees currently in the city; her seniority and strength gave her a measure of influence with most of the nearby guards.

“The latest update puts the massive army of what appears to be Dark, Plant, and Earth monsters about a minute out from the walls. They’ve essentially destroyed anyone unlucky enough to be in their path as they rushed into the valley, though there didn’t seem to be any of our people out there,” Agelstein reported, coming right up next to her as soon as she appeared. The Necro-Wizard was a high-A-Rated one-man powerhouse, who combined his necromantic skills with hard-hitting non-elemental spells; he was also a great asset to the governmental sector, because he had a good head on his shoulders that held a mind sharper than almost anyone else Chareese had ever met. Agelstein was her second-in-command – because they had known each other for decades – though it was “unofficial” in the eyes of the Allroads government; they didn’t necessarily recognize past working relationships, and their relationship was entirely that: *working*.

“That’s good at least, but there had to have been hundreds of other people out there; are they all dead?”

“Some were able to escape, but for the most part they were wiped out,” the Necro-Wizard explained as they jogged towards the city center exit on the way north to the walls.

This “Fred” guy now has their deaths on his head. To think, all of this was caused by one man; or, I guess I should say, one Dungeon Core in Human form. The revelation that the person that they had held captive in their prison could build dungeons just like the Cores in the dungeons throughout the world was incredible; if she hadn’t seen it herself, she wouldn’t have believed him when he said that. If it had just been the rooms and tunnels that he had made, that could’ve been explained somewhat through the manipulation of elements; when the dungeon monsters and simple traps that had populated the few simple rooms she had seen were considered, however, it all added up to the fact that he was telling the truth.

She barely needed her Aural Truth ability to tell her that.

It still seemed impossible that he had somehow created a dungeon underneath her city, but that was the least of her problems at the moment. She needed to get to the walls in order to add her strength to the defense. “What exactly are we up against?”

“It appears as though, fortunately, most of those monsters heading our way are the smaller, less-powerful creatures you would find in most G to lower B-Rated dungeons. There haven’t been any massive boss monsters sighted, but they could still be coming,” her second-in-command responded with obvious confusion at the lack of serious threats. He knew what those dungeons in the A and even S-Rated categories could produce as far as monsters went, and it probably seemed strange that none of them were there.

“I...have it on dubious authority that the nearby dungeons don’t want to risk destroying the elemental concentration fixtures outside the city.” Chareese thought about what Fredwynkle—*Fred*—had said regarding something called the “Convergence”, which she assumed meant where Allroads was located. She figured if they were so mad that the Dungeon Core-man in their midst had established a...*territory*?...there, then they were probably very protective of the elemental formations outside the city. It could also explain the area around Allroads being relatively clear of dungeons, with them all starting at almost the exact same place in seven different, clearly delineated directions.

In fact, the city was the only place she knew of in that part of the world – she had heard rumors of others – that had access to all seven types of dungeons that existed nearby; it was one of the main reasons that Allroads was so popular, as Adventurers could find a little of whatever they were looking for in terms of challenges close to hand. She was just glad

that only three of the dungeon types seemed to be sending forces against them, as she wasn't sure they could hold off attacks from all of them at once.

“I...guess that would make sense. The reports said that the monsters are deliberately avoiding those concentrations out there—we better hurry, I think they should be at the walls at any—”

Before Agelstein could finish what he was saying, Chareese could hear a large shout coming from up ahead on the walls, and she could see flashes of light reflecting off of shiny weapons as they were raised in defense. The *thwacks* of bows being fired echoed through the street she was running down as hundreds of Scout-based classes fired their deadly missiles down onto something she couldn't see; in addition, the results of spells and abilities that had a visual manifestation – like fireballs or conjured whirlwinds – were briefly seen as they were flung onto the attacking monsters down below.

Chareese pumped her legs even harder as she raced towards the city wall she could see in the distance. She almost fell on her face when she stopped abruptly – and was subsequently run into by Agelstein who was running behind her; fortunately, Chareese was able to catch her balance, as well as the balance of her second-in-command as he careened off her back. The few guards running with them from the governmental center stopped when she stopped and looked confused for a moment.

“Why are—” the Necro-Wizard asked, before clapping his mouth shut as he looked up from where he himself had almost fallen.

“Back! Everyone back to the Prison!” Chareese yelled out, putting her own words into action as she turned around and headed back the way she had come.

She glanced behind – and above – her to see a veritable swarm of dungeon monsters streaming through the sky, heading straight for the center of Allroads. While Chareese briefly considered that they might be going for the governmental sector to assassinate the Allroads Council, or just to wreak havoc on the buildings located within – which would indeed hamper the overall running of the city – she was pretty sure that she knew exactly where they were going. There was only the slightest doubt in her mind that they were heading straight for the prison, and from there straight down to their new underground resident’s “dungeon”.

With what she saw bypassing the walls entirely (to be fair, quite a few were shot out of the air by those protecting the walls, but many more made it through unscathed), Fred and those with him wouldn’t live long. Chareese fleetingly thought that would only be fitting, as he was – by his own admission – the one that had caused the invasion by these dungeon monsters in the first place; it didn’t take long for her to dismiss that potential outcome, for a couple of reasons.

As she started to outdistance all but the Scout-based governmental guards running with her, the first reason was at the forefront of her mind. Chareese passed through the gates of the governmental compound and pulled out her bladed staff, reaching the entrance to the Prison just seconds before the first large wasps, flying demons and devils, disgusting imps, and even a few barely visible spectral ghosts descended from nearly 100 feet above. Activating her Whip of Justice and holding it in her left hand, she sent it flying forward, wrapping around a speedy imp up front of the aerial monster wave that didn’t even seem to see her there.

Chareese yanked the Whip down, which had the effect of nearly slicing the Dark-aligned monster in half as it was smashed against the ground, where it broke apart and dissolved away into nothing fairly

quickly. “It’s bad enough—” she began, slicing with her bladed staff at a large wasp that got near— “that someone—” she almost lost her balance as the blade sheared through the flying bug with almost no resistance— “broke out earlier—” she caught her balance and flung up her whip, catching a succubus around the neck just as the demon woman was trying to snap her own bladed whip at Chareese— “and I’m not about to—” she pulled the whip to the left, causing the succubus to collide with a nearby red devil holding a pitchfork of all things— “let anything break *into* the prison!” The two monsters tangled their wings up with each other and fell to the ground, and Chareese deactivated her Whip. The rest of the guards following her quickly dispatched them, and the Inquisitor turned to the rest of the attacking force.

The sky seemed to darken as hundreds or even thousands of flying dungeon monsters descended on the Prison compound; fortunately, none of them seemed to be particularly powerful. Most of those she saw she hadn’t fought against in decades, if not centuries; she was used to stronger, larger, and more dangerous monsters in her all-too-infrequent forays into dungeons nowadays. Despite their less than stellar strength – and unlikely ability to actually harm her seriously individually – there was something to be said for numbers.

And there was no way she was going to let them get past her.

If there was one failing about herself that she could admit – it was pride. The fact that someone had escaped during her watch over the Allroads Governmental Prison was a blow to that pride, never mind that it was through some extenuating circumstances (i.e. Fred could build a dungeon). Despite the reality that the escapees weren’t technically in the prison anymore, she took her job seriously; one of the tenets of the job was to ensure that no harm came to those within their care, even if they were to

be executed the next day. Theirs was a rule-laden society, and it worked – even those that complained about so many restrictions couldn’t deny that Allroads was safer, more prosperous, and better organized than any other city in the world. Or as much of the world that was known.

If she allowed the monsters inside willy-nilly, they could potentially harm the non-combat-oriented staff they had on hand, or even harm the other prisoners they were holding – and if they made it all the way down to Fred and his dungeon, *Chareese* would be responsible for their deaths. Sentence hadn’t been passed down on them quite yet, and if the Inquisitor was a stickler for anything, it was to do everything by the book – even in the middle of a crisis like a dungeon monster invasion.

Out of the corner of her eye, Chareese saw Agelstein dump out a massive pile of bones from his Pocket Interface Bag, while tossing frightfully accurate Power Blasts out towards the incoming monsters. One after another, a neon-blue light emerged from his hand and shot out toward the flying creatures, blasting some almost entirely in half in the blink of an eye; Chareese knew from experience that he couldn’t keep that kind of barrage up long, and he was barely making a dent in the approaching force.

“There’s too many! Everyone inside! We’ll fight them from inside the hallways,” she yelled out while knocking two more imps away, killing one and smacking the other one nearly 30 feet away. Looking around she saw that there were two Scout-based Spy classes with her (with long-range attack capability), while the others were variations of Fighters; with a quick shout, she sent everyone through the Prison entrance where they would be able to set up an effective barricade in the small hallways, where flight wouldn’t help the monsters much.

No one argued with her (not that she thought they would), though her second-in-command didn’t seem to hear her. “Agel – get inside!”

Spinning her bladed staff in a complicated blur of defensive whirls – made much easier by decades of practice – she managed to intercept a few monsters heading for the Necro-Wizard, who had his hands held out facing his now-massive pile of bones.

“Ten more seconds!” he shouted, which frustrated Chareese to no end. *This is no time to be disobeying orders!*

Regardless of his insubordination, she knew there was no changing his mind short of grabbing and throwing him bodily over her shoulder – which probably wouldn’t work out very well. A stab by a pitchfork into her back when she was distracted hurt just enough to let her know that – although they were quite easy to kill – they could definitely do some damage to her if she were overwhelmed; Agelstein was a bit squishier than even she was, and couldn’t withstand too much of an onslaught.

So, knowing that she had to buy some time for the Necro-Wizard to finish whatever spell he was trying to cast, Chareese used a spell of her own. After slicing another large wasp bug out of the air, she stabbed her bladed staff into the ground, and it stood straight up, a good six inches buried in the ground. She took both of her hands and placed them together, before spreading them apart as wide as she could, all the while activating her Revealing Light spell. A blinding – to others, at least – burst of light erupted out of her body, blasting out 100 feet in every direction.

Normally, she used the Revealing Light spell as part of her Inquisitor class to reveal hidden areas and traps within dungeons; the light would find anything previously hidden and highlight it for nearly a minute before it disappeared. However, it also had a known side effect of damaging Dark-based monsters – though the damage was typically inconsequential when used against the stronger ones she was used to going up against. Against the weaker flying creatures diving down to invade the

Prison, though, it was more than enough to destroy all of the demons, devils, imps, and even the spectral ghosts that were within range of her light blast.

When the light faded after a moment, Chareese saw all of the Dark monsters practically dissolve in mid-air, most of them not even hitting the ground before they disappeared completely. With just that one spell, she had killed over a hundred of the enemy, though there were still about a dozen non-Dark-based flying insects still nearby, completely unscathed from her light attack. Yanking the bladed staff out of the ground, she twirled it around just in time to slice off the stinger of a wasp trying to imbed itself in her face; with another quick turn of the staff, she bisected the rest of the bug and intercepted the other surviving wasps before they could attack Agelstein and interrupt his spell.

Her deft movements and strength made short work of the monsters, but when she looked up, the flood of enemies seemed unending. “We have to go!” she shouted, rushing over to her second-in-command’s side, prepared to forcefully remove him despite his protests.

“One more second...done!” he said back, his voice hard to hear over the buzzing and flapping of wings heading their way.

The massive pile of bones in front of Agelstein dimly glowed for just a moment to Chareese’s sight before disappearing, and then they began to quickly move, attaching to one another through the spell that the Necro-Wizard had imbued into them. Her second-in-command slumped over a bit in what appeared to be exhaustion, so Chareese picked him up, threw him over her shoulder, and then ran with him towards the entrance, where a few monsters were already starting to fly inside.

“This better be worth it!” she said, using her staff to knock aside a demon in her way. As soon as she stepped over the threshold to the Prison,

she was happy to see that the guards were already set up to block the relatively narrow hallway using a combination of shields and large two-handed weapons. They could only set up two across, but the front line was braced while squatting down, allowing those behind to attack over their heads. The formation essentially funneled the few flying monsters that had already entered the hallway into a killing zone that the Spies near the back were taking advantage of with their enhanced throwing knife abilities.

They spread apart enough for her to squeeze through when she got to them, after watching them handily take down everything that entered within seconds. When she was far enough down the hallway that she felt safe enough to put Agelstein down, she did so.

“That was a highly foolish stunt out there, Agel—” she said, beginning to lay into him for his insubordination, but then something out of the corner of her eyes caught her attention.

Outside the entrance – the doors were flung wide open, as she forgot to close them when she came in – she saw a portion of some sort of skeleton creation standing in front of the entryway. It had two beefy legs that appeared fused to the ground and unable to move, which supported its massive chest and even more massive arms, though it didn’t have anything resembling a head; essentially, it was just two bony skeletal fists of destruction that was laying into the approaching monsters with surprising effectiveness.

“What is *that*?” she asked, amazed. Logically, Chareese knew it had to have been made by the Necro-Wizard, but she’d never seen something like it before.

Agelstein seemed to have recovered from the rapid expenditure of Power his creation must’ve required. He stood up straight and answered her calmly. “It’s a stationary Skeletal Behemoth; I’ve never really had a

chance to use it before now, because it doesn't do much good in a dungeon. It's too big to fit in some of the rooms, and it can't move from where it gets placed; that, and it's rather weak and can't withstand much punishment from the monsters that we usually go up against. Also, the long casting time for the spell isn't the best when up against a time crunch – which most dungeons definitely qualify for. Against these weaker monsters, though, it works exceptionally well.”

Chareese couldn't help but agree; the behemoth was pounding anything that came close to it into oblivion, destroying one monster after another with each wave of its arms. Even so, it couldn't hope to get them all; dozens of imps, wasps, and demons managed to sneak by it, entering the Prison hallway – where her team of guards was set up to take them down with efficiency. Without the skeleton outside the entrance, however, they would've been a bit overwhelmed, and casualties would probably be likely.

“How long can you maintain that thing?” she asked, worried for when his Power ran out.

“Not too long, unfortunately; I've got about...19 minutes before I'm completely tapped out.”

Just under 20 minutes sounds like a lot of time, but then again, there were a lot of monsters out there. Based on the strength of the flying monsters attacking the Prison – or lack thereof – she wasn't too worried about the city walls. They would likely be fine, even if they had a greater quantity attacking them; they had many more defenders up on top of the walls than were probably needed.

“Let's just hope that's long enough,” she said, using her Gift of Impartiality healing spell to heal one of the guards up front that got a wasp stinger plunged through his eye. *Because if it's not, then we could be in*

trouble. If the monsters managed to make it past them – and down into the dungeon below, killing Fred and destroying his dungeon – then Chareese had a feeling that things would go from bad to worse.

Because that was the second reason she refused to let the monsters through to kill the half human/dungeon person down below. From her quick – and frankly strange – conversation with him when he confessed to being some sort of dungeon maker, she got the feeling that if his “territory” disappeared, the people of Allroads could be in real danger. As much as the whole situation confused her, she knew for a fact how vindictive the nearby dungeons could be when it came to righting the “wrongs” done to them.

Chareese remembered a situation – centuries ago – when a town was wiped out completely for trying to protect an individual that had just *touched* a dungeon’s core, without actually damaging it. She couldn’t even imagine what would happen to Allroads for harboring someone who had destroyed not one, but *three* cores, if he was telling the truth. She couldn’t help but think that if they had just allowed the monsters to enter the city and do their thing, then they would’ve been safe; however, she couldn’t imagine a single person in the city – non-combatants included – that would’ve been ok letting them invade without putting up a fight. She could *almost* empathize with the dungeons that Adventurers invaded; they were protecting their home, using whatever they had at their disposal to do that.

Of course, if the dungeons really wanted to protect themselves, they wouldn’t have so much awesome loot that could be earned from delving through.

That was besides the point, however; even if the people of Allroads had all of the information that she had and the time to formulate and decide on that particular course of action, she doubted the monsters would just... go home. It was likely that many people would die as a result of even

temporarily protecting Fred, which was something that Chareese wouldn't allow.

As their course was now set – unwittingly as it was by most of the residents of Allroads – Chareese had to ensure that the one who caused the disaster survived long enough to get them out of the situation. While she wasn't exactly sure how that was going to happen, she was prepared to have a *long* talk with him when the current crisis passed.

18 more minutes...

Chapter 4

Fred watched in awe as hundreds of Adventurers around the top of the wall unleashed their long-range spells and abilities upon the teeming horde of Dungeon Defenders as soon as they came into range. Hundreds of various creatures died as a result, but even with their destruction, there barely seemed to be a dent in the forces sent against them. What was curious, however, was how...weak...the Defenders were. When he looked at them closer and could pick out individual ones, he realized that most of them were only Level 1 – their base level, and the weakest they could ever be.

While some of them had stronger base stats than others, none of them were particularly threatening by themselves to those on the wall; it was only when they attacked as a group as they were that they were a danger. While an S-Rated adventurer could shrug off many of their attacks, hundreds or *thousands* of strikes against them would result in serious injuries or even death. Which made their pause and encirclement of the entire city puzzling; if Fred was in charge of the attacking dungeon monster army, he would've kept them attacking a single place along the wall, putting all of their massed weight behind a point that could only be defended by relatively few Humans at a time.

When they were all spread out, though, it made the job much easier for the Adventurers on the wall. Fred had a brief spike of fear when he saw the aerial portion of the army fly straight up when they got to the wall and bypass many of the defenders; he soon saw the Inquisitor and her group of guards turn back, though, and as they began to protect the entrance of the Prison he breathed easier. He heard her say that she wasn't about to let

anyone break *into* her place of jurisdiction, which made him feel better about their chances of survival – and made him feel a little guilty about breaking *out* of the Prison. *Couldn't be helped.*

He turned his attention back to the walls when the woman and a unique skeleton construct blocking the entrance seemed to have everything in hand. Fred was heartened to see how easily the Humans were tearing the monster army apart, blasting them with spells, skewering them with arrows, or slicing them apart if they made it to the top of the walls. The Giant Webspinners – using the webs they were able to quickly expel out from their bodies – shot strands of webbing towards the top of the walls, creating springy ramps for the others to use to reach the top. Of course, this didn't last long as almost every Mage-based Class up on the walls immediately burned them with their spells, causing many monsters to fall to the ground or catch fire along with them. This still didn't deter the attacking Dungeon Defenders, who were incessantly trying to reach the top without care for their own safety.

As hundreds of different abilities were used all at once, Fred eagerly tried to learn how to use them. However, there was so much going on that the entire battlefield was a mass of Essence, Mana, and Power expenditures that after less than a minute it was all jumbled up and indecipherable. Even when he concentrated on a single Channeler Class he saw wiping out masses of the enemy with channeled spells, he couldn't make out anything specific – it was like the city and its surrounding environs were foggy with so much energy and Mana floating around that he couldn't see anything clearly.

Although, when he looked closer at how much Mana there was floating around in comparison to how many Defenders had been destroyed, it was nowhere near where he thought it should be. *“Why isn't there a lot of*

Mana being left behind by these Defenders? Even at Level 1, they should've been infused with extra Mana to allow them to travel into my territory, even for a short time," Fred asked Deecy through his Mana Communication skill. The Dire Wolf thought about it for a moment before she answered.

"I...believe that the Dungeon Defenders are sustained by their close proximity to the Convergence. My best guess is that they only require the smallest amount of Mana to bring them into existence, and their continued existence is supplied by the elemental concentrations surrounding the city. That could also explain why there were so many to begin with, because it would still take quite a lot of Mana to create such an army if they were to be sent somewhere else."

"Ok, that might explain it, then. But why are they so weak to begin with? The Cores should've known that these weaker Defenders wouldn't do much good against so many Adventurers."

"Based on how quickly they responded, I'm going to guess that they were trying to catch everyone unprepared and to overwhelm the defenses with numbers before anything more permanent could be set up against them. That, and they reacted both out of anger and likely fear for their Convergence that they didn't stop to think about it before they sent their armies."

That...wasn't good news. The fact that what they were seeing now was just a...*what was it called?...oh, yeah...* "knee-jerk reaction", didn't bode well for the future. If the three factions actually got their stuff

together and sent an army with some *thought* behind it, then they could be in trouble. As it was now, though, not even a single person inside the city had been hurt yet, though with the teeming masses of Defenders still trying to get inside, it could be just a matter of time before that happened.

Just as he thought that, one of the Giant Webspinners shot out a web that hit one of the Adventurers on the edge of the wall; that by itself didn't do much, but when three Charging Boars jumped on the wide web strand in order to climb up, the combined weight of them all managed to pull the poor Elementalist off of the wall and down to the ground below. Fred could tell right away that the woman was injured severely from the fall, but they weren't life-threatening injuries; he also expected that would change when those below noticed her helpless on the ground and attacked, but they did nothing of the sort.

Apparently, they were so focused on reaching Fred that unless someone was standing directly in their way, they ignored them.

The city defenders had everything in hand, at least until a few Rockworms and Stone Golems managed to make it to the wall unhindered. As soon as they approached the base of the wall, the Stone Golems immediately started to smash their bodies against the tough stone wall, chipping it slowly away. Their attacks damaged their forms as well, but there were a lot of them; all over the wall, the sounds of stone smashing against stone echoed in a deafening cacophony of noise, and the wall even perceptively shook in a few spots.

The Rockworms also took part in the attack, tunneling under the ground near the base of the wall; Fred looked underground with his Territorial Sight and saw that they were very slowly burrowing into the foundation of the wall, creating tiny cracks in the stone and weakening it. Based on both their progress – as slow as it was – it would take at least half

a day for that to become too much of an issue for the integrity of the wall, however. That was further slowed as Mage-based Classes braved the edge of the wall and shot their spells downward, blasting apart the Golems in shards of stone that quickly dissolved into the ground and released some Earth Mana.

The Rockworms, unfortunately, were completely ignored; since they weren't as visible as the still-attacking Dungeon Defenders that seemed endless, the large worms continued to wear away at the wall's foundation – for the most part undetected. There were a few people on the wall that had seen them descend into the ground, of course; however, most of the action was still taking place aboveground, and the Rockworms were – in the heat of battle – forgotten.

As the monsters died by the score in front of the walls of the city, the Dark and Nature-based flying Defenders had been largely ignored after the first wave was through and above them; the Adventurers and guards on the walls couldn't afford to divide their attention between the ground and the airborne forces. As a result, 98% of the flying creatures arrived at the Prison without harm, where they were smashed flat or flung away to crash into the side of a building by the massive skeleton the Necro-Wizard had created out of a giant pile of bones. *I need to figure out how he did that*, Fred couldn't help but think. He wished he had seen the process in which it had been done, but he had been distracted by everything else that had been going on.

As the majority of the Dungeon Defenders outside were winding down to just a trickle – still with no actual deaths on the side of the Humans on the wall (the Elementalist that had fallen earlier had been healed and hauled back up) – there were still thousands of aerial monsters trying to get

into the prison above Fred's dungeon. Fortunately, the defensive skeleton was doing a great job—

Suddenly, the massive bone creation collapsed into hundreds of individual pieces; zooming into the hallway where the guards, the Inquisitor, and the Necro-Wizard were located, Fred saw that the latter had collapsed, his Power completely spent. As he watched, however, Agelstein Periwynn's Power crept back up, as his regeneration was quite impressive. Which, given that he was an A-9th-Rated Adventurer that had a focus on Power instead of anything else, it made a lot of sense. Still, he wasn't going to be casting another spell to reanimate those bones anytime soon – even if he had a remarkable capacity of Power and Power regeneration in comparison to someone like Fred.

With the protection outside the entrance gone, the flying monsters hovering in the Governmental Center Courtyard started to flood inside, almost knocking each other out of the way to enter the relatively narrow doorway. While they were low Level and not very strong, the sheer quantity of them was soon to be an issue to those defending the upper Prison hallway. Fred knew that they were going to need help...and soon.

Opening up his eyes, he looked at his friends standing around him looking worried; Fred quickly relayed what was happening, and what he thought needed to be done. Eisa and Regnark immediately agreed, and he sent them on their way; he stayed back with Deecy and the townspeople for now, as Fred didn't think it would be wise to leave his dungeon at the moment.

His Shards, on the other hand, were quite capable of leaving and working autonomously – especially as they were just about to get an upgrade.

Shard Status
Eisa Howells
Elemental Origin: Earth Shard Level: 4 Next Mana Threshold: 1000 Earth Earth Mana: 920/920
Defender Creation Options
Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Earth Mana) Stone Golem (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Earth Mana) Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana)
Special Abilities
Earth Elemental Form (Activation Cost: 15 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 2 Mana per minute) Earth's Renewal (Activation Cost: 5 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1-5 Mana per minute)

Shard Status
Regnark McDonald
Elemental Origin: Dark Shard Level: 2 Next Mana Threshold: 250 Dark Dark Mana: 100/100
Necromancy Options
Permanent Reanimation (Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana)
Special Abilities
Summoning Circle (Base Cost: 30 Dark Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Dark Mana per hour)

At some point over the last few days, Eisa had reported that she was very close to hitting Shard Level 5, as she almost had a maximum of 1000 Earth Mana – which was increased over their travels the last few days. Fred's big friend, however, was still at Shard Level 2, as they had just

barely unlocked his Shard Status screen before they were captured by the Allroads government. It was about time they changed that.

Fortunately, there happened to be a lot of free-floating Mana of different types just floating all over his territory.

As they raced up the tunnel Fred had hastily dug down from the Government Prison cells, he started to gather up blobs of Earth Mana from the slain Dungeon Defenders attacking Allroads. When he had a fairly large blob – not nearly all there was, though, because it was actually fairly difficult to separate it all from the maelstrom of Power, Essence, and Mana hovering over the battlefield – he mentally brought it to where Eisa was rushing up ahead of Regnark on the way to the surface.

Without thinking about it, he slammed the blob that was larger than her entire body into her, and she cried out in...*pain?*...before slamming face-first into the dirt tunnel they had almost finished traversing. She was stiff as a board for a moment, before her body relaxed enough for her to be picked up by the trailing Regnark.

“Oh...my...Fred...what did you just...do to me?” she asked the air, likely knowing that he could hear her. She moaned loudly (in what he assumed was pain) as she struggled to walk again, breathing hard at the same time – almost like she had just run nonstop for an hour or more.

Fred wished he could apologize for making her fall on her face, but he still hadn’t been able to communicate to her with his Mana Communication skill yet. Though, if he remembered what Deecy said weeks ago, that might change once he got it up to Expert.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth-Dark
Core Age: 2
Core Structure Level: 20

Fire Mana: 251/285 Water Mana: 251/284 Nature Mana: 251/284 Earth Mana: 251/284 Dark Mana: 251/284 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 42542 Unconverted Essence: 14322
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 36% Expert Mana Conversion: 51% Expert Core Crystallization: 15% Intermediate Mana Communication: 95% Intermediate Defender Creation: 99% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 95% Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 35% Intermediate Dungeon Core Absorption: 23% Intermediate Dungeon Creation: 28% Novice Essence Conversion: 13% Novice Defense Creation: 98%
Dungeon Information
Maximum Dungeon Rating: B-10th Current Dungeon Rating: N/A (No Core Room) Current Mana Upkeep: 45 Unconverted Number of Rooms: 2 Number of Defenders: 0 (0 Mana) Number of Defenses: 0 (0 Mana) Defender/Defense Range Limit: 65000—72000 Mana Reward Count: 0 Points Reward Range Limit: 43000—50000 Points (Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)

His Intermediate Mana Communication was at 95% – close, but not quite there yet. Regardless, Fred saw that Eisa had recovered quite well from the massive infusion of Earth Mana, though her cheeks were quite flushed, her knees looked a bit weak, and her breathing was still rough; fortunately, Regnark was there to move her along and even carried her when she started to flag a little. *That must have really hurt when all that slammed into her; I need to remember not to give her so much at once in the future.*

Fred then started to accumulate Dark Mana for his larger friend to increase the big man's Shard Level, hopefully unlocking some additional abilities and allowing him to make use of his current ones. Learning from what happened with Eisa, however, he kept the blobs much smaller; he figured that a steady infusion of little impacts of Dark Mana wouldn't hurt nearly as much. As he smacked the comparatively tiny orbs of Mana into his friend, he was rewarded by a big smile from Regnark, signaling that he had succeeded in not harming him.

I really have to apologize to Eisa later – I didn't mean to hurt her like that.

He put that out of his mind as he continued to gather Dark Mana and send it into the big man, until he estimated that it was just a little more than Eisa had received. Regnark seemed to be able to absorb a lot more without difficulty, and hopefully it would put him on equal footing with the woman, who had a bit of a head start in her existence as a Shard.

He finished just as they reached the top of the long staircase leading down, both of them seemingly energized by the infusion of new Mana. Luckily, all of the doors were left unlocked; if Fred remembered correctly, the Inquisitor and the others had left in a bit of a hurry earlier. As his friends rounded the corner of the hallway leading to the besieged Allroads Governmental employees, he mentally stepped back to take in the whole situation, ready to create some of his own defenders if the need arose. He hadn't done so before because he didn't want to freak out the Humans helping to defend him, with more "monsters" appearing in their midst out of nowhere with no explanation; if they saw that there was similar help coming from actual *people*, Fred was hoping they would be more accepting.

There was an expression that he had heard the Humans use before, which hadn't made sense until now: "any port in a storm". Fred thought

that was appropriate for the situation, because it was practically raining flying Dungeon Defenders in the hallway.

He smiled as his friends shouted that they were there to help...and watched things unfold with rapt attention.

Chapter 5

Regnark watched, surprised, as Eisa stumbled on her way up the tunnel from the impromptu dungeon that Fred had made earlier. Actually, *stumbled* wasn't quite the right word; the woman went full-on stiff as a board from one second to another and collapsed on her front side without even attempting to catch herself. When he got to her and helped her up, he saw that she was extremely flushed and breathing hard, as if she went from a careful jog up the tunnel to the end of running a marathon in less than a second.

She moaned loudly as she got up, and said, "Oh...my...Fred...what did you just...do to me?" From her words and what she was likely experiencing physically, Regnark began to have his suspicions of what had just happened.

He had experienced the same feeling that came from Fred giving him Dark Mana; it was...slightly pleasurable...as if he was eating a great meal after a period of practically starving for food. Of course, the transfer of Mana from Fred to Regnark had been small and gradual, so it wasn't too extreme.

From what he imagined just happened to Eisa, however, he figured she had been hit with *a lot* of Earth Mana all at once, more than she could handle – which was why her body locked up. In fact, with all of that Mana entering her body all at once, the experience probably felt very similar to an intense—

He pushed the thought away before he could finish it, as he was busy with trying to get the weak-kneed and slightly confused woman walking again. He eventually had to pick her up and carry her a little bit of

the way before she protested and asked to be let down; by the time they reached the prison cells above she was able to walk – no, *run* – again with what appeared to be an extra boost of energy.

Which he quickly felt himself as he caught small orbs of Dark Mana smacking into him from all sides, in a constant-yet-measured stream. He smiled as he experienced the same pleasure from absorbing the Mana into his body that he had felt before, though the feeling was *sharply* increased from Fred’s experiments before. It was almost more than he could comfortably handle, but the measured pace that it was slammed into his body was enough to energize him and made him move even faster.

In what felt like no time at all, the two reached the top of the staircase and all infusions of Dark Mana into his body had stopped. Before they went through the unlocked door into what Fred said earlier was the Prison building’s hallway, he stopped Eisa and said, “Let’s check and see what’s changed.” She nodded and immediately had a faraway look in her eyes, as if she was looking at something only she could see – which she was. Regnark was glad to see that she had...recovered...from the experience earlier. *I’m glad Fred learned from that and didn’t hit me with all of that Mana at once.*

Shard Status
Regnark McDonald
Elemental Origin: Dark Shard Level: 5 Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Dark Dark Mana: 1340/1340
Necromancy Options
Permanent Reanimation (Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana) Convert Undead (Base Cost: 5 Dark Mana, Base Success Chance: 80%)

Special Abilities

Summoning Circle (Base Cost: 30 Dark Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Dark Mana per hour)

Shadow Meld (Cost: 50 Dark Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1 Dark Mana per minute)

Siphon Unlife (Cost: 10 Dark Mana per second, only usable upon summoned/converted minions)

Now that's more like it. He still wasn't exactly sure what the **Summoning Circle** special ability was, but he now had a better inkling of what it did from his new **Siphon Unlife** ability; he could apparently summon "minions", whatever those were, and then – if he understood it correctly when he thought about it – suck the life out of them to heal himself. The fact that it was called "unlife" made him feel a little strange about the whole thing, but he decided to reserve judgement until he had used it.

And not only did he get a little more information about his **Summoning Circle**, but he also received another Necromancy Option called **Convert Undead**. From the feeling he got when he concentrated on it, he knew it was something that could be used to *attempt* to permanently take control of an undead (not a demon or devil-type monster, though); the stronger the undead, the more Mana it would take, and the chances of succeeding went down on stronger undead. He wasn't exactly sure how quickly the success chance plummeted in relation to how strong the undead was, however; it was something he'd have to experiment with, he assumed.

Lastly, he saw that he also received another ability called **Shadow Meld**, which essentially allowed him to cloak himself in nearby shadows, making him both harder to see and providing a measure of protection against physical attacks. Regnark got the impression that the more Dark Mana he spent on the ability, the stronger the protection would be, but at the

moment there wasn't a specific "chart" or anything to go by to see how much defense that would be. For all he knew, spending 500 Dark Mana as opposed to the base cost of 50 was only marginally better, instead of being 10 times better in terms of expense. It was just another thing he'd have to experiment with.

All of that took only seconds to get a better understanding of, and even though he hurried, Eisa was already looking impatiently at him. "I received another Special Ability called Stone Barrier – tell me about yours as we move!" she said without further explanation, before heading towards the door.

Regnark was only able to explain a portion of his new abilities by the time they rounded the corner of the hallway, only to find themselves in the middle of a narrow battlefield. He saw the woman that had sent them down to the prison cells – and then later followed them into Fred's dungeon – cracking a whip made of what appeared to be pure light over the heads of the nearby guards. With each strike she was able to destroy or severely damage the flying monsters trying to batter through and above the obviously tiring tanks out front, and she appeared to be exhausted as well. A man standing next to her was firing spells that hit those he was aiming at with incredible aim, but he was bent over in exhaustion – signaling that he was suffering from Power fatigue (using his Power up completely and then doing so repeatedly afterward).

His old instincts kicked in and Regnark shouted, "Reinforcements coming in!" He and Eisa ran forward to help, only to be rounded on by the woman wielding the whip made of light, which made him instinctively flinch as it got a little too close to him when she turned.

"Get back! This is no place for those of your Rating!" she yelled at them, before turning back to the defense of the hallway. The temporary

interruption meant that one of the succubi was able to get her own whip around the arm of one of the tanks out front; the demon yanked on it and unbalanced the poor guy until he fell on his front, who immediately suffered under the blows and stings of some big wasps, a few demons, and a handful of imps. It wasn't enough to kill him immediately but given another few seconds he might get injured someplace that could wind up fatal.

Out of the corner of his eye, Regnark saw Eisa raise her hand and a slab of stone essentially materialized in the hallway in front of the besieged guards, which cut off all but the top 2 feet of the hallway from the teeming horde intent on their destruction. It pushed away those monsters in its path and didn't actually harm them, with the result that a good dozen or so imps, demons, and wasps were left on the defenders' side, most of which were attacking the downed tank up front. The Earth Shard raised her hand again and the man on the ground stiffened for a moment before he appeared to recover a little, though the press of monsters attacking wouldn't allow him to get up quite yet.

More of the enemy were flying or crawling through the gap near the ceiling, but at least the flow of them had been severely lessened. The woman in charge took advantage of the slight respite and barked orders. "Get him up and dispatch those attacking him! Then fall back and regroup!"

Regnark turned to Eisa and asked, "Can that barrier go up any more?"

She looked strained, and immediately shook her head. "No, it won't let me close off the hallway entirely; it's almost like it follows the same rules Fred told us about with his dungeon construction. I tried to bring it all the way to the top, sealing off the hallway completely, but something

stopped it from going all the way up, no matter how much Mana I attempted to push into it. And we better figure out something soon, because it won't last long."

He looked back at the wall and he could see cracks already spiderwebbing along the thin stone barrier, which only confirmed her words. Fortunately, it was still standing long enough for the guards to destroy the monsters attacking the injured man and send him to the back, all the while fighting the additional ones making their way over the gap.

I guess it's my turn.

Seeing an opportunity, Regnark saw one of the wispy ghosts – that he remembered were called Revenants – *phase* through the center of the barrier, making the slab of stone essentially worthless as protection against it. He knew from experience that normal physical attacks couldn't hurt it, and only spells, some abilities, or enchanted weapons could even touch the monster. The *undead* monster.

Before anyone could attack it – he was almost positive that the guards had enchanted weapons or at least some abilities that could harm the ghostly monster – Regnark concentrated on his **Convert Undead** Necromancy Option and was surprised when he looked at the Revenant right afterward.

Convert Undead: Spectral Revenant (Cost: 45 Dark Mana, Success Chance: 62%)

It wasn't another status screen that popped up or anything like that, it was almost like it was information sent directly to his mind when he looked at the undead. All of that happened within a split second during the battle, and he didn't hesitate to activate the **Convert Undead** option.

Almost against his volition (he thought he could've stopped himself if he cared to), Regnark pulled back his arm as if he was about to throw something, a small ball of Dark Mana formed inside his hand – seemingly seeping from his skin – and then he threw that darkly glowing orb forward. It flew through the air faster almost than he could see, impacting the... *Spectral Revenant, I guess it's called...* in its barely visible front; the Dark Mana practically blew apart, but instead of going everywhere, it acted more like an ooze that rapidly covered the Revenant in glowing darkness.

The impact also had the benefit of stopping its forward progress, so that it was out of range of the tanks still fighting off the few incoming demons and wasps crawling over the quickly breaking wall. Precious seconds passed, and the Dark Mana coating the ghostly monster faded away...and Regnark thought that it had failed. Suddenly, he felt a connection form between them so quickly that it was almost like being hit in the chest, and he took a step back.

Of course, that was precisely when the guards finished dispatching the monsters nearest them and stepped forward to destroy his new acquisition. “Wait! Don’t kill that ghost – it’s mine now!” he yelled, rushing forward to be heard better. Either they didn’t hear him or didn’t believe what he said, because they continued to advance. With a quick thought toward his captured “minion”, he sent it back towards the wall and up near the gap, where it covered a good portion of it. None of the monsters seemed to care that it was there or even attempted to fight the Revenant (which made sense, as he didn’t think they could actually harm it), but when they literally passed *through* his minion, they suffered from its touch.

Ghostly monsters like his Spectral Revenant – and even some corporeal undead – were dangerous not because they did copious amounts

of physical damage, but for another reason entirely: they sapped the Stamina from your body upon their touch, and some even sucked the Vitality straight from your bones. Although this Spectral Revenant didn't suck the life from them, the demons, devils, succubi, and wasps that passed through it became very weak as their strength was stolen from them, causing many of them to lose the ability to keep themselves airborne once they got past his minion.

Unfortunately, that didn't last long. Three more Spectral Revenants soon appeared, and contrary to what the other monsters did, they went straight for Regnark's own Revenant. It turned out that they *could* attack and damage his captured minion, and they did so quickly and efficiently through the use of some sort of spectral force he couldn't see. He attempted to have his minion fight back, but it didn't get very far; within seconds it was dead, and it disappeared into more Dark Mana, though it didn't appear to be nearly as much as he had spent on converting it to his side.

Rather than attempt that again, knowing the chance of success, Regnark instead focused on his **Summoning Circle** Special Ability. He instinctively turned around toward the empty back half of the hallway and activated it using the base amount of Dark Mana required, not knowing *exactly* what it would do, but having a general idea. His hands again moved of their own volition, spreading apart just enough to form two equally sized balls of Dark Mana. He then brought his hands together in a sharp clap, which melded the two orbs of Mana together and propelled it forward, until it splashed against the ground.

A glowing black circle approximately 3 feet across formed on the ground in front of him; when he looked at it closely, the circle created a hole in the floor that almost appeared to be depthless, though he knew that

was impossible. Regardless, it was impressive-looking, but he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with it.

“What...is that?” someone near him asked, sounding fascinated for some reason. Regnark looked over to see the caster that had been throwing spells at the flying monsters when he had first gotten there, and who appeared to be trying to recover from his Power fatigue.

Just past the caster, Regnark spotted Eisa pointing towards the stone barrier she had erected earlier – which he could see was just about to shatter and collapse – and three large stone golems (larger than he usually saw) appeared where she pointed. “These are mine! They’re here to help!” she shouted when the guards out front jumped in surprise at their appearance and made to attack them. Knowing that he had a few moments before the barrier fell and Eisa’s new “Defenders” joined the fray, Regnark answered the caster.

“I actually have no idea – this is the first time I’ve ever used this Special Ability, so I’m eager to see what it does.”

“What do you mean by—” the man was asking, confused, but Regnark ignored him as he concentrated on the Summoning Circle he had established.

Summoning Circle:

Exchange Dark Mana to summon a vast variety of available demon and devil minions with blueprints acquired through conquest.

- ***Each summoned minion is limited in range to the Summoning Circle and will only exist as long as the Circle is active***
- ***There is no limit to the number of minions that can be summoned at one time***

- *When destroyed, minions automatically return a fixed percentage of the Dark Mana exchanged for their service; if minion is not destroyed, it may be reabsorbed into the Summoning Circle for a full refund (must be done before the Circle is banished)*
- *Larger Summoning Circles (with a higher initial cost and upkeep) can summon stronger minions and have extended range; Circles are also fixed and cannot be moved from their original location*
- *Minions summoned through the Summoning Circle are always at their base level, though this can change through future Special Abilities*

Current Summoned Minion Range: 50 feet

Current Returned Mana Upon Minion Destruction: 50%

Current Minion Summon Rating(s): G-F

Available Summons:

- **Lesser Imp (Cost: 2 Dark Mana)**

Regnark quickly glossed over most of the information that he saw, only catching the part where there was no limit to the number of minions he could summon. He was a little disappointed that he could only summon some Lesser Imps as minions, but at 2 Dark Mana a piece, he had enough Mana available to summon over 600 of them, even considering the warning Eisa and Deecy had given him about keeping Mana in reserve – in order to stay living. He didn't need quite that many, however, so he instead settled on a good round 100 of the Lesser Imps.

“Well, here goes nothing...” he said, interrupting the caster who was still talking to him; Regnark realized that his entire perusal of the Summoning Circle had only taken a little more than two seconds. He knew he would have to dig into it more later, but for now he consciously pulled 200 Dark Mana from his body and flung it toward the circle, keeping his mind on summoning 100 Imps; it almost felt like he was at a store buying something, exchanging copper or silver pieces for some merchandise. Especially when he saw the large orb of Dark Mana he extracted enter the bottomless void and disappear – just like all his money when he was younger trying to outfit himself for a dungeon run.

As Lesser Imps streamed out of the hole one after another, he smiled at the man standing next to him, his mouth opened in shock. With a mental command, he leaned on the tiny connection he felt with each of his new minions and sent them to the front, shouting at the same time to warn those up front. “These are mine, too!” he yelled, to the further surprise of all those defending in the hallway.

The first of his little army of summoned minions reached the stone barrier just as it finally cracked down the middle and broke apart, dissolving into nothing just like a dungeon monster would when it was killed. There was soon an insane clash of Imps versus the incoming monster army, backed up and supported by Eisa’s large Stone Golems smashing their fists into anything that got by the Imps.

The whole thing – the battle, the Summoning Circle, his minions – was, to put it bluntly...glorious. He actually laughed involuntarily as he summoned another 100 Imps and sent them to crash into the seemingly endless army of flying monsters.

I haven’t had this much fun in years!

Chapter 6

Fred watched the entire fight unfold from his Territorial Sight, ready to jump in when – or *if* – he was needed. However, after seeing what the upgrades to both Eisa and Regnark could do – Eisa able to create a stone barricade (which wasn't necessarily a deadly defense, but it definitely helped in a pinch) and Regnark who appeared able to take control over an enemy undead – he found that he wasn't needed. And, to actually see the “summoning circle” Special Ability that the Dark Shard possessed and hadn't been able to utilize yet was awe inspiring.

By the time there were only a few hundred flying monsters trying to get inside the Prison entrance, many of the Adventurers and Allroads guards near – but not *on* – the walls (which had calmed down after all of the Dungeon Defenders sent by the three factions had been destroyed) had arrived at the Governmental Center to lend a hand. They effectively slaughtered everything still flapping around the Prison, who didn't even put up a fight because they were all intent on getting inside the building. Some damage had been done to the outside of the Prison itself because of the “monsters” trying to get in, but on the whole it was relatively undamaged.

When both sides of the Human forces sandwiched the last of the flying monsters inside the hallway and finished them off, the state of that internal section of the Prison was a different matter entirely. Although the building was constructed of stone, chips and cracks could be seen in it from the abuse the intensely rough battle had on the hallway. Fred watched as Regnark recalled his surviving Imps – there were probably around 30 of them – after one of the outside reinforcements killed one of the flying demons; he immediately sent them back into the summoning circle and they

disappeared, absorbed fully into the dark, bottomless void and Dark Mana was returned straight to the big man.

Fred had seen tiny little specks of Dark Mana being shot into Regnark during the battle whenever one of his Lesser Imps died – *automatically*, without Fred having to do it himself. It was a neat benefit of the Dark Shard's Special Ability, though for some reason it appeared to only be a fraction of what he had put into the summoning. Regardless, it was beneficial to him during the heat of battle not to have to worry about getting his Mana replenished.

Speaking of that, Eisa walked past the Inquisitor and the guards – the latter of whom were silently looking at her with expressions that confused Fred. On the one hand, they appeared grateful that they'd had help from the two Shards; on the other, they almost looked...afraid, for some reason. Chareese the Inquisitor was expressionless as she silently folded her arms and watched Eisa touch and absorb her Level 8 Stone Golems, which had done a remarkable job of defending the hallway and not letting anything through to attack the humans. Agelstein – the Necro-Wizard – was staring at Regnark in what appeared to be awe.

Silence reigned inside the hallway, which was dense with Mana and Essence; seconds later, however, the wispy Essence started to move, flowing into everyone inside the hallway and those outside who had helped with the defense in the Governmental sector. Looking at a few of their Adventurer Statuses, he saw that most everyone got anywhere between 150 to 300 Essence, with the latecomers receiving less and Eisa and Regnark somewhere in the middle. The additional Essence for the big guy actually caused him to increase to the G-2nd-Rating, since that was the first time he had actually participated in a battle that he had killed something after being resurrected into a Shard.

“What? We gained some ‘juice’ from that?” one of the guards near Eisa asked, breaking the silence. “We aren’t even in a dungeon!”

“As far as I understand it, as long as you’re inside a dungeon’s territory when you kill a dungeon monster, you’ll receive essence for killing it,” Eisa said, shocking more than a few who were staring at her in the hallway.

“What do you mean—?”

“Territory? What is—?”

“There’s a dungeon near here?”

The Inquisitor finally decided that she wanted to intervene before things got too out of hand; Chareese walked forward and held out her hands for the questions to stop. “The Allroads Government will be sending out additional information soon; for the moment, we need to ensure the walls are secure. Does anyone know if they are still attacking?”

Fred could’ve told her that the walls were quiet – except for the Rockworms still burrowing into their foundations. Their presence was the reason the massive cloud of Essence was still floating around out there, as typically it was only distributed when there were no more enemies present. It also seemed like everyone had forgotten about them, and since they were out of sight and practically soundless in their burrowing (especially from atop the walls), no one was trying to kill them.

“Deecy? Do you think you can communicate to Eisa and Regnark from here?” he mentally asked the Dire Wolf Pup by his side.

“Of course I can; I’m actually surprised you haven’t asked me before this. What do you want me to relay to them?”

Now Fred felt a little stupid; he should've realized that Deecy's Mana Communication wasn't limited to what she could see, as that would essentially defeat the purpose of the skill in the first place. *"First, can you apologize to Eisa for giving her that Earth Mana all at once and hurting her. Then, can you have her tell the Inquisitor that the walls are now secure, but that there are Rockworms underground that are weakening the foundations of those same walls. I can create some defenders that can take care of them, but I don't want them attacked and killed by those on the walls before they can do their job."*

"Sure, I can do that—wait a minute...how much Earth Mana did you give Eisa 'all at once'?"

Fred had to think about it for a moment before answering. *"I'm not exactly sure, but it was probably right around 4,000 Earth Mana."*

"I think you're going to have to apologize to her in person, because giving that much to her could've killed her. You know how you almost overloaded your Core when you absorbed too much Unconverted Mana not just once, but twice? Think about that for a second."

Deecy was absolutely right. Fred held his head in shame when he realized how close he had come to killing the woman he loved, all because he wasn't thinking about his actions. *"I will, Deecy. Can you at least tell her the rest?"*

The Dire Wolf didn't answer, but she obviously did so because the next thing he knew Eisa was relaying all of the information to Chareese. *"And how, pray tell me, can he know that stuck...where he is right now?"*

she asked, circumventing mentioning his actual location because of the non-governmental Adventurers still filing out of the hallway and back to the city.

Eisa toned her voice low when she answered, keeping with the same clandestine attitude the Inquisitor seemed to want to adopt. “Because he can see *everything* inside of his territory; in fact, he’s probably watching all of this right now.”

That seemed to shock both the woman in charge and the guards still nearby in the hallway that overheard. “Seriously? How *large* is this... territory?” she asked, looking around the hallway as if she could spot Fred spying on her.

Eisa hesitated with her answer, probably because she didn’t know. Fred communicated via Deecy, letting her know that his territory diameter was now approximately 6 miles – with the city of Allroads at the center, of course – which included all of the elemental concentrations in the Convergence. It wasn’t even close to covering all of the Allroads valley, which was approximately 20 miles in diameter, but it enclosed all the most important parts.

“That’s...interesting. Are you saying that all...Dungeon Cores... can see outside of their dungeons into the surrounding area? That goes against most of what we know about them, which I’ll admit, isn’t much.”

Eisa easily answered that with an affirmative – just before two of the guards came up behind Eisa and Regnark and grabbed them firmly by their arms. “Hey, what are you—” Eisa asked, confused, all the while trying – but horribly failing – to break free from their grasp.

“I *should* throw you back in Prison, because you were never officially released,” Chareese said, which caused Fred to tense up and plan how to get them free. “*However...*I’m going to let you go back to your

friend down below, mainly because I don't want wherever I put you to be destroyed again. I don't want you to leave without permission or an escort, as you're too dangerous to be running around the city right now. Talk about what you've done in here is sure to be making the rumor rounds as we speak and having the source of those rumors running around in the open isn't good for anyone," she continued, which made Fred relieved to hear. He was concerned for their safety, and Eisa and Regnark were too different and unusual enough to likely draw some negative attention if they weren't careful. "From this moment on, consider yourself on house – *dungeon*, I suppose – arrest."

The guards let the two Shards go at a signal from the Inquisitor, who walked towards the door outside, now that it had largely cleared out from all of those coming to help as reinforcements. However, before she left the Prison, Chareese stopped and turned around, addressing Eisa and Regnark. "I'm going to the wall to make sure everything is indeed secure. When I get there and it looks good, I'll give a signal to your...*all-seeing* friend down there. He can then do whatever he has to do to get rid of those monsters gnawing at the wall's foundation – and then I'm coming back and we're having a *very* long talk." The Inquisitor turned on her heel and practically ran out the door, heading straight for the northern city wall.

Fred barely noticed as Eisa and Regnark shrugged and headed back down below, but not before the big guy stopped and absorbed every single Dark Mana blob that he could see – which was a considerable amount. There was still a bunch of Nature Mana there as well, but Fred left it alone for the moment; he was just glad that it wasn't actually inside his dungeon, otherwise it would've automatically been sucked up and sent to his Cores, which ran counter to what he wanted to do with it.

No, he didn't pay much attention to them, because something else caught his Territorial "eye", so to speak. While Fred had already noticed that the nearby Nature, Earth, and Dark Cores closest to the Allroads valley had extended their territories far enough that they were butted right up against his own, he wasn't too concerned. It only made sense that they would do that – though he wasn't quite sure how they had elongated and spread their territories that far from their Core (but thought it was some long-known technique regarding territories that he *should* probably know) – if they wanted to attack him. By being essentially right next to him, there was no "dead" area that their Dungeon Defenders had to traverse on their mission of assassination.

What concerned him now, however, was that the Fire, Water, Light, and Air Cores nearby were now doing the same thing. It wasn't instantaneous by any means, but Fred could visibly see their territories expanding towards his own. In less than a minute, all of them had connected to his outer border, fully enclosing him between seven Core factions that seemed to almost physically push at his territory. It was entirely his imagination, of course, because nothing happened or moved, but the sensation was still there.

Fred wasn't exactly sure what it meant, but he knew that it probably wasn't good. If all of the factions were united against him, he didn't think they stood a chance. Nothing happened yet, fortunately, but he was on figurative "pins and needles" waiting to see armies of Dungeon Defenders marching from every direction.

He pulled his attention back to Allroads just in time to see Chareese at the top of the walls, looking down at the land outside the city which was trampled and torn up quite a bit from the rampaging army of Dungeon Defenders that had just been there. After talking with some of the people

there about the attack, she walked to the edge of the 3-foot-tall parapet along the top of the outer wall and looked down. The Inquisitor then raised her arm and waved it back and forth, saying something softly enough that very few could actually hear her – but of course Fred could. “Ok, strange dungeon man – if you’re watching, go ahead and do your thing.”

He had thought about the easiest way to eliminate the Rockworms chewing up the foundations while the battle was still taking place. The problem he had was that he was limited on what could actually fit into the holes dug by the Earth-based creatures. He immediately brought up his list of available Defenders again, and with a second look at it he couldn’t see any other solution than what he had come up with earlier.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (All Blueprints)

- Flower Tripper (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Flameflower Burster (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Frostflower Spiker (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana)
- Flametripper Spiker (Level 2 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Rock Beetle (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- Scorching Water Beetle (Level 2 Base Cost: 1 Nature Mana, 1 Water Mana, 1 Fire Mana)
- Large Wasp (Level 1 Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana)
- Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Level 1 Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana)
- Vine Spider (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana)

- Am-bushes (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana)
- Charging Boar (Level 1 Base Cost: 15 Nature Mana)
- Skeletal Squirrel (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Dark Mana)
- Bones of the Earth Squirrel (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Dark Mana, 1 Earth Mana)
- Plague Rats (Level 1 Base Cost: 5 Dark Mana)
- Shriveled Deer (Level 1 Base Cost: 7 Dark Mana)
- Putrid Giant Spider (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Dark Mana)
- Defiled Goblinoid (Level 1 Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana)
- Decomposing Boar (Level 1 Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana)
- Desiccated Lynx (Level 1 Base Cost: 17 Dark Mana)
- Shrunk Monkey (Level 1 Base Cost: 20 Dark Mana)
- Rotting Wolf (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Dark Mana)
- Undead Bear (Level 1 Base Cost: 50 Dark Mana)
- Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Earth Mana)
- Stone Golem (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Earth Mana)
- Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana)

None of his Defenders – other than one – were really small enough to go underground to go after the Rockworms; he briefly thought about digging a hole above each one and then dropping one of his Defenders down to kill the worm. However, that probably wouldn't help with the whole foundation problem if he removed some of the dirt keeping the walls securely in place. And it was almost impossible to add to things outside of his dungeon while using his Territorial Sight compared to eliminating things like dirt, so he would have to visit in person to fix the missing areas.

So, he took the only one he could think of that could fit inside the hole dug by the Rockworms and...enhanced it. Using the blueprint for

Plague Rats, Fred filled it up with 5 Dark Mana and then added 5 Nature Mana to the mixture from the blobs of Mana floating around; in less than a second the blueprint had filled up since it wasn't too much, and a new Defender variant combination was born.

Venomous Plague Rats (Level 1)

Vitality: 20

Attack: 5, Venomous/Diseased Bite

Defense: 2

Respawn: 5 Dark Mana, 5 Nature Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 4 units

Five Venomous Plague Rats appeared when it was done, which was unusual compared to any of the other ones that Fred had seen; it was usually just one Defender that appeared per blueprint, but apparently the Rats all worked as a single team. Fred's new dual-element Defenders weren't all that powerful – especially at Level 1 – but they certainly looked deadly; each rat was nearly a foot long from nose to tail, were scabbed all over with diseased pustules, and had a greenish glowing liquid dripping from their wicked little rat-fangs.

Looking up at the wall at Chareese's reaction, he saw she looked disgusted at his Defender's appearance; she was so disgusted that she raised her hand and *almost* cast some sort of spell at them. A gathering of bright Power was formed inside her right fist – which was aimed at his creation – but she brought her hand down after a moment and the glow around it faded quickly.

Satisfied that the Inquisitor wasn't going to destroy it out of hand, he immediately sent his Rats down the hole after the Rockworm. They didn't have far to travel before they encountered its tail end; the Earth-based creature was primarily made of rock along its outside in the form of rings (hence the name), but it also had vulnerable segments in between those rings – which the lead Rat immediately located.

A quick bite at one of the vulnerable, flesh-like segments elicited a reaction from the Worm; its tail flicked out with destructive force, crushing the first and second Rats with literal bone-crunching force. *Apparently, their Vitality of 20 is split up between all of them; combined with their low defense, they're a bit...squishy.* The Rockworm then rapidly turned from the wall foundation and burrowed quickly through the dirt, aiming for the other Rats. The move was unexpected, and Fred's defenders were caught flat-footed; a third and then a fourth Rat were swallowed up by the gaping, rock-toothed mouth of the Rockworm.

The fifth, however, was able to squeeze next to the Worm while it was distracted with crunching down on the others, barely fitting through the tight tunnel. Nevertheless, the Rat was able to chomp down on one of the vulnerable flesh-segments near where its "neck" would be – before being smashed against the tunnel wall when the Rockworm spasmed and flailed about. His Defenders all being dead, the enemy creature turned back to the foundation and started biting the hard stone again.

Fred worried for a second that his attack hadn't worked and that he would have to try something else, but a closer look at the Rockworm showed that it was only a matter of time before the venom and disease imparted into its body from the Rats' bites would kill it.

Rockworm (Level 1)

Vitality: 12 (Venomous Bite: -1 Vitality every 3 seconds for 60 seconds)

Attack: 8

Defense: 8 (Diseased Bite: -50% Defense for 60 seconds)

Respawn: 8 Earth Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 5 units

The venom that the Venomous Plague Rats imparted to the Rockworm was more than enough to kill it, but it would take a bit longer than usual to do it. He watched as its Vitality ticked down, until it finally stopped while in mid-bite at the foundation, before dissolving into the ground and releasing both Essence and Mana.

With that success, Fred immediately recreated more of his Venomous Plague Rats along every section where he could detect a Rockworm still at work, using the Mana still floating around out in front of the city. This time, however, he doubled the amount of Mana he placed in each blueprint; the result was a Rat that was just barely able to fit in the Rockworm tunnels, but their increased Vitality, Attack, and Defense was enough to ensure they survived long enough for them to get the job done.

The Rockworms were still deadly enough that none of his Rats survived their plunge inside the tunnels, mainly because they couldn't maneuver as agilely in the tunnels as their smaller cousins; regardless, every single group of Rats was able to deliver enough venom to the Worms to do them in. In less than 5 minutes after Chareese had given the signal, the threat to the walls' foundation was eliminated – and so was anything keeping the Essence being granted to those who fought against the thousands of monsters that had tried to invade Allroads.

Essence streamed into the Adventurers and guards lined up along the walls, which elicited the same response – as the Prison hallway – to the unexpected bonus from those who received it. Unfortunately, there was no one there who was able to explain why it had happened, though most took the nearly 500 Essence as a reward for their excellent defense of the city without another thought.

“Now that the city is taken care of, you and I are going to have some words,” Chareese said softly to the air.

This should be fun.

Chapter 7

“Did you *knowingly* come here to put us in danger? Is this some sort of sick game to you? People could’ve *died* inside the city – and dozens *did die* outside of the city!” the Inquisitor yelled at Fred, who was meeting the woman and a few of her own associates inside his dungeon down below the Prison.

While she had been making her way back to the Governmental center of the city, she took her time conferring with the others in charge of restoring order to Allroads to ensure everything was running smoothly. Even though she was obviously an important figure in the Governmental hierarchy, she wasn’t actually in charge; her seniority and experience – as well as her reputation – gave her orders and suggestions weight, but the actual authority to enact change or allocate resources rested elsewhere. Or at least, that was the impression he got as she talked to numerous people on her journey back to the Prison.

To ensure the tunnel leading to his dungeon didn’t collapse, Fred took the time to use a combination of his Unconverted Mana and Adventurer Power to widen it and create stone walls to solidify its construction. It was still dark – because he didn’t have any permanent light fixtures or even torches – but that didn’t seem to be much of a problem for Chareese and her entourage as they made their way down to him.

“I apologize profusely for any of the deaths that my actions have caused; I assure you that it was entirely unintentional,” Fred responded, his false confidence at their first meeting having eroded somewhat after being presented with the fact that dozens or even hundreds of people traveling through the Allroads valley had been killed – all because of what he had

done. “As for *knowingly* coming here in order to put the city in danger, this was never the plan when we arrived; all we wanted was to find my Core Power Guild and the remaining townspeople of Gatecross.”

“This isn’t his fault! It was the nearby Dungeon Cores that sent that army of monsters, not Fred!” Eisa interjected, trying to bolster his case. “And he only established his territory here because you had locked him away and were likely to try executing him – *all of us*, probably. I know how these things work.”

Her entreaties fell on deaf ears, unfortunately. “So, you’re saying this is all *our fault*? For the ‘crime’ of locking you up, you essentially summoned an army of Dungeon Monsters to assault the city – I don’t really think that punishment fits the ‘crime’.”

Fred held his hands up in what he hoped was a placating gesture, as Chareese seemed to be even more mad now. “No, no, no – you’re throwing this all out of proportion. I never intended for any of this to happen. I didn’t intend for the city to be attacked at all when we came here—”

“You keep saying that you didn’t *intend* any of this, but we’re still stuck with the fact that it happened. I let you stay down here before because the city was under attack, but that isn’t the case anymore; now, I could lock you up again until we can pass judgement – but you’d probably just escape again. *Of course*, I could just execute you for the part you played in the deaths of dozens of people, and I’m pretty sure my cohorts here—” the Inquisitor looked around at her companions— “would agree with me that what you’ve done – *and* admitted to – is more than enough cause for just eliminating the problem of your existence here once and for all.”

Silence reigned inside the first dungeon room where the meeting between Fred and the Allroads representatives was taking place. Fred

mentally started to gather up all of the Mana floating around his territory, separating them into massive blobs that each dwarfed the amount he had used to create his massive Beetle back in Gatecross. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with all of it, but he had it ready, nonetheless.

“*But—*” Chareese finally said, prompting Fred to relax...*a little—* “I don't think that would actually accomplish anything. The stories about villages, towns, and even cities paying the price for participating in a perceived ‘crime’ or even harboring ‘criminals’ who wronged a local dungeon is ingrained in all our memories. And since we destroyed the force sent to kill *you*, I doubt that they are likely to see reason. I think our best bet of all of Allroads surviving your presence here...is to have you and your friends *exiled*. We can only hope that they perceive it as giving you up to them in exchange for our continued existence.”

Fred was both relieved and saddened at the turn of events. He had really been hoping that the Humans in Allroads would get behind him once they could see what he could do – not only what *he* could do, but what he could do for *them*. *Maybe I can show them some other things to prove how valuable an ally we can be—*

His thought was broken as the Inquisitor glanced over at the Necro-Wizard, who was looking pointedly at her. “*However*, after conferring with both the Council and some of my trusted companions—” she nodded toward Agelstein as she said that— “I don't think that would work either. The damage has already been done, and I know for a fact that if the roles between us Adventurers and the dungeons were reversed, we wouldn't be lenient on those we thought had wronged us. And again, as the stories and few actual memories of some of the older DAS members in the city can attest to, dungeons are anything but lenient.”

That is news to me. He had watched the Inquisitor for a while when she had been heading back to the Prison, but he hadn't been listening to every conversation she had, as most of it didn't really interest him. Plus, he had been busy shoring up the hastily dug tunnel down to his dungeon, so his attention had been a bit distracted. The fact that she had discussed Fred's eventual fate with both her Necro-Wizard friend and the Council without his knowledge was...worrying. *I'll have to pay better attention in the future.*

Before he could say anything, Chareese cut him off again. "That being said, keeping you here and *alive* would not be my ideal solution, but it's what we have to work with. Now, as much as I want to interrogate you down here and hide you from the world so as not to cause a panic, the Council wants to talk to you. I take it that you can leave your dungeon? Because there is no way I am going to allow the members of the Council down here," she said, her tone brooking no argument.

"I can leave the dungeon – I just can't leave my territory or it will collapse."

Eisa inserted herself into the conversation again before the Inquisitor could order him to move. "He's not going anywhere unless Regnark, Deecy, and I are allowed to go with him," she said, slipping her arm around Fred's with a strange look on her face.

Chareese was silent for a moment with an unreadable look on her face as she contemplated the demand. "Fine. I'm willing to trust you because of what you did up above, but the first sign of anything funny, you won't live long enough to regret asking to come."

"We've no reason to be causing any trouble, I assure you," Regnark replied, looking pointedly at Eisa while he said so. Fred was thoroughly

confused at the entire exchange, but he was relieved to have his friends near him while he was going to see the Allroads Council.

“Alright, then let’s go.”

The group was silent as they walked up the tunnels and up to the surface, their way lit by the Inquisitor and an upgraded version of the Magelight spell that Fred and the others possessed. Fred didn’t technically need it, because his Territorial Sight (when used to see directly outside his body) revealed everything, but the others weren’t quite as accustomed to the lack of light. Well, all but Regnark, who seemed to have no trouble seeing – which Fred attributed to his status as a Dark Shard.

Along the way, he walked next to Eisa and tried to apologize. “Eisa, I’m sorry for what I did earlier.” His voice carried up the tunnel, echoing down the stone walls.

She looked confused, even with the lack of light. “What are you talking about, Fred?” she asked, her voice pitched lower than usual.

“I didn’t mean to shove all of that into you all at once, and I’m afraid that I might have hurt you unintentionally.”

Eisa missed a step, and Fred reached out and caught her before she could fall on her face again. Using his Territorial Sight, he could see that her face was flushed again, which probably meant that she was still mad at him. “Fred! This isn’t the time to talk about things like that!” she hissed at him – her voice so low that even he had trouble hearing her. She looked around at the others, but the only one close enough for Fred to see without taking his attention away from walking was Regnark, who appeared to be in some distress.

Fred was about to ask the big guy what was wrong, but Eisa continued, slipping her arm around his again and leaning close to his ear as they walked. “And it didn’t hurt...*exactly*...it was just very surprising, is

all. Just...don't do something like that without telling me first and giving me a warning. *And*, if you respect me at all, please don't bring that up again when other people can hear."

"Uh...okay," he said, confused but happy that she had forgiven him. He assumed she didn't want him talking about how their unique Shard powers worked, and he was respectful enough of her privacy. He knew firsthand how hard it was being the different one, and he didn't want to isolate her from Humans any more than she already was.

It felt like it took no time at all to get to the top of the Prison and out the door. Chareese and her companions led Fred and his friends across the Government Quarter compound, to a rather nondescript building near the center. There were more guards stationed outside the double doors leading into the squat, windowless structure, which seemed strange considering that the room inside was likely fairly small, but a quick peek at his Territorial Sight told him that the building aboveground was just a façade.

While the dug-out rooms under the ground weren't large by any means, they were definitely secure enough that it would be hard for anyone trying to get to those inside without having to go through a lot of hassle. He saw more of the strange metal that had comprised his former Prison cell covering most of the walls, which showed even clearer that whoever had designed the compound had prepared for the worst.

He decided not to snoop any more while he was walking, because it was hard to concentrate on using his Territorial Sight to observe things while he was mobile. Soon enough, however, he and his friends had been led inside the small building, down two flights of stairs, and through a veritable maze of hallways and rooms, before they ended up between two ornately carved wooden doors that Fred could tell had a core of...

Magisteel, he thought he heard it called...strengthening its structure. He

didn't even have time to look to see what was waiting for them when the doors opened seemingly of their own accord, and Fred, Eisa, Regnark, and Deecy were led inside with only the slightest ceremony.

"Allroads Council, let me present to you Eisa Howells, who seems to be able to create Earth-like structures and monsters out of thin air; Regnark McDonald, who can open some sort of portal and summon Dark creatures from its depths; a Dire Wolf named Deecy, I believe, who has some sort of affinity for walls of fire and spiky barricades of ice; and, of course, Fredwyn—" the Inquisitor presenting them to the four people in the room stumbled over his name— "*Fred*, who it seems is some kind of human and dungeon hybrid. I have seen the dungeon he is able to create myself, as well as some traps and even dungeon monsters inside; he is also, admitted from his own mouth, the one responsible for the current situation in the city." She bowed to the Council and then walked to the side of the room, where she held her hands behind her back and waited.

Fred looked around as the door closed behind them, and he was momentarily shocked to see that none of the guards had come inside with them; it was only the Council, the Inquisitor, Fred, and his friends inside the comfortably small room. A quick look at the Council members revealed why they probably didn't need protection, however.

Starting on the far left was a mature woman with severe-looking features, jet-black hair, and a no-nonsense air about her. He tried to look at her Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface, but nothing came up; either something was blocking his ability to read it, or she didn't have an SDIA in the first place. Next to her was a young man in strange attire, a dark-blue one-piece suit of some sort that was completely free of wrinkles and shined a little bit in the enchanted light fixtures shining down from the ceiling. His

Interface showed that he was something called a C-4th-Rated Diplomat, and that appeared to be the only Class that he possessed.

His abilities weren't combat-oriented in the least, with names like Negotiation, Persuasion, and Hostile Communication – all things that made no sense to Fred. Seeing what he assumed was the Government Quarter representative's Interface made it likely that the first woman was either representing the Residential or Merchant's Quarter, though he guessed it was likely the former rather than the latter.

Next in the room was a large man, almost as large as Regnark – but the largeness was attributed to a huge belly rather than strong muscles. He had an Interface as well, which showed that he was a B-3rd-Rated Trader-Spy, possessed skills such as Infiltration (which seemed unlikely given his size) and Barter (which sounded exactly like someone from the Merchant's Quarter would have). With that evidence, his original assessment of the first woman was likely correct.

The last person in the room – and the one that indicated why there didn't need to be any guards present – was an older woman, who appeared much older than the mature woman Fred had first looked at. She was on the small side height-wise, with a full head of greyish-white hair that gave the impression of being unkempt, but was probably deliberate; after looking at her eyes – which bored into him and the others somehow at the same time – he knew she was the most dangerous person in the room even before he looked at her Interface.

A S-9th-Rated Arcanist! He didn't even know what that was, but she had so much Essence infusing her body and such a large amount of Power at her fingertips that Fred was sure all she had to do was wave a hand and they would all be blasted away. She *appeared* frail, but her Body and Brawn stats were higher than most B-Rated – and even some low A-Rated –

tanks that he had seen on the wall earlier, which meant that she was no pushover. He resolved to be on his best behavior – and sincerely hoped that his friends were as well.

“So, it’s our understanding that we have you to *thank* for bringing all of those dungeon monsters here, don’t we?” the young man in the strange suit asked with heavy sarcasm in his voice. Fred was just glad he had a crash course in things like sarcasm when he met Regnark and Eisa, otherwise his old self probably would’ve believed the man was actually thanking him. Before he could answer, the man continued. “Despite the danger you brought and will likely further bring, we as a Council have decided to let you live. It was determined that killing you or letting you go would probably have...*worse*...consequences, though I have to say that I don’t agree.”

The young man – whose name was Prime Warren (according to his Interface) – didn’t look happy to see him there. Neither did the Residential Quarter woman, whose name Fred still didn’t know; she looked down her sharp nose at him with an expression he recognized as distaste, so he ignored her completely – which she didn’t like either.

“Well, I want to thank you for sparing myself and my friends; I think this relationship can be long-lasting and mutually beneficial—” Fred started to say, before he was cut off by the young man (who appeared to speak for the Council, even though they were supposed to be equal according to the pamphlet they had bought upon arriving at Allroads).

“Like I said, I don’t agree with Master Bellario or Elder Hood’s decision to keep you around, but that’s the decision and we’re going to make the best of it. I’m just surprised that our Inquisitor – whose Prison *you broke out of* – ended our stalemate with her deciding vote. I would’ve thought that lawbreakers – like you obviously are – would’ve been treated

according to the code of laws we've established over the years, but there you have it." Fred was actually surprised, so he looked at Chareese standing over near the wall. Her face became flushed under his scrutiny, which was another confusing reaction he had no explanation for.

What is going on around here?

Regardless of his confusion, the meeting with the Allroads Council progressed. Fred soon learned that the severe woman from the Residential Quarter was named Goodwoman Graverly, the large Merchant Quarter representative was named Master Pyotr Bellario, and the S-9th-Rated Arcanist was named Elder Judylynn Hood, which were all strange names to Fred, but he was starting to get used to it. In his head, he just referred to them by what he assumed were their titles (Goodwoman, Master, and Elder), so he forgot their names for the most part. If he ever needed a refresher, he could always look at their Interfaces again – all except the Goodwoman's, of course.

Then they began to ask question after question about what he had done, how he had done it, why he was there, why there were Judgement Marks above his Guild's head, why there were Judgment Marks above the former Gatecross townspeople's heads, and about his origin. Fred answered everything as honestly as he could, because there was no reason not to; that, and the Inquisitor was using her unique ability to tell if what he was saying was a lie, and he didn't want to lose the little bit of confidence she had in him by lying.

When his personal history was done, Eisa and Regnark were also interrogated, and they answered everything as honestly as possible as well. Fred was sure that Deecy would've been questioned at the same time if they knew she could "technically" communicate, but no one actually mentioned that.

However, the past was just that – the past. What everyone really wanted to know was what plans he had for the future. “Now that you’ve made it here, caused all of this trouble, and endangered the lives of our citizens – not to mention the entire DAS headquarters here – what are your plans from here? What do you have to offer us that would make sparing your lives the correct decision? And better yet...how in the world are *they* —” the Elder asked, pointing at Eisa and Regnark— “able to...summon... their own personal dungeon monsters? There is no ability that I know of that comes anywhere close to that, and believe me, I’ve been around a long, long time. I can vaguely understand how *you* can do that, young man, because of your unique status as some sort of hybrid dungeon core, but *they* make no sense.”

Fred took a deep breath and thought furiously before he answered. On the one hand, he wanted to be as honest as possible and describe exactly what he did; on the other, he worried that they would perceive what he had done in a negative light, even though it had only been done out of desperation and necessity. In the end, however, he decided that he might as well lay it all out for them – including some background information so that they would understand it a little better – and then deal with the repercussions if they came.

Therefore, he spent the next two hours describing his internal Cores, how he had a Human Core and five Elemental Cores, and how he went about absorbing the Dungeon Cores that he had touched. He also described how he had theoretically learned how to avoid completely absorbing them in the first place, and how it was only when the Dark Core had panicked that it had ended up destroying itself. Then he went on to describe how he had used slivers of Dungeon Cores to make all of his friends into Shards, though it had never been his original objective when he started out.

All three of them then demonstrated what they could do on a small scale, and Fred was actually amazed at one of the new abilities that Regnark had picked up that he hadn't seen yet – Shadow Meld. He seemed to melt into the shadows when he activated it and the ability made it extremely hard to see him, though it was easily apparent where he was – being the biggest shadow in the room made it quite obvious. Regardless, everyone – including the Government man, Prime – was impressed at what they could do.

Fred also told them about his special ability to see how the Humans used Power outside of their body, *adapting* them for his own use – and then being able to teach those spells and abilities he observed to anyone with his Instructor Class. While they were shocked that he could do that in the first place – like everyone else who knew that secret about him – they were disappointed when he described that the likelihood of success for higher-Rated spells and abilities (especially ones higher-Rated than his own Rating) was nearly 0%. Still, he could see some intrigued faces among the Council, but that wasn't necessarily what they were most interested in – as he soon found out.

“Do you have any more pieces of dungeon cores that you can use to make more of these...*Shards*, as you call them?” the Elder asked. Fred wasn't sure if she was asking because she *wanted* him to make more or was *worried* that he would.

He cautiously responded. “I don't have any more pieces of the Cores I accidentally destroyed; it was only luck that the few pieces that I did find were still intact and usable. In order to make more, I'd have to destroy another Core – which is the furthest thing from my mind at the moment.”

The Elder waved away his response. “Yes, yes – I understand that, and I’m not asking you to go out and destroy any more dungeons; the city of Allroads is already in enough trouble as it is – we don’t need to invite more problems. But what I really want to know is this: you said that you’re a Dungeon Core as well, right?”

“Uh...yes, at least partially,” Fred answered, unsure of what she was getting at.

“Well then, what’s to stop *you* from breaking off a piece of your *own* Cores to use during this Shard-making process?” the Elder asked, which froze the room into silence.

Fred wasn’t frozen, however. “Well, first of all, my Cores don’t actually have a physical presence—” he said, before he cut *himself* off this time. *That’s actually not entirely true; if I look at it a certain way—*

Something extremely important tugged his attention away from the Allroads Council session where he was the main attraction. As he looked at his territory’s borders, his heart felt like it dropped into his stomach.

“I apologize for my inattention, Council, but there’s something you should probably be aware of...”

Part II – Territorial Warfare

Chapter 8

The Supreme of Air looked around her sprawling dungeon in anxiousness, though her mental state had nothing to do with what was going on inside; in fact, if she remembered correctly, there hadn't been a Human inside her underground tunnels, deadly trapped rooms, and Defender-filled spaces in nearly...*a decade? Has it really been that long?* Thinking about that last visit, she remembered that it had only been brief, with the Human group only spending about half a day inside her massive dungeon complex before they left, having lost one of their party along the way. Normally, invaders could spend *weeks* inside without even making it all the way through, and it had been disappointing that they hadn't all survived long enough to feed her a steady stream of Mana from their presence.

Regardless, she remembered enjoying the boost to her Mana from that death, knowing that more would be coming soon. Except that they hadn't.

The small Human town at the bottom of the mountain her dungeon catacombed had been steadily shrinking in the quantity of livestock living there over the years, until about six months ago it finally appeared to be completely abandoned. Air had expanded her territory so that it encompassed the now-deserted habitation, adding much-needed ambient Mana to the upkeep of her dungeon. Her Core was in a prime position, fortunately, so she received quite a bit of ambient Mana from her territory; normally, it was enough to maintain her dungeon with a little bit left over for growth, so anything that added to that was welcome.

Therefore, she hadn't been too worried with the loss of the nearby town. She knew from listening to their conversations that the Humans

considered her dungeon to be famous and they would travel for weeks or even months just to visit it. Her S-10th-Rated dungeon had the best “loot”, excellent challenges, and a reputation for being less deadly to the invaders who were of the cautious variety. Air prided herself on making sure that her Defenses and Defenders were all able to be defeated by a determined group of livestock and was even known to reduce the challenge (just a little) inside her dungeon when it was obvious they weren’t quite up to it.

Keeping them inside her dungeon for longer periods of time was *almost* as good as their deaths, so her usual intent was not to outright kill them. That’s not to say she gave them a free pass; “reducing the challenge” really meant that she took out a Defense or Defender or two, just to put them on more of an even playing field. She wanted them to have to work for their rewards, which also ensured that they stayed longer to rest and recover, thereby increasing the amount of Mana she received from their presence. It was a basic Dungeon Operation method that had been tried and true for thousands of years.

Again, she hadn’t been worried at first; there were times in the past when years flew by between visitations, though it hadn’t been nearly as long as it was currently. It was only when she had become impatient about a month ago that she deliberately searched around her territory – and the territories of her nearby neighbors – to look for the next group of Humans searching for her dungeon. And she found...nothing.

Well, not *nothing*; with her superior Territorial Sight and given access as her status as the Supreme of Air, she was able to essentially connect and *see* through any Core’s territory in her faction – though she couldn’t directly influence anything. Regardless of that limitation, Air saw that even within a week’s traveling distance (in Human terms), there were groups of Humans invading other dungeons; the only thing was, however,

that *all* of them appeared to be so weak that they wouldn't survive past the first few rooms in her 463-room dungeon. Unless, of course, she severely handicapped it for them – which was something she would *consider*, if it came down to that – but she doubted she would even have the chance.

Her own dungeon was barely even spoken about, and when she actually recognized her location during a conversation she was overhearing, she realized that she wasn't likely to see anyone anytime soon.

“—not going there. That mountain dungeon is S-Rated, and the DAS has labeled it off-limits until it can be reevaluated. Let's just stick to these ones here, because I – for one – do not want to die. They say that place is cursed, anyway, because any party that has gone in there has lost *at least* one person, and the risk isn't worth it.”

That disturbed her more than a little bit, but Air knew deep down that all she had to do was wait for the Humans in the area to become a bit more powerful before they decided to invade her dungeon again. Except... when she looked around more comprehensively, even ranging farther than could be reasonably expected for the Humans to travel to her location, she saw the same disturbing trend.

Their livestock was slowly dying out.

It was extremely gradual, however – and it wasn't immediately obvious. It was only because she had been around a lot longer than almost any other Dungeon Core (at least in her portion of the world) that she was able to see the changes. Comparing her memories of the early days, when her kind was hunted down by the Humans – who seemed to be *everywhere* and in such concentrations that it was hard to find a place to put down a territory – and what it looked like today, she saw a vast difference. While there were still quite a few Humans in concentrated areas – *cities* and

Kingdoms, she remembered hearing them called – they were few and far between.

Air was pretty sure she knew the reason for that; the war between the factions had a big role in that reduction of Human habitations, settlements, villages, and towns. While there were fairly strict rules about not placing territories over the areas where their livestock lived, when there was a territorial war going on between the factions, many times those rules were conveniently ignored. The Cores involved with those clashes never *intended* to destroy the Human habitations nearby, but when the only way to get an advantage during the warring process was to acquire a little more ambient Mana from extending your territory – even into an off-limits area – when no one was watching, it happened more often than not. And with Defenders constantly on the borders fighting for control, the helpless livestock caught within those clashes frequently didn't live long unless they moved somewhere – and quickly.

To almost all Dungeon Cores, unfortunately, this was “normal”; so what if a few Humans died during their conquest? There were plenty more all over the place, and their little war wouldn't have that much of an impact, would it? Their livestock bred so quickly and spread out to make new places to live that most thought it wasn't that big of a deal; they were just casualties of war.

Except that it was having a much bigger impact than anyone had anticipated. With the reduction of the smaller towns and villages all over, the Humans were congregating together into the larger cities and Kingdoms. This meant that the Cores in harder-to-access areas (which historically had at least a few Human settlements nearby) were seeing fewer and fewer invaders, especially when the landscape was still filled with warring faction battles, making travel for them difficult.

Not only that, but the quality of the Humans had also dropped as a result. Air knew for a fact that their livestock could increase their Rating much faster than most Dungeon Cores could, which was only understandable given their short lifespan; with the difficulty or inability to get to some of the larger, higher-Rated dungeons (like her own), she could only imagine how much their advancement slowed down because of that. That fact hit close to home, because if they couldn't get to *her* dungeon, then her own advancement was diminished as a result.

All of which was partially why the Supreme of Air was anxious. The appearance of a Dualborn – or *Cursedborn* – near a Convergence nearly half a world away from her Core was a cause for concern, certainly, but as a whole the Dungeon Cores were much more prepared for it than they had been for the last one. While they had been relatively weaker and hunted by the Humans at the time, they were still able to come together and kill the Cursedborn all those millennia ago, even if most of them had been destroyed in the process. Now, however, they were organized, had exponentially more Dungeon Cores and Mana at their disposal, and the entity was still relatively new and not as powerful as the old one.

In fact, the Cores near Convergence #3 – including one from her own faction – had just begun to assault the Cursedborn's territory; with all of them working together, it wouldn't be long until the multi-faction territory fell, and they were able to kill the Cursedborn with ease, all while preserving the precious Convergence. Then would likely come a cleansing of the Humans there, as the Supreme Council's policy had always been one of subjugation; they couldn't give their livestock hope that they could fight back, and that the death of even a single Core would be forgiven without a hefty price that had to be paid, let alone *three* Cores.

However, Air had always thought of herself as different than the others, more of a thinker and – she was happy to admit it – a dreamer; maybe it was because she spent so much time among the clouds above her dungeon, or maybe it was just because she didn't take things as seriously as the other Council members. In the end, it didn't matter, she supposed; what *did* matter, though, was that she saw the appearance of the Cursedborn as a cause for concern...and hope.

Maybe there is a reason it has appeared right now, when I'm just beginning to realize that something is very wrong with the way we're doing things. That was along the lines of the same thought she had just hours ago when she was in the Core-to-Core meeting with the Council; now, however, with the implementation of their plan to destroy the Cursedborn taking place, the thought that they were going about everything all wrong was causing Air some distress. She couldn't exactly pinpoint why this new threat felt different from the previous one, but it was nagging at her, nevertheless.

That being said, she turned her complete attention on the conflict going on thousands of miles away, inserting herself (in a pure spectator context) into the territory of Whislycenedray, the B-7th-Rated Core who was currently nearest the Convergence – and who had just extended her territory right up against the Cursedborn's. The privilege of being so near the Convergence was an honor, mainly because the proximity to so much concentrated ambient Mana increased a Core's growth (even without the visitations by the nearby Humans) and speed of Crystallization by 10-fold or more. In fact, only a few years before, Whislycenedray had been a low E-Rated dungeon, which just went to show how beneficial being nearby could be.

Once she reached A-1st-Rating, of course, she would be forced to move; another juvenile Core that showed great promise would then be rotated in her place. Even the territorial areas just a little farther away from the Convergence were coveted, as their growth was sped up greatly, but not nearly as much as the closest spot. Then again, with Whisly's territory going even deeper into the historically no-Core's-land of the Convergence, the amount of ambient Mana would increase even more – but she was going to be using most of that (along with what Mana the dozens of nearby Cores were feeding her) – to ensure the assault on the territory was successful.

As Air watched the Dungeon Defenders that Whisly had created line up along the border, she couldn't help but hope that *something* unexpected happened. While she could play out what was likely going to happen in her mind, she nevertheless held to the belief that this Cursedborn was different, that it was the answer to *all* of their eventual problems.

The Supreme of Air was looking forward to seeing if her instincts in this situation were correct...or if she was searching for a solution in the wrong place.

Chapter 9

Fred had been ushered out from the Council chamber soon after he had announced that the border of his territory was now effectively surrounded by monsters; he was about to instinctively call them Dungeon Defenders, but at the last moment he remembered that they were referred to as something else entirely by Humans – and “monsters” did sound more menacing, which was exactly the way they were acting. As soon as he and his friends were outside the small Council building aboveground, they could hear the *bong* *bong* of alarm bells going off near the walls; he hadn’t really heard them before when the first army of Dark, Earth, and Nature monsters had arrived, mainly because he was underground dealing with an Inquisitor bent on recapturing him.

People all around were streaming through the Government Quarter, heading for the walls, though even more were stationed around the Prison and Council building; they had obviously learned from the initial attack that they didn’t really have a good defense against flying monsters at the wall, and they knew – or at least thought they knew – where they would likely attack. There were many more guards there than had been present before, and a quick look at his Territorial Sight around the city of Allroads showed that many of those on the walls were now closer by. While there were still quite a few on the walls, most of the defense appeared to be taken over by members from the DAS instead.

“Fred, what’s going on? All you said was that your territory border is now completely surrounded on all sides,” Eisa asked him just loud enough to be heard over the loud bells in the distance.

“Let’s get back inside the Prison building and I’ll tell you; I didn’t get a chance to explain exactly what’s happening before they rushed us out, and I need to tell the Inquisitor as well,” he replied. Eisa didn’t look happy about that for some reason, but she didn’t actually say anything.

It wasn’t long before the bells were just barely audible to them as they walked inside the Prison, and even they were muffled when Fred and the others were escorted into a relatively small room with a round wooden table and a half-dozen chairs. “Sit down for now, until we can figure out what’s going on,” Chareese said roughly. “If it looks like it’s going to come to fighting here, your instructions, Fred, are to head back down to your... dungeon...while we protect you from above. Your Shard friends, however, are welcome to help with the defense.”

The fact that they were willing to protect him with their lives made Fred confused, especially when they were just contemplating whether or not to kill or exile him not so long ago. Going back to his interrupted conversation with the Allroads Council, however, made him think that his personal safety wasn’t necessarily a concern; it was quite possible that they were thinking of himself as an asset that could provide something they didn’t have access to before, but he wasn’t exactly sure what they wanted.

When he first thought about making some sort of deal with them (to both save his own life and the lives of his friends), he was thinking of helping to provide a dungeon where they could train without the risk of death, where they could obtain Essence to improve themselves. He also thought about the opportunity to teach any of his adapted abilities to them, though they hadn’t seemed as impressed by that as he had expected. *Probably because the chance of them learning anything really worth their time was hampered by my own lack of a higher Adventurer Rating.*

No, what really seemed to interest them was Eisa's and Regnark's statuses as Shards – but for the life of him, he didn't know what they could possibly want. He refused to go out and destroy more Dungeon Cores to obtain more pieces that could be used to make Shards, and if *they* started to do that, he would refuse to help; he wasn't there in Allroads to assemble some sort of Human army that was focused on destroying all of the Dungeon Cores around the world. He was there to find some way they could co-exist without one being more powerful than the other, where the Humans – or even the Cores, though that wasn't really a current possibility – as a species weren't at risk of being extremely endangered and possibly enslaved or go extinct altogether. He still wasn't sure how to go about that, but he knew the first thing he needed to do was to put them all on equal footing.

Which was his goal with the Teaching and by providing Essence via his dungeon, as it would make them stronger and able to become self-sufficient, without the need to brave the dangers of delving through other dungeons. From there, his hope was to dictate some sort of treaty with the surrounding Dungeon Cores – the details of which were still a little fuzzy in his head – where the consequences for killing a Human was seen as just as bad as killing a Dungeon Core. There was a lot more to it than that, but the first step was trying to eliminate so many people dying inside and outside of dungeons, because of the Cores' actions; only then could the Human species hope to recover from the rapid decline it was currently experiencing.

But the Council seemed to have another objective in mind.

Before he could think any more on that, he needed to put Chareese's mind at ease...somewhat. “You don't have to worry about us being

attacked...quite yet,” he told her while he was sitting down in one of the surprisingly comfortable chairs, which confused everyone in the room.

“What do you mean? What do you know that you aren’t telling us?” Agelstein – the Necro-Wizard that had been accompanying the Inquisitor everywhere she went – asked, suspicious.

Fred took a moment to think about what he was going to share, because – for the most part – it was going to be common knowledge soon. “Well, I have some good news and I have some bad news. The good news is that while my entire territory border is completely blocked off by Def— *monsters*...they aren’t currently moving. There is a large contingent of them inside my territory, but there is also a good number of them inside the other territories butting up against it.”

“That sounds worrisome, alright – but that is definitely good news. There are many on the wall that are still recovering their Power from the first fight, myself and Agelstein included, and this isn’t the ideal time to be attacked – not that any time is *ideal*. I’m afraid to ask what the bad news is, then,” the Inquisitor remarked, her tone evidently worried.

Fred sighed, knowing they would find out soon enough regardless, but this way they might have a better idea what they were going up against. “Two bad things, actually. One, the monsters that are surrounding the border – while some of them are familiar from the previous attack – are a lot stronger than before.”

“What do you mean, stronger? And how do you know?”

“That’s right, I forgot you don’t know. I can see their Levels – which are kind of like our Ratings – when I look at them, just like I can see your Interface—” he said, before being cut off.

“Wait a minute! You can see our Interfaces?” Agelstein asked, incredulous.

“Yes, but that’s beside the point. Did you notice how relatively weak all of those monsters from the first attack were? Most of those that invaded Allroads were what is considered Level 1, with a few Level 2’s mixed in. This put them at the weakest state that they could possibly be, though the difference between a Level 1 Goblin Gnome and a Level 1 Hell-touched Bear Demon is quite considerable. I believe the previous assault on this city was thrown together rather quickly and was more of a reaction to my presence here, and it was designed to overwhelm the defenses with numbers to get enough through to kill me. I don’t believe it was consciously intended to destroy the city and kill everyone, just to get to me,” he answered slowly, working it out in his head while he spoke.

“...Ok, I guess that does make sense; based on reports – and the lack of actual casualties (other than outside the city) – the monsters, while numerous, were not that powerful. Go on,” the Inquisitor ordered, politely this time.

“So anyway, while those were primarily Level 1s that attacked, the monsters at the border range anywhere from Level 7 to Level 11; I know from my own experimentation that once you get past Level 10, there are some diminishing returns on how much Mana you spend on a creation, so that’s why there aren’t any at a higher level. Added to that, along with what you saw before, it appears as though some of the larger ‘boss’ monsters – which I’m sure you’re all quite well aware of – are there as well. While those larger monsters that you’re probably used to seeing are deadly inside a dungeon, they are usually at a lower Level; not so these, which – with the increase in Level – are quite a bit bigger than you’ve likely seen before. That could be a reason they aren’t progressing further inside my territory and attacking the walls, because I’m almost positive that they don’t want to risk harming the elemental concentrations along the valley.”

“You’ve said that before, but I don’t get it; historically, there is a mandate to leave all of them alone out there, which has been passed down to this day as an irrefutable law – but no one knows exactly why,” Agelstein asked curiously.

Eisa and Regnark – as well as Deecy, of course – could see the Mana that Dungeon Cores used for nearly everything, but the two representatives from the Allroads Government in the audience couldn’t; Fred had to see if he could try to come up with a recognizable example that would make sense.

“Just like you rely on Essence gained from dungeons to make yourselves stronger, Dungeon Cores use something called Mana to do the same thing, though unlike Essence, if a Core runs out of Mana, they essentially die. It is what they are made of, it is a part of their lifeforce, and they are practically insatiable when it comes to gaining more of it. When Humans enter their dungeon, they give off Mana that they can absorb, and can gain quite a bit more when someone dies within their deadly rooms. But they also acquire ambient Mana that emanates from the world itself, though there are areas like these Convergences that the concentration is multiplied so greatly that it’s practically inconceivable,” Fred tried to give some background info to them, at least as far as he could.

“Then why are there no dungeons *right here*?”

Fred went on to explain how it used to be that way, but then there were conflicts at another Convergence that ended up with its destruction, which affected and practically killed off the landscape for thousands of miles around the area.

Agelstein scoffed. “That seems stupid. Why would they endanger a place like that, knowing that it could kill off the surrounding lands if it were destroyed?”

“Because, like I said, they are near-insatiable when it comes to acquiring more Mana. Look at it this way; imagine if there was a fountain in the middle of Allroads that shot up a never-ending stream of Essence. Now, the closer you were to it, the more Essence you would absorb – and it affected the entire city, but those on the outskirts would get less. Now, if someone were to stand right on top of it, that stream would stop, and only the one standing on top of the fountain would benefit. How long do you think it would take for there to be an all-out war between everyone with a SDIA and for the city to be destroyed?”

Chareese looked thoughtful, but Agelstein answered right away. “Probably within an hour, based on how crazy some members of the DAS can be when it comes to acquiring more Essence. I can see what you’re getting at, but why is this important?”

“It’s important because the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores – like your own Allroads Council, but made up of the most powerful Cores in the world – actually came up with a way to prevent anyone from getting too close to the Convergence, so that they wouldn’t have to worry about it being destroyed. And why *that* is important, unfortunately, is that the Cores closest to the Convergence extended their territories farther into the valley, which gives them much more ambient Mana to absorb, that in turn allows them to create even more monsters to send against us.”

Chareese spoke up, coming to her own conclusions. “And now that they’ve had a taste of that sweet Essence – or Mana, like you said – they are less likely to want to give it up. I have a feeling that we were likely screwed as soon as you alerted them to your presence here; even if we or they had killed you – or even if we had exiled you – then it was quite possible that we may have had a war of epic proportions on our hands. Maybe not tomorrow or the next day, but I’ve seen things like that happen

before, and that was with people that could just fling spells around – not send entire armies of monsters to defeat their enemies.”

The room was quiet while she was talking, and it stayed that way when she finished; Fred couldn’t help but agree with her, and he was pretty sure everyone else felt the same way.

“But you said that there were two pieces of bad news. The... *Level*...of the monsters out there, as well as their composition was only one, wasn’t it? Unless you meant that as both?” Agelstein asked, breaking the silence.

“Unfortunately, you’re right – there is some other bad news. When I said that the monsters around my territory border are surrounding all of it, I really meant the *entire* thing. Whereas the Dark, Earth, and Nature territories had bumped up to my own during that first attack, they hadn’t been surrounding it completely, though they did make their monsters do so once they were close enough to the city. Now, however, the entire thing is now enclosed – and we’re trapped with no way out, even if we wanted to escape somehow.”

It took Chareese only a moment to catch on to what he was saying. “You can’t be serious—I thought you only destroyed...” she said, before trailing off as horror set in.

“Yes, that’s exactly right. *All* of the factions – Fire, Water, Light, and now Air – are now surrounding us, with their own monsters adding to the massive encircling army. It looks like they got over their differences enough to work together to take me – and likely the entire city – down. When it was just the three that I ‘wronged’, they *might* have been content with my death, though I tend to doubt that; with all of them against me – *us* – that can only mean one thing.

“They are going to wipe Allroads off the map, so that nothing like this can happen again.”

Again, silence reigned in the room, so deep that it almost seemed as though everyone even forgot to breathe. Eisa surprised him by touching him on the arm and asking softly and sadly, “Then what are they waiting for? It sounds as though they have more than enough power to destroy us – even while still avoiding damaging those elemental concentrations.”

Fred was looking at the border again as something caught his attention, so he answered automatically. “I don’t know, actually; their behavior confuses me—” he said, but then he froze as he *felt* something he’d never experienced before. It was almost the feeling of someone pushing his chest with gentle-yet-constant force...and then he felt it along his back, and then his side, and then everywhere all at once.

When he looked at the border again, he could visibly see that it had moved – inward. He wouldn’t have even noticed if he hadn’t seen a few of the Defenders out there shuffle just the barest bit forward, but now that he knew what he was looking for, he could tell that every part of his territory sphere had shrunk. Everywhere – not just in a few places, but every single inch where there were Dungeon Defenders (which was essentially all of it except a small section where two of the enemy faction territories butted up against each other). It felt like he was being forcibly compressed down, and when he tried to fight against it...nothing happened.

“Uh...we may have a problem. Somehow, somehow, those monsters are making my territory shrink,” he said, now feeling slightly – but not painfully, thankfully – uncomfortable.

“*Hmm...*”

“Deecy? Do you know something?” Fred used his Mana Communication skill to speak directly to her.

“Information incoming!”

“Huh? Wait, hold on...” he said out loud involuntarily in surprise, looking at the Dire Wolf that seemed to enjoy torturing him with information downloads. The next thing he knew, his mind blacked out, and he woke up what he thought was moments later, with a whole lot more information at his fingertips...and dread in his heart at what it meant.

Chapter 10

With a bit of a headache from the massive influx of information Deecy sent him, Fred cleared his mind enough to pull it all up again – just to make sure he fully comprehended how screwed they were.

Congratulations on graduating to the next step in your existence as a Dungeon Core! Now that you are joining the wider realm of inter-factional conflict, there are some things that you need to know in order to take part in the exciting world of Territorial Warfare.

Territorial Warfare:

- *Territorial Warfare is process in which a Dungeon Core attempts to attack and “shrink” the territory of another, with the ultimate goal of acquiring new territory for their faction*
- *This is accomplished by “pushing” at the neutral border between two territories, thereby collapsing the available space of the defending Dungeon Core*
- *Once past the original neutral border, the one doing the pushing is designated as the “attacker”, while the other is naturally called the “defender” (this will become important later in this discussion)*
- *The way the border is pushed is through the use of Dungeon Defenders; any Defenders can be used in this process, as long as they are stationed right up against the border and have this specific order given to them: “Expand”; this will allow them to*

push the other border back, while at the same time expanding your territory forward

- *Note: While your territory expands forward, your overall territorial space does not change, so if you already at your maximum spread, you will lose area in the exact opposite direction of your forward push*
- *It is best to use the most powerful Defenders you possess, however, as the defending Core can use theirs to destroy your attackers – and therefore push back your expansion; this can mean that Territorial Warfare can last anywhere from days and weeks to decades or even centuries before there is a clear winner, especially with the back-and-forth nature of the conflict*
- *Expansion and “shrinkage” can happen at different speeds, though it is fairly constant when attacking a faction other than your own; on the rare occasions where a rogue Dungeon Core needs to be removed due to instability or other reasons, internal faction Territorial Warfare is much more time-consuming – the expansion and “shrinkage” is approximately 30 times slower in that event.*
- *Only one Dungeon Core territory of a particular faction can attack another faction at the same time, though they can receive aid in the form of Mana transfers; this does not apply to alliance partners, however, meaning that both alliance members (or all three, if they are in the Nature, Earth, and Water factions) can attack the same territory at the same time.*
- *The restriction on a single Dungeon Core per faction participating in an attack does not apply to defenders; an unlimited number of nearby Cores can send aid in the form of*

Mana or Dungeon Defenders, though keep in mind that sharing those resources from their territories could mean that they in turn are more vulnerable to attack; in addition, Defenders sent from another Dungeon Core of the same faction will be able to draw on the ambient Mana in the defending territory to maintain their state of existence

- *If the defending Dungeon Core manages to push their entire territory over the neutral border, then they become the attacker; if they become the attacker, they lose the ability to receive aid through additional Defenders, and the Defenders sent from other Cores inside the territory lose the benefit of relying on ambient Mana to survive, and those Defenders can also not participate in expanding the territory over the neutral border*
- *In the event that an attacker expands enough to encompass the dungeon of the defending Dungeon Core, most of the functions of the dungeon as a whole will collapse, though the stability of the rooms and tunnels are maintained; once this happens, it is easy enough for the attacking Core to send in their own Defenders to the defending Core Room*

Territorial Warfare Victories and Defeats

- *In the past, whenever a Dungeon Core was defeated during Territorial Warfare, they were destroyed if there was a Dungeon Defender capable of accomplishing the feat; in our more civilized times, 95% of victories result in capturing the losing Core and bringing them back to the winning Core's dungeon for ransoming*

- *This approach results in multiple advantages over deliberate destruction:*
 - *One, the losing Core loses their territory, which the winning Core can then absorb into their own*
 - *Two, when the losing Core enters the winner's dungeon, Mana is slowly leached from them and given to the winner over time, until the losing Core's level drops to the critical 100 Mana mark*
 - *Three, ransoming a Core back to their faction can result in either getting a friendly hostage Core in exchange or territorial concessions*
 - *Four, if there is no successful ransom negotiation after a reasonable amount of time, the losing Core is then forfeit and may be destroyed without consequences*
 - *Five, destroying Cores outright too frequently can give you a negative reputation, which may result in additional attacks on your territory, all the way up to being hunted down by your own faction as a "rogue"*
- *Keeping that in mind, losing a battle in Territorial Warfare doesn't mean it is the end for you; if you aren't destroyed outright and are ransomed, you may acquire another territory and try again*
 - *You will have lost most of your internal Mana, of course, but your Core Structure Level will remain the same; only time and effort will have*

***been ultimately lost, but those can be regained
quickly if you work hard enough***

Looking at the information, Fred realized that he was essentially in the middle of a border dispute – though one of monumental proportions. And while the other Cores were the “attackers” in the situation, there was only one territory from each faction working to contract the border; if it wasn’t his life, the lives of his friends, and everyone inside Allroads that was on the line, he would’ve felt slightly honored that he brought them all together in a single cause. As it was, he was more terrified of what was going to happen than anything else.

While he had felt the gentle “pressure” at his territory before, there were two areas where the feeling spiked in – almost – painful intensity. Based on his understanding of the Territorial Warfare information that he had received from Deecy, he knew exactly what it was before he actually looked. The portions of his border next to the Dark, Nature, Earth, Water, and Fire factions were the ones being gently pushed; the Light and Air portions, on the other hand, were moving forward at an accelerated pace.

He was silent as he closed his eyes and used his Territorial Sight to look between them, blocking out the questions from the others in the room until he could see how dramatic the difference was. After a minute of comparing the advancement of his border contraction, he thought he had a good baseline.

Sighing, he opened his eyes to see the worried faces of everyone in the room, including the Inquisitor and Necro-Wizard. “Fred, what exactly is going on? Are you okay?” Eisa asked, by his side and holding onto his arm. Fred realized he had fallen forward onto the table when the

information was transferred from Deecy, and Eisa was making sure he was being held upright.

“Sorry about that everyone, I needed to check on some things after Deecy unexpectedly transferred some information to me. I think I’m okay now, Eisa – thank you for your help,” he said, before smiling at her to assure the woman that he was ok. She was obviously unconvinced, because she still held onto his arm.

Fred then began a quick explanation of what was happening to his territory, about the presence of the “monsters” lined up along the slowly shrinking border, and what was likely to happen unless something was done about it.

“So, like I said, those monsters are protecting their efforts to move the border closer to the city. If they are able to make it all the way here, they’ll be able to create even more monsters in practically unlimited numbers *right on top of us*, with very little to stop them. If that happens, then I have my doubts that anyone would survive,” he told them, ending his explanation with the impending doom they would all soon face.

“How long do we have? How fast is this...*contraction*...you speak of? And approximately how far does your territory extend?” Agelstein asked rapid-fire, his mind obviously working overtime at the new development.

“I’m not exactly sure how long we have, but I can approximate that the Dark, Nature, Earth, Fire, and Water sections are moving quite slow – I’d say about 5 inches an hour or so. I’m not sure if that will change or not, it’s too hard to tell. All I know is that they are just over 3 miles out from the center of Allroads, which is where I had established my territory.”

The Necro-Wizard looked upward at the ceiling, in what appeared to be some sort of trance while he did some mental calculations; Fred could do

the same if he really needed to and had the time, but he was sure Agelstein could do it much faster. The other man smiled a little and said, “That’s not too bad, then; we have about four years until they reach the walls – plenty of time to figure something out. But wait a minute – you only said that about five of the dungeon-types out there. What about the others?”

“That’s the bad news, unfortunately. While the others were moving at about 5 inches per hour, the Light and Air factions were moving at... about 12 and a half *feet*.”

Agelstein seemed to pale at that revelation, and so did everyone else in the room. Some more calculations in the Necro-Wizard’s head prompted him to whisper, “50 days...”

Using some quick mental math himself – as well as another check on how far the borders appeared to contract – Fred found that the assessment was essentially correct. *50 days until they’re at the walls, and then everything falls apart*. He wasn’t sure exactly what they could hope to accomplish in that short of a time, but there had to be something.

“I don’t understand; why are those two...*factions*...moving at such an accelerated pace?” Chareese asked.

Before he could answer, Eisa chimed in, showing her own quick thinking and knowledge of the situation – and explained it better than he could. “Because Fred doesn’t have access to those elements; even though he didn’t come out and say it, I’m guessing that because he shares the same elements in his Cores, the others are considerably slowed in their contraction for some reason. Am I right, Fred?”

He nodded and she continued. “Because he hasn’t absorbed a Light or an Air Dungeon Core, those ones are moving much faster. Now, if he somehow was able to acquire one...”

Fred shut her down right there, though not unkindly. “No, let’s not even think about that,” he said softly but firmly, putting his free hand on her arm to emphasize the point.

Agelstein seemed to be curious, however. “What is she talking about?”

Fred sighed regretfully and described how his Guild had went out and “obtained” Nature Cores from the nearby dungeons, bringing them back so that he could absorb blueprints from them. He ended up taking Mana from them, as well, but he immediately put it back and even strengthened their Core Structure as a result; when he was finished with them, they were put back where they had been found, but the damage had already been done. The Cores that were stolen away from their territories lost all of the Mana that they had invested in their dungeons, though fortunately they weren’t quite developed enough to have lost that much; it almost felt like stealing from children, even if they were children bent on his death.

The only things the Guild had going for them at that point was their surprise action of invading those Nature dungeons, along with the fact that most of them were thoroughly depleted of Mana from the ineffective attack they sent against Gatecross – and therefore couldn’t put up too much of a fight to defend themselves. The one Core that hadn’t had foreknowledge of the attacks and had Mana to spare was the Earth Core, and it had elected to use its Mana Combustion skill to destroy itself – though not before Fred was able to absorb just enough of it to obtain the use of Earth as an element. It was only due to the fact that the Earth Core didn’t have a lot more Mana at its disposal that the entire town of Gatecross – and all of the Humans nearby – hadn’t been destroyed along with Fred’s dungeon.

None of those things would apply now. It was obvious that most – if not all – of the factions were aware of what he had done, probably as a result of the vaunted Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores. Any nearby Cores were likely much more difficult to get through than the easier Nature Cores located by Gatecross, and they would be ready to defend themselves against someone trying to take them away. They might even have instructions to explode using their Mana Construction skill to prevent such a thing, and if Fred wasn't there to explain what was happening, he couldn't allow others to take that risk. Not only that, but the entire region was sure to be monitored, and anyone trying to remove a Core from the area would likely find a swarm of monsters at their location within minutes.

And there was no way that Fred could go himself. The most obvious reason was that if he left his territory would collapse, which would instantly allow all the factions trying to get into Allroads free rein – which wouldn't go well for any Humans. And second, he didn't want to be responsible for destroying any more Dungeon Cores, as much as it seemed contradictory; while he had figured out (theoretically) how to absorb an element without destroying a Core, he didn't want the Core to freak out again and inadvertently destroy itself.

Then again, if he couldn't find a way to slow down the Light and Air factions, in less than two months it wasn't going to matter.

“But if we were able to bring some of these Dungeon Cores back, you'd be able to...*absorb*...their element? And if, say, they exploded and created a bunch of pieces, you'd be able to create more...Shards?”

Agelstein asked, strangely excited about the prospect.

“Theoretically yes, but...” Fred went on to explain his thoughts on the entire issue, as well as his reluctance to go through with something like that. When it was just *him* doing all of those things, it felt...normal. It felt

a little strange when his Guild had gone out and brought Cores back, but at that point it was a matter of survival; now, however, this felt like a deliberate act against the Dungeon Cores, one which might set a precedent he wasn't sure they were ready for. It was entirely possible that the Supreme Council might decide they were too dangerous to even have the possibility of surviving and use their incredible power to wipe him and the entire Convergence off the planet, taking their losses as the price that had to be paid to ensure their future safety.

And this obsession with his Shards was a bit overwhelming; he knew that they were unique and something that the people of Gatecross had never seen before, but both the Allroads Council (or at least the DAS Elder Hood) and Agelstein seemed inordinately enamored over them. He constantly saw the Necro-Wizard eyeing Regnark as if he wanted to dissect him and see what he was made of, and the Elder had a noticeable interest in Eisa and Deecy while they had been talking. Chareese seemed more focused on Fred, which he was fine with; his friends didn't need any more attention than they already had.

"No, I refuse to allow anyone to risk themselves on a venture like that, and even if it were to succeed, bringing back a high-Rated Core to Allroads would be extremely dangerous for the city itself. I can't even imagine how powerful of an explosion that a Core filled with borrowed Mana from other Cores would be, and I'm sure that you don't want to find out," Fred said, and the Inquisitor agreed with him...somewhat.

"You're right, Fred. I wouldn't authorize anything like that, even if we were able to get through the encircling monsters out there. The safety of Allroads is one of my paramount duties, and that seems almost as stupid as letting you in here in the first place," Chareese said, which elicited an involuntary grunt from Fred. "Besides, what will that even accomplish? If

I am understanding everything correctly, all that ultimately would do would be to slow down this ‘contraction’ of your territory, not stop it altogether.”

That was essentially true. While having Light and Air as part of his Core would slow down the Territorial Warfare side of things significantly, all it would do was delay the inevitable. There had to be a way out of the mess he had – again, unintentionally – created, but he just couldn’t see it right now. It was thoroughly frustrating, because he didn’t like being responsible for so many people, even if they didn’t necessarily think of it that way.

“Honestly, it would accomplish nothing. Sure, it would make me quite a bit more powerful, but usually that just means that I can create a larger dungeon or expand my territory; the first wouldn’t really matter in this situation, and the second can’t happen while I’m constantly constricted on all sides. I might acquire access to some additional blueprints for those elements, but those probably wouldn’t do much good.” Fred hung his head down and supported it with his hands, his elbows on the table supporting his arms as he squeezed his eyes shut in reluctant acceptance of their impending doom.

While there was still a lot of Mana floating around from the destruction of so many Dungeon Defenders that had attacked earlier, there wasn’t nearly enough to make a difference against the massive army outside. Even creating his own army out of the free Mana wouldn’t accomplish much other than potentially destroying a small portion of their enemies surrounding the valley if he was lucky; sure, he would reuse that Mana once they were killed – as well as any other monsters that were killed inside his territory – but so could the Cores attacking him. And while that might net him additional Mana over time with which to build a bigger army, it would be rapidly outpaced by the increase in ambient Mana the Cores

could absorb from the Convergence, especially as they got closer and closer to the center.

“And even considering that I’m able to successfully create my internal Elemental Cores and rearrange their structure, there’s no reason to believe that—” Fred continued, but then stopped when something finally clicked in his head. Something that the Allroads Council Elder had said earlier had started something in his mind working, and he had largely ignored it until his conversation with Chareese and Agelstein triggered something else.

“Believe that...what?” Eisa asked softly by his side.

He jumped at her voice, only then realizing that he had frozen mid-sentence and the room was silent. Fred lifted his head up and for the first time that day felt genuine hope coursing through his body; he looked up at Eisa’s concerned face and was overcome with gratitude at her presence, at the way she stuck by him even when faced with overwhelming odds.

So, he kissed her.

It was more of a quick peck on her lips, but it was enough to make her cheeks flush red. For a moment he thought she was mad, but all she said was, “What was that for?”

As his idea flowed incessantly through his head, he responded absently to her question. “Because I love you...and because I think I have a solution to our problem.”

He only barely glimpsed that her face turned even redder as he closed his eyes, as he tried to envision what he wanted to do. Fred ignored the any of the others’ questions, saying only that he needed to try something and that he wouldn’t know if it would work until he experimented a little.

“I need to go back to my dungeon...I’ll need to try this where I’m most comfortable.”

And with that, he departed with his friends back down below the Governmental Prison, to his makeshift dungeon; as soon as he passed over the threshold into the first room, he relaxed...and got to work.

Chapter 11

Eisa followed Fred and the others back down to the dungeon below the cells where they had been imprisoned, still marveling at the circumstances that brought them to that place. Not only had they managed to survive their confinement, but now she and the others were joining Fred on this crazy journey to rope the city of Allroads in on their offense against the Cores lined up against them. Don't get her wrong, she was all for looking for help from powerful people, but to use an entire city with reportedly millions of people to help protect them was...insane.

But somehow, some way, Fred was making it work.

To be able to showcase her new abilities to the powerful guards was a rush. It wasn't that Eisa actively liked to show off, but it was nice to find people that didn't know her reputation and weren't expecting anything from her. To be able to demonstrate her new abilities – as different as they were from “normal” – and gain some measure of approval and even awe from those *technically* more powerful than herself made her confidence rise. Which was very important to her nowadays, because she had been lacking in self-confidence ever since the incident that ruined her reputation.

But now that had all changed; Eisa had friends now, a Guild to be in charge of, and a man that she loved and – she thought – loved her back. Fred really didn't show that love all that often, but even the little things made her heart warm whenever she was around him. There was just something about him that made her feel comfortable with who she was around him, and she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible; she didn't think that made her like those...*women*...who used to throw themselves at her former group mates because they were “so powerful”,

however. She was pretty sure they only did that because they wanted something in exchange, and Eisa didn't want anything from Fred but his love.

Or do I?

She had to admit that the benefits of her new status as a Shard were nothing short of a miracle. Eisa felt more powerful than she ever had as a Necro-Healer, even if she was nowhere near the Rating she had been back then. Her rebirth as a Shard brought new abilities that were a little scary at first, but they also brought her closer to the man she loved. It allowed her to understand him a little better, to comprehend what exactly made him tick, and to grasp – at least a little more – why he acted the way he did. But... she could also see how the Dungeon Cores in the world could get so focused on collecting Mana that they didn't care about the little people – namely, her people.

Because it was just so easy to accumulate Mana, and there seemed to be limitless possibilities with it.

Essence used to be the same way with her, and probably most members of the DAS; kill some monsters and get stronger as a result, what could be better than that? Getting the “juice” from delving through a dungeon wasn't just a bonus to the loot that they could obtain therein, it was vital towards every Adventurer who wanted to become more than they started as – which was every single one. Eisa couldn't help but think that 99.9% of all people who joined the DAS and started delving through dungeons did so to improve themselves; some liked to say that they did it exclusively for the money, but she was sure that none of them would trade all of their Essence away for a large bag of gold pieces. There was just something addicting about the rush of getting stronger, unlocking new

spells and abilities, and increasing your Rating after a lot of hard work – very few would willingly give that up.

Mana seemed to be similar, but oh so different. With Essence, you accumulated it and then “spent” it to unlock things to make you smarter, stronger, more durable, and faster – as well as acquiring those new spells and abilities; once you used that Essence, for all intents and purposes, it disappeared. The Earth Mana that she absorbed could be used over and over again – and it regenerated at a rapid pace from the ambient Mana in the environment, especially while she was inside the Convergence. While acquiring the ability to handle even more Mana came at the cost of having to absorb large quantities of the brown Earth Mana, the experience was much more...*unique*...than gathering Essence.

Let’s just call it uncomfortably pleasant in indescribable ways and leave it at that. When Fred had smashed the massive blob of Earth Mana into her earlier in the day, she almost blacked out from the experience, and she still felt it even hours later. Despite the shock of the absorption, it did have the effect of increasing her available Mana by a fairly large amount – so much that it actually kicked her over to the next Shard Level and unlocked a new ability. In fact, she was well on her way to the next Level, though she wasn’t sure how long that would take.

Shard Status
Eisa Howells
Elemental Origin: Earth Shard Level: 5 Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Earth Earth Mana: 1510/1510
Defender Creation Options
Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 Earth Mana) Rockworm (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Earth Mana)

Stone Golem (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Earth Mana) Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana) Golden Sphinx (Level 1 Base Cost: 250 Earth Mana)
Special Abilities
Earth Elemental Form (Activation Cost: 15 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 2 Mana per minute) Earth's Renewal (Activation Cost: 5 Earth Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1-5 Mana per minute) Stone Barrier (Base Activation Cost: 50 Earth Mana, Cooldown: 10 minutes)

Not only that, but because the Mana that Fred had shoved into her had come from the fighting outside the walls, she also gained access to some additional Defender Creation Options: **Rockworm** and **Golden Sphinx**. She remembered the Golden Sphinxes were a little large from their days running away from Gatecross and didn't think that one of them would fit in the hallway, which also went for her favorite Defender, the Crystal Scorpion; therefore, she pumped a bunch of extra Mana into some Stone Golems, which easily did the trick. Still, she couldn't wait to see what the Golden Sphinx could do, once she got a chance to create it; she heard that there were only a few of them that had been with the army that had attacked them earlier, so she was lucky to have received access to it already.

Once Eisa and the others arrived at the dungeon beneath the city of Allroads, without a word Fred walked off toward one of the side walls and sat down against it, closing his eyes in what appeared to be some sort of meditation. He had been a bit mysterious earlier, with his refusal to explain what kind of plan he had in mind, but the kiss had been so distracting that she hadn't thought to pursue the matter. *He'll do what he wants to do, and I think the best idea is to just let him be for the moment.*

She looked again at the uniquely adorable man as feelings of gratitude and love coursed through her, glad that the Allroads Council had decided not to try to get rid of them; while they would've fought back with everything that they had at their disposal, seeing and hearing about how powerful many of the local population was made their survival unlikely. The decision to let them live was only tinged with the fact that they owed their continued existence to that woman, Chareese, who seemed to pay a little *too much* attention to Fred.

It could be that she was imagining things, but she couldn't help but feel a little possessiveness flare up when she saw the woman staring at Fred constantly. It was stupid and juvenile, but she wanted to scratch the other woman's eyes out; she was just glad that Fred seemed completely oblivious of the entire situation. Then again, he still seemed oblivious to a lot of things that she thought were quite obvious, like when he had apologized for shoving all of that Earth Mana into her...

She shook her head at all the thoughts going through her head as she turned to Regnark and Deecy, who were standing around looking at each other in an apparent lack of purpose. *Right – it's time to get things organized.* Since she had become Co-leader of the Core Power Guild with Fred, she had taken on many more responsibilities than she ever thought she would in her life. Most of which included managing the members of their Guild, since Fred didn't seem to want – or even know how – to manage that part of their duties. Therefore, it fell to her to keep things running, though back in Gatecross it had been quite easy and straightforward.

There in Allroads, however, things were quite a bit different.

“Regnark, do you want to come with me to see to the Guild? We should probably see about adding you to Core Power when we get the chance; that is, if you want to be a part of a Guild?” Eisa said, breaking the

silence. “Unless you want to come too, Deecy? I figured you’d want to stay by Fred.”

Deecy answered that she would stay there and proceeded to curl up by his side in her smaller Pup form. Eisa was a little envious sometimes of how the Dire Wolf could change her size at will, though that was tempered by the fact that she could at least change her shape using her Earth Elemental Form. And with what she could do apart from that as a Shard, Eisa wouldn’t change it for anything.

“Sure, I’d love to join you. Both on your way to see them, as well as becoming part of your Guild,” Regnark responded, a smile on his face. “In all my years delving through dungeons, I’ve never been offered a spot in a Guild before, and I couldn’t think of any better one than Core Power. Especially with the lengths you and he went through to find your missing members, I know that it’ll be worth it to join your Guild family.”

That made Eisa pause for a moment. *Family?* She never really thought about it that way, but in a strange way Regnark was right. She considered the Guild more of a family than just colleagues or even friends; the bond that had cemented between them after the battle in Gatecross was strong enough that they had traveled hundreds of miles to find out what had happened to their Guild members. And not only them, but the other townspeople of Gatecross had all become honorary members of the Guild; maybe it was time to make that official as well.

Eisa smiled at Regnark and waved for him to follow her. “Then let’s go see how they’ve been holding up.”

She felt a little bad for practically neglecting them, mainly because as soon as they were all together again, something – namely, an attack on the entire city by hordes of monsters – came up. And after that, they had been so busy talking with the Allroads leadership that the Guild had been

all but forgotten. Not any longer, though; she was determined to see how they were doing now that they had some time, and to figure out what they wanted to do in the future. Eisa knew that Fred cared about what happened to them, but he also knew that they would do what was right for *themselves*, which may or may not coincide with what the Guild, as a whole, had in mind. Even though Metch and the other core Guild members had already pledged their help, Eisa wanted to gauge how the others were holding up and what their plans were.

As they walked into the second dungeon room – which was essentially empty, as Fred had gotten rid of all the traps and there were no monsters, of course – she found most of the Guild and many of the townspeople just lounging around the floor looking bored. When they saw her, they immediately jumped up from their positions; Metch and Harriette jogged over to her within seconds, and the strong tank spoke just as soon as they were close enough that he didn't have to shout.

“Eisa! What's going on? What happened up above? What are they going to do with us?” he asked, his questions rattling off in quick succession. From the desperate expression on his face, it looked like he had been holding it in for long enough that he was going to explode if he didn't get answers soon. Eisa could understand it, as there had been a distinct lack of information to them all – and both her and Fred were to blame for that.

Fortunately, she was about to rectify the situation. “If you can gather everyone around, I'm going to explain what happened in the past, what is happening now, and what is likely to happen in the future. Hopefully, that should answer all of your questions, and I'm sure everyone else has a lot of the same ones.”

It didn't take long for everyone to gather inside the second dungeon room, which was bigger and more accommodating of the crowd than the

smaller side room Fred had dug out for them to stay in earlier. Finding herself surrounded by a veritable mob of people, though, made her realize that it might be better if she could be seen by them all, instead of being lost in the crowd. With a quick warning to those around her to step back, she activated her new ability and focused on what she wanted it to look like.

Instead of the Stone Barrier blocking off most of the room like it did to the hallway up above, Eisa formed it in her mind a little differently, pushing more of her Mana into it than the base amount of 50 Earth Mana it required. She thought that was ok, however, as she knew she could reabsorb it when she was done; the stone barrier above had been broken, unfortunately, and the Mana used in its construction was lost, but this one wasn't likely to be damaged by the time she was done with it.

In all, Eisa pumped 200 Earth Mana into the ability and mentally formed a square column of stone that slowly emerged from the floor, raising her higher into the air until she was 10 feet above the crowd – and she was able to easily see them all, as well as them being able to see her. The throng quieted when they saw her emerge on top of a literal stone pedestal, though with as travel-weary and experienced with the strange habits of Fred they were, they barely blinked an eye at what she could do.

Eisa went a bit more in depth about her resurrection via a Dungeon Core piece, their journey to Allroads, Fred's accidental destruction of *another* Core, Regnark's resurrection, and what it meant that she and the big man (as well as Deecy) were Shards. She answered some more questions about all of that before she explained what had happened above with the monster army sent to ultimately kill Fred, the decision of the Allroads Council, and all of their relatively "free" status – though they were told to stay below, which was almost like still being imprisoned. She also described what the status of the surrounding land looked like – as much as

she could piece together by Fred's descriptions – with his territory, the enemy monsters, and the contraction of Fred's border being the most important factors.

It didn't take much explanation about the probable outcome of Fred's territory collapsing for them all to understand the threat they – and the entire city of Allroads – was under. By the end of her rather depressing speech, the room was silent as everyone absorbed what was told to them. Finally, Raspel surprised her by speaking first.

"This sounds like a right mess, it does. I'm all for helping out wherever I'm needed, but what in the world can we do about it?" His question was followed up by everyone in the room – including all of the townspeople – chiming in and agreeing with him.

Eisa didn't have a ready answer for that, but fortunately for her, Regnark did. "This doesn't sound much different from when your town of Gatecross was attacked, though I will admit that this is on a *much* bigger scale than that. What was it that you did back then when you found your lives on the line?" he asked those in front of him, his powerful voice projecting so that everyone in the room could hear him.

"We trained and prepared for their coming, but how are we supposed to do that here?" Metch responded.

"Well, where do you think you're standing right now? Sure, it's empty now, but I'm sure that it won't be for long. And I also have a feeling that Fred may be onto something that can help with all of this, though I have no idea what that is. He'll let us know soon, I imagine, but for now we can at least train to improve your skills."

"That's all well and good, but without Fred, how are we supposed to train without monsters to fight?"

Eisa saw Regnark smile and she did as well, as thoughts about how she was able to manipulate her own abilities back in Gatecross flitted across her mind. They might not be able to provide Essence right now to strengthen them, but there wasn't any reason why the Guild couldn't experiment with their spells and abilities to make them deadlier; during a real fight or dungeon delve it could be problematic or even foolish to try something new and untested, but in a controlled environment...

"Don't worry about that," Eisa told them. "Regnark and I have that covered."

Chapter 12

The moment Fred sat down in his dungeon, he closed his eyes and tried to block everything out so he could concentrate. It was difficult, however, with the constant “pressure” on his territory border; every time he seemed to clear all outside distractions, the almost-pain of the Light and Air sections pressing against him brought his focus back to the outside world. After an indeterminate amount of time of no progress towards *anything*, Fred realized that he was unconsciously keeping a tenuous connection to his territory with his Territorial Sight skill.

Whenever he had established a territory in the past, that connection wasn't that big of a deal; he never really paid attention to it unless something caught his attention, and it allowed him to spot enemies before they could surprise him or his friends. Fred never actually activated it originally, it was just always on and it was only when he consciously used it that he could see specific places or things inside his territory. So, in the effort to finally clear his mind of those distractions, he looked around his immediate area, the walls of Allroads, and his territory border one last time...then he deliberately deactivated his Territorial Sight.

And then he freaked out when he couldn't feel his territory anymore.

In less than a second of sheer panic, Fred reactivated his Sight and sighed in relief as his territory seemed just fine; a quick look around showed everything just the way it should be. He had worried that he had inadvertently collapsed his territory when he did that, which at that point would be extraordinarily bad. While he *might* be able to establish a territory again before the nearby Cores recovered from its sudden disappearance and expanded their own territories, he didn't think his

chances were that great that none of them took advantage in just that short amount of time. Fortunately, despite not being able to sense it, his territory seemed to stay intact even if he couldn't feel or sense it there.

He tried again a couple of times, extending the time his Territorial Sight was down all the way up to about 5 minutes, and was again relieved when there was no change. With a deep breath, Fred deactivated his Sight again, knowing that it was going to be down for as long as he was working on his project that he needed full concentration for. After about ten minutes of sitting there nervously and almost twitching with the need to turn it on again, he tried to calm himself – but it was difficult. With his Territorial Sight off for probably the first time since he had absorbed Firbey and Frozzles back near his parents' dungeon, it felt like a piece of him was missing that he didn't realize was always there. In the beginning and in between his need to establish a territory, he had unconsciously used it to sense where nearby territories were, even without knowing he was doing it.

And now it felt as though he was partially blind.

Regardless of how strange and uncomfortable it felt, he had a job to do, and the absence of his Sight was exactly what he needed. After another 10 minutes of paranoia setting in, he reactivated it again and saw that everything was *still* fine, so he immediately got rid of it again and settled down. He consoled his paranoia by telling himself that if he didn't do what he needed to accomplish, then it wouldn't matter if his territory collapsed, or something important happened that he wasn't immediately aware of. It also helped knowing that all the Humans didn't have the same skills he had, and they had survived thousands of years without Territorial Sight – so *he* could too.

When he was finally ready, Fred mentally blocked out the noises that were coming from the other dungeon room, which was *way* easier than

trying to block out the feeling of his ever-shrinking territory. He already saw that Eisa and Regnark were doing something with the Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross, which he was glad for; Fred felt a brief spike of regret from basically ignoring them for the most part since they were rescued from the Prison above, but even that he pushed aside and cleared his mind.

He looked inside himself, to the Cores he had mentally constructed to contain both his Unconverted and Elemental Mana. At least, Fred *thought* that they were just mental representations; his original intention when he was making them had just been to better contain and manipulate the free-floating Mana his body contained, and the Cores were the most familiar and easiest to visualize.

His Mana before had been practically infused inside the smallest parts of his Human body, separate and not as clearly accessible as they could be; when he looked around his body now, he could still see multiple faint lines running through his limbs and ending back up at his chest, where he had visualized his Cores. It almost mirrored his veins where the blood pumped by his heart traveled all throughout his body, but it was much more vibrant and colorful, with the rich blue of Water, the burning red of Fire, the healthy green of Nature, the dark brown of Earth, and the deep black of the Dark element passing through every inch of his form. In short, it was a wonderful visualization of the Mana he had inside his body, and also provided a glimpse of how it had kept him alive even after being burnt to death, decapitated, and blown up by an exploding Earth Core.

*But what if it's not a **visualization**, but actual real constructs?*

He had never considered it before, because it sounded ridiculous. *Where would it even fit? How in the world would I have six Cores inside my body without them killing my Human body?* When he looked at them

with his Mana Sight, pictured them essentially right smack in the middle of his torso, just above his stomach and slightly below his lungs; if they really were there, he was sure they would interfere with his organs somehow... wouldn't they?

Without actually cutting himself open and visually looking – or having someone else do it – there was no real way to tell (and there was no way he wanted that to happen, even knowing he would survive; he was done with dying or even just *nearly* dying for the month, thank you very much). Therefore, Fred did the only thing he could think of to test his theory that the cores inside of him were actually real: he tried to make another one. Using half of his Water Mana (because it was the...*calmest*... of his elements, so he thought it was the easiest to work with), he tried to visually create a Core inside himself that was approximately half the size of his original one.

(Warning! You are attempting to place another Water Elemental Core inside your vessel, where one already exists. Doing so will replace it with your new one, which will permanently destroy the previous Core. Do you wish to proceed? Y/N)

Fred immediately said no, as he didn't want to give it a chance to do it automatically if he didn't choose fast enough; he'd already experienced that before, and once was more than enough. He wasn't sure if it would cut his Core in half, thereby reducing his current maximum amount of Water Mana, which would waste all those days of building it up to its current level. As soon as he said no, the Water Mana was reabsorbed into his Elemental Core, bringing it back to where it started from.

Fire Mana: 301/301

Water Mana: 300/300

Nature Mana: 300/300

Earth Mana: 300/300

Dark Mana: 300/300

Unconverted Mana: 68460 (45)

All of his Elemental Mana had been rapidly increasing since he hadn't been using any lately, so much so that they were all at a maximum of 300 or more; in addition, because there were so many Humans inside of his dungeon, his Unconverted Mana total was rapidly increasing as well. He knew from experience that at some point the amount he was receiving from them would taper off and stop altogether, but they were still providing plenty for his use. Not only that, but he had noticed earlier that when Chareese the Inquisitor (as well as the brief visit by the Allroads Governmental guards alerting the woman to the army attacking outside) had provided nearly insane levels of UM for the short time they were there, which only served to show how important high-Rated Adventurers were to high-Rated Dungeon Cores.

Slightly frustrated by his failure with the Water Mana, Fred decided to try making additional Elemental Cores using the other elements, but ended up with the same result; he even tried to use his Unconverted Mana to create another "Human" Core, but he quickly selected **No** when it appeared as though it wanted to replace what he had there already. Then, because nothing seemed to be working, he tried combining two different elements together...then three...then all of them...and then just Human and one other element or two – but no combination he tried worked to do anything. The combinations actually seemed to want to do something,

which he was happy to see, but it all gave him the same warning, and he was unwilling to risk upsetting the balance in his Core by saying **Yes** to anything.

Having no luck and feeling a little down – because he really thought he had a good idea – Fred decided to turn his Territorial Sight back on, because he wasn't sure how long he had been experimenting. Fortunately, everything still looked the same as it had earlier, though it appeared to be night outside – and the border was continuing to shrink at an alarming rate, especially around the Light and Air faction areas. Looking around, he saw that the gobs of free-floating Earth, Dark, and Nature Mana outside the walls of Allroads were still there, but he didn't quite want to use those yet until he had a clear idea of what they would be best used for.

They were a mess to his Mana Sight and blocked a clear view of the immediate area around the walls, however, so Fred decided to clear his head a bit from the failed attempts at creating other Cores inside of him and took the time to clean up the Mana outside. One by one, he grabbed all of the Nature Mana blobs and stuck them together; then he did the Earth Mana orbs, followed by the Dark Mana, until he had three separate huge floating blobs of Mana outside the walls at least 25 feet high and almost that much wide.

Now, instead of thousands of tiny orbs blocking his view, he had three massive ones; knowing that he had only exchanged one problem with a slightly better one, he wanted to move them somewhere out of the way and close by, but he didn't want Regnark or Eisa to accidentally run into them – the influx of that amount of Mana all at once he thought might kill them. So, he brought them underground, placing them inside the dirt and stone near his dungeon but not actually inside – mainly so that it wouldn't be automatically absorbed.

Unfortunately, as soon as he placed the Earth Mana inside the dirt, it started to break up into thousands of blobs again, dispersing through the ground all around the outside of the dungeon for some reason. The Dark and Nature seemed fine, it was just the Earth reacting with the ground that was having an issue. So, Fred simply gathered it all back up and sent it high above the city of Allroads where it would stay out of trouble...only to find it floating gently back to the ground, hitting stone streets of the city and breaking apart into thousands of tiny pieces again. *It's almost like putting it all together made it **heavier** than it had been, and it breaks apart when it comes in contact with its natural element.*

Fred tried the same thing with the other giant blobs of Mana and found that they also sunk down back to the ground, but didn't break apart – until the Nature one touched a tree growing in the backyard of one of the Residential Quarter's houses; it started to break apart similarly to the Earth blob, though not nearly as dramatically. He almost left them all that way since they weren't blocking his vision anymore, but he also wanted them together so that if he needed to use them in a hurry, he wouldn't have to individually find each and every one of them again.

Thinking about what he did with the Nature Cores which were brought to him back in Gatecross, he thought that he might be able to do the same thing he had done with them. At that time, he was able to take the Mana that had been absorbed from them – which he didn't really need, as he only wanted some more blueprints from them – and *condense* it down, inserting it back into their Cores. This had the added benefit of increasing their Core Crystallization, which was key to increasing their Core Rating, and most seemed appreciative. It was a similar process which he had used to create his own internal Cores, but completely different at the same time.

Of course, he didn't have another Core he could shove it back into, but he wanted to see if it would work the same way; he'd rather have 10 to 20 smaller condensed orbs of Mana than thousands of tiny ones floating around. Using the Earth Mana blob first (since it had been the most trouble), he broke off a good-sized chunk of it about the size of his torso and concentrated on condensing it down until it got smaller and smaller. By some good fortune, it seemed to work; by the time it was about a quarter of the size of his fist, he let go of his concentration, expecting it to stay that way – and, just like everything else he had tried lately, it failed.

The Earth blob instantly sprang back to its original size, as his condensation of the Mana lost cohesion. It was like he hadn't done anything to it, and there was nothing keeping it condensed together without his direct control. He thought about it for a moment, before he condensed it again, and then pulled a small chunk – about 50 units – of his Unconverted Mana from his Human Core. Wrapping the clear-ish non-element around the condensed form of Earth Mana, he created a thin shell around it, and imagined it hardening to create a smooth bubble of sorts to keep the Earth Mana contained. And then he let his concentration focused on condensing the brown Mana go.

It held...for all of five seconds. He could see the Mana inside the small bubble expand and strain at the clear shell, until it finally gave way and it burst apart, *all* of the Mana inside practically vaporizing and disappearing. The resulting explosion was also unexpected, and he was glad he had done his experiment underground where no one was around, though it did make the ground shake enough that he felt it even from where he was sitting. He looked at where it had been, and he saw a hole four times the size of the condensed orb blown into the underground portion of the stone and dirt he had been using as a lab.

I guess that didn't work.

It almost looked like what happened when the small Earth Core had used its Mana Combustion skill and exploded, destroying Fred's body and actually killing Eisa. He stared at the hole in the dirt using his Territorial Sight for what felt like forever, as thoughts about what he had just witnessed coursed through his mind. It felt like everything he knew about Mana, Cores, and Core structures had just been turned on its head, and his brain was starting to hurt from the ramifications of what he had seen. If what he thought was true, then *everything* could change.

And if he was indeed correct, he was more than sure he could create another Core – but it was going to take a lot more Mana. What he ultimately realized about the entire process stemmed from his (at the time, unwanted) education on Dungeon Core reproduction; according to his parents, a new Dungeon Core was “born” between two Cores as they mingled their Mana together. The new Core was born after days or even months of this “mingling”, of course, though Fred could never figure out why it took that long – but he had an idea about it now.

What they were actually doing – as far as he could understand – was working together to make something similar to what he was just trying to create with his condensed Earth Mana blob, though on a much, much smaller scale. Unbeknownst to them (he assumed), one Core would mentally condense a very small amount of Mana down until it was barely larger than a pebble, while the other would create a thin shield around it with their own Mana. That shield would take a while to fully harden, or “crystallize”, into a shell that could contain the condensed Mana; it took a while because – as Fred had just seen – Elemental Mana didn't want to stay in one state without some supreme effort on the side of the Cores.

Once it had crystallized enough and formed into the shape it needed to be to become a baby Core, the condensed Mana inside would stay in that state; only after years of being condensed would it crystallize as well. And then when any Core gathered more Mana, they would store it inside their crystallized form, where it in turn would slowly crystallize and add to the existing Core, thereby increasing its Rating – and everything that went with that.

As he put that all together, Fred realized what made him special and different from a “normal” Dungeon Core: his Unconverted Mana. His Human side could manipulate Unconverted Mana as well or even better than any of the Elemental Mana he possessed, which was something that other Cores probably only dreamed of. Or not, because very few seemed to want to have anything to do with Mana that was associated with Humans.

Regardless of the truth of that statement, Fred was all too aware of what his possession of usable Unconverted Mana meant. Looking back at how he had condensed the Mana “borrowed” from the Nature Cores with a new eye, he realized that he had inadvertently infused the Nature Mana he was condensing with a small amount of his “Human” Mana after it had been in his possession, which was how it was able to stabilize and crystalize it so quickly. It didn’t require a shield or “bubble” around it like the formation of a new Core, because he was already shoving it into an acceptable vessel already: the Nature Core.

Now knowing this – or at least thinking he understood what had happened – Fred checked his territory quickly and then shut off his Territorial Sight again, which got rid of the pushing and prodding it felt like his body was undergoing from the Dungeon Defenders outside attacking it. He didn’t want any distractions now, because what he was doing could be dangerous; the explosive properties of his last experiment was evidence

enough of that. The problem was that he wanted to see what he was doing with his own eyes using his Mana Sight, so he was going to do it right there in the dungeon.

Here goes nothing...

Chapter 13

Fred stood up, his body protesting a little from sitting down against the wall for an unknown amount of time; stretching for a moment, he faced the center of the relatively small dungeon room and blocked out the sounds coming from the other space in his dungeon. He had glanced over there earlier with his Territorial Sight, seeing that Eisa and Regnark were creating and recreating various Defenders, and the others were practicing different attacks and spells, though they looked a bit strange to Fred after a while. *I'll have to check that out later.*

“Fred...what exactly are you doing? I felt the explosion – or whatever it was – earlier and left you alone because you seemed intent on what you were doing, but if you’re going to try something like that in here...I’d probably advise against it.”

He jumped at Deecy’s voice in his head, as he had forgotten she was there in the room with him. Fred hesitated before he responded, because he wasn’t altogether sure that what he was doing was safe, but he really thought he had it handled. *“I’m not going to be using nearly as much as I was before, and I think I have it figured out. Still, I wouldn’t feel bad if you decide to stand as far away from the center of the room as possible.”*

Deecy immediately hopped up from where she had been lying by his side and transformed from her Pup form to her normal Dire Wolf form, before trotting to the corner of the room and lying down again – bracing herself for the inevitable explosion. *“I love how you didn’t even hesitate there, Deecy,”* he mentally said to her.

“Yes, well, you still haven’t told me what you’re attempting to do, so I’m staying as far away as I can get without leaving the room. Despite my instincts telling me to run, I’m still interested in what you’re doing.”

Fred chuckled at her explanation. *“Fair enough. As to what I’m going to attempt to do...I’m going to try to make a Dungeon Core.”*

“What? I know you’ve done some crazy things in the past that shouldn’t be possible, but I think you’re going too far. How about we talk about this first, so that you can see that this isn’t the best idea—”

Fred only smiled and ignored the Dire Wolf, who had actually stood up in surprise and looked ready to bolt for the exit; apparently, what he was attempting was so dangerous that she’d rather take her chances up in the city of Allroads than be in the same room as the attempted creation of a Dungeon Core. Before she could move, however, Fred had already taken 100 Nature Mana out from his internal Nature Elemental Core and tossed it into the middle of the room. He slowly condensed it with his mind, squashing it together tighter and tighter, farther than he ever had before, even smaller than the Fire Mana he had condensed and used to break through the Power-nullifying bracelets the Prison had placed on him and his friends.

He felt himself starting to sweat and shake as he concentrated on keeping the Nature Mana condensed – and then he squashed it down some more. Fred involuntarily stepped forward to the tightly condensed orb of vibrating and brightly glowing green Mana; when he was close enough, he instinctively reached out with his arms and enclosed the sphere of the

powerful element in his hands. He thought he couldn't actually *feel* the Mana, but he was wrong; when it was condensed as far as he had done, it felt tangible, though soft like some sort of putty. At that point it was no bigger than a glass marble he had seen a child playing with back in Gatecross, but Fred wanted it even smaller.

He squeezed his hands and fingers together, physically doing what his mental Dungeon Core abilities couldn't: condense the Nature Mana even further. Soon enough, it got even smaller and the "putty" felt harder, almost like highly compacted dirt. Another minute of straining to condense it even further through the use of his fingers or his mental abilities proved to be ineffective, so he figured it was time for phase two.

Taking twice the amount of Unconverted Mana from his Human Core that he used for the Nature Mana, he wrapped the compressed ball of green Mana in the clear-ish substance until it was fully contained within the large blob. And then he compressed the "Human" Mana, doing the exact same thing he had done just moments before.

He almost lost control of it all, as the strain of keeping two different elements compressed was almost too much for him; Fred now knew why the act of "reproduction" needed two Cores doing it at the same time, because the effort involved was enormous. Fortunately for him, he didn't have to wait days or weeks or months for his Human Mana to crystallize; within moments of it condensing to a certain point, he could feel it harden beneath his fingers, becoming rigid and somehow faceted, similar to what he had seen in other Dungeon Cores – including his parents.

I...can't...hold this...anymore!

When he didn't think he could maintain his concentration any further, he panicked and threw his experiment across the room towards the entrance of his dungeon...and let go of everything. He flung himself

backwards, away from where he had thrown his failed creation and braced himself for an explosion – but it never came. Instead, he heard what sounded like a solid stone hitting the floor, followed by its rolling around... until it abruptly came to a stop.

Fred lifted his head from where he had hidden it beneath his arms where he had been bracing himself, only to look up and see Chareese along with the Necro-Wizard and another man, who was unbelievably larger than Regnark and fully armored with what appeared to be large plates – some of which were nearly larger than Fred. It made sense though when he looked closer at the man's Interface, as he was a S-4th-Rated Knight-Commander named Winston Rodabaugh; something that he'd never seen before, however, was that there was an actual nickname next to his real name in quotes that said "Roady". Fred assumed that his nickname was what he was most frequently called by and had been around long enough for the DAS to find some way to alter it on his Interface, even if no one but he saw it regularly.

It took him a moment, but he realized that the Inquisitor was also decked out in armor, which was different from what he had seen her wear around the city. And underneath her shiny, black leather, calf-high boots was a green-glowing stone that pulsed with regular flashes of light...almost like a slow heartbeat.

"And what, pray tell, is this? And why did you throw it at me?" Chareese asked, moving her foot off of the stone and picking it up at the same time. She looked curiously at it, but Fred was more than a bit worried.

"Uh...sorry, I didn't see you there..." he mumbled, trying to figure out how to get his experiment back from the Inquisitor before it exploded. Because, as much as he wanted it to have worked, he couldn't really tell if

everything would hold properly without handling it himself. “As for that, it’s an experiment I’ve been working on...can I see it for a moment?” he asked as innocently as he could.

“Sure, here you go,” the woman said, tossing it back to him without seeing his nervousness over it. He dived forward before it hit the ground, catching it in his hands before it could shatter...and then explode. Except that, as soon as he held it in his hand and ran his Mana Sight over it, he knew deep down that it wouldn’t explode – it was firmly and permanently sealed, and the crystallization he had worried about holding was, for lack of a better word, perfect.

“...this action is risky – and I told the Council that – and it may only hold them back temporarily, but it’s already more than obvious how much faster they are moving towards the city than the others. Almost anything we can do to postpone what looks to be inevitable is authorized, even if it means risking ourselves out there.”

Her words just barely penetrated the surprise and excitement over *the Core he held in his hand*; Fred had to literally shake himself to snap his attention back to what she was saying, but he obviously missed what she first said, because he had no idea what she was talking about. “I’m sorry, I missed the first part of what you said; what are you talking about that is risky?”

The Inquisitor didn’t look happy that he had ignored her, but fortunately the – surprisingly – soft-spoken “Roady” fellow repeated what she had said. “She said that we were coming down here to let you know that a good portion of the higher-Rated DAS members and most of the Allroads Governmental people – ourselves included – will be hitting the Light and Air monsters out there at dawn, to try to delay them while you figure out how you’re going to take care of them permanently.” He looked

around the room and frowned. “When they said there was a dungeon down here, I was expecting...more, somehow.”

Fred was fully aware of how deficient his dungeon was, as he had only made it as a temporary refuge at first and hadn’t thrown any real thought into its construction. It wasn’t as if it was there to seriously keep anything out, so he hadn’t spent much time – or Mana – on making it look nice. Or deadly. Or whatever the man named “Roady” was expecting.

“It’s only temporary, and I can always add more to it later,” Fred said, feeling the need to defend his dungeon. He waved it off, though, because there were more important matters. “But that’s not important; what *is* important is the fact that you have people going out there to fight. I’m not sure if that’s a good idea – mainly because anything you kill that is on the other side of my border can have its Mana reused almost instantly to recreate it. You’ll be faced with a practically never-ending stream of monsters out there.”

The three people looked at each other with worried expressions, before turning back to Fred. “That...complicates matters, then. But, you said that only applies to monsters killed on *the other side* of your border? What happens if they are killed in your...territory?” Chareese asked, correctly using the terminology that she had just recently learned. She still looked perturbed by his earlier ignoring of her, but she appeared to have gotten over most of it.

“Well, the Mana they drop will belong to me, then. But that still doesn’t guarantee that the nearby Core pushing their border into mine won’t have extra Mana at their disposal to create hordes more, but it *will* take away a good portion of what is already out there. Their Mana isn’t infinite, but with an operation like this, they are sure to have plenty of it in reserve.”

“I think we can handle that, I guess. I think that as long as we’re aware that more could spawn at any time, we should be alright. Now, we’re doing all of this so that you can finish whatever you’re working on, so hurry up!” The Inquisitor motioned to the others that it was time to leave, before turning on her heel.

Fred was still slightly distracted by the Core in his hand, but their leaving caused him to shout, “Wait!” When they stopped and looked at him in what appeared to be anger, he held up his hands in apology. “Sorry, didn’t mean to shout. How about I help you out up there? Give you a little leg-up on your competition with an ally of your own?”

“What, you? I don’t think you should be anywhere near the battle we’re about to face with your measly Rating,” Chareese said. “No offense, of course, but it was my understanding from what you told the Council earlier that you can’t...create another dungeon out there, and I’m not sure it would do any good even if you could. Or do you mean your friends, the ‘Shards’? Again, no offense, but while those stone creatures and flying imps they were able to create earlier were enough to defeat those weaker monsters, from what our scouts say of what we’re up against they wouldn’t last a minute out there.”

Fred couldn’t help but think the Inquisitor was underestimating the abilities of his friends, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he waved those concerns away as he said, “No, I wasn’t planning on either them or I going out there; what I meant was that I could provide you with some...monster help...out there. While I can’t add anything to my dungeon down here while there are Humans present, nothing prevents me – just like the other Cores – from creating my own monsters to fight theirs.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment, before nodding in acceptance. “I’m sure that would come in handy; if you can keep creating

and re-creating them like you say, then that would give us an advantage,” she acknowledged, before turning back around. “Just make sure you keep a leash on it – I don’t want it attacking our people!” Chareese said over her shoulder as she ran after the others up the entrance tunnel.

When they were gone, Fred reactivated his Territorial Sight and looked outside; he was surprised at how long he had been working, because dawn was only minutes away. The pushing and prodding of his border hadn’t lessened or worsened, at least, and everything else looked fairly normal. Well, except for the gathering of hundreds of people – DAS members and Governmental employees – near the small southern gate. The Air and Light border encompassed much of the southern part of his territory, and the massive group would have to skirt around the small Earth-concentrated mountains in the way, but from there it was a straight shot to their destination.

Before he could get distracted any more by the Core he was holding in his hand, Fred grabbed ahold of *all* of the Nature Mana he was holding in reserve from the previous battle and brought it out past the mountains and any other Elemental concentration that was part of the Convergence. He was planning on making something...large...and he wanted to lessen the possibility of damaging or destroying anything inside the valley; he didn’t want to give the Cores a reason to abandon their plan and decide to completely level the Convergence, cutting their losses.

He had chosen Nature Mana for the simple reason that it didn’t have any weaknesses or advantages over the two elements it would be going against; since Light and Air were right next to each other and Fred wanted the Defender he was planning on making able to attack either of them, he wanted to make it more versatile. Since Dark was the obvious opposite of Light, it would both be more powerful in attacking the Light Defenders on

the border and weak against them at the same time; in the same vein, Earth was the opposite of Air, which would have the same effect.

Plus, he had other plans for the vast quantities of Earth and Dark Mana he had hanging about.

Looking at his list of Defenders he could create, he realized that he didn't have a large list; since it was limited to just the Nature ones – and he didn't want to create any type of hybrid with the other elements he had large quantities of, for the same reason as before – there were only a few viable options. Fred briefly considered making another massive Rock Beetle like he had made before to fight the Emerald Dragon in Gatecross, but he thought he could come up with something more useful. He decided to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each potential option.

Having something flying like the Large Wasp would be beneficial against the multitude of airborne Defenders attacking his border, but from what he could see, the Air-based creatures appeared to be much more agile and had multiple avenues of attack; in comparison, his Wasp would only be able to really attack with its stinger, and if that was somehow damaged it would be practically useless other than a battering ram of sorts. Against birds large and small with their sharp claws and beaks, disturbing-looking Harpies with the general shape of a massively deformed woman with wings and talons that could rip a human to shreds, large winged two-legged lizards called Wyverns (not any massive dragons, fortunately) with deadly fanged jaws and lethal-looking claws, a cross between a bird and a lizard that said it was a Cockatrice with elements of both, Griffons with their lion bodies and eagle heads, and even some spinning Wind Elementals that barely even had a form, the Large Wasp would get chewed up – even if it were three times the size of the largest of the enemy Defenders.

A Wasp *might* do better against the Light-based army, which was comprised of a mixture of ground and flying Defenders. However, based on some of their composition as quick, aethereal-appearing beings, Fred wasn't sure if it would do much good either. When pitted against some blindingly glitter-filled Bright Lynxes, some Sleek Unicorns with their sharp two-foot-long glowing horns, or even a few of the Crystal Golems he saw it would probably be fine. However, against the Distortion Behemoth that seemed *wavy* for some reason, the Light Elemental that didn't seem to have an actual form (being just a bright orb of light), and the Warp Dragon (which was thankfully a relatively small Defender about the same size as Air's Wyverns) that didn't seem to want to stay in one place...he wasn't sure a Wasp would survive long.

Having an immobile Flower Tripper (or its variants) wouldn't do much good either, the Am-bushes he had access to would be nearly the same in immobility as well, and the Poisonous Mobile Mushroom – while *mobile* – was relatively slow and he wasn't even sure if any type of Poison would affect some of the Defenders he saw. He needed something a bit faster and deadlier but would also help augment the attacks of the Humans heading out to battle.

Since Fred had already ruled out the Rock Beetle (and its variant) because it couldn't even hope to reach any of the airborne Air monsters, he looked at the Charging Boar. While it wasn't flying, it was much taller than the beetle and could move quickly and would be ideal in breaking up the line on the ground near the border by charging through them – and *over* them. However, it didn't have much in terms of attack other than its charge, though its tusks and hooves would do plenty of damage to whatever it could get a hold of.

There were two problems with the Boar, however. One, it would likely get in the way of the Humans out there, because it needed a little bit of space to charge ahead, and the likelihood of it accidentally stepping on someone was a real concern. Two, if it managed to break through the line, killing many of the enemy defenders in the process, it would be on the *wrong side of the border*; if it were somehow killed over there, Fred would lose the Mana from its creation, and wouldn't be able to bring it back.

So, with the Charging Boar something he would choose if he didn't have any other choice, Fred turned to the last Defender option he had left: Vine Spider. While it wasn't ideal, it did tick off most of the requirements he needed in it; it was fast and agile, could stab with its legs to impale many of the monsters that attacked it – including anything airborne, as it could rear up on its back legs and strike above, could actually jump and either land on something or grab a monster from the air, and it could also create webs that would hopefully help protect its Human allies. He hoped that by making it larger that it could shoot webs out like its Giant Spider “cousin” he had seen assault his dungeon back in Gatecross, but he wasn't relying on it.

Then again, I do have a Putrid Giant Spider blueprint I unlocked in the Deadlands, and if I remember correctly, it had been able to shoot out webs...

But that would mean having a Dark-based Defender, which he had already dismissed as being unfeasible. Even pumping in an equal amount of Nature Mana into the blueprint would still make it vulnerable to the Light-based monsters out there, which would hamper its usefulness. A thought came to his mind, though; he wasn't sure if it was because he had just done the impossible when he created an actual Dungeon Core – which he was still holding in his hand – or if he was just being reckless, but he

couldn't help to think that there had to be something he could do about his problem.

So, for the second time that day – or night, whatever time of day it might be – Fred tried to do the impossible.

Chapter 14

A quick look at the city of Allroads showed that the group of Adventurers that were heading towards the southern border of his territory were just beginning to file out of the southern gate. Fred estimated that it would be about 30 minutes until they reached far enough south to be in range of the monsters there, mainly because they weren't rushing there to conserve their energy. And the 1000+ Humans were going to need all of the energy they could get; when you considered that the border being pushed was over 5 miles long, with Light and Air taking a roughly equal amount of that, then there was barely enough for one group of five to cover a section 150 feet or so across. Then again, he wasn't sure of their exact plan, so he would have to wait to find out.

Regardless, he had a limited amount of time to try out his experiment. If it failed, then he would still be able to make a massive Vine Spider; but if it worked, the results of his experiment could have far-reaching effects.

Fred already knew from his relatively minor experiments with his Flower Tripper – and his Scorching Water Beetle – that trying to put more Mana from a different elemental type than its base element wasn't possible. For instance, he couldn't take his Flower Tripper (or any other Nature-based Dungeon Defender) and put in 2 units of Water Mana and only 1 unit of Nature Mana – it just didn't work. It could be an equal or lesser amount, but not more; all of which meant trying to “dilute” the Dark-based Putrid Giant Spider with vast quantities of Nature Mana was out of the question, if it even produced a viable variant in the first place.

What Fred wanted to do was something different, something radical by usual Dungeon Core standards – he wanted to see if he could fuse two different blueprints together to make something that combined the best of both.

Admittedly, he had already tried that back in Gatecross, even when he only had access to a few blueprints. Fred had tried bringing out the blueprint for a Flower Tripper and the Rock Beetle, putting them side-by-side in his empty dungeon, and mentally *merged* them together. He was trying to see if he could somehow strengthen either the Flower Tripper with the hard shell of the beetle and maybe even give it some deadly mandibles, or else give his Rock Beetle the ability to extend its limbs and reach out to the enemy – all he knew was he wanted something different. Unfortunately, all he got was this message:

Warning! Trying to merge these types of blueprints together is not possible. Please try again when you have different blueprint types.

It hadn't made much sense earlier, because he wasn't sure what it meant by "types"; later, when he received the Am-bushes blueprint, he tried again, thinking that they both had to be "plant type" Defenders or something, but that didn't work either. Neither did the variant types of his Flower Trippers, though he got a slightly different message for that one.

Warning! Trying to merge variant blueprints together is not possible. Please try again with different blueprint types.

Without any sign of anything working from his attempted merging, he had abandoned it. However, the thought that had occurred to him earlier

– and what had prompted his current experimentation – was something that hearkened back to his Researcher and Combiner days back in Gatecross, before all of the mess with the Dungeon Cores came about. He had found that Combining spells or abilities that were too similar to each other – like Flamestrike and Fireblast – didn’t really work to change much; although they weren’t technically “elements” like Fire Mana, that was kind of how he viewed them. If he Combined two “Fire element” spells together, there was little to no change; it was only when he introduced a different “element” that he had the most success.

Take his Vampiric Stunning Fireblast, for example, which he hadn’t had the need to use since he was delving through dungeons with a group of his Guild Members.

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.*

If he considered that **Lifedrain** was Dark, **Sudden Shock** was Air, and **Fireblast** was Fire-based, then his method of looking at the whole process like the different elemental factions made sense. And then if he applied that same concept to blueprints, the mysterious “type” the warning was talking about didn’t refer to the *type* of Defenders he was trying to merge together – like a plant and a bug or boar or whatever – but a different *elemental faction*.

Thus, using a blueprint for a Level 1 Vine Spider and a Level 1 Putrid Giant Spider, he placed them side-by-side beyond the mountains and more than a half-mile away from his territory border...just in case what he was trying made it explode like his first experiment with condensing Mana had. Without more than a brief whispered hope to himself that it would work this time, Fred grabbed both wire-frame blueprints and *merged* them together.

Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization v.0.1:

Warning! Anything contained within this outdated experimental module is highly restricted and untested; if you have encountered this module in error, it is imperative that you dismiss this immediately and contact your superior. Failure to do so could result in your full and complete termination.

>>>>>>>>>

>>>>>>>>>

Welcome to Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization! With a few simple steps, you and a member of another faction can work together to create a hybrid blueprint to protect your dungeons against the Human scourge running across the planet, as well as combining efforts against possible Dualborn uprisings. These hybrids take the best characteristics of your Defenders and Defenses and merges them with another, creating a new Defender or Defense that can potentially outperform the original blueprints.

Note 1: This method is entirely untested; until experiments are run, risks, chances of success, and a list of the best hybrids to create is entirely unknown. Please take caution when merging blueprints, as the results can likely be unpredictable.

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

Current Blueprints Merged:

- **Vine Spider (Level 1) Nature**
- **Putrid Giant Spider (Level 1) Dark**

Do you wish to add more blueprints? Y/N

The information that practically exploded in his mind was shocking, to say the least; he was half-expecting another warning to come up saying that it hadn't worked or for nothing to happen at all, but to have unlocked something completely new was...unexpected. He had to read through it three times to fully comprehend what he was reading, and when he finally did, he realized the void monsters back in the Plains of Grass had slightly different origins than his parents must've been told. He wasn't sure exactly what happened back whenever this "near-disaster" occurred, but since it was likely caused by this...*module*...he now had access to, Fred hesitated for a moment.

He pushed the fear that he would create something just as horrible and destructive – and *perpetual*, apparently – aside and selected **N** to the

question of whether he wished to add more blueprints. It was intriguing that he could add more than two together, but for now he wanted to see if it would even work or not; the fact that the whole “Hybridization” system had been in the experimental phase only made him more cautious, not reckless.

Please select which blueprint characteristics to focus on during Hybridization:

Caution! Preliminary tests have shown that the more characteristics that are chosen for focusing, the higher the chance of failure!

- **Acidic Poison []**
- **Diseased Bite []**
- **Enhanced Leap []**
- **Armored Exoskeleton []**
- **Strengthened Limbs []**
- **Hardened Web Shield []**
- **Sticky Web Net []**

Confirm selections: Y/N

The options for his new hybrid Defender were surprising; not only were there more than he would’ve thought there might be, but the fact that he could pick and choose what he wanted to focus on was extraordinary. He wanted *all* of them, of course, but he also read the cautionary note; he was tempted to select all of them anyway, but he knew that was likely to fail.

He wasn’t exactly sure what failure would mean, however. *Does it mean I can just try again with no penalty? Will it consume some Mana and I would lose it permanently? Will it explode? Or will it – and this I think is the worst possible outcome – lock me out from trying that combination*

again similar to how failing to Teach someone an ability will prevent them from being Taught that way ever again?

He got one of those answers right after he took a little risk and chose to focus on Strengthened Limbs, Hardened Web Shield, and Sticky Web Net; as soon as he mentally selected them and confirmed his selections, something new came up.

Cost to create Hybrid Blueprint (#1): 100 Nature Mana, 100 Dark Mana

So, obviously it requires some Mana to even create the blueprint, which I doubt I would get back if it were to fail. At that point, the merged blueprints were glowing in his vision of them, and it was only when he looked around that he realized that strange time-freeze thing was going on again. The flying Air Defenders in the distance were frozen in the middle of the air, though when he stared at them for more than a moment he realized they were just moving very, very slow.

Having gone that far already, Fred snatched a small portion of the massive Nature and Dark Mana blobs and started to pour them into the glowing merged blueprint. When it was full – he assumed that 100 of each Mana was now inside of it – it started to glow brighter and brighter, to the point where Fred thought something had gone wrong and it was about to explode. After flashing one more time which was so bright that it almost blinded him – even using his Territorial Sight – it disappeared, and a new prompt appeared in his vision.

Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization Success!

Please rename this new Hybrid Blueprint: _____

I...did it? It worked? With just the slightest bit of hesitation, Fred mentally inserted “Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider” into the space asking for a name (not real original, but it described exactly what it was to him), and then confirmed it. As soon as that happened, the world seemed to pick back up again in normal time, and he saw that the Adventurers leaving Allroads had only traveled about 100 feet since he started messing with blueprints. All signs of the merged blueprints were gone, however, and Fred began to worry that it didn’t work after all.

Fortunately, after checking his Dungeon Defense Creation Menu, he found the new blueprint underneath all the new “Single Faction” Blueprints and Variants, in a section called “Multi-faction Hybrid” Blueprints.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (Single Faction Blueprints and Variants)

- Flower Tripper (Level 1 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana)
- (*More*)
- Crystal Scorpion (Level 1 Base Cost: 125 Earth Mana)

Create Defender (Multi-faction Hybrid Blueprints)

- Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider (Level 2 Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana, 2 Dark Mana, 2 Unconverted Mana)

Yes, it was right there at there at the bottom of the list for a cost at Level 2 of 2 Nature Mana, 2 Dark Mana, and...2 *Unconverted Mana*? He had no idea why it would cost some of his Unconverted Mana to create the new blueprint, especially as it had *never* been used to create anything before

that. Well, except to help stabilize and crystallize Mana so that he could make a Dungeon Core, but that was entirely different. *Or is it?*

Maybe the reason the whole “Multi-faction Blueprint Hybridization Module” hadn’t been successful was because they didn’t have access to the “Human” element to stabilize it. He didn’t know for sure that was the reason it was apparently abandoned, but it definitely could have been a contributing factor. Regardless of the reason, the inclusion of his Unconverted Mana into the new blueprint complicated matter a bit, because he didn’t know how much he could reasonably expect to contribute.

Fire Mana: 321/321

Water Mana: 320/320

Nature Mana: 320/320

Earth Mana: 320/320

Dark Mana: 320/320

Unconverted Mana: 114385 (45)

Then again, I guess I can afford to spare a little bit. Having been mentally “absent” so long working on various experiments had allowed his Unconverted Mana total climb from his Guild being inside his dungeon for so long, as well as the appearance by the three S-Rated people earlier – even if it was for a relatively short time.

To be sort of safe and to not risk running out of Unconverted Mana quite yet, Fred impulsively decided to contribute up to 100,000 of it towards the creation of his new Spider Defender. He wasn’t sure how much it would actually take, since he wasn’t sure how much Nature and Dark Mana he had available, but he hoped it was more than enough.

Bringing out the new **Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider** blueprint, he placed it in the same spot he had been merging the blueprints from before and mentally increased its Level. Fred watched the strange green-and-black wire-frame blueprint grow and grow, passing Level 300, 400, 800, and finally reaching Level 1000. At that point it was frankly huge, larger even than the Scorching Water Beetle he had made in Gatecross. In fact, looking behind the blueprint towards the small mountain range near Allroads, he realized that it was nearly a third of the height of them and could probably jump over them in one leap, even without the **Enhanced Leap** characteristic.

I think that's probably good.

He brought the blobs of Mana over and plopped them next to the blueprint, before shoving both of them into it one after another, like he was trying to fill a cooking pot up with water. All but the smallest amount of the Dark Mana was siphoned into the blueprint, leaving what he estimated as about 100 units of it left; the Nature Mana, on the other hand, had at least ten times or more left over. Fred attributed that difference to the fact that he had gathered up and sent a bit of Dark Mana to Regnark to help with repelling the attack the day before, but he was just glad that he had enough to fill up the blueprint.

Now it was time for his Unconverted Mana; Fred started to pull out large chunks of 10,000 UM at a time, before sending it to the blueprint to fill it up. After the seventh chunk, he started to feel a little light-headed; he was glad he was sitting down while he was doing all of that, because he would've fallen down otherwise. And still the blueprint wasn't filled yet.

He began to worry when forcibly removing the tenth chunk of 10,000 from his Human Core, and he almost passed out from the fatigue he felt from the rapid loss of so much Mana from inside of him. Fortunately,

when he sent it to the blueprint, a little more than half of it stayed outside of the wire-frame form, and Fred eagerly “gobbled” it back up. The infusion of over 6,000 Unconverted Mana at once was a rush, and it did wonders to alleviate his weariness.

As soon as it filled up completely, the blueprint solidified, and Fred could see it start to form from its legs upward. Just like the massive Beetle he had made before, however, it formed incredibly slow; unlike that time, though, he could see that it was materializing at least twice as fast or more than the Beetle had been, which only made sense because he had increased his Defender Creation Skill since then. In fact, as he looked at it, he saw the skill increase from Intermediate Defender Creation: 99% to Expert Defender Creation: 1% – and the speed of its creation visibly increased. It didn’t double or anything like that, but he estimated that a 10% boost in the speed wouldn’t be too far amiss.

Still, it was going to take a while for it to fully form – which was good, because it was still going to take a while for the Adventurers – including Chareese and her two groupmates, Agelstein and Roady – to arrive. And when they did, they were in for a treat.

A little less than 25 minutes later, the large group of powerful Adventurers rounded the mountains and started to head towards the Light-controlled border. Before they got halfway there, though, they stopped and organized themselves into separate groups similar to what they had done up on the walls of Allroads. Just before they took off again, Fred’s new massive Defender materialized into existence, its presence essentially invisible to the Humans until it had fully formed. With each of its eight 200-foot-long, thick, jointed, and strengthened legs spread out on either side of its massive body, it was suspended over the Humans like a massive tent. He took a look at its stats as soon as it formed, and he was surprised and

excited to see that none of the weaknesses against Light-based spells and effects from the Dark portion of the Defender seemed to carry over; of course, none of the strengths that made it *more* effective against the Light were there, either, but it was a fair trade as far as he was concerned.

Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider (Level 1000)

Vitality: 80000

Attack: 2900, Limb Impale, Sticky Web Net

Defense: 2100, (2500 on limbs)

And, of course, since Fred couldn't directly communicate with anyone out there to let them know it was an ally, at the abrupt appearance of the giant Spider...the Humans freaked out.

Chapter 15

Fortunately, Fred was ready for that kind of reaction; he wasn't that fond of spiders in the first place and having one the size of a small mountain appear above them without warning wasn't likely to elicit good feelings in those below. Before the multitude of spells and arrows quickly launched at the underside of his Spider could hit, he told his new Defender to jump quickly backwards. Even for its size, the massive arachnid was able to swiftly flex its legs and jump about 100 feet behind the group, though some of the faster spells and abilities of the Adventurers managed to hit its underside and do a bit of damage.

Looking at its Vitality and the actual visible damage done to its tough – but by no means invulnerable – exterior, he knew he was lucky they didn't all hit him at the same time, otherwise it would've likely died in less than a few seconds. Even so, the few that managed to hit the Spider had taken a few thousand Vitality away, though it was still in fairly good shape. But it probably wouldn't stay that way long if he couldn't get the Adventurers to understand that it wasn't there to attack them.

“Defensive positions!” Fred heard someone from the group of Humans shout. “It's going to attack; as soon as it does, I want the tanks up front to deflect it – I don't think anyone can withstand more than a hit or two from something that large. When it's busy with them, I want the long-range damage-dealers to flank it from the sides – and I need a few people to start crippling its legs!” The voice turned out to be Roady; the soft-spoken voice he had heard from the Knight-Commander before was completely gone, replaced by one that resonated authority.

It was amazing to Fred that, despite the sudden appearance of an impossibly large monster in their midst, not a single Adventurer showed any signs of panicking. He did see them tense up when he had his Spider attack with its Sticky Web Net...which shot out of its rear end in a large gob of white webbing, far over the heads of the Adventurers. It sailed over 1500 feet (which was only just over seven times its body length, which wasn't that far on that sort of scale) to impact the front line of Light-based Defenders just over the border in Fred's territory. It landed precisely on a large Sleek Unicorn, fully enclosing it in the sticky webbing (to be fair, he was hoping to hit the even larger Crystal Golem beside it). Using its front legs, Fred's Giant Vine Spider started to reel in the webbed Unicorn with the thick line attached to it and its rear end.

"Hold! Don't attack the giant spider!" Fred heard Chareese yell out, and he saw her quickly converse with the Knight-Commander and Necro-Wizard beside her.

Soon enough, Rody brought his battlefield voice back into play. "Yes, hold! This could be our ally from our...special guest...in Allroads! Fred, if that's your monster, give us a sign!"

Fred intervened and stopped his Spider from reeling in its catch, and then had it wave one of its front legs at the group, before starting up again. And that was about all he could handle, because trying to directly control his Defender took insanely focused concentration for more than a few seconds; normally, he would just give it specific orders and let it do what it wanted to do to accomplish those orders. Luckily, the Defenders he had created in the past seemed to know their "jobs" and he didn't need to do anything with them; there was no reason not to think this one was the same.

When the struggling Sleek Unicorn was dragged all the way back to the group, he ordered his Spider to leave it just in front of the massive Adventurer group – and the Humans went to work. Within seconds the Unicorn was dead, and it disappeared inside the web net, leaving behind a bright-white orb that he easily identified as Light Mana; not only that, but Essence drifted out of it, which dispersed between everyone standing within 50 feet. A quick look at a few people's Interfaces showed that they didn't receive more than a point or two – because it was dispersed between so many of them – but it was a start.

Fred actually had to look away for a moment as the webbing was brought back by his Spider and essentially *sucked up* and absorbed into its rear again, and he wasn't the only one who had to look away. Maybe it had something to do with its sheer size, but the whole act was...disturbing...to watch.

As for the Light Mana, Fred went ahead and pulled it to his body and absorbed it as Unconverted Mana, since he didn't really have a need for it for anything else. It was strange trying to manipulate Mana that he didn't have an internal elemental Core for; it was like handing a foreign material that he not only couldn't identify but couldn't find a use for. He was only now beginning to understand what Mana was, especially with his recent creation of...whatever it was that he had made. And what he knew was that with the Light Mana, he couldn't *do* anything with it other than absorb it, and his quick attempt to condense it ended in absolute failure – because it was like trying to compress...nothing. It was like it didn't exist to his manipulations.

Once that was done, he gave orders to his Spider to continue casting its web net and bringing back monsters for the Humans to kill, but to protect them over everything else. Which he knew would become

important, because on the next shot of his Spider's web – which hit the Crystal Golem that time – a dozen other Light Defenders on the front line followed after it. Abandoning its catch by cutting the line, the Giant Vine Spider then shot out another gob of webbing, though this was directed toward the front of the Adventurers' right side.

When it hit the ground, the webbing started to solidify and build upwards, until it was over 20 feet tall and 15 feet wide. It was just in time, too, because one of the Distortion Behemoths was racing ahead of the Light Defender group, and it smacked right into the middle of the web "shield", breaking off a chunk of the surprisingly solid material – but also bringing the Behemoth to a complete stop. Fred couldn't even imagine the damage it could've done to the Humans if it had been able to run full speed at them; judging by what it did to his Spider's web shield, it wouldn't have been pretty.

However, now that the Distortion Behemoth was stopped, the white 20-foot-tall, six-legged monster with an iridescent scaly hide was set on by the Adventurers, who practically obliterated it with a barrage of spells that all impacted it within seconds of each other. Still, it survived long enough to take a few more steps forward due to its unique ability to distort its body, which essentially phased it out of existence just long enough for nearly half of the attacks aimed at it to miss. The Humans weren't playing around and obviously knew what it could do, hence the literal overkill's worth of spells thrown at the monster.

Fred's Spider then took out a flying Winged Pegasus – which was essentially an even larger unicorn with wings – with another shot of sticky web netting, and it dropped to the ground in a big splat. The impact didn't kill the Light monster – or even hurt it very much – because the webbing acted as a sort of cushion, but it was essentially out of the fight.

The Adventurers then showed how effective they were even without Fred's help; they expertly separated the additional monsters heading towards their line, ganging up on them one at a time to take them down quickly. Another two Unicorns, two Golems, three Bright Lynxes, a second Distortion Behemoth, a second and third Pegasus, a Warp Dragon, and two Light Elementals – which were slow-moving but powerful, as they shot out concentrated beams of light that could burn through even the strongest metal if it had enough time – were all taken down within a couple of minutes. The Warp Dragon appeared to be the most difficult to kill, only because it was the hardest to lock down; whenever any type of projectile (as in arrows or spells) approached it, the Warp Dragon would disappear and appear somewhere else. His Spider had no luck catching it in a web, and the Adventurers were forced to blanket the area with area-of-effect spells in order to damage it enough to kill it.

Through it all, there were a few injuries that were quickly and efficiently healed by the designated Healer Classes in the massive group, so there were ultimately no casualties. Even more Essence was distributed through all of the combatants, and that time the haul was even more impressive, though just over 3,000 Essence for the high-B, A, and S-Rated Adventurers was more like a drop in the bucket than anything. Still, they seemed to appreciate it.

For Fred, however, his own reward from the battle was almost 18,000 Unconverted Mana from the Light Mana left behind; a few more fights like that and everything he had spent on the Spider's construction would be completely recouped. Since everything seemed to be going well, Fred reconfirmed his orders with the Spider and left it to do what it was already doing, which was supporting the Human Adventurers; through the

entire previous fight, he hadn't done anything but watch, so he was fairly confident that it could handle itself without too much supervision.

As another group of Light Defenders were pulled as a result of his Spider's shot web netting, Fred watched for a moment before focusing his attention back to his dungeon...and the Core he was still clutching tightly in his hand.

It always felt strange going from concentrating on something distant in his territory to looking at his immediate surroundings, and Fred was again thankful that he was sitting down – though when he looked up from where his head was lolling against his chest, Deecy was sitting in her normal Dire Wolf form staring into his face.

“Now that I have your attention and you seem to be back...WHAT DID YOU JUST DO?!”

Fred winced at the mental shout in his head, and it took a moment for him to recover. He wasn't aware that Mana Communication like that could hurt, but then again, there always seemed to be a lot that he didn't know. Instead of answering using the same method – since his mind felt a little raw after that – he spoke out loud. “Are you talking about the multi-element hybrid blueprint I just made, the 200-foot-tall Spider that's helping Chareese and the other Adventurers out near the border with the Light faction, or do you mean the fact that I now know the real origin of those Horrors in the Plains of Grass?” he asked, still reeling from the mental shout.

“No, I'm talking about the—wait, what did you just say? Hybrid? Is that like a variant of some sort? And 200-foot-tall Spider? What have you

been doing?”

Deecy seemed genuinely confused, and the slight anger in her mental voice was replaced by curiosity. Fred then explained in detail what he had done with his blueprints, the “module” he had somehow unlocked access to in the process, the fact that the Horrors thought to be “natural” were actually a result of some botched experiment with said module, and how his massive Level 1000 Shield Net Limb Giant Vine Spider actually needed Unconverted Mana to create it. It was a lot to go over, and by the time he was done he had trouble believing that he had done it at all – if it weren’t for the fact that he could jump his view back to the ongoing battle along his territory border and confirm it with his own eyes.

While he was talking, Eisa, Regnark, and what appeared to be the rest of the Guild and Gatecross townspeople had come into the first dungeon room, likely after hearing him speak. They looked intrigued by what he was telling Deecy, but most of them had no idea what Horrors he was talking about, as well as having very little clue about the “module” thing he was referring to.

“That’s interesting, Fred, but what in the world are you holding there?” Eisa asked, coming over and sitting by his side, snuggling up against his left arm. “I looked in on you at one point last night to see you standing with your hands cupped around something; you looked like you were intensely concentrating on something, so I didn’t disturb you. But now I’m curious as to what you were working on, since it seems like this other thing you did just recently.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to know, Fred, before you distracted me with something else that should be impossible.”

Fred ignored the Dire Wolf as he finally held up the glowing stone in his hands and *really* looked at it. All in all, it wasn't very large; in fact, it was just barely larger than his thumbnail in diameter, and it was spherical in shape. Tiny facets around outside of the gem-like stone mirrored what he had seen in the other Dungeon Cores previously, including his parents; though, unlike his parents and even the relatively tiny Earth Core that had exploded by using its Mana Combustion skill, this one had smaller facets – but that could be because it was smaller than that last one by at least half. Not that he had a chance to give the Core that had exploded and killed Eisa more than a glance, but the general impression he got was that the one he was holding was smaller.

He used his Mana Sight to delve into it a little deeper, finding that the outside shell of the gem was still almost entirely “Human” Mana, though there were streaks of green running throughout in thin precise lines indicating that the Nature Mana was accessing the surface. When he prodded deeper, he could almost *feel* how the Nature Mana inside had compressed so completely that it had crystallized into what resembled a Dungeon Core.

Except...

There was no...personality...inside; no consciousness, or whatever it was that made a Dungeon Core something more than a pretty glowing stone. Fred wasn't exactly sure what that meant, or whether his goal had been to actually create a real, functioning Dungeon Core; based on the process used in its creation “normally”, he thought it would've been like bringing a baby – or maybe a child, based on its current size – into the world, but it didn't seem to have worked.

“This is my attempt at creating a Dungeon Core,” Fred told the room, and the small murmur that had been going around the assembled Guild members completely stopped at his revelation. “Though, to be fair, I’m not sure that it worked. I mean, I was able to condense the Mana tight enough to start crystallizing, and then used my...” He went on to explain how he had created it, but eventually realized that he had lost all but the three Shards with his descriptions of Mana and crystallization. And even then, Eisa and Regnark looked slightly confused; Deecy, on the other... paw...seemed to understand everything he was describing, though her Dire Wolf face still somehow appeared incredulous.

When he was done, Deecy padded closer and took a closer look at the gem in his hand; eventually, she even pressed her nose up against it – and then snapped her head back so quickly he thought she was hurt.

“You...you did it... I understand what you did, but I’m still having trouble understanding why it worked the way it did for you. I can clearly sense all of the normal Dungeon Core systems that you have access to in there, though it’s missing all of the information that was transferred to me when I was created. It could be that the Newborn Dungeon Core Initialization Program that you were first greeted with when your Core side was awoken is needed to create a new consciousness, or it could be something else entirely – I’m not sure.

“All I can tell you is that for all intents and purposes, you’ve created a Dungeon Core out of nothing but your own Mana – which should be impossible according to all the knowledge I possess. I feel like I should just throw all of the limitations and ‘impossibilities’ out of my head,

because they don't seem to apply to you. What you've done is nothing short of a miracle, in my opinion, even if the Core is essentially empty."

Huh... Then, what good is it? He had to admit, his original intention in creating more Cores – and the reason he told the Inquisitor he thought he had an idea that might work – was that he could create more Cores inside of himself, which he could then use to get stronger and help fight back against the continuously collapsing territory border. Then, when he thought he had created a fully functioning Dungeon Core, the possibilities of having additional friendly helpers to help defend Allroads... was shot down by the absence of any type of consciousness inside of it.

“So, if this is a Dungeon Core, but it doesn't have any consciousness inside of it, then what can it be used for? I can feel a strong connection to it when I hold it in my hand, and I'm pretty sure I can absorb it if I wanted to – but what's the purpose of that? Is this just a way to store Mana for use at another time?” he absently asked the room, his thoughts spilling out of his mouth almost involuntarily.

Fred looked up to see Eisa, Regnark, and Deecy taking turns staring at each other in silence, and he realized they were probably using Mana Communication to essentially talk to each other through Deecy. He felt slightly annoyed that they were talking about something without his knowledge, but in the end he decided that he didn't really care all that much; if they wanted to tell him something, they would just come out and say it.

“Do you think that Core can be used to create another Shard?” Eisa asked softly, though it was quiet enough in the room that everyone heard the question.

Fred thought about it for a moment, before shaking his head – though not in denial, exactly. “I’m...not sure, actually. It *might* work, but I’m not entirely sure why it worked the way it did in the first place. It could be that using a piece of a Dungeon Core that had a consciousness attached to it is required for it to work, or it could be something else that I haven’t even considered. And, as much as it would be an interesting experiment to try out, it’s not like there are any dead bodies around here we can attempt it on,” he chuckled humorlessly.

Whether or not his poor attempt at a joke had anything to do with it, something tugged at his attention far outside the city, where the Adventurers and his massive Spider were systematically destroying dozens and even hundreds of Light-based Defenders by working together. When he used his Territorial Sight to survey the battlefield, however, he realized the error right away, and it was one he should’ve known, given his personal knowledge of Dungeon Cores and how they operated.

I think they’re in trouble...

Chapter 16

As much as they seemed overly focused on one thing to the point of obsession – like sending an army of Dark, Nature, and Earth Defenders to the city of Allroads just to reach Fred – the Dungeon Cores surrounding the Convergence weren't stupid. Although it was harder to control and give specific orders to those Defenders outside of your territory, it apparently could be done, especially since the attrition along the front line of Light Defenders – with consequently barely a scratch on the part of the Adventurers – was enough to goad them into action.

And now they were being attacked on all sides, as the entire remaining line of Light Defenders inside his territory had abandoned their position near the border and were starting to practically swarm over the Adventurers. Fred's Spider had blanketed the area with web shields to protect as many of them as possible, but many of them had already been destroyed; the ones that were still up were funneling many of the Light Defenders in tight groups, at least, so that all of the Humans weren't immediately overwhelmed.

But they soon would be; while there were just over 1,000 high-Rated Adventurers out there, they couldn't withstand the sheer onslaught of nearly 10 times their number. That was approximately how many he saw heading for the besieged group from Allroads, and that total didn't even count the Defenders still stationed on the border, maintaining the constant pushing against his territory – though their numbers were low-Leveled and weaker than the ones inside. From the Territorial Warfare information that he received earlier, he figured that as long as something was pushing, it

didn't matter if they were a Level 1 Rock Beetle or a Level 1000 Emerald Dragon – because it would only progress at the same speed, regardless.

It was going to take some time for the distant monsters to reach the Adventurers, but Fred could see that they were starting to become overwhelmed with what was already nearby. The only thing keeping them from being completely overrun were the tanks, who were doing a fantastic job of holding back the pressing masses of creatures trying to bowl them over. They were supported from behind by a vast array of spell-casters, healers of different types, and long-range attackers; they were encircled in the middle of a torn-up battlefield surrounded by broken web shields, but fortunately there were only four real avenues of attack that they could be assaulted from.

Three of them were on ground level, where the monsters were being funneled to them from the south, east, and west, leaving the north towards the city relatively open. The fourth was from above, but Fred's Spider was doing everything it could to defend from that position. It was poised above the Humans below, rearing up on its hindmost legs and was stabbing, biting, and webbing things out of the sky with all its worth. It was doing a respectable job, too, until two Warp Dragons arrived and managed to “warp” next to the base of one of the Spider's legs; within moments, the iridescent-white-colored Dragons had chewed and clawed through the base of the leg so much that it eventually snapped off, only to fall and crush another one of the web shields to the east.

With that direction now almost entirely open, the arriving Light-based Defenders swarmed into the widened gap, pressing into the already tired and nearly Power-depleted Allroads forces. One, then two, then a dozen tanks fell under the pressure, only to be trampled under those monsters behind. There was so much going on that he couldn't tell if they

were dead or not, as Fred didn't obtain any Mana from their death (since they weren't in his dungeon), and there was too much going on to dig into their wellbeing any further.

Fred immediately started to create Defenders as quickly as he could, literally throwing them in the way of the stampeding Light monsters; they were small and weak in comparison, however, so the Flametripper Spikers, Undead Bears, and even the Stone Golems he put in their way lasted no more than a few seconds before they in turn were destroyed. He would've made something larger, but by the time it materialized into existence it would likely be too late. As it was, the line of Adventurers was breaking and streaming north and back towards the city – led by the shouts of Roady and Chareese.

“Fall back! Stay in formation—Bushie, plug that gap! Healers – keep the tanks up and moving! I need concentrated spellpower over to the east! Fall back! Fall back!”

It was chaotic and hard to tell what was happening, but one thing was vitally clear – they weren't going to make it. Already, a few airborne Light Defenders had made it past Fred's slightly crippled Giant Vine Spider and were attacking from the new direction – right in the middle of the formation where the healers and spell casters were. Those first few were quickly targeted and taken out, but that also pulled attention away from those on the front lines. Another pair of tanks fell, giving even more Light-based monsters a way through, and Fred knew it was only a matter of time before the Adventurers' defensive retreat collapsed around them. Even with taking the Mana from his hastily created Defenders and recreating even more, they wouldn't last long.

Fred had to buy them time to escape; as it was, there were only two things he could do, and he immediately used one of them while he prepared

the second. Ordering his Spider to essentially sacrifice itself, he sent it crashing down in front of the Humans, cutting off all but a few of the Light monsters with its massive body and legs to the sides. It was in an extremely vulnerable position, and the only thing it could really do was shoot out a bunch more webs into the air, grabbing as many of the airborne creatures as it could while it was still alive. Because it wouldn't be that way long; as soon as the Spider hit the ground, it was immediately set upon by hundreds or thousands of Light Defenders, who clawed, burnt through focused light, bit, and essentially tore it apart from the outside within seconds.

Still, it was long enough to take pressure off the now-smaller Adventurer army, which appeared to be missing nearly 50 people at that point. Fred looked around for their bodies but couldn't see them; it was only when he looked behind the mass of Light creatures that he saw groups of Crystal Golems heading back towards the border – with what appeared to be the bleeding, broken, and partially unconscious bodies in their grasps.

What are they doing?

The entire thing sort of made sense when he looked behind the group of Adventurers being *herded* back to the city; the northern side – towards the city – was *still* completely open and free of any type of Light Defender, despite more than enough opportunity for them to come around and cut them off if their purpose was to kill them all. Readjusting his viewpoint to one more like the Dungeon Cores surrounding his territory, however, he realized that killing them would only benefit them temporarily – because, just like him, they wouldn't gain any benefit from their deaths... unless it was inside their dungeons.

Which meant that they had left an escape route for the Humans, so that they could come back later – alive and well; for those that were taken from the battlefield against their will, it was more than likely that they

wouldn't survive the next hour or so – only long enough to arrive at the nearby Light dungeon. They would be killed once they were *inside* a dungeon, giving the Core the full benefits of their deaths; according to things he was told by his parents and hints from Deecy, that kind of thing was normally frowned upon or downright forbidden, but the city of Allroads was apparently written off – and now anything seemed like it was fair game.

Even with their now-obvious plan to grab as many Humans as they could to take back while letting the others go – because, Fred well understood, Adventurers were liable to make a last stand if they were forced to it, and would likely die out on the field instead of in a dungeon – they weren't faking their attacks. After his Spider was completely torn apart and dissolved into blobs of Nature, Dark, and Unconverted Mana, the Light forces streamed forward, quickly trying to catch up with the retreating Adventurers. While that was going on, however, Fred let loose the other option he had, which was dangerous, but he couldn't think of anything else to do.

As his Spider crashed down and temporarily blocked the ground-based Light Defenders from attacking the Humans, Fred had gathered up the leftover Earth Mana from the previous attack on the walls and put it to use. He didn't have enough time to create anything large, though he would've loved to see a massive Crystal Scorpion of some sort (or even a hybrid blueprint involving it), but there was no chance; instead, he used his "oops" moment from the day before to set a series of explosions off in the middle of blocked monsters.

Breaking up the giant Earth blob into three separate and smaller blobs, he split his concentration – which almost immediately gave him a headache, though he was sure it would be much worse if he hadn't been

practicing lately – to tightly condense the Mana and placed them over the assembling crowd of blocked Light Defenders. He siphoned off a little of the Unconverted Mana blob that came from his Spider when it was dead and created a relatively thin bubble around the tightly condensed Mana orbs. When the Light monsters pushed forward, Fred let go of his focus on the Mana “bombs”.

There were three unbelievably massive explosions that went off almost simultaneously, as the tightly condensed Earth Mana broke free of the relatively thin clear shell of Unconverted Mana he had placed around them. There was a brief flash of bright light, then a shockwave that spread out for hundreds of feet from their origins spread out over the battlefield, completely obliterating anything within 50 feet, and severely damaging or destroying outright anything within the next 100 feet. The Adventurers, despite the closest of them being over 200 feet away, were propelled backwards from the shockwave and into their companions, creating a massive pileup that injured many of the already exhausted and hurt front-line of tanks covering their retreat.

Fortunately, there were no actual casualties...except for one.

Chareese's chest had been completely run through by an oversized sword being held by Rody, tearing straight through her armor and bursting out through her back; even though her natural defenses were quite high, even she couldn't stand up to an impact from another high-Rated tank that specialized in doing damage with melee weapons, even if it was entirely unintentional. If she had just been stabbed in the stomach or somewhere else not quite as vital, she probably would've survived long enough to be healed; as it was, the sword essentially obliterated her entire heart and lungs, which did more than enough damage to her Vitality that by the time everyone picked themselves up from the explosion...she was gone.

The explosion had another effect other than destroying thousands of Light-based monsters all in one fell swoop – and, unfortunately, killing an Inquisitor. The Light forces that were heading towards the battle from all along the border with the Light dungeon stopped where they were, before heading back to where they started. Even those close to the fight – both injured and not – turned around and made their way to the border. The Humans were free to retreat in safety now, lucky to have only lost a little more than 5% of their number.

But even a single person was too many, especially when compared to the virtually limitless numbers of Dungeon Defenders that could replenish those that had been killed in the battle. All in all, the entire expedition had been essentially for nothing, as the group from Allroads hadn't even had a chance to attack those on the border actually doing the “pushing” against his territory. Fred appreciated them trying to hold them back from contracting his territory any more, but it appeared as though it was going to be a futile endeavor.

When everyone was healed up and ready to go, they marched back to the city, Roady looking like he was going to break down from grief, holding the body of Chareese in his arms as he went. Someone offered to take her from him, but he refused, snarling at them and saying that it was *his* fault that she had died, and that *he* would be the one to carry her back to the city. No one dared approach him after that, though some tried to tell him that it wasn't his fault, that it was whatever those explosions were that had killed the Inquisitor.

Fred felt horrible, as he considered everything that had happened was his own fault. If *he* hadn't come to the city, if *he* hadn't established a territory, if *he* hadn't created the massive Giant Vine Spider and caused all the Light Defenders to attack all at once, if *he* hadn't created those

explosions in the first place – then Chareese and the other Adventurers that had been stolen away from the battlefield would probably still be alive.

Unfortunately, there wasn't anything that he could do about it right now; the only thing he could do was watch the slow progression of Adventurers walking back to the city – and notice that the areas that were unprotected along the inside border of his territory to the south were already being slowly filled up with brand-new Light-based reinforcements.

Part III – Dungeon Preparation

Chapter 17

The Supreme of Air was again the first to arrive at the emergency meeting of the Supreme Council, which was probably a good thing; the isolation and quiet was like a balm to her now-unsteady nerves. What they had all witnessed had been...unsettling, to say the least.

The Humans fighting back against the slowly tightening noose around their city had been anticipated, though the method in which they did it was certainly unexpected. That they had focused on Light as their primary target had also been expected, as her faction's larger array of airborne Defenders made it much harder for the ground-based Humans to combat; Air knew for a fact that her faction's underground dungeons usually hindered their Defenders because of their limited size, but out in the upper world they were free to take advantage of the available open air. This made them quite a bit more deadly, and it seemed as though the Humans knew that fact.

What hadn't been planned for was the Cursedborn to use its Mana to create a massive Defender of their own and for it to help *protect* the Humans. In the past – at least from what she remembered and had been told about the Dualborns throughout history – they didn't seem to care about Humans in the same way this one seemed to. While they didn't go out of their way to kill them or hunt them down like they did Dungeon Cores, Cursedborns typically didn't have any particular affection towards Humans – except perhaps as tools to be used. That could be what was happening here, of course; the Humans inside the city might be being used to help defend the Cursedborn and were nothing more than a means to an end.

However...

She was sure she wasn't the only one that had seen that the giant Spider Defender had *sacrificed* itself to protect the Humans in their retreat; again, that could be because the Dualborn wanted to save as many as possible so they could be used again at a later date – but Air didn't think so. She thought it was mainly because the way it had been supporting them before that point had been designed to protect rather than to do as much damage to Light's Defensive force along the border. That thought was only cemented with what had come next, though—

“What was that? Earth – are there any of your Cores missing?” The rest of the Supreme Council had arrived within seconds of each other while Air was thinking, and Light immediately jumped on Earth – who arrived last – to explain what had happened.

“No – absolutely not. As much as those explosions appeared to be Earth Dungeon Cores using their Mana Combustion skill, there are precisely *zero* of my own that are missing,” Earth responded, his voice shaking like Air had never heard before. If she didn't know better, she would say he was...*scared*...but that seemed entirely out of character for the relatively ancient Dungeon Core.

“Ok then, did anyone see what exactly *happened*?” Dark asked impatiently, breaking into the conversation. Air had no answer and most of the others had no answer, of course; it was extremely difficult to use Mana Sight to accurately pinpoint how Mana was manipulated in another territory, especially if it wasn't your own faction. Air had been watching the battle intently – just as everyone else was – but all she had was a vague impression of Earth Mana being shifted around; she was sure that everyone else received the same impression...well, except for one of them.

Earth spoke up, his voice uncharacteristically shaking even more. “I can’t be entirely certain, because everything was a bit chaotic at the time, but it appeared as though the Earth Mana left behind by our initial unsuccessful attack was used in some manner I have no way to explain properly.”

“Try anyway,” Dark said, his voice deep and...well, *dark*.

Earth was quiet for a moment; it was almost like he was trying to drum up the courage to speak, or it could be that he was trying to organize his thoughts. “I’m sure this will sound crazy, and I can’t be sure because it happened *extremely* fast, but from the limited amount of what I could see... it appeared as though three Dungeon Cores were constructed in a matter of seconds and then Combusted.”

An abnormal silence descended over the Supreme Council room at Earth’s words, and Air herself was left reeling at the implications of what Earth said if it were true. That silence was broken by Fire’s nervous laugh. “That’s ridiculous! Nothing like that has ever been seen before, plus it isn’t even possible for that to happen. You must be confusing what you *think* you saw with what actually happened.”

The others – except Air – seconded that statement, ganging up on Earth who sounded flustered when he responded. “Now hold on, I said it sounds crazy and I agree. That’s just what it appeared like, but unless you can think of what it might be, I don’t have another explanation.”

“Regardless of how it happened or where it came from—” Air finally broke into the conversation, something that was also fairly uncharacteristic for her— “the fact remains that there is a new potential threat from the Cursedborn in that Human city. What’s to stop it from doing the same to all of our Defenders on the border? Or worse yet, using

whatever that was to deliberately destroy the elemental concentrations in the Convergence?”

That shut everyone up. “Well, for one, whatever was done – Dungeon Core creation or not, I’m not going to argue about what I saw – required *a lot* of Mana to accomplish, so I doubt this Cursedborn could do it again anytime soon,” Earth told the Council.

Air almost informed the others that the explosions didn’t seem to actually take *that* much initial Mana to create; although there was likely quite a bit of Earth Mana in whatever was created, looking at the massive craters left behind in the landscape – as well as the devastation for hundreds of feet around them – she had noticed one thing the others may have overlooked. For as big as the initial explosions (be them the Combustion of a Dungeon Core or not) were, they appeared to have been fueled by the Light, Nature, and Dark Mana that had been in the area from the destroyed Defenders – Light’s Defenders and what was left over from the Cursedborn’s giant Spider. In fact, even though she wasn’t as adept at spotting Mana from another faction with her Mana Sight inside another territory, it was plain to see that there was practically *nothing* anywhere near the explosion; it was almost as if it had been *consumed*.

That fact, along with how the Cursedborn’s Defender had sacrificed itself to protect the Humans, was enough to convince Air that the Dualborn actually *cared* about the livestock in the city as more than a tool to use when convenient. No Dungeon Core – despite its origins, that was essentially what the Cursedborn was, if fundamentally different – would willingly sacrifice that much Mana for anything but to save its own life if it were in severe danger. To have used it to save *livestock* was ridiculous to the Supreme of Air, but she had never really cared about anything other

than herself and her own well-being for so long that the thought of doing so was almost inherently foreign to her.

But...it was just another aspect of this Dualborn that Air thought might be the harbinger of her race's salvation, as crazy as that sounded.

Therefore, she kept her insights to herself, because the verdict was still out on whether or not it was true about the Cursedborn. Air wouldn't go against the Council and voice her thoughts, as they were sure to be unpopular; at that point, they needed to stay as united as possible to eliminate this threat to both the Convergence and their race as a whole. Speaking up about her theories would only cause dissension, and that was the last thing they needed right now. Besides, if she was right about this Dualborn, it wouldn't matter if she said anything at all – the truth would likely be known at some point no matter what.

“Be that as it may, we need to be more cautious of what we do in the future to prevent something like that coming too close to the vital areas in the Convergence. This attack on our territorial advancement makes it patently obvious that we need to implement alternative measures at this point,” Dark said, and to Air it was obvious that he took the threat of future explosions seriously but wasn't going to let it deter them from their purpose – to eliminate the Cursedborn while maintaining the safety of the Convergence. “While it may cost a bit of Mana to do so, we need to avoid using our Defenders in a concentrated attack like Light did.”

Light seemed to want to defend her actions, but Dark cut her off. “I'm not saying what Light did was wrong; in fact, any one of us would've done the same thing to respond to a threat to our territorial expansion – myself included. In the future, we need to let these livestock do what they're going to do to our lines, with only limited reprisals on the part of your nearby Cores. And no risking another explosion to snatch some

livestock to bring back to those nearby dungeons – I’m talking to you, Light.”

The Supreme of Light seemed as though she wanted to be offended, but she probably realized her Core on the border had done wrong – though it was likely at her order. Forcibly taking livestock and either holding or killing them in your dungeon was highly forbidden, as it set an extremely bad precedent for younger Cores – which was something they especially didn’t need right now; if even a small portion of Dungeon Cores started snatching Humans up from outside of their dungeons, it would both quickly cause a shortage of them *and* give their livestock a reason to rise up and start deliberately hunting Cores again. It had happened in the past and had caused enormous problems that lasted through the years, and they had finally gotten to the point where none did it anymore. Until now, apparently.

“What? They’re all going to die anyway, because we can’t allow them to get away with protecting this Cursedborn – whether they know what it is or not. That attack on the border took a lot of my nearby Core’s Mana that it was fed from other Light Cores, and she had to recoup it somehow. They’ll be held for about three weeks before they’re killed, as we all know that holding these high-Rated Humans any longer than that starts to have diminishing returns. It’s already been done, but I’ll discourage her from doing it any more from now on,” Light told them all, not sounding at all apologetic.

“Let’s just make sure this is an isolated incident, and for all of you to restrict any information about it to just the Cores surrounding the Convergence; the last thing we need is for this to get out among the general Dungeon Core population and some enterprising Core get it into their heads to try something like this,” Dark responded.

That's for sure – that could make this even more of a disaster than it already is.

Nature spoke up next, having been relatively quiet so far. “That’s all well and good; I agree that we don’t want to risk the safety of the Convergence unless we have to – and destroy everything there as a last resort – but if we don’t fight back, these...Humans—” Nature said with disgust— “might eventually delay our advance enough that this could take *decades*. Delay will only help this Cursedborn get stronger while depleting the Mana reserves of the nearby Cores, which doesn’t sound like a good solution.”

“I never said that was all we were going to do; allowing the livestock to do what they will delaying our border expansion – if they even choose to after their display earlier – is only the first step in our strategy. What we need to do is initiate the Wixlenerby maneuver and catch this Cursedborn unaware.”

Water laughed in the silence at Dark’s announcement. “There’s no way that outdated maneuver will ever work; it was highly effective in the first, what, *decade* after Wixlenerby used it – and then it was horribly predictable once everyone knew to watch out for it.”

“Which is precisely why it will work. You have to remember that this Cursedborn *isn’t* one of us, and that kind of information is only shared when a Core is older and begins its run in the global back-and-forth of Territorial Warfare. I doubt something like that would’ve been shared with this...*thing*...so there’s no reason why it shouldn’t work. Besides, with all *seven* of the factions doing it, there really shouldn’t be a problem,” Dark said, sure of himself. “Of course, if it doesn’t work, we can try something else – or just wait a couple of years until the border contracts enough that we can just go in and take care of the problem.”

“Yes, well, some factions are better at the maneuver than others, but I see your point,” Water said – which Air completely agreed with. Her Defenders weren’t quite the best for that kind of work, but without anything else offered up as a solution that ensured the safety of the Convergence and the destruction of this Cursedborn, she was all for it. Plus, there wouldn’t be any of her own Mana tied up in the operation, so she didn’t mind delegating matters like this to those closest to the Convergence. After all, if it didn’t work, all they would lose was a little Mana and some time – both of which they all had plenty of at the moment.

“Excellent. Once we get this started, if everything goes the way it should, then we might be able to wrap this Cursedborn problem up in weeks instead of months or years.”

Air wasn’t so sure, but she was interested to see what would happen. She thought there was more to the Dualborn inside the Human city than the others probably even considered, and the Wixlenerby maneuver would only work if it wasn’t well equipped to defend a dungeon. Based on the information she received from some contacts in the Nature faction a few hours ago, the likelihood of that happening was slim – considering that this individual they were hunting managed to fight off a full invasion of Nature Defenders, including an Emerald Dragon. Granted, the nearby Nature Cores that had attacked the town the Dualborn had been staying at were extremely low-Rated – and the Dragon was only Level 1 – it was still an impressive defense.

Decision made, they left the hidden Council Room one by one, until Air and Dark were the last ones left.

“Why do I get the feeling like you disapprove of this course of action?” Dark asked, sounding genuinely curious instead of accusatory.

The Supreme of Air hesitated, wondering if she should reveal her reservations – and the hope that was engendered from them. Ultimately, she decided that it wasn't time for that yet, because even *she* wasn't sure if her feelings on the matter were correct. “We've never used this maneuver in the Air faction, despite its popularity millennia ago. And I'm pretty sure you can guess why,” she finally said, diverting his attention to something that was actually true.

“I can well understand that. However, despite the fact that your faction will probably be the last to the goal, we need to all be united in this or it'll have less chance of working. Do we have your support?”

“Of course you do, I just think it's a waste of time for my Core to start something like that. However, despite our faction's reservations about delving into Earth's favorite realm, we'll do what needs to be done – even if it could take years for our Defenders to arrive.”

Dark chuckled, his deep, scratchy voice at odds with the emotion of mirth. “You could be right, but any little bit will help.” With that, the Supreme of Dark disappeared, leaving Air to think things over. It wouldn't necessarily be *hard* ordering for the initiation of the Wixlenerby maneuver but convincing a Core that their Air-based Defenders would be best utilized digging underground...that was something else entirely.

Chapter 18

It was a sad procession that filed into the southern gate of Allroads, made even sadder by the absence of so many Adventurers. Fred had finally had to stop constantly watching them as they had made the journey back to the city, taking nearly twice as long to make it back as it had to go out near the border. Instead, he had taken the time to let everyone in his dungeon – Eisa, Regnark, and all the others – know exactly what had happened.

“...and so they’re marching back to the dungeon, without nearly 60 of their number. Other than Chareese, however, none of them appeared to have actually died; I saw groups of Crystal Golems taking their heavily injured or unconscious bodies back towards the border. They’ll probably be killed right away when they enter the nearest Light dungeon, because that will give them quite a large increase in their available Mana, as much as it hurts me to say that.”

Eisa sat back from where she had been sitting extremely close to Fred, before looking at him intently in the eyes. “I know what you’re going to say; you’re going to say that this is all your fault, that if it hadn’t been for you coming here, if it hadn’t been for you creating those explosive...Mana bombs...then everyone would still be alive and present in the city. And for the most part, you’re probably right.”

That’s not exactly encouraging—

Before he could say anything, she continued. “But that doesn’t erase the fact that you came here for a noble purpose: to find your missing Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross. And when you did, and we *all* were faced with a hard choice of just trying to survive or let them execute us, you made the only decision you could. Even after that, you’ve tried to

help out wherever you could...and you've even given hope to some of us that – as crazy as it sounds when I say it out loud – there could be something else in our lives other than dying because of a Dungeon Core one day.”

There were some affirmations around the crowd as they heard Eisa's words, and Fred couldn't help but feel a little better as a result. He agreed with her, at least in part; he too wanted there to be something other than wondering when a nearby territorial dispute would end up with a village or a town being destroyed, or dreading that one trap in a hard dungeon that could wipe out you and your entire group in a matter of seconds or minutes. Just like Eisa's group had been before she made her way to Gatecross.

But he also wanted there to be a fundamental change in the way Dungeon Cores operated around the world. Everything seemed to stem from their insatiable need for more Mana, either for their personal growth or to fuel some war with an “enemy” Core. The Humans were just playing pieces in the global struggle for territory, and for that to change, there had to be something Fred could do to put them on equal ground.

However, the last thing he wanted was a war between the species, as that probably wouldn't end well for either of them; no, what he needed was to reestablish the same symbiotic relationship between them that had lasted for seemingly countless years, before the decline in the Human species over the last 500 or so years, as far as he could tell. Then, and only then, would both races have a chance to survive on this world, this...dungeon world.

“Thank you all for your confidence, it really means a lot to me. However, as much as I appreciate it, the semi-failed results of my experiments haven't created what I thought they would. The only thing I've learned how to do is destroy, where I'd prefer to create; my actions

have only resulted in death, whereas my goal is to ultimately preserve life – and show the Supreme Council of Dungeon Cores that Humans aren't going to be considered as 'livestock' anymore. That feels like the best revenge I can get for the deaths of my parents, who only wanted to live their lives in peace...and love." Fred hung his head in shame, as if his failure here was like he was besmirching the memory of his parents.

"All is not lost, Fred; just because this experiment didn't work doesn't mean that the next one won't. And if that one doesn't work, there is still a lot that you can Teach the people of Allroads and, of course, you have all of us – you can count on us to fight to the best of our abilities to protect you as long as we can," Eisa told him, waving her hand around at the assembled people. "And we've been preparing and practicing while you were experimenting, and I think we're making progress; then again, there is only so much we can do since we don't have any easy access to Essence, but we're doing what we can."

Fred thought about what she said and realized she was right. The war wasn't over, despite the fact that they had lost a single battle; there was still time to figure something out that could save them all, and perhaps start the fundamental change in the relationship between the Cores and Humans that he was hoping to produce somewhere along the way. In fact, looking at what he had accomplished already (even if it hadn't necessarily worked the way he wanted it to), the surface of what he was capable of was only barely scratched. As more thoughts trickled into his mind of other things he could try, he smiled at the crowd and thanked Eisa and them again.

"Thank you all, I really do appreciate your words. And Eisa, you're absolutely right; I – no, we – can do this. All it will take me is some time and some more experimentation, and perhaps – if we're lucky – I'll figure out something that can save us. What I do know, though, is that I won't be

able to do it without all of you; your support has shown how important you are to me, and I hope to live up to all of your expectations.” Eisa hugged Fred while the others all acknowledged his words with a soft cheer, and he kissed the woman by his side on the cheek, attempting to show how much she meant to him.

He was still having trouble figuring out exactly how he should act around her now that they had “professed their love for each other”, because Human mating rituals were something that he had very little experience in. Regardless, he had learned a few things – and kissing her seemed to be something that she enjoyed and wanted more of, so he was happy to oblige. Sadly, he wasn’t exactly sure what it was supposed to accomplish in the long run, but he figured he’d find out about it later at some point.

But now wasn’t the time for that.

“Let me see what you’ve been working on – I’d love to see it! Who knows, maybe I’ll get some more inspiration as I watch.”

Eisa and Regnark were more than happy enough to demonstrate what they had been working on. Because they could provide “monsters” on demand, the others were able to practice their spells and abilities on something that wouldn’t necessarily be trying to kill them. Merida – taking charge of the Guild’s healers – reported that they had some accidents that required some attention, but luckily no major injuries had occurred.

Creating two of her Crystal Scorpions at Level 3, Eisa sent them against groups of the Guild first; Metch and the others in the Guild (who were already quite experienced through years of dungeon delving) showed how adept they were working together to take the large Defenders down. Some new strategies were implemented with various spell combinations to weaken the Scorpions in ways Fred wouldn’t have thought of before; for instance, two Elementalists combined an intense heat from a sustained

Firetorch spell with a Freezing Halo spell to literally crack the crystalline shell of the Scorpion, making it much more vulnerable than before. Other spell and ability combinations were showcased, each one more inventive than the last.

Fred even picked up a few new Adapted Abilities that he hadn't seen before, adding to his ever-growing list. The time would hopefully come soon when he could start Teaching many of those abilities to his friends, to make them even more effective in battle.

It was Regnark's turn next, and he had also improved his new abilities. Creating an even larger Summoning Circle than Fred had seen before in the middle of the room, the Dark Shard was able to summon forth more than just Imps; demons and devils of different sorts flew or crawled out of the Circle, sometimes accompanied by the smaller Imps or Hellhounds, sent to harry the Guild groups while they fought the tougher summoned creatures. Fred had to admit that he was impressed at how they handled themselves, for the most part defeating the more numerous Defenders with relative ease honed by practice in a controlled environment.

Even better than that, just like the Earth Defenders that Eisa could create, Fred was able to "absorb" the blueprint from Regnark's summoned monsters, giving him a larger selection of "Demon"-type Defenders for his own use. Eisa was also able to create two new Defenders that she hadn't been able to before, due to the Mana left over from the attack the day before: Golden Sphinx and Rockworm. The Rockworm wasn't terribly impressive, but the Golden Sphinx was; the large Defender had the body of a lion and a vaguely Humanoid face, though it was also made entirely out of very hard stone. Even at Level 1, it was powerful enough to give the groups of Guild members trouble because of its speed and size but working together they could take it down.

By the time the Guild members had finished demonstrating their new skills, which again were quite impressive for the amount of time they had practiced, Fred had acquired blueprints for seven new Defenders – more than he was expecting.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defender (Single Faction Blueprints)

- (More)
- Rockworm (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Earth Mana)
- Golden Sphinx (Level 1 Base Cost: 250 Earth Mana)
- Lesser Imp (Level 1 Base Cost: 5 Dark Mana)
- Hellhound (Level 1 Base Cost: 10 Dark Mana)
- Succubus (Level 1 Base Cost: 25 Dark Mana)
- Hell-touched Bear Demon (Level 1 Base Cost: 75 Dark Mana)
- Desecration Devil (Level 1 Base Cost: 100 Dark Mana)

All in all, his Shards, the Guild, and he had benefited from the practice that they had gone through over the last day and part of the night. However, those gains paled in comparison to what the townspeople of Gatecross had learned – and created themselves. Since most of them only had a single spell or ability (since they were all still Researcher-Classed), Flamestrike, Magestrike, or Heal Minor Wounds was all they had to work with. Metch and the others suggested that they change their Base Class to something more in line with what spells they already had (such as Mage or Healer), but Eisa had other ideas.

The impressive results over the last nearly 24 hours was the result of a few important ideas. First, Eisa remembered how beneficial the Researcher class had been in developing Fred's own abilities when he first

picked the class, throwing convention out the window. Second, Eisa herself had learned how to alter one of her existing abilities through the manipulation of her Power during the defense of Fred's dungeon in Gatecross (with her **Untethered Skeletal Swords** ability she had discovered), so she thought that the townspeople of Gatecross had a chance to do the same as well.

Third – and what was probably the most important factor – was that many of the townspeople were still relatively new to the Sub-dermal implant, the DAS Interface, and the usage of their own Adventurer Power. Because of that last reason, there weren't quite as many pre-conceived notions about their Power that clouded what was possible; the possibilities of unlocking new abilities had been nearly limitless, though most of what they wanted to do was hindered by their low Essence and Power in general.

Eisa first started everyone off by sitting down on the floor, closing their eyes, and then centering themselves so that they could “feel” the Power inside of them. The existing Core Power Guild had the most trouble with this part, because they used their Adventurer Power automatically, based on the guidelines their Interface supplied them – and all of their spells and abilities were used without more than a thought and expected result. In fact, while many of the Guild were able to “feel” their Power and see how it was used for their own purposes, they hadn't been able to do anything with it quite yet; even Eisa had a lot of trouble with the whole thing, though she was further along than the rest of the Guild.

It was quite a different story with the townspeople, however.

Most were able to not only “feel” the Power within them but were able to grasp it in their mental hands. When they activated their current spell or ability, they were then able to actually see what the action did, how

the Power was shaped...and how it could be manipulated to have another type of effect.

Fred's mind took a mental gasp at the revelation, because it sounded almost exactly like what he could do. Not only that, but it was reportedly similar to how he and the Shards manipulated their Mana, though it was fundamentally different at its core. The biggest difference from what Fred could do, however, was that the townspeople could only see what they themselves did; while he could Adapt abilities by seeing other people perform them, these new "students" of their Power had to have other spells or abilities described to them from those who could use them.

Before all of that happened, they quickly improved upon what they already had access to. Those with Flamestrike were able to see how they could increase the Power used in its origination and create a much larger attack, resulting in a Fireblast – a much more powerful version that did more area-of-effect damage than the original. As soon as they successfully executed the new spell, it was unlocked for their use as...*an Adapted Ability!*

It didn't make sense at first why Eisa's ability that she had unlocked in Gatecross wasn't considered an Adapted Ability, but Fred surmised that it had to do with the fact that he and the others were all *Researchers*. That, and the **Untethered Skeletal Swords** was almost like a variant of the original ability and depended on a lot of its information – at least from what Eisa remembered; what was more, it was almost like these new Adapted Abilities were like his Multi-faction Hybrids when compared to the variants of his "normal" Defenders.

With their success, those with access to the Magestrike spell were able to develop Mageblast; not to be outdone, they also figured out how to manipulate their Power enough to develop something defensive as well:

Magewall. It was like a translucent square wall of Power 6 feet tall and wide that could withstand damage determined by how much Power was pumped into it – which was found to be variable.

The new discoveries by the townspeople (well, new to *them*, but they were known to others) snowballed from there, with a Flamewall, then a Magelight, followed by a Blazing Orb, and so on. It became a competition of sorts to see how many ways they could manipulate their Power and discover new ways to do things. There were some things that they attempted that they didn't have the required Power for and failed, while others were a bit too complicated for their fledgling abilities. However, despite how impressive their Adapted Abilities were, they largely stuck to their areas of expertise – either Fire-based or element-less Mage spells and abilities.

It was only when the townspeople who had Heal Minor Wounds started trying to teach others how to perform the ability that other possibilities opened up. After experimenting on their own and increasing both the severity of the injuries they could heal with Heal Major Wounds, Mend Bone, Cleanse Poison, and even Remove Fatigue – which was in high demand – they decided to see if they could learn other, more offensive spells and abilities while also teaching those who couldn't heal themselves a way to do so. It took over an hour for the first townspeople that had Flamestrike to learn how to cast Heal Minor Wounds through an intense teaching session where it was described in great detail – and with a lot of failed attempts that resulted in a few injuries, but nothing too serious.

That was nearly the extent of how far they had progressed because it had been less than a day. Still, it was impressive how much was accomplished, and it also proved something that Fred had considered as soon as he learned about his Adapted Abilities. The SDIA and Interface

from the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate was an excellent tool for those who needed help in figuring out how to use their Power, and also provided “tried-and-true” Classes for those who needed direction in how to specialize their abilities; for all of that, it also stymied the Humans’ and Adventurers’ natural inclinations to improvise and create their own spells and abilities through the manipulation of their Power.

Normally, for those who didn’t really have a support system set up that could help instruct them on the use of their Power (or who didn’t care to wait for that instruction), the Interface was perfect for them; it allowed them to go out and start delving through dungeons without too much hassle, and their development pathway was relatively planned out – even if there were hundreds of different choices of Classes to choose from. Every combination had likely been tried and/or considered, so there were no surprises there; the townspeople of Gatecross, though, had broken free from a lot of those constraints on Classes and were probably able to do *anything* they wanted to.

They were just lucky that they had so many other people around them that had the same starting abilities as they did, because they were able to help each other develop at a rapid pace. The higher difficulty in learning another “Class” of spell – like the Fire-based townspeople learning Heal Minor Wounds – mirrored Fred’s Instructor ability to Teach; the chance of success of Teaching a different-Class ability was very low, which matched the success rate of them learning the healing spell. The major difference in learning it “organically” as opposed to Fred’s Teach ability, though, was that they weren’t locked out of ever learning it through instruction again. It was entirely possible that *anyone* who could learn how to “feel” and “see” their Power could learn how to do *anything* they wanted, with enough time to practice and a good instructor.

Overall, it appeared as though his friends, his Guild, and the townspeople were getting along much better than he had been. Fred was still disappointed in his own failure to produce something viable for their salvation, but he was also encouraged by their development. *If they can figure out how to do all of this, then certainly I can figure out how to save us all.* It was a lofty goal, but it was also one that he wanted to reach – and reach quickly.

“What’s all of this?! Are you celebrating? How can you celebrate in a time like this?” a voice practically roared through the first dungeon room, just as he was congratulating everyone on how good a job they had done while he was off doing his experimenting. Fred recognized it immediately as Roady, who was using the same loud battlefield tone he had used when fighting against the Light-based Defenders aboveground.

And still in his arms, all the way from that battlefield, was the bloody and lifeless form of Chareese.

Chapter 19

Eisa could almost feel the restrained violence emanating off of the massive armored man like some sort of physical force, and she involuntarily flinched back at his angry and obviously grief-stricken tone. However, some intuition of hers told her that it was warranted, especially after she looked at how he was holding the body of the woman in his arms. The man – which Fred had told her about earlier and said his name was Roady – wasn't holding her like she was just a friend that he had inadvertently killed, and he felt guilty over the accident.

No, their relationship appeared to be much deeper than that – like a lover or some sort of stronger bond than that.

Eisa felt relieved. Sure, it was wrong, out of place, and entirely ill-timed, but she couldn't help but feel reassured that the woman hadn't been trying to get her claws into *Eisa's* man. She couldn't help the feelings of possessiveness she felt earlier around Fred, whenever she caught the Inquisitor staring at him with a funny expression on her face. Apparently, though, it had all been relatively innocent and was likely due to her curiosity over *what* he was, instead of *who* he was. Eisa couldn't help but feel a little protective of Fred, of course, because of how she felt about him; she mentally chastised herself for previously thinking ill of the dead woman. Chareese obviously had someone else she was in a relationship with, so Eisa was seeing things when nothing was there.

“How dare you make light of the sacrifices of those who lost their lives today! Of those whose families wouldn't ever see their loved ones again! And for my sister to have died by my own hand, because of

something *you* did!” Roady screamed out, tears finally making an appearance in his rage-filled eyes.

Then again, maybe not.

“She...was your sister?” Fred asked the silence that had descended upon the dungeon room. That wasn’t exactly what Eisa would’ve asked or even said, but she didn’t stop him.

“Half-sister, but we were close enough that the distinction hardly mattered – and now it doesn’t matter at all, because she’s dead!” The big man took a threatening step forward and there was such menace coming off of him that everyone except Fred took a step back.

Fred just stood there, not looking scared at all; as much as she loved him and didn’t want to see anything happen to Fred, the sheer physical presence of the massive man walking as if he wanted to rip her love apart made her joints and mouth lock up, preventing her from trying to help him. But all he did was just stand there, not even looking at Roady, but instead looking at the corpse in the massive man’s arms.

Regnark wasn’t frozen, though. Eisa watched him try to intercept the man, but was brushed aside with barely any thought; “brushed aside” probably wasn’t the best portrayal of what happened, however – thrown across the room with such force that he crumpled into a heap when he smashed against the wall with tremendous force was probably an aptly better description.

She stared at what could only be his corpse from the impact, but she saw him still breathing; not only that, but she could’ve sworn she saw some slow movements in his chest, as if his body was regenerating itself. Fred also looked at Regnark and barely batted an eye, so she felt a little better about his chances of living. *Must be the Dark Mana inside of him healing him similar to how Fred is almost impossible to kill.*

Almost, but not quite, impossible.

Eisa briefly thought Fred was considering that he wouldn't *really* die if the massive man got ahold of him, but he didn't look like a man bravely accepting his fate; instead, he looked like a man with a plan.

"What if she wasn't dead, Roady? What if your sister—sorry, half-sister—was back with us?" Fred said calmly, which stopped the massive armored man in his tracks.

"What lies are these? I won't let you use any Necromancy on her; if I wanted that, I would've had Agelstein do it – because he's likely *much* better at it than you. But that's not what she would want, nor is it what I would want; what I do want, however, is to rip you limb from limb for what you did – and don't try to deny it, because I *know* it was you!"

"Wait!" Fred yelled and put his hands up in front of his body, just as Roady's arm was cocked back to strike him. "It won't be Necromancy – it will be the same thing I used on Eisa and Regnark, in fact. I want to see if I can make her a Shard."

"Roady, wait. If what he says is true, then she really will come back alive – no Necromancy about it, as far as I can tell," a voice she recognized as Agelstein came from behind the massive man. She hadn't even really noticed that there were other people in the room, because the frightening presence of the armored man was enough to block everyone else out.

"No, he deserves to die for what he did, and I won't have him touching my sister with his filthy, murdering hands."

"Roady, *think!* Is this what Chareese would've wanted? Or don't you think she'd appreciate anything that might help her live again?"

There was a tense moment when Eisa thought the frighteningly strong man wouldn't listen, but finally he sagged in his armor and put his arm down. "Fine. You're right, she wouldn't have wanted this, and she

would want to live again if she had the chance,” Roady said softly, his voice changed from the violence-filled one from before...at least for a moment. “But if I see you doing *anything* funny, you better believe that I’ll rip you *and* all your friends apart before you can even blink.”

With that threat, the armored man placed his sister gently on the floor and stepped back a little; he was still within grabbing distance, since he was so large, though Fred didn’t seem to notice or care. All Eisa saw was him looking at the woman with her chest essentially...gone; now that the Inquisitor wasn’t being held up against Roady’s body, she could see exactly why she had died – having a giant hole through your chest, even with the best healers nearby, was basically an immediate death sentence. It was almost as bad as getting your head cut off, but there was usually a slim chance of surviving with a chest wound like hers, as opposed to decapitation – there was no coming back from that.

Usually.

Fred reached inside his pocket, casually pulling out the glowing stone he had shown them earlier. From what Eisa understood, it was essentially a Dungeon Core, though it was apparently missing some of the key components that made it possible to contain some sort of consciousness. It was like an empty vessel, sort of like the undead creatures she would create back in the day when she was a Necro-Healer; their bodies were reanimated and made relatively “healthy” for the duration of her ability, but there was nothing behind their eyes. If there had been, of course, something like that would probably be considered torture of the beasts’ souls, and consequently outlawed. There were a lot of things that Adventurers did that skirted the border of morality, but that would be like smashing right through that border without stopping.

When Fred reach over to place the glowing “Core” inside Chareese’s empty chest cavity, Eisa saw Roady tense up and visibly restrain himself; she just hoped that the missing parts of the Core weren’t important for the process. She still didn’t know exactly what was happening when a Shard was created – and she wasn’t entirely sure that Fred did, either – but she prayed that it would work; if it didn’t, then all of their lives were at stake, and she really didn’t feel like dying...again.

Fred kept his hand there and appeared to be concentrating; soon enough, however, Eisa started to feel something coming from him. She couldn’t see anything, of course, but either her further practice with manipulating Earth Mana attuned her to feeling other types, or her practice touching and attempting to manipulate her Adventurer Power made her more aware of what Fred was doing. Again, she couldn’t see what she assumed was a massive amount of Mana being used on the Core inside the Inquisitor, but she could definitely feel the energy coming from such concentrations.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the townspeople and a few of their Core Power Guild members flinching away from what Fred was doing. For Eisa, however, it felt powerful...but “normal”, she supposed. *Manipulating Mana has probably made me accustomed to it or it could be because I’m a Shard.* She didn’t know why, but that’s the way it was.

As for Roady and Agelstein – and a few other people behind them that she didn’t recognize – they didn’t seem to feel a thing. Which, when she considered it, was probably a good thing; the amount of Mana that Fred seemed to be manipulating was fairly impressive, and it might...*alarm* them more than a little bit.

Fred was seemingly frozen in place, kneeling next to Chareese's mutilated body for what felt like hours – but was probably only minutes. Eisa kept expecting someone to say something, for Roady or one of the others behind him to say to stop wasting their time, since it was obviously not working...but no one said anything. Moreover, there wasn't a single person moving, and her slight head turns to see everyone in the room was the only movement she saw; if she didn't see the slight rise and fall of their chests when they breathed, she would've thought that time had stopped somehow. Actually, looking closer at everyone, she saw that Deecy and Regnark (who was almost recovered from his injuries) seemed immune to the frozen state everyone else seemed to be in, though even they were only moving slightly more than the others.

The feeling of Mana felt like it was flooding the room, and then the intensity of everything ramped up gradually at first, but it quickly became almost painful to be around after another minute. When it started to feel like she was suffocating under the blanket of Mana surrounding the area, a bright light started to emit from Chareese, beginning with the "Core" inside of her chest and spreading until her entire body seemed to glow.

And then Eisa and everyone else was blown off their feet by an explosion of light, which also nearly blinded her; she was fortunately already closing her eyes most of the way from the bright glow the Inquisitors corpse had already been emitting, so she was pretty sure she was going to be okay. When she pulled herself up off the ground after being pushed back a few feet, she looked up to see the former corpse replaced with the perfectly healthy body of Chareese – repaired clothes and all. Eisa was glad for the woman's sake that Fred had learned from her own resurrection as a Shard and didn't bring her back naked for everyone to see – especially with her brother right there.

Eisa wasn't the only one to see the Inquisitor's repaired body there; Roady sat up, blinking furiously – probably to attempt to remove the afterimages of the light burst – and set his clearing sights on his sister. “Chareese! You're...all fixed up!”

His voice must have woken the resurrected woman up, because as she quickly sat up she held her hands in front of her body like she was trying to block something coming for her – and then she screamed so loudly that it reverberated inside the relatively small dungeon room, leaving those already half-blinded and knocked down to cover their ears in pain. Fortunately, the scream didn't last long as Eisa could see Chareese's eyes slowly focus on what was around her.

“What...what happened? Did we get away in time? How many did we lose? And why am I underground surrounded by all of these people?” The Inquisitor asked one question right after another, which Eisa couldn't blame her for; if her last memory had been of the battle right before she was killed, her surroundings were probably quite confusing. Actually, when she thought about her own resurrection, *Inquisitor* might not be the appropriate word anymore; there was a good chance that Chareese was de-Rated all the way back to a Classless G-1st-Rated Adventurer.

It was only then that Eisa saw Fred, who had been blown back by the blast of light as well; unlike the others, however, he seemed to be unconscious and unmoving. She raced by his side in a flash, placing her hand on his chest to see if she felt movement. A weak heartbeat and erratic breathing showed that he hadn't died as a result of what he had done, though for some reason – completely different from when he had brought her and Regnark back – he looked...*drained*. His skin was almost waxy and extremely pale; accompanied by his weak heartbeat and shallow breaths, she would've said he was on the verge of death. Immediately, Eisa

used her Earth's Renewal to try to heal him, but it didn't seem to make much difference; whatever had happened to him wasn't an injury she could fix.

Fortunately, within seconds he started to look better as the color came back to his face, and his lungs finally filled completely with air, causing his chest to rise – and for his heartbeat to strengthen enough that he didn't seem to be in any danger. She wouldn't want to see what would've happened if he had died while his territory was established; while burning to death and having his head chopped off hadn't seemed to do much on that front, being blown to pieces by an exploding Earth Core had apparently done the trick. She wasn't quite sure where the line was – and hoped she never had to find out.

Watching a loved one die was never easy...even if they eventually came back from the dead.

Eisa ignored everything around her, though she could hear lots of conversation going on; instead, she was joined soon by Deecy, who lay down by Fred with her head on his shoulder, looking for all the world like a dog who was waiting for their master to wake up. The Dire Wolf didn't say anything, so she figured it would only be a matter of time before the man she loved woke up.

As she sat there, she pushed down feelings of anger directed towards Chareese and Roady, who had practically almost killed Fred. Though, after a few moments she lost most of her resentment towards the woman, as it wasn't her fault in the least; the big armored man, on the other hand, took the full brunt of her ire. Granted, no one knew that this would happen to him – she didn't think even Fred knew what was going to happen – but she couldn't help but be mad at the giant of a man for putting him in danger.

An indeterminate amount of time later, Eisa finally felt movement under her hand on Fred's chest that wasn't attributed to his normal breathing – he was waking up. Moments later, his eyes shot open and he smiled strangely; she thought there might have been some damage to his mind in addition to his body that hadn't been healed yet, because she didn't think this was any time for smiling.

“Fred! Is it you that I need to thank for bringing me back to life?” Eisa heard Chareese ask before Eisa could say anything, which was fairly perturbing.

Fred, for his sake, barely seemed to hear her or even care all that much for some reason. “What? Oh, yes – that was me. No thanks are necessary, I'm sure you'd do the same for me if you had the chance,” he answered her with barely a glance in her direction, his vision far off in thought, apparently.

“But what exactly happened? As much as I appreciate being alive, what did you do—WHERE IS ALL MY ESSENCE?!” the former Inquisitor screamed out in shock, probably noticing the change in her Interface just at that moment. Eisa could relate; as much as she had been opposed to Chareese being around Fred earlier, she took pity on the woman and took her aside, ignoring the tear-stained face of Roady who was looking at his sister in wonder and disbelief – because she was still mad at him for what had been done to Fred.

“Look, come with me and I'll explain what happened – or as much as we know—” she started to say to the stunned woman, leading her away, when she heard Fred speaking behind her.

“I think I know what I have to do! If I take—” her love said excitedly, before he cut his own self off abruptly. Eisa turned around in concern, only to see him looking off in the distance, which usually signaled

– to her at least – that he was viewing something not in the room, and not just being lost in thought.

He frowned in a worrying manner, before his head turned from side to side...then he sucked in a breath at whatever he was seeing. “Um... we’ve got another problem.”

Agelstein spoke up, asking exactly what Eisa and likely everyone else wanted to know. “What problem? Is your...territory...collapsing even faster now?”

“Not at all. Those are still progressing at the same rate as they were previously, and everything looks the same as it was before I was... incapacitated. No, the issue doesn’t have to do with the valley *aboveground*; it’s the underground portion of this Convergence that we’re going to soon have problems with.”

“What do you mean, Fred?” Eisa asked, confused.

He sighed heavily, and she became even more worried. “It seems as though one avenue of attack wasn’t good enough for the surrounding Cores; not just one or two, but *all* of them are starting to tunnel down belowground and appear to be heading directly towards my dungeon – which would bypass the entire city of Allroads.”

And at that statement, silence fell over the room...

Chapter 20

The process of turning Chareese into a Shard was a lot different, more intense, complicated, and extremely Mana-consuming process than before. After he had placed the glowing “Core” in her chest where her heart *should’ve been*, Fred gathered 6,000 Unconverted Mana into a sphere above her body, infusing it with all the memories he had of the Inquisitor – which were unfortunately fairly basic and probably incomplete – and activated his Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill, just like he had done with both Eisa and Regnark.

Error! Insufficient **n*1*y***s*****8*****e****q***

.....

He wasn’t exactly sure what all of that meant since most of it was unreadable gibberish, and he quickly worried that the entire process wasn’t going to work. *Insufficient...what?* It could be that he didn’t have enough information about Chareese in his memories of her – if that even mattered anyway; it was what he had done with the other Shard creations, but he didn’t know if it was actually necessary.

Next, Fred thought that the amount of Unconverted Mana that he needed to supply was *insufficient* but dismissed that because of what he remembered from Eisa’s resurrection; he had originally supplied 3,000 UM, but the process had extracted another 3,000 from him to fuel the process. With Regnark it had required quite a bit more as well, and the Sharding procedure had pulled it out of his Core automatically. He figured that if it needed more, it would just pull it from him without his approval.

Lastly – and regretfully – he considered that it could be because the “Core” he had created was *insufficient* because it was missing some vital things inside of its structure that would allow a consciousness to inhabit it. It was also entirely possible that none of the systems would work properly without that proper information; for all he knew, that information was needed for it to merge with Chareese’s body, giving consciousness to the Core in a pairing that would create a Shard. The entire process was still mostly a mystery to him despite having done it twice (three times if he considered Deecy, though that had been entirely unintentional).

As there wasn’t anything he could really do to increase his memories of the currently deceased woman, and that if the process needed more Mana it would just yank it out of him, Fred considered what he could do to affect the third reason it wasn’t working. At first, he almost gave up and reabsorbed the UM he had floating above her body, but a quick glance at the Knight-Commander’s face convinced him to at least *try* before he admitted defeat.

So, he did the only thing he could think of: he shoved everything he knew about the Dungeon Core systems and screens, all of the information that Deecy had provided him via his parents’ memories, what he remembered from the Newborn Dungeon Core Initialization Program that first introduced him to his heritage, and even every conversation he had with his parents regarding their existence as Dungeon Cores...into the ball of UM that already contained his limited impressions of Chareese inside.

It took a little while, but everything he could remember or think to include was pushed inside – and then he “felt” the memories of the woman get squeezed out of the Unconverted Mana and disappear, as if they weren’t needed in the first place. Fred tried to add it again, but it was almost like the UM “bounced” it away and wouldn’t let it in, though any other stray

thoughts and information about Dungeon Cores were immediately absorbed.

It was almost as if the floating orb of Unconverted Mana had developed a mind of its own, and it knew exactly what it should contain – and what was unimportant.

Mentally shrugging, Fred then directed it towards the incomplete Core he had placed inside the chest cavity of Chareese and held his breath, expecting and at the same time dreading the same Error message from before. There was a temporary pause in the world similar to the times when Fred would come in contact with another Dungeon Core; everything froze around him and all he could focus on was the orb of UM being sucked into the glowing green Core under his hand.

Something...*shifted*...in his perception, almost like the frozen world around him suffered under an extremely brief but violent earthquake...and then it stabilized, bringing the natural flow of time back with it. He didn't look away from the Core, but he could sense that – despite being in the same time flow as he was – no one around him was moving; in fact, if he didn't know better, he would've said they were still frozen in time, but he could hear those closest to him softly breathing.

Which increased in intensity as Fred felt more Unconverted Mana being pulled from him. Worried, he checked his current Mana levels to see what they were at.

Fire Mana: 324/324

Water Mana: 323/323

Nature Mana: 323/323

Earth Mana: 323/323

Dark Mana: 323/323

Unconverted Mana: 46145 (45)

He was still looking fine for the amount of Mana he currently had, which he noticed had gone up significantly since he had ended up spending nearly 100,000 UM on the Giant Vine Spider; unfortunately, because all of the Mana being consumed during the explosions – making them even larger than Fred had ever expected – he had gotten nothing back from that expenditure. However, because of the presence of his Guild and the townspeople in his dungeon constantly giving him Unconverted Mana (though that amount was slowly decreasing the longer they stayed inside), as well as the recent attendance of 5 high-Rated individuals including Rody and Agelstein, his reserves had shot up significantly.

And as the process he had begun started to pull Mana from him, he watched them drop...quickly.

First 1,000, then 5,000, and then 10,000 was sucked out of Fred's Human Core, feeding the process happening inside Chareese's body – but it didn't stop there. More and more was almost forcibly yanked out of him, until it began to physically hurt; the problem was, all his muscles were locked up tight and he couldn't move, couldn't break the connection with what was happening. In short, he was helpless to do anything but watch as his literal life was sucked away from him.

His Unconverted Mana finally bottomed out, leaving just 46 UM in reserve, fortunately, though 45 of that was tied up in keeping his dungeon intact; he thought that was it, but then all of his elemental Mana was pulled out, leaving them completely empty. Just before he slipped into unconsciousness from the pain and from the rapid loss of Mana, he saw Chareese's body start to glow with an intense light...and then something knocked him back and out.

He woke up at some point later with Eisa looking worriedly at him and Deecy's head on his shoulder.

“Are you alright, Fred? It apparently worked, but it looked like you almost died at the same time.”

Fred smiled and sat up rapidly, knocking Eisa's hand from his chest and the Dire Wolf's head away as he did so. *It worked! I'll have to verify that what I did actually completed the whole Dungeon Core creation process, but the fact that it worked and Chareese is alive – and I assume a Shard now – means that it was a success. And with that fact, I'm pretty sure I can come up with a way to save us.*

Fred was knocked out of his thoughts by having to answer a question from the recently resurrected Inquisitor...actually, a quick glance at her Interface revealed that she – as the others had been – was now a no-Classed G-1st-Rated Adventurer. He was relatively happy that she was back in the world of the living, though the implications of what he had just done to make that happen were more important to him. Even Chareese's scream about her missing Essence only fazed him a little bit, as his thoughts were already on his next project. A quick look at his Mana levels dampened his enthusiasm a little bit, but he knew it would only be a matter of time before he could experiment some more.

Fire Mana: 1/324

Water Mana: 0/323

Nature Mana: 0/323

Earth Mana: 0/323

Dark Mana: 0/323

Unconverted Mana: 5 (45)

“I think I know what I have to do!” he exclaimed, unable to hold it in anymore. At the same time, he was looking around his territory to see if there were any loose globs of Mana left *anywhere*, which would help him replenish his reserves faster. “If I take—” he began to explain, before he stopped when he saw something far out of the ordinary happening in his territory. Far below the surface, near the border next to the Earth-controlled territory, was a mass of Rockworms digging through the dirt and stone at a frightening pace.

He watched them for no more than a second, before quickly zooming his perception out to see the direction they were headed; as he feared, they were aiming straight for Allroads, or more specifically, Fred’s dungeon. If they didn’t want to disturb the elemental concentrations which seemed to stem from far below, they would have to make a couple of turns to avoid their flows, but it was more than obvious where they were going.

If Fred hadn’t been looking for Mana all over his territory on the off chance there was any left from the explosions, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed them. There were so many Dungeon Defenders inside of his territory that they wouldn’t have really even registered to his Territorial Sight unless he knew to look for them. That was one of the drawbacks to having a large territory like he did now; he could see and hear everything inside of his territory, but unless his attention was drawn to a specific place, relatively small things like the Rockworms tunneling towards his dungeon could happen without his knowledge.

He visually looked outside his territory to just over the line of Earth Defenders working to condense the border looking for the source of the tunnel. He finally spotted what he thought was it about 300 feet into the

Earth's territory, a 12-foot-wide hole that was angled sharply into the ground. He only noticed it because there was a slight disturbance in the landscape and had a fairly good idea where to look, otherwise he would've missed it on a casual inspection.

Quickly looking around at the other factions' territories, he spotted six other holes dug into the ground, though how far they had progressed was unknown since none of them – except Earth – had broken into his territory yet.

“Um...we've got another problem.”

Fred then had to explain what was happening to everyone, which quite thoroughly dampened the celebratory mood in the room. It also affected his own mood, which had been lifted after the success of Chareese's resurrection; now he had another problem to deal with, and he was sitting essentially on empty as far as Mana was concerned, though it was quickly refilling – though not nearly fast enough for his liking. Since he hadn't found a single speck of Mana left over from either battle in his territory, he didn't have a lot of options.

“What are we going to do, Fred?” Eisa asked, breaking the silence that had befallen the room.

“Yes, that's what I would like to know – what are you going to do about this? I assume you can just fill in these tunnels they're digging towards us with your special 'dungeon powers'; you made this place without even being down here, I assume, so do the same thing to them,” Chareese stated confidently, as if it were just that easy.

He considered it briefly, but he knew without even trying to do what she said that it wouldn't work. “I can certainly affect some things anywhere inside my territory right here, but what I can do is quite limited unless it is

connected to my dungeon in some way – and that would be a very bad idea to allow them access right now.”

“What are you talking about? From what I understand, you literally tunneled down below the Prison above this place – all without actually touching any of it yourself,” the former Inquisitor asked, confused.

How do I explain this...?

“Yes, I can certainly *take away* pieces of the ground to make a tunnel or a room without it actually being part of my dungeon from anywhere in my territory but *creating* anything not inside my actual dungeon is essentially impossible unless I can physically see it. I can only use my Mana or Power to create something that I can visually see with my actual two eyes,” Fred said, pointing to his face while he said it. “Unless, of course, if it’s inside my dungeon, then the rules don’t necessarily apply in that instance. Tell me, have you seen anything strange done to the landscape *around* a dungeon, but not actually inside of it?” he asked.

No one claimed to have seen anything out of the ordinary, though some of them commented that monsters like his big Spider were created outside of his dungeon. “Special rules apply to Defenders—*monsters*—and Defenses—*traps*—in that they can be created outside of a dungeon, because they are part of the normal Dungeon defenses...and I’m also assuming because they can be used in Territorial Warfare. Mana-formed Object Creation, or just my Conjure Object Adventurer ability, is relatively unique in my case because I can use it *outside* of a dungeon – though the restriction is that I have to physically see where it is going to go. That’s one of the reasons why these dungeon rooms were created sturdily compared to the original tunnel up above, which was essentially me ripping out chunks of dirt via my Dungeon Creation system, but not tying them to my dungeon – which I made later.”

Something of what he had said apparently made sense, because Chareese asked, “So, what you’re saying is that you can take away dirt and stone, but you can’t add any? I don’t think that would necessarily help, unless you can make the tunnels collapse somehow.”

“Exactly. Making the tunnel bigger wouldn’t help anything but to perhaps allow them to get here faster; even if I was able to make the ground above them collapse and fill in the tunnel, I worry what something like that would do to the landscape above. A large collapse might shift the land enough that it could damage or destroy some of the elemental concentrations in the Convergence – which would probably be worse.”

“Why is that?” Metch asked, and Fred realized that most of those in the room hadn’t been in the Council chambers, so they didn’t know exactly why they needed to be protected.

“Because the whole presence of the Convergence – or elemental concentrations you see outside – is the only thing keeping the dungeons from sending in their biggest monsters to just destroy me and everyone else,” Fred explained. When more than a few of them seemed not to understand, he tried to explain it in terms they might comprehend. “If you remember the relatively ‘baby’ Emerald Dragon that practically leveled Gatecross, just imagine if its bigger, badder brother came to visit with dozens of its friends. They don’t do that right now because it would endanger the elemental concentrations, which are essential to Dungeon Cores as they provide ambient Mana to tens of thousands of Dungeon Cores in a large area. If they were destroyed, it would be like taking...well, like the air away for them to breathe; they would suffocate and die off over time.”

“So why don’t we just destroy them ourselves, killing off all the local dungeons who are attacking us?” one of the townspeople asked.

Roady answered, finally getting his voice back after the resurrection of his half-sister (which was still strange to Fred, especially since they didn't share a surname). "Because then they wouldn't have any reason to hold back, and just like you would live for a few minutes even if all of the air were removed from a room, they would survive more than long enough to make sure none of *us* survived – at least, that's what I'm understanding."

"Precisely. So, I can't collapse their tunnels or create an impenetrable wall of some sort to stop them," Fred told them plainly, laying out the problem.

"So then just create some monsters and have them appear inside the tunnel – should be pretty easy, since you just said you can do that," Roady said.

Fred had thought of that already, but there was a problem. "That was the first thing I thought of, but there's an issue with that. First of all, I'm almost completely out of Mana after bringing Chareese back; that's something that will come back in time, however, so it's not really too much of a concern. Once I get enough Mana, I can certainly start creating monsters that would easily kill those Rockworms, and hopefully anything else that is tunneling toward this dungeon from the other directions, but I don't think it will do much good."

"Why not?" Eisa asked.

"Because there is something called a Hyper Stoneworm right next to them apparently guarding the Rockworms as they dig. It's actually rather huge, and it's so close to the smaller monsters that I wouldn't be able to create any Defenders of my own near enough to kill them; they can't be created when there is something in the same space you see. And I don't think that my defenders would last against a Level 9 beast like that, because its teeth alone—"

Fred saw a couple of the high-Rated people (including Roady and Chareese) in the room blanch at the mention of the giant, 50-foot-long Stonewyrm, which practically filled up the entire tunnel with its presence. Its mouth opened the entire circumference of the tunnel, and its jagged teeth seemed to be made of some sort of metallic material, which likely made it much sharper and more durable than regular teeth. “You don’t have to tell us what the Stonewyrm is, we know exactly what it is. And yes, there’s very little that can kill one of those when they’re in the natural environment of their tunnels. I’ve only gone up against one of them and killed it, but it also took nearly a day of goading it out of its tunnel so that my group could attack it from its sides. And the only way that happened was because our Wizard kept casting damaging air gusts at it, which slightly damaged it, but those gusts ticked it off even more.”

That’s right; the opposite element of Earth is Air, so that makes sense. “Yes, so you see my dilemma. I can’t stop them...but maybe I can prepare for their arrival.”

Chareese spoke up again. “What do you mean?” she asked suspiciously.

“You all seem to forget one important thing about Fred here,” Eisa said, walking over to him and wrapping her arms around his waist. “He may not look it, but my love here is half-Dungeon Core; and if my experience – and I’m sure all of yours – has taught me anything, it’s that dungeons are pretty good about making it quite the challenge to progress through, though from what he’s told me they have fairly strict guidelines they have to follow. Fortunately for us, though, Fred doesn’t have to play by their rules.”

Looks like my day just got a whole lot busier...

Chapter 21

Before he could get started on any of that, however, Fred finally calmed down enough from all the excitement and discoveries to finally check up on both Regnark and the woman he had brought back to life. He had been only momentarily worried when Roady had smacked him across the room, where he impacted the far wall with a loud *crack*, but a quick look at his Interface showed that his Vitality was already increasing; in fact, his recovery was remarkable considering how much damage had been done to the big man's body. It was like a hyper-fast recovery rate in comparison to his own regeneration, which was definitely not a bad thing.

It took another couple of minutes for everyone to break up from the excitement, for the members of the Core Power Guild and the townspeople to head back to their "training" room (which was what they had dubbed it earlier) and for all but Roady and Chareese to return to the surface in order to inform the Council of what had occurred. Once they were gone, Fred walked over to Regnark with the massive armored Knight-Commander and former Inquisitor in tow.

He knelt down by the big guy's side, noticing that he appeared practically recovered from the entire ordeal; he had refused healing from some of the townspeople earlier, saying that he wanted to test the limits of his abilities, so they left him to recover on his own. "How are you doing, Regnark? Is your Dark Mana helping to regenerate your Vitality?" he asked, already knowing the answer but wanting to explain what was going on to the others listening.

"Absolutely! It feels...strange...but other than a few spikes of pain now and then, my body just felt relatively numb through the entire

experience. Fortunately, the natural regen of my Mana here in this place is high enough that I've only ended up using just under 20 Dark Mana for my recovery. I would hate to see it somewhere else, though; it feels like a lot of it is being used to repair my bones and fix all my internal injuries, and if I were low on Mana out there, it might not be enough. I don't think I can stop it either – it feels like it's doing it automatically, so I'm not sure it would halt the flow of Dark Mana before it sucked me dry."

Fred tried to reassure him. "I'm not positive, but I believe there are some limits in place that would prevent the use of *all* your Mana if you weren't dangerously close to death. Just now, the process I was using to bring Chareese back as a Shard sucked all but one point of my Mana that wasn't being used to maintain the dungeon. Of course, if someone had chopped my head off or stabbed me in the chest at that point I would probably die for good, but fortunately that didn't happen," he said with a smile on his face.

"You didn't tell me that! You could've died," Eisa exclaimed as she smacked him on the arm...hard.

As he rubbed the sting of her smack away, Fred shrugged. "Well, I didn't, so there's nothing to worry about."

"That's hardly the point," he heard her mutter under her breath.

"Speaking of almost dying, I want to thank you, Fred. You brought my sister back to me, even if she's...changed a bit. She still has the same biting personality, though – couldn't you have changed that?" Roady said to Fred with a smile, which earned a similar-looking smack on his armor from Chareese. "And I also want to apologize for almost killing you, my good man," he continued, looking at Regnark. "I was...a bit out of my mind at that point, and I'm sorry; it's good to see that there is no permanent damage, at least."

“No worries, I know how protective I was of my little brother, so I understand. And you didn’t *almost* kill me; I’m pretty sure I felt my spine snap in half and half my skull was crushed from the impact. If that didn’t actually kill me, then the broken rib bone through my heart probably did the job.”

Roady blanched again at Regnark’s description of his injuries, and his mouth opened in astonishment. He couldn’t speak, apparently, so Chareese asked for him. “How? How is it that you’re alive? Are you some sort of...*undead*, or something with all of that Dark Mana inside of you?”

Regnark laughed and finally recovered enough to stand up; when he got up, he looked perfectly fine, as if his spine hadn’t just been snapped in half and his head crushed just...*a half-hour ago*? “Ha! No, nothing like that. I’m pretty sure it has to do with my status as a Shard now; the Mana inside of me healed me up, and since this place is so rich in the substance it was rather easy. In fact, now that you’re a Shard – she *is* a Shard now, isn’t she?” Regnark asked, looking right at Fred. Fred shrugged again, mainly because he wasn’t exactly sure. “Anyway, if you’re a Shard now, you should be able to do the same thing with your own Mana.”

Fred looked a little closer at Chareese, using his Mana Sight more intently; sure enough, her entire form was infused with Nature Mana, the same that the Core was created from. “Looking at you closer, I can see Mana all through you, which looks very similar to Eisa, Deecy, and Regnark. As far as I can tell, you’re a Shard—”

“Roady, break my little finger,” Chareese said, and her brother immediately complied without hesitation. She held her hand out, and before anyone could stop him, he had grabbed her pinky and bent it in a way it wasn’t supposed to bend. A wet-sounding **pop** came from her finger as it was broken, and the former Inquisitor screamed out in pain...for

a moment. Her scream cut off as she stared at her hand, the finger seemingly moving of its own accord as it straightened back out and started to heal. Fred noticed a slight dip in the intensity of the green Mana inside of her, but it quickly brightened again when her finger was completely healed after about 15 seconds.

“That...was amazing. It hurt at first, but then it went numb just like Regnark said,” Chareese said, moving her finger around in astonishment. “And then I felt...some sort of force inside me concentrating on the break – is that this Mana you speak of?” she asked, looking at Fred.

“Yes. In fact, if I’m correct in my assumption, you might just have enough Mana inside of you to call up your new Status. Think, ‘Shard Status’, and a new...Interface, I guess...should pop up,” Fred told Chareese, hoping that it had been built into the Core he had created, or at least put in there during the “Sharding” process.

Her gasp and vacant expression said that it had indeed worked. “What do you see?” he asked, wondering what kind of abilities she would have.

Suddenly, her Shard Status appeared in front of him, similar to how Deecy was able to communicate hers to him. Unlike the Dire Wolf, however, he didn’t think it was due to some sort of Mana Communication skill; instead, Fred felt some sort of connection to Chareese, almost like *he* had accessed it with his own will. *It must be some sort of side effect of the process; maybe because I created the Nature Core inside of her, I can at least access her Status.* Whether or not that was all he could do still had yet to be seen, but he figured he would look into that later as he concentrated on what her Shard Status showed him.

Shard Status

Chareese Alonties
Elemental Origin: Nature Shard Level: 2 Next Mana Threshold: 250 Nature Nature Mana: 100/100
Defender/Defense Growth Options
Flower Tripper (Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 4 mins) Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 5 mins) Am-bushes (Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 6 mins) Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 7 mins) Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 14 mins) Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 28 mins)
Special Abilities
Natural Growth (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Nature Mana per day)

Chareese began to describe what she (and Fred, obviously) was looking at; it was interesting to note that the new Nature Shard had started with Defender/Defense Growth options that matched the blueprints that Fred had obtained. Of course, Flower Trippers, Poisonous Mobile Mushrooms, and Am-bushes weren't *all* the Defenders that he had access to, and the Ensnaring Vine, Small Thorn Trap, and Poisonous Gas Bomb weren't all of the Defenses, but they were all that were technically *grown*. It was an interesting distinction.

As for the Natural Growth Special Ability she possessed, it didn't mean anything to Fred until Chareese broke off her explanation by asking Eisa to create one of her monsters. Eisa pulled out some of her Mana and

created a basic, Level 1 Goblin Gnome, which looked vacantly off into the distance once it was created.

Chareese was apparently already getting accustomed to her new status as a Shard – or the healing done to her pinky finger gave her the information she needed about the power inside of her – because she adeptly pulled out a small portion of her Nature Mana, held it in her hand, and then tossed it at the Gnome. Rather than hurt the small Defender, a greenish glow encompassed the Goblin for a moment – to Fred’s Mana Sight, at least – before it faded. He was still confused at what it was supposed to do, but then he saw the Goblin Gnome...*grow*.

It wasn’t a lot, but it was definitely noticeable to everyone looking at the Goblin; it grew at least three inches in height and widened a little bit, and it somehow looked *tougher*. A quick check of its stats indicated that it was...Level 5! The Natural Growth Special Ability of the new Nature Shard could obviously make whatever it affected stronger and more powerful, though how that would translate to larger Defenders still had yet to be seen; it would be strange if that little bit of Mana used for the Ability could bump something like an Emerald Dragon from Level 1 to Level 5, because that would be...almost insane.

“That is awesome, Chareese! You made him so much bigger and stronger!” Eisa exclaimed in surprise. “Does that work on people?” she then asked, obviously curious.

Chareese seemed to look inside herself in a questioning manner – Fred wasn’t exactly sure what she was looking at, but from what the other Shards had said about their abilities, everything they did felt natural; he assumed she was investigating her Special Ability, almost like taking a bite of something and then spending some time tasting it. After a few seconds, she shook her head. “It’s weird, but I’m one hundred percent sure that it

will only work on monsters – *Defenders*, is what my instincts want me to call them – though if I use it on anything Fire-based it won't work. Makes sense, I guess; fire tends to burn things that grow, so that limitation isn't that far-fetched. Oh, and I may be able to help other plants grow...like crops or something."

Roady looked at her as if she was speaking a language he didn't understand, before he shook his head in unintended imitation of her. "Wow, you really have changed. Hopefully it's worth it – especially since you lost all of your Essence, if what you told me is correct."

"Only time will tell, I guess – but the loss of all that Power is... painful," Chareese said with a pinched look on her face, and Fred could understand where she was coming from. She had probably been in the S-Ratings for a century or more, and to lose all of that progress was difficult, to say the least. But at least she was alive.

Eisa reabsorbed the Goblin Gnome and got back what she put into it, which meant that although its Level had been increased, it didn't add any Earth Mana to it. At the same time that the Gnome disappeared and was reabsorbed, a small blob of Nature Mana popped out of it – which caught the attention of Chareese. "Is that...? Yes, I'm sure that's the strange power I put into that...Defender. What did you call it? Nature Mana?"

Roady looked confused, mainly because he couldn't see what his sister was talking about. Eisa couldn't either, but she obviously knew what had happened; she started to explain how to absorb Mana and how her maximum Mana could increase by absorbing larger amounts of Mana, followed by a bare-bones explanation of Shard Levels and unlocking more abilities when she Leveled up.

"So, it's kind of like Ratings? This Mana that I can absorb will eventually increase my *Level*, unlocking more abilities – which sounds very

familiar. I...think I understand, for the most part.”

Eisa confirmed her assumption, though she also warned her about spending too much Mana and how it was like her lifeblood. “Spend too much and get to zero, and there is a likelihood that you’ll die. Oh, and you don’t need to eat or drink anymore, as...”

Fred had stopped listening as Eisa continued to explain some of the intricacies of Shard life to Chareese, because he was distracted...again. He had been periodically checking in on the progress of the Earth Defenders tunneling towards Allroads, trying to gauge how long it would take for them to arrive. It was an estimate, of course, but at their current speed they would likely arrive within four days. Four days until they got to his dungeon wasn’t a lot of time to get ready for them, and he was worried that they wouldn’t be ready.

But what had distracted him was the fact that he now saw some Nature Defenders finally breaking through the underground portion of his territory. While the Earth-based Rockworms from the Earth side were making much faster progress because the monsters actually *ate* the rocks, the small Treants “digging” in the Nature tunnel had to transport the dirt back to the surface.

Fred used the term “digging” loosely, because what was actually happening was the Defenders would worm their roots into the dirt ahead of them and worked it loose, leaving behind almost a *net* of roots that covered the sides and roof of the tunnel as they progressed, keeping its structure intact and minimizing the possibility that it would collapse. Looking at the Earth tunnel again, he saw that the Hyper Stonewyrm guarding the Rockworms was pressing up against the tunnel it slowly backed down, firming up the sides and roof just as well – or better – than the Nature tunnel.

The dirt in the new tunnel, once it was broken up by the Treants, was then scooped up by large Rock Beetles using their mandibles and placed on a sheet of tight webbing created by some Giant Spiders. From there, it was wrapped up into a large ball that must've weighed half a ton at least but were easily handled by a constant stream of Forest Trolls, who carried them all the way back up the tunnel.

Using his Territorial Sight to watch from above the ground, he saw the Trolls emerge from the entrance, hold the large webbed ball of dirt, spin around in a circle a few times to build up momentum, and then launch the balls back towards Nature's territory. They flew so far that even Fred couldn't see them land, which had the benefit – for the nearby Nature Core, at least – of hiding what they were doing; seeing a massive pile of dirt near the border was much harder to hide than a relatively small hole in the ground.

The entire operation was guarded by something familiar to Fred – an Emerald Dragon. It was much smaller than the one that had attacked Gatecross, but it was still as strong; it appeared to conform its size to its environment or at its own discretion, because although it took up half of the tunnel, there was still room enough for the “miners” to all do their job. And because it wasn't guarding the Treants, Beetles, and Spiders by being right on top of them, it left an opening for Fred to insert some Defenders of his own to disrupt the whole process.

Unfortunately, he didn't have enough Mana right now other than for the most basic of Defenders. Even when he had enough to create something that would be able to kill at least a few of the Nature monsters digging their way through the ground, Fred considered not doing *anything*; doing so might slow them down, but it would also alert the Cores against him that he was aware of what they were doing. From all that he could see

– and the relatively secret process that they were trying their best to hide – he figured that their attacks from below were supposed to be a surprise.

And it probably would've been if he hadn't been searching for any scrap of Mana, because otherwise he likely wouldn't have seen them until it was too late.

If Fred did something that alerted them that he was conscious of their presence, there was the possibility that they would abandon their sneak attack. Which would be a good thing in most cases, but then he feared they would try something else secretive, and worried that he wouldn't get lucky and catch that attack in time; there was a lot he didn't know about the whole Territorial Warfare process, and Dungeon Cores had been doing it for years upon years – there was bound to be tricks that he didn't know about.

Then there was the possibility that if he showed his awareness of their presence that they would continue their project *and* do something else sneaky. At the moment he only had the tunnels to deal with – not that it was something insignificant, by any means – but being attacked on another front wasn't something they needed at the moment.

What ultimately decided him was his limited time and available Mana. He could disrupt the Nature tunnel – and possibly some others that would probably be making an appearance in his territory soon – but the Earth Defenders would soon make it to his dungeon without interference. And if he wasn't ready for them, they would destroy him and everyone he cared about.

He was well aware that the people of Allroads would likely be helping with the defense if the monsters did manage to make it through, but there was only so much that they could do. They got tired, ran out of Power, and only so many could fit inside his dungeon or the tunnels leading to it; eventually, a steady stream of Earth Defenders would wear them down

long enough for some of the other factions to arrive and overwhelm any defense they could put up. With those thoughts in mind, Fred decided to concentrate his efforts – and Mana – into defending his dungeon instead of trying to delay them.

There was one problem though.

“Deecy, when the Defenders from the other factions arrive from underground, won’t they be able to dig their way right into my dungeon wherever they please?” Fred asked the Dire Wolf, using his Mana Communication skill. She didn’t seem surprised to hear him speak, probably because she wasn’t paying attention to the conversation between Eisa, Regnark, Chareese, and Roady either.

“No. You’re forgetting the upkeep that you spend on maintaining your dungeon; not only does that help prevent it from collapsing and being damaged from the inside, but it also stops any Mana-formed Defender from digging through or damaging it from the outside. You should be safe as long as each room and tunnel is maintained through your upkeep. The most likely point of entry is going to be your normal entrance, so they will probably dig up to there in order to swarm inside your dungeon.”

That was a relief. Fred had been worried that they would be able to essentially make his dungeon useless by being able to come in from everywhere; if they were limited to the entrance, however, it would be much easier to control where they went. There was also some danger to the people of Allroads, because the *city* wasn’t protected from being invaded; Fred just had to hope that the Cores were focused on him primarily and would leave them alone. As much as that prospect scared him, it was the

best result for everyone to stay as safe as possible; while he desired to instill some drive into the Adventurers in Allroads to fight back against the Dungeon Cores, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands or millions of innocent Humans who *couldn't* fight back was not something he wanted.

With that worry basically null and void, Fred got to work, building a dungeon unlike any that he had built before.

Chapter 22

The first thing Fred had to do was get almost everyone out of his dungeon – at least temporarily. While he enjoyed the Unconverted Mana that was practically pouring into him (bringing him up to just over 5,000 UM already from the combined presence of Roady and the Core Power Guild – though their contribution was rapidly decreasing), he couldn't build onto his dungeon or fill it with Defenses and Defenders while there were Humans or foreign Defenders present. The only ones that didn't count toward that restriction were Deecy, Eisa, Regnark, and now Chareese – because they were all Shards.

Rather than stick his Core Power Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross in the relatively small room he had dug out – but not officially connected to his dungeon – while he worked, he had Roady and Chareese's permission (and guarantee that they wouldn't be imprisoned again) to go aboveground and get something to eat and sleep on something other than dirt and stone. Fred had earlier supplied them with some relatively tasteless food and water that he used his Mana to make – he wasn't quite adept at getting taste right – but it was nothing like *real* food, or so they said.

Speaking of food, Chareese had mentioned that because of the “siege” going on outside, it was unlikely they'd have any shipments coming in from elsewhere, so they were going to have to make do with what was already in the city and surrounding fields – at least what was left of them after the attack the day before. She said that they likely had enough food for at least a month before they had to start rationing; Fred told her that if it came down to it, he could create food, but she might also be able to use her new Special Ability to grow a new crop of food as well. She actually

smiled as if she would enjoy that – which was strange coming from the former strictly-by-the-book Inquisitor – before she left with her brother to report to the Allroads Council.

Now that he was left with just Deecy, Eisa, and Regnark in his dungeon, he got to work using his Unconverted Mana to build tunnels and rooms. He left the first room down from the entrance alone – mainly because they were currently inside of it and it was suited for a preliminary room; no frills, no Defenses, and no Defenders – at least not yet. Then he mapped out how much room he had, which turned out to be quite a bit; beneath Allroads, the ground was relatively free of any flows of elemental concentrations, which meant that he could expand almost a half-mile in every direction – including straight down. Any further than that risked interrupting one of the flows, and he wasn't quite sure what would happen if he did that, but he wanted to err on the side of caution, so he kept in mind to avoid them.

His second room – the “training room” that his Guild and Shards had been using earlier – he expanded to twice its original size, enveloping the small unattached room he had built earlier in its construction. That took an additional 35 Unconverted Mana for the actual construction and another 5 as upkeep, and he was slightly worried that he wouldn't have enough to finish what he wanted to build for his dungeon.

Fire Mana: 5/324

Water Mana: 5/323

Nature Mana: 5/323

Earth Mana: 5/323

Dark Mana: 4/323

Unconverted Mana: 5125 (50)

Looking at his available Mana, however, he realized that if he started running low he could just ask a group of the high-Rated Allroads Government people aboveground to just come down and walk through his dungeon for a half-hour or so, and he'd be good to go. Therefore, he forged ahead and finished up the second room, expanding it a little beyond the tunnel entrance on either side, creating little alcoves that could hide either Defenders or Defenses that wouldn't be visible at first.

With 20-foot ceilings and with the room being approximately 100 feet wide and long (plus the little alcoves near the entrance) it was easy enough to add thick dividing walls with carved-out grooves to the room that ran parallel with the entrance tunnel; these dividing walls were spaced so that there were different widths between them, starting with a very narrow opening only two feet wide, going all the way up to 10 feet wide. Fred also placed the tunnel to the next room near where the narrowest divided area was, which was also instantly visible to whatever ran into the room; his theory was that the monsters that rushed into his dungeon would be looking to get to the end as soon as possible, and would take the first available section that they could fit through. He had some special plans for when they were divided up into different sizes, though he couldn't place anything in there quite yet.

Extending the tunnel out from the "dividing room" exit nearly 30 feet, Fred started work on his third room. This one he built about half of the width and length of the previous room, but he made it very deep – 200 feet deep, in fact. It was a square-shaped (because that was the easiest shape he could produce) and he built stone steps that led down around the edge of the room, leaving the center completely empty – except for a very long drop down to the bottom. Now, if something were to, perhaps, be

pushed off the staircase heading down, then the drop alone might kill or severely damage them; again, he had some surprises in store for the monsters heading towards his dungeon, but he didn't have the Mana quite yet to implement them.

If whatever invaded his dungeon managed to make it down the staircase (or survive a fall), then they would be able to progress to the next room via another tunnel. This one he made 20 feet long, which led to a room similar to the last – just reversed. While the third room went *down*, the fourth room went *up*; it was a relatively simple concept, but Fred was hoping that it would be highly effective to whittle down the invaders without having to go through too much trouble.

At that point, after creating the dividing walls, the tunnels to rooms three and four, and the staircases in those rooms, Fred had already used almost 1,500 Unconverted Mana, leaving him with only just over 3,600 to use for the rest of his dungeon.

Unconverted Mana: 3628 (155)

Not only that, but his upkeep had already tripled to 155 because of how much he had built, so it was obvious that finishing the rest of the dungeon was going to be expensive in terms of Mana. While he had been building those, Eisa and Regnark had also gone up above to join the Guild in searching out some real food; although they didn't technically need it to survive, their desire for food was a holdover from their previous life as a full Human. After tasting how delicious actual food was compared to the entirely tasteless Mana-formed food his parents used to give him, he couldn't blame them.

Deecy was sleeping near him in her Pup form and he didn't want to disturb her, so he went back to his dungeon construction. Before that, however, he took another look at the incoming miners making their way towards his dungeon; the Earth and Nature tunnels were still progressing at the same pace, but he also noticed that the next to break through into his territory was the Water faction. However, they were *just* starting to pass through the border, and he couldn't get a good look at what was doing the mining; all he could see were jets of water being forcefully shot into the dirt and stone, washing it away. *I'll check back later.*

More peering around his entire territory showed no more specific threats that he could see, so he turned back to making tunnels and rooms. For the fifth room – the one just after the staircase leading upwards – Fred made a room a bit different from the others. This one looked like a large “L” if you were to look at it from above, with one long and moderately wide hallway-type part of the room making a sharp turn with another long hallway connected to it. Each “hallway” was 150 feet long, 20 feet tall, and 20 feet wide making the entire room 300 feet long – but it didn't seem that long if you were to look at it.

That was because he also used his ability to create rooms to create a custom one, where he made the walls protrude out into the “hallway” in various spiked arrangements; because he wasn't creating each one individually and *adding* it to a normal room, but instead made the spikes at the same time he was removing the material for the room, he saved a lot of Unconverted Mana in the process. Still, having a 300-foot-long room with projecting stone spikes was expensive, and ended up using another 1,200 UM in the process.

Thankfully, his Dungeon Creation skill kept improving, which helped to reduce the amount of Mana needed to excavate and create rooms.

When he started improving his dungeon earlier in the day it had been at Intermediate 28%, but even the few rooms that he had made – which were admittedly larger than most that he had made before – had already bumped it up to 59%. He was interested to see how much more it would help to get it up to Expert skill level, because he was practically depleted again.

He thought he could still make one more before he had to stop for the moment, so he started on the next one...and then paused. *I've manipulated the shape of my dungeon rooms itself for effect with Defenders and Defenses to help, but what about using elements?* He had already minimally done that with the dungeon he had created back in Gatecross, but now he needed to ramp that up a bit. With what was going to arrive first in mind – Earth – there wasn't much he could do about them because he didn't really have any Air-based room designs he could lean on (he was honestly hoping that most of the Earth-based monsters invading would take a long plunge to the bottom of his staircase rooms), but for Nature and Water that were coming up next...some sort of Fire-based room might just do the trick.

He had made pits full of burning wood and even a room full of bonfires in his previous dungeon, but for this one he wanted something new. Again, he didn't have any Fire-based traps that he could adapt and expand upon; what he did have, however, was more knowledge. Knowledge of how the other Defenses he had access to worked, visual proof that learning to manipulate Adventurer Power was not only possible but could be more powerful than trying to learn it through a DAS Interface, and his ability to create hybrid Defender blueprints using his new Multi-element system. Armed with that knowledge, Fred thought he had a good chance of perhaps designing something on his own.

It was going to be a massive undertaking, one that was going to require a lot of Mana most likely – which he, of course, didn't have.

Breaking out of his concentration that had been fully focused on dungeon construction, he brought his attention back to the first dungeon room, the only one that hadn't had a makeover. He sighed as he realized he was going to need to wait for his Mana to convert more UM to Fire Mana and might even need to invite more people into the dungeon to resupply him.

And then his gaze fell on Deecy.

I wonder if I can absorb the Mana from her Defenses? He hadn't tried it before because...well...he didn't think of it before, and he hadn't really had need of Fire and Water Mana at any point. In fact, most of the time he sent gobs of those two from his own reserve to her, because they hadn't really been as useful as the others. *I think it's time to change that.*

“Deecy? Do you think I can try to absorb your Ice Spear Barricade for the Mana?” Fred decided that placing his hand on sharp spears of ice was preferable as a first test rather than risking burning his hand off with the Fire Wall Defense she could create. The Dire Wolf Pup didn't even raise her head up from where it was lying across her front paws, though she did open up her eyes and look at him.

“Sure, go for it. I’m actually curious whether or not you can, but based on how you were able to absorb the Defenders from your other Shards, it would make sense that you can do these too.”

Without another word, an Ice Spear Barricade formed almost instantly in the middle of the room. Fred got up from where he was leaning against the wall and walked over to it, before he placed his hand on one of the ice spears. He was actually surprised at how cold it was, almost as if it was trying to leach all of the warmth out of the surrounding air; before his hand completely froze, he imagined how it was formed and mimed

absorbing it like he did with Eisa's and Regnark's Defenders...and lo and behold, it worked!

The Barricade dissolved and was sucked up into his body, and he felt a small infusion of Water Mana go into his internal elemental Core. Along with that, though, he also received another surprise. When he looked at his available Defenses, he could now create the same Barricade as a permanent Defense inside of his dungeon!

Eager for more, Fred stepped back and mentally asked Deecy to create one of her Fire Walls. It sprang into existence a few feet away from him, but the heat coming from it forced him to take another step back. *This...could hurt.* Braving the intense flames, Fred stuck his hand inside the edge of the wall of fire and almost instantly his skin started to burn and blacken. Seconds later, through an involuntary scream that erupted from his throat because of the pain, the Fire Wall was absorbed into his body and the crazy pain stopped getting worse.

His hand was basically a melted mess, but he visually watched it repair itself using the Unconverted Mana in his Human Core. Fortunately, the pain numbed somewhat while the regeneration went on, and after about 5 minutes it was completely back to normal.

Fire Mana: 31/324

Water Mana: 30/323

Nature Mana: 10/323

Earth Mana: 10/323

Dark Mana: 10/323

Unconverted Mana: 2312 (205)

As a result of absorbing both Defenses, Fred had gained 20 Fire and Water Mana – and of course the blueprints for both – but the repair of his hand required almost 100 UM in the process. Not necessarily a fair trade, plus the pain and recovery time necessary to absorb a wall of fire wasn't the most...fun.

*“Is there any way that **you** can start the process of reabsorbing your Defenses, but leave the Mana outside of your body so that I can absorb it? I indeed got the blueprints from those, but the process wasn't the most convenient,”* Fred used his Mana Communication to ask the amused-looking Dire Wolf. He was still trying to use the skill as much as possible in order to improve it, so he was taking every opportunity to use it. *“And another question – how fast does your Mana regenerate here in the Convergence; Eisa and Regnark claimed that it was fairly quick, but how fast are we talking?”*

Rather than say anything, Deecy got up from where she had been lying down, created another Ice Spear Barricade in the middle of the room, and then walked over to it. She nosed the side of one of the freezing-cold spears and Fred could see her activate her reabsorption; the Defense started to disappear, but it stopped for just a moment in mid-absorption and wavered in and out of existence. That didn't last long, however, as it completed its disappearing act and was sucked back into the Dire Wolf.

Rather than admit defeat, Deecy created another Barricade and tried again, and then another...but none of them seemed to want to stay out. Finally, she cocked her head to the side as she looked at Fred.

“It doesn't look like it will work that way – it's apparently all or nothing. However, I think we're going about this all wrong; if what you want is Mana, then I should be able to pull a certain amount from my body just

like you do with your Cores and send it to you. At least, in theory it should work, since I pull out Mana already to create these defenses.”

Without more than the barest thought, the Dire Wolf pulled out a large chunk of Fire Mana and Fred saw the red glow infusing half of her body dim precipitously, before it started to strengthen again almost immediately. Before he could react to reach out to touch the glob of Mana, it hit him in the chest and was absorbed instantly by his elemental Core; the speed and suddenness of its impact actually knocked him on his back, and he wondered if Eisa and Regnark felt the same way when he shoved more Mana into *their* bodies.

“That was much easier. As for your other question, that portion of my Fire Mana I sent you was 100 units, and I estimate that I’ll recover that in just over five minutes. I can well understand how valuable this Convergence is to the surrounding Dungeon Cores; even if they receive a smaller portion of what I’m getting right now, then a year or two of sitting nearby could give them enough Mana to increase their Rating by an incredible amount.”

Sure enough, when Fred picked himself up and checked his Fire Mana, it had gone up by 100 units. With that 100 units also came a smile; *if the others are able to do the same thing and can regenerate their Mana so quickly here in the Convergence, then I think I have an almost unlimited supply of elemental Mana at my fingertips. And if I fill up my maximum elemental Mana, anything past that will count as Unconverted Mana...*

Not only that, but once he received a hefty amount of Mana from his Shards, he could then wait until *they* were full...and then give them it back,

which would hopefully help increase their Shard Level after a while. As they had all seen, increasing their Shard Level was *very* beneficial, as it seemed to unlock more and more Special Abilities and options. Deecy, for instance, hadn't really received enough Mana from him yet to obtain Shard Level 3, which he was sure she was eager for – and now there was an opportunity to do just that.

Fred told her his plan, and she immediately agreed. Sitting down against the wall again, he turned his attention back to his dungeon; using another 800 UM, he hollowed out another room that was 250 feet long, 20 feet high, and 30 feet wide. There were no special fixtures he was going to place inside there quite yet; instead, while Deecy continued to feed him Mana from both elements every couple of minutes, he got to work designing a room that would burn anything passing through alive.

Now ***this*** will be fun...

Chapter 23

Fred pulled up his Defense list, because now that he finally had *a little* Mana, he wanted to see what he could make.

Dungeon Defense Creation Menu:

Create Defense (All Blueprints)

- Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana)
- Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana)
- Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana)
- Bone Spike Projection Wall (Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana)
- Darkfire Portal Pit (Base Cost: 35 Dark Mana)
- Ice Spear Barricade (Base Cost: 40 Water Mana)
- Fire Wall (Base Cost: 40 Fire Mana)

Fred had forgotten that he had received two Defenses when he had absorbed the Dark element from the Core in the Deadlands; he hadn't really had a need to build many defenses since then and he had been more concerned with what Defenders he had instead of traps for his dungeon. Now that he saw what he had received, he was enthusiastic about trying them out – and when he focused on their names he got an impression of what they did.

The Bone Spike Projection Wall was theoretically only able to be placed against a flat vertical surface, but Fred was curious whether he might be able to get around that if he tried hard enough. Either way, when the Defense was triggered it would expel sharp bones out from that surface at

extremely high speed, impaling anything unlucky enough to be nearby – if their defense was low enough. For instance, trying to impale a Stone Golem probably wouldn't work out that well, because shoving a bone through a stone would likely cause the bone to shatter instead. However, it would probably hit hard enough to push said Golem...

The Darkfire Portal Pit was interesting; the opposite of the Bone Spike Projection Wall, it was only able to be used on a flat horizontal surface. When it was triggered, a “portal” of sorts was created underneath whatever was in the designated flat surface area, though it was more of a short 5-foot pit that materialized without affecting the dungeon room as a whole. He wasn't exactly sure how it worked in terms of the whole Portal deal, but he likened it to how Regnark's Summoning Circle operated – almost as if it was opening up into some sort of other plane of existence. Regardless of how it worked behind the scenes, whatever fell into the pit would be subjected to Darkfire, which burned and damaged whatever was inside with pure Darkness rather than heat.

As much as he'd like to see them work in person, he'd have to wait until Regnark came back to him and started to feed him some of his Dark Mana. Speaking of that, Deecy had now fed him enough Fire Mana for him to start reciprocating; just before she was going to send him some more, he pulled out 100 units and sent it back to her.

“That did it! My maximum Fire Mana went up by 5 units, so now that we know that this method works, let's keep it up.”

So, of course, they did; every five minutes or so while Fred was working on his traps, he would send some of each element she possessed back to her, and she would increase her Maximum Mana as a result. She

was still a bit of a ways away from hitting Shard Level 3, so he kept the process up kind of on automatic while he concentrated on filling his newest room with some sort of Fire-based trap.

The simplest solution was to place a Fire Wall every couple of feet in the room, though he knew that would become extremely expensive after a while; even though the Fire Wall had only cost Deecy 20 Fire Mana to create, it cost twice as much for Fred to place as a permanent Defense. *I guess that's one of the benefits of being a Shard*, he couldn't help but think.

He would literally need to have hundreds of Fire Walls to fully cover the width and length of the room, which would be entirely too much in terms of Mana for him to spend. Granted, he would eventually get enough to do all of that, but it could take hours of the constant back and forth of Fire Mana with the Dire Wolf, and there were other things he wanted to work on. Not only that, but he had to think of how his dungeon was going to operate during the invasion by the other Cores.

When there were foreign invaders inside his dungeon, resetting Defenses that had already been triggered wasn't possible, though Fred would immediately receive the Mana used in their construction as soon as they were used up and/or destroyed. This was fine for other Dungeon Cores, since they didn't necessarily have a maximum amount of Mana that they could hold for their element; for Fred, however, once he absorbed it back into his Core anything over his maximum amount would be turned into Unconverted Mana.

Therefore, if his new room was filled with 4,000 Fire Mana worth of traps and they were all triggered – hopefully killing everything inside, of course – then he would lose (at his current maximum) over 3,600 *elemental Mana*, which then couldn't be used immediately to reset those Defenses that were triggered. Basically, it was a one-shot deal and couldn't be reloaded

fast enough to make a difference for the next group. What Fred needed to do was design something that didn't require as much Mana but would still cook anything inside the room alive.

With that thought in mind, he created a Fire Wall and set it to automatically trigger when he placed it. At its current "base" level, it would only last for 2 minutes before it used all of the Mana inside of it; the heat and super-hot flames were so intense that it could only maintain it so long before it had to shut down, though all of what he had spent was returned to him when it was finished. Defenses – like Defenders – were fortunately unique in the fact that the Mana didn't really disappear when it was used, it just turned back into Mana again when it was destroyed or "consumed" in the trap-triggering process.

Of course, if he were to add more Fire Mana to the Fire Wall Defense when he set it up, he could make it last longer and even make it larger; that, however, was the opposite of what he wanted to achieve, as he wanted to spend *less* to do the same thing – or at least have the same overall effect. And to do that, Fred had to see how far he could "alter" the blueprint of the Fire Wall to suit his purposes.

Unlike his ability to combine two blueprints from different elemental factions to create a hybrid – which he still wanted to try, but not for this room – or even add in different elements to the existing blueprint to create a variant, Fred took a page from the townspeople of Gatecross' book and altered the blueprint himself. Since they were able to change how they manipulated their Power to get different results, he figured he could do the same thing with a blueprint.

Each Defense was unique and at the same time similar to the others, and the Fire Wall was no different from the norm. The wire-grid outline of the wall of flames he was looking at made sense when he saw it activated; it

was essentially a large rectangular box that encompassed the height and width of the Fire Wall, showing how the flames were contained inside the blueprint when it was activated. There was also a small line running out from the larger blueprint box with a small flat square that was used as a trigger point, but it was sitting underneath the Defense itself right now because he wanted it to automatically activate.

When that trap “consumed” all the Mana it was filled with, it disappeared, and the Fire Mana was left floating for a moment before it was automatically reabsorbed into his Core. For his second experiment, he pumped twice the amount of Mana into the Defense to see how the blueprint changed; not only did it last 3 minutes instead of the original 2, but it also had a 50% bigger rectangular blueprint box.

So, obviously, the bigger the blueprint, the larger the flames – and of course, the higher the cost. What he wanted to do, however, was to expand the box to encompass the entire room – but also keep the cost of the Defense to something that he could easily reset. Settling on 300 Fire Mana as his limit, he created another Fire Wall and pumped all 300 of that Mana into it; some Dungeon-based instinct of his, though, said that he had passed the point of diminishing returns of the Defense, similar to how Defenders didn’t increase quite as much past Level 10 than they did originally.

Instead of being massive, the rectangular box of the blueprint managed to cover almost the entire width and height of the room but wasn’t much larger otherwise. Fred estimated that he could’ve put 3 or 4 less expensive Fire Walls together to encompass the space used by the 300-Fire Mana one, and to top it off, the larger one would only last for 4 minutes. It wasn’t exactly a wise use of his resources, but he was planning on changing that.

Before he confirmed the placement of the large Fire Wall, Fred mentally reached out and tried to alter the blueprint somehow.

Warning!

You are attempting to alter an already-existing blueprint; this action is not permitted by the Supreme Council without direct permission. Please contact your immediate superior to obtain permission before attempting to alter any dungeon blueprints in the future.

After the warning came up Fred paused in his action, seeing that nothing had changed in the blueprint. He tried to do something to the blueprint again, only to have the same warning come up. Frustrated, he tried again and blatantly ignored the warning; he used all his mental strength to try to shift the blueprint even a little bit, but it was like trying to bend a high-grade steel sword with his bare hands. Finally, after about five minutes of trying non-stop without success, he was about to give up...when he saw the wire-grid shift slightly.

Defense Alteration Program.....DAP v.1.1

If you have accessed this program accidentally, please shut it down and contact your immediate supervisor as soon as possible. If you received permission to use the Defense Alteration Program, then welcome!

The DAP allows you to alter existing Defense blueprints that are not performing the way they should; by making small changes to key aspects of Defenses, you can refine them so that they are more successful in harming or even killing invaders in your dungeon.

Note: Existing Universal Blueprints cannot be changed; only variations of your currently accessible blueprints can be saved. Please consult with the Supreme Council concerning any worldwide rollouts.

Would you like to alter the selected blueprint? Yes/No

Fred smiled at the information that was given to him. *Sometimes stubbornness and brute force can come in handy.* Without hesitation, he said **Yes** and a series of options with slider bars appeared.

Fire Wall (Base Cost: 40 Fire Mana)

Length [*]

Width [*]

Height [*]

Intensity [*]

Duration [*]

Trigger Sensitivity [*]

Trigger Area [*]

It seemed as though the options he saw were for the “base” version of the Fire Wall instead of his large version and looking at the blueprint again in the room, he saw that it had shrunk back down to its original size. What he noticed first off about the options was that the *Intensity* was turned up to about two-thirds of its maximum; that made sense, because it was so hot that his hand practically melted within only a few seconds of placing it near the edge. He couldn’t even imagine what it would feel like if it was turned up *all the way*; he probably would’ve been burnt to ash in no time.

Obviously, this special blueprint altering program was off-limits to most Dungeon Cores because of how it could be abused; Fire Cores could make a Defense that could likely kill *anyone* near-instantly with intense heat, which went against most of the ideas behind dungeons that Fred had learned over the years. They *wanted* Humans to delve through them, and if they had something that killed them too quickly, they would be less likely to revisit – or would tell their friends about it. That's why most Defenders and Defenses had some sort of weakness or a way around them, though it was all designed to make their stay inside the dungeon as long as possible.

The original Fire Wall, for instance, would kill you if you stayed near or in it for too long, but if your stay was brief, you'd be hurt and have to be healed – thereby making the entire dungeon delve longer. Fred had found that most of the things he had seen or heard about in dungeons were like this; you could still die to most things if you weren't careful – and the Cores appreciated that – but they didn't design things to be unbeatable, just difficult and time-consuming.

With some interesting options for the Defense now, Fred started to play around with the sliders, watching the blueprint change while he did so. When he made it larger through the *Length*, *Width*, and *Height* options, he saw the Base Cost of the Fire Wall change dramatically. He was finally able to get it to encompass the entire room by manipulating the size options while keeping the other ones the same...and saw that the Base Cost jumped up to 65,230 Fire Mana.

Obviously, that wasn't going to work. Keeping the size of the blueprint to cover the entire room, Fred manipulated the *Intensity* of the trap, bringing it down as low as it could go; when it was as low as it could go, the Base Cost for the Defense was only 1 Fire Mana. If Fred had to guess, the room might be slightly warmer but probably wouldn't even be

noticeable, and he doubted that any actual flames would be present. Slowly bringing the *Intensity* up, he watched as it increased without actually affecting the Base Cost; when it was about a third of the way up, the Cost started to move gradually – so he stopped it as it hit 100.

He wasn't exactly sure how hot that was, but he knew he needed it to last longer than 2 minutes; therefore, he moved the slider for the *Duration* until it was about halfway, at which time the Base Cost settled right around 300.

Would you like to preview your new Defense before finalizing your selections? Yes/No

As soon as Fred thought he was as done as he could be without actually testing it, the option to preview it popped up. Of course, he chose **Yes**.

Suddenly, 300 Fire Mana from his Core was pulled out – the same amount he was going to use on it previously – and rapidly filled the blueprint, which promptly disappeared. And then...nothing. Well, not exactly nothing; using his Territorial Sight, he could see the room and it looked a little hazy or wavy, as if he was looking at heat lines in the daytime emanating from stone. And if he looked carefully, he could almost see the flickers of very faint flames, but again, it was so faint that he wasn't exactly sure if it was actually there.

He had no way of testing to see if it was hot without going there himself...or by sending in a disposable Defender. Using some of the small amount of Nature Mana he currently possessed – which was sitting at a whopping 12 units at the moment – Fred created a Rock Beetle, a Vine Spider, and a Large Wasp and placed them in the tunnel leading to the new

room. Each of them were only Level 1, so he didn't expect much from them, but it was good to get a baseline of what would happen to them.

First he sent in the Rock Beetle and instructed it to move to the other side of the room; after about 20 feet it had slowed down; after 50 feet it stopped altogether, as its legs started to melt and disgusting liquid started to boil out from underneath its shell. It collapsed and dissipated soon after, and Fred reabsorbed the Nature Mana from it.

The Vine Spider did a bit better, as it was faster and could scuttle ahead quite quickly. Still, after 60 feet it slowed considerably, only reaching about 75 of the 300-foot-long room. It too dissolved and offered up its Mana again to Fred, and everything was starting to look very promising.

The Large Wasp did the worst of all of them, as its wings were relatively fragile and thin, which meant that they started to melt within 25 feet, and it was only its forward momentum that allowed it to reach 35 feet. *Extremely promising, indeed.*

Fred didn't have any Water-based Defenders to test, so he tested out what he did have access to. Skeletal Squirrels, Plague Rats, Lesser Imps, and Putrid Giant Spiders from some of the less-expensive Dark Defenders he had were tested, and they too succumbed to the super-heated room. However, despite them dying, they were all only Level 1 and they *did* end up traveling farther than the Nature-based monsters he had created; still, it was a promising result.

Then came some Earth-based Goblin Gnomes, which managed to get to 50 feet before collapsing – a surprisingly far distance for the little guys. The only other Earth-based creature he had access to (solely because of Eisa, for which he was thankful) was the Rockworm – which did the best of all, unfortunately. It managed to travel within about 30 feet of the exit

before the heat had gotten too much for it, though the last 100 feet were very slow. Its rocky exterior must've protected it from most of the heat, but even stone will heat up after a while, and its more vulnerable parts inside of its body appeared to be cooked alive by the heated rocks surrounding it.

He could only imagine something like a Stone Golem – that didn't really have any vulnerable inner “living” parts – would be able to pass through without too much trouble, but hopefully it would've been taken care of by some of the earlier rooms. If not, he still had plans to add on to the dungeon after this room (as well as possibly putting some obstacles in his new Fire-based room), but first he needed more Mana – and to complete the first five rooms he had already constructed but hadn't filled with anything.

Another mental prompt at the Defense Alteration Program sucked all of the Mana used in the preview and the wire frame popped back up on his blueprint.

Would you like to approve this blueprint or make changes?

Approve/Make Changes

As soon as he approved it, it asked him to name the new blueprint. He thought for a moment before he named it something a little more creative than his last decision; he didn't think “Extended Low-intensity Long-duration Fire Wall” sounded good, plus it was a bit of a mouthful.

Instead, he called it...The Oven.

Chapter 24

Dying and coming back to life a changed woman was a very strange experience. Chareese still hadn't yet come to terms with her loss of Power and, of course, her Rating – though she found that as time went on, that seemed to matter less and less to her. Sure, she had spent almost three centuries of constantly trying to improve herself, of dungeon delving, of living through dozens or even hundreds of close friends dying in those dungeons over the years, and even her latest stint as one of the top officials in Allroads...but for some reason, it almost felt *good* to start over.

It wasn't as though she thought she had made some poor decisions over the course of her life; on the contrary, there were only a few minor things that she regretted doing, and they were so insignificant that even if she hadn't done them her life probably wouldn't have changed from where it was today. Or yesterday...or whatever. Regardless, given the chance to live her previous life over, she probably wouldn't have switched up a thing. Her new life, however, felt like a new beginning, with new opportunities that she had never considered before.

It was just a shame that they had dungeon monsters encircling the city and within a few months – if they were lucky – they would all be dead.

Nevertheless, after coming to terms (sort of) with the Power, prestige, and even straight-up physical strength she had lost as a result of dying, she was excited for the future. A future that she hoped contained a certain man; but if not, she was going to live her life to the fullest she could. No more strict attitude, no more strait-laced personality, and no more “normal” for her.

That's not to say that she was going to go out and break the law or cause chaos inside the city, but she had been living the life of a disciplinarian for so long that she wanted something different. She was well aware that kind of thinking was quite out of character for her and she sometimes wondered if Fred had done something to change that in her, but in the end it didn't really matter; she *could* go back to how she was before, but the more she thought about it, the less it seemed like a good idea.

She wanted to...*live*.

To do that, unfortunately, she had to help with the defense of the city; to help with the defense meant that she had to help Fred and his dungeon get prepared for the arrival of some monsters from underground. If she wanted to *live* more than a couple of days, then that meant making sure the one person that shouldn't die, stayed alive.

Which was why she was inside the first room of Fred's dungeon, gathered with Eisa, the Dire Wolf (which was still strange, as she had discovered that she could have some sort of mental conversation with her earlier), and Regnark – all of the “Shards”, of which she technically was one now. Even though she felt basically the same as she had before she had died, seeing personal evidence that she wasn't quite all “human” anymore was eye-opening.

“I've built a handful of rooms, but I need all of your help to populate them with Defenders and Defenses. Unlike you all—” Chareese saw Fred speaking particularly to her— “I can't absorb the natural ambient Mana that this Convergence is spreading around the valley, and my conversion of my ‘unconverted mana’ into elemental Mana is relatively slow. Fortunately, I've learned through Deecy here that you might all be able to supply some of that Mana to me.”

That's interesting. I wonder what he's talking about.

“But that’s not all; because of the superior regeneration of your Mana, you’ll be able to quickly replenish your current Mana after giving me some of it – and then I can give you some back,” Fred said, finishing with a smile. Looking around, she saw Eisa and Regnark smiling as well, but Chareese was confused.

Suddenly, she saw Fred pull a blob of glowing green...Mana...out of his chest – and then he threw it at her. She flinched and stepped back, expecting it to hurt, but instead it felt...*awesome*. Her body immediately absorbed the Plant—*Nature*—Mana and her body felt infused with pleasure; unfortunately, it didn’t last long, and she came back within seconds to see everyone looking at her, smiles on their faces still.

“I could see that you didn’t really comprehend what I was saying, so I thought it was best that I show you – and for you to experience it directly” Fred explained. “I managed to convert a little more than that 20 units of Nature Mana over a couple of hours, but I gave it to you so that you can see what it will do. I’m sure you experienced what it feels like to absorb Mana – which I’m told is amplified a bit when you’re already full – but what you really need to see is your Shard Status. You’ll see that your maximum Nature Mana should’ve increased as a result of absorbing more Mana over that maximum.”

Sure enough, when Chareese checked, her new maximum Nature Mana had gone up from 100 to 105. It apparently wasn’t a direct correlation of how much she absorbed, but was instead a percentage; regardless, seeing it increase was a heady feeling, especially since it was almost like getting stronger via Essence. Through some conversations with the other Shards over the last couple of hours, she knew that increasing her Shard Level was a way to unlock some more Special Abilities, and to do that she needed her maximum Mana to go up.

Things are looking up.

“Now, what I want all of you to do is see if you can pull out a portion of your Mana and send it to me. I’ve seen all of you do this already – at least partially – when you’ve used one of your Special Abilities; this time, however, just imagine pulling it from your body without any specific purpose.”

Chareese had only really done it once before – when she had used her Natural Growth ability on a little goblin thing Eisa had created – but she still remembered how it felt. She closed her eyes and mentally reached inside of herself, grasping the force with invisible hands, before she imagined it like a big loaf of green...bread. It was the best analogy she could think of at the time, but it worked; she pictured tearing off a small portion of the loaf – the heel, really – and envisioned it forming in her hand.

When she opened her eyes, she saw a small green orb of Mana sitting there and she stared at it, fascinated. After a few moments, she saw the others making a little tossing motion with their hands, and she did the same thing, aiming for Fred and willing the orb forward. It quickly shot forward, smacking into Fred’s chest and she smiled a little when he flinched from the impact.

“Perfect! Well, almost – you don’t necessarily need to throw it so hard, but I appreciate it, nonetheless. Now, you’ll probably see that your Mana will recover fairly quickly because of our location in the Convergence, so let me know when you’re full again.”

Chareese looked at her Shard Status again, seeing that she had brought forth approximately 5...*units*?...of her Nature Mana. Within seconds of Fred finishing his statement, she was already full. She let him know, and the others weren’t far behind.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to see. You are all regenerating your Mana so quickly that throwing out 10, 20, or even 50 Mana won’t take you long to recover; for me, though, converting all of that elemental energy could take *hours*, whereas you can do it in a few minutes or less.” Fred spread his hands while he was explaining and grinned slowly – as if he had a secret. “But that’s not the only way you can help – especially you, Chareese.”

Now she was confused again. *Me? What can I do to help?* She was practically useless as an Adventurer – she still hadn’t even chosen a Class, mainly because it didn’t seem important yet – and all she could do was make things grow.

“Alright, follow me – I want to show you my dungeon so far, as well as showing where all of you can help. While we’re going through, keep up with the Mana infusions and I’ll do the same,” Fred said, before turning towards the tunnel leading deeper into the dungeon. Eisa and Deecy immediately followed, and Chareese was left behind with just Regnark.

“After you,” he said, bowing and waving her forward with a cheesy smile on his face.

Why do I like that smile so much? She had been getting to know him – as well as Eisa – a little better over the last few hours while Fred had been at “work” on his dungeon; she didn’t really see Fred doing actual “work” however, because he was in the exact same place they had left him earlier when they came back. Regardless, she had enjoyed hearing more details about their story and journey to Allroads that hadn’t been important enough to share before, and she empathized with him when he described how he had tried taking care of his little brother.

And strangely enough, she started to feel more comfortable around him – which hadn't happened with anyone in a long, long time. Looking at it logically, she knew it was in part because of his large, muscular size; Regnark reminded her a little bit of her half-brother, who had always been there for her and she felt safe when he was around. He had been a little distant lately since she had been resurrected, but he explained it was because he had been the one to accidentally kill her in the first place; despite her telling him not to apologize, he still did – and that apparently wasn't enough for him. Roady was always like that, though; taking responsibility for actions that may or may not have been his actual fault – but it was also why he made such a good Knight-Commander.

Again, looking at it logically – which she had always tried to do in the past – that was probably the most likely explanation why she was attracted to the big Shard who could summon demons at a whim...but she was tired of being logical. Whether or not this was her following her heart, she refused to let logic get in the way of her new way of life.

Once she passed through the tunnel leading to the second room and immediately saw that it had changed from what it looked like previously, she was all business. Putting her personal feelings aside, she viewed the room with the critical eye of a veteran dungeon delver – and found it extremely strange.

“I see your confused look, Chareese. Why are you confused?” Fred asked, still with that knowing smile on his face.

“Well, for one, this wouldn't stop anybody from getting to the exit —”

“Ah, I see what the problem is; you're forgetting that this dungeon isn't for 'anybody' – it's for monsters of unknown quantity and size. This 'sorting room' is designed to funnel them down these different chutes,

thereby making them susceptible to whatever we choose to place in them. And while I can set some of these traps, I need *you*, Chareese—” Fred said, nodding in her direction— “to help with the bulk of it.”

“Um...how? I can only grow things—”

“Precisely...watch.” Fred turned towards the first narrow gap between the thick walls in the room and...nearly a foot of soft, loamy dirt started to fill the space above the floor, all the way down the passageway. When that was done, grooves that were cut out and angled into the sides of the walls were filled with dirt as well, filling up the majority of the tight “hallway” with excellent growing material. Lastly, there were multiple spaces near where the stone walls met the ceiling where even more dirt plots were placed, making the whole thing a grower’s paradise.

Chareese may have been reborn yesterday...that *afternoon*, actually...but she wasn’t stupid, because she knew exactly what he wanted. “You want me to fill these passageways with plants.” It wasn’t a question – it was a statement.

“Exactly. You have both Defenders and Defenses that you can place in these plots in whatever combination you choose; what I suggest you do is create some samples of each of them to see what they can do, and then you can go from there. I will be adding some of my own Defenses – which will automatically reset once the dungeon is free from invaders, very similar to how a ‘normal’ dungeon operates – but I don’t have nearly enough to fill this entire room up. With your accelerated regeneration and increased maximum Nature Mana – via additional infusions of Mana from me – the combination of both our efforts should see this place looking well defended,” Fred told them all confidently. “But before you do that, I want to show you the rest of what I’ve built – and, of course, I still have to fill the other passageways with dirt. Therefore, onward!”

Possibilities ran through her head as she followed Fred and the others, though she took the time to “plant” a few of her available options. It worked similarly to her Natural Growth Special Ability, fortunately; all she did was mentally “grab” some Mana from wherever it sat inside her body and thought about what she needed to use it for. With her finger pointing to where she wanted it, small green globs flew out and were absorbed into the dirt, and she could sort of “sense” where they were – and what they were. Fred nodded in acknowledgement as she finished making the three Defender options she had (Flower Tripper, Poisonous Mobile Mushroom, and the Am-bushes), before heading down the tunnel leading to the next room.

She was impressed and a little scared of the next two rooms; while she wasn’t exactly scared of heights – especially over the last century or so, when a fall from the height she was seeing would only injure her a little bit – the stairway down to the bottom was very narrow. A misplaced step would result in her plummeting to her death – or at least until her Mana brought her back to life again, which Fred assured her would occur if that were to happen. It wasn’t something she wanted to test, however, and she wasn’t the only one who stayed near the wall as they walked down.

In those two rooms, he described how he was going to put some of his Dark-based traps, which would shove sharp bones out of the wall, possibly injuring whatever was walking down, but more likely shoving them completely off and into the pit in the center. He also made a few dirt plots on various stairs, and asked Chareese if she could help place another few plants like Flower Trippers to help knock monsters off; as much as she didn’t want to spend more time in the deep stairway-filled room, she agreed.

On the bottom, Fred said he wanted to put a combination of Small Thorn Traps and Ice Spear Barricades, which he additionally asked if she could help with the Thorn Traps – and of course she agreed. *He really meant it when he said he needed my help.*

The others weren't left out either; in those rooms with the stairways, Regnark was going to be needed to create his "Summoning Circle" – the portal that allowed him to summon demons – and create different flying monsters that could help knock off any invaders. It meant that he had to be nearby during an attack on the dungeon, but Fred also said he had thought of that and had a means of escape already planned; Chareese was glad, because she didn't want Regnark to be in any more danger than necessary.

Eisa was also asked to supply some Stone Golems for the fourth dungeon room where the stairs went upwards, for the sole – and simple – purpose of trying to knock off the stairs anything that had managed to get that far. It was in the fifth room, however, that the other woman really got to create some bigger Defenders, including a Crystal scorpion and a Golden Sphinx. With the stone spikes built into and jutting out from the walls, there was no real way to get around them, and she knew for a fact how fast they could move – which would help them smash into and fling other monsters into those spikes.

Fred also talked about adding a few other traps to that room to help with the defense, and even placed a few patches of dirt while he walked that could be used for growing some more plants. Before he could ask, Chareese told him that she would add some more plants for him, and she had a fairly good idea what would work well there.

The last room that he had built at that point (he said he was waiting to accumulate more Mana to make even more) looked completely unassuming; it was just a wider and longer room than she had seen before,

unadorned by anything. “What are you planning on putting in here?” she asked.

“Well, there is actually a Defense that I...altered...specifically for this room. Just be glad that you’re Shards and considered part of this dungeon, because otherwise you’d have triggered the trap as soon as you walked in and would be cooking alive at this point.” He smiled at them innocently.

Chareese just realized that the entire time she was walking through the dungeon, she hadn’t checked for a trap even once; that realization was strange to her, because that kind of behavior would’ve gotten her killed in another dungeon. It wasn’t that she had been the primary one that checked and disabled traps in her groups, but she always checked for them using some of her past abilities in case some had been missed. Of course, she didn’t have those abilities anymore, but the instincts were still there – but she had completely ignored them.

Just a part of my new life, I guess.

It was good to know that none of the traps – or monsters that were inside the dungeon – would activate or attack her when she was walking through. Still, though, those instincts that had kept her alive for so long were important, and they were something that she *didn’t* want to change; Chareese planned on living as long as she could and keeping aware of danger was an important factor in making that happen.

At that point, they turned back. While they had been originally been making their way through the dungeon as Fred had pointed things out, all of them had been constantly feeding him Mana – herself included – and he had been sending chunks of Mana back to them (at least she assumed so, though she could only really sense her own). As they passed by some of the Earth-based monsters that Eisa had created in the fifth room, she wondered aloud

if the other woman could just...*absorb*...them and increase her maximum at the same time if she were full.

“I can, but I’ve found that the rate of gain is extremely slow for some reason after I reached Shard Level 4; it used to be beneficial to do that, but after a point it was almost like anything that I created didn’t give me much when I reabsorbed it. Right now, for instance, every 10000 Earth Mana I reabsorb back in from my Defenders, I might increase my maximum Mana by 1; in contrast, every 100 Mana I receive back from Fred increases it by 1 – which is much faster,” Eisa explained.

Interesting.

Halfway through their journey back through the dungeon, Chareese unexpectedly hit a milestone; she hadn’t really been paying attention to her maximum Nature Mana, so it came as a bit of a surprise when she felt a change in the back of her mind. Pulling up her Shard Status, she saw what the difference was immediately.

Shard Status
Chareese Alonties
Elemental Origin: Nature Shard Level: 3 Next Mana Threshold: 500 Nature Nature Mana: 251/251
Defender/Defense Growth Options
Flower Tripper (Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 4 mins) Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 5 mins) Am-bushes (Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 6 mins) Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 7 mins)

Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 14 mins) Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 28 mins)
Special Abilities
Natural Growth (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Nature Mana per day) Mother Dryad Form (Activation Cost: 150 Nature Mana, Upkeep Cost: 25 Nature Mana per min)

Curious about her new Special Ability, Chareese unthinkingly activated it while they were climbing up the staircase in the third room. Instantly, she felt a large chunk of her Mana leave her, while at the same time something covered her entire body; fortunately, it didn't cover her eyes, so she could still see, but she also felt a little unbalanced. Looking down, she saw that her body was covered in a wooden-yet-flexible substance, which felt a little weird but almost natural, almost like it was her real body emerging from her skin; she also noticed that her clothes were gone and she was essentially naked, but other than some vague outlines of her natural features, it wasn't really like being completely unclothed – so it didn't bother her too much.

What bothered her more was the fact that her point of view changed so that she was looking down from a greater height; not only that, but she felt larger and *wider* – wide enough that she couldn't avoid falling off of the staircase and into the pit below.

As Chareese left the staircase, she could vaguely feel Regnark behind her try to grab her leg, but he lost hold of it – and a scream was ripped from her throat as she plummeted down the pit to what she considered was her death. She heard shouts from above where the others were looking down on her falling, but there was nothing they could do on

such short notice; she felt wind buffeting against her, as if one of them were trying to use some sort of air spell, but all it did was slow her down the tiniest bit.

Panicking with her heart beating in her chest, she instinctively threw out her hand to try to grab *something* to stop her fall...and her arm elongated and shot forward like some sort of branches of a tree, and her fingers spread out around the staircase she managed to grab like small stems. Chareese was so shocked that she almost kept falling to the ground but seeing that at least one side was trying to grab something, she flung out her other arm and it automatically lengthened to join the first. With her “arms” and “hands” holding onto a solid object, it stopped her downward momentum, but it also swung her up against the wall below the staircase.

While the impact against the wall didn’t hurt all that much, it did cause her to lose her “grip” on the staircase a little bit. Another instinctual thought passed through her mind and her legs shot downwards, forming extremely long roots that managed to reach the bottom of the pit. Stretched out like that, with her root-legs touching the bottom of the pit at least 100 feet below and her branch-arms lengthened to their fullest and holding on for dear life, she felt – and appeared to be, when she got the chance to look – extremely thinned out all along the rest of her body. Strangely though, it didn’t hurt or even feel uncomfortable – it just felt...*natural*.

“Are you alright?” Regnark shouted down to her, which wasn’t really necessary because she could hear him just fine. His action to try to save her and his concern for her wellbeing was touching, though.

“Um...yes?” she said, still confused at what was happening. Taking a peek at her Shard Status again, she saw that her Nature Mana was continuing to drop because of her new form’s “upkeep”, though she estimated that she still had at least a half-hour before she ran out completely

– mainly due to her natural regeneration. Knowing that she wasn't going to fall to her death anymore – or at least, severely injure herself – Chareese let go of the staircase and deliberately shortened her arms, hands, and fingers back to their normal size. Then, standing on slightly wobbly root-legs, she very gradually shortened those too so that she wound up at the bottom of the pit and near the tunnel leading to the fourth dungeon room.

The others had rushed down to meet her, and she mentally deactivated her new Mother Dryad Form; the wooden exterior covering her sloughed off and disappeared, and she was thankful to see that her normal clothes were brought back and appeared unchanged from the experience. Chareese, on the other hand, was *quite* changed from the entire endeavor.

Regnark, his smile back on his face when he saw her safe and sound, said, “Maybe next time, wait to experiment with a new ability until you're somewhere safe – preferably not on a narrow staircase just feet from falling into a deep pit.”

She couldn't agree more...and she shyly smiled back, a little embarrassed over the whole situation.

Chapter 25

Almost three days after he had started building rooms in his dungeon, and thousands upon thousands of different types of elemental Mana coming in and out of his Cores, things were finally starting to look... defensible. It had been a major task at the beginning with seemingly insurmountable odds stacked against them, but after discovering how the Shards could easily transfer Mana over to him the whole process had gone smoother than he thought it would.

There were still more rooms that he wanted to construct after his “oven” room, but most of his concentration had been on finishing up the details for the first six rooms that he had already built. First, he needed an easier way for his people – the Core Power Guild and the townspeople (who strangely appeared to want to stay in or near the dungeon as opposed to up in the city) – to move around without having to worry about traversing through and avoiding all of the Defenders and Defenses that were set up all through the dungeon. Not only that, but he had to design and build a place for them to stay, since just having them sit around a large empty room probably wouldn’t be much fun – or comfortable, for that matter.

And, because many of them specifically asked for a way to contribute to the actual defense of the dungeon, he had to figure out a way for them to do that...and do it *safely*. He couldn’t necessarily do what he had done in Gatecross, where a bunch of them would defend a room and then fall back when they started to get overrun, because there were too many permanent traps in place; as soon as they fell back, their status as “invaders” would trigger the traps, and it was almost impossible to navigate a way through them without some sort of casualties. The last thing he

wanted to do was eliminate those traps, either, because he was planning on them being a huge help towards the defense of his dungeon.

It was harder to come up with the solution than the actual execution, however. A day and a half of different ideas were tossed around, before Fred stumbled upon a way to benefit from their help, while at the same time staying as safe as possible; it wasn't perfect and would still have its dangers, but there were multiple fail-safes set up to minimize the risk to both his people and himself.

Strangely enough, the answer came from a portal to Hell. Or, more accurately, the Darkfire Portal Pit trap he had access to, which he hadn't really found a great way to use quite yet. It was expensive in terms of Defenses went, though it was inarguably effective, especially when he experimented with it and some of his Defenders; even the Dark-based ones he sent into the pit were damaged from the Darkfire inside the pit, though it of course didn't do quite as much as it did to the other factions.

However, Fred also found that it was relatively easy to escape from, as instead of the portal part of the pit being straight-sided, it was sloped, which allowed whatever fell into it a chance to escape. He figured it was yet another deliberate aspect of the trap from the Dungeon Cores who employed it, as they didn't necessarily *want* anyone to die from it, but the damage it caused would keep them there longer as they healed from falling into the Defense.

Fred wanted to see if he could change the shape of it to be even deadlier in his own dungeon, so he accessed the Defense Alteration Program again with the Darkfire Portal Pit as the blueprint he wanted to change. That time he didn't have to force his way into it, fortunately, because it opened right away for him; when he looked at the different ways

he could change the Defense, he found the solution he had been looking for – though not for his original purpose.

Darkfire Portal Pit (Base Cost: 35 Dark Mana)

Length [*]
Width [*]
Depth [*]
Slope [*]
Intensity [*]
Duration [*]
Trigger Sensitivity [*]
Trigger Area [*]
Opacity [*]
Omnidirectional []
Dual-sided []

He played around with the slider bars for a little bit and actually managed to figure out how to make the portal pit straight-sided, though it required him to shrink it a little and turn down the *Intensity* of the Darkfire to keep it around the same Base Cost – when he saw the last three options. One was for *Opacity*, which didn't really make sense, since it was a Dark portal and it would be strange if it were transparent; the second was for *Omnidirectional* and it only had a box instead of a slider bar. Curious, he concentrated on it and a large "X" appeared in it and he waited to see what would happen...which was nothing, apparently. The third option – *Dual-sided* – he left alone, because he didn't think he'd need for something to enter the portal from *both sides*.

It was only when he was positioning it later after approving the blueprint (and having left that option “on”), that he learned what *Omnidirectional* did. He had pushed it up next to the wall of his staircase room pit and moved it a little too far, apparently, because it immediately jumped to the wall – meaning that it was now able to go vertical instead of just horizontal. After some experimentation, he also found that it would work on the ceiling as well, though why it would benefit anything being up there he didn’t really know.

With that revelation also came the idea for his people. Some more playing around with his DAP system and with Eisa volunteering for some very safe experiments, he developed a way for his Shards, the Core Power Guild, and the townspeople of Gatecross to participate with much less danger to them.

Fred discovered that if he turned the *Opacity* down to its lowest setting, it was largely see-through when activated, with just a little darkening of the area. Then, when he turned the *Intensity* and *Depth* down to its lowest settings as well, it was essentially an invisible barrier with no depth and did no damage at all; normally it would be useless to a Dungeon Core, because it didn’t actually *do* anything, but for Fred it was perfect for his purposes. After upping its *Duration* to its maximum – which would last for just under five hours – the Base Cost of his new Defense was...1 Dark Mana.

Eisa experimented with his new “Viewing Portal” when he set it up spanning in front of a hole he carved out of the wall in the first room; she found that she could both see *and* cast spells through the new largely transparent shield from *behind* it, though anything that tried to enter through it from the opposite side was stopped by the Defense. Repeated blows by the Defenders he sent against it would eventually break and

disable the Viewing Portal, but it was still a good way to ensure his people could attack from afar without being in too vulnerable a position.

What he essentially ended up doing after that – and using up a lot of Unconverted Mana in the process – was build a series of tunnels that spanned outside of his dungeon rooms, and then connected them to small 2-foot by 2-foot holes at approximately head-height on a Human. Those holes would allow his people to view the room and cast spells and use abilities from relative safety, especially when he placed one of his Viewing Portals in front of them on the room side, set to activate when something got near it.

In the case where something managed to break through one of the Viewing Portals, Fred installed a series of “gates”, which were essentially large thick slabs of stone that were technically part of his dungeon. They were set up near each opening to fall down and cover the hole in the wall when they were triggered by pulling sharply on some ropes, which were connected to some thick wooden pillars that were nearly on the verge of breaking already. A few hours of testing got them to the point where they were easily usable by anyone, and as safe as they could possibly be. Once those walls were pulled, however, that hole leading into the room was sealed permanently – until Fred was able to reset everything when the dungeon was free from invaders.

A fail-safe in addition to those fail-safes was added to the tunnels leading from room to room, where – in case the invading monsters were able to get inside the outer tunnels – whole sections of the tunnels could be blocked completely, leaving whoever was still alive in that blocked section at the mercy of the monsters that broke through. He almost didn't add them, but after talking with Chareese and her brother, they convinced him that it was necessary.

“As much as it would likely pain you to do that, if you don’t stop them there, the monsters could reach all of the other unsuspecting people in the rest of the tunnels without anything there to stop them. It’ll be better to lose a few people rather than all of them.”

It made sense, but he didn’t like it; still, he put them in and made it the responsibility of those managing the tunnels to activate the blockages if they were necessary – mainly because he couldn’t affect them anyway from afar when there were invaders in his dungeon.

With those passageways now as safe and protected as they could be for his friends, Guild members, and the townspeople, Fred next built a series of rooms for those same people to stay in while they were in his dungeon. Because they said that – after the first night staying in the city aboveground – they preferred to sleep down below, he needed somewhere they could stay; they only mentioned their experience up there as “unwelcoming”, which Fred assumed was because of the glowing “X” mark above their head. It was something he still needed to look into, but it was something that could wait until they were safe – if they ever were.

He refused to think about that, though, so he instead dove into the construction of multiple small rooms located near the end of his current dungeon, filled with beds that he created using his Adventurer Power and Conjure Object ability – the whole area of which he called his “Barracks”. He sealed these rooms up with stone walls, ceilings, and floors to keep them intact because he didn’t make them an actual part of his dungeon. They weren’t being “upkept” with his Mana, which also meant that they were vulnerable to the factions coming to kill him.

Therefore, what he ended up doing was creating a series of very small rooms connected to the tunnel leading to the Barracks, which wrapped around the entire complex; looking at it from a distance away, it

almost looked like a box inside of a box. While it was still accessible from the dungeon if you were to get to the end, it was relatively safe from those Defenders coming to get him.

Speaking of that, over the last day and a half, three more factions had shown themselves in his territory, digging far underground and making their way towards his dungeon. All but Air were represented, though they were all at different stages of progress; Earth, of course, was only about a day out, and they had angled their approach to coincide exactly where Deecy had said they would go: the entrance to his dungeon. Nature and Water were next, followed by Dark, Light, and then Fire; Fred assumed Air was still digging their way to his dungeon, but as the border near them kept shifting dramatically every day they probably couldn't keep up.

It didn't really matter in the end, however, because if they couldn't stop the other factions from getting to Fred then whether or not they were there was a moot point. Which was why Fred and the other Shards had been going almost non-stop to finish everything before the Earth monsters arrived; Fred and (occasionally) Chareese had been finishing up the dungeon Defenses, while Eisa, Regnark, and even Deecy had been working with the Guild and townspeople with their training.

At that point, most of the Guild could finally see and were starting to manipulate their Power, leading to them expanding upon what they could already do to some degree; learning how to do something completely foreign to them (like learning a healing ability as a tank) was still extremely difficult and only one person – Metch – had been able to do the simplest of healing spells. Nevertheless, the practice they got with what they *could* do was impressive.

The townspeople, on the other hand, were branching out and trying to learn everything they could. Fred had taken an hour out of his busy

construction schedule to use his Instructor Class to Teach as many abilities as he could to them; they didn't change their Class while doing so, however, which meant that many of the abilities he tried to Teach had a small chance of success. Regardless of the chances, enough were able to learn them – and then teach the others *organically* instead of through Fred's Teach ability, which easily got around the failure restriction.

In short, because most of his Adapted Abilities were for beginning Classes or just a step up from them, by the end of the three days of construction they had shared enough spells and abilities to each other that you could almost consider them *every* starting Class. While they were technically Researchers, they could use a few Fighter abilities, could heal like a Healer, could skulk around like a Scout, and of course throw around spells like a Mage. Most of their concentration was on the latter, however, because they weren't planning on getting in the thick of battle but would use their Power to hurt the incoming monsters from afar.

The way they learned also caught the attention of Chareese, to whom Fred also Taught as many abilities as he could. While she only chanced to pick up about a third of what he had to offer, she worked with the townspeople (when she wasn't planting Defenses or Defenders in the dungeon) on manipulating her own Power, which she said was much easier now that she had been exposed to Mana and how it operated. As a result, she had picked up many of the ones that Fred hadn't been able to Teach her.

Also because of her success, Chareese convinced her half-brother to attempt doing the same, but he soon became frustrated; nevertheless, he was able to convince Elder Hood to allow some of the much lower-Rated (G-Rated, mostly) Adventurers in the city to attempt to learn how to manipulate their Power. That was all based on the fact that Roady and many of the higher-Rated Guild members had difficulty with it, and it was

thought that the less ingrained the Syndicate's Interface was into someone's conscious use of Power, the more likely they'd be able to be successful with the new way they were doing things.

The first batch of "students" were scheduled to arrive in a couple of days, when it was determined if they were still going to be alive at that point; since the Earth faction was set to arrive the next day, only time would tell if the dungeon Fred and the others had built and filled with deadly Defenses and Defenders would be enough to save them...against the first wave of monsters, at least. If they survived the next few days, then they still had to worry about Nature...and then Water...and then the rest arriving after that. And, of course, they only had about a month and a half before the Light and Air borders were in the city...

One thing at a time. Fred was hoping he would have some time at the end of all the preparation to experiment more on making another Core, but he was dead tired by the time it was all finished. Instead, he created a few rooms near the Barracks that were actually part of the dungeon for his Shards and himself – five in all; he figured Deecy deserved one all for herself and Created a nice fluffy mattress for her to lie on. In the other rooms he created a small bed frame with even more fluffy mattresses, and he picked one at random for himself, as they were all identical.

As he walked in, something *clicked* strangely in his head.

Core Room now designated!

Core Room? Well, I guess I am technically the Dungeon Core in this dungeon and I'm choosing this as my room, so I guess that's all that was needed? He didn't understand all of the rules a dungeon had to reside by sometimes – designating a Core Room being one of them – but if that's

all it wanted from him then he wasn't going to complain. Curious, he pulled up his Dungeon Core Status; he hadn't had a designated Core Room before and was interested to see what difference it would make.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth-Dark Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 20 Fire Mana: 523/523 Water Mana: 522/522 Nature Mana: 522/522 Earth Mana: 522/522 Dark Mana: 522/522 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 32814 Unconverted Essence: 14322
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 82% Expert Mana Conversion: 94% Expert Core Crystallization: 60% Expert Mana Communication: 3% Expert Defender Creation: 24% Expert Mana-formed Object Creation: 15% Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 95% Intermediate Dungeon Core Absorption: 23% Intermediate Dungeon Creation: 98% Intermediate Defense Creation: 86% Novice Essence Conversion: 13%
Dungeon Information
Maximum Dungeon Rating: B-10th Current Dungeon Rating: E-9th Current Mana Upkeep: 645 Unconverted Number of Rooms: 42 Number of Defenders: 2 (500 Earth Mana) Number of Defenses: 87 (450 Fire Mana, 480 Water Mana, 500 Nature Mana, 510 Dark Mana) Defender/Defense Range Limit: 65000—72000 Mana Reward Count: 0 Points Reward Range Limit: 43000—50000 Points (Consult your Dungeon Creation Menu for more information)

Fred wasn't quite sure why his dungeon only Rated as an E-9th dungeon, but he supposed that it was probably based on factors he didn't really understand. However, looking at it objectively, he did notice that less than a quarter of his actual Defenses and Defenders were actually *his* and tied to the dungeon; there were numerous plants set up by Chareese, there would be a Summoning Circle or two from Regnark during the attack, Deecy was planning on contributing her own Defenses (and a little more, after her most recent Shard Level increase), and Eisa had dozens of her own Defenders inside the dungeon. Fred only actually had two Defenders himself, as most of his Mana was tied up in his Defensive traps; before the Earth faction arrived he was planning on creating some more, but he hadn't gotten around to it yet with how busy he was.

As for those Defensive traps, only so many of them were tied into the dungeon; anything that he set up that was above and beyond his maximum Mana he didn't tie so they were essentially on their own and wouldn't automatically be replaced when all the invaders left. So, of course, none of those counted as part of his dungeon – which likely affected its Rating. Which might be a good thing, because he was almost positive that the nearby Cores might be able to see his dungeon Rating from their own Territorial Sight, even if he hadn't figured that out yet; hints from the past from a few sources indicated that was entirely plausible, so he was hoping they might see that and underestimate him.

That done, he lay down on the bed, ready to get some sleep; as he had discovered so long ago when he was making his way south from his parents' dungeon, he technically didn't need to sleep, but it affected his thoughts after a while and started to use some of his Unconverted Mana to keep him running the way he needed to be. And while he hadn't been

exactly *hoarding* every scrap of UM that came his way, something told him that he was going to need it later.

Just as he was closing his eyes to rest, he heard someone walk into his room. “Eisa? What are you doing here? I made you your own room, you know.”

“I know, and thank you for that, but I’d rather sleep in here with you tonight.”

Fred was a little confused because he had made the beds rather small to save his Power. *Now that she can finally sleep in a real, safe bed all by herself...she’d rather share?* He shrugged while still lying down and closed his eyes, too tired to care either way. He felt her climb onto the bed and lie down next to him, followed soon by the feeling of her putting her head on his shoulder and arm across his chest...and then he was out.

Part IV – Dungeon Defense

Chapter 26

Fred woke up the next morning to find Eisa typically drooling on his chest and still fast asleep; he gently moved her off and laid her head down on the pillows he had created. While the sleep had been much needed and his head felt much clearer than it had been, he regretted the lost time; looking at how close the Earth Defenders were to his dungeon, he realized he had – at most – an hour before they arrived. He'd wake up Eisa (and have her wake any others that were still asleep) in plenty of time before the attack started – they were going to need their rest.

Now that he had advanced his Mana Communication skill, he found that he could indeed mentally communicate with any of his Shards now, not just Deecy; he held off from doing so very often, however, because they weren't quite used to hearing his voice in their heads. For some reason that didn't make sense to Fred, they seemed to think that hearing a Dire Wolf talk in their heads was “normal”, while *his voice* was “weird”. Regardless, he could use the skill to communicate with them up to approximately 1500 feet away, which meant that he could reach them just about anywhere inside his dungeon; Deecy said that that range would increase the higher the skill became, until he could eventually communicate hundreds or thousands of miles away.

He left Eisa sleeping as he walked out into the long hallway connecting him to the end of the dungeon on one side and to the Barracks on the other. Instead of traversing his entire dungeon through all of the rooms, he took the side hallways he had created for his people's use in attacking the monsters when they arrived; it was honestly much easier and faster to take the fairly straightforward tunnels – and there weren't hundreds

of stairs to walk up and down. Along the way, Fred looked out all of the little holes he had created that had a Viewing Portal, double checking that everything was set up just the way it needed to be; while he could technically do it all from his Territorial Sight, sometimes it was good to see it with his own two eyes.

There were a few places that he saw the potential for a few more Defenders, but unfortunately there were already people inside his dungeon. He had experimented with trying to develop some sort of small “non-dungeon” room adjacent to each room similar to the Barracks he had constructed – so as to potentially create more Defenders even while the Dungeon was occupied with invaders, but he hadn’t had time to perfect it yet. He was just going to have to hope that he – and all his friends – had done enough to survive.

This is it – all that we’ve prepared and practiced for is about to happen. Being responsible for not just his Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross, but for the entire population of Allroads, was a bit more than he preferred to have on his shoulders – but there wasn’t any choice now. They had to succeed in this defense, or else they wouldn’t be able to do anything to stop the greater threat coming their way.

The Territorial Warfare going on around his borders was still happening, though Fred had learned to ignore it – for the most part. The pressure was still inside his head, always constant and slightly annoying, but he had...gotten used to it, he supposed. He had some vague, half-thought-out plans in his mind on how to stop them at least temporarily – and even some long-term ideas to save both species – but they were going to have to wait until they repelled the Earth Defenders...and then the Nature Defenders about a day later...

Not for the first time, Fred wondered why they hadn't timed their attack better, so as to come at his dungeon around the same moment instead of all spread out. The only reason he could think of was that – although they were “technically” working together – they were all independent factions, despite their supposed “Alliances”, and weren't really used to actually coordinating in such a short amount of time. He figured that to them – with their extended lifespan – if they all arrived within the same month, then that was almost the same as attacking simultaneously.

Even with the side hallways looking into the dungeon rooms taking a circuitous route, it still only took Fred about 15 minutes to get towards the entrance. He was pleased to see that there were dozens of his people already occupying their places by their little viewing ports. Most of the Core Power Guild that he saw were relatively relaxed, talking and joking with each other in shared camaraderie and past experiences. The townspeople, on the other hand, who had far less experience (and Essence, and Rating), had worked really hard in learning everything they could to make up for that lack; despite that learning and practice, many of them appeared nervous and some even a little scared – but all of them looked determined. When they saw Fred, they perked up a little, but their uplifted morale was short-lived; by the time he left the area they were in, they were back to looking the same they had before he had arrived.

“They've at least had *some* experience back in Gatecross, but that was – no offense – a crazy mess compared to this place,” Metch had explained to him the day before when he noticed some of their worried expressions. “Now that they've had more time to train and *think* about what's coming, they're a lot more nervous; before, they were just reacting to a sudden situation and doing what they could to stay alive – here, though, they are part of a complex team and defensive structure, with literally

millions of people on the line if they fail. Even if those in charge of millions of people had imprisoned and were set to execute them, the innocent people up there are counting on them to succeed.”

If Metch was expecting to ease his fears about their performance during the attack, it helped somewhat; at the same time, it only heightened Fred’s own anxiety over the impending attack. Nevertheless, now that he could understand a little of what they felt, he knew that once the attack was underway...they would stop at nothing to see it through. And as much as Fred didn’t want anyone else to die, he knew that it was inevitable in the coming clash of Human vs. Dungeon Core; he fervently hoped that the toll wouldn’t be that large.

Fred passed through the “doorway” leading from the end of the side hallway to the far end of the first room of his dungeon; it too was set up with a large slab of stone connected to his actual dungeon, and it would be the first thing that was closed when the attack came. For now, though, it was open, and it allowed him to walk up and out of his dungeon – to meet with Roady and 49 other high-Rated members of the Allroads government.

“Is everything okay?” the large Knight-Commander asked, seeing him emerge. He and the rest of those with him were relaxed – very similar to his own Guild members – but Fred could see that they were ready to fight in a second or less if it were needed; in essence, they were a coiled spring ready to jump at the first threat that entered their field of vision.

“What?” Fred asked, confused for a moment. “Oh, yes, everything is fine; I was just making a last-minute check on everything, and to see if you were all ready. From what I can tell, they’ll be here sometime between 30 to 45 minutes.”

“Ok, we’ll be moving back into position in those defensive areas you made for us in just a minute; don’t worry, nothing is getting past us.”

Fred laughed at that. “I’m not too concerned about you – I’ve seen you fight, after all. I doubt you’ll see any action, but I wanted to make sure the word was spread. I’m heading back down myself, to make sure everything else is taken care of. I’ll be keeping an eye out, and I’ll do what I can if you get into trouble.”

“You just keep an eye on my sister – we’ll be fine here. Thanks for the warning,” Roady said, before signaling for the others to move back. Fred hadn’t been just strengthening his dungeon over the last few days; he had created a series of smaller rooms in the dirt and stone just above his dungeon leading to the Prison for some of the Allroads Governmental guards and protectors to use for defense. Because there was going to be a tunnel leading all the way outside of Fred’s barrier, if for some reason the monsters coming in to attack his dungeon decided to go the *opposite* way, Roady and his large group of powerful Adventurers were there to stop them.

Not only that, but every single Adventurer in the city – all 37,845 of them – was prepared to defend the city in case the tunnel didn’t stop at his dungeon. Of course, many of those Adventurers were G, F, and E-Rated, which wouldn’t do much in case an invasion poured out in the middle of the city, but they were prepared, nevertheless. It was also the reason there weren’t any extra people from above helping to defend his dungeon; they couldn’t afford to spare any of them in case the city itself was attacked. Not only that, but his presence and what he was doing underneath their city wasn’t exactly “common” knowledge, though many did know something was going on and had *some* information; the fewer that realized he was a Dungeon Core, the better, he was told.

Fortunately, Fred thought he had a fairly good defense himself; with the help of his Shards and his Guild, they had created something that he was

confident could hold back whatever the Earth faction sent at him...at least he hoped so. As he turned back to his dungeon's entrance and walked down the ramp leading to the first room, he took another look to verify they were still coming.

Not only were they still coming – they were speeding up...and bringing some friends. Towards the border of his territory, a long stream of Earth Defenders were running, rolling, or otherwise traversing up the dug tunnel at full speed. They were moving so fast that Fred estimated that they would arrive just as the tunnel was complete.

And that was because – as if they were impatient for their digging to end – the Rockworms eating their way through the dirt and stone sped up their endeavor. They were now eating at twice their previous speed, though Fred doubted they could keep that up for long. As he watched them, one of the Rockworms had apparently eaten too much and had actually ruptured its side; it still kept chewing the rock and dirt up even as it died and was replaced in its spot almost instantly by another. It seemed as though they were expendable by that point, and the Earth Faction just wanted to get there as quickly as possible.

Or maybe they know that I know. He wasn't sure how they might figure that, but maybe because they were so close they expected him to finally realize they were there. Regardless, the timetable had changed, and it was time to get everyone up and ready; he debated going back and warning Rody and his crew but decided he didn't have the time now – and that the massive Knight-Commander would likely be alright, as prepared as they were.

“Eisa! Wake up! The Earth tunnel is almost here, and they sped up their progress quite a bit. Can you round up any of the Guild or townspeople that aren't ready yet and get them into position?” Fred

communicated to the woman still lying in his bed. His initial communication jerked her awake and she groaned, but she acknowledged his request – albeit grumpily.

She couldn't actually communicate back via Mana Communication, but she could at least hear him. "Yes, give me a second to wake up completely and I'll do that."

Putting her out of his mind, Fred passed through the "doorway" leading to the side passages; he triggered the slab of stone to collapse and seal it off after he made his way through, and the horrendous crash it made was enough to echo through the entire warren of tunnels. *I'm glad that it's reinforced through my Mana, otherwise that would've probably cracked something.*

As he ran down the passageway, he could see that everyone was already preparing themselves; the sound of one of the stone blocks hitting the floor was probably pretty unmistakable. Without looking with his Territorial Sight, Fred reached out to Regnark and said, *"It looks like they're coming slightly earlier than predicted; can you make sure Chareese knows? I'm going to contact Deecy next."*

Stopping at the next intersection, he looked in Regnark's room to make sure the big man had heard him; a quick check showed the Dark Shard throwing on clothes in a hurry, which indicated to Fred that he had indeed heard him. And better yet, Chareese was right there with him, throwing on her own clothes. *Maybe she didn't want to be alone like Eisa the night before; whatever the reason, it will save time.*

Deecy was up and out her door as soon as he Communicated with her, and she met and passed him in the passageway. She had her own spot in the defense, with a specially made Viewing Portal that was a lot further towards the ground than the others, which would allow her to stay in her

Dire Wolf Pup Form – which would help with her regeneration from the local ambient Mana. By the time Fred got to the Barracks and sleeping areas, Eisa, Regnark, and Chareese were all ready to go and had rounded up everyone else.

“Good luck, everyone – if you need me, just call out and I’ll hear you; I’ll be monitoring everything from here,” he told them all. They were all well aware of where they were going to be for the defense, and there wasn’t anything else to be said.

Regnark and Chareese turned to each other briefly before smiling oddly and running off without a word, but Eisa surprised him by throwing her arms around his neck and giving him a long, deep kiss. When she finally pulled away, Fred found himself a little disappointed; her kiss felt good and...*passionate*? He wasn’t exactly sure if that was the right word, but it felt appropriate. She also smiled oddly at him and hurried away towards the side passageway.

“Stay safe, Eisa...I don’t want to lose you,” he blurted out almost involuntarily, which made her stop and turn to him.

“I’ll be fine, love; you just worry about yourself. They’re coming for *you*, not me,” she said, before taking off.

He was quite aware of that, which was precisely why he was near the Barracks and his “Core Room”; he needed to be at the *end* of his dungeon to lure the invading Earth monsters down deeper. Somehow, through some sort of innate Mana sense he assumed, Defenders could easily determine his exact location; it was similar to how he could also sense Dungeon Cores and accurately pinpoint them, though he had to be relatively close in order to do that – within half a mile or so. Otherwise, it was just a general feeling of a direction and distance, and even with his

Territorial Sight he could only narrow it down to an area rather than a precise location.

If he were helping out by throwing spells or using abilities in the upper rooms, there was a distinct possibility that they concentrate all their efforts in *that* room, instead of trying to travel through the entire dungeon to get him. And while he was fairly confident that his walls, Viewing Portals, and safeguards were enough to stop them, he didn't want to take the chance that enough determined Defenders could somehow break through at a certain point and get to him. Therefore, he was stuck essentially by himself down below – though he had a nice view of everything via his Territorial Sight.

Now that the time had come, the wait seemed longer than only the 15 minutes or so that it took once he was alone. It was better, at least, than the wait he had to undergo when they were defending Gatecross; that anticipation had been hard because Fred didn't *know* when they would attack and had to prepare as quickly as he could, all the time hoping that they would all have more time before the Nature army arrived. This situation was different in that he knew when they would attack...and once Fred and the others were ready, he strangely wanted the Earth monsters to *hurry up*.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of sitting comfortably on his bed that was just recently vacated by Eisa (and was still relatively warm where she had been lying), Fred watched the Rockworms eating their way through the dirt and stone – now with only about half of them alive and still chewing, as the rest had eaten too much, too fast and burst – break into the 30-foot-square room where his dungeon entrance was located. At first a few trickled through and immediately wriggled their way towards the entrance tunnel; after a half-dozen had broken through, however, the wall

practically exploded outwards as the Hyper Stonewyrm burst through, smashing and destroying the last few Rockworms in the process.

As soon as it emerged into the room and “looked” around (it didn’t really have eyes, technically)...it turned away from his dungeon and raced up the passage leading towards the city, where Roady and the others were waiting. Fred was worried for a moment that everything coming up the dug-out tunnel would follow, but then he realized something he should’ve before – it couldn’t fit through his dungeon entrance, but it could certainly fit through the wider passageway the other direction.

It hadn’t even occurred to Fred that some Defenders couldn’t even enter his dungeon; some obvious things like a massive Rock Giant would have difficulty even putting a foot inside the entrance tunnel, but others like the Hyper Stonewyrm – while large – weren’t small enough to fit inside his entrance tunnel, let alone any of his other tunnels inside his dungeon. He was always curious why tunnel sizes were small by default in his Dungeon Creation System, but he had assumed it was because they were made for Humans. Now, though, it made sense to limit what kinds of foreign Defenders could enter your dungeon, even if it were at the cost of not being able to move your own large ones around in the midst of an invasion.

As the first Rockworm hit his entrance tunnel, he saw the start of the horde that was racing up the dug-up tunnel emerge – and he knew that, for good or ill...it had begun.

Chapter 27

The first monsters that made it down to the bottom of the entrance tunnel were allowed to venture about 10 feet inside the relatively plain first room of Fred's dungeon; from her love's description of the entire digging situation, Eisa knew that the Rockworms were likely the first to arrive, though she worried about the "Hyper Stonewyrm" that he said was accompanying them. From the stories some of the higher-Rated members of the Allroads government – and Chareese – mentioned, she wasn't liking their chances against something so large and powerful.

Fortunately, despite a massive crash she and the others heard a few moments earlier coming from up the entrance tunnel, there was no sign of this Stonewyrm monster. Instead, they were left with the few Rockworms that wriggled their way quickly inside.

"The Hyper Stonewyrm went the other way, towards Roady and the others. I believe it is too big to fit down our tunnels."

Eisa jumped when she heard Fred in her head, though his message was welcome. She flashed a thumbs-up sign towards the ceiling, a pre-arranged signal that she had heard his Communication. She wished she could speak back to him, but only Deecy apparently had the ability to do that; she wasn't jealous of the Dire Wolf, but sometimes she wished that *she* had been the first Shard he had helped to create. It was a ridiculous thought, of course, but it was there in her head, nonetheless.

She peeked around the hole in the wall Fred had made – which was covered by his unique "Viewing Portal" trap she had helped test – to see

that the Rockworms were already halfway across the room. Eisa concentrated on her Earth Mana and pulled out a chunk, before quickly throwing it out into the room; when it reached the area in front of the lead Rockworm, a large Stone Barrier appeared in front of them, stopping them...at least temporarily. Being what they were, however, they immediately started to chew up her Barrier instead of just moving around it – but she wasn't expecting it to really stop them for long.

Just long enough to suffer under the spells and abilities of those watching from their own holes in the wall. Two townspeople per Viewing Portal sent out a spell designed specifically for destroying Rockworms – and was relatively cheap Power-wise, to boot. It was one that she – and strangely enough, everyone in Allroads – had never heard of before, but it was certainly effective. It was a shame that it wouldn't necessarily work on many of the other Earth-based monsters heading their way – because they didn't necessarily have blood – but for the Rockworms, it worked perfectly. She would know, as she had provided plenty of test subjects for them to experiment with.

Boiling Blood 1 – 0/1000

This spell is a very unusual combination of multiple spells, including Flamestrike (Mage), Heal Minor Wounds (Healer), and Multiply (Sorcerer). A tiny, self-contained “healing” flame is inserted into a target’s bloodstream, where it is then spread and multiplied throughout the entire body of said target. Does Fire damage to the target and lasts for a specified amount of time.

Power cost of Boiling Blood: 10

Fire Damage per Flame: .1 per second (.2 vs. Water targets)

Number of Multiplied Flames: 80

Duration: 10 seconds

Maximum range: 18.5 feet

Eisa was glad that Fred had helped to boost the amount of Essence everyone had by nearly 40,000, which was enough to raise many of the townspeople up to the next Rating or beyond. Through the use of the Flower Trippers he had access to, he spent four hours letting them kill a whole room of them over and over – all so they had enough Essence to unlock and officially use the different spells and abilities they had learned on their own (and, of course, boost their Mind Stat so they could utilize more Power). While they could still manipulate their Power in a way to create the same effect, in the heat of battle it was *much* easier to use the premade spells and abilities it provided; it was actually Eisa's understanding that one of the reasons the Interface was created in the first place was to aid in things like that – and despite some flaws, it did it very well.

The Rockworms were hit with a multitude of Boiling Blood spells from each of the people peering in from the side wall, and each of the monsters literally burned up from the inside. The spell was extremely deadly and did enough damage within moments to kill all of the invaders; added to that, since it was fairly inexpensive Power-wise, in a minute or so the townspeople would regen it automatically. Which was good, because she could hear more unwelcome guests racing down the entrance tunnel.

Before they got there, the dissolved bodies of the Rockworms became little blobs of Earth Mana, and half of them shot into Eisa one by one in a measured tempo. She had a brief – if slightly embarrassing – conversation with Fred earlier about pacing himself when it came to shoving Mana into her; he was planning on splitting the Mana that was

dropped from the Earth monsters invading his dungeon upon their deaths, and she cautioned him about giving her too much at once. The last thing she needed was to miss something important because she was overcome with...a pleasant experience.

“We’ve got a literal horde of Level 1 Goblin Gnomes incoming; I would use one or a few of your Defenders to take out as many as you can and tell the others to hold their attacks. I have a suspicion that these guys are out front to trigger Defenses throughout the dungeon, as they aren’t much of a threat.”

Smart. She was already creating two Crystal Scorpions that were flanking the Stone Barrier that was still in the center of the room, and as soon as they appeared she turned to the other person in her little alcove next to the window. She told the woman sharing a Viewing Portal with her to let the others know to hold their attack for the moment until a bigger threat arrived. She watched the other woman rush off before turning her attention back to the room, just as the first Goblin Gnomes Fred told her about arrived.

Seeing a figurative tide of the little Goblins appear and spread out as they advanced proved to Eisa that Fred was likely correct; they advanced quickly yet in measured spacing, as if they were instructed to cover every foot of the floor as they went. She had to admit that it was really smart on the part of the enemy Dungeon Core, because she knew from personal experience how inexpensive Mana-wise the little buggers were; if she had enough Mana to create a small army of them, she would certainly do so and send them in first to activate as many of the traps inside the dungeon before her stronger and more expensive Defenders arrived.

She wasn't going to give them that advantage, however – not if she could help it.

For good measure – and because she had quite a bit of Mana to spare – she created two Golden Sphinxes by the exit tunnel to complement her two Crystal Scorpions in the middle of the room. With the almost countless hundreds (or even thousands) of Goblin Gnomes rushing into the room, she knew her Defenders were unlikely to kill them all, but she was hoping that at least the majority would be taken out before they could advance any further.

Her Scorpions – which were only level 1, as she didn't think they needed to be much more powerful to get the job done – tore into the Gnome wave; they swung their claws around in big sweeps, launching the Goblins against the walls where they impacted with tremendous force. Every once in a while they would stab down with their tails, impaling and instantly killing a luckless Goblin Gnome; they were also grabbing the little things with their claws and snapping them in half, before tossing aside the remains – which instantly disappeared and left behind a tiny glob of Earth Mana. Dozens died in the first few seconds – but it wasn't enough to stem the tide.

Hundreds more streamed under, around, and in a few cases *over* her Crystal Scorpions; none stopped to fight, even if they could hope to damage the more powerful Defenders she had created. The Goblin Gnomes apparently had only a single purpose in their frantic advance: get as far as they could, as fast as they could, and cover every square inch of the dungeon while doing so. That last part was made obvious by the way many of the ones who made it past her Scorpions deliberately headed for the corners of the room, which were out of the way towards the exit.

Speaking of the exit to the next room, Eisa's Sphinxes were batting away and chomping down on the Goblin Gnomes in quick and efficient

strikes. Goblins were flying everywhere, splattering against walls, her Barrier, and even the ceiling in a gruesome display of carnage. Still, the enemy kept coming, faster and faster until they were practically running; eventually, a few managed to make it through all of Eisa's Defenders, and then a dozen, and then even more as they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of them. She debated making more of her creations, but there were so many monsters already in the room that there was no place for her to isolate a space.

And space was important for their creation, because she couldn't create a Defender when there was something else in the way. And even if she could, it was likely that anything she made would just get in the way of her other Defenders; therefore, she left them alone and just watched the slaughter. She knew there were plenty of other traps and defenders in the next room – Chareese had made sure of that.

Eisa was impressed at what the newly made Shard could do with just a little dirt and Mana; not only that, but her special form as a massive Dryad was nearly unbelievable. At first, she had been a bit...*conflicted*...at her sudden appearance as a Shard, because it tied her to Fred all that much more. However, the fact that Chareese seemed to be chasing after someone else thawed Eisa a bit towards the woman; after a few days, she was actually beginning to like her, especially with the way she threw herself into the defense of Fred's dungeon without much convincing.

The swarm of Goblin Gnomes seemed to never end, and Eisa estimated that at least a thousand had already arrived in the first room, though less than 50 made it through her Defenders to the exit tunnel. Her Scorpions and Sphinxes were still tearing them up without trouble...until some sort of switch was flipped in the Goblin Gnomes. They went from mindless trap-finding throwaway monsters to savage killing machines in the

blink of an eye; either whoever was in charge of them somehow changed their orders because of the sheer slaughter of them, or...they had already thoroughly checked the room for traps and were free to attack anything inside.

Regardless of the reason, they all pulled out their rusty knives and went to work on her Defenders; her Crystal Scorpions were immediately piled on by dozens of Goblin Gnomes at the same time, and knives stabbed their vulnerable faces and eyes repeatedly. Dozens more Goblins were killed in the process, especially when they were eyeless and attacked almost randomly in a blind rage – but the damage was done. A few lucky strikes at her Scorpions' mutilated faces with their small knives hit something vital inside, killing her Defenders within a minute of the Goblins turning on them.

Her Sphinxes were made of stronger stuff, however, and their all-stone bodies were capable of taking a beating; even with their superior speed, strength, and defense, however, chips of stone flew off the large Defenders at an alarming rate with every strike of a rusty knife wielded by a Goblin Gnome. The end came quickly, as one of her Sphinxes collapsed under the weight on one of its legs, which snapped off because it was weakened significantly by repeated attacks from the Goblins. With only three legs to stand on, it couldn't effectively attack – or defend – and it was piled on by hundreds of the little invaders.

The other Sphinx lasted only slightly longer and was literally spinning around in a frenzy of blows, all the while trying to shake off Goblin Gnomes that had gotten onto its back. Two persistent Goblins had managed to work its way to the back of the Sphinx's neck, where they proceeded to stab and chop with relative impunity – until her Defender

snapped its head forward to bite another Gnome and snapped its own neck off.

“Let them go, they won’t get far; the next wave is almost here anyway, so prepare for...dozens of large, Level 8 Stone Golems heading your way.”

The savagery shown by the Goblin Gnomes were a little scary, as she hadn’t seen them act like that before; then again, she rarely had more than a half-dozen of her own present at any one time, even while she was training with the Guild. She was happy enough to let them go, as she was sure anything she created – if she was even able to find space for them – would get destroyed just as quickly. She gave a thumbs up to the air and passed the word Fred sent her to those defending the room from behind their Viewing Portals. She was halfway glad that the diminutive Gnomes hadn’t turned their attention to *them* because having hundreds of horrid creatures flinging themselves at her face would likely be more than a bit unnerving.

While they passed by, Eisa was repeatedly bombarded by small globs of Mana sent by Fred, which were large and frequent enough to keep her right on the edge of experiencing *too much*; fortunately, the bombardment was to the point where it felt pleasant without it being overwhelming. She quickly had her Mana fill up again through those influxes of new Mana, and she soon saw her maximum Mana increase a little bit at a time. And then, just as Fred had said, the tide of Goblin Gnomes stopped, and there was a small gap in between the last of them and the first Stone Golems that he said were coming.

Through some experimentation of her own during the training with the Guild and Gatecross townspeople, Eisa had learned that the Stone

Golems she was creating had a weakness against something that made sense, but she probably wouldn't have thought of it without some additional prompting by Fred. The way he had made a gigantic Spider to help the army of Adventurers out against the Light-based monsters on his border gave her the original idea, but it was expounded upon by his description of how he did it.

“You see, most Dungeon Cores won't create a Defender that is higher than a Level 10 or so; this is because the Mana cost starts to quickly outpace the additional benefits a higher-Level Defender possesses. While in some certain cases this would be acceptable, they would much rather replace that specific Defender with something stronger and deadlier at Level 1 – all with perhaps the same cost as a weaker one at Level 15. I don't really have to follow those rules, however, and especially because I usually don't have access to ‘stronger and deadlier’ Defenders that would do the job better.”

It made sense, she supposed; if she had to choose between a large, Level 40 Goblin Gnome with the same cost as a Level 1 Crystal Scorpion – she would likely choose the Scorpion every day of the week. It was faster, had deadly poison in its stinger, and would probably wipe the floor with the Gnome, despite its higher Level. But when she had an excess of Mana at her fingertips and wanted to create something for a specific purpose, then she was willing to break those same conventions Fred did to make something effective.

The days were gone when she could only make a Crystal Scorpion or two before she was low on Mana, and she used her much larger pool to create something Fred would be proud of. Two large shapes materialized

on either side of her Stone Barrier, filled up by over 800 Mana each; the drain of almost two-thirds of her available Mana pool in the matter of seconds made Eisa stagger a little, but she quickly recovered – and she wished that Stone Golems had faces in which to show expression, because she was sure they were surprised.

Two Level 85 Rockworms were filling up a third of the room each, and they immediately did what they apparently liked to do best: eat stone. Each of them were five feet tall, 25 feet long, and had mouth openings with jagged teeth that could chomp down on one of the Stone Golems and practically bite it in half. The animated stone monsters had no chance, as their attacks with their heavy stone fists just bounced off the equally hard stone shells of the Rockworms, and their teeth were strong enough to crush stone – so her creations were hardly affected by the Stone Golems at all.

Added to that, multiple inexpensive Magipush spells flew out from the Viewing Portals in a measured and staggered pace; while they didn't really do damage, they were designed to knock back the increasing number of Stone Golems trying to push their way into the room. As a result, the Rockworms were practically able to eat a Stone Golem one at a time, one after another, as they were herded by the townspeople observing from safety behind the room's side wall.

It couldn't last forever, of course, and the mass of Golems trying to push their way inside was too much for anyone to keep back. However, even as they rushed towards the Rockworms and started to bash the ever-loving daylights out of them, they didn't take much damage other than a few cracks here and there. All the while, her Defenders were chomping... and biting...and swallowing chunks of Golems whole; it was because they were in a frenzy, gorging on "delicious" stone that the inevitable happened

– within moments of each other, her Rockworms swallowed whole an entire Stone Golem without chewing it.

Unlike a Human who would probably choke, the swallowing of an entire Golem without chewing didn't – in and of itself – harm it; no, it was the fact that the invading stone creature wasn't happy with its current environment inside a large Rockworm that did them in. Within seconds, the Golems had torn apart the internal organs of their respective captors, doing so much damage to their vulnerable bits that it looked like the Worms exploded from the inside out.

With her Defenders destroyed, the room was now too full to create anything more than the smallest of her options. A little more than two dozen Stone Golems had managed to survive her Rockworms and there were still a few more coming inside the entrance from above. Eisa joined the others in casting Minor Shock using her Power on the lead Golems, a spell that did air-based damage and had the chance to jump to other targets – as well as stunning them briefly. With the other 11 people joining her, the air was literally charged with electricity, and another 6 of their targets fell and crumpled apart as a result.

They could've kept it up and likely destroyed all of them before they escaped the first room, but that wasn't really their overall purpose. The first room was designed to slow down the onslaught of monsters invading the dungeon, to thin them out as much as possible before they hit the other rooms – which were designed to whittle them down each step of the way. Therefore, after the initial volley of Minor Shocks thrown out, they let the rest of the Golems go.

Eisa was hit by some larger orbs of Earth Mana and she staggered again – though this time it wasn't from exhaustion from expending too much all at once.

“Sorry about that, I’ll try to break it up a little more. Get ready for the next wave – it’s going to start getting a bit harder to hold them back from here on out but do your best. Next up...Boulder Trolls.”

She’d never seen a Boulder Troll, but she knew what they were. A large figure stomped heavily down the entrance ramp soon after the last of the Stone Golems were filing out through the exit tunnel, and she could see that it was *just* barely able to fit through the tunnel. Its skin was a mottled green and brown color, with stringy unwashed hair all over its body, and a soiled loincloth around its waist; the Troll also carried a massive stone club about half the size of its body, ringed around with metal bands to reinforce the weapon.

And, of course, it wasn’t alone – she could glimpse the figures of other Boulder Trolls behind the first one.

The Trolls, being something that she hadn’t fought against before, made Eisa waver briefly on what to do – before she settled on a trio of Level 3 Crystal Scorpions...and four dozen Level 3 Goblin Gnomes. She was hoping to be able to poison them with the Scorpions’ stingers, while distracting them with the Goblins around their feet; it was a basic plan, but without much knowledge of how the Trolls operated it was the best she could do for the moment without going overboard.

Of course, she forgot about the townspeople near her for a moment; without orders otherwise – and a target that had “blood” inside of it in their sights – they used their Boiling Blood spells to try to hurt the Boulder Troll out front. While it might have hurt it, the spell must’ve caused it to go into a rage...because it rushed forward with a tremendous yell, swinging its heavy club all around it indiscriminately. Unfortunately for one of her

Scorpions, it got its face bashed in and almost instantly died, but not before it managed to strike with its stinger, poisoning the monster.

It didn't seem to do much, though, and Eisa realized why – the poison was probably burned away from the Boiling Blood spell still ravaging its bloodstream.

“No more! Hold off on the Boiling—” she shouted as she turned away, hoping to be heard over the pounding going on. She broke off as a stone club slammed into the outside of the wall near her Viewing Portal and she flinched backwards. Fortunately for her, the hole was too small for the club to enter, and she cast a few Minor Shocks at the Troll who was aiming at her, watching as it staggered backwards – slightly hurt, but more stunned than anything.

Ok, if that's the way you want to play it...let's go.

Cracking her knuckles and shaking them out, Eisa was prepared to show these Trolls that she wasn't one to be messed with.

Chapter 28

Chareese watched the majority of the Stone Golems that entered the second room get picked apart by a combination of some Ensnaring Vines and Am-bushes she had placed in the slot they had *all* chosen to go down. She had to admit that Fred was right; given sight of the first section that they would fit through, none of the monsters invading *her* room looked to go anywhere else. Well, it wasn't exactly "her" room, per se, but as she was the only one in charge of overseeing it and had invested so much into its production, she kind of felt like it was hers.

She had a great view of everything from just over the exit tunnel, with multiple windows that she could move in between to see everything with ease. The Goblin Gnomes from earlier had predictably gone down the center row, which was rife with Small Thorn Traps, Poisonous Mobile Mushrooms, and a few Ensnaring Vines. Needless to say, none of them managed to make it through to the end.

The Stone Golems that arrived afterwards, however, managed to squeeze a couple of their group through, mainly from the semi-destroyed traps or her own Defenders encumbered with another monster. Despite being made of heavy stone, Chareese found that a grouping of 10 Ensnaring Vines next to each other could coordinate together to lift one of the Golems up – and then smash it against the wall or toss it back out the passageway, causing it to take enough damage to start crumbling apart.

While that didn't always necessarily kill them, she found that the series of higher-Level Am-bushes she placed in the side walls could grab the invading stone monsters and rapidly shred them with the extra sharp thorns on their stems. Normally, the Am-bushes were relatively tame, but

after some experimentation she discovered that at Level 12 their thorns grew long, extremely sharp, and highly durable – and they acted as a stone-cutting saw against the unfortunate Golems.

A half-dozen still made it through, however, because her Defenses and Defenders were busy with others as they passed through without harm, but that was okay – Regnark would take care of them. Thoughts of that wonderful man floated through her head as she was repeatedly hit with Mana from the few spent or destroyed Defenses in the room, as Fred sent them back to her. She forced thoughts of last night from her head as she immediately “replanted” the ones that had been eliminated, their placement in her mind was almost automatic by that point; it was strange, but when she thought about all that she had planted inside Fred’s strange dungeon, she felt a connection to them. It wasn’t as though she could “feel” what they were feeling, or anything like that, but she was well aware of where every single one of them were and knew when one was destroyed.

It would take a while for those to grow back, but there was nothing she could do about that to speed them up – at least, *not yet*. She had expanded her capabilities since she was first reborn, and some instinct of hers hinted that something that would help with the time it took for them to grow was just around the corner. In fact, her most recent abilities were already proving to be very useful—

Some huge crashes and thumps came from up in the first room where Eisa was stationed with about a dozen of the Judgement-marked townspeople. Chareese was curious to exactly what was happening, because there hadn’t been anything quite like what she was hearing from those monsters that invaded before. *I’m guessing that it’s probably not more Stone Golems.*

“Chareese – Eisa’s having...difficulties thinning out this next group, so you may be facing more than would be ideal. Just be prepared for their arrival, because they’re coming in a bit perturbed at her and the others.”

Chareese froze for a second after hearing Fred’s voice in her head, which was still very strange. She had some lengthy conversations with his Dire Wolf friend, Deecy, and those had been...“normal”, compared to listening to an actual person in her head.

After a moment with no other explanation, she held up her hands in a questioning gesture, and asked, “What’s coming?”

“Oh, sorry – they’re Boulder Trolls. Good luck.”

Ah, then that made sense. Trolls were big, mean, and nasty...but really stupid at the same time. She’d never gone up against more than two at a time in all her days of dungeon delving, and every time she did, she was amazed at how easy they were to distract and pick apart. That was, unless you managed to enrage one of them; if that happened, it was usually a good time to retreat for an hour or so to let them calm down. Otherwise, they were...*wild, crazy, and unpredictable*, to say the least.

And it sounded like Eisa had ticked one off. Or more than one, based on what Chareese was hearing. Either way, she heard lots of yelling and thumping, and crashes – but fortunately, she didn’t hear any of their safety gates falling down, blocking off the Viewing Portals Fred had designed.

Soon enough, the first of the Boulder Trolls managed to squeeze its way down the tunnel to her room, obviously enraged, and stupidly tried to walk through the narrowest passageway – because there was a clear view of

the exit tunnel. As Chareese had expected of something so dumb, it railed against the too-narrow walls and started to hit them with its stone-and-metal-banded club – which did a whole lot of nothing. Fred had said that his dungeon walls were nigh-on impenetrable, and it appeared he was right – at least as far as Troll clubs went.

A second Troll barreled down the tunnel, seemingly oblivious of the other one right in its way; when it popped through the entrance to the room, it was moving fast enough that it ended up hitting the first Troll so hard that it was flung forward and to the side. The knocked-over Troll had been getting ready to swing its club again when it was hit, which caused its body to be angled sideways...so when it was flung forward, it squeezed through the slightly wider passageway to the right, before getting stuck fast halfway in and halfway out. It had one arm above its head wielding its club, while the other was trapped below it, unable to move.

Chareese couldn't help it – she giggled. *They're as stupid as I remember.* The first Boulder Troll was now stuck, banging around its club in small movements, because it couldn't move its arm more than a few inches either way. And being single-minded (if you could consider it to have an actual mind), none of the other Trolls were interested in helping “unstick” it.

Easy pickings, at least.

She had a couple of her Poisonous Gas Bombs inside that narrow passageway, along with some Poisonous Mobile Mushrooms; she employed these to great effect, poisoning the helpless Troll while the bed of a Small Thorn Trap was suddenly stabbing into it from below – with some extra help by her Natural Growth ability, of course. The Trolls were notoriously hard to kill, mainly because of their tough skin and strength, but they could

be brought low by certain spells and abilities that sapped that strength – which was exactly what her Poison was there to achieve.

One of the new Special Abilities she received was called **Poison Recombiner Module**, and it was basically a way for her to take the poison that one of her creations had and *change it* on a fundamental level. When she first received it she didn't understand exactly what it did, so she had asked Fred for help – and he was kind enough to show her how powerful it could be. Normally, she only thought of “poison” as something that would damage her Vitality; with her new Special Ability, however, she learned how it could be altered to do so much more.

Straight-up Vitality damage was still an option, but they could also be utilized to lower – whatever was affected by it – their strength and attack power, their natural resistance to damage and defense power, and even addle their mind a little bit. There were even other options that inhibited their natural regeneration and their speed – as well as a host of very strange afflictions, most of which weren't very useful unless used against a specific target.

And since she knew that she was going up against Earth-based monsters that usually had quite a high natural resistance to damage, she had employed most of her poisons in the room to reduce that resistance. Of course, it wouldn't work against something like the Stone Golems, which didn't really have a “body” to affect...but it worked great against the Boulder Trolls.

By the time the stuck Troll died due to being impaled by sharp thorns, the others (about 20 so far, but she could see more heading down) had figured out where to go. As they were quite dumb, they all followed the one who had managed to find its way down a passageway that was just barely wide enough for it to walk down; Chareese actively waited until a

dozen or so were between the walls before she instructed her creations to attack.

Poison wafted over them all from a few Poisonous Gas Bombs, easily contained by the close quarters, which weakened their natural resistances and reduced their strength at the same time. Not that they necessarily noticed, of course – as she said, they were quite challenged in the intellect department. Regardless, they *finally* noticed as Am-Bushes, Small Thorn Traps, and even some Ensnaring Vines picked them up, stabbed into them, and in general tore the hulking masses of dumb muscle apart.

Apparently, however, there was a smart one in the bunch, because it saw what was happening to its brethren and turned towards another passageway. This one was a lot wider and not so closed in, and it – as well as another dozen that followed it – weren't quite as affected by the Poison the plants emitted towards them. More than half were able to get through with only minor injuries, which was repeated by another group that followed in their footsteps. By the time the flow of Trolls stopped, Chareese had used all of the poison-type resources she had in more than half of her passageways, though she had already replanted them. She made sure to mentally select which poison she wanted them to utilize when they were planted because otherwise they would default to the normal, Vitality-damaging one.

In all, 23 Boulder Trolls managed to make it through her room, though she had managed to kill more than that in the process. She looked at some of the passageways that were used by the most recent group of invaders and saw that they were almost bare; while her plants had managed to put the hurt on them, they hadn't done so without a price. All of them were in the midst of regrowing, but they wouldn't be ready before the next

wave came. Nevertheless, she was proud of what she had accomplished – something which she would never have thought she could do even when she was an S-Rated Adventurer. She was powerful, yes, but by herself she could've maybe taken out 3 or 4 of those Trolls in a row before she was either forced to run because she was out of Power or died as she was overwhelmed.

“Nice job, Chareese. Regnark is taking care of those that got through your room with very little trouble. It appears as though the Trolls aren’t very smart, are they? Anyway, the next wave is coming, and I’m not sure you’ll be able to hurt them.”

“I won’t? That doesn’t sound good,” Chareese spoke to the air, knowing Fred was probably listening. He didn’t bother to explain what she was about to face, but she had a fairly good idea. As they were talking about potential monsters that might be included in this invasion, there was only one from the Earth dungeons she had faced before that was something that might fit the category of monsters she couldn’t hurt. And, as it flowed down the tunnel to her room, she found that she was right.

A mass of sand, almost as large as the Trolls from before – if it were to stand up and take that shape, of course – was entering her room and undulated forward without any seeming mode of locomotion, flowing towards the narrowest passageway without a care. Chareese mentally held her Defenses and Defenders from attacking, as they wouldn’t be able to do a thing to the Shifting Sand Elementals; the most common method of killing them would be either to freeze or melt them, though when they solidified in an attack they could be marginally harmed in the process.

None of those methods were really available to her, so she let them go rather than waste her already-grown plants for no purpose.

Luckily, it appeared as though Eisa had more luck in thinning them out, as only about a dozen made it down to her room, and half of them were a bit smaller in size. Whatever they had done up there had seemingly worked, at least, so Chareese didn't feel too bad about letting so many get through.

“Deecy’s got a plan for them, so don’t worry about them. Now, get ready for the next wave – Iron Sentinels!”

Chareese wasn't sure why Fred seemed excited about the appearance of more monsters coming to kill him, but she couldn't help but be caught up in the same enthusiasm. If this whole situation of defending a dungeon wasn't for the sole purpose of saving everyone in the city of Allroads, she would easily acknowledge that she had been having a...fun time, she mused. There was just something about killing monsters that never got old, and she hoped it never did.

And not only that, but she had also been gaining massive amounts of Essence in the process; she hadn't really been paying attention because her focus had been on keeping her plants alive and constantly regrowing, and the influxes of Mana from Fred feeding it back to her when they were destroyed was much more...*intense*...than when she gained Essence. She was sharing it with everyone from the room before hers, but there were so many that it was still an impressive haul.

She didn't even pay attention to that, however, because she needed to focus on the next wave. And if they were indeed Iron Sentinels – essentially empty walking suits of thick iron armor wielding massive

swords – then she was probably going to have to access her latest Special Ability; she just hoped she had enough Mana for it.

Shard Status
Chareese Alonties
Elemental Origin: Nature Shard Level: 5 Next Mana Threshold: 2000 Nature Nature Mana: 1550/1890
Defender/Defense Growth Options
Flower Tripper (Base Cost: 2 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 4 mins) Poisonous Mobile Mushroom (Base Cost: 3 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 5 mins) Am-bushes (Base Cost: 4 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 6 mins) Ensnaring Vine (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 7 mins) Small Thorn Trap (Base Cost: 10 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 14 mins) Poisonous Gas Bomb (Base Cost: 20 Nature Mana, Base Maturation Time: 28 mins)
Special Abilities
Natural Growth (Base Cost: 5 Nature Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Nature Mana per day) Mother Dryad Form (Activation Cost: 150 Nature Mana, Upkeep Cost: 25 Nature Mana per min) Poison Recombiner Module (Activation Cost: 100 Nature Mana) Flora Animation (Activation Cost: 1500 Mana, Cooldown: 3 hours)

She did, if just barely. Using her newest ability now was a risk, but if it worked, then her new **Flora Animation** Special Ability was just what she needed.

Taking a massive chunk of Nature Mana out from her body – 1,500 to be precise – Chareese threw it into the room and activated **Flora Animation**; she practically collapsed from instant exhaustion as the rapid expenditure of Mana hit her like a punch to the face...but she could sense that it worked. Dragging herself to the window she had been previously looking out of, she smiled as she saw the Ability at work.

Her plants – which had formerly been permanently attached to the dirt where they were grown – had ripped themselves up by their roots...and were moving around on their own. Well, not necessarily *on their own*, as they were obeying instructions that were given to them by Chareese. Nevertheless, it was an impressive display of power by her Nature Mana; it was just too bad that it was so expensive Mana-wise and only lasted for 20 minutes – with a 3-hour cooldown, to boot.

And the worst part of the Mana expenditure was that she wouldn't get it back; just like her other Special Abilities – and from what she knew of the others, it was the same way – she didn't get Mana back when it was used up. Luckily, her natural Mana regeneration would keep her alive and eventually fill her back up, but it was a big chunk to be spent all at once.

Those were concerns for another time, however, because now it was time to see what her little friends could do. When the first Iron Sentinel tried to pass through one of the passageways, a small horde of Ensnaring Vines *slithered* quickly over to it like snakes, where they immediately wrapped around its form, keeping its arms pinned to its sides so that it couldn't use its sword to slice them up. It struggled mightily and looked strong enough to break out with pure brute force, but two Flower Trippers worked together to, what else, trip it onto its front side. The sword flew out of its grip and ahead, where three other Trippers wrapped their stems around it and pulled it out of the way.

Chareese knew it would disappear when the Sentinel died, but she – and her little buddies – didn’t want the monster getting ahold of its sword just in case it broke free. She didn’t have to worry about that, at least, because four Level 12 Am-bushes worked together to remove the walking armor’s legs and arms at the joints with a painful screech of the razor-sharp thorns on their stems, before scampering off to attack another invader. It was strange thinking of their movement as “scampering”, but that was what it looked like.

The Ensnaring Vines unraveled from the now-limbless Sentinel, though one appeared to have been crushed a little too much in the initial fall and disappeared into Nature Mana. Otherwise, her little hit squad had done a remarkable job; if only that same efficiency would last, then they would see the end of everything in the room quickly.

Of course, even though the walking hunks of metal didn’t really have a mind, per se, they weren’t quite as dumb as the Boulder Trolls had been. After seeing what happened to the first Sentinel, they went on the defensive, slicing up anything making their way towards them. After about a quarter of her plants had been hacked to bits by their massive swords, she pulled them back from the relatively open space of the entrance; she felt that it would be better served to wait until they were inside one of the passageways before they attacked again.

After a moment – as if to make sure that the plants had retreated – the 15 Iron Sentinels that eventually made it to the room started moving towards two different passageways, opposite from each other in the room; one was extremely wide off to the right, while the other was about twice their width to the left. She wasn’t sure why they split up, but they had shown that they were smarter than the Trolls, so that was probably the

reason. Though, regardless of what the reason really was, it played into her plans perfectly.

In the dark recesses of the two alcoves situated on either side of the entrance tunnel – and a little back, so as to hide them a little better from anything entering – were two massive Flower Trippers. Taking a page from Fred’s book with his gigantic Spider trick outside the city, she had worked with him to produce two 20-foot-tall, 25-foot-wide Level 410 Flower Trippers; it took almost all of her maximum mana in addition to another 400 from Fred, but she succeeded in creating something that could put the hurt on the Iron Sentinels.

Because, while they were previously stuck back in the corner and only able to reach anything that got too close, at the moment – thanks to her **Flora Animation** – they were *mobile*. And when half the lines of Sentinels heading into the passageways were inside, they attacked at the same time. Their leaves – which at Level 1 were just barely strong enough to *possibly* trip a normal non-Adventurer person – were like battering rams at Level 410. When her Trippers scuttled their way over to the literally “armored” invaders, they smashed their leaves into the hard Iron plate of the Sentinels, and it crumpled under the force of their blows. Screeching metal bent and tore like paper, completely destroying five of the Sentinels in as many seconds.

At the same time, her much smaller plants took advantage of the distraction to launch an attack of their own, wrapping up and dismembering one after another of the invaders. A few managed to get sliced up in the process, but many more survived to fight again. The last two surviving Iron Sentinels were tripped up and dragged out via some Ensnaring Vines to where the giant Flower Trippers could smash them into the floor; when they were destroyed, all of the limbless and helpless ones that were

dismembered were dragged out as well, where they were finished off in spectacular fashion.

And just like that, the Iron Sentinels were all destroyed – but the day was still young. Knowing that her Special Ability wouldn't last for too much longer, she instructed her army of plants to move back where they had been planted before, and they immediately sunk their roots back down into the dirt, appearing as if they had been there the entire time. As for her gigantic Flower Trippers, there were two circular plots located about 10 feet from the entrance tunnel, where they moved to and replanted themselves. It was just in time, too, as the **Flora Animation** ran out and they were no longer mobile; she was pretty sure that if they were still “walking around” when it ended, they would unfortunately shrivel up and die.

Now that they weren't hiding and in “reserve”, her Flower Trippers were out front and ready to pound anything that arrived to literal dust. Which, unless she missed her guess, was just about...now...

Chapter 29

Regnark had two different **Summoning Circles** going at once because it was much easier to just maintain them with an hourly upkeep than to keep creating them whenever – and wherever – he needed them. Especially since they weren't the base-Level **Summoning Circles**; no, instead of pumping only 30 Dark Mana into them (the Base Cost), he had thrown in 480 – 16 times the minimum. It was a significant investment – as well as an increased hourly upkeep of 21 Dark Mana (42 for both) – but that was well within his natural Mana regeneration rate.

Why did he spend so much on the Circles? For a few reasons, actually; one, because larger **Summoning Circles** allowed him to summon a lot more than just Lesser Imps. Two, because if he went with the base Circle, his summoned minions would only be able to travel 50 feet from it; as he was in charge of two rooms that were both 200 feet deep, that just wouldn't do for his purposes.

Third, with larger **Summoning Circles** came a greater percentage of the Mana returned upon his minions' destruction. With as much as everything cost, it was beneficial to get most of it back, though he would still have to watch what he summoned so as to not run out of Mana.

Summoning Circle:

Current Summoned Minion Range: 500 feet

Current Returned Mana Upon Minion Destruction: 70%

Current Minion Summon Rating(s): G-B

Available Summons:

- Lesser Imp (Cost: 2 Dark Mana)
- Hellhound (Cost: 4 Dark Mana)
- Succubus (Cost: 10 Dark Mana)
- Hell-touched Bear Demon (Cost: 30 Dark Mana)
- Desecration Devil (Cost: 40 Dark Mana)
- Flaying Tormentor (Cost: 100 Dark Mana)
- Pit Fiend (Cost: 300 Dark Mana)

It was disappointing that, even though he could summon more-powerful demons, they all still came out at Level 1; however, with his recent Shard Level increase, he unlocked a Special Ability to help with that.

Shard Status
Regnark McDonald
Elemental Origin: Dark Shard Level: 6 Next Mana Threshold: 4000 Dark Dark Mana: 2250/2875
Necromancy Options
Permanent Reanimation (Base Cost: 15 Dark Mana) Convert Undead (Base Cost: 5 Dark Mana, Base Success Chance: 80%)
Special Abilities
Summoning Circle (Base Cost: 30 Dark Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 5 Dark Mana per hour) Shadow Meld (Cost: 50 Dark Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1 Dark Mana per minute) Siphon Unlife (Cost: 10 Dark Mana per second, only usable upon summoned/converted minions) Demonic Boost (Base Cost: 100 Dark Mana, Cooldown: 10 minutes)

Demonic Boost, at its Base Cost, would increase the starting Level of any newly summoned minions by one for a total of five minutes. There was no extra cost involved, but the effect would only last for 10 minutes after the **Boost** ended, which was exactly how long it took for the Ability to be used again. Fortunately, he could absorb his summoned minions for a full refund and bring them back if he used the Special Ability again, but the cost would be something he'd have to watch out for – because he didn't get the 100 Dark Mana back that was used to activate it.

While he regenerated that amount every five minutes or so, nearly half of that was being used for the upkeep his summoning circles. And then with the cost of the demons he was summoning, his Mana was being constantly used to fuel *something*; to top it off, if he wanted to raise his summoned minions by *two* or *three* Levels (or even more), it required an extra 100 Dark Mana per Level for his **Demonic Boost** – which could get very expensive after a while.

Regardless, he knew it would ultimately help, though he hadn't really needed to use it yet. In fact, he hadn't even really needed to summon anything yet, and was letting his Mana regenerate while he was waiting. There was a side hallway attached between the two staircase rooms he was overseeing, which would allow him to move between them with just a short jog; he thought it was ingenious how the defense of Fred's dungeon was able to be done with just a simple application of human ingenuity. He didn't know any Dungeon Cores personally – other than Fred, he supposed – but he couldn't even imagine one of them thinking up what Fred had, especially with the cut-out holes for viewing and interconnected side hallways.

It was found that the best place for those viewing holes was towards the top of both rooms, so that he could see what was coming in, as well as being able to see down below. They originally tried in the middle, but it was almost impossible to see everything above his location on the stairs – which was the same as the very bottom. When the monsters got towards the floor of the large central pit – which had a few nasty surprises for whatever fell down there – it was a little difficult to see what they were doing, but for the most part his location was ideal.

Especially when Fred made a large platform that jutted out from the wall and was located *above* the highest part of the staircase; it required that the room's ceiling be extended a bit – so that there was about 20 feet of space in between the platform and the ceiling – but it was worth it for the purpose it was designed for: holding his Summoning Circles. He found that he couldn't create the Circle on a vertical surface, so there was nowhere in the room with a big enough horizontal surface other than the bottom of the pit – but that was already occupied with some of Fred's defenses; hence, the presence of the platforms, which also allowed anything that he summoned that couldn't fly to easily drop down to the stairs below without much harm.

From the start of the attack, Regnark was nervously pacing back and forth over the Viewing Portal located near the entrance to his first room. He tensed up when a few Stone Golems eventually rolled in, but Fred's voice in his head asked him to hold off for the moment to see if the normal traps he had set up would work. If they didn't, then Regnark was free to destroy the Golems with his blessing.

Along the stairway leading down, there were a series of dirt patches where a plethora of Flower Trippers were planted; some were his new... lover's...but the rest were Fred's. In addition to those, there were other

traps set up in the walls, which were not necessarily designed to damage anything – but to push.

After showing Regnark how he had been able to alter his previously available traps, Fred had unveiled his new *Boneclub* Wall – a variation of something he had called a *Bonespike* Wall. Instead of sharpened bones jutting out from the wall in an instant, with the intent of impaling something, they were instead toughened blunted bones that pushed quickly out of the wall and impacted whatever was in front of it.

It did very little actual damage – because it was more of a strong punch rather than a stab – but it would hopefully do the job; better yet, Fred said that once it was activated, the Boneclubs would retract into the wall after a few seconds and be ready to be used again in less than a minute. It would only work a total of 10 times before it deactivated completely and would have to be reset later, though they were both hoping that would be more than sufficient.

Sure enough, the first Golem that started rolling down the stairway when it reached the room hit the trap's trigger without pause – and was immediately, violently pushed off the narrow stairway by the sprung Defense. In fact, the dozen Boneclubs that shot out were so forceful that they launched the stone-made invader across the room, where it impacted the far wall and Regnark could hear a large crack as a portion of its form was broken off. The impact hurt the Golem, of course, but didn't kill it; that part was taken care of by the fall of nearly 180 feet down to the bottom of the pit, where it hit the floor with a crash and the complete shattering of its stone body. It even managed to activate one of the Ice Spear Barricade traps down below, but that wasn't actually needed to finish it off.

The ice trap was broken in half in the process, but it quickly reformed back to its original shape; Fred said that it would continue to

regenerate itself for up to three hours, and only its complete destruction would fully deactivate the trap. The same would apply to the other traps down there – but even if there weren't any at all, the fall from such a height would kill or seriously damage most monsters.

The rest of the Golems made their way down the stairs, completely unconcerned with what had happened with the first. The first Boneclub trap had retracted and wasn't ready for them yet...fortunately, the second and the third ones were more than ready for them. When those were triggered, the largish Flower Trippers – three to a dirt plot – worked in conjunction with each other to basically sweep the Golems that got too close off the stairs.

When three of the stone invaders were swept off in this fashion, the next in line finally got wise and decided to rush down the stairs; it bowled over the Flower in the middle – which luckily just bent under the weight of the Golem instead of breaking – and it was past the dirt plot and out of danger...until another Boneclub trap a few steps down shoved it off.

This continued until they were all shattered on the pit floor down below, and not a single thing in the room was destroyed. Sure, there were a limited number of “charges” on Fred's Boneclub traps, but everything had performed exactly the way they had planned. The Stone Golems hadn't even tried to fight and destroy the Flower Trippers; Regnark supposed it was because they didn't look like much of a threat, because they couldn't actually *hurt* the Golems, and were considered to be more of an obstacle that just needed to be navigated around.

“Those traps worked exactly as I had hoped! I know you’ve been anxious to use your minions, though, and I appreciate you waiting; fortunately, that waiting is at an end – Boulder Trolls are coming up!”

Boulder Trolls? He wasn't exactly sure what they were until he saw the first one drag itself into the room...and promptly walk off the stairs, plummeting almost 200 feet to its death. *Oh, ok.* Regnark knew exactly what these Boulder Trolls were, and he was almost confident that they would need some extra...*help*...to be knocked off the stairs.

While the first one was stupid enough to walk out into the middle of the open space of the pit, the others were – unfortunately – smart enough not to follow in its footsteps. Instead, they walked down the stairs with big thuds of their heavy feet, dragging their metal-banded stone clubs after them. He waited to see if he was correct in his assumption...and was proven correct; the first Boneclub trap was ready to be sprung again, and as it thrust out at the Boulder Troll, the force of the impact – which was enough to send a Stone Golem across the room – only managed to push the Troll an inch or two, which was just a few shy of knocking one of its feet off.

That was because the Trolls – in his limited experience with them – were a lot heavier and stronger than they appeared. One of the Boneclubs actually cracked when it hit the heavy invader, which just went to show that it was like hitting a solid wall instead of a monster. When that was all that happened to the Troll, it continued down the stairs, barely even fazed by the sprung trap.

Now, Regnark wouldn't say he had been bored while waiting for his turn, but he freely acknowledged that he was looking forward to summoning some minions. He had a much wider selection of choices with his larger circle than the first one he had ever created, and there were a few – like the Pit Fiend – which would probably be strong enough to kill a few of the trolls all by itself. However, with a cost of 300 Dark Mana, it was a

large investment that he didn't necessarily have to make at that point – because the Trolls were famously dumb.

Lesser Imps, while irritating at Level 1, didn't really have much way to attack other than by flying in and scratching something to death. However, a little-known fact about them that he didn't know about until he experimented with them a bit, was that they also had a long-range attack – that was more annoying than actually damaging. At higher Levels, Fred told him that it would turn into a Hellfireball attack, but for the moment the Level 1 Lesser Imp attack Hellfirespark was little more than throwing a lit match at someone.

That was all he needed though.

Regnark accessed his Summoning Circle to create 50 Lesser Imps, which immediately took 100 of his Dark Mana to complete. As soon as they streamed out of the Circle, he directed them to fly over to all of the Trolls walking down the stairs, staying just out of range of their stone clubs. When they were hovering in position, they started to launch the annoying little Hellfiresparks at the Trolls' faces – which did little to no damage – but it had the bonus effect of thoroughly annoying them.

Unable to reach the Imps that were causing the annoyance, they became enraged, swinging their clubs around while they tried to hit the Imps, who were hovering just out of range – and who weren't letting up their constant barrage of irritating sparks in the Trolls faces. It appeared to be a standoff, with neither side doing anything to hurt the others, but Regnark counted on it not lasting that way for long.

Because, eventually, one of the Trolls got fed up and threw caution to the wind – not that they understood caution all that much – and *launched* itself off the stairs towards the hovering Imps. Now, Regnark *could've* had his Imps dodge out of the way of the poorly planned movement, but he

thought it might be more effective if the Troll actually caught a few. And so, the large invader did, grabbing two of the Imps with either hand in mid-jump, dropping its club in the process; the imps were squashed and crushed immediately, before being flung away and disappearing, sending some of the Mana involved in their summoning back to Regnark.

As the Troll raced towards its death at the bottom of the pit, its impending doom was far from the minds of the other Boulder Trolls; all they saw was that their comrade had succeeded in killing some of the annoying creatures sending sparks at their faces. And, predictably, they too jumped off the stairs, grabbing one or two of the hovering Imps on the way down to their deaths.

In all, he had lost 16 of his Lesser Imps out of his original 50, but that only amounted to all of...16 Dark Mana, after he received Mana back from their deaths. Most of which he had regenerated during the short-lived fight with the Trolls, so it basically cost him nothing – especially when he had his remaining Imps let themselves be reabsorbed into the Circle, giving him the entire cost of their summoning back to him.

Easy.

“Nice work there and great conservation of your Mana! For these next ones, I’ve already talked to Deecy and she has a plan for them. Falling down into the pit probably won’t do much to them, so just let them pass if you can.”

“Why would I do that—?” he asked the air, confused...until he saw the first grains of sand flowing into the room. “Oh, never mind.”

These types of monsters were some of his least favorite to go up against, because they were only really consistently defeated by Power-based

spells that most Mage-types could cast. Shooting a shifting pile of sand – or blob of water, or some sort of living flame, depending on the dungeon – with an arrow or smashing it with a warhammer weren't very effective ways to damage them; the same would apply to knocking it off the stairway, because it would just fall to the bottom of the pit without being hurt, most likely. It was possible that one of his minions might be able to hurt them, but if Fred said that Deecy had a plan then he was more than willing to let them by without trouble.

The shifting piles of sand actually flung themselves off the topmost step into the pit without even considering moving down the entire staircase; as he had thought, they didn't seem to be hurt by the fall, and immediately moved into the next room. Regnark shifted his position to that room so that he could watch them *flow* up the stairs unnaturally, though they did end up activating every single trap on the way. The Boneclubs were entirely ineffective, as they shot out above the pile of shifting sand; the Flower Trippers only managed to sweep off small piles of sand, which immediately moved from the pit base and flowed upstairs after its main form.

All in all, it was quite anti-climactic, but Regnark knew there was more coming. Fred had mentioned that there was much more than just this coming, so he prepared himself – all the while conserving his Mana and letting it regenerate.

The wait was longer than he had anticipated, but some loud thuds coming from the previous room told him that Chareese had finally broke out her giant Flower Trippers. Regnark remembered how excited she had been when they were first made the day before; she was like a child opening up a present during a celebration of her naming day. It made his heart soar watching how—

His thoughts about his new relationship were interrupted when something large and spherical rolled into his dungeon room and seemed to bounce as it flung itself off the top of the stairs; he thought that whatever the thing was wouldn't last long as it fell to the bottom of the pit, but to his surprise the 4-foot-wide metal-and-hard-stone sphere seemed to explode in midair.

Except that it wasn't necessarily an explosion, though it looked that way when eight long, multi-jointed metal legs seemed to uncurl from the center and extend far out to the sides of the room. They were so long, in fact, that they managed to reach all the way across, giving what appeared to be a massive metal-and-stone spider purchase on eight separate stairs all over the top of the room. Two of the Boneclub traps even activated when the legs appeared on their step, but the blunt bones either completely missed the relatively thin legs of the monster or just barely pushed it away an inch or two.

“Sorry for the lack of advanced warning, these came in and down so fast that the others didn't even really get a good look at them. Do what you can against these Crevice Spiders, because Deecy's still dealing with those Shifting Sands Defenders from earlier.”

While Fred was talking, Regnark was already thinking. *Imps will be useless, Hellhounds too. I have to go bigger; I think this is what I was waiting for.* Watching the...*Crevice Spider?*...easily navigate its way down the sides of the room, he activated his **Demonic Boost** Special Ability and pumped 300 Dark Mana into it, which would give anything he summoned a boost of 3 Levels automatically.

As a second, then a third, and then a fourth Spider rolled in and did its same exploding act, Regnark summoned three Pit Fiends, 14-foot-tall demons with 30-foot wingspans – and vicious claws that could disembowel a person with a single swipe. By the time the first Fiend crawled out of the circle and flew down to the descending Crevice Spiders, another half-dozen of the metal-and-stone invaders had already entered the room – with who knows how many more on the way. The lowest one was almost to the bottom of the room, so he switched his mental focus to the Circle in the other room, where he summoned two more of the Pit Fiends to assault anything coming up that way.

As his lead Fiend crashed into the topmost Spider, Regnark heard a few snaps as three of its legs on one side were ripped off where they connected to its body – but it didn't fall; the remaining five legs were enough to keep it stable as they were firmly planted on the stairs, though the remaining leg on the side that was heavily damaged looked strained. His Pit Fiend had landed on the body of the Spider itself, which probably wasn't the best idea; as his minion tried to use its claws to remove the rest of the legs, sharp spikes of stone shot out of the Crevice Spider's body, which impaled its unwelcome passenger through the legs and lower body.

It tried to flap its wings to fly away, but it was stuck to the Spider; for its part, the metal-and-stone invader was voluntarily connected to the Fiend, and it continued to walk awkwardly down the walls. By the time his next minion was available, another Spider was already poised above his Pit Fiend, the monster looking like it wanted to eat the face off Regnark's minion as it quickly caught up to the struggling duo.

Silently instructing all his minions to avoid the central bodies of the Spiders, his second and then third Fiends in the first room aimed for the legs of whatever monster they could reach, slicing them off one by one as

they flapped their way downwards. Luckily, it appeared as though 15 was the total of all the Crevice Spiders invading, as they stopped coming as soon as that many had appeared.

Metal-and-stone-covered legs were flung everywhere as they were sliced off by the powerful claws of the Pit Fiends, but his minions didn't do it without taking damage themselves. Sliced-apart legs – when not removed directly from the central body – turned out to be deadly weapons, which the Crevice Spiders used efficiently to stab his minions whenever they could. Fortunately, being Level 4, they had fairly high resistances and Vitality, but when stabbed by over a dozen legs through different parts of their bodies it began to take a toll. After a minute of frenzied slicing and cutting on the part of his Fiends and stabbing on the part of the Spiders, his first free minion was killed, dispersing into Mana that got pulled straight back into Regnark.

The Fiend that had been impaled managed to survive longer, somehow, but it eventually fended off the monster above it long enough to slice off two more legs from the Spider it was stuck to. They both fell about 75 feet to the floor below, and Regnark could hear the crunch of stone and metal collapsing under the weight of the large demon stuck to it – and suddenly he netted another 210 Mana from its death.

Of course, he wasn't done yet; he used the Mana from those two deaths to create two more Pit Fiends, though he had to dip into his reserve a little more. With them added to the fight, the three of them worked together starting at the top, slicing into legs as a group, watching the Spiders fall and impact those below it on the way down. The two Fiends Regnark had summoned earlier in the next room had an easier time because the Spiders had to walk *up* – which took a bit more time and allowed his minions to slice and delimb the metal-and-stone monsters at their leisure.

It wasn't done yet, however. Except for the first Spider that fell and was crushed under the weight of the demon on top of it, the rest of the metal-and-stone invaders had been minimally damaged in their falls – probably because they hit their brethren on the way down, which slowed their rapid descent. And, despite Regnark's hope that they would be helpless and easy to kill – and that the traps on the bottom of the pit would finish them off – all but two had unluckily landed in between the traps laid out on the floor of the room. That left 6 of them still alive in the first room, and each of them unfolded an extra set of legs from inside their bodies, though these were *much* shorter and thinner – only about 3 feet in length and they appeared like thin metal sticks. They moved around a little awkwardly with them, but it was enough to get around – and jump, apparently.

Because when his Pit Fiends landed on the lowest stairs to destroy them once and for all, the Crevice Spiders jumped and launched themselves at his minions, only to latch onto them with fangs made of what appeared to be sharp steel. When they were latched on, the thin metal stick legs turned out to be razor sharp along the sides and point, which were used extensively by the Spiders to slice apart his minions.

His Fiends weren't having any of that, though, and they tore into the metal-and-stone monsters themselves, but the surprise damage had been done. Two of his Fiends had taken so much damage that they wouldn't survive much longer, so he had them sacrifice themselves and take the Spiders with them – so they jumped off the stairs and landed right on a trap, which impaled all of them and squished the invading monsters in the process. The last Fiend managed to rip off the Spiders and tear them apart, though it took a bit of damage in the process – but not enough to kill it;

unfortunately, based on how it was going in the other room, it was the only survivor.

Four Crevice Spiders managed to survive having their legs removed and falling back into the pit, and they tore into those two Pit Fiends without mercy. Three of the invaders died in the process, taking Regnark's minions with them, and the last one managed to escape...until it was knocked off the stairs on its way up with its short awkward legs, only to fall down to the bottom pit and was impaled by multiple Ice Spears from the trap below.

He managed to kill them all, but it also ended up costing him a little over 800 Mana in the process, because he didn't get all of it back from the deaths of his minions – and none at all from the 300 he spent on the **Demonic Boost**. In such a short time, he was already down a chunk of his resources, and there was still more to come.

In fact, as he walked back to his first room, he thought he heard something coming from Chareese's room...

Chapter 30

Fred watched Deecy lying peacefully in the side hallway next to the fifth room, calmly looking out her specially made Viewing Portal that sat closer to the ground and had a wider view of the two lengths of the L-shaped space. If he didn't know better, he would've said she was napping; since he did, he knew she was wide awake and anticipating her own part in the battle to come.

Everything was going well so far, with only a few minor unexpected hiccups that were quickly taken care of by either Eisa, Chareese, or Regnark in the respective rooms they were in charge of. He was encouraged, too, because although there were still quite a few Earth Defenders on their way to his dungeon, he was also keeping an eye on his territory border. Little by little, one by one, the monsters on his side of the border were being recalled.

It was probably only about a quarter of them, and unless he had been looking around for anything else unexpected during the invasion then he probably wouldn't have seen the subtle thinning in their ranks. As it was, they spread out just enough that there weren't any major gaps, so it wasn't obvious by any means; regardless, he knew it was happening, as well as *why* it was happening.

Every large Defender that was recalled immediately disappeared into Mana that was there for just a split second, before it moved like a shot deep underground. He couldn't see what happened to it from there – because it wasn't in his territory – but a very short time later he could see a fresh batch of new monsters running down the dug-out tunnel in his dungeon's direction. At a point not too long after the attack started, the

Defenders stopped making their way back over the border, and he knew that the Earth Core likely had a predetermined stopping point; there was a point where it would just be throwing good Mana after bad, and as much as he figured the Earth Core wanted to end the whole siege immediately, it likely would have to wait until some of the other factions joined in an assault.

Which was a good thing, knowing that the Earth monsters invading his dungeon were eventually going to stop, at least temporarily...but that wasn't likely to be for hours into the future, and they still had *a lot* of fighting to do.

The first major obstacle they had was the presence of a monster called Shifting Sands, which was essentially just a pile of sand that moved around of its own volition. It could attack by solidifying the sand it was made from and bashing things, or it could even send that sand into someone's face, where the sand could be manipulated to move through their orifices and wreak havoc on their insides – which didn't sound like a good way to go. At least, that was what he was told about them when they had a discussion of potential monsters they might be facing, and the Shifting Sands was one of them.

Eisa and the others did an awesome job whittling their numbers down by using as many powerful Fire-based spells as they could to permanently solidify about a third of them in the first room, as well reduce some of the others in size, but there wasn't much that Chareese or Regnark would likely be able to do to them. Therefore, it was Deecy's turn.

“Are you ready, Deecy? We’ve got something that needs your... expertise, so to say.”

“Of course, I’m ready. I was about to fall asleep, actually, so I’m glad there’s finally something for me to do.”

Although her words were said jokingly, he knew they masked a slight nervousness that he hadn't observed in her before. Fred figured it was because this was the first time she had really been a part of the integral defense of a dungeon before, and not just as a participant or as a last-ditch effort to stay alive. The dungeon in the Plains of Grass let her see some action, but that was more of a Mana-driven slugfest against horrifying creatures, and not part of the "normal" operations a dungeon underwent. Not that his dungeon was anything resembling "normal", but the underlying principles were there.

Fred explained about the Shifting Sands monsters coming up to the Dire Wolf Pup, which she acknowledged by standing up to prepare. Deecy was silent for a moment, before she explained her simple-yet-effective plan to him; he thought it was an excellent idea and told her to go for it. If it didn't work, it would fall on the last defensive room in his dungeon: The Oven.

The Oven had transformed a little from the original design, but the overall shape and purpose behind it was the same. The night before, because he now had access to over 500 Fire Mana, Fred altered the trap a little so that he could create it with just a *little* more heat with the extra 200 Mana he had since it was first created. A few experiments showed that it was now almost twice as effective as it had been before...though it still wouldn't do much to stop something made entirely of stone or metal, which a lot of the Earth Defenders seemed to be primarily made of.

But that wasn't the only thing that had changed in the room. He had placed floor-to-ceiling walls inside the long room, but not quite the same as Chareese's plant room; they were placed in such a way as to make a maze of sorts, with many twists and turns and a few dead ends. It would make

the traversal through the heat quite a bit longer, even if the invaders knew the exact route through his maze, but they would also have to contend with some additional obstacles.

Along the ceiling, Fred had placed more of the accessible hallways with small Viewing Portals looking straight down, where the rest of the Guild and townspeople were ready to bombard the maze-traversing invaders with relative impunity. Right now, they were up there lying down and keeping a watch through the small holes, waiting for their opportunity to strike. He wanted them to be the last line of defense, mainly because of a preference to keep them as safe as possible until they were really needed; the townspeople up in the first room with Eisa were all volunteers for the most dangerous spot because everything up there would be fresh, undamaged, and ready to do some damage.

He figured he should feel worried for Eisa being up there, but he knew she could take care of herself. Besides, she was a Shard, and his relatively new creations were proving to be hard to hurt – let alone kill. Not only that, but it was *her* idea to be in the first room, and he wasn't about to gainsay her at that point; they were all in danger just being the target of the Core factions' wrath, and nobody was really safe anywhere in the city of Allroads – and especially not inside his dungeon.

Soon enough, the Shifting Sands monsters had made it through the next three rooms without encountering much in the way of resistance, but then they entered Deecy's room...and being a Dire Wolf (if a strange one), she didn't take kindly to those crossing into her territory.

The room was filled with long sharp spikes jutting towards the entrance that were built into the walls, staggered so that they would have a greater chance of not being avoided when something was forced into them; these defenses were augmented by over 50 of Eisa's Defenders – large

Crystal Scorpions and Golden Sphinxes – placed strategically, meant to stop anything from coming through and hopefully shoving the invaders into the spikes for additional environmental damage. Deecy being Deecy, though, didn't use any of that to destroy the undulating piles of sand that made their way into the room.

She used fire, flames, and all sorts of burny stuff – because she was the Shard of Fire...and Water, of course, but that's beside the point.

As soon as the first one got more than a few feet inside the room, a large fireball materialized out of nowhere, close to the ceiling; the 4-foot-wide sphere of burning death shot down to the floor in less than a second, impacting the Shifting Sands monster and enveloping it in flames. The sand particles in the Defender solidified into a solid chunk of a glass-like substance before disappearing, leaving behind a hefty glob of Earth Mana in its place.

“Uh...wasn't that a little...overkill?” Fred asked the Dire Wolf, who respectfully denied any such thing. She even tried to justify the expenditure of Mana as necessary, and sent over her Status to prove it.

Shard Status
Deecy Greymane
Elemental Origin: Fire-Water Shard Level: 4 Next Mana Threshold: 1000 Fire, 1000 Water Fire Mana: 585/945 Water Mana: 744/944
Defense Creation Options
Fire Wall (Base Cost: 20 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Fire Mana per hour) Spinning Flame Wheel (Base Cost: 30 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 2 Fire Mana per hour)

Raging Inferno (Base Cost: 50 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 3 Fire Mana per hour)

Ice Spear Barricade (Base Cost: 20 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Water Mana per hour)

Water Geyser (Base Cost: 30 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 2 Water Mana per hour)

Drowning Pool (Base Cost: 50 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 3 Water Mana per hour)

Special Abilities

Giant Dire Wolf Form (Activation Cost: 5 Fire and 5 Water Mana, Upkeep Cost: 1 Fire and 1 Water Mana per minute)

Dire Wolf Form (Activation Cost: 0)

Dire Wolf Pup Form (Activation Cost: 0, Ambient Mana Absorption increased)

Fireball (Base Activation Cost: 40 Fire Mana) *Pack Hunter* (-75%)

Icicle Explosion (Base Activation Cost: 40 Water Mana)

Pack Hunter (Activation Cost: 200 Fire and 200 Water Mana, Cooldown: 2 hours)

Fred had forgotten about the most recent Special Ability, which she received when she hit Shard Level 4, mainly because there hadn't been a cause to use it yet. That, and she never got around to explaining what **Pack Hunter** was until now; he just hoped it had been worth the 200 Fire and Water Mana she had apparently just spent on it.

“Pack Hunter – when activated before I use a Defense or Special Ability – will allow me to replicate the same ability for a 75% reduction in Mana for 5 minutes if the Defense or Special Ability resulted in a death within 30 seconds. There’s a lot of stipulations, as you can see, so I had to make sure that the 160 Fire Mana I spent to ‘overkill’ actually did the job, otherwise Pack Hunter would’ve been wasted. Now, because it worked, I

can use the same Fireball over and over for only 40 Fire Mana – and for the next 4 minutes and 50 seconds, of course.”

Fred shouldn't even have doubted her because she apparently had it well in hand. The only problem for the future was that using all Special Abilities for her plan meant that the Mana used wouldn't be returned to her automatically, but it already looked like there was going to be a little time for her Mana to regenerate naturally. A quick peek at the other rooms showed that each of them were doing an excellent job in taking out most if not all of the other Earth Defenders invading his dungeon, so she'd have a little break in between. And besides, it wasn't like the room was *completely* undefended without her support, but it helped immensely when she was able to provide it.

Like now, for instance; the Shifting Sands monsters weren't particularly smart – just hard to kill, so they flowed into the room and got pounded into glass by a giant **Fireball**. They didn't seem to notice that the sand-based creature in front of them was getting destroyed, and one even attempted to go around one that was getting smashed flat and solidified – only to take another large flaming sphere of destruction a moment later. In a matter of two minutes, all of the invading Defenders were dead and destroyed, and Fred almost automatically routed the Earth Mana to himself and Eisa still fighting up in the first room.

*“Nice job, Deecy. It'll be a little bit before there's more...and there **will** be more.”*

She lay back down by her Viewing Portal with a brief head nod in response, putting her head on her Pup form paws – as if completely obliterating a dozen monsters just moments ago was no big thing. Fred

chuckled to himself at her air of nonchalance, knowing that she'd have plenty of opportunities to defend his dungeon in the future.

Fred looked over the rest of his dungeon briefly, moving Mana around to the different Shards defending the rooms when needed, but such a thing was nearly automated by that point. He had lots of practice over the last few days when they would send him their Mana and he would send some back after a little while, and he found that his mind (assisted by his Territorial and Mana Sights) automatically figured when the best time to send it back to them was, as well as pinpointing what needed his attention. The whole process was strange, but he figured that it was something that normal Dungeon Cores probably dealt with all the time...so that's probably why it felt "natural".

Now that he had a real opportunity to peer outside of his dungeon (and not at his ever-shrinking borders), he realized that he never got a chance to see what had happened with the Hyper Stonewyrm that had Roady so worried. The last that he'd seen, the large Wyrm had headed up the tunnel leading to the Knight-Commander and his large group of high-Rated Governmental people...and there it still stayed.

It had only moved up a little bit, and Fred thought it was stuck for a moment; on a further look, however, he saw that it had just...stopped. It was filling up almost the entire corridor leading down to his dungeon but there was nothing impeding it from going further; instead, it appeared as though it was keeping the Humans standing guard where they were, as if it was instructed to prevent them from helping out.

Roady and the others looked cautiously at the Stonewyrm blocking the tunnel downwards and were ready to fight it at a moment's notice, but they hadn't deliberately attacked it. Given what Fred had been told about it, he didn't blame them; while it wasn't necessarily a challenge to kill with 50

Adventurers, the Earth Defenders had no reason to go looking for a fight. Since it wasn't attacking anywhere aboveground – periodic messengers appeared to be coming and going, informing Roady and the rest about the state of the city – it was likely that they weren't going to invite trouble.

As much as it put him and his own people at risk, Fred was fine with that; fighting a war on another front when he was trapped in his own dungeon wasn't something he wanted to do.

Another two hours of fierce fighting progressed, and Fred could finally see the end in sight. Most of the townspeople in the first room had run out of Power a while ago and were only periodically casting a spell or using an ability whenever it regenerated enough; Eisa was still going strong with all of the Mana Fred was sending her, but she looked absolutely wiped.

Chareese's room was mostly full of growing plants, as everything had been destroyed at least once by that point, so there were very few Defenses or Defenders in there; the two giant Flower Trippers had survived for about 30 minutes after they had initially been used, and there was no way one of them – he had provided some of his Mana to help with replacing a single one – would grow fast enough to make a difference. As for the woman herself, she also looked tired, though she was holding on bravely.

Regnark was in his element, summoning demon after demon, but after less than an hour most of the traps inside the room had been either used up or destroyed. There was a single Flower Tripper still intact, but it couldn't do much against the plethora of different Earth-based monsters passing by. Still, the minions created by the Dark Shard were a force in and of themselves, but the big man was starting to run out of Mana to do much other than summon a few demons at a time – despite his fast regeneration.

Deecy was also running on empty, having used her created Defenses to the best she could to damage whatever got to her room; unfortunately, without spending a ton of Mana, most of her Fire and Water abilities were relatively ineffective to many of the other Earth monsters. What she did was definitely worthwhile, but other than a few lucky opportunities she took advantage of, nothing much died because of what she did. She hurt them and made them more vulnerable to Eisa's Defenders in the room, no doubt, but as far as straight-up killing them...not much help there.

That didn't seem to matter too much, fortunately, as the Crystal Scorpions and Golden Sphinxes did their job splendidly even without Eisa directly overseeing them. In fact, the only monsters that managed to get through all five rooms that were defended by the Shards was a swarm of Pebble Snakes, smallish creatures that were made from hundreds of little brown pebbles and shaped like...well...snakes. They moved incredibly fast, however, and hundreds of them flooded inside the dungeon within a couple of seconds – which caught everyone off guard.

A few of them were destroyed by the Defenders Eisa had in the first room, but they were so quick and small that they easily avoided most attacks sent by the townspeople. Chareese's plants couldn't really get a hold on them in the next room, and they were in and down the steps in Regnark's first room before he could really react. He managed to summon a few dozen Lesser Imps in his second room, though, which managed to sweep a couple of the Snakes that were quickly pulling themselves up the stairs. In all, maybe a dozen were shattered when they hit the bottom of the pit at speed, but that was just the barest few of them compared to how many there still were.

Deecy was still recovering from a previous incursion and couldn't provide much defense, though she tried – and it was entirely ineffective. In

fact, the entire room was relatively ineffective, mainly because the Pebble Snakes were so close to the ground that they went around all of Eisa's Defenders and *under* the stone spikes jutting out of the wall. One unlucky Snake got caught by a Sphinx and was shattered to pieces, which just went to show that they weren't that powerful in and of themselves – they were just incredibly fast and hard to catch.

The Guild and remaining townspeople were ready for them, however. The Oven Defense was activated as soon as the first one crossed through into the room, though it didn't seem to do too much; hot pebbles could still roll across the floor without impediment, so the trap wasn't much use. That was, at least, until Harriette – their resident Elementalist – used a spell called Torrential Freeze.

There was one passageway through the maze of walls that *had* to be navigated in order to progress further, and she took advantage of that to use the spell as the Pebble Snakes crossed through it. Across the 5-foot gap, a torrent of freezing "rain" fell on the Snakes as they passed by. Normally, the spell did a little bit of water damage to a target, as well as slowing them down a little with the nearly frozen water falling on them; with the pebbles that comprised the Snakes heated up to a high degree, the cold water caused the relatively fragile stones the monsters were made up of to crack and split apart.

She had to keep casting the spell over and over for about 20 seconds to get every single one, but she ended up doing it without too much trouble. It was good for Fred to know he could count on his people to come up with a solution without his input – and quickly at that.

Let's just hope that keeps up.

Chapter 31

Finally, after hours of constant battle, everyone was exhausted; even Fred was tired of the constant fighting – and all he had been doing was watching. There was only one last wave from the Earth faction that he could see coming in the tunnel – and it was a doozy.

The Graveler (Level 10)

Vitality: 34000

Attack: 2600, Power Shot, Rapid Shot, Engulf, Scatter

Defense: 2120

Thousands of dark-grey stones the size of Fred's fist filled the entire dug-out tunnel leading to his dungeon, moving as an amorphous group and flowing along very similar to the movements of the Shifting Sands monsters from earlier. The Graveler appeared too large to fit through the opening of his dungeon entrance, but as it passed through the opening, it elongated and squeezed itself through without much effort.

"This is the last monster – give it all you got!" Fred Communicated towards Eisa, hoping that The Graveler could be destroyed quickly so they could all rest – and reset the dungeon so that they'd be prepared for whatever else was coming their way.

He watched as she let the others know about this being the last monster – for now, at least – and they seemed to perk up at that knowledge. Reaching deep into their reserves, spells flew out of the Viewing Portals in quick succession: flashes of light, minor explosions, and biting wind blades slammed into the multi-stoned creature, which quickly brought the rest of

its...body...into the room and formed into a squat, four-legged, four-armed monstrosity that took up half the room all by itself. Two of Eisa's Crystal Scorpions attacked as well, followed by a Golden Sphinx, throwing themselves into the fight without care for their safety. Essentially, they went all out, just like Fred had told Eisa.

While a few of the grey stones comprising The Graveler were shattered from some of the spells, the rest of the attacks were absorbed by the monster without much harm; because the townspeople weren't all that powerful in terms of Power, they couldn't do enough damage to really harm the invading Earth Defender. Eisa's own creations had a little more luck, but not much; as soon as they attacked and managed to break a few of the stones from The Graveler, the monster immediately counterattacked and formed a massive club that smashed Eisa's Defenders into literal pieces.

She, of course, created more from her Mana reserve while Fred sent the Mana left behind by her destroyed Defenders to her – but nothing she created seemed to live longer than a few moments. Eisa even delved into her now-impressive list of Earth Defenders she could create, after she had acquired access to them from killing them during the long invasion; every single Earth-based monster that had been killed added another option for her to utilize. And apparently, even something like the Shifting Sands monster – that had been so hard to kill – could be smashed and crushed into fine dust when she started running out of options.

“Nothing I have is working! I'm switching to my Power now—” Eisa yelled out, after the last of her creations failed – but was quickly interrupted. Without having to defend against her Defenders, for the first real time during the entire invasion, something deliberately hit the Viewing Portal with tremendous force, causing her to step back in shock. Before she could react, Fred saw another fist-sized stone shoot towards the Dark-based

trap at incredible speed – almost faster than he could see it – and shatter the Viewing Portal. It didn't stop there, however, as it kept going in a slightly deflected angle, slamming into Eisa's right shoulder and practically ripping her arm off in the process. If it hadn't been deflected the tiniest bit by breaking through the Viewing Portal, it likely would've went right through her head; as much as he knew his Shards could heal from quite a few injuries using their Mana like Fred, he wasn't sure if decapitation would work the same way.

Eisa fell back with a scream, landing on her injured side and yelling out in intense pain again – before passing out. Fred longed to run to her aid, but he could see the blood already starting to slow from the horrendous wound, and the flesh was just barely starting to knit together – so he knew she'd be alright. As for the others in the first room, that was a different story.

The grey stone that shot Eisa through the arm was somehow pulled back to The Graveler through whatever means that animated it, and it was immediately shot back out towards the next Viewing Portal. This one shattered on the first powerful hit, unfortunately, and it kept going – right through the chest and out the back of one of the townspeople preparing to cast another spell. The man collapsed in a heap, dead before he hit the floor – and the stone was sucked back out the hole in the wall, ready to be fired again.

His partner – watching through the same Viewing Portal as him – stared down in shock at the sudden killing of the man she had been destroying monsters with just seconds ago; luckily, she snapped out of her frozen state in enough time to pull the string connected to the slab of stone designed to block the window into the room. It slammed down quickly to

protect her, just before another stone hit the now-blocked hole, bouncing off and being recalled to The Graveler.

By that time, the others understood the danger they were in – accentuated by the loud slamming of the stone slab – and stood away from the Viewing Portals before pulling their own strings, closing their access to the room as more slabs slammed down in quick succession. There was nothing they could do, so they retreated down the side hallway towards the next room, but only before picking up Eisa and the now-deceased body of the unfortunate townsman that had perished.

“Chareese! You’ve got something called The Graveler coming up, and its already killed one of ours and Eisa’s down for now. Stay away from the Viewing Portals, because it’s able to shoot them out.”

The Nature Shard acknowledged his words by moving away from the center of the Viewing Portal across from the entrance to her room, though she still looked out from another one, though at a severe angle. It was just enough for her to see what was happening, but she wasn’t as exposed as she could be. *I guess that’s the best we can hope for.*

As soon as it rolled/flowed into Chareese’s room, a single glance at it was enough for all the color to drain from her face. “This isn’t good, Fred. That’s a high S-Rated Boss Monster—” she said, her voice shaking a little— “and it’s notoriously hard to kill. You have to destroy every single one of its stones to defeat it, which is hard when it keeps shooting out those darn things every few seconds! I’ve heard of a few Adventurers killing one after a protracted battle with a very specific strategy, but usually it’s not worth it; the one time I’ve seen one of these in person our party turned around and left the dungeon – because it’s that hard. I didn’t even think we’d see one here because it’s so large, but I guess I’d never seen it contract like that before,” she mentioned, an apology in her tone.

“Don’t worry about it, we can’t plan for everything. Close the Portals and retreat; I don’t want it getting any ideas of flowing through the holes in the wall and using our side-hallways against us. Your remaining plants will have to do what they can, but I expect that it won’t be much.”

Chareese immediately complied, pulling the strings to collapse all of the holes blocked by the Viewing Portals. She then ran down the hallway, joining the retreating townspeople, who were already trying to speed up Eisa’s healing with what little Power they had. The Nature Shard immediately contributed her own meager Power to the cause, and Fred could see the flesh knitting itself together even faster, rebuilding bone and replacing blood at a much-increased rate. With how much damage she had taken and blood she had lost, she probably would’ve been dead if she were a regular Human; Fred was doubly glad she was a Shard now, as it was likely the only thing that kept her alive.

Chareese’s plants were able to destroy all of two of the thousands of grey fist-sized stones of The Graveler, and it proceeded to flow through the tunnel leading to Regnark’s first room. Fred had already warned the Dark Shard to do what he could before pulling down the slabs, and 3 Pit Fiends crawled out of the Summoning Circle – which was all that Regnark could afford. They immediately swooped in and started crushing stones in their powerful claws; they were doing a fairly good job before the hyper-accelerated stones started to fly out from the mass, shearing through wings left and right. Within 30 seconds, the Fiends were plummeting towards the bottom of the pit, though two of them managed to grab hold of the stairs to stop their descent.

That didn’t really matter, however, because as soon as they rushed up the stairs to fight some more, they were *engulfed* by the descending monster; the stones contracted tightly together, crushing the poor demons in

seconds. As soon as they died, Regnark got some of his Mana back and created a few more, but they had even less success; The Graveler was ready for them and shot them out of the air with more stones. One went through a Fiend's head, while the other had its left wing completely shot off its body, leaving it to plummet to its death down below.

Rather than summon any more, Regnark canceled his Circles and joined the retreat, electing to regenerate more Mana instead of paying for their upkeep when they weren't doing much good.

Deecy had been lucky over the last few waves because they didn't even reach her, so she was able to regenerate a bit of her Fire and Water Mana in the interim. She briefly tried using some Fire-based Defenses – but they didn't do much good; the same massive Fireball that had melted the Shifting Sands monsters only managed to scatter the stones, and only one managed to shatter in the process. Instead of Fire, though, she decided to use her Water Geyser Defense, which she hadn't used before; it turned out to be an excellent choice, as it created an extremely powerful jet of water 3 feet across to expel out of the floor, propelling anything caught in the geyser up to the ceiling.

The Dire Wolf placed the Geyser underneath the massive pile of grey stones and hundreds of them were shot upwards, shattering dozens of them as they hit the ceiling. Fred could tell she was about to create another one when The Graveler reacted, shooting a fist-sized stone into her Viewing Portal and breaking it instantly. Deecy had thought she was too far away for it to hit the small narrow hole accurately, but she was wrong; a fortunate ricochet sent the stone off course, and instead of smashing her head in, it only managed to shear off her left ear and the skin covering that side of her skull.

Howling in pain, she backed away out of range and waited for the stone to get sucked back out before pulling the string that would collapse the slab of stone poised above with her teeth. As it crashed down, Deecy whined and howled as she too retreated, blood running freely from her head as it slowly healed from her Mana.

The six Defenders that Eisa had left in the fifth room were no match for The Graveler. One Sphinx had a leg shot out from underneath it, before it was engulfed and ground into dust; the others tried to attack but were crushed underneath another massive “club” of stones that smashed them to pieces. The sharp spikes jutting out from the sides of the room did absolutely nothing, as the Earth monster passed through the room without issue.

If Fred was hoping that The Oven would prove The Graveler’s undoing, he was sorely disappointed. Just like the Pebble Snakes from earlier, Fred could tell that the stones heated up tremendously, but it wasn’t enough to do anything to them. Taking the lesson learned from those same Snakes and Harriette’s ingenious plan, the Guild members and townspeople looking in from the ceiling tried the same sort of freezing water plan, and it worked...for a little bit.

With the first cast of a powerful frozen water spell, the Guild member managed to destroy about a third of the unsuspecting monster, as the cold water shattered the fist-sized stones in an explosion of shrapnel that was thoroughly satisfying. The Graveler, as a Boss Monster and much smarter than the average Defender, wasn’t taking any of it. It retreated back to the entrance and started systematically shooting out the Viewing Portals in the ceiling with crazily accurate shots of its grey stones, all the while moving unopposed through the maze. This caused the Guild and the

townspeople to close up their holes, so as to prevent the stones from hitting any of them, either with a direct shot or a ricochet.

“I’m keeping mine open – we don’t have any other choice but to try,” Harriette insisted, which was echoed by two others who had powerful water spells at their disposal. The three of them hovered near a hole that The Graveler had just shot out and then waited a few seconds, and with a cautious glance, the Elementalist peeked down below and nodded silently towards the others with her.

Almost as one, the three cast three different freezing water spells on the bunched-up monster below them – including her Torrential Freeze spell – and it was quickly covered by so much water that it was hard to make out. Fred was ecstatic, because it looked like it had finally been defeated... but then the pile of stones exploded outwards, sending parts of The Graveler everywhere. Many of the stones impacted walls and shattered, and Fred could see the temporary remains of those that the water spells had destroyed in the explosion’s epicenter. However, there were still at least a few hundred that survived the spells and scattering of their components.

And then the stones went crazy.

One after another – in rapid succession – stones flew up to the hole in the ceiling; they didn’t shoot up as fast or as powerfully as before, and Fred highly doubted they could shatter a Viewing Portal...but there wasn’t one in the way anymore.

The three casters fell back in alarm, letting their spells end in the process. The two Guild members that had joined Harriette were unharmed as they retreated in time. Harriette, on the other hand, wasn’t so lucky; a stone impacted her head and virtually ripped off the right side of her face as she was tossed backwards from the sheer force. Fortunately for her, there

were dozens of people around that could heal her and they did so, keeping her alive until she stabilized enough to be dragged away.

This rapid-firing of the stones continued through the rest of the maze, after a single, more-powerful shot broke the Viewing Portal. Fred's Guild was helpless, as they had to cover all of the holes with the slabs to prevent anyone else from getting hurt or dying.

And just like that, The Graveler – albeit much reduced in size – made it through Fred's dungeon...and it headed for his "Core Room".

Fred's people were falling back as well, but there was a lengthier series of hallways they had to travel down to reach him, as opposed to the one that was almost a straight shot from the last dungeon room to his location. Looking at their location, they wouldn't reach him in time to help; after losing over 80% of its body mass, The Graveler moved at an insanely quick pace compared to before – why that was, Fred wasn't sure, but he supposed it didn't really matter. All that mattered was that he was on his own.

Possible scenarios of how he could defeat the monster flashed through his head, but each of them ended with his death – or at least a gruesome yet temporary death, but that would likely still collapse his territory – which was essentially also a death sentence for everyone in Allroads. None of the Adventurer spells and abilities he possessed would do anything but delay the inevitable, and after watching the Earth-based invader shoot its fist-sized stones so accurately, he knew that seconds after he saw it, he would likely be "stoned" to death.

Which left his Dungeon Core abilities; the most obvious abilities a Core possessed dealt with changing things around in a dungeon – and since there were "invaders" inside of his dungeon, his hands were tied. He had already tried creating a Defender in an area designated as "not-dungeon",

but the same restriction was in place as it was back in Gatecross; he couldn't bring Defenders created from outside his dungeon *inside*. As much as he liked to – as Deecy would say – “break the rules”, there were some things he couldn't break or even bend a little, and that was one of them.

The one major advantage he had over the other Cores, however, was his ability to manipulate many types of Mana. Not only that, but Fred was pretty sure he could create all-new Dungeon Cores that actually worked, though he hadn't really tested that theory apart from what he had created for Chareese and her resurrection. He had been so busy getting the dungeon ready that he hadn't had time to follow up that experiment with more research...and if he didn't survive the next minute, he probably never would.

But he had also inadvertently created some “Mana bombs” as a result of those initial experiments, which he had used to great effect against the Light army near his territory border; granted, the explosions they caused got a little out of hand and ended up killing Chareese, but in reality...they worked. That was the only thing he could think of to do now, as he used his Adventurer Power and Conjure Object ability to create a thick stone barrier that covered the doorway into his bedroom. It wasn't “dungeon stone” infused with Mana, so it would quickly be pummeled to pieces by The Graveler, but hopefully it would keep it out long enough for Fred to do what he needed to do.

Luckily, there were still a large amount of Earth Mana blobs floating around outside his dungeon; he had stopped giving a lot of the extra to Eisa a little while ago after she complained that each additional infusion was starting to hurt. She said something along the lines of it being “too much, too fast” and Fred could completely understand; when he absorbed way too

much Unconverted Mana in the past, he was forced to upgrade his Human Core to prevent himself from exploding. He wasn't sure what the equivalent was when it came to his Shards, but it was probably something similar that was done internally.

So he had been only giving her enough to fill her up again and not expand her maximum capacity; at the same time, he had stopped taking any more himself because he felt his own internal Core reaching the limit – and he didn't want to take the chance he would miss something by having to upgrade his Human Core to compensate for it. He figured he would have time to figure out what to do with it later, so he had just been gathering it up and letting it roam free *outside* of his dungeon; the last thing he wanted was for it to be absorbed automatically if—*when*—all the invaders were gone.

Fred hesitated when grabbing some of that Earth Mana, however. *How much is too much? Will it damage...or even **destroy** my dungeon? And if I use too little, will I have enough time to create another Mana bomb before it reaches me?* His hesitation proved to take entirely too long because he soon heard the smashing of stone against stone from his impromptu wall. Looking with his Territorial Sight, he saw that The Graveler was already pummeling his wall into dust with repeated rapid-fire strikes, and Fred knew he didn't have long to decide.

Pulling a chunk that he estimated was about 75 units of Earth Mana, he quickly condensed it as tightly as he could and wrapped it thinly with a small portion of his Unconverted Mana from his Human Core; he then placed it near the main “body” of the Earth Defender attacking his Core Room. Bracing himself against the far corner wall, he watched and waited for the explo—

BOOM!

The sound was so much louder than he expected, and the force of the explosion shook his entire Core Room. It also had the unfortunate side effect of finishing the job on his temporary stone wall that The Graveler had started, blasting it inside his bedroom and completely destroying his bed; fortunately, the only physical damage Fred took was from a few pieces of shrapnel that stabbed deeply into his thigh, but the wounds were more superficial than debilitating.

But his head felt much worse; he wasn't sure if it was the explosion itself or because Mana was involved, but his head felt...woozy, and it was hard to think straight. He had a heck of a time just concentrating enough to pull up his Territorial Sight to see if he had succeeded.

The outside of his Core Room where he had set his Mana bomb was thoroughly destroyed; there was a round sphere of destruction centering on where he had placed it, which consumed the Mana-infused upkept walls of his dungeon and left nothing in its wake. Well, not nothing; Fred panicked when he saw at least two dozen of the grey fist-sized stones down the hallway it had come from and the adjoining hallway leading to the other bedrooms. It seemed as though the explosion had destroyed *most* of The Graveler, but as Chareese had said earlier – *all* of it needed to be destroyed in order to kill it.

“Fred, what...that? Are...okay?”

Fred could hear Deecy's broken-up voice in his mind, and try as he might, he couldn't answer back – and the effort hurt his head. A quick glance around showed that his friends were still too far away to reach him in time, despite his delaying tactics. Sure enough, when he looked at the hallways near him again, the stones of The Graveler were all coming back

together where the explosion just occurred; as soon as that happened, he was sure it was over for him.

He tried to Conjure up another stone wall to delay the monster again, but he couldn't even concentrate enough to do that; he held his head between his hands because the world seemed to be spinning, and all he wanted to do was pass out and let it pass. Thoughts of what would happen if he were to do that spurred him on, though, and he pushed through the disorientation and the pain to gather up some more of the scattered Earth Mana, though it was less this time.

If I can create one more bomb and time it so that it goes off just as all the stones gather again, that should do it.

With that thought in his mind, he took some Mana from his Human Core and brought it out to where The Graveler was converging, joining the Earth Mana he had brought over. Still a bit confused and disoriented, he condensed the Unconverted Mana as far as he could and then wrapped it with a thin layer of Earth Mana. As soon as that was done, he released it just as the last of the stones rolled to join the others.

Wait a minute, I think I did that backwa—

Just as he had belatedly thought, his temporarily addled mind wrapped the wrong Mana and there was no big explosion; instead, what happened was just the opposite – an *implosion*.

The Graveler moved forward as soon as all its surviving parts were together again, intending to finish Fred off – but it didn't get far. The inverted “Mana bomb” Fred had created shrunk even smaller than it had originally been, collapsing in upon itself; at the same time, it started to literally *absorb* all the Mana within 10 feet of it, which included the nearby Earth-Mana-based invader looking to kill Fred. The Defender tried to move away, but the force of the Mana implosion was so strong that it was held

fast; within a few seconds, the shape and form of the stone melted away, revealing a massive blob of Earth Mana that Fred estimated had to have held at least 10,000 units of Mana, if not more – a very expensive and powerful Defender, indeed.

That Mana was sucked into the creation Fred had made, which had the result of making it larger in the process; he worried for a second that it would continue to expand and eventually suck in all of his dungeon – and himself included – but it only pulsed once and then stopped. It hung in the air for a moment before it fell to the dirt below that was exposed by the explosion earlier, making a faint *tink* sound as it hit a buried rock.

What...just happened?

Part V – Rescue Mission

Chapter 32

The Supreme of Air could barely hold her “I told you so’s” inside, as she heard Earth complaining about how unfair the Cursedborn’s dungeon had been. She hadn’t been able to see the battle itself, of course, and all she had was secondhand knowledge – but it had been a horrific failure, no matter where she heard the information from. She wasn’t agreeable in the first place to using this tactic; it wasn’t just because Air Defenders weren’t really equipped to dig, though that was a large part of it. No, it was because she was fairly certain that it wouldn’t work.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Council had made its decision, and even if she didn’t wholly support the plan, she had to go along with it for solidarity. And now that the local Earth Core had wasted a sizeable portion of the nearby Earth Cores’ Mana they had contributed to the attack, it was forced to wait until more could be collected and transferred over before attacking again. They weren’t going to risk depleting their entire border of Defenders – if only for the off-chance that the Humans attacked and beat them back, setting back their progress...as little as it was. The local Air Core and her Light ally nearby were contracting the border much more swiftly, so it wouldn’t be that big of a deal in the overall scheme of things, but Earth would take a hit to his pride.

Not that he hadn’t already had his pride utterly devastated with his faction’s showing during the direct attack on the Cursedborn’s dungeon.

And, of course, through Earth’s failure came boasts from most of the other members of the Council, saying that their faction would prevail where the others most likely could not. Air was the only one to not boast, but instead tried to make them see that waiting to attack until they could

coordinate – and attack together – was the best idea. It was the smartest move – at least from what Air could see – but pride was at stake between the factions; most of them only thought of themselves and their faction, unfortunately, instead of taking care of the bigger problem: getting rid of the Cursedborn.

Even the Supreme of Dark had gotten into the arguments and boasting, despite his previous stance of solidarity. It was almost as if the proof that they could reach the dungeon of this individual – despite the danger involved – was some sort of challenge to them, as if they needed to prove to themselves that they *weren't* scared of the Cursedborn's existence and could utterly destroy it at any time. She didn't understand it herself, though she was less and less convinced as the days went by that they *needed* to kill this...person.

While a lot of the details given by those who had witnessed the attack through the eyes of the Earth Defenders were glossed over and deemed unimportant, one fact was made abundantly clear: Humans were assisting him and could manipulate Mana somehow. Not a single one of the Council could explain how that could come about and most dismissed it as an anomaly, a fluke even; however, despite those dismissals, the Supreme of Air couldn't help but wonder how Humans were able to create Defenders and Defenses that went completely against the laws of nature.

Or at least, the laws of Dungeon Core nature.

Because when Air looked at the territory controlled by the Dualborn – and *really* looked, not just glancing at it – with her Mana Sight, she could sense four small concentrations of Mana *separate* from the one in charge of the dungeon. She couldn't actually tell what they were, but as she already knew she couldn't see actual Defenders or Defenses – though she *could* see Cores – she wondered exactly what they were. It was obvious that none of

their factions were actually helping from the inside because every Dungeon Core was accounted for...so it was a mystery.

And Air liked mysteries, especially since it involved this Cursedborn and its uniqueness compared to others of its kind throughout their extensive history. Not only because she wanted the information, but because it might just lead to salvation.

Air lost herself as the others debated on who was going to be the one to take down the Cursedborn, but her thoughts were interrupted as she heard them all agree to something – though it excluded her.

“As much as I don’t agree with Air,” Dark began, which raised her ire a little, “I think it would be prudent to attack all at the same time...*after* we’ve all had a chance to destroy that abomination. Of course, with the Air faction moving so *slowly* through the ground, we’ll exclude them from the attack – unless they improve their progress significantly over the next two weeks.”

That was fine – whatever. She didn’t want to do the whole thing anyway, so they could all have fun doing what they wanted. Air was only happy to hear that they took her advice on coordinating their attack... eventually, of course. When they were all defeated individually, they could get past their pride and get the job done – unless the Cursedborn managed to repel that attack, as well. From what she’d heard, she wouldn’t put it past this individual to manage something like that.

She wished she could meet this Dualborn and find out more about it. There were just so many things different from the norm about it; Air couldn’t help but think that its presence was going to be the change they all were looking for (even if the Council didn’t know it), though she didn’t know why she thought that. Maybe because the world *needed* a change in order for her kind to survive in the long run, and not be controlled by just a

few powerful Cores – and yes, she lumped herself in that group as well. They had done so much over the last 10,000 years to further their survival in the world, but it had gone way past that; the younger generations didn't know what she – and many of the most powerful and senior members of their large Dungeon Core community – had gone through to be where they were today.

They were complacent with the status quo, were used to a structured environment, and didn't ever have to worry about being destroyed by the Humans. As much as it pained her to say it, that complacency – that the Supreme Council helped foster, unfortunately – made them weak, a mere shadow of what they used to be. Air didn't know what to do or how to enact that change, but she had the feeling that this Cursedborn—*Dualborn*—was the catalyst for a shake-up that was needed for them all to survive another 10,000 years...and even beyond that.

But a meeting between her and this Dualborn wasn't likely to happen, because they might not even survive the next month. There was nothing she could do to change what was going to happen because everything was already committed to the cause and pulling support now would only cause undue strife among the factions. There was a relatively steady balance between the alliances right now, and an action like that could have unforeseen consequences; it could even hasten the eventual decline of her species, which was the opposite of what she wanted to accomplish.

So, she decided to just bide her time and wait for an opportunity to work behind the scenes, keeping her involvement a secret – even from her own faction. What she wanted to do would be unpopular and a huge risk, and she wanted to ensure it stayed inside a very private council, a council of one: herself, and herself alone.

Chapter 33

The aftereffects of the Mana explosion happening so close to him didn't last long, fortunately, and within 15 minutes Fred was back to normal. As "normal" as could be figured, of course – especially with what had just occurred, which he still didn't have a proper explanation for. Regardless of the implications of what he had done, Fred needed to ensure that his people were alright, and that his dungeon was prepared to repel another invasion that might come at any time.

The first person he checked on was Eisa, who was doing much better; she was actually conscious again and healing at a fairly rapid pace, thanks to the multiple healers adding their own help to speed up her recovery. By the time he had his wits about him, in fact, she was almost back to perfect health – just missing a little bit of her shoulder still, but it was filling in quickly. Her dress took a beating as well and Fred took the time to use his Repair Object ability to fix it for her, which she appreciated greatly.

As for everyone else – even Harriette, who also received a full recovery for her face – they were on the whole fine, if exhausted. Well, other than the poor townsman that lost his life in the first room.

"His name was Chausser, and he was a good man," Eisa whispered to him later when he was asking about the man. Fred felt like a horrible person not even knowing his name beforehand, but he wasn't really good with names; his upbringing in a dungeon didn't lend itself to needing to learn very many names, and it was something he wasn't too accustomed to doing – especially if he didn't have any particularly strong interactions with them.

“Are you going to try to bring him back as a...Shard?”

The Dire Wolf had also made a full recovery, though she seemed to feel bad that she hadn't been able to do more against The Graveler. *“I don't know, Deecy. I'm worried that if I try to make another Core like I did with Chareese, it might consume all of my Mana again and almost kill me; however, I will look into it – but not until I make sure everything here is as safe as can be and ready to repel any more invasions.”*

It wasn't as though he was worried about the Mana expenditure in doing something like attempting to make Chausser a Shard; as far as he was concerned, Mana was meant to be used and he couldn't think of any better reason to use it than to bring someone back to life that had perished in Fred's defense. No, it was because he didn't want to become vulnerable just as an attack was imminent – being nearly empty of Mana when an invasion was incoming wasn't the smartest choice he could make. An extra Shard on their team would definitely help, but would it be enough to offset being extremely low on Mana?

He didn't want to consider himself callous and not value the life of Chausser appropriately, but there was a lot that he wanted to use his available Mana on that would benefit *them all*, and not just one person. If they managed to survive long enough that he felt safe doing so, Fred would consider it; until that time, he'd much prefer to use his resources to reset his dungeon, build additional rooms, add more Defenses and Defenders, and – what he thought was most important over everything else – experiment with Cores to figure out how to prevent all of Allroads from being destroyed.

Thankfully, Deecy and the others approved of this decision because they well understood his reasoning; however, they thought that they should

at least preserve his body until the time came when Fred could attempt to bring him back, and Fred wholeheartedly agreed.

More important than the other Shards backing up his decision was the other townspeople, the ones that knew Chausser the best, agreeing with his decision. They said that if it came to having him miraculously come back to life *right now*, or having additional rooms and defenses to protect them, they said that even the man himself – Chausser – would push off his potential resurrection. That, more than anything, made Fred feel better about the decision, even if it still bothered him not to do something about it when he potentially could.

Regardless of his feelings, he had a job to do – after he got a little rest, though. Even though he hadn't been directly involved in the fighting, the intense concentration needed for keeping track of the entire invasion took a toll on him, not to mention almost blowing himself up with his own Mana bomb. As for the Mana “implosion”, he still needed to think about what that meant and what dangers it could pose in the future – as well as any potential uses he could find for it. Fred was just glad that no one had seen what had been done because he couldn't explain it himself quite yet; it wasn't a secret, of course, but he hadn't told anyone about the strange “Core” he had picked up that was left behind. He just had to figure things out first.

So, after making sure everything was reset in the dungeon, and Eisa and Chareese both replenished as many of their Defenders and Plants as they could, Fred felt that it was time for a well-deserved rest for everyone. As much as he worried about another army of Earth-based monsters invading, he felt fairly confident that they were going to hold off for the time being – at least until their Mana regenerated a little bit before trying again. Even the Hyper Stoneworm – that had been holding still in the

tunnel leading to Allroads – had taken off back towards the Earth territory, so there was no danger from that direction. There were still the other factions that were nearing his dungeon, of course, but the nearest was a few days away at least.

Now that he officially “knew” about them digging towards his dungeon, he had some plans on how to slow them down – at least temporarily – but he was going to wait until he got some rest. He still felt a little shaken up from his brush with death, and he was sure that some sleep would allow him to move forward with a lot of his plans.

Unfortunately, a *long* restful sleep was not his to have. It felt like he just closed his eyes when Fred jerked awake, some sense of his alerting him of danger. He knew exactly what it was: an invader had entered his dungeon. The Guild and townspeople had all been in the Barracks sleeping off their exhaustion (as well as allocating the 236,510 Essence that they all received after all of the Earth invaders were gone), and a quick check of his Territorial Sight showed that they were all still there. The only explanation he could come up with was that the monsters had arrived already, despite his assumption that they wouldn’t attack for at least a day or two, or else wait until there were two factions able to coordinate in a joint assault.

But no, he was wrong again, fortunately; instead of a monster army flooding his dungeon, there was just one familiar person there – and one of the last people he would expect to see set a foot inside of his dungeon: Elder Hood, the DAS representative from the Allroads Council. Where before she had practically shone with confidence and power, she now appeared to be beaten down and haggard, as if she hadn’t slept in days.

Almost as if she could sense him looking at her, she said to the empty air, “We need to talk.” And with that simple statement, she walked

back up the entrance tunnel and waited there, with just Roady and Agelstein in attendance.

This...can't be good. Waking Eisa up gently – which still elicited a grumpy remark about not getting enough sleep – he told her what was going on, before waking up the other Shards to tell them what was going on. They too weren't happy about being woken up, either, but they were as interested as he was to find out what the Elder's appearance was all about – especially Chareese.

“She hasn't left the Governmental Quarter in...decades, maybe? I'm not really sure, actually, because I honestly can't remember a time she wasn't always there. For her to come down here – even during this terrible siege by the nearby dungeons – is an interesting development,” the former Inquisitor told them as they rushed through the side hallways on their way to the entrance.

Fred was thinking the same thing, though he hadn't known about the Elder's lack of leaving; Roady had come to check on everyone in the dungeon (and especially his sister) after the Stonewyrm had left, and from what he said, the city was doing fine. They barely even knew there was something going on underneath their feet, which was the way the Government wanted to handle it for the time being; the people of Allroads had enough to worry about with the enclosing ring of monsters along Fred's borders – they didn't need something else on their minds.

Regardless of the reasons Elder Hood was there, Fred's mind was already going off on tangents even as he was walking to meet her; there were new ideas of rooms he wanted to construct, new Defenses he wanted to alter from what he already had access to, and there were also ideas floating around with the Defenders that Eisa now had access to – because there were now dozens of new ones that Fred could absorb and learn the

blueprints for. Even though it was all to keep himself and his people safe, he couldn't help but be excited about what he could potentially create in the future.

But now he had to see what was going on that would cause one of the Allroads Council to visit unexpectedly.

Fred had to admit, the Elder looked even worse in person. There were heavy bags under her eyes and those eyes looked a little...*wild*...was the only thing he could equate them with. "To what do I owe the honor—"

Fred was cut off immediately by the S-9th-Rated Arcanist. "Cut the pleasantries, I'm not in the mood for them today. My husband is in trouble, and I need your help."

That...is the last thing I was expecting. "What do you mean, and how can I help?" Fred automatically responded. He wasn't sure how he'd be able to help, but he was willing to do what he could to keep the Council – and especially the powerful Elder – on his side.

"Wait a minute...you have a husband?" Chareese asked before Hood could respond. *This is getting more interesting by the moment.*

"Yes, I do. We were married so long ago that very few even remember it, and since I joined the Allroads Council we elected to keep it that way. Not even the other Council members know, so I apologize for keeping you out of the loop; we – as in my husband Mikel and I – decided that it would be safer for the both of us if no one knew, so that we couldn't be used against each other for either political or financial gain."

Fred could sort of understand that; if someone captured one of his friends, he would go to the ends of the world to help save them. *Just look at what I did to locate my Guild and the Gatecross townspeople.*

"Mikel? Wait, Mikel Trovell? As in..." Chareese asked, and Fred could see shock and he guessed sorrow on her face at the same time. "Did

you know about this?” she then demanded, looking straight at her brother.

“He knows *now* – I had to tell him and Agelstein, otherwise they wouldn’t let me come down here without a good reason. Security concerns and all that...though it’s not like they could stop me if I really decided I wanted to make my way down here,” the Elder muttered under her breath irritably. Roady silently shrugged as if to say sorry and there was nothing he could do.

“I’m confused,” Fred broke in to the strange conversation. “What’s going on – and what does this have to do with me?”

Elder Hood opened her mouth a couple of times without anything coming out; when she appeared like she was having trouble explaining, Chareese took over for her. “Mikel was one of our tanks in our expedition against the Light monsters earlier this week. I never did find out exactly what happened, but I was told he was one of almost 60 of us that didn’t make it back.” The Nature Shard looked at the Elder apologetically, before saying, “It was my understanding that he...died out there, his body consumed by that massive explosion – is that not true?”

Ah, I think I’m understanding some of this now. “No, the only one that died out there was you, Chareese,” Fred said, and it was his turn to look apologetic.

“What do you mean?” Roady asked, his concern plain on his face.

Fred realized that he had mentioned it to Eisa and Regnark – as well as his Guild and townspeople – but forgot to mention it to anyone from Allroads. “None of the missing were killed on the battlefield out there; instead, I witnessed them either gravely injured or unconscious, being dragged or carried by a pair or a trio of Crystal Golems back to Light territory. I assumed they were being brought back there to be killed, thereby giving the Core there a massive increase in their Mana.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” Chareese demanded hotly.

“I apologize profusely. I think that I unconsciously didn’t want you to worry over their fate, because it was probably better that you considered that they died near their comrades, instead of being dragged back to a dungeon to be...consumed. I honestly thought they would be killed immediately, so I didn’t think it would matter,” Fred said as sincerely as he could, and his newest Shard – as well as Roady – were mollified... somewhat. “But that doesn’t seem to be the case,” he added, before turning back to Elder Hood and asking what she meant by her husband being in trouble.

“I created a Bond between us after I joined the Allroads Council, mainly as a way that we could stay connected even when we were forced to be apart. It allows us to know where the other one is anywhere in the world, and it also imparts a very low level of emotion that the other person is feeling. It was almost like we were near each other all the time, though it was a poor substitute for the real thing,” the Elder said sadly, a faraway look in her eyes.

She shook her head as if to clear those thoughts and got back to her explanation. “Mikel was always a stubborn man, however – and that was what I loved about him. He insisted in joined the others in the expedition out to thin out the Light monsters even when I told it was too dangerous; when he didn’t come back with you all, I mourned privately...but the feeling of him being alive persisted. I thought that something was wrong with the Bond, but after a while I realized that he was still living – and being tortured into incapacitation every couple of hours when he would heal enough to fight back. Or at least, that’s what I assume, as I can only feel his intense emotions from here.”

Unfortunately, what the Elder said made sense to Fred, as insane as it sounded. Instead of killing them outright, the “prisoners” were likely being held to accumulate as much Mana from them as possible; when the amount that the Core was receiving from them waned, only *then* would they be killed, giving them another boost. It was a horrible way to go, of course, and he felt a little dirty even as he – from a pure Dungeon Core point of view – considered the practicality of the technique. He’d never do something like that himself, but he could see why a Core that was planning on killing everyone nearby anyway wouldn’t be above that sort of thing.

“I...see. I’m assuming he was fairly high-Rated, and if that’s the case, he could be held for *weeks* – along with everyone else that was captured. But that brings me back to my original question: what can *I* do about it? I’m kind of stuck here, remember?” Fred asked.

“Because I want to lead a rescue party to save him and anyone else held captive there.” Elder Hood explained, before hesitating. “Only...I don’t have any idea how to negotiate for their release. My guess, as far as I can assume with a dungeon that isn’t above torture, is that if the dungeon knows we’re there to rescue the captives – including my husband – they’ll be killed immediately and there’d be no way to save them. Therefore, I need your help.”

Fred felt for her and wanted to help – but there was one major problem. “I’ll help however I can, but I can’t leave my territory, or it’ll collapse. And even if I could, they’ll be able to see me coming as soon as I step a foot in their territory; they likely know what I look like now according to my unique Mana signature, so they’ll be on the lookout for me. Normally, it doesn’t show outside of my body as much as a normal Dungeon Core, but I don’t want to risk them seeing me out there,” Fred explained. He looked over at Deecy with a brief thought, before she shook

her head sadly. “The same goes for any of the Shards with me; Deecy could probably communicate with the dungeon if she were within a couple hundred feet of the dungeon entrance, but she – as well as any of the others – would light up like a giant beacon with all the Mana they hold inside them.”

The Elder looked disappointed and her shoulders slumped in defeat. “Well, I had to ask. I’m going tomorrow morning anyway, to see if I can succeed; if Mikel had been killed outright it would be one thing, but I can’t let him suffer any longer than he already has. If you can figure out any way to help, please do so,” she said, before walking away up the tunnel leading to the Prison without another word.

Something in her brother’s expression seemed to catch Chareese’s eye. “Please don’t tell me you’re going with her,” she whisper-shouted to Roady as soon as the Elder was far enough away. “It’s suicide – and you know it!”

“And I also know my duty, which is to protect the Council – wherever they are,” the massive armored man whispered softly back. “We’ll do everything we can to protect her, but I doubt she’ll even need us, to be honest.”

“We? Agelstein – you’re going too?”

The Necro-Wizard didn’t look afraid in the slightest. “Of course. It’ll be exciting to see a master at work.”

Fred didn’t think that anything involving delving through a dungeon in order to rescue captives was exciting, but he knew from looking at the Elder’s Adventurer Interface that she was...formidable. The Knight-Commander and Agelstein then turned around and walked away as well, following Hood as she traveled faster through the tunnel than he expected

for such an aged Human. *I guess age doesn't really mean much when you're such a high-Rated person.*

Fred turned back towards his dungeon, new thoughts running through his head now. Chareese stayed behind, looking at where her brother just disappeared up the tunnel. "I should be the one going with them..." she said softly, with a hint of regret in her voice.

He stopped and put his hand on her shoulder, hoping that she would take it as a sign of comfort. "I'm sorry for what happened to you, Chareese, but as soon as you step foot into the Light territory you'll have a target on your back. They have a better chance of succeeding if they don't have your Mana signature pinpointing their location all the time," Fred told her. "Humans are practically invisible to Cores unless they're inside their dungeon—" he continued, before stopping as a thought occurred to him.

Hmm...maybe that will work...

Leaving Chareese to figure things out on her own, Fred speed-walked back to his bedroom/Core Room with fresh ideas running through his head. All thoughts of getting some extra sleep were lost as the possibilities opened up before him...

Chapter 34

“What are you doing, Fred? I thought you were going to build some more rooms to expand your dungeon,” Eisa asked him, pulling Fred from his thoughts.

That’s true, I was going to do that...

As soon as he got back to his Core Room, Fred had built a small adjacent room to conduct his experiments; as much as his bedroom was more comfortable, he had just recreated his bed after it had been destroyed and he didn’t want to have to do it again if something went wrong. Then again, if something went wrong he’d probably end up blowing himself up as well, so it probably didn’t matter, but he didn’t want to think about that.

“I will, but this is...time-sensitive.”

Eisa stared at him for a moment, before asking in a quiet voice, “You’re trying to figure out a way to go with the Elder, aren’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“Then I’m going with you,” she stated, as if it were final.

“I’m sorry, Eisa, but you can’t,” he told her and then held up his hands to stop her from arguing when she looked angry. “It’s not that I don’t want you there, but you’ll light up with your Mana even more than Chareese, Regnark, or Deecy – especially with how much Mana you can hold now,” he explained.

“Then what about you? You said that they’d be able to pinpoint you just as well because of your Mana signature, or something like that,” Eisa demanded, obviously still angry about being told no.

“If what I’m doing is successful, then they won’t be able to sense me. And before you ask, I won’t be able to do the same for you or the

others; whereas my Mana signature is like seeing a candle in the forest at night, the Mana infused in all your bodies is like the sun on a hot day. It's much easier to hide a candle flame than a giant burning orb in the sky."

She huffed angrily, still not willing to accept what he was saying. "But why you? Why do you need to go? We—I—need you here."

Why me? That's a good question, and I have to admit that it's a bit selfish, though it will benefit everyone in the end. "I'm the only one that can go and speak to this Core and convince it to spare the captives. And," he added when he saw that reason wasn't good enough for her, "because I'm hoping to gain access to Light Mana."

There. It's out in the open now, and she'll probably hate me for being greedy.

Instead of appearing like she was angry, she looked thoughtful. "That's...actually a good idea. From what you said, the only reason the Light – and Air – monsters are moving much faster towards the city is because you don't share an element with them. And if you *are* able to gain access to Light, then they would slow down as much as the others...which in turn would give us a lot more time to plan how to break this siege," she reasoned, quite insightfully. "But it's still too dangerous; even if you managed to succeed, I'm sure you'll be accosted as soon as you step out of the dungeon."

"That's...true. I'm not going to deny that it's dangerous, but the way I see it, it's the only way we're going to survive in the long run. Sure, I can stay here and build more dungeon rooms to protect *us* – and I still plan to – but if this succeeds, then we're one step closer to saving *everyone*. And I just don't mean the city of Allroads, but every Human *and* Dungeon Core around the world. I don't know exactly how yet, but something is telling me that if I don't do this then we've lost before we even begin."

Eisa was silent for a long time; it was so long that Fred worried that she was going to argue with him again and she was only thinking up a good angle. “Okay. I’m not going to stop or argue against this plan of action because I know that will only delay the inevitable. However, I’m still not happy about it; despite how I feel, though, you have my support to do what your instincts are telling you – because they haven’t led us *too* astray before this,” she finally said, ending with a sad smile.

Fred grabbed her and gave her a big hug followed up with a long kiss. It felt good having her back in this endeavor and he really appreciated her seeing his side. He shared her misgivings and didn’t blame her for having them, he was just glad that she wasn’t going to hinder him in any way. “Thank you. You know I wouldn’t leave unless I had to.”

“I know, and that’s why I’m standing behind your decision, even if I personally don’t like it.” She kissed *him* this time, before turning away and heading out his Core Room doorway. “And I’m going to break this to the others because I’m sure you don’t want to have to deal with their questions, either,” she added, before she disappeared around the corner.

Thankful that the issue was taken care of – at least temporarily – Fred turned back to his thoughts on Mana, Dungeon Cores, and even how a dungeon operated with those Cores. Thinking about what he had done in the past, he was pretty sure he knew what had occurred – and how to fix things.

When he first attempted to create a Dungeon Core, he had succeeded in creating an...empty shell of sorts – that was more than obvious. While it had the structure of a Dungeon Core, it didn’t have any of the internal bits and pieces and information that allowed a Core to operate independently; in short, it didn’t have a sentient consciousness to it.

Now, when he used it to make Chareese a Shard, he had needed to add all of that information into the Core, which helped – but that wasn't what made it eventually succeed; no, he had needed to create a new consciousness to fully operate it. And whereas the other pieces of Dungeon Cores he had used to create Deecy, Eisa, and Regnark already had a spot for a consciousness imprinted on them – even if they weren't technically in residence anymore – there wasn't anything like that in this new Core he created.

From what he could ascertain from his own memories, it was that establishment of some sort of consciousness slot inside the Core that cost so much Mana; it wasn't necessarily the establishment in and of itself, but because he was specifically creating it for something not designed to fit inside: a non-Dungeon Core consciousness. Eisa and the others were basically *shoehorned* into those previous slots, which made them still work but weren't necessarily ideal; that could be why Eisa suffered some pain and discomfort when she absorbed too much Mana all at once.

It could also explain why Chareese had such a stronger connection with her Mana; he hadn't said anything to any of them, but she seemed to almost *merge* with her Mana when she manipulated it, and she had a deeper connection with her plants than any of the others did with their Defenders, minions, or Defenses they created. Not only that, but her maximum Mana increased at a slightly faster rate than the others, but he only noticed because he could actually monitor it himself – which was yet another reason why he thought his theory was valid. It wasn't only because *he* had made the Core, but because it was suited to a Human rather than exclusively as a Dungeon Core, which related to him much better; Fred was neither a Dungeon Core nor a Human, but a perfect mixture of both.

Even if what he was theorizing was correct, it still didn't mean he could create a fully functioning, independent Dungeon Core – he didn't have a consciousness to place into it. Eisa's, Regnark's, and Chareese's consciousnesses were taken from their bodies and placed inside the pieces of Cores and the Core Fred had created; Deecy was a crazy mixture of his parents' consciousness which ended up making a completely different personality in the end, but the same principle applied to her as well. Therefore, without a consciousness to insert into a Core, it was just a pretty hunk of glowing rock.

He *thought* he could transfer a living Human's consciousness to a Core he created, but something told him that wouldn't necessarily be a good idea. First, it would likely kill the person – no mind inside a body wouldn't be good for its health; and second, he had a feeling that transferring a *living* Human consciousness would result in it not being able to adapt to its new form very well, even if it were completely voluntary – and it could potentially lead to some horrific consequences.

There was something about it being “dead” that made a consciousness more amenable to new circumstances, either because it was easier to mold into what it needed to be or because it didn't have any other choice; regardless, he didn't want to find out what would happen if he tried that, and wouldn't be asking for volunteers anytime soon.

*But what if instead of **transferring** an entire consciousness, I connected the two forms somehow?*

He didn't think that would necessarily work for a full Human and a Dungeon Core – they were just too different for something like that to succeed. But for Fred himself...it might just work, because he was already an unusual combination of Human and Dungeon Core. He wasn't quite

sure where he was going with it, but his *instincts* – as Eisa said earlier – told him he was on the right track.

With that in mind, Fred pulled up his available Mana to see what he had to work with.

Fire Mana: 540/540

Water Mana: 540/540

Nature Mana: 540/540

Earth Mana: 540/540

Dark Mana: 540/540

Unconverted Mana: 154312 (647)

Fred had accumulated quite a lot of Unconverted Mana during the invasion of his dungeon, but he had stopped taking it in after it got close to his limit of 160,000. He knew he could've upgraded his Human Core Structure Level if he took that much in, but as he had considered before, he didn't want to lose all that Mana in the process nor possibly miss something important while he was doing it.

But now was the time to use some of it.

Fred used his Adventurer Power to Conjure up a small stool in the middle of the adjacent room, and as he settled down on it, he cleared his mind. He was forced to deactivate his Territorial Sight again – after first making sure everything was looking okay – because of the constant pressure on his borders; while he had gotten used to it after a while, it was still distracting when he was trying to focus on something vital...and potentially dangerous.

With a deep breath, Fred closed his eyes as he focused on the Cores inside of his body. His Human Core was practically humming with energy

– being almost completely filled – and each of his Elemental Cores were much larger than they had been the last time he *really* looked at them – which were pulsing with a healthy glow as well. Focusing on the red Fire Core, he mentally reached in and slowly pulled every single drop of Mana out of it; Fred felt a little drain from its loss, but by doing it slowly he negated a lot of the fatigue he usually experienced when so much was removed at once.

Opening his eyes, he took the surprisingly large blob of 540 Fire Mana and started to smash it together, compressing it until it was a tight sphere that was half the size of his fist. Fred kept his mental hold on the compressed Fire orb as he reached back inside of himself and slowly drew out all of the Water Mana from the blue-colored Elemental Core. Repeating what he did with the Fire Mana, he compressed the Water Mana down to a sphere the same size as the other.

Fred did the same with his Nature Mana while still keeping hold on the first two. It was only when he completed the green sphere that he started to feel the strain on his mind; taking out the Earth Mana slowly was a minor struggle to pace himself, because he wanted to just rip it out and do what he had done with the others, but he restrained himself. After he was done compressing the brown sphere, he almost lost all focus as his vision wavered from the pressure of keeping everything tightly compacted at the same time.

He pulled every drop of Dark Mana out of the black-colored Elemental Core probably a little too fast in his haste, and he almost felt everything collapse. With a tremendous effort, he managed to keep hold of everything, with only the Fire sphere expanding a little bit before he clamped it back down to its former shape. When he finally compacted the

Dark Mana into the same shape as the four others, he arranged them in the same pattern they appeared in his body.

There wasn't a Human Core there, of course, but it had the same general shape. He had gone into this knowing that he wouldn't be able to replicate his special Core, because he had already tried that in his previous experiment; however, that didn't mean he wasn't going to use any Unconverted Mana at all. Quite the contrary, actually.

Still maintaining his hold over the five elemental spheres floating in front of him, Fred pulled out 5,000 units of Unconverted Mana and wrapped it around each of the spheres individually...and then, one-by-one, he compressed the clear shell around each of the elements with as much mental force as he could. After an hour of condensing them down as much as he could, he was sweating profusely and felt ready to pass out.

But he wasn't done yet.

Holding everything together in place was either getting easier or becoming automatic, because it wasn't as much of a strain as it was at first; however, it was the pressure he had to place on everything that was the hard part and what was quickly exhausting him. With another deep breath and a wipe of his arm across his forehead to get rid of some of his sweat, Fred pulled out 10,000 Unconverted Mana from his Human Core and Wrapped it entirely around the five spheres. When they were entirely enclosed in a much larger nigh-invisible bubble, he realized how thin that bubble was; he reached in and pulled out another 10,000...then another...then another. In all, he pumped 50,000 UM into the outer shell, bringing it to a thickness that he was finally satisfied with.

Before he did anything else, Fred mentally inserted all of the information regarding Dungeon Core systems into the outer shell, similarly to what he did with Chareese during her Sharding process; the major

difference, however, was he wasn't creating a "slot" for a consciousness. Instead, he reached out with his hands to grab the large bubble and started to transfer a portion of his own consciousness over to it; with nowhere to go, it rebounded back towards him without harm – and then he sent it back.

Back and forth, over and over, Fred quickly increased the speed of the partial consciousness transfer until it was so fast that it was practically in two places at once. When it got to that point, he started to contract the entire sphere in his hands.

And that part proved to be the hardest of all.

In all, he was trying to condense almost 90,000 total Mana together into one, and the mental pressure almost broke his mind. Thoughts about what would happen if he failed – and about the lives of the captives that were at stake – flashed through his head; instead of it discouraging him, however, it only spurred him on to fight harder. He pushed with his hands, he pushed with his mind, he even brought the large sphere down and pushed it with his feet; after an indeterminate time of fighting to smash everything together as tightly as he could, he wound up with an extremely hard, two-fist-sized sphere with clearly defined colors, though they were smashed together so that they weren't quite spheres inside anymore.

Fred yelled out in pain as the strain of keeping it compressed finally stabbed into his mind, and he knew it was time to let go or risk doing himself permanent harm. So...he did.

A bright flash of light and soundless shockwave blew him off his stool and out the doorway leading to his bedroom. Fortunately for him, he landed on the mattress, which prevented him from taking any more than superficial damage when he bounced off and hit the floor.

Before he even picked himself up from where he landed, Fred could feel a fundamental change in his body. Curious, he looked inside of himself

to see his Human Core appearing largely unchanged – other than having about half as much Mana in it – but his Elemental Cores looked...dormant. Not dead or destroyed or anything so drastic as that, but...empty and “closed” (that was the only way he could describe the feeling of them). However, there was an invisible line leading from them and out of his chest – straight into the adjacent room.

He got up excitedly, only to see Eisa racing in with a worried expression on her face. “Are you okay? Everyone just felt something like a shockwave pass through them and I knew it had to be you.”

“Yes, I believe I’m fine,” Fred said with a smile on his face. He wasn’t quite sure if he succeeded, but not dying was a victory in and of itself.

Eisa joined him as he walked to the adjoining room, only to see a glowing, multi-colored stone floating in the middle of the room, the brightness in it pulsing with the same “heartbeat” as his Human Core inside of his own body.

“What’s that?” she asked, fascinated. She walked around it curiously and kept hesitatingly bringing her hands up like she wanted to touch the floating stone.

“That, my dear love, is my Core.”

Chapter 35

It wasn't quite as simple as all that, but that's essentially what it was. Instead of Fred directly controlling the elements inside his body, the stone that he had created was an amalgamation of the different types of Mana he could control – just *outside* of his body. He found that he could still access everything the same as he used to with the same speed and ease, but when he pulled out Fire Mana, for example, it came from the multi-colored Core instead of his body.

Best of all, his territory had transferred to his new floating Core, which was what he was hoping for. Since it had been established using the elements, it only made sense that it would stay tied to them; and seeing as though it wasn't connected directly to his body anymore...he was theoretically able to leave now.

There were still things that he had to test, of course – which his friends were more than happy to help with. The first thing was making sure the dungeon would reset the way it was supposed to after all the “invaders” were gone; a simple test of this occurred when one of Fred's few Defenders was killed and a trap was set off deliberately – and it reset exactly the way it was supposed to without Fred doing anything.

Next, he had to see if he could “program” additional instructions that it would follow – the first of which was sorting out incoming additional Mana so that some went to the Shard that needed it and some went to Fred. This was a little harder to test, but it was accomplished by Fred bringing in a Rock Beetle that was made from outside of the dungeon when there were no invaders and then killing it. Since it wasn't tied to the dungeon, it wasn't something that would automatically be reset, and the Core

automatically split the Nature Mana from its death up between Chareese and itself.

He also found that extra elemental Mana over and above his maximum would still be changed to Unconverted Mana, which meant he could accumulate more even when he wasn't there. He discovered that when the process grabbed all of the extra Earth Mana that had been floating around from the previous invasion and split it up between Eisa and his own reserves – and it even did it at a measured pace instead of all at once! When he thought back to how the whole process seemed to be automatic to him, he found that he wasn't far wrong.

The only thing that the multi-colored Core *couldn't* do was access and use Unconverted Mana, which meant that it wasn't able to remove and replace the slabs of stone that were designed to block the Viewing Portals. Fred could only hope that by the time something like that was needed, he would be back and ready to help with that portion of the defense.

There were some things that he was unable to test, the most important one was whether or not him actually leaving his territory would have an effect on anything. He was 99% sure that the territory wouldn't collapse when he left, but it was unknown what would actually happen; it could range anywhere from nothing to a full shutdown of the multi-element Core in everything but the territory. Unfortunately, the only way to test that was to leave...and hope for the best.

Everything that he had done had taken the rest of the day and most of the night to finish, and though he was exhausted from everything, he knew he had to get moving if he wanted to join Elder Hood and the others on their rescue mission. Just before he headed out of his dungeon, however, Eisa stopped him.

“Fred...be careful. I wasn’t joking when I said I need you; come back safe to me,” she said, before wrapping her arms around him and giving him a long kiss. “And when you come back, we’re going to find some time to be alone together,” she whispered in his ear when she pulled away.

“What do you mean—?” Fred asked, not understanding what she was saying at first. They had spent some time alone together the last few instances they had both slept in his room, so it didn’t make sense. Then his tired mind caught up with what he assumed she was hinting at, and he smiled. “Sure, I’d love that,” he replied. He wasn’t exactly sure if he would actually love it or not, but if that was what she wanted, he wasn’t going to complain. From what he’d observed from the few times he saw an “act of love” through his Territorial Sight in Allroads up above, it looked fun.

He didn’t say anything else as he took off, racing up the tunnel to meet up with Elder Hood and her small party. Chareese had already informed them that he would be coming so they wouldn’t leave without him, and sure enough, they were waiting just outside the prison.

“So, do you have any idea how you want to try to get past the border? There appears to be very little room in between the monsters there, and they’ll see us coming from a mile away,” Fred asked the Elder as soon as he joined them, the light from the sun just barely touching the sky in the far distance. The S-9th-Rated Arcanist was accompanied by only three other people: Rody, Agelstein, and Ravenne – the S-2nd-Rated Assassin-Spy that Fred had briefly met when they were first captured by the Allroads government.

“I have the ability to camouflage us from their sight, but we’ll have to be really cautious to stay away from monsters that have really good hearing and sense of smell. If we’re lucky, we should be able to sneak

through and then it'll be a straight shot to the Light dungeon," Elder Hood told him.

Fred thought about that for a second, before looking back at the line along the border. From what he could see, her plan *might* work, but it was extremely risky. "I have another idea that hopefully won't be as dangerous; and if it works, we won't have to sneak by anything close enough to touch," he stated, giving a little shiver at the thought of trying to tiptoe past a Warp Dragon on one side and a massive Crystal Golem on the other. "It'll be a little longer of a walk, but it'll be much safer," he warned.

The three others looked between themselves as if trying to decide whether to trust him, but Elder Hood only looked straight into his eyes, as if she could plumb the depths of his soul with a stare. With a slight shrug, she said, "I'm all for that – I don't want to have to fight my way all the way to the dungeon if I can help it."

And so, Fred led them out of the city to the west and a little south – straight for the nearby Earth Core's territory. It was located adjacent to the Light territory – which was a little further south – and going that way would add a couple of miles to their journey, but Fred would rather walk further than get ripped apart by Light Defenders on the border. And despite the thinner ranks of the Earth Defenders on that border, he wasn't planning on trying to sneak through their line either.

He'd rather go below them.

So as they walked past all of the elemental concentrations surrounding the city on their way out west, Fred gradually used his Unconverted Mana to dig a small tunnel just wide enough for Rody – being the largest of them – to walk down, angled in a gradual slope that eventually wound up next to the tunnel the Rockworms had finished digging to his dungeon only a day or so ago. From what he could tell on his

side of the border, it was completely empty; he had periodically been keeping an eye on the other end as much as he could and hadn't seen anything enter it from the Earth territory side, but there was no way to be sure without actually going inside.

It took them about an hour from the center of the city to where he had dug his passageway right next to the Earth invasion tunnel, which meant that the sun had finally come up – but they couldn't see it, of course, being extremely deep underground. And although a Dungeon Core didn't “technically” need light to see, it made it much easier to spot things visually in daylight as opposed to the dark of night while using Territory Sight.

“Before I eliminate this last portion, I would advise you to use your **Anti-detection Field** ability before we enter the tunnel; I don't see anything on my side of the border, but I can't speak for the other,” Fred told the Elder.

She nodded. “I can do that—wait...how do you know what that is? I didn't mention its name earlier.”

“That's because I can see your Interface, if you remember; and though I don't get a full description of everything at a quick glance, I guessed about which one you were talking about fairly fast,” he replied, before turning back to the last portion of the passageway he hadn't dug out yet. It ended up costing him almost 8,000 Unconverted Mana to make the dirt-lined tunnel, but it was worth the expense not to end up smashed flat by some horrendously powerful monster up above.

Fred felt Power wash over him and extend in a sort of dome around the group. It wasn't small, by any means, but he couldn't see more than a few other people in addition to those currently in their party being able to stay within it consistently. *I was wondering why there were only five of us for a rescue mission – this makes sense, though.* Secrecy and stealth was

the main objective of the first part of the operation and having too many people to keep safely hidden was liable to expose them to the prying Sight of the nearby Cores.

They were through and into the dug-out tunnel in no time, and Fred turned to the hole he had removed from the wall, filling it back in quickly with dirt and doing his best to smooth it out so it matched the rest. It wouldn't do to have his work there as evidence in case anything came by at some point in the near future, and Fred thought it looked pretty good. It wouldn't hold up to any significant inspection, but at a cursory glance it looked indistinguishable.

It was extremely dark in the tunnel, but Ravenne used an ability on them called Nighteyes, which brightened it up considerably. Again, Fred didn't necessarily need it to see, but it helped not having to rely on his Mana and Territorial Sight to navigate his way.

Luckily, as they cautiously made their way up and out of the tunnel, not a single Earth Defender seemed to be present. Within a matter of minutes, Fred could feel his territory border coming up; he stopped the group just feet from passing through, despite the confused and impatient expressions on their faces. Fred took a few trepidatious steps forward, braced for everything to fall apart...and he passed through the intangible barrier, no worse for wear.

However, as he looked around and saw that – thankfully – his territory was still there, he found that he had been essentially cut off from his Core back in his dungeon. He stepped back for a moment to find that the connection between them was still there, but apparently when he left the territory he couldn't access the elemental mana it contained. Whether or not it meant that he would still receive Unconverted Mana from it was still

unknown, but at least it seemed like it was still working autonomously even without his presence.

He shrugged at the others – who could just barely see him in the dim lighting of the tunnel – and gestured for them to continue. There was nothing he could do about it now, especially as he was essentially already committed. As long as the territory was still there, his hope was that everything else would work itself out without him.

They still didn't see anything in the tunnel as they worked their way out of it into the morning sunshine; the first Earth Defender they saw, in fact, was a lonely Stone Golem 50 feet away from the hole in the ground and angled towards the border a short distance ahead. Though, with Stone Golems it was hard to determine which way they were facing, mainly because they didn't have distinguishable features – but that was his impression, anyway.

Other than that, the valley around them was entirely clear. They were as silent as they could be as they started to run to the east and the Light territory, and any tracks they left were instantly cleared up by Ravenne, who used an ability called **Dispersion** to erase their passage. *I guess being an Assassin-Spy comes with more than just abilities to kill things quietly – they are great at concealment and are probably used to sneaking up on people, too.* Her abilities – when he looked at her Interface briefly as they ran – certainly backed up that assumption.

The run was actually quite exhilarating and woke Fred up a bit from his exhaustion; while he felt comfortable down below in a dungeon – probably because he had spent more than 80% of his life in one – it felt good to be out in the wide open world, free to move around and not be tied to a specific place. *I wonder if Dungeon Cores would feel the same, or if this is just my Human side coming out?*

Nothing accosted them on the way, so it was obvious that his plan to separate and leave the Mana and Mana signature in his body back in Allroads had worked. He was confident that the nearby Cores would recognize him if he hadn't done what he did; that was further proven when they crossed over to Light territory and no Defenders appeared out of thin air to accost them.

Fred could vaguely sense with his Mana Sight where the Light dungeon was, even though it was miles away; however, Elder Hood apparently knew exactly where she was going and led them there unerringly. Again, while they could see Light Defenders in the far distance near the border with Fred's territory, there wasn't a single thing in the valley around them as they ran.

Eventually, though, they reached the area where the "normal" valley met the homeland of the Light faction. There were still trees there, but they weren't the greens and browns he was used to; instead, most of them were colored in various shades of white – their bark, branches, and leaves were different in hue, but they were essentially all white. There were normal trees as well, but even they had a sort of luminescent quality to them that made them stand out from anything he'd seen before.

In addition, just like he had seen in the elemental concentrations near Allroads, every once in a while thick clear crystal pillars could be found thrusting out of the ground and occasionally reaching as high as the treetops. On top of that, the entire environment had a glow about it that was a little hard on his eyes after being underground for so long.

It wasn't until they were about a mile into what the locals called the Crystal Forest that Fred realized that it was also entirely silent...except for a faint tinkling in the air that sounded like a delicate tap against glass. Or, what was more likely, crystal – given their proximity. No one else seemed

to remark on this, so he went with it also, but it was definitely unlike anything he'd seen before.

Another hour of moving through the forest had them arrive at the dungeon, which Fred had pinpointed using his Dungeon Core senses about a mile ago. As they were about to head in, Fred put his hand hesitantly on the Elder's arm, stopping her from heading in. Before he could speak, Ravenne used another ability that Fred didn't get to see and suddenly the world seemed...muted.

"What is it? We have about three minutes before her **Muffle** ability runs out to talk freely without anything hearing," the Arcanist asked impatiently.

"What's the plan from here?" Fred asked. "You didn't really go over it before we left."

The Elder huffed, clearly still impatient to enter the dungeon and rescue her husband. "Fair enough, I suppose. This dungeon is only a B-2nd-Rated dungeon, at least according to the latest information we have on it – which is only a week old. It's been mapped out extensively since it's so close to the city, and although I haven't run it myself, I'm pretty sure I can navigate my way through it without too much trouble. It's been quite a while since anything less than an S-Rated dungeon has worried me, and this one will be like a walk in the park.

"I can sense exactly where Mikel is, and it's more than likely the others are near him. However, we can't let this dungeon know why we're here, and it'll be your job to tell me if you think their lives are in danger. When we're close enough, I'll need you to do whatever you can to negotiate their release; there's a lot that has no chance of surviving while standing in my way, but when it comes to blasting down dungeon walls... even my powerful spells can't do that."

Fred thought he understood; he was there as a negotiator and to communicate with the Core when it came down to that critical moment when they needed to get to the captives. He highly doubted that they were *completely* sealed off from the rest of the dungeon, because the Core's own rules would prevent that; however, that didn't mean they weren't hard to get to, just that it wasn't impossible.

As for the others, they were there as the muscle. If the dungeon was indeed only B-2nd-Rated, any one of them would likely be able to complete it with a minimum of fuss, though it might take a little bit – and it would still be dangerous. With all four of them working together, though, the Core wouldn't know what hit it.

Instead of saying anything, Fred just nodded. There wasn't much he could say or do at that point, and he didn't have a better idea of how to execute the rescue mission; he would just have to play it by ear and hope that they succeeded.

Maybe I can heal them if they need it; that might justify my presence in the group. He thought it might look a little suspicious if he was just following them around doing nothing, so that's what he decided to do. Of course, his other party members being who they were, it wasn't likely to be needed, but he would be ready just in case.

With his acknowledgment, Fred felt all of the abilities keeping them invisible and silent fade away, and he followed the others down into the Light dungeon.

Chapter 36

“Uh...there’s some livestock that just walked into my dungeon.”

That was the first thing Fred heard as soon as they walked into the Light dungeon. It was a bit of a brassy-sounding female voice, and it was clearly surprised at their presence.

There was silence in his head for a moment, so Fred looked at the first room of the dungeon; as he had typically seen from most of the other dungeons he had been in, the walls were made from rough stone carved into the ground, though some additions had been made to make it...brighter. First, the ambient light in the room was turned up quite a bit; it wasn’t blinding or anything, but it was certainly a little more than his physical eyes were comfortable with.

In addition, the rough stone that comprised the floor, walls, and ceiling was a lighter shade of brown – almost a cream color; the lighter color only seemed to emphasize the brightness in the room, and he was just glad that the stone wasn’t white – because otherwise it probably *would* be blinding. Otherwise, the room was roughly ovoid in shape with the exit on the far side of the room opposite the entrance, with only a few Defenders blocking the way. Using his Mana Sight, he couldn’t see any Defenses set up in the first room, which was typical; in his experience, most dungeons kept their first room fairly basic and not too difficult, either to draw their “livestock” in further by projecting ease or by conserving their Mana so that it was better utilized on later rooms.

As for those Defenders, they were something he had never seen before – mainly because there were none of them outside near the border of

his territory working to condense it down. There were half a dozen winged figures that glowed brighter than even the room itself floating in the middle of the room; they weren't terribly large – probably only about a foot and a half tall – but if Fred looked closely at them, their general shapes looked like some sort of mutated Human with wings. Of course, there were no actual faces or any other distinguishing characteristics he could discern on them – other than the fact that their fingers were seriously elongated and appeared to have even brighter claws attached to them.

“...No, I have no idea where they came from.....Like I said, I didn't even see them until they crossed over the threshold to my dungeon – but as you can certainly understand, my attention has been focused elsewhere.....Be that as it may, what should I do about them?.....”

Obviously, just like the other dungeons he had been in, he could hear the Core running this one talking to another Core but couldn't hear the response. He was hoping that his increased skill in Mana Communication would've finally allowed him to listen in to *both* sides of the conversation, but it seemed like it wasn't quite yet to that point.

Meanwhile, without hesitation Rody charged ahead of the others and engaged the Light Defenders – which Fred belatedly saw were called Glow Sprites. “*Engaged*” might be too strong of a word, because it was more like a slaughter; a few measured and expert swipes of his massive sword was enough to slice all six of the Sprites in half, destroying them in mere moments.

“...Yes, from what I can see they're obviously not suited to my dungeon; as much as I've improved over the last year, based on how much Mana I'm

getting from most of them they shouldn't even be here.....Well, there is one that seems like it would benefit from invading, but it's the others that are worrying me.....You think so? Do you really think they could be here to try to free the other livestock?"

That's not good. It was only a minute into their rescue mission, and they had already been found out. Well, not quite yet, but things aren't looking good.

They passed into the next room, which was filled with the same unicorns he had seen aboveground by the border, and this time there was an actual Defense in the room. Two mirrors were set up on opposite sides of the room facing each other innocuously; however, based on what he could see of the Defense setup – and the experience he had recently in altering his own traps – it appeared as though passing between the mirrors would do... something. He wasn't an expert, of course, but he figured that whatever it did was probably not going to be beneficial to the party.

Before he could even warn anyone, Roady stepped up to block the Unicorns who were already attacking, while Elder Hood sent out two spells simultaneously at the mirrors. Fred was amazed at her use of her Power; it was frankly remarkable and extremely intricate because it appeared like she was quickly *drawing* complex symbols that created an effect. In fact, the symbols were done so quickly that he barely got a glimpse of them before they faded, and the mirrors shattered into thousands of pieces.

I don't think I need to say anything – she obviously knows what she's doing.

"...I agree, and they're moving entirely too quickly through my dungeon for it to be anything else.....No, I don't see any of them that are like that, so I

don't think that's what this is.....Well, yes, they're stashed behind my Core Room, so they wouldn't be able to find them anyways.....If that's your order, then I'll just kill them to be on the safe side; it's such a waste, though – I still had a couple of weeks to drain them.....Yes, I understand.”

Fred thought furiously as Roady fended off the sharp horns of the Unicorns trying to stab him and practically decapitated each of them when they got too close. *I could try communicating with the Core from here, but that would definitely give away our mission. And there is no guarantee the captives wouldn't be killed anyway, especially as it seems that she – the Core – got orders to do that already. Or, I can just improvise...*

Fred spoke loudly to the others, hoping that this Core could understand Human speech. “I want to thank you again for bringing me to this wonderful dungeon to gain Essence,” he said, and even to his own ears it sounded extremely insincere – but he had already started, so he decided to pile it on even further. The Elder, Agelstein, and Roady just looked at him like he was crazy, but Fred got the feeling that Ravenne knew what he was doing.

“It was definitely worth all the gold I paid you to bring me along, because I've already gained more Essence in just a few minutes than I earned all last month. And this ‘Light’ dungeon is so bright and cheery, I really appreciate it compared to all those other dark and dreary ones you brought me to before. I'm going to tell *all* my hundreds of rich friends to hire you to bring them here, because this dungeon is awesome. Of course, they'll have to probably wait in line outside the entrance for days, but I can already tell it'll be worth it!” he continued. Even as the words were coming out of his mouth, he knew they were ridiculous and horribly acted, but it was the only thing he could think of.

Ravenne luckily came to his rescue. “Absolutely, this dungeon is wonderful! And we’d love to come back here with all your friends back in Trevline *to the south*, because we’ve been looking for more places to bring our clients; if this place keeps being as great as it seems already, then I’m sure we’ll be back *hundreds* of times over the next few years.”

The others still looked a little skeptical, but they wisely didn’t say anything and went with it; Fred just smiled and gestured for them to move ahead, doing his best to act like he really had hired them to farm Essence for him. It wasn’t unheard of even back in the Craytion Kingdom for some of the rich nobles to hire strong teams of high-Rated Adventurers to help gain loads of Essence quickly, so he thought the farce was a good one.

And, fortunately, it worked.

*“Hold on, I think they’re only here to run through my dungeon.....Yes, I overheard them talking about coming here just to gain this ‘Essence’ stuff they’re always talking about.....I know it probably wouldn’t matter if I killed them or not, but I was only about a day or two away from regaining all I lost earlier, and this one female livestock is giving me **a lot** of Mana.....Absolutely; if something seems suspicious, I’ll kill them right away, but for the time being I’m leaving them alive and producing.....I know, I know – but I need all the Mana I can get if I have any hope of beating out the other factions and destroying that dungeon. I’m hesitant to take away any advantage we might have, so I appreciate you letting me keep them around a little longer.”*

Some of what the Core was saying didn’t make much sense, but Fred got the gist of it – she wasn’t going to kill her captives unless she absolutely had to. And giving her any reason to doubt their reason for

being there might be enough for the Core to decide to be better safe than sorry. From what he personally knew and what Deecy could tell him, he knew that what the Light Core was doing was wrong – and not just to Humans, but to other Dungeon Cores as well – and the possibility of the prisoners getting out and spreading the word of their experiences there would be very bad for Cores in general. At best, it would prevent anyone from wanting to visit the dungeon and possibly even the surrounding dungeons; at worst, it could cause an uprising in their “livestock”, which could have major repercussions.

Fred was glad that appealing to the Core’s greed and vanity worked; Cores were all about attracting more Humans to their dungeon, and with it obvious that they planned on killing everyone in Allroads, having a potential source of invaders from somewhere else was probably the best news the Core had heard all week. And just as Fred had been a little offended when Chareese knocked his original two-room, bare-bones dungeon back in Allroads, he knew that praising the Light Core’s dungeon would have a beneficial effect on her opinion of them.

“That is great news! In fact, I think I’ll even show you off to my really good *friend*, who I’ve heard is doing well, and I know *exactly* where he’s been staying. Don’t worry, with my introduction, he’ll probably have dozens of his other friends there wanting your services; you get rich and we get stronger – it’s a win-win situation!” Fred told the group, mainly for the benefit of Elder Hood.

She wasn’t oblivious, fortunately, and she caught on quickly to what he was saying – even if she wasn’t exactly sure why. “That is good to hear...shall we continue?”

“Absolutely – lead on!”

And so, she did – and absolutely obliterated everything in her path that the others didn't destroy first. There were some smaller Bright Lynxes that tried to attack her from multiple sides, but some sort of area-effect spell blasted them to pieces in mid-jump; Winged Pegasi swooped down from above to catch her off-guard, but smashed into an invisible spherical shield that surrounded them all – before getting filled with powerful arrows shot from Ravenne; there were even Light Elementals that shot out beams of pure light that could burn through almost anything within seconds, but she ended up reflecting them back on their sources and destroying them with their own weapons; in short, she was a force of nature all by herself.

There were more Defenses that she destroyed or bypassed altogether, including a room *completely* filled with mirrors that seemed to bounce light back and forth in some sort of resonating amplification, a room with invisible crystal spikes that jutted out from the wall, and there was even a room that was so bright that Fred couldn't even see with his eyes. He found that if he closed them he could see via his other means, but the others weren't so lucky; he was sure that the Elder could see no matter what, but Agelstein showed his expertise with the darker side of his Power by using a spell called **Shroud**. Normally, it would conceal anyone inside the range of the spell in a misty cloud of darkness to move around without detection; against the bright illumination of the room, however, it only served to balance out the light so that it looked...normal.

By the time they got to the final room, Fred was feeling quite useless. No one had suffered even the slightest injury as they delved through the dungeon, and only a slight scratch on Roady's chest armor indicated where he had gotten hit by a stray shattered mirror fragment. Otherwise, none of them appeared to be particularly strained from the hour and a half they had been tearing their way through the Light dungeon, and

their Power regenerated so quickly – when they even deigned to use it – that they were practically still completely full. Elder Hood was down a little, but when she had 149,750 total Power, 10,000 removed from that wasn't that big of a deal.

In the “Boss Room”, there were actually two giant Level 10 Crystal Golems that were essentially animated crystal pillars standing 20 feet tall and half of that wide, all lit with an internal glow that pulsed slowly. They were formidable enough that Fred wouldn't have wanted to face them with a group of his Guild members without a firm plan in place first. Looking at their stats, he saw that they had high Vitality and could probably crush him with very little effort; despite his party's Rating advantage, they would have to take out one while keeping the other busy—

Both of the Crystal Golems exploded within a split second of each other, sending clear crystal shards all over the room; a quickly erected barrier surrounded Fred and the others, shielding them from the shrapnel, before it faded away a few seconds later when the remnants of the Golems disappeared and turned into Light Mana, which was instantly absorbed by the Core.

Shocked at what he'd just seen, he looked at Elder Hood's Interface and saw that she had spent over 40,000 Power to do whatever it was she had just done. Fred hadn't seen anything but the briefest flicker of massed Power envelop the Golems before they were obliterated, and even if he had that much Power he couldn't imagine trying to replicate that.

He just looked at her in amazement, and she just shrugged as if to say, “What? That was no big deal.” But he needed to make it a big deal, because now Fred didn't have an excuse to look for the entrance to the Core Room; he had been counting on it being a slightly protracted battle where he could work his way around to the back of the large room they found

themselves in, sort of like what he was able to do when he found the passageway to the Dark dungeon's Core Room back in the Deadlands. But now...

"That must have exhausted you to use that much Power...why don't you rest while the others loot what they got from killing those bosses. They *were* bosses, weren't they? I've never been in a boss room like this before – it's so...lively compared to other ones I've seen. I think I'll look around it a little before we head out, if you don't mind...maybe there's secret treasure even! I feel so useless, so let me see what I can find!"

Fred was trying to sound as ignorant as possible, but he didn't know if he succeeded. With just the vague reason to stay in the room and look around, he was worried that they would start to look suspicious; while he could pinpoint exactly where the Light Core was, he needed to be able to inspect the far wall to find the opening to get to it. He started to walk around the perimeter of the room, slowly making his way toward the back, all the while trying to act like he was looking for secret "treasure".

He kept glancing at the back wall, however, and trying to find the hidden access to the Core Room. A few minutes or so went by with the others standing in the middle of the room and Fred fervently inspecting everything, when he finally saw it. *Aha! There it is!*

"Ok, I think you're right – they're here for the other livestock. I'm putting them down—"

No! As soon as he heard that, Fred shouted for the others. "Hurry, this way – Roady, you're probably not going to fit!" And then he ran for the hidden entrance he had spotted moments ago and got there within seconds.

Fortunately, it wasn't as tight of a space as he had feared, and he realized that it had probably been expanded a bit to fit all of the captives through; if they were anywhere near Roady's size, then it would've been difficult otherwise to transport them to the room where they were being held. As he ran through the entrance with the others on his heels, he spoke to the Light Core directly for the first time.

"You don't want to do that! We don't want to hurt you, but if you kill them I don't think I can stop the Elder from destroying you. You saw what she did to the Crystal Golems; don't think she can't do the same to you."

Silence greeted his warning, though whether it was from shock on the Core's part that Fred was talking to her, or because his Communication didn't work, he didn't know. Regardless, in a few seconds he emerged in a relatively small room with a decently sized, white-glowing Core floating in the middle of the room. He slowed as he walked up to it, waving the others past him towards the exit at the back of the Core Room. "They're back—"

"I know, I can feel Mikel," the Elder shouted as she ran past him faster than he had seen her move before, and the others – including Roady, who managed to squeeze inside somehow – followed quickly thereafter. Within moments, Fred heard the sounds of explosions and other fighting coming from the tunnel they raced down. After less than a minute, however, most of the sound stopped; Fred almost sagged in relief when he heard the voice of Elder Hood shouting something unintelligible, yet obviously happy-sounding. They had made it in time, and hopefully none had perished while they were racing to save them.

"I know you now; you're the one from inside the Convergence. But... how? How is your territory still there, and not only that, but how is it you can even make a territory? How is it you can do all of this?"

Suddenly, Fred could strangely sense intense scrutiny centered on his chest; he wasn't sure how he knew, but figured it was due to some sort of increase in his skills that he wasn't informed about before that.

Regardless, it was slightly uncomfortable, like someone was digging under his skin to see what was beneath it; fortunately, it stopped fairly quickly, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“I can almost sense multiple Cores inside of the body of the Human you’re wearing, though it’s almost like they are mere shadows of what they could be. I don’t understand it, but I do know one thing – you’re the one who somehow destroyed three other Cores, and you’re likely going to do the same thing to me. Go ahead and do it, murderer! What are you waiting for!”

The Light Core went from investigative to extremely angry in the span of a second it seemed like to Fred, who was taken aback by the sheer vehemence in her voice. *“Look, I know you probably won’t believe this, but I don’t want to hurt you. In fact, I never wanted to hurt any of the others; the Nature and Earth Cores I destroyed were complete accidents, and the Dark Core inadvertently killed itself. All we’re here for are your prisoners, and then we’ll leave; you know it’s wrong to keep them, and we’re just taking them back.”*

“You know you won’t get far; even if you let me live, you won’t step more than a foot outside my entrance before I pull most of my Defenders back from the border. Despite what I saw your friends doing in my dungeon, they won’t survive the inevitable onslaught. And if you do destroy me,

there's a nearby Core just waiting to expand his territory here; you might make it a few feet further from my entrance, but by the time you think you've escaped, you'll be surrounded and killed to the last."

Fred could tell that wasn't an idle threat; either of those scenarios were likely to happen, and Fred could vaguely sense another Light Dungeon Core not terribly far away from his position. *"That might be true, but what I'm trying to tell you is that we don't want to hurt you—"*

Elder Hood walked back into the Core Room, a man with haunted eyes following her; looking at his Interface briefly, she saw that it was Mikel, the Elder's husband. "I want that thing destroyed for what it did to those poor people in there, let alone what they did to my husband," she declared with heat in her voice and fire in her eyes. That wasn't just an expression, either – her eyes literally looked like they were on fire.

"Now, hold on – did anyone die?" Fred asked, standing in front of the Core – as if that really mattered if the Elder decided to try destroying it; and if anyone other than himself could, it would be her.

That seemed to bank the fires a little bit, but not extinguish them completely. "Luckily we made it in time, though a few appeared to be on their way out. Fortunately, Roady and Agelstein have some minor healing spells at their disposal and were able to stabilize their injuries before I could get to them," she told him. "But that doesn't excuse what this...*thing*... did! It deserves to be destroyed for the torture it enacted on them!"

"Personally, I agree – something like this should never happen. However, it won't make a difference to the people you saved, and it could be detrimental to Allroads; if we destroy this one, then the rest might take it as a sign that *everything* should just be destroyed before we're able to

destroy any more. It'll hurt them severely, but they'll survive; we, on the other hand, will not."

Elder Hood still seemed like she was going to shatter the Core no matter what he said, so Fred hastily added, "What about a compromise?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, obviously curious about what he was talking about.

To demonstrate his point, he turned to the Light Core and held his hands out towards the glowing hunk of crystallized Mana.

Chapter 37

As was becoming a little too familiar as of late, the world froze around him as his hands closed around the glowing Core in front of him.

Do you wish to absorb: Light Core B-2nd-Rating? Yes/No

Just like he did with the Dark Core, Fred chose **No** – though without any hesitation this time. Additionally, unlike last time, the next part of the process didn't seem to take hours for it to come up.

Rerouting absorption parameters. Do you wish to extract: (Base) Light Element, (6) blueprints, and (834960) Light Mana?

Warning! The rapid release of vast quantities of Mana will cause a temporary collapse in B-2nd-Rated Light Core's territory! Proceed? Yes/No

That's...a lot of Mana. This was the tricky part; what he wanted to accomplish was to punish the Core enough that it would forever regret what she did, while still keeping her alive. It sounded harsh, but so was what she had done to the people in the other room, even if she considered them “livestock”; and, believe it or not, it was to save her Core from destruction – though she might eventually have wished for that instead. At the same time, it was probably going to end up helping her grow as a Core, but that wasn't his original plan.

It was the vast quantity of Mana she possessed, which was likely because she was amassing it so quickly and then using it to create more

Defenders on her border. If he ended up absorbing all of that, there was a very good chance it could kill *him* in the process – which might be a final death if it destroyed his Human Core completely. Therefore, in addition to collapsing the Core’s territory momentarily, extracting the Light Element for him to make use of, and then stripping the Core of all its Mana as punishment, he had to make sure he didn’t blow his own self up.

Fortunately, his memories of his prior experience with the Dark Core, as well as his recent experiments would help him with that...he hoped. With a hesitant **Yes**, Fred braced for what he knew was coming.

Immediately, time started up again and he stumbled backwards, an internal impact to his chest knocking him back a little. Fred immediately looked to see what his Mana situation was looking like, and it only confirmed what he had expected.

Fire Mana: 0/540

Water Mana: 0/540

Nature Mana: 0/540

Earth Mana: 0/540

Dark Mana: 0/540

Light Mana: 100/100

Unconverted Mana: 92457 (647)

As it had been since he had transferred his elemental Mana to the multi-colored Core back in Allroads, his Fire, Water, Nature, Earth, and Dark Mana was greyed out – which he assumed meant that it still existed but was inaccessible. However, as soon as he said yes to absorbing the Light Element, it was the first thing that was transferred over to him; he could sense that he also received 6 blueprints, but he didn’t even bother

looking at them. Partly because they weren't important right now and mainly because he was primed to explode.

Using his Mana Sight, he saw a similar-looking conduit connecting his chest with the Light Core – and it was rapidly transferring Mana to him in dangerous levels. His Unconverted Mana was increasing so fast that it was starting to get painful, and Fred knew he needed to do something.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING! YOU’RE KILLING MEEEEEE!”

The voice of the Light Core almost distracted him, but he focused on what he needed to do to stop himself from exploding. Mentally reaching out with his new ability to manipulate Light Mana, he pushed against the torrent rushing against his chest; it was harder than he thought it would be, unfortunately – it was like trying to stop a waterfall from hitting the ground with your bare hands.

However, Fred was determined – not in the least because if he failed he was likely going to die. Using his practice earlier that morning – and last night – in condensing all of his elemental Mana into one, he used his hands along with his mind to stop any more of the Light Mana from reaching him directly; instead, he started to condense all the Mana flowing towards him into a tight little ball, while at the same time pulling small quantities of his Unconverted Mana out from his chest. He used the UM to periodically wrap the increasingly growing Mana ball with a thin sheet of clear Mana, which helped to reinforce the compression of the entire sphere.

This actually helped to reduce the amount of Unconverted Mana he was holding, until he finally brought it below the threshold that was causing it to crack and threaten to explode. That was a good thing; the sheer size and intense brightness of compacted Light Mana was not. It was now so

bright that Fred couldn't look at it with his physical eyes, and even his Mana Sight was suffering from the insanely brilliant illumination. By the time the flow stopped, Fred thought he was going to be blind, as the light even leaked through his tightly shut eyelids.

“You took all the Light from me! I’m useless now! I’ll show you – I’m going to absorb my Defenders and—”

Before the Core could do something stupid like the Dark Core had done, Fred took the intensely glowing ball of condensed Light and Unconverted Mana and threw it towards the former Light Core, after quickly imbedding it with all the information he had just gained regarding the manipulation of Light Mana. He still retained all the information, fortunately, but he wanted to give it back to the other Core before she did something drastic.

It hit the dull floating stone in less than a second, causing an explosion of light and force that flung Fred backwards against the wall behind him, where he heard a few wet-sounding cracks come from his spine. Luckily – he supposed – he didn't hit his head, so he was able to see that Elder Hood and Mikel had been equally tossed backwards, but they were made of sterner stuff; they picked themselves up and looked at Fred and the still dull-looking – but quite a bit larger – Core floating in the center of the room in confusion.

“That was your compromise?” the Elder asked.

“What...did you do? You took my element and...gave it back? You took all my Mana...and you increased my Core to the A-6th-Rating? How... what?”

Fred was glad that the Light Core was confused, because hopefully that meant that it wasn't planning on inadvertently trying to destroy itself. Though, to be fair, it probably wouldn't like what he had to say next.

"I took away all the Mana she had been using to wage war against us and collapsed her territory at the same time. She told me earlier that there was a nearby territory that was poised to take this area over if hers went away for some reason, and she was right; as a benefit for us, though, my territory regained all of the ground it had lost during the last few days as the new Core's territory is right back where it started.

"As for this Core, you might not think that's a punishment, but I assure you it is. It's highly unlikely that any of the other Light Cores would be willing to give her former territory back to her, so she'll likely have to move somewhere else – somewhere with a lot less ambient Mana to absorb. Losing all of that progress and Mana is probably the worst part, because it will take a *long* time to gain all that back; short of killing her outright, that's the worst that could happen to a Core," Fred explained. His back was rapidly healing due to his Mana, but he wasn't quite able to move yet; his spine had been broken in a few places, but within a few minutes hopefully he'd be fine enough to walk.

"I see...I can sort of understand—" the Elder started, before a crack above her head cut her off.

"Oh, and because she no longer has a territory, her dungeon isn't going to survive much longer – we better leave before it falls down on us... though I can't walk quite yet because I broke my back," he finished lamely.

The Elder immediately got everyone into motion; it didn't take long for a stream of people to come running out of the far room and run past him. Most of them looked as haunted as Mikel had, and many of them had

blood stains all over their armor, and one of them was even missing an entire arm; regardless, they ran as if their lives depended on it – which it did.

More startlingly loud cracks emitted from the dungeon ceiling, though fortunately nothing had started to cave in quite yet. As the last of the people filed through the Core Room, many giving the Light Core curious or murderous glances, Roady came through last and picked Fred up from the floor. “I got you – at least until you can walk again,” he said, pushing through the tight entrance to the Core Room.

“Wait...you can’t leave me here – I’ll be buried when my dungeon collapses! Without my territory, I can’t absorb any ambient Mana to dig myself out!”

“That’s right, I forgot to mention that to the others. I guess you’ll have to rely on the kindness of your fellow Light Cores to dig you out; I’m sure they’ll be happy to help the Core that set back their Territorial Warfare push against my border, used up all the Mana that was probably given to you from nearby Cores, as well as giving me access to the Light Element. It’ll only be a matter of time...”

Sure, it was a bit mean of Fred, but he was tired of being pushed around by the Cores and threatened whenever he tried to talk to them. And, given what had occurred to the captives – which he was sure to hear about in more detail later – in his opinion, he was leaving the Light Core to a fate that was well-deserved. Most of the things that Dungeon Cores did he could *understand*, if not always agree with; torture of Humans – even if they were considered “livestock” – was not one of those things. It was one

thing hearing about it and knowing it was happening; it was another thing entirely seeing the haunted look in the former captives' eyes.

Luckily, none of the dungeon collapsed on their way out, and halfway through Fred was able to move again; Roady put him down and he ran along with the rest, the entire time on pins and needles waiting for everything to fall down on him. Well, that, and it was almost impossible to block out the threats, pleading, begging, and hysterical crying from the Light Core they left behind. *Who knows? Maybe they'll dig her out and send her away somewhere pretty quickly; it's not like her ability to communicate has been cut from her...obviously.*

Fifteen minutes later, Fred arrived at the entrance of the dungeon, only to almost run into the massive man when he stopped abruptly. He looked around to find the captives and their rescuers all stopped just before the upward-sloping tunnel heading out.

“—there's hundreds, no *thousands* of monsters up there – it's suicide!” one of the captives said, and Fred realized that other than Mikel he didn't know the names of any of the others. *I should really put an effort into learning names in the future – if we get out of here alive.*

“Look, there's over 60 of us here, and despite the fact that you're all recovering still, we can fight our way through...and Elder Hood could take out half of them herself!” Agelstein was telling them all. Fred looked at the Elder – who didn't look very confident in that statement – and saw that she was relatively low on Power. After hearing that she had taken it upon herself to heal most of the captives – and it didn't surprise him that she could heal in addition to everything else – she was down to just over 10,000 Power; that was a lot for someone like Fred, but relatively little for someone like her.

Her Power regeneration was insanely high, which meant that they could wait for her to get some of that back before heading out—

A *crack* above his head easily illustrated that waiting wasn't an option – at least not for very long. And it wasn't like the Light Core that had taken over the territory would be amenable to moving the Defenders outside the dungeon; the Core they had left behind had probably ordered them to destroy him and the others as soon as they emerged before she lost her territory. Now that she was without that, she couldn't control them anymore, so they were stuck doing the last thing they were ordered to do.

And even if they ended up killing dozens or hundreds of them as they broke free, the new Core in residence could absorb the Light Mana left behind and almost instantly replace them. Unless, of course, there was no Mana left behind...

A crazy plan formed in his head; it was extremely risky and might backfire and kill him, but they were running out of time. As the others argued over what to do, Fred walked forward and approached the tunnel leading upwards; even from down below, he could easily see the heads of multiple Defenders looking straight at the entrance, just waiting for someone to emerge. "Elder, I have a plan."

"Plan? What plan are you talking about?"

"Just be ready to pull me back after I throw it," he said, before starting to walk up the stairs.

"Throw what? Fred, don't go out there – you'll get yourself killed!" Rody said, running up behind him but not actually stopping him from going up the tunnel.

"I'm not planning on dying, but this may or may not have some... unforeseen effects."

While he walked up, Fred pulled out the 100 – now 103, actually – units of Light Mana that he possessed and held it out in front of him; taking a large portion (he estimated around 1,000 units) of his Unconverted Mana out as well, he did something that he had discovered the day before, but he wasn't sure what it would do outside of his dungeon – or how dangerous it would be: he condensed the Unconverted Mana and then wrapped it with the Light Mana he had brought forth. Last time it had created a sort of Mana “implosion”, but it had only been a little amount of each type because he didn't want to destroy his whole dungeon; this time, he was using probably 10-20 times the amount he had used earlier, and he was slightly worried about what it might do.

He was more worried what a Mana “bomb” might do so close to the dungeon, however – so this was his best guess of what might work without killing them all.

He condensed and condensed the Mana together, using everything he had learned about the process over the last few days to make it as small as he could; because it wasn't set up the right way, it didn't crystallize per se, but it did materialize until it was a small sphere a little bigger than his fist. Standing in the entryway of the dungeon, he looked out to see hundreds of Defenders crowding the area, standing still or hovering in place, just waiting to attack him as soon as he stepped foot outside.

He would've rather done this from down below, but because he couldn't utilize his Territorial Sight to affect things he couldn't see, he had to do this from here; so, without wasting any more time, he mentally propelled the condensed sphere of Light and Unconverted Mana as far as he could through the sea of Defenders. With just the barest sight of his creation as it traveled only about 60 feet, he gritted his teeth while he held it

in place; without turning away, he grunted out, “Grab me and pull me back.”

Almost before he finished saying that, he felt Roady grab him and yank him back down the entrance tunnel so fast it felt like Fred was flying. Behind him, he felt his focus on the condensed sphere of his Mana implosion snap...but nothing happened.

Roady put him down when they got to the bottom, and Fred looked back up the tunnel in confusion. *Did I do it wrong—?*

Suddenly, a bright light lit up the entrance, brighter even than the one that had almost blinded Fred in the Core Room. *Uh oh...*

“Back, everyone! Run!” he said, taking off and not waiting for any of the others to react.

He wasn’t sure what would happen when the – apparently massive – implosion passed through a Human, but he knew for sure that it would likely suck all the Mana out of *him*, which would kill him in the process. Unlike an explosion, it didn’t destroy everything around them, but the ground shook even though; a few parts of the rooms they ran through to get away from the implosions fell around them, but there was no full collapse. They passed through at least a dozen rooms before the rumbling stopped, which caused Fred to stop as well.

He wasn’t sure how close it had gotten to them, but he had a feeling that it had been entirely too close. Fred had been playing with forces he was only now starting to understand, and it had almost killed him; as they made their way back out, he saw the evidence of how far the implosion had gone when he looked at the stone walls of the dungeon in just the room nearest to where they had stopped. The dungeon had been just barely held together by some residual Mana – which had all been sucked out, making the collapse of at least the first few rooms likely to be even faster.

“Uh...we have to hurry again – it’s going to collapse even faster now!” Fred said, before taking off again. He felt a little silly making everyone run back and forth, but that was just the way it was. Fortunately, no one argued, and Roady even ended up picking him back up when he began to lag behind.

The ceiling, and even the walls, started to collapse in on themselves so quickly that Fred was worried they wouldn’t make it out. By some miracle, everyone made it out of the collapsing dungeon...only to find that the space outside of the dungeon was completely devoid of any of the Light-based monsters that had been crowding around the entrance.

And in the spot where he had thrown the Mana implosion was a massive Core-shaped stone about half the size of Fred.

Chapter 38

Fred didn't even know how to explain what had happened, but rather than trying, everyone elected to move back to the city as soon as they could, especially before the border got filled back up with Defenders. If the Light Core they had left back in her collapsed dungeon had indeed brought every one of them back to kill them as they left the entrance, then it was likely that the new Core that had taken over her territory hadn't replenished all of them yet. And, with the border a bit closer now, it wasn't going to take a lot of time to get there.

Roady picked up the large stone at Fred's request – he wasn't sure what he could do with it, but he didn't want to leave it there – and they started running through the Crystal Forest. Elder Hood didn't even bother trying to hide them, mainly because there were too many of them to cover completely, but also because they didn't see a single monster their entire journey through the forest. Either the new Light Core didn't have enough Mana to create more than just a few Defenders, or after seeing what happened to the massive army of them surrounding the entrance, it might have thought twice over throwing what resources it did have away without reason.

Regardless of the reason, they broke out of the forest and looked into the valley; they could see quite a long way, and it appeared as though only a few Light Defenders were popping up along the border, separated by a lot of space in between them. Fred rejoiced along with the others over their fortune, and he could empathize with them regarding their upcoming return to the city. Fred, for one, would be happy to get back to his territory to make sure nothing was falling apart without him.

Dualborn...

A faint, whispery voice echoed through his head, so soft and brief that he thought he imagined it. He cocked his head to the side in confusion, but when there was no repetition of the voice, he dismissed it as just a figment of his exhaustion.

Dualborn...

There it was again, though it was stronger that time. Fred wasn't sure exactly what the voice was, or what in the world a "Dualborn" was, but it certainly didn't sound like any sort of Mana Communication he had heard before.

Dualborn...we must speak...

Now Fred was convinced he was hallucinating, because he could've sworn with that last message he could almost pinpoint where it was coming from. He looked off to the east, where the Air territory was, but he couldn't see anything for as far as he could see. Far off in the distance, he could see the faint outlines of some of the Air defenders on the border, which was still progressing at a faster pace than anything else – but that didn't seem to be what he was looking for.

Hurry, Dualborn...I don't have much time...

That helped to pinpoint it even further, but when he looked where he thought it was coming from – where he estimated the Light and Air territories intersected – it was at least a half mile from the border. It wasn't until he looked through what he could of his Territorial Sight that he saw a tiny ovoid space where neither of the territories intersected; because he wasn't in his own territory, he couldn't see any more than a general absence of a territory, but he knew that it was exactly what he was looking for.

“Elder, I have to go to the east for a moment,” he blurted out to the running Council member ahead of him. It was almost involuntary how the words came out of his mouth, but as soon as they passed his lips he knew he had to go. Even if the others didn't join him, he knew that he couldn't pass up whatever was calling to him, even if it turned out to be a trap; his intuition said that it wasn't for some reason, and he was inclined to trust those instincts.

His words stopped the whole group, who looked at him in confusion – and an exasperated look from the Elder. “We can't stop now when we're almost there – we need to get home to finish up with some healing on all the captives that I hadn't been able to get to yet.” She wasn't lying; although everyone was up and mobile, Fred could tell by looking at the Interface on a couple that they were still injured – just not enough to prevent them from moving.

“I understand, Elder – I'm not asking you to stop; I can go alone, because it's something that I have to do.”

“What is it that is so important that you want to gallivant behind enemy lines?” she asked, still annoyed but now curious.

Fred didn't really have a good reason, only the feeling that he *had* to go – and he told her that.

“Fine, we’re wasting time; Roady, Agelstein, and Ravenne – go with him and make sure he gets back to the city in one piece.”

Roady hesitated. “It’s my duty to make sure that *you*—”

“That’s an order, Winston,” she said sternly, using his real name for the first time. “I have my husband back, and there isn’t anything that’s going to keep me from bringing him home safe.”

Stiffening at the use of his given name, Roady wisely didn’t argue any more – because Fred could see the determination in her eyes. He also saw the Knight-Commander pass the large heavy stone he was carrying off to one of the captives, and Fred told the unlucky man to deliver it to the dungeon underneath the city. Apparently, he hadn’t been briefed on its existence before the disastrous attack on the Light border, but the Elder assured Fred that it would be delivered.

Without another word, the larger group left at a run for the border, aiming for a big gap between Defenders that was obvious even from their position. Fred turned to Roady, Agelstein, and Ravenne – the three the Elder had assigned as his bodyguards, apparently – and said, “This way.”

They turned east, the last direction the others probably wanted to go, but Fred could still feel the...*presence*...calling for him in the distance. He still hadn’t the slightest clue of what it was, but now he was committed to finding out the answer to that; it was in part curiosity over what could be “communicating” with him, though if he admitted it to himself, the real reason was because he felt a kinship of sorts with the voice in his head. How that kinship worked, again he had no idea, but it was there, nevertheless.

It only took about 10 minutes of running, fortunately, because Fred knew the longer they were inside the new Light Core’s territory, the greater the risk that they would be surrounded by Defenders. He could

theoretically generate a few more little Mana implosions, but the risk of them “imploding” too close to Fred was still a possible danger – let alone being too close to one of the Humans with him; he still wasn’t sure what it would do to them.

Every time I discover something new, it seems to come with dozens of questions and unknowns.

The voice had stopped a while ago, but he could still feel it pulling him in a certain direction. Checking what he could of his Territorial Sight again, he still saw the void in between the Light and the Air territories, but it was getting smaller; fortunately, they were almost there as well. Looking ahead with his own eyes, he saw a natural dip in the land ahead, where the void was perfectly located; whatever it was that was calling him seemed to be coming from a relatively small crevice in the natural landscape.

Without hesitation, Fred ran over to the lip of the void with the others behind him, only to look down on a small natural depression in the ground about 20 feet deep. And in the center of the depression was an extremely large yellow-glowing Dungeon Core.

* * *

The Supreme of Air watched the Human/Dungeon Core anomaly approach her negative territorial space she had created; she had needed to work fast – as soon as she had felt the Light Core’s own territory collapse, in fact – to set it up in a part of the Convergence valley that wouldn’t necessarily be spotted from a distance. While the negative territorial space was only temporary and didn’t usually have much purpose, it also prevented any Core from looking inside of it with their Territorial Sight.

She was glad she had been watching everything so closely around the Convergence, otherwise she wouldn't have had the opportunity to do this. Her chance to see the Dualborn in person was something she couldn't pass up, and calling it—*he, apparently*—with a slightly altered form of Mana Communication was relatively easy. Normally, the skill required the sender to know where they were sending their Communication, but being in the realm of Air had taught her a few tricks over the years; because she didn't know where the Dualborn was exactly, she had sent out a series of Communicative waves that didn't reach terribly far, but would allow anything within that range to sense it.

She was lucky that none of the other nearby Dungeon Cores were anywhere near, including her own faction's; what she was doing wasn't authorized by the council, and if they found out she had spoken to it—*him, I have to remember that*—there could be some serious repercussions. Despite the risks, this was something she needed to do.

And her justifications for doing it were only strengthened when she tangentially heard what had just occurred to the Light Core that was controlling the border push – and had unwisely taken some Humans captive to drain them of Mana. The Dualborn had reportedly led some sort of rescue mission – she wasn't sure how he had done that while still maintaining his territory around the Convergence – to free the captives; instead of destroying the Light Core – which the Supreme of Air thought would've been relatively justified, given what she had done (which was a big no-no, even during the current circumstances) – the Dualborn had let her live...after draining her of all her Mana, removing her territory, and collapsing her dungeon, of course.

As a Dungeon Core, even having a dungeon collapse on top of you wouldn't necessarily destroy your Core; the Light Core could be easily dug

out and returned to the world, free to set up someplace else. Where she would end up after the disaster she caused was still to be seen – as well as *when* it would happen – but Air wouldn't have wanted to be her...except for one little detail, which she was having a hard time believing.

Apparently – and she wasn't quite sure it was true, given the secondhand knowledge she received from a few sources – the Dualborn did something to the Mana he had drained from the Light Core and *changed* it, before shoving it back into her. With that change in the mana, the Light Core had her Rating bumped up tremendously – from a B-2nd-Rating to an A-6th-Rating. Of course, despite having a greater Rating and larger Core, the unfortunate Light Core was still stuck buried underneath tons of dirt and stone, with no territory, no dungeon, and only the barest amount of Mana keeping her alive – but she *was* alive.

It was frankly unbelievable...and yet the Supreme of Air believed it. Whether or not it was illogical didn't faze her; she had felt something different about this Dualborn ever since she had heard about his exploits, and the fact that he hadn't destroyed a Dungeon Core when he had the chance – and the debatable justification – to do so was another point in his favor.

And now it was time to meet this Dualborn, the “Cursedborn” that had caused more fervor in the Supreme Council than had been seen in literally thousands of years. Strangely enough, she was more nervous with anticipation than she thought she would be, and there wasn't even a hint of fear in her thoughts. *I can only imagine the others would be cracking their Cores in fright at his approach.*

Because when she created her avatar to occupy the negative territorial space she had created, she had needed to infuse even more of her Mana inside of it, as well as a greater portion of her consciousness. If the

Dualborn turned out to be a homicidal maniac after all, if he tried to absorb and destroy her avatar, it would severely drain her Mana and could have unknown consequences on her mind, though she had taken safeguards to ensure it wouldn't affect her main Core thousands of miles away. What she created in her avatar was more of a...child of sorts, though even that didn't quite match what was put into it.

“Welcome, Dualborn. I am the Supreme of Air,” she sent to him via Mana Communication, as she was perfectly aware that he could hear her already. The Dualborn hesitated for a moment before slowly walking down, a strange look on his face; she had studied Humans for almost countless years, and it appeared as though he was struggling to keep anger off his face.

“What are you doing here? Is this a trap?” the Dualborn said as he walked closer, and his hands were clenching and unclenching as if he wanted to strangle something. His face transformed into something she could only describe as unbridled rage. ***“I should kill you for what you did to my parents!”***

Ah, so that's it. “I understand your hatred for us on the Supreme Council but hear me out before you do that. This is not my actual Core, anyway; it's more of a copy that I created here so that I can communicate with you, so if you destroy it that won't hurt me significantly. I'm not going to lie and say it wouldn't hurt me a bit, but it would be far from destroying me in revenge.”

That stopped him from walking any closer, though he still looked like he wanted to rip her avatar apart with his bare hands.

“Fine, I get it – I can’t hurt you. Why are you here, then? To taunt me?”

The Dualborn obviously had some buried hatred towards her and the others on the Council, which she honestly couldn’t blame him for – they *had* killed his parents, after all. Still, she needed to take this delicately – though quickly, before her negative space shrunk to the point where she would have to remove her avatar – so that he didn’t just try to destroy her out of revenge.

*“I’m not here to taunt you, though **I am** sorry about your parents. I know you won’t believe me, but we did that for the greater good—”*

“I know all that – because you were worried they would set up some sort of rival Supreme Council; the first Nature Core I found told me so, before I accidentally destroyed him. They had no plans to set up a rival Council, they just wanted to be left alone.”

The Supreme of Air was confused for a second, because she realized that the Council had probably done an even better job at spreading that information around to the Dungeon Core community than she realized. Since the Council couldn’t tell everyone the *real* reason behind the assassination, that was the story that was put forth; she hadn’t realized that it had filtered down to even juvenile Cores in an entirely different faction.

*“That’s not...not anywhere near the real reason we sent our Defenders after your parents; while the threat of having a rival Supreme Council is potentially real, I know for a fact that many of us on the Council would gladly give up our positions if there were another Core that **really** wanted it that bad.”*

Which was true; if there were any other Cores that wanted the responsibility of leading her entire faction, she would be happy to give it up. The sad fact of the matter was, though, that the longer Dungeon Cores were around and increased their Rating, the more authority and responsibilities they accumulated; after a while, most – if not all – realized that those types of “administrative” duties weren’t all that fun when it came down to having that kind of power.

In fact, if Air thought that there was another more suited to the position, she would gladly transfer her authority over to them; sadly, of those who *might* be a good fit, none of them wanted to be on the Council. And she would know...because she had asked them, and they turned her down. Of course, there were a few on the Council that would never give up their position voluntarily – like the Supreme of Dark – but most of them, she had a feeling, were tired of the responsibility.

Her response to his angry accusation earlier seemed to chip away at some of the anger on his face, fortunately.

“What are you talking about? If not because of that, then...what? I don’t understand – and you still haven’t told me why you’re here.”

“As horrible as it might be to hear, the reason your parents were killed was because of...you. Well, not you specifically, but the possibility that you would be created between their union – and the threat that you would pose towards the entire Dungeon Core race.”

The Dualborn’s face lost all of its color, and he looked like he was suffering under some sort of attack. She assumed that the information she gave him was new to him, and hearing that *he* was the cause of their death – even if not *specifically him* – was hard to hear. Before he could question

her about the details of his parents' situation, she established a Communication Link between them, which she rarely ever did with another Core – because it made her extremely vulnerable.

It was necessary, however; by establishing the Link, she could send the Dualborn not only words, but memories and remembered feelings. And that was what she did – she sent her memories of a time thousands and thousands of years in the past, when Humans hunted Dungeon Cores as a regular activity; she sent the feelings of always having to find some place to hide, of building dungeons that would keep the Humans from reaching their Cores; and then she sent all the information – including how they were inadvertently created – that she had regarding the greatest threat to her kind: the Dualborns, or as they were later known – Cursedborn.

The problem with the Link was that her mind was completely open to whomever it was established with; the Dualborn could access memories of anything in her mind, including the complete composition of her dungeon, where she was located in the world, the size of her territory, and even any defenses she had set up to defend that territory. It was dangerous sharing that information with another Core, even one from her own faction, just in case it was ever – accidentally or otherwise – given to a rival faction. As a Supreme Council member, her territory was essentially off-limits, but old habits die hard...and *very* old habits die hardest of all.

The reverse was also true, however; she could also access the memories of the Dualborn, which she proceeded to do. Accessing the memories of another was completely undetectable, which was why it was so dangerous to establish a Link, because you didn't know what memories had been seen. Normally, any Cores older than the youngest juveniles had enough skill in Mana Communication to repel a Link if they felt another

Core trying to establish one, but obviously the Dualborn wasn't quite to that point yet.

She was encouraged by what she saw, though her perusal was brief; she saw his upbringing and the love of his parents, which made her feel horrible at what the Council was forced to do to them – they seemed genuinely in love and wanted to be left alone; she saw his initial journey into the world, meeting Humans, becoming stronger, and invading dungeons; she witnessed through his eyes how he had accidentally destroyed a Core and gained access to the latent Dungeon Core powers within him; she saw the defense of a town called Gatecross, doing whatever he could to save the people there; then came another accidental destruction of an Earth Core, though she saw it was because it destroyed itself – which was never mentioned by the Supreme of Earth; the flight to the east and the passage through the Horror-laden Plains of Grass; she also saw that the Dark Core that was destroyed was because of the Core's fault, and that... *Fredwynklemossering*...had done what he could to prevent that destruction; and finally she saw him in the city in the middle of the Convergence – before their link was severed abruptly.

“WHAT WAS THAT! What are you doing to me?!”

I guess he has some skill after all. While the Supreme of Air hadn't been able to see what had happened after he reached the city – including what his dungeon looked like – she *did* see how he had created what he was calling “Shards”; there were three of them, and one of them was a Dire Wolf of all things, but it was entirely possible that even more had been made after he arrived in the city. Their existence was a complete surprise... but it was also enlightening at the same time.

While their creation was at the expense of Dungeon Core “shards” – which made the Supreme of Air mentally shudder at the thought of a piece of her being used in that matter – the fact that the Dualborn had found a way to...*merge*...the two species together was encouraging. It meant that somehow, someway, coexistence between Humans and Dungeon Cores could be possible.

*“I’m sorry, that was the easiest way to let you know the history of our people – and **your** kind – and why we felt it was justified in doing what we did. It might not have been the **right** thing to do, but there’s nothing we can do to change that now.”*

Fredwynklemossering – *a genuine Dungeon Core name if I’ve ever heard one* – had taken a step back when he had severed the Link, and for the first time the Supreme of Air saw the other Humans behind him. A large, armor-laden one steadied the Dualborn when he looked a little shaken, before asking, “Fred – what’s going on? What is a Dungeon Core doing all the way out here?”

“It’s fine, Roady. Me and the Supreme of Air were just having a conversation, and she shoved all these memories into my head that I wasn’t expecting – and it hurt more than a little bit,” *Fred* said to the man steadying him. “A little warning would’ve been nice, though.”

That shouldn’t have hurt him, but I guess having a fragile body like that can have some drawbacks. At least he didn’t look angry anymore, and he didn’t look like he wanted to break her apart with his bare hands.

“Do you understand – even if you don’t approve of it – why we did what we did?”

The Dualborn steadied himself, shaking his head at the same time as if to clear away the pain; after a moment, he sighed and Communicated to her again.

“Yes, I can...understand why you did that – but you’re also right, I don’t approve. However, I’m more than aware that even if I were to hunt all of you down – the Supreme Council, I mean – and destroy you, it won’t bring them back. I don’t even know at this point if it would even make me feel better...”

“Which is why I had decided a little bit ago to switch my focus into figuring out how to stop this unseen war between Humans and Dungeon Cores. You may not see it, but the Human race is slowly dying out, being killed and slaughtered without thought to the future; eventually, there won’t be any of your ‘livestock’ left to gain Mana from, and you’ll only be left with what you can obtain from the ambient Mana in the environment. After learning about this Convergence, however, I can just picture that the world would descend into chaos as Cores fight over them – because they don’t have the Humans to rely on anymore.”

Fredwynklemossering sounded tired, defeated even...but Air was ecstatic! *He is looking for the same thing I am! His focus is a little more centered over saving the Humans instead of Dungeon Cores, which is understandable, but we both want the same thing – to save **everyone**.* The Supreme of Air told him exactly that, which seemed to surprise him to no end; he likely thought he was the only one to see the way the world was slowly in decline.

“I’m not sure I believe you, but it would explain why you called me here. What is it that you think I can do to bring about this...change...we’re both hoping for?”

She had no idea. The Supreme of Air, despite how powerful she was and her vast experience, couldn't see a way to achieve what they both obviously thought was needed.

"I honestly have no idea. The only thing I know is that change won't happen overnight, or perhaps even in a year, a decade, or a century; we're talking about changing things that have been "normal" for thousands of years, and something like that won't occur without some significant sacrifices on both races' parts. Which is what I want to offer you now...a sacrifice. Touch my avatar and...do whatever you need to absorb my element from it."

To say he was shocked was an understatement. "You can't be serious...you're just giving it to me?"

"Yes, I believe that the only way you're going to save the world is to have access to all of the elements; the first reason should be obvious, though – you need to slow down the contraction of your territory from my Air faction. I still want to know how you managed to leave your territory without it collapsing...but there's no time. This place is going to collapse, and I'll have to disperse my avatar before the others find out what I'm doing here. Go ahead...do it."

With only a few seconds' hesitation, the Dualborn reached out and touched her avatar – and she felt like he ripped out something vital from her; it took her a moment to realize what it was, and then it hit her: her access to the Air element was gone. And not just from her avatar, but from her actual Core thousands of miles away – which shouldn't have been possible. It was only when she realized this and started to panic that she felt her Mana being drained from the avatar, flowing into Fredwynklemossering...before it stopped hitting his chest and was being

held between his hands in a small compressed yellow sphere that was rapidly getting bigger.

A quick check showed that her Core still had quite a reserve of Mana...but she couldn't access it! And without access, she couldn't reestablish her territory that had collapsed...and then her dungeon would collapse, burying her deep under the ground just like the Light Core only a few miles away from her avatar.

While she was panicking, the flow of her Air Mana stopped draining from her avatar and she felt it starting to break apart with nothing to sustain it. However, before it could disperse completely, the compressed glowing sphere that the Dualborn was holding with great difficulty *slammed* into her collapsing avatar and broke it apart into a million pieces.

The former Supreme of Air lost her sight of the now-gone negative territorial space, so she couldn't see what happened after that...but then her Core was hit with something. She was barely able to see what it was, but from what she could comprehend, it was the sphere that hit her avatar before it was destroyed – and the sphere had somehow traveled through the connection she had with it. The strange glowing sphere was a lot smaller than she remembered (she figured it was because of the sheer distance it traveled), but it was certainly the same.

Is this a betrayal? Is the Dualborn trying to kill me too?

She expected her Core to be shattered from the impact, but something else happened entirely: she felt her Air element come back to her. With that revelation, she immediately reestablished her territory – which thankfully hadn't been encroached upon in such a short time – and felt a large chunk of her Mana reserve flow out of her to reestablish her dungeon, which fortunately hadn't had time to deteriorate or collapse.

Relaxing in relief, she took stock of what had happened...and what she had lost. Her reserve was quite low – the lowest it had been in centuries, in fact – but she was alive and still in control of her territory and dungeon. The temporary interruption hadn't had time to really affect anything significant, so the only thing that the Supreme of Air lost was a seriously large amount of Mana.

I'm back!

Hopefully that Dualborn appreciates all of that – and I hope it does him some good. As much as she didn't like relying on him to save the world, she knew she had to – and she would support him from the shadows whenever she got the opportunity. Of course, that might be hard for a S-10th-Rated Air Dungeon Core with very little extra Mana—

Wait a minute...

She had to look three times, but there was no denying it when the evidence was right there: the Supreme of Air wasn't a S-10th-Rated Air Dungeon Core anymore. She was now an S-12th-Rated Air Dungeon Core – and now the most powerful Dungeon Core in the world...without any Mana, unfortunately.

I guess Dark was right – he really is just a S-11th-Rated Core...

The End of Book 4

Author's Note

And there it is – the fourth book in the Dungeon World series!

I really enjoyed writing this book, because it had all of the things I love: large-scale battles with massive monsters, dungeon construction, dungeon defense, and a little bit of crafting thrown in there. My goal for this book was to show that Fred and his friends were more than capable of defending themselves from the different elemental factions, and to set it up for the fifth (and theoretically last, unless I can't fit all I want to in a single volume) book in the Dungeon World series.

Because as of the end of this book, Fred has all of the elements at his disposal; what that means exactly is anyone's guess, but I envision fun things happening in the next book.

Again, thank you for reading and I implore you to consider leaving a review – I love 4 and 5-star ones! Reviews make it more likely that others will pick up a good book and read it!

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