

JONATHAN BROOKS

DUNGEON WORLD 3



Dungeon World 3

A Dungeon Core Experience
Dungeon World Series

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Dedication

To my wife, Melody, who encourages me to write better every day.
And to my daughter, who just started Kindergarten – and can already read
at a 1st grade level!

Additionally, I want to thank everyone who beta-read this book –
your input and help has made this book phenomenal!

Aaron Wiley

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Brian O’Neil

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Grant Harrell

Sean Hall

Steven Genskay

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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.

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

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

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

after Fred pushed his new human friend for information about the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, Fred was kicked out of Regnark's house and was 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 – though not without some temporary pain and suffering from an incompatible implanted Artifact. After meeting Eisa, a woman with an unfairly-assigned bad reputation – who was a Necro-healer – they delved through an “easy” dungeon together. Along the way, she learned that it was very difficult for her new “friend” to die, and also that he had the miraculous ability to conjure gold pieces out of thin air.

Fred soon created the Core Power Guild to journey through multiple dungeons every day, learning new spells and abilities along the way. And all the Guild members wanted in return was cold, hard currency – which he easily supplied as part of his special Dungeon Core powers.

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 where he learned why his parents were considered “traitors” – and found out who had most likely arranged their assassination – the small Nature Core's personal attacks toward his mother prompted Fred to physically grab the other dungeon core.

After mistakenly taking too long to decide on whether he wanted to absorb the Nature Core, he inadvertently destroyed the small, green, floating, spherical gem-like core and absorbed its power into his body. Not

only did he gain access to Nature Mana, but the absorption also unlocked his ability to create a dungeon.

Faced with the need to protect everyone from the nearby Cores' retribution, Fred went back to Gatecross with the intent to build a dungeon underneath the town for defensive purposes. After Eisa explained to the rest of the town and Guild about his origins with half-truths, they were on board with protecting themselves after all of the children departed south for safety.

Through trial and error, Fred was able to figure out how to establish a dungeon territory around Gatecross. 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.

A pre-emptive attack by a small scouting force by the Nature Cores forced Fred into overdrive to build traps inside Gatecross and inside the dungeon itself, using his Fire Mana for flame-based traps, his Water Mana for deadly pools of water, and his Nature Mana for the two defensive blueprints he had access to. He also reworked a previous rush job he had made of the dungeon rooms earlier into a defensive-based formation that would use the Guild (and the citizens of Gatecross) as his defenders.

To that end, Fred also changed one of his Classes from Researcher to Instructor, where he was able to "Teach" any of his adapted abilities to someone else, though the chance of success was determined by multiple factors. To help the townspeople of Gatecross get as strong as they could before the inevitable attack, they "trained" in the dungeon using Fred's own

Flower Tripper defenders to provide them with large amounts of Essence when they were killed.

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. By using every iota of Nature Mana that was dropped from the destroyed assaulting army of monsters (as well as most of his own Elemental Mana), he created a Level 1,800 Scorching Water Beetle that was just as large as the giant Emerald Dragon, though not necessarily as deadly.

During the titanic battle 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. While it did some damage, the giant insect was literally on its last legs when the massive winged lizard used its Poison Breath attack to finish off Fred's defender; unfortunately for the Dragon, Fred used every bit of Fire Mana he could get his hands on to ignite the cloud of poisonous breath and caused it to explode in a gigantic fireball which practically leveled the town.

Unfortunately, Fred wasn't able to hide from the intense flames of the explosion that reached even inside his dungeon, and his body was horribly burned to death. 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 burnt to death, Fred was killed – again – during the interrogation when he had his

head chopped off, and the Guild and townspeople were marked with a highly visible yellow X above their heads – which told everyone they saw that they had destroyed a Dungeon Core.

Fred regrew his head and Eisa was forced to tell everyone about his actual origins. Surprisingly (or not so surprisingly, considering their circumstances), the Guild and even the townspeople were still on board with having Fred defend them and even helped in the rebuilding of defenses outside of the dungeon itself. When one of the hunting parties foraging for food in the forest came back with a Nature Core that they had stolen from a weakened dungeon nearby, Fred was able to figure out how to absorb *only* some Nature Mana and a blueprint from the Core instead of destroying it completely. He also returned the Mana that he had absorbed from the stolen Nature Core and was able to improve its Core Structure at the same time.

With the knowledge that he could gain valuable blueprints without killing any more Cores – which he definitely didn't want to do – teams of Guild members went out to the surrounding dungeons and brought back more stolen Cores to Fred, who stayed inside Gatecross to maintain his territory. But then Eisa and her group decided to bring back an Earth Core, which Fred took unexpectedly from her inside a safe room located in his dungeon. In the process, Fred couldn't say no to absorbing the Core completely for some reason; while he tried to figure out what to do, the brown-colored 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's head was blown off – again –

and his body was mangled horribly, but there was enough of him left 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.

Emerging from the hole after manipulating the dirt around him with his Mana, Fred was able to drag Eisa's body aboveground, where he met Deecy – who had stuck around, knowing that Fred was likely still alive. The rest of the Guild and townspeople ended up leaving after Fred's dungeon collapsed – believing that he was dead – and headed far to the west, where they had heard there were Dark-based dungeons, which (remembering what Fred had told them) weren't allied with the Nature Faction.

With Eisa dead and Fred at a loss of 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 light infused her corpse and caused Fred to shield his eyes, he looked back to see Eisa sitting up and looking confused – but also completely healthy and alive.

Part I – Recovery

Chapter 1

“Fred...what’s going on?” Eisa asked, her head a little fuzzy from whatever just happened. *Did I hit my head or something?*

“Uh...yeah, that’s what I’d like to know.”

A voice she had never heard before echoed in her head, shocking her in its intensity and clarity; it was so clear that it sounded like whatever woman was talking was sitting right next to her. “Whoa – who was that?” she asked, even more confused after just seeing Fred and Deecy nearby.

Fred looked shocked and happy simultaneously as he looked at Eisa; at the same time, though, his overall appearance looked bedraggled and his clothes were practically non-existent. It was actually worse than when he had been burned to near-death in his dungeon; at least then, the clothes were melted in patches to his skin. Here, however, what scraps that were left on his body made it appear as if he had just barely survived an explosion.

It was dark even with a few flames floating in the center of what appeared to be some sort of camp in a cleared area, so she couldn’t see anything... inappropriate... from her position. Regardless, it was hard not to blush a little as she looked at his form sitting so near her.

Silence descended over their campsite as Eisa still struggled to figure out what was going on. Fred looked at Deecy in confusion, before turning back to Eisa with a smile on his face – and then he got up and approached her.

Whatever the darkness had hid was exposed as she got an inadvertent look at *everything*, before turning away for politeness’ sake.

Fred crouched down next to Eisa and wrapped his arms around her; she froze there in surprise at his awkward display of affection as he said, “I’m so glad it worked! I was starting to miss you. Fortunately, my Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill was able to bring you back to life.”

Eisa continued to sit immobilized in disbelief as Fred’s arms embraced her, his surprisingly hot skin warming her up on what she realized was a cold night. The disbelief she was experiencing wasn’t from the little nugget of knowledge the half-human/half-dungeon core dropped on her regarding her apparent death and miraculous resurrection; instead, she was trying to come to terms with the fact that – with a quick glance down at herself to confirm her suspicions – she was completely naked.

“Wh-why don’t I have clothes on!?” she screamed out in shock, causing Fred to jump as she shouted, and he quickly let go of her. She was a little disappointed when he retreated a bit; one part of her enjoyed the embrace on an intimate level, while another part of her missed the heat he was giving off. She quickly tried to ineffectually cover herself up with her hands as Fred looked on with amusement. *Infuriating man.*

“Please keep it down – there are still roaming patrols of Earth dungeon defenders out in the forest looking for anything alive to take out their frustration on. I’d rather not have to run again so quickly; I’ve only had a short time to recharge my energy.”

There’s that voice again. She looked around in confusion another time, though there was still only Fred and Deecy near her; she was beginning to suspect that she was hearing the Dire Wolf Pup talking to her, but that seemed preposterous. *Maybe I have some damage to my brain – which might be why I didn’t realize I was nude until now.*

“Sorry about your old clothes – they were destroyed in the explosion. Here, let me Create you a new dress; I should probably get something for myself, as well,” Fred said, bringing Eisa back to her current undressed situation.

Within seconds, a warm black dress materialized in front of her and floated down into her lap, where she immediately held it up to better cover her modesty. A pair of comfortable-looking black shoes followed quickly thereafter. “Turn away, Fred – you’ve already seen plenty, now be a gentleman and let me dress in peace,” Eisa said, after the man just stared at her without giving any indication of turning away.

“Oh...sorry. I should probably finish with my own clothes anyway.” So saying, the hybrid human/dungeon core got up from his crouch and turned towards the darkness surrounding their little camp. Already, she could see he had brand-new clothes in his hands that were conjured up from nowhere, and he began to dress himself.

Not wanting him to finish and then stare at her while she dressed, Eisa quickly stood up and swayed a little as dizziness hit her all of a sudden. Fortunately, it was short-lived, and she managed to maintain her balance before she slipped her new dress over her head and brought it down, covering her from head to just above her ankles. She slipped on her shoes and felt warmth suffuse her from the extra layer of protection against the cool night air.

Surprisingly, the dress and shoes fit even better than her old accoutrements; they were comfortable and seemed to conform to her body in ways that was difficult to achieve unless she altered her clothes herself. It was slightly disturbing and at the same time endearing that Fred seemed to know her body well enough to custom-make her dress to fit so perfectly.

Fred finished dressing around the same time and turned around with that smile again on his face; she wasn't going to let that distract her, though, because now she needed some answers. Before she could ask anything, however, she was interrupted by that voice again.

“If you’re done with whatever mating ritual you’re doing, I’d like to know what you did to Eisa’s corpse, Fredwynklemossering.”

My corpse? Now *this*, Eisa wanted to hear. She blushed at the inference to a “mating ritual”, but she looked at Fred with a questioning expression on her face – copied almost exactly, she was sure, by the Dire Wolf Pup sitting across from them.

Fred looked a little sheepish as he started to explain. “Well...it’s a little hard to explain, actually. First, Eisa, let me tell you about what happened...”

Eisa listened as Fred talked about her coming back to Gatecross with an Earth Dungeon Core – of all things – and how he wasn’t expecting it to be anything other than a Nature Core. Her memories of anything past leaving Gatecross to look for Plant (or as Fred called them, *Nature*) Cores for him to absorb were quite fuzzy; they were so disjointed and irretrievable that it was almost like they hadn’t been fully committed to memory like everything else she could remember before that.

“—and then you yelled out, ‘I WILL NOT let the man I love die again!’ and reached for me, but the Earth Core exploded using its Mana Combustion skill. A shard from the Core shot straight into your heart, killing you instantly – before burning the upper half of your body. I, myself, was ‘killed’ as well, but I was able to reform myself over time and with a generous helping of my stored Mana.”

Horror shot through Eisa as she heard his recounting of the tale and of how she practically professed her love. She doubted he was lying, but she couldn't remember anything at all regarding her words or the explosion. Her embarrassment and mortification were so great that it was only after a few moments that the rest of his words sunk in and paired with something that he had said earlier. *Wait a minute...I died? How am I alive, then?*

Her questions were only marginally answered as Fred continued. "When my Core managed to put me back together and I woke up, I found your bottom half buried underneath a collapsed wall, and your upper half had been burned beyond almost all recognition. When I managed to repair the damage done to my internal Cores, I was able to extract you and escape the closed-off room underground – only to find Deecy was here waiting for me.

"As I laid your body down, I started some of my Fire Mana here to keep Deecy and I warm, and while watching Deecy resting lethargically as I tried to come up with some sort of direction to take, I had an idea. You see, Deecy didn't just find me and we became friends; I, in fact, Created her – albeit accidentally. By consuming the shards that were my only remaining representatives of my parents, I inadvertently created a Dire Wolf that was a manifestation of their memories and elemental attributes.

"With less experience on my side at that time, Deecy's Creation almost killed me; I didn't have a lot of Unconverted Mana at that time and it practically drained me of almost all of it, which was the only thing keeping me alive at that point in the cold snow without clothing. Fortunately, I was found and brought back to health quickly – but that's not the important part," Fred said as he started to get off-track.

“The notable thing that I took away from Deecy’s Creation was the fact that she consumed the two large shards of my parents as a...catalyst, of sorts. When I saw the shard of the Earth Core that was destroyed imbedded in your chest, I thought I could use the same skill that I used to Create Deecy on you, but I wasn’t sure if it would work.

“But I really wanted it to. As I sat there, looking at your deceased body, I realized how much I missed you and I felt... incomplete... when you weren’t around. You had been an important part of my new life here in the human world, and without you I felt *lost*. Not only did I miss your smile, your no-nonsense attitude toward the world, your courage, and your resolve, but I missed the way you made me feel around you – like I could be myself and you would accept me no matter what. I don’t know if that is what you would define as love, but it was something that I wanted to find out.

“So, I activated my Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill on your body, as I focused on what you looked like and all of my memories of you. Using the Core shard in your body as a focus, I pumped a lot of my Unconverted Mana into the process – but it wasn’t nearly enough; I’m not sure if it was because the sliver of the Core was much smaller than the ones I had of my parents, but it took nearly three times as much Mana for some type of result. After a blindingly bright flash of light that seemed to emanate from your body, you appeared in place of your desiccated corpse, as it appeared that it was consumed in the process.”

Eisa had no idea what to say. Much of what he described about Mana-formed Object skills and Unconverted Mana went over her head, but she took two things away from his explanation. One – which was the most obvious – Fred had used his special Dungeon Core abilities to bring her back to life after it sounded like she had been dead for...quite a while. She

wasn't sure exactly *what* he did, but she didn't feel any different than she had before.

Actually, once she concentrated on her surroundings, she realized that – while her body felt the same – her awareness of her surroundings was different. She couldn't quite put her finger on what was changed, but there was definitely something strange and unusual in the way she perceived the dirt and stone around her. Suddenly, almost as if the mere thought of everything being different triggered something inside her brain, a faint multi-colored dome appeared around them, stretching out hundreds of feet in every direction and centering on Fred. It was constantly shifting in splotches of red, blue, green, and brown; she thought that the colors were significant, but she wasn't sure exactly why – until she looked at the man responsible for bringing her back to life. When she concentrated on him, she could make out a faint aura suffusing his body, colored almost exactly the same as the large dome surrounding them.

Looking at Deecy, she was surprised to see an aura on the Dire Wolf Pup, as well – though instead of four colors like Fred, hers was just a steady half-red and half-blue mixture. That made sense, however, if what he had said about his parents being Fire and Water Dungeon Cores were true – and that they were used in the Creation of the Wolf.

She looked down at herself at that thought and saw a faint brown aura surrounding her body, but it was easier to see in her peripheral vision than straight on. Nevertheless, it appeared as though she somehow had a deeper connection to the element of Earth than she ever had before – whatever that was supposed to mean. Despite many of the things he said about the specific process being a little over her head, she had worked with him over the last few days enough that she thought she understood that the

different colors she was seeing were likely the Elemental Mana types that he had described as he worked with them.

Am I a Dungeon Core now? Is Deecy a Dungeon Core, too? While she was glad that she was alive and seemingly healthy, she didn't know what the changes in her ultimately meant – nor what the future held for her in her new existence.

The other thing that Eisa took away from his explanation was that he apparently reciprocated some of the same feelings that she had for him. At least, that's what she took away from his talk about missing her and “not knowing if he would define it as love” message; if she was understanding him correctly, he was confused about what he was feeling towards her but was interested in developing them further. That was...understandable, considering his upbringing – and it also explained his severe social awkwardness.

She could work with that.

“Ok...that's all well and good, and congratulations on doing something impossible yet again. Now, however, we need to—hold on, I hear something coming. That woman's shouting must have alerted one of the passing Earth dungeon defender patrols.”

It must be Deecy talking, Eisa thought. “Deecy, is that you talking in my head?” she whispered very softly, keenly aware of keeping her voice down now that she knew there was danger around.

Fred answered her question, though, and he whispered just as softly in her ear, his hot breath warming the side of her face as he leaned close. “Yes, it is. It must be a side-effect of my skill, though I'm not exactly sure why it works that way. Now, get behind me; Deecy and I'll see what we

can do to fight off whatever comes. We may need your help, however, so save whatever Power you have for the moment.”

Eisa agreed; not because she thought she needed protecting, but because she was still trying to get her bearings and she didn’t quite feel up to fighting yet. She moved back behind Fred and Deecy – who had grown into her giant Dire Wolf form again – and waited until whatever was out there came into the light of the floating flames.

For his part, Fred appeared to concentrate for a moment before a large version of the tripping flowers he was fond of creating appeared in front of him – though it looked a bit different from usual. The flower itself was blue and appeared literally frozen in immobility, while the leaves appeared to be on fire. She was about to say that something went wrong, but the fire didn’t seem to harm it.

Listening as intently as she could, she heard some noise coming from the darkness ahead. It sounded like something was walking toward them slowly, but almost as if they were dragging something at the same time. She tensed up as she got the first glimpse of what appeared to be a giant bear, and she jumped again when Fred’s flower monster seemed to melt in front of her eyes and little streaks of colored light zipped into him.

“What happened—” she started to ask, before Fred flashed a smile back at her as he rushed towards the bear.

What is he doing?!

Chapter 2

Fred felt a little bad about not making sure Eisa – and himself, for that matter – was clothed before he went over and did his best to hug her in what he thought was an affectionate manner. He knew there were some taboos in the Human world about keeping covered up, and it wasn't necessarily for warmth or protection purposes; it took him a while to learn about modesty and how it was inappropriate to show too much of certain parts of your body in public. Since Dungeon Cores didn't wear clothes or alter their outward appearance in any way – as well as the fact that the only clothing Cores usually saw in their dungeons was armor-based for protection – it wasn't something that was known to them, let alone an aspect of Human society that his parents would know to teach him. He knew these lessons *now*, of course, but sometimes he forgot or didn't think it was important.

Regardless of how he felt regarding Eisa's state of undress, he was still happy to see her – and to see that the mark over her head was now gone. That feeling of incompleteness he had felt when she wasn't there was gone, and it felt good having her by his side again. The changes in her were interesting, though; by observing her when he was explaining what had happened, he could tell that she could somehow detect the territories around her, as well as see the Mana inside of Fred and the Mana infusing Deecy. For her part, when he looked with his Mana Sight, he could see she was infused similarly to the Dire Wolf, though instead of half-Fire and half-Water, she was all Earth.

Also, like Deecy, there wasn't a concentration of the Mana in one specific place, like he could see in himself or another Dungeon Core. He

still had never figured out exactly what the Dire Wolf that contained some of the memories and knowledge of his parents was, though it was patently obvious now that Eisa had been brought back that they weren't any type of Core. It was almost like they were special entities that had some of the same characteristics but had abilities that were entirely unlike anything that Fred could do.

In Deecy's case, she could shrink down to the size of a Wolf Pup or grow to a giant size larger than any Dire Wolf should ever naturally be; he somehow doubted that Eisa could do that, but it would be interesting to see. Regardless of what she could do now as a result of his Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation skill, she appeared to be as normal as could be.

The warning from the Dire Wolf Pup about a potential Earth-based scouting party interrupted his thought about Eisa, and Fred switched his focus onto his territory. He had been neglecting monitoring it while he was preoccupied with explanations, but now he was fully committed to protecting his friend – and he didn't want her to die so quickly again. He wasn't sure if he could bring her back or not, since the Core shard had been consumed with his skill and he didn't want to take the chance.

Fred immediately created a level 16 Flametripper Spiker, which required most of the Elemental Mana that he had regenerated since he “woke up” underground.

Flametripper Spiker (Level 16)

Vitality: 45

Attack: 45, Frost Spike, Flame Tendrils

Defense: 45 (60 against water and fire-based attacks)

Respawn: 16 Nature Mana, 16 Water Mana, 16 Fire Mana

Loot: N/A

Essence: 65 units

It wasn't the most powerful of dungeon defenders, but it would hopefully be powerful enough to lend a helping hand against whatever was attacking them. He quickly searched for any signs of Earth-based (or even Nature-based, as unlikely as that was since the nearby Nature Cores were still recovering from their failed assault) defenders, but he couldn't see anything alive other than a small family of mice on the edge of his territory, hiding underneath some underbrush. He almost relaxed, but then he heard what the Dire Wolf had likely heard – footsteps.

His vision was quite good in the dark, so it didn't take him long to pick out the form of a giant bear slowly making its way towards him, but it was walking so ponderously it almost appeared injured. It was only when it got a little closer that he recognized that particular bear, though it wasn't quite the four-legged behemoth that he thought it was at first.

Fred “deleted” his large Flametripper Spiker from his territory and sucked out the Mana he had infused into it, as he glanced back at Eisa with a smile on his face – and took off toward the figure heading towards them. Eisa seemed momentarily startled, but Fred ignored her shock and raced toward the bear-fur-covered form.

“Regnark! What are you doing here?”

The face of the large man liberally covered in bear fur looked up at the question, and Fred could now see that Regnark's slow pace was because he was severely injured. Blood coated his face and he walked with a severe limp; while it was hard to see anything underneath the larger man's bulky clothing, he was sure that there were some wounds there that he couldn't see.

Instinctively, Fred looked at Regnark and tried to pull up a Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface; he had gotten so used to everyone having one in the town of Gatecross lately that he didn't even think about it. To his surprise, though, one actually appeared when he looked close enough.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Regnark McDonald		Class: Berserker-Marksman
Rating: C-3 rd		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 117910
Total Essence: 16278390		Available Essence to Distribute: 60330
Body: 20 (0/5242880) Brawn: 20 (0/5242880) Mind: 12 (0/20480) Speed: 17 (0/1310720)		Vitality: 162/4000 Stamina: 85/4000 Power: 6/60
Base Physical Attack: 50 Base Physical Defense: 50		Power Regen Rate: 1.2/min
Class Traits (Berserker)		
<i>Your Vitality is greatly increased by your Body stat</i>		
<i>Your Stamina is greatly increased by your Brawn stat</i>		
<i>Your Base Physical Attack and Defense are multiplied by 2.5 of your Body and Brawn stats</i>		
<i>You are able to convert Stamina to temporarily increase your Base Physical Attack, though you suffer a penalty to your Base Physical Defense</i>		
Class Traits (Marksman)		
<i>You have access to the Speed stat, which increases your movement speed and dodge ability</i>		
<i>Your ability to move stealthily is increased by your Speed stat</i>		
<i>Your long-range attacks are greatly increased by your Speed stat</i>		
Class Abilities (Berserker)		
Rage 8 – 0/2187000	Whirlwind 6 – 0/243000	Flattening Strike 6 – 0/243000
Relentless Assault 5 – 0/81000	Armor Cleave 7 – 0/729000	Intimidating Shout 5 – 0/81000
Overwhelming Blow 6 – 0/243000	Aggressive Aura 8 – 0/2187000	Unflinching Stance 7 – 0/729000
Class Abilities (Marksman)		
Pinpoint Accuracy 7 – 0/729000	Multi-arrow Shot 5 – 0/81000	Penetrating Arrow 6 – 0/243000
Quick-shot 5 – 0/81000	Raining Volley 5 – 0/81000	Dodge Boost 8 – 0/2187000

To say he was shocked was an understatement. *A C-Rated Berserker-Marksman? What was he doing in the literal end of nowhere?*

Why isn't he up in the village up north? He realized that those questions were stupid once he had a second to think about it; if the Earth Cores were looking for him, the Guild, or the citizens of Gatecross, they had likely searched *everywhere*.

“Fred? Is that...you?” Regnark panted out, the pain he was suffering from obvious in his stance and his voice.

“Here, let me help you.” Fred rushed ahead and put his shoulder under Regnark’s arm, doing his best to help the large man to their impromptu campsite. Once he got there, Regnark collapsed in a heap and fell unconscious, his breathing growing a bit ragged; another look at his Interface again revealed that the big bear of a man’s Vitality was still dropping.

“Eisa, I need you to help me heal him – he must be bleeding from somewhere I can’t see!” Without waiting for her, Fred started to use his Power on some Vitality Transfers, as they were the best option he had at the moment. He had some higher-Rated healing abilities that he had adapted from watching some of his Healing-based Guild members at work, but the Vitality Transfer was the best Power-cost-to-Vitality-increase ability he had Adapted.

Of course, it came with the drawback of sapping his own Vitality in the process, but the pain was worth it.

Fred felt the Power inside of him flowing towards Regnark – encompassing the big man with dark-colored healing energy – and stabs of pain echoed throughout his body, causing him to double over in temporary agony. The torturous pain only lasted for a couple of seconds each time he used the ability, but it still hurt quite a bit. *I don't know how Eisa can stand to use this ability more than once a day.*

Speaking of Eisa, he looked around for her, expecting her to already be nearby and helping to heal, but she still stood in the exact same place. The expression of shock or dread – he wasn’t quite sure which one it was – on her face was new, however.

“Eisa, hurry up! I need your help!” he whisper-shouted to her, more than aware that right now was not the time to attract attention from passing Earth Core scouting parties. He turned back to Regnark to see that his healing via Vitality Transfers was finally making a difference; the bearskin-covered human’s Vitality had stopped dropping so precipitously and was slowly starting to rise. Regnark still had a way to go before he was fully recovered from whatever injuries he had sustained, but with a little time and prodigious use of Power on the part of Fred and Eisa, he’d be fine.

“I...can’t, Fred. It’s...all gone,” Eisa said hesitatingly after another moment.

Fred paused in the middle of starting another Vitality Transfer, after recovering from the last round of torment. He looked back at Eisa in confusion, before he really *looked* at her – and he felt his eyes open wide in astonishment.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface	
Name: Eisa Howells	Class: Unselected
Rating: G-1 st	Essence Needed to Rate-up: 100
Total Essence: 0	Available Essence to Distribute: 0
Body: 2 (0/20) Brawn: 2 (0/20) Mind: 3 (0/40)	Vitality: 10/10 Stamina: 10/10 Power: 15/15
Base Physical Attack: 2 Base Physical Defense: 2	Power Regen Rate: 0.1/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>	

Apparently, when Fred brought her back to life, whatever process he used didn't transfer over any of the Essence she had collected over her lifetime. It made a bit of sense, he supposed, as he hadn't thought about that particular aspect when he brought her back; he had been concentrating on who she was and what she looked like – and not about how much Essence she had. Unlike what happened to him, she had actually *died*; all of her Essence was lost when she perished, and it wasn't something he thought he could actually bring back.

While he could transform Unconverted Mana into Essence and vice versa inside his own body, he couldn't just make it appear out of thin air. *At least, I don't think I can.* Either way, he thought that even if he could've brought back Eisa with all of her Essence – based on his own conversion rate – he thought it would've cost hundreds of thousands of Unconverted Mana to do that.

With Eisa's lack of Essence came the removal of all her abilities and even her Class. She now looked almost exactly the same as Fred did when he joined the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate, though with just a Mind stat of 3 instead of the 4 he had started with. From what he had learned, her stats were actually high for a novice Adventurer; he thought that the initial bump was likely due to the transformation she had undergone when Fred brought her back to life.

Fred pulled his attention away from her and focused back on Regnark, who was starting to wake up after his Vitality had stabilized enough. The big man opened his eyes in a flash and sat up quickly, his hands out in front of him like he was ready for a fight.

"Where are they? We have to keep moving!" he shouted, looking around frantically.

“Whoa, keep it down, my friend,” Fred said softly, trying to calm the big man down.

Regnark turned toward Fred with wild eyes when he heard him speak and lifted his hands like he was going to hit him, but he stopped himself before he made contact. His eyes cleared a little bit and he lowered his arms as he asked, “Fred? Is that really you?”

“Yes, it’s me. Now, why don’t you tell me what happened while I heal you some more.”

At the mention of healing, Regnark sighed and slumped with relief; the pain must’ve been excruciating for a while and Fred was glad that he had some healing capabilities. The big man started to recount his tale but froze when he saw Deecy sitting quietly – back in her Dire Wolf Pup form – nearby, watching them.

“Boy! Get back – there’s a wolf!” he exclaimed, before picking himself off the ground and pulling out a beat-up sword from somewhere inside of his furs.

Fred quickly stepped in front of Regnark, blocking his forward progress as Deecy got up and backed away behind him. “Stop! She’s a friend!” he pleaded with the fur-covered man, holding up his hands in a “hold” gesture.

“What? What are you talking about, boy? These beasts aren’t anyone’s friends!” The wild look was back in Regnark’s eyes, and he took a step forward as if he was going to bowl over Fred like he wasn’t even there. Fred thought that was an apt description; despite still having only about 500 of his 4000 Vitality and dangerously low Stamina, the bigger man could knock him out of the way with ease.

Deecy’s rescue came from an entirely unexpected source.

Chapter 3

“Stop! Deecy really is a friend!” Eisa shouted, louder than she probably should’ve.

She had never met this giant of a man covered in furs before, but she recognized his name from the stories that Fred had told her. Regnark was the first person that he had met after journeying for nearly a year and a half after his parents died up in Northend; she felt a kind of kinship with the big man because of his relationship with Fred. But now he was threatening Deecy, who she knew only had their best interests at heart – and who was strangely more akin to Eisa than even other humans now.

Although she wasn’t sure what had happened to Regnark to bring him to his half-dead state, she could guess. If he was up in Northend, it was likely that the roaming packs of Earth monsters that Deecy had mentioned had attacked them, looking for the people of Gatecross and Fred in particular. In fact, it was a wonder that he was even still alive, as not many people that weren’t Adventurers could stand up to even the lowliest of monsters.

Her words didn’t seem to have any effect on him, though, as he easily pushed Fred out of the way. *Fred’s stronger than a normal person due to his status as an Adventurer; this Regnark must have an SDIA as well, otherwise he couldn’t manhandle my love like that.* The thought of calling Fred her love even in her mind made her blush a little bit, but it also spurred her on to action.

Normally, she would’ve had a few abilities to choose from to stop or incapacitate even a large man without harming him with ease; however, due to the absence of any Essence – that was an unwelcome shock, to say the

least – she didn’t have *any* abilities. What she did have, though, was an instinctual feeling that she should be able to do *something*. She wasn’t completely aware of what it was, unfortunately, but she knew she had to act before Fred did something to attack his friend to keep him from hurting the Dire Wolf.

Reaching down inside herself, she fumbled with the brown aura that permeated her body, looking for some kind of source she could tap into like she would her Power. Unfortunately, a quick look at it with her mysterious sight revealed no concentration of what she assumed was an aura of Earth – according to Fred’s description of it, at least – anywhere; her entire body was infused with the...*Mana*, she supposed.

Rather than looking for a pool or a reservoir of the Mana, Eisa instead focused on extending the entire Earth aura surrounding her to a spot right in front of Regnark as he slowly stomped after Deecy, who was fleeing from him. Her intention was to somehow use the Earth-based extension of her aura to build a dirt wall or something along those lines, preventing him from moving any farther.

That wasn’t quite what happened.

She “felt” a tug at the end of her aura where she was concentrating, and a blob of what she assumed was Mana broke off and floated for a second a few inches off the ground in front of Regnark. Before she knew it, the blob of Mana materialized not into a wall – which she was halfway hoping for – but a ferocious...two-foot-tall Goblin Gnome. Shock – as well as fatigue – knocked her back on her butt as a good portion of the Mana that had infused her was consumed in the creation of the small, ugly, rusty-knife-wielding, greenish-brown creature with rocks imbedded within its skin.

Its appearance was a shock to everyone; everyone – including Regnark – froze as they watched the Goblin Gnome stand there with a vacant expression on its scrunched-up face, loosely holding its rusty knife down by its side. Fred was the first one to react, as he looked at Eisa and asked with amusement in his voice, “Eisa, did you just create a dungeon defender?”

It took a few moments for her to wrangle up enough energy to speak; the strangely crazy process of creating the Goblin Gnome was exhausting. “Uh...I think so.”

Before anyone could react, Regnark brought his beat-up sword down on top of the Goblin Gnome and easily sliced it in half like it was a hot loaf of bread, despite the dull edge of the blade itself. The two halves of the creature fell apart, splattering along the ground before it melted and disappeared into the ground...and an identical blob of brown Earth Mana appeared in its place, floating where it had been before it was transformed into the Gnome.

All strength seemed to leave Regnark as he sat down right where he was, looking around incredulously at Fred, Eisa, Deecy, and the spot where the Goblin Gnome had disappeared. “Can someone please tell me what’s going on? And—” he looked around a little more outside the campsite for what appeared to be the first time since he arrived— “shouldn’t this be Gatecross? I could’ve sworn I had traveled far enough to reach it.”

Now that Deecy seemed a bit less like she was going to be hacked apart, the Dire Wolf Pup came back to the campsite and lay back down – albeit as far away from Regnark as possible. Fred went over and sat next to the big man covered in bear furs and started to heal him again, trying to explain what happened over the last couple of months since he had left Northend. From their conversation and the shocked and disbelieving looks

coming from Regnark, it was clear to see that the fur-covered man hadn't known about Fred's origins.

Eisa stayed on the ground and listened as she slowly started to recover her energy. When she looked at herself, she could see that her brown-colored aura was a lot thinner and lighter in color than it had been before; bit-by-bit, though, it was starting to thicken and darken for some reason. She assumed that it was similar to Power in that she automatically regenerated some over time, and that was indeed the case. However, she was able to actually see the process; underneath her, very tiny dots of highlighted brown...somethings...slowly moved in her direction, where her body absorbed them and added it to her aura. The process was extremely slow, however, and she estimated that it could take a day or two of sitting there to fully regenerate her aura to the point it started out at.

“That’s the ambient Earth Mana you’re seeing and absorbing. The ambient Mana around here in the north isn’t very concentrated, which is why you don’t see a lot of powerful Dungeon Cores around here, but it is enough to provide a little bit of sustenance to those who require it to live and function.”

She jumped at the Dire Wolf's sudden voice in her head, as she wasn't expecting it. She looked over at Deecy and saw her staring right at her with a bored-looking expression on her face – as far as she could tell on someone not human. She spoke softly so as not to disturb Fred and Regnark as they finally got to the point where – as she suspected – the Earth monsters had attacked and ended up destroying the northern town where the big man was from. “What do you mean? Who needs it to live and function?”

“Well, me, for example. I absorb the nearby ambient Mana – usually in the form of moisture in the air or snow along the ground, as well as heat from things like Fred’s floating flames here or even body heat from normal living creatures – to keep me alive and healthy. I also use the Mana inside my body, which I can see that you can sense, to change my form; the expenditure to keep my giant form is significant, which is why I don’t stay in that form longer than necessary. This smaller Pup form allows me to acquire ambient Mana with very little cost to me, so it’s what you usually see me in as I can accumulate it much faster than I would otherwise.

“Dungeon Defenders – like the army that attacked us a month ago, as well as the Earth force roaming the forest right now – are constructs of Mana, but they don’t have the ability to accumulate ambient Mana outside of the Dungeon Cores’ territory. Eventually, if left outside a territory for long enough, they will cease to be and dissolve into nothing, not even leaving Mana behind as it was all consumed to ‘power’ the monsters – as you call them. If they had the ability to absorb Mana like you and I and survive longer, this world would be a whole lot different.”

“What do you mean, ‘you and I’? I’m not a monster, right?” Eisa asked, worried.

“Do I look like a monster to you? Sure, I have the shape of a Dire Wolf, but I’m nothing like the relatively mindless Mana creations which defend dungeons. They have a rudimentary intelligence and can’t think for themselves – they can only follow orders; granted, the more powerful

ones can follow more complicated orders, but they are still relatively unthinking walking blobs of Mana given form. You and I, on the other hand, are something else entirely.”

“I have to admit, that makes me feel a little better, but what exactly are we? Does Fred even know?”

“I...don’t think even Fred knows – and I certainly don’t know for certain. All that I’ve been able to determine is that we are flesh and blood, though we are powered by Mana and Mana alone. Unless I’m mistaken and you’re somehow vastly different than I, then you’ll notice that you’re probably not hungry; you’ll have no need of other sustenance other than the Mana inside of you, but you can still eat. I can hunt for prey – and I sometimes have natural urges to do that – and consume my kills, but I don’t need to.”

Now that she mentioned it, she didn’t feel the least bit hungry or even thirsty. She felt a great wave of fatigue when the Goblin Gnome was inadvertently created by an extension of her Earth-based aura – which was slowly fading as she absorbed some nearby ambient Mana – but it didn’t make her feel hungry or starving...just a bit rundown. “What happens if we run out of...Mana?”

“Well, don’t think of it like the Power that Humans seem to be able to manipulate, where if you run out you just have to wait for it to regenerate and everything will be ok. Instead, think of it more like...the blood running through your veins; what do you think would happen if every drop of blood was removed from your body?”

Eisa shuddered at the thought; she knew exactly what would happen – there was no healing a total lack of blood inside of your body. “By doing...whatever it was that I did, did I almost kill myself?”

The Dire Wolf snorted in what Eisa quickly assumed was laughter, before Deecy’s amused voice filled her head.

“No, no – I don’t think you could accidentally do that. Even when I’ve pushed myself to the limit, my transformation just gets to the point where it shuts down, preserving the tiniest bit of Mana to keep me alive. I’m sure there is a way to voluntarily use all of your Mana if that was what you really wanted to do, but there are apparently limits to what your body and Mana will allow. While my transformations are a little different from what you can apparently do, my assumption is that if you try to Create a dungeon defender that would require too much Mana, it will just not work.”

That’s a relief...wait. “You assume? You don’t know if I could accidentally kill myself?”

“I was just created less than a year ago, you know – I’m still learning my way through this as much as you. I may have a bit more knowledge when it comes to dungeons and the information that Fred requires, but as far as I’m aware, we’re the only two beings in this world like us. There’s no training or instruction manual for this – it’s all been a bit of trial and error. For instance, why don’t you go try to reabsorb that Earth Mana you used earlier?”

Eisa thought Deecy's reasoning was valid concerning her knowledge of their existence, but she was distracted from being more disappointed in the lack of information when she saw what the Dire Wolf Pup was talking about. The blob of Earth Mana was still there where the Goblin Gnome had disappeared when it was killed, though it had settled along the ground instead of floating in the air like it had been originally.

She got up a little unsteadily, the fatigue from being low in her Mana "lifeblood" making her a little woozy, but she managed to make her way over to the blob without falling on her face. She knelt down heavily next to it – vaguely aware that the conversation between Regnark and Fred had stopped at her presence in front of them – and reached out to touch the amorphous globule of brown Mana. As she reached out with her hand and made contact, she could see and feel it being quickly sucked into her body through her fingers.

It was incredible. The fatigue that she was starting to get used to immediately disappeared, leaving her with the feeling of being nearly "full" and satisfied. Eisa could tell that she wasn't at her limit of how much Mana she could contain in her aura, though it was close. She vaguely wondered how she could increase her capacity so that she could hold even more as she let out an extremely content sigh and groan of pleasure.

She looked over at Fred and Regnark, who were smiling at her with ridiculous grins on their faces.

"Well...that certainly seemed like some sort of religious experience there, little lady. You look better, though; I thought you'd been heavily drinking just a few moments ago, but now you look like you've sobered up quick," the big man covered in furs said to her, before turning back to Fred. "I want some of whatever she was having," he joked in a whispered aside.

Eisa figured it was obvious what his smile implied, but she didn't care what he thought.

Fred, on the other hand, was smiling for another reason. "That was amazing! Not only can you create dungeon defenders, but you can absorb Mana as well! We're going to have to test it out to see what else you can ___"

"No time for that. I sense something else heading in our direction – and I doubt it's another friendly face from up north."

Eisa scrambled to her feet as Fred did the same, the expression on his face going from happy to heavy concentration in a split second. He looked at her and nodded, before pointing off to the east. *Fight or flee?*

She got her answer as a large circle of dirt and stone surrounding them disappeared, creating a circular ring pit 10 feet deep and 10 feet wide; Eisa, Fred, Regnark, and Deecy were located in the center intact circle which was about 20 feet wide. It was almost like they were on a tiny island in the middle of Gatecross, just waiting for whatever was coming their way.

Eisa wasn't sure what her Goblin Gnome could do against whatever was attacking them, but she was ready.

Chapter 4

Fred again felt like he was being neglectful of their safety, as he let his attention wander from the state of his territory. Even given that they were important matters – like catching up with Regnark and informing him of what was going on (which the big man took much better than Fred had expected), healing the rest of the wounds that he still couldn't see under all the bear furs, and learning a little bit about Eisa's new...abilities – he should've been more alert to potential threats. Now that he wasn't distracted by watching the former Necro-healer absorb Earth Mana like it was nothing, he could concentrate on protection.

Using his Territorial Sight, he was able to see that there were nearly thirty Earth-based Dungeon Defenders heading in their direction; he wasn't sure if it was the noise they had been making, the sight of the flames in the center of their campsite, or if it was just happenstance that they were passing that way, but there was no way they would be able to outrun the “monsters” heading in their direction.

He didn't look at them for more than a brief glance before he discovered that they were entirely land-based, so he took steps to set up some defenses. Using his Unconverted Mana, he created a large circular pit that surrounded him and the others, leaving them relatively safe in the center. It was wide and deep enough that those coming towards them were unlikely to be able to get to them easily, but that wasn't all he was planning on doing.

“What's going on?” Regnark asked, confused at what was happening, but getting prepared to fight like the veteran Adventurer Fred now knew he was. If he thought the appearance of the pit was strange, he

didn't show any signs of it – or he didn't care because he was likely still exhausted.

Fred realized that he and Eisa had both reacted to Deecy's warning because of the Mana Communication within their head, but the big man didn't have the benefit of that silent communication. "We've got Earth def—monsters incoming from the east. There's about 30 of them, though fortunately none of them look extraordinarily powerful."

Regnark took this knowledge in stride, just as well as he did the creation of the circular pit; if the bear-fur-clad man had doubted Fred's assertion that he was half Dungeon Core before, those doubts were probably being chased away faster than the enemy was arriving. Fred gestured to Regnark's beat-up sword and asked, "Do you have any other weapons? I'm not sure how effective that sword will be against what's coming."

The big man grunted loudly, before responding with a mournful tone. "No, unfortunately. My favorite bow was smashed to pieces by a Stone Giant not too long ago when I was flung against a tree, and I had to leave my two-handed war axe at home. Though, *home* is a bit of a misnomer now – everything was destroyed. I'm sure if I were to go back, I might be able to salvage a couple of things, but it would be suicide going back there for just a hunk of metal."

Regnark had told him how a wave of various Earth monsters had descended on the unprepared village of Northend a week ago, and only about half of them were able to flee with their lives. The big man himself had been out hunting, luckily, and he had come upon the survivors and led them south; over the next week, they had been forced to backtrack to avoid hunting parties of more Earth monsters, making the less-than-one-day trek extraordinarily long.

He said that only five of them had been left just hours ago, when they were practically ambushed by four Stone Giants. Only Regnark had survived the encounter, though he left there highly wounded and his only weapon was the beat-up old sword he had taken from the corpse of one of the others. Fortunately, Fred was able to heal him up almost back to normal, and there was something he could do about the lack of weapons.

He brought up the memory of the bow he had learned to shoot all those months ago – albeit poorly at the time – and used his Mana to Create another one just like it. In less than a second, it materialized in his hand and he gave it to Regnark, who looked more than surprised at its presence.

“Where did you get—? Never mind, do you have any—?”

Fred was already on top of it, and he handed a quiver full of arrows that he had just Created before the big man could finish asking, before turning to other matters. Wanting to know what he had available to work with himself, he checked his Core Status and DAS Interface.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 8 Fire Mana: 20/139 Water Mana: 22/138 Nature Mana: 22/138 Earth Mana: 22/22 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 4412 Unconverted Essence: 7122
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 4% Expert Mana Conversion: 1% Intermediate Mana Communication: 62% Intermediate Core Crystallization: 21% Intermediate Defender Creation: 67% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 28% Novice Essence Conversion: 9%

Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 50%
Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 87%
Novice Dungeon Creation: 98%
Novice Defense Creation: 79%

Dungeon Information

(none)

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface

Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Instructor-Researcher	
Rating: E-6 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 5197	
Total Essence: 765803	Available Essence to Distribute: 67216		Unconverted Essence: 44120
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 130/180 Stamina: 150/160 Power: 1200/5100	
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 25/min	
Class Traits (Instructor)			
<i>Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)</i>			
Class Traits (Researcher)			
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>			
Class Abilities (Instructor)			
Teach 4 – 0/27000			
Class Abilities (Researcher)			
Experiment 0 – 0/100			
Adapted Abilities			
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 3 – 0/9000	
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000	
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000	
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 1 – 0/1000	Slamming Shout 1 – 0/1000	
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>		

He had ended up using almost 4,000 of his available 5,100 Power to heal Regnark back to nearly full Vitality; if he had been a normal Healer with better healing abilities, he was sure it wouldn't have taken nearly that much – but that was the state of matters at the moment, unfortunately. He still had 1,200 Power available to use against what was coming, but he would've rather had much more than that.

Fred also noticed almost as an afterthought that he hadn't received any Essence since before the attack on his dungeon a month ago. He supposed it made sense, though; he hadn't exactly been "alive" and in a position to absorb his portion of the essence, as he had been burnt to a crisp by the time the Essence was being doled out. As a result, he was still E-6th-Rated, but his Adapted Abilities didn't really reflect that, of course.

As far as his Core Mana went, he was sitting at only 20 in Fire and 22 in Nature and Water; the other element – Earth at 22 and rising – he couldn't do much with, as he had no blueprints for defenders or defenses. The absorption of the Earth Core had been severely interrupted when it had exploded in the middle of the process, which was likely the reason he didn't get anything from it.

Theoretically, he could utilize the Earth Mana to create some more hybrids, but he didn't have enough time to experiment; the Earth-based dungeon defenders would be there in a few seconds. Instead, he created another Flametripper Spiker on the eastern edge of their inner circle, where it could help defend them from the direction that the enemy was coming from. Anything else was going to have to wait until they saw exactly what they were up against.

While he could see what they were, he didn't know how powerful they were or what kind of attacks they could perform; he knew Nature-based creatures fairly well by then, as he had delved through many of their

dungeons with his Guild, but he hadn't ever gone through an Earth Dungeon. Because of that, he could only rely on what his Territorial Sight could tell him about the creatures they were facing.

Goblin Gnomes (Level 5)

Vitality: 20

Attack: 7, Knife Stab, Bite

Defense: 5

Respawn: 8 Earth Mana

The Goblin Gnomes looked a little smaller than Eisa's from earlier, which made sense because hers was a Level 10 – and it had almost drained her of all her Earth Mana. She apparently didn't have a lot of Mana inside of her, which was unfortunate, because she had likely obtained some of the blueprints from the Earth Core that he didn't; if she had access to more-powerful (and therefore more expensive) defenders, he could really use the help right now.

He wasn't really worried about the enemy Goblin Gnomes, though, even if there were about two dozen of them; they were so weak that the only one in danger was likely Eisa, as the little Gnomes' knives likely wouldn't even penetrate Fred or Regnark's skin. No, it was the larger defenders that the smaller Goblin Gnomes were hitching a ride on that concerned him.

Crystal Scorpion (Level 5)

Vitality: 380

Attack: 80, Pincer Strike, Tail Impalement

Defense: 30, (120 Crystallized Exoskeleton)

There were six of the large Crystal Scorpions heading in their direction, each with four of the Gnomes riding on their backs. The giant scorpions were at least 15 feet from the end of their forward pincers to their tails, and their eight legs lifted them off of the ground about a foot; in addition, their entire bodies were encased in a clear crystalline exoskeleton that appeared to take the place of their normal outer shells, though their faces and barbed stingers at the end of their tails looked...normal. Their faces and stingers were a dark green/brownish color, and when you looked at them in comparison to the rest of their bodies, the crystal shells they exhibited almost made them appear as if the bugs were encased in thick layers of ice.

Fred could see why the Goblin Gnomes were riding on top of the Crystal Scorpions; the giant bugs were eating up the distance between them and Fred's group faster than he thought possible. Within seconds they would be within range of sight of the others, so Fred thought to warn them what was incoming.

"We've got six Crystal Scorpions and two dozen Goblin Gnomes incoming, so let's see what they do—"

As they emerged into the faint light given off by the Fire Mana he had burning in the middle of their protective circle, Regnark lifted his bow and shot three arrows faster than Fred could even follow. He cut off what he was going to say when he saw the three arrows impact the face of the lead Scorpion, one in each eye and the last directly in its mouth. The three precisely shot arrows – when combined together – were fatal wounds, and the Crystal-encased bug took two more steps and collapsed, its momentum

making it slide a few more feet before its front pincers dug into the dirt, causing it to stop abruptly.

The four Goblin Gnomes weren't expecting that and flew through the air, landing hard nearly 20 feet ahead of the downed Scorpion. A quick glance at them told Fred that they were hurt – but not enough to hinder them as they picked themselves up and brandished their knives ahead of them.

Unfortunately for them, the other Crystal Scorpions were still running rapidly forward and either didn't see the Gnomes or didn't care, as they practically impaled them with their sharp crystalline legs, ending their lives near-instantly. At that point, they were about 60 feet away from the dug-out circle Fred had made less than a minute ago, so he turned to Regnark to see if he could do that again – when he stopped.

His first human friend in the world looked even more ragged than he had when he first arrived.

"Sorry," Regnark said as he panted, seeing Fred looking at him in concern. "Using my Pinpoint Accuracy skill takes a lot out of me; I forgot that I still hadn't fully recovered my Stamina from earlier."

Makes sense. When Fred looked at his friend's Stamina again, he could see that it was down from the 110 it had been just a few moments ago to just 20, which was very dangerous. "Don't use any more skills – shoot normally and do your best. I'll keep you supplied in arrows, just don't stop," Fred told him, using his Mana-formed Object Creation to Create two dozen more arrows while he said that.

Regnark nodded, nocking another arrow on his bow and taking his time before he fired. Fred didn't watch to see if he succeeded in hitting one of the Scorpions again, but he assumed the big man's low Stamina was

affecting his aim; he heard a *thunk*, followed by a cut-off screech as one of the riding Goblin Gnomes got knocked off its ride by an arrow.

He ignored that, though, because the dead Crystal Scorpion had finally dissolved and left a big blob of Earth Mana behind; it was time to see what Eisa could do with some more ammunition.

Chapter 5

Normally, when Fred absorbed or manipulated the available Mana inside of his territory left behind by fallen defenders, all he had to do was think about absorbing it and the Mana would flow quickly where he needed it – either right to him as an absorption or to a defender blueprint. What he hadn't ever done was move it around his territory at a distance, placing it in another location – but now it was time to try.

He had observed earlier that Eisa needed to physically contact Earth Mana to absorb it again, so it wasn't doing any good about 200 feet away where the deceased Scorpion had fallen. With a thought, Fred “grabbed” hold of the large blob of brown-colored Mana and brought it close to him as if he was going to absorb it; he stopped from doing that since it wouldn't do much good, as it would turn into Unconverted Mana in his Human Core. Instead, he stopped it just a foot away from himself, where it floated in the air within reach.

By that time, the Crystal Scorpions with their passengers arrived at Fred's circular-shaped pit and paused right on the edge. While they were large and could reach halfway across the pit with their forward pincers, they couldn't navigate their way to the other side; since the pit was made with 90-degree angles, if they fell down the pit they wouldn't be able to climb back up – theoretically. What they *could* do was assist the Goblin Gnomes in their way over to Fred's area of safety.

As Fred turned to Eisa to see what she could do with the Earth Mana, the Scorpions started flinging their tails forward, propelling a single Goblin through the air and over the pit. Five small ugly forms flew towards them, brandishing their rusty knives and screaming incoherently as they

rocketed toward them. Fred's Flametripper Spiker grabbed a pair of the Gnomes with two of its flaming leaves, which started to burn them as soon as they were snatched out of the air. Since they were a low level and not terribly powerful at that, they were killed within seconds.

His defender also managed to hit a single Goblin with a volley of ice spikes that it shot out of its blue flower petals, impaling it and doing quite a bit of damage. In fact, before it even hit the ground it was starting to dissolve and give up its Mana from its death.

With three of the five Goblins defeated by his defender, Fred and the others still had to contend with the two that made it through. Fred told Regnark to ignore them as they landed nearby, as his focus needed to be solely on trying to hit the vulnerable faces of the Scorpions to keep them back; that, of course, was made much easier since they were all within 20 feet – a theoretically easy shot for the accomplished Marksman and hunter that the big man was. Unfortunately, his fatigue from his low Stamina – and the fact that the Scorpions were moving so quickly – made most of his shots fairly inaccurate.

Eisa was already on top of the Goblin Gnome situation, however; she had already instinctively Created another Goblin Gnome of her own, though hers was quite a bit more powerful in comparison to the two that landed surprisingly spritely in their protected circle. At Level 10, hers had enough defense that the knives of the others would just barely scratch its natural protection.

Goblin Gnome (Level 10)

Vitality: 30

Attack: 12, Knife Stab, Bite

Defense: 10

Respawn: 13 Earth Mana

Of course, there was only one of Eisa's Gnomes and two of the enemy, which meant that Eisa was in trouble if one of them got through to her. Scratch that, actually – five more Goblin Gnomes flew towards them as the Scorpions tossed another volley of the smaller monsters over the pit. This time, only a single Goblin was snatched out of the air by Fred's Spiker; the other flaming leaf missed and the ice spikes in its petals were recharging for another 50 seconds or so.

Seven-on-one wasn't great odds, and all but one of the enemies ignored Eisa's defender and went straight for her. Fred wasn't going to have that, though, so he intervened with some attacks of his own.

Using his Power, he hit the nearest two in the back with a Fireblast, knocking them down and heavily burning them but not enough to kill them. Since he only had that ability at level 1, it didn't do much damage; seeing how ineffectual it was, he Slotted another 4,000 Essence into it to bring it up to level 3 and shot another two that had turned toward him in response to his earlier attack. This time, his attack did enough damage to burn the front half of each Gnome, killing them almost instantly.

That still left two wounded and three unwounded ones, however. Fred jumped near the two wounded Goblin Gnomes and Created a steel dagger in each hand with his Unconverted Mana, stabbing down at the same time and dispatching them both with efficiency. He looked up to see where the other ones were, when he saw Eisa jump back from a strike, only to trip and fall backwards. The exhaustion from being low on Mana was evident in her face and body, and she struggled to scramble out of the way of the advancing enemies.

Her own Goblin managed to intercept two of the enemy, keeping them at bay with quick strikes. One lucky strike managed to hit one of its fast and wily opponents, creating a large slash in its mottled brown-green skin that ended up incapacitating it. The strike opened it up to attack, but it had much better defense being a higher level; the attack only scored a thin scratch along the torso of Eisa's Goblin Gnome, with just a tiny bead of blood showing that any damage had been done.

Fred tossed out another Fireblast at the small Goblin still heading for Eisa but just barely missed; the Gnome jumped forward in an attempt to land on and impale the woman with its knife before she could get up, narrowly avoiding the attack from Fred. The battle seemed to progress in slow motion as he watched the small knife-wielding figure flying through the air in its attempt to kill Eisa. Meanwhile, he thought furiously about his abilities and what would work to help keep her safe.

He needn't have worried, as Deecy chose that time to make her presence known. She leapt through the air in her normal Dire Wolf form and snatched the descending Gnome's head in her jaws, biting down hard and snapping its neck before tossing it away. When she turned to help dispatch the others, Deecy found that she wasn't needed to help with the Goblins nearby.

That was because another four Gnomes were flung inside their circle just then; a single one was snatched out of the air again and killed by his large multi-element flower defender. Eisa's Goblin Gnome finished off its wounded counterpart and engaged the other Gnome, so it wasn't able to intercept the newest four heading straight for the still-struggling-to-rise woman. Fred looked at his own Power and winced as he saw what he had used already.

Fredwynklemossering

Vitality: 132/180

Stamina: 145/160

Power: 550/5100

His Vitality was still low from healing Regnark earlier, but he wasn't too worried about that; instead, he was quickly running out of Power – he had used more than half of what he had available when the fight started, and he was just fighting some of the easiest defenders there were out there. He was worried that he wouldn't have enough leftover when the Scorpions finally figured out how to get to them, and they would end up dying anyway. He could get Regnark or Deecy to help, but from a quick glance it appeared as though the big man's attacks were actually doing fairly well at keeping the Crystal bugs from doing anything other than flinging Goblin Gnomes. As for Deecy, a quick query to her didn't get the best response.

“I’m still very low on my own Mana right now. I have maybe 30 seconds of my giant form before I’ll be forced to rest again, and I’m waiting for the inevitable attack by those Crystal Scorpions.”

A glance at her aura proved that she was correct; the blue and red mana inside of her was looking almost as faded as Eisa's. *Well, there's nothing for it but to use my Power—*. But looking at Deecy reminded him of the large blob of Earth Mana he had left floating in the middle of their circle. With another quick thought – as the enemy Gnomes bounded toward Eisa and Deecy – Fred corralled all of the smaller brown globs left behind by the dead Goblins and combined them with the larger blob...and then

shoved the slightly larger blob straight into Eisa as if he was trying to fill her up like one of his defender blueprints.

He could see her stagger backwards as she was just getting to her feet, the Shield of Darkness he had placed on her fading from her form at the same time. The Mana hit her like a battering ram, but instead of ultimately hurting her, it seemed as if she literally shone with a healthy brown aura. A smile lit her face as her aura shone brightly for a few seconds before fading away; the bright light she emitted had the effect of blinding everyone looking at her in the darkness of the night.

Fred was only momentarily blinded as he was looking slightly away from her when she lit up, but the Goblin Gnomes weren't so lucky; they started to stumble around in confusion, though a quick check of their Vitality showed that they weren't actually hurt by the light. When Fred was able to see again, he blinked in surprise at where Eisa was standing as he saw a slightly larger figure in her place.

It looked like Eisa...if her entire body had been covered by a thin layer of compressed brown dirt. The packed earth surrounding the figure conformed to the basic shape of Eisa's body, though its face was relatively featureless; and, seeing as it didn't have any clothes covering the dirt, it was essentially naked.

Fred thought that it would be prudent not to mention that fact – but he did have to admit that what Eisa had turned into was beautiful.

Not in the sense of what he had learned humans thought of beauty, though, but in what he could only assume was Eisa's Earth Elemental form. She was perfectly proportioned and sleek, with very little wasted material; in fact, when Eisa started to move, he could see the compressed dirt in the various joints in her elbows, hips, and knees almost melt into a "mud", leaving her new form flexible enough to move almost effortlessly.

As if she could “feel” the inherent strength in her new form, she immediately attacked the Goblin Gnomes still recovering from the blinding light she had emitted. With what looked like effortlessness to Fred, she formed her hands and upper arms into sharp bladed implements of destruction and went to work on the Goblins, slicing them apart with clumsy but effective strikes. Deecy just stayed back and watched in surprise, though he could tell she was waiting to help if Eisa needed it.

As they died and dissolved into the ground, she absorbed the small orbs of Earth Mana they left behind, strengthening her slowly depleting aura; it wasn’t fading at a rapid pace, but Fred could tell that the longer she held her form, the more her Mana was used up. Looking at Deecy, he likened the effect to one similar to the Dire Wolf’s as she changed into her giant form.

“Fred! I need some more arrows!” Regnark called out, pulling Fred’s attention back to the greater threat.

He felt a little silly watching Eisa at work, but it was fascinating watching her learn how to use her new abilities; the experience was a whole lot different from what he knew Deecy could do, mainly because Eisa was human and existed before this big change in her. He couldn’t help but feel proud that she was embracing her new-found skillset like the veteran Adventurer he knew she was.

But that was neither here nor there, as he whipped his head back to the bear-fur-clad man, using his Mana-formed Object Creation to Create another two-dozen arrows as he did so. He immediately ran up to Regnark and shoved the arrows into the man’s nearly empty quiver; only then did he look up and check his Territorial Sight to see what the situation was.

The Crystal Scorpions had already flung their passengers and were running around the circular pit, looking for a way across. Regnark had

managed to injure one of them with a lucky shot to one of its eyes, but they were still moving too quickly for the big man to hit them. Most of the arrows he fired missed by only the barest margins, but even though they were close, they still hit and ricocheted off of the bugs' crystallized exoskeletons, leaving no more than a few chips or cracks here and there. Although the damage done was minimal, the impacts still kept the Scorpions from staying in one place too long.

That all changed when they had unloaded their payload, however; as soon as they discovered there was no accessible way across the pit, almost as one they descended into the relatively short depths, wedging their bodies down inside the 10-foot-wide hole and maneuvered themselves so they were facing the inner circle where Fred, Eisa, Regnark, and Deecy were relatively safe.

And then the giant bugs started to slam their pincers into the inner wall of the pit, gouging out a portion of it and causing a small bit of the compressed dirt to collapse. Fred hadn't made the walls into stone like he had done with some of the other defenses he had set up in Gatecross, as he didn't think it was necessary at the time and didn't want to use too much of his Mana to do so. And since it wasn't necessarily part of his "dungeon", there wasn't any of his mana imbuing the walls, protecting them from destruction.

This just got a whole lot more interesting.

Chapter 6

The one fortunate thing out of all of that, though, was that – other than moving their massive pincers in an effort to destroy their safe area – they weren't moving around that fast. Despite the danger of getting too close, Regnark was able to quickly step up and fire point-blank into one Scorpion's face and then another, filling them with five-six arrows each. The strikes destroyed their eyes and caused critical fatal damage, which killed them quickly.

Unfortunately, that was all the big man had time for. Eisa and her little Goblin Gnome finished off the rest of the enemy Goblins and were standing in the middle of their quickly crumbling circle. Fred grabbed one of the blobs of Earth Mana that came from the newly fallen Scorpions and sent it straight into her, calling out, "Eisa! Try to make some more of your little friends there!"

She nodded at him before she paused and tilted her head to the side. "I can do you one better if there's just a little bit more of that Mana for me!" she called out in response.

Fred had an idea about how to use the remaining Earth Mana blob for his own attack, so instead he pulled all but 1 of his 22 Earth Mana inside of his Core Structure and flung it out toward her. She didn't even wait until it reached her body as she held up her hand and seemed to grab the small brown orb out of the air; when it easily absorbed into her aura, he saw her smile again – at least, he thought she did, as there was a crack in her Earth Elemental form's face that was upturned. Her aura extended out from her like it did when she Created a Goblin Gnome, though this time it was much, much bigger.

In fact, it was the size of a Crystal Scorpion, which soon materialized on their crumbling platform, almost pushing Fred off the side in the process.

“Sorry about that, Fred! I’m still getting the hang of this!” Eisa shouted in apology.

Regnark turned around at the commotion in the middle of retreating from an enemy Crystal Scorpion making its way up the now-destroyed side of the pit. When it didn’t attack her – and in fact turned away towards where another one was making its way up the crumbled remains of the inner wall – he turned back towards the one he was retreating from and shook his head in disbelief.

Fred stepped up next to him and yelled to get his attention, as he was doing his best to walk backwards and fire at the same time. “Here, I’ve got something else for you to use now!” Fred handed the big man a massive, heavy steel warhammer that he remembered some of the front-line Adventurers liked to use – like Metch, if he remembered correctly; he himself could lift it and move it around, but he didn’t fancy trying to swing it. Regnark, though, dropped his bow and quiver with a slight smirk on his face, and grabbed it from him, swinging it back and forth like it was a thin stick.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had one of these? I didn’t even need to waste my time with those arrows.” At those words, Regnark stepped towards the Scorpion he had been retreating from and roared like the bear his furs were made of. With a mighty swing, the warhammer impacted one of the pincers moving to grab the human and shattered a sizable chunk of the crystal covering it. With a surprisingly graceful turn – considering his size and the state of his Stamina – Regnark spun and smashed his warhammer into the other pincer trying to grab him from behind. More

crystal shattered upon impact, and Fred could see that the “normal” Scorpion pincers underneath the exoskeleton had been nearly crippled in the process.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), the big man’s gracefulness was short-lived as he stumbled a bit as he turned toward the face and mouth of the Scorpion and raised his Hammer to deliver what appeared to be a rage-fueled blow to its head, when the stinger struck out at him with shockingly fast speed. Regnark was saved from being impaled and pumped full of what Fred figured was likely lethal poison by his stumble, and instead of being hit in the chest with eight inches of stinger, it instead struck at the warhammer. The big man had a solid grip on it, however, which was good...and bad.

The good part was that he didn’t lose hold of his weapon, which would leave him relatively defenseless. The bad part was that the stinger struck so strongly and swiftly that Regnark was flung backwards 15 feet and nearly collided with Fred, who dodged out of the way at the last moment. Without any other impedance to its upward climb, the Crystal Scorpion made it to the top of the inner circle with only minor wounds to its pincers.

Meanwhile, Eisa’s own Crystal Scorpion was facing off against its counterpart and was slowly losing. While the enemy bug was Level 5, Eisa’s was only Level 2; there was a big difference in both attack and defense, and it was more than obvious when her giant Scorpion started having its crystalline exoskeleton ripped away in chunks.

Eisa wasn’t going to allow her big creation to go down without some support, though; she somehow canceled her Earth Elemental form and Created two more Goblin Gnomes the same level as the first and sent them to harass the enemy Scorpion. While they couldn’t harm the exoskeleton

even a little bit, they were fairly fast and managed to close in on it without too much trouble – and they promptly jumped on top of it, reminiscent of the riders that had been on there earlier. They immediately converged on its face and started stabbing its more-vulnerable eyes, gouging out one of them before the bug’s stinger impaled a Goblin Gnome through the back, causing it to turn even more green than it normally was, before it died and dissolved into more Earth Mana.

Eisa’s Scorpion took advantage of the enemy’s distraction to approach quickly and attack with its own upstretched tail, striking and impaling its stinger inside the mouth of the bigger, stronger Crystal bug. Although it initially appeared to be immune to the poison from the stinger – as the enemy struck out with both pincers in the now-vulnerable position Eisa’s Scorpion was now situated and practically tore it apart, as well as striking another Goblin Gnome through the back and lifting it up as it died – the lethality of the substance eventually caused it to collapse on its belly, its strength drained as the poison went to work destroying its insides.

While all that was going on, Deecy was also battling against the third Scorpion, the time finally coming for her to use her giant form to help defend herself and the others. She was so large and quick that she was able to avoid even the lightning-fast strikes of the Scorpion’s stinger, though she couldn’t manage to do any major damage to the crystal-encased bug.

“I’m almost out of Mana. I’ve got one more thing I can do to give you all some time, but then it’s up to you.”

Fred heard her as he was helping Regnark back to his feet and he turned toward her with a question on his lips. Before he could ask what she was going to do, she dodged a pincer strike by just inches as she bit down

on the large crystal appendage. Deecy then lifted the entire Scorpion up and flung her head to the side so quickly – while letting go with her jaws – that it flung the bug into the night at least 200 feet away. Fred couldn't visually see where it went, but it tumbled for a while before coming to a stop. Based upon its Vitality when he looked at it with his Territorial Sight, it was injured, but it would likely be back.

Deecy shrunk down to her Pup form almost immediately after flinging the Crystal Scorpion into the night. She limped away from the last of the Scorpions, which was rapidly gaining on Fred and Regnark. Thinking quickly, Fred grabbed the Earth Mana blob from the second Scorpion the big man had killed inside the pit and used it to create a weapon.

“Keep it right there, Regnark! I have a plan – just don't let it move from that spot,” he told his friend quickly, as he threw out a Fireblast right into the Scorpion's face, causing it to flinch back and pause in surprise.

Regnark immediately went to work, exchanging blows but keeping out of range of the stinger as much as he could. Fred flung out another Fireblast into its face when it appeared as though the stinger was about to strike, which made the Scorpion pause in its attack. While he wasn't doing a lot of damage, that wasn't the purpose behind their defense.

The big man stumbled after blocking another pincer attack, and the stinger struck down at the temporarily off-balance Regnark. Just as it was about to impale Fred's friend, a Goblin Gnome jumped into the stinger's path where it was impaled and knocked the Scorpion's aim off just enough to miss the human entirely. Fred glanced behind him to nod at Eisa in thanks and moved to fling another Fireblast out – but there was no need.

Fred grabbed at the fur covering Regnark and pulled backwards while yelling, “Fall back now!”

Without arguing, the big man flung himself backwards so quickly he took Fred with him. It was a good thing, too, as the large slab of heavy stone he had Created with the blob of Earth Mana high above his territory slammed down with tremendous force – right on top of the Crystal Scorpion. Even the tough crystalline exoskeleton couldn't handle the weight and force of the stone falling from 250 feet and it was almost instantly squished flat, with some of the crystal covering its body crushed so violently it turned to a fine powder.

The powerful slam of stone against crystal shook the ground and knocked everyone off their feet, their ears ringing a bit from the tremendous noise the impact made. When Fred picked himself up and gave Regnark a hand up, he looked back to see how Eisa had fared. She had been blown off the side of the circular platform from the shockwave, but she seemed to be fine; when she climbed back up the nearest crumbled ramp, she looked at the large stone in astonishment.

“What the—? Where did that come from?” she asked, disbelief at what she was seeing evident in her voice.

“No time, we have the last one still incoming from where Deecy threw it and...Deecy? What's wrong?” Fred asked concernedly, as she had collapsed on her side and was panting heavily – a highly unusual action from the normally stoic Dire Wolf.

“The...stinger nicked me...as I was flinging...it away...”

Even her voice sounded weak to Fred, and he rushed over to her side. It took no time at all to see the jagged wound on her side, the blood having stopped flowing from the shallow scrape and only a dark-green substance leaking out. Fred immediately tried to heal her with all of his

Power, alternating from Vitality Transfer to Heal Minor Wounds – but nothing he had did more than delay the inevitable. He frantically searched for some sort of “Cure Poison” ability that he may have adapted, but he couldn’t see anything that might counteract the toxic sludge eating away at her body.

While he was working to heal her, out of the corner of his eye Fred saw Eisa rush over and grab every blob of Earth Mana left behind by the defeated Crystal Scorpions, including her own and her destroyed Goblin Gnomes. When she had collected them all, she Created two more Scorpions, though they looked slightly larger than her first. Regnark grabbed his discarded bow and quiver and hooked the warhammer to his waist.

“We’ll take care of the last one, Fred – you take care of Deecy,” Eisa told him, and all he could do was nod as he frantically tried to stop the last of her Vitality from leaving her body. The colors of her aura were fading fast as it also combated the poison consuming her, but it was starting to get extremely faint. Within a minute, Fred was completely out of Power and the Dire Wolf’s breathing started to slow as her body began to give up the fight.

No! This isn’t fair – there has to be a way to save her!

Fred pounded the ground and looked at the impact in the dirt his fist made from his frustration – and had an idea. *If giving Earth Mana to Eisa strengthened **her**, maybe the same could be done for Deecy?* He had nothing else to try, so he fed her everything he had left of Water and Fire Mana inside his Cores, which ultimately didn’t amount to more than a dozen total. He had spent the rest of his Mana on—

Without giving it more than a split-second thought, he “deleted” his Flametripper Spiker for the second time that night, and immediately brought the Mana it left behind next to him and the still-fading Dire Wolf

Pup. He could tell that even the small influx of Mana had done her some good and was counteracting the poison as the Fire and Water Mana fought against it. Fred sent what he had received from the deletion of his defender straight into her and watched her aura flare brighter and stronger. The blue and red emanating from off of her body quickly ate away at the dark-green poison, and her breathing strengthened as a result.

But it wasn't quite enough. Her aura faded after it consumed more than two-thirds of the poison he could see, but after about a minute it wasn't strong enough to do any more. Fred could hear another battle going on within earshot, but he ignored it as he desperately tried whatever else he could to save his friend.

He tried to send the Nature Mana he received from his Spiker's deletion, but it just passed right through her without doing anything. A single point of Earth Mana had been converted within the last minute, so he tried the same with it – only to have it pass through the Dire Wolf's body just as ineffectually as the Nature Mana. His Power had also regenerated another 25 points, so he used the least-costly healing ability he had on her – which only delayed the inevitable another minute or so.

Well, there's only one thing left to try.

Doubting it could work, he mentally reached inside his Human Core and grabbed over 1,000 Unconverted Mana from his dwindling stockpile. He held it in his hands and gently moved it over to Deecy's form and placed it against her side where the poison was centered, careful not to touch it himself. His hopes were dashed as the clear-colored Mana passed right through her without doing anything and he sighed in defeat.

But then her aura started to suck up the Mana and absorb it, drinking it like someone would drink a cup of water after being stranded in the desert for days. Fred checked his reserves of Unconverted Mana and kept feeding

it to her aura, eventually bringing his total down to 215 before it stopped. He knew he could convert some Essence to start making more if he needed to, but he was glad it hadn't sucked him dry.

The change in Deecy was apparent and immediate once her aura drank in as much Mana as it could hold. The poison practically evaporated and her wound – as relatively shallow as it had been – was healed, and her breathing steadied to the point where she actually sounded healthy. The Dire Wolf Pup opened her eyes and immediately sat up, her tongue lolling out of her mouth in a wolfy grin.

“Wow...that was close. What took you so long?”

Fred laughed, relief at her full recovery and her snarky attitude sending him into hysterics. Eisa and Regnark came back from defeating the last Scorpion, grins on their faces as they saw Deecy sitting up looking as healthy as could be.

Finally, Fred calmed down and scratched Deecy behind the ears, almost in an effort to make sure she was alive. “I’m glad you’re alright – but try not to do anything like that again, okay?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on it. But enough with all that...we’ve got to get moving. This whole battle has likely alerted the entire forest, especially since you decided to drop 20 tons of rock on top of a Scorpion.”

She was right – they had to get moving. Fred told Regnark what the Dire Wolf Pup had said, and he nodded his agreement.

“There are swarms of those things – and worse – out there. We need to get gone,” the big man said.

“I agree – but at least we’ve got transportation,” Eisa said with a smile, pointing toward the two Crystal Scorpions she had Created, only looking slightly worse for wear from the fight with the last enemy bug. “But where should we go?”

Fred didn’t have to think about it for long. “We go west – it’s about time we find the Guild.”

Part II – Westbound

Chapter 7

Traveling on Crystal-Scorpion-back wasn't as comfortable as Eisa would've liked it to be, but it sure was a heck of a lot faster than walking. Trying to stay upright on the quickly moving crystal bug was difficult, but the process was made a bit easier when she wrapped her arms around Fred, who was sitting just in front of her, legs hanging over the sides of the giant Scorpion. Being pressed up so close to him made her heart race, but it was tempered by the need to constantly watch where they were going and attempt to adjust her balance to the changing terrain conditions.

Deecy was at least comfortable, though, and Eisa kind of envied her being held in Fred's lap.

After Deecy was healed miraculously by Fred – Eisa still didn't know exactly what he did, but it was effective – and stated their need to leave as soon as possible, they all scrambled to prepare for their departure. There wasn't much that Regnark and Deecy needed to do, but there were two things that Eisa and Fred needed to accomplish.

The first was to find Eisa's Pocket Interface Bag, which had been buried underneath the same dirt wall she had been after the Earth Core exploded and she had...died. It was still hard thinking about that, so she did her best to ignore the fact that she had been dead only a few hours ago; so many things had happened since then and they were in a hurry, so the ignoring process was made much easier.

Anyway, when Fred was able to clear away some of the dirt and found her PIB, she discovered it largely intact and undamaged. Eisa wasn't looking for it for her own personal possessions, however; she had been the one entrusted with keeping something that would be hard for Fred to

replicate: the Class Selector used by the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate. The Class Selector helped those who had a Sub-dermal Interface Artifact select or remove one of their classes – which Fred had used extensively when he was training the townspeople of Gatecross.

They needed it for two reasons. The most obvious one was that Eisa didn't have a class since she had been...reborn, or whatever she wanted to think of it as. Selecting a class would give her some bonuses and help shape what kind of Adventurer she wanted to be; the only thing, though, was that she hadn't yet decided if she wanted to follow her previous path as a Necro-healer or not.

The second reason they needed to obtain the Class Selector was one for the future. If – no, *when* – they found the Core Power Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross again, they would be able to change the townspeople's classes to whatever was necessary for Fred to teach them additional abilities. Right now, they were stuck as Researchers, which was great for the defense of Fred's now-destroyed dungeon in Gatecross as it gave them extra Power to use, but it wouldn't let them advance too well on their own.

The other thing they needed to do was distribute their Essence that they had earned from killing all of the enemy Goblin Gnomes and Crystal Scorpions. Since there were only three of them (Deecy couldn't absorb any of it, since she didn't have an SDIA), they had actually earned quite a bit from the powerful giant bugs. Each one was worth just under 9,000 Essence, and when they added in the little bit extra that the smaller Goblins gave, each person had absorbed 54,030 Essence.

As a result, Eisa had increased to the G-10th Rating already, though she didn't really see any advantage from that since she didn't have a class. She immediately distributed quite a bit of it to her base stats of Body,

Brawn, and Mind – mainly so that she hopefully wouldn’t die from a single knife thrust from a Goblin Gnome. She did save a portion of what they had earned for whatever class abilities she would have access to, but she decided to wait to select a class until they were moving, as they needed to leave as soon as possible.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface	
Name: Eisa Howells	Class: Unselected
Rating: G-10 th	Essence Needed to Rate-up: 48270
Total Essence: 54030	Available Essence to Distribute: 23390
Body: 10 (0/10240) Brawn: 10 (0/10240) Mind: 10 (0/10240)	Vitality: 50/50 Stamina: 50/50 Power: 50/50
Base Physical Attack: 10 Base Physical Defense: 10	Power Regen Rate: 0.3/min
<i>(Additional stats and abilities available once class is chosen)</i>	

Eisa had brought all of her stats up to 10 so that she felt a little more “normal”, and the boost to her overall Vitality and Physical Defense was a welcome difference. She had felt more than a bit vulnerable fighting against even the enemy Goblin Gnomes; before she had lost all of her Essence as a result of dying, she wouldn’t have been in the least concerned, as they would barely scratch her if she was hit by them. But with practically no defense and very low Vitality, she was theoretically a single stab away from dying.

And that concern didn’t even consider the giant Crystal Scorpions – she couldn’t even imagine what would happen after being hit by one of them.

Fortunately, her new abilities with Earth Mana as... whatever she was now... had allowed her to survive. The sheer strangeness of being able to create a monster that would fight for her had faded, and the excitement of what she could do now filled her whole being. Eisa was just glad that she hadn't been filled with the memories of the Earth Core like Fred had mentioned Deecy had been; she didn't think she'd be able to handle foreign thoughts and information invading her mind.

What did pop in her mind after Fred had thrown a big blob of Earth Mana the first time was something that scared her at first, but it was similar enough to her Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface that she quickly adapted to it and took it in stride. She remembered how she had pulled it up earlier just before they left the area around Gatecross, as she held onto Fred a little tighter as her Scorpion ride maneuvered over some tree roots.

Shard Status
Eisa Howells
Elemental Origin: Earth Shard Level: 3 Next Mana Threshold: 500 Earth Mana: 208/320
Defender Creation Options
Goblin Gnome (Level 1 Base Cost: 4 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)

The halfway transparent screen that popped up was similar to her normal Adventurer Interface, but instead of being called that, it instead said Shard Status. It also referenced that she was at Shard Level 3, which she

assumed was like some sort of Rating – that was the only thing she could compare it to, at least. Eisa hadn't seen the screen at first, and it was only when Fred had bombarded her with a large influx of Earth Mana that it popped up; at the time it had said Shard Level 2 with a maximum Earth Mana of 120 – and that she had the Special Ability of Earth Elemental Form.

She had tried it right away, desperate for something that could save her at the time. It had felt extremely weird at first, as her body felt like it was hardening and inflating a little bit at the same time, but after a few seconds it just felt like she was wearing a really thick bodysuit that clung tightly to every part of her body – including her head. She wasn't sure if she had been actually *inside* the compacted dirt that surrounded her or if her body had changed completely, but overall it was...comfortable and “normal”-feeling.

And she felt powerful.

Well, powerful enough to destroy those Goblin Gnomes, at least. Eisa wouldn't have wanted to test her form against the quite-a-bit-more-dangerous Crystal Scorpions. She thought that it was likely she would've been smashed apart just as easily as her normal human form would've been. As it was, though, she reveled in the fact that – with just a thought – she could transform her arms and hands into bladed instruments of death, which she used liberally on the small ugly creatures attacking her.

She hadn't spent much of her Adventuring career on the front lines attacking monsters with her brute strength (which wasn't much when compared to the ones normally up there), but after that fight she could see the appeal of it. Using her own strength to destroy the monsters had a certain appeal to it that staying back and using skills and abilities from afar couldn't give. Upon reflection afterward, however, she realized that the

front-line melee life wasn't for her. If forced to do it, she would, but she felt more comfortable staying out of direct confrontation.

Unlike Regnark, apparently; she was in awe of his physical prowess, not to mention the sheer size of him. While Eisa had seen bigger and more powerful DAS members while she was with her old group and closer to the capital of the Craytion Kingdom, the ferocity of the fur-clad man's attacks was a bit scary. Fred had mentioned off-hand that he was a Berserker-Marksman class, which seemed contradictory, but it also seemed to fit his fighting style.

Regnark was so big, in fact, that he had to have one of the Crystal Scorpions all for his own to ride. His weight was a little more than Eisa's, Fred's, and Deecy's combined – though she believed it was almost entirely muscle underneath all those bear furs covering him; as a result of his bulk, however, his Scorpion-based ride was forced to slow a little bit down to make sure he didn't break its back when it maneuvered this way and that. That might be a little exaggerated when its crystalline exoskeleton was considered, but she could definitely see it straining just a little bit to stay walking normally.

They made fairly good time after leaving the flattened remains of Gatecross, striking out towards the west through the forest. She was hopeful that they would eventually find the Guild and the Gatecross townspeople, but they had apparently had a month's head start; while they were moving at probably twice or even three times the speed that the bigger group was likely moving, it could still take weeks of travel to catch up with them. And not only that, but the time was dramatically increased as they were forced to take detours to avoid some of the stronger Earth-based monster scouting parties.

The first monster party they came across shortly after leaving Gatecross was fortunately not that strong; a dozen human-sized Stone Golems had blocked their path, and it was quite likely that they were heading towards the commotion they had caused a short while earlier. Eisa instructed her Scorpions go around them, but the Golems were quicker than she thought they would be; they turned their bipedal forms into large boulders and rolled after them, keeping up with or overtaking the faster Crystal Scorpions. As a result, they were forced to stop and take care of them.

Everyone jumped off of their rides and got ready to defend themselves, but her own “defenders” waded into the mass of Stone Golems with deadly efficiency. They held off from using their tail stingers, as the poison in them wouldn’t do much against pure stone. However, they used their pincers to great effect, literally slicing the Golems in half with a pinch or two. Within less than a minute, and a minimum of damage done to the Scorpions themselves, all of the enemy monsters were destroyed, and she collected their Earth Mana they left behind. They all received a little more Essence (about 300 each) as a result of the fight, and they were on their way.

When Eisa had checked her “Shard Status” again after that fight – to see how much Earth Mana she had collected – she had the ability to create another defender: a Stone Golem. She mentioned it to Fred, and she could see that he was a little envious for some reason; when she asked him what the issue was, he admitted that he couldn’t get blueprints for dungeon defenders from killing them, only from absorbing them from Dungeon Cores. While Eisa felt a little bad at first, Fred told her that he was proud of her and that it just proved how special she was.

She could see and hear Deecy exaggeratingly gag at that statement – which sounded strange coming from a Dire Wolf Pup – but she didn't care; she felt her heart warm at the thought that Fred considered her special.

The next few hours were filled with fighting and fleeing; the forest was so inundated with Earth monsters that Eisa was surprised that her group hadn't been swarmed while they were still inside Gatecross. Along the way they faced off against monsters that they thought they could defeat or whom they couldn't outrun. In one instance, they fought against another small band of three Crystal Scorpions with their Goblin Gnome passengers, but it was made much easier as Regnark's Stamina had recovered a bit since the fight back in Gatecross. He proved how good of a Marksman he was when he peppered the faces of two of the Scorpions with powerful and accurate shots, and the third was taken apart by Eisa's own giant bugs.

The Goblin Gnomes weren't really a threat anymore and were easily defeated with a combination of Regnark's warhammer, Fred's knives, and Eisa's Earth Elemental Form. After the battle – and before she turned back into her normal body – she caught Regnark looking at her funny. “What? What's wrong?” she asked him, confused at what looked like a smirk on his face.

“You do know that when you do that, you're na—” he began, before Fred cut him off with timely throat-clearing.

I'm what? Na? What does he mean by that...? She looked down at herself for the first time since learning how to use her new form and saw that she was essentially nude without a stitch of clothing on her. The compressed dirt her Earth Elemental Form was comprised of didn't match her curves entirely, but it was close enough that it looked like her – only it was the very dark brown of dirt instead of bare skin. She let out a little yelp

and immediately covered herself up, before she turned away from the staring looks of the two men.

Using her ability to manipulate her form, Eisa created an approximation of her normal dress covering up her body. It was actually quite easy and stayed in place even when she took her attention away from it; the only downside was that it wasn't free-flowing like normal fabric, instead staying adhered to her body in an extremely form-fitting ensemble. With a little experimentation, she ended up slitting the middle of the dress up the middle near her legs, which allowed her to move freely instead of having them restricted in what otherwise felt like a long tube of compressed dirt.

"Why didn't you tell me about that earlier, Fred?" she asked as she turned around, glad that the embarrassing blush in her cheeks couldn't be seen in her Earth Elemental Form. At least she hoped they couldn't see it.

"I'm sorry, I thought it might upset you again, so I didn't mention it. You look lovely, by the way," he responded with sincerity.

"In my dress, or before?"

"Both," he said, with a smile on his face.

Now she was doubly glad they couldn't see the blush on her face.

Chapter 8

As a result of the various attacks that they couldn't avoid over the next few hours, Eisa accumulated more and more Earth Mana. They fought a few more Crystal Scorpions, two more groups of Stone Golems, and even a veritable horde of Goblin Gnomes at least 150-strong. Despite their diminutive size and low strength, the hardest fight was actually that Goblin horde, as the Crystal Scorpions were swarmed and took massive damage to their more-vulnerable heads and faces. By the time they had destroyed every single one of the little monsters, one of Eisa's Scorpions had been killed and the other was hurt and extremely low on its Vitality.

Unfortunately, none of the "defenders" she could make would heal on their own like Fred said they would naturally do if they were in a dungeon after a while. Luckily, that problem was fixed when she extended some of the Earth Mana inside her body to her injured Scorpion, and it started to heal itself over the course of the next minute. She had to spend a bit of what she had collected to create another Crystal Scorpion for them to ride, but it was worth it to have the protection they afforded.

It was extremely fortuitous that the stronger Earth monsters they saw or ran into were relatively slow, because otherwise they weren't likely to survive the encounters. Massive walking slabs of stone that Fred called Rock Giants roamed around, knocking down and crushing trees that got in their way. Their steps were lengthy but ponderous, as they couldn't move quickly or even turn around without taking time to realign their enormous bulk towards where they wanted to go. These were extremely easy to outrun; the only danger they represented was if the group happened to be caught in a fight nearby one of them, as they would be hard-pressed to get

away before they were squished flatter than the trees the Giants left in their wake.

There were also Enormous Sand Crabs, which were at least three times the size of one of Eisa's Crystal Scorpions; despite their bulk, they could scuttle around quite quickly. Unfortunately for them, however, their large size made it difficult for them to navigate between the trees and trying to turn toward Eisa and her group was sometimes impossible without taking the time to remove trees out of their way. By remove, she meant using one or both of their giant claws to crush and snap a tree in half.

The last extremely dangerous monster that they saw from afar – luckily – was a Golden Sphinx. It wasn't as large as the Rock Giant or even the Enormous Sand Crab, however; its danger lay in the sheer power it represented in its relatively small package. While it was only marginally larger than one of Eisa's Crystal Scorpions, when Fred somehow glimpsed the feline-looking woman-faced monster from afar in the dark forest, he had them flee in the opposite direction as fast as possible. Eisa had never heard of them before, but apparently Regnark had; later on, he said they were an extremely difficult dungeon monster that was only seen in A or S-Rated Earth dungeons. Fortunately for all of them, the Sphinx either didn't see them or only saw the Crystal Scorpions that they were riding – and were left alone.

Overall, though, they were making progress in making their way westward. Dawn had already made itself known by the time they had traveled far enough that they hadn't seen any Earth monsters in a while. Eisa figured that it was more than likely that they were being followed, as they hadn't really tried to hide their tracks, but Fred and Deecy told her that most of the monsters weren't that independently intelligent. He said that while the Dungeon Cores could instruct them on where to go (based upon the last

attack), many of them probably wouldn't know how to track Fred's group precisely enough to find them. Or at least, he said he hoped so.

Either way, they finally got to the point where they needed to rest, as the night had been extraordinarily draining, tense, and long. They found a slightly secluded thicket of some younger trees and made camp, though it was more of a collapse-where-they-stood-and-fall-asleep type of campsite. Fortunately, Deecy had been able to nap – somehow – during their hectic night-time ride and volunteered to keep watch. Eisa left her Crystal Scorpions outside of the thicket on the more accessible sides, and mentally told them to keep watch; she chuckled to herself as she considered how second nature it was now controlling the monsters she created with her Earth Mana, though she had to admit that she had some prior experience with her previous necromantic ability to animate the dead.

Thinking of that as she fell asleep caused her to remember to think about finally choosing a class (or even two), as she had received enough Essence to progress to the F-Ratings. The ride had been stressful, because she had essentially been in charge of giving her crystal-exoskeleton bugs directions when they needed to alter their course; as a result, she was too busy and nervous the entire ride to think about what she wanted to do.

Oh well, I'll think about that when I wake up... she thought, as the oblivion of sleep overtook her within moments of closing her eyes.

* * *

Eisa woke up to someone gently shaking her and opened her eyes to see Fred staring down at her with a smile on his face.

“Good...afternoon,” he whispered. “It’s past time that we left; a small group of Goblin Gnomes just attacked and got utterly destroyed by one of your Crystal Scorpions, so we better go.”

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes with the heels of her hands as she sat up groggily. *Definitely not enough sleep.* “Why—?” she croaked out, her mouth a bit dehydrated. She cleared her throat and wet it enough to speak clearer. “Why do we need to hurry, if they’re all dead?”

“Because the Earth Cores will know where we are by now, and they’ll send even more of their defenders this way. What’s that expression I’ve heard before? Oh, yes, ‘we’re not out of the woods yet’ I think it is. And that’s quite true; I can still sense Nature – and even some distant Earth – territories nearby, which means we really have to get out of this forest before we’re hunted down,” Fred told her.

I guess that makes sense. She knew she would’ve thought of it herself if she had been a little more awake; now that the urgency of their situation made itself known to her, she was starting to become a bit more alert. She picked herself off the ground and saw that Regnark was already up and ready, standing next to Deecy in her normal Dire Wolf form. The Wolf’s aura was looking a whole lot better than it had earlier, so she was likely able to maintain that form without trouble.

She looked toward her Crystal Scorpions and saw that the one facing east had a smattering of small Earth Mana orbs scattered along the ground. *Must be where the Goblin Gnomes that found us were killed.* Almost as if looking at them had summoned them to her, they flew quickly through the air and impacted her body; instead of hurting her, though, they were immediately absorbed into her completely full brown Earth aura, increasing the maximum by a few points.

“Thanks, Fred,” she said with a voice that she hoped wasn’t too obvious as one full of pleasure. Whenever she absorbed any amount of Earth Mana, the feeling was highly enjoyable; not necessarily on an... intimate...level, but more one of relief and satisfaction. It almost felt as if she had been running for half a day and then sat down to rest, her protesting

muscles giving a nearly audible sigh of relief as they were given a break – only more intense.

Fred turned to go, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Hold on, while we have the time, I want to select my class.”

Regnark snorted in disbelief when he heard that. “Wait a minute. You’re telling me that all this time you’ve been fighting, you don’t even have a class yet? How is that—? Never mind; everything I’ve seen in the past few days has been so out of the realm of ‘normal’ that I’m surprised that I’m still on the same planet as you two.”

Ignoring him, Eisa pulled the Class Selector out of her PIB and plopped it down on the ground in front of her. “I forgot how heavy this thing was,” she commented as she looked down at the DAS device. When it was in her Bag, it was virtually weightless; once it came out, however, it regained all of its weight back.

Last night, she had been entirely too tired and paranoid of something popping out from around the next tree to pay attention to her Status and Interface, so she thought it was prudent to check them out before making any hasty decisions. She checked out her Interface first and found that it hadn’t changed all that much except to see that she was now F-2nd-Rated, after gaining enough Essence to increase her base Rating. She still didn’t have any abilities because she didn’t have a class and her other stats were still at the same place they were before; she was tempted to use some of her Essence to boost them up a little more, but she decided to wait to see what she needed to unlock and upgrade any of her upcoming new class abilities.

Her Shard Status, on the other hand, was an entirely different story.

Shard Status
Eisa Howells
Elemental Origin: Earth

Shard Level: 4 Next Mana Threshold: 1000 Earth Mana: 710/710
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)

Every time she acquired more than her maximum Earth Mana, a portion of the excess was converted into increasing that maximum, which she assumed was how she increased her Shard Level – which was now sitting at four. After she reached a maximum of 500 Earth Mana, apparently, she had unlocked another special ability: Earth's Renewal. She didn't know exactly what it did because none of her new abilities came with any instructions, but just like when she concentrated on everything else that she could activate, she had an idea of what the ability would do.

“Fred, can I see one of your knives for a moment?” she asked.

Fred only hesitated for a moment before he took one off his belt and handed it to her. “Uh...sure, but what do you need it for?”

“Just watch.” She took the sharp knife in her right hand and used it to cut a line along her left arm; it was relatively shallow – because she didn't want to actually hurt herself too much unnecessarily – but it was deep enough that it bled a bit. She heard Fred's breath intake as soon as she did it, but before he could do or say anything, she activated her Earth's Renewal Special Ability.

Eisa felt the warmth and comfort of rich, loamy, sun-kissed soil permeate her body, the feeling of the strong and solid Earth wrapping her in an envelope of protection. She looked down at the scratch on her arm and watched it quickly disappear, the edges of the parted skin mending together and leaving her arm as unblemished as it was before. The blood that had dripped down her arm still remained, of course, but the wound itself was gone.

She deactivated the ability and felt the Renewal fade away from her, leaving her wanting to feel it again. She smiled at Fred's look of incredulity and gave him his knife back.

"Wow! That was unexpected; can you do that to...anyone, or just yourself?" Fred asked.

Eisa thought about it for a moment and decided to test it out. She extended her aura out from her and covered Fred in it, before activating her new ability and thinking about using it on him. She could see the moment it worked when he visibly relaxed his posture and a lazy smile lit up his face. Before she could react, Fred took the knife Eisa had just given back to him and cut the tip of his pinky finger off, the amputated portion of his finger flying off behind her.

"What the—?" she exclaimed, before seeing that the blood had already stopped flowing from his finger and skin sealed over the wound. Eisa felt an extra draw of Mana from her as the finger literally grew back before their eyes; she figured the healing energy needed to regrow missing pieces was why the upkeep cost of the ability varied from 1 to 5 Earth Mana per minute.

Within twenty seconds, his pinky finger was back and looking none the worse for what had been done to it. Just like her arm, though, the blood from the original wound still covered his hand, but the injury was completely gone.

“You’re crazy! What if it didn’t work?” she yelled at him quietly, remembering at the last moment to keep her voice down.

“Oh, I knew it would work as soon as I felt it. And besides, my own Mana would regenerate it after a while, though not nearly that fast,” Fred replied, tensing up as Eisa canceled her Earth’s Renewal on him. “I was going to suggest selecting a healer of some sort as your class, but now that you have that, I don’t know if that’s the way to go. Whatever you do choose, though, keep in mind that I’ll try to Teach you some of my Adapted Abilities later.”

That’s right, I forgot about his ability to Teach me with his Instructor Class.

“Wait a minute, what are you talking about?” Regnark asked, after overhearing Fred mention teaching. Fred explained it quickly, recounting how he could “adapt” abilities that he saw being used for his own and in turn Teach them to people via his Instructor class.

“So why don’t you teach me some things right now?” the big man asked, though more out of curiosity than insistence.

“Because every time I use the Teach ability, it will drain both of us of all our Power; it wouldn’t affect *you* too much, but it will take me three or four hours to recover from that, and I don’t think it will be a good idea to have any of us low on Power – especially since we’ve just regenerated up to full.”

Fred had a point, and it also tempered Eisa’s choice in class. She had forgotten that he could teach her some abilities, and she knew from when he was teaching the townspeople of Gatecross that there was a higher chance of success when their class matched what they were trying to learn. As a result, she decided to take Mage as her first class and Fighter as her second; she wanted the extra protection and strength that having a melee class would

benefit her Earth Elemental Form, while having the ability to use long-range attack skills that a Mage would have access to.

Anything that she unlocked wouldn't necessarily be that powerful, because she wasn't planning on upgrading them with extra Essence. The cost of 100 to at least have access to them wasn't too bad, but she wasn't planning on unlocking them until she needed them; that way, if or when she changed her class to obtain a permanent ability from Fred, she wouldn't lose much of her Essence in the process. She did end up using a little of her stored Essence to bump her Stats another point, but that was all she spent for now.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Eisa Howells		Class: Mage-Fighter
Rating: F-2 nd		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 550
Total Essence: 103250		Available Essence to Distribute: 41890
Body: 11 (0/20480) Brawn: 11 (0/20480) Mind: 11 (0/20480)		Vitality: 50/220 Stamina: 52/220 Power: 52/220
Base Physical Attack: 11 Base Physical Defense: 11		Power Regen Rate: 2.2/min
Class Traits (Mage)		
<i>Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is marginally increased by your Mind stat</i>		
<i>You now take less damage from magical sources (10%)</i>		
Class Traits (Fighter)		
<i>Your Vitality and Base Physical Defense is increased by your Body stat</i>		
<i>Your Stamina and Base Physical Attack is increased by your Brawn stat</i>		
<i>Your Class Abilities use Stamina instead of Power to perform</i>		
Class Abilities (Mage)		
Magestrike 0 – 0/100	Barrier 0 – 0/100	Magelight 0 – 0/100
Flamestrike 0 – 0/100	Froststrike 0 – 0/100	Minor Shock 0 – 0/100
Class Abilities (Fighter)		
Power Blow 0 – 0/100	Focused Strike 0 – 0/100	Deflection 0 – 0/100
Shield Slam 0 – 0/100	Double Assault 0 – 0/100	Focused Irritation 0 – 0/100

With that complete, Eisa was ready to go – armed with a larger maximum Power and Power regeneration from being a Mage, an Earth Mana-based healing ability, and extra Vitality and Stamina due to her Fighter class. She stored the Class Selector back into her PIB and turned to the others.

“Alright, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Chapter 9

Fred thought that the change that had come over Eisa was exhilarating. He felt a lot less worried that she was going to end up getting killed by a stray attack compared to when she was just “reborn” as what she was now; according to the Status screen Eisa told him she could see, she was something called a “Shard”. He didn’t know exactly what that was, but he suspected that it was the same thing that Deecy was – though she seemed not to have any knowledge about it either. The Dire Wolf couldn’t pull up a “Shard Status” like Eisa, but Fred had an idea about that.

Because the recently resurrected woman hadn’t seen the screen until she had increased her “Shard Level”, he figured it was something like what had happened to Fred himself. While he had always technically been a Dungeon Core, nothing had really activated inside of him until he had absorbed the Mana left behind by his two deceased bodyguards – Furbey and Frozzles. Since Deecy had been inadvertently Created, the Dire Wolf really hadn’t had a source of Fire or Water Mana that she could absorb from a defeated dungeon defender. She could absorb the ambient mana in the environment to “recharge”, but there hadn’t been anything to increase her maximum mana like Fred had been able to give to Eisa.

Therefore, he had been slowly feeding Deecy globules of Fire and Water Mana over the last couple of minutes – pretty much as soon as he woke up. He would love to give her more than the single or double units of mana that he could spare, but just like the reason he didn’t want to consume all of his Power to Teach the others, he wanted to ensure he had enough available resources to help defend themselves. Still, he was banking on the random influx of Mana from him – which she was absorbing just like Eisa

did with Earth Mana – triggering some sort of change in her. He just hoped it was something positive.

As for himself, his own Earth Mana maximum was slowly increasing, and the six hours of sleep that they had gotten had converted over a hundred units of Unconverted Mana (UM) into his available elemental Mana. Fortunately, even though he was low on UM after healing Deecy, he had taken half of the Earth Mana that had been dropped by the random groups of Earth-based defenders they had been forced to fight in their flight to the west.

Dungeon Core Status
Fredwynklemossering
Core Faction: Fire-Water-Nature-Earth Core Age: 2 Core Structure Level: 8 Fire Mana: 40/139 Water Mana: 40/138 Nature Mana: 43/138 Earth Mana: 43/43 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 852 Unconverted Essence: 16647
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 12% Expert Mana Conversion: 15% Intermediate Mana Communication: 69% Intermediate Core Crystallization: 30% Intermediate Defender Creation: 70% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 35% Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 1% Novice Essence Conversion: 11% Novice Dungeon Core Absorption: 87% Novice Dungeon Creation: 98% Novice Defense Creation: 79%
Dungeon Information
(none)

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface

Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Instructor-Researcher	
Rating: E-7 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 61947	
Total Essence: 869053	Available Essence to Distribute: 166466		Unconverted Essence: 8520
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 130/180 Stamina: 150/160 Power: 1200/5100	
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13		Power Regen Rate: 25/min	
Class Traits (Instructor)			
<i>Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)</i>			
Class Traits (Researcher)			
<i>Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat</i>			
<i>You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications</i>			
Class Abilities (Instructor)			
Teach 4 – 0/27000			
Class Abilities (Researcher)			
Experiment 0 – 0/100			
Adapted Abilities			
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Vitality Transfer 3 – 0/9000	
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000	
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000	
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 3 – 0/9000	Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000	
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>		

While he had increased his Rating over the last day, nothing much of note had changed with him. There were a few random increases to his Dungeon Core skills, but nothing significant – he had been more of a passenger and support through the battles than a significant participant. There was one exception, however – his Novice Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation was now Intermediate. Fred assumed that it was due to what he did to heal Deecy when she was dying from the Scorpion poison; if that wasn't it, then he wasn't sure what else it could be.

Unfortunately for their flight through the forest in the dead of night, he hadn't been able to establish a territory since Gatecross; while the actual Nature Cores (and a few scattered Earth Cores next to scattered hills or miniature mountain ranges) he could sense were sometimes distant, their territories extended out significantly wherever there was room. However, with a quick look at his Territorial Sight, he could see that they would eventually come to an area where there weren't any territories at all. After that, he could *almost* sense more territories even farther distant, but they were a dark, almost-black color compared to the browns and greens he was used to seeing.

Fred didn't know what the Dark-element Cores had in store for them, but he figured that anything was better than being constantly chased and corralled by the Earth-based defenders hounding them at every step. He was glad that he hadn't seen signs that the townspeople of Gatecross or his Core Power Guild had been caught and attacked, but then again it was a *very* large forest; they could've missed almost anything last night, even though they did their best to come back to their westward heading whenever they got waylaid.

With everyone ready to go – Eisa had stowed the Class Selector back into her Pocket Interface Bag – they got back on her Crystal Scorpions and set off heading west again. For the first half-hour they didn't see anyone or anything, but they didn't let down their guard; in fact, the lack of attacks set them all on edge. Fred knew that it was just a matter of time before more defenders descended on their location as the Cores around the area zeroed in on where their Goblin Gnomes were just killed. And he didn't want to be anywhere near there when they arrived.

While he was still paying attention to his surroundings, Fred was able to – for the first time – really look at the Crystal Scorpion he was

riding on top of. Eisa was holding on to him from behind again and Deecy was back in her Pup form watching out for potential threats; now that it wasn't dark, with their help – and Regnark's – they would likely be able to see anything before he could. As a result of their vigilance, Fred could finally analyze what had been literally bugging him.

The large Scorpion underneath him was reacting slightly to his touch.

He had ignored it before, but now that he had a chance to really pay attention to it, he could feel as though it was calling to him somehow. Not as if he could control it like he could his own dungeon defenders, but almost as if he could reach out and understand it; in fact, he thought if he just placed his hand upon it, concentrated for almost a minute on the finer details and structure of the giant bug he was riding, and then “pulled” out the information...

The Crystal Scorpion disappeared underneath them when it was striding forward at full speed; Deecy reacted quickly by changing from a Pup to her normal Dire Wolf form, but Fred and Eisa were taken completely by surprise. Fred managed to miss landing on Deecy as she wiggled out of his embrace and landed agilely on the ground, only stumbling a little with her abrupt landing. Fred landed awkwardly with his legs splayed in the same position they had been in while riding and he heard something *pop* in his left ankle – just as Eisa landed on his back with a quick cut-off shriek.

Horrific pain erupted up and down his left leg as Eisa rolled off of him, unfortunately right on his injured appendage; he had to force himself to hold in the scream that threatened to erupt from the sheer agony he was experiencing. He lay there face-down on the ground, literally biting his tongue so that he wouldn't draw any more attention to their little group.

“What happened?” Eisa said as she picked herself up and brushed some leaves off her dress. “One moment I was looking around, trying to see if there were any—HOLY GODDESS! What happened to your leg?” she nearly yelled in shock.

Fred couldn’t answer; the pain was extraordinary, and he was worried he was going to blackout from it. *That doesn’t feel like just a busted ankle or something like that.* While he had been hurt drastically before – including “dying” multiple times – most of the wounds he had taken had been largely superficial and had been healed quickly right after. When he thought about it – to distract himself from the pain, mostly – he realized most of his injuries had either been a few cuts here and there or outright “death”, there wasn’t much in between that wasn’t healed by either Eisa or another Healer-classed Guild member.

“Hold on, Fred, I’ll heal you,” Eisa continued a little unsteadily, before her voice turned away. “Regnark, can you help me...uh...put him back together?”

He heard Regnark jump down from the Crystal Scorpion and head towards him, the leaves crackling underneath his steps. With his eyes closed in concentration – trying to block out the pain – his other senses seemed to be amplified; he could hear some sort of liquid dripping and pitter-pattering on some leaves underneath him, the feel of the soil underneath his fingers was extremely gritty, and he realized he could detect Eisa’s earthy-yet-somehow-floral scent on the back of his shirt. With that concentration he was trying to maintain, he attempted to use one of his abilities to heal himself, but as soon as he tried to activate Heal Minor Wounds, all his thoughts scattered to the wind.

In the few seconds before Regnark reached them, Fred decided to focus on something else. The first thing on his mind was that Eisa had said

she was going to heal him, but she hadn't started for some reason; actually, when he considered her statement about putting him back together and needing help to do that, he decided he didn't want to know what had happened.

Therefore, in another effort not to think about how much pain he was in, he instead tried to figure out why he was in that situation in the first place. *What did I do? Why did the big bug disappear?*

Fred first checked his Mana to see if he had absorbed it somehow, but everything was largely unchanged; a few more Mana had been converted, but his totals hadn't really changed. Looking at his DAS Interface, he saw that not much had changed from that – except that his Vitality had taken a massive hit and was steadily dropping. He knew he wouldn't *die*, but if he wasn't healed soon by other means, his Mana would start to be consumed in an effort to heal him and keep him alive.

So, what happened? His thoughts were a bit unfocused as the pain seemed to numb and he figured he had lost quite a bit of blood as he felt inordinately weak. Trying to organize his scattered thoughts, he tried to remember what he was doing prior to their ride disappearing...

Then he remembered – he was trying to understand the Crystal Scorpion better. Connections fired slowly through his mind as he considered what that meant, which led him to open up his available Dungeon Defense Creation Menu. *Aha! Ther iiit iss...* His brain started to shut down as the blood loss hit him hard.

And then it was like a shock ran through his body as it felt like someone was ripping his leg off. The pain that was starting to numb from the injury came back full force, blood loss or not; fortunately, it was short-lived as he felt the healing of the Earth's Renewal ability that Eisa possessed fill his body. The healing energy started on his leg, thankfully,

and numbed it completely at the same time. He wasn't sure how long he lay there while his injury repaired itself, but by the time it was done and Eisa canceled the ability, he felt...great.

Cautiously, he picked himself up and – feeling no pain or weakness – turned around to see Regnark already on his Crystal Scorpion again, and another of the giant bugs waiting near Eisa. She was a bit pale-faced, but she smiled as Fred got up and walked over, with what he hoped was an apologetic smile on his own face.

“I'm so sorry about that, it was entirely my fault. I was doing something I probably shouldn't have, and I caused your Scorpion to disappear. Are you okay? Did you get hurt?” Fred said quietly as soon as he was close enough that he didn't have to yell.

“Yes, I'm fine. I only got a little scrape on my knee because you, uh, broke my fall.”

He looked back at the scene of the accident and saw a huge pool of blood covering the leaves and when he looked down, he saw that his left pant leg was essentially gone. His bare leg appeared to be healthy and whole, and there were only a few bloodstains where he had likely got them from laying in the bloody leaves.

“How bad was it?” Fred couldn't help but ask as he repaired his pant leg with his Power-based Repair Object ability. It only took a few units of Power and it was done, so he joined Eisa, who was already settling up on top of the Crystal Scorpion.

“Oh, uh...let's just say it was pretty bad, and leave it at that,” Eisa whispered to him, laying her head on his back after wrapping her arms around him. “I didn't like seeing you like that, and I almost broke down *myself* when I saw you in such pain.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that; like I said, it was my fault. You don’t have to tell me, but I’m thankful for the healing – that new ability of yours is a literal life saver!” Fred told her, patting her arm consolingly as Deecy, back in her Pup form, jumped up and settled in front of him. “To change the subject to something positive, I think I absorbed the Crystal Scorpion’s blueprint—”

“If she won’t tell you what happened, I will. I tried to talk to you when you hurt, but it was like there was some sort of painful mental block you threw up. Anyway, when you hit the ground initially, you snapped your ankle as you impacted a hidden rock underneath the leaves, but when Eisa landed on you, it continued the destruction and essentially shattered your leg into pieces. It turned out that the rock was actually quite sharp in a couple of places, and I think your foot almost detached itself; there was so much blood everywhere, squirting out and—”

“Thanks, Deecy – but I think I agree with Eisa; I don’t even want to think about that.”

Fred could’ve sworn he heard Deecy snicker at him as they started to move westward through the trees again.

Chapter 10

Luckily for everyone, the next few hours were quite uneventful. Fred could finally see the ending of the territories coming up and he could sense that Eisa and Deecy had detected it as well. As they got closer to the open stretch of space, he could almost feel the pressure of being constantly surrounded by other Cores' territories start to lessen and a big weight was lifted off of his shoulders.

Fred hadn't realized how pervasive the feeling was; while he was in Gatecross, he had his own territory and things felt, if not normal, then at least like he was free to grow and expand however he wanted. The constant presence of foreign territories enveloping him was strangely difficult to become used to, even if it had only been relatively recently since he'd had the ability to see and create territories. He was looking forward to being able to "stretch his legs" a little as the end of the Nature Core territory approached.

It was probably going to be another hour or so before they actually got there, and Fred used the time to continue to pump Deecy full of Fire and Water Mana. While the Mana was useful for making defenders and defenses, there wasn't a whole lot he could do with it when he didn't have his territory surrounding him – unlike Eisa. And even when he did establish another territory, he couldn't even create the Crystal Scorpion he had acquired the blueprint for, because it required more Earth Mana than he could supply. There was a possibility of creating some sort of hybrid which would lessen the cost, but he still couldn't even do that until he had a territory.

Therefore, he continued to build up his reserve of elemental Mana bit-by-bit, while funneling what he thought he could spare towards Deecy. His Unconverted Mana was starting to get a bit low again and he was planning on converting Essence to Unconverted Mana when he had the chance; he had been saving a little bit over 166,000 available Essence to distribute for that purpose, which equated to over 16,000 Mana when converted. Right now, ensuring that his Cores didn't run out of Mana took priority over improving his Human Adventurer stats, mainly because even small changes to them now took quite a bit of Essence.

Fire Mana: 48/139

Water Mana: 48/138

Nature Mana: 50/138

Earth Mana: 50/50

Unconverted Mana: 792

Eventually, his efforts with the Dire Wolf that contained specialized dungeon core knowledge – as well as the scattered memories of his parents – paid off. After sending another two orbs of Water and Fire Mana containing two units each into Deecy's alert form watching the surroundings in front of him, the intensity of the blue and red aura in the Wolf Pup's form flared brightly for a moment to his Mana Sight, before fading back to its previous level.

“I...think it worked! Hold on...well, this is interesting. Here, I think I might be able to send this to you like I did with those other packets of information about creating your dungeon.”

Fred was ecstatic! Deecy had gone along with the process of absorbing the Mana because it wasn't hurting her, but she admitted to him that she didn't think it would do anything. Honestly, Fred wasn't entirely sure if it would do anything, either, but he figured it couldn't hurt to try.

Shard Status
Deecy Greymane
Elemental Origin: Fire-Water Shard Level: 2 Next Mana Threshold: 250 Fire, 250 Water Fire Mana: 100/100 Earth Mana: 100/100
Defense Creation Options
Fire Wall (Base Cost: 20 Fire Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 Fire Mana per hour) Ice Spear Barricade (Base Cost: 20 Water Mana, Base Upkeep Cost: 1 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)

“That’s amazing, Deecy!” Fred told the Pup in his lap. “Eisa, do you think we can stop for just a moment to try something out?” he asked the woman who still had her hands wrapped around his waist.

“Sure, just as long as it’s not something like last time,” Eisa replied, referencing his experiment where he had absorbed the blueprint from the Crystal Scorpion.

“Don’t worry, it’s not me this time – it’s Deecy.”

Eisa slowed the Scorpions to a stop in a small clearing between some trees, and Deecy immediately transformed into her normal Dire Wolf Form, landing lightly on the fallen leaves underfoot. Regnark looked over at them and asked, “What’s going on? Why did we stop?”

Fred was just about to answer when he saw Deecy extend her aura out – similar to Eisa when she created a defender – and a wall of fire erupted out of the ground in front of her; while it was only about a foot wide, it was ten feet long and the flames reached half that high, and they burned with such an intensity that Fred could feel it even from where he was nearly thirty feet away.

“Wha—?” Regnark and Eisa exclaimed at the same time, before watching the Dire Wolf literally walk into the wall of flames like it was something that she did all the time. Fred jerked in surprise but didn’t do anything to stop her, though he did hear Eisa inhale sharply and out of the corner of his eye he saw Regnark tense up. However, their worry over the Dire Wolf’s safety was short-lived; as soon as Deecy touched the Fire Wall she had created, it shrunk down and disappeared, flowing back into the Wolf as Fire Mana and replenishing her aura.

“Deecy, did you just...I don’t even know what to say...what was that?” Eisa asked, shocked at the events.

Regnark loosened up and shrugged, the events over the last few days apparently numbing his shock at all of the strange occurrences that were happening. Fred made a mental note to talk to him later; the big man had been unusually quiet since he had shown up in Gatecross last night. Not that he could blame him, after all of the death and destruction he had likely seen and experienced – which Regnark had alluded to but didn’t expand on when explaining what had happened – but he was worried about the first friend he had made in the human world.

Deecy turned around after the wall had disappeared and faced Fred and Eisa, with a self-satisfied wolfy smile on her face.

“Yes, that was me. Fred has been feeding me extra Fire and Water Mana from his Cores and I achieved a Shard Level increase from it. I can now see the same Shard Status screen that you had reported that you have access to, and this Fire Wall was one of the new defenses that I have access to.”

“Is that as big as you can make it? Does it cost anything to maintain? What else can you do?” Eisa asked excitedly, beating Fred to the same questions. He was frankly amazed at how quickly she had adapted to her new way of life.

“I can make the wall bigger and...I think I can even change its shape... but it would cost a lot more Fire Mana in the process. The cost to upkeep the defense is only one Fire Mana per hour for this size, so it’s not very cost-prohibitive. And like you with your defenders, I can absorb the Mana again when I touch it, and it won’t even hurt me.

“As for what else I can make, let me show you.”

At that statement, the Dire Wolf turned back to the area where the Fire Wall had been – which he noticed hadn’t even burned the leaves underneath (*that’s interesting*) – and Fred could see her aura extend out again, though this time it was the blue half. Within seconds, a four-foot-tall, five-foot-wide cluster of sharp, thick ice spears appeared, the individual spears pointing in every direction except down. They were all attached to

each other in a cluster in the middle, making the relatively short wall of deadly frozen water sturdy enough to likely withstand a bit of impact.

It was impressive, to say the least.

Deecy touched one of the ice spears with her nose and it – and the entire structure – melted into the ground, before turning back into Mana and being absorbed by the Dire Wolf. She walked back to the Crystal Scorpion that she had been riding with Fred and Eisa like what she had done wasn't amazing – but it was. And now Fred was wondering if he could learn how to create those traps the same way he had acquired the blueprint for the Scorpion he was riding. He just didn't relish the thought of having to touch the burning flames for more than a second in order to do so.

“That was awesome, Deecy! I wish I could do something like that,” Eisa gushed over the Dire Wolf's display of her new abilities.

“Thank you, Eisa. Maybe someday you will; this whole shard business is new to both of us and we don't know what we're capable of yet. Now, we better get moving – we're not out of the range of those Earth defenders yet.”

She was right, they needed to get moving. With all of the delays, he was surprised that they hadn't been caught already; he figured that they had acquired quite a bit of a head start, but that advantage could be eaten up quickly by the pursuing dungeon defenders heading in their direction. Of course, he could be wrong and perhaps the Earth Cores had given up the search and pursuit because they had run out of Mana, though he doubted it; from what he could tell from the range of his Territorial Sight, there were some fairly large Earth territories surrounding the hundreds of relatively

smaller Nature ones near Gatecross. While he had seen some powerful defenders, he didn't think they were anywhere near being out of Mana.

It didn't take long until they passed the last of the Nature territories and emerged from the massive forest of trees. Fred wasn't sure exactly how far they had traveled but based upon the impressive speed and tireless walking/running of the Scorpions, he estimated that they had journeyed at least a hundred miles in the last ten hours. It probably would've been even more than that if they hadn't had to avoid so many defenders last night, because the Scorpions were *fast* when they had room to run.

Other than the relatively clear area around Northend and Gatecross where the humans had set up their little village and town, Fred hadn't been out of the forest in *years* – and it had only been a short distance between the barren nothingness of his parents' dungeon and the massive northern forest. Therefore, when the trees started to thin out and then completely disappear from around him, he caught his breath at the view.

A large plain with very gently rolling hills stretched out as far as he could see in every direction except the forest behind them to the east. Relatively short green grass (about two feet tall), bushes, and other small plants dotted the landscape – and not a single tree could be seen. In the far distance to the west, he could see the vague outline of...something...but it was too far away to see it as anything but a pale-white streak stretching for what appeared to be hundreds of miles.

“What is this place?” Fred asked in awe, having never seen anything like it before.

Regnark was close enough on his own Scorpion to hear the question. “This is the Plains of Grass – I know, not a very creative name, but it describes it fairly well. It stretches in a large band that runs from north to south for hundreds or thousands of miles; even *I* haven't been far

enough north or south to see what's at the end of it. Regardless, I'm guessing our destination is to the west in the Deadlands, as that is the only spot near here where there are Dark dungeons."

"Have you ever been there?" Eisa asked.

The big man was silent for a moment before he answered. "Yes, a long time ago."

When he didn't expand on that, Fred ventured forth his own questions since Regnark seemed to be in a talkative mood. "Are there any dungeons out in the, what did you call it? The Plains of Grass? And is there anything we should be watching out for here? While we're at it, what are the Deadlands?"

"Let's get moving before it gets too late and I'll try to tell you what I know along the way," the Berserker-Marksman said, looking at Eisa to get them started again. She complied and they started to move again, staying close enough to each other that they didn't have to yell to be heard – though the sound of the grass being pressed flat from the thick, crystallized exoskeleton covering the Scorpions' legs was quite loud even in the open air. Fred looked back and was dismayed to see a clear trail through the grass leading back from where they emerged from the forest; while they were within the trees, there were faint signs of where they had traveled through, enough that someone could follow it if they knew where to look. It didn't compare to the extremely clear pathway they were leaving behind them here, though.

There was no way around it, however; even if they abandoned the Crystal Scorpions, they would still likely leave a trail while walking through on foot. Not as big of a trail, but a trail, nonetheless. Because of that, he looked around as they trampled through the grass, hoping to see some sort of sign that the townspeople of Gatecross and his Core Power

Guild had passed through, but he didn't see anything. That didn't mean that they hadn't entered the vast Plains of Grass even a mile to the north or south; it was hard even from their slightly elevated position on top of their giant bugs to see something like trampled grass for more than a half mile.

Regnark didn't speak for the first hour they were moving through the grass and Fred didn't press him. He knew the big man would speak when he was ready and pushing him might cause him to reconsider sharing what he knew.

Eventually, though, Regnark's story – as abridged as it was – began to unfold.

Chapter 11

“I never wanted to be an Adventurer when I was younger, opposed to many other young boys I grew up with. I was born to a family of hunters who made their living tracking, killing, and bringing back wild game for those in our village to survive on. Hunting was a good living and something that could be easily done and the deer in the forest were our main source of meat. However, even the rare lone wolf or bears nearby weren’t usually aggressive enough to attack anyone in the forest – or at least not the outskirts of the small village where we lived.

“My younger brother, on the other hand, didn’t want to spend his life hunting game in the forest. When he foolishly decided to run away to join the Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate when he was 16, my parents urged me to go after him; if I couldn’t convince him to come home, they asked me to protect him. Despite being siblings, we were never very close; I was always one to stick to my chores and dutifully learned all there was about hunting, killing, and skinning animals as part of the trade.

“I was 18 at the time and I didn’t want to go after him, but he was my brother; even if we weren’t close, I still didn’t want anything bad to happen to him. I eventually caught up to him and tried to convince him to return home, but he was adamant about not wanting the life that I had been perfectly happy to live. Long story short, I ended up joining up with the Syndicate – if only to protect him the best I could.

“He was highly reckless, and his recklessness was only magnified as he took the route of a Mage; he would constantly send out his long-range abilities at the most inopportune times, calling attention to himself when it wasn’t necessary. He wanted to advance through the Ratings as fast as he

possibly could and often went to dungeons far above what he should've – and almost died multiple times as a result.

“Without being modest, the only reason he lived as long as he did was because I took to the role of his protector like I was born to it. His mistakes that he made while delving through dungeons with random groups – it was rare that the same people grouped up with us again after the first time – I tried to rectify by throwing myself in harm's way and apologizing for his multiple errors, but I knew it was only a matter of time before he made a mistake he wouldn't survive.

“I tried to convince him to stop, to give up the life of an Adventurer and to use whatever abilities he had already learned to do something – *anything* – else, but he was blinded by his own incompetence. It sounds mean to say that about him, but there was no other explanation for his behavior that I can see.

“Anyway, we managed to somehow survive for three whole years before he managed to screw up one too many times. After using one of his long-range abilities – in fact, it was the same Fireblast you had used last night, Fred – on a monster that wasn't even engaged in attacking us, he ran when it came after him. Normally, that wouldn't have been a big deal because we had been in a fairly competent group and could've handled the additional monster or two at the same time, but instead of running to us – or even the exit tunnel – he ran *farther* into the dungeon.

“By the time I could break off and chase after him, he was already dead and burnt to a crisp from attracting the entire next room full of small Lava Salamanders. Forced to retreat, I had to leave him there while the rest of us escaped that room and the previous one, where I had left them alone to deal with the then-overwhelming number of monsters. By the time I was

able to get back in there, his body had either been consumed by the dungeon or by the flames the small Salamanders emitted from their bodies.”

Fred had to interrupt, even though he didn’t want to disturb the flow of information coming from his oldest friend. “It sounds as though you were in a Fire dungeon; why would he use Fireblast? That sounds a bit counterproductive.”

Regnark chuckled at that, his eyes distant as he answered. “Like I said, he wasn’t the smartest brother in the world; he had placed almost all of his Essence into his Mind stat and a single ability: Fireblast. I had told him that it probably wouldn’t do much good going into a Fire dungeon with a single fire-based attack ability, but he thought it was strong enough to still do some damage. Admittedly, when he used it almost anywhere else, it absolutely devastated monsters quickly and efficiently; however, that same type of attack would often get him in trouble with how absolutely destructive it was. Dungeon monsters are smart enough to recognize a threat when they see it.

“Anyway, after he died, I couldn’t imagine going back to my parents and admitting to them that I had failed to protect my little brother. Instead, I threw myself back into the DAS and worked to protect those like him; there were hundreds of young men – and women – that were either in way over their heads or as incompetent as my brother was, and I aimed to save them all like I couldn’t save my brother.

“Over the years I got stronger, faster, and better able to defend both myself and those I had taken on to protect. But it still wasn’t enough; one-by-one, each and every single Adventurer I took under my wing to guide, mentor, and even lead by the hand through dungeons throughout the Craytion Kingdom ended up just the same as my brother: dead. The last

one I deigned to try to save just so happened to have met her end in the Deadlands, and I haven't been back since.

“Nor did I go back to being an Adventurer. After witnessing so many youngsters lose their lives unnecessarily, I retreated from the world by going to the one place in the Kingdom that I could find where there were no dungeons around, no Syndicate members looking to group up, and no young men or women looking to delve through dungeons: Northend. And that, of course, is where you found me, Fred – or should I say, *I found you.*”

That...certainly explains a lot. Fred had been wondering what could've caused a powerful Adventurer like Regnark turned out to be to want to live in a place like Northend, where he was just barely scraping by with the hunting and fur trade that he did up there. And it also explained why mention of the DAS in the first place had set the big man off and caused him to kick Fred out of his house. He felt bad about upsetting his friend all those months ago, but when he thought about it, he didn't know any better at that time and probably wouldn't have changed anything if he did.

“As for the Plains of Grass, it's dangerous here at night, which is why most people who traverse it try to do it in one day. Although it looks hard, it's not impossible; we'll have to chance that we can get all the way across before dark sets in, because we don't want to wait for what's likely coming up behind us.”

“Why is it so dangerous?” Eisa asked from behind him. Fred had been so comfortably relaxed listening to Regnark's story that he almost forgot she was there.

“Because there are some large, fearsome monsters that emerge from the Deadlands at night and prey on whatever they can find. For some unknown reason, they don't attack anyone within the forest we just left or

inside the Deadlands from whence they came, but anything out on the Plains is fair game.”

“Are they Dungeon monsters?” Fred asked. He thought it would be weird if they were, as he didn’t see the point in it, but then again, he had very little knowledge of Dark Dungeon Cores.

“No, I don’t believe so. I’ve heard of a few high-Rated Syndicate parties slaying one of them and their corpses didn’t disappear like a dungeon monster would, but apart from that I don’t really have a good idea or even description of what they are...other than *large*.

“To answer one of your other questions, it’s these same monsters that roam the Plains at night that likely prevent any dungeons from establishing themselves out here. It’s my experience that, even with some of the larger Supreme-Rated dungeons that are harder to get to and are set farther away from most, they’re at least *accessible* by us. Out here, there aren’t any villages, towns, or cities – and therefore no people to delve through their dungeons. At least, that’s what I’ve heard,” Regnark informed them.

That...makes sense, I guess. If there weren’t any humans around or if it was too dangerous for them to even stay near the Plains of Grass, there wouldn’t be any reason to establish a dungeon there. And unless it was in an area found around there that had high concentrations of ambient Mana nearby, they would need to have humans frequenting their dungeon to grow faster than a Rating every couple of decades – if they were lucky.

“As for what the Deadlands are, they’re what they sound like: dead. By some strange occurrence no one really understands, everything there is dead...and yet not. There are trees that grow and monsters that roam around, but they appear as if they are not...quite...alive. If you’ve ever met a Necromancer, you would probably understand what I’m talking about.”

Eisa snorted in a little chuckle behind his back at Regnark's statement; the big man somehow heard and looked at her in confusion.

Fred answered for her, since she didn't seem like she was going to explain – and it wasn't something she needed to hide, especially given that she wasn't one anymore. “Before Eisa became...what she is now...she had been a Necro-healer, though all of that progress had been wiped away after the whole process. So, I think we have a fairly good idea of what we might be up against.”

Regnark looked funnily at Eisa for a moment, before shrugging his shoulders. “I've met some interesting people over the years, but you two certainly have them beat. Sorry, I should've said you *three* – as it seems you're all a bit...unique.”

From the tone of his voice, it didn't sound as if he was meaning that in a derogatory manner and Fred had to agree with him – but that included Regnark himself. An Adventurer that didn't want to delve through dungeons, a Dire Wolf that could change its shape and produce elemental defenses, a recently deceased woman who could create monsters out of thin air, and him – a Dungeon Core/Human hybrid like the world had never seen before; they certainly did make an interesting and unique bunch.

Not to mention, they were riding giant Crystal Scorpions like it was nothing.

With the talk over with, each of them sunk into their own thoughts as they sped through the grass; looking around, Fred couldn't see anything alive moving around except for some birds flying high overhead. Since there wasn't really anywhere for them to land (no nearby trees) they were only flying either to the east or to the west, not north or south; they also stayed high up above, as if just being too close to the Plains of Grass was dangerous.

The hours passed by without anything to relieve the monotony, and the sun started to fall in the sky. After eating a midday meal of some water, bread, and relatively tasteless meat that Fred was able to use his Conjure Object Adapted Adventurer ability to produce (he still hadn't perfected flavor quite yet, which was probably a side effect of eating the tasteless mana-formed orbs his mother used to feed him when he was growing up), Eisa somehow fell asleep, her steady, relaxed breathing against his back as she laid her head sideways on him; to the front of him, Deecy had fallen asleep as well, curled up in her Pup form in his lap. Fortunately, the Crystal Scorpions were following their last instructions, which meant that they kept moving even if Eisa wasn't aware of it. If anything happened that needed her attention, he would wake her up; luckily, if there was anything out there that was going to cause them a problem, they would likely see it from a far way off.

Looking at Regnark, he saw that the big man was still awake and staring straight ahead, though from the glimpse of his eyes they looked a little glazed-over. As for Fred, he was quite alert despite only getting a couple of hours of sleep that morning; considering that his body had only fully recovered from essentially getting blown up by the Earth Core less than a day ago, he was feeling pretty good. And, he had to admit, he kind of liked the feel of Eisa pressed up against his back for some reason and he smiled as he looked down at the loosely wrapped arms around his waist.

However, Fred's mood started to sour a little when he saw that even with the high speed of the Scorpions they were riding, they weren't going to make it to the Deadlands before dark. A few hours after night descended on the Plains would probably get them there, but that wouldn't help if they were killed by whatever roamed the grassy area after the sun went down.

As much as it might be the smart thing to press on and hope they weren't caught and killed, they were going to have to stop for the night. Fortunately, they had an advantage that most people didn't when they traveled across the innocuous-looking grassy plain.

They had a Dungeon Core.

Chapter 12

Just as the sun started to touch the distant horizon, Fred woke up Eisa and told her to stop the Crystal Scorpions. She blinked sleepily but did as he asked, but Regnark wasn't having any of it.

"What are you doing?! We need to get to the Deadlands as soon as we can; what part of large, fearsome monsters did you not understand?" he practically yelled at Fred.

"Quiet down, I understood you fine. The problem, though, is that it's going to take a lot longer than we thought to get to the Deadlands. I need to start preparing if we're going to survive the night," Fred calmly replied, getting off the back of the Scorpion and stretching his legs out. He helped Eisa down by grabbing her by the waist and lifting her down, and she thanked him for his help.

"Prepare for what? From what I've heard, there's no preparing against these things. Only some of the highest-Rated groups of DAS members have endured a night out here – and not all of them actually survived an encounter with whatever they are. It's suicide to—"

"Don't worry, we're not staying out *here* – we're staying under *there*," Fred said, pointing to the ground in front of him.

"What? I know I saw you remove some dirt, but a trench isn't going to—"

Fred ignored him and had already begun reaching out around him and found sources of the four elements he needed, though Fire was a bit difficult. There was an extremely small bug about fifteen feet underground that had a tiny spark of Fire in its makeup; it looked like some sort of beetle, but he couldn't tell much more than that. Regardless of what it was,

it was enough for him to connect to it for Fire, the grass for Nature, the moisture in that same grass for Water, and the dirt underneath his feet for Earth. In a snap, he established his territory and felt it expand, encompassing more than he thought possible.

It wasn't necessarily because he had increased or improved his Cores, but because he wasn't restrained by nearby Core territories. Inside the area of Gatecross, his territory bumped right up against the Nature Cores surrounding the town, but out in the Plains of Grass, it wasn't restrained by anything. There was nothing around him for what felt like miles, he was all alone in the middle of nowhere...

And – he realized a little late – he had probably just painted a big giant bullseye on their location. If the Dungeon Cores were anything like him, they could see his territory even from a distance – possibly farther than he himself could see. His territory was quite unique, and if the Earth defenders were indeed following them, his territory had likely just lit up the sky with a big “Find me right here” sign.

It was too late to do anything about it, though, as he gathered the necessary Mana to create his dungeon entrance. He briefly thought about quickly recreating his “saved” dungeon that he was using back in Gatecross, but he didn't want to spend his Unconverted Mana unnecessarily – and he didn't think they'd need all those rooms. Instead, he took out 80 of his colorless mana and started to design three rooms underground, connecting them with basic tunnels. It wasn't pretty or necessarily uniform, but it would do what he needed. Along with those rooms came the upthrust of rock signifying the dungeon entrance – which was fortunately situated away from Fred this time, unlike the first time he had created it.

A low rumble preceded the appearance of the entrance and Regnark stepped back in surprise, his tirade about what they were doing being

suicide cutting off abruptly. When everything settled, Fred beckoned to the others to join him inside. The big man looked cautious, but when he saw Fred, Eisa, and Deecy enter into the rocky entrance heading underground, he slowly brought up the rear without protest.

“What I made here is pretty basic, but I’m hoping it is enough to protect us for the night. If what Regnark says is true about this monster being really large, then it shouldn’t be able to get in here; however, just in case there is something else that can get in here, I’m planning on setting up some defenses and adding my own defenders here,” Fred told the others once they were in the first room.

Unlike his saved dungeon from Gatecross, the first room was a bit larger; instead of a custom-built room that was 10 feet long on each side, he used three of the quick “Pre-built” 20X20X20-foot rooms that cost 20 Mana and added a short tunnel in between them, which consumed his initial 80 Mana. An additional 12 Unconverted Mana was used for the upkeep of the construction, but it was well worth the price to ensure that it didn’t collapse around them.

Other than the size difference, though, the rooms were completely empty and essentially just large cubes. He still had a little bit of time to add some defenses – and he wanted some help from Deecy and Eisa as well – so that they were as prepared for the night as it was possible to get. Of course, he needed the humans out of there so that he could start modifying the dungeon—

He noticed that Eisa wasn’t providing him any Unconverted Mana like she used to; he wasn’t sure why that was, but he suspected it was because she wasn’t fully “human” now – just like Deecy and himself. Her “Shard” status probably meant that she wouldn’t prevent him from

changing anything inside his dungeon while she was inside, which was good, but that didn't apply to Regnark.

When he looked at the large fur-clad man, he saw that there was *a lot* of the small little Unconverted Mana orbs drifting out from him and being absorbed by Fred's dungeon walls. It was more than he'd ever seen a single person give out, and he realized it was probably because Regnark was a much higher Rating compared to anyone who'd been in his dungeon before. *That must be how the more powerful Cores increase their already-high Rating; if all humans gave out the same amount of mana, there would be no reason for them to want higher-Rated Adventurers to delve through their dungeons – other than possibly longevity.* Regardless of the reason why, the fact that Regnark was giving out so much more than made up for the fact that Eisa wasn't.

“Did you just...create all of this? Like, while we were standing up there, aboveground?” Regnark asked, looking around in surprise touched with a little bit of wonder. “You really are a Dungeon Core, aren't you?”

“Absolutely, my friend. Again, I'm sorry I had to deceive you when we first met, but I was new to the world of humans and wasn't sure how anyone would react to my actual nature. And, yes, I did just make this with my Mana just now, though to add any more to it, I'm going to need to have you wait outside,” Fred said apologetically.

Regnark narrowed his eyes as he looked at Fred. “Is...there some secret Dungeon Core process that I'm not allowed to see?”

“No, nothing like that; I just can't change the dungeon around when there are human 'invaders' inside. It's a failsafe that you probably appreciated – but didn't necessarily know about – in your delving days as an Adventurer; can you imagine if the dungeons started moving rooms around or adding traps or monsters *while you were inside?*” Fred asked, as a

way of clarification. “There are rules that even *I* can’t get around, even if there are a lot that I can. It hopefully won’t take long, and then you can come back down, and we can hide – hopefully protected – for the night.”

The big man’s expression softened from one of suspicion at Fred’s explanation. “Ok, I guess Eisa and I can wait outside until you’re finished.” Regnark started to walk back up the entrance and Eisa went to join him.

“Eisa, you can stay if you want. In fact, I’ll probably need your help —” Fred quickly stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“What? Why does she get to stay?”

Fred looked at Eisa and tried to communicate his apology, but she just looked confused. He tried to use his Mana Communication to talk to her, but either she wasn’t receiving his thoughts, or she could only really hear Deecy for some reason. *Maybe it’s some sort of “Shard” ability.*

“Because...she’s not quite human anymore. Sorry to break it to you like that, Eisa, but I just now noticed that my dungeon isn’t reacting to you the same way it did before,” he said apologetically.

Fortunately, she just shrugged. “That’s ok. I wasn’t particularly attached to being human, anyway; besides, I kind of like what I am now.”

“Ok, ok, ok – I’ll let you lovebirds have some time alone if you want it, but keep in mind that we’re on a time crunch here!” Regnark laughed as he walked back up the tunnel leading aboveground, his large frame moving surprisingly lithely and almost effortlessly.

Eisa’s face flushed and Fred was momentarily worried she was feeling hot again or sick but based on its presence he suspected it was due to Regnark’s statement about ‘lovebirds having some time alone’. The more he thought he was catching on to the meaning behind all of the human words and interactions, the more he seemed not to understand.

“I knew it! She’s in heat, isn’t she?”

“What? *I have no idea what you’re talking about,*” Fred sent back to Deecy with his Mana Communication skill. He wasn’t sure if Eisa heard Deecy talking, but it didn’t appear as if she had.

Before the Dire Wolf could respond to Fred, Eisa – as if she was trying to cover something up – quickly asked, “So, what did you need my help with?”

“Uh...oh yes, I said that didn’t I,” Fred said, his mind trying to catch up with things and failing badly. When he took a moment to reorder his thoughts, he told her, “Ok, yes, I’m going to need some additional defenders in here. I don’t think your Crystal Scorpions are going to fit down here, but you can always eliminate them and use their mana to recreate them in this room.

“However, I might need to widen this room out a *little more,*” Fred said, as he used his Unconverted Mana to widen the room so that it was forty feet wide instead of just the previous twenty. Just like he thought, Eisa’s presence didn’t impede his work in the slightest – she really wasn’t a human anymore.

“Ok, I’ll actually create two more right now and then go up and try to ‘eliminate’ the ones aboveground,” Eisa said, putting forth her aura to create the Crystal Scorpions on either side of the room. Unless he was missing his guess, they were a tad bit smaller than the ones they had ridden earlier, which meant that she had used less of her Earth Mana to make them a lower level – which was perfect. He didn’t even mention that he wanted her to make some of her smaller defenders as well – it was almost as though they were operating within the same mind or something.

“Excellent! Ok, for the next room I want to add...”

* * *

Less than a half-hour later, Fred, Eisa, and Deecy exited the dungeon entrance to find Regnark nervously watching the sun make its final descent under the horizon. “It’s about time – I don’t think we have long before we’re in real danger here.”

“Don’t worry too much, we’ll be inside in just a moment. Eisa just wants to get rid of her Scorpions out here so that she doesn’t have to worry about them being snatched away during the night, and thereby losing the Mana inside of them,” Fred told him reassuringly. He turned to Eisa and said, “Ok, do it just like Deecy said; touch them and think about reabsorbing what they are made of like you would an orb of Earth Mana.”

Eisa did as he said and tiredly placed her hands on one of the legs of the closest Crystal Scorpion, the fatigue from using so much of her Mana in the dungeon plainly affecting her. Fred watched as she closed her eyes and scrunched her face up in concentration for nearly thirty seconds; he thought she might not be able to do it, after all – and then it was like something clicked inside her head as he saw her face relax.

The leg that Eisa was touching seemed to melt and get sucked into her hand at the same time; this was followed by the entire Scorpion dissolving into a big glob of Earth Mana accompanied by an audible *pop*. In less than a second, she had absorbed every drop of Earth Mana that had gone into the construction of the Crystal Scorpion.

“That was harder than I thought,” Eisa said, relief evident in her voice at her success. “There was some sort of mental block that prevented me from initiating the absorption process, but I powered through it; this next

one should take no time at all.” With a smile, she walked over to the other Scorpion and easily dissolved and absorbed it until the aura around her shone brightly. He knew that she wasn’t nearly full of Mana after what she had spent downstairs, but she was obviously feeling a lot better than she had been just a few minutes ago.

“Nice job, Eisa; alright, let’s get down and finish preparations before night hits completely,” Fred told them, before leading the way down the entrance into the dungeon. The others followed quickly – especially Regnark – as they didn’t want to be outside in the darkness any longer than necessary.

It was time to prepare for the unknown – and to hope and pray that their defenses were enough to save them.

Chapter 13

Once Fred led them into the first room, he signaled to Deecy to go ahead and throw up her first defense. When everyone was clear, a Fire Wall sprang into being as the Dire Wolf extended her aura and created the floating sheet of flames right in front of the entrance. The defense essentially covered all but the barest amount at the top of the entrance tunnel, but hopefully it would be deterrent enough for whatever was heading their way.

Without knowing exactly what they were up against, it was hard to plan for it – so they ended up putting a little bit of everything in their defenses. This was obvious when he looked at the makeup of the rest of the first room, which still had the Crystal Scorpions on either end of the room. The tunnel leading to the next room was placed directly across from the entrance, but the floor in between was turned into a boiling pool of water, with just barely enough room to walk around near the tunnel outlets. Using the same method as the one in Gatecross, Fred had hollowed out the floor and lined it with stone, infusing Fire Mana into the stone to heat it up – and then using his Water Mana to fill it up.

He found that it was much more cost-effective to use Earth Mana while constructing the stone pool itself instead of just Unconverted Mana. The expense using Earth instead of Unconverted Mana was only about 15% of what it would've cost him normally, which also allowed him to add some extra insurance to deter anything flying from bypassing any of the other defenses. Sharp, thin stone blades extended down from the ceiling in all directions, until they were just out of reach of the Crystal Scorpions and dropped even lower over the boiling pit of water. It wasn't impossible that

something flying could maneuver through without getting hurt, but it would have to either be rather small (about half the size of a Large Wasp) or extremely durable to withstand being sliced to bits.

Fred carefully led the way towards the next room, chuckling internally at the astonished look on Regnark's face as he took in the transformation that had taken place. "You did all of this in just a half hour?" Regnark asked, confusion and amazement warring in his voice.

"We sure did – and there's even more to see," Fred replied, beckoning them on. They arrived at the tunnel leading to the next room without trouble; as they walked through, Deecy brought up the rear and placed two of her Ice Spear Barricades – one on top of the other – inside the tunnel, blocking most access to anyone (or *anything*) trying to get through. It was an expensive defense, but it was worth it to provide the kind of protection they needed.

Walking into the next room, Fred told Regnark to ignore the four Flametripper Spikers he had set up about the entrance of the room and squeezed in between two of them without worry. Just past Fred's defenders, another large and rather deep pit spanned the width of the room, preventing them from crossing; fortunately, there was a long thick board of wood creating a temporary bridge across the 10-foot-wide pit, which would hold even the significant bulk of Regnark. Overhead, six Entangling Vines descended from the ceiling, there to try to grab anything trying to jump or fly across.

"If anything manages to make it this far, my Spikers near the entrance will do their best to attack and to fling whatever they grab with their flaming leaves into this stone-spike-lined pit, which – with a 30-foot drop – should do quite a bit of damage to it. If they somehow survive *that*, they will come up against a contingent of Eisa's Stone Golems, who will do

their best to knock whatever climbs out of the pit back into it. Along with them are some smaller Goblin Gnomes, who will also try to do their best to annoy and trip up anything that survives being impaled by spikes as they come up,” Fred said for Regnark’s benefit as they crossed the thick wooden plank.

As soon as they were across, they came up against the Stone Golems, which Eisa temporarily moved away so that they could get through. “Regnark, do you think you can help me move this wooden bridge? I have another use for it.” They turned around and – with great difficulty because of the sheer weight of the wood – they managed to slide it across and up near the exit to the next room.

“Alright, we’re going to use this as a giant door blocking the tunnel, though there will be a small gap towards the top to let air through. Use the handles to drag it in place—” Fred said as he indicated the handles that he had previously formed as part of the thick wooden board using his Nature Mana— “and then when it is butted up against either wall on the outside of the tunnel, we’ll lock it in place with this.” Fred picked up the metal bar he had made using his Conjure Object Adventurer ability and slipped it into place. The strong steel bar slid through the projecting wooden handles of the board and into the tunnel wall, where Fred had hollowed out a deep hole, locking the board where it was and – hopefully – preventing it from being moved.

The last room was relatively empty, as there weren’t any traps or other defenses inside it; this was where they were going to wait and make a last stand if necessary, and having to worry about avoiding their own defenses (Fred could do it easily, as he could “feel” where everything was in his dungeon) wasn’t the best idea for a fight. Nevertheless, there were multiple weapons stacked up against the back wall, including extra bows

and bundles of arrows – as well as two massive two-handed weapons, one a warhammer and one a double-edged sword – for Regnark, additional knives and a longsword (just in case) for Fred, and even an extremely large spiked metal ball on a short chain that ended with a long stick with a leather pad covering it.

That last was for Deecy when she was in her Giant Dire Wolf form, who would be able to pick it up by the leather-padded stick end and swing the large spiked metal ball around in circles, demolishing anything it came in contact with. Thinking back at the battle in Gatecross, they both agreed that being able to stay far away from potentially fatal attacks (such as being stuck by a Scorpion’s stinger) was probably a good idea. Producing the oversized morning star weapon along with the others cost Fred quite a bit of Power – almost 2,500, in fact – but it was regenerating quickly; at 25 Power/min, his natural regeneration had already replenished about 10% of that expenditure since he had used it. He was hoping he’d be back to full once whatever was out there attacked, but it was worth it to have everything they needed on hand.

“And this is where we’ll stay; if everything goes well, nothing will reach us this far into the dungeon, but I’ve got supplies here just in case. Additionally, Eisa can create some additional defenders and Deecy can put up some more defenses nearby – but those hopefully won’t be necessary.”

They all just stared at each other for a moment, before Eisa mumbled, “Now what do we do?”

“Now we wait, Eisa – now we wait.”

* * *

They had to wait longer than they expected. Regnark had made it seem that as soon as the sun went down, they'd be immediately attacked; however, more than two hours passed with nothing happening, which allowed everyone to refill most of their Power or Mana that they had consumed with the creation of the dungeon. Fred still had quite a bit of time to go before he converted enough to fill up fully, but most of what he had used inside the dungeon had been replenished. It helped that his Mana Conversion skill – which was now at Expert Mana Conversion: 45% – was still increasing, which sped up the process of turning his Unconverted Mana into the different elemental Mana he had access to.

Fire Mana: 61/139

Water Mana: 61/138

Nature Mana: 60/138

Earth Mana: 60/60

Unconverted Mana: 1450 (30)

Not only that, but having Regnark inside his dungeon was giving him quite a bit of Unconverted Mana; he had used a sizable chunk during the construction of the dungeon, but he had recouped that and quite a bit additional while he was there. In fact, he calculated that he was receiving an additional unit of UM every 15 seconds from the man being in there. Fred wasn't sure if that amount was typical of what a C-Rated Adventurer would give off or if it was because he had a relatively lower-Rated dungeon, but it was a happy happenstance, nonetheless.

Everyone had been topped off on Power and/or Stamina – in the case of Regnark – for at least half an hour before something showed up on Fred's Territorial Sight. They had been tensely waiting for something to

arrive and he had been tempted to try to teach some abilities to Eisa or Regnark while they waited, but he held off just in case; it wouldn't be prudent to be out of Power just as the threat they were waiting for showed up.

But finally, after hurrying up to get everything as prepared as they could and then waiting what Fred thought was an unnecessarily long time, he detected something on the edge of his territory to the west – directly from the Deadlands like Regnark had said. He almost missed it at first because it was *not there*; it was only because he had been looking for *anything* out of the ordinary that he saw the massive void heading in his dungeon's direction.

Void was an appropriate word, he thought; what he saw wasn't made up of any element, necessarily – more like the absence of anything. Not quite like a human, where they weren't made from Mana; humans at least had body heat and moisture inside their bodies that he could detect with his Fire and Water elements, as well as being able to detect a living being with his Nature Mana. When he thought about it, if there was a human that had any type of Earth product on them – like metals in a weapon or armor – then he could pinpoint them as well.

But not this thing that was heading toward him slowly, as if it couldn't move quickly if it wanted to. He couldn't actually *see* it with his Territorial Sight, but the void it created in his sight was frightening enough that he was kind of glad he couldn't make out too many details. From what he could tell, the void creature was at least 40 feet tall and half that wide, cylindrical in general shape – and it had hundreds of lengthy, undulating tentacles roaming all over its body in all directions. The tentacles stretched out at least 50 feet from the main body and were each at least a half-foot

thick, making the whole mass of writhing appendages quite the sight to behold.

It wasn't until the creature had crossed fully into his territory that he realized that it wasn't alone. There weren't any more of the massive creatures, fortunately, but instead there were small amorphous blobs that were probably only 4 feet tall accompanying it. It was difficult to tell exactly what they looked like, but Fred thought he could see smaller tentacles stretching out from only a couple of places from their smaller "bodies". They didn't seem too threatening at the moment, but after a minute of them making their way unerringly in his dungeon's location, he backed up his view to take in the entire field of grass around his territory and he realized that they might be in trouble.

There were hundreds of the smaller void blobs.

After concentrating on both monsters with as much effort as he could, he was finally rewarded with some information – as little as there was.

Greater Horror (Level ?)

Vitality: ?

Attack: ?

Defense: ?

Horrorlings (Level ?)

Vitality: ?

Attack: ?

Defense: ?

Despite having Master Territorial Sight, the best he could get from these things coming toward them was a name – no levels, no Vitality, and certainly no guess on how powerful they were. Despite the lack of information, he told the others what he had seen and described them, including the basic names that he was able to glean from his limited information.

“I haven’t heard of those smaller things being out here before, but I never made it my mission to learn more about this place other than knowing not to spend the night out here. The giant monster you’re describing could be the one that some of the higher-Rated Syndicate members had killed before, but I don’t really know,” Regnark said, before Deecy interrupted Fred’s thoughts with an urgent Mana Communication.

“Something about what you described triggered something in your mother’s memories. It seems as though she had known exactly what these things are.”

“Well, then – what are they?” Fred communicated back – the others oblivious to their conversation as they discussed what they thought the monsters were.

“Hold on, I’m still processing the memories and trying to make sense of them. They’re still a bit fragmented...and...ok, I think that’s as good as they’re going to get.”

The Dire Wolf started to explain what he had understood from Pyrannelstencia’s memories, and Fred told the others at the same time.

Chapter 14

“Now, she apparently didn’t have first-hand knowledge of these Horrors; she only knew about them because of her status as a Supreme-Rated Dungeon Core and her position as one of the leaders of the Fire-Dark Alliance. It was through that connection that she learned of the existence of these byproducts of the Dark Mana origination process.”

Fred listened and conveyed the information to the others with rapt attention; it wasn’t often that he learned more about his mother and her life before she ran off with Fred’s father.

“These creatures are being constantly formed by the Dark Mana bubbling up from the depths underneath the Deadlands and other Dark Core territories around the world; no one knows exactly why they are formed in the first place – all they know is that they’ve always existed. They only last for a single night and disappear in the light of day, and then even more are created the next day.”

“Ok, but what exactly are these monsters?” Eisa asked, after listening to Fred recount what Deecy had been telling him. He briefly wondered why the Dire Wolf wasn’t communicating directly with her; however, he was kind of glad that Deecy wasn’t directly sharing these memories of his mother with anyone other than him.

“I was just getting to that. These ‘monsters’ – as you call them – are physical representations of the absence of Mana; they don’t have any

inherent Mana inside of them, even the Unconverted Mana that humans are apparently comprised of. Instead of needing Mana to exist, they exist to consume Mana; whenever they encounter sources of Mana, they use their forms to try to eliminate it in some bizarre instinctual need.”

That doesn't sound good, Fred thought. “Can they be killed?” he asked, as that was the most pertinent question at the moment.

“Oh yes, they can be killed. When they adapt a physical form, they conform to the basic laws of nature and therefore react just the same as any other creature or monster in the world. As for how powerful they are, I have no idea – though your mother thought that they were quite dangerous, but the reason behind that thought isn't quite clear.”

Fred thought that if his mother – a Supreme-Rated Dungeon Core – considered them dangerous, then they were likely in big trouble. One thing was nagging at him, though.

“Why don't they attack the Dark Cores inside the Deadlands, though, if they are looking for sources of Mana? I would think that they would be the closest and easiest to get to.”

“That part wasn't as clear from your mother's memories. From what I can piece together, these elemental voids given physical form are repelled by Dark territories, and that there was some proprietary Dark method to direct where these things appear. I would imagine that any human habitations located within the Dark Cores' territories wouldn't last more than a night, otherwise.”

That was, unfortunately, all of the information that Deecy could extract from the memories inside Fred's mother's shard inside of her.

“So, what do we know? There are hundreds of these ‘Horrorlings’ – not to mention the giant one you saw – and they can theoretically be killed, but we don’t know how powerful they are. They consume this ‘Mana’ you’ve been talking about, but we’re not really sure what that means. Does that change our defensive strategy?” Regnark recounted the information, and then asked the same thing Fred had been thinking.

Everyone was silent for a moment before Fred finally answered for them all. “No, I don’t think we could or should change anything right now, as it’s both too late and I don’t even know what to change anyway. We’ll just have to see how it goes and switch things up if necessary.”

No one had anything to add to that, so they all waited until the Horrorlings reached his dungeon first. Fred wasn’t sure if the Greater Horror could even fit inside of his dungeon and didn’t want to find out; the smaller elemental void creatures were likely going to be difficult enough to deal with.

Fred immediately found out why these monsters were said to “consume” Mana. As soon as they touched the rock formation denoting his dungeon entrance, the Horrorlings shot out their smaller tentacles and attached them to the structure. Within seconds, the Unconverted Mana that was being used to hold them all together was sucked up into the void-like creatures and the left side of the entrance tunnel partially collapsed when the Mana holding it together was removed. Fortunately (or unfortunately, as the case was), the tunnel leading down into Fred’s dungeon was largely intact and wouldn’t block any of the Horrorlings from progressing farther inside.

He looked at his Mana totals and saw that the upkeep that had been formerly used to maintain the dungeon entrance was gone; it was something that he was definitely not getting back anytime soon. It was almost as if these things could absorb the Mana in something like Fred, Eisa, and Deecy could do with their creations – though, fortunately, any Mana they consumed didn't seem to enhance or strengthen them in any way. At least he hoped it didn't.

What that meant for the rest of the defenses he didn't know, but he was about to find out.

The first Horroring reached the bottom of the entrance tunnel and didn't even stop as it hit the Fire Wall that Deecy had set up there earlier. The monster immediately went up in flames and a terrifying scream emerged from it – with no discernable source whatsoever – as it was lit up like a stack of dried kindling. Despite being on fire, the smallish creature (which was still basically a void to his Territorial Sight) kept moving forward, only to dissolve into nothing just before the boiling pool of water.

That was extremely promising from Fred's point of view, because it meant that the Horrings were vulnerable to fire, at least. But then he looked at Deecy's Fire Wall and it looked like it had diminished significantly from the intense wall it had been before. From his estimation, nearly a fifth of the wall had been reduced, making the formerly 10-foot wall only about 8 feet now. Fred knew that if Deecy were there she could replenish the Mana that had obviously been consumed in her defense, but at the moment she was too far away...or was she?

"Deecy, they are consuming your Fire Wall as they go through it – can you replenish the strength of it from here?" Fred asked, hoping that the Dire Wolf could do it remotely like Fred was normally able to do from a distance – as long as there weren't any intruders in his dungeon, of course.

He could always add some things outside in his territory, but until he knew what would be most effective, he was holding off for now.

Fred could see Deecy concentrating with her head cocked to the side, focusing intently into the distance...before she shook her head in denial.

“I can sort of feel it, as it’s connected to me and consuming Fire Mana for its upkeep every hour, but I can’t directly interact with it. I think if I was close enough to it, I could extend my aura and repair it, but at this distance it’s impossible.”

That was unfortunate, as a veritable flood of Horrorlings descended down into Fred’s dungeon. Deecy’s Fire Wall was able to destroy another five of the void monsters before it was completely drained of Mana and disappeared. Fred could see the Dire Wolf visibly flinch when it was finally completely consumed, and he looked at her with concern.

“There was a bit of a backlash from its disappearance that I wasn’t expecting. I’m fine, though – just surprised.”

Looking back at the first room, Fred kept up a running commentary of what was happening; there wasn’t much he could do other than watch at the moment. With the Fire Wall gone, dozens of Horrorlings were streaming inside without hindrance, only to immediately fall inside the boiling pit of water in the center of the room like mindless monsters hungering for the closest source of Mana. The super-hot liquid was powerful enough to kill the Horrorlings as they fell in; however, just like the Fire Wall, a bit of the Water Mana – and therefore the water itself – was

consumed in the process. With his Territorial and Mana Sight working in conjunction together, he was able to visually see the Water Mana being eroded little by little from the large pit of boiling water.

Four dozen Horrorlings met their end inside the heated pool before the water finally gave out; without the water to insulate the Fire-infused stone, the void creatures started to burn from contact with the pool's structure itself. And then, just like the dungeon entrance, the following Horrorlings fell down into the pit, burned themselves, and then ate at the pool's structure, removing all of the Fire Mana inside of it.

The entire process took all of five minutes from when the first void creature fell into the boiling water until the Fire Mana inside the stone was completely consumed. Nearly 60 of the Horrorlings had been killed in the process – and there was absolutely nothing to show for it as far as Fred was concerned. The dead left behind no corpses, no Mana, and provided no Essence; they, in fact, essentially *took* from Fred and Deecy, consuming his dungeon instead of providing anything to it. *No wonder there are no dungeons out here; it's not that there aren't any humans – It's that a Dungeon Core wouldn't survive long out here.*

Despite such attrition to their ranks, there still seemed to be hundreds more outside trying to force themselves inside the entrance. Fortunately, the Greater Horror seemed to be waiting for the smaller Horrorlings to enter before doing anything itself.

Seeing an opportunity, Fred told the others, "I'm going to try something with those still outside. Hold on." He pulled out about a third of his available Fire Mana – approximately 20 units – and sent it right outside of his dungeon where there were dozens or hundreds of the smaller Horrorlings pushing against each other in their efforts to enter Fred's

dungeon. He didn't target them directly, however; instead, he spread out the Fire Mana beneath them and lit the grass on fire.

Normally, he wouldn't have done something like that because he could potentially set the entire Plains of Grass on fire, and it might spread to the forest they had just left and even the Deadlands. Fred wasn't out to burn everything down; one, because who knew how far it would spread before it stopped; two, he didn't see the purpose of it, and it might make it harder to travel. Nevertheless, he did it now because he was hoping to keep it contained in his territory long enough to eliminate everything attacking them.

Unfortunately, the grass fire he was hoping to rage across his territory barely lasted 15 seconds before it sputtered out.

The fire flared up in hundreds of spots as the Fire Mana he had liberally spread all over lit the grass on fire, but it wasn't the raging bonfire Fred was hoping for. Since the grass was alive and healthy, it didn't burn as quickly and strongly as he was hoping; added to that, as soon as flames flared up here and there, they were instantly swarmed upon and consumed.

It wasn't all for naught, however; the fires ended up killing a few dozen and – hopefully – injuring others, but it wasn't the wholesale destruction he had wanted. He thought about using twice as much Mana next time, but he decided against it since it would probably just be consumed as quickly as the first. Besides, most of the grass around the dungeon entrance had been burned from the initial test and there wasn't much left over for the Fire Mana to consume.

Realizing the futility of the thought, he turned away from that and told the others about his failure. They were relatively silent as they listened to how ineffective his attack ultimately was, with Eisa finally saying that maybe her defenders would have more luck. He was sorry to disappoint

her, however, as he had half of his mind on the action in the first room again.

With the Fire and Water-borne pool completely consumed, the Horrorlings turned their attention to the next-nearest source of Mana available: the two Crystal Scorpions in the room. To those that were still inside the pit, getting out seemed futile as there was nothing to climb up and get out; however, the Horrorlings didn't rely on silly human things like steps, ropes, or ladders to ascend a vertical surface. No, all they needed to do was bump up and somehow adhere themselves to the wall – and practically roll up it with ease.

They soon joined the others who were splitting up to attack both Scorpions at the same time. Four to five-foot tentacles reached out toward the giant bugs like eager hands looking for a handout, or a long-absent friend looking for a hug. Those hugs, however, weren't quite safe; the Crystal Scorpions struck out with their claws and even their stingers, cutting apart the Horrorlings with contemptuous ease – but the process took a toll on their exoskeleton. Whatever part impacted the elemental void monsters was eaten away just as easily as the Fire Wall and boiling pit of water.

Dozens more were killed by each of the Scorpions, but eventually their claws and stingers (and a large portion of their tails) were completely eaten away – so they threw their legs and bodies into the fight, smashing down on the strange creatures without care for their own lives. Fred guessed that over 100 were killed by the large bugs, but it was barely a drop in the bucket compared to how many were still swarming into his territory from the west.

Fred was sure they would stop and consume the Mana keeping his room intact, but they were lured away down the tunnel towards the next

room before they started dismantling his dungeon structure. After they consumed the Ice Spear Barricades that Deecy had placed inside the tunnel – losing another dozen of their number in the process – they left his tunnel alone, which made sense because the concentration of Mana was so small inside the structure of it that the Mana inside the next room must’ve been like a blazing bonfire to them.

There were hundreds of the non-element void monsters now in Fred’s dungeon and many more were on the way; when he looked aboveground again, his entire territory for hundreds of feet in almost every direction seemed to be carpeted with the smaller voids that indicated where the Horrorlings were. Then, from the north and south, two more Greater Horrors started to enter into his territory; he wasn’t positive, but he thought it likely that his dungeon and territory was like a beacon to them for miles in every direction.

“I think we’ve got a serious problem—” Fred started to tell his friends before he cut himself off. Something crossed over into his territory from an unexpected direction and he smiled.

“Never mind – I think we just got some help. I don’t think they’ll see it that way, but I’ll take whatever we can get at this point.”

Chapter 15

The Horrorlings inside of Fred's dungeon were just finishing up consuming his Flametripper Spikers set up in front of the big pit full of stone spikes when help arrived aboveground. It didn't affect those inside the dungeon, but it did prevent more from entering and joining what Fred estimated as 300 Horrorlings already there.

In an effort to get to the dungeon entrance, Crystal Scorpions with Goblin Gnome riders attacked the swarm of Horrorlings outside. At first, it appeared as if they would make it as they practically shredded the opposition; however, it soon became apparent that the Scorpions were being destroyed just as quickly. The Scorpions' claws and tails were also consumed faster than Eisa's had been inside the dungeon because of the sheer number of void creatures swarming them. Not only that, but tentacles snatched Gnomes off of the backs of the giant bugs and literally ate away at them as they were held tightly against their "bodies".

There were just too many of the smaller Horrorlings and the Scorpions that had attacked were soon pushed back and destroyed. That wasn't the end of the attack, however – it was only the beginning.

Dozens of Stone Golems rolled in and started to attack the Horrorlings with abandon, withstanding their own horrendous casualties in the process. They were quickly joined by nearly two dozen Enormous Sand Crabs that came scuttling in sideways and laying into the void-creature forces without missing a beat. They were actually making some significant progress towards the dungeon entrance when the Greater Horrors finally joined the fray.

Hundreds of extremely long tentacles shot out and grabbed the Stone Golems, enveloping them in their steel-cable-like appendages. They were consumed even faster than they had been against the smaller Horrorlings, and within seconds the dozens of Golems were destroyed.

Other tentacles snatched at the Sand Crabs with just slightly less success; massive claws were able to cut some of the tentacles as soon as they were within range with quick snips, but others latched onto the Crabs' legs or anything else it could reach. When enough were able to latch on, the Greater Horror started to rip off legs as it pulled its tentacles in different directions; when it was incapacitated, it was much easier for the smaller Horrorlings to swarm in and consume the rest of the Earth defender.

But they were soon joined by others; more Crystal Scorpions, Enormous Sand Crabs, Stone Golems, and even large Rockworms that burrowed up from under the ground to attack from below. There wasn't much headway on either group's part, though the Earth defenders seemed to be getting the worst of it. However, a trio of Golden Sphinxes showed up and immediately tore into one of the Greater Horrors.

Their enormous lion-like claws were a bit more resilient than almost anything else that Fred had seen; he wasn't sure if it was because they were inherently more powerful, or if they had larger amounts of Mana that had to be consumed in order to harm them. Regardless of the reason, they clawed, bit, and generally tore apart any tentacles that attacked them and reduced the northern Greater Horror to nothing within minutes.

Of course, they had taken a beating as well, with entire parts of their anatomy completely consumed. They made their way towards another of the Horrors and managed to damage it before they literally fell apart and were quickly consumed by large tentacles. Their progress, though, had allowed many of the other Earth defenders to reduce the number of

Horrorlings around the dungeon. Fred began to think he was going to have to start worrying about defending against them fairly soon, especially when a half-dozen Rock Giants showed up, their footsteps sending reverberations through the ground and his dungeon.

The Horrors and their smaller brethren weren't quite done yet, either. Another three Greater Horrors showed up from different directions and went to work ripping the smaller Earth defenders apart. The Rock Giants stomped and pounded the Horrors flat, but they weren't quite as resilient as the Sphinxes; their limbs were quickly consumed, and they were rendered almost useless other than a massive crushing weight after a couple of strikes.

Meanwhile, as the battle above raged with more and more void monsters and Earth defenders battling to get inside Fred's dungeon, the remaining Horrorlings were getting closer to destroying everything inside the second room. The Flametripper Spikers only managed to kill about a dozen of the Mana-less creatures before they succumbed to their consumptive attacks. The Entangling Vines placed above the stone-spike pit reached out at the Horrorlings and got caught by some extended tentacles; the void monsters literally used the vines as ropes and climbed up them, consuming them in the process.

The spike pit did a little more damage as the rest of those streaming through the tunnel into the room fell directly down in the same spot. While there weren't large amounts of Mana inside the stone spikes, Fred had used Earth Mana to construct them; as a result, the sharp spikes slowly wore away not from the Horrorlings deliberately targeting them to consume, but almost from the friction caused by the amorphous blobs rubbing against them. While more than two dozen were impaled by the spikes initially, they

eventually survived the drop as the sharp points were blunted from the constant wear of seemingly countless void bodies rubbing against them.

Once they were able to squeeze themselves between the rest of the spikes in the pit, they were easily able to climb the far wall and up to where the Eisa's defenders were waiting for them. Just as Fred had seen up above, the Stone Golems and Goblin Gnomes did well on smashing everything that came up and knocking them back into the pit, but as their body parts began to be consumed, more and more Horrorlings were able to make it to the top and spread out. At that point, it didn't take long for Eisa's forces to be overwhelmed, and the next thing Fred knew, they were at the thick wooden "door" they had placed over the tunnel entrance.

"Alright, they're here...is everybody ready?" Fred asked, as the first Horrorling completely ignored the wooden plank in its way and simply climbed up it and somehow contorted itself to fit through the gap near the roof of the tunnel. It was only about three inches tall, plenty for letting air flow in and out, but apparently also large enough to let the void creature slide through as it compressed down small enough to fit. If nothing else proved that those creatures didn't have any type of bone structure inside them, that would've been sufficient proof.

They also got their first visual look at the Horrorling, which didn't look anything like it had in his Mana and Territorial Sight. Whereas it was a literal *void* to those Sights – due to the lack of Mana inside of them – when seen in person, they looked more like "clear darkness". That was the best way to describe them; it was as if they were originally the blackest of blacks they could be, and then something tried to make them invisible but failed to complete the process.

Without even saying anything while Fred and the others readied to attack, Deecy immediately ran forward and extended her aura to create a

Fire Wall inside the tunnel, running its entire length except for right next to the wooden board. It was a relatively inexpensive defense that she could throw up quickly to kill the Horrorlings as they dropped off the top of the wooden barricade. When one would start to burn and consume the Wall, she would extend a little more of her Mana to repair it, keeping it in place to continue the process.

After killing over 30 of the Horrorlings – with a horde of still over 200 of them trying to make their way through Fred’s dungeon – the middle of the thick wooden board started to crack. It wasn’t from weight against it, however; the board was created from Nature Mana and the press of the Horrorlings was starting to eat away at it. After another couple of the void monsters climbed over, the center of the wood completely split down the middle and spread apart the metal rod holding them closed. As soon as there was a gap large enough for them to squeeze through, they started pouring into the tunnel in increasingly larger numbers.

Deecy couldn’t keep up and the Fire Wall was snuffed out, leaving the horde of Horrorlings to enter without trouble. Arrows started to fly out from Regnark in a steady stream; because they weren’t made from Mana – they were produced by Fred’s Conjure Object Adventurer ability – they weren’t consumed on impact. Large chunks of the Horrorlings started to disappear as they were injured by the arrows slicing into them, though they had to be reduced down to almost nothing for them to “die” completely – *if that is what is actually happening to them*. Fred wasn’t exactly sure that these creatures/monsters were even alive, given the explanation that Deecy imparted to him.

Either way, Regnark was making short work of them as he fired faster than Fred could reasonably follow; unfortunately, doing so was sapping his Stamina at a prodigious rate. “Regnark! Rest for a moment and

I'll take over!" Fred called out, getting ready to add his own Power to the fight.

Fireblasts seemed to be the way to go, as they expanded and did quite a lot of damage as a result. Fred started to launch one Fireblast after another down the tunnel, blowing back the ones in the front in the process; he was doing some major damage to them and taking them out two or three at a time because they were bunched up. They had very little in the way of Defense or Vitality, which he belatedly realized had updated when he finally got a face-to-face look at them.

Horrorlings (Level 1)

Vitality: 10

Attack: 0, absorbs Mana

Defense: 1, able to continue fighting even when 90% of its body is destroyed

Essentially, they were blobs of mindless, manaless voids that operated only to consume Mana; they didn't really attack in the barest sense of the word, nor were their bodies capable of fending off any damage. They only managed to kill and destroy things because anything with Mana in it that touched them would be consumed.

At 100 units of Power per Fireblast, he was using his available Power up quickly and the end of them never seemed to be near. Eisa joined in with her own Power by sending simple Magestrikes which she had unlocked with a little of her Essence. After she had exhausted her Power and he had used over 30 Fireblasts – killing a few score of them in the process – Eisa sent in a squad of a dozen Stone Golems she had created and

said, “You rest now, Fred – I’ve got this!” And then she transformed into her Earth Elemental form and followed after them.

“No! Don’t get near them, Eisa – they’ll consume all the Mana inside of you!” he shouted a little more harshly than he intended, snatching her by the arm and yanking her back. He didn’t want anything to happen to her and was perhaps a bit too forceful in his protection, and the shock and surprise was evident even on the normally expressionless Earth Elemental form’s face.

“Fred! What are you—”

“I’m sorry, Eisa – but I can’t let you go in there. If they get ahold of you, you could die!” He tried to apologize, but there was too much happening to see if his apology had been accepted.

Eisa’s Stone Golems had paused in their advance when he had snatched Eisa back from almost certain death, which allowed a few of the Horrorlings to push out from the tunnel and spread out. Her defenders started toward them soon after – but the damage had already been done. Fortunately, Regnark had seen and started to fire arrows again and destroyed the ones that had broken free of the tunnel, while the Golems attempted to contain the flood of void monsters.

Deecy got back into it with the establishment of one Ice Spear Barricade after another, set lengthwise in the middle of the tunnel. Each one lasted about a second before it was consumed, but it also took out between five and seven Horrorlings at the same time. She even threw in some Fire Walls that didn’t last any longer but did about the same amount of damage to the swarm.

The Stone Golems didn’t last long as defenders and were soon taken apart as they touched the strange void monsters in their attacks. Outstretched tentacles on the part of the Horrorlings also managed to touch

or snag a stone body part or two, which hastened their destruction. And through it all, not a single drop of Earth Mana was left behind for either Fred or Eisa to reabsorb.

As soon as the last Stone Golem fell, Fred tossed more Fireblasts into the tunnel, destroying even more in the process. Regnark's arrows quickly ran out and he threw down his bow and grabbed the two-handed, double-bladed Steel Longsword Fred had Conjured for him. He ran over next to Deecy and prepared to hold back the tide once the Dire Wolf was out of Mana.

"Here, Eisa – take some Earth Mana and create some more Stone Golems – those seem to be the best for getting in there and stopping up the tide of these things," Fred said, while pulling out all 60 Earth Mana from his Core and sending it right to her. She had dropped her Earth Elemental form and frowned at him but did as he asked; soon enough another three Stone Golems appeared and went towards the front line, holding back the Horrorlings with great sweeps of their bludgeoning fists.

Looking at the other room with his Territorial Sight, he could see that the end of the Horrorlings inside his dungeon was near; there were probably only 50 more or so still trying to make their way into the tunnel, but they were all quickly running out of ways to kill them. Fred had even supplied Deecy with some additional Fire and Water Mana from his cores during the fight, but now she was getting to the point where she had to choose whether to transform into a giant Dire Wolf and go down fighting, or use what she could to produce additional defenses.

Fred was going to make that decision for her. "Deecy, grab your weapon and go for it!" he called out to her, just as he was throwing his last few Fireblasts down the tunnel.

Deecy transformed into her Giant Dire Wolf form and quickly picked up her massive morning star weapon with her teeth and started swinging it around and around. Moving closer to the tunnel entrance, Regnark moved back in case he was needed and watched with the others as the spinning spiked ball smashed into the first Horrorling perfectly. It basically disintegrated on contact, but that proved not to be a good thing; expecting at least a little resistance, Deecy mistimed her next rotation and the spiked ball was jerked forward to impale itself inside the tunnel wall, smashing four other void monsters in the process. She tried to yank it out and made it move a little bit – but it was ultimately stuck fast.

“Leave it! We’ll take it from here. No, stay back, Eisa – if they touch you, you’re dead,” he called out, looking at Eisa and seeing a frustrated expression on her face.

“Well, what about you, Fred? You have Mana inside you, too!” she yelled back, as he moved up with the longsword he had picked up from the supplies near the back wall.

She has a point, but at least I’m trying to use a longer-reach weapon. He preferred to use his knives if he were to engage in close-quarters combat but getting too close to those things wasn’t the best idea. Eisa, on the other hand, only had her own form to use for attacking; he had to think of a weapon that she, as an Earth Elemental, could use other than her own fists – or whatever bladed weapon she made from the dirt surrounding her.

One on each side of the tunnel exit, Fred and Regnark stood and swung their swords back and forth with abandon. Regnark used his exceptional skill as an experienced Adventurer to cut down the incoming Horrorlings with precise cuts; Fred, on the other hand, felt like he was

flailing about with a long pointy stick and had almost no idea what he was doing.

Fortunately, it didn't take a lot of skill to hit the void monsters as they didn't try to dodge, and they were relatively slow in comparison. *Unfortunately*, most of those coming out of the tunnel entrance turned in his direction first, even if they ended up being cut down from behind by Regnark. Neither of them could keep up with the incoming flood of "clear darkness"-colored forms, however, and inevitably Fred was hurt.

A cold spike of pain erupted out of his chest as a tentacle shot out from the closest Horrorling and wrapped around his upper right arm. He fell to his knees in weakness as he felt like his very soul was being drained – but in reality, his Unconverted Mana was being sucked out faster and faster the more he looked at it. Fred couldn't even stand up and defend himself, and he looked up to see two more descending on him.

Then suddenly all three were destroyed before his eyes as a weapon flew through where they had formerly been. It wasn't the two-handed, double-bladed longsword that Regnark was wielding, however; it was the large warhammer he had Conjured for the Berserker/Marksman in case he needed it. Only, it wasn't being wielded by the human – it was being swung with ease by Eisa in her Earth Elemental form.

"Get up – I can't do this all by myself! And don't look at me like that; I'm pretty sure you know I'm not going to let the man I love die without a fight!" Eisa yelled at him, swinging the warhammer again and almost hitting him in the process. She might have enough strength while in her special form to wield the heavy warhammer, but she didn't necessarily have the skill to go with it.

He stood up, the weakness a passing memory as he threw himself back into the fight. With all three of them taking a different section of the

tunnel exit, they were able to fight through the rest of the void creatures until there were none left. Panting and sweating by the end of it, Fred walked over to Eisa and smiled tiredly at her. “Thanks, Eisa. I probably would’ve died if you hadn’t come to my rescue.”

She smiled back at him, though with a harder expression on her face, which stayed there even when she changed back to her normal “human” form. “You’re welcome...just don’t yell at me like that again or I’ll chop your—”

Regnark grunted in restrained laughter as Eisa cut off what she was going to say. “Uh...yeah, well...I’d help grow them back with my new special ability, of course, but just so long as we have an understanding, right?”

“Right,” Fred answered right away. He never really understood what Metch had always said about women being difficult to understand, and now he didn’t think he ever would.

Chapter 16

The fight was far from over, however; the battle aboveground was only seeming to intensify by the time Fred and the others had managed to defeat all of the Horrorlings already inside the dungeon. All Fred could do was watch and recover from the Mana and Power expenditure from their own fight, as the ground shook from the battle between the Earth defenders and the Horrors that came from the Deadlands.

The shaking had been going on during their own defense against the Horrorlings, of course, but he had barely noticed it in the heat of the fight. Now that they were all sitting down and enjoying a bit of a rest, it almost felt worse; a couple times the surrounding earth shook so badly that Fred thought his dungeon would collapse despite the protections put in place automatically. Fortunately, nothing like that happened and they weren't squished by falling rock as the dungeon collapsed around them.

His entrance, however, was completely demolished. It was only luck that any air was able to get in and out through the rubble filling the entrance tunnel, and Fred didn't look forward to clearing it out. Normally, he'd be able to just eliminate it with his Dungeon Core skill, but with Regnark inside the dungeon at the moment he couldn't – which meant it would probably be a lot of manual labor instead.

Instead of worrying about the battle waging above their heads, Fred decided to take advantage of the situation. Since everyone was essentially out of Power – Regnark had even used most of his for a few of his Marksman abilities – he decided to use his Conjure Object skill to make them some food, before attempting to Teach each of them as much as he could. He figured that even with a little bit of time to recharge what they

had spent, that it wouldn't really matter if thousands of the Horrorlings or hundreds of Earth defenders (whoever ended up winning) streamed down into his dungeon. They were lucky to have survived even that long and a few extra points of Power weren't likely to make a huge difference.

First, he looked at his own Adventurer Status to see where he was at, and whether or not he could spare some more Essence to increase the chance of success.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface					
Name: Fredwynklemossering			Class: Instructor-Researcher		
Rating: E-7 th			Essence Needed to Rate-up: 61947		
Total Essence: 869053		Available Essence to Distribute: 166466		Unconverted Essence: 6520	
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)			Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 145/160 Power: 125/5100		
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 13			Power Regen Rate: 25/min		
Class Traits (Instructor)					
Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat					
Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat					
You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)					
Class Traits (Researcher)					
Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat					
Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat					
You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications					
Class Abilities (Instructor)					
Teach 4 – 0/27000					
Class Abilities (Researcher)					
Experiment 0 – 0/100					
Adapted Abilities					
Animate Dead 1 – 0/1000		Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000		Vitality Transfer 3 – 0/9000	
Vitality Explosion 1 – 0/1000		Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000		Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000	
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000		Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000		Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000	
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000		Fireblast 3 – 0/9000		Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000	
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000		(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)			

Not much had changed since the last time he had checked, although he had lost quite a bit of his Unconverted Mana due to being almost sucked dry by the Horrorling that had gotten hold of him. As a result, he didn't want to use too much of his stored Essence, because he wanted it there in order to convert to UM if he needed it; still, he wanted this Teaching session to be as successful as possible. With an additional 27,000 Essence added to his Teach Instructor ability, he found that he upped his maximum chance of success from 80% to 85% – a significant jump when it came to ensuring something worked as often as possible.

He started with Eisa, as she needed his help more and she was likely to be the easiest to Teach. It wasn't necessarily because she would be able to acquire everything that he had to Teach her, but for the opposite reason; there were some abilities that were for a higher-Rated Adventurer (depending on the class) and the likelihood of learning it was going to be so low that it wasn't worth it to try at the moment. It was better if she had more time to increase her Rating and acquire them when she had more of a chance to succeed, because if it didn't work, she would be locked out from learning it in the future – from him at least.

He started with the Mage abilities that she already technically had access to; by learning them as “Taught Abilities”, she would keep them even if she changed her class. With the extra boost to Fred's Teach ability, the result was ideal. She was a Mage-Fighter, she already had access to the abilities, and her Mind Stat was more than high enough to accommodate her class.

E-7th-Rated Instructor --> Magestrike --> F-2nd-Rated (Mage-Fighter)

Maximum Chance of Success: 85%

No deductions: -0%

Resulting Chance of Success: 85%

As he had hoped, every single Mage ability that she already had access to were successes: Magestrike, Barrier, Magelight, Flamestrike, Froststrike, and Minor Shock. Next was her Fighter skills, though he only had access to Teach Focused Irritation; most Fighter abilities relied on Stamina to produce an effect or had an internal Power use, which he wasn't able to observe. Focused Irritation was a Power effect that expelled an aura outside of the Fighter's body that "irritated" the nearby monsters to cause them to want to attack the Fighter instead of the more vulnerable members of the group. It was because he could see that "irritating" aura that he was able to adapt it as an ability. Fortunately, he was able to Teach her that one as well, because the Mind stat requirement for a G-Rated Fighter was fairly low.

For the next portion of the Teaching session, he had her bring out the Class Selector and change her class to the next two beginner types of Adventurers, the Scout and the Healer. She was already familiar with the Healing abilities – as she had been one originally before branching off into Necromancer territory – and that knowledge actually seemed to help.

E-7th-Rated Instructor --> Heal Minor Wounds --> F-2nd-Rated (Healer-Scout)

Maximum Chance of Success: 85%

Target's Prior Knowledge: +5%

No deductions: -0%

Resulting Chance of Success: 90%

It wasn't a large bonus, but a 5% increase in the chance of success was significant. At 90%, there was very little chance that it wouldn't work; as a result, she easily acquired the four basic Healer Abilities that he had adapted himself: Heal Minor Wounds, Minor Protection, Remove Blindness, and Lightscythe. The Lightscythe was a low-damage ability that sent out a blinding shock of light in an arc toward a target, but it was rarely used because the cost was rather high for a Healer whose main job was to heal. There were other abilities that he likely could learn from a G-Rated Healer, but he had never seen them used in person.

As for the Scout, there were only two Power-based abilities that he had Adapted, as most of the Scout's abilities were either internal, Stamina-based, or something he'd never seen in action before. The first one was one that was the staple of the profession: Disarm Trap – which allowed for the disarming of the defenses that a Core placed in their dungeon. Concealment – the only other ability he had access to for a Scout – was also a handy one to have; an aura of Power surrounded the person using it, which blurred their outlines enough that it was hard to pinpoint them. It wasn't quite the same as some of the more advanced Scout classes like Infiltrator, who could disappear almost completely, but it was much better than nothing.

Eisa tried a few of those other advanced classes, but as her stats and even her F-2nd-Rating were still relatively low, the penalty for trying to learn them was large.

E-7th-Rated Instructor --> Spike Arrows --> F-2nd-Rated (Archer)

Maximum Chance of Success: 85%

Target Rating Too Low for Higher-Rated Ability: -30%

Low Brawn Stat: -10%

Low Speed Stat: -10%

Resulting Chance of Success: 35%

For instance, when he tried to teach her Spike Arrows as an Archer, her Rating and stats weren't quite high enough, therefore the chance of success was only 35%; it was still possible that she could learn it, but as it was likely that she wouldn't learn it, it wasn't worth doing in the long-run. Almost every other spell or ability he tried to teach her from what he had adapted was similar, with varying degrees of success depending on what it was, though none of them had a better than 50/50 likelihood of working.

The Necromancer spells and abilities he had adapted from watching Eisa in her previous incarnation added a bonus to her chance of success because of her prior knowledge, but she wasn't able to select the class quite yet. It was only available on the Class Selector when someone was Rated "E" or higher, which made those Necromancer abilities unfortunately unattainable at the moment. When she progressed to the E-Rating, Fred would be able to Teach her quite a bit more.

All of that only took about ten minutes, because the whole Teaching process didn't require an elaborate setup and it wasn't necessary to be at full Power. When there wasn't much else that he could teach her, she changed her Class to Researcher-Researcher so that she would have an extra boost to her maximum Power and Power regeneration.

An extra-powerful rumble shook the entire dungeon just then, causing a few cracks to spiderweb across the ceiling of the room they were in. Fred looked up in alarm and checked the integrity of his dungeon; overall, it looked stable enough, but many more impacts like that probably wouldn't be good for their continued survival. He spared some attention

before he got started Teaching Regnark to see how the fight aboveground was going.

He discovered what had happened to damage his dungeon. Two separate Rock Giants had lost portions of their legs and came crashing down right on top of where the third room was located underground. Even though the Giants were down, they weren't completely incapacitated; they flailed around and destroyed dozens of Horrorlings in the process of their thrashing, though they were eventually consumed enough that they stopped moving and were swarmed over soon after.

The entire battle seemed a bit insane, actually. Mindless void creatures were battling against Earth Core-created defenders, and neither of them were seemingly making any headway toward defeating the other army. More and more Earth-based defenders arrived every minute – from multiple directions even – until Fred thought that every single Earth Core in that part of the world had sent something to kill him. In one respect, he was strangely a little flattered that the Cores thought he was enough of a threat to send so many after him; at the same time, he was awed at the sheer amount of Mana that they used to field such an army. He was a little worried that the stream of defenders would never end, and he'd have to run from them for the rest of his life.

But they had to stop sometime, right?

There was nothing he could do about it right now, so he turned back to Regnark and started to Teach him everything he could. Because the big man couldn't change his class – well, he technically *could*, but it would erase all of the Essence he had placed in his abilities – it made Teaching him anything past the basic starter classes nearly impossible. While not having the correct class played a big part in reducing his chances, a lot of the Power-based abilities or spells that he could Teach required a higher

Mind stat to be compatible – and Regnark only had 12 in Mind. To be fair, that was probably all he needed for his main class, but it didn't help with learning new Taught Abilities.

Regardless, there were still quite a few new abilities that both of his friends now had access to; from healing abilities to ranged Mage spells, they had a little something for every situation they might encounter. Granted, they weren't super-powerful, but even a simple healing spell or being able to detect traps might be just what they needed to survive in a dungeon – or elsewhere.

With nothing else to do, when Fred's power regenerated enough, he used his Repair Object ability to repair the wooden plank in front of the tunnel leading into the final room and with Regnark's help, was able to put it back in place. While it didn't seem to do much in the way of preventing the Horrorlings from entering, it still slowed them down – a little. There wasn't much else that Fred himself could do since Regnark was inside the dungeon, however, so he just concentrated on converting his Unconverted Mana into useable Elemental Mana and feeding it little by little to Eisa and Deecy; if they indeed were attacked again, they would be the ones that could utilize the Mana better than Fred could.

The UM he was gaining from Regnark was still quite a bit at least and didn't seem to be slacking off quite yet; he knew from experience that the longer a human was inside his dungeon, the less Mana he would acquire from them – though with as powerful as the big man was, he thought it might take a bit longer to hit the point where it slacked off a little. From what he understood, Dungeon Cores tended to make their dungeons lengthier not because they wanted to challenge the humans, but because the more powerful they were, the longer they could spend inside the dungeon

and be “profitable” in terms of giving as much Mana as possible while they were there.

For hours they waited for something to happen, Eisa and Regnark nervously watching the wooden barrier inside the tunnel. Deecy was back in her Pup form somehow napping as she regenerated her Mana and seemed to ignore everything around her. Fred watched the fight aboveground as countless void monsters and Earth defenders fought and were destroyed, trampling the ground underneath them until he couldn’t see a single blade of grass still standing upright in his territory.

Finally, after what seemed like weeks of waiting and experiencing the shocks of large Earthen forms stomping or collapsing on the ground, a change was finally starting to become apparent to his Territorial Sight. The massive wave of Horrorlings seemed to slack off until he couldn’t make any more out in his territory, though he counted at least four Greater Horrors still present. That was significant enough, he thought, but the flow of Earth Core defenders also started to slack off. In fact, after another group of Enormous Sand Crabs had been destroyed by the reaching tentacles of two Greater Horrors, there were only three Rock Giants in his territory.

Fred waited to see if any more reinforcements were coming – from either side of the battle – but there...was nothing. He watched as the three Giants smashed and stomped on their opponents, destroying an equal number of opponents before they themselves fell to the grasping multiple appendages of the fourth – and last – Greater Horror. The ground stopped shaking for the first time basically since the battle aboveground started and the others looked to Fred to see what was happening.

“There’s no more Earth defenders incoming and there’s only a Greater Horror left. Fortunately, it seems like it’s too big to get in here—” he started to tell them, just as the massive void creature arrived at his

dungeon entrance. Masses of tentacles struck down at the entrance; some were sliced apart when they contacted some sharp edges on the rocks blocking the tunnel, but the others wormed their way through, eroding the stone as they slipped inside. They weren't absorbed as quickly as they would be if they were full of Mana, but just like the Horrorlings inside of his dungeon, mere contact was enough to wear away at them.

Within minutes, the void-looking tentacles were slowly clearing the way and providing access to the entrance tunnel, though Fred didn't see the point. There was no way the 40-foot-tall Mana-less monster could fit inside...and then he looked at the plank of wood in the tunnel right next to him. He suddenly remembered how the Horrorlings had managed to squeeze themselves through the small gap at the top of the tunnel.

"I think we have a big problem," he told them, before standing up and rushing toward the wooden barrier, Regnark and Eisa hard on his heels.

Chapter 17

Eisa followed after Fred and Regnark, confused at why they were heading *toward* danger, but trusting that there was a good reason for it. She assisted as much as she could with removing the wooden plank blocking the tunnel and helped to carry it over to the spike pit, allowing them to cross over it. Fred attempted to explain what was happening while they worked, but it wasn't until she got to the first room that she understood.

Long tentacles were squeezing through and reaching inside the jumbled mass of rocks blocking the entrance tunnel, and it was plain to see that the chunks of stone were being eroded away in the process. If the grasping appendages managed to clear the way, it was likely that this Greater Horror that Fred had been telling them about could somehow squeeze itself inside and destroy them with impunity.

"We just need to hold it off for about 15 minutes; the sun is coming up soon and according to my mother's memories, the sunlight should destroy it," Fred told them as they stood there looking at the transparent-black tentacles working their way further inside.

It's only been a single night? Eisa felt as though they had been trapped down there for days, not just the relatively small amount of time the sun had been down.

Fortunately, the time that they had needed to wait after the battle against those "Horrorlings" – or whatever Fred had called them – had allowed them to recharge most of their Power and even a good portion of her and Deecy's Mana. Her capability to create Earth defenders, along with the new spells and abilities that Fred had taught her, meant that she was feeling even more equipped to defend their little dungeon than she had been

before. She didn't have as much Mana as she would've liked since she didn't absorb the ambient Mana as quickly as her Power regenerated – especially since she was a Researcher-Researcher, which sped it up even more – but Fred had been feeding her and Deecy some whenever he accumulated some himself.

In fact, before she did anything, Fred hit her with another infusion of Earth Mana. He said that he couldn't really use it while Regnark was in the dungeon, so it was better if she utilized it somehow. She checked her available Power and Mana so that she knew what she could use to help keep that...thing...outside.

Power: 4400/4400

Earth Mana: 215/710

She had enough to make a decent-leveled Crystal Scorpion or about 5 Stone Golems with her Earth Mana (leaving plenty in reserve for herself), but her available Power is what she was most excited about. Although she only had some basic spells and abilities that she could use, she had so much Power that she didn't even know what to do with herself. Even when she had been a Necro-healer, she hadn't had that much Power; taking two Researchers as her classes – while normally fairly stupid for anyone wanting to survive long in a dungeon – was frankly genius as it gave her an insane amount of Power to work with.

Eisa had already unlocked all of her “Taught Abilities” earlier, though she hadn't upgraded any of them. She quickly upgraded her Minor Shock spell using 40,000 of her Essence reserve because she knew from prior experience how effective it was at higher levels; while it cost more

Power to use and it only did a little more overall damage, its range and area of effect increased the higher the level.

Minor Shock 5 – 0/81000

When used, the Minor Shock spell will send a small orb of lightning toward a target, originating at the caster's location, and deals air-based damage. Minor Shock also has a large chance to jump to other targets, dealing a small amount of damage and very briefly stunning them.

Power cost of Minor Shock: 25

Air damage: 8

Jump chance: 60%

Jump area: 5 feet from the point of contact

Jump damage: 2

Jump stun duration: 1 second

Maximum range: 25 feet

There were other spells that did much more damage, but that wasn't necessarily what she was looking for. Based upon how relatively defenseless the Horrorlings were, she was banking on these tentacles being the same; while they were larger and more numerous, from Fred's descriptions of the battle aboveground, they were likely just as easy to destroy. At least, she hoped so.

Deecy came running in after them, and Eisa saw her immediately extend her aura out and establish a Fire Wall right in the middle of the rock pile where the tentacles were squeezing through. A screeching sound that was slightly muffled by the rock blockade emitted from the Greater Horror outside as the reaching tentacles caught in the flames were cut off and dissipated into thin air. A few rocks shifted to the side as a result of some

of the appendages swiftly pulling out of the tunnel, which inadvertently cleared a larger space in the blockage.

Eisa used her own Earth Mana to create her own defenders; instead of a Crystal Scorpion (which would've had difficulty attacking the tentacles squirming through the rocks) or even Stone Golems (which would've been fine, but they couldn't withstand many hits compared to their cost) she created 30 Level 1 Goblin Gnomes for 120 Earth Mana. Why? Because she was thinking along the same lines of quantity over quality that her Minor Shock spell would accomplish. While getting close to the Mana-absorbing appendages would be dangerous, a single knife stab by her Gnomes was likely to damage the tentacles just as well as being hit by a Stone Golem's fist or her Crystal Scorpion's stinger.

They immediately swarmed over the rocks and attacked the returning Horror's appendages poking through the rocks in different areas with their rusty iron knives, slicing through them as soon as they showed themselves. Of course, each of them could only attack two or three times before their knives were eaten away, but then they threw themselves at the exposed transparent-black tentacles with their fists and teeth. That didn't work out great for them, but they were able to destroy a little bit more before they were consumed completely.

Fred seemed to have the same idea she had; after creating bundles of arrows out of thin air for Regnark, he started to toss out very low-powered Magestrikes whenever he saw a tentacle appear – especially toward the top of the tunnel where her Goblin Gnomes couldn't reach. Just as she had thought and hoped, even the small amount of damage they inflicted was enough to destroy a small section of the tentacle.

Regnark, for his part, used the bundles of ammunition Fred supplied him with to great effect. Arrows flew through the air faster than she could

see, hitting the shadowy tentacles as soon as they peeked out and sending them back up a couple of feet.

Deecy intermittently sent another Fire Wall into the middle of the rockpile whenever the appendages started to gain ground to push them back. She couldn't do too many based on her available Fire Mana, however, and when she tried an Ice Spear Barricade, it ended up shifting some of the rocks a little too much.

When all of her Goblin Gnomes died, Eisa started tossing the large Minor Shock orbs toward the blocked tunnel and watched as it impacted and spread out from the point of contact five feet in every direction. It didn't always hit the nearest tentacles poking through, but it hit enough to eliminate quite a few.

"How much more of this thing is there?" Regnark shouted to be heard over the snap of the bowstring, the clang of arrows impacting stone, the electrical *zzzt* of Eisa's Minor Shock orbs, the crackling of Deecy's Fire Walls, and Fred's Magestrikes as they hissed from his hand to their targets.

"We're hurting it, that's for sure. I can see that a small portion of it seems to have disappeared—" Fred answered while still throwing out Magestrikes from left to right, before he was interrupted by the rumble of falling rocks.

Something that had likely been holding up the great pile of rocks blocking the entrance started to collapse, causing a landslide of crushed stone to slide down far and fast enough that it started to fill the large hole in the ground left behind by the Horrorlings' meal of his boiling pool of water. The collapse also had the added benefit of destroying all of the tentacles working their way through the pile of rocks, which cleared the tunnel completely for the first time since they arrived.

Unfortunately, it also cleared the way for the Greater Horror to enter.

Dozens of tentacles shot forward into the largely open entrance tunnel and latched onto the sides; Eisa and the others opened fire on them to destroy as many as they could, but two more arrived for each one they destroyed. Her Minor Shocks were wiping out whole swathes of tentacles, but it wasn't enough – there were just too many of them.

And then the tentacles started to *pull* the entire Greater Horror down the tunnel. Eisa watched in horror as a massive shadow-form started to squeeze into the tunnel from aboveground and oozed its way down like some sort of large insubstantial slime. She directed her Minor Shocks to the main body of the Greater Horror and watched as everyone else put everything else they had into it, but everything they did only seemed to delay the inevitable. Huge chunks were taken out of the monster with every hit, but there didn't seem to be an end to it.

Deecy was the first to run out of Mana, since she didn't have a lot to begin with – even with using the Water Mana-based Barricades instead of Fire Walls. She stepped back and let the others fight on, as Eisa could see she was dangerously low on both her Mana levels and wouldn't even be able to transform into her Giant form – even if that was a bad idea against this enemy.

Both Eisa and the Dire Wolf had learned their lessons when they saw what that smaller Horroring did to Fred.

She was still a bit ticked off at him for how he had handled that situation, especially when he threw himself in harm's way to “protect” her. Eisa was perfectly capable of handling herself and she showed it when she saved him from death at the...tentacles...of those horrifying monsters.

Fred had apologized, fortunately, but that didn't mean she forgot the way he yelled at her.

But that was neither here nor there – they had to stop this thing from getting inside, otherwise it was almost guaranteed that they wouldn't survive. She started to worry when she looked at her available Power and realized she only had three more Minor Shocks she could throw out before she was tapped out. She had a little bit of Earth Mana still, but she couldn't think of anything that might help for more than a few seconds at most.

"I'm out!" she called out as soon as she launched her last Minor Shock orb and watched it eliminate a large portion of the Greater Horror... but it didn't seem to make much difference. Eisa stepped back and joined Deecy, ready to run back to the other room if it looked like everything was lost.

Even the hundreds of arrows that were made for Regnark couldn't last forever, and the supply was soon exhausted. While Fred continued to frantically toss out Magestrikes (*he has to be getting low on Power by now, too*), the big fur-clad man grabbed the massive double-bladed longsword he had dropped when he had pulled out his bow and charged ahead. Fortunately, the Greater Horror wasn't actively attacking, as it seemed to be concentrating on just getting inside; as a result, Regnark was able to hack, slash, and generally cut apart in some sort of enraged frenzy the rightmost part of the monster as it started to emerge from the tunnel.

Eisa turned out to be right about Fred, as he threw out his last Magestrike and pulled out his longsword again. "Fred, don't you dare!" she shouted, catching his attention before he could rush in and attack.

"But—"

Before he could finish or even rush to help, three tentacles lashed out at Regnark in an abrupt attack. The big man managed to slice two of

them apart, but the third wrapped around his torso and jerked him off his feet into the air, causing him to drop his sword in the process. A silent scream was written all over his face as his eyes and mouth opened wide in painful surprise; frozen into immobility, all the blood seemed to drain from his skin, leaving him looking pale and sick.

“No!” Fred shouted, as he leapt forward in some sort of super jump with his longsword held high above his head. At the arc of his leap, he swung his sword at the tentacle holding Regnark and cut it in half, causing the part holding the big man to disappear and drop him to the ground with a big *thunk*. Fred landed and stood over Regnark’s barely moving body and sliced at anything that got near.

Eisa rushed forward to help, but before she could transform into her Earth Elemental Form and grab the massive warhammer she had brought with her, she watched a tentacle snake down from below and grab Fred by the ankle. Her love immediately froze in place and she watched as another shadowy appendage shot forward from behind him – and then it stopped an inch from his back.

Weak sunlight shone down from the entrance tunnel, piercing straight through the Greater Horror and causing it to dissolve within seconds. The tentacle that was holding Fred disappeared along with it and he fell to the ground, breathing heavy; Regnark struggled to his knees and Eisa saw that his face looked...haggard. He looked almost like he had been drinking hard for days and hadn’t gotten any sleep for weeks – along with starving himself at the same time. His face definitely looked thinner than it had before and though it was hard to tell underneath all of his furs, it was quite possible that he had lost some weight as well. But he was alive.

In fact, by some miracle, they *all* were.

Chapter 18

The one good thing that came from the Greater Horror attacking his dungeon's entrance tunnel – if anything – was that they didn't have to move much in order to exit. And exit they did, as soon as Fred and the others had recovered enough to start moving. There was no way they were going to spend another night out there on the Plains of Grass if they could help it, and the only way to ensure they weren't attacked by the Horrors again was to vacate the area as soon as possible.

Regnark looked horrible, but an application of Eisa's Earth's Renewal special ability cleared away most of the negative effects that had been caused in him from the touch of the Greater Horror's tentacle. It wasn't until Fred had a chance to talk to him after he had been healed up a little that he realized why the big man looked so...drained.

Because Regnark didn't necessarily have Mana inside of him to consume, the tentacle ate whatever else it could find. In his case – and what Fred had to assume would be the case of any other human snatched by one of its appendages – that meant the Essence that Regnark had stored up inside of him.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface	
Name: Regnark McDonald	Class: Berserker-Marksman
Rating: C-1 st	Essence Needed to Rate-up: 31245
Total Essence: 15885504	Available Essence to Distribute: 0
Body: 20 (2391134/2621440) Brawn: 19 (0/52428802621440) Mind: 12 (0/20480) Speed: 17 (0/1310720)	Vitality: 4000/4000 Stamina: 125/3800 Power: 38/60
Base Physical Attack: 50 Base Physical Defense: 48	Power Regen Rate: 1.2/min
Class Traits (Berserker)	

<i>Your Vitality is greatly increased by your Body stat</i>		
<i>Your Stamina is greatly increased by your Brawn stat</i>		
<i>Your Base Physical Attack and Defense are multiplied by 2.5 of your Body and Brawn stats</i>		
<i>You are able to convert Stamina to temporarily increase your Base Physical Attack, though you suffer a penalty to your Base Physical Defense</i>		
Class Traits (Marksman)		
<i>You have access to the Speed stat, which increases your movement speed and dodge ability</i>		
<i>Your ability to move stealthily is increased by your Speed stat</i>		
<i>Your long-range attacks are greatly increased by your Speed stat</i>		
Class Abilities (Berserker)		
Rage 8 – 0/2187000	Whirlwind 6 – 0/243000	Flattening Strike 6 – 0/243000
Relentless Assault 5 – 0/81000	Armor Cleave 7 – 0/729000	Intimidating Shout 5 – 0/81000
Overwhelming Blow 6 – 0/243000	Aggressive Aura 8 – 0/2187000	Unflinching Stance 7 – 0/729000
Class Abilities (Marksman)		
Pinpoint Accuracy 7 – 0/729000	Multi-arrow Shot 5 – 0/81000	Penetrating Arrow 6 – 0/243000
Quick-shot 5 – 0/81000	Raining Volley 5 – 0/81000	Dodge Boost 8 – 0/2187000
Taught Abilities		
Magestrike 1 – 0/1000	Barrier 1 – 0/1000	Magelight 1 – 0/1000
Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000	Froststrike 1 – 0/1000	Minor Shock 1 – 0/1000
Focused Irritation 1 – 0/1000	Heal Minor Wounds 1 – 0/1000	Minor Protection 1 – 0/1000
Remove Blindness 1 – 0/1000	Lightscythe 1 – 0/1000	Disarm Trap 1 – 0/1000
Concealment 1 – 0/1000		

All of his extra, undistributed Essence was gobbled up quickly, followed by his Body stat; when Fred looked at his Status sheet, he could see that he had dropped from 20 points in Body to 19, though there was still a lot invested in it toward 20 again. In addition – as if that wasn't bad enough, the loss of Essence had dropped him down from a C-3rd-Rated Adventurer to a C-1st-Rated one – Fred estimated that he had lost almost 400,000 total Essence. Even to Regnark that was a significant chunk; if it had been Fred or Eisa getting their Essence gobbled up, Eisa would've been completely drained in a quarter of the time the big man had been held and

Fred would've only lasted another couple of seconds himself before he didn't have any Essence left at all.

Fortunately, as bad as that was, it seemed like Regnark was going to make a full recovery – even if he had lost a massive amount of Essence in the process. As a side effect, too, there wasn't any Mana being given off by him and subsequently absorbed by the dungeon anymore, which was a bummer because Fred had lost a few hundred Unconverted Mana when he had been grabbed by a tentacle again. That was ok, though, because they were leaving.

As soon as they emerged from out of the dungeon to the relatively dim dawn's light, through the destroyed entrance tunnel, they could all see the devastation that had been wrought around Fred's territory – and beyond. Fred had already seen that the grass had been flattened in every direction, but now he could see there were large gouges in the ground all around his entrance where the dirt was thrown up in the air; quite obviously, it was due to so many large Earth-based defenders hitting the ground when they were taken down by the void creatures. Even though his territory extended out for hundreds of feet in every direction, the destruction hadn't been contained within that boundary; the battle had extended to the north, south, and to the west as the Earth defenders were likely pulled into a fight they originally didn't have a plan to engage.

But now there wasn't a single thing to see anywhere on the horizon, stretching all the way from the forest behind them – where Fred could see the obvious pathway of destroyed grass where the Earth defenders had trampled everything – to the Deadlands in the west. The night filled with intense titanic fighting was over and there wasn't a single corpse, body, or speck of Mana left on the field of battle.

“I have to say, I didn’t think we’d survive the night,” Regnark said as he gazed on the sheer destruction of the land around Fred’s dungeon. “But now that we have, I never want to cross these Plains ever again – and especially not at night.”

Fred thoroughly agreed with him; it was one thing to fight something that could harm him physically, it was a whole other thing to go up against something that could almost literally suck his life out from him. The whole existence of the void creatures was frightening, actually, and he didn’t even like thinking about what would’ve happened if one of those things got ahold of one of his friends again.

Unfortunately, Eisa didn’t have enough Earth Mana at the moment to create even a single Crystal Scorpion – let alone two – so they were relegated to walking the rest of the distance toward the Deadlands. With the dawn light brightening as they assembled outside the dungeon entrance, Fred reached into his dungeon and pulled out the remaining Mana holding the rooms intact and let his dungeon go unsupported. The damage around the area was so extensive that the room immediately collapsed and the ground above them dropped down, creating a fairly large hole in the ground.

The others looked shocked and stared at him in fright. “Could that have happened...” was all that Eisa was able to get out before Fred realized why they were looking like that.

“Oh, I’m sorry; I forgot to warn you I was removing my Mana from inside the dungeon. No, that wouldn’t have happened while we were in it... though with all that was happening up here, it was certainly a possibility that it wouldn’t hold,” he told them with a smile, his relief that everything had held showing on his face.

Regnark grunted. “That’s not very reassuring, but at least the roof *didn’t* fall right on top of us,” the big man said, before turning away.

“Actually, it was quite close to a full dungeon collapse. My best guess was that if there was another direct hit to the spot right above that last room, it would’ve caused a cascading failure that would’ve buried us alive.”

“That was my thought as well, but please don’t share that with anyone else,” Fred Communicated back to the Dire Wolf.

“Oh, was I not supposed to do that?”

Fred looked at Eisa and saw her face go even paler than it had been after his dungeon collapsed. “She’s just kidding...*anyway*, it’s about time we got out of here. Like Regnark said, there’s no way I’m spending another night out here.”

They were hot on his heels as he took off at a brisk walk, eliminating his territory at the same time. As his territory faded from his awareness, Fred looked toward the west...and to the Deadlands awaiting them.

* * *

Thankfully enough, there was nothing of note as they crossed through the remaining distance between his former temporary dungeon and the Deadlands. While it would’ve likely taken a couple of hours to get there by Scorpion-back, it took almost five by foot. That was okay with

everyone, though, as it gave them time to recoup their Power and Stamina along the way. While it wasn't nearly enough to fill up anyone's Mana, it still allowed for the ambient Mana around to give Eisa and Deecy enough to defend themselves with if something came up. In fact, a couple of hours into their walk, Eisa could've created some Crystal Scorpions, but Regnark advised that the more time they had to recover before they reached their destination, the better. While there was no threat on the Plains of Grass – at that time of day, at least – that didn't necessarily apply to the Deadlands.

Regnark told them a little about what to expect when they got there. “One of my charges used to be a bit of an historian and liked to regale me with useless facts and trivia about the places we visited. Most of it was useless drivel to me, but the history of these Deadlands actually stuck with me for some reason – probably because it has a major influence on the state of the land around there today.

“I won't bore you with the specifics – not that I could remember them, anyway – but suffice it to say that the small villages and towns inside the Deadlands are...unique...and can be as dangerous as the rest of the surrounding environments. Essentially, most of the people that founded the different towns centuries or more ago were exiled from another Kingdom to the far west for some reason or another, and they stopped in the Deadlands to settle down and survive. It is that unsavory heritage of theirs that exists still today and is what makes them just as dangerous – at least to your wallet – as all the land surrounding them.”

“How do they survive if everything around them is dead?” Eisa asked, echoing the thought inside Fred's mind.

“That's actually the unique part of the towns and the land directly around it. I'm assuming – based on a lot of the information I've learned over the last few days from Fred regarding Dungeon Cores – that the Dark

dungeons around here knew they needed humans nearby to grow and expand; as a result, they somehow limited the expansion of the Deadlands in certain areas, which are instead lush, vibrant environments with nutrient-rich soil and almost perfect growing conditions for planting crops. They aren't particularly large in terms of size, but the yield from those plantings is more than enough to support the towns that exist out here – and the Adventurers that use them as staging areas for Dark-dungeon diving.

“You'll see it when we get to one of these towns; the dividing line between the actual Deadlands and area around the towns is dramatic, to say the least.”

Fred thought about these “exiles” that Regnark had mentioned and wasn't quite sure what that meant. For his own Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross, they had essentially been exiled from the Craytion Kingdom, but that didn't necessarily make them dangerous.

“No, they're nothing like that,” Regnark told him when he asked about them. “They were exiled because they were the ‘unsavory’ elements of society: Thieves, murderers, or – even worse – thieving murderers. Even today, these towns still take in exiles because it takes a certain kind of person to live in a land where stepping outside the boundaries of the town brings to you a land of death.”

“Is it...safe? That doesn't sound like it would be prudent to even spend any time in a place full of thieves and murderers,” Eisa asked.

Regnark grunted out a laugh. “That's the thing – if you're an Adventurer, you're perfectly safe. Your money, though – not necessarily. While these towns might be full of people who would – anywhere else – slit your throat and take all your money without hesitation, they also know that their continued existence is dependent on the custom they get from Adventurers visiting. Though they can grow enough food to survive, there

is very little else that they make themselves, and getting any sort of merchant to brave the Deadlands to trade with them is expensive.

Therefore, they want Adventurers to come and spend their money – and come back again in the future; they won't kill you, but your wallet won't thank you because they charge an extravagant amount just to stay there."

"If it's so dangerous and expensive to even visit, why do people even go there? When I had been with my...previous group, we were able to safely – and relatively cheaply – stay near the Craytion Kingdom and delve through many of the dungeons near there, so I've never been to a Dark dungeon before," Eisa continued to ask, the confusion about the whole situation obvious in her voice.

"Normally, you'd be absolutely right. There are much safer and less expensive alternatives, and most people never set a foot inside of a Dark dungeon their whole lives. However, for those whose goals include becoming fabulously wealthy rather quickly – few do, of course, but there are some successful ones out there – then there is no other place in the world to make some 'easy' and quick gold.

"The Dark dungeons, you see, don't just drop copper, silver, and gold – they drop a wide variety of alchemical components. Not only that, but their environments themselves are full of exclusive plants that can be harvested, metals that can literally be scooped out of the walls, and – in some of the higher-Rated ones – there are unique weapons and armor that drop from some of the harder monsters that you can't find anywhere else."

"Why doesn't everyone just come here and delve through the dungeons, then?" Fred himself asked, beating Eisa to it.

"Because they are *dangerous*. As you could probably guess, there are undead roaming the rooms of the dungeons...but there are worse things..."

“Like what?” Eisa asked.

“Let’s hope you never have to find out,” Regnark told her as he shuddered at some memory.

They were silent as they finished their walk, each thinking about what they would encounter in the Deadlands – and whether they would find the Guild and townspeople alive.

Part III – The Deadlands

Chapter 19

The Deadlands were exactly what Regnark described, but Fred thought he had failed to mention how *alive* they seemed at the same time. Sure, the trees that faced the border between the land of the Dark Dungeon Cores and the Plains of Grass were dead, but they were also visibly growing. Large, bone-white, skeletal-looking dead trees reached to the sky without a single leaf or greenery on them; while they looked like they were ready to collapse from the brittle appearance of their dried-out trunks and branches, they were in fact quite sturdy – and were constantly being altered by new growth from the depths of the earth.

It was relatively slow in terms of speed, but it was still visible to anyone looking at them for more than a few minutes. First, the longest and topmost branches of the trees would periodically break off a portion of its length and drop them to the featureless dirt ground, where they would be dissolved and absorbed; at the same time, the trunk of the trees were very slowly – but visibly, when you stared at them for a minute or two – growing upwards. It was a unique cycle of dead growth that Fred had never seen nor heard of before.

The dead forest was thick and – despite the lack of leaves – it was difficult for Fred to see more than 100 feet ahead. That was fine, though, because Regnark seemed to know where he was going.

“The town locations are strangely regular in their distance from each other; it makes more sense to me now, however, after learning a little from you about how these Dungeon Cores operate. Since they essentially created the places inside the Deadlands where humans could live, they could dictate

where the towns would be allowed to exist,” Regnark told him after Fred had asked about how he seemed confident in his ability to find a town.

Apparently, if you walked exactly five miles from the border with the Plains of Grass, you could stop and turn either due north or south – where you would eventually run into one of the locations set up for human habitations. The Deadlands were quite vast, as well, so depending on where you entered, you might or might not encounter the same town on subsequent visits.

Fortunately, there didn’t need to be any type of measurement of the distance they walked, because Fred could pinpoint exactly where they needed to go because of his Territorial Sight. When he focused on it, he could sense the Dark Territories all around him – as well as their respective dungeons – pressed up against each other without even the tiniest gap; when he ventured out further with his Sight, he could see a large, oval-shaped break in the territories at some distance to the northwest, as well as one a bit further to the southwest. He had no desire to walk farther than necessary, so he pointed in the direction of the one closest to their position.

Honestly, Fred wasn’t sure what they would do when they got there. It would be extremely lucky if the first one they came to would possess any information about those they were following, because it all depended on a few factors. One, if they had entered the Deadlands nearby instead of far to the north or south; two, whether these “unscrupulous thieves and murderers” would even give them the information they sought; and three, whether or not – as much as he wanted to believe otherwise – his Guild and the Gatecross townspeople were even still alive.

There were countless dangers that Fred and his friends had encountered or narrowly avoided on their journey so far, and it was quite possible that they had been stuck out on the Plains of Grass at night – and

there wouldn't likely be anything left of them by that point. Granted, based upon what Regnark had said, the dangers of the Plains were a bit more common knowledge than some other things Fred didn't know about previously; added to that, it was unlikely that the Earth Cores had been organized enough to assault the large group when they initially left, because Deecy had mentioned that it was only a day or two after they had left the ruins of Gatecross that the first elements of the Earth Cores' retribution arrived.

So, they had a lot going for them, but there were still plenty of other dangers – like the undead roaming the Deadlands...kind of like the giant Undead Bear they encountered shortly after crossing over into Dark territory.

Undead Bear (Level 8)

Vitality: 345, Undead Regeneration

Attack: 55, Jagged Claw Swipe, Putrid Bite

Defense: 70, (+95% Dark defense, -70% Light defense, -20% Fire defense)

The massive 12-foot-long form of the bear hadn't necessarily been hiding, but it was so still that they hadn't even noticed it before it moved out from behind a tree and attacked. Fortunately, Regnark was faster; he pulled out his massive two-handed sword from the back-sheath that Fred had Conjured for him and swung it out in a single smooth motion, slicing a great furrow in the side of the Bear's face.

There was no blood or even any indication that the undead creature felt it, however, but that was to be expected with an undead. Fred backed up along with Eisa and Deecy at the Bear's appearance and he looked

around, making sure that the undead monster was the only one around. *I've got to pay more attention; I'm so used to relying on my Territorial Sight to warn me of danger that I forgot that I can use my eyes.* He didn't feel too bad, though, because no one else had noticed it – not even his Dire Wolf companion.

“It's not my fault; I can usually detect things from a far distance away through my form's excellent sense of smell, but I can't with these. Sure, they smell like rotting flesh, but so does everything else in this place.”

Only now – strangely, in the middle of a fight – did he notice that Deecy seemed to be pawing at her nose every once in a while, as if she was trying to remove something that had gotten inside. While he could smell the dead and rotting environment as well, it had to be exponentially worse for the Dire Wolf.

“Save your, uh—” Regnark started to say as he deftly dodged a powerful claw swipe from the Undead Bear— “Mana, or whatever it is. Just use your low-cost Fire spells or if you have anything with Light, that would be better.” He slashed again with his sword, removing a large chunk of the Bear's decomposing shoulder in the process. When Fred looked at the furrow on the side of its face from Regnark's initial attack, he could see that it was already starting to close up and “heal” itself.

Following his advice, since it appeared as though the big man could handle himself quite well going toe-to-toe with the massive bear – which looked a little funny, as Regnark was *almost* the same size and covered in bear fur as well – Fred and Eisa looked at each other and said at the same time, “Lightscythe.”.

Lightscythe 1 – 0/1000

When activated, the Lightscythe spell will send an arc of bright light towards a target, originating at the caster's location, and it deals light-based damage upon contact. Lightscythe also has a chance to blind a target temporarily.

Power cost of Lightscythe: 15

Light damage: 5

Blind chance: 15%

Blind duration: 3 seconds

Maximum range: 20 feet

Diverting around the battling pair to attack from two different sides, Fred and Eisa started launching Lightscythes safely from behind a tree 15 feet away – and the result was quite dramatic. While they didn't do a lot of initial damage, wherever the sharp arcs of light impacted the Undead Bear, the flesh was gouged deeply – and didn't repair itself. Fred threw a Flamestrike in there as well and noticed that it had the same result of preventing regeneration but didn't do nearly the same damage as the light-based spell.

Their attacks seemed to tick off the massive bear and it turned toward Eisa, before Regnark activated his new Focused Irritation ability and brought its attention back onto him. The big man's speed in avoiding attacks – especially when he was relatively rested and not almost out of Stamina – was completely at odds with his bulk, and he deftly avoided the clumsy-looking strikes of the Undead Bear. While he couldn't do more than slice off chunks of its flesh here and there – which were eventually growing back – he was more than capable of holding its attention.

That wasn't quite true, of course, because Fred had seen some of the abilities Regnark possessed from his Berserker class – but he wasn't using any of them for some reason. *I'll have to ask after this is over.*

The fight was over sooner than he thought it would be, as less than 30 seconds later – and an expenditure of only about 200 Power from both Fred and Eisa – the Undead Bear fell at Regnark's feet, without ever actually landing a blow. A decent-sized blob of Dark Mana seemed to seep out the top of its “re-dead” corpse and pool on top of it – and then the body itself started to melt into the ground, similar to the pieces of branches from the nearby trees that fell off and were absorbed.

Regnark re-sheathed his sword on his back after making sure there weren't any pieces of rotting flesh stuck to it, before turning to Fred and the others. “Sorry, I forgot to mention that the Deadlands are filled with these types of things. That was why we needed to make sure we had enough Power to fight them off before we got here. The bodies don't stay around long before they are...um...hmm...I guess the best word would be ‘recycled’. Just as the trees are constantly ‘growing’, these undead tend to spring up everywhere with no discernable pattern; we might walk for an hour without seeing one, but then we might come across a few dozen grouped up together. This is the only place I've heard of that does anything like this, which is another reason this place is so dangerous.

“We need to be at our strongest as we move through, so if we come across these individual undead monsters, only use what you have to – because right around the corner could be something worse or more numerous,” Regnark warned them.

That explains why he hadn't really been using any of his abilities, Fred reasoned. As for Fred, the Power that he had used would regenerate in a couple of minutes, and he knew that Eisa was the same way; Stamina took

a little longer to regenerate in comparison, he knew, so it made sense not to waste resources when it wasn't needed. Fred was just glad they had Regnark around who could distract the undead while they finished it off.

The corpse of the Undead Bear finally disappeared into the ground completely and Fred walked over to the glob of Dark Mana and reached out to absorb it. Just as soon as it was sucked up into his hand and turned into Unconverted Mana, a prompt flashed across his vision.

Absorption Complete!

You have absorbed (85) **Unknown Element** Mana from Undead Bear (Wild)!

Unable to absorb Unknown Element Mana...switching it to Unconverted Mana

You have absorbed knowledge of (1) Blueprint!

Blueprint absorbed: Undead Bear (Level 1 Base Cost: 50 Dark Mana)

Unknown Element type...please obtain correct element Core to place this blueprint in your dungeon.

What? Fred was confused, as this had never happened before. "Deecy, what's going on?" he asked the Dire Wolf using his Mana Communication skill. He then explained exactly what had occurred.

"Do you remember me telling you that you could acquire blueprints for creatures that weren't dungeon defenders? You never had a chance to do it before, since you were fighting Nature and then Earth defenders, but since this creature isn't connected to a specific dungeon, you acquired the blueprint for it. Of course, you can't actually create it unless you have a Dark Core..."

“Deecy, you know what that would mean, right? I’d have to end up killing another Core, and that is something I think I’d like to avoid right now,” Fred Communicated back. The prospect was intriguing, though; the major problem with acquiring access to the Dark element – other than the fact that it would mean the death of another Core – would be the fact that he would end up making even more enemies out of another elemental faction. It was bad enough that the Earth faction – and the Nature faction, once they figured out what to do after the loss of their local army – was out to exact retribution on him and his friends; the last thing he needed was to add something to that ever-growing list of enemies.

His own goal of revenge was looking more and more like an unobtainable dream; he was having enough trouble just barely surviving against some of the lower-Rated dungeons nearby that he couldn’t imagine what it would be like to go up against the “Supreme Council” of powerful Cores. *And what exactly do I want to achieve out of my revenge? Do I want every single member of this lofty Supreme Council to be destroyed?* He froze, bent over in the act of absorbing the Dark Mana, as he finally considered what he wanted.

I...don’t know. I’m not sure – even if I was able to destroy them all – if that would even change anything. My parents would still be dead, I’d probably be hunted for the rest of my life, humans the world over would likely suffer (as they already have) from my actions, and another “Council” would just move in to take the place of the ones I destroyed. Where would it end? Honestly, he didn’t know – but it was something he wasn’t too concerned with at the moment. Survival and finding the ones that he felt responsible for came first.

As he straightened up from where he had been bending down, he saw the looks of concern on the others' faces. Fred put aside all thoughts of revenge and brought himself back into the moment. "Sorry, I just acquired something that was unexpected," he told them, with what he hoped was a genuine smile on his face. "I'm fine, really."

"What did you...acquire?" Regnark asked, curious.

"Oh, just a blueprint to use in my dungeon for that Undead Bear we just killed. Though, I don't have the correct Core or access to Dark Mana, so it's fairly useless right now."

The big man asked what he thought was the obvious question.

"Well then, how do you get the correct...Core?"

"I can only get one if I destroy a Dark Core, which would be a terrible idea – it's what inadvertently caused this whole issue with the Earth Cores if you remember—"

"Actually, I have a thought about that—"

Whatever the Dire Wolf was going to say was interrupted as what seemed to be three walking human corpses appeared as if from nowhere 20 feet away and started to quickly run toward them. They were loudly groaning as they ran fairly uncoordinated, but they closed the distance quickly – though Regnark was faster. He whipped out his sword again and slashed it horizontally, managing to catch the first Decaying Zombie across the chest and right arm, taking it off at the elbow. That didn't seem to perturb the Zombie, but missing half of its ribcage from the same blow seemed to give it a little pause.

Fred checked the information on the Decaying Zombies and saw that they were – individually, at least – a lot weaker than the Undead Bear

they had just defeated.

Decaying Zombie (Level 4)

Vitality: 90, Undead Regeneration

Attack: 30, Chokehold, Rancid Bite

Defense: 35, (+95% Dark defense, -70% Light defense, -20% Fire defense)

Despite their lower stats, they were actually quite a bit faster than the Bear, though their attempts at harming Regnark when they got ahold of him were largely ineffective. Fred and Eisa joined in and quickly destroyed them using their Lightscythe spell; his first instinctual use of Flamestrike actually lit one on fire – which seemed beneficial at the time – but ended up slightly harming the big man on their side when it bit his arm with its flaming face.

There was no real danger from them, however – but Fred thought that the presence of the Zombies so soon after being attacked by the Undead Bear was setting a likely precedent for the rest of their journey through the Deadlands. As the walking human corpses started to melt into the ground, he absorbed the Dark Mana from them and received another prompt telling him that he had received another blueprint. *At least we won't be walking away empty-handed.*

I just wish that these things gave off Essence, too.

Chapter 20

The journey to the first cleared space where there wasn't a Dark territory – which indeed turned out to be a small town – took twice or even three times as long as it should've. Every hundred feet or so that they traveled, the dead forest seemed to spit out another undead something or other. At first, Fred thought it was relatively normal for the area because of what Regnark had warned them of, but the big man said the sheer number of undead creatures attacking them was beyond ridiculous.

“The only time I've been here it wasn't like this,” Regnark said, after they were stopped for the 12th time in the first half-hour and forced to fight another small group of Decaying Zombies. “I remember only having to fight this many undead over the *entire* trip to town, not in the first half mile.”

Fred could only think it had something to do with his status as a Dungeon Core, or even Eisa's and Deecy's statuses as Shards. He didn't know exactly why that would make a difference, but after the next half hour it seemed like the most plausible explanation. By the time they reached the town, even Eisa was grumbling about never wanting to see another undead again in her life – and that was coming from a former Necromancer!

Fortunately, everything they fought was a “basic” animal or human that had been turned undead. Although at times it seemed as though there were swarms of difficult walking dead roaming through the forest, in reality, they hadn't encountered anything in a group larger than five – and it had only been more of the Decaying Zombies. Added to that, the Undead Bear that they had been attacked by at the beginning was the most powerful

creature that they had faced, though there were some that were close in terms of difficulty.

By the end of their five-hour trek, they were exhausted from the constant battling against the undead – and they hadn't slept the night before, either. Fred was the only one that really benefitted from the fights, as he had accumulated just over 5,000 Unconverted Mana and quite a few blueprints for his dungeon – which he couldn't use, of course.

In addition to the **Undead Bear** and **Decaying Zombie** blueprints he had acquired, he also picked up:

Shrunken Monkey

Desiccated Lynx

Rotting Wolf

Putrid Giant Spider

Decomposing Boar

Shriveled Deer

Basically, anything that he would normally find in a forest – but dead...or undead, as it were. There was another blueprint that he acquired, though he wasn't sure how useful it would be even if he eventually did have access to it: **Skeletal Squirrel**. If it hadn't been out to kill them all, he would've agreed with Eisa that it was actually quite adorable; despite her reluctance to kill something relatively cute (it was just a bunch of small reanimated bones, without any of the meat left on it), she killed it with a single Lightscythe spell to its face.

Regardless, it was productive as far as Mana and unusable blueprints for Fred – but the others were sick of the constant fighting. Even Deecy had gotten involved in a couple of fights by activating her Giant

form for a while, though with one of her main attacks involving using her jaws to bite and rend her enemies, after the first time she got a mouth full of rotting flesh, she stuck to the occasional Fire Wall defense when there were multiple enemies attacking at the same time.

Therefore, it was a relief when they came upon the figurative oasis in the middle of the Deadlands. Like Regnark had mentioned earlier in the day, the dividing line between the Deadlands and the “townlands” was so plain to see that it couldn’t be anything other than deliberate. It was almost like someone took a knife and carved a large patch of land out from the forest of dead trees around them and replaced it with a lush, green paradise of health – and life.

Looking through his Territorial Sight, he could see that the Dark territories all around the townlands were pressed up right against it...and then stopped abruptly, as if they were pressed up against an invisible wall. He couldn’t see anything inside the green living land to show why it looked like that, but it was clearly *something* that held back the dead area surrounding it.

“Finally! That was one of the worst experiences of my life – and I was dead just a few days ago!” Eisa complained as the fatigue, stench of rotting bodies, and the tension of being ready for another attack at any time took their toll on her attitude.

“At least you didn’t have my heightened sense of smell that felt like I was tasting it every time I breathed in, or actually get some of the nasty putrid flesh in your mouth.”

Eisa cocked her head to the side and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. That would suck,” she said, smiling at the Dire Wolf with ill-

contained mirth.

Regnark – now marginally used to the others having one-sided conversations with Deecy – stepped forward over the invisible barrier between the dead and the living lands and called back behind him. “Let’s get to the town and settled in before we do anything else. We’ll check to see if your friends are here; if they’re not, we’ll check out some of the other towns to see if we can track them down – after a bath and a good night’s rest, of course. I don’t know about you, but I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

Fred followed after the others, but just before he was about to cross the threshold into the townlands, he heard a noise behind him and saw two Decaying Zombies rushing for him. He turned toward them and backed up, stepping over into the green grass of the townlands and readied his Lightscythe spell...but the Zombies immediately stopped and wandered off in the other direction – almost as if they couldn’t detect him anymore.

“Whatever barrier keeps out the Deadlands also protects the inhabitants from any attacks by these undead. In fact, you’ll see that there aren’t even any walls around the town,” Regnark remarked as he heard and saw the tail end of the commotion with Fred and the now-leaving Zombies.

Indeed, when Fred looked at the not-so-distant town, he didn’t see any walls surrounding it, unlike Gatecross. If it weren’t for the fact that the buildings were larger and more numerous, the town almost looked like the small village of Northend, which didn’t have walls, either. *Though, I don’t believe they had walls in Northend because it was too much work to build them and they were barely surviving up there as it was.*

In contrast, this town appeared to be thriving. It was still a bit too far away to make out many details, but Fred could see figures walking the streets in both hurried and unhurried manners, and the buildings all looked

in great repair from where they were. For a place reputed to be full of thieves and murderers (or at least founded by them), it had a remarkably “normal”-looking atmosphere – *if there is anything **normal** in this world*, thought Fred.

As he peered back at the invisible barrier separating the two lands, he had another thought. *I wonder if this barrier is what keeps those void monsters out that invade the Plains of Grass every night?* It probably had to, because otherwise these towns wouldn’t exist for more than a day – *but how does it work?* He couldn’t detect anything with his Mana or Territorial Sight, which perplexed him.

Shrugging it off, he followed after the others and quickly caught up to them. As he walked next to Regnark, Fred voiced a thought that had been on his mind. “Now that we’re safe in relative civilization, what are your plans?”

“What do you mean?” the big man asked, plainly confused.

Fred wasn’t sure exactly how to explain it. “Well...what I’m trying to ask is...what are you still doing here? As much as I appreciate you coming with us and I know we wouldn’t have survived if it weren’t for your help, you don’t have any obligation to stay. In fact, it will likely still be as dangerous as it’s been – or even more so. Eisa, Deecy, and I are in this together, along with my Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross, but you have no responsibility to any of us. You could walk away right now, and I doubt anything would come after you,” he finished lamely.

Regnark kept silent for almost a minute before he responded. “Remember when I told you about my brother, and then how I used to mentor and guide young Adventurers in the effort to save them from themselves? Well, I really enjoyed doing that – but after a while I couldn’t stand seeing them fall victim to the dangers of their own incompetence.

Given that, I have trouble walking away from someone needing help...and you definitely need help, my friend.”

Fred chuckled at that. “Are you saying I’m incompetent?”

“No, not at all. If you remember, I told you I used to help those that were in way over their heads; I think this qualifies, as you’re practically drowning here.”

He couldn’t help but agree. “I – no, we – would love any help you can spare. Like I said, we couldn’t have made it here without you. Thank you for being willing to help us out.”

“Not a problem; besides, it’s not like I have a home to go back to. In fact, if we end up getting a little revenge for the destruction of Northend – and Gatecross, as well – then I’d say that this whole trip was worth it,” Regnark said.

“Well, I can’t guarantee revenge quite yet – I’m still trying to work that out myself,” Fred admitted. “But I’ll do my best to ensure we all stay alive, at least.”

“Yes, that would certainly be a plus,” the big man said, clapping Fred on the back and making him stumble a little.

Now, if we could only find the rest of my people, I’ll try to do the same for them.

* * *

“A gold piece for a single night?! That’s straight-up robbery, even for *this* place,” Regnark told the man behind the counter at the extremely full inn, who only smiled at him.

“It’s all about supply and demand, my friend. You see, we’re almost at maximum capacity here, so the *supply* of rooms is extremely limited, so I

can *demand* whatever price I want for them,” the tiny man with the short, slicked-back hair shot right back at Fred’s big friend. Despite the size difference, the innkeeper didn’t seem to be scared of Regnark at all, and even kept the smile on his face as he repeated his price. The two large men – both mid-B-Rated Enforcers (whatever that was) – watching them intently from the corner of the room probably had something to do with it.

“Again, that’ll be a gold piece per night...per person. And it’ll be an *additional* gold piece for your pet there; we run a classy establishment here, and we technically don’t allow animals inside...but I like you guys, so I’ll make an exception if you...ahem...make it worth my while,” the innkeeper explained, sticking his nose up at Deecy like she was worse than the undead they had fought to get there.

“The vileness of this person is almost stinking my nose up worse than the Deadlands. I can go sleep outside – that’s no problem.”

“Nonsense, the money doesn’t really matter. I think we all need some sort of secure roof over our heads tonight, and you know that I can definitely ‘afford’ it,” Fred silently Communicated to the Dire Wolf.

Fred put his hand on Regnark’s arm to get his attention, which likely prevented the big man from exploding in anger at the innkeeper. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

He squeezed himself up next to Regnark and pushed him a little to the side so that he could see the relatively small innkeeper still smiling at them – and apparently enjoying watching the bigger man about to throw a rage-filled fit at the exorbitant price of their rooms. The amount of which, in comparison, could’ve rented a nice room for almost a year in Gatecross.

“Does the price include meals and somewhere that we can wash up?” Fred asked the innkeeper.

The small, weasel-looking man switched his smile to Fred without hesitation, taking in his young appearance and likely making a judgement about him in less than a second. It was actually quite impressive how calm, cool, and collected he appeared in the face of an angry fur-covered hulk of a human that was staring daggers at him. “Yes...I think I can throw those in for you. Of course, we take payment up front; if you don’t have enough, there are plenty of dungeons around here that you can brave for some loot and we have a very generous item exchange rate—”

Fred reached behind his back and used his Conjure Object ability to create a small cloth bag filled with 4 gold pieces inside of it; he brought it forth and clomped it down on the counter, cutting off the innkeeper’s explanation of how they could earn enough money to pay for the room. He looked slightly startled at first, but almost instantly his smile was back as he looked inside the bag and quickly did a count of the contents inside.

“Looks good, I’ll go get your key,” the innkeeper said, before turning around and dumping the payment inside a slot on the wall behind the counter. Fred could hear the faint sound of the relatively heavy bag sliding down a chute of some sort, before cutting off with a faint jingle as it landed somewhere likely below the main common room. “Here you go,” he said as he opened up a small cabinet adjacent to the counter and pulled a key off of a hook. Fred wasn’t positive – since the doors of the cabinet blocked most of his view – but he thought that all of the other key hooks were empty.

I guess he was being truthful about the supply of rooms available.

“Dinner is being served in the common room in about an hour, and there is a bath house out back where you can bathe and even wash those...

clothes,” the innkeeper sneered at the horrid state of their clothing, which – to be fair – was not in the best of conditions. Even the bear furs that Regnark had draped over him were a bit torn-up and stunk almost as bad as the Deadlands.

Fred’s big friend snatched the key out of the innkeeper’s hand with a snarl and turned towards the back stairs, where they would find their room. Eisa and Deecy followed, but Fred stuck around for another moment. “Is there a place...that we might be able to find out some...information?” he hesitatingly asked. He didn’t exactly want to come out and say he was looking for a large group of people with marks over their heads, because he wasn’t sure how that would come across.

“Absolutely. There is a small house that you’ll find at the edge of town with a faded red roof up top; if you go there, you’ll be able to find out whatever you need. It’ll cost you though – but if you mention that I sent you, it *might* be a little cheaper,” the innkeeper answered, before muttering something that sounded like, “and I’ll get a little kickback, too.”

Fred thanked him and joined his friends as they headed upstairs to their room. The inn they were staying at was actually quite large and they had to walk down a long hallway to arrive at their room near the end of the hallway, dodging a few Adventurers who were looking to be leaving in a hurry down the hall. In fact, it was actually larger than the DAS building in Gatecross; thinking of that, he asked Regnark about the Syndicate as soon as they were safely inside their room.

“There are no Syndicate outposts out here – the towns won’t allow them, as the towns want to have full control of every expenditure of the Adventurers here. Since they are technically not part of any Kingdom, it is hard for the DAS to control anything here, but it’s expected that people will pay their fair portion of the loot fee for whatever they acquire here, but it’s

rarely enforced – because it’s extremely hard to prove how much is acquired in these non-DAS-sanctioned Dark dungeons.

“There are no jobs to run for any of the dungeons, either, since there are no job boards around; this place is considered to be a bit of a lawless wild frontier, which is another reason it’s so dangerous. There’s nothing watching over the operations here, so just about anything goes – so we need to watch ourselves every second we’re in town. Normally, I’d say it’s safer out in the Deadlands, but with the crazy amount of undead that attacked us on the way here, I’m not so sure anymore.”

That certainly wasn’t encouraging, but he guessed it didn’t matter because they weren’t planning on staying there long. Since he hadn’t seen a single person with a glowing mark above their heads when they were walking through town looking for the inn, he assumed that they either hadn’t been there at all or had left some time ago.

I’m sure we’ll be out of here before anything bad happens...right?

Chapter 21

After washing up in the surprisingly nice bath house in the back – which was separated into different areas for the two sexes – and removing most of the stink out of their clothes, they enjoyed another surprisingly good meal in the inn’s common room. Despite it being extraordinarily busy – they barely found a seat together along the long benches set up in long rows – they were able to get their food (and as much as they wanted, as well) rather quickly. After surviving on Fred’s Conjured supplies for the last few days, the simple stew and bread they were served was both hearty, filling, and – last, but not least – *tasty*. Regnark ended up eating five entire bowls and two whole loaves of bread before he was satisfied, but the staff serving everyone didn’t seem to care.

Which was probably because there were so many Adventurers packed into the room that were eating just as much or more than him. Many of them were C-Rated or slightly higher, with just a few in the D-Rated range; Fred didn’t see anyone higher than B-8th-Rated, however. There were dozens of different classes he had never heard of and quite a few that he had, and he had to stop himself after a minute after he realized he kept staring at people to see their Interfaces. He didn’t need to cause any trouble with the Adventurers in there; the last time he and Eisa had met someone not from their Guild or part of the town of Gatecross, they had chopped off Fred’s head and put visibly glowing marks above everyone else’s head. If anything positive had come from Eisa’s death, it was that she no longer had that mark.

Fred overheard Regnark asking questions of one of their tablemates, which caused him to pay more attention to hear the response over the loud

hubbub of so many bodies pressed so close together. “You haven’t heard? Why are you here then—never mind, I guess the word hasn’t gotten out yet *everywhere*,” the shorter, stockier man to Regnark’s right started to tell him. “Someone reportedly found Shadow Glass in one of the nearby dungeons! That stuff is so rare and expensive that these towns are almost all filled to capacity right now – all because no one knows which dungeon it came from. They know that it did come from a dungeon instead of being created through a prohibitively expensive alchemical process, though, so everyone is searching and hoping to hit the jackpot.”

So that’s why there are so many people here.

Regardless of the reason behind the Adventurers all being there, it didn’t really matter to Fred. He wasn’t out to look for rare and expensive loot – he was there to find his Guild and the Gatecross townspeople and to...actually, he wasn’t really sure. He hadn’t thought that far; honestly, his only objective had been to find them and to get them somewhere safe from the retribution of the Nature Cores (and now the Earth Cores added to that) – wherever that might be. Speaking of that, it was about time to see if they could discreetly find out any information that would lead to them.

Unfortunately, Regnark was a little bit less than discreet.

“Huh, we may have to look into that once we’re done with our current job. Have you happened to see a large group of people with big glowing X’s above their heads?” the big man asked innocently, after hearing the description Fred had given him about the ones they were looking for.

The table around him went quiet as everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at Regnark...before breaking into raucous laughter. “What do you want with those fools?” the man to his right – a C-8th-Rated Elemental Ranger (who seemed to specialize in charging his arrows with

different elements when fired, which Fred thought could be extremely useful) – choked out, the mirth more than obvious in his voice. “They were here more than two weeks ago looking for handouts from the people here – good luck with that, am I right?” he said as he looked around at the other Adventurers nearby, who laughed at his statement.

This could be easier to get information than I thought. From what he heard, they had only missed them by about two weeks, which meant that they had at least been there. The only problem with Regnark’s approach, however, was that almost everyone in the common room was looking at them – including the people working there.

“Why are you looking for them, anyway?” the same Elemental Ranger named Terrill (which Fred discovered when he looked at his Interface in more detail) asked Regnark.

“They’re friends of mine, actually. Do you know which way they went?”

More laughter greeted his question, and now Fred was starting to get a little angry. *Why are they laughing at my people? What happened to them?*

His question was answered rather quickly, fortunately. “Friends, huh? Well, I don’t know how good of friends they were, but they likely didn’t survive the trip to Allroads after they were kicked out. None of the other towns here would let them on their land because the word had already spread about their status to the others out here. Continuing to the southwest was their only choice, since they seemed fairly determined not to go back over the Plains of Grass to the east.”

They were kicked out? Who would do that? Though, when Fred thought about it for a moment, he realized that the entire Craytion Kingdom had done that, in a sense.

“Why were they kicked out? Was it because of their marks?”

Regnark continued his questions, as it seemed that he was getting some valuable information. While that was true, Fred was getting more and more angry at the treatment his people suffered – and the next response from Terrill the Elemental Ranger just added fuel to the fire.

“Of course not! This place thrives on people marked, exiled, or those escaping judgement back in their old Kingdoms. No, it wasn’t for anything as stupid as that; it was because they didn’t have the one thing these people respect over anything else: gold. Or, at least they didn’t after the first night, when they woke up in the morning after camping out in the field and found that all of the PIBs were mysteriously missing. They should’ve known better than to fall asleep without at least one eye open around here – they’ll steal the clothes right off your back if you aren’t paying attention!” Terrill guffawed at his poor excuse of a joke, as the rest of the common room joined in the laughter.

They stole all of their money and then kicked them out when they couldn’t pay? How could they—I’ll kill every single one of them, including all these lousy Adventurers—

“Whoa, hold on there, Fred. It’s not worth getting all worked up over; we’ll leave this place as soon as we can and find them. There’s no way we can take all of these humans on at the same time, and if you do anything, you’ll just get us all killed. While you might survive due to your extraordinary healing ability granted by your existence as a dungeon core, we might not.”

Fred wasn’t sure what he was feeling, but it was unlike anything he had experienced before. Red-hot fury ran through his system and he just

wanted to kill all the filthy livestock in the room; he felt himself reaching out to establish a territory and—

Eisa's hand on his leg shocked him out of his fit of rage and he slowly calmed down, the conversation around him returning to normalcy as Eisa leaned over and spoke into his ear to be heard over everyone else.

“Are you okay?”

It took him a second to answer, as he tried to understand the feelings that she had snapped him out of. “Y-Yes...I think so...” he said, feeling the anger melting away at her touch for some reason. He breathed in a heavy breath to try to clear out the rest of his inflamed emotions from his mind and body. It was almost like he had been reacting to something instinctual – and he didn't like it.

“Let's go to our room, I think we all need a good night's sleep before we head out in the morning for this 'Allroads' place that the man mentioned,” Eisa said, getting up and signaling to Regnark that they needed to leave. Originally, they were planning on visiting the red-roofed place for information after dinner, but it didn't seem like it was needed anymore.

Fred followed them, feeling inordinately drained from his experience...which was why he missed the looks the staff was giving him and his friends on the way past.

Chapter 22

“—up. Fred! Wake up!”

Fred and the others had essentially collapsed on the two beds when they got back to their room – one for the large figure of Regnark and the other for him, Eisa, and Deecy – fully clothed, without even bothering to pull back the sheets. Within minutes, their exhaustion from the last couple of days finally caught up with them and they were out, despite the fact that the sun hadn’t even set yet for the day.

In fact, the only thing that they did – including not even removing their shoes – was ensure that they had locked and barred the door (an unusual but apparently necessary feature) to their surprisingly large and roomy accommodations before they fell asleep. They may have been dead tired, but they would be dead stupid not to have learned from the mistake of the very people they were looking for. The last thing any of them wanted was to wake up the next morning with all of their possessions gone – or even with their throats slit while they slept. Normally he didn’t care overly much about possessions because he could make more if he needed it, but Eisa had the Class Selector in her PIB – which would be relatively impossible for him to replicate on his own.

“*Wha—what’s going on, Deecy?*” his tired mind managed to Communicate to the Dire Wolf. He was so tired he could barely open his eyes, but when he did, he saw a Giant Dire Wolf face staring down at him. *Um...why is she all big right now?*

“Someone’s trying to break in. Several someones, actually – I can smell more than one out there, but they all stink so I’m not sure how many of them there really are.”

Fred opened up his eyes wider at that and tried to sit up, but there was something lying across his chest. He looked down and saw Eisa draped over him, drooling ever so slightly out of the side of her mouth. Carefully shaking her, he whispered in her ear at the same time. “Wake up, Eisa – someone’s trying to break in.”

She woke up just as slowly as he had earlier but seemed to snap awake when she realized what he had just said – and where she was lying. She sat up quickly and only then wiped away the drool from her face, before turning toward the faint sounds coming from the door to their room.

“*Can you wake up Regnark?*” Fred asked Deecy through his silent Mana Communication skill. “*Quietly?*” he added, not wanting the big man to be startled when he woke up.

While the Dire Wolf went over to the other bed and started to pull at the furs around his large frame, Fred got off the bed as silently as he could and tip-toed to the door, putting his ear to it in an attempt to determine what was going on. He could hear just the barest scuff of what sounded like boots against the wooden hallway floor, and there was a rattling in the door’s lock as someone worked on picking it. He had never seen anyone doing it before, but it was plainly obvious someone was doing it; after a few seconds, he heard a faint **click** as the lock disengaged and all that was keeping the door closed was the bar placed across the entire door and doorframe.

Fred stepped back as he saw a very faint bubble of Power emerge through the bottom gap in the door and float upwards, until it completely

enveloped the sturdy wooden bar. He looked around at the others, who were all now alert and watching what was happening; it was only at that point that he realized that the only light in the room was coming from the small window in the far wall, where moonlight filtered through to provide the barest of illumination. Still, it was more than enough to make out the sight of the bar lifting up gently from the brackets where it was placed delicately down out of range of the doorway, making just the barest of noises as it touched the flooring.

Someone has obviously done this before – probably many times.

Everyone in the room had already prepared themselves for an attack; Fred had his knives out in preparation and some spells at the ready; Regnark had his bow and a quiver full of arrows ready, with his large two-handed longsword nearby (which wouldn't be quite as useful in the tight quarters); Eisa had already transformed into her Earth Elemental form and was ready with her aura to create any defenders; Deecy, of course, had everything she needed in her Giant Dire Wolf form – but she added something that would help protect them a little more.

With an extension of her bluish aura, she formed an Ice Spear Barricade right in front of the door, which practically stabbed into the wood of the door and floor, securing it in place. Now, it would take quite a bit of effort to smash through it and fully open the door – which he hoped that whoever was out there would take as a sign that the people inside weren't anyone to mess with. Fred knew that if they managed to get inside, it would likely end up with someone dying that night – and he was going to do whatever it took to ensure it wasn't him or his friends.

He was expecting them to try to enter right away, but whoever was out there seemed to be inclined to take their time. Which turned out not to be the best idea, as it gave Fred too much time to think. *Why are they*

targeting our room? What do they hope to steal from us? Is it because they know we're associated with the marked people they already easily stole from and think we're the same? The more he thought about the situation, the more he started to feel the same rage he had experienced before down in the common room – but this time Eisa wasn't paying attention to him.

How dare they try to steal from us! They all deserve to die for their assault against me and mine! As the fury built in him, he again started to reach out to the surrounding area to establish a territory.

“Fred, I wouldn't do that – you'll paint a target right on us that—”

Deecy had obviously seen what he was attempting and tried to stop him, but it was too late – he was too far gone into his fury. Fred finished establishing a territory and he felt his awareness expand, until he could pinpoint every single person in town...including the six humans outside preparing themselves to sneak inside and steal from him – or worse. They were all C-Rated Adventurers of differing classes, but most of them had one thing in common – they all had sharp steel knives out and obviously ready to use.

He was about to start destroying the entire Inn in an attempt to destroy those that were intending more than just theft, but a hand on his shoulder made him pause. Eisa had obviously seen him establish his territory and was rightfully worried about what he would do; her touch wasn't enough to drain away the anger as it had in the common room, but it did restrain his murderous impulses...a little.

“If we kill anyone, we'll have the entire town after us. We need to leave here without getting into a fight,” she whispered softly with her lips so close to his ear that they were almost touching. He nodded mutely –

signaling his understanding – but it was hard to keep from reaching down underneath the Inn and creating a massive hole where the entire building would sink into. His desire for everyone near him – the people in his room excluded – to die was still there, but it was slightly muted due to Eisa's infuriatingly reasonable words.

Instead of destroying the *entire* Inn, he instead only destroyed part of it. Walking quickly past everyone, he approached the far wall that led to the outside of the building and pressed his hand against the wood; using his Unconverted Mana, he shaped a large hole in the wall just as he did when he carved out holes or pits in the ground and removed the wood blocking them from outside. In less than a second, the moonlight shone through the large 5-foot-wide and 6-foot-tall portal to the outside, and Fred could feel the cool breeze of the pre-dawn night flow through, acting as a balm to the red-hot rage still simmering below the surface of his thoughts.

The thieves/murderers apparently took that as their signal to finally try to enter, and Fred could hear first a thud as they tried to open the door and failed as it wouldn't budge against the Ice Spear Barricade Deecy had set up. When that didn't work, they started to push harder on the door until the sounds of wood cracking and splintering filled their room.

Eisa took off from where she was standing and immediately jumped outside, falling to the ground without harm in her Earth Elemental form despite them being on the second floor. Fred followed quickly after and found the distance to the ground wasn't actually too far, and he easily landed and rolled to absorb the shock of the fall and heard a thud against the ground behind him. Looking back, he saw that Regnark had also descended, though with less agility; still, due to his Body stat, he wasn't injured from falling over 20 feet down to the ground.

Deecy squeezed her way through the hole in the wall next and fortunately landed on the ground on all fours, arriving near them without harm. Just after she landed, they heard a loud crack followed by a crash from their room; almost faster than he could believe, Fred saw the form of one of those that broke in at the missing portion of the wall.

“*Deecy, move!*” Fred Communicated to the Dire Wolf and she sprang forward, following the others as they ran through the town. Looking back at the Inn, he saw that all 6 of those that had broken into their room were standing and watching them run – and he could tell they were contemplating following them. With a quick thought and fumbling with his Territorial Sight while he kept running, Fred used his Unconverted Mana again to make a large, relatively open-top “room” in the ground directly beneath the expanded window he had made. He left a very thin layer of hardened dirt on top that threatened to collapse even as it was formed – but it stayed in place just long enough for it to work the way he intended.

Three of the intruders jumped out from the Inn and landed perfectly on top of his room, the “roof” of which collapsed easily under their weight. They fell another 40 feet down the improvised pit and landed heavily, but largely unhurt at the bottom; his intention wasn’t to kill them – an impulse that he *almost* gave into, however – but to slow them down enough for Fred and his friends to escape. Without turning around, he kept his concentration on placing his feet one in front of another as he “watched” the three remaining intruders still in the Inn run back inside and make their way normally outside – to follow his escaping group, he was sure.

“Where do we go?” Eisa called out after they passed the last of the houses in the town, slowing down and dropping her Earth Elemental form in favor of being able to move a little more swiftly in her own human body. Without prompting, she immediately used her Earth aura to form two

Crystal Scorpions, which would help immensely to speed their escape. By the time they climbed on, unfortunately, Fred could already see that there was a crowd chasing after them. From the snippets of conversation that he overheard using his Territorial Sight, they were saying something about Fred and his friends stealing something from all of the Inn's other Inn's and killing a few innocent Adventurers in the process – but that didn't make sense.

“Why are they saying we stole things and killed some people? My impromptu pit didn't harm them at all,” Fred asked, ignoring Eisa's question for the moment – because he had no idea where they should go.

Regnark apparently understood faster than Fred could work through it. “They probably used their botched attempt to rob us as a way to steal from everyone else and someone probably protested a little too much – and now they can blame it all on us since we're running away.”

“Then can't we just go back and explain what happened?” Fred wondered aloud as he watched the crowd of around 50 or 60 now fan throughout the town, with the majority heading in the direction he and his friends had just went.

“Don't you remember what I said about this place being essentially lawless? They'll kill us before we even—never mind, we don't have time for this. If we're going to head for Allroads, we've got to head to the southwest, but we're nearest to the eastern border of the town right now. We can exit there and swing around, making our way there through the Deadlands.”

With the decision made, they took off on their Scorpions faster than their pursuers could keep up. They wouldn't be able to maneuver through the Deadlands very well with them since they were so large, unfortunately, but they definitely helped them race across the green fields on their way

out. Fred wasn't looking forward to fighting their way through constant hordes of undead again, but with his homicidal feelings waning but not completely gone yet, he thought it might be a good way to let off some of his unusual rage.

Why am I just now feeling these things? Is it my Dungeon Core nature finally making itself known? Is this what they feel like towards humans, all the time? Logically, he knew that couldn't be true, otherwise his parents probably wouldn't have shown such love toward him; in fact, they probably would've just killed him when he was a baby if they felt like that towards humans. *So, what is it?*

Unfortunately, he didn't have an answer and they were too busy leaving the town's land as soon as they could. Less than a minute later, he reached the end of his own territory and it collapsed as he left where he had established it earlier; he could've set up another one on their way out, but he didn't see the point. His last look at the ones chasing after them was of them just leaving town, too far away to be a big threat. He vaguely wondered if they would continue chasing after them into the Deadlands; he didn't think it was likely, because it was technically still dark out and it was likely even darker inside the dead forest. Even though there weren't any living leaves on the trees, they were so numerous and placed close together that it blocked out a bit of the sun during the day – the moonlight wouldn't stand much of a chance.

Finally, they reached the edge of the living lands and as they passed through the invisible barrier separating the two distinct areas, he realized that he didn't even know the name of the place they were leaving, but he guessed it didn't really matter; he wasn't planning on visiting there anytime soon.

They were quickly assaulted by what could've been the exact same duo of Decaying Zombies that had chased Fred into the townlands in the first place, except for the fact that it was nearly 600 feet to the south where they had entered. Regardless, the Crystal Scorpions used their large claws to essentially chop them in half within seconds, and Fred wished they could take the giant bugs with them – but there was no room in between the trees for them to easily move.

Guess it's back to walking – and fighting through seemingly endless waves of undead, he thought, the rage that had built in him completely draining away at the prospect. Just as Eisa reabsorbed the Mana from her Scorpions, they were attacked by a mummified-looking Shrunken Monkey that appeared to materialize in the branch of one of the nearby trees. *Oh well, at least we got a little bit of sleep.*

Chapter 23

Eisa had never really gotten used to being near and controlling the undead while she was a Necromancer, but it hadn't been all that bad. She thought that she might have had some sort of immunity to the smell of the undead while she was her former class, because she couldn't remember them ever being this wretchedly stinky.

After they had left the living lands where the town full of thieves and murderers had tried to murder them and steal their things, they entered the Deadlands again and were immediately attacked. Unfortunately, her Crystal Scorpions couldn't fit through the trees without taking the time to destroy them all in the process, which she thought it prudent to avoid because it would only clearly mark their path through the dead forest. She didn't know if the townspeople and Adventurers would continue to follow them into the Deadlands at night, but she didn't want to make it easier to track them down if they did.

Even though her largest, most powerful 'defenders' she could create couldn't fit through the trees, that didn't mean she was out of options. Converting the Mana from the two Level 1 Scorpions into six strong Level 8 Stone Golems, they now had a sort of escort that could lead the way through; they were quite durable against the undead and were easily repaired after most fights with just the small amount of ambient Mana she absorbed along the way from the dirt underneath her feet – at least most times.

She was beginning to be able to detect where better concentrations of Earth Mana were; for instance, the forest where the Plant – *Nature...it was hard to remember the different name the dungeons used sometimes* –

dungeons were was relatively rich in Earth Mana because it melded fairly well with the Nature aspect of the forest. Likewise, the Plains of Grass had a decent amount of Earth Mana beneath all that grass, and she could access it even better while they were inside of Fred's dungeon.

The Deadlands...not so much. There was a trickle of ambient Mana coming into her while walking through the dead forest, which helped – but it was only about 10% of what she had absorbed from the Nature forest and even the town's lands they had just left. Fortunately, they had spent enough time there last night for her to recharge a bit of her Mana, and Fred had also been feeding her some as well.

Which was still plain strange to her how all this Mana stuff worked, as well as how Fred was able to do so much when he could establish a “territory” but wasn't able to do much at all with his Mana when he couldn't. And the way he could “convert” some of the Mana he had access to into different elements was almost miraculous and didn't seem limited by the nearby ambient availability. Of course, she had also learned that he couldn't absorb *any* ambient Mana, so that was a bit of a drawback.

Fred had cast his Magelight spell once they were deep enough into the Deadlands because the descending moon and subsequent moonlight wasn't penetrating the forest of dead trees very well; it bobbed over their heads and shone a bright light that illuminated the surrounding forest for nearly 50 feet – but also had the unfortunate side effect of casting shadows everywhere. However, with her Stone Golems out front and the rest of them playing backup to their front line, they made quite short work of anything that got in their way.

They went east back towards the Plains of Grass for about a mile, before they turned directly southwest – which would avoid running into any other towns along the way to their destination; Regnark had mentioned that

the city of Allroads was located there, but he didn't have much more information about it. He had never been there and only heard of its existence and general location, but that was about the extent of his knowledge. Fred hadn't seemed particularly interested in what it was either; all he seemed to care about was that they now had a general direction in which to search.

If she was being honest with herself, she was more than a bit worried about him. Back in that town...she realized she didn't even know the name of it...there were a couple of times that Fred seemed to be on the verge of a murderous rampage; thankfully, he seemed to calm down and stopped from goodness only knows what he was planning on doing. But the whole thing was highly unlike him and she wondered what was going on; her traitorous mind couldn't help but think it was his half-Dungeon Core heritage finally rearing its ugly head.

It was unfair to think that way, she knew; he couldn't help how he was born, but just based on the actions of the Cores that had taken to hunting them down, she pictured them all as murderous homicidal maniacs even worse than the people running these towns in the Deadlands. To think that he was in any way associated with them was...unpleasant.

Regardless, he seemed fine and as normal as he could be – which for him was still sometimes weird – as they turned southwest to fight even more undead along their way to this Allroads place. When she thought about it, she couldn't blame him for wanting to kill them all after she had heard the same information about how the town had stolen all of their money and then kicked them out – she had felt the same thing, in fact. The difference, however, was that he seemed right on the verge of actually *doing it*, while she had just thought about it and felt intense anger towards them – but she had no intention of following up on those feelings.

Therefore, the only thing Eisa thought she could do was to be there to keep an eye on him in case he lost it; she was reasonably confident he wouldn't hurt any of their current group on purpose (and hopefully not unintentionally), but she didn't think the same could be said for any other groups of humans or Adventurers they came across. She didn't know what was wrong with him and she hoped it was just temporary.

Shortly after they had turned towards the southwest, something... familiar... tickled the back of her mind. She wasn't sure what it was at first and kept looking behind them as if there was something trying to sneak up on them; every time that she checked, however, she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. It wasn't for another ten minutes that she realized why it felt somewhat familiar – she was feeling Earth Mana nearby. As Eisa had noticed before, being more attuned to the Mana that provided her with life made it nearly second nature to reach out and feel the ambient Mana around her – and allowed her to extend those senses farther and farther out. She couldn't absorb or manipulate it in any way, but she could at least pinpoint where it was.

Excited that there might be a cache of Earth Mana around that she could tap into and absorb, she closed her eyes while her Stone Golems were fighting off another small group of Shriveled Deer, the Deer's firm shriveled skin underneath their patchy hair making them essentially surrounded in natural armor. They weren't very dangerous, fortunately, so they were easily dispatched – but they were annoyingly numerous in the dead forest.

She easily pinpointed the Earth Mana she was feeling a short way to the east, which seemed obvious because it was almost directly behind them; hence, it was the reason she felt like they were being followed. The cache of Earth Mana was actually close by and she excitedly got Fred's attention.

“Fred, I think there might be a source of Earth Mana just to the east; if I can get there to absorb it, I can completely fill up and possibly even extend my maximum—”

She cut herself off as she surveyed the feeling of Mana again – but this time it was slightly closer than it had been before, and Eisa hadn’t moved. Confusion was quickly replaced with horror as a few conclusions passed through her head: The Earth Mana was now closer in relation to them, which meant it was *moving*, and that in turn meant that the source of the Mana that she was sensing was mobile – and heading straight for them.

“Fred, I think we have a problem.”

* * *

“You did what?” Eisa heard Regnark yell, as they crashed through another group of undead trying to block their way, leaving it behind in their rush to put as much distance between them and what she now knew was likely a whole bunch of monsters from the Earth dungeons apparently still chasing them.

“Look, I said I’m sorry. I kind of lost it back in that town and I established a territory in response to them trying to break into our room. I wasn’t thinking straight at the time and I inadvertently just sent up a signal to anyone looking for us in here. Our only chance is to hide,” Fred shot back, flinging out two more Lightscythes toward an undead who had managed to squeeze through the line of her Stone Golems.

“Well then, establish your ‘territory’ again and dig us another dungeon like you did out on the Plains of Grass,” Regnark shouted back, using his massive double-handed sword on the hordes of undead trying to swarm them. They had taken off running as soon as Eisa had given them

her warning; it didn't work so well, as they hadn't stopped to finish off the undead they encountered, so now they were forced to stop and take care of those that were chasing them before they got overwhelmed when there were too many of them to take care of all at once.

Even though they weren't all that powerful or dangerous singly or even as a group of 10 or less (for the most part), they were already approaching nearly 40 assorted undead chasing after them. The undead weren't the type to give up either; if they were held up somewhere along the way, they might get swarmed by even more if they continued without taking care of the issue now. Fortunately, Deecy had been saving her precious Mana for a time like this and practically roasted the huge group of decaying and withered creatures with two quick Fire Walls.

"I can't do that while there are already territories here; I could only do it on the Plains and in town because no other Cores had established any there. The closest empty spot I can sense is either the place we just left – and I advise against going back there for obvious reasons – and what is likely another town to the south approximately twelve miles away. Or, of course, there's always the Plains – but even if we were able to get there fast enough to avoid these Earth defenders chasing after us, it'll likely still be dark enough for those Horror things to still be present. We're probably lucky they are there, actually, because it's very likely that those same void creatures are slowing down this new army from the Earth Cores," Fred said as the last of the current large group of undead was finished off by Eisa's Stone Golems – which were looking a little beat-up by that time.

She spread her aura out over them before they started to move again and spent some of her precious Mana to repair them. She looked at her current Mana and saw that she was getting a little low from all the repairs, and she was getting very little ambient Mana from the environment.

Earth Mana: 118/710

She was by no means in danger of running out of Mana at the moment, but she couldn't even afford to create a Crystal Scorpion anymore. She hadn't received any Earth Mana from Fred lately so she knew she could count on a little bit at least from that quarter, but she didn't have nearly as much as she wanted if they ended up trying to fight the wave of monsters she could feel slowly descending on them.

"Well, then – what's your plan, Fred?" Regnark asked, speaking normally now that the current threat of undead had been dealt with.

Fred looked around vaguely for a moment before grunting like what he was about to say was going to be unpleasant. "I don't need to build my own dungeon – there are plenty around here already."

Is he suggesting what I think he is? "You don't mean..."

"Yep – we're going to delve into a Dark dungeon."

Chapter 23

Despite everyone's monumental reservations (including Deecy), Fred led them unerringly toward the closest dungeon he could find with his Territorial Sight, which was fortunately not too far away. It was less than half a mile to the south, in fact, and their journey there was quicker than he had expected. While they were still assaulted by numerous undead along the way, it was noticeably much less than it had been just a couple of minutes ago.

I'm guessing that the Earth defenders have finally entered the Deadlands; it's probably taking some of the attention off of us.

After killing hundreds of the undead creatures both on their way to the town and during their escape, the lessening of the onslaught finally gave Fred a chance to figure out what was happening. At first, he thought that his presence there was noted by some nearby Dark dungeons and they were sending everything they could after him, even though he couldn't understand how they had managed to learn about his status as a human/dungeon core and his interactions with the Nature and Earth Cores. From what he knew, the Dark faction was allied with the Fire faction, and it seemed counterintuitive for them to have communicated his existence across "enemy" lines.

But when he had a chance to see what was happening with the Dark Mana that he could vaguely see almost bubbling up from the ground, he changed his theory. It wasn't the Cores themselves directing the undead they had battled in the Deadwoods; just as the Nature Cores didn't control the wild bears, deer, and wolves that roamed their lands, neither did the Dark Cores control what happened outside of their dungeons proper.

Instead, the creatures that attacked them were a product of the concentration of so much Dark Mana rising up from the depths of the planet. It was so wild and initially unfocused that the nearby Dungeon Cores couldn't absorb much of it when it rose to the surface; the vast uncontrollable makeup of the Mana caused it to form into the undead they had been fighting. Fred also thought that it was this chaotic nature of the Dark Mana itself that led to the creation of the non-elemental void creatures they had seen on the Plains of Grass.

When the undead creatures were killed, the nearby Dungeon Cores were then able to absorb the Dark Mana left behind if it was in their territory – just like Fred could. It was likely that there wasn't as much ambient mana for them to absorb naturally, unlike what he assumed most of the other elements had access to; most of their growth was from humans killing the undead outside their dungeons and from those same people delving through their defenses.

For some reason, Fred or his friends – or a combination of everyone – were acting as a sort of lodestone for the chaotic Dark Mana, which completed the undead forming process much faster than it normally would've if they hadn't been nearby. His guess was that it occurred naturally every once in a while, which was why humans only had to fight a few on their way through to a town or an actual dungeon; he also suspected that it was the large amount of Mana present inside Fred, Deecy, and now Eisa that instigated the accelerated creation process.

Fred's guess was likely proved correct when Eisa said that the advance of the Earth defenders behind them had slowed slightly; when they crossed into the Deadlands, beings made from pure Earth presented a much larger source of Mana that the undead could focus on. Unfortunately, from what he had seen so far in the Deadlands, he doubted there was much that

would present any type of hindrance to the Earth defenders – they were probably just an annoyance that had to be dealt with before they could continue their chase. Regardless, it would slow them down a little bit – which, fortunately, gave Fred and the others plenty of time to get to a Dark dungeon before it was too late.

“So, what do we do? I doubt that walking inside and asking, ‘Excuse me, Mr. Dungeon Core, can we hide in your dungeon until the Earth monsters go away?’ is going to work,” Eisa asked him – which was a good question.

They had arrived at the dungeon, which looked very similar to every other entrance Fred had ever seen – including his own. A pile of stone looked as though it had thrust out haphazardly in the middle of the forest of dead trees, presenting a tunnel leading deep into the ground. Unlike most of the others, however, it seemed somehow darker than usual; even considering that dawn was still just barely breaking over the horizon and they still needed to utilize Fred’s Magelight to see, his spell almost seemed to be absorbed by the wall of darkness the entrance presented.

“Deecy, can you prevent the Core inside from Communicating outside again?” Fred asked the Dire Wolf, who had been traveling in her normal form since the word came of the Earth defenders’ presence.

“I can...though I don’t really see the need. The Dark Cores around here have probably already noticed that you are stealing all of their Dark Mana from these undead, so they have to know that something strange is afoot. And this Core won’t be the only one to see a massive line of Earth defenders heading in this direction.”

Hmm...she's got a point. He hadn't realized that his absorption of the small amounts of Dark Mana left behind by the undead would raise some flags, but he probably should've; if it had been *his* territory, he probably would've noticed if someone was taking his Mana – especially if there was no one in his dungeon to occupy his attention. And when he thought about it some more, the disappearance of “free” Mana would've had some of them turn their Territorial Sight on him and his group – where they would likely see a wolf made from Fire and Water elements, as well as a “human” filled with Earth Mana. Fred thought that he might be a little less obvious than the others because his Mana was contained in his cores, but he wasn't entirely sure; he could be entirely wrong based on how the undead creatures reacted to his presence.

“You're probably right. Well, I guess there's no other option but to go in and try to clear as much as we can. If we can hide at least a few rooms in, it should still give us quite the advantage. And if we get overwhelmed, we can retreat even further and try to play the defenders off each other, like what happened in the Plains of—” Fred began to explain his plan but stopped when something happened that was so unexpected that his mind froze in confusion.

It was almost normal by then to expect the Earth defenders to attack them; in addition, any type of surprise attack by a horde of undead... certainly plausible. Fred even figured that it was entirely possible that the angry mob from the town had caught up to them, which was what he thought the voices he heard nearby was – at least at first. However, what it actually turned out to be was something he hadn't planned for.

There was a group of Adventurers heading *out* of the dungeon.

“—told you there wasn't going to be any of that Shadow Glass in there. But *noooo*, you didn't listen to me, did you? Why would it be this

close to Death's March, anyway? All the rumors said it was found far to the south, but why you wanted to try here first, I'll never know," a thin, reedy voice echoed flatly from the entrance tunnel.

"Shut up, Metlin! I've had just about enough of you running your mouth every chance you get. You're lucky; if we weren't desperate for any type of healer, I'd have left your sorry excuse for a Druid back in Allroads – and I'm half-thinking we'd be better off without you. Maybe we can leave you in Death's March – how does that sound?" a loud, rough voice responded with heat.

Fred couldn't see any of the speakers yet, but they would likely be out of the dungeon within moments. His thoughts finally started to churn again, and he checked for another nearby dungeon, but the closest one was at least two miles away – they'd be caught before they made it even half that distance. *It looks like we won't have to clear anything out, at least*, he thought – before his mind froze again when he tried to figure out how to explain their presence there.

It was bad practice in the DAS to delve through the same dungeon someone had just vacated, mainly because it didn't allow the dungeon to respawn everything inside. Next to that, he heard a story back when he was running dungeons with his Guild in Gatecross about a group of renegade Adventurers that would ambush Syndicate members as soon as they emerged from a dungeon, tired, possibly hurt – and full of loot. Apparently, they were hunted down and wiped out...messily...by two S-Rated Adventurer groups commissioned by the Syndicate, but the story was a good reminder of the dangers and to always watch yourself. And in the lawless Deadlands, Fred and his friends surrounding the exit didn't quite look innocent, especially accompanied by half-a-dozen Stone Golems.

The Stone Golems!

Fortunately, Regnark came to the rescue. Fred saw the big man slide next to Eisa's shocked form and quickly whispered something in her ear, too low for him to hear it.

She turned to stare at him and whispered back – louder, but not loud enough for whoever was in the dungeon to hear, “What? Why—?”

Fred trusted that Regnark had a plan – which Fred certainly did not – so he Communicated with Deecy. “*Tell her to do it.*”

He couldn't tell if the Dire Wolf complied or not, but the next second, the six Stone Golems controlled by Eisa turned to attack Regnark without warning. The big man already had his massive sword out and was blocking the sudden flurry of attacks thrown his way, taking a few hits in the process. Fred wasn't exactly sure how Eisa had lost control of her own creations, but he knew he needed to help; he accessed his spell repertoire and used something air-based that had been particularly effective against the Stone Golems when they were in the Nature Core forest: Windbreak.

Windbreak 2 – 0/3000

When activated, the Windbreak spell will create a fist of hardened air in front of the caster; with a thought, the fist of air will propel forward at high speed, breaking through anything in its path and causing a knockback effect. Particularly effective against Earth-based targets.

Power cost of Windbreak: 45

Air damage: 45 (70 vs. Earth targets)

Fist diameter: 2.1 feet

Knockback distance: up to 2 feet depending on target

Maximum range: 10.5 feet

Learned from an Elementalist – Harriette, if his memory served him right – Windbreak was a spell that formed a large fist of hardened air two feet in diameter and punched it ten feet ahead, *breaking* through anything in its path. At least, that was the intention; against the Stone Golems, Windbreak would smash them apart, doing enough damage sometimes to destroy them completely. With a little application of his Power, Fred could eliminate quite a few of the Golems without putting too much of a dent in his Power levels.

He quickly aimed at the one coming up behind Regnark and activated the spell. He was releasing the hardened fist of air when something strange caught his eye – the big man was pretending to struggle against the Golems, when Fred knew he could take a few swipes and end the threat of at least a few of them before they even touched him. It was that strangeness that caused Fred to alter the course of his Windbreak just enough that it only tore through a portion of his target's upper arm, doing a bit of damage but nothing significant.

Regnark's playacting served its purpose, however, as the people Fred had heard inside the dungeon finally emerged and stopped in shock at the scene unfolding in front of them.

“What's going on here?”

Chapter 24

Regnark took over the simple explanations, all while still “fighting” the Stone Golems. “Help! There are these rock monsters all over the Deadlands!”

Fred watched the other group immediately jump in without question, pulling out weapons and flinging spells in the direction of the Stone Golems. He wasn’t that surprised; unless the other Adventurers were inherently bad people, they wouldn’t hesitate to save another group if it were within their power and ability. And judging by who came out of the dungeon, six Stone Golems were probably the easiest monsters they’d killed over the last few hours.

The speaker that had the loud, rough voice that Fred heard earlier turned out to be a large man covered in a full suit of shiny metal armor; it appeared to be steel, but it also had a prismatic sheen to it that was visible to Fred’s Magelight. He wasn’t quite as large as Regnark, but the B-8th-Rated Knight-Mage was definitely more imposing – including his twin-bladed short sword; it wasn’t as large as the fur-covered man’s massive longsword, but it appeared much deadlier for some reason. With two deft cuts through the body of a Stone Golem, Fred was proved correct as it sliced through the rock without much resistance.

The other speaker was a small, thin man that was wearing an airy-looking dark-green shirt and some loose-fitting trousers, who carried a gnarled wooden staff that he handled as if it were more for show than utility. Fred was proved right as the C-4th-Rated Druid-Thief fumbled it, letting it drop to the ground; instead of attacking with a weapon, he cast some sort of spell and a greenish aura surrounded him and his other group

members. Although he couldn't tell what the aura did, Fred could almost see everyone moving just a little bit faster than they had before.

The third member of the group that emerged from the Dark dungeon was a full-on B-5th-Rated Assassin, wearing all-black clothing and a hood that covered their face completely. As soon as the Assassin stepped out of the dungeon, they disappeared completely from his visual sight; Fred could still track them, though, because of the Druid's faint green aura surrounding their invisible figure. Within seconds, the stealthy Assassin appeared behind another one of the Stone Golems and stabbed their twin black-coated knives into the unsuspecting back of Eisa's creation, the metal somehow melting through the stone like it wasn't there. Something vital inside the Golem was pierced, however, and it immediately collapsed into a pile of inert rocks, before dissipating and leaving behind a globule of Earth Mana.

The next member of the group was a pure spell-flinging B-5th-Rated Channeler. Fred had never met one of them before and was excited and intrigued from the unique method she applied her Power to cast spells. Instead of initially activating the spell and then sending it toward the target, the heavily built woman – in drab brown robes with a simple rope belt cinched around her waist – extended her Power out from her hands and surrounded the target. She maintained a small conduit of Power, channeling enough into the spell she was maintaining to keep it activated.

Fred saw her channel a whirlwind of hardened air shards that cut into another of the Stone Golems, reducing it to ribbons within a few seconds – and then she *moved* the whirlwind so that it enveloped the next closest Golem. Because she kept her Power channeling into the spell, it wasn't just a one-shot ability; it appeared as if – if she had enough available Power – she could move the whirlwind all over the battlefield if she chose

to do so. Based on her Power levels that Fred could observe from her Interface, the cost to initiate the spell was expensive, but the required channeled Power to maintain it was relatively minor in comparison.

The last, but not least, of the group that emerged from the dungeon held a unique weapon that Fred had never seen before. It looked like he held a six-pointed star on a stick in his hand; in reality, it was a strange bow that looked like three separate bows were melded together, leaving a hole in the center where the arrow would rest and be fired from. As he watched the B-8th-Rated Sniper quickly slide an arrow inside the hole, nock it to the six-strong string connected in the middle, and pull it back – he was amazed at how strong the man apparently needed to be to fully extend the string. Looking at his stats, he realized the Sniper actually had more Brawn than even Regnark and was on par with the Knight-Mage – a surprising thing to be specialized in for someone firing arrows at long range.

His surprise was short-lived as the arrow left the strange weapon with a boost of Power that was applied so quickly that he barely even registered it happened, let alone had seen enough of it to Adapt it. The arrow flew so fast and hit the last of the Stone Golems so hard that the defender shattered into pieces, flinging shards of rock into some of the other members of the group.

“Lasgo! Watch it, man! Those rocks could’ve hurt one of these people,” the large Knight-Mage said once all of the Golems were down, having dispatched two of them quickly himself.

“Sorry about that – I’m not used to my targets being so squishy and exploding like that,” the Sniper named Lasgo responded, smiling and not sounding even the least bit sorry.

“Thank you for the help, we—” Regnark started, before being cut off by the armor-clad Knight-Mage, whose name turned out to be Trenk – at

least according to his Interface.

“What are you all doing in this place? And why are there these rock monsters here? They’re obviously from a dungeon – because they disappeared – but I don’t know of any Earth dungeons around here.”

Regnark hesitated for a scant moment before responding. “There are more of these rock monsters all through the Deadlands and we were running from them, hoping to hide inside a dungeon until they leave. This one just happened to be the closest one – and we had no idea you were inside. Thank you again for your—”

“Why would these things be all over the Deadlands? This is a place for the undead...and it seems strange that I don’t see any around. Metlin, do you sense anything nearby?” Trenk asked, turning toward the Druid-Thief – *which is a strange mix of classes*, he thought. The smaller, thin man grumbled out something unintelligible, but did as their obvious group leader asked.

Fred had already Adapted Metlin’s earlier ability, which turned out to be something called Nature’s Breath, which slightly augmented the speed of whoever the spell surrounded for a limited time. A quick look at his abilities showed him that he had also Adapted the Channeler’s spell, Whirlwind (Channeled) – but none of the others that had been used – if there even were any other abilities used in that quick fight. However, he quickly learned another one as the Druid-Thief held his hands in front of him and fed Power into a small, roiling green sphere.

After about 10 seconds, Metlin closed his eyes as another small infusion of Power to the sphere caused it to explode; it was slow at first, expanding its size to double its original within the first second, but then speeding up exponentially. Within ten seconds, it had expanded in a big bubble so far that it extended past where he could see it in the darkness,

even with the benefit of his Mana Sight – which Fred figured was what allowed him to see Power being manipulated in the first place. Another few seconds later, the faint traces of the exploded sphere disappeared, and the Druid-Thief opened his eyes in surprise.

“He was telling the truth. There are a lot more monsters heading this way – and they are moving fast. I can’t tell exactly what they are, but some of them are...huge. My Movement Detection spell is limited, but it appears as though they came from the direction of the Plains of Grass before fanning out; it’s almost like they are searching for something and rolling over everything in their path...which will include Death’s March if they keep heading in that direction.”

“We have to save them! My sister is supposed to be staying there tonight before heading off later today to the north,” the surprisingly high-pitched voice of the Assassin shouted, which caused Fred to look at his – *her* – name: Pollianne. *Hmm...Pollianne the Assassin? I guess I’ve heard stranger names.*

“How far away are they, Metlin? Can we get there in time?” Trenk asked.

The Druid-Thief seemed to consider it for a moment, while the Assassin was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet in apparent worry. “We’re at least three miles away from there which will take us at least an hour; even if we run, it’ll be inevitable that we’ll get caught by more of the undead. If we ignore them completely, it’ll still take us at least 45 minutes—”

“I can get there in half an hour or shorter,” Pollianne interrupted him, looking like she was about to take off running.

“Hold on, Striker,” Metlin said, addressing the Assassin. *I guess she doesn’t go by her real name – good to know.* “You didn’t let me finish. My

best guess is that they'll be *here* in about 30 minutes...and to Death's March in less than 20."

The group fell silent as Fred looked at Regnark and Eisa, noticing for the first time that Deecy had shrunk down to her Pup form and was curled protectively around the woman's feet – and looking as unthreatening as possible. *I'm guessing that she saw how powerful these Adventurers were and knew they could likely kill her if she exuded any type of threat.*

The other group almost appeared to have forgotten about them – at least until their leader turned toward Regnark and quickly asked, "I don't know what's going on, but we have to try to save as many of them as we can – even if we get there late. Will you help us?"

Regnark immediately replied in the affirmative. "Of course, we will...but a quick question: What is Death's March?"

"Death's March is the town just to the north; it was named so because the founders were exiled and forced to—" Metlin started, before being cut off by Pollianne/Striker.

"We don't have time for that – we have to go!" And she started to run out of the small clearing surrounding the dungeon entrance. The Assassin was so eager to get to the town that had just chased Fred and his friends out that she didn't even wait to see if anyone followed her.

"Wait!" Fred called out, his first words since the other group arrived so insistent that the Assassin actually paused in her run to look back at him. Well, he assumed she was looking at him – her hood was still pulled up and he couldn't even see her face. "You'll never get there in time to make a difference, if what I think is heading that way reaches the town," he started, and could almost feel the anger pouring off Pollianne/Striker in waves.

"I can't just let my sister die without trying to help! I'm going even if no one else joins me," she said as she turned around to leave.

“Hold on! I didn’t say we didn’t want to help – but there is another way,” Fred said, as a plan flitted through his mind. It wasn’t the most ideal of plans as far as they went, but it might just have a chance of succeeding. As much as he didn’t like the people running the town – *Death’s March*, *apparently* – that had tried to murder them and take their stuff, there were hundreds of relatively innocent Adventurers (those that had laughed at his Guild’s misfortune, notwithstanding) that would ultimately suffer for Fred’s actions.

“What are you talking about...and how do you know what’s headed their way? What do you know about all of this?” Trenk asked, stepping over to Fred and lifting him off the ground by his shirt.

Fred waved Regnark off with his free hand as the big man appeared to move to help, which calmed him down – slightly. Eisa looked worried as well, but he smiled in her direction to try to reassure her, before turning his attention back to the large armored man holding him a few feet off the ground. “It’s too long to explain all of it and we’re wasting time as it is. Basically, we need to go inside that dungeon there.”

“What? Why? Is this some sort of trick to get us in there to look for Shadow Glass? I should just kill you right now!” Trenk said, shaking Fred so hard that he thought his neck would snap.

Refelynn – the Channeler that hadn’t spoken yet – stopped Trenk from inadvertently killing Fred, for which he was thoroughly thankful. “Put him down and let him speak – I’m curious to what this plan is,” she said in a surprisingly soft but authoritative voice. Luckily, the Knight-Mage was listening and did as she asked without question – which made him reevaluate who was really the one in charge of their group.

“Thank you,” Fred said, using his Heal Minor Wounds spell on himself to repair some the damage to his neck that had been inflicted.

“Look, we’re not here for Shadow Glass or any type of loot – we don’t care about money in the slightest. What we were planning on doing was hiding out in this dungeon, but now that innocent lives are in danger, I don’t think we can sit by and allow that.”

“What do you mean, you don’t care about money; everyone cares about money,” Metlin asked, confusion plain in his voice.

“Look, I’ll explain along the way, but we better get going if we are going to save everyone. I’ll even give all of you some gold if you want – like I said, money isn’t important to me or us.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m in,” Metlin immediately replied with greed painted all over his face.

“Are you sure this plan of yours will work?” Pollianne/Striker asked with the tiniest sliver of hope in her voice.

“I’m positive.”

“Well...then let’s get going. If this saves my sister, I’m willing to do anything,” she said, before heading towards the dungeon entrance – before turning back to Fred. “But if you’re lying or my sister dies, you better hope you can run faster than me, because I will hunt you down and take my time killing you.” The Assassin then turned back to the dungeon and walked inside.

“Fred...what are you doing?”

“Only what I have to, Deecy. Only what I have to.”

Chapter 25

Depending on the size of a dungeon, it could take hours for every defender and defense that had been killed/deactivated or whatnot to respawn. While Fred could do it faster if he had free Mana lying around from destroyed defenders – such as when he was in Gatecross and could manipulate the Nature Mana into the blueprints directly, without absorbing it – actual “real” Dungeon Cores did things a little differently. They absorbed the Mana straight away when a defender was killed, or a trap was activated/deactivated, and then stored it in their Core until they needed it later.

This allowed them to have the Mana at their “fingertips” so to say, which would allow them to change the dungeon around if they wanted to when the humans went away. The downside to that was that it took longer for the automatic respawning of all their defenses, as it needed to be pulled directly from their Core, which could only handle manipulating so much Mana at once. Fred could do a bit more due to his unique Human Core which shared some of the stress pulling so much Mana at once would incur, but even he had pushed things a bit too far sometimes.

The end result of that limitation meant that it took longer to replace each individual room’s defenses. In a small G-1st or 2nd-Rated dungeon, for instance, it could repopulate everything in less than a minute; from what Fred had heard, an S-Rated dungeon could take up to almost a full day if the entire place had been wiped out.

He learned most of that information from Deecy, who seemed to have facts in her mind from his parents’ Core shards she was created from; other than what he had learned regarding dungeon construction and

territories, most of it had been largely unhelpful – because it didn't really apply to him. In this instance, however, he used that knowledge to help the group heading back into the dungeon – by telling them what they were likely to expect.

Since they had only been outside no more than ten minutes, there wasn't a lot of time for the Dark dungeon to respawn its defenders and defenses, but if it was aware of what was happening with the Earth defenders invading the Deadlands, then it had probably stressed itself a little bit trying to repopulate as much as it could. There was one thing that hindered it, however: procedure.

When the dungeon was refilled with the appropriate defenders and defenses, the automatic procedure put in place was to finish everything nearest the core first, before expanding outward. That way, if any other humans or even wild creatures entered the dungeon before it was completely reset, it would have the strongest defenses available near its core. It also allowed Adventurers to quickly check to see if the dungeon was ready to be delved again if the first room was repopulated.

“What Rating is this dungeon?” Fred asked, heading down the entrance tunnel behind the other group and letting them lead the way.

“Don't you know?” Trenk asked, before shaking his head. “Never mind. It's a C-3rd-Rated dungeon, which is a little below what we usually delve through, but we were looking for Shadow Glass.”

Fred hadn't been in any dungeon higher than E-Rated (his parents' dungeon didn't count, even if he knew its actual rating) so he wasn't sure what to expect. However, he sighed in relief when he saw that the first room wasn't repopulated yet. “How long did it take you to go through this whole dungeon?”

Metlin answered this time. “It took almost all night, but we did explore all of the side passages and cleared every monster in here looking for loot.”

“We’ve got maybe 15 minutes to get to the last room, where you probably had to fight the boss-level monster. Fortunately, the Dark Core in here hasn’t had time to repopulate everything, so if we rush right there it hopefully won’t be too bad,” Fred told them.

They looked shocked, which wasn’t surprising based on what he had just told them. “Are you insane? Even if we skip all of the side passages and go straight there, you’re talking like 30 rooms to advance through in that time – at 30 seconds a room, that’s impossible.”

“It shouldn’t be too bad, though,” he responded, trying to instill confidence in his voice – even if he wasn’t completely sure he was right. “In a dungeon this size, only the last few rooms should be filled with anything, and if you deactivated all the defenses – *traps* – on your way, they should still be safe.”

Trenk still looked unsure, but Pollianne was impatient. “C’mon, let’s go – the sooner we get this done, the sooner I can make sure my sister is safe back in Death’s March. I’ll do a quick check of the traps I deactivated earlier to see if he’s telling the truth, but we need to hurry!” So saying, she took off for the tunnel leading to the next room.

Fred followed along, looking at the atmosphere of a Dark dungeon for the first time. Whereas his parents’ dungeon was filled with an aquatic/flaming atmosphere with pools of water, rings of fire, and even a small lava pool – and the Nature dungeons he had visited with Eisa and the Guild had plants, trees, and other nature-type accoutrements – the Dark dungeon was, well, gloomy.

The lighting inside was down very low, with just barely enough light to see more than a few feet in front of your face. Fortunately, he had his Magelight still up – which had to be cast every five minutes as the spell wore off – and they could see quite well. Not that there was a lot that he wanted to see; the walls were a dark-reddish color (nearly black) that appeared to be a representation of dried blood, there were rusted chains and iron spikes draped across everything like a macabre backdrop, and there were clouds of inky darkness that – when he looked at them in his Mana Sight – appeared to be made up of very small amounts of Dark Mana spread out like a mini explosion caught in mid detonation.

Metlin saw him looking at the clouds and told him, “That’s where the mobs were that we killed earlier.” As they passed on to the next room at a run – which looked very similar, but with minor changes to the layout of everything – the Druid-Thief went on. “They would hide in there and emerge either when we got close or we passed a certain part of the room. It makes it...interesting, as we never know what’s going to come out and attack us. Unless you’ve run this dungeon a few times and have their locations memorized, it’s a mystery every time.”

Interesting – that certainly does add an element of surprise that I’d never thought of before. Fred ran with everyone past a small pit trap that was exposed near the tunnel leading to the next room, seeing the darkness inside that looked very uninviting. The third room had more of the same, though it was bigger than the previous two rooms and had exits heading off in three directions instead of just one. Without hesitation, Pollianne – who was still leading the way and quickly checking to see if any of the traps had been reactivated – turned to the right, heading through the tunnel there.

“Those were some of the side passages that led us to a few optional areas, which were good for our wallets, but otherwise had no major

surprises,” Metlin continued his explanation unprompted, even though Fred didn’t necessarily need it. This close to the Dark Core, he could pinpoint it unerringly even through the walls.

Speaking of the Dark Core, it had been uncharacteristically silent up to that point; every other dungeon he had been in (which, admittedly, were only run by Nature Cores) was filled with chatty Cores that were constantly talking to the dungeons around the area. At the time, they didn’t know he could hear them, fortunately, or his nature might’ve been found out earlier – and it also led to hours of one-sided (he couldn’t hear incoming Communications from external sources) inane gossip between low-Rated Dungeon Cores. So, either there was something wrong and he couldn’t hear the Core for some reason, or it was silent for another reason.

Though, when he thought about it, it was probably because Eisa and Deecy were obviously anomalies, as they were identifiable as having an aura of Mana inside of them, unlike his own (hopefully) hidden status of his Cores – and the humans with him, who didn’t have any Mana inside of them at all. Or, it could just be that it was listening to others speak and wasn’t paying attention to the invaders in its midst – which turned out to be the real reason.

*“Yes, from what I see, they’re entering into my territory now. <Short Pause> No, I have no idea why those Earth fools are attacking, but it probably has something to do with that strange territory we saw in that human habitation earlier. It looked like a mixture of Water, Nature, Earth, **and** Fire – if you can believe it. Send that up to the Fire Faction, because maybe they’ll know what it was, because it wasn’t around long enough for me to identify it. <Long Pause> Yes, I will start pumping out more right away; it won’t cost me anything if they die in my territory, so I can just keep*

up the defense until you can send some reinforcements. <Short Pause> I should be fine for a while, but you need to reinforce the border around the livestock pen; if we lose them all there, it could set us back decades or possibly centuries in this part of the—hold on, I have some of those livestock back in my dungeon. <Very Short Pause> I have no idea, but they came back in just minutes after they left and are—wait...I think there's already an Earth defender in my dungeon! Send help, now!"

The female voice of the Dark Core sounded a bit scared at the presence of Eisa inside her dungeon, which was understandable. It almost sounded like the Core had put a lot of her repopulation on hold when it became obvious that the Earth defenders were heading her direction. Not only that, but it was interesting how they were actively looking to save the humans in their “livestock pen”; all for selfish reasons, of course, but it was good to know that the Adventurers in the town would have a little bit of unexpected help defending themselves in case Fred failed.

He decided not to even attempt to talk back to the Core, even though he was curious if he could use his Mana Communication from his current location. While he could hear her, he remembered that he hadn't been able to speak to any of the Nature Cores that had been brought to him in Gatecross until he was touching them. Granted, even if he *could* Communicate with her, he wasn't sure what he should say.

“Hello, I have to apologize. I'm here to absorb you so I can establish a territory and distract the Earth defenders heading toward the human town of Death's March. Can you please submit willingly to your death?” just didn't sound like it would go over well.

The larger group sped through more than two dozen rooms without encountering a single obstacle along the way. They were making excellent

time, since the defenses were all deactivated and the way through was fairly straightforward. Along the way, he could hear the Dark Core keeping up a running commentary on their progress – and on the progress of the reinforcements.

“They’re getting closer and closer to my Core Room. I don’t know what their plan is, but something about them is worrying me. This Earth defender looks like livestock, but I can see an aura of Earth Mana around it; not only that, but there appears to be some sort of wolf with not just one element, but two! Do you think these are what Dryvenhelixia was seeing earlier in her territory? <Long Pause> What am I supposed to do – ask them? How am I supposed to know? Anyway, where are those defenders? <Pause> Yes, I see them passing into my territory right now. <Short Pause> Well, tell them to hurry – I think I’m in serious danger here.”

Probably unnecessarily, Fred directed his Mana Communication strictly to Deecy and warned her not to use any of her abilities unless it was looking like they’d need it to survive. Not only would it alert the Dark Core to the further danger of their presence in its dungeon (which, honestly, was probably a moot point), but he also wasn’t sure how the other group of Adventurers would react. Without asking, the Dire Wolf Pup passed on the warning to Eisa, who likely agreed with him for at least that last reason.

Fred saw variations on the first few rooms with the blood-red walls and chains, but it soon changed to even darker colors mixed with glowing red stones embedded in the walls and in strategic places around the room. The light inside the dungeon by that point was soon cut off to practically nothing, and Metlin was forced to add his own light spell – Moon’s

Reflection – to Fred’s Magelight, which acted nearly the same but was a bit brighter.

Overall, the atmosphere was indeed dark, but it didn’t look like the lair of countless undead. First, there was no rotting flesh smell permeating the air; in fact, it almost smelled like...eggs, for some reason. They might have even been rotten, which he had smelled once in Gatecross when a shipment of spoiled eggs arrived in their normal shipments to the restaurants around the town that catered to the Adventurers.

In the 27th room – and less than four minutes into their journey through the dungeon (they had made excellent time) – they finally met their first defender. When it emerged from the dark cloud in the room, it was nothing like what he was expecting.

“I thought this was a Dark dungeon – where are all of the undead?”

Chapter 26

“Undead? Uh...not in this dungeon?” Metlin responded, casting his Nature’s Breath spell on his group – but this time it included Fred and his friends, too. There had been some initial sideways glances at Deecy aboveground when they finally noticed her, but as she was staying next to Eisa in her smaller Pup form, they mostly ignored her presence. Her size wasn’t really a threat to any of the more powerful group – even the Druid or Channeler, who both had the least amount of Vitality and natural Base Defense.

“What do you mean, not in this dungeon? I thought all Dark dungeons had undead,” Fred said, confused.

“Not at all, Fred,” Regnark interrupted their conversation, as he readied his massive two-handed sword for a fight. “The most common are Undead, sure, but there are also ones that are filled with Hellspawn – and this dungeon appears to be one of the latter.” Joining Trenk at the front line, the big man took the opposite side of the large, red, winged demon emerging from the cloud of darkness.

Pit Fiend (Level 2)

Vitality: 1280

Attack: 105, Claw Swipe, Disembowelment

Defense: 90, (+70% Dark defense, +70% Fire defense, -85%

Light defense)

The Pit Fiend tried to lift into the air with great flaps of its 30-foot wingspan, but two quickly shot arrows from the Sniper tore large holes in

each wing; the sheer power of the fired arrows caused them to fly straight through, impacting the wall behind it. The 14-foot-tall Fiend dropped the few feet it had managed to lift up and crashed to the ground, where Trenk and Regnark immediately went crazy and hacked away. When the demon recovered from its uncoordinated fall, it immediately struck out at the Knight-Mage with a powerful swipe of its claws – which rebounded off a barrier protecting the front of the fully armored man.

Trenk had cast the temporary barrier so quickly that Fred hadn't even seen him do it, but it was obvious why he had taken Mage as his second class. A quick look at the Knight-Mage's abilities showed that his Barrier spell was at Level 8 – which meant that he had spent over a million Essence to increase it to that level. It was worth it, though; another swipe that likely would've wrecked his armor a bit was reflected off the Barrier, doing no damage to him whatsoever.

While the two front-line melee group members were doing quite a bit of damage themselves (Trenk was doing a bit more, but not by much), the Pit Fiend had no chance when it was assaulted by the rest of the people filling the room. A channeled Light explosion – unoriginally called Light Explosion (Channeled) – erupted in its face, which almost seemed to burn the demon with its intensity. A few Lightscythes thrown out by Fred and Eisa – as well as two more arrows that *thunked* deep into the flesh of the Fiend in strategic places – was enough to finish it off in less than thirty seconds from when it had emerged.

Fred could tell that if the others hadn't been there, the fight would've gone quite a bit differently. He thought that they might've still won, but it would've taken a bit out of them to accomplish that; regardless, they had the help and they rushed ahead without even picking up the loot

that the Pit Fiend dropped – when Fred realized that he hadn't seen Pollianne in the fight.

He saw her near the end of the room near the exit when he looked around for her, and it appeared as though she had just finished disarming a trap just before the tunnel leading on. He couldn't tell what it did, but there was a lot of Dark Mana invested in it; his best guess – based on its placement on the floor and the theme of the dungeon – was a pit filled with shadowy Hellfire. Of course, he never got to see it, so his guess may have been way off.

In less than a minute since they first entered the 27th room they were done with it and they entered the 28th – where they faced two more Hellspawns. The black-skinned demons that emerged from the large clouds of darkness were both at least 12 feet tall and had deep-red accents along their bodies, highlighting their broad chest and arms – all six of them. At the end of their arms there were long thin-bladed knife-looking projections, sort of like Eisa when she was in her Earth Elemental form and could manipulate the dirt covering her into bladed weapons. These Hellspawn, however, used those knives for something completely different from killing Earth defenders.

Flaying Tormentor (Level 2)

Vitality: 1050

Attack: 85, Skin Flaying, Crosscut

Defense: 75, (+70% Dark defense, +70% Fire defense, -85%

Light defense)

Fred really didn't want to see what its special Skin Flaying attack did, because it sounded more than painful. Fortunately, he didn't have to;

Trenk and Regnark went right to work getting their attention and inflicting large wounds on the two demons within seconds. The two tanks were backed up by the rest of the group as similar spells from the prior room bombarded them, one at a time, and multiple arrows – which Fred noticed were made entirely of high-quality steel instead of wood – embedded themselves into the throat and chest of each Tormentor.

Unfortunately, before the demon that Regnark was fighting was killed, it managed to sneak one of its bladed arms past the big man's defense, slicing deep through the multiple bear furs covering his body and carving a chunk of his skin off in the process. He cried out in temporary pain before he activated his Unflinching Stance ability, which apparently numbed any of his wounds for a limited time and allowed him to keep fighting.

Metlin healed him up with a spell called Accelerated Regrowth, which sped up his body's natural healing process exponentially; within a minute, he was back to full Vitality – which was good, because Pollianne was just finishing up with the disarmament of the defense that encompassed the last half of the room.

Long, mostly transparent shadowy tendrils dropped down from the ceiling and hung there largely inert – except for two near the Assassin as she worked on disarming the trap trigger on the floor. The two tendrils reared back and struck at her – but passed through her form as if she wasn't even there; it was only when Fred looked harder that he noticed another figure of Pollianne crouched down safely about two feet to the left of what appeared to be some sort of illusion. He hadn't seen her use an ability, but then again, he hadn't really been watching her at the time. *That would be handy to be able to do, though.*

A few seconds later, the shadowy tendrils disappeared, and Fred saw the Dark Mana from the defense, as well as the blobs left over from the two Flaying Tormentors, zoom away through the wall toward where he could detect the Dungeon Core – which was getting closer by the minute. He had barely even registered it happening in the previous room because he was still reeling from the presence of Hellspawn in the dungeon, but he also noticed that everyone received some Essence – not a lot, because there were quite a few of them in their group, but he estimated that he had received approximately 1,200 from the last two rooms.

“This next room is tricky, but once we’re past it we’ll be at the last room – and then you can do whatever it is you said you need to do there,” Metlin said, before adding, “and, of course, pay us that gold you mentioned earlier.”

Fred ignored the gold comment, as he was more curious about what he had meant about the next room being tricky. “What do you mean—” he began to ask, before he emerged into the 29th room – and saw exactly what the Druid-Thief meant.

Instead of there being a single large demon – or even a pair, like the previous room – there were *dozens* of the black clouds of infinite darkness scattered around the huge, 200-foot by 200-foot room. Fortunately, it appeared as though the Dark Mana clouds were much smaller than in the later rooms; in fact, they almost looked like the ones Fred had seen still present in the first dozen or so rooms. That similarity turned out to be accurate, as smaller demons emerged from the clouds scattered across the area.

“This isn’t good – they’re not supposed to come out all at once!” Metlin shouted, his voice rising in pitch as fear set in. Fred ignored him as he took in what they were up against.

Defiled Goblinoid (Level 14)

Vitality: 85

Attack: 30, Knife Stab

Defense: 25, (+80% Dark defense, -60% Light defense)

Lesser Imp (Level 12)

Vitality: 110

Attack: 35, Hellfireball

Defense: 30, (+70% Dark defense, +70% Fire defense, -85% Light defense)

Succubus (Level 8)

Vitality: 125

Attack: 50, Whipcrack, Entangle

Defense: 25, (+80% Dark defense, -60% Light defense)

Hell-touched Bear Demon (Level 6)

Vitality: 200

Attack: 60, Maul, Bear Hug

Defense: 55, (+80% Dark defense, -60% Light defense)

Desecration Devil (Level 4)

Vitality: 250

Attack: 70, Pitchfork Stab, Divebomb

Defense: 60, (+70% Dark defense, +70% Fire defense, -85% Light defense)

Twelve large Goblins that were vaguely similar in appearance to Eisa's Goblin Gnomes appeared first to Fred's sight in a semi-circle around the entrance. Unlike the Earth-based version of her Goblins, these ones were all black with glowing red eyes, wielded steel daggers instead of the rusty iron daggers hers held, and were at least twice as large. They were still shorter than any of the humans by at least a foot, but they definitely appeared more dangerous than a normal Goblin Gnome. They approached the ready group of Adventurers cautiously but with murder in their eyes.

Above them, suspended in the air, were ten darkness-filled clouds that spat out dark-red winged Lesser Imps, who immediately started to fling out Hellfireballs at the assembled group. They weren't the typical thrown ball of fire; instead, they had a core of black flames in the center of them, with unnaturally dark-red flames surrounding it that barely flickered as they flew through the air.

Most of the Hellfireballs either crashed harmlessly against Trenk's barrier or were dodged by Regnark, but one of them managed to get close to harming Metlin. A hastily thrown-up wall of vines filled with thorns blocked it as the Druid-Thief cast another spell, Thorn Wall; the wall was consumed almost completely by the Hellfire, but it also prevented Metlin from harm.

Meanwhile, eight barbed-whip-wielding, red-skinned, horned, female demons appeared, wearing next to nothing on their over-exaggerated "human"-like bodies. They advanced slower than the others, but Fred could understand it; they had some serious reach to their weapons, and he watched them snap their barbed-tipped whips forward with a loud *crack* that looked capable of tearing the flesh off someone's body.

Next to them were half a dozen large, black-furred forms of Hell-touched Bear Demons, and Fred honestly had to say they looked fairly

normal...until they reared back on their hind legs, which seemed to grow longer and more sturdy as he watched. Standing over 9 feet tall, the Bear Demons' eyes glowed red with demonic energy as they advanced on two feet and judging by the strength in their chests and arms, looked like they could take Regnark in a fair fight without weapons.

Finally, appearing in the rear of the room, four much larger and deadlier-looking versions of the Lesser Imps appeared above the ground with their wings outstretched, wielding long red-steel pitchforks in their hands. Instead of staying at a distance like the Imps, however, they immediately shot forward and started to dive towards the group with their weapons extended.

Fred took in all of that information within the first few seconds, and after Metlin had mentioned that the defenders weren't all supposed to attack at once, he realized that the Dark Core was changing up their attack patterns. While it couldn't create anything new or change anything inside its dungeon, it could certainly dictate how its defenders could attack. He couldn't blame it, though, because he probably would've done the same thing if he saw a potential threat to his existence.

Based on that knowledge, he realized that – unless he and his friends pulled out all the stops – some of them wouldn't live long enough to get to the Dark Core. While none of the 40 monsters arrayed against them were particularly powerful – Fred and his friends could probably fight them in groups of 5 or 6 – there were too many of them to properly defend against.

For the members of their group that had less Vitality and Defense – namely, Metlin, Refelynn, and even Eisa – they would likely get swarmed before they could be saved. If the other group hadn't been relatively low on Power and Stamina from their earlier delve through the dungeon, Fred

thought that they might pull off a defense, but with the current state of affairs...Eisa and Deecy were going to have to intervene.

“There’s no help for it, Eisa – it’s Scorpion time! Deecy, you do your thing – we have to get through!” Fred yelled, while pumping 13,100 Essence that he had in reserve into Light Explosion – the new one he had Adapted from the Channeler – to unlock it and bring it up to Level 4.

Light Explosion (Channeled) 4 – 0/27000

Upon activation of the channeled Light Explosion spell, the caster extends their Power toward a specific point of space (non-targeted). Once enough power builds up, a controlled explosion of light will occur at that point that will harm anything within a certain distance from the origin point, with light-based damage. The explosion will continually wax and wane if the channeled conduit is maintained with sufficient Power. Origin point may be moved slowly, as quick movements could cause the explosion to become unstable and extinguish.

Activation Power cost of Light Explosion (Channeled): 250

Channeled Power cost: 25 per second

Light damage: 40 per second

Explosion damage range: 4.5 feet

Movement speed: 1.4 feet per second

Maximum channeled range: 22 feet

Looking at his own Power, Fred saw that he hadn’t actually used a lot lately, as most of the heavy work had been done by the others.

Fredwynklemossering

Power: 4725/5100

With his reserve of Power and his new channeled spell, he was finally going to be able to contribute to the fight. “Everyone! Don’t get distracted by what you’re about to see!” he called out to the others, as Deecy transformed into her Giant form and a Crystal Scorpion appeared on the side of the room. With a quick dodge to the side as a Hellfireball flew past his head, Fred began to unleash his Power.

Chapter 27

Despite Fred's warning, the others were still distracted by what Deecy and Eisa did. She herself was only *slightly* distracted as she saw Fred extend both of his hands out in two directions and two simultaneous explosions of light appeared in the air, swallowing up two of the flying, fireball-flinging demons in the middle of the air. They tried to escape the destruction, but they were essentially burnt to a crisp in less than a second as the light damage destroyed their Dark-based bodies.

She had heard a long time ago from her starting days as an Adventurer in the Syndicate about the different types of Dark dungeons, but she'd never thought that she would ever visit one. Despite having a former affinity for death and Necromancy, she never wanted to be surrounded by undead; the one place she wanted to visit even *less* than undead Dark dungeons were the ones filled with Hellspawn. She wasn't sure what it was, but she used to have some sort of mental breakdown whenever she thought about demons and the other denizens of Hellspawn dungeons.

But now...it didn't really bother her. She still wasn't necessarily a fan of demons, devils, imps, and succubi – but she wasn't prepared to run screaming at the thought of going up against them. As soon as they entered the dungeon, she knew right away that it wasn't an undead dungeon and she had prepared herself for the abject terror she knew was coming – but it never hit her. Whatever part of her that had rebelled against the thought of delving through Hellspawn-infested dungeons was...just...*gone*.

Strangely, it worried her a little bit. *What else is gone? Am I missing anything else?*

So far, she hadn't encountered anything but a much-muted fear of death; since she had died already, death wasn't quite as scary as it was anymore. She didn't for a minute think that if she died again that she would come back to life, but the all-encompassing drive to save herself was almost non-existent; it wasn't gone completely, but it seemed to be mostly replaced by a need to help others. Which was the main reason she wanted to help find her Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross – she felt a drive to ensure *they* didn't die. That same drive also extended to the people of Death's March, despite the fact that they had tried to kill them; she was glad when Fred had volunteered to help them, even though he had no idea what he had in mind in the Dark dungeon.

Speaking of that, she returned her attention back to the fight against dozens of Hellspawn after being distracted by Fred's new light-explosion ability. She directed her Level 6 Crystal Scorpion she had just created to start attacking the bear demon thingies that looked powerful. The large winged devils with pitchforks diving toward Regnark and Trenk appeared to be even more dangerous, but her Scorpion was better suited to tackle ground-based foes.

At a size that was half again as big as the biggest demon bear, her defender tore into the closest bear with its front claws, doing significant damage to its body and its left front leg. A return attack by the powerful paws of the bear rocked her Scorpion back a little as the hit impacted its right claws, but the sharp-looking nails of the demon only skittered along the outside of the crystal exoskeleton, doing very little damage. The vulnerable point of her Scorpion was in its face and the tip of its stinger, which the bear couldn't reach – which meant that it was picked apart quite easily by the giant claws of her defender.

For herself, Eisa threw out a Lightscythe spell toward one of the imps throwing dark-colored fireballs and scored a direct hit, but all it seemed to do was annoy it. The flying Hellspawn was more powerful than the undead they had been fighting outside of the dungeon, and her Level 2 Lightscythe just didn't do quite enough damage, despite its vulnerability to light damage. She quickly opened up her Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface and spent an additional precious 12,000 Essence to bring it up to level 4, essentially doubling the damage it did.

She closed her Interface and immediately saw a black fireball heading right for her face; the imp that she had targeted with her Lightscythe was fighting back. Without time to dodge, she instinctively transformed into her Earth Elemental form and felt the dirt covering her body – and face – just in time to receive the flung fireball. Her head snapped back from the force of the impact and she braced herself for the feeling of having her face burnt away; she reached up with her dirt-covered hands and felt around, finding some cracks in the rough exterior of her head, but it was fully intact – and it wasn't hot in the least.

She didn't think she could surprise Hellspawn, but she could've sworn the look on the imp that had tried to burn her face off was one of shock. She wiped even that look off its face as she flung out two more improved Lightscythes in succession, finally knocking the annoying demon out of the air with her last strike.

A line of pain running down her back made her stumble forward in reaction to an attack from behind; she recovered quickly and saw that one of the dark-colored goblins she had seen earlier had snuck up and tried to stab her while she was dealing with the imp. Fortunately, her new Earth Elemental's dirt "skin" was a lot stronger than her normal human body, which was probably the only reason she hadn't been hurt too badly. She

could tell that if she completely ignored the Goblin that it would eventually break through her hard exterior and inflict some real damage.

She mentally transformed her arms into sharp-bladed instruments of death, which she had found over the last couple of days was much easier than she had thought it would be. It was almost as natural as performing a spell or activating an ability; she had the knowledge of it in her head – all she had to do was think of it and it would happen. The biggest difference was that, instead of available Power limiting her potential, she was limited by how much of her body she could manipulate.

The easiest thing that she could do was turn her arms into blades, but she could also grow taller or shrink down, become thin as a stick or as fat as a large tree, or even extend her arms to three times their normal length. The only issue was her mass of dirt covering her; if she grew taller, for instance, her body would extend upwards, but she would grow much thinner as a result. Essentially, if she wanted to make something bigger, something else needed to become smaller. Still, there was only so much she could do, but it was quite a bit if she didn't mind bending and stretching her very form in order to do all of it.

Eisa struck back at the dark goblin with admittedly clumsy strikes, which were just as clumsily deflected by what appeared to be a steel knife in its hand. She'd never had much weapons training in the past, which only made sense – most of her Adventurer days had been filled with slinging spells or occasionally fending off an enemy with a staff she kept stored in her PIB. As far as edged weapons, however, she had never really fought with one before she acquired her new Earth Elemental form, so she knew her skills were a little lacking.

Fortunately, desperation and a willingness to throw oneself into a fight could make up for that lack of training...a little bit. When Eisa added

the fact that she knew she wouldn't be seriously hurt if she was stabbed once or twice, she was more than willing to go all out without regard to any type of defense. Well, that, and she cheated a little.

A Lightscythe she shot directly in its face caused the agile goblin to dodge quickly out of the way, while partially blinding it at the same time. When it was disoriented, she struck hard and fast, stabbing and slashing for everything she was worth as she practically jumped on top of the shorter figure; she felt a single slash from its knife scrape across her chest, but she was able to overcome its natural speed and defense with her suicidal assault.

She kept slashing at it until it disappeared into the ground, melting away and leaving Dark Mana behind – which was immediately absorbed by the dungeon. She looked up to see the rest of the group finished with their own fights and staring at her; the new group they had joined with were looking at her with expressions ranging from shock to veiled interest, while Fred and Regnark just smiled at her.

“What?” she asked, trying to figure out why they were staring.

She looked around to see that the other dungeon monsters had already disappeared as well, and Essence flowed into all of them. She couldn't believe that they had managed to kill all of them so quickly while she was fighting, but then she saw Deecy shrink back down to Pup size and pad over to her side, her tongue hanging out of her mouth.

***“Apparently, my Fire mana makes me partially immune to Hellfire and some Dark Mana attacks; that, and with my ability to jump and snatch those pesky devils out of the air, they didn't stand a chance. And your Crystal Scorpion garnered so much attention that everyone was easily able to pick them off individually rather quickly.*”**

“Unfortunately, one of those darn succubi managed to grab my leg with its barbed whip – which hurt...a lot – so if you wouldn’t mind, could you heal me with your special ability? I think the shock of my appearance has sent the Druid into conniptions.”

Eisa smiled at Deecy – until she saw that she was limping and bleeding quite heavily. She shot a glare at the small, green-clothed “Druid”, and immediately used Earth’s Renewal on the Dire Wolf Pup. Within a few seconds, the wound stopped bleeding and Deecy quickly walked around showing off her healed state. Eisa looked around for her Scorpion and saw it in the center of the room, looking quite a bit worse for wear but still miraculously alive.

“Thank you, Eisa. By the way, you’re naked. Just thought you’d like to know.”

Eisa immediately banished her Earth Elemental form and hid her face behind her hands once she was back to her human body again. *I must’ve forgotten to add clothes when I changed so quickly!* She couldn’t believe she had been figuratively naked again in front of all those people; it was one thing to do it in front of Fred and Regnark, but it was something else to do it in front of strangers.

Muted laughter from the group was quickly cut off as Trenk told everyone, “Alright, we’ve made good time and there’s only one room left – let’s go!”

Chapter 28

Fred couldn't believe how deadly Deecy could be once she had the opportunity to show off her skills. To her Giant Dire Wolf form, the demons and devils and imps were more like chew toys than real threats, and she – along with Eisa's highly durable Crystal Scorpion – dominated the battle. Once the other group had overcome their shock at their appearance, they threw themselves into the fight with enthusiasm – so much so that they had managed to kill everything in the room within three minutes. That was good, though, because Fred just overheard the Dark Core Communicating again.

“I don't know what is going on, but these livestock are more than they appear. I swear one of them just created an Earth defender from the Mana inside its body! And then there's this wolf creature that can change its size – and it's made from both Water and Fire Mana! <Pause> Of course I activated my fail-safe; I never thought that I'd have to use it, but now there's very little chance that they're getting through my last room. <Short Pause> Yes, I see them filing down my entrance tunnel now – you have my layout, right? <Very Short Pause> Excellent, that means your undead should be hitting them from the back in about five minutes; my Demonlord's alternate fail-safe form should be strong enough to hold them back at least that long. Thanks for sending your defenders – once these invaders are dead, I'll be sending everything I've got outside.”

Fred heard that one-sided conversation and worried just a little bit. Not only was the final boss – a Demonlord, apparently – transformed into

something likely more powerful, but there was another Core's undead army now at their back. They needed to move – and move *quickly*.

Fortunately, Trenk was able to get everyone moving after they were distracted from Eisa's show of hacking apart a Defiled Goblinoid in her "naked" Earth Elemental form. Eisa, now recovered from her obvious embarrassment, had run over to her Scorpion and reabsorbed it, as it wouldn't fit through the passageway to the next room.

As they started to move towards the exit tunnel, Pollianne finally showed up, after having spent the entire battle deactivating two more trap defenses that had been set up in an area near the far side of the room.

"What did I miss?" she asked, running along with the large group.

"What did you miss? Just the fact that this little wolf can transform into a giant 20-foot monster. Oh, and this girl can summon monsters to do her bidding and can become some sort of naked dirt creature that has the ability to create blades from her arms. That's all," Metlin told her with exaggerated sarcasm. "And then, let's not forget that this guy here is apparently a Channeler as well, along with some sort of Mage...who *are* you people?" he continued, directing his question toward Fred.

"It would take too long to explain it right now; if we survive the next five minutes, I'll tell you whatever you want to know. We have to hurry to get past this last room before time runs out," Fred told him.

"What do you mean by *survive*? And, by my reckoning, we still have over ten minutes before those monsters reach Death's March – as well as over twenty before they reach here."

I guess it couldn't hurt to tell them. "Oh, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the army of undead that just entered through the entrance tunnel. We've got about five minutes before they hit us from behind."

Trenk stopped at the front of the group, halfway through the tunnel to the 30th and last room. “What? Where did they come from, and how do you know?”

The question was echoed by the Dark Core at almost precisely the same time – she could obviously understand her “livestock’s” speech well enough.

“...how does this wretched livestock know?”

“Because I can hear the Dark Core talking. Look, I can explain later, but we’re running out of time.”

Refelynn spoke up, which was a rarity, but whenever she spoke the others seemed to listen. “I would very much like to hear more about that. But if you’re telling the truth, we need to hurry – and your plan better have something to deal with this army of undead you say is coming.”

I sure hope so.

“Enough of this – let’s get going,” Regnark said, pushing ahead and the others followed close behind him. Fred was glad that they hadn’t stopped to question him more, because they really couldn’t afford to waste any more time.

“Let me disarm this trap at the entrance really quick—huh? It’s not there,” Pollianne said, leading the group into the final room. She hesitated when she passed over the threshold and looked around suspiciously, as if the trap being disarmed was somehow unnatural and had to be a trick.

Fred used his Mana Sight and didn’t see any activated defenses, but he thought he saw a faint residue where one might’ve been, but it was essentially powerless now. Looking around the room – which he could see in the complete darkness better than his normal vision – he saw seven other

spots around the room that appeared very similar to the “emptied” defense at the entrance. When he looked toward the middle of the room, however, he thought that he had found where the Mana went.

A pulsing Dark Mana outline of...something...stood tall in the middle of the massive room, unmoving but facing toward the entrance of the room. Fred immediately brought forth another Magelight – which fortunately cost very little Power to cast – and directed the bright, harmless orb toward where he saw the pulsing Dark Mana. It flew at least 50 feet forward before it collided against something so dark red that it appeared almost black.

Gasps near him from the Druid-Thief and Lasgo were echoed by the rest of the group as Eisa added her own Magelight, followed by Refelynn channeling her own illumination spell so that they could see all of what they were up against.

“Well, now I know why this room is so large; it had never made much sense for a boss only 20 feet tall that couldn’t fly to be in a room with 100-foot-tall ceilings, but this...this would explain it. What happened?” Trenk said, wonder and a little fright in his voice for the first time since Fred had known him.

At over 60 feet tall, a massive dark-red demon stood in the center of the expansive room, staring at them but not moving. Two sharp, 3-foot-long horns shot out of the top of its nightmarish head, which looked like a combination of an insect and a pig with small embers burning in where he thought the eyes were; six arms extended from its shoulders all the way down to its torso on both sides of its chest, which sported muscles on top of muscles to support the extra appendages. A black-colored rotted loincloth covered its waist, which allowed the tree-trunk legs extending from its hips – which ended in cloven hooves – free range of movement.

To top it all off, each of the six hands held a large black-steel scimitar at least a dozen feet long, currently held upright without the demon seemingly straining itself.

“Uh, guys – there’s no way we can kill that thing. It wouldn’t surprise me if it’s something only seen in at least a very high B-Rated dungeon, if not an A-Rated. If we were completely rested and at full Power, we *might* be able to harm that thing, but I doubt we could kill it – even with whatever special abilities you all seem to have,” Trenk said, glancing at Eisa and the Dire Wolf in particular.

“He’s likely right; there’s no way we can kill that thing. I might be able to do a little damage, but a solid hit or two from one of those swords and I’m done for.”

That wasn’t promising, if Deecy was admitting defeat before they even tried. After looking closer at it, though, he couldn’t help but agree.

Demonlord – Upgraded (Level 1)

Vitality: 35000

Attack: 1800, Multi-slash, Crosscut, Forced Assault, Hellfire Stomp

Defense: 750, (+70% Dark defense, +70% Fire defense, -85% Light defense)

Yeah, that’s not good. The Demonlord wasn’t quite as bad as an Emerald Dragon in terms of raw strength, but then again, he didn’t have any mana to make a giant Rock Beetle, either.

“We can’t do this – we’ve got to go back,” Metlin was saying to the others in his group, who seemed to agree with him. Before they could decide to go back, Regnark tried to stop them.

“No! Our only chance is if we go forward; Fred already told you that there is an undead army behind us, so going back isn’t an option.”

They still looked to want to turn back as they all stared at each other in silence, for entirely too long – to the point where Fred thought that they would just wait for the undead reinforcements to reach them before deciding. All except Pollianne, who rocked from foot to foot in impatience – she just wanted to do *something* to save her sister.

Fortunately, they didn’t have to wait until they were overwhelmed by undead, because Refelynn amazingly came to his rescue. “Ok, for some strange reason I feel like I can trust that you’re telling the truth. So...what’s your plan?”

“Well, you’re probably not going to like this, but this is what we’re going to do...”

* * *

Fred crept around the perimeter of the room, following after Pollianne who was silently leading the way in the shadowed darkness near the walls. All of their illumination was concentrated in the middle of the room, where the others could use it to “fight” the extremely deadly Demonlord. The Assassin was cloaked in her normal invisibility, which she had tried to show Fred – but he failed to learn the ability. Although it was Power-based, it wasn’t necessarily a failure on his part; the entire process was internal and actually converted her body and clothing invisible from the *inside out*. By the time it reached outside of her clothing, most of the

Power had dissipated and there was very little he could learn. He thought that if he played around with some of his other spells and abilities as a Researcher that he might be able to figure it out, but he didn't currently have that kind of time.

After about 30 seconds of prep, Trenk walked forward and passed some invisible line in the room, which triggered the attack by the Demonlord in the middle. Luckily, despite having the strength to likely chop Fred in half with one blow of a sword, the massive defender was relatively slow. Trenk wasn't particularly fast himself as he went up against the large-building-sized demon, but he was at least able to dive out of the way of a few sword swipes. The problem was that his foe had *six* swords that it could strike down at him.

Thankfully, Regnark was there to draw the attention of some of them, as was Eisa's two Crystal Scorpions she had created with her Earth Mana. Fred had actually ended up emptying his Earth Mana to feed her almost 50 more, which was just enough for her to bring forth the two – albeit only at the bare Level 1 minimum. When you added in Deecy in her Giant Dire Wolf form, there were now *five* close targets for the Demonlord to contend with.

Both Metlin and Fred ended up using the Nature's Breath Druid ability to speed everyone up – which confused the heck out of everyone at the sight of yet another ability he shouldn't have access to – and it ended up stacking, giving them a significant boost to their sword-dodging ability. Lasgo was apparently low on his special steel arrows, so Fred Conjured up a few bundles, which made the Sniper extremely happy – and the greed practically shone from the Druid-Thief's face as he saw him do that. Fred ignored it and knew he would face some uncomfortable questions later – if they all survived.

Refelynn was keeping her channeled Light Explosion spell in the Demonlord's face as much as she could, though Fred wasn't sure if it was making much of a difference. Eisa was tossing out Lightscythes one after another – while doing little to no damage – and Lasgo was firing non-stop at every body part he could target. Despite the strength of his bow and the use of his abilities, very few arrows actually penetrated the massive demon's skin, let alone actually harmed it. A few accurate shots towards its eyes only managed to bounce off its fiery embers without harm.

It was all good, though, because their objective was to keep their gigantic opponent busy, not to actually kill it. That job was supposedly for Fred and Pollianne, who were circling around to attack from behind. He had told them that he had a special ability to heavily damage or even instantly kill the Demonlord, but it was something that had to be done to an unaware target. And as he had to physically touch it, the best way for that to happen was to come at it from behind.

They were nearly to the opposite side of the entrance when Pollianne turned toward the center of the room with Fred in tow. He could vaguely sense her in her invisibility state with his Mana Sight, because even though she didn't have any inherent elemental Mana inside of her, he could partially sense the movement of her passing through the strong ambient Dark Mana filling up the entire dungeon. It was almost like watching the tiny ambient Mana particles in the air part around a void in the shape of a person.

They “snuck” up on the humongous demon and took their time not alerting it to their presence. His friends – old and new – were doing a great job distracting it, but he could see some of them tiring already; despite only fighting for over a minute, they were constantly having to dodge and avoid attacks, because even a single strike could prove deadly. In fact, as Fred

and the Assassin were closing in on the demon's left leg, Trenk took a glancing blow to his armor – and was launched across the room to impact against the nearest wall, colliding with a cacophonous crash of metal. He slid down to the floor and lay there unmoving – but with a quick check at his Vitality, Fred saw that he was at least still alive.

With one less target, the others were in danger, so Fred hurried to reach the leg he was aiming for...when the inevitable happened, and the Demonlord lifted his foot up and tried to stomp Fred flat into the ground. Strangely enough, that was what Fred had been waiting for; as Pollianne dived forwards out of the way, he flung himself backwards and cast *Windbreak on himself* while in the air. A fist of air slammed into him – which hurt quite a bit – and turned his little backwards dive into something like a skipped stone across a pond towards the back wall of the room.

Luckily, he rolled to a stop before he smashed into the hard stone, but it took him a moment to recover and get to his feet. Looking up, he saw the Demonlord looking straight at him stomping his way, despite the lack of light; since Demons could apparently see in the darkness as if it were daylight, Fred quickly used a *Magelight* spell and turned towards the wall.

He ran his hands over the rough stone projections of the wall, desperately running back and forth over a section. *Where is it? Where is it?!* He kept searching, hoping to find what he was looking for, when some sixth sense told him to duck; throwing himself flat to the ground, Fred felt the wind of a sword's passage half a foot over his body, striking the rock and causing sparks to flare out. It was one of those sparks that he happened to see out of the corner of his eye that showed him the opening he was searching for.

He immediately got to his feet, ran three steps forward, and dived straight ahead into the spot where he had seen the spark disappear – all the

while hoping he didn't slam straight into solid rock or get chopped in half by a sword. By whatever fortune favored him, Fred managed to fling himself into a small crevice in the seemingly solid stone wall, just as another sword slammed on the ground outside, causing the ground to tremble a bit at the impact.

I found it!

He had done what he had briefly thought might be impossible by getting past the Demonlord and finding the small crevice in the massive stone wall; indeed, that was hard – but the next part was going to be even harder.

Chapter 29

Fred didn't want to deceive both his old friends and the new group of Adventurers, but he had no real choice. Any plan he conveyed to them was bound to be picked up by the Dark Core listening in, and even trying to softly whisper his plans into their ears would've likely resulted in the same problem. He personally remembered being able to observe and hear *everything* located in his territory, and he would be a fool to expect that this Dungeon Core was any different.

Therefore, he had to tell them a little lie; while their jobs distracting the massive Demonlord was important, it served a different purpose from the one they thought. Fred didn't have any type of ability that would allow him to kill anything by touching them, but they didn't know that; based on the strange abilities the others seemed to have, it was just another surprise that he had yet to show.

He could tell that Eisa and Regnark didn't *quite* believe him, but went along with it anyway; Deecy, on the other hand, knew he was lying straight away. Fortunately, he had a way to privately communicate with her that the Dark Core couldn't seem to pick up – at least it didn't seem so from the few times he had done it in the dungeon – and so was able to explain his real plan. Once he had done so, she went along with it as well, as it seemed like the only option; though, she said that she had some advice to go along with that, but didn't have the time to explain it because they needed to start the attack and didn't want to distract him.

As soon as he had dived safely into the hidden crevice, though, she had Communicated with him again.

“You really ticked this thing off – it’s standing next to where you disappeared and staring at the wall like it was going to start trying to smash its way through. Anyway, there was something I was thinking about yesterday, but we were interrupted by attacking undead, I think.

“I don’t think you need to fully absorb and kill the Dark Core to obtain its element. With that first Nature Core you touched, you probably could’ve chosen to acquire just the Nature Element from it, but also leave it extremely weakened – but alive. The rapid Mana loss would’ve likely collapsed its territory as well, though only temporarily until they could establish it again. But, because you waited too long, your internal dungeon core system made the choice for you.

“For the Earth Core, that’s a little trickier; I assume that – since it was taken from its territory – it didn’t have the necessary Mana reserves to survive the acquisition of a new element and everything that goes along with it. Therefore, it would’ve been destroyed by you even touching it, which obviously started the process automatically.”

Fred squeezed himself through the crevice, which turned a sharp corner and led farther into the wall. It seemed to be a lot longer passageway than he had ever seen before, but he could tell he was going the right way – the Dark Core felt almost within touching distance now. “*Then why didn’t I fully absorb the other Nature Cores that were stolen from their territories,*” he Communicated back to her, as he squeezed through another couple of feet in the tight crevice. He was glad that Regnark didn’t want to come, because the big man’s leg would barely even fit inside.

“Probably because you didn’t need the basic “building blocks” of their element, so there was no need to fully absorb them anymore. You were able to just acquire what you needed from them and that was it.”

Fred thought that made sense, though he wasn’t sure what to do with the information. He had been trying to work his resolve up to deliberately destroying the Dark Core, but if there was a way around actually killing her, he wanted to try that instead.

“Good luck...and hurry, I think I hear the undead approaching.”

Fred squeezed through even faster and felt the skin on his chest tear underneath his clothes in his hurry, but he ignored the flares of pain and pushed himself to move faster. He was running out of time and if he didn’t find the Core Room soon, he didn’t think—

He stumbled out into empty space and fell to his knees as the last of the crevice ran out, which led to a completely dark room. *I shouldn’t be surprised – this is a **Dark Core**, after all.* He stood up and used his Mana Sight to look around; he didn’t want to use his Magelight spell quite yet, as he wanted to save every drop of Power that he had just in case he needed it. Besides, he didn’t need it to see what he needed to.

“What are you doing here, fool? Why go through all of this when there is nothing you can do to me – I’m indestructible. And if you try to take me, there’s a horde of undead making its way down here that won’t let you get two steps past my Core Room. All your stupid livestock friends will die – and for what? To say you saw a Dungeon Core? You won’t live long enough to tell anyone—”

Fred stepped forward to place his hands on the Core, when he felt a piercing pain in his back. He stumbled and fell back to his knees as he looked behind him; a small, Level 1 Defiled Goblinoid was standing there with its steel knife raised to strike again. He hadn't seen it because its small amount of Mana was eclipsed by the raging inferno that was the Dungeon Core.

“You know, I’ve had that Goblin in my Core Room for almost 300 years. I constantly thought about getting rid of it to use the Mana on something else, but something always told me to keep it around in case of an emergency. I guess I was right.”

The Defiled Goblinoid quickly stepped forward to deliver another blow and Fred raised his hands towards the out-of-reach Core as if in supplication. However, that wasn't what he had in mind; since it had worked so well already, he used his Windbreak spell again and hit himself from behind, propelling himself forward and out of range of the Goblin's attack. He managed to smash the fist of air right into the deep knife wound – which hurt quite a bit – but the spell also managed to get him close enough to touch the Dark Core with his outstretched right hand.

So...he did.

Time seemed to freeze again as his fingertips brushed up against the slowly pulsing Dark Core. Hundreds of things went through Fred's head as he thought about what he had to do, his wound to his back, and his friends who were likely stuck in between the Demonlord and an army of undead coming to wipe them out.

Do you wish to absorb: Dark Core C-3rd-Rating? Yes/No

Fred thought about it for a half-second – which was actually quite a lot of time in that frozen state – before he chose **No**, refusing to destroy the Dark Core if he had another choice. If Deecy was correct, doing it a different way would net him what he ultimately needed – for the Core’s territory to collapse so that he could establish his own.

Nothing else happened, though, and he worried that he had still taken too long to decide. Finally, after he sat there with his fingers touching the Dark Core for what felt like hours, he experienced a weird shift in his entire perception.

Rerouting absorption parameters. Do you wish to extract: (Base) Dark Element, (4) blueprints, and (161328) Dark Mana?

Warning! The rapid release of vast quantities of Mana will cause a temporary collapse in C-3rd-Rated Dark Core’s territory! Proceed? Yes/No

This must be what Deecy was talking about. It seemed as though he would be getting what he needed – which was the elimination of the Dark Core’s territory, however temporary it was. With his decision made, Fred chose **Yes**, and waited...and waited...

Hmm...something’s wro—

Suddenly, it felt like he had just been punched in the head by the Demonlord from the previous room, though he wasn’t sent flying across the room like Trenk had. Instead, time started again as his hand instinctively closed around the Dark Core he was touching as he continued his tumble forward, his Windbreaker spell finishing its knockback effect. He rolled to

a stop against the far wall of the Core Room as it started to feel like his chest was going to explode.

“WHAT DID YOU DO!? No! Not all of my Mana! Nooooooooo!”

Fred barely heard the Dark Core Communicating with him because he was almost delirious with pain erupting all over his body. Fortunately, he still had enough presence of Mind to check his Mana and Territorial Sight to see if he had succeeded, and he was rewarded by seeing that there was no longer a territory surrounding him and the dungeon. Before the Core could reestablish it, Fred reached out with his own senses and found faint traces of Fire, Water, Nature, and large representations of Earth; he tried to bring forth a territory...but nothing happened.

In the building pressure of his body as Dark Mana streaming from the Core in his hand continued to transfer to him, he realized he hadn't included his new element. Along with absorbing all of the Mana, he had “extracted” the Dark element along with the process. Fred didn't even have to look at his Core Status to see that he now had access to a fifth element – he could *feel* it all around him now.

Adding the Dark element to his territory was easy, as it was literally all around him. As soon as he did that, his territory snapped into place – and Fred could sense *everything*. He wanted to see if his friends were alright, but there were other concerns closer to hand; the pressure on his body refused to stop or even slow, so he looked with his Mana Sight to see what was happening.

There was a large conduit connecting his body with the Dark Core in his hand, and the constant flow of Dark Mana was filling him up – to overflowing. He peered at the Core system he had hidden inside of his

chest and saw another elemental Core separate from his structure, pulsing to its own rhythm. That wasn't really what concerned him, though, because large cracks were starting to form on his Human Core every few seconds, until it looked like it was going to burst any moment. The conduit started to shrink and sputter as the majority of the Dark Mana finished transferring to him, but the damage had already been done. He began to scream out in sheer torment as the Mana threatened to burst out from him from the inside.

(Warning! You are now holding 133,145 Unconverted Mana units over your current capacity of 40,000. Containing extra Unconverted Mana can damage your core over time without the appropriate Core Structure Level.)

Would you like to use 40,000 Unconverted Mana Units to increase your Core Structure Level? Yes/No

Fred instantly selected **Yes** and felt a lessening of the pain as his Human Core cocooned itself in Mana and filled in the cracks, enlarging the entire Core in the process. It helped, but the agony of containing too much Mana was still there.

(Warning! You are now holding 53,145 Unconverted Mana units over your current capacity of 80,000. Containing extra Unconverted Mana can damage your core over time without the appropriate Core Structure Level.)

Would you like to use 80,000 Unconverted Mana Units to increase your Core Structure Level? Yes/No

Fred, of course, selected **Yes** again and he almost instantly felt a relief as 80,000 Unconverted Mana was sent into his Human Core to increase its Core Structure Level, fixing the few small cracks that had appeared since it had just increased and wrapping the entire Core in soft, colorless light. As soon as it was done, there was a brief flash as his Human Core appeared in his Mana Sight, huge in comparison to his Elemental Cores. With just a thought, he brought his new Dark Mana Core into the structure by rearranging the pattern to include it, separating them so that the entire thing looked like a five-pointed star. As everything clicked into place and Mana streams started running through it all, Fred felt relief and exhaustion run through his bones.

The sound of a foot scuffing the ground nearby forced him into action, as he remembered that he wasn't alone. Not only were his friends still in danger, but that Goblinoid was still nearby and likely looking to finish him off.

“I will kill you for what you’ve done! I will watch in pleasure as my defender here takes its sweet time and carves you up slowly...wait...where’s my territory! Do you even know what you’ve done? You’ve opened up a gap in the border protecting the livestock pen! Tonight, the Horrors will have access to them all – you have to let me reestablish it before they all die, and everything is set back for decades! Just let me...what? I can’t access my Mana anymore? What does unknown element mean? WHAT DID YOU DO!?”

Fred wasn't exactly sure what she was talking about, but he had a suspicion. When the prompt asked him if he wanted to “extract” the Dark

element from her Core, he thought it was the same as absorbing the information on how to use it – like when he absorbed blueprints; instead, it looked like he actually “extracted” her access to the element instead.

(Caution: A nearby Dungeon Core is attempting to acquire an element from nearby defenders.)

“What are you doing?” Fred asked out loud, his confusion at the message displayed in his vision in his voice.

Warning! The nearby Dungeon Core has been temporarily damaged due to rapid release of Mana in vast quantities; any mass infusion of Mana may increase this damage, up to and including full destruction.

“Uh, stop what you’re doing – you’re going to kill yourself!”

“No! I will not stop until I have my element back, you thief! Since you seem to be protected from me somehow, I’m going to just have to use my former defenders.”

He didn’t know what she meant, but looking through his Mana Sight, he could see a tenuous tendril of colorless Mana connecting the Defiled Goblinoid – who was now standing over him about to strike – and the element-less Core in his hand. Suddenly, a surge of Mana shot out of the knife-wielding defender and into the small Core, which caused the Goblinoid to disappear as if it had never been there.

Fred felt a small vibration in the Core he was holding, but nothing much else happened; he looked down and saw some colorless Mana inside

it that reminded him of his Unconverted Mana – which was just strange to see outside of his own body.

“Not enough...”

Wait, what? It was only then that he saw the other tendril heading off through the wall – and into the final room where his friends were still fighting for their lives. Before he could react, a surge of Mana came flying down the connection and pumped into the Core in his hand – which started to heat up quickly.

“Yes! It’s back! Now you’re going to pay—No! That’s too much – I don’t need any mo—”

The Core started to shake violently in his hand, and he could guess what was going to happen next. Rather than get blown up again with an exploding Core in his hand, Fred threw the blistering-hot crystal away from him and lay flat on the floor; he heard a *tink* *tink* as the Dungeon Core rolled to the entrance of the Core Room and through the crevice a little bit. Fred cast his Mage’s Barrier and his Necromancer’s Shield of Darkness on himself – hoping to avoid dying again – and was about to add some more protection... but a massive explosion rocked the Core Room and the last room of the dungeon, causing Fred to temporarily black out from the shockwave.

Chapter 30

When he came to, Fred was surprised to find himself relatively intact, if trapped underneath a stone slab that fell across his back. It was propped up just enough that he wasn't squished flat, but he couldn't feel his lower half; a quick check through his Territorial Sight showed that his legs were still attached, but the heavy stone was slightly crushing them and cutting off circulation – which made them numb.

Fred wasn't sure how long he was out, but when he expanded his search of his surroundings, he discovered that it wasn't long. Looking in the last room of the dungeon where the others were fighting the Demonlord, he found his friends in various states of unconsciousness after the explosion, with no sign of the massive demon.

There was a dozen undead of different types inside the room, however; no more were incoming, though, because a portion of the stone wall had been propelled across the room in the explosion, where it had crashed into the entrance tunnel, trapping those inside but also preventing any more undead from entering. Which he was glad of, because as he looked farther, he could see the previous rooms swarming with an assortment of giant Skeletons, Wraiths, Undead Knights, and even a small Bone Dragon, which appeared to be a miniature version of the Emerald Dragon his giant Rock Beetle had gone up against – only made completely of bone.

Regardless of the happenstance of the blockage, there still remained a threat to his friends; instead of trying to free himself, he instead started to do what he could to help his friends further. Deecy appeared to be waking up first, but she was back in her Pup form and severely drained of her own

Mana, which meant that she wasn't likely to be of much help. Regnark was stirring next, but by the time he got to his feet, he would likely be overwhelmed by the undead that had recovered and were running for him.

That was ok, though, because Fred could finally *do something*.

He felt...incomplete, he supposed...when he didn't have his territory up and access to his dungeon-making abilities; now that he had one back up – which filled up the entire Dark Core's former territory and then some – he was ready to be a little more than a spell-flinging multi-Mage. He was a Dungeon Core, and it was about time he used those skills to the fullest.

While he couldn't create actual dungeon rooms, he could still carve out what he wanted through the dirt and stone – it just wouldn't be counted as an actual dungeon. So, just like he had done back in Gatecross shortly after Regnark had arrived, he dug a trench in front of the approaching undead group. There were five high-level Shambling Skeletons, four Butchering Ghouls (which looked to be a “healthier and faster” form of Zombie, if such a thing could exist), and three Bone Wights (which were taller, emaciated-looking Zombies) heading towards his friends – which weren't looking where they were going as the floor ended in front of them.

He made the trench much deeper than the one in Gatecross – the undead fell down nearly 40 feet before they hit the bottom. It didn't do much more than hurt them a little, but that wasn't the point; they were now trapped below without a way to get up to hurt his friends. With that taken care of for the moment, he turned back to his own predicament – but then something caught his attention.

Hidden in the shadows of the room near the entrance, a figure stood up from where Fred had seen some others that had fallen and disappeared quickly thereafter, but he had overlooked one that hadn't. When he looked closer at it, he realized that it had been seriously hurt, but not killed; if it

hadn't been undead, it surely would've perished from being slammed with thousands of pounds of solid rock.

Lich King.(Level 6)

Vitality: 945/13000

Attack: 300, Shadow Bolt, Soul Steal

Defense: 250, (+90% Dark defense, -85% Light defense)

The Lich King walked instead of ran towards the downed Adventurers, either taking its time or its movements hampered by its injuries. Either way, when it approached the large trench where its fellow undead had fallen, Fred was expecting it to plummet straight down – *but it kept walking*, floating above the hole in the flooring. When he thought back, he realized that it wasn't walking at all – it was floating slowly, but inexorably, toward his friends.

A loud *crack* echoed through the dungeon, originating in the final room. Fred looked above the slowly recovering Adventurers and saw that the dungeon was just about to collapse. Since the dungeon's owner had lost her territory and had destroyed herself, the mana keeping everything intact was fading away. Fred could tell that the top of the giant final room was at least 200 feet underneath the ground; if everything fell in on top of everyone, there would be very little chance that any of them would survive.

Of course, none of them would survive if the Lich King got to them first. The 7-foot-tall skeleton/zombie defender was wreathed in shadows that enveloped it in a type of inflated robe, leaving only its face really visible to the naked eye. A black metal crown adorned with what appeared to be severed fingers sat on top of its head, and it held a long staff of what

appeared to be from the Deadlands trees aboveground, though it had been blackened for some sort of purpose.

Regnark stood up just in time to get a Shadow Bolt to his chest, which knocked him onto his back with a shout. The attack would've alerted the others, but they were either still unconscious or were too hurt and too far away to be of much help; Fred, on the other hand, thought he could do something about it.

Briefly checking his Core Status, he noticed a lot of changes that were going to have to wait for him to look at, especially when he was trying to save his friends; the most important thing, though, was what his current Mana was looking like.

Fire Mana: 2/139

Water Mana: 2/138

Nature Mana: 82/138

Earth Mana: 1/82

Dark Mana: 100/100

Unconverted Mana: 52985

The only thing he had at his disposal was some Nature Mana and a full complement of his new Dark Mana; he had given Deecy and Eisa his other element types for the previous battle, so that they would go into it as capable as they could be. The problem with his current Mana types was that, while he could make quite a few defenders and defenses, he didn't have anything large or powerful enough to hold off or kill the Lich King. He had received some blueprints from the Dark Core during the extraction process, but a quick look at them showed that they were for a Defiled Goblinoid and something called a Plague Rat – which didn't seem powerful

enough, even if he were to make them a higher level. He also received two defenses, but as they were Dark-based, they would be practically useless against an undead.

A brief thought about his Nature defenses came up with the same uselessness; even if he had enough Mana to create an Ensnaring Vine that hung down from the ceiling, it wouldn't do much against the powerful undead – the same with his Small Thorn Trap. The Poisonous Bomb he had received from one of the stolen Cores back in Gatecross was likely to be equally ineffective – from what he had heard, undead were immune to poison or diseases. He really didn't have anything that would be *effective*, though he could just throw a small horde of weak defenders against it...

The Lich King finally floated over the large trench Fred had created, when a large portion of the stone ceiling fell down just behind it, plummeting into the deep pit and crushing the undead struggling to find some way up. As they quickly dissipated and left behind some globs of Dark Mana, Fred looked around the room and thought he had a plan. As soon as he had something in mind, it was almost as if his thoughts sped up so fast that the world around him froze again – almost like it did when he held a Dungeon Core. Well, not quite; he could observe everything moving super slow, but it was better than nothing. He wasn't sure what was happening, but he was thankful because it gave him a chance to consider his options.

Eisa's Crystal Scorpions had perished either before or during the explosion – he wasn't exactly sure when; regardless, the Earth Mana left behind by them was drifting lazily down to the floor, just waiting to be used. Along with the available Dark Mana left behind by the destroyed undead in the pit, Fred mentally gathered it all up to create something... original. He momentarily thought about trying to make some sort of

Crystal Scorpion, but he realized that even if he were to combine two different elements into it, he still didn't think he could make one bigger than a Level 9 – it was expensive Mana-wise to bring them even that high, even considering he was using two different elements.

No, what he needed was something that he could boost up in Level cheaply, similar to the Rock Beetle he had sicced against the Emerald Dragon. He didn't have enough Mana available to make something *that* powerful, but he was sure he could come up with something. He temporarily thought about beefing up some sort of Nature defender, but he realized that it wouldn't survive long against the Lich King – it was still too powerful. No, what he needed was one of his Dark defenders, which would be able to survive a lot longer because of its innate protection against Dark-based attacks.

There was a Defiled Goblinoid which had a base cost of 15 Dark Mana and the Plague Rats, which had a base cost of 5; since he could likely boost the level of the Rats much more than the Goblinoid, he prepared the blueprint and started to fill it up with Mana...but stopped before he could finish. Looking back at his options, he realized he had neglected the list of defenders he had acquired aboveground in the Deadlands. He looked it over a couple of times and almost went back to the Rats...when he saw it.

Skeletal Squirrel (Level 1 Base Cost: 1 Dark Mana)

Perfect. He set up the blueprint of the tiny, 8-inch-tall Skeletal Squirrel and started pumping equal amounts of Dark and Earth Mana into it from what had been free-floating in the room. When all that was gone, he saw that he had managed to pump 250 of each type inside the creation, and he watched as the wire-frame blueprint got bigger and bigger. By the time

it was as big as it was going to be, the 8-inch Squirrel had transformed into a 13-foot-tall monstrosity.

Bones of the Earth Squirrel (Level 125)

Vitality: 2500/2500

Attack: 250, Claw Scratch

Defense: 310, (+45% Dark and Earth defense, -43% Air and Light defense)

The Bones of the Earth Squirrel wasn't precisely what he wanted; the additional Earth Mana had reduced its bonuses and weaknesses, but it also strengthened its natural defense somehow. As soon as he confirmed in his mind his final decision, time sped back up to normal, and the Lich King approached Regnark, just as Fred's blueprint of his new defender finished filling up with Mana. The big man stood up and swung his sword – which he had somehow kept a grip on despite being flung backwards – slicing right into the floating royal undead's left side. The Lich was hit hard enough that it was knocked to the right of Regnark, but it only managed to do a paltry 5 points of damage.

The undead reached its hands out to grab the big man as he swung his sword again, barely brushing its fingertips against his lower arm – when it was tackled from the side by a stone projectile. Fred's Squirrel looked quite different than its progenitor; its skeleton – if it was indeed still there – was completely covered in hard stone, giving it the appearance of a squirrel-shaped Stone Golem – but much more agile and deadly. It was kind of strange being able to see all the way through its rock-covered bones, but he had to admit that the cute little skeletal animal was now a behemoth of death and destruction.

Despite the brief touch against his lower arm, Regnark started screaming; it was a deep-soul-rending scream, as if his life was being sucked out of him. Fred looked and saw a conduit similar to the one the Dark Core had used to absorb mana from its defenders connecting the Lich and the big man, despite the fact that the former was rolling across the ground as it was tackled by a giant squirrel. *I guess that's what its Soul Steal ability is all about.*

Regnark's Vitality was draining at a rapid pace, while the Vitality of the Lich started to rise – though the two weren't decreasing and increasing at an equal rate. His friend's life was being drained away from him faster than the other was being healed, but the problem was that Regnark didn't have much more to give. Everyone had been hurt from the explosion, and despite having more defense than the others, he had somehow taken more than his fair share; either that, or he had been severely hurt even before that.

Regnark McDonald

Vitality: 268/4000

Stamina: 405/3800

Power: 40/60

“Eisa! Wake up and heal Regnark!” Fred practically shouted through his Mana Communication skill, hoping that his voice would wake her unconscious form up. Miraculously, she started to stir – though it probably helped that Deecy was licking her face at the same time; her eyes fluttered open and she groaned as she picked herself up off the floor – before looking around in shock.

“Eisa! Hurry – Regnark's dying!” That finally got her attention, as she got to her feet and stumbled from exhaustion. He saw her try to extend

her aura towards the big man...but it failed – she, just as Deecy, had spent all of her Mana during the previous battle to give Fred enough time to do what he needed to do. Fred checked her Power and saw that it was practically empty as well; she must have seen that too, but she used what she had to cast one Heal Minor Wounds spell after another, prolonging his life a little while she still had Power.

“Deecy! Try to wake up Metlin and the others!” he Communicated to the Dire Wolf, hoping that the others would return to consciousness in time.

Meanwhile, Fred’s Squirrel and the Lich King were trading blows back and forth, though neither of them was doing much damage to each other. The undead didn’t seem as powerful in a straight-up melee situation, and the few Shadow Bolts that it shot out at his defender did very little due to its higher defense and reduction to Dark attacks. The most that his more-agile Squirrel could do was keep the Lich’s Vitality steady, negating any of the extra it was receiving from using Soul Steal on Regnark.

Therefore, Fred wanted to change that. Using his Nature Mana and the excess Dark Mana left over from the slain undead in the trench, he started creating as many Large Wasps and Defiled Goblinoids as he could and sent them toward the fighting pair. At most, they were able to do a point of damage to the Lich King before it backhanded or cast a Shadow Bolt at them – which killed them instantly; it wasn’t a lot, but it was starting to add up.

Craaaack

Fred looked up and saw the ceiling in the last room on the verge of collapse. Thinking quickly, he pulled out hundreds and then thousands of Unconverted Mana and sent it upwards into the dirt and stone in between the dungeon and the ground above. While he couldn’t necessarily remake

the dungeon with his Mana, he could definitely use it to dig a pit; so that's what he did, though his pit was 150 feet wide and 200 feet deep – and leading all the way up to the surface.

For good measure, he did the same in a large chute leading up from the Core Room where he was still trapped; the last thing he needed was for the rest of the ceiling to collapse on him. With that done, he turned his attention back to the fight for Regnark's life.

Deecy had managed to wake up Trenk and Lasgo, who were groggily picking themselves up off the ground; as for Metlin and the others, they were a bit less responsive. Pollianne was the next to wake, though she groaned mightily as she tried to pick herself up – and then screamed as she fell back down, clutching at her left leg where it had been sliced deeply by something. *Probably shrapnel from the explosion*, Fred thought. The high-pitched scream, however, had the effect of waking up the last two, who apparently hadn't been disturbed by Regnark's continued screaming – especially since Eisa had run out of Power and couldn't heal him anymore.

Trenk rushed forward with his sword that he picked back up from nearby where he had fallen and started laying into the Lich when there was an opening. Small chunks of its Vitality were quickly chipped away, but it still wasn't enough; soon after that, though, arrows thudded into the King in quick succession, taking even more off of its Vitality. A few seconds later, a channeled Light Explosion erupted where the Lich was centered; though it tried to escape, the constant barrage of attacks from all sides by Fred's Squirrel and his smaller defenders kept it in place, until the Light-based attack finally finished the job.

Refelynn's channeled spell had also destroyed Fred's damaged Bones of the Earth Squirrel from sheer proximity, and it disappeared along with the other defenders he had created. As the spell fizzled out, the silence

echoed throughout the now-open-to-the-outside-world room and Fred realized that Regnark had stopped screaming after the Lich King had been taken down.

Metlin had finally gained enough presence of mind to heal the big man who had collapsed on his face following the attack. He tried once, twice, and then a third time to land a healing spell on Regnark...but nothing happened.

The large, fur-covered man – the first human, and the first friend, that Fred had ever met – lay on the floor of the Dark dungeon...silent and unmoving.

Chapter 31

“I’m so sorry, I tried to get to him in time, but...” Metlin said, obvious sorrow in his face. He stood with the others in a circle around the fallen form of Regnark, which Fred had confirmed had perished just before the Lich King was killed. He couldn’t fault them for the effort; he just wished that there was something else that he could’ve done to prevent everything from happening.

Fred felt a great pain in his chest as he worked on removing the rock covering his body, using the Unconverted Mana to eliminate it from above him. When he really looked at it for the first time, he saw how lucky he was that his entire body wasn’t squished flat by multiple tons of solid rock; and like what Deecy had said when he first met her, there wasn’t going to be any coming back from that, Dungeon Core or no Dungeon Core.

His lower half was remarkably intact, with only a few fractures to his upper leg bones – though his flesh was in rough shape. Fortunately, the way the rock had been crushing him had numbed all of the nerves, so he didn’t feel any pain right away. Once he started to pump healing spells into them using his Adventurer Power, *then* it started to hurt. Luckily, the pain faded over the next minute as his body healed from the damage, so by the time he was done, he was able to stand up and walk without pain.

Well, all but the pain in his heart.

The crevice that hid the Core Room was blown apart, though there had been a collapse that sealed most of it up again. Fred used more of his Unconverted Mana to clear the way, which was made much easier the more he removed. Halfway through the tunnel he was making, he discovered something small that his Mana couldn’t clear away, so he curiously picked

it up and, shrugging, put it in his pocket. In less than a minute, he was all the way through, and the other group stared at him in shock.

“I-I thought you were dead. I didn’t think anyone could’ve survived that explosion, especially since it appeared to come from where you had gone,” Trenk said, surprise and perhaps a little bit of fear on his face.

“Yes, well, I’m a bit harder to keep down than that. Sorry about the explosion – the Dark Core ended up killing herself accidentally,” Fred told them distractedly, as he stared at the body of his friend.

“Wait...did you just say the Core was destroyed? Don’t you know what that means? They’re going to kill everyone...” Metlin said, to the consternation of his other group members.

Eisa came up beside Fred and wrapped her arms around his waist, as she addressed the others. “I wouldn’t worry about that too much; they’ll probably be after Fred and me more than you and the other towns around here – we’ve got a bit of a history.” That didn’t seem to mollify them too much, but they seemed to at least believe that they weren’t going to be hunted down and killed for their participation. “And don’t worry about the explosion, Fred...*I’m* sorry I couldn’t heal him anymore. I was out of Power and Mana...I felt so useless.”

“It’s not your fault; it’s not *any* of your fault that this happened—”

Suddenly, the ground shook and they could all hear the sound of stone cracking against stone, as the rest of the dungeon started to collapse. It lasted for almost a minute before it grew so distant that they couldn’t feel or hear it anymore, though Fred saw through his Territorial Sight that it had finished its collapse another few seconds later. Along with the collapse, hundreds of undead reinforcements that had been trapped outside the last room were crushed in the process – and left behind a veritable pond of Dark Mana as they dissipated.

Something at the edge of his territory caught his attention, and he expanded his view to look even farther away. There was a small army of undead just inside the border of his territory that were holding back the approaching Earth defenders, though they were being slowly overwhelmed. He couldn't specifically see anything farther out than that, but he was almost positive that his plan had worked, and that they had turned away from the town of Death's March when his territory sprung into existence. Of course, that also meant that they were heading in *Fred's* direction.

And, unfortunately, he didn't think it would be long until the other Dark Cores nearby pieced everything together and discovered that he had destroyed one of *their* number. Fred even thought it was possible that they might join in the hunt for him – not necessarily as allies but possibly allowing them through without hindrance. He was making enemies to the left and right, and it seemed like everything was closing in on him.

But there was still something else he had to do.

"Here, I made a promise and I intend to keep it," Fred told the other group, as he used some more of his dwindling Power to Conjure up a small – but heavy – sack filled with 50 gold pieces – more than they'd likely earn as a group in a month or more at their Rating. He handed it to Trenk, who was closest to him and looked like he was able to carry it safely; the man in the battered armor just looked shocked as he took the bag without enthusiasm or protestation. "You need to get out of here and head to Death's March; if the Core was telling the truth, by eliminating her territory, there is now a gap in the barrier protecting the town from the monsters roaming the Plains of Grass at night. I can see that dawn is close enough that they were likely fine for tonight, but by tomorrow night – if the Cores aren't able to fix the barrier that quickly – everyone should evacuate."

“Uh...how do we get out of here? It sounds like the entire dungeon just collapsed,” Metlin asked, looking around in confusion.

Fred looked at the far wall and pulled out another large chunk of Unconverted Mana from his Human Core, sending it to start making a long, angled tunnel up to the surface. The opening was in the general direction of the town of Death’s March, though it would come out away from the Earth defender army. It was also only about 3 feet wide and just under 7 feet tall, which would hopefully be stable enough for now. He didn’t have the time or Power to add stone to reinforce it, so that was the best he could supply for now.

“That tunnel should lead you toward the surface in the general direction of the town. Just don’t tarry in there for long – I’m not sure how long it will stay intact – especially if those Earth monsters start rampaging overhead. I angled it so that you should exit the tunnel away from the army but be careful – I can’t see where they are outside of my territory.”

They just stared at Fred for a moment, before Refelynn asked, “Who—no—*What* are you? None of this makes any sense.”

He didn’t have time to explain everything, especially as Fred, Eisa, and Deecy had to take their exit as well. He told them that and told them to go before it was too late – the Earth defenders were starting to get close. “If we ever meet again, I’ll tell you everything you want to know then – but you’ve got to go.”

“Fine, but I’ll hold you to that,” Refelynn said, indicating with a nod of her head that they should head toward the tunnel exit. Before she herself left, however, she asked one more question. “What are you going to do now?”

That’s a good question. He hadn’t really thought about what would happen *after* he established his territory and got the Earth defenders to

focus on him instead of the town of Death's March. "Do you happen to know where the town of Allroads is?"

"Yes, it's far to the south and a little west, almost two weeks' journey by foot. And it's not a town, it's a city – probably the largest in this area of the world. Well, technically, it's the entire land around it, too...but I don't think I have time to explain it all to you," Refelynn responded, as she turned away and followed after the rest of her group. She turned around before she entered the tunnel and asked, "By the way, what are you expecting to find in Allroads?"

"Some friends, hopefully. Just some friends."

Refelynn nodded and disappeared down the tunnel, where Fred used his Territorial Sight to see her quickly catch up to the others, even though they were practically running down the dark tunnel. *There's more to her than I thought.*

"What do we do now, Fred? How are we going to outrun that army of Earth monsters heading this way? And, if what you said was true, the Dark Core was destroyed? Then...that means..." Eisa trailed off with obvious worry in her voice.

"Yes, I have a feeling I just made the Dark faction very angry at me, but I didn't intend to destroy the Core. In fact, I technically didn't; it was *her* final actions that precipitated the explosion, but I doubt the others will care about that. Which, as you probably thought, will make getting out of here very difficult," Fred told them absently, as his attention was being taken up by the skirmish of Dark and Earth defenders spilling over to his territory. "However, I think I have a plan; it's not going to be fun, but hopefully we'll be able to survive."

Both Eisa and Deecy looked dubious – if the Dire Wolf's expression could be interpreted that way – but Eisa reluctantly said, "Ok, I've trusted

you this far – what’s the plan?”

Deecy seemed to read his thoughts, and she snorted in response.

* * *

“This isn’t what I had in mind when you said it wouldn’t be fun; you never said anything about torture!” Eisa shouted across to him, her ride bumping along as they practically flew across the ground in their mad dash to escape the converging armies. It wasn’t long after the other group had left that the Dark defenders that had been keeping the Earth army back had stopped their defense and let them through – and now there were *two* armies heading towards the dungeon they had just left behind.

Whereas the other group’s tunnel had gone basically toward the northeast, the tunnel Fred made for himself and the others went to the southwest. It was a bit larger, as well, because their conveyances were big and needed to be able to run through without getting stuck. Fortunately, he still had a little over 35,000 Unconverted Mana at his disposal even after removing so much dirt and rock in the dungeon, so he was easily able to create it with plenty to spare.

Their rides, on the other hand, took a little bit of doing. Fred had briefly thought about having Eisa create another Crystal Scorpion to transport them, but it was still too big to fit easily through the trees in the Deadlands; it could certainly cut them down with its powerful claws, but that would take time and would leave an obvious trail that even the relatively mindless defenders chasing them could follow. What they needed, instead, was something fast and relatively small in comparison to the large Scorpion.

There were only a few choices, unfortunately. While Fred thought that one of his new Dark defenders he now had access to could work out, as soon as they left his territory, they would start to degrade and lose Mana – the same way it worked when any other Core sent one outside of its territory. It would take much more Mana than he had access to in order to make some that would last more than a day or two, even with the fallen Dark Mana left behind by the defenders near the border of his territory. All of that added up to a little over 2,000 Dark Mana – which was quite a lot – but it still wasn't enough to last them long.

However, Dark Mana wasn't the only thing that had sprung up near his border. While the more powerful Earth defenders were handily holding their own, there were quite a few smaller, weaker ones that had perished in the fighting. With an additional 503 Mana added to what was left over when his Squirrel was killed, they had enough for something more... permanent.

Eisa's defenders didn't rely on a territory for permanence – once they were created, they existed until they were killed. With the Crystal Scorpion out as a choice, though, they were only left with two: Stone Golems and Goblin Gnomes. While Stone Golems were actually able to move fairly quickly, they only moved that fast because they compacted themselves into a ball and *rolled*. Fred couldn't think of a way to use them to transport anything easily or quickly, so it was up to the other option.

Goblin Gnomes (Level 60)

Vitality: 310

Attack: 62, Knife Stab, Bite

Defense: 61

Respawn: 213 Earth Mana

Just as the giant Rock Beetle and Dark/Earth Squirrel had proved, it sometimes paid off to make a particularly weak defender more powerful. While it wouldn't survive long against a determined opponent, the main advantage of the Goblin Gnome – both big and small – was its speed. It was a particularly annoying opponent to fight, not because it was powerful, but because it was harder to hit than most others, as it could move quickly. And that advantage was what made the choice for them.

The level increase transformed them from small 2-foot-tall nuisances to 9-foot-tall behemoths. They couldn't take a lot of damage or dish it out like another, less expensive alternative, but they were fast – and strong. They could easily transport them cradled in their arms like a baby, though the ride was quite bumpy as they ran. Fred was being carried by one, Eisa and Deecy (in her Pup form) was carried by another, and a third ran with Regnark's body on its back, only slowed a little by the weight of the big man.

The only issue with their transportation, however, was the smell. While the stench of 2-foot-tall Goblin Gnomes was terrible, the rancid odor of 9-foot-tall ones was almost overwhelming. It was almost as bad as the rotting flesh of the undead the Goblins were able to dodge around and escape from, leaving them far behind in their race to leave the Deadlands; again, it was *almost* as bad, but the difference was negligible because it was *persistent*. Regardless, it was working, and they were escaping faster than anything could follow.

Fred had left his territory up as long as he could as a beacon for those chasing after him as they ran away; he collapsed the tunnel behind them so their enemies wouldn't have as much to track when they finally realized he was gone. From what he could see from the stinky arms of the

disgusting-looking Goblin Gnome carrying him, there were hordes of both Earth and Dark defenders milling around the dungeon, looking for him. Only seconds before he left his territory and it collapsed, he caught the beginnings of another battle between the two elemental factions as they apparently grew frustrated at the lack of progress.

There was quite a bit of Dark Mana and even some Earth Mana from fallen defenders in his territory that he could've absorbed on his way out, but he refrained from doing that. As much as he could've used it in the form of Unconverted Mana, he was pretty sure that the defenders looking for them would be able to see the direction where the Mana was sent when he absorbed it; it wasn't just automatic, and though it would speed across the distance quickly, it still had to travel to him. He would inadvertently be giving them a sign of where they had gone, which would negate their heretofore stealthy escape.

"So, tell me again – why did you bring Regnark's body? I understand not wanting to leave him for those coming after us to...I don't know...*desecrate*...but you can probably just put him down anywhere and bury him if you want now," Eisa asked, her voice nasally as she held her nose at the horrendous stink.

Fred looked over at the Goblin Gnome carrying his large friend and patted his pocket, where he felt the shard of a Dark Core inside. "You'll see, Eisa; you'll see."

Part IV – Allroads

Chapter 32

“Wake up, Fred – we’re here.”

Deecy’s voice echoed through Fred’s drifting consciousness, and he struggled to wake up. As soon as he opened his eyes, he was almost blinded by the intense sunlight shining down from the midday sun. Blinking a few times and shading his eyes with his hand, he looked around and saw they were indeed...somewhere.

The journey hadn’t been the most comfortable, nor the most exciting, but if it was anything – it was safe. The journey through and out of the Deadlands had taken three full days of constant running by the Goblin Gnomes – who thankfully didn’t tire – all the while dodging undead that would pop up every once in a while. They couldn’t stop for anything, unfortunately, which meant that they had needed to catch what sleep they could in the jostling embrace of Eisa’s defenders while they continued to run.

While they hadn’t seen any sign of any major opposition – like Earth or Dark armies waiting for them to arrive – they hadn’t let down their guard. Fred thought it was only a matter of time before they were pinpointed going through a territory or two and had defenders on their heels. Thankfully, they finally came to the end of the Dark Cores’ land of the dead trees and were able to breathe a sigh of relief – which immediately became coughs as they inhaled the stink of their conveyances.

They had passed into a pretty landscape of grass and trees, where Fred could detect distant Nature territories scattered here and there, but none of them were especially close to the Deadlands. In fact, it almost

looked like the Plains of Grass on the eastern side of the Deadlands – except for the trees; he was a little worried that what they were traveling through was another area where the void creatures roamed at night, but after the first night of traveling through it and avoiding the Core territories on either side of the narrow strip of land, nothing attacked them. Fred assumed that the territory-less area was some sort of buffer between the two factions and not because it was deadly to stay there at night.

The strip of land they traveled through ran north to south, so they continued taking it south as far as they could go. For the next four days, the Goblins continued to run without stopping, journeying through the pleasant locale; Fred and Eisa even saw some deer and other animals off in the distance occasionally, which further cemented the fact that the area wasn't necessarily dangerous, just unused by either of the factions nearby.

Finally, after a week of travel, of having to be held like an infant in the arms of the large Goblin Gnomes, they had arrived. Or, at least, he thought they did; when he looked around, he saw what could only be described as an unbelievable mishmash of paradise and nightmare. After gazing at it for a few moments, he spread his Territorial Sight around as far as he could go and was shocked to see that they had left behind the nearest territories at least a mile ago.

It turned out that they had made their two-week-long journey by foot in half of the time, because the area around them couldn't be anything but Allroads. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but this certainly wasn't it.

In what appeared to be around a shallow 100-square-mile valley, there were representations of every type of element. Fred saw deep, crystal-clear lakes and rivers for Water; humongous trees accompanied by fields of beautiful grass for Nature; a row of mountains along the rear of the

land acting like some sort of backdrop for Earth; three sporadically placed lava pits that shot flames into the air for Fire; what looked like a large graveyard on one side of the area that had similar-looking dead trees as the Deadlands, as well as a cave inside one of the mountains that looked quite forbidding for Dark; two literal forests of clear crystal pillars shining with an almost-blinding luminescence even in full daylight for Light; and, though he couldn't see it with his physical eyes, his Mana Sight showed him a contained tornado of moving wind above it all for Air.

And sitting in the middle of everything, was a massive city that dwarfed anything that Fred could even imagine could've existed. He saw dirt roads running into and out of the city, going through six different gates in the thick, 50-foot tall walls; looking farther out, he could see that a road actually led across the long strip they had been traveling down, though with a quick look behind the massive form of the Goblin Gnome carrying him, he could see that it shortly split into two different directions, one into the Deadlands and one into the Nature Core territory nearby.

And there were humans everywhere – though, fortunately, none of them were currently on the road to where they were standing. The city was still quite distant, but even from his vantage point leading into what he was mentally calling the “valley of impossibilities”, he could see their tiny figures moving around.

“Eisa, get rid of these defenders before it catches someone’s attention!”

Fred heard the Communication from Deecy, which meant that it was meant for both of them. He mentally chastised himself for not thinking of that sooner, and he took the silent admonition from the Dire Wolf with acceptance. While the sight of such an unbelievable place was really at

fault, he needed to be better aware of the danger of having “dungeon monsters” out for anyone to see would impose.

Eisa immediately instructed her creations to put them down – including Regnark’s body – and she went to each of them and touched them briefly, before they disappeared into Earth Mana and were sucked into her body. After she was done, she looked much healthier than she had just a few minutes ago, as her available Mana most likely hit its max amount – and likely extended it a little. Although she had been absorbing the nearby ambient Earth Mana on their journey, they were moving at such speeds that it wasn’t as much as it would’ve been if they had been standing still; nevertheless, she had likely gathered a bit in that time, so the extra Earth Mana couldn’t do anything but help.

Over the last week, Fred had also managed to convert more of his Unconverted Mana into his Elemental Cores, which had finally evened out – and even increased a little bit. Since he wasn’t using *any* Mana, his maximums finally had a chance to increase. He was tempted to keep slowly feeding Earth, Fire, and Water to Eisa and Deecy, but he thought it would be more prudent to increase his maximums so that he could transfer over a larger chunk at a time – and so he’d have a larger reserve in the future during an emergency. He had even managed to push the maximums to just over 250 by the time they arrived, as his Mana Conversion skill continued to improve.

And, since he was kind of stuck being held in a giant Goblin’s arms and didn’t have a lot to do, he had ample time to see what had happened to him back in the Dark dungeon.

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

Core Structure Level: 20 Fire Mana: 251/252 Water Mana: 251/251 Nature Mana: 251/251 Earth Mana: 251/251 Dark Mana: 251/251 Unconverted (Unusable) Mana: 36145 Unconverted Essence: 14322
Skills
Master Mana Sight: 100% Master Territorial Sight: 100% Expert Mana Absorption: 35% Expert Mana Conversion: 45% Expert Core Crystallization: 12% Intermediate Mana Communication: 87% Intermediate Defender Creation: 98% Intermediate Mana-formed Object Creation: 92% Intermediate Sentient Mana-formed Object Creation: 1% Intermediate Dungeon Core Absorption: 23% Intermediate Dungeon Creation: 22% Novice Essence Conversion: 13% Novice Defense Creation: 96%
Dungeon Information
(none)

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface			
Name: Fredwynklemossering		Class: Instructor-Researcher	
Rating: E-7 th		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 45093	
Total Essence: 885907	Available Essence to Distribute: 143220		Unconverted Essence: 361450
Body: 14 (0/81920) Brawn: 13 (0/40960) Mind: 16 (0/327680)		Vitality: 180/180 Stamina: 160/160 Power: 5100/5100	
Base Physical Attack: 13 Base Physical Defense: 14		Power Regen Rate: 25/min	
Class Traits (Instructor)			
Your available Power is increased by your Mind stat			
Your Power Regen Rate is increased by your Mind stat			
You are able to pass along the knowledge of your spells and abilities to another (success is variable)			
Class Traits (Researcher)			
Your available Power is greatly increased by your Mind stat			
Your Power Regen Rate is greatly increased by your Mind stat			
You have a much-heightened ability to adapt known spells and abilities for use in other applications			

Class Abilities (Instructor)		
Teach 5 – 0/81000		
Class Abilities (Researcher)		
Experiment 0 – 0/100		
Adapted Abilities		
Lightscythe 1 – 0/1000	Fireblast 3 – 0/9000	Vitality Transfer 3 – 0/9000
Light Explosion 4 – 0/27000	Shield of Darkness 1 – 0/1000	Lifedrain 1 – 0/1000
Repair Object 1 – 0/1000	Conjure Object 4 – 0/27000	Disarm Trap 3 – 0/9000
Sudden Shock 1 – 0/1000	Repair Animation 1 – 0/1000	Flamestrike 1 – 0/1000
Spike Arrows 1 – 0/1000	<i>(List truncated due to space – focus here for additional abilities...)</i>	

While a few of his Dungeon skills had increased in ranking (Core Crystallization was now Expert, Dungeon Creation and Dungeon Core Absorption were now Intermediate), the biggest change – other than his maximum elemental Mana levels being around 251 – was that fact that his Core Structure Level was now 20! Just a week ago, it had been 8...though, when he thought about it for a moment, it made sense.

Before he had discovered how to arrange his Human and Elemental Cores in his body, his Core Structure Level had been a lowly 2 – though it was likely only that high because he had a disorganized mess of random Cores. After he managed to figure out how the elements worked together to complement his Human Core, it had shot up to 6 when he had needed to spend 20,000 units of his Unconverted Mana to increase his Core Structure Level. It was simple math from there; his “official” Human Core Structure Level of 2, now that it had been organized correctly, was multiplied by how many elements he had access to – which at the time had been three, giving him a total of 6. When he accidentally absorbed the Earth Core later, that number shot up to 8; and now, after he had needed to upgrade his official Core Structure Level two more times and acquired another element, the total shot up to 20.

He had also received a relatively tiny amount of Essence from the recent battles in the dungeon, mainly because most of the defenders that had actually died weren't killed by them – but instead by the dungeon collapsing on them. Therefore, they didn't get the Essence for them dying, but they did get it for the Lich King and the other demons that they had killed inside the dungeon before the end. That didn't matter overly much to him, however, as right now he was more concerned about finding the people he was setting out to find.

“What is this place?” he asked out loud, still amazed at what he was seeing. He could tell that Eisa was awed as well, though she was doing her best to try to recover from the horrible smell they were forced to endure over the last week. Fred had thought he had become immune to it, but as soon as some fresh air blew past his nose, he realized that he had just ignored it – because it was somehow imbedded in his clothes or flesh or...

Actually, after a second, he realized he was smelling his dead friend, who had been roasting in the sun, in furs, on the back of a stinky Goblin Gnome – for a week. Fred didn't want to check too closely, but he was sure that Regnark's body was probably not looking too great by then – at least based on the smell that wafted in their direction.

“Surprisingly, your father knew a little something about this place. Well...not this place, exactly, but places like it. The Dungeon Cores would call spots like this around the world – which are reputed to be relatively rare – “Convergences”, where all of the elements tend to converge in a single place. The concentrated ambient Mana is so great in this place that I can feel it even from here; if I wasn't full already, I doubt it would take me more than a minute or so to completely fill me up if I was almost out.”

“I...I can feel that too,” Eisa said, hesitatingly. “I just thought it was excitement from being able to walk again after a week, but now I know it’s that place down there. You’re right, Deecy, I almost feel like I’m slightly...charged, I guess would be the closest comparison.”

Fred could see the intense Mana concentrations; it was almost so intense that it hurt his head looking straight at them with his Mana Sight. “O...kay – but why aren’t there any territories here? Why isn’t this a massive battlefield of all the nearby Factions fighting over this place? I would think that this would be the ultimate prize for any of them, even if it’s only for their certain Mana type.”

“From what I understand from your father’s memories, they indeed used to fight over these “Convergences”, but some sort of accident during a battle more than a millennium ago caused the destruction of one of them, which ended up with the land all around – thousands of miles in every direction, in fact – losing most of its natural ambient Mana. This caused many of the Cores nearby (regardless of their elemental Faction) to grow almost dormant because they didn’t have enough to properly operate. The last thing Aquel knew, the area was starting to recover, and the “Convergence” was starting to reform – but it was growing so slowly that he had thought that it could take another 1,000 years or more to get back to where it was before.

“As a result of that disastrous battle, it was determined by the Supreme Council that these sites were off limits, and any known Core that established a territory or sent any of their defenders within 10 miles would be completely and utterly destroyed by a joint operation by the

Council, with no excuses allowed. Therefore, there isn't a Core on the planet that is willing to risk their wrath, so they stay far away from these Convergences. There is a great benefit of being even this close to them, however, which is why you'll likely find territories for every faction nearby; however, because fighting between the factions or alliances might spill over and damage these precious hotbeds of ambient Mana, no fighting, assaults on dungeons, or any other type of inter-Core violence is permitted within 100 miles.

"And, because the area is so rich in all the elements, it makes for a prime living area for humans. From the land around the city, they can likely grow all the food they need and possibly extra, as anything grown here will mature quickly and expansively. With access to every element nearby, this is also a prime staging area for Adventurer groups that want to challenge themselves in different types of dungeons."

Fred mentally muted his Mana Sight for a moment because it was hurting his head and concentrated on his Territorial Sight, instead. He looked all around the Allroads area and saw that she was correct; closest to him were the Dark and Nature territories, of course; farther to the west past the Nature faction, there was another small strip of "no-territory" area, followed by a Water Territory, then another blank strip, then came the Earth territory, almost opposite of where Fred, Eisa, and Deecy were standing. Next came the bright white of the Light territory, then the hazy yellowish of Air, and then last, but not least, Fire was situated right next to Dark. They were arranged in a circle like wedges, or perhaps like spokes of a wheel, with strictly designated boundaries that led right up to the edge of where

they could approach, with the separating strips keeping all of the faction areas from getting in each other's way.

If there was anywhere in the world that his Guild and the citizens of Gatecross would be safe from the Cores chasing after them, Fred thought it would be Allroads. Whether or not that applied to the person who riled them up in the first place...only time would tell.

Chapter 33

“Are we just going to leave him here?” Eisa asked, as they stood staring at the magnificent sight arrayed before them. To the former human-turned-“Shard”, it looked like a dangerous paradise; one where she could bask in the pure ambient Mana she could feel even at that distance, but also one with people – lots of people. She still felt a little like the shunned Adventurer with the horrid reputation even now and going into a city full of people that might look down on her wasn’t something she was looking forward to.

Calm down, girl – no one even knows who you are here! It’s almost impossible that they would’ve heard about you all this way from the Craytion Kingdom, so don’t worry yourself unnecessarily, she told herself. Regardless of the logic behind that, she couldn’t help but feel a little nervous as butterflies warred with each other in her empty stomach. The thought of her stomach actually calmed her a little, because she realized she hadn’t eaten anything in over a week – her Mana had sustained her all that time and she didn’t feel the least bit hungry. *You’re a **completely** different person now – and don’t you forget it!*

“Huh?” Fred asked, tearing his eyes away from the land ahead of them and looking at her. He then looked over at Regnark’s body and seemed to comprehend what she was talking about. “Oh, that’s right – we can’t very well drag him with us. He’ll have to walk on his own.”

Uh, oh – has he started to lose his mind? With everything that had happened lately, it wouldn’t surprise her; the destruction of Gatecross, those weird creatures in the Plains of Grass, being accused of murder and chased out of a town, and the death of his first real friend *ever* had to have weighed

heavily on Fred's mind. *Oh, wait – he better not be thinking of reanimating him! I know he said that he acquired a few of my former Necromancer abilities, but I never thought he would treat his friend that way!*

“I...don't think that's what he has in mind. Watch...”

Eisa did as Deecy suggested and watched Fred walk over to Regnark's dead body and knelt by his side. The Goblin Gnome that had been carrying him had put him down face-first – because, honestly, Eisa was a little disturbed by them carrying a corpse for so long and didn't want to see the state of his face – so Fred put his arms underneath and gave it a mighty shove...which turned the big man over so that his open and staring eyes were staring at the bright sun. Eisa was glad that she didn't have anything in her stomach because the stench of his rotting body combined with his appearance would've brought it all back up.

“I was waiting until we were at a relatively safe place before doing this, and I guess this is as good a place as any. Now—” Fred said as he turned toward her for a moment— “I'm really hoping this works, but if it doesn't, it might knock me out. If that's the case, you may have to drag me somewhere to keep me safe until I wake up.”

“Wait, what—” Eisa began, before she saw him pull something out of his front pocket. It appeared to be a large sliver of some sort of gemstone, though she'd never seen one that was so black that it almost seemed to suck in the light. *Where did he get that?* She was about to finish her question, but she saw Fred move some of Regnark's furs off of his chest until she could see his pale, lifeless skin...and then he pulled his hand back and stabbed the gemstone into the big man's chest, right where his heart was.

Blackish blood oozed up slowly from the wound on the corpse, which mixed with the fresh red blood of Fred as the sharp sliver had cut him deeply. “I guess I should’ve used something other than my hand...” Eisa heard him mutter, before he froze in concentration and stared at the big man in bear furs. Sweat started to pour off his head as he started to shake violently, before a blindingly bright light enveloped Regnark, and Fred collapsed on his side – alive, breathing, and conscious, fortunately.

“That...took...much...much...more...than you...Eisa...” Fred croaked out.

Wha—me? What is he— The bright light suddenly faded in less than a second until it was completely gone...and then Regnark sat up, screaming incoherently. It took him a moment for his wild eyes to focus on anything, but as soon as he registered the bright light, Eisa standing there with what she was sure was a shocked expression on her face, and Deecy looking at him with her tongue hanging out of her mouth, he shut up and looked around.

“Hey there, friend – glad to have you back,” Fred croaked out by his side, apparently just barely recovering himself.

Regnark whipped his head down at Fred, surprise and a smile fighting each other on his face. “What happened? What did you do?”

Eisa had recovered from what she had just witnessed enough to realize what Fred had just done. “You were dead, Regnark. Fred brought you back to life and...well...welcome to the ‘Shard’ club, I guess.”

“Like she said...welcome.”

Apparently, hearing Deecy’s voice in his head was too much for him, and the big, strong, hulk of a man rolled his eyes into the back of his

head and...fainted.

* * *

“I did not faint. I was just...so overcome with joy at being alive that my mind couldn’t handle it,” Regnark repeated as they walked towards the city of Allroads in the distance.

They all let him get away with that excuse, mainly because it seemed to make him feel better for not having fainted. In his defense, though, he had been out for less than 5 seconds, so it was easy enough to pass it off as something else. Regardless of whether he fainted or not, the fact that he was alive and walking around was something to celebrate.

Eisa could see the black aura of Dark surrounding the big man, though instead of it being in any way scary like she would’ve imagined it, the feeling she got when she looked at him was more of...kinship than anything else. As much as she had enjoyed sharing her status as a “Shard” along with Deecy, it just wasn’t the same as having a connection with another human. Regnark was more like an older brother she’d never had before; she felt like she could count on him to protect not just her, but her entire family.

Because that was what she was beginning to think of these other people (and Dire Wolf) as: family. If Regnark was an older brother, Deecy was like an older, wiser sister; on the other hand, instead of Fred being a younger brother or whatnot, she liked to consider him her husband – or at least possibly that at some time in the future. She blushed as she considered that possibility but pushed it from her mind as they slowly approached the city of Allroads.

They didn't really have time for such romantic pursuits as what she was thinking of, because they had a mission to accomplish. Not only were they still looking for their Guild and the townspeople, but there was still the chance – despite Deecy's memories saying otherwise – that the Earth, Dark, and Nature dungeons out there would send in their monsters to hunt them down even in that forbidden place.

She couldn't help but think of this Supreme Council that the Dire Wolf had told them about like the mayor of a large town or even the King of a Kingdom; if someone went to them with a petition to hunt down a dangerous thief or murderer – but such a hunt would require passing into different jurisdiction like another Kingdom – then she wouldn't put it past the two people in charge to agree that they could allow an exception of crossing borders. Eisa just hoped that she and the others weren't the *exception* in this case.

As they got closer to Allroads, she could feel the intensity of the ambient Mana rise as she walked; judging by the excited/energized state of the two other Shards with her, it seemed as though they felt the same. Fred seemed totally unaffected, though she supposed that made sense – he couldn't absorb the natural ambient Mana all around him. *Poor thing.*

She couldn't absorb any of that Mana, however, because she was already full; she could only absorb over and above what her maximum was if she touched what was left over from an Earth monster dying or when Fred gave her some of his own. So, while she was practically bathing in ambient Mana there, it ultimately didn't do much for her – or the others.

They had found a nearby road that led toward the city, which wasn't hard – all the roads they saw led to the city...which, when she thought about it, was probably why they called that place Allroads. Since all roads led there, it seemed like it was obvious.

Their road snaked around an outrageously hot lava pit on the right side, and then curved by one of the almost-blindingly bright crystal pillar forests a little further up on the left, before skipping past one of the deep, crystal-clear lakes on the right again. While they were walking, Eisa could see that the other roads leading to the city passed through different elemental “hotspots”, so that every way into the city had a slightly different path through the natural obstacles.

But what held her main attention was the small mountain range lined up behind everything like a backdrop. It pulled at her and she had to push down an impulse to run all the way there and fling herself onto the 500-foot-tall rock projections – and then hug it and squeeze it like a long-lost friend. It felt silly when she identified those feelings, however, which helped to restrain herself.

She could see the same sort of restraint on Deecy when they passed by the lava pool and lake – which she was glad to see, because Eisa didn’t think that jumping into burning-hot lava was the best idea. Regnark had his gaze set on the dark and dreary graveyard over a mile away, but he also was restrained enough that he was at least paying attention to where he was going and his other surroundings.

When she forcibly turned her attention away from the mountains in the distance, she realized that they had been passing or were being passed by people as they walked – and she had been fairly oblivious. Many of those she saw were obviously Adventurers as they were decked out in armor, carried a few weapons, and had PIBs at their waist. They traveled in groups ranging from 2 to up to 20, though she knew that such large groups were likely just a Guild traveling together to a certain area and would split up into smaller groups when they got where they were going.

However, there were plenty of what appeared to be merchants, slowly leading small caravans of wagons pulled by large oxen – which was the best way to transport large amounts of goods, though they were quite slow. She saw a few of the obviously wealthier merchants almost speeding by in comparison, as they used Brawn-focused Adventurers to help pull their wagons; it was common practice by many of the not-so-well-off tanks and other front-line fighters to take a commission like that on their way to a dungeon delve, as it provided quite a bit of extra gold if they were strong or fast enough. The other members of the group usually chipped in with whatever they could, as well as providing protection against aggressive wildlife and the occasional (but rare) bandits or thieves that sometimes roamed through some areas.

Most of those they passed paid absolutely no attention to them as they walked at a steady pace towards the city of Allroads, though a few stared at them – or, more accurately, they stared at the Dire Wolf in her normal form walking next to Regnark. Eisa could vaguely tell that the old and new Shards were having a mental discussion; she couldn't hear them, *per se*, but it was almost like hearing a very faint conversation through thin walls in a building. While she could sense that they were speaking, she couldn't make anything out.

Fortunately, no one had done any more than stare; looking at it from an outsider's perspective, she assumed everyone thought that the big man still covered in bear furs – they really needed to get him something else because the sun shining down was *hot* – was somehow the Dire Wolf's owner, like she was some sort of trained pet or something. That, of course, was far from the truth – but if other people thought that, it only made it easier for them to travel without being accosted.

The city got closer and closer, and she could see farmland stretching for at least a mile in every direction outside of the walls, which was generally clear of any specific elemental hotspot. To her, it almost appeared as if the center of the valley was left clear specifically for the city to exist but looking around at the relatively wild and disorganized placement of the elemental areas, she thought that was unlikely. It was probably just happenstance that enough room was left for the large city – a fortunate coincidence, indeed, but a happenstance, nevertheless.

Eisa couldn't help but think that the capital city of Craytion – where the King and the Kingdom's DAS headquarters were located – could fill only about a third of the massive city stretching out before them. Although the huge valley that held all of the elemental wonders was at least 100 square miles in area, about 5% of that was just full-on city. The 50-foot-tall stone walls loomed above the local landscape, dwarfing everyone below that was either entering or exiting the city.

Which was, admittedly, quite a lot. Eisa and the others were heading towards what appeared to be the northeastern gate, one of the six gates that they could see the city had from farther away. And, from what she could see of the eastern and northern gates, they were all likewise swelled up with large crowds.

"How are we going to find our people in there?" she asked, practically shouting to be heard over the figurative mob of people shouting orders to teams of oxen and Adventurers screaming at those same caravans to get out of their way.

"I'm not quite sure, but if they still have their marks above their head, I assume it won't be too hard," Fred responded, talking just as loudly.

I sure hope so. The worry about people knowing her tarnished reputation there started to fade as she saw the mass of people everywhere;

rumors and gossip about Syndicate members was one thing in a relatively self-contained Kingdom, but in a place that looked to contain almost as many people in the entire Kingdom they came from in a single city, it was likely easier to blend in when no one knew who she was – or cared.

Sometimes anonymity can be a good thing.

Feeling a little better about it, Eisa smiled at Fred and joined him and the others in the slowly progressing line heading into the city.

Chapter 34

Fred couldn't help but smile back at Eisa as they waited in line to enter the massive city of Allroads. Though, the more he looked at the lengthy walls and masses of people, it wouldn't have been far-fetched to call the city and surrounding environs a Kingdom in and of itself.

There were more people in just the nearest 500 feet around him than Fred had ever seen in his life – and they weren't even inside yet. To tell the truth, he was a little nervous being around so many humans; the thought that one of them would learn of his real identity sent shivers through his body. Everywhere he looked, he saw Adventurers ranging from those just starting out in the low G-Ratings, all the way up to the high A-Ratings; if even a dozen of those in the A-Ratings were to try to kill him and his friends, he doubted they would survive – even if he had an established territory and a dungeon at his disposal. At least, not yet; Fred was still getting stronger, and he knew that the day would come when he would be able to not only survive but thrive if Adventurers ran through his dungeon.

He frowned at that thought, which caused Eisa to look worriedly at him – which he immediately waved off without explanation and put a smile back on his face. It was a bit forced, he knew, but he didn't want to worry her. Those strange thoughts were popping up in his mind and manipulating his emotions more and more lately, and he wasn't sure what – if anything – to do about it. It started with his incomprehensible anger back in the town of Death's March, almost like that had triggered more issues. He had been busy enough fleeing and surviving since then, but as soon as he had room to breathe, the thoughts had started up again.

Luckily, none of his thoughts were directed towards Eisa, Regnark, Deecy, those they were searching for, or even the group that had assisted in getting Fred to the Dark Core; instead, when he looked at the people going in or out of Allroads, all he could think about was how much Mana they would provide to his dungeon. It was almost as if they were some sort of commodity to be exploited for only one thing and had no other uses.

Kind of like...livestock.

The thought that his mind was becoming more and more like every other Dungeon Core in the world brought a bout of anger, though it was directed more at himself than anything else. *I will not be like them! I won't be like those that murdered my parents!*

The more he interacted with Dungeon Cores, the more he realized that his parents – despite taking care of and raising him without judgment of his obvious differences – were probably of the same mindset as all the others. He shied away from labeling them with the same callous attitudes towards humans as “livestock” that every Core seemed to have, but...they *had* existed for centuries or even a millennium before he arrived; there was always the possibility that they had changed over the years and grew more thoughtful of humans, but they had likely thought exactly the same viewpoint about people like Eisa, Regnark, or any other human that every Core he had spoken with seemed to share.

That still didn't forgive what the Supreme Council did to them.

Fred decided that when he found his people and made sure they were safe, only then would he plan what he wanted to do to get revenge on those that murdered his parents. He had to ensure that he wasn't endangering more humans in the process, though, because that would go completely counter to his main intention: personal retribution. They had

wronged *him*; if he ended up dragging thousands or millions of humans into the fight, then he couldn't imagine the chaos that would ensue.

However, just like his previous internal debate about his revenge, he didn't know where it would stop. Even if he succeeded in destroying the Supreme Council, it wouldn't make a difference; no one but him would care that he got his personal retribution, and there would just be more to take their place. They would continue to punish and destroy any Cores that had the thought of doing what his parents had done, and the cycle of treating humans as livestock would continue. And – from a conversation he remembered overhearing from some of his Guild – the territories of the Cores would continue to encroach on human lands, reducing the amount of space where they could live safely.

He had to imagine that this reduction of human-controlled lands was happening over the entire world. If what he had heard was correct about the constant wars between the elemental factions and alliances, then the places where humans were “allowed” to live could shrink over the centuries as the Cores tried to expand as much as they could to hold an advantage over their counterparts. Within 500 years, it was entirely possible that the Craytion Kingdom could be reduced to nothing more than a few towns that were jealously protected by the nearby Cores as a dwindling “resource”. And they would only have themselves to blame for the scarcity.

In 1,000 years or more – which was a long time to a human, but honestly not that long to a Dungeon Core – the only place where humans might be safe to live would be these “Convergences”. In his mind's eye, Fred could see Kingdoms and other habitations around the world being reduced to nothing more than a luxury trade resource, fought over by the powerful Cores as they attempted to steal away the livestock of another faction in constant wars that would likely end with humans perishing in the

fight. Eventually, the millions or billions of people around the world would be hunted down to near extinction, forced to procreate, and shoved into dungeons to make the Cores stronger.

Ideally, the interactions between the two entities should be a symbiotic relationship. Humans got stronger by delving through dungeons – there’s no doubt about that – and dungeons in turn accumulated the Mana from humans visiting their dungeons; it seemed like the arrangement had worked for quite a while after the disastrous war between humans and dungeons long ago, but something had changed.

From what he had learned, Dungeon Cores used to *need* to get stronger so that they weren’t destroyed by powerful humans – it was a matter of survival. The threat that the humans presented to them, while also helping them of course, kept them constantly trying to improve themselves to survive; this also helped to keep the Cores’ “population” at a reasonable level, so that they were able to spread out and be harder to find.

It could almost be said that the humans had “control” of the situation; they were smart enough to keep the dungeons around, but they occasionally had to hunt down some to “cull” the herd, so to say – almost like the way the Cores nowadays treated humans like livestock. It wasn’t necessarily the *right* way to do it, but the balance between the two species had apparently lasted for thousands upon thousands of years.

After the Cores had organized and fought back, however, that balance changed. Fred thought that it was only due to his dual origins that he was able to see it for what it was. His Core heritage gave him the ability to visualize the long term; the power shift between the two species was gradual, but inevitable. Without the humans’ ability to “cull” the herd, there was nothing stopping the Dungeon Cores from exploding in population.

Although it took quite a while for a “baby” Core to be born and raised up to the point where it could go out on its own, there were likely hundreds of thousands of Dungeon Cores around the world that were using their newfound safety from destruction to repopulate themselves. And after a thousand years or more, they had “repopulated” so much that they were now overcrowded – especially as they got stronger and had larger territories. He figured this was what led to the alliances between the factions and the wars between them, which would only get worse as time went on. The humans would just be another casualty, because they were forbidden from fighting back.

And they would continue to not fight back against the rising number of Dungeon Cores, because humans were quite short-sighted. While their lives extended the more powerful that they were, they still only tended to exist “in the moment” and weren’t really concerned about the future. As long as the Adventurers could fight and get stronger and richer, that was all they really cared about; the thought that the village, town, city, or even Kingdom might not exist in five to six hundred years probably would never occur to them. The non-Adventurers were even more short-sighted, because they typically only lived a short amount of time and things were always “normal” to them – they didn’t remember it being better or thought about how the future might be worse.

But what could Fred do about any of that, though? He...didn’t know, but he knew something had better change soon before it was entirely too late. It was entirely possible that many of the older Dungeon Cores could see the inevitable coming as well, but the status quo was likely too ingrained in them now to do anything about it. That, and those in positions of authority like the Supreme Council were probably alive when they had to

fight for their survival against the humans, so the thought of giving up some of their power over their livestock was doubtless unthinkable.

Fred didn't know if he was the one who could or even *should* try to do anything to change the way things were – especially since he was currently just trying to survive. Regardless of the answer to that question, he thought that it was something to consider for a different time.

His musings were interrupted as the line they were in to enter the city finally approached the gates, and a bored-looking guard stopped them before they could pass through. “Do you have a permit for your bonded pet? We only allow permitted Beastmaster pets that are bonded inside the city, as they are too dangerous to allow to run around otherwise.”

They all looked at each other in surprise; the Beastmaster class was a new one for Fred, as he hadn't heard of it before. Regnark, fortunately, was quick with a response – though Deecy expressed her slight displeasure through her Mana Communication. “I'm sorry, sir – I just became a Beastmaster and just bonded my pet recently; I was just coming back to the city to get her permit, but I seem to have forgotten where I need to go for that.”

The guard looked skeptically at the bigger man and said, “They didn't tell you to come back to the Syndicate building? I don't know what they're teaching these people nowadays...” The guard muttered under his breath. “Fine, I don't want you clogging up the line anymore, so go on in – but you must get your permit as soon as you can! Any unpermitted bonded pets found in the city after dark are subject to imprisonment and a hefty fine is placed on your Syndicate account. If you refuse to pay, your pet can be terminated without warning.”

That seems harsh, but they probably have a reason for it. “We will definitely be heading there soon, but I was wondering—” Fred started to

ask, but he was almost negligently interrupted by the guard with a seemingly rehearsed speech.

“Any questions can be answered by the information booth just inside the gates for a fee; Gate Guards are not permitted to answer any questions, as it would severely interrupt the flow of traffic both into and out of the city. Now, be on your way,” he said while waving them forward, before turning towards the next people in line with his bored expression back on his face. “Next!”

Rather than potentially call even more attention to themselves, they hurried through the gates and stepped inside one of the largest cities in the world.

Chapter 35

If Fred thought he was overwhelmed by the large amount of people standing outside the city, he practically lost his mind at the sheer number of people walking, running, shouting, and generally assaulting his senses. It took putting some mental blinders on his eyes that blocked out anything past his immediate area to function with so many people around. It was almost like when he first activated his territory back in Gatecross and was overwhelmed by his Territorial Sight – which looked at *everything* – and he had to learn how to focus on whatever he was specifically looking at.

All of that was done within a couple of seconds, fortunately, so he was able to keep up with the others as they moved off to the side to avoid the hustle and bustle of people going every which way.

“This is almost worse than getting undead flesh in my mouth or being carried by those disgusting Goblin Gnomes; there are just too many people and too many scents here – it’s overwhelming.”

The fact that Deecy was experiencing similar feelings of being overcome by the press of people made Fred feel a little better for not being the only one to suffer. He sent his agreement and checked with the others; they seemed much better accustomed to the people, but he figured it made sense – they had been to much larger towns and cities compared to the small town of Gatecross.

“I think that’s the information booth over there; let’s go check it out,” Eisa said, leading the way confidently toward one of about half-a-dozen small stands set up near the wall next to the gate. Only two of them

were actually staffed by anyone, and of those two, only one had someone actually getting information. Fred watched Eisa walk up to the other booth and asked the bored-looking – *hmm, everyone working around here seems bored for some reason* – petite woman behind it a question. “Hello there, I was wondering if you could give me any information about—”

“Welcome to Allroads, the most spectacular city in the entire world,” the woman droned out in a very slow, monotone voice. “Here at the information booth, for a price we can provide you information about the rules and regulations to follow while you are here. It is everyone’s responsibility to know these rules and regulations before you step foot past the front gates; ignorance is not an acceptable defense if you violate one of these rules or regulations.”

That...is strange. Fred figured this was some sort of rote response to anyone looking for information, and apparently Eisa thought so too; she began to ask about those they were looking for, but was immediately cut off by the bored woman, who didn’t even appear to really see who she was talking to.

“Each verbal rule or regulation I can recite to you can be purchased for 5 copper pieces each, or you can purchase a printed copy of your own for the low, low price of 50 silver pieces. Please decide quickly, there are many people who would like to learn the rules and regulations of Allroads before entering,” the woman continued in the same sluggish, bored voice she had used before.

Fred looked around at the “many” people looking for information and didn’t see anyone even near them; in fact, the other person had left the other booth looking frustrated, so they were the only ones partaking of any of the “information” at the time. He glanced over at the other booth and saw the man standing behind it looking even more bored than the woman

talking to them – which he thought would've been impossible, but it appeared to be true.

“O...kay. Look, we're searching for some friends of ours—” Eisa tried to ask again but was immediately cut off by the woman's repeated speech, which started over at the beginning and didn't stop even when the others tried to interrupt her. Regnark looked to be on the verge of strangling the woman, so Fred took over and Conjured 1 gold and 50 silver pieces to purchase three of the written “rules and regulations”. The woman actually looked surprised for a fraction of a second before her bored expression came back, as she took the precious metal pieces he offered and placed it in a box underneath the booth. She then handed him three cheap paper booklets that were at least 6 pages long filled with cramped writing.

He was hoping that actually purchasing what she was selling would let her loosen up afterward, but as soon as anyone tried to ask her another question, she just repeated her spiel from earlier. Now *Fred* was starting to get annoyed, so he had them leave before he did something he would likely regret.

They stopped to the side of the wall just past the information booths in an out-of-the-way section of what seemed to be a major pedestrian thoroughfare. Each of them stared at the booklets they had received to make sense of them, but Regnark tossed his away within moments.

“Useless drivel – let me know if there's anything worth knowing in there.”

Fred honestly couldn't blame him, because there seemed to be countless rules and regulations, though many of them didn't really apply to them. Over half of them were in reference to what merchants could and couldn't sell, the prices they could charge, and even the time of day that they could sell them. Another third of them had to deal with Syndicate regulations regarding the acceptance of jobs, the completion of said jobs,

and about the conduct that Syndicate members had to adhere to while in the city. And then, finally, there were some that were pertinent to everyone and were actually quite important – enough so that violating them could send some trouble their way.

- Adventurers are prohibited from using any skills or abilities while in the city; violation of this rule will result in heavy fines, jailtime, or exile depending upon offence
- Touching, interacting, or vandalizing any of the unique elemental structures outside of the city will result in heavy fines, jailtime, or exile depending upon offence
- Loitering for long periods of time (which includes sleeping on the street if you can't afford a place to stay) results in heavy fines, jailtime, or exile depending upon offence
- Theft, assault, or murder is strictly prohibited and is thoroughly prosecuted; most crimes are given the minimum penalty of at least 1 year of jailtime, all the way up to and including execution, depending on the severity of the crime
- While there are four major sections of the city – The Syndicate Quarter, The Government Quarter, The Merchant Quarter, and The Residential Quarter – only those with business with the Allroads Government are permitted to step foot in the Government Quarter
- The government is operated by the Allroads Council, the four-person leadership team that is comprised of one representative from each Quarter; any petitions regarding *anything* in Allroads (in the city or the nearby environs) need to be submitted to the Allroads Council for approval

It was only the barest amount of information that actually pertained to them, but it was important, nonetheless. Especially the rule about using their skills or abilities in the city; that was an easy one that could result in trouble for them rather quickly. The other information was good to have, however, as they didn't want to inadvertently do something that could result in jailtime or whatever the "exiled" punishment was. Fines were no problem, of course, but anything that would delay their mission was something to be avoided.

The most important part of the booklet, however, was a relatively simple drawing of a map of the city on the back cover. It showed the six different gates – the west, northwest, north, northeast, east, and southern gates (the mountain range to the south blocked most access from that direction) – as well as the four separate Quarters in the city. The Government Quarter was by far the smallest and in the center of the city, whereas the Residential Quarter was the largest in the southern half. The Merchant and Syndicate Quarters were approximately the same size and lived up to their "Quarter" name, as they each comprised about 25% of the city; it appeared as though they had entered near the Syndicate Quarter, which was located in the northeast corner of the massive metropolis.

And it sure seemed that was indeed where they were, especially as Fred started to look around cautiously; everywhere he looked, nearly 80% of the people he saw were Adventurers of one type or another. Just like he had seen outside, they ranged from G to A-Rated members of the Syndicate, though he thought he saw a small group of S-Rated Adventurers in the distance, but they were gone so quickly through the doorway of a building that he wasn't quite sure if he saw it correctly. There was so much

information being thrown his way as he looked at people that he had to stop after a while – his head was starting to hurt again.

“Ok...so don’t use any abilities, commit a crime, or touch the stuff outside – got it. Now, where do we begin?” Regnark finally asked, as Fred and Eisa summed up the information on the booklet for the other two.

The regulation about having a permit for a Beastmaster’s bonded pet was in the booklet as well, and one that they had to take care of before they started looking around for their people. He didn’t want to get into the same situation as Death’s March, where they’d be chased out for doing something wrong – even if they hadn’t done anything.

“Well, we need to get you a permit for your pet – sorry, Deecy, but it’s probably the only way you’ll be able to walk around in here,” Fred said, looking apologetically at the large Dire Wolf.

Eisa threw in her own advice. “But you’ll probably have to go alone, as I don’t think it would be smart for Fred or me to attract too much attention to ourselves. I don’t know how extensive the Syndicate’s communication system is, but I know that they were able to relay messages fairly fast in the Craytion Kingdom; if word about what happened in Gatecross has reached here, it may have included our descriptions.” She seemed to think about something else, because she added, “And I would avoid asking about the ones we’re looking for in there as well.”

“What? Why?” Regnark asked, confused.

“Because it was a high-Rated Syndicate group that marked them and left them to be ravaged by the Dungeon Cores nearby as punishment. It’s highly doubtful that they would look for help from the Syndicate after that; more likely, they avoided them entirely and are hiding out somewhere else in this nightmarishly large city. Asking about them

would be akin to painting a target on their backs, which is the last thing we need.”

Deecy and Eisa had thought about it more than Fred had, because he didn't even consider that. He naturally assumed that at least the Core Power Guild would go to the Syndicate for help, but what the Dire Wolf said made sense. Even though they were marked by the members in the Craytion Kingdom, their appearance would likely raise some uncomfortable questions if they were corralled by the Syndicate there in Allroads.

“They're both right. You'll have to go alone to get Deecy permitted, because it wouldn't be smart for Eisa or me to go with you. Here, I don't know what it costs to get a permit, but this should hopefully cover it,” Fred said, while Conjuring a large bag of 200 gold pieces with his Power and handing it to the big man, who immediately hid it underneath his bulky bear furs. “While you're doing that, we'll look around and see about getting us someplace to stay for the night,” Fred told him.

Looking up at the sky, the sun was already making its inevitable way towards the horizon, which meant that they needed to find some place to sleep that wouldn't violate the “loitering” regulations he had read about. Besides, even though he and Eisa had gotten some sleep during their journey while being held by giant Goblin Gnomes, it was in no way comfortable or restful. If she was feeling as tired as he was, then they needed to get some sleep before they really began their search.

“Ok, I guess I can do that. Let's go, my little pet.” Regnark patted the Dire Wolf on her head and took off deeper into the crowd, heading toward a massive building that had “Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate” in huge letters attached to the side of it. It nostalgically reminded Fred of the first time he had seen the DAS building in Gatecross and had marveled at

how large it was compared to most of the others in the town. The same size difference was modeled here, as well, except instead of the Syndicate building being a large two-story structure, it was at least six stories high and spanned nearly 20% of the entire Syndicate Quarter. Frankly, it was huge; Fred estimated that it was larger than his giant Rock Beetle he had created and the Emerald Dragon it had fought combined.

Deecy hesitated before she followed after the big man, though she caught up to him quickly.

“If you ever call me your pet again, I’m going to rip a big chunk out of your butt.”

Fred chuckled a little at that, watching as they – despite their size – quickly disappeared in the crowd. He wasn’t really worried about finding the two later, because over the last week he had noticed that he had a tiny, little, miniscule connection to Eisa and Deecy; there was nothing he could do with it other than acknowledge that it was there, but it allowed him to pinpoint a general direction of where they were in relation to his position. He couldn’t tell how close or far away they were, but he figured that it would help them find each other again. It had been a bit crazy since he had been able to bring Regnark back to life as a Shard – which still amazed him that it had worked – but he could tell that the connection also existed with him.

“It’s just you and me now, Eisa. Shall we look around?” Fred asked the woman next to him. “I don’t know how long they’ll be, and I don’t feel like standing around here all day. Besides, we need to look for someplace we can stay tonight.”

“Oh, are you asking me on a date? I would love to,” Eisa responded, grabbing him by the arm and practically dragging him towards where the map had said the Merchant Quarter was.

Fred wasn't sure what she was talking about, but she at least seemed enthusiastic and happy about whatever this “date” thing was. The last month and a half had been filled with so much danger, death, and destruction that it was good to see her enjoying herself for a change. He felt a little guilty about doing the same when they were there to find his Guild and the townspeople they were looking for, but he reconciled that with the possibility that they might happen to learn something about them while they were out and about.

“Uh, sure – let's go on this date.”

Eisa smiled at him and he smiled back – then she dragged him off even faster.

Chapter 36

“Sorry about that, Deecy – I was just trying to get into my role,” Regnark told the Dire Wolf as she caught up with him, noticing the stares as Adventurers saw her walking next to him. As they got closer to the massive Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate building – which was at least two or three times larger than the headquarters inside the Craytion Kingdom’s capital – he saw two other Syndicate members with “pets”; one was a tall, hooded woman wearing what looked like some Hunter-class clothes – soft dark-green leathers with even darker accents – walking by with what looked like a small bear cub following her; the other was an older-looking man that was covered in what appeared to be wolfskins that was accompanied by some sort of large, exotic, black and orange-striped cat he had never seen or heard of before.

Regnark briefly worried that Deecy would be offended by the wolfskins that the man was wearing and want some sort of revenge, but his worries were unfounded – and were inadvertently mentally transmitted to the Dire Wolf by his side.

“You know I’m not really a Dire Wolf, right? Fred created me from Dungeon Core shards, so I have no attachment to those that are similar in appearance to my form. I’ve killed wolves myself, so things like those wolfskins don’t bother me.”

He grunted back in acknowledgement. The whole “mental communication” thing had freaked him out at first, which was what caused him to briefly faint just shortly after Fred brought him back to life. While

Regnark was able to handle the destruction of Northend village, the discovery that Fred was half-Dungeon Core, somehow surviving the night in the Plains of Grass, and even dying (which was still something that he was trying to wrap his head around), a Dire Wolf talking in his head was just too much. Even now, it was difficult to think that he could communicate with her just by thinking something at her, which was why most of their conversations so far had been generally one-sided on her part.

As they traveled towards Allroads, she had told him what she had explained to the others about the area, which was a whole lot more than he had known. While he had never been there, he had heard a little about it; he knew that there was a huge city surrounded by elemental representations – but nothing had prepared him for how...beautiful...it was. Especially what appeared to be a graveyard and, in the distance, a large dark cave leading into the mountain range to the south; he felt a particularly strong pull towards those places, almost as if he wanted to run to them and bathe in all their glory.

Deecy had also told him a little about what Fred had done to him, as well as what being a Shard was all about. At least, what little she knew; as Eisa and her had just recently found out about their unique status not long ago, there wasn't much to tell. However, it definitely explained how drawn he was to the Dark elemental representations outside of the city; since it had apparently been the shard of the Dark Dungeon Core that had been destroyed that had brought him back, he had a natural affinity with the element. He wasn't yet sure how he felt about that, because the Dark dungeons were always considered at least a little "evil", but he didn't feel like he had turned "evil" because of his new status.

They had all been curious what kind of abilities he had acquired from being a Shard, but he had to disappoint them – and was a little

disappointed, himself. He had seen how Eisa could seemingly create monsters out of thin air to fight for them and turn into a sometimes-naked and sometimes-not dirt elemental; then there was Deecy, who could transform into a massive Dire Wolf and create ice and fire traps at will. With those as examples, he was hoping for something that would help him fight just as well as they could.

But whenever he tried to do *something*, there was always some sort of piece that was missing. Regnark didn't know what it was, per se, but he had a suspicion it had something to do with Necromancy; the lack of a dead body nearby that he could reanimate might be the issue he was dealing with.

In addition, he couldn't pull up this "Shard Status" window that was supposed to be similar to his Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface. Deecy had told him that she hadn't been able to access it until she had increased her maximum Mana to a certain point, so he was probably going to have to wait for that to happen before he could learn a little more about what he could do.

The crowd was so thick walking along the streets of what was purported to be the Syndicate Quarter that it took them a few minutes to travel the short distance to the massive DAS building. Looking around as they got close to it, Regnark could see other substantial-sized buildings – but not nearly as large – across the street; if he was correct in his identification of the crests that were nailed to the outside of the buildings, they were Syndicate Guild headquarters. He had never joined one himself – because of the restrictions and requirements they imposed on their Guild members – but he had seen plenty of them in the Craytion Kingdom.

Judging by how many he could see, he estimated that the majority of the Syndicate Quarter was made up of these Guild headquarters, where their

members could stay while they were in the city. Based on their occupancy, the amount of people he had to wade through to get to the main DAS building, and the relative size of the Syndicate Quarter in comparison to the rest of the city, it wouldn't have surprised him to learn that there were at least a million Adventurers inside of Allroads.

And that didn't even count the merchants and normal residents in the Residential Quarter.

They finally got to the DAS building and walked inside the large open door, following a stream of other Adventurers filing inside. There was another flow of them coming out as well, almost a constant influx and outflux into what was undoubtedly the most important building in the city.

The place was packed, but Regnark was fortunate to be tall enough to see over the tops of most of the people inside. He saw that it was set up similarly to every other DAS branch that he had visited – just on a much larger scale. The job posting board took up the entirety of two walls, and there was a constant mob around them; many of the Adventurers there were ripping jobs off the board soon after one of the Syndicate workers pinned them. It was a hectic mess that somehow still worked, as there were dozens of those pinning big stacks of jobs to keep up with the hundreds or thousands looking for one to complete.

Along the longest wall was the counter where the Syndicate representatives stood to accept job acceptances, job turn-ins, Syndicate applications, Guild establishments, Class changes, or any other type of DAS-based issues. There were at least a hundred representatives ready to help – and each of them was inundated with a long line of Adventurers needing help. Regnark looked around to see if there was any type of system set up to filter the Syndicate members into certain lines – which would be smart – but there didn't seem to be anything he could see.

“Ugh, it’s even worse in here! So many unwashed bodies together don’t make my nose happy. I feel like I’m literally tasting them all on my tongue, the scent is so strong. I hope this doesn’t take long.”

He could smell what she was talking about and it didn’t smell *that* bad, but then again, he didn’t have as sensitive of a nose, either. “Sorry, Deecy – I’ll try to make this as quick as possible, but it looks like we’ll have to wait in line for a while.”

She whined and rubbed at her nose with her paw, but she still followed him as he got in what looked like the shortest line. “Shortest” was relative, of course, because there was still at least 40 people ahead of them. He was a little worried that some of the nearby Syndicate members would be curious about him and the large Dire Wolf by his side, but luckily all of them seemed to be too self-centered with their own issues and problems to care too much about him.

An hour later, they finally got to the front of the line and approached the counter, where the young man quickly asked, “What can I help you with?”

“I need to obtain a permit for my...bonded pet.”

“Ooooh, sorry – wrong line. You need to go to the line down there for pet permits—” The man pointed down the long counter, before turning back to Regnark and laughing so hard he could barely catch his breath. “I’m sorry, it’s just a little rep humor,” he managed to gasp out in between breaths. “You should have seen your face, though. Anyway, yes, I can help you with the permit,” he continued when he had calmed down enough to keep a straight face.

Regnark was at first horrified that they had gotten in the wrong line and wasted over an hour, and then he was inordinately angry at the man behind the counter.

“Calm down, it appears as though it was just a joke. Don’t cause a scene or it’s going to take longer to get out of this horribly awful building.”

He calmed down enough to ask the rep what he needed to do.

“All I need you to do is to place your hand here—” the young man brought up an artifact that would connect to his SDIA and from there to the Syndicate’s codex array, which would bring up all his information— “and then I can link your pet to your profile. I’ll also create the physical permit for you so that you have proof of your status, which is what you’ll need to show if anyone questions the validity of your bonded pet.”

That could be a problem, he thought worriedly. When Fred had brought him back to life, he had ended up just the same as Eisa had been when he had first met her in Gatecross: G-1st-Rated without a single speck of Essence to his name. The only difference was that he still had access to the “Taught Abilities” that Fred had given him back in the Plains of Grass, though none of them were unlocked. Decades of work had been wiped out in an instant, but it hadn’t bothered him too much – because he was *alive*. Now, however, it might raise a few eyebrows if it showed him to be a G-1st-Rated with no Class – but also with a bunch of abilities that were taught to him that he shouldn’t have.

Bluffing time, I guess. He tried to act confidently as he placed his hand on the artifact and waited for it to initiate; by the look on the young man’s face a few moments later, he knew exactly what he was seeing.

Dungeon Adventurer Syndicate Interface		
Name: Regnark McDonald		Class: Unselected
Rating: G-1 st		Essence Needed to Rate-up: 100
Total Essence: 0		Available Essence to Distribute: 0
Body: 3 (0/40) Brawn: 3 (0/40) Mind: 1 (0/10)		Vitality: 15/15 Stamina: 15/15 Power: 5/5
Base Physical Attack: 3 Base Physical Defense: 3		Power Regen Rate: .05/min
Taught Abilities		
Magestrike 0 – 0/100	Barrier 0 – 0/100	Magelight 0 – 0/100
Flamestrike 0 – 0/100	Froststrike 0 – 0/100	Minor Shock 0 – 0/100
Focused Irritation 0 – 0/100	Heal Minor Wounds 0 – 0/100	Minor Protection 0 – 0/100
Remove Blindness 0 – 0/100	Lightscythe 0 – 0/100	Disarm Trap 0 – 0/100
Concealment 0 – 0/100		

“Umm...there looks to be a problem. Can you lift your hand up and place it back on the linking artifact again?” the young man asked, the confusion evident in his voice.

Regnark did as he asked and tried to look like he was a combination of bored and impatient; he wasn't sure if he succeeded or not, but it didn't really matter because the rep wasn't even looking at him.

“Huh. Well, this is telling me you are only G-1st-Rated with no Class selected, as well as having not a single Essence. And it also says you have some Taught abilities, which are completely at odds with a C-Rated Beastmaster Class. That can't be correct, right?” the young man asked, still looking at the codex array and fiddling with something on it.

Regnark snorted with indignation. “Absolutely not! I'm a C-Rated Beastmaster! There must be something wrong with your equipment there. I'm looking at my Interface right now and everything looks normal to me,” he responded as haughtily as he could.

The rep fiddled with the array some more, before turning back to Regnark. “I think I need to call someone higher up to see if we can fix this

—” he started, which caused the Adventurers in line behind to groan in impatience.

“Can you still link my bonded pet to my profile? I’m sure these fine people behind me don’t want to wait *even longer* to get helped.” He made sure to speak up so that those waiting for their turn could hear him.

“Um...yes, I believe I can still do that. However, I can’t guarantee that it will stay that way if you’re to check it in the future due to this error —”

“As long as I have the physical permit, I should be fine, though?” Regnark interrupted him.

“Well...sure. But don’t you want—”

“No, I think I’ll be fine with the permit. We can try to figure out what is wrong later, but I need to get going after this. My group is waiting on me so we can go delve some more; I just came to get my permit and then leave. How much?” he said, trying to hurry the rep along.

The young man still looked really confused, but he responded to Regnark’s question almost automatically. “The permit is a single gold piece. But I really think I should call...”

Two gold pieces were slapped down on the counter, stopping the rep in the process of turning away. “Here, this extra piece is for you if you hurry with the permit. I really don’t have time to wait for whatever the issue is with your array; my own Interface is fine, so I’m sure it’s just a temporary glitch – it’ll probably be fixed by the time the next person uses it.”

The extra gold piece was probably what the rep made in a month – if not two or three months – so the extra little bribe was enough to still his protests as he gathered up both gold pieces. “O...kay. You’re right, I’m sure it’s just temporary and I don’t want to hold up everyone else. Here, let

me just get your physical permit and we should be good to go. Have you decided on a name for your pet yet?”

The rest of the details were actually completed quite quickly, and they were done and gone within a couple of minutes. Tucking the permit away in his furs, he swore he saw the Dire Wolf breathe a sigh of relief as they left the DAS building – only to cough when the stink of the rest of the city made itself known.

“Where to now?” he asked as he looked at Deecy.

“Just follow me. I can sense where Fred is, though I’m not sure how far away he is. We’ll find him eventually.”

And with that, Regnark followed his “bonded pet” Dire Wolf farther into the massive city of Allroads.

Chapter 37

It didn't take as long as he had feared to find Fred and Eisa, especially when people tended to move out of the way of a large Dire Wolf padding through the streets. Regnark fortunately only had to show his permit once to a squad of guards passing by, which took all of 30 seconds for them to look at it and send him on his way. Thirty minutes later, Deecy had tracked them down near a clothing merchant fairly close to the Residential Quarter.

"Hey there, how is the lovely couple doing?" Regnark asked as soon as they had gotten close enough to speak. Eisa was holding Fred by the hand and appeared to be dragging the poor man from merchant stall to merchant stall. They were both smiling, so it obviously wasn't *that* bad for the guy.

"Oh, good! You're done; did everything go alright with the permit?" Fred asked, relief written on his face.

Regnark explained the slight difficulty that he had come up against, but he also told them that everything was taken care of. "However, I doubt I could get away with the 'glitch' excuse again, so it's best that I stay away from there as much as you two."

"Agreed. If we're lucky, we'll be able to find my Guild and the townspeople quickly tomorrow. We'll go someplace safe where we won't have to worry about being destroyed by either the Syndicate or the Core factions chasing us," Fred said with confidence.

Yeah, but where in the world would that be? Regnark tried to think of somewhere that would provide that sort of security but couldn't think of

a single place. Rather than bring up his doubts, he instead asked if they had found out any information.

Fred seemed a little uncomfortable. “Uh...no. We were moving so quickly through these different merchants that I never got a chance to ask. I’m sure we’ll be better tomorrow when we’re not so rushed and we aren’t...distracted,” he said, looking sideways at Eisa – who had the presence of mind to blush.

“Yes, I think we’ve done a good job shopping – let’s go find a place to spend the night and we can start fresh in the morning. I don’t know about you, but I’m almost dead on my feet,” Eisa quickly interjected before anything else could be said about distractions.

“What a coincidence; I feel so tired, it’s almost like I was *dead* this morning,” he said, smiling at them.

Eisa stuck her tongue out at him and turned away, leading Fred towards the Residential Quarter to the south. Regnark quickly took the lead, however, because he probably knew what they were looking for better than the young couple. He never really liked to stay in the less-expensive DAS buildings in the towns he had visited over the years, so he had visited many an inn that catered to Adventurers over the years.

As the sun was starting to set, he finally found an inn that looked suitable – not too fancy and not too rundown (though, to be honest, he didn’t see any really rundown places like he would see in any other city he had been to). The Fire’s Eye was a low-key but well-taken-care-of establishment that surprised him when he walked inside. The common room was brightly lit with lamps and even a fancy chandelier overhead, and the clientele that filled it almost to bursting was a little more upscale than he was counting on, but it would do.

“It’s going to be extra for your pet – and you better keep control of it! I don’t need it messing up rugs upstairs, if you know what I mean,” the innkeeper told them sternly after Regnark asked for some rooms.

“I only have two rooms left – and you’re lucky I even have those. Two of my normal patrons ended up being caught in some sort of disaster over in the Craytion Kingdom and haven’t been seen since,” he added. “That’ll be 10 silver a night for each person, but it also includes three meals a day if you’re here for them. The wolf will be 15 a night, however – paid in advance. If you’re going to be staying for longer than a week, I have some slightly lower rates for you.”

Much more reasonable than the crooks in Death’s March, though still a little on the high side. He didn’t try to haggle with the innkeeper, though, as he still had a large bag of gold that Fred had given him earlier. “We’ll probably be staying for two nights,” he said, handing him a gold piece.

“Alright, no refunds if you aren’t here for the second night, though we’ll keep it open for you if you come in late,” the innkeeper warned them as he gave him his change. “Here are your keys – upstairs to the fourth floor and all the way down the hallway. Your two rooms are right on the end.”

Regnark thanked him and led the others upstairs, which were a bit of a tight fit for his large frame, but he was able to squeeze through by going a bit sideways. When they finally got to their rooms, they were quite richly furnished with fine wood furniture, a large soft rug running over the floorboards, and the beds actually looked big enough to fit his whole body. *I guess the price was actually more than reasonable.*

“Regnark, when we were shopping, we bought something for you,” Eisa said, surprising him. She pulled out large pieces of pristine-looking

dark-grey leather armor from her PIB, placing them on the bed for him to see. His eyes teared up a little as he saw them all laid out; they reminded him of the days when he would delve through dungeons with his little brother. He never liked to wear bulky plate or chainmail armor, as he needed to be able to move quickly and it hadn't meshed well with his Marksman Class.

"They're...perfect. Thank you." And they were; amazingly, it appeared that they had found some armor that would actually fit him. He normally had to have things custom-made because of his large size, but these seemed to be suited perfectly for someone of his stature.

"Not a problem. With Fred along, there isn't much that we can't afford," she smiled as she looked at Fred, who blushed at the mention of his ability to Conjure up money on a whim. Regnark still thought it was crazy that he could do that, and it seemed somehow *wrong* – but he had to admit that it came in handy.

"Oh, and we got you another PIB because you said that you had to leave yours behind back in Northend when you had to flee. Again, I'm sorry about all that," Fred said sadly, before taking a PIB off of his waist – which had been tied next to one of his own. "They're more expensive than if you get them from the DAS, of course, but as Eisa said..." He shrugged and smiled weakly as he handed Regnark the Pocket Interface Bag.

It felt good having a PIB again; he felt a little naked without it sometimes. It was almost a requirement to have one when delving through dungeons, and he had gotten used to it always being there. Regnark tied it to his own waist and placed the large sack of gold pieces that Fred had given him and the permit he had obtained earlier.

"Don't worry, we did plenty of shopping for ourselves, so don't think you're special or anything." Eisa's eyes sparkled in laughter as she

pulled out clothes for themselves from her PIB. She laid a large pile of dresses on the bed – most of them in different shades of brown for some reason – and a smaller pile of shirts and trousers for Fred next to it. Near Regnark's armor set, she also placed some accompanying clothes that he could wear under the leather. And then she pulled out shoes, boots, hats, coats, scarves, and other types of clothing for almost any type of weather or environment.

“Huh. I didn't think we bought that much, but I guess I was wrong. You do know that I can just use my Conjure Object skill to make any of the things I touched out there, don't you?” Fred said, looking a little embarrassed.

“Yes, but it's nice to have some extra clothes just in case. I've been wearing the same dress – with some of your repairs, of course – for what feels like months, so I needed a little variety. Granted, most of these are brown because I felt more attached to the color, but there's still some variety there,” she said innocently.

“They're very nice, Eisa. I'm ready to get cleaned up and get to bed – we have a big day tomorrow,” Regnark told them, before heading out the door. He had heard that there was a bathhouse in the rear of the inn and took advantage of its presence – and the others partook of it as well. He had to admit that it was good to finally get out of his bear furs as he put on some of his new clothes Fred and Eisa had bought for him; while they were great for up north where it was at least a little chilly year-round, he had been sweltering in them down in the south.

They met again afterwards, but before they retired for the night – his first real opportunity to sleep as a newborn “Shard” – Fred wanted to talk to him about his new abilities. He tried to explain again that he couldn't actually do anything, but he was interrupted.

“I know – but I want to try giving you some Dark Mana to see if we can unlock your Status screen. The others weren’t able to access it until they had acquired more of their Mana type, so I’m hoping that the same will work for you,” Fred told him.

This whole “Mana” thing was still strange to him; he could see what looked like some sort of aura surrounding Eisa and Deecy – brown for the former and red/blue for the latter – and it had become “normal” to him even after less than a day. But for *him* to have it to use? He could vaguely see a translucent dark aura around his own body, but as he couldn’t do anything with it, he had been ignoring its presence. The strange thing, though, was that he *wanted* to do something with it – he just didn’t know what or how.

“Ok, go ahead—”

A large black orb quickly formed in the front of Fred’s chest, and then shot across the space separating him and Regnark. It hit his own chest and seemed to melt into him...and there was a euphoric tingle that started at the spot where the black orb hit and quickly traveled all throughout his body. He shuddered a few times and exhaled in satisfaction, but all too soon the feeling was gone.

“Wow, what was that?” he asked, slightly disappointed that the experience didn’t last. However, he noticed that he still felt *good* – just not as good as that initial burst.

“That was a hundred units of Dark Mana. Increasing your own maximum Mana isn’t quite one-to-one as I’ve discovered with the others, but I’m hoping that is enough to get you up to the next Shard Level and unlock your screen.”

Regnark wasn’t sure if it was working, but he could gradually see the aura surrounding him start to darken, albeit by only miniscule amounts.

That was apparently enough, because he experienced a sort of *click*, and the screen that Fred had been talking about popped up.

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)

He practiced a couple of times with it and found that he could close it and bring it back just as easily as his Syndicate Interface, which made it convenient. He wasn't exactly sure what it all meant, however, so he explained what he saw to Fred.

"Well, your Dark Mana totals should be self-explanatory, as you can think of them similarly enough to your Power or Stamina that it shouldn't be too confusing. As for your other abilities, I'm assuming you can guess what Permanent Reanimation is – we just don't have a corpse nearby for you to demonstrate. The Summoning Circle is a new one for me, though – thoughts?" Fred asked, looking at the others.

Deecy seemed to have no clue, but Eisa offered up a possibility. "I've heard about an old story that the original demons and their ilk, that the Dark dungeons apparently use were originally 'summoned' from their deep underground realm by humans. This was before Adventurers were aided by the SDIAs and the Power in everyone was quite wild, of course, but I

always thought it was some sort of children's story to scare children. Maybe there is some truth to the myth, though."

I can summon demons? He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but he supposed it wasn't any worse than reanimating corpses to fight for him. "Should I try it?"

Fred held up his hands in a stopping motion. "Uh, no – we don't know what it could do in a confined place like this; what if it destroyed the building in the process or got someone killed? We can't take that chance this close to finding my Guild and those townspeople. Let's wait until you can do it without having to worry about being jailed or exiled...or worse."

Probably a good idea. With that discovery and the day that they'd all had, they all turned in for the night, with Regnark and Deecy sharing a room and Fred and Eisa sharing the other. He was almost positive that nothing was going to happen between the other two tonight; one, because they were both too tired to keep their eyes open; and two, Fred didn't have a clue what he was doing. During the darkest nights up in Northend, Regnark had seen a deer look at his un-shuttered bright lamp with a shocked and confused expression on its face – that was exactly what Fred looked like most times when Eisa was near him.

Learning from their previous stay in Death's March, Regnark laid himself down on the bed with his clothes still on – though he made sure to store his new leather armor in his PIB before he closed his eyes. As he was quickly falling asleep, he belatedly realized that he hadn't eaten anything all day – and yet he wasn't even the slightest bit hungry. *Huh, that's very strange. I wonder why this Mana makes it so that I don't have to eat, but it does nothing for being sleepy...*

He never finished the thought as sleep enfolded him in its sweet embrace.

Chapter 38

The next morning, they woke up refreshed – and still alive and with all their possessions, unlike what would've likely happened in the previous town if Deecy hadn't detected someone trying to get in. They had slept with their clothes on and their possessions close by anyway, just as a precaution. When Fred woke up, Eisa was draped over his chest drooling on him in her sleep again, which seemed strange because she had a very nice down pillow that she had completely ignored. This time, at least, she didn't seem as flustered to be woken up in that position, so it didn't really bother him if she wanted to sleep that way if it made her more comfortable – it certainly didn't bother *him*.

They stopped downstairs in the early morning hours to get something to eat; while they didn't technically *need* to eat, they all enjoyed it and they wanted to keep up appearances. They didn't partake of the evening meal the night before, and Regnark thought it prudent that they at least *look* normal.

Fred was glad that they did stop for breakfast, because the eggs, fruit, and spiced porridge were excellent – and was just the thing to fuel them on their way. After exiting the inn, they split up into the two teams from the day before and worked their way through the Residential Quarter, asking (hopefully) innocent-sounding questions about the people they were looking for. They didn't want to call any undue attention to them if they were hiding out, but Fred and the others needed to take a risk to find out any information they could.

Eisa said that it made the most sense that they would be in the Residential Quarter, as it was away from the Syndicate Quarter and the

gossipy Merchants. After a full day of searching and questioning the residents – at least those that would talk to them, because not everyone was very friendly or seemed to have time – about hearing anything about some brightly marked people who may have come to the city, they came up with not a single lead. Deecy had briefly thought about trying to recognize the scent of one of the people from her memories, but there were so many different smells inside of Allroads that it was almost impossible.

The next day, Fred woke up to find Eisa sleeping on his chest again, and he lay there looking at her for a while. *What is this that she's doing? That can't be comfortable – her neck is probably cramped in that position and the constant up-and-down motion of my chest when I breathe has got to be bothersome.*

“It's probably some sort of mating ritual. I've never heard of it before, but then again, I'm not an expert on human customs.”

Apparently, Fred had been projecting his thoughts uncontrolled and Deecy had picked it up. *“Is she waiting for me to respond and do the same to her? I would think it would feel uncomfortable for her if I did that.”*

“I have no idea. You may need to ask her sometime – but if you're going to continue with this mating ritual business, I suggest you do it later. We still have some of the Residential Quarter to go through and we'll have to decide where to go if we don't find anything there.”

Fred thought that was a good idea, so he woke Eisa up gently and got to his feet. It took a little bit for Eisa to get ready, but they were soon out and about in the Residential Quarter again. Before noon, they had

investigated as much of it as they reasonably could short of going door to door and asking every single person.

“They’re obviously not here; *someone* would’ve seen them if they still had the marks above their heads, but there doesn’t seem to be any sign of them here. Are you sure the marks are permanent?” Fred asked Eisa, as he wasn’t technically alive when it had been done to them – he had been missing his head at the time.

“That’s what that Holy Paladin said, and as much as I hate him for what he did, I don’t think he lied about them being permanent. My worry is that they never actually came here and instead went somewhere else; either that, or they...never made it,” she said with a bit of hesitation in her voice. It wasn’t something that Fred wanted to consider, so she probably didn’t want to even bring it up.

“I have to believe that they made it here – we just haven’t found them yet. Based on the timing of when they left Death’s March, they should’ve arrived before we did, even with the help of your Goblins running most of the distance here. I think we’ve exhausted all of the easy possibilities here in the Residential Quarter – it’s time to investigate somewhere else,” Fred told them, with what he hoped was confidence in his voice. Privately, he shared some of her fears, but he just had a *feeling* they were there – he just needed to find them.

Therefore, they expanded their search to include the Merchant’s Quarter. They still wanted to avoid the Syndicate’s main area for now, because of the dangers inherent in making themselves known there, but they figured it was worth the risk to investigate in the new Quarter. Regnark said that since merchants talked with a lot of people and their gossip spread around quite quickly, it was entirely possible that if anyone knew of the presence of Fred’s people, it would be them.

He was right, though it took hours and dozens of gold pieces in outrageously expensive “bribes” to get the merchants who knew something to share their information.

From what they could piece together, a very large group (Fred was happy to hear it was still large, which meant that most if not all of them had survived) of “Judgement-marked” refugees had shown up during the night less than a week ago, begging to be let inside. Normally, the gates of the city would close a few hours after dark and would reopen as soon as predawn started to light the sky; with the large mass of people begging to be let in, however, the gate guards alerted the appropriate members of the Allroads Government, who in turn informed the Syndicate.

From there, Fred and the others got conflicting information. A few accounts told of the group being brought inside and were being housed safely in the Syndicate Quarter; others said they were marched straight to the Government Quarter and never seen again; still others said they were refused entry and sent on their way; one merchant even said that they were killed by the guards and a few high-Rated Syndicate groups. The last one worried him a little, but he figured if something like that had happened, it probably would’ve been some news that was spread around a lot more.

They spent the rest of the day looking for more information from the merchants, but they didn’t learn anything more than what they had heard before. They went back to the inn, paid for another two nights, and resolved to cautiously do some searching in the Syndicate Quarter in the morning.

Unfortunately, their sleep was interrupted by people outside their door.

“Fred, we have company again. I don’t think there’s any running from these people, though.”

A pounding on their doors woke everyone up, followed by them being flung open violently at the same time, their sturdy locks completely destroyed by the powerful kicks of those entering their rooms. Fred immediately sat up, which dislodged Eisa – who was sleeping on his chest again – and she made a yelping noise that was quickly silenced when she opened her eyes and caught a look at the doorway.

“Deecy, tell Regnark not to fight back in any way – there’s no way to get away from this,” Fred Communicated to the Dire Wolf in the next room. She didn’t respond back, but he also didn’t hear any type of fighting, which was a good sign.

“You’re under arrest for purchasing information outside of a licensed Information Broker, for soliciting information from residents in the Residential Quarter, and for tampering with SDIA systems. In addition, you’re also wanted for questioning regarding the information you were trying to acquire. Resistance will result in further fines or jailtime, so we suggest you come quietly,” the fully armored A-9th-Rated Commander-Sentinel spoke as soon as he entered the room.

Behind him, Fred could see another four Syndicate members, all ranging from the low A-Ratings to an S-1st-Rated Channeler-Alchemist in the back of the group. He couldn’t see who was at Regnark and Deecy’s door, but he assumed there was another group just as powerful.

Needless to say, Fred and the others didn’t put up any resistance; not only was Regnark fairly weak in terms of his Adventurer status now, but even if he had been the same as he was before he died and became a Shard, there still wasn’t much that they could do against such powerful people.

“We’ll go willingly, but I think there’s been some sort of mistake here,” Fred told them as he got out of bed and helped Eisa – who was rapidly waking up now that their room was suddenly invaded – out as well.

“Put your hands behind your back and turn around with your face against that wall,” the Commander-Sentinel told them with authority and absolutely no indication that he had even heard Fred’s assertion of innocence. They complied and placed their heads against the wall; Fred looked over at Eisa’s wide-eyed and shocked face and whispered, “Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay.”

“No talking unless you’re being asked a question – got it?” the gruff voice of the one who had kicked down their door asked, just as something *snapped* around his wrists he was holding behind him. Suddenly, it felt like something was cut off from him; he wasn’t sure what it was, but it was answered shortly afterwards by their captors.

“Now, I wouldn’t advise trying to escape, because that will result in further fines and/or jailtime. Also, if you’ve never experienced these Negation Artifact Bands before, you’ll notice that you’re completely cut off from your Power and all but the barest amount of your Stamina – just enough to keep you alive and mobile. If you are found innocent of your crimes or at the end of your sentence, these NABs will be removed and you’ll have full access to your skills and abilities again; until then, these will stay on,” the Commander-Sentinel – whose name was Rogert – told them, before bodily moving them towards the door.

“The others are secure, sir,” a voice called out from the hallway outside their room.

“They put a collar and a leash on me; I don’t like it, but I could break out of it if you wanted me to.”

“It doesn’t seem like they know who we are quite yet. Let’s just go along with this for the moment, and maybe all we need to pay is a fine,” Fred Communicated back to Deecy. He didn’t think it was necessary for him to remind her to tell the others, because he was sure she would do that to calm at least Regnark down. A few seconds later, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Eisa’s shoulders relax a little, so he was pretty sure she got the message.

She tensed up again when their PIBs were untied from their waists and confiscated, which confused him for a moment, but then he remembered that she had the DAS Class Selector Artifact from Gatecross in there. *That...could be troublesome.*

Fortunately, they didn’t look in there right away and they were marched down the stairs and out of the Fire’s Eye Inn, where dozens of people still in the common room watched them leave. Fred was glad to see that Regnark and Deecy looked alright, though the big man’s face looked quite angry – *he must be mad at having his sleep interrupted.*

And just that quickly, Fred and his friends were at the mercy of Allroads.

Chapter 39

They were pushed and dragged quickly through the streets, which were sparsely lit by lamps on posts every 100 feet or so. Despite the lack of effective lighting, Fred was easily able to see where they were going: The Government Quarter. Within minutes, they were passing through a gate through another wall – which was not quite as big as the one on the perimeter of the city, but almost – and quickly rushed into a building just inside. It was too dark to see much more of the Government Quarter, but what he *did* see just looked like more plain, non-descript buildings.

The inside of the structure they were brought to was brightly lit compared to outside, which blinded him for a moment. When he blinked his eyes and could see again, he found himself and the others in a relatively small, stone-walled room with very little ornamentation other than the sconces up against the walls, holding what was creating the bright light. It looked like some sort of glowing stone, but it also looked uniform enough that it was likely something made by humans. *Probably some sort of light-producing Artifact.*

They were led to three chairs in the center of the room, and Deecy's leash was tied to a hook in the wall, and then their captors left through the same door they came in. Looking around, Fred saw another door on the opposite side of the entrance, which he assumed led farther into the building, but other than that, there was nothing of note.

"What do we do?" Eisa whispered.

"Nothing for now," Fred whispered back, taking the cue from her to keep his voice down. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he could almost feel someone watching or listening to them even if there wasn't anyone

obviously there. “Hopefully this is just a misunderstanding, and they’ll let us go with just a fine.”

Regnark just grunted and Eisa was silent in response, apparently too scared to talk anymore. Fred just couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being watched, so he looked around again – and then he saw what he was looking for in the back corner of the room behind them.

“I see them, too. The ambient Mana everywhere around here is so thick that it’s quite easy to see where there’s a void.”

A void was exactly what he saw in the corner, as there was a person-shaped disturbance in the ambient Mana; he was reminded of how Pollianne was technically invisible in the Dark dungeon, but he could still follow her by watching her void move through the ambient Mana. It was much easier to see because of the sheer thickness of it in Allroads, however. With his attention caught by it, the others looked where he was concentrating, and it was obvious that they could see it as well.

The door abruptly opened, and a woman walked inside; the authority that she exhibited as she looked at Fred and the others was almost a physical force. He swallowed in nervousness as she stood in front of them, unarmored and without a weapon, but looking like she could kill them all with a look. When he peered at her Interface, he could well understand why; as a S-5th-Rated Inquisitor, he wouldn’t have put it past her to be able to do that.

She had very short brown hair and what he would classify as a severe face, with thin cheeks, sharp angles, and a pointed nose. She was probably a little shorter than Eisa and was thick but not with fat; from what he could see, most of her frame was filled out with well-toned muscle.

Overall, she didn't look overly intimidating...until you saw her eyes. They seemed as if they could see everything about a person just by looking at them, as well as ferreting out secrets without even trying.

She looked at the corner where the invisible person was standing. "Agent Ravenne, you can show yourself. They can obviously sense you're there, so there's no point in you hiding anymore." Fred looked at the corner and saw another woman, wearing an outfit almost identical to Pollianne's – though this one made his vision want to slip past her for some reason – materialize where he had seen the void earlier.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. They shouldn't have been able to see me – I have no idea what happened," Agent Ravenne said in a lower-pitched voice than Fred had been expecting, though it was still quite feminine.

"It's not your fault, Agent. I believe these people here are quite... unique," the Inquisitor said to the S-2nd-Rated Assassin-Spy in the corner. She turned back to Fred and the others, and for some reason decided that Regnark was the one in charge, because she primarily addressed him. Not that Fred necessarily thought of himself as any sort of leader, but if he was strictly going by Adventurer Rating, then it made sense that he was their leader. *I guess she doesn't know **everything**.*

"Welcome to Allroads; my name is Chareese and I'm in charge of the Syndicate's Investigative branch of the Allroads Council. Now, which one of you is Regnark?"

And then the questions (and a few explanations) began.

* * *

It turned out that Regnark's "glitch" when he went to get the permit for Deecy was what caught the attention of the Syndicate. The issue with

the Codex Array was such an isolated and unusual incident that they suspected that the big man had somehow tampered with his SDIA somehow, which was supposed to be impossible. They didn't know what exactly went wrong with it, but they apparently sent Agent Ravenne to trail them to see if anything else unusual would make itself known.

Fortunately for Fred and the others, the Agent hadn't gotten into their rooms to hear their more private conversations – like the ones about Mana, Necromancy, and summoning demons. All that the invisible Ravenne could find out was that they were looking for some people with Judgement Marks over their heads, which was what they had been doing in public for the last two days. They apparently could've been arrested as soon as they started talking to the residents in their Quarter, as well as giving “bribes” to the merchants, but they held off in case something else presented itself. When the Agent overheard them talking about trying to investigate the Syndicate Quarter, that was when the order to arrest them came down.

“So, now that I've explained to you why you are here, there are two things that I need to know. First thing first, though, I need to check all of your SDIAs to see if there is any other evidence of tampering,” the Inquisitor said, before pulling out the same sort of Artifacts that Regnark had used when he went to get his permit.

There was nothing that any of them could do...well, there *technically* was, but their Mana usage wasn't something that they wanted to show at the moment. Fred had shared what he knew of their captors to Deecy and she had relayed that information to the others, which pretty much shut down any sort of thoughts of resistance.

Regnark went first and the same results as earlier showed up on the array; it appeared as though Chareese was prepared for that, because it

didn't seem to faze her. Eisa went next, and though a single eyebrow raised when she saw the Taught Abilities that she had access to, the Inquisitor didn't say anything.

Fred dreaded his turn, because his was likely to raise more than a single eyebrow. He placed his hand on the Artifact with just the slightest hesitation and waited for her to be surprised. However, she only looked confused after looking at his Interface. "Well, obviously you two have altered your SDIA in some way, because there is no way you should have all of those Taught Abilities when you're such low-Rated Adventurers. As for yours...Fredwynklemossering?...that's a strange name...you don't seem to have *any* abilities other than Teach as an Instructor. Am I supposed to believe you 'Taught' your friends here your non-existent abilities?"

Huh? I wonder if my Adapted Abilities don't show up on there...
"Uh...I don't know what you're talking about." It was a lame answer, but he was temporarily confused at what was going on.

"You should know that I have the ability to tell if someone is lying, and that statement, Fredwynklemossering, was a lie. Now, I'm going to ask each of you a question and you had better not lie again, because my patience isn't infinite," the Inquisitor said calmly at first, but her voice grew hard toward the end. "Did you alter or in any other way manipulate your SDIAs to present false information?"

Fred and the others answered honestly, "No." This only seemed to infuriate Chareese as it was apparent that they were telling the truth.

"I'm not sure how it's possible that you're telling the truth. Do you know why the Codex Array is displaying false information?"

Again, each of them answered, "No", which was technically true. As far as all of them knew, it should be displaying accurate information and

none of it was “false”. Of course, the Inquisitor didn’t think to ask that and the frustration on her face only grew.

“Regardless, something is going on and we’re justified in keeping you here until we figure it out. Now, as for your other crimes, normally you’d get away with just paying a fine...but in this instance, the subject of your inquiries is of more concern. Why were you looking for these...‘Judgement-marked’ individuals?”

Fred answered simply for the others. “They’re our friends and we wanted to know what happened to them.”

“Your friends, huh? Do you know why they were Judgement-marked in the first place? Most marked that way are usually bad people; if you were friends with them, does that make you bad people?”

Fred wasn’t sure how to answer that, because trying to explain why they were “Judgement-marked” probably wasn’t the best idea. Instead, he said the only thing he knew to be true. “They aren’t bad people – and neither are we.”

“Hmm...that might be true in *your* opinion, but I doubt the world would agree with you. I’m tired of this for tonight, however; we’re holding you until we can get to the bottom of this. After I get some sleep, I’ll be questioning you again tomorrow. Ravenne—” Chareese turned toward the formerly invisible woman still in the corner— “please escort these individuals below and see that they’re secured for the rest of the night.”

“Yes, ma’am. About the wolf...?” the Agent asked.

The Inquisitor looked over at Deecy leashed up against the wall, calmly watching the proceedings. “Take it with them; sometimes when bonded pairs are split up in captivity, there can be some...unfortunate consequences. If everyone here is innocent, I don’t want it said that we treated them poorly.”

Chareese left quickly, leaving them alone with Agent Ravenne. “Don’t even think of trying to escape; even if you were able to get past me – which is doubtful – there are dozens of A and S-Rated waiting outside for you to attempt something like that.”

Fred wasn’t planning on it; he knew when he was outmatched, especially if he didn’t have access to his Adventurer Power. The others were powerful in their own ways, but even together they stood only a very slight chance against the Assassin-Spy, let alone the guards outside if they were anything like the ones that had arrested them.

The Agent led them through the same door the Inquisitor had disappeared through, which opened into a long hallway lined with approximately a dozen doors. There was no sign of the other woman, however, and Fred figured she must’ve gone through one of the doors on either side of the hallway.

They were corralled toward the end, where the hallway took a sharp right turn that led to some stairs leading down. And down...and down... and down. Fred counted at least a dozen flights of steps leading down into the depths of the earth, which ended in a stone hallway almost identical in appearance to the wooden building above them. The main difference was that the lightweight wooden doors were instead heavy-looking solid metal doors with enormous locks on them. They had a small open grate on it that you could look through to see what was inside them, however, and from the first one Fred looked through on their way past, he could see that they appeared to be large empty rooms.

The first six that they passed were empty, but the seventh one held a surprise. It was only a glimpse, but he could see people inside that had the Judgement Mark above their heads. *We found them!* Of course, he didn’t get a good look at them to recognize any of them, but he doubted there were

that many *other* Marked people in the city. *It has to be them.* They passed another door and he managed to peek inside to see even more people with the Marks; one just so happened to be looking straight through the grate at that time and Fred briefly met the gaze of Metch.

It is them! From what he could see, at least most of them seemed to be alive and well, though they appeared quite downcast. He wasn't sure what the Syndicate and the Allroads Government was planning on doing with them, but it probably wasn't good. He wasn't sure if the others had seen what he had, so he Communicated with them via Deecy.

“Amazingly, the stench of the city is quite muted down here and I recognized a few of their scents as soon as you told me. I can’t tell if they’re all here, but it’s quite possible that if they’ve survived this long, they’ll be in there.”

Soon enough, they were led into their own metal-walled cell, which looked identical to the others Fred had seen. They were told to go inside while the Agent locked the door from the outside.

“This door and the walls are made of a very strong metal that even a Brawn-centric S-Rated Tank would have trouble damaging, so don't even think about trying to bust your way out. The Inquisitor will be back for you in the morning,” Ravenne spoke to them through the grate. And without anything further, the Agent walked away and left them.

“Along with myself, they both want to know what the plan is.”

“So do I, Deecy. So do I.”

Chapter 40

They had no Power, essentially no Stamina, and no weapons – not that having them would necessarily do much good. Fred doubted that there was any hope of them fighting their way out against the force waiting for any type of attempt to break out aboveground. Even if Fred found some way to get the Negation Artifact Bands off of their wrists, it still probably wouldn't do much good. It was possible that they might be able to sneak out using their Concealment ability that Fred had taught the others, but Deecy didn't have access to that.

Waiting until the Inquisitor came to question them again was out of the question, either. It would only be a matter of time before she asked the right questions or they let something slip, which would be bad for all of them – the Judgment-marked prisoners in the other cells included. Fred guessed that they were awaiting word back from the Craytion Kingdom on the crime that his Guild and the townspeople of Gatecross were accused of before doing anything with them, but it probably wouldn't be long before they had the information they needed. And whether they would execute them all or just force them into a high-Rated Nature dungeon for punishment was a toss-up in his opinion.

So that left the Shards' ability to still use their Mana. A quick application of Eisa's Defender Creation ability with a Goblin Gnome – that was promptly absorbed back into her aura – proved that they were still a viable option, but he couldn't see any way out even with that to help. It was possible that pumping Eisa and Deecy full of his reserve of their elemental Mana would unlock something that might help, but he doubted it. In fact,

the only thing he could think of to help was something he was hesitant to do...

“I’m going to ask all of your opinions before I do this, because this could have some serious consequences. Should I establish a territory here and dig my way out using my Mana? I could easily make a tunnel to the other rooms and grab the others using the same process...but what then? I’m not sure I have enough Unconverted Mana to tunnel all the way out of the entirety of the Allroads area, and even if I did, I’m sure we would be quickly hunted down by the authorities here. Even all together without these Bands on our wrists, we wouldn’t stand a chance against a single group of S-Rated Syndicate members,” Fred Communicated to Deecy, who relayed it to the others. He kept their conversation mental, because the Allroads Government and the Syndicate had already proved that they had been spying on them; he wouldn’t put it past them to have someone listening in from somewhere nearby.

Before they could answer, he added, *“If that isn’t bad enough, if I establish a territory here, we’ll be telling every single elemental faction where we are. As this place is supposed to be ‘forbidden’ to establish a territory in, the three factions that want me dead for destroying one of their Cores could easily turn the other four against us.”*

Their expressions showed that they hadn’t thought of that, though it had been on Fred’s mind ever since he stepped foot in the city. The area around Allroads was a big focus of the elemental Core factions if only because of its presence as a Convergence; he wasn’t exactly sure what would happen if he were to establish a territory. Obviously, the so-called Dungeon Core Supreme Council wouldn’t be happy about it, but Fred didn’t know how far they would go to eliminate him.

Would they send in armies of defenders? Would they wait until I left? And, if that is the case, am I essentially trapped in Allroads for the rest of my life? It wasn't like he could outwait them – they would essentially be around for eternity if nothing happened to destroy them. Based on the way the world was going, any threat to them wouldn't be coming from humans. *But maybe...just maybe...it should.*

The thought felt like a betrayal of his parents and the sacrifices they made to ensure he survived and grew up as “normal” as he could. He felt deep down that there were Dungeon Cores out there – somewhere – that were capable of the same caring and loving attitudes that his parents had towards him, but they were likely few and far between. The rest, though, were just the same as the others that he had experiences with.

So maybe it wasn't such a betrayal of his parents after all. In fact, based on his conversation with the Nature Core he had inadvertently absorbed months ago, it wasn't just the Supreme Council that had betrayed his parents, it was *all* of the Dungeon Cores around the world. His memory of his parents' kind and loving natures had biased his view of Cores in general and made excuses for them, when it was *their* fault for the way the world was today for both themselves and humans. He was sure that they didn't *want* to fight over territory in constant wars, it was just something that was inevitable because of their past and probable future actions.

With the Dungeon Cores at the top of the food chain, there was nothing to challenge them, nothing to keep them from expanding more and more. Eventually, they were going to destroy themselves and the humans along with them. Something had to change, and maybe...that something was him.

Fred had Deecy Communicate another plan to them, which sounded insane – but he thought it might work.

It didn't take long for the others to decide, fortunately, which matched exactly what he wanted to do. With a nod acknowledging their approval and some mental Communication to the others about what he was about to do, Fred got to work. Establishing his territory was probably the easiest it had ever been, because there were representations of all of the elements even inside the city. Within seconds, his territory had been established and he felt his awareness expand.

Fred was glad he had learned how to focus his attention only on what he was looking at, because with his territory now with a diameter of nearly 10 miles since he had upgraded his Core Structure Level, there was *a lot* to see. Millions of people were now inside his area of influence, as well as a large variety of the concentrated elements outside of the city. He didn't even cover half of the entire Allroads area, but what he did cover was enough to overwhelm him if he let it.

Focusing his attention to right outside their jail cell, he could see one invisible Syndicate member near the bottom of the stairs; again, it was easy to see him/her when he looked at the void in the ambient Mana. Since it would normally penetrate through everything but humans, it was obvious where someone was trying to hide from human senses – but not from his Mana Sight.

Fred was glad that their invisible guard was far enough away that they weren't able to see inside the cells, because otherwise it would've complicated matters. Before he did anything else, Fred concentrated on his Fire Mana and brought forth a few units in a small blob that bobbed in the air in front of him. Concentrating on it, he brought it toward his left wrist and started to condense the blob until it was no bigger than his thumbnail – and then he shrunk it again and again. He ended up having to add a little bit more Fire Mana to the little orb that was no bigger than the head of a pin

until it contained a full 10 units. It was hard to concentrate and keep it contained in the tightly condensed bubble; soon enough, the intense heat it was giving off – as well as the strain on his control – caused him to break out in a sweat.

Before it could break apart and dissipate, he brought it to the NAB on his left wrist and forced the tiny dot through the metal, severing it – and burning and charring his skin and some of the muscle underneath severely in the process. Hissing through the pain, he brought it to the other wrist and did the same thing, though he managed to avoid all but superficial burns that time. The others held their wrists out to him and turned away, afraid to watch; he smiled grimly as he felt his control starting to slip, but he managed to hold onto it long enough to slice through their bands without doing *too* much damage.

He let the condensed Mana go and it inflated back to normal size; he reabsorbed it and found that over half of it had been used up in the process. *There's got to be a better way to get those off.* Eisa used her Heal Minor Wounds spell to heal them all afterwards, because even though he was being as careful as he could be, they all still managed to get some severe burns. Relief washed over him as he felt his self-sustained injuries heal and he concentrated on the next project.

So as not to arouse too much suspicion if the guard did decide to check up on them, Fred Communicated through Deecy to have them pretend to keep wearing the Bands, while they lay down as if they were trying to get some sleep. He didn't bother with Deecy, because all she had to do was transform into her Pup form and the collar would slip right off her neck and over her head any time. When everyone was in position, he lay down and closed his eyes.

Looking at his Territorial Sight, he had a lot of room to work with now. There were a few areas where the nearest lake of water and pool of lava dipped far down into the ground, but otherwise he had a fairly blank slate. Some of the buildings in the city had basements that went down a few stories, but none of them were as deep as the one he was currently in underneath the Government Quarter. He was tempted to search around and see if there were any alternatives to what he was about to do in the city, but he wasn't even sure what he'd be looking for – so he blocked out everything aboveground and concentrated on his work.

Fire Mana: 283/283

Water Mana: 283/283

Nature Mana: 283/283

Earth Mana: 282/282

Dark Mana: 282/282

Unconverted Mana: 33540

First, Fred started to pull masses of his Unconverted Mana out from his Human Core and sent it underground, tracing out a series of tunnels that didn't connect to anything quite yet. They weren't classified as dungeon rooms because he hadn't made an entrance, nor were they held up by anything but the occasional pillar of dirt and stone he left for support.

In order to make stone walls that would support it further, he needed to be able to physically see it to use either his Adventurer ability – Conjure Object – or his Mana-formed Item Creation skill. His Territory Sight allowed him to create dungeon “rooms” at least, which was essentially what his tunnels were – really long rooms. Since they weren't technically part of

the dungeon, however, the Mana upkeep wasn't taken out of his Unconverted Mana pool that was taken to ensure its stability.

He created the tunnels so that they ran right up to the metal jail cells of the other captives (which he did check and confirmed that nearly all of the ones that had been in Gatecross were in those two cells) and then connected it with his own, though he didn't remove the special metal yet. A quick test from below and out of sight was enough to prove that he could remove it, though it took a little more UM than just dirt and stone – but, ultimately, it would work.

Then, approximately 300 feet down from his location – which was just over 400 feet from the surface – Fred directed his tunnels to meet in a slightly larger space, where he sent direction to his Unconverted Mana to create a dungeon entrance. A miniscule vibration ran through the metal jail cell when the stone entrance erupted through the bottom of his larger space underground and impacted its ceiling; he hadn't planned on how large it would be. Normally it was just large enough to contain the entrance tunnel and spread out a little above and to the sides; with his increased Core Structure Level, it appeared as though his entrance had gotten larger as well – by at least three times. Looking at his upkeep for the entrance tunnel, he saw that instead of just (5), it read (15) – three times more than normal.

Unfortunately, even that small vibration was felt by the guard outside in the hallway. He or she immediately started to walk down the hallway and looked inside every room, checking on the prisoners to see if they could find the reason for the disturbance. After looking through the two rooms full of Judgement-marked people, the invisible guard peered in through their door to see them all “sleeping”, with their broken Bands still on their wrists but un-operational. After a few minutes of peering inside, the guard went back to their post by the bottom of the stairs.

Only after it appeared as if the guard wouldn't come back did Fred get back to work. Following that unexpected development, he was a little more cautious of what he was doing, because the vibration also collapsed part of the tunnel he had created earlier. Repairing it took even more Unconverted Mana and it was likely only temporary, because all he could really do from afar was remove dirt and stone – not compact or shape it, and certainly not create something to help stabilize it.

Once that was done, however, Fred needed to be strategic. They didn't have a lot of time before the sun came up and they were hauled away for questioning; he wasn't sure if they were going to come for him and his friends first thing in the morning or wait a little bit, but he had to plan for them coming early. Using that vein of thought, he used his Unconverted Mana to start creating some rooms.

He didn't get fancy or too detailed, his main purpose was to have someplace to put some defenders and a few defenses in there. In all, he only made two large generic, box-like rooms that he then filled with a variety of defenders and the few defenses he had access to. By that time, though, the predawn light of morning was already starting to touch the horizon, and Fred knew it was time to go.

After checking to make sure the guard was still in place at the hallway entrance, he opened his eyes and signaled for the others to get up quietly. Then, near one of the corners closest to the entrance to their room – which would likely be missed if someone just peered inside through the grate – Fred used his Mana again to remove the chunk of Metal separating the tunnel he had dug out earlier from the room. He was surprised at how much Unconverted Mana it took to get rid of the metal; he had been forced to use more than 500 just to clear a 3-square-foot section. All of the

tunneling and the rooms he had made had only required just over 4,000, so it was a significant amount.

The smell of fresh, wet dirt wafted through the tunnel and into the room as soon as it was unblocked – which was unexpected and caused Fred to hurry. If the guard suddenly smelled the dirt, the operation could be over before they got started.

Regnark squeezed through and lowered himself down into the tunnel first, and Fred was glad that he had made it as wide as he did. Any bigger would cause more collapses in the tunnel itself, while if it was any smaller, the big man – and possibly some of the larger Core Power Guild members – wouldn't be able to fit. Eisa went next and Deecy shrunk down to her Pup form, sliding easily out of the collar and leash that had been connected to it. Fred went in last and followed the others down the dark tunnel that Regnark didn't seem to have a problem navigating, until they came to a junction where the three tunnels from the three rooms connected underneath. With more mental Communication aided by the Dire Wolf, Regnark and Deecy stayed where they were and Eisa and Fred traveled quickly to the end of the other tunnels.

He pulled up his Territory Sight again and concentrated on the area near where Eisa was standing. With another large usage of his Unconverted Mana, he eliminated the metal covering the tunnel and watched as Eisa popped her head up and held her finger to her lips. It was just in time, too, because they almost exclaimed out loud in excitement at seeing her familiar face, but fortunately, this was the room that held Metch who had likely spread the word of his arrival earlier. As a result, they all tiptoed as quietly as they could to the tunnel and followed Eisa down into the dark recesses of it without hesitation. When they got to the junction with Regnark and Deecy, Eisa used her Magelight spell to give them some light and some of

them squeaked out in surprise, but they were fortunately too far down for more than a trace of it to make it out of the tunnel.

Fred had another issue, however. The spot where he had made his tunnel to this jail cell was currently blocked by a townsman who had recently decided to sleep curled up over the entrance. *This could be a problem.* Thinking quickly as he watched the last of the people filing down from the other room, he luckily found Werne – the first townsman he had taught anything to back in Gatecross – sitting nearby with his knees pulled up under his chin and staring vacantly at the floor. With an application of his Mana, he etched the word, “MOVE” followed by a small arrow pointing toward the man in the corner.

It took the better part of a minute before Werne focused enough to read it and Fred almost gave up and started digging another tunnel, but he hesitated because he didn’t want to mess with the stability of the tunnel he currently had. Fortunately, the townsman was starved for something to break up the monotony and he immediately crawled to the man in the corner and woke him up. Unfortunately, the man yelped when he was shaken awake; Fred looked outside in the hallway and saw the invisible person immediately move toward the door to look inside. Fred quickly ate away at his writing with a little more Mana to make it smooth, though there was now a noticeable divot on it.

Werne, luckily, calmed down the man that he had woken up and moved him to the side, before sliding himself back over to the divot, feigning his bored expression again. Some of the others had looked over to see what the yelp was about as well, but quickly turned back to doing nothing when they didn’t see anything – which was precisely what the guard did after looking inside for a minute. Somehow they seemed to know there was a guard outside the door even if they couldn’t see it; however, as

it was almost completely silent in the metal room, now that he was listening closely, he could hear the faint scuff of the invisible person when they were walking.

Fred was worried that the other doors would be checked since the guard was already there, but they returned to their position after making sure nothing was going on. Breathing a sigh of relief, Fred quickly got rid of the metal covering his tunnel and popped his head up with a finger to his lips similar to Eisa earlier. Gasps escaped some of their lips before they could silence themselves – and the operation was now in jeopardy. The guard practically ran back to the room this time and peered inside to see everyone staring at Fred in shock, and the sounds of keys jingling could be heard. Fred immediately used his Mana-formed Object Skill and visualized a thin bar of the same metal covering the cell in front of the door and essentially welded it into place, preventing the door from opening.

It felt like his chest was being ripped out of his body when he did that; he looked to see what was wrong and saw that over 8,000 Unconverted Mana had just been used to make the metal bar! He wasn't exactly sure what it was, but it was even more expensive *Creating* it than getting rid of it. He quickly recovered, though, and beckoned everyone inside the tunnel. They rushed to the hole and ran as fast as they could, as stealth was no longer an option. He practically flew down the tunnel until he reached the junction, which was clear now that the others had started down toward his dungeon.

“Deecy, get everyone inside and push towards the back – and avoid the defenses! They should be pretty easy to spot, but I don’t want anyone getting hurt. We’re out of time, so everyone has to hurry!”

She acknowledged the information and he saw through his Territorial Sight how Eisa and Regnark were now urging everyone to run;

looking quite a bit further out, he stared at something, searching for some sign that his assumptions were accurate. He really hoped they were, because otherwise they were all going to be in serious trouble.

Chapter 41

Chareese was just waking up when the guard she had stationed down in the prison threw open the door and shouted, “The prisoners have escaped!”

Normally, she would’ve screamed and reprimanded the Assassin Agent-in-training for barging in and shouting at her, but there were more pertinent issues to address. “Which ones? And how did they get past you?” she asked, flinging herself already dressed out of bed. She was so exhausted last night when the prisoners had been brought in that she had barely gotten through the intake interview process before she was forced to retire.

Being up for nearly two days straight dealing with the mess the Westfork Merchant Collective had dropped on her lap was enough to drive her straight to bed after the disaster of an interview. In fact, she barely remembered walking inside her sparsely furnished room at the Allroads Governmental Criminal Prison before she collapsed on her bed...it felt like only minutes ago.

“Everyone in Room 8 – they looked to be going into some sort of hole in the floor,” the guard said, which was confusing.

She was already running out the door and towards the stairs when she asked him, “Well, did you open the door and stop them? You have the authority to do that, you know; I doubt they could’ve stopped you even if they piled on top of you.”

He sounded hesitant as they started to fly down the stairs, taking them 3 or 4 at a time. “I tried, ma’am – but the door wouldn’t open. Something they did is blocking it.”

She didn't even know what to say. Never in her 60 years in her position at Allroads had there ever been a single escape, let alone the 87 inmates inside Room 8. From what she knew from before she arrived, there hadn't been any escapes on record. She knew from experience that not *everything* was recorded the way it should be, but something like an escaped criminal was something that would've been noted.

She hit the ground floor at a run and shouted back at the obviously incompetent guard, "Give me the keys!" A ring of keys flew towards her and she deftly caught it, finding the right key immediately. She was about to put it in the lock, but she saw that it was already open. "You left it open! No wonder they escaped."

"Sorry, ma'am – I didn't think it mattered and I thought it would be better to get to you as soon as possible. Besides, it won't—"

She was already trying to push open the door, but it was like the man said: It wouldn't budge. She knew she had a much higher Brawn Stat than an Assassin, though even with that, the door didn't move more than a tiny amount. It was almost as if they had found some way to weld the metal together, locking it in place – which should be impossible, but especially for those with NABs on their wrists. She gave up after almost a minute of trying to force her way through. *I'm going to have to contact the Syndicate to see if they can loan me Goliath – not even Magisteel can resist him if he wants to get through somewhere.* The prison wasn't made to accommodate anyone with primarily Brawn stats past A-10th-Rated, though they didn't advertise that fact.

"Well, as long as you've secured the other cells, I'll have to see if I can get some help with this door," she said, but there was only silence behind her. Putting her head in her hand, she asked with sleep-deprived impatience, "You *did* check the other rooms, didn't you?"

“Uh...let me get right on that.”

You would think that being A-Rated would indicate some sort of smarts for living that long, but I guess delving through dungeons doesn't prepare you for working for the Allroads Government. Chareese ran with him to the next cell which held even more of the Judgement-marked people – and there was no one inside. All of them...were gone.

When they were originally taken into custody just over a week ago, she was thoroughly confused by them; normally, those with the marks above their heads – which were created by one of the few Holy Paladins that existed in that area of the world – were murderers, thieves, and other unwanted miscreants that were sent into exile rather than killed outright. It was thought to be a worse punishment to be stripped of any help and branded as an outlaw, sent to try to survive in the tumultuous countryside by themselves. Every once in a while, one of these Marked individuals would arrive at Allroads from all over the land, where they would seek asylum and help from a city not affiliated with any Kingdom.

The Allroads Government, however, didn't quite have the same sort of reputation for leniency that the Kingdoms did when it came to the Judgement-marked by letting them continue to live in the first place. Strict laws were in place in the city in the form of rules and regulations, and if someone was already proven to be some sort of serious criminal, Allroads tended to eliminate a future problem rather than risk something else happening in their city. Needless to say, those with the Marks who arrived didn't live long.

However, the arrival of so many at once was unprecedented; they were taken to the Prison rather than killed out of hand because something seemed strange about them. First, they didn't seem the type to be Judgement-marked; many of them appeared to be bedraggled townspeople

that looked like they were completely out of their element walking around the countryside. *Some* of them had the rough exterior that was usually seen on the Marked, but after talking with a few of them, they didn't have the same attitude or personality as a murderer, thief, or other scoundrel.

Second, even the townspeople included in the bunch had SDIAs, though none of them were officially registered with the Syndicate – which was more than highly unusual. Most of them were still in their G-Ratings, but they were at similar enough statuses that they appeared to have all received their Interface Artifacts at roughly the same time. Not only that, but the low-Rated townspeople all had at least one Taught ability – which was also highly unusual.

Third, none of them would admit to what they had done to get them Judgement-marked. Her Aural Truth ability – which allowed her to detect truth and lies when she heard someone speaking – could only determine if they were lying to her, but none of them had disclosed their story. The most she had gotten from them was where they had come from: the Craytion Kingdom to the east; with that information, at least, she had sent a courier to the Syndicate headquarters in the Kingdom to see if they had any insight on what these people were accused of doing. What worried her a little was that there was some sort of rogue Holy Paladin Marking whole villages and towns as they passed through the Kingdom, so she wanted to make sure the people they were holding were indeed criminals.

She looked at the guard with consternation and ran over to the next cell, which was the one supposed to be housing their newest guests; she used that term because they weren't technically criminals yet even though they had broken a few rules – but those usually just resulted in heavy fines. What was unproven was how they had somehow altered their SDIAs in a way to display false information, which was something much more serious.

When she had heard about the large man with the Dire Wolf as a bonded pet having Taught Abilities, she somehow knew the two groups had to be connected somehow.

The girl had most of the same Taught Abilities plus a few more, but the young man – *boy, really* – had practically nothing. Unsurprising considering his Class as an Instructor-Researcher, but it was a strange choice for one only in the E-Ratings. Chareese had planned on digging into more of their backgrounds and questioning them some more this morning, but as she looked through the grate inside the cell holding them – it was empty as well.

She took the keys and unlocked the door and pushed hard, fully expecting it to be as stuck as the others – which caused her to overcompensate and practically fall inside. She got up quickly and saw the square hole in the floor near the corner; less than a second later, she was holding her head down into what looked like a freshly dug, precisely cut tunnel leading down. *How did they cut through the Magisteel?* Looking around, she saw three pairs of NABs lying somehow cut on the floor, with what looked like scorch marks on their edges. The collar and leash that held the Dire Wolf was unbroken and lying on the floor as well, looking almost as if the beast had just casually slipped it off.

Even if they had somehow had their Power back, there isn't a single spell or ability that can cut through Magisteel – at least that I know of. In addition to being strong, Magisteel was highly resistant to Power-based effects, which was what made it such an effective material for housing some of the most powerful criminals; while NABs were usually quite effective, particularly strong Adventurers with abnormally high Mind stats were occasionally able to break them through a Power overload. Again, it wasn't something that they advertised, but it happened occasionally.

“You’re with me – we’re going after them,” she told the Assassin Agent-in-training, who was looking horrified at the hole in the cell floor. Chareese could imagine what he was thinking: “If they were powerful enough to get through their Bands and cut through the floor, how do we stand a chance against them?” While she shared his reservations, something about the entire situation didn’t seem right – and she hated a mystery. It was why she chose to be an Inquisitor in the first place.

Chareese jumped down the hole and started moving down the tunnel, giving the guard no chance to back out; there was no way he was refusing a direct order, as well as leaving his superior to go after the prisoners he had let get away under his watch by herself. She moved quickly down the dark tunnel and used her Searchlight spell to project a beam of intense light in front of her. Hearing the Assassin drop down behind her, she increased her pace, knowing he would easily be able to keep up with her.

Coming to a junction in the tunnels, she saw two branching off in what she assumed was the direction of the other cells. *Where did all of these tunnels come from? How long have these been here?* While they looked like they were freshly carved out of the earth, as there were slight crumbings here and there where a part of it had fallen, there was no way someone could’ve done this all in just the last few hours. There were some spells and other Mage-class abilities that could probably do it, but it would take days and tens of thousands of units of Power to accomplish even what she had seen so far. And that didn’t even count the broken NABs and the missing metal from their cells...

Picking the only alternative tunnel to go down, she led the way down an even longer tunnel. She deactivated her Searchlight spell because someone had placed basic Magelight orbs along the right wall of the tunnel

every 50 feet or so, which provided plenty of light to see by. Pulling her bladed staff out of her PIB as she ran, Chareese held it out in front of her so that if anything was waiting for them, she was ready; while the Inquisitor Class was primarily spell-based, she had enough points in her Brawn and Body stats to make her more than a match for almost anyone in the mid-B-Ratings or below – and, if the Codex Array had been accurate about their Interfaces, none of the people who had escaped was much of a threat.

What worried Chareese as she progressed deeper and deeper down the tunnel was the sheer size and depth of it; the presence of someone either on the inside helping them escape or other, powerful outside help was highly probable by that point. She debated turning back as she estimated that she had run nearly half a mile, as it was quite possible she was heading into an ambush at that point; this was looking less and less like a prisoner escape, and more like some sort of carefully planned action that must've taken years to set up and arrange. Thoughts of some sort of overarching conspiracy flitted across her mind, occupying her attention so thoroughly that she almost ran into something – at least, before her awareness caught up to her and stopped her body before she ran straight into some rocks.

“Wha-what is...uh...is that a dungeon?!” the guard asked unnecessarily from behind her, his voice incredulous and a bit shaken. For the first time, she was right there with him.

She had seen thousands upon thousands of dungeon entrances over her 315 years as an Adventurer – once you reached the B-Ratings, aging was slowed down dramatically, and it only increased as you progressed. Therefore, she recognized the arrangement of rocks that appeared to erupt out of the dirt floor, as well as the relatively dark tunnel leading farther inside. *Where did this come from? Was it here this whole time?* The

churned-up ground around the entrance spoke to it having been recently formed, but she also wasn't an expert on dirt and tunnels.

"Thorve," she said quietly, using the guard's name for the first time, "go back up and get at least two squads as reinforcements as quickly as you can – but don't spread around what you saw here. Doing so could cause a panic we can't afford right now."

Thorve hesitated, before saying, "Yes, ma'am...but aren't you coming with me? This looks too dangerous to stay here by yourself."

"No, I'm staying here," she told him without even looking back at him – her eyes were all on the dark dungeon entrance. "While you're gone, I'm going to investigate this to see if I can find out what's going on."

"Are you sure that's a good idea—"

"You have your orders," she told him sternly.

Another hesitation, before he said, "Yes, ma'am."

Chareese heard him take off back up the tunnel, moving faster than he had before due to his superior Speed stat. She activated her Searchlight spell again and pointed it down the entrance tunnel; with careful steps, she ventured down into a dungeon that shouldn't even exist.

Chapter 42

It didn't take long for her to get to the bottom of the tunnel, where she encountered a large plain-looking room with no interior ornamentation, which was quite unlike almost every dungeon she had ever encountered before. Even back when she had been a G-Rated Adventurer nearly three centuries ago, even the plainest, easiest dungeons had some sort of theme to them – from simple vines along the wall in Plant dungeons, to jets of flame constantly erupting from the ceiling in Fire dungeons, to veins of illuminated crystals in Light dungeons. This one, however, had nothing... except monsters.

An impossible collection of dungeon monsters.

She saw some undead skeletons shambling towards her, a relatively small lumbering stone golem that stomped its way slowly along, and a large wasp that quickly buzzed in her direction. Three different types of elements that were represented all together, which was something she had never heard of before. Behind them came more of the same, though there weren't many; all told, she quickly counted less than two dozen monsters ready to attack her.

With her Searchlight spell still on, she saw three traps highlighted to her vision – which was its actual primary function – but they appeared to be quite avoidable if she took care. Which was good, because although she could easily identify their presence, she didn't have any type of spell or ability that could deactivate them.

Within seconds, the first of the wasps approached her and she swung her bladed staff at it with practiced efficiency, instantly slicing through it like it was paper. It fell to the ground and started to dissolve just as quickly

as it would inside a normal dungeon, which made the entire situation even stranger; she had briefly thought that the dungeon entrance was faked somehow and that these monsters were real beasts and creatures brought down here – again, somehow – but that possibility was now gone.

Using her other hand, she activated her Whip of Justice – which was a silly name, because she would never use it on a person in the name of “Justice” – and a long strand of light appeared, and she instantly flicked it forward into the skeleton getting closer to her. Its bones shattered upon impact, flinging pieces everywhere – with a few even hitting the nearby stone golem, chipping off a piece of it. *Why are they so weak?* She had a feeling that she could just punch every single one of them with her bare fists and be fine, but she was a lot more cautious than that.

Using her Whip and bladed staff, she tore through the rest of the monsters in the room in under a minute. None of them required more than one strike to take down, which she hadn’t experienced in a long, long time; the last time she had felt the difference in their Ratings so much was when she helped a friend over a century ago in a G-Rated dungeon. Even as a low-A-Rated Adventurer, she was able to tear through the dungeon just as easily as she was here.

She avoided the traps on the way to the exit, but in a fit of curiosity, she triggered the one next to the door with her staff and jumped back. Noxious gas erupted out of the ground, spewing around so quickly that she got a whiff of it; it burned her throat a little and made her cough a couple of times before it cleared up. When she looked at her Vitality, however, she saw that a single point had been taken away. She instantly healed herself with her lowest Power-cost healing spell – Heal Minor Wounds – which she had purchased from an Instructor years ago that Taught her for 50 gold

pieces. It was a deal she never regretted, as her other healing spells were expensive and worked better on groups.

Before she went through the tunnel to the next room, she felt the rush of Essence fill her body. It wasn't much – pitiful, really – but it had been over a decade since she had been dungeon delving and she forgot how good it felt to absorb the precious substance. If she had doubted it before, the Essence she received cemented the proof that she was really in a dungeon – and that she wasn't imagining everything.

Chareese passed through the short tunnel and found a very similar room, though this time it was filled with smaller plague-ridden rats, small brown-and-green goblins, and two large boars. They fell just as quickly as the ones from the first room and pretty soon the room was clear. She saw the tunnel leading on near the right-hand corner of the room and felt a rush of excitement that she hadn't felt in a long, long time; it was very rare that a new dungeon was found and being the ones to delve through it for the first time was sometimes scary and sometimes deadly, but it was always exhilarating. “I just wish these monsters were a bit harder,” she grumbled out loud.

Before she could advance, though, three barricades filled with sharp icicles appeared in front of her and two large sheets of fire appeared behind her. A large crystal-coated scorpion appeared in one corner, while a trio of large Stone Golems (at least three times larger than the ones in the previous room) appeared in another corner. The bonded pet wolf she had just seen earlier walked out of the tunnel leading to the other room and...*transformed*...into a giant dire wolf that walked into the third corner of the room and sat down on its hind legs and stared at her.

“While I could've made them stronger, presenting a challenge to someone like you or those you work with is a bit beyond me right now,”

said a voice she instantly recognized that came from the tunnel the wolf had walked out of. The young man walked calmly out with his hands out in a placating gesture, followed by the big man – Regnark – and the woman. Well, she assumed it was the woman, because it appeared as though she was now covered in dirt that conformed to her body, and she moved around as if it was perfectly natural.

Nothing Chareese saw made her worried for her safety, though it would be a difficult fight if she were assaulted on all sides. That, and there was the unknown component of the three people who were looking at her with confidence in their stances. *What if they're more powerful than I can handle?* She vaguely regretted not waiting for reinforcements, but maybe she could buy some time until they arrived.

“What is going on here? Where did this dungeon come from?” If she could keep them talking and get answers at the same time, she was willing to talk with these criminals.

“That is a rather long explanation, but I’ll try to be brief before we run out of time. Your reinforcements are already rushing down here as we speak, and we don’t have long before they arrive,” the young man, Fredwynkle—something said, looking absently into the distance as if he really could see them coming. “The short version, then; first, this is my dungeon that I created, and I didn’t intend for it to be a challenge. It was more of an...what did you call it, Eisa? Oh, yes, an *interview* of sorts. To show some of my abilities off to you.”

His dungeon? What does that—?

“Before you ask, yes...I am a Dungeon Core. Well, half-Dungeon Core, at least – the other half of me is as human as you are. I’m not to go into my history right now, because as I said, we don’t have a lot of time.”

She had almost instinctually used her Aural Truth ability as soon as they had started talking, and as crazy as it sounded, the young man was telling the truth. Or what he believed to be the truth; her ability could only detect knowingly spoken falsehoods. For the moment, however, she didn't doubt that he was telling at least a portion of the truth – the dungeon around her was proof enough of that. “What is the purpose of all of this, then?”

“Very good, we can get to the heart of the matter. Essentially, although I'm part Dungeon Core, I have no real love of the Cores that I have met and exist out there. The Supreme Council – think of it like your Allroads Council, but for all Dungeon Cores – ordered my parents murdered, and I wanted to put a stop to them. It was only after learning more about the world that my quest for revenge has changed; I discovered that my selfish desire to see the Supreme Council destroyed wouldn't accomplish much even if I managed to accomplish the deed.

“Do you want to know why? It's because – as much as I hate them for doing what they did to my parents and would still like to see them pay – I generally feel that what they did was just a symptom of a larger problem. Dungeon Cores are taking over the world and, if they aren't stopped soon, there won't be anything to stop them from destroying themselves and everything on the planet.”

Chareese didn't know what he was talking about; they had coexisted with the dungeons for thousands of years and she didn't see any sign of what he was talking about.

“I can see by your face that you don't believe me,” the young man said. “That's fine. But let me ask you a couple of questions. I'm sure that in your – I'm guessing at least three centuries to have achieved an S-5th-Rating Inquisitor – you've seen the changes I'm talking about over the years. Tell me, in all that time, are there as many Adventurers as there used

to be? What about smaller towns and villages across the countryside? Have you seen any changes there?”

The shock of Fredwynkle—whatever knowing her exact Rating and Class was muted as she thought about the changes that both the land and the Syndicate had undergone over the years. She had definitely seen a change in the number of Adventurers applying to join the Syndicate; they had gone down dramatically since she had joined, and the quantity of S-Rated members had been reduced by half since she had taken her current position in Allroads. It was one of the main reasons she had taken the less-dangerous job; the S-Rated dungeons all seemed to be getting deadlier and harder to finish safely, and many were perishing as a result.

As for the landscape, that hit home – literally. Just over a century ago, the village she grew up in far to the west was destroyed and basically wiped off the map; she never found out the cause – mainly because she only heard about it years later – but everyone assumed it was some sort of bandit attack gone wrong. She hunted for them but never found them, though she did find that a dungeon had sprung up very close by, practically inside the village boundary.

“I can...vaguely...see what you’re talking about, but what does that have to do with you? And what do you think we’re supposed to do about it?” She kept talking in the hopes that her reinforcements would arrive, then they would be able to recapture and question these people for as long as it took to get answers.

“Look, it’s hard to see it from your perspective because humans only live so long. But if you see the long-term, you’ll realize that it’s only a matter of time before the Cores fight over the dwindling resources – *humans*, as much as it pains me to say – to the point where everyone is at risk. They’ll continue to expand into human lands, taking over more and

more territory to fuel their war, while at the same time treating your – *our* – people like slaves or livestock. This has to end for both of our kinds to survive, or else no one will.”

She was about to answer when she heard the sound of running boots behind her. She smiled at the young man and the others. “As much as I’ve enjoyed this fantastical conversation, I think it’s about time to give yourselves up—”

“Ma’am, we have a problem!” she heard shouting from behind her.

“You’re absolutely correct that we have a problem. Now, if you can all help me—” she started to say without turning around.

“No, not this – I’m talking about up above...uh...by the way, where did this dungeon come from?”

Chareese’s mind came to a screeching halt. *What?* “What are you talking about?”

“The city is being attacked by dungeon monsters from all sides! We need everyone’s help at the walls!”

That was the absolute last thing she ever thought she would hear in her life. She looked at the three strange people standing there and trying – and failing – to look innocent. “What do you know about this?”

“Let’s just say that they *might* be a little mad that I established a territory in the middle of the Convergence. Apparently, it’s a bit of a no-no in their world,” the young man said with a sheepish expression on his face. But then it turned deadly serious so fast that she suspected that it was all an act. “So, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to just let them walk right in here and take me, likely destroying half the city in the process? Are you going to let them invade here and then depart, leaving you to wonder when’s the next time they will invade because someone destroyed one of their Cores?”

“You...destroyed one of their Cores?” she asked incredulously. She had heard about one being taken about a century ago, which resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent people; she couldn’t imagine the death toll from *destroying* one of them.

“It was totally an accident...as were the other two, but that’s besides the point. It’s getting to the point all around the world where humans need to strike back, to establish themselves as more than just ‘livestock’ – did you know that’s what they think of humans?” the young man asked with sincerity. “And I think I – no, *we*—” he continued, pointing at the others around him, including the giant Dire Wolf in the corner— “can help with that. Now, what are you going to do?”

As much as she wanted to recapture and bring these people in, she knew where her duty lay – with the city of Allroads. “We’re not done here. I have to go save my people apparently from a war *you* started, and then I’ll be back to have a more serious conversation,” she told him with mounting anger. “And no more theatrics, please.” As soon as she said that, the Dire Wolf moved to the fire walls behind her and touched them with its nose, making them instantly disappear, and then did the same for the sharp icicle barricades in the front.

“I’ll be here. Let me know if you need any help.”

She snorted, which wasn’t very dignified, but she didn’t care. “You’ve been enough *help*, thank you,” she said, before she joined the two squads who had come to reinforce her. *What a day this is turning out to be; I just wish I had gotten more sleep last night.*

* * *

Fred collapsed to the floor in relief as the Inquisitor left with her people, and he watched them rush up the tunnel back to the surface. That was one of the hardest things he had done in his life, and he still wasn't sure if it had been the right decision. However, it was the only thing he could think of that seemed like it would work. It was the instinctual knowledge that the Dungeon Cores nearby would react to his presence here quickly that cemented his choice, however.

If he had just established his territory, without ever having done anything else, they probably wouldn't have done anything right away without assessing the situation; after having destroyed three Cores, though – however inadvertently – he knew they would react with anger and without much thought to the consequences. In fact, he was counting on it to be the spark that ignited the fighting spirit of the people of Allroads.

Whether or not that would be a good decision in the long run had yet to be seen.

He hadn't intended to share *all* that information with the woman, but something told him he should try to be as honest and open as possible. That was the only way he was going to have any type of working relationship with her; if he had lied to her or left too much out, there was a good chance she would come back down after the defense of the city was taken care of and kill him and the others.

He looked down the tunnel leading to the room that he had hastily dug out when he arrived at his dungeon and saw the scared faces of his Guild members and Gatecross townspeople. *It wouldn't just be Eisa, Regnark, Deecy, and me that will suffer, but they'll also be killed for participating.*

“Did you really mean what you said?” Eisa asked softly. “You want to...fight back against the Dungeon Cores?”

Although he didn't exactly know *how* he was going to go about that, he knew that it was the right decision – for everyone involved. As much as it would cause the deaths of thousands – possibly millions – on either side of the conflict, he thought it was the only way to save the rest.

“Yes, Eisa. It's time the ‘livestock’ fought back.”

End of Book 3

Author's Note

Thank you for reading Dungeon World 3!

We finally reached a turning point in Fred's journey – a place where he had to choose what he wanted to realistically do about his parents' murder. Go right to the top and attempt to destroy the Supreme Council, provided he could even find them? Or embrace his other half, helping the humans with their status as livestock – and in turn “save the world”? While it seems as though he has made his decision, only time will tell if it works out the way he wants it to.

Not only that, but Fred finally found a place where he can put down some permanent roots. His previous dungeon in Gatecross was only minimally adequate for defense – and it required the help of the humans there to help defend it. On top of that, it was right in the middle of enemy territory; now that he's in a spot where he has many more “allies” available, he can finally build the dungeon he is going to need to defend himself and his friends from the Cores' wrath.

In the 4th book, Fred will have to negotiate a way to exist while helping Allroads weather the attacks from the enraged Dungeon Cores nearby. And what of the other elements he has yet to encounter or obtain? What does an Air or Light dungeon look like? Where is the reaction from the Supreme Council to Fred's existence? All this will be answered in the next book, as well as a lot more dungeon construction and defense!

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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