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# SHADOWGROFT

YEAR ONE

## ACADEMY FOR DUNGEONS

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## Summary



### **BUILD A DUNGEON. SLAY Heroes. Survive Finals.**

Wounded Army vet Logan Murray thought mimics were the stuff of board games and dungeon manuals... right up until one ate him.

In a flash of snapping teeth, Logan suddenly finds himself on the doorstep to another world. He's been unwittingly recruited into the Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons—the most prestigious interdimensional school dedicated to training the monstrous guardians who protect the Tree of Souls from so-called heroes. Heroes who would destroy the universe if it meant a shot at advancement.

Unfortunately, as a bottom-tier cultivator with a laughably weak core, Logan's dungeon options aren't exactly stellar, and he finds himself reincarnated as a lowly fungaloid, a three-foot-tall mass of spongy mushroom with fewer skills than a typical sewer rat. If he's going to survive the grueling challenges the academy has in store, he'll need to ace the odd assortment of classes—Fiendish Fabrication, Dungeon Feng Shui, the Ethics of Murder 101—and learn how to turn his unusual guardian form into an asset instead of a liability.

And that's only if the gargoyle professor doesn't demote him to a doomed wandering monster first...



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# Chapter One



LOGAN MURRAY PULLED his truck into the driveway of his ranch house in Arvada, Colorado. The suspension creaked as the tires crunched onto the gravel beside his garage. The garage itself was full of tools, lawn mowers, replacement parts, and a big woodchipper named Wanda—not to mention a variety of equipment he only pulled out when he had specialty jobs to run. But that was fine. His big F-350 didn't need a comfortable place to live. His business did. Logan's Landscaping, though physically demanding work, kept food on the table and him out of trouble.

He killed the engine, but just sat there for a long beat. He rubbed his tired eyes with calloused hands and sighed.

It had been a long day, and he was glad to be done with it. The work had been the same as always, but he'd had to fire Tyler McWiggins. HR was easily the worst part of running his own business. But Tyler had it coming. The kid had three major issues in his life: he drank too much, worked too little, and complained like a defendant in divorce court.

Out of the three issues, the complaining was the worst. Tyler had called in to complain how sick he was. Logan knew better. His employee had the Monday flu after a weekend of Coors Light and kvetching, red wine and whining, Bud Light and bellyaching.

So Logan had to work the day alone, which he hated. His other guys were hammering together a deck in Cherry Creek. Logan had spent most of the day bidding jobs and most of the evening digging postholes for Grady Henderson in Thornton.

The setting sun streaked red and gold across the sky. After spending hours in the heat, Logan was sweaty, dirty, and his belly rang empty like the bell in an abandoned church. Dirt covered his hands and clothes, and mud encrusted his boots. When digging

postholes, you soaked them down first, before you used the digger. One of the first rules of landscaping? Let water do the heavy lifting for you. Still, even with the water, digging postholes was backbreaking work.

His uncle had disagreed with Logan's choice of careers. Uncle Bud called picks and shovels idiot sticks. Logan shrugged that off. He found the long hours, the heat, and the labor fun. Besides, any kind of manual labor was a thousand times easier than the grunt work and never-ending hours he'd pulled overseas in the Army. Logan had been a 25B, once upon a time—an Information Tech Specialist. Sounded fancy, though in reality it amounted to being a radio operator attached to an Infantry unit.

Now that had been work. Running line. Going on patrol. Lugging around the oversized PRC-77 radio—affectionately referred to as the Prick-77 by the poor souls who had to carry it. Landscaping had nothing on that. The work was fulfilling in its way. And the hours went by fast when he was with his workers, listening to the radio, talking trash, and building things. Nothing was as satisfying as taking nothing and leaving behind a masterpiece of wood, sod, and flowers.

Working with plants was fascinating.

Logan spent hours researching flowers, climbing vines, mushrooms, and different kinds of fertilizers. After five years of running his own business, he knew, down to the week, the life cycle of your typical lawn.

He popped open the door of his truck, stepped out, and winced as he put weight on his prosthetic leg. Unlike Tyler, he wasn't a complainer. However, if he did have a mind to whine, it would be about his leg. Not losing it. He was lucky to be alive. But by god, it hurt after a long day. Phantom tingles raced up and down the skin that wasn't there. The tingles were better than the raw pain that often lingered in his stump. They'd taken the leg just below the knee. Why? That was a long story, too long for a summer night when there were beer and voicemails to attend to.

Moving with a slight limp, he headed through his back gate and into the weeds and grass of his backyard. It was a jungle—the only thing it was missing was Tarzan and a few stray lions strolling

through the savannah near the back fence. Logan spent his days perfecting the yards of his customers, but his own was liable to get a notice from the HOA any day. What was that old proverb? *The shoemaker's children have no shoes.* It was like that but with more weeds.

He strode across the cracked patio cement and through the back door.

The scratch of nails on tile announced the presence of his three slobber hounds. The trio were only too happy to see him. He felt the same. Petting their heads and ruffling their fur, he let them race out into the wilds of his backyard.

The fridge gave him beer and some leftover fried chicken. He stuck a leg in his teeth and stood at the sink watching his dogs race through the tracks they'd created in the jungle. Those puppies were the best: Noodle Doodle, Princess Peach, and Booker DeWitt.

He caught a whiff of himself. "That's the smell of money for a working man," he muttered under his breath.

He'd get a shower. *Eventually.* But first he had voicemails to suffer through. His foreman, Ramon Garcia, said the deck was going well and that the team got more work done without him. It was an old joke between the two.

Then there were the clients, asking for updates or wanting him for more work. Always more, which was a good problem to have at the end of the day. Denver and its suburbs were booming. He'd have to replace Tyler—despite the kid's failings, he hated having to let him go. He sighed again, resigned. Such was life. Truthfully, finding help was always an issue when you ran your own business, but it needed to be done. Hard work was always made easier by many hands. Too bad he couldn't cast a spell and turn his dogs into people.

Speaking of spells, he had something special planned for tonight.

He would chew down some chicken, wash it down with a cold one, then grab a fresh beer for an evening of murder and magic. He was so damned close to beating the game, and what a game it was.

He grunted and sat down in a wood chair at the same dinner table he'd grown up eating at. His parents were gone now, both

passed on, but they'd left him the house and a fair amount of their personal effects in the will.

Slowly, he unlaced his boots then threw them on the welcome rug by the back door. His pups were done with their jungle expedition and whining for dinner. He'd feed them outside so they could enjoy the night. He limped out, one foot in a holey sock, the other bare plastic. From the garage, he grabbed the food and filled their bowls on the back porch. They joined him, tails wagging, mouths drooling, nails *clicking* on the cement. The fragrance of dog and dry grass reminded him that he'd need to give them baths soon.

"Good dogs," he said. Having the puppies kept him from feeling too alone. He'd have to try that dating thing again at some point. He still had his lapsed OkCupid account and a Lizzy-sized hole in his life.

That was a worry for another night, or maybe another year entirely.

For now? He had a date with destiny.

Beer in hand, he ambled back into the house and through the kitchen. His living room was bachelor sparse. Over the years, he'd cleaned out his mother's stuff, then his father's stuff, and now all that remained was his stuff—two big La-Z-Boys, flanked by end tables, faced a seventy-five-inch TV sitting on a shelf above his game consoles. The walls had some pictures of Logan, his dad, and Uncle Bud, but mainly they were for the speakers, which gave him perfect, crystal-clear surround sound and enough bass to stop the heart in your chest.

His newest game console awaited him, and it was strange to say the least.

It was a purple cube he'd picked up at a pawnshop for twenty-five bucks. Old-school. The single controller had a long wire—that told you exactly how old the unit was. He liked to think of it as a lost classic, probably some knockoff of the old-school systems like Atari and Intellivision. Maybe the purple cube had been one of Nintendo's first competitors. He hadn't been able to find anything out about the thing on Google, which was shocking in its own right, but he didn't really care.

Logan liked the classic gaming experience. His Army buddies were all probably shooting it up in *Blood Warfare 4: Blood Debt*.

Logan needed to keep in better touch with his buddies. Growing up as an only child, struggling through high school, he hadn't found true friends until he'd enlisted. Then? It was what the military called the *esprit de corps*, a fancy French term for morale. But it was more than that. It was that feeling of camaraderie that Logan missed. Going through hell with your buddies made you love every single one of them... Well, maybe some more than others. He would never miss Wheeler getting black-out drunk and barfing all over his bunk. There was plenty he did miss, though.

With a sigh, Logan promised himself he'd send more texts and make more calls. Just as soon as he beat this game.

He'd been hooked on the thing for the past month.

Only one controller. Only one game: *The Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons*. Zany. Wild. It had character. It was an outdated 2D Dungeon Keeper-style game. The graphics weren't great, but the game play was fun and that was all that mattered in the end. And he was so close to finishing it. Stuck on the last level.

A stylized S, the black logo of the company, decorated the front of the purple cube. The power button was nestled in the top swoop of the S. He pressed the button and a mauve light winked on in the bottom swoop.

As the old game console rattled to life, he plopped down on his favorite La-Z-Boy. He unstrapped his fake leg and propped it beside his chair. It felt good to be free of the prosthesis—like taking off ski boots after a long day on the slopes.

He sipped his beer and set it on the end table. No coasters. If the dating thing turned into the girlfriend thing, she might insist on coasters. He wasn't sure he could handle that kind of action.

The screen flashed, music tinkled out with 8-bit beauty, and his current progress showed him at 97% complete. He'd kept his dungeon safe from dozens of waves of greedy dungeoneers looking to steal his dungeon core from out of the inner sanctum. Tonight would be the night he'd kill the last, most powerful group. It was

made up of five raiders, each a different class, all bent on his destruction.

Logan had prepared his dungeon carefully.

It was a deadly place, full of traps, monsters, and mazes. Logan had chosen the Spider King Guardian, so he had access to webs and arachnids of every size and shape.

Logan licked his lips and hunched forward, allowing the lead fighter to effortlessly hack through cobwebs he'd placed in an inner stairwell. Sure, let the tank through. Logan didn't much care about that guy. However, the cleric in the party? His healing spells would only make Logan's life harder.

At the perfect time, Logan pushed the X button. The floor opened up like a yawning maw and the pixel-y cleric fell onto venom-coated spikes.

“Hell yeah!” Logan crowed.

The cleric gushed blocky blood before flashing and dematerializing. The cube gave out the kill sound, “Wah-wah,” before promptly notifying him that only four dungeoneers remained.

The party's magic-user, an Inferno Hellreaver, cast a fireball that fried a room full of giant spiders. That was the bad news. The good news? They'd missed the secret room that Logan had put behind them. One of his largest minions, Debbie the Drider—his name for her—scurried out of the hidden room on a host of arachnoid legs, raising her bow and unleashing a hail of poisoned arrows. The magic-user's days of fireballs were over. Two arrows pierced him, shattering him like the glass cannon he was. Debbie was also critically wounded, thanks to the efforts of an elven ranger, before the party's rogue managed to stab her in the back.

Poor Debbie.

The rogue undid Logan's pressure-plate trap in the next room, and the tank took out his giant spider, Shelly Shelob. Logan frowned. Three raiders were still alive. He'd wanted to keep the party out of the inner sanctum. They'd taken a fair bit of damage, but was it enough?

The tank and the ranger slashed through the webs covering the entryway to the innermost chamber. Logan's boss, a spidery wizard

with web spells, poison missiles, and hard chitinous armor, waited for the raiders, protecting the dark gem floating over the sanctum's pedestal. That dark gem was the heart of the dungeon, and if he lost that, the game was over. This was risky, and the fight could go either way, but he was too close now not to at least *try*.

Logan focused his efforts on the rogue, riddling him with arcane missiles. The *wah-wah* of the kill was sweet, but the battle was far from over.

Logan quickly spawned a pair of level-two Spiderkin. They never stood a chance against the invaders, but he used them to split the remainder of the party just long enough to snare the elven ranger in his Web Lock spell. He used the last of his magic—called Apothos instead of the more typical mana—to summon an additional round of Spiderkin, which rappelled in from the ceiling on strands of silver silk.

The tank had his big two-handed sword raised, ready to slash Logan's dungeon lord to pieces.

The cube squawked and hissed as the spiders descended and killed the ranger. *Wah-wah*. The tank hit Logan's arachnoid wizard, halving his hit points.

Logan clicked to his menu, found the melee option, and chose his only weapon, a Black Widow dagger.

Logan toggled the directional pad, narrowly avoiding an overhand slash, then smashed X, driving his blade home even as the tank pivoted and ran him through with his sword.

Breathless, the Army vet turned landscaper winced, waiting for either the *wah-wah* or the more sinister tones of his own destruction. He had to grin. He was a combat veteran, and yet he felt like a twelve-year-old boy. This was fun. This was so much better than being in a real firefight—so much less was on the line.

Then?

*Wah-wah!*

His stomach clenched into a knot.

Logan's character had single-digit hit points but the tank was dead. Dead. Gone. TPK. And his fragile dungeon core had survived every single dungeoneer the game had thrown at it. Supposedly, something called the Tree of Souls was now safe from the raiders.

Logan wasn't sure what that meant—great game play, but the world building lacked the substance of some of the more modern dungeon crawlers out there on the market. The game was over, though. He grabbed his beer and raised the tip of the bottle in a salute.

“Debbie. Shelly. We did it.”

His eyes narrowed. The screen was flashing, almost like the dang thing was glitching. That would suck—to beat the game and be denied the endgame cutscene. At least he hoped there was an endgame cutscene.

Suddenly, the cube went crazy with blips and bloopers, and then a new song started, the victory song. Logan let out a sigh of relief as he waited for the end credits to roll. But something else happened. A purple glow slowly filled in the room. The cube looked like a radioactive bomb about to explode.

The screen itself went black.

Words formed in the darkness, growing larger and brighter.  
*Congratulations, Neophyte. Welcome to the Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons!*

Huh? That was a strange message. Why did it say welcome when he'd just beaten the game?

The cube wasn't just glowing purple anymore, it was twitching, shaking, and rattling on the shelf next to his Xbox and Playstation.

Uh-oh. Seriously, what in the heck was going on?

Blisters bubbled across the plastic of the cube, and plumes of fine gray smoke curled up.

No, no, no. It was overheating. Catching fire maybe. Logan wasn't about to lose his TV and his other gaming consoles. He threw himself off the sofa and hit the carpet, lunging forward to try to knock the boiling plastic away. He was too late.

Tentacles exploded out of the purple cube. His TV careened backward as the cube grew and split the shelf and smacked away the other consoles.

The cube itself, now the size of a sofa, was covered with a slick purple skin. The horror, whatever it was, opened like a mouth as wide as his woodchipper. Too many jagged teeth filled that glowing maw.

Logan skittered back, hit the chair, and used it to stand. He was moving so slow—he'd taken his leg off! The pups were still outside. Thank goodness for that. But things were looking bleak.

No, he couldn't afford to think like that.

The battle was only over when you gave up, and he wasn't going to do that. Not ever.

Resolve hardened, he hopped toward the bedroom to get to the Mossberg 500 shotgun by his nightstand. That would put a damper on the purple monster in his living room—tentacles, teeth, that garish purple glow.

He would grab the Colt 1911, his father's pistol, as well as the scattergun, but that meant getting there. He got three hops in before a tentacle whipped around his single leg and pulled it out from under him. He hit the ground with a thud, teeth biting into his tongue in a bright flash of pain.

Logan spit out a mouthful of blood, dug his fingers into the carpet, and began to pull himself forward. The air had a hot, fetid smell, like a dead raccoon stuck in a truck engine on a hot summer's day. He couldn't see the creature now—his eyes were fixed on the door at the end of the hall—but he could feel it looming over him.

With a jerk, Logan was yanked across his carpet. He felt teeth sink into his good calf, a jagged lance of pain shooting through his body. The mouth opened and chomped back down, ripping into both his thighs. When he felt the teeth rise for a third bite, he turned and kicked at it. He wouldn't be taken by this monster cube without a fight.

The thing had grown a single eye—in the same place where the power button had been. It roared in defiance, flinging greasy saliva into Logan's face.

Logan grimaced then roared back. He lashed out again with his remaining leg, but the kick felt weak and uncoordinated. He was losing blood, and his vision was narrowing. Tentacles slithered out, wrapping around his arms, his neck, and what was left of his legs. Logan struggled and thrashed, still fighting toward his bedroom, determined to get to the gun. He was losing consciousness.

The last thing he saw was the thing's fangs, and then it was all darkness.



## Chapter Two



LOGAN BLINKED HIS EYES open. He was glad he still had eyes, but having a head wasn't so great. A migraine banged away on the inside of his skull.

Where in the hell was he? What happened?

Things were sort of hazy in his head. He remembered teeth, glowing purple tentacles, and a single large eye. Was it a nightmare maybe? It wouldn't be the first.

Surviving Iraq often meant nightmares.

He glanced down and saw he was sitting on a padded leather chair with ornate wooden armrests. For reasons he couldn't even begin to guess at, he wore a rough-spun cotton tunic. At least he wasn't naked. Everything felt strange enough as it was.

The place smelled like lemon oil and wood polish. Brass lanterns hanging from the wall cast the room in a soft light. It kind of looked like a waiting room, but this was no doctor's office. This reception area belonged in a fantasy novel—sort of medieval, from the stone floors, to the long ebony tables, to the brass lanterns attached to the corners of the square room. Four tapestries covered the walls: a snarling blue dragon, a crimson phoenix in flight, a crystalline tiger ready to pounce, and a gleaming black tortoise with chin raised high.

The blue dragon tapestry curled up as if on its own, and a heavy door, impossibly tall and covered in brass rivets, swung open. Something strolled in. And it was definitely a *something*, not a *someone*, since it wasn't even remotely human. It was a giant tree creature, at least eleven feet tall, wearing flowing robes, blue cloth with gold runes. Guy had a very wizardly look about him. A light-green mossy beard swung from a creased and weathered face made of bark. His nose was a sharp branch. Wild green grass, full of

flowers, sprouted from his head. Golden specks floated in curiously bright blue eyes.

Logan was beyond flabbergasted. He didn't know if he should fight or run.

The wizened old tree man noticed Logan's sweat.

"Be calm, Logan Murray," the creature said, his voice deep and sage. "I'm Headmaster Shadowcroft, and you are safe." As he spoke, swirls of colorful light filled the air, settling over Logan like a cloud of pollen. Had those lights come from the flowers on Shadowcroft's head?

Suddenly, Logan felt strangely at ease, his worry melting away in an instant. Had the tree wizard just done something to him? Sedated him somehow? The thought seemed curiously unimportant and drifted away. Instead, Logan found himself thinking about the name. Shadowcroft. That name seemed familiar.

The tree-like wizard continued with a nod. "That's better. Should be a little more at ease. Now, I'm sure you have many questions, Mr. Murray, the first of which is usually... *where am I?* I do appreciate that you aren't yelling, shrieking, or weeping. I get that a lot." He paused and frowned. "It is very sad, but you seem to be taking your death in stride. Quite remarkable, all things considered."

The words stopped Logan cold. *Taking your death in stride*. No, that couldn't be right. He couldn't be dead. He was here. Sitting here. *Alive*. Yet he couldn't forget the feel of slashing teeth and curling tentacles. Couldn't forget the creature looming over him.

"You're wrong," he said flatly, gripping the ornate armrests in a white-knuckled grip. "I can't be dead if I'm here."

Mossbeard sniffed. "Nonsense, Mr. Murray. Of course you can. I restored your corporeal form when you transitioned across the soul barrier—though I really should've removed your glands. Mammalian perspiration is rather repugnant." He wrinkled his nose in clear distaste. "Regardless of your state, I would like to welcome you to the Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons. We are the finest dungeon core academy in the entirety of the Ashvattha."

Logan shivered. "That's where I've heard that word before. Shadowcroft. Okay, I'm definitely not going to play any more

pawnshop video gaming systems.” He blinked and ran a hand through his short-cropped hair. Then it hit him. “You *Jumanji*’d me... Or it’s sunstroke,” he muttered to himself. “Probably sunstroke.”

“You’re talking to yourself,” Shadowcroft said gently. “If you talk directly to me, I can give you answers. As long as there is no weeping. I detest the weeping.”

“No weeping,” Logan agreed numbly. He just sat there for a beat, replaying everything he could remember about the day. Firing Tyler... Digging posts... Feeding the pups... Beating Shadowcroft... That... that *thing* unfolding from the box and tearing after him down the hall. “This is a dream, right?” he finally said. “I must’ve hit my head. Or fallen asleep. Bad chicken? That chicken was from Thursday—definitely could’ve been the chicken. Or maybe too much time inhaling the fertilizer in my garage. There has to be a way to explain this.”

Shadowcroft shook his head. More glowing pollen leaked from his skull-flowers. “No, no, nothing of the sort. I can assure you, Mr. Murray, this is no dream. Nor is it a fantasy. This, my intrepid young student, is all quite real. Which segues nicely into the second question new recruits usually have. How did I get here?”

Memories hit Logan like a five-pound sledge. “The crazy monster thing. The video game frickin’ ate me.”

“Ah. Yes. That would be the mimic.” The headmaster nodded sagely as though this should all make perfect sense. “Hopefully, your transition didn’t hurt too much.” He paused and frowned. “Those mimics can be overzealous at times, I fear.”

“Wait.” Logan recalled the teeth and blood in grisly detail. “Are you telling me you sent that thing to eat me?” he growled, leaning forward in his seat, hands balling into tight fists.

“Well, not you personally, please understand. But someone with your skills, yes.” Shadowcroft’s moss-covered face split into a grin. He had white wooden teeth. “If you’ll kindly follow me, I’ll explain why.” He motioned toward the open door, previously concealed by the rolled-up dragon tapestry.

Logan rose from his seat to stand on unsteady feet. He froze. He had both his legs. Both legs and no pain. Despite what ol’

Mossbeard said, this had to be a dream. He didn't particularly care right then. He was simply glad not to be hopping around.

He remembered waking up in the hospital, at the medical base. The first person he'd seen was Dave Baker, his command sergeant major. Sergeant Major Baker worked for the Battalion and was a good man—he'd come in to check on Logan and to tell him the bad news. Baker had a high-and-tight haircut, a scar splitting his lips, and steel-gray eyes. Baker was a straight shooter, and he gave it to Logan straight as an arrow. Logan had lost his left leg below the knee. An IED—improvised explosive device—attack outside of Al-Fallujah. He'd get a purple heart, sure, but it would come with a medical discharge. He was also up for a Bronze Star.

And Logan would get it if the sergeant major had any say.

No one in his unit would ever forget what Logan had done. The weird thing was, Logan felt his leg, and he kept wanting to scratch his nonexistent toes. The idea he was missing a limb hadn't seemed as harsh as being discharged. He'd leave both Iraq and his friends without finishing the job. It was a hard idea to take.

In the medieval waiting room, Logan stared at both his feet. It was as surreal as feeling the itch of a phantom limb.

Sergeant Major Baker, ever blunt, had said Logan shouldn't waste a moment second-guessing himself or what he'd done. He said plain as day that Logan should value the rest of his limbs as well as his life because it was precious. Not every soldier got to go home with a heartbeat.

Logan swore to himself that he wouldn't let his injury ruin his life.

Sergeant Major Baker was exactly right: living in regret would kill him.

Yet if this was real and not a) food poisoning or b) some kind of fever dream, then that meant his whole life was gone. Unless... unless the tree guy could send him home. Was that possible?

Logan didn't know, but he was glad his dogs were outside and they had plenty of water. It would save on the carpet cleaning.

Shadowcroft sighed—it sounded like wind rustling through pines. "Perhaps I was wrong in my initial assessment. Clearly, the transition is going to be hard on you after all. I can't blame you, Mr. Murray.

You come from a severely backward planet with an extremely limited understanding of the universe. To call it myopic is the understatement of the century.”

Traveling overseas, Logan was used to defending the United States. Now, he had to defend his whole world, and he was up for the task. “Slow your roll there,” he said, holding up his hands. “Earth is better than whatever this place is. For example, on my planet it’s considered bad manners to *murder* someone. So don’t come at me, talking about backwards.”

They stood in front of the doorway.

The moss-bearded tree man stooped down to speak. He smelled like spring flowers. “My apologies, Mr. Murray. I did not mean to give offense. I’m merely speaking from an analytic standpoint. Please, tell me of the awe you have for your world. I do so like it when creatures show pride in their homes.”

Logan raised his chin defiantly and stared Shadowcroft right in his twinkling eyes. “What’s not to be in awe of? Until you’ve seen the sun rise over the Atlantic or set over the Rockies, you ain’t seen shit. We have people—good people who care for each other. People that are willing to risk their lives for one another, to shelter those that need it, to serve others even at the expense of themselves. We have nurses, police officers, firemen, and soldiers who would give you the shirt off their backs. Earth is a place of dreams and dreamers. And best of all, we have cold beer and dogs, so I think that it’s you who are backwards.”

Shadowcroft was silent for a moment. “Perhaps you will do well here after all. Now come. I can appreciate you taking a moment to enjoy both of your two fleshy leg stalks.”

“Fleshy leg stalks.” Logan said each word carefully.

Shadowcroft walked on long, skinny tree trunks with twigs and leaves poking out here and there.

In a haze, Logan followed the tree man into a plush office.

Unlike the waiting room, the office had wooden floors, as polished as the walls. Stained-glass windows showed different forests in a variety of seasons, though each had a domineering central tree. The ceiling was a dome thirty feet above his head. More

stained glass decorated the peak. Shelves stood against the walls stuffed full of books, statues—even a sword or two. A crystal figure danced on a nearby table, swaying her gemstone hips to silent music. On another table was a rose in a vase, only the rose had a face, complete with fangs, and leafy fingers.

The rose flipped him the bird, then chuckled, which made its petals shake.

Logan smiled. He'd always thought roses were overrated. He wasn't even remotely surprised by the flower's obscene finger gesture.

A gigantic chair, encircled in ivy, grew out of the floor behind a vast desk. The desktop was a map, showing a circular island that floated in the clouds. To the north was a desert, then mountains, then a lake, with swamps to the southeast and a massive forest to the west. The details of the map were flawless—it almost looked like a video screen.

Behind the ivy chair, on a pedestal all its own, floated a crazy crystal several feet long and at least a foot wide. Glyphs, runes, and images appeared on the facets. It rotated, flashing constantly, like a beacon.

Shadowcroft took a seat on the ivy throne. He gestured to an equally green chair in front of the desk. The wood looked soft. Those green leaves, though, made Logan nervous. He could imagine them snagging him, securing him so the tree guy could torture him.

The headmaster appraised him with his ageless blue eyes, so interesting with those flecks of gold. In those eyes were patience, wisdom, and understanding—sometimes one of Logan's dogs would look at him like that. Anything that had a dog's eyes should be trustworthy. After a moment of hesitation, Logan took a seat, the ivy leaves moving so he wouldn't crush them.

“So, let me get this straight. You sent a mimic to kill me. Is that right?”

“No. Not at all,” the headmaster said. “We sent it to *recruit* you.”

“Did recruiting me involve murdering me?” Logan replied, feeling a dull fury burning inside him.

Shadowcroft considered the question, brows knit. “Well, I suppose if you looked at it in a certain light, it might *appear* that way. But what is one death when balanced against all of reality, hmm? This is an honor. You have been chosen, Logan Murray. Chosen to fight in a battle older than the universe itself.”

That sounded a whole lot like *murder* with extra steps. Logan clenched his teeth, thinking about what kind of monster would do such a thing to him. What kind of asshole would deploy a supernatural assassin to kill a civilian noncombatant in the sanctity of his own home? Suddenly, he was *pissed*, and Shadowcroft seemed to know it.

“Please, Mr. Murray. Let us not be hasty.”

“You were awfully hasty in murdering me,” he spat back.

“There is more going on than you see. Than you could ever begin to imagine. There are thousands of worlds, young one, all connected to the Ashvattha, the Tree of Souls. You come from such a world, however distant, and we need you to help save the universe.”

Logan narrowed his eyes. “You have about two minutes to spell this out for me in plain English before I get out of this chair and rip your arms from your body and beat you with ‘em. Now tell me what in the hell all of that means.”



## Chapter Three



SHADOWCROFT CHUCKLED and relaxed in his throne-like chair.

“Rip my arms from my body and beat me with them,” Shadowcroft repeated the threat good-naturedly. “That is a *most* unlikely outcome, but I admire your spunk. Give me just a moment and all shall be made clear.”

Ropes of ivy caressed Shadowcroft’s arms, and Logan thought that the headmaster’s grassy hair had joined with the bark of his seat, intertwining in some way. Looking at him, it was hard to tell where the headmaster ended and the chair started—almost as though they were two parts of the same whole.

Light from one of the stained-glass windows spilled across the desk in front of Logan. The gem behind Shadowcroft continued to spin, glimmering like a disco ball. The crystal ballerina continued her dance while the rose in the glass case snored softly, apparently bored to sleep by the goings-on of the office. Beneath the wood polish and lemon were the smells of spring: growing grass, flowers, and the scent of trees budding.

Ivy leaves shivered next to Logan’s elbow.

The mossy-bearded tree man chuckled. “It is very simple, young one. You were chosen by the Reaper Box. The boxes are my servants in recruitment. They are alive. Sentient. A special type of mimic, known as Reapers. I send the Reapers out across the multiverse, to every known world that connects to the Tree of Souls. Even those only tenuously connected like your own world. They find those candidates who are worthy enough to serve as dungeon cores, and if the candidate passes their test, then they are processed and reaped. Harvested if you will.”

“Harvested,” Logan repeated hollowly. “Like I’m corn.”

Shadowcroft wrinkled his wooden brow. “Corn? Let me see...” He paused, pressing his eyes shut, and mumbled quietly under his breath. “Ah yes. *Corn*. A grain on your planet, that comes on the cob, in a can, or creamed. Creamed corn. Is this something you value? Does this fill you with awe?”

Logan raised his hands. “Creamed corn? Do you really think that’s what we should be talking about right now? Countdown timer is still ticking. I was reaped. How’s about you tell me more about that?”

“As I said, it is a simple thing. You completed the Reaper’s Challenge. In this case the game, which was a crude simulation of what is going on, right now, across the multiverse. As I said before, your world is a crude, backward place, starved nearly to death for Apothos. The mimic knew that creating an actual dungeon would cause great suspicion, and so it *blended* in—as is its way—searching, always searching, for a hero who would be worthy.”

Logan’s mouth fell open. “You didn’t *Jumanji* me, you dirty SOB. You *Last Starfighter*’d me. Are you seriously telling me that beating that stupid 8-bit game is the whole reason I’m here? Not because I’m a war hero or because I’m some sort of chosen one? Because of a stupid game I picked up at a pawnshop?”

Shadowcroft held up a branchy finger. “I am familiar with corn, but unfortunately I am unfamiliar with this last starfighter. Was he some sort of hero on your world?”

“It’s a movie,” Logan grumbled. “And you totally *Last Starfighter*’d me.”

“Ah, film, yes, we have heard of your Marvel movies. People say the second Thor movie was the very best. And the most historically accurate.”

Logan didn’t know where to start with that argument. First, totally wrong—*Ragnarök* was obviously the best—and second, *historically* accurate? In what possible way could *The Dark World* be considered historically accurate?

The headmaster leaned forward. “As to the second part of your question. Yes, you are here because you alone completed the mimic’s challenge. You beat the game and thus proved your potential

worth to our illustrious cause. It truly is the greatest of honors. Now, let us move on shall we, hmm?"

"Yeah, about that. I'm not ready to move on. Still sort of caught up on that whole *you unleashed a monster to kill me in my home* thing."

Shadowcroft sighed and rolled his eyes. "The Ethics of Murder class will really be of benefit to you, I'll wager," he grumbled under his breath before growing somber. "This is not a game, Mr. Murray. Perhaps you do not condone our methods of recruitment, but that is only because you do not realize what is at stake. This is not for a single life, nor even the lives of your fellow countrymen. We deal not in the fate of a nation or a planet, but in the fate of the universe itself. There is no work more valuable than what we do. You said that on your world there are good people. People willing to risk life and limb for one another, to sacrifice at the expense of themselves. That is what I am asking of you."

Logan sat there, mulling over the words. He wasn't sure about this Shadowcroft guy, but the idea of serving in some sort of galactic defense force didn't sound terrible. Not really. *The Last Starfighter* had worked out pretty well for Alex Rogan.

"Fine," he finally said, crossing his arms. "I can at least finish hearing you out."

"Excellent." Shadowcroft beamed, leaning back in his chair. "Let us just pull up your file." He waved a spindly hand. The spinning crystal behind the tree man threw a complicated sheet of numbers and glyphs into the air above their heads. At first, it was unreadable, but after a second it shimmered and shifted, taking the form of an evaluation sheet of sorts.

It reminded Logan of the menus from the Shadowcroft game.

"Do not be alarmed, Mr. Murray. The Arcane Lexicon of the Tree of Souls is indecipherable to all but those closest to the Tree Spirit. As a result, your mind will interpret the report in a way that makes sense to you," Shadowcroft explained. "Let's see what we have to work with." His fingers flicked through the air. Information scrolled by. "Ah, an elite warrior. Good. Decorated for heroism in combat. Excellent. No long-term relationships to get hung up on, other than the uncle. Yes, that should make the transition easier."

The tree man beamed more brightly than ever, seeming quite pleased. He swept through more pages until he got to one that detailed Logan's core, whatever that was.

His smile evaporated like water in the scorching desert sun. Shadowcroft sighed and pointed. "Oh dear. Now here, you see, is the real problem. The mimic must've been truly desperate to have taken you." He faltered and tapped at his chin. "Perhaps we might have to rethink the quota system."

"I'm sorry. What's the problem?" Logan asked, hunching forward, forearms resting on his thighs.

"No, no, that can't be right," Shadowcroft said, ignoring Logan's prodding. He stood, walked to the crystal, and flicked it with a finger several times.

The crystal went dark, then reignited, even brighter. The information was the same. The headmaster shook his head. A few flowers swayed. "It says you are a Deep Root cultivator, Rank 9? Am I reading this right?"

"Deep Root cultivator sounds promising," Logan said. "Not sure if being a Rank 9 is good or not."

Once more, Shadowcroft didn't respond. Clearly troubled, he stole a sidelong glance at Logan.

"Okay, seriously. What the hell is going on?" Logan asked, starting to get annoyed. "Do I get to keep the leg? Or do I have to give it back? I've kinda grown attached to it." The bad joke didn't clear the air.

"Not to pad it, Mr. Murray, but your core is just... well, *terrible*. I'm honestly shocked you survived the transition at all. You are supposed to be an elite warrior, yet to be honest, there are peasants—literal *serfs*—on Eritreus with more robust cores than you. I knew your world had troubles, but I didn't think it was so severe. Let's check it again."

The crystal flickered, as did the screen hanging in the air. Shadowcroft, standing next to his desk, appraised it carefully. "Now isn't that interesting. You call it Earth, but we have it classified as Uroth, a world on one of the far branches of the Theta Arcturus. Yes,

I understand your comments more. It does indeed appear to be a beautiful planet, though a wretched one in many ways.”

“Not wretched,” Logan said forcefully.

Shadowcroft shook his head, sending his mossy beard waving. “By the Tree, look here. No wonder your core is so terrible. While once a great place, full of promise, your planet is now dying. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more Apothos-poor world since I first started the academy. The fact that you even reached Deep Root status is amazing, considering the circumstances. Yes, so far, your world’s greatest contribution to the multiverse has been the Marvel movies.”

Logan let out a grunt of frustration. “All I’m hearing is a whole lot of bad-mouthing and not a whole lot of answers. How about you tell me *why* you seem to think my planet sucks so much. You mentioned Apothos. That’s the energy I used in the game to build the dungeon that protected the Tree of Souls. Which, given where I am, is probably important. Care to fill in some of the blanks for me?”

“Fair points. And yes, both Apothos and the Tree of Souls are extremely important,” Shadowcroft agreed. “The Tree of Souls supports all of reality. Every aspect, every version. You played the game, so you understand the basics. I’m relieved, at least, to see you are putting things together quickly. Astute of you—a trait that will carry you far.”

“Appreciate the compliment, but maybe you can just circle back around to the part about my world dying and you recruiting me into your little academy by having something eat me. I remember the fangs quite clearly.”

“Yes, the fangs, regrettable.” The headmaster stroked his beard, musing hard. “As to your world. To put it candidly, your world, Mr. Murray, has become incredibly weak. Amazingly, your species has adapted some impressive technology to compensate for its many deficiencies. Let me clarify. It’s quite rudimentary by our standards, but fairly impressive by your standards.”

Logan blew out a breath. “Okay, Mr. Shadowcroft. You call me Mr. Murray. I’ll call you Mr. Shadowcroft. Tell me everything I need to know.”

The headmaster nodded. “Good. Good. You wish for more information. Sit back, Mr. Murray, while I reveal the very secrets of the universe to you.”

He snapped his tree fingers, and a resonating *crack* like a gun report echoed off the domed ceiling. The crystal brightened, spilling stars, planets, and space across the room.

Logan flashed back to trips to the planetarium in elementary school.

The headmaster’s rich voice filled the room. “The Ashvattha, otherwise known as the Tree of Souls, is rich with Apothos—the fundamental energy of creation. The tree is not root, bark, nor branch, like I am, but invisible dark matter that holds the multiverse together.”

Shadowcroft gestured to the branching darkness that wove endless, twisting limbs through stars and planets. “Every world, in every dimension, is sustained through its connection to the Tree of Souls. Those worlds are basically the fruit of the Tree, hanging from its branches, being nourished. But no piece of fruit can survive long apart from the Tree, yes? And, if the Tree of Souls were ever to fall, it would be the death of reality itself.” He nodded his head grimly.

After a beat, Shadowcroft snapped his fingers. The tree—that dark thread twisting through the entire multiverse—vanished. The results were immediate. Stars winked out. Green planets turned brown, then black, then crumbled into nothing. Dust, blown away into less than nothing. Whole galaxies stopped spinning and grew dark.

With a word, Shadowcroft directed the crystal to restore the simulated Tree of Souls. The picture of the multiverse reappeared as it had before, in all its shimmering glory. He then moved aside various versions of galaxies until he reached Logan’s home section of the Milky Way—or what Shadowcroft referred to as the Theta Arcturus.

The sun was a yellow ball shining across the planets, and there, attached to a weak looking branch of darkness, the dull green continents sat on dirty blue oceans.

“This, then, is your Earth,” Shadowcroft said. “Though Earth is such an odd name, don’t you think? Uroth sounds far more natural.

You see, your world is barely connected to that far-flung branch of the Ashvattha. The limb has withered away to almost nothing. Hence, it is an Apothos-poor environment. My records indicate that it used to be more powerful, but as the Apothos began to die, you replaced it with technology.

“Magic and magic cultivation was forgotten. Now Uroth is a withered piece of fruit hanging on to existence by the skin of its teeth. True, there are still a few Celestial Nodes present, but not many. The nodes are where your world is connected to the Tree. You might consider them strange places full of strange beasts and creatures of lore—all of which are guardians of the Tree, as you shall be one day. Dragons, werewolves, cyclops... Your myths and legends are from a time when there were more nodes, protected by guardians and the dungeons they built. Let me show you by simply turning back the clock a few thousand years, hmm?”

With every one of Shadowcroft’s motions, the Earth spun backward through time. Cities receded, clusters of lights blinking out. The air cleared. Large swatches of gray strip malls and black asphalt were replaced with fields and forests. The dark limb connecting the planet to the Tree of Souls thickened and the whole world glowed—almost *buzzed*—with tangible energy. The greens were greener. The ocean blues were far more vibrant.

The headmaster focused on a certain island in the Mediterranean Sea. He was able to zoom in until Logan saw a dusty city with narrow alleys and stone buildings. People in tunics, robes, and cloaks meandered through a marketplace full of squawking chickens, bins of fruit, and hanging wineskins.

“This is Knossos on the island of Crete,” Shadowcroft said, eyeing the world with great interest. “There was a rather weak minotaur there named Asterion. I assure you... the god Zeus was not involved. Asterion was a dungeon core, an Iron Trunk cultivator, who protected the node there.”

The headmaster lifted his hands to show Logan the vast stone corridors of a labyrinth underneath the city. There, the dark branches of the Tree of Souls were connected to the world.

“I’ll show you the dungeoneers,” Shadowcroft said. “A motley crew of greedy villains, though your stories don’t mention that. As they say, history is written by the victors.”

The scene changed to show a collection of armor-clad warriors standing in front of an archway underground. A young Greek man with a lopsided grin swaggered up with a bunch of other rough-looking soldiers. Accompanying them was a fat old man in a stained toga swilling wine. The old man finished his wineskin and then used it to smack the smirking swaggerer on the back of the head. The entire group laughed. They weren’t laughing when the young Greek turned on his heel and ran the old man through with a glimmering gladius. The curly-haired hero then rummaged through the old man’s robes and removed a big spool of thread, while the rest of the ruffians looted the body.

Logan sighed. “Well, this is sobering. Heroes are terrible. Got it.”

The headmaster said nothing, merely watching Logan’s reactions.

Once done ransacking the old man’s corpse, the dungeoneers laughed and headed into the impressive labyrinth of stone and iron, all without a care in the world. The maze itself was far more than just stone corridors—there were traps and minions. One hallway had a machine that smashed the walls together. Another cul-de-sac held dozens of rat men in ragged robes armed with stick spears. Not all of the raiders made it to the center of the labyrinth, but Theseus did. Along with a pair of olive-skinned flunkies carrying polearms.

In the central square room—lava burbling around the edges—stood the minotaur, ten feet tall, wearing gilded armor and wielding a golden axe. Asterion was protecting a vermillion crystal floating over a gorgeously carved pedestal. From his time playing the Shadowcroft console, Logan knew this was the dungeon’s inner sanctum.

With careless cruelty, Theseus sent his friends to be slaughtered by the minotaur while he lingered back, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. When it came, he rushed forward and stabbed Asterion in the heart. The horned beast fell, gasping while he tried to fight off the invaders with his last breath.

The raiders strutted contemptuously past him and over to the crystal. Theseus plucked it from its pedestal. Golden light flooded from the gem and into the hero like a surge of lightning, the crystal crumbling to dust in his outstretched palm.

Shadowcroft zoomed out, showing its effect on the shadowy branch tethering ancient Earth to the Tree of Souls. The limb connecting Earth to the Ashvattha withered and darkened. Large sections of the world lost its glow.

Logan's mind whirled. It seemed his high school classes had gotten a lot wrong about the world, the heroes, the whole deal.

Shadowcroft fast-forwarded through history. Other dungeons and their assorted guardians fell. A tiger-headed man in a temple in India was killed by laughing raiders. A demon lord in a Chinese cave fell to an army of sneering men. A dragon in Europe during the Middle Ages was murdered by a strutting knight. When each dungeon fell, Earth lost more of that healthy gleam until once again, the post-industrial Earth spun in space, growing weaker and dimmer.

Logan felt sick. "Oh. You weren't joking. My world really is dying."

"Yes. Unfortunately." The headmaster shook his head sadly. "It's not irreversible, but it is on the cusp."

"Is there a way to stop that from happening?" Logan asked. "You guys will miss out on the phase-four Marvel movies if Earth dies."

The headmaster let a sly grin split his mossy beard. "We can't let that happen. Why do you think the academy exists, lad?"

"First *young one* and now *lad*. I don't know if I should be grateful or insulted." Logan inhaled and nodded. "I'll go with grateful. Tell me more, old-timer. Tell me how to save my world."



## Chapter Four



“UNFORTUNATELY, THERE is too much to tell and too little time to tell it.” Shadowcroft swept the simulated galaxy back into the crystal. “We are preparing for new recruit orientation, and you, my boy, are the last to arrive. But I can assure you all your questions will be answered in full during your time here at the academy.” Shadowcroft paused and canted his malformed head, stealing a measuring, sidelong glance at Logan. “Admittedly, you are starting off at a decided disadvantage, but I believe we can expect great things from you. Your zest and pep are admirable.”

The little rose guy yawned and made loud smacking sounds. “Yes, yes of course,” the headmaster mumbled under his breath. “She’s quite the needy little thing—but it’s best to keep her happy and well fed.” He stooped and opened a desk drawer, retrieved a glowing bead the size of a marble, and flicked it to the rose with a gnarled thumb. The surly plant chewed it down and belched. “Last time I forgot to feed her, she grew thirty feet and devoured part of a dormitory wing.”

The crystal dancer put her hands on her hips, tapping her foot, clearly angry she didn’t get a treat. Shadowcroft produced a glimmering sunshine snack for her as well.

“Let me guess,” Logan said, eyeballing the beads. “That was an Apothos popper, right?”

Shadowcroft thought for a moment. “Not even remotely,” he replied. “If I understand correctly, I believe it is something akin to your jalapeno poppers? Snack food. Though”—he shrugged—“I could be wrong, since accessing your very specific cultural language isn’t easy. Now, if we could continue...”

The former soldier had to put a few things together in his head first. “If I’m tracking with you so far, we have to protect the Tree of

Souls from dungeoneers across a billion worlds. But my little planet is already pretty messed up. Can we just create new Celestial Nodes? Maybe we can turn shopping malls into dungeons. The way online shopping is going, I'm not sure we're going to be using them much anymore."

"In time, such a thing might be possible." The headmaster stroked his mossy beard thoughtfully. "But first, you must survive. Survive and advance in your classes to get the power you need to reconnect Uroth to the Ashvattha. It is no small thing to do."

"Survive? Classes? What exactly do you have in store for me?" Logan said slowly. His thoughts flashed back to his time in Iraq. Riding behind a .50 Cal in a steel-ringed turret. Kicking in doors and hurling flashbangs while he and his brothers flooded in through a cloud of smoke, M4 muzzles sweeping the room. If the recruitment process involved being *murdered*, he couldn't even imagine what Shadowcroft had prepared. But Logan had gone through some of the toughest training on the planet, and if he could survive that, he could survive this too.

Shadowcroft raised a hand before he could ask any other questions. "In time, all will be revealed. Truly, I wish we had more time to talk, but I am a very busy tree, and you have places to be. I must admit, however, I haven't enjoyed an interview this much in ages. If ever."

Logan stood up. "You're right. Let's get on with it. I don't want to get a demerit for being tardy."

"Sit, young one. As I said, I applaud your zeal, but you can't use *that* body for the work we have to do."

"Why?" Logan asked, eyes narrowing. "It's served me pretty well up until now. I have two feet, a pair of hands with working digits, and everything in between. Hell, the legs even work." He stomped them before returning to his seat.

"For one, it's wholly insufficient for the task to come. For another, it's not real," Shadowcroft replied. "In truth, that form you wear is little more than a mask—a construct of light and illusion I conjured to put you at ease during the initial interview. But now... Well, now it is time to shed the old and put on the new. For the mortal to clothe thyself

with immortality. Which brings us to the third reason. This is an institute dedicated to dungeon cores. Before you can leave my office, you must pick your guardian form. Then, and only then, can you enter into the academy proper."

With a flick of his hand, the gem behind Shadowcroft erupted with opalescent light, revealing a crystalline screen of monstrous-looking figures that could've been plucked from the pages of any DM manual. Unfortunately, the six creatures all looked like terrible choices to get saddled with: Putrid Ratling. Stink Slime. Muck Crab. Goober Changeling. Anemic Strig. Fungaloid.

Logan squinted, bleakly surveying the first few options. By touching the guardian form, he was able to select the class details.

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**Putrid Ratling:** Small and aggressive, Putrid Ratlings are a humanoid rat-like creatures that often dwell in small burrows with others of their kind. They are hardworking and industrious in nature and are well known for their ability to make innovative traps, but their fragile bodies and brittle bones mean they are no challenge physically for even the weakest dungeoneers. Putrid Ratlings are bipedal and can utilize simple weapons like swords and shields, but they are severely weakened by sunlight, and dungeoneers with *clean* hands and good hygiene inflict more damage when attacking.

Because they are so physically weak, they are rarely able to kill even small animals on their own, so rely predominately on scavenging and foraging for meals and supplies. On the plus side, because of their steady diet of carrion, Putrid Ratlings have developed iron-clad stomachs and are immune to almost all poisons and diseases! Moreover, when push comes to shove, they can also summon a small army of feverishly sick rodents to fight at their behest.

*Would you like to know more? Yes/No*

<<<>>>

No. Logan definitely, totally, completely did not want to know more. The negatives far outweighed the positives on this one, and he seriously didn't want to lose out to simple handwashing. His gaze skipped to the next option in line.

<<<>>

**Stink Slime:** Stink Slimes are amorphous blobs and fill out the lowest rung in the Slime/Ooze evolutionary tree. Since Stink Slimes are both blind and deaf at the Deep Root Level, they have a wide range of severe disadvantages, but they are able to sense nearby creatures through vibrational noise that carries through the ground, allowing them to seek out prey over time.

As Stink Slimes are not particularly fast or agile, catching prey may be difficult, so they secrete a variety of pheromones to lure in small, vulnerable creatures, while conversely utilizing potent stink sacs to scare off more dangerous predators. Using sticky tentacles, they immobilize their prey, then use a weak acid to slowly dissolve the hapless creature over a period of days or even weeks—during which time the slime must remain completely immobile.

*Would you like to know more? Yes/No*

<<<>>

This time, he felt the color drain from his face as he read over the description.

Perfect. Great. So, he could go from being a fully functional combat trigger puller to an amorphous puddle of blind and deaf goo that could slowly and ineptly hunt rabbits. Maybe. If he got lucky.

Yeah, hard pass.

“Where are the other choices? The good ones.”

“These are your only choices,” Shadowcroft replied.

“These six. You’re saying I only have those six options?” Logan asked after a moment. “But can I become human again when I’m not in my dungeon?”

Shadowcroft shook his head. “Once you choose your class, you will be forever in that form, though as you progress in your cultivation practices, your body will improve. Assuming you survive long enough to advance.”

Logan studied the six figures: An emaciated rat man in tattered rags. A puddle of stinky goo. A filth-covered, green-shelled crustacean. A grinning little goblin with electric blue skin. A scrawny, bird-like creature with a long proboscis and a bad case of eczema.

Terrible. Just terrible. He paused at the last option. A tiny red-and-white mushroom with a dopey grin on his face.

“So my character class, otherwise known as my guardian form, wouldn’t just be Ratling, but a Putrid Ratling.” He let the sarcasm flow. “Cool. Who wouldn’t want to be putrid? I didn’t read everything, but I would imagine my bite would cause a cholera outbreak.”

“Something like that.” The headmaster shifted in his seat. He was getting antsy. Uncomfortable. It was clear he was in a hurry to get somewhere.

Ironic. Shadowcroft wanted to hurry things along. Logan had to pick his new body, which he might have for a long time, if he survived.

“Good thing this isn’t stressful,” he muttered darkly.

“Once you choose your guardian form,” the headmaster explained, “we will take your essence and store it in your core. That core, in turn, will transmute the energy into your guardian form, giving it substance and shape. Material reality.”

“Gee. You don’t say. And, if I understand correctly, I’ll be stuck as a *Muck Crab* for the rest of my foreseeable life. Dreams do come true.” He was trying to keep his sense of humor.

“You wouldn’t be the small crab you see there forever.” The headmaster tapped the image. “Your form will change and evolve into a greater, more formidable version of the guardian as your core advances from level to level. It is the way of all guardians.”

Logan sat back, thinking. “But why are there only six choices? I’ve played DnD since the seventh grade, and these are all newb monsters for level-one dungeons. Why can’t I pick a dragon or something that doesn’t absolutely suck ass?”

“*DnD*. Dungeons and Dragons. At best, a simulation of how the real world works. At worst, it’s a game designed to sell pizza and dice.” Shadowcroft nodded. “Yet there is some truth in your words, young one. Sadly, because of your crippled core, you are limited to lower-class guardians. Here is the full list of all options available to *all* cultivation levels.”

With a flick of Shadowcroft’s wooden fingers, the gem showed Logan thousands of monsters—a dizzying array that included a

Terror Strig, a Slime Prince, and more normal dungeon denizens: lich kings, insect royalty, eldritch horrors, ancient dragons of every size, shape, and color, and yes, there was the Spider Sorcerer he'd beaten the game with.

Most of the creatures were amazing, powerful, and scary. Many were so bizarre that Logan had to do a quick sanity check. Gelatinous Knight? Cleanup on aisle five.

Then, just as quick as the options appeared, Shadowcroft dismissed the menagerie. "Yes, we have an impressive list of possible guardian forms, but, as I said, you cannot choose any of them. I would change things if I could, but the situation is this—you are a Deep Root cultivator, Class E, Rank 9. The guardian forms you have access to are directly proportional to your Core Class at the time of selection. These are the only possible forms for you to use."

The six bland figures flickered back into sight. The Goober Changeling emitted a goblinny giggle and a new blue pimple appeared on its face.

"Can I upgrade my form when my core improves?" Logan asked.

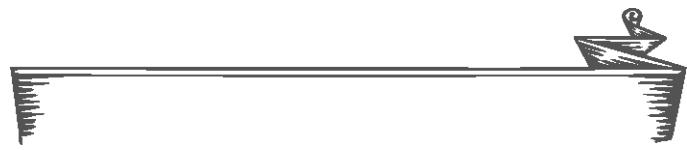
"*Advances* is the term," the headmaster said. "When your core *advances*. And I'm afraid not. However, as previously mentioned, your guardian form will evolve as your cultivation improves."

"But that's just it," Logan said. "Evolving is hard to do when you're dead. How the heck am I supposed to advance as a Putrid Ratling?"

Shadowcroft softened. "Your worry is understandable. And, truthfully, this situation pains me, Mr. Murray. I am sorry your options are so terribly limited, your chances are poor, and that there is a good chance that the Reaper Box I sent out into the multiverse has doomed you. However, the Tree of Souls has a wisdom that defies our mortal understanding. The Tree knows how to protect itself. I believe that you were chosen to fight in this war for a reason, even if it is hard to glean that reason in the here and now."

Logan hardly listened. He reviewed the pathetic classes again. He stood and shook his head. "Nope. You're talking about my life and death. I'm not going to fight your war as a newb sewer rat or shower mold. Just send me back."

“Back?” Shadowcroft looked shocked. “No, no. I’m afraid you misunderstand. There is no going back. I can dissolve your core and feed your energy into the Tree if you’d like, but your body is gone. Devoured. Your flesh was converted into the energy that is powering you at this very moment. There is only forward.”



## Chapter Five



*THERE IS NO GOING BACK. There is only forward.* The words echoed in his head like the clarion chime of a struck bell.

Wow. Now that was a hell of a gut punch.

Logan sat down. He swallowed hard and pressed his eyes shut. There was no going back. Others might get an afterlife, but he got a temporary body and a one-way ticket into a dungeon core academy.

He thought about the people who would miss him. Upon reflection, it was a rather short list. Uncle Bud would inherit the house and the dogs. Ramon could take over the landscaping business. His military buddies would see his obituary or read about his messy death on Facebook, and they'd raise a glass in his honor. Lizzy, his old girlfriend, had already moved on. His parents were gone.

For a minute he felt alone, a bit lost, but then remembered what Sergeant Major Baker had said to him after his accident. Not every soldier got to go home with a heartbeat. There was no going back, and if he lived in regret and resentment, that would kill him just as surely as the mimic had. If he was going to make it here, he needed to find the silver lining. That was the only way to deal.

So maybe this wasn't perfect. Maybe he was starting out at a disadvantage, and maybe he'd have to climb his way up from the very bottom, rung by bloody rung. But he also had the opportunity to do some real good. To save the world—his world—and protect the Tree of Souls. At the same time, his imagination was fired up and blasting on all cylinders. What in the hell was a dungeon core academy anyway? How was this going to work? What were the classes going to be like?

He'd been out of the Army for a while, and though he'd been running his landscaping business, he'd always secretly nursed the

dream of using his GI Bill benefits to go to college at some point. What the hell. He might as well get a degree in advanced dungeoneering. It would be more interesting than a business and marketing degree.

Above all, Logan was a survivor, and though his choices were bad, he'd never been one to stew or sulk. If these were his options... Well, he'd find the one that would give him the best chance. An edge. Then? Then he'd improvise, adapt, and overcome. His unit had always had to do more with less. He could do the same here. He just needed to be smart about it.

Logan opened his eyes. "So I need to pick a guardian form and level up so I can eventually save the Earth." He nodded. "The only way is forward. Show me my options again."

Shadowcroft put his hands together, and it was the sound of two-by-fours clapping. "Yes, now there is that enthusiasm I so enjoy. Feel free to study your options. I will try to give you all the time you need, but you should hurry."

Logan shook his head. "I'm on the clock, got it."

He skipped over Putrid Ratling without a second thought and *flew* by the Stink Slime options—he had absolutely no desire to spend the next century as sentient nose mucus. Next up was the Muck Crab, and though the creature didn't sound overly appealing, it was a far cry better than the other options he'd seen so far.

The Muck Crab guardian form was perfect for underwater dungeons, and he would be able to summon a variety of aquatic minions. The deadly beastie could also engineer interesting coral traps and cast sand-based spells. The melee attacks were okay, and the physical armor stat was decent enough, but at the lowest level, some hungry dungeoneers might come looking for a seafood buffet. One-on-one, the Muck Crab wasn't the worst option. Against a bevy of raiders? Logan wouldn't last five minutes. And weren't crustaceans just the spiders of the sea? He'd gotten used to walking around as a bipedal animal with four limbs and an internal skeleton.

The Goober Changeling was bipedal, and it started off with the amazing ability to grow three inches and add ten pounds to its chubby frame. It was basically an uncoordinated baby troll without

any natural armor. It did have the physical ability to turn its fingers into scissors—short, stubby scissors with the blunt ends like the ones Logan had used in the third grade. Unfortunately, as terrible as the Changeling was, it went onto the *maybe* list.

The Anemic Strig was actually rather promising. Part feathered bat, part mosquito with a skin condition, the two-foot-long monster could suck blood, fly, and swell its body so much that physical attacks would bounce off its thick, metallic feathers. It could also summon insect clouds and set up bloodsucker traps, but in the end, the thing was crazy ugly and didn't seem to have much versatility. It was a one-trick pony with a mediocre trick at best.

While Logan read and pondered, the headmaster sat quietly at his desk, wooden fingers folded. New flowers budded on the grassy knoll of his head. It was like sitting in a room with a Hayao Miyazaki character.

“So, there’s a real problem with all these things,” Logan said, glancing up at Shadowcroft. “You might get more powerful as you go, but my chances of surviving first-level encounters are terrible.”

Shadowcroft adjusted a flower on his head. “You aren’t wrong, Mr. Murray. However, your core simply can’t power anything better. Now, if you’d have come from an Apothos-rich world, like Eritreus, and if you were an Iron Trunk cultivator, C-Class—even a low-ranking one—you would have far more options with a much better chance of long-term success. Better still would’ve been the Azure Branch cultivator, B-Class, at any rank. We have some of those higher-level cultivators at our school. One of our top students in your class is a B-Class Abyss Lord, immune to non-magical weapons, able to summon hordes of devils and demons. He’s nearly undefeatable.”

“And I get to be a used Kleenex, a Red Lobster entrée, or Batman’s more mosquito cousin.” Logan blew out a breath and made his lips flap. “Great.”

The last in the line was the fungaloid class. Just looking at the image of the mopey little mushroom man made him depressed. He took a break to study the leveling system, which seemed to apply to

both Dungeons and Raiders, so at least he'd have some sense of how he could progress.

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**Ranks:** All Classes are subdivided into ten ranks, starting at level 10, then proceeding incrementally to level 1. When a dungeon core or dungeoneer surpasses level 1, they advance to the next Class and begin the process over again.

**U-Class (Dirt Cultivators):** The masses. The vast majority of sentient fauna and flora fall into this category. U-Class creatures *barely* have enough Apothos to keep their hearts beating. Not particularly hardy, they are easily injured, cannot heal quickly, and are prone to sickness and death. U-Class do not have ranks. This is the foundational state of existence, only slightly more advanced than the dirt underfoot.

**E-Class (Deep Root Cultivators):** This is a starting hero. Deep Root cultivators have taken the first step to opening their cores to the power undergirding creation and have begun to passively cultivate small amounts of Apothos. They are slightly stronger than average creatures of the same type, but they have yet to commit to a cultivation path. Most cannot form an energy attack.

Elite soldiers or war-hardened athletes might have progressed to this level. Without training, such a dungeon core would be overwhelmed in minutes by even the weakest dungeoneers. The Deep Root cultivators, as with the rest of the cultivation levels, are ranked from 10 to 1, 10 being the highest, and 1 being on the cusp of advancement.

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Logan frowned. "So I'm a Deep Root cultivator, Class E, Rank 9. Some of that is probably thanks to the pawnshop game. Most of that is the Army. *Hooah.*" He kept on reading, though it was rather sobering to think that he was just a notch better than literal dirt. More daunting was how far he had to go until he advanced to an Iron Trunk cultivator—the basic entry level required for a successful dungeon core.

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**C-Class (Iron Trunk Cultivators):** This is the “average” dungeon core. They are just beginning but are still much stronger than most other creatures. Their bodies are harder and more powerful, and they have begun to actively cultivate the divine energy of the cosmos, putting them firmly on a class/cultivation path. No single C-Class dungeoneer could clear even the most basic C-Class dungeon singlehandedly—a group of Iron Trunk cultivators can be dangerous indeed.

Iron Trunk is the foundational class for most dungeons and dungeoneers because the Iron Trunk class transforms the body in dramatic ways, making those at this class sturdier and able to heal dramatically faster than those at lower classes. Those at higher tiers can heal grievous wounds quickly, while those in the highest Class Tier are even said to be able to regrow limbs. Most C-Class dungeoneers are still too squishy to survive alone in even low-level dungeons.

**B-Class (Azure Branch Cultivators):** At the third-strongest level, these cultivators are extremely powerful and dangerous. With focus and determination, they can externally shape their Apothos into devastating energy and magical attacks. A group of B- and C-Class dungeoneers is nothing to scoff at, especially for a new dungeon without much experience. Typically, Azure Branch cultivators comprise the majority of mid-ranged dungeoneers: successful and working their way up but nowhere near the top.

**A-Class (Jade Leaf Cultivators):** The second-strongest class, Jade Leaf cultivators are extremely powerful. Dungeon cores at the A-Class level are often entrusted with the defense of the most prestigious Celestial Nodes and are almost guaranteed any assignment they desire.

As for the Jade Leaf dungeoneers—even a single dungeoneer can clear a C-Class dungeon alone. Jade Leaf dungeoneers are both masters and specialists of their craft. Thanks to the hardy strength of Iron Trunk and the active cycling abilities of Azure Branch, these dungeoneers are nearly impossible to kill and can effortlessly shape their Apothos into attacks that defy explanation. Jade Leaf raiders frequently serve as powerful lords and ladies to

the Monarch-Level S-Class. They often run powerful organizations or are senior guild members.

**S-Class (Heartwood Cultivators):** The strongest and rarest class of dungeons and dungeoneers. Every Heartwood cultivator is equivalent to a small army. Heartwood dungeons can span miles of territory and descend miles below the ground.

**SS-Class (Crown):** Little is known about Crown-level dungeon cores and dungeoneers or what they are capable of, in part because they rarely involve themselves in typical human affairs. Some dungeons, however, do achieve this ranking since they are capable of fighting more than one Heartwood dungeoneer at a time. The strongest Heartwood dungeoneer is approximately ten times weaker than the weakest Crown-class cultivator.

**SSS-Class (Immortal Crown):** Mythical beings with god-tier power. They are ascended masters of legend, and no one knows whether they even truly exist.

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Logan paused to think about the levels. Both dungeons and raiders were ranked in similar ways. The A-Class, or Jade Leaf cultivators, were like the B-Tier heroes of the Justice League while the S-Class, or Heartwood cultivators, were like the A-Tier. Logan figured the Heartwood cultivators would be like Superman deciding to do a dungeon crawl.

It was strange to think that these dungeoneers were actively raiding dungeons and destroying worlds. Did they know and not care? And why raid these places at all if it was so dangerous? What were their end goals? What did they get out of the arrangement that made it worth the risk?

He glanced at Shadowcroft, who was massaging the grass around one of his skull flowers. “So, hey, old-timer, what class of dungeon core are you? I’m assuming you’re a dungeon core, right?”

“Indeed, I am.” Shadowcroft smiled. “But what I am matters not to you. You must pick your guardian form, Mr. Murray. We have run out of time.”

Logan wasn’t going to press the question. Afterall, Shadowcroft he had to be at least S-Class since he was running the show.

But stalling for answers wasn't going to change his situation. He needed to pick a guardian form, and he needed to do it quickly. The only other guardian left for Logan to study was the fungaloid. Reluctantly, he clicked on the image of the stumpy creature and pulled up its details. It wasn't much at first glance. Little humanoid dude, about three feet tall, with a red-and-white toadstool head. Not only did the thing look silly, it had bad mobility and was super weak against fire. The little guy was as flammable as a newspaper soaked in lighter fluid. It also didn't have any kind of physical attack, not at the first level, and its defenses were next to nonexistent.

However, owning his own landscaping business had led Logan into the wacky world of mushrooms a time or two, since some fungi could harm lawns and destroy gardens.

Back on Earth, fungal spores were everywhere, floating around in the air humans breathed. Most were harmless, simply waiting for a dark, wet place to grow—like under a log or between your toes—but some fungi were so nasty it took powerful poisons to remove them.

Logan felt a shiver. Yes, the fungaloid was pathetic at first. But what kind of terrifying mushrooms could it grow down the road?

Logan saw that the list of fungaloid abilities was stupidly short. Almost laughably so.

"Hey, Shadowcroft," Logan said. "Why isn't there more information about the fungaloid?"

Shadowcroft cleared his wooden throat. "Well, now, Mr. Murray, that is an unlikely choice. I don't recommend it. Granted, at higher levels, the fungaloid can be extremely powerful, but very few have ever progressed that far. I've had six students who chose that guardian form. One died immediately in the Threshing—his core pulverized into powder. Three were expelled and later slain by various raiders. One did graduate, started his fungal dungeon, and was exterminated by five Iron Trunk dungeoneers. The last student? I lost track of him, though last I heard, he was able to survive and even thrive, protecting his Celestial Node."

"Six people chose this form," Logan said. "How long have you been running this school?"

“It has been ten thousand of your Uroth years since I first founded the school.”

That made Logan pause. He read the description again:

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**Fungaloid:** The fungaloid guardian form is a small humanoid creature composed of a white, spongy material capable of emitting a variety of spore types. Although fungaloids are mobile, in the early stages of life they are weak, slow, and susceptible to many natural dangers, including fire, heat, and sunlight. Additionally, they have few offensive abilities early on and are often harvested by overeager dungeoneers due to their ability to produce highly profitable narcotic, hallucinogenic, and alchemic potion ingredients.

Fungaloids can evolve to harder and deadlier versions as they cultivate Apothos and refine their cores. These higher-level forms are rarely, if ever, seen, however. This is due, in large part, to a unique facet of the race: Because of the pathway mechanics involved in fungaloid biology, only Deep Root cultivators (E-Class) or lower can pick fungaloid as a starting race.

*Would you like to know more? Yes/No*

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“E-Class or lower,” Logan mused out loud.

“That is correct,” Shadowcroft agreed. “Some students have drunk potions to limit their cores to become a Putrid Ratling, but that is not possible for the fungaloid class. Hence, it is very rare. Please, Mr. Murray, I would suggest the Anemic Strig or, yes, the Putrid Ratling. Even the Stink Slime would be better.”

Logan didn’t comment. Instead, he selected Yes. He absolutely wanted to know more.

More information populated, replacing the initial fungaloid description. Quickly, he read about the fungaloid’s Initial Active Ability in his Fungal Form:

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**Fungal Form 1: Harden.** Trigger Harden to temporarily calcify your exterior by 25%, reducing damage, though at a 20% reduction to speed. Harden is a stackable ability and can stack up to four times. At higher levels, this turns into Chitin Armor, creating

hardened plates of chitin similar to an insect's exoskeleton. Light but resilient, the chitin reinforces the body without being cumbersome.

**Available at:** E-Class, Rank 10+

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Logan had to laugh. That was so much like the dumb Caterpie Pokémon. Basically, you could turn yourself into a semi-soft brick. People could still beat on you because you were too slow to scurry away. He rolled his eyes.

Reading on, he saw other initial abilities:

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**Spore Halo, General Ability:** Although fungaloids can become physically powerful at higher evolutionary stages, their most potent weapon lies in their ability to release a variety of spore types. Unlike many caster creatures who use single-target spells, fungaloids release spore clouds that are always Area of Effect. Any creature or dungeoneer in the area will be affected—unless the creature has a symbiotic relationship with the caster, causing them to be immune.

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Hey, now. This was promising, or so Logan thought. At least until he read about the first spore he'd be able to emit.

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**Pollen:** Release a toxin into the air that causes slight physical discomfort for all creatures in the Area of Effect. At lower levels this causes irritation of the skin and eyes, difficulty breathing, sneezing, and can even lead to swollen joints.

**Available at:** E-Class, Rank 9+

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Logan was about to give up on the mushroom guy when he two words jumped out at him: *symbiotic relationship*.

He flicked through screens, tracking down the reference. Bingo. He'd found it. He could emit something called Symbiosis spores:

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**Symbiosis:** This is a unique and powerful ability. The fungaloid can create a symbiotic relationship with a host—or even more than one host, at higher levels—giving the host a wide range of unique fungaloid-based abilities and advantages in exchange for the

fungaloid leeching off a portion of the host's absorbed Apothos energy. Typically, Symbiosis is used to find a Dungeoneer Champion who willingly serves the dungeon. In this case, the fungaloid becomes an Eldritch Patron/Fungus Warlock. Though rare, it is also possible to use the Symbiosis ability in tandem with other dungeon cores, creating a unique relationship where a single dungeon could host multiple cores.

**Available at:** E-Class, Rank 9+

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Logan again felt a shiver. Okay, now they were cooking.

Magic and support users were always weak up front, but they paid off in the long run—if you could survive long enough to power up. If he could find a partner, he just might have an edge. He would need help, and a lot of it. At the first level, he could transform into a brick and he could make dungeoneers sneeze—not exactly a promising ability set—but with a partner in crime, he could *maybe* survive long enough to truly make something of himself.

*Many hands make light work.* Uncle Bud always said that life's burdens were easier to bear when you found other people to help share the load. Logan was going to bet his life on it.

“Fungaloid,” he said, feeling sure about his decision.

Shadowcroft winced, those magical blue eyes losing a bit of their sparkle. “Are you certain? You might think teaming up with another dungeon core would be easy, but I can assure you, no one will want to link their fate to yours. What the description doesn’t say is that in cases of symbiotic dungeon cores, only the fungaloid can terminate the relationship—the host would be at your mercy, and no other dungeon would ever be foolish enough to do such a thing.”

“That’s what you think,” Logan said, “but I’m likeable. And if you don’t like me, as a fungus, I’ll grow on you.”

“Yes, the puns,” Shadowcroft said with some distaste. “I remember the puns were an issue for these dungeons.” The headmaster’s mood shifted, and he laughed. “All in all, it’s an interesting choice. Unconventional. Odd. You will certainly be one to watch. Now, prepare yourself. The academy awaits!”

Strangely enough, Logan was perfectly at ease with his decision. However, he was still human, even in his temporary form. He might have extreme buyer's remorse once he was given his shroomy little body.

"Now, young one," the ancient tree man said, "this next part might sting a bit..."

Logan nodded but was in no way prepared when his heart abruptly exploded out of his chest, leaving a gaping hole behind. The immediate sting was actually less than he would've guessed, all things considered. The mind-altering agony afterward, however, was definitely going to leave a mark.



## Chapter Six



THE PAIN SPUN LOGAN Murray into a dark void. The second time in less than twenty-four hours he'd visited Abysstown. Population ouch. Well, no one ever said that dying and becoming a dungeon core would be easy.

This time, at least, the darkness was fleeting—there one minute, gone the next.

And this time, Logan didn't wake up human. Not even close. He was lying on his back, and he felt smooth cold stone under him. His eyes fluttered open and he found himself looking at his pudgy white hands. The three fingers and a stump-like thumb came in and out of focus. No fingernails. Not even any proper joints to speak of. He opened and closed his hands and balled his fingers into loose fists. He was made of the spongey gray-white material of your garden-variety fungus. No pun intended.

This was wickedly weird. He also felt terrible.

What wasn't numb tingled, and he wanted everything that tingled to be numb. He dropped his arms, letting them flop like rubber tubes against the floor, and stared up at the arching black stone of a high-vaulted ceiling. He turned his head to the left and spotted huge columns rising *up, up, up* into the air like monstrous redwoods. Those columns were a bit fuzzy, though, blurry around the edges since his eyes felt like they were rebooting. A turn to his right showed him arches crafted from black stone framing long windows glowing with amber light. He'd gone to France with a few enlisted buddies, and this felt like the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris.

He groaned and pushed himself to his feet, both feet, though he stood on elephant pads with four toes sticking out. There went counting to ten. Though having two legs was still a win in his book. Better two legs and eight toes than one leg and five. Sure, his legs

were just spongy white twigs, but in the sheer numbers department, he was *killing* it!

Still... He was short. He was wide. And he wore white cotton pants that ended in the middle of his jointless legs. A red shirt, soft and comfortable, hung from his round, sloping shoulders—the shirt, too short, showed a swatch of pasty white belly. He was as skinless and boneless as discount chicken.

His pudgy hands went to his head, and he felt his cap. At first, it felt like he was wearing a big round hat. Then he felt at the gills underneath the cap, the weird ridges that most mushrooms had. His fingers traveled south, and he hesitantly touched his face—bulbous eyes, a tiny little nose, and a narrow mouth without very much lip. He didn't have ears. Another strike in the body part ledger. But it could've been worse, he reminded himself. He could've been a puddle of goo with no limbs at all, devoid of sight, sound, and taste. Compared to that unfortunate fate, he was doing pretty well.

He took one step. Then another. Then stopped. Something itched on his belly and he scratched at it absently. Again, he felt his spongey new flesh. He was a mushroom. A fungaloid. He'd known this was coming, but wow... Hopefully he'd made a wise choice.

His other senses were slow to come around. Without ears, did he hear through his gills? At first, things were indistinct, but after a few moments he heard the murmuring, laughter, and conversations going on around him. A mixture of odors reached his button-mushroom nose. Puns were definitely going to be a problem.

He smelled a variety of things, some animal, some vegetable, some mineral. Eventually, his knobby eyes cleared, giving him a very Mos Eisley moment. There were monsters *everywhere*. Big, terrible, strange. Hearing Shadowcroft talk about Lich Priests and Abyss Lords had been one thing, but seeing it was something else entirely. He realized with a jolt exactly how much the deck was stacked against him. These things could crush him underfoot without missing a step. If he wanted to survive and thrive here, he was going to have to work harder than everyone else, smarter than everyone else, and fight for every single inch.

He was going to have to become the undisputed King of the Hustle.

Several long tables had been pushed to the side of the vast hallway, the space cleared so the incoming dungeon cores in their guardian forms could mingle. Schmooze.

Two hulking werewolves, covered in coarse tawny-colored fur, stood on their hind legs, wearing red robes, chatting amicably while they passed a big leg of beef between them. Dragons the size of horses snorted flames and chatted. An enormous creature that looked equal parts fire demon and shadow nightmare yakked it up with a cold-faced undead queen, who glowed with a greasy, queasy jade light. Both were drinking from golden cups encrusted with jewels. They looked like dungeon core royalty, all right.

What was the name of that Apothos-rich world that Shadowcroft had mentioned? Logan couldn't quite recall, but he bet dollars to donuts that those two were former residents.

A centaur clopped by, his mane fluttering in some unfelt breeze. Logan stumbled back on instinct, craning his neck. Well, trying to. His neck didn't really crane. He sort of bowed his whole body to get a better look. Majestic looking. Regal. Also stinky with a capital S. Another figure ambled past, a suit of armor made from what looked like lime Jell-O, leaving behind a trail of goo.

"Gelatinous Knight," Logan whispered in shock.

Everything was bigger, taller, and more powerful than Logan, including a depressed-looking minotaur with his huge arms folded across his massive beef-slab chest. The bullheaded man leaned against the wall, sighing every once in a while, his ears fluttering in obvious annoyance. Near him was a tall, slender woman with blue-black moth wings poking out from her back and lacy antennae protruding from her brows. She looked about as uncomfortable as Logan felt and radiated social awkwardness in waves.

A jubilant voice echoed through the hall, reverberating off the high ceilings. "No, guys! I'm telling you. With my new hooves, I can slide through that slime trail!"

In a clatter of hoof clops, a toga-wearing satyr went zipping through the goo the Gelatinous Knight had left in his wake as though

it were a Slip 'N Slide.

The satyr had the furry legs of a goat but the muscled torso of a man. The hair around his wrists half-covered his human hands. His face was also humanish, with a pointed beard covering a chiseled jaw, a wide nose, and a mouth that looked like it would always be smiling. He had goat eyes—horizontal pupils—and two big curling horns spiraling around pointed ears capped with tufts of golden hair. A fuzzy tail stuck straight out, then curled up like an overgrown pug. In one hand was a comically oversized flagon—the thing was dang near a punch bowl—which he somehow managed to hold with perfect balance despite careening through the slime. Something was printed on his toga, but Logan couldn't quite make out the words.

The satyr finally slid to a stop. He deftly leapt from the goop, landing on his clopping hooves. “Haha! See that?”

No one seemed especially impressed by his antics, not that the satyr seemed to notice or care. Instead, the goat-footed man took a huge gulp from his cup and scanned the crowd. He zeroed in on Logan almost at once.

“Hey, bro,” he boomed, clopping over with a lopsided grin on his face, “I bet you’re like me. A fun-guy. Get it? You’re a little mushroom dude. A literal fungi.”

The satyr was a little under six feet tall. Normally Logan would’ve been looking down into the horizontal slit of his beast eyes.

Now? Logan had his head back. He smiled. Well, he attempted to smile; it was hard to tell if it worked with his new face. “Shadowcroft said to keep the puns to a minimum,” he replied. “And for the record, those hooves are perfect for sliding. I never would’ve doubted you. I’m Logan Murray.” He extended one pudgy hand in greeting.

The satyr stepped over and bent down on one goat knee. “Well, Logan Murray,” he said, accepting the proffered limb, “I’m Marko Laskarelis. The pleasure is all yours.” He paused and dropped Logan’s hand, his eyes going hazy for a beat. “Do you realize the first letter in your last name is the first letter of my first name? And vice-versa for the other names involved in this interesting bit of wordplay. It’s destiny that we have met, I think. Yes. Yes! I can feel it in the bottom of my wine cup. *Destiny*.”

The furry-wristed guy, already a bit drunk, took another long slog from the punch bowl turned chalice. From this close, Logan could finally see what was printed on the front of his toga—THE PARTY STARTS HERE with an arrow pointing down.

Logan had to laugh. “How did you customize your toga?”

Marko shrugged. “When the S-man, old crafty crofty, let me choose my guardian form, I saw my chance to do a little decorating. I have a keen eye for such things, you know. And I do like to party. So, put the two together and *bam!* A little embroidery later and I’m walking around with a surefire conversation starter. I’m just glad they have booze here. So, which world are you from?”

“Uroth,” Logan replied. “Or we call it Earth. It’s, uh, far away and having issues.”

“I dated a girl like that... far away and having issues. I’m from Sangretta myself, which is like Eritreus, only stupider. But I had fun there, so it wasn’t that stupid.”

“Sangretta?” Logan had to smile. “That kind of sounds like sangria—red wine and chopped fruit.”

“Yes!” Marko drank some more. “I’ll have two. Make both a double. Quadruple me, barkeep, and don’t stop until breakfast. I might as well party it up since I don’t suppose I’ll survive very long. I’m not what you would call *competent*. Honestly, it’s an absolute miracle I can cultivate as well as I can. I suppose that old saying is true, *the gods watch over children, drunks, and fools*. I am certainly the last two. Still, I doubt I’ll make it long, even with divine intervention. It’s not like a satyr is anyone’s first choice as far as quality guardian forms are concerned.”

“Better than being a mushroom,” Logan said, sighing.

“No, guy, mushrooms are awesome. I’ve spent some great nights with mushrooms, I can assure you.”

“I don’t know.” Logan’s hands went to his cap. “Is there a mirror in the hall? I haven’t gotten a chance to look at myself.”

Marko laughed. “Gods, I know just what you mean.” He grabbed one of his horns and wiggled his head. “How in the inferno below am I supposed to sleep with these things, hmm? I like to sleep on my side, you know. Not anymore. I wonder if I can sleep standing up?”

Goats do that—sleep standing up. That would be useful! I'd save a ton of money on beds. At least, I think so." He tapped at his curly goatee. "Or maybe I'm thinking of elephants."

A gruff voice interrupted their conversation, slashing through the low murmuring and the uncertain shuffle of feet. "Quiet, all of you. Eyes front and center."

A formidable gargoyle-griffin-like creature stood on a raised dais at the far end of the hall. He stood upright, legs reverse hinged, his feet ending in bone-crushing, flesh-rending eagle talons. He had huge wings and a lionesque head with a lush mane. He wore heavy silver plate mail, with some sort of blue enamel running around the edges and an intricate dragon crest at the center. A wicked mace hung from his hip, the flanged head the size of a large melon. He looked terrifying, mean, and as dark as the inside of a coffin on Halloween night.

His voice boomed out, sharp and precise. "I said quiet! From this point on, we are watching you, every one of you, and we are grading you. So, you *will* all be on your best behavior, or you will suffer."

That sure seemed to get everyone's attention.

Suddenly, Logan felt like he was in middle school. "I think my vice principal said that same thing to us at one point."

Marko lightly punched Logan's arm. "Looks like we're getting started. Good luck, Logan Murray. I hope you make it. You seem like you're one all-right toadstool." The satyr left to go stand with the friends he'd already made. Marko was clearly someone who could make friends with anyone, anywhere.

Logan liked that.

The room fell quiet, and the various monsters shuffled forward. There was no way Logan would be able to see.

He hurried to the side, near where the minotaur and the moth girl loitered, and climbed up on a stack of chairs. Again, he felt his incredible shortness and how fragile his body was.

The gargoyle-griffin raised his claws and spread his wings wide, showing off the spectacular golden plumage.

"Better," he snapped. "Welcome to Shadowcroft's Academy for Dungeons. I am Professor Yullis Rockheart, the rector prime here at

Shadowcroft's. We are the finest dungeon academy in all the Dungeon Corps. You may have heard good things about Gadsore's Institute of Defense or the Crossworld Academy of the Arcane, but they do not have our legacy of excellence.

"Saudrian's School of Guardians is third-rate, and the Waldorf School of Strategic Learning is a joke—a JOKE!" he roared, the noise shaking the floor. "And don't even get me started on the shortsighted, myopic curriculum at the Plaguebringer College of the Undead! Nightfall University has given us a run for our money a time or two, this is true, but there's a reason we've won the dungeon games the past three years running."

Several of the guardians in the place let out a triumphant yell. Logan put two and two together. Somehow, many of the monsters here already knew what was going on and were probably at Shadowcroft Academy by choice.

Logan had to wonder if any of these other dungeon core schools had people who'd chosen the fungaloid guardian form. Maybe mushroom dungeons had fared better at these other institutions.

Professor Rockheart continued. "Shadowcroft's is the best because we have three things. One"—he stuck a talon-tipped finger into the air—"the best headmaster and staff of any dungeon core academy. Period. Full stop. Two"—another finger joined the first—"the most well-rounded and forward-thinking dungeon curriculum in all the realms. And three." He paused, face a thunderhead, tone turning dark. "We have absolutely *no mercy*. Not a shred. You will *conform*. You will *succeed*. Or you will be *crushed* under heel.

"At Shadowcroft," he continued, "we strictly adhere to Cemoyre's Constant: *only the fit survive*. It is our firm belief that only the worthy should be allowed the honor to serve. You will not be coddled at this institution, but pushed to your uttermost limits. Pushed to your breaking point and beyond. My job as rector prime is to ensure this. Many of you will die during your time at Shadowcroft—and likely at my hands no less. Better in here than out there in the real world," he said. There was no malice in his words but rather a cool indifference—a statement of absolute fact.

“The truth is, all of you—even the most powerful among your number—are replaceable, one grain of sand on an endless seashore of souls. There are no special snowflakes at Shadowcroft, only motes in an endless avalanche that crushes our enemies. You do not matter. The Tree of Souls matters, and to that end, I will do everything within my power to weed out the fit from the weak. Let there be no doubt, this is a school for winners. Time will tell which of you don’t belong here.” He scanned the crowd, gaze resting especially long on Logan. “And that time starts now! By standing in this room, you’ve already passed through the Reaper. Now... Now comes the Threshing. Prepare to fight for your life.”

Logan didn’t like the sound of that. “What’s the Threshing?” he asked himself out loud.

The nearby minotaur heard him, ears twitching manically. The bull man sighed like he’d just crashed his first car, gotten fired from a great job, and dropped his ice cream cone.

“It’s our first solo dungeon run in our new guardian forms,” he replied, sounding for all the world like Eeyore’s clinically depressed little brother. “Don’t tell me your name,” he said, raising a calloused hand. “I don’t care, and I don’t want to know it. You’re probably going to die, and I know I will. That would be funny... me living and you dying.”

Logan went to protest, but then the itching on his stomach turned into a searing burn. He jerked up his short little shirt to see a gleaming ruby where his belly button should’ve been. It was about the size of his shroomy fist and reminded him of the gems in those old Troll dolls.

Logan gently touched the gemstone. The minute he did, he was sent reeling back into the void—third verse same as the first. This time, however, there was no pain.

And just like that, Logan found himself excited. A solo dungeon run? He was going into an actual dungeon. Awesome! Too bad he was doing it as a pizza topping.



## Chapter Seven



LOGAN FOUND HIMSELF in a classic dungeon hallway with only one way to go. He padded forward slowly and silently on his fat Gumby feet. He had to move slowly, of course, because his little mushroom frame simply wasn't *built* for speed; it was obviously built for sitting around on rotten trees and germinating. He metaphorically gritted his teeth—unfortunately, he was missing teeth too, so he'd be gumming all his food for a while. He was determined to show both Shadowcroft and this new gargoyle professor that he belonged here. This fungaloid was going places in the academy, even if he had to take his sweet time getting there.

The dungeon itself was all rough gray stone and flickering torchlight that did little to dispel the gloomy pockets of shadow. Not a fun place to be, but there was a certain thrill in the notion that he was in a *real* dungeon. One with monsters and traps. One with *loot*. Or so he hoped. While he walked, he tried to pull up his fungaloid character sheet, but he couldn't quite figure out the trick of the thing. There were no buttons to click or icons floating in the corner of his eye, and all his verbal commands—*open character sheet, examine core, stats*—accomplished nothing.

He was sure he *could* do it, since he'd seen an overview in Shadowcroft's plush office, but he didn't have the fancy crystalline viewing screen to help him, and Shadowcroft hadn't exactly given him a tutorial. Nope. He was in here, barreling headfirst toward death, without even a rudimentary idea of how the controls worked. But sometimes the only way to win was to button mash, and he could button mash with the best of 'em if it came right down to it. Not ideal, but he was a survivor.

Eventually, the twisting hallway spit him out into an octagonal chamber that vaguely reminded him of a Catholic cathedral. Vaulted

ceiling, intricate pillars, carved stone featuring freakish gargoyles and other monstrous creatures, and even stained-glass masterpieces that glowed with otherworldly light. Ahead were three heavy doors studded with brass rivets, all in different colors, all emblazoned with their own unique crest. The first was brilliant electric blue with three spiked horns braided together to form an odd wheel. The second was the color of spilled blood and engraved with a series of three interlocking triangles that looked oddly familiar. The last was a brilliant golden door with a pair of stylized raven heads facing away from each other.

Above the three doors was a central stained-glass window, a kaleidoscope of color, with a cryptic poem running across the glass:

*The TRIPLE HORNS calls to the scholar blue, a scholar true, gifted with wit*

*The THRICE-BRANDED TRIANGLE calls to the mighty dressed in red, wed to battle, married to grit*

*The DOUBLE-FACED RAVEN sings for the gold, for the lucky, for the bold, for those who will act instead of sit*

*The way out is through the ONYX DOOR, across the trickery rooms, through the danger doors, for those bound for glory instead of the pit.*

Logan stood there, staring up at the poem, mulling it over, looking at it this way and that. Clearly, the poem was the key, or at least the instructions for moving forward. He folded his arms and frowned, rereading the script for a third time. He'd taken an intro lit class over at the community college, but he'd nearly flunked the poetry section. All those haikus, ballads, and sonnets did nothing for him. Nothing against them, but he preferred his literature to be more of the pulp variety. Knights riding dinosaurs fighting aliens were far more interesting than red roses and tears falling like April rain.

Still, this seemed simple enough. The way out was through an onyx door. To get there, he'd have to go through a variety of dungeon rooms, and they seemed to come in three flavors. One door for combat, one for puzzles—or maybe wits?—and another for... the lucky? Or maybe the bold. Perhaps both?

Logan wasn't entirely sure. But he knew how he could find out. He could look.

He headed over to the blue door inscribed with the Triple Horn symbol. The room he suspected was for puzzles, wits, and logic challenges. Since it was possible that once he opened a door the others would automatically lock, he chose the one he felt most likely to be able to defeat. Combat was certainly not his strongest suit at the moment, and he wasn't known to be particularly lucky—recently being eaten by a mimic reinforced that notion. So, wits it was. He licked thick, spongy lips and pressed his hand against the door. There was no visible lock or knob, but the door swung silently inward.

On the other side was a room that looked equal parts fire hazard and Temple of Doom. Thick, colored ceramic tiles, all inscribed with char-black arrows, covered the floor at seemingly random intervals. Positioned throughout the room on glassy onyx squares were hulking bronze dragon statues that spewed gouts of flickering yellow-orange fire. As he watched, the statues groaned and creaked, rotating to vomit their flame in different directions. There were two doors leading out: a golden door on the far side of the room and a crimson door, positioned against the left-hand wall.

Even though Logan wasn't particularly good with poetry, he was a savvy enough gamer to know what needed to happen here. Use the arrow tiles to navigate the ever-shifting maze without getting charbroiled. Problem was, as a fungaloid, he was basically a walking soup mix, so one misstep and this would likely be the last room he ever saw. Just the idea of fire made him think of dried shitake mushrooms. Backtracking, he headed over to the next door in the octagonal riddle chamber: the crimson with its three interlocking triangles.

Nervous, and unsure whether the door would open at all, he pressed his pudgy, pale white digits against the metal. He let out a sigh of relief as the door swung inward, just as the first had, revealing a long hallway, straight as an arrow, made of the same gray stone as the rest of the dungeon. There were two doors at the far end, nearly side by side. This time the golden *luck* door and the blue *wits* door awaited him inside. He was starting to sense a pattern. Unfortunately, standing like a hulking tower of doom

between Logan and the pair of doors was a balding, slope-shouldered ogre with a wooden club that was twice as tall as Logan.

Ogre boy gave Logan a spitty, gritty grin and tapped an open palm with his sapling-sized club.

Yep. Combat oriented.

Logan had no desire whatsoever to tangle with the thing standing in the hallway.

Once more, he repeated the trek, heading toward the final of the three doors, the golden luck door, waiting so patiently for him at the end of the line.

This one opened just as the others had.

This time, however, Logan's jaw almost hit the floor in shock. There were no slathering monsters waiting to club him into mushroom paste or deadly traps ready to roast him to a crisp. Instead, this was a treasure room, filled with piles of golden loot, teetering with glimmering weapons and shining armor. He was sure there were no freebies here, so the fact that there was no *obvious* danger made him even more wary. Still. Of the three rooms, this was hands down the most appealing. Taking down the ogre was out of the question, and chancing the fire-statue trap room was a risky proposition.

So, maybe rolling the dice was the best option after all. Was it a risk? Sure.

But you never got anywhere without a little luck, and you sure as heck didn't become a soldier or make it long attached to an Infantry unit without a streak of boldness.

Before he had a chance to second-guess his gut instincts, Logan stole forward and into the treasure-filled chamber. The moment he crossed the threshold, the door slammed shut and, against the laws of nature, *vanished*. Gone as though it had never been there. Cool trick. If he survived this whole thing, he'd have to learn how to pull that one off. There would be time for that later, though. For now, he needed to stay focused on the task at hand. Survival. Narrow pathways carved their way through the piles of loot, leading toward a pair of exit doors, crimson and blue.

He glanced down and noticed there was a flowing inscription carved deeply into the stone: *Take only what you need, for the Journey is long.*

Logan frowned at the line, tracing the letters with the edge of his toe. Take only what you need—good to know.

He moved gingerly through the stacks, pulling his arms in tight against his body so that he didn't risk touching any of the loot—though the temptation to run his knubby fingers through all that gold was nearly overwhelming. He'd never been a greedy man and he'd always gotten by with what he had, but all that gold... Why, there had to be a hundred million dollars' worth of the stuff, just lying around for the taking. And that wasn't even accounting for the rubies, rough-cut diamonds, and beautifully wrought weapons and armor littering the teetering piles.

But his old life was gone, he reminded himself, and what good was gold or gaudy jewels to a fungaloid? He wouldn't even be able to *carry* the armor on his minuscule frame. Besides, *Aladdin* had been his favorite Disney movie as a kid, and he knew what happened when you fell for the treasure. So, he ignored that greedy impulse and pushed inward, winding his way toward the exit.

About halfway through, he noticed something that didn't quite fit the rest of the room's treasure-vault décor. A simple satchel, well worn, the leather creased and cracked from age. A grappling hook, attached to a length of rope, hung out the side.

*Ding, ding, ding!* His spidey sense was tingling. *Take only what you need.* The words burbled through the back of his head like a brook.

Messing with that satchel would be risky, but even riskier would be to ignore it. If he was right, this was a room both for the lucky *and* the bold. The deck was heavily stacked against him, and having a few tools could go a long way toward rectifying that. He *needed* to be able to carry items, and every DnD player worth their salt knew you *always* carried rope. It was a dungeoneering essential.

Logan took a deep breath, preparing for catastrophe, and swung the bag over his shoulder. After a few seconds, when nothing terrible happened, he let out the pent-up breath in a sigh of relief.

Running a real dungeon was a lot more intense than grinding through a dungeon in an RPG or board game campaign. He continued on, keeping an eye out for any other out-of-place items that might come in handy. Much to his excitement, he found a plain, rusty-edged dagger that had seen better days and a travel-worn green cloak, frayed at the edges. Not exactly grand treasures, but practical and useful for a newb like him. He pilfered the blade and cloak without any dire consequences, proving once more that there were at least a few things in the room that were up for grabs.

After nearly ten minutes, he found himself across the room and much richer for it—the dagger, rope, and cloak stowed safely in his worn traveling bag. Lucky and bold was definitely the right pick, though unfortunately he wouldn't get to play the same card again. He had two doors to choose from, two options to move forward. Combat and wits. As a fungaloid, this choice was an absolute no-brainer. He pressed his hand against the blue door, *wits*, and it swung open, giving him a glimpse of what was to come.

He expected to see the arrows and the fire-barfing dragon statues, but no, this was a different *wits* room. So each door was different... Interesting.

Inside lay a perfectly square chamber, its floor studded by a variety of colorful tiles, an enormous diamond hung overhead. There was no obvious threat, and he had the opportunity to open another golden door. He would take another puzzle room over a combat room any day of the week. He might not have to face the smirking ogre, but who knew what else he'd have to fight?

Still, though, he lingered, his foot at the edge of the threshold. He knew without a doubt that he wasn't going through the combat room, but he couldn't help but wonder about all the treasure piled up all around him. He was so close to the exit and some part of him *needed* to know what would happen if he touched the gleaming loot.

Probably something bad. *Probably.*

But what if it was all just some head game?

He couldn't rightly live with himself if he passed over all these goodies without even trying. Nearby was a small silver buckler with a fist-sized ruby in the center. Small enough for him to use, which was

rare. Something like that could go a long way later on in the dungeon. He had to try—had to know.

Keeping an eye on the door into the wits room, he ghosted forward, one hand reaching for the buckler. The second he touched it, he felt a minute surge of power, almost like getting a static shock from a light switch. The shield came away with ease and was light as a feather. Perfect for his arm, with a trio of straps crisscrossing the back.

Naturally, the floor started rumbling and heaving beneath him, enormous fissures cracking through stone and swallowing piles of loot in real time.

Yep. Not a mind game after all.

This had Aladdin Cave of Wonders written all over it, and it was time to get out. Moving as quickly as his misshapen fungaloid body would allow, he turned on a heel and darted toward the open door. The floor rumbled beneath him, accompanied by the sound of boulders crumbling and the *tinkle* of coins falling. He propelled himself forward, diving over the threshold and into the connecting room, landing on his belly with a meaty *thud*. He glanced back as the door slammed shut, just in time to see magma erupt in violent molten geysers, consuming everything in fire and heat.

The door swung shut and disappeared from reality, banishing the image of the fiery room with its passing.

Check. *Bold*, not *greedy*. He'd have to keep that in mind for the next pass through a golden door—though, admittedly, his silver buckler was a pretty slick prize. He stood, brushing himself off, and examined his new shield in all its glimmering glory. The gem was fiery red and, if it was real, probably could've paid off his mortgage back on Earth. Delicately etched golden runes encircled the outer edge of the shield, the script flowing and beautiful. The shield thrummed with a soft power that seemed to radiate up through the metal, down his squishy arm, and into his center.

His core.

With a thought, he focused on the tenuous connection between shield and core, and abruptly a flickering dome of red light blossomed from the gem. He wanted to cackle. An energy shield!

Like magic. *Real magic.* The light flickered after a matter of seconds and disappeared, leaving a sense of hollow exhaustion behind. So, there was definitely a catch to using this stuff, but still, what a find. Maybe a little greed—*in moderation, of course*—wasn’t such a bad thing. Logan slung the shield over his narrow shoulders, letting it rest on his back, and turned his attention to the colored tiles room.

This one turned out to be a relatively straightforward puzzle room, and not a terribly complex one at that. There were two doors—this time combat crimson and lucky gold—each on opposite sides of the enormous room. The walls were bare gray stone, though the floor was covered in hundreds of multicolored tiles in a riot of hues. Reds and orange here, blues and violets there. A spattering of greens and yellows. Overhead, an enormous crystalline prism hung from the high ceiling; it glowed with a gentle white light, projecting a wavering riddle into the air. Just a single sentence: *The prism reveals the truth and lights the path to victory.*

After scanning the floor for a few seconds, Logan quickly came to the solution. The prism was the key to solving the riddle. Since it didn’t *actually* shed any light, Logan knew that the answer was more likely metaphorical than literal. Thing was, Logan knew that a prism had a very specific purpose. His mind instantly flashed back to the cover of the classic Pink Floyd album, *Dark Side of the Moon*. Prisms broke up light, revealing the colors of the rainbow. The same colors as the tiles decorating the floor. He even remembered that silly little mnemonic device he’d learned in his freshman applied sciences class, ROYGBIV.

Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.

Honestly, he didn’t remember a lot from high school—he’d never used calculus and the importance of the War of 1812 had never come up in real life—but he did know three things: the quadratic equation, that the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, and that the colors of the rainbow are named Roy G. Biv. Sweet, sweet education for the win.

All he had to do was follow the correct colors of the rainbow and walk his way to either door. Easy.

He grinned like a maniac as he effortlessly blazed through the pattern... right up until he got past the G. That's where things went sideways. It was right about the time Logan discovered that fungaloids were apparently colorblind—at least partially. Try as he might, he could not tell the difference between the last three colors. They all looked like slightly differing shades of blue. Normal blue. Dirty blue. Light blue.

Colors had never been his strong suit, even with human eyes. An old girlfriend had dragged him to a fabric store to pick out curtains. He'd not been helpful.

Logan squinted and took a chance. Light blue.

That was a hard no.

He narrowly avoided being skewered by deadly spears that launched from the walls—only his ridiculously short height saved him there. He stumbled forward because it was too late to turn back. A section of the wall opened to cough out a blast of fire. He dodged the flames, but felt like a marshmallow on his way to S'moresville, USA.

Another wrong tile took out the entire floor near the golden door. Maybe if Logan had been taller or more athletic, he could've leaped his way into the clear, but as a sponge on legs with the vertical jump of a wobbly toddler, he didn't stand a chance.

So instead, he made it to the crimson door more or less in one piece.

Logan equipped his pilfered shield, slipping his arm through the straps, then pulled free the pitiful pitted dagger. It honestly looked like a short sword in his pudgy hand. Better than nothing, Logan supposed. He took one last longing glance at the golden door across the room, then pressed his free hand against the bloodred door. He was dreading this part, but he'd known in his gut that he was going to have to do battle sooner or later. Looked like sooner it was.

Steeling himself, Logan stepped through into the unknown, ready for the first fight of his fungaloid life.

Time to roll for initiative.



## Chapter Eight



LOGAN STEPPED INTO a gloomy, rocky cavern filled with towering stalagmites and stalactites like the teeth of some monstrous creature. Flittering bugs, each the size of a quarter, buzzed lazily through the air, shedding witchy green light from glowing abdomens. The light bounced off the slick stone columns and rippled across shallow-looking pools of water dotting the ground in pockets. Logan instantly felt a rush of relief. If all he had to do was swat a few bugs, he'd be golden. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all*, he thought.

As a landscaper, he was well familiar with bugs of every variety and had no problem serving up justice with the bottom of a metaphorical shoe.

That thought fled a heartbeat later as he caught the scrape of hooves on stone and movement blurred in the corner of his bulbous eye. Across the cavern, loitering in a pool of murk, was the biggest hog Logan had ever seen. *Boar* was probably a more accurate term, though even that wasn't quite right since this thing had a thick gray hide, blazing red eyes, and curving tusks long enough and sharp enough to shish-kabob him straight through. The thing was the size of a small car with a mouth as big as a manhole cover. It snorted its piggy snout, and its eyes narrowed as it caught sight of the interloper.

Logan glanced down at his pitiful rusty dagger, then back up at the rabid, genetically altered Pumbaa out for blood. Of course it would be a pig—probably a truffle-sniffing boar hellbent on his destruction. No way did he stand a chance. Not in a straight-up fight.

The monster boar snorted again and pawed at the ground, lowering his head—clearly preparing to charge.

An idea slithered through Logan's mind.

What if he didn't *have* to fight this thing at all? What if he could somehow get past it instead? The doors didn't require a key, so if he could just avoid being impaled, he might be able to escape to a more favorable room.

Logan stowed the knife and exchanged it for the rope and grappling hook. Thinking fast and working faster, he whirled the rope *round-round-round* and tossed it up, aiming at a crevice near one of the hanging stalactites. The grappling hook clanged loudly and dropped to the ground. The boar chose that moment to charge, flying toward Logan, hooves kicking up rooster tails of water in passing.

Logan wondered if mushrooms in France felt like this when the pigs came sniffing. He frantically spun the rope again, hurling it up, muttering a silent prayer under his breath. *Clang!* This time the hook caught, and when he applied pressure to the rope, it held. Grabbing it with grubby arms, he wormed his way up the rope, coiling it around one leg to make the work easier going. As a fungaloid, he didn't have much upper body strength, but thankfully he also weighed next to nothing. Plus, climbing a rope was really more about technique than raw strength, and thanks to his time in the military, he had that technique in spades.

As quickly as he moved, however, the boar moved faster. It closed the distance in a matter of seconds.

Logan was well on the way toward the ceiling, but one of his legs was still dangling a little too close to the ground, a fact he realized too late. The boar reared up and clamped down around his foot with incredible crushing pressure. He felt a flash of pain lance up his limb and had a momentary flashback to his time in Iraq. God, but he hoped he wasn't about to lose a leg straight out of the gate; there would be no small amount of irony in that. But instead of panicking, he felt something build inside of him. It was almost like a reflex, a knee twitch.

He thought of his rudimentary spore attack: pollen.

No sooner had he conjured the image in his mind than a cloud of yellow spores poured from his gills under his toadstool cap. The motes of dust danced in the air, getting into the creature's eyes and snout, filling its mouth with a chalky yellow residue. The boar

recoiled at once, promptly letting out a honking sneeze that shook the room and ejected Logan's foot.

The pollen attack didn't seem to hurt the boar in the least, but it had distracted it just enough for Logan to climb the rest of the way to the top of the rope, well out of reach of the ravenous boar.

Logan let out trembling laugh. This was fine. He was safe. He had a second to breathe.

From up high, he could easily see both the golden door and the blue door. Both were too far away. With only one rope, there was no way to get to the other stalactites, and the thought of somehow leaping along the upward-jutting stalagmites was laughable. He'd bought himself a little time, sure, but he'd really only prolonged the inevitable. If he wanted out of this chamber, it would be over that boar's dead body, *literally*. And speaking of, the hairy beast was circling below, snorting and pawing at the ground as it watched Logan's hanging form with hate-filled eyes—which were inflamed thanks to his awesome fungaloid powers.

"Too bad you don't have your inhaler, Piggy," Logan crowed.

The boar sneezed and snotted, but that wasn't much of a consolation, as it soon cleared its sinuses. Maybe the monster had secret Benadryl powers.

Logan knew he wasn't going to allergy the thing to death, and he doubted the rusted dagger would even pierce its tough hide.

As a former ground pounder, his natural instinct was just to brawl, but he wasn't a grunt anymore, he reminded himself—he was a mushroom. Choosing fungaloid had gotten him here, and being a fungaloid was going to get him out, dammit. But he needed to know what tools he had at his disposal. Dangling like a Christmas ornament, he tried to pull up his character sheet again. This time he pressed his eyes shut and visualized what he wanted to happen, envisioning the floating screen in his mind's eye. He felt a trickle of energy in his belly—his core activating just as it had when he released the spore cloud.

When he opened his eyes again, the screen was floating before him.

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## **Logan Murray** **Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Fungaloid

**Current Evolution:** Toadstool

**Cultivator Class:** Deep Root Cultivators; E-Class, Rank 9

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Morta/Toxicus

**Racial Abilities:**

- Digestion

**Racial Skill:**

*Domestic Fungi*

- Cultivated Fungi: Outstanding Allotment!

**Fungal Form (Active):**

- Harden

**Fungal Form (Passive):**

- Fungal Vision

**Spore Halo:**

- Pollen
- Symbiosis

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Logan felt an ember of hope stir in his chest and a surge of wild adrenaline race through his limbs. He had options here—way more than Shadowcroft had let on about. He was sorely regretting the fact that he hadn't gotten even a basic rundown on how all of this worked, but he was no stranger to chaos, pain, or hardship. Logan would improvise, adapt, and overcome, just like he always had. He

needed to act quickly, though, since his arms were starting to get tired and he couldn't just hang there all day. He needed out of this dungeon, and the quicker the better. His eyes skipped past the first few options, dismissing them since he'd seen them before.

He started on *Digestion* and worked his way down the list, looking for anything that might help.

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**Digestion:** Consume immobile and dead creatures to absorb more of their core-essence, and *instantly* convert it to usable Apothos. Fungi are nothing if not efficient, and that efficiency is on full display in the digestion ability! *Would you like to learn more about the digestive abilities of the fungaloid? Yes/No?*

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Hmm, that sounded like it might have some interesting uses down the road, but since the boar below was neither dead nor immobile it didn't seem particularly useful at the moment. He moved on to the Racial Skill, *Domestic Fungi*:

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**Domestic Fungi:** There are thousands of types of mundane and magical mushrooms that grow throughout the realms connected to Ashvattha. But the fungaloid can spawn many of the rarest, deadliest, and most valuable mushrooms around. These fungi can be quite useful to dungeoneers and attract those looking for rare alchemic ingredients. More advanced types of fungi can have additional abilities or even be mobile and aggressive. Proto-Spore Cultures live inside of the host fungaloid and can be spawned even if mature specimens are lost, destroyed, or harvested. Mature mushrooms can take days or even weeks to grow, though it is possible to drastically increase maturity with the *Rapid Growth Spore Ability*.

As an E-Class, Rank-9 cultivator, you can select *two* Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures and *one* Level-Two Proto-Spore Culture. *Would you like to view a list of available Proto-Spore Cultures? Yes/No?*

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Logan wanted to get a gander at the different mushrooms he could domesticate and grow, but his fleshy arms were burning and none of those would help with his current circumstances. The skill box said they could take hours or even days to grow, and he needed something that would help right now. So, he dismissed the info and moved on to the next item on the list, *Fungal Form Active*.

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**Fungal Form 1: Harden.** Trigger Harden to temporarily calcify your exterior by 25%, reducing damage, though at a 20% reduction to speed. Harden is a stackable ability and can stack up to four times. At higher levels, this turns into Chitin Armor, creating hardened plates of chitin similar to an insect's exoskeleton. Light but resilient, the chitin reinforces the body without being cumbersome.

**Available at:** E-Class, Rank 10+

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On the surface this one seemed absolutely worthless—seriously, what good would it be to turn yourself into an immovable brick of petrified wood? He was on the verge of moving on when inspiration struck. Under normal circumstances this skill would be basically useless, but these weren't normal circumstances. He was dangling thirty feet above a rampaging murder-boar, his arms only a matter of minutes from giving out. True, Harden was obviously meant to be a defensive ability, but in this situation he could use it offensively.

He probably only weighed seventy pounds or so, but seventy pounds of calcified rock, dropped from thirty feet, had to do something. Right?

He wasn't exactly spoiled for choices, so he made a snap decision. That was something else the military had pounded into his head. Initiative and decision-making—because *no* decision was often worse than making a *bad* decision.

Logan focused on the meager energy radiating out from his core.

With a thought and an effort of will, he triggered Harden. Energy surged out of his core, creeping into his limbs, turning him into a reinforced husk of his former self. Since it was a stackable ability, he added another dose—his joints stiffened and his muscles felt sluggishly tight. He was also *substantially* heavier, putting additional

strain on his frail arms and sloth-like hands. With a grimace, Logan tucked his legs up into his chest, trying to transform himself into a tight little ball while still clinging desperately to the rope. He used every last bit of energy in his core to add a third and fourth layer of armor, maxing out the ability. He was a chitin-covered mushroom almost as wide as he was tall. No way could he hold on.

The rope slipped through his petrified fingers, and he plummeted toward the ground, air rushing past him. Logan's stomach lurched into his throat, and he hoped fervently that he hadn't just killed himself during his first combat encounter. Well, then Shadowcroft could warn the next yahoo who thought being a fungaloid was a good idea.

Below, the boar roared in a frenzied fury, rearing up on its hind legs, mouth yawning wide to claim its falling prey. Logan rotated, and a moment later his back slammed into the creature's tusks and fangs, smashing through them like a baseball bat to the teeth. The creature squealed in pain. Logan was lodged firmly in the creature's oversized mouth—a bitter pill that the monster hog couldn't swallow. The boar dropped to all fours, crunching on Logan's hardened exterior, trying to turn him into a tasty shiitake snack.

Logan didn't feel a thing. He was an unbreakable jawbreaker, laughing in the face of the laws of mastication.

The boar was wheezing, walking in drunken circles, trying its best to spit Logan out, but that didn't work either. Logan couldn't move much, or fast, but he was able to use his frail arms to lodge himself in place, slowly choking the air from the boar's lungs. After a handful of minutes, the creature toppled onto its side, seizing, then finally falling still.

Despite being lodged in a boar's mouth and covered in monster slobber, Logan felt like an absolute champion. He'd done it, he'd killed something!

Maybe Shadowcroft would have to rethink his stance on the fungal guardian form.

*Ha!* Logan thought. He couldn't actually laugh out loud—he had what basically amounted to lockjaw. But a win was a win.

After what felt like a lifetime, Harden wore off enough for Logan to pull himself, inch by drool-covered inch, from the boar's mouth and tumble out onto the dusty floor. He stood with a groan, testing out his mauled foot and finding that it could bear weight even though it still looked like a mangled piece of portabella on a cooking show. These guardian forms were far more resilient than the typical human body.

Satisfied, he turned his attention back to the dead hog waiting to be processed. Since this was a game of sorts, that meant there should be loot. He dropped to a knee and placed a hand against the creature's coarse side, trying to see if there was some way to open an inventory. But nothing.

He did, however, feel a faint thrum of power radiating out from the beast. The same power that he felt burbling into the gem lodged in his belly button. *Apothos*. The energy of the universe. He focused on that potent buzz—like a live wire running beneath his fingertips—and, on instinct, drew the power inward. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, like a man dying of thirst, sucking up water through a bendy straw. It flowed effortlessly through his fingers, coursing along unseen pathways in his arms and directly into his core, where it hit like a shot of Jack. Hot and angry and potent.

Logan had never felt more alive or more powerful.

He was also determined to get *something* more out of this hog. He removed his knife from the pack and went to work, cutting through the tough outer hide and skinning the beast, revealing dense muscle underneath. With a few quick strokes, he cut off a hunk of meat. He had no idea what kind of food they would serve at Shadowcroft, but he knew one thing for certain—he would be eating bacon. With a grin, he rose to his feet, feeling like he could move mountains, and headed for the golden door at the far end of the chamber.

It was time to rack up some more wins by finishing this dungeon run!



## Chapter Nine



PROFESSOR YULLIS ROCKHEART, rector prime of the Shadowcroft Academy and master of the Azure Dragon Clan, stood alone in the Golden Serpent Hall. He absently smoothed out his cloak and picked invisible lint from the gleaming scale mail running down his front. He wore his formal regalia tonight, something he did far too rarely, which was a shame. He eyed himself in one of the polished columns lining the dais and had to admit he looked rather regal. Rockheart was a no-nonsense creature by nature—shrewd, pragmatic, and callous—but he also appreciated a finely crafted cloak or a complementing color scheme on ornate armor.

He pulled his gaze away from the column as Shadowcroft came down the steps from the upper rooms of the castle. He limped along in his normal gait, one shoulder lowered, moving quickly. His green beard swayed, and the flowers on his grassy head wobbled.

Rockheart offered the headmaster a shallow bow of his head, a gesture of genuine respect befitting Shadowcroft's station. One of his stone wings itched, and he scratched it with his beak. Images flashed across the wide-open air of the vast hall. Fifty-five students battled their way through various Threshing dungeons. Some of the weaker students would be killed, but that was the way of the Threshing. If they couldn't even survive this simple trial, truly they deserved to go no further. Ending them here was a mercy in its way, Rockheart mused. He wasn't a guardian known for mercy—just the opposite—but he fully endorsed ending the weak before they could suffer.

Or become a drain on academy resources.

Shadowcroft lurched up. It wasn't clear if the headmaster had chosen the Treowen guardian form or if he'd been born into that race. Shadowcroft was a mystery. Rockheart was too busy to ponder

mysteries. For a century he'd not only helped the headmaster run the entire school, but he'd been a clan master and taught classes.

Rockheart didn't sleep much, he was overworked and underappreciated, and this new round of recruits wasn't about to make his life any easier. Except for a few exceptional students, most of them were terrible.

And Shadowcroft knew it. Honestly, the recruits seemed to get worse with every cycle, while the dungeoneers they contended against seemed to grow stronger and stronger, raiding ever more nodes and harvesting even the most powerful dungeon cores. Rockheart couldn't help but wonder if that meant Shadowcroft Academy was slipping—that the other dungeon schools were attracting better talent—or whether this was some longer-term symptom of worlds withering away as their Apothos was drained.

The headmaster frowned as his eyes darted around to take in the onslaught of incoming images. He winced as one of the students, a Swamp Revenant, was torn in half by a Gorptor Beast. Her core gem shattered on the floor—destroyed beyond repair—and her Apothos rejoined the Tree.

“Oh, Darla, I had high hopes for you,” Shadowcroft sighed, the sound like wind rustling through fall leaves.

Rockheart scowled. “We'll need to lose at least three, Headmaster. In that way, we'll have thirteen cohorts, though that is an unwieldy number. If I were you, I would Thresh the lot ourselves to get down to twelve cohorts.”

It was as if Shadowcroft hadn't heard a thing Rockheart said. “Oh yes, Inga, you are clever to have figured out the Sphinx riddle. I like that Okitori woman even though her core is rather weak, at least compared to the others.” The tree man furrowed his brow. “We'll have the top cohort coming through any minute. Those four from Eritreus will be in the First Cohort. Clearly.”

Rockheart couldn't suppress his grumbling sigh. “Our recruiting process should give us twelve such cohorts. You expect me to provide the universe with the most powerful dungeon cores, and yet, you give me... this to work with.” Rockheart waved a claw-tipped hand and brought up the worst of the incoming class—some

fungaloid named Logan something or other. A disgusting little creature wearing unseemly linen pants. Utterly unflattering. Not that it would matter since the mushroom creature surely wouldn't survive the Threshing. Currently, he was dangling from a rope above a Vicious Hoggler.

“Logan Murray.” Shadowcroft smiled, though it was a sad sort of smile. “Yes, he will be in the last cohort. Assuming he survives at all.”

All of the images flickered as a twelve-foot-tall tortoise man took shape, first made of light and then made of pure Apothos that hardened into flesh. A black shell, cracked and chipped, covered his dark green skin, creased with age. Above his lip was a patch of white skin that looked like a moustache. He limped with a long staff made of polished black wood, the head a gnarled lump that resembled a closed fist. A cracked soul gem was usually a death sentence, yet here he stood. In his way, the Thresher Turtle was even more of an enigma than Shadowcroft. Unimaginably ancient, somehow this entity was able to keep all fifty-five dungeons running.

The Thresher’s voice was as cracked as his shell, elderly and rasping. “The top and the bottom are easily Threshed, friends. Easily, easily, quite easily.”

Shadowcroft raised a branchy hand. “Hello, old friend, any surprises?”

The turtle grinned. “Always surprises, old friend. Look. Your Urothling has come up with a unique solution to his Hoggler problem.”

Rockheart watched with a sour grimace on his face as the chitinous mushroom came crashing down on the monstrous pig, somehow lodging himself in the creature’s throat. He shook his head. “It is but the third room. He has twelve more rooms to go. I wouldn’t bet a squirt of rain on his chances.”

Shadowcroft reached into his robes and touched the gem set into his wooden belly.

“How I do love watching the Threshing,” he said with another windy sigh.

Rockheart always found that odd. Shadowcroft was an odd sort who seemed to love the students as much as Rockheart silently

loathed them. Yet he watched their demises with hungry eyes. He might play the doddering old grandfather figure, but Rockheart knew in his gut that the headmaster was as viciously pragmatic as any instructor at the Academy.

“But sadly,” Shadowcroft said after a moment, “it seems I have an important matter to attend to, Professor. I trust that you’ll oversee the Threshing in your usual exemplary manner. I couldn’t run this school without you, Yullis. I truly appreciate your efforts.” Shadowcroft clapped him on the shoulder in affection, rustling Rockheart’s cloak. Rockheart straightened the garment at once. By the time Rockheart adjusted the fabric, Shadowcroft was already limping away through the portcullis and toward the exit of the castle. The headmaster didn’t stand, sit, or stay anywhere long.

Shadowcroft’s voice drifted behind him. “I know how unsatisfied you are, Yullis, so we’ll put the top cohort in the Azure Dragon Clan.”

That made Rockheart feel a bit better. He glanced at the Thresher.

The turtle nodded. “Yes, of course. The Azure Dragon Clan draws the unique and the heroic.” The Thresher squinted. “Oh dear. Nathan isn’t going to make it.”

That was an understatement. The Skeleton Cavalier met his end in an ice trap. Frozen solid, the gem in his belly shattered into a thousand diamond-like motes. The Cavalier’s Apothos was reabsorbed into the Tree of Souls, nourishment for the universe. Good riddance, Rockheart thought.

A second later, a grand demonic figure came waltzing out of thin air into the room. He was eight feet tall and wreathed in flames and shadow, a serene look on his handsome face. His horns were long and sharp.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad, Professor,” the Abyss Lord said. “I’ve always heard the Threshing was difficult.”

Rockheart didn’t show his proud smile. He only nodded. “Welcome, Prince Chadrigoth of the First Realm, of the Eritreus Elite.”

The demon tipped his horns in deference. “Thank you, Professor Rockheart. I hope my performance impressed you enough to put me

in your clan."

"It's not my decision," Rockheart said. "The Thresher decides."

The turtle chuckled until he choked and coughed. "Yes, Prince Chadrigoth, you and your three will be in the Azure Dragon Clan. All will be Threshed. All will find a home, either in the academy or back in the Tree. Such is the way."

Rockheart couldn't help but scowl. The Thresher's ways were far too cryptic for his liking. If it were up to Yullis Rockheart, he'd appoint the clans himself. But it wasn't up to him. The Threshing not only weeded out the weak of heart and will, feeding their essence back into the Tree, but it somehow also delved to the depths of their very soul. Every choice, every door, every move. They all blended together in a grand tapestry that allowed the ancient Thresher Turtle to place them within the proper clan—a clan where they would be nourished and watered, growing to bear much fruit.

The Azure Dragon of the East for the bold, loyal, and disciplined.

The Vermilion Phoenix of the South for those of a virtuous nature and fiery temper.

The Crystal Tiger of the West for the headstrong and brave—the proud maverick, determined to carve a different path.

And, of course, the Onyx Tortoise of the North with their cool heads and kind hearts. Rockheart had always considered them to be the weakest of the Clans, yet Shadowcroft himself was a disciple of the Onyx Tortoise, so that was one opinion he kept to himself.

In time, other dungeon cores appeared in the Golden Serpent Hall, and the Thresher easily sorted them into both cohorts and clans.

As for Little Logan nobody? He and the rest of the weaklings continued to struggle their way pathetically through the dungeon rooms. It was sad, really, but it was better this way.

Yullis Rockheart only wanted to teach the best of the best.



FOR THREE HOURS, LOGAN scrambled from door to door, from room to room. Fifteen chambers to be precise, each more difficult

than the last—the puzzles progressively harder, the golden luck rooms wicked and enticing in equal measure. He faced down rooms filled with stagnant pools of water and clouds of killer hornets. Clockwork puzzles that threatened to crush his frail body in titanic whirling gears. Enormous spiders, dastardly deadfalls, and head-scratching riddles. He moved slowly, but he never quit—never even considered it—and eventually, against what seemed like all odds, he made it through.

Logan finally found the onyx doorway at the end of one last gray stone corridor, like a mirage glimmering in the desert heat. But this was all too real.

He tumbled through the magic portal, one arm missing completely, one leg burnt to a shriveled black crisp, a chunk of his left shoulder just... gone. A swinging pendulum axe as big as he was had sheared the limb off. He fell onto the stone floor and glanced up with bleary eyes, finding himself no longer in the dungeon, but back in the reception hall where this had all started. He felt like shouting out, pumping his one remaining arm in sheer triumph. He didn't because he was too exhausted to lift his hand, much less pump it. That had been a brutal blow, losing another limb. At least his leg, however blackened, still supported his weight. He'd made it out with the satchel, dagger, the raggedy cloak, and the magical shield. So that was something.

As he lay on his back, a fiendish rocky face glared down at him. The gargoyle-griffin Professor Yullis Rockheart sneered. "Took you long enough, fungaloid fool. I'm surprised you made it at all. Now, restore your form, and we can continue."

Logan grinned at that one word. Restore. He sighed and closed his eyes. "I don't know how to do it, but I love the sound of it."

"Tree above," the professor spat, "but you are pathetic."

Logan's eyes flipped open as the gargoyle grabbed him by his one remaining arm. Rockheart shook him a few times, in front of a room full of his fellow students. The gemstone in his belly gleamed, and Logan felt Apothos flow from his core to his extremities, circulating out like a river, pumping energy through his limbs, then returning to his core in a never-ending circuit. Logan's burnt leg

plumped back into shape and turned a pasty white. A new arm came flapping out of his stump.

Rockheart slammed Logan back onto his little toadstool feet before storming away in a huff. The gargoyle-griffin marched up the steps of the dais at the front of the room to stand next to a giant geriatric turtle man leaning casually on a black staff. A black gem, badly damaged and leaking a reddish glow, was embedded in the turtle's belly.

Rockheart addressed the room. "Congratulations to you all for surviving the Threshing. Seven recruits died, thank the Tree of Souls, because that gives us an even number, divisible by four, which is what we want."

A big demony fire guy stood a bit too close to Logan, causing his shroomy skin to dry and shrivel. Logan eased himself away.

Rockheart continued. "We will divide the forty-eight into cohorts of four. Each of the cohorts will belong to a clan. At the Shadowcroft Academy, you will be in constant competition with your fellow cores. We will have a leaderboard marking the progress of both the clans and the cohorts. The top clan as well as the highest-ranking three cohorts will be gifted with extra power, magical items, and cultivating pills and potions. The losers will get nothing but ridicule, as is right and proper."

Logan was trying to listen, but the Balrog-wannabe kept inching closer and his flames were hot. Logan figured if demon boy didn't step back, he'd have to punch the guy. It might mean a bad burn, but no one was going to bully him.

Marko sauntered over, pretended to trip, and slopped his wine onto the feet of the demon. The wine hissed, and the fire guy let out a grunt and moved away.

Marko rolled his goat-like eyes. "Chadrigoth might be the best dungeon core in our class, but that's not going to stop him from being a total asshat. As in wearing a metaphorical butt for a hat, which would be both inconvenient and smelly."

Logan knocked Marko with a doughy, boneless elbow. "You made it, Marko! Congrats!"

“Silence!” Rockheart thundered. “Yes, you have all passed the Threshing, but your status at this school is not secure nor will it ever be secure. You were reaped, you were threshed, and during your freshman year, you will be *winnowed*.”

“The Reaping, the Threshing, and the Winnowing,” the turtle man croaked. “Yes, that is what we do. Watching you brave cores, I am filled with hope, however. And even if you die, you simply join the Tree. We all rest in the end. Now, it’s time I earned my paycheck. I’ll divide you fine cores up based on your choices in my dungeons.”

Logan didn’t like the sound of this winnowing business. But he took a second to go over the math, speaking his thoughts out loud. “Forty-eight students divided into twelve cohorts of four. That means there will be three cohorts in each clan.”

“Of our year, yeah,” Marko said. “The Shadowcroft Academy is a four-year program, and from what I’ve heard through the ol’ grapevine, each class has around fifty students.”

The gargoyle-griffin lifted his claws and spread his wings. “Doubtless, you all know of the grand clans of the Shadowcroft Academy. You will be part of your cohort, closer than family, and you’ll be part of your clans, more powerful than death. The clans are taken from the greatest guardians of all time—the four Primal Guardians, also known as the Four Auspicious Beasts. The Azure Dragon of the East. The Vermilion Phoenix of the South. The Crystal Tiger of the West. The Onyx Tortoise of the North.”

“Yeah, but there’s a fifth guardian,” Marko murmured. “The Golden Serpent of the Center is not a clan but represents Ashvattha itself. That’s why they call this the Golden Serpent Hall.”

“Welcome to the Golden Serpent Hall!” Rockheart echoed.

“Like I said.” Marko gave Logan a knowing smile and a wink. For being such an easy-going guy, it was obvious there was more to Marko than strictly met the eye.

The turtle tapped his staff on the dais. “Yes, yes, grand heroes of the past, though I am more interested in the heroic dungeons of the future. And so, on to the meat of the day. The First Cohort will consist of the best students. That would be Prince Chadrigoth of the

First Realm, the Archduke Jimi Magmarty of the Eritreus Elite, Her Lady Elesiel of Everstar, and Tet-Akhat of the Coptic Champions.”

Demon boy was Chadrigoth, and he was joined at the front of the room by a hulking earth elemental not unlike *The Fantastic Four*’s Ben Grimm. Lady Elesiel was a lich queen as thin as a desiccated corpse and as beautiful as a moonless night. Green necrotic energy glowed around her skeletal hands and snaked up her arms in intricate swirls. Tet-Akhat had an Egyptian-cat-woman-goddess thing going on. So that was the best of the best. And yes, they were sorted into the Azure Dragon Clan, which Rockheart led. He made that clear. He was enormously proud of it.

Logan frowned as more students were called up and sorted into cohorts and clans by the ancient, slightly loony turtle. Other house masters walked up onto the dais to represent their clans. A woman wearing dark glasses, her head wrapped in a pink scarf, was the master of the Vermillion Phoenix Clan. A massive shark man with a hook for a hand, wielding a spiked anchor, led the Onyx Turtle Clan. Lastly, a tiger-headed giant in white crushed velvet robes glimmering with diamonds and rubies was the clan master of the Crystal Tiger. That last reminded Logan for all the world of a cross between Elvis and Liberace—assuming either had had a tiger head.

Logan didn’t catch their names. He was too busy watching.

Marko sipped and grinned and nodded. “Yeah, it’s looking like you and me are going to be together in the sewer, my mushroom man. Makes sense, since we are obviously terrible. But the real question is, who else will be joining us?”

Rockheart clapped his stone hands together to quiet the room, as the new cohorts were talking loudly. The room hushed.

The Thresher cleared his throat and spat to the side. “Yes, yes, thank you, Yullis. We are down to the last cohort.”

Rockheart nodded. “This last cohort doesn’t matter. But you, you forty-four dungeon cores, are the universe’s greatest hope.”

The Thresher laughed a rusty chuckle. “This last cohort does have a great deal of work to do. Yet.” He licked dry lips and raised a gnarled finger. “Yet they survived. And so we’ll get them sussed out. The twelfth and last cohort will be the following students: Inga Thosa

Therian, Treacle Glimmerhappy, and Marko Laskarelis. And one more, the unlikely Urothling, Logan Murray.”

Marko slammed Logan on the back. “Welcome to the Terrible Twelfth. We suck, but we’ll have fun.”

The morose minotaur and the socially awkward moth woman shuffled forward.

The insect girl’s antennae stuck straight up, quivering madly. “I’m Inga Thosa Therian, of the Okitori Elite, Grand Archivist of the Eastern Aerie Archive and former sorceress of the Far Cloud Mountain Palace. The Thresher forgot my titles. I’m sure he just forgot. He seems aged.”

Treacle Glimmerhappy sighed and sorrowfully shook his great horned head. “I was a gnome lord. I had titles, too. They don’t matter. Nothing matters now, does it? We’re doomed.”

Logan wasn’t sure he’d heard that right. Gnome lord? The minotaur was at least seven feet tall.

The turtle tapped his staff. “Yes, and one last thing if you please. This last cohort will join the Azure Dragon Clan. May they rise to the occasion.”

“This can’t be!” Rockheart thundered, turning on the old turtle like a cobra poised to strike. “No! They shouldn’t be in my clan. They are *weak*. It doesn’t look like a single one of them even knows the word *discipline*. You’re mistaken, I’m sure. Surely, they seem a better fit for the Onyx Tortoise.”

“I dinna ask for them, lad!” The shark man had a definite Scottish-sounding accent. Were all sharks Scottish? It did beg the question.

The turtle just chuckled. “There are no mistakes, Yullis. None at all. Ashvattha decides as it will, and I am but a conduit of the Tree’s guiding power. Although it may seem unlikely to you, in your infinite wisdom, the Tree believes they are best suited to the Azure Dragon Clan. It is the way.”

Rockheart fluttered his rocky wings, a scowl painting his face. “I’ll be talking to Shadowcroft about this,” he snarled.

“Do as you must, Yullis,” the turtle said, “but we all serve the Tree —even our honored headmaster.”

Marko threw his head back. “Ugh, we’re going to have to deal with Chadrigoth and those other uppity, annoying dungeon cores. *Doomed* isn’t a strong enough word. Yep, Treacle Glimmerhappy, we have nothing to be happy about.”

Logan stepped up. “Whoa now,” he said, raising stubby hands. *Stubby restored* hands—how cool was that? “Don’t be so quick to give up. Yes, we’re at the bottom of the barrel, but the only way to go is up, am I right?”

“That or die.” Treacle exhaled through his big bull nostrils. “We could die.”

“But we won’t,” Logan said, cutting off that line of thought before it took root. “We’re going to show Rockbutt that he’s put his faith in the wrong dungeon cores.”

Marko looked at his empty goblet. “I like your enthusiasm, Logan, but I’m going to need a lot more wine to even flirt with optimism.”

Treacle turned away. “I need a nap. To forget. To remember. To remember to forget.”

Inga seemed to be deep in thought. Her eyes were completely black and her face expressionless. It was hard to know what she was thinking. Finally, she nodded with determination. “I’d like to see the library before I rejoin the Tree of Souls. And I’m sure there’s a welcome package with an introductory level. That would be fun to read.”

Logan had his work cut out for him. That was okay—owning his own landscaping business had meant he’d learned how to motivate people. They might have been the last cohort sorted, but that didn’t mean they had to be the worst.



## Chapter Ten



LOGAN AND THE REST of the incoming freshman class were given a single day of orientation. Inga, the bookworm moth woman, was overjoyed when they were given their DCG, or *Dungeon Core Grimoire*. It contained the following:

- A very encouraging letter from the headmaster, S. Shadowcroft
- Their class schedule
- A map of the campus
- Their cohort and clan assignment
- The leaderboard, which would be magically updated as their standings changed

Currently, Logan's Terrible Twelve wasn't just the worst cohort in the freshman class, it was the worst team in the entire school—ranked dead last out of the forty-eight cohorts and the one hundred and ninety-two students. Not the most promising or auspicious start to things, but Logan was still convinced that was an edge in its own way. Sure, they were at the bottom, but that meant everyone would discount them and underestimate their abilities.

As for the rest of the facility, turned out the Shadowcroft Academy actually existed in its own pocket dimension, on a sliver of a continent called Arborea. Logan recalled the map on Shadowcroft's desk with the deserts to the north, the western forests, the vast eastern lake, and the island on Loch Endless. The academy proper was located in a castle on the island. The central keep held the Golden Serpent Hall, the majority of the classrooms, and the four Auspicious wings, each of which housed a clan dormitory, a common room, and a practice hall.

Nestled in a labyrinth-like undercroft below the Golden Serpent Hall was the Codex Athenaeum—a grand library filled with endless

manuals and cultivation texts. The Codex Athenaeum reached the cliffs over Loch Endless and boasted a spectacular view of the blue waters, where dark shapes swam in the depths. Logan didn't think they were guppies. If the monsters spoke, it would probably be with a Scottish accent.

Across the way from the library was something called the Tartarucha Cells. Not even Inga knew what they were.

Outside the keep itself, but within the academy's towering walls, were four practice fields between the three-story stone dormitory wings.

Monday Orientation passed by in a blur, with Logan spending most of that time outside, on the grounds, checking out the practice fields, walking the walls, and finding his various classrooms. Marko had buddied up to him while Inga spent most of the time nose-deep in a book, studying, while Treacle slept, which only made the minotaur more depressed.

Those two were a mystery to Logan in many ways. It made sense that Logan would be in the Terrible Twelfth, and Marko also seemed to fit the bill. Logan couldn't help but wonder, however, why Inga and Treacle were in the worst cohort. Inga was incredibly smart and studious—she already seemed to know more about dungeon cores than everyone else combined—and Treacle bulged with bullish muscles. The words of the wizened Threshing Turtle drifted in the back of his mind whenever he thought about his new crew: *There are no mistakes. None at all. Ashvattha decides as it will.*

There was a reason they were all together, and he would figure out why, come hell or high water.

The four of them ate in the Golden Serpent Hall.

The hall was enormous and even with every student, from every year, clan, and cohort in attendance, there was room to spare. Like everything else at the academy, the hall was sectioned off by clan, and further separated by year. The students ate at enormous oversized wooden tables, polished to a dull glow and edged in the clan colors. It felt a little bit like being back in high school—that or hitting up a chow hall. Everyone formed into little cliques, gossiping and chatting over steaming platters of food.

For Logan, it was a harrowing experience. For one, no one wanted to sit close to them—as though they stank to high heaven and no one could stand the odor. Although, it was possible that Logan *did* actually stink—being a mushroom had its drawbacks. Two, long communal benches flanked the tables, and thanks to his small stature, he could barely reach the tabletop. He had to sit up on his knees, which certainly wasn't great for his pride. And lastly was the food itself. They had fresh chicken legs and salty rice. It didn't taste right. It was too fresh and too cooked. He barely managed to choke the meal down.

Tuesday morning, bright and early, he walked down the central Azure Dragon hallway heading toward breakfast.

The Terrible Twelfth were together, all dressed in the Azure Dragon robes, magically sewn to fit them. Only like with his other outfit—and the table and just about everything else—Logan's were a bit too small for him. Marko's robes were fashionably big, and Inga's had slits to accommodate her fluttering moth-like wings. The towering Treacle, awash in blue, followed morosely behind them.

Marko could barely open his goat eyes. "Could you people walk a bit more quietly? Treacle, dude, your hooves are going to split my head wide open."

"You have hooves," Treacle pointed out, his bullish ears twitching in apparent irritation.

"Uh, yeah. But my hooves *slide* across the stone like butter on toast. You have a definite clomp to you."

"Well, sorry for clomping." Treacle sighed and slowed his pace.

Marko turned. "Sorry, my bullish bro, rough night last night is all. I tied one on with the Gelatinous Knight. That guy is crazy. And hey, he had a question. The welcome letter in our DCG was from an S. Shadowcroft. What does the S stand for?"

"Sappy?" Treacle grunted. "Stupidly hopeful? Sinfully optimistic?"

Inga's antennae wiggled. "Not sure, which is frustrating. I simply hate not knowing things. I wanted to study up on our dear headmaster, but when I eventually found the library, the doors were locked. So I still don't have an answer on that account, which is depressing." She paused, antennae twitching. "Though not nearly as

depressing as the Stairwell of True Seeing, which leads to the library.”

Logan went to ask why, but Treacle moaned. “This whole place is depressing.”

Marko shrugged. “The wine is good. And I got my friends. We’re going to have so much fun in our first class. What’s our first class again?”

“The Ethics of Murder,” Inga replied. “I’m very excited to be taking a class by Headmaster Shadowcroft himself. He is as sweet as honey.”

Logan chuckled. “I wonder if honey comes from bee dungeon cores.”

“It could be,” the moth woman muttered, oblivious to the joke. “Insect dungeons are very popular. Not as popular as undead cores nor dragon cores, but still, a bee guardian would be interesting.”

“Honey is too sweet for me,” Treacle complained. “Makes my teeth hurt. Or at least it did, back when I was a gnome lord. I suppose it’d be different now that I’m a minotaur, but my gut says I’ll have an allergic reaction and die from tongue swellage.”

“Good to see you’re as chipper as always,” Logan said. “So we’re starting off with the Ethics of Murder this morning, huh? And this afternoon it looks like we have Dungeon Core Calisthenics in the northwest practice field. Hey, Inga, why was the Stairwell of True Seeing depressing?”

Inga’s antennae wiggled. “You know the class I’m most excited about on our schedule?” she said. “The History of the Soul Tree. It’s taught by Professor Bartholomew Nekhbet. He’s a legend.” She grew breathless. “And, if I’m being entirely honest, more than a little attractive. And dynamic. Did I mention dynamic?”

“You didn’t.” Marko rolled his eyes.

Logan noticed Inga hadn’t answered his question. She was the queen of non sequiturs. Ask her about breakfast, and she’d talk about how respected she was on her world, a place called Toriopa, where there were vast libraries at the top of massive mountains.

“Hey, Treacle, what class are you looking forward to?” Marko sneaked a hand into his robes and pulled out a little silver flask and

took a sip.

Marko might have a drinking problem.

Treacle had a sighing problem. “None of the classes are really going to help us in the end. I mean, they would, if we survived long enough to take advantage of them. As it is, we probably won’t make it through finals. You know, if we fail, terrible things will happen to us. Terrible.”

Logan stopped and let Treacle catch up. “Let’s pretend we won’t flunk out—big leap I know—but say we all survive. Which classes look good to you?”

The minotaur had an immediate answer. “Well, if I dared to hope, I would say I could be excited about Traps, Pits, and Pendulums 101. Rockheart is teaching us that one. But the class that I’m going to love, as much as I love anything, is going to be Fiendish Fabrication: Craftsmanship 101. Everyone knows that Ronnalg Crucible is the finest craftsman in the universe.”

Marko pulled Logan along. “Of course, you knew that, Logan. Right? I mean, back in the day, I couldn’t go five minutes without talking about Ronnalg Crucible.”

“You’re being sarcastic,” Treacle sighed.

“You’re not wrong, Treacle ol’ buddy, but I’m also waking up and feeling better,” Marko said. “As for me, I am really looking forward to Underground Feng Shui: Maximizing Your Dungeon for Murder. It’s taught by some teacher named Arketa the Hellgazer. Where I come from, Arketa means pretty. As for Hellgazer? Oh yeah. I’m in. Give me hell, baby.”

They walked into the Golden Serpent Hall, where a collection of plant people of all shapes and sizes were serving breakfast and removing dirty dishes. There were flower women only about two feet tall. There were big leafy oak men well over seven feet. Inga knew all about them—they were the Treegees, and they did all the cooking, cleaning, and janitorial services at the school. Who didn’t like the Treegees?

Logan had to choke down the eggs. They tasted vile, the texture somehow slimy and overcooked at the same time. And again, they were too fresh.

Upstairs, they found their Ethics of Murder class. It was your typical classroom with desks, windows that showed blue sky with wispy clouds, and a lectern next to a desk in front of a chalkboard.

Sitting at the desks was a menagerie of dungeon cores, including the First Cohort gang, Chadrigoth, his rock monster buddy, the undead queen, and the goth-y cat woman, who looked beyond bored. Inga had explained that the school rotated the cohorts through classes, so everyone would eventually work with every single student at the school.

Shadowcroft stood at the front, curling his massive tree form around the lectern. On the chalkboard was the name of the class: *The Ethics of Murder with Professor S. Shadowcroft*.

The headmaster's expressive eyes brightened. "Ah, excellent. Welcome, welcome. Come in. We are going to talk about murder today, killing in the name of goodness. It's a remarkably interesting subject. And my heart sings at the idea of getting to know you all better. It goes without saying that I'm also glad you weren't killed in the Threshing. You live! Which means you are still able to do wonderful things."

Taking his seat, Logan heard Treacle grumble under his breath. "His sweetness wears me out. I need a nap."

"Too many naps aren't good for you," Marko whispered.

"I'd like to see the research on that," Treacle returned.

Shadowcroft cleared his throat. A few flowers bloomed on his dome. "I know, many of you are wondering, how can murder be ethical?"

Inga's hand shot up.

Logan grinned. Why didn't that surprise him?

Shadowcroft was genuinely delighted. "Yes, Inga Thosa Therian. Yes, you would know since you were the Grand Archivist of the Eastern Aerie Archive and former sorceress of the Far Cloud Mountain Palace. Also, you were a renowned beauty on your world of Toriopa, unless I'm terribly mistaken."

Inga's mouth dropped open. She blushed, a gentle purple color creeping into her pale cheeks. "Well, I was the Grand Archivist, yes. The beauty contest wasn't... I mean, I inherited my feathers and my

beak. My wings... well, I worked on those, but I enjoyed the exercise." She swallowed, blinked, and her antennae drooped. "I'm sorry, but what was the question again?"

Shadowcroft chuckled, as did the classroom, except for members of the First Cohort.

Logan wasn't sure what kind of world Inga had come from, but she must've been some kind of bird creature. They all had new bodies, after all.

Shadowcroft smiled at the moth woman. "I suppose my question was rhetorical, my dear. But yes, here, murder can be ethical. We are here to stop dungeoneers from destroying the universe one Celestial Node at a time. We murder for the greater good, since wouldn't it be better to kill a few villainous people than let all life die? For life is precious, wouldn't you agree?"

"The trolley problem," Logan found himself saying.

Shadowcroft snapped his wooden fingers. "Yes, on your world, moral philosophy professors have pondered this issue before. If you are driving an out-of-control trolley, should you throw a lever to kill one person or refuse to do nothing at all and kill five?"

"How drunk am I?" Marko asked, eyebrows scrunching as though he were seriously considering an answer.

The headmaster waved a finger at him. "Sober as a judge, Mr. Laskarelis. And the answer, of course, is that you throw the switch and doom the one. As plain as the wooden nose on my face. You see, my friends, we here at the Shadowcroft Academy have a very utilitarian view of our work. Yes, in a perfect universe, we would convince the dungeoneers that what they are doing is inherently wrong. We have even tried that a time or two. Why, back in the 60s —that would be the 600s of the Age of Harmony, mind you—I even advocated for a nonviolent solution. Give peace a chance, and all that. Fruitless." He shook his head, mossy beard swinging. "These raiders will not stop, will not be deterred. They do it for money. They do it for power. And, in the end, they are searching for immortality."

He shrugged and spread his hands as though to say, *and here we are.*

Logan nodded. “I can see that. The more powerful they become with stolen Apothos, the higher they climb in their classes. An Immortal Crown dungeoneer would be immortal. Are there any dungeoneers who’ve become immortal?”

Shadowcroft lifted a finger to speak. He then closed his eyes. “That is a difficult question and better suited for Professor Nekhbet’s course on the Tree of Souls.” The headmaster inhaled. “Yes, a long story, and a sad one. Suffice it to say, Mr. Murray, some raiders are driven to plunder by their fear of death. That which we cling to can kill us in the end. You are an example of the opposite.”

Logan felt a shiver on his neck. “Me?”

The headmaster nodded. “Yes, you come from Uroth.”

Chadrigoth’s desk near the back smoldered from his flames. The Abyss Lord laughed. “Uroth? That place is a myth. No world could be so weak. It would fall from the Tree a blackened cinder.”

“Yeah, Chad,” Jimi Magmarty agreed, his voice the sound of churning cement. “You tell ‘em.”

Shadowcroft motioned to Logan. “Not only does he come from Uroth, but his reaping was unexpected and a bit extreme. He leapt at the chance to fight raiders and save dungeons, and his performance during the Threshing impressed us all.”

“Even Professor Rockheart?” Logan asked.

“Impressed most of us,” the headmaster conceded, bowing his head a fraction of an inch.

“Here’s what I don’t get,” Logan said. “Do the dungeoneers know they are destroying the Tree of Souls?”

“That is the central question,” Inga agreed. “I have part of the answer.”

Shadowcroft gestured for her to continue.

The moth woman blushed, glanced around, and then drew her wings in close. She touched her hair, as if to make sure she still had it. What had she said about feathers? She talked in an awkward, slightly choked voice. “The lesser raiders are either clueless or are in terrible denial. They tell themselves they’ve never seen a world die, so people are probably overreacting. Or they convince themselves that some worlds should be destroyed because they’re weak. Like

Uroth. Who would want to live in such a weak, pathetic place in the first place?"

"Easy there," Logan said with a sharp smile. "That's my hometown. It's not much, but we do have Netflix and nachos."

"I apologize," Inga said, still nervous and quaking a bit. Again, her hand went to her hair. "Or, the raiders say that the universe is so vast that it can't die. Some dungeoneers think that destroying Celestial Nodes actually helps the Tree of Souls grow. Like pruning a grapevine—you clip off some branches to help it grow. That's not correct. The Tree doesn't work like that."

The headmaster nodded. "Very good, Inga. You are, of course, correct. You see, my friends, everyone is born with an instinctive knowledge of the Tree of Souls. We know we are connected. However, the Iron Trunk, Azure Branch, Jade Leaf dungeoneers all convince themselves that the Celestial Nodes, the places where the Tree meets worlds, aren't real. They think dungeon cores are evil monsters, deserving of destruction."

"This changes, however, when raiders move from being Jade Leaf cultivators to S-Class cultivators. Heartwood, Crown, and Immortal Crown raiders know exactly what they are doing. To advance from Jade Leaf to Heartwood is no easy feat, mind you. It requires both a massive amount of energy and a divine connection to the tree. What we call a *Revelation*. They know all right, and they don't care. They simply don't care." Shadowcroft got choked up, eyes watering at the mere thought of it all.

Chadrigoth's aura of flame exploded. "Those villains think that if they become Immortal Crown cultivators, they can create their own realities, and who cares about anyone else? We need to stop them, all of them. Even the fools." He growled, fiery claws digging into the desktop.

"We do need to stop them," Shadowcroft agreed softly. "As I've said, the raiders, even someone as weak as a Deep Root dungeoneer, instinctively know that what they are doing is wrong. Still they do it. We have no choice but to stop them. If we lose too many Celestial Nodes, the Tree of Souls will wither and die. If the Tree dies, then all of reality will die with it. How many will lose their

lives? Countless souls will be lost. Countless animals. Countless people. All of reality will be gone like tears in rain.”

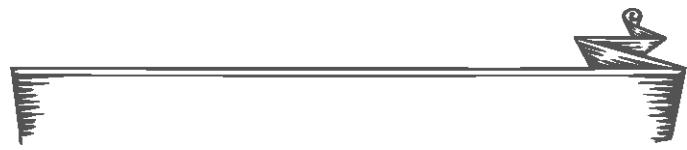
“The ethics of murder,” Logan muttered to himself. This made the trolley problem seem so small in comparison. What was a few thousand dungeoneers when compared to the impossible number of all possible lives strewn across the multiverse?

Still, it was hard. He’d fought in an active combat zone, even killed. He’d pulled the trigger because it had been him or the man behind the wheel of the car-borne IED barreling toward his convoy. He’d done what needed doing, but it had haunted him.

This, though, was war on another level. When Logan created his dungeon to protect a Celestial Node, he wouldn’t be killing pixels... he’d be cutting down real people. Still, there was also a sure knowledge that this was a war that needed fighting. There were no politics involved here, no uncertainty. They were defending the universe itself from annihilation, and he would gladly pull the trigger again when the time came. No hesitation and not a moment of doubt.

However, he had to make sure he didn’t die first.

He hoped his next class, Dungeon Core Calisthenics, would help with that.



## Chapter Eleven



LOGAN AND THE TERRIBLE Twelfth hit the Golden Serpent Hall for a quick lunch—some kind of roast in a thick gravy sauce—and then made their way to the Akros Coliseum, which was the northeast practice field. A dirt running track, packed down from thousands of feet, surrounded a grassy field filled with a variety of odd implements. Some of them resembled obstacles Logan had seen at Fort Jackson—such as the Victory wall and the enormous wooden ladder bars. Others, made of polished metal and engraved with glowing runes, were a mystery. Stone seats rose up around the arena grounds in a ring, just like a football stadium.

Luckily, no one would be watching Logan and his cohort. No, their attention would be firmly fixed on the First Cohort, who were already limbering up on the field. Chadrigoth had his wings tucked back as he stretched his hamstring. “Well, hello there, weaklings. Look at you, coming out here with such bravery on your faces.”

Magmarty, rock arms crossed, flexed his stony muscles. Sludgy mud oozed out of the cracks. His eyes were just as muddy. “Yeah, Chad, bravery is probably their middle names.”

Lady Elesiel rolled her eyes. Logan had no idea how her skeletal face could be so pretty, what with the miasma of green necrotic energy lingering around her. Her face was gaunt and rather angular, and her hair was so black, like liquid midnight. The combination shouldn’t have worked, but somehow she managed to make it look like an absolute ten.

Tet-Akhat merely sighed, her green feline eyes so incredibly bored.

Marko laughed. “I don’t have a middle name. What about you, Logan?”

“Eugene.” He winced. “Though I generally don’t tell people that.”

“Ennui is my middle name,” Treacle said. “Treacle Ennui Glimmerhappy. Life is so very heavy.”

Inga wasn’t saying anything, and so Chadrigoth asked, “Don’t you have quip to add?”

The moth woman frowned and hit them with a non sequitur. “This class should test both our physical bodies as well as our Apothos cores. I am interested in learning more about the cultivation techniques that will allow us to increase our power.”

Magmarty wrinkled his rocky nose. “That wasn’t funny. Aren’t all of you supposed to be funny?”

“What was the question again?” Inga asked innocently, cocking her head to one side as though only now realizing there had been a question at all. That one was an absolute space cadet. Maybe that was why she’d ended up in the Terrible Twelfth—because her head was so high up in the clouds she couldn’t be bothered with reality.

As for Magmarty, it was clear that guy wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. He sounded about as dumb as a pile of rocks, which was what he was.

Logan put the other cohort from his thoughts, focusing on the arena. This place really was different. And it wasn’t just the training equipment. The air here felt *powerful*, rich with Apothos, something he’d not noticed before. This was a place that was near the Tree of Souls—he could feel it in his core. The colors were vibrant, and the very air seemed to thrum with life.

Professor Rockheart came flying in from the blue sky, his great stony wings catching an updraft as he descended. Today he wore a splendid velvet doublet with a high collar that bore the symbol of the Azure Dragons. The gargoyle landed on the running track near them in a blast of dust, debris billowing up around him. When the cloud cleared, Rockheart shook his wings and rose up on his lion legs. He had a whistle around his neck like a medieval PE coach. “Welcome, cohorts, to Dungeon Core Calisthenics. I am not going to waste my time explaining this class to you. Your understanding will come from suffering. And suffer you shall. Release the doomhounds!”

Several sections of the stone seats rose. Hellish dogs the size of horses rushed out snarling. They looked like an unholy mixture of

wolves, bighorn sheep, and bonfires. They coughed dark flames and smelled like a dog kennel on a hot August day.

Logan wasted a precious second by asking, “What are we supposed to do, Rockheart?”

“Run, fight, or die!” Rockheart barked like just another slavering doomhound.

Logan turned and ran, because fighting and dying weren’t such good options. He started down the track, working his legs as fast as he could.

Inga was lucky. She took to the air on her resplendent wings, quickly gaining altitude to avoid the snapping maws. Treacle had such long legs that he easily tore ahead, hooves digging deep divots into the earth and throwing up tails of dust. Marko was right behind him, nimble and fleet of foot, though not as fast as the minotaur.

They outpaced Logan in seconds, and he could feel the doomhounds gaining on him. The pounding of their paws reverberated up through his feet as they drew closer. In moments, he could feel the heat radiating off them in waves. There was no way he could outrun them—not in a million years.

Logan had no choice but to use his Harden ability, but before he could thicken up enough, a doomhound had him by his toadstool cap, vicious teeth digging down, thrashing him this way and that. The demon dog spit him out once Logan hardened into a chunky gray lump. That wasn’t the end, though. The hound continued to claw and bite at him, trying to rip apart the calcified exterior. Logan felt like a chew toy.

Logan triggered his Pollen ability, but that only made the doomhound sneeze a bit, its snot like liquid red-hot coals. It sizzled onto Logan’s armor.

Why had he chosen fungaloid again?

The doomhound eventually got its fangs through the thickened skin around his thigh and chewed one of his legs clean off. Well, it was hardly *clean*. Oddly enough, Logan was getting used to losing limbs. The overgrown puppy ram took the leg and gnawed on the severed limb like a bully stick. All Logan could do was lie there, facedown in the dirt, hoping a leg was all he would lose to the

monstrous creature. That and watch. At least he had a great view of everything else going on.

As for the First Cohort, they chose the fight option. The four powerful guardians already stood over a mound of the doomhound corpses, and it looked like they were ready to add more to the pile at the drop of a hat.

Rockheart blew his whistle. “Enough! Ned! Zed! Can I get some help?”

Two huge rosebushes came scurrying out of the chambers under the seats like weird flowery spiders, creeping along on twisting roots. Seeing the living rosebushes come at him freaked Logan out. He tried to crawl away.

However, one of the rosebushes quickly scurried over, picked him up, and touched the gemstone on his belly with a branch. Fresh Apothos was injected into his core, and then, magically, the white rose doctor healed Logan.

“So I can heal any damage?” Logan asked, eyes wide.

The bush giggled, roses coming together to form a face—two eyes and one long multi-flowered mouth. It spoke in a high-pitched, cartoony voice. “Yes, silly. Your guardian form is only a manifestation of your core gem. As long as your gem is not destroyed and cultivated, you can heal any wound. It may take time, but such is the way of all dungeon cores.”

The shrubbery doctor set Logan down on his feet and gave him a friendly little pat on his toadstool head. Then the bush—either Ned or Zed, Logan couldn’t for the life of him discern the difference—scurried back under the seats.

The other rosy medic, this one with red flowers, took care of Treacle and Marko, who’d also been torn up pretty badly by the doomhounds.

“All of you, gather at the kill site of the First Cohort. I want to show you something.”

Marko rolled his shoulder as they walked over, the skin knitting together with fresh Apothos. “Damn dog nearly tore off my arm. It was a good workout though.”

Logan had to chuckle. “Yeah, I was very motivated. Too bad my legs are so short and squishy. It’s like running on pasta.”

Marko turned philosophical. “I like pasta. You know, it’s a simple dish, but satisfying. Back on my homeworld, we had this garlic and mussel sauce I liked with a fine white. I guzzled it by the gallon... the wine, not the pasta sauce.”

“Enough!” Rockheart roared. “Your banter is not cute. You both are *ridiculous*. If you knew how ridiculous you were, you wouldn’t speak a word, ever, for fear of becoming even more ridiculous. It is a shame on your head and a pox on our distinguished clan.”

Treacle raised a hand. “I know I’m ridiculous, sir. I’ll be quiet.”

Inga landed with a whisper of fluttering wings, her antennae going crazy.

Rockheart glared at the minotaur, but held his tongue.

The First Cohort guardians tried to hide their smiles, except for Tet-Akhat, who was examining the black polish on her human fingernails. Cat head. Human hands. She did have a black tail, and it seemed as bored as the rest of her.

The professor nodded at the four dead doomhounds. “Even though these monsters are dead, they still have energy in them that can be cultivated. All life in the universe is filled with Apothos, but there are different kinds of the mystical energy, each with an elemental affinity. Who can name me the thirteen different Meta-Affinities of Apothos?”

Inga raised her hand, but Rockheart called on Lady Elesiel.

Fresh green fire burned around her midnight hair. “Ignis is fire. Magma is the earth/fire mix. Then you have Corrosivus and Toxicus. One devours the world, and one poisons it. Fulgur aligns itself with lightning. Glacies is ice. Aer is the gases we breath. Terra is in the rocky ground under our feet.”

“I like Terra and Magma,” Magmarty growled.

Lady Elesiel went on. “Aqua is the water. Mallus is raw kinetic force. Luminosus is light. I myself am drawn to Umbra, the shadows. Finally, there is Vita and Morta, life and death.”

Logan tried to keep track. He’d expected the classic four elements. This was far more complicated. “How many is that? And

why do we have a corrosiveness and a toxicity? I'm not getting this."

Inga brightened. "I created a mnemonic phrase that helps me remember the thirteen Apothine energies. 'I make coffee and tea for Grandfather Tiberius and make lemonade under the Velveeta moon.'"

"How do you know about Velveeta?" Logan asked, glancing at her askance.

Inga tilted her head. "The real question is how do *you* know about the goddess of dairy products?"

"Dairy products—" Logan started.

Rockheart cut him off. "Ignis. Magma. Corrosivus. Toxicus. Fulgur. Glacies. Terra. Aqua. Mallus. Luminosus. Umbra. Vita. Morta. Those are the thirteen meta-energies, and each dungeon and dungeoneer has a predilection for specific energies. For example, Chadrigoth is clearly an Ignis cultivator."

The demon prince opened his palm and fire burst forth.

The gargoyle-griffin nodded. "The doomhounds are also rich with Ignis Apothos, though it is tempered by Umbra Apothos. Chadrigoth is a creature of like nature—a balance of fire and shadow—so he can cultivate the energy more effectively than Lady Elesiel, for example, who is a Morta cultivator."

"Can I show them, Professor?" Chadrigoth asked, sounding for all the world like the teacher's pet he was.

Rockheart nodded, a small grin curling his lips. "Yes, but first, all of you open your internal eye." He glanced at Logan. "Even you should be able to do this. Just focus on your core as though you're accessing your Guardian Core Matrix. But instead of pushing that thread of Apothos into your core, direct it up, into your eyes, and then out in an arc."

Logan did as instructed, channeling a small portion of the energy flowing through him upward, infusing his eyes with a spark of power. He gasped as all around him the world came to life with added color and texture. He felt like he'd been playing one of those old PS1s, only to suddenly upgrade to the newest model. He watched as Chadrigoth bent and touched the skin of the doomhound. The dead creature shriveled as the Abyss Lord's nostrils flared and a haze of

purple and orange light bubbled up, swirling around Chadrigoth, seeping into his skin and clawing at his nose and mouth.

Rockheart described what was happening. "Chadrigoth is absorbing the Ignis and Umbra Apothine energies into his core. He can process it almost immediately since he is aligned with both the fire and shadow energy. If this were Aqua Apothos, it would take him twice as long to cultivate the energy. He would be able to absorb it directly, but then his core would need to refine it, banishing the elemental affinity over the course of minutes, hours, or even days, until it becomes pure Apothos, which is usable by any cultivator. During that time, the energy wouldn't be accessible to him."

"Like this one seaweed beer I once drank." Marko nudged Logan with his elbow. "My stomach is not aligned with kelp-based alcohol. There was a lot of *refining* involved—though the less generous might call it puking, I suppose."

The professor ignored the satyr and continued with his lecture. "Any cultivator can harness and absorb any energy, but that energy must be processed in the core and converted into the primary strand of energy that the cultivator utilizes. This process is slow and takes time and focus. Dungeoneer cultivators are drawn to Celestial Nodes that already 'bleed' the right type of Apothos for them to cultivate without needing to convert it. That inherently makes some Apothos types more valuable than others, based on how common or rare they happen to be. Ignis, Aqua, Aer, and Terra are the most common elemental affinities amongst dungeoneers, while Mallus and Vita are comparatively the rarest among cultivators."

Logan had to ponder the different energies for a minute. So each of the dungeons protecting the Celestial Nodes had its own specific flavor—maybe even a couple types of flavor, since Chad was both Ignis and Umbra—which probably came from the guardian of that dungeon. Logan pulled up his Guardian Core Matrix and saw that his primary elemental affinities were Morta and Toxicus. That made sense since mushrooms took advantage of decay. And many mushrooms were highly poisonous. He didn't quite understand how all this worked. He had so much left to learn.

Rockheart shoved his beak into Logan's face. "Oh, look, the Urothling is trying to think. It's adorable watching you attempt higher logic. Do you have questions, then?"

Logan grinned. "I have a ton of questions. First off, can you make beer out of kelp?"

The professor withdrew, scowling.

Inga's antennae drooped as she adjusted her hair. "Don't worry, Logan. I can help you with cultivation theory. You'll get the hang of it."

Rockheart stood with his arms crossed. "He'd better get the hang of it and quickly. Finals will be here before you know it, and he is a weak Deep Root cultivator—hardly more than a simple dirt digger. Now, Prince Chadrigoth, on the other hand, is already a highly ranked Azure Branch cultivator. He is only here to sharpen his skills and to be a shining example of what all dungeon cores should aspire to."

"And I'm good with the ladies," the Abyss Lord said with a confident grin. He towered over Logan, who felt like a football about to get kicked.

"But leveling gets more difficult as you go, right, Inga?" Logan asked.

"It does," Inga agreed. "Going from Deep Root to an Iron Trunk cultivator is far easier than going from Iron Trunk to Azure Branch. And even gaining ranks is easier the weaker you are."

Logan smiled. "Glad to hear it. This is good news for us, actually. I mean sure, we might be on the low end, but that means if we train harder than everyone else, we could grow by leaps and bounds while everyone else is plateaued. After I lost my leg back on Uroth, I had this physical therapy trainer who called them newb gains. He said even if you had no idea what you were doing in the beginning, you could make crazy progress just by showing up and doing the work."

Laughter rang out, starting with Rockheart, but then Chadrigoth started guffawing as did the rest of the First Cohort. Everyone in the Terrible Twelfth looked dejected, even Marko.

The professor motioned to the two cohorts. “You are being daft, Mr. Murray. There is no such thing as *newb gains*. And the difference between your two teams should be clear, though it seems you don’t truly understand how outclassed you are. What a worthless piece of dirt you are. Some of the guardians on this field are the epitome of strength and power, while the rest of you are cooling dog turds.”

Marko waggled his hairy eyebrows. “Aww, Professor, how did you guess my mom’s pet name for me?”

Not like Rockheart was going to pause. “Perhaps a tangible example of how far you have to go is in order, Mr. Murray. Prince Chadrigoth, I would like you and your cohort to subdue Logan and his team. Don’t kill them. But, please, hurt them.”

Inga didn’t pause. She turned and leaped in a single fluid motion, desperately trying to fly away, but Chadrigoth’s fiery rope pulled her from the sky. Logan bolted in her direction but then ran right into Magmarty’s big rocky fist, mutated into a hammer the size of a wheelbarrow. Logan went flying and lost an arm in the process—another limb seared off his body by Magmarty’s red-hot rocky skin.

Treacle lowered his head to ram his way out of the trouble, but skeletal hands reached from the ground and tripped him. Lady Elesiel danced forward and stabbed him in the chest with a dagger made from green fire. She pulled the blade free, only to plunge it back in over and over again, turning the former gnome into a bloody pincushion.

Marko backed up and raised his hands as Tet-Akhat approached. “Who’s a good kitty, heh? You are, Tet, you’re a good kitty. You wouldn’t scratch a half-drunk goat man, would you?”

Tet didn’t scratch him. She punched his lights out.

In seconds, the Terrible Twelfth were on the ground, bleeding, burned, bludgeoned, and all just a hairsbreadth from death’s door.

Rockheart clapped. “Yes, yes, you see? That is the power of mature dungeon cores working with the Apothos inside them. Let this be the true lesson. Class dismissed!”

Tet helped Marko up then went over to Logan. She was carrying his arm. “I think you lost this,” she said, handing it over with a thin grimace.

“Thanks.” Logan took the limb and held it awkwardly. Already Ned and Zed were racing out onto the field to help with injuries.

Tet gave him a long look. “Sorry we had to kick your asses. This really *is* about saving the universe, though. Better you buy it at this school than in a dungeon, failing to protect a Celestial Node.” She nodded and sauntered away, tail twitching. Her words were cold, but they carried no malice.

Marko, Inga, and Treacle drew near.

The minotaur winced, then sighed. “I was stabbed in the heart. Also the kidney, lungs, and stomach. It’s so depressing. Stabbing. Hearts. Organs. Losing.”

“I never should’ve left home,” Inga said morosely, staring down at the dusty ground beneath her feet.

“I never should’ve stopped drinking.” Marko dropped his head.

“But you were drinking this morning,” Inga pointed out.

“Yeah, I never should’ve stopped.”

Logan, though, didn’t feel too bad. He’d grow himself a new arm, and he knew what he’d told Rockheart was true. Being at the bottom was hard, sure, but it didn’t mean they had to stay there. He just needed to convince his ragtag crew of misfits that winning really was possible.

“You guys, after dinner, we need to talk about the law of diminishing returns. Our situation is bad, but we can make it better. And I’m wondering what we’ll learn in our other four classes.” He swung his severed arm around like a baton. “Will there be more dismemberment involved?”

“Likely,” Treacle muttered. “Very, very likely.”

Well, at least he had that to look forward to.



## Chapter Twelve



DINNER WAS BETTER FOR Logan, but only because the menu was leftover chicken legs. They were lukewarm, and some pieces were about to turn. For a fungaloid, apparently, the extra tang was just what the doctor ordered. Logan traded his fresh pieces for Marko's questionable ones and stuck a couple of chicken legs away in his satchel for later. Some part of him felt more than a little mortified at the notion of eating nearly expired food, but then he reminded himself he was literally a walking, talking mushroom. Moreover, he'd just spent the morning in a class called Ethics of Murder, so he was withholding all personal earthly judgements for a while.

Treacle had a sack of hay on his tray, and he ate it, sighing the entire time, clearly not enjoying it. On the other hand, Inga had a jug of honey, which she poured on everything. Literally everything. Chicken wings dipped in honey, honey drizzled over broccoli, honey slathered thick as paste on butter noodles. The lady certainly had one heck of a sweet tooth.

After dinner, with the various Treegees starting the cleanup, Logan made sure his cohort didn't disperse. "Listen, I know today wasn't ideal for anyone, but that doesn't mean we should give up. We're not the strongest here, just the opposite, but that doesn't mean we can't *outwork* everyone here. Strength and work ethic have nothing to do with each other. In my experience, it's usually the opposite—the strong coast by on their natural ability. But if we put in the elbow grease, we can make up for our lack of physical ability. I think we should head over to this Stairwell of True Seeing Inga mentioned. We need a private place to talk. To strategize. And I'm thinking the library is perfect. Plus, it should be dead this time of night."

Reluctantly, the others agreed, and Inga led the way to the southern part of the Golden Serpent Hall and down smooth stone steps, worn by time and the countless passing of feet.

One single unbroken mirror covered both walls and arched overhead. A few magical torches burned in sconces in the glass. At first, Logan didn't think anything was strange with the mirrored stairwell. He saw his red-and-white toadstool head bobbing along, short and dopey like one of those goombas from Mario. As he walked, though, he started to see changes in himself and the others. By the time they reached the bottom of the winding staircase, Logan was seeing himself as he'd been seconds before the Reaper Box had eaten him.

He touched his face, but he didn't feel stubble. He also didn't feel his hair, only the gills of his mushroom cap. He moved back against the other side to get a better look. All four of them did.

Logan realized he was seeing a literal dead man in the mirror. He'd never be human again. In the mirror, his left leg was gone. Gone also were his landscaping business, his Uncle Bud, any chance of dating another human again. Realizing the finality of it all was a gut punch. He was dead. Or, at least, he had died and now he was something else. But then it dawned on him that he wasn't the only one experiencing that loss.

Perhaps it was harder for him than the others because he knew absolutely nothing about this world. However, each of his teammates had likewise experienced the trauma and loss of the reaping. He stole a sidelong gaze at the other members of the Terrible Twelfth. In some ways, Marko wasn't that different. In the mirror was a dark-haired human with a deeply tanned Mediterranean complexion, a wavy mass of dark hair, and an infectious grin. His eyes were the same color but didn't have the weird goat pupils. And no horns. But basically similar.

Marko pointed. "True seeing. That's me. That can't be more me. But I have to say, I'm happy to be here with a tail. My old life was so... tailless. And I'm going to save a fortune on shoes. Hooves frickin' rule."

The satyr smiled that same friendly, lopsided grin. So did the human in the mirror.

Treacle Glimmerhappy frowned, sighed, and shook his shaggy head. Whereas Marko was remarkably close in appearance to his old self, the looming minotaur couldn't have been more different. His reflection was only about two feet tall. Tiny. The Treacle in the mirror was the classic gnome, with a big white beard, a red cap, little blue overalls, and big black boots. He could've walked off anyone's lawn. And yes, people still bought lawn gnomes.

Treacle moved his big minotaur head back and forth. The gnome echoed the movement. He stroked his bare bull chin.

"No beard." He opened his mouth. "And my teeth are different. I have more stomachs now. Lost my life. Picked up more stomachs." He paused. Shrugged. "Might not be such a bad deal, I suppose."

"You don't miss being royalty?" Marko asked.

"On Plimpkinny, I wasn't very popular," Treacle said softly, still feeling for his absent beard. "I was a gnome lord, sure, but I found the money boring. Plimpkinny gnomes love money. I liked crafting things, not to sell, but to use. I made machines in my workshop. My wife always complained I spent too much time out there. My wife always complained. She was very good at it. She mostly complained because we were so poor for a lord and a lady."

"We're not going to talk about how we got here, are we?" Marko asked uncertainly, eyes squinting, forehead bunching. For once, he wasn't smiling.

"We don't have to," Logan said.

Treacle, though, kept talking. "How I got here? I had no idea I was being recruited, truth be told. Near Castle Candylick—that's where I was the lord, though my wife did most of the lording work—we had an infestation of nickel chucks, these metal rodent critters who would devour anything and anyone they could. Those nickel chucks sure were an itch in our beards, so I made a very fine chucktrap and took it to their cave, which now I understand was a reaping dungeon.

"Long story short? My chucktrap worked too well, and I was reaped. Now here I am. I chose to be a minotaur. At the time, I didn't

care much. When Shadowcroft suggested I might like a labyrinth full of traps, it made a certain sort of sense.” He took a deep breath and sighed, deflating as though in defeat. “Suppose it doesn’t much matter, though. Not in the long run. I think I could’ve liked being a guardian, but I won’t live long enough to see that happen, I reckon.” Treacle, the little gnome, smiled wistfully. “Of all the things I miss, my workshop is at the top of the list. I don’t miss the complaining wife.”

The cogs in Logan’s head clanked to life, and he started slowly piecing it together. Treacle must’ve come from a world richer in Apothos than Earth, but the gnome lord hadn’t done much cultivating. That was why he’d wound up in the Terrible Twelfth. Marko and Inga, on the other hand, knew about cultivation and about the academy. So they must be terrible in other ways.

Marko didn’t laugh at the wife joke. He was sweating a little. “So, nice story, we can keep going. Check out the library. Maybe stop talking about this forever, because the past is the past...”

Logan patted Marko’s furry hand. “It’s okay, Marko, you don’t have to share.” He caught Treacle’s eyes. “So, you didn’t sign up for this. Did you do any cultivating? Before, I mean?”

“I still don’t quite understand how my core and my body work together. Or the thirteen Apothine energies. Or are there fourteen?” The minotaur shrugged one shoulder, apparently unconcerned by the lack of knowledge. “I can’t imagine I’ll survive long enough to really understand how they work together. There’s this Winnowing Professor Rockheart spoke of. It won’t matter once I’m winnowed.”

Marko tapped Logan on the shoulder and pointed at Inga. She hadn’t said a word, but instead stared entranced at the image reflected back at her in the unnatural mirror.

Tall and slender, the moth woman’s antennae drooped. Even her wings seemed to sag as she regarded the monstrous bird creature in the mirror. In her former life, she’d been a massive owlish creature with a long golden beak encrusted with jewels. Her feathers looked a tad bit greasy, but they shined white, black, and brown. She had golden eagle eyes as intense as burning embers. Those eyes filled with tears.

Logan recalled what Shadowcroft had said in their class that day... something about a beauty contest.

Inga sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. "This does nothing but bring back bad memories. The life I had is gone." She reached up a delicate pale hand and wiped away the tears streaking down her flawless cheeks. "We should get to the library, otherwise known as an athenaeum. There are many kinds of libraries, you know." She spoke matter-of-factly, clearly trying to hide just how upset she was by the changes in her appearance. Logan could sympathize—though, honestly, he thought she'd made a heck of an upgrade. "Different words mean different things," Inga continued. "For example, we use the word undercroft for this section of the castle, though it's somewhat inappropriate because this isn't a church. Regardless."

"Less regard. I completely agree! No bad memories!" Marko pushed them all the rest of the way down the stairway and into a wide lobby where a turtle fountain gurgled.

Comfortable chairs surrounded the basin. To the left were two huge wooden doors, large enough to accommodate even the most formidable guardians. The entrance to the Codex Athenaeum. The entrance to the Tartarucha Cells was across the way. Whatever that was.

They moved to go into the library, but the doors were locked.

The water stopped flowing, and the turtle perched atop the fountain spoke. "Library hours are eight a.m. to eight p.m. daily. After-hours access is limited to advanced-level cultivators—Azure Branch or higher. Thank you for your interest. Knowledge is power!" The stone head stopped talking, and water flowed out once more.

"Like *Schoolhouse Rock*," Logan muttered.

Inga stood with her arms crossed. "No books? How can I live even a single night without books? This can't be happening." She threw her arms up in obvious frustration. "It's a nightmare, a genuine nightmare."

"They don't want us to succeed," Treacle said, nodding slowly. "It's open, but only if you have the school's seal of approval. Only the strong should survive. The weak should just give up."

“Treacle, this isn’t helping us,” Logan said. “Yes, alright. Everything is against us. Yes, we’re the weakest of the weakest. But I keep thinking about the law of diminishing returns, and I feel like you guys just aren’t getting it. Rockheart made it clear that cores like Chadrigoth and the First Cohort aren’t going to level that much during their time here. But us? We’re going to level our asses off. Already, I feel stronger, tougher. Hold on.”

The gem in Logan’s belly glowed, and he was able to cast an image of his character sheet into the air. Yes, it was kind of like dropping his pants, but he was going to have to trust his cohort.

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### **Logan Murray Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Fungaloid

**Current Evolution:** Toadstool

**Cultivator Class:** Deep Root Cultivators; E-Class, Rank 8

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Morta/Toxicus

**Racial Abilities:**

- Digestion

**Racial Skill:**

Domestic Fungi

- Cultivated Fungi: Outstanding Allotment!

**Fungal Form (Active):**

- Harden

**Fungal Form (Passive):**

- Fungal Vision

**Spore Halo:**

- Pollen

## - Symbiosis

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Logan had the perfect example. “Listen, I know my Matrix isn’t impressive, but I started off the day as a *Rank 9 Deep Root* cultivator. But after a single day, one day, I’m *Rank 8*. And I don’t even know how to cultivate properly. Those are massive gains. Chadrigoth and his buddies can get into the library after hours, but I’d be surprised if they stopped flexing in the mirror long enough to come down here. They don’t need to. Like I said before, they are gonna skate their asses off. Just coast along because they already know they have it made.”

Inga squinted. “E-Class? Rank 8? You’re proud of that?” She looked aghast.

Marko had another question, which was even harder to answer. “What’s Fungal Vision? Can you hallucinate at will? Also, follow-up question—can you give me Fungal Vision? That’d be trippy.”

“I don’t know,” Logan said. “I’m as clueless as Treacle when it comes to this stuff. We have a ton of stuff to learn, but we have Inga, who is not only brilliant, but she was an impressive archivist.”

Inga threatened tears again. “It’s true. I was so impressive. Terribly, terribly impressive.”

“Stay current, Ms. Moth,” Marko said a little desperately. “We’re not talking about the past. Ever. You’re still impressive. Believe you me.” He shot her a wink.

Treacle opened his mouth and closed it, snorting a puff of hot air from his oversized nostrils.

“What were you going to say?” Logan turned off his gem.

The minotaur shook his head sadly. “It wouldn’t be helpful. I am enjoying your motivational speech. Please, continue blowing sunshine up our butts. I think you missed a spot in my large colon.”

Marko burst into laughter.

Logan wasn’t going to let a dumb joke stop him. “In the mirror, you saw that I didn’t have my left leg. You know why that is? Because I lost it in combat. Roadside bomb, just north of Fallujah—

which I know doesn't mean anything to any of you, but it means everything to me. What matters is that I got off lucky, because I survived. Not all of us did. Not Sergeant Martin. All the doctors told me I would be lucky if I ever walked again, because there was also shrapnel lodged in my back. Which is when I decided I was done with luck—that I was gonna make my own luck.

"No one believed in me, but I believed in myself and I put in the sweat equity. I put in the work. I went to rehab. I went to the gym. I worked and worked and worked until I could strap on a prosthetic, walk right out of that hospital, and take charge of my life. We can do this if we want it bad enough. We just need to work for it. That, and we need to be prepared. If my time attached to the 2nd Infantry taught me anything, it's that prior preparation is the key to victory. Which is why I vote that we wake up at five a.m. tomorrow so we're out in the Akros Coliseum at six. Inga can give us a private lesson on cultivating the rich Apothos out there."

Marko puffed out his lower lip. "I don't get it. What's a five a.m.? I'm pretty sure that doesn't exist."

"Marko, our lives are on the line," Logan said, somber as the grave. "This is the only card we have left up our sleeve. We're going to outwork everyone else and level up, and we're going to do it together as a team."

That satyr wasn't convinced. "It's official. I hate this guy. So much hatred is in my heart right now for this guy."

Inga ignored him. "It really is the law of diminishing returns. Even if Chadrigoth and his crew worked as hard as we're going to work, they wouldn't show the same results. We are uniquely poised to advance exponentially."

Logan tried to snap his fingers, but his finger nubs were too stubby and moist. "That's right. Being the worst makes us the best."

"Worst. Motto. Ever," Treacle said, folding his furry, tree-trunk arms across his chest.

"Gah." Marko burst out with a, "Fine, I'm in!"

Logan quirked an eyebrow.

Marko grinned unabashedly. "Oh, I couldn't stay mad at our little mushroom leader. He's too cute. Also, I'm a joiner. I like to join

things.” He poked the minotaur with an elbow. “Come on, Treacle. We can make all of your murderous labyrinthine trap dreams come true!”

“I’ll get up early. I’ll work. It won’t matter.” The minotaur inhaled doubt and exhaled sorrow.

Logan would have to work on him.

Inga smiled. “It will be a lot of reading. I like that part. And I like teaching. But it’s late, and I need my ten to twelve hours of—”

“Drinking,” Marko finished. “Ten to twelve hours of solid drinking. We’ll sleep for fifteen minutes, and then kick some butt.”

“—sleeping,” Inga said firmly.

Out of habit, Logan checked his wrist for a watch. “It’s past eight. If we’re getting up at fiveish, we need to get to bed.”

Marko complained the whole way back to the dormitory. At one point, Treacle huffed, ears twitching like mad. “Honest to gods below, but you’re starting to sound like my long-lost wife.”

“If only I could be that lucky, you sweet beast you.”



## Chapter Thirteen



AFTER TREKKING THROUGH what felt like half of Shadowcroft Castle, they finally returned to the Azure Dragon wing of the keep. Each clan had its own residential area for the students, complete with common room, training hall, and dormitory—though the dormitory was further divided by year. The common room was a welcoming space with gray stone floors covered by plush rugs edged in blues and golds. The clan colors. An ornate marble fireplace large enough to fit a horse occupied the far side of the wall, burning with an otherworldly blue light.

Leather chairs and oversized sofas, large enough for the clan's monstrous residents, littered the room, along with sleek coffee tables. Intricately woven tapestries covered the stone walls, displaying magnificent battles scenes that could've been ripped straight from the pages of a fantasy novel: Some dark-elf warrior, wreathed in glowing shadows, sat atop a six-eyed shadow dragon. A ferocious dungeon troll with a meat tenderizer fought beside a tortoise-shelled lizard. A shapeshifting golem with mace-hands waylaid a small army of dungeoneers. Mounted prominently above the fireplace was a golden tree, entwined with a curling Azure Dragon.

### The Tree of Souls.

The common room was genuinely warm and welcoming—at least, it would've been if the Terrible Twelfth weren't at the very bottom of the proverbial pecking order. Shadowcroft Academy was an institution that valued strength, and the Azure Dragon Clan emulated that ethos to their core. The couches and chairs were already occupied by the strongest teams, while the private alcoves, fitted with bookshelves and oversized desks, were all occupied by the upperclassmen, who pretty much got first dibs on everything.

Despite that, some part of Logan wanted to stay and socialize, but then he spotted Chadrigoth and his Undead girlfriend hamming it up with some of the senior dungeon cores.

Logan wasn't one to be pushed around or bullied, no matter how small he was, but he just didn't have the mental energy to deal with that guy tonight. Especially not since he had more important matters to occupy his time. So, after a quick round of goodbyes and good nights to his team, Logan beelined for the curling staircase that led to the first-year dorm rooms. Since he was the weakest core, he also got the worst accommodations. All the way at the very top of the tower, in the attic, which meant trudging up ten flights of stairs. His narrow room was nothing to write home about—*not that he could write home*—but it included a small cot, a water closet, and a little woodburning stove.

The room was small, but Logan thought of it as cozy. Besides, he was small, he reminded himself, so it wasn't like he needed a giant room. Plus, the attic came with a fantastic view of Loch Endless. He had to climb a ladder up from Marko's room, which was pretty spartan at the moment, though the satyr had big plans. According to him and Inga, crafting items was part of the dungeon-core gig. The more they leveled, the more they could furnish their rooms.

For the time being, Logan liked his little space. He pulled the bed over next to the window, the wooden legs scraping against the stone. He wanted to fall asleep watching the moonlight on the lake and wake up to the sunrise.

He had a wardrobe, mostly empty, a chest of drawers, and a worn table. A little fire burned in the stove. As a mushroom, he didn't much like fire, but he did find the warm flames fun. It would go out in the middle of the night, and he'd enjoy the damp darkness under the sloping ceilings of his attic home.

That night, Logan couldn't sleep. He knew he needed to, and he should capitalize on the fact that Marko wasn't home and snoring. With his horns, the satyr couldn't sleep on his side, so he slept flat on his back, which made the snoring worse. The guy sounded like a foghorn alerting incoming ships.

Marko, against all reason, had gone out with his friends to the nearby town of Vralkag, the only non-academy settlement on Arborea. That Gelatinous Knight was not being a good influence on the satyr.

Marko's question came back to Logan... one of the serious ones. What was Fungal Vision? Also, Logan had to figure out which fungus he could start growing.

Since he couldn't sleep anyway, Logan closed his eyes, accessed his core, and focused on the menu options. He found a description of Fungal Vision as well as his other passive skills.

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### **Passive Fungal Form Abilities:**

- Fungaloids have a wide variety of passive abilities, which never need to be activated to be in effect. Because of their unique anatomy, evolved fungaloids cannot be blinded, deafened, or poisoned, and because they don't have a single source "brain," they are additionally immune to mental spells and psionic attacks such as charm, frighten, and calm.
- **At E-Class**, Ranks 10 – 6 Fungal Vision, Current Status: *Unlocked*
- **At E-Class**, Ranks 5 – 1 Disease Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At C-Class**, Ranks 10 – 6 Poison Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At C-Class**, Ranks 5 – 1 Ability: Replicate, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At B-Class**, Ranks 10 – 6 Blindness Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At B-Class** Ranks 5 – 1 Deafness Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At A-Class**, Ranks 10 – 6 Mental Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*
- **At A-Class**, Ranks 5 – 1 Psionic Immunity, Current Status: *Locked*

**Fungal Vision:** Fungaloids are creatures made from a collection of spores, and they can use those spores to see in a variety of ways. Fungal Vision allows the fungaloid to see in the dark and to detect invisible entities. With practice, the Fungaloid cannot be surprised since their sight encompasses their spore field.

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It was a little nerve-wracking to think Logan was constantly leaking spores, but he decided to give this new ability a whirl. He exhaled and felt the spores leave his gills, just like when he was using his pollen ability. This time, though, he concentrated on his core. He still had Apothos, but more than that, it opened him up to the knowledge that he wasn't his body, not really, but the gemstone in his belly.

Abruptly, he was seeing himself, lying on his bed, with his tiny fire flickering in the stove across the room. His clothes were hung up, and he was comfortable on his mattress, under the scratchy sheets and comfy blankets. The darkness didn't matter. He had his Fungal Vision working!

What else could he do? His character sheet said that one of his racial abilities was fungi domestication. He'd read about that while he'd been in the Threshing dungeon, but hadn't had the opportunity to go through the options available to him. Now, though, he had all the time he needed to delve into the information. It was time to get elbow-deep in all the nitty-gritty details of the abilities his new guardian form had to offer. Everyone seemed to think the fungaloid was rather worthless, but Logan knew he just needed to find the right loophole.

The right build.

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**Domestic Fungi:** There are thousands of types of mundane and magical mushrooms that grow throughout the realms connected to Ashvattha. But the fungaloid can spawn many of the rarest, deadliest, and most valuable mushrooms around. These fungi can be quite useful to dungeoneers and attract those looking for rare alchemic ingredients. More advanced types of fungi can have additional abilities or even be mobile and aggressive. Proto-Spore

Cultures live inside of the host fungaloid and can be spawned even if mature specimens are lost, destroyed, or harvested. Mature mushrooms can take days or even weeks to grow, though it is possible to drastically increase maturity with the *Rapid Growth Spore Ability*.

As an E-Class, Rank-8 cultivator, you can select *two* Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures and *one* Level-Two Proto-Spore Culture. *Would you like to view a list of available Proto-Spore Cultures? Yes/No?*

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Logan read over the text once more, though this time at a far more leisurely pace than when he'd been dangling above a wild monster hog looking to gore him to death. After rereading the description, he mentally selected *yes*, pulling a brief overview of the E-Class system:

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### **At E-Class:**

- **Ranks 10 – 6:** Unlock (2) Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures; Unlock (1) Level-Two Proto-Spore Culture.
  - **Running Total:** (2) Level-One; (1) Level-Two
- **Ranks 5 – 1:** Unlock (1) additional Level-One Proto-Spore Culture.
  - **Running Total:** (3) Level-One; (1) Level-Two

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So, even new and weak, he could unlock two level-one spore cultures and one level-two culture. Feeling excited at the possibilities, he immediately dove into the various mushroom types. Suddenly, his situation seemed better, and maybe next time, he could find a way to avoid becoming a chew toy for one of Rockheart's doomhounds.

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### ***Proto-Spore Cultures by Level***

#### **Level One:**

- **Opal Truffle (Type, Ingredient):** Growing in mossy and damp areas, the opal truffle is a prized cooking ingredient coveted by gourmands everywhere. They cannot be farmed by humans or other sentient races, so finding a cache in the wild is worth its weight in gold—literally! **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Terra, Morta
- **Silver Beard (Type, Ingredient):** This is a wispy silver fungus that hangs from trees and other bushes. A good coagulant often sought by healers and clerics, ground Silver Beard can halt bleeding in its tracks! **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Vita, Fulgur
- **God's Eye Caps (Type, Ingredient):** This fungus glows with a pale blue bioluminescent light. It has a bitter and pungent taste, but it is a key, though common, ingredient in many core purifying elixirs. It is highly valued and sought after by Alchemists and Luminosus cultivators since it is one of the few natural resources with Luminal Affinity. **Rarity:** B-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Pure Apothos, Luminosus
- **Blister Wart (Type, Ingredient/Trap):** If this fungus is stepped on or touched, it creates a painful skin rash, which includes raised blisters filled with watery pus. No one wants to touch Blister Wart, but it can be harvested and processed to produce an antibacterial salve that drastically speeds wound recovery when applied directly to an open wound. **Rarity:** E-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Corrosivus, Toxicus
- **Eyelash Stinkhorn (Type, Trap):** This ghostly green mushroom often grows on the sides of rocks and trees. They look like oversized eyelashes and are capable of emitting a horrendous smell that can deter even the most stalwart dungeoneers. **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Toxicus, Aer
- **Ghoul's Snare (Type, Trap):** This is a type of curling purple-black fungus that grows on the ground. When touched, it activates, curling around feet and entangling enemies while dealing acid damage over time. **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Corrosivus, Umbra

- **Mucal Film (Type, Ingredient/Trap):** This is a thin fungus that can be stretched taut over open pits. Although it is often used to conceal deadly traps, it can be harvested and used as antibiotic wrapping for injuries. **Rarity:** E-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Vita, Aer

## Level Two:

- **Owleye Berries (Type, Ingredient):** Not true berries at all, these fungi look like large owl eyes perched on top of spindly white stalks. These can be eaten directly and are often quite sweet—part of the reason for the name—and help cure many types of poison! **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Ignis, Toxicus
- **Ashvein (Type, Narcotic):** This type of fungus has narcotic properties, often used as a mild anesthetic in small doses. Because of its chemical properties it is sought by both healers and rogues in equal measure. *Warning:* High doses cause nausea, vomiting, and possibly strokes. **Rarity:** E-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Toxicus, Glacies
- **Bird Bill Bulbs (Type, Ingredient)** – These fungi look like yellow bird bills that grow up from the soil. Though they are highly toxic, they are very valuable. If strained properly, they can be turned into a tincture that rapidly speeds along the elemental affinity purifying process. These fungi are highly prized by Alchemists, who use them in a variety of specialized potions. **Rarity:** B-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Pure, Vita
- **Gem-Studded Puffballs (Type, Trap):** These are among the most beautiful mushrooms that grow anywhere. These bulb-shaped mushrooms are amethyst in color and studded with brilliant multicolored spikes that look like gemstones. They are very enticing, but anyone who gets too close will suffer since they explode, hurling their sharpened projectiles in every direction. The fine fragments of crystalline glass can cut through skin, blind the unwary, and cause extreme respiratory problems! **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Glacies, Aer, Mallus

- **Skullcap Waddlers (Type, Sentient/Minion):** These are the first sentient, mobile mushrooms fungaloids have access to. At only three feet tall, these stubby, mushroom-shaped creatures move around on thick arms and short legs. They aren't quick, but they do follow orders well and can wield primitive weapons. They are most effective in packs, where they can overwhelm their enemies. Beware the Waddlers! **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Vita, Mallus
- **Braincap (Type, Parasite):** This is a parasitic growth that pairs with the Symbiosis Spore ability; a Braincap can be planted on a willing host, allowing its fungaloid master to control the host or boost its abilities. When implanted, a Braincap mushroom offers its host a wide array of positive abilities: Fungal Replication, Poison Immunity, and more!

**Level Three: Fungi Locked**

**Level Four: Fungi Locked**

**Level Five: Fungi Locked**

**Level Six: Fungi Locked**

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Reading over the various fungi he could grow, Logan saw a definite silver lining. Although he still didn't perfectly understand cultivation or the elemental affinity types, it was obvious even to him that some of these mushrooms would be incredibly valuable to certain people. If he chose wisely, he could entice the right type of dungeoneers while actively warding off those with less desirable—and more dangerous—affinities.

Logan carefully considered his options. For the time being, he didn't necessarily need to choose any of the fungi, but he was sorely tempted to do so. Going through the level-one fungi, he couldn't help but imagine the potential uses for the combat-oriented mushrooms like Ghoul's Snare and Mucal Film. With a few nasty surprises like that, he might have a fighting chance—but all of the ingredient-type mushrooms couldn't be dismissed outright. If Ghoul's Snare was the stick, then strands like Opal Truffle and Silver Beard were the carrot.

Going through the level-two spores, Logan definitely liked the idea of having minions, the Skullcap Waddlers. Yet Braincap seemed especially powerful... particularly if he could team up with another dungeon.

What had Shadowcroft said? No dungeon cores would want to combine their powers with him.

He returned to what had drawn him to the fungaloid dungeon core in the first place: *Symbiosis*. With those spores, he could co-host dungeons with another core.

Well, he had three friends now. Would one of them want to team up?

He wasn't sure, and he didn't know how to ask. So, for now, he'd bide his time. He didn't think his life was in danger at the moment—no need to jump in without knowing a little more first. Still, he didn't want to wait too long. After all, he also hadn't thought a video game console would come alive to eat him, so it was possible his life was *always* in danger.

He fell asleep wondering about the Winnowing, knowing that unicorns and rainbows probably wouldn't be involved.



## Chapter Fourteen



LOGAN WOKE UP WITH his Dungeon Core Grimoire vibrating on the nightstand. Despite the fact that it was a leather tome as thick as a phone book, the book brimmed with so much potent magical energy that it might as well have been an iPad. It was five a.m. and time to get up.

“I need sleep,” he said to the room. “I need to not suck,” he said to himself.

He had a little jug of water, which he drank and splashed on his face over a porcelain tub on his bare desk. He didn’t need to brush his teeth because, *ha*, no teeth. He was feeling a little hungry, however, and he had the chicken legs from the night before.

While Marko had spent the night drinking in Vralkag, Logan had stayed up way too late studying the various aspects of his guardian form. Fungaloids might not have been much to look at, but, man, they were fascinating.

They had a wide array of skills, and among the more intriguing abilities he’d read about was his *Digestion* ability—supposedly, it was critically important to his race. If he understood correctly, he could use digestive spores to consume dead creatures even at a distance, absorbing additional core-essence in the process then instantly converting it into usable Apothos. That last bit he still didn’t entirely understand, but it seemed like a selling point. Once he started building dungeons, he could also use the ability to create an *Acidic Digestion Pit* to aid in digestive efforts. Sort of an easy, hands-off way to eat your foes.

Logan put the chicken leg in a bowl near the fireplace. He then concentrated on the meat, shedding a fine powder of nearly invisible spores. A layer of fungus appeared on the skin, moldering and gray.

A second later, Logan felt like he'd eaten something. He didn't get a shot of Apothos, but that was probably because it was only a piece of the animal and not the animal itself. If this thing had contained Apothos at some point, it was probably all gone by the time it wound up on his plate.

He shimmied down the ladder and found Marko, upside down in his bed with his hooves in the air. Logan tapped his forehead. "Okay, Marko, time to pay the piper. We warned you about staying out all night."

Marko didn't move. Logan checked for a pulse. Sure and steady. Check. He went out into the hall and down the stairs all the way to the empty common room, where the fires had all burned to coals. Inga was already there with her DCG, reading while absently sipping some sweet-smelling tea.

"You're late," she said.

Logan grinned. "Inga, I like you. You get me like no one else."

"Insects and plants should get along." She turned a page and kept on reading. She also must have some magical ability to see in low light.

Treacle came lumbering into the room.

"I'm going to need your help," Logan said to the minotaur.

Back up the stairs they went.

Treacle threw the satyr over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes—Marko snored like a jackhammer the whole while—and they made their way out to the Akros Coliseum in the crisp morning air. The world was still mostly dark, the sky the color of a fresh bruise. Like most things on campus, the Coliseum didn't properly open until eight. But unlike the library, there were no locks, bars, or doors to keep them out, and there was also not another soul in sight at this ungodly hour. That made Logan obscenely happy.

Thin fingers of gold and pink sunlight were starting to break across the horizon when they started training in earnest. That also happened to be when Marko finally stirred from his bender-fueled hangover. They'd laid him on the first row of stone seats. He lifted a fuzzy hand. "I need... coffee... and a hammer. The coffee is for you. The hammer is for me."

The air had a brisk, autumn-y chill to it. Somewhere there were pine trees, and their morning perfume mixed with the murky stink of the lake.

Inga had them head off the dirt track and into the gently swaying grass in the middle of the field, which was a terrible mistake. Logan tromped in with confident steps, eager to sprawl out in the dewy grass. Pain hit him seconds later when the green grass sliced through his fragile skin like frozen razor blades. He let out a yelp and backpedaled, a series of lace-fine cuts littering his body, arms, and legs.

“What the heck?” he called out, even as the others forged deeper into the ocean of green.

“Iceblade grass,” Inga called back over a shoulder. “It’s meant to help you focus while cultivating, plus it’s designed to help you refine your Iron Trunk. Once you become an Iron Trunk like the rest of us, you will hardly feel the sting at all. Take a seat”—she motioned toward a deceptively lush section of grass in front of her—“and we’ll begin.”

Logan grimaced, took a steady breath, then nodded. He gingerly waded back into the sharpened blades as though preparing for battle. It felt like rolling around in a fire ant mound, but he ignored the blazing pain and took a seat, crossing his legs just as the others had, then straightening his back.

“Excellent.” Inga started her lecture like she was a tenured professor. “Now, there are hundreds of different cultivation techniques and theories. The more interesting ones include Boundless Wheel, Heavenly Root, Ancient Void Flame, Metamorphic Array, Blood Prison Sea, Ashen Sun in Ascension, Wise Moonlight Chain, SpiritWater Feeding Tree, Parasitic Coil Blossom, and Lost Branch Path. And these barely scratch the surface of the possibilities. Powerful Heartwood and Crown Class cultivators are even known for inventing their own cultivation techniques, shared only with their closest disciples.”

*Heavenly Root? Metamorphic Array? Ashen Sun in Ascension?* What in the world was she talking about?

Logan raised his hand. “I’m sorry—I guess I don’t understand. Do all these techniques do different things or...” He trailed off, not sure how to finish.

Inga pinched the bridge of her nose. “My, but you really are from a backwater world. Listen, the answer is both yes and no. Each of these techniques—and the thousands of others like them—is designed to help cultivators absorb Apothos and cycle it through their cores so they can power their innate abilities, and so that their cores can ascend to the next level. Different cultivators believe that these techniques allow you to process Apothos better or faster. Some of these techniques also focus on specific elemental affinities and how best to integrate them. Still others deal in the art of Core Configuration.”

“Core Configuration?” Logan asked.

She waved his question away. “That won’t become important until you reach the upper levels of Deep Root and start the ascent into Iron Trunk. And even then, your Core Configuration doesn’t drastically start to affect outcomes until your ascension to Azure Branch. The Knot Patterns are too basic at the lower class levels to really have a huge impact.”

Marko swallowed and squinted. “Professor Inga, I have a question. Which technique allows for the most vomiting?”

Treacle burped and chewed his cud from the dinner the night before. He was mellow but not enthusiastic, and Marko was barely even present.

Logan had to save their morning. “Okay, so I don’t need to worry about Core Knot Configuration yet. Good to know. But where should someone like me even start? Maybe you could just pick your favorite technique, Inga, and teach us that.”

The moth woman snorted and laughed awkwardly. “But they’re all so good. I generally do ten minutes of each.”

“For us newbs, we need to choose one and stick with it.” Logan had the idea that Inga probably should’ve done that as well. In his experience, being a master of a single thing was far better than being a novice at a hundred different things.

She paused, lips pursing into a thin line as she tapped at her plump bottom lip. “Just one. Hmm. Well, that is a challenge, but I suppose for someone entirely unacquainted with proper Core Cultivation, the best technique is probably Boundless Wheel. It is a good foundational form that will help you to cycle Apothos quite efficiently. First, I want you to close your eyes and focus on your breathing—the rush of air filling your lungs, then trickling out.”

Logan did as he was told, stilling his mind, fighting to block out the painful cuts from the Iceblade grass. No easy task, that. It took several minutes, but eventually the sensations faded to a dull roar in the background noise of his mind. He was one with his breath. The crisp, pine-scented air swirled around him. Rich and alive with energy.

“Good,” Inga intoned, her voice mellow and strangely distant. “Now, while still feeling the ebb and flow of your breath, I want you to focus on your core. Envision it in your mind’s eye and call it forth.”

Logan followed suit, shifting his thoughts away from his lungs and toward the gem embedded in his belly, reaching out for it with his will. A picture formed inside his mind: a swirling cloud of jade and gray energy, shot through with veins of gold. It looked like a disheveled tangle of dying weeds; unkempt strands of wispy energy trailed away from the sprawling tangle.

“Since you’re new to cultivating,” Inga said, “chances are high that your core will look a proper mess. You are probably seeing tendrils trailing off. That’s what we refer to as *seepage*. You’re losing energy all the time, getting weaker every moment because you are not actively cycling that power back into your core and through your body. The goal of using the Boundless Wheel form is to turn that untidy affair into a singular orb of energy. A perfectly dense marble of Apothos. To do this, you must push your core. Spin it in a great circle, all while feeding those wispy strands of energy back into the ball in a never-ending wheel.”

Logan focused, and his body trembled with the effort.

He envisioned the ball on a potter’s wheel, spinning round and round, faster and faster. His core responded, whirling, even as he pressed down and in, shaping that power through sheer willpower.

Feeding the strands of energy into the mass, reeling them in like stray fishing line. It was almost impossible to do both at the same time, though. True, he managed to capture a few of the free-floating strands, but for every one he caught, another seemed to slip through his mental fingers. His heart was pounding like mad inside his narrow chest, and he felt like he was trying to carry a pickup truck on his back up the side of Mount Everest.

Carrying a pickup while simultaneously juggling a trio of buzzing chainsaws.

“Good,” Inga said. “This is the first phase of cultivation—a process known as *refinement*. During refinement, you aren’t actively filling your core with new Apothos, but instead you’re cycling the Apothos already contained within. Harnessing it. Now it’s time to use it, though only a little bit.”

Logan could feel her close by, but he kept his eyes shut tight, focusing on the churning sphere of power.

“What I want you to do now is peel off a few of those wispy strands and push them out. Circulate them through the meridians that crisscross the body. Meridians are a bit like veins, but instead of carrying life-giving blood to various parts of your body, they carry the essence of life themselves. Circulate the energy to your skin, reinforcing your body, tempering it against the slicing Icegrass blades.”

Logan concentrated, digging down while he envisioned a slim tether of energy floating away from his core. He focused on that tether, pushing it outward by flexing some sort of internal, metaphysical muscle he didn’t fully understand yet. The energy moved slow at first, almost hesitant, like water trickling through the cracks in a dam wall. He kept pushing, though, forcing the energy through a snaking network of invisible meridians that pulsed with a gentle life of their own. He focused on the meridians closest to his skin and felt the energy begrudgingly flow where he directed it.

A shiver ran through his body, followed by a sweet wave of relief as the nicks and minor lacerations began to heal themselves. Spongy flesh knitted closed in an instant. The sensation was so extraordinary that it almost broke the meditative spell. Logan held

strong, though. He was making real progress, and he didn't want it to end—not now. Not when he felt so close to a breakthrough.

“Reinforcing your skin,” Inga mused. “Impressive for a first attempt. Maybe there’s more to you than I thought.” She paused, the silence tense and somehow thoughtful. “Let’s push it a little further, Logan, and see how far you can go. Next, I want you to cycle the energy upward, through the heart line meridian and into your eyes. Reinforce them, just as you did with your skin.”

Logan licked his lips, his body violently trembling from the strain, which only served to open up fresh cuts, courtesy of the razor-sharp grass blades. Still, he wasn’t one to give up—never had been and never would be—so he did as he was instructed. The Apothos was responding even slower now, more sluggishly. It seemed the farther he forced the energy from his core, the harder it was to control. But after what felt like a lifetime, the buzzing energy reached his eyes. Unlike with his skin, he didn’t feel any immediate difference, but he was sure he’d done as Inga had asked.

Operating on gut instinct, he opened his eyes. Not an easy task while trying to hold the image of his core in his mind. What he saw took his breath away. Covering the field were swirling pockets of mist in a kaleidoscope of colors. Fiery orange streaks that danced here, chilly waves of blue and purple light there. He even spotted streaks of green and gray energy, drifting up like heat waves on a hot day. When he turned to his friends, he saw a faint halo of light surrounding each of them. A nimbus of gold, purple, and white flashing around Marko. Copper, crimson, and silver cloaking Treacle. A vibrant whirlwind of opal, electric blue, and neon green around Inga.

It was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. Apothos. The life force of the universe on display. And now that he could *see*, he felt an unbridled desire to drink it all up, like a man dying of thirst finding a refreshing oasis. Without actively thinking about it, he focused back on his breathing—*inhale*, hold, *exhale*, release—drawing a strand of bright red mist into the gill fronds running beneath his mushroom cap. For the briefest moment, Logan felt a surge of fiery

power, filling him with boundless energy. And then the mist hit his core...

It felt like snorting a line of cayenne chili powder. The image dissolved, and Logan found himself sprawled out on his back in the painful grass, struggling to breathe and keep his eyes open. Everything hurt.

Marko was looming over him, cackling. "You just tried to cultivate Ignis. You're a squishy plant, dude." It seemed Marko had finally shaken off his hangover and was back in good spirits. "Respect for the effort, but that's a classic leap-before-you-look situation. And believe me, I would know because I am *constantly* leaping before looking. Bet you're feeling about like I did when I woke up this morning."

Logan groaned and nodded. He really *did* feel hungover. "You have to be careful *what* you cultivate," Inga said, a smile on her normally reserved face. "Still, not terrible as first attempts go." She offered him a hand up. Logan noticed that she wasn't covered in grass-blade cuts and didn't seem at all winded by the exercise. "Before you can actively start cultivating new energy, though, you need to refine your core to at least Rank 6. And to do that, you need to practice the Boundless Wheel. Practice it until it's second nature. Until you can do it in your sleep. While reading a book. While in combat. Get that down, get to Rank 6, and I'll teach you how to *actively* cultivate and purify elemental Apothos without killing yourself in the process."

"Hey, don't let it bum you out," Marko said, slapping Logan on the shoulder. "It takes time, but even I managed to get to Iron Trunk, so you know it can't be that hard, amiright?"

"Yeah, okay," Logan replied. "I think I'm wiped on meditation, but maybe we could get in a round of sparring before we call it a day?" he asked. He was feeling exhausted to the *core*, but he would sure like to have a few moves to pull out against those doomhounds; he was sure he hadn't seen the last of them.

Inga snorted and rolled her eyes. "As if. You are as weak as kelpie grub. More grub than kelpie for sure. Right, Marko?"

“No idea, moth mama,” Marko shot back, “but I have a better idea. Instead of meditation or martial prowess, I think it’s time for coffee and breakfast! I have a greasy omelet with my name on it.”

The resounding chime of the dining bell off in the distance seemed to agree with Marko.

“Fine.” Inga crossed her arms. “Breakfast it is.”



## Chapter Fifteen



AS THEY WALKED TO THE Golden Serpent Hall, Logan realized he wouldn't need breakfast. While he'd been busy refining his core, the chicken leg in his room was busy filling his stomach. Hurray for Digestion! Neat trick alright. Logan idly wondered how hard it would be to get his own dead chicken. He'd start with an egg—it must have some primal energy to it. He got one from a friendly Treegee.

While she ate, Inga flipped open her DCG. Her hand went to her mouth. "We have a problem. I should've read closer about today's class... but I got caught up in a biography of Professor Bartholomew Nekhbet." She paused, eyelashes fluttering madly. "It was a spicy read, let me tell you." She sighed and shook her head. "At any rate, this new class with Professor Hellgazer could be a bit problematic."

Treacle moaned. "Is this the dungeon decorating class? Please, tell me it's not."

"Heck yeah it is!" Marko erupted. "It's my jam. Who needs murder when you have fashion?"

Logan held up a hand. "What's the problem, Inga?"  
"Well, Professor Hellgazer's class isn't at the castle. It's in the Xiru Forest to the west. We'll have to run to get there in time!"

"Yes, we could run," Marko replied with a grin. "Or... we could blow it off, and I could go back to bed!"

Inga looked miserable. "I can't be late. I just can't. Maybe I could fly there, but I'd have to leave you three. That would be horrible!"

Logan liked that she wanted to stay together as a team.  
Treacle burped a cloud of hay stink. "It's at least thirty miles to the Xiru Forest. No way we can make it in time. That's a shame." He crunched some more, unconcerned.

Marko made a face. "You guys! Let's just skip this one class. I promise we'll never do it again."

Inga was near tears.

“No crying, Inga,” Marko said. “I’m allergic to women’s tears. Fine. I can get us there right quick and in a hurry. We can DIE to get there.”

“Tell me I didn’t hear you right,” Logan said.

Marko rolled his eyes. “And you guys didn’t want me going to Vralkag last night. The Gelatinous Knight showed me the DIE—as in the Dungeon Interchange of Entrances. It’s a way of getting to any dungeon on Arborea.” He paused and shot a smug smirk at Inga. “Looks like you haven’t memorized the entire Dungeon Core Grimoire yet.”

Inga scowled but didn’t correct him. “So you use DIE to get there,” she said. “Now, quit your games and take us there!”

The satyr stood. “It would be my pleasure. Good ol’ Marko, saving the day.”

They headed outside to the northwest practice field. Near the ramparts of the castle was a large stone pavilion with statues of the four clan animals carved into the top. Nice thing here, the grass wasn’t trying to kill them.

They gathered around a stone table under the pavilion’s roof. There were weathered stone steps for the smaller folk, though as far as he knew, Logan was the smallest core at the school. On top of the table was a painted map of the circular continent of Arborea. Demon skull icons lay scattered across the land.

“My boy, the Gelatinous Knight, told me each of the scary demon heads marks the entrance of a dungeon,” Marko explained. “You touch the skull you want and channel your Apothos into the icon. You’ll be taken right to the entrance. From our work this morning, this shouldn’t be a problem.”

Logan studied the map for a beat—land nav had always been one of his strongest suits—and noticed that the deserts to the north had three dungeons. The mountain region had two, as did the sprawling swamp to the south. The grasslands around Vralkag had two more, while the forests to the west had three. Loch Endless had one as well. There were thirteen dungeons in all. The castle was also prominently displayed, and there was a tree icon to the east.

Marko pointed to a building in the Xiru Forest. “That’s the Wayfarer Inn. GK—that’s what I call him sometimes—says it can get pretty dicey there, and it’s hard to get to. But apparently it has the best monster mead anywhere in the multiverse, so there’s our Saturday night plans.”

Treacle appeared slightly amused. “GK?”

“Yeah, man,” Marko said. “I have no idea what that guy’s name is. He’s told me like five times, but I can’t ever remember it.”

“Which forest dungeon do we need?” Logan asked, focused as a laser. Although, admittedly, a round of drinking monster mead didn’t sound terrible. But that was for later, once he’d improved his cultivation and achieved a higher rank.

Inga already had her DCG open. “Well, pluck my feathers, it does talk about the Dungeon Interchange of Entrances. I missed that. The three forest dungeons are Root Kill, the Under Stump, and Cruelwood. Cruelwood is the one nearest Vralkag. We need to get to the Under Stump, which is the southwest dungeon.”

Marko didn’t pause. He touched the demon skull and vanished in a swirl of silver light. Treacle went next, then Inga, and Logan was left alone for a second. He enjoyed the moment. He was about to magic himself thirty miles away. Based on the dungeon locations and the scale of the map, he figured Arborea must be a hundred miles or so in diameter. He’d figured that water surrounded the land, but the painting swirled to life, with white clouds rolling around a void of inky black. Didn’t look like water. Was Arborea floating in the sky? More questions to answer, but not now.

Logan touched the Under Stump’s demon skull and cycled the merest trickle of energy from his core, sending it coursing through his finger and into the map.

A second later, he was in a forest, under looming trees, standing on a carpet of pine needles. The pines smelled good, and the place was pretty. However, Logan was so dizzy he had to put his hands on his legs so he wouldn’t fall over.

Marko lay flat on his back, looking a little green around the gills. “Probably should’ve ordered my greasy omelet with a little less grease.”

There were two other cohorts present, but not the First Cohort. Good. The less Logan had to interact with Chadrigoth and his goons, the better. There were eight other monster students of various shapes and sizes, ranging from an Inferno Salamander to a Lady Ice Dragon to an Undead Kobold Mage.

The professor, Arketa the Hellgazer, walked over to stare down at Marko.

She might've stepped off the set of *Legally Blonde*. Dark sunglasses covered her pale green face. The pink scarf wrapping her head matched both the pink business suit and her pink heels. Her fingernails, tapered to deadly points, sported the same color. She was the essence of style and grace, and yet something was off about her.

The professor's voice had a sorority girl's lilt to it. "You must be Marko Laskarelis. There may or may not be a warrant for your arrest in Vralkag."

"I'm either totally innocent or completely guilty," Marko said with a smile.

He shamelessly held up a hand so she could help him up.

Arketa the Hellgazer stepped back. "Oh, no, dear, I don't think so."

A green Rot Troll, tall and impossibly thin, came over, nose as long as his lengthy index fingers. He helped Marko up.

The satyr gave the troll a hug. "Thanks, Ed. You're the best."

The troll grunted. "Help. Friend. Good."

"Well, now, that makes everyone." While the professor talked, Logan caught a glimpse of her forked tongue.

"I'm Professor Arketa, and yes, I'm the Hellgazer. It's why I wear the dark glasses. I'm an A-Class Gorgonic Enchantress. Simply put, a gorgon."

"Not a gorgon," Marko said loudly. "More like a *gorgeous*."

Arketa laughed, the sound light and bubbly. "Oh, sweetie, I haven't been single in *centuries*. But we won't be talking about my private life. Now, I wanted to give you a tour of your first dungeon here at Shadowcroft. As you'll find out, I'm a very hands-on teacher."

She took off her pink heels and held them slung over her shoulder with one hand.

“Don’t make the hands-on joke,” Logan warned the satyr under his breath.

Marko swallowed loudly. And, mercifully, didn’t make the hands-on joke.

Arketa led them to the stump of a huge tree, long dead. Under the rotting wood was a moss-covered set of stairs. “You guys are so great. I feel so lucky to be teaching you. Just so we’re on the same page, this is Underground Feng Shui: Maximizing Your Dungeon for Murder. Unfortunately, for budgetary reasons, we had to combine this class with Minion Maintenance 101.” She paused and glanced back at them over one slender shoulder. “Believe me, I am not happy about it.”

Inga snorted out an awkward laugh. “I understand. While having a fashionable dungeon is important, minions are basically the heart and soul of the operation.”

Arketa clapped. “Oh, you’re that nice astral moth core. Yes, you did so well in the Threshing. So proud of you. I’m sorry you’re... well... *stuck* below your station. Hope that’s not rude to say.”

Inga blushed, and her antennae curled inward.

Without waiting for a proper reply, Arketa turned and ushered them down into the dungeon, talking in her sorority-girl voice. “And we’re walking, and we’re walking.” She paused at a narrow corridor near the entrance. “Now, class, a good dungeon is all about flow. You see? We have a choke point here, so those devious dungeoneers can’t easily swing their larger weapons, like axes and polearms.”

On the other side, she pointed out the punji pit—a collection of stakes concealed in the dirt and leaf clutter. “Notice, we altered the floor so the punji sticks are just the right height to pierce the feet and tear up the calves of our would-be heroes. Of course, you would want your punjis dripping with toxins to really mess with the raiders. I’d suggest something either on the Corrosivus or Toxicus side of things. Professor Rockheart will cover this more in your traps class. That Rockheart.” She sighed and shook her head.

Logan didn't know how to take that.

They went through more rooms. Traps were hidden in the twisting roots of the trees above. Other rooms had tentacled monstrosities in underwater lakes. Another chamber had a literal carpet of poisonous insects. Arketa moved the spiders and scorpions aside easily with her magic.

"I must say, I prefer snakes to spiders." She laughed like she was flirting with a frat boy. "You can understand why."

Logan made sure Marko didn't make any snake jokes. In the end, the satyr was too excited to really pay attention. Logan had never seen his buddy so focused. Arketa pointed out little flourishes a dungeon core could make—the unexpected cursed fountain, a painting that trapped you inside the canvas, and trick-tiled rooms that could bring monsters dropping down on your head.

They stopped in one such room with a very *Raiders of the Lost Ark* feel to it. Diamond-shaped stones covered the floor, while curling vines climbed the muddy walls.

Logan felt at home in the dark, wet environment. He kind of wanted to move there and set up shop. It was the perfect place for a mushroom dungeon core.

Arketa beamed at them all. "In this class, and for the rest of the year, we'll be talking about room size, corridor length and width, as well as the proper use of staircases. Your natural inclination will be to trap every single staircase, but come on, let's avoid the clichés when we can. The dungeoneers will be expecting the sliding stairs and false floors. Plus, pacing is important—I cannot stress that enough. You want to lure them into a false sense of security before pouncing with something really nasty."

"We're also going to be doing a fair amount of resource management, since you'll be severely limited in dungeon design based on your Core Strength. In some cases"—she glanced toward Logan—"severely limited is the understatement of the century." Her face seemed to soften, empathy flashing across her perfect features. Logan had fully expected all the professors to be like Rockheart, but maybe he'd been wrong. "But there are even ways around that, assuming you are creative in your build. Any questions so far?"

Logan raised his hand. “Just so you know, all of my dungeon experience is from a video game, but how big can our dungeons be?”

Arketa smiled, her very pink lipstick unsmudged and perfect. “A very interesting question coming from a fungaloid.”

Logan wasn’t exactly sure why she was smiling.

She continued. “As I said, your dungeon design—including its relative size—is limited by your Core Strength. The more Apothos you can cultivate, the bigger your dungeon because Apothos is the metaphysical energy that materializes dungeon elements. This is why cultivation is so important. And this is why the type of dungeoneers that you attract is critical. The more powerful you get, the more powerful you want your dungeoneers. I want to stress something.”

Arketa paused for dramatic effect. “It’s not just about protecting the Tree of Souls, it’s about attracting high-quality raiders, murdering them mercilessly, and siphoning their energy. A quality dungeon core will cultivate only what they need, while giving the rest of the energy back to the Tree. Which is why dungeon design is such a delicate balance. We want to stop the dungeoneers, but we also need to attract and kill them in order to rebalance the universe. Make your dungeon too difficult and no dungeoneers will ever come. Make it too easy and they’ll butcher you where you stand. We are like the Deadly Fly Trap—emitting an enticing smell while simultaneously arming ourselves for the kill.”

The professor pointed at Logan. “Believe it or not, but I happen to think you were smart to choose the fungaloid form. You can attract high-level raiders by growing any number of interesting mushrooms. Others of you, like Yellsa here”—she motioned to the Lady Ice Dragon—“can craft serious loot and imbue it with powerful spells and abilities. I’ve heard about your winter diamonds. Oh yes, I have. We’ll talk.”

Yellsa was in her half-dragon form at the time—a woman with a mostly serpentine body, except with long ice-white hair.

“But be careful,” Arketa warned. “As I said, it is a delicate balance. A dance of sorts. If you draw in raiders too powerful, they

might take your loot, kill you, and keep going.” She threw Logan a glance. “For some of you, this will be the more pressing concern.”

Logan steeled his resolve. He was the weakest core in the class, but he was determined to change that.

Arketa wasn’t about to let up on her endless encouragement. “However, for weaker dungeon cores, you need to get creative. It’s not the size of the dungeon, but how you use it. For example, you can multipurpose rooms by mixing treasures with trap rooms and putting them near your minion barracks.”

Logan nodded. “Do more with less and utilize even the smallest space. Like a murder-y trip to Ikea.”

Arketa laughed. “I don’t get it, but you expected a laugh. I want to be polite.” She shot him a wink. “Okay, class, we are walking.”

She led them deeper underground. They passed a collection of natural caves. “Sometimes, you want a more natural look. The stalactite and stalagmite combo is a classic for a reason. Also, such caves can branch off to house your minions. The trick there is to make sure your minions have their privacy but are still able to get anywhere in the dungeon as quickly as possible.” She shook her head and sighed. “We really shouldn’t have merged these courses. Well, maybe next year I can find a volunteer to teach the intro minion class. These professors can be so prickly.”

Arketa took them to what was obviously the center of the dungeon, with waterfalls of slimy root water gurling through channels in an ornate stone floor. The walls were a mixture of mud, vines, and stone carved into monstrous faces. Torches sputtered in the damp cavern. A familiar-looking pedestal rose up from the central dais.

Professor Arketa walked to the pedestal, turned, and waved her hand. “One cliché that you must embrace is the placement of the inner sanctum. Believe me, we’ve had dungeons try to hide their sanctums near the entrance. It simply doesn’t work and always, always, always ends in ruin. You want to protect your gem at all costs. Also, you want your raiders to work for their ultimate reward, which will be your destruction.”

“One question I’ve always had,” Logan said, sticking a spongy arm into the air, “is why not just wall off the inner sanctum? I mean, if

they're trying to destroy your core, why even give them a chance? I can build walls. Why not just cement myself behind ten feet of stone?"

"An excellent question," she beamed. "You see, no matter where you position your inner sanctum in relation to the rest of the dungeon, the inner sanctum itself always connects to the Celestial Node. It is the energy that flows from the Node that makes Endogenous Apothos Manifestation possible. But more importantly, the Apothos that flows from the Tree and through the Node is the same Apothos that keeps the connected world from withering and dying. If you block off the inner sanctum, the Apothos will well up, doing great damage over time. For that reason, it must never be done. Now, who wants to take ownership of this dungeon?"

Ed the Rot Troll raised a hand. "Me will, Professor Pretty. Me will try."

Arketa tilted her head. "Aww, Ed, that's sweet, but Professor Arketa is fine. Just come forward. You're a C-Class guardian, if I'm not mistaken. This should be easy for you. Fairly straightforward."

Logan watched as Ed took the scratched-up gem from his belly and let it float above the pedestal. A ripple of unseen force washed out from the pedestal in a wave. Light flashed along the pedestal, and the walls seemed to glitter briefly with arcane power.

Arketa nodded. "This is good, Ed. Now, do you want to try some changes? This isn't your crafting class—that's going to be Fiendish Fabrication with Ronnalg Crucible. He'll show you how blueprints work and how to craft items as well as architecture. Ron can be abrasive, but in the end, he's a real sweetheart. For now, I'll impart you a bit of my Apothos to give you a bump."

Ed lifted his hands, and four stone columns rose from the black water. He added torches at the top.

The professor adjusted her glasses. "The columns are useful in hiding you, but if that were the case, you wouldn't want the torches. Yet this is good, Edward, a simple improvement. Your columns create a bit of mystery, and also, you have both cover and concealment from potential ranged fighters such as archers. Oh, I hate archers. Arrows are the worst."

Since Logan's Ikea joke had fallen flat, he wasn't going to attempt a *Clash of the Titans* joke.

After a few more tweaks, Ed took his gemstone and slipped it back into his belly.

One by one, the students took their turn connecting their core to the dungeon and crafting little changes to the room.

Marko added gorgeous paintings to the columns and a fountain that smelled suspiciously like beer. When Ed the Rot Troll saw that, he produced a flagon crafted from a hollowed-out yellow horn. He stood sipping the brew. Marko's magic was impressive, but wouldn't really do much to repel raiders. Though maybe a beer fountain could be a good lure.

Treacle crafted a steampunk-looking machine that flung little copper spheres like ping-pong balls at an alarming rate. It was a good piece of crafting for the former gnome, though Logan couldn't see the boiler or flames that a normal steam-powered machine would have.

Inga summoned huge centipedes that crawled out of the water and skittered around the columns, tearing the canvas of some of Marko's paintings.

The satyr scowled. "No one appreciates fine art like they should. Beer me, Ed."

Ed passed him the flagon.

Finally, it was Logan's turn. He approached the pedestal, trembling.

"So I just take the gem out and put it up there?" he asked, licking his nonexistent lips.

She nodded. "Remember, you are the gem, not your body. The body is just an Apothos-manifested version of your guardian form. Now, relax, little guy. This will be fun."

Before dying, Logan had been well over six feet tall. He hadn't been called "little guy" since the sixth grade.

He took a deep breath of courage and touched his gem, and it easily came out into his hand. He then placed it on the pedestal, where it floated upward to spin lazily around.

Logan blinked as fresh spores dropped from his gills. He suddenly felt lightheaded, and then all sensation disappeared for a minute. When he could feel again, it was like he was wearing a big coat full of pockets. Different parts of the dungeon filled the pockets to overflowing. The hallways. The rooms. The traps. He felt the giant centipedes skittering about in the room, the placement of a punji trap near the entrance, and each leaf on every vine.

He wasn't watching over the dungeon—he was the dungeon. He could sense things he'd never sensed before, and it was overwhelming.

"Now, Logan, try to create something," the professor encouraged, her voice echoing and oddly distorted in his ears. Almost as though he were hearing her from more than one source.

Logan couldn't think straight. Every square inch of the place threatened to crush his brains into gravel meatloaf. There were just so many rooms! And he could feel Arketa helping him. Alone, he very well might've gone insane.

Logan focused on growing one of the Skullcap Waddlers, just a single mushroom.

A single red-and-white toadstool grew out of the cracks near Marko's beer fountain. He tried to increase the size, maybe have it grow some arms and legs like a real minion.

Instead, he drew it upward until the toadstool was a foot tall.

Then he felt himself losing consciousness.

His gem fell and would've smashed down on the pedestal if Arketa hadn't grabbed it and pushed it back into Logan's belly.

Her forehead creased with worry. "Dear me, you have a long way to go, Logan. Have you heard of the Tartarucha Cells?"

Logan blinked, though he was seeing with both his eyes and his spores because of Fungal Vision. "Heard of it, yeah. It's in the undercroft."

Arketa knelt so she could look him in the eye. "The Tartarucha Cells are a simulation dungeon. You need as much time in there as possible. That might be difficult since there are so many cores signing up to use it. Incoming freshmen are at the bottom of the list, which is sad, since you have the Winnowing to deal with." She shook

her head. “You need practice, a lot of practice, a miracle really, hate to say it. I’ll see what I can do, but I wouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

“Two questions,” Logan said, raising two stumpy fingers. God, it was embarrassing to have this conversation in front of the whole class, but part of him didn’t care. “One. Why do you seem to like fungaloids? And secondly, what exactly is the Winnowing?”

The professor tapped him on the head. “Well, fungaloids are rare, for one thing, which is always exciting. And for the record, I’ve long suspected that fungaloids can be amazing, we’ve just never seen one grow into its full potential. Incidentally, I also have a soft spot for this truffle cream sauce I once had in Haven’s Door on Eritreus. Made from Opal Truffles and absolutely amazing. It was delicious and virtually impossible to get outside of Eritreus.”

*Hmm. Now that’s something,* Logan thought. So far, Arketa seemed like good people, and it just so happened that he could grow something she loved. There had to be a way to use that to his advantage. He’d need to revisit that later.

“As for the Winnowing?” Her expression turned deadly serious. “Basically, the Winnowing is your Freshman Final at Shadowcroft. The four worst students are expelled.”

“I’ve been expelled from schools before.” Marko waggled his eyebrows. “It’s not so bad. Weekends aren’t a big deal anymore... except you get to hang out with your un-expelled friends.”

Arketa let her sunglasses slip a little and threw a withering gaze at Marko.

The satyr shut his trap and stopped smiling.

Logan felt his insides turn to slush.

“Expelled is a nice way of putting it,” the professor said. “Dungeon cores who wash out become wandering monsters, alone, readily killed... at the mercy of every dungeoneer with a smirk and a sword. The Winnowing is cruel, but crueler would be for a dungeon to fail at protecting a Celestial Node.”

“Utilitarianism at its best,” Logan murmured under his breath. He had to find someone to team up with because there was no way he was ever going to avoid the Winnowing on his own.



## Chapter Sixteen



THE NEXT TWO WEEKS went by in a flash. After that first *Underground Feng Shui* class, Logan had decided on two out of the three mushrooms he would cultivate. However, he was still on the fence about the second-level mushroom.

Like on Earth, the school gave the students weekends off. Logan wasn't going to spend any time goofing off, however. Inga said he needed to master Boundless Wheel so that it was as natural as breathing. So, Logan cultivated. *Constantly*. Walking up the ten flights of stairs to his room. Going to sleep. Waking up at the crack of dawn. Cross-legged in the swaying field of Iceblade grass. Relaxing in the Golden Serpent Hall. Sitting through Shadowcroft's musings about ethics and the universe. Logan worked on spinning his core into a perfect orb and taking care of all that seepage, all while constantly circulating a hair-thin tendril of power through his body, reinforcing his skin against damage and improving his eyes so he could see the floating wisps of Apothos.

Logan insisted the Terrible Twelfth keep their early morning schedule six days a week, despite the extra time off. He would've done seven, but Marko threatened to violently revolt. However, it wasn't like waking up early on Saturday would stop the satyr from partying with his other friends on Friday night. As for Treacle, the minotaur didn't mind much. Whenever he got bored, he would simply chew his cud like a Wyoming guernsey cow.

Inga, though, matched Logan step for step.

On that second Sunday, she was reading in the common room when Logan came down at six a.m. He hadn't really expected to see anyone else and had planned to go alone to the Akros Coliseum to cultivate. The Iceblade grass was miserable, but it really did help him sharpen his mind. In just two weeks, he'd already progressed to E-

Class Rank 5, which was a major threshold. He didn't feel it when he went up a rank. According to Inga and the others, that wouldn't happen until he ascended to Iron Trunk. For him, ranking up was more like a status bar in a video game—it showed the progress he was making toward his next evolutionary form.

He hauled himself up onto the bench next to her. She steeped her tea with her left hand while turning pages with her right. A fresh log burned in the fireplace on the glowing red coals, casting a scarlet light on her blue-black wings. She was in her Azure Dragon robe with the matching scarf, blue and gold.

Logan wasn't about to interrupt her, so he pulled up his Guardian Matrix Form.

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### **Logan Murray Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Fungaloid

**Current Evolution:** Toadstool

**Cultivator Class:** Deep Root Cultivators; E-Class, Rank 5

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Morta/Toxicus

**Racial Abilities:**

- Digestion

**Racial Skill:**

Domestic Fungi

- Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures
- Opal Truffles, Mucal Film, Ghoul's Snare
- Level-Two Proto-Spore Cultures
- Outstanding Allotment!

**Fungal Form (Active):**

- Harden

**Fungal Form (Passive):**

- Fungal Vision
- Disease Immunity

### **Spore Halo:**

- Pollen
- Symbiosis
- Athlete's Foot

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He glanced through the new abilities he'd been given with his E-Class Rank 5 upgrade. He now had access to another first-level Proto-Spore Culture. He'd chosen Ghoul's Snare.

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**Ghoul's Snare (Type, Trap):** This is a type of curling purple-black fungus that grows on the ground. When touched, it activates, curling around feet and entangling enemies while dealing acid damage over time. **Rarity:** C-Class; **Elemental Affinity:** Corrosivus, Umbra

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Along with the new fungal culture, he'd also gained total Disease Immunity as part of his Passive Fungal Form and, even better, he'd managed to unlock a new Spore Halo ability, *Athlete's Foot*.

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**Athlete's Foot:** Release a burst of spores that causes irritating itching between the toes. Although not lethal at this level, Athlete's Foot can be quite painful if left untreated and takes ages to clear up. So inconvenient!

**Available at:** E-Class, Rank 5+

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Going up three ranks in two weeks was no easy task. From here on out, his improvement would slow, though he was determined not to let it stop. He was still contemplating his level-two spore culture, but he didn't have to decide on anything right away. Right now, it was a tossup between the Waddler and the Gem-Studded Puffballs, but he didn't want to rush things and he still had some time.

Inga read on, and so he blinked away his character sheet and quietly began to cultivate. Reinforcing his eyes, he watched a thin golden-red miasma of Ignis Apothos drift across the floor from the fireplace. As a fungaloid, he had a natural affinity with Morta and Toxicus—cultivating those elements was like drinking pure water on a hot summer day. Ignis Apothos, however, was the hardest elemental affinity for him to cultivate by a country mile. That also made it the best to practice with. He breathed in a thin line of the churning power and drew it into his swirling core. The pain hit like a taser to the sternum, and his skin smoked and smoldered in places as that fiery energy burned through his meridians like a wildfire.

Logan was ready for it. He staunched the incoming flow and sent a pulse of his own power surging out along his internal pathways, putting out those fires and instantly reinforcing the skin and healing the burns. He was getting pretty good at directing the Apothos through the meridians in his body. He could heal the minor injuries, yet still needed Zed and Ned, the rosebush doctors, for when he lost limbs, which happened all too frequently.

From there, he contained the rest of the unincorporated Ignis Affinity through sheer force of will, directing it to circle his core in elaborate loops and swirls. His core looked almost like Saturn, with its many rings. If you cultivated pure Apothos or Apothos that was already elementally aligned with your nature, it could be incorporated and used immediately. This Ignis Affinity, though, he needed to strip down and purify. Ever so slowly, Logan peeled away fine strands of the golden energy, manhandling it into his center, where the Ignis would be chipped away by bits and pieces, then expelled as he breathed out.

“You really are getting much better at this.” Inga closed her book.

Logan opened his eyes, keeping the purification process running quietly in the back of his head.

“Sorry about being absent,” Inga said after a beat. “I got lost in that last chapter. Professor Nekhbet can spin such a wondrous tale.”

Logan adjusted the book so he could see the spine. “*The Butter Knives of Eritreus*? Am I reading that right?”

The moth woman got defensive and clutched the book close to her chest like a treasured prize. “It’s more than about spreading butter, Logan. It’s a memoir about his travels to Eritreus. Bart captures what it feels like to dine in the cafes and bistros of Haven’s Door on a spring morning or a winter night, having quiet conversations on any number of interesting topics.”

“Bart?” Logan wondered.

Inga’s antennae pulled in close. “Professor Nekhbet. I shouldn’t have referred to him as Bart.”

Logan had no idea what she saw in Professor Bartholomew Nekhbet. He taught their The History of the Soul Tree class, which was supremely boring. Grass growing, paint drying, solitary confinement levels of boring. Marko had completely given up on trying to stay awake through Nekhbet’s droning lectures. Logan had thought the subject matter would be interesting—talking about the fundamental reality of all creation—and yet, Professor Nekhbet talked in a monotone voice and had spent the first two weeks going over the anatomy of the Tallwood pines, the most common trees of the Xiru Forest.

The idea that he’d written a book about butter knives wasn’t a stretch.

Nekhbet had nattered on endlessly about roots, sap, heartwood, and branches, giving them every mind-numbing detail, none of which seemed relevant or useful in any way that Logan could understand. However, Inga sat enraptured, hanging on every word as though he were some sage prophet of old, dispensing ancient wisdom from on high. He was no Charlton Heston, though. Nekhbet was a paunchy birdman monster with a big vulture head. A bright red wattle hung from his yellow beak. Maybe it was a bird woman thing since Inga’s original race, the Okitori, were big owlish creatures?

No idea. Logan seriously didn’t even know where to start with that whole situation.

“Sounds interesting,” he said, shooting for genuine and missing. “I imagine we’ll get to Eritreus at some point. Rockheart has talked about going there on a field trip to see a real dungeon core in

action.” Eritreus was the most Apothos-rich world in the multiverse, and the birthplace of Chadrigoth, who wouldn’t let them forget it.

“I enjoy Rockheart’s trap class far more than that terrible calisthenics torture.” Inga winced. “Sorry to bring it up. I would stay off the grass as much as you can.”

Logan shrugged. “The murder grass is terrible, but things are fine. And on the bright side, I think the doomhounds are finally starting to lose their taste for me. Last time, they tore me apart, sure, but then they kept running. A part of me was offended. We’ll change subjects. Which do you like better? Traps, Pits, and Pendulums or our crafting class?”

Inga cupped her tea in both hands. “I don’t care much for either, really. I’m far more interested in the more theoretical aspects of dungeons. And Professor Crucible can be distant. He doesn’t have Professor Nekhbet’s warmth and charm.”

Logan held his tongue. She was wrong about Nekhbet. She wasn’t about Ronnalg Crucible. He was a big ogre, eight feet tall, with a lustrous moustache and a permanent frown. He mostly grunted, sighed, and grumbled at the students as they used their Apothos to create simple items. They’d been working on a single wooden chair for a few days now. Objects had to be created carefully, based on blueprints, and then brought into reality through a complex process called *Exogenous Apothos Manifestation*. It was far more complicated than *Endogenous Apothos Manifestation*, which was the process they used to manipulate dungeon spaces—creating rooms, spawning monsters, and engineering traps that would never leave the dungeon core’s sphere of influence.

*Exogenous Apothos Manifestations* were crafted enchanted items that could be removed from a dungeon space by dungeoners. Creating such items was no easy task, and Crucible threw annoyed sighs at them when they couldn’t understand the basics.

The mustached ogre was the embodiment of taciturn. He offered no personal details, didn’t ask any of his students a single question, and was generally antisocial. Rumor had it Crucible didn’t even live at the academy proper, but instead had a cabin deep in the heart of the Xiru Forest. No one had ever visited the cabin and survived.

Even worse, getting to their Fiendish Fabrication class took forever, since they had to walk to Crucible's workshop from the closest dungeon, Bloodrock, up in the Heckish Hills of the World Forge Wastes. Probably hellish would've been better than heckish—it was like a pile of miniature Mount Dooms all clustered together.

Planning for that extra time was easy for Logan, Inga, and Treacle. In fact, the minotaur always showed up early for that class. Marko? He was forever late, which hurt them in the rankings. Tardiness was a surefire way to lose points for both their cohort and their clan.

Sitting there with Inga, a realization hit Logan like a hammer blow. Inga had said it herself: she liked the theory of dungeons. That made sense. She had the study skills and discipline to really explore the many different aspects of cultivation and how that could help them work on their dungeons. But, at the same time, she lacked focus. In a way, she was like a Swiss Army knife with a thousand attachments that could do everything, but none of them particularly well. Logan, on the other hand, was a meat cleaver—he could only do one thing at a time, but he excelled at that one thing.

However, out of the entire Terrible Twelfth, she was further along than any of them. If he wanted a committed partner without a partying problem or bovine depression, Inga would be the perfect match for him.

She was the answer he'd been looking for, but he suddenly grew nervous.

Inga saw it. "What's wrong? Your energy just changed completely."

He gulped and tried to hide it. "Nothing. I'm just... not used to sleeping in that extra hour. I'm fine." He nodded his toadstool head.

"Would you like some of my honey apple tea?" she asked.

He would, but he'd like it a few weeks old, with a layer of bacteria slowly creeping across the top. He couldn't say that, of course. Now that the idea had laid root, he had to ask her to join him. Instead he veered off on another subject. "I guess in our next Ethics of Murder class, Shadowcroft is going to talk about the morality of murdering

evil before that evil bears fruit. It's an old argument on my world about a certain fascist in central Europe."

"And you say I have a non sequitur problem," the moth woman tsked. "So, no tea then?"

"No tea for me." Logan kicked himself. He couldn't waste time. If Inga didn't want to join up with him, he'd have to move on to Treacle. However much he liked Marko personally, the satyr had trouble taking anything seriously, and nothing was more serious than survival.

"Inga," he started. When words failed him, he took in a deep breath. "Listen, you like theory, I like the application of theory. I'm a fungaloid, and I have this power that would allow us—"

She cut him off and let out a breath of relief. "Night Mother above, finally," she sighed with an eyeroll. "If I had lost out to the sad minotaur, I would've been very distraught indeed. Yes, Logan, of course we're going to use Symbiosis to join our cores together. I've been pondering on it since we found ourselves in the same cohort, but I didn't want to pressure you in case you were going to go in a different direction with your dungeon build. On the off chance that you would ask, though, I've been trying to sign us up to get into the Tartarucha Cells, but I'm fearing it will be impossible. We simply don't have the seniority. You know, if you haven't picked fungi to domesticate, I have some very specific ideas on which mushrooms you should grow. Or must you have a dungeon to start growing them? The literature was unclear."

The tornado of words left Logan's head spinning. "What now? Literature who?"

Inga's antennae were stretched out to their full length. Her wings shivered. "Immelda Menagerie Inkboon's definitive work on guardian forms—*The Eternal Monsters of Our Infinite Selves: Dungeon Cores, Magical Creatures, and the Many Protectors of the Tree of Souls.*"

"That's the title?" Logan asked uncertainly.

"Of volume one, yes." Inga nodded enthusiastically. "There are eighteen volumes. Each has a unique title. It took a bit for me to find fungaloid, since it's so seldom selected. You do realize there have

only ever been thirteen fungaloids in recorded history across all the dungeon core academies, correct?"

He winced. "Yeah. Only six here. It's at the bottom of the barrel."

"Almost half come from Shadowcroft," Inga said. "It's because Shadowcroft, himself, has a more liberal view of what lesser creatures can do. Like everyone in the Terrible Twelfth. No other school would've ever taken us in at all, you know." Her eyes, solid orbs of black, looked far away. She was having a moment.

Logan wanted to ask more about her history, but then those black eyes darted to his face. "Yes, and so, for you to use your Symbiosis ability, we'll need a dungeon. I've been coming up with some options, though none are very good. We need to get into the Tartarucha Cells. But the question is how?" She tapped on her chin with a pale finger.

Logan slid off the bench. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

They left the common room and hiked up the steps. She flitted along with ease, while he felt like he was trying to summit Everest thanks to his stumpy legs. Finally, they slipped through the door into the shared room. Logan and Inga found Marko asleep, snoring like a woodchipper with his legs straight up the stone wall and the rest of him sprawled perpendicular to them on his bed. The place smelled like a teenage boy's socks dipped in beer.

Inga's hands went to her tiny nose. "Bless my beak, that is a terrible stench."

"You get used to it," Logan said with a halfhearted shrug. He didn't mention that the bacteria in the room had a certain charm. She'd be shocked enough by the state of his own place.

He climbed the ladder and motioned for her to join him. They stood in his attic room, which now had pearl-colored mushrooms growing in most of the nooks and crannies of the ceiling in a bed of green moss. The place was chilly and dark, though a flickering fire burned in the stove. Logan's human side still liked a little light and heat, though not too much. It would dry out his damp attic home.

"Do you need more light to see?" Logan asked.

“No, as an astral moth, I can see just fine.” She glanced around. “You went with the Opal Truffles. It’s a lure mushroom. An odd choice, especially since for the Winnowing, you don’t need a lure. You’d have been better to grow something far more aggressive.” She toed some slime leaking out from under his bed. “Oh yes, Mucal Film, a very good choice.”

“Thanks.” Logan went and touched the biggest mushroom growing near his bed. He’d watched it form over the past few days. “You’re right about the Truffles, but I think there’s another way they can help us. During our first lesson with Professor Hellgazer, she mentioned that she has a soft spot for some sort of truffle cream you can only get in Eritreus.”

“Of course,” Inga said, eyes lighting up. “Opal Sunset Sauce.” She patted her leather-bound book. “Professor Nekhbet described it as one of the wonders of the culinary world.”

Logan couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Of course, Nekhbet’s stupid book would actually have something useful in it. “Yeah, well it’s made from Opal Truffles. And I managed to talk Chef Treegee”—he ran the academy’s kitchen staff with a steady hand—“into whipping up a special batch just for Professor Hellgazer. I wrote her a little note, letting her know how much I would appreciate her help getting us into the simulation dungeon. I told her I would appreciate it so much, in fact, that I’d keep her flush with Opal Truffles for the rest of the school year.”

Inga fluttered her wings. “Logan, you’re simply brilliant!”

He nodded. He appreciated the kind words. And best of all? Inga didn’t think his fungal attic home was gross. In fact, she seemed at home there.

Logan’s plan worked perfectly.

The next day, their DCG’s vibrated with an incoming message, marked urgent. There, in a letter written by Shadowcroft, was an announcement. The Tartarucha Cells would be open for extended hours from 8 a.m. to midnight.

And who was signed up in the eleven-p.m. slot on every Monday night? Logan/Inga.

On Tuesdays, they'd feel the lack of sleep, but that didn't matter. Logan and Inga were going to build their very first dungeon together. He couldn't wait.



## Chapter Seventeen



THAT MONDAY NIGHT, Logan and Inga met in the undercroft lobby at the bottom of the Stairwell of True Seeing. Logan had brought the shield and dagger he'd won from the Threshing dungeon. The chipped dagger would have a hard time cutting butter, but it was better than nothing. The shield had much more promise.

After a long discussion, Logan had chosen Braincap for his Level-Two Proto-Spore Culture. Now that he knew he was teaming up with another dungeon core, he needed to commit fully to the idea.

Both he and Inga stood with the library behind them, facing the Tartarucha Cells. The big dungeon doors flew open. The guy in the slot before them was spit out onto the floor, and the doors clanged shut.

The turtle fountain had definite opinions on the subject. "I told you, Alphonse, that you don't get a second longer. Please do keep track of your time better. Spitting you out makes me uncomfortable."

Alphonse looked like your classic Egyptian mummy, with a gold headdress and a body wrapped in bandages. He smelled like dust, rot, and really old cinnamon. He bent his bandaged head. "Sorry, guys." He slunk away up the Stairwell of True Seeing. His reflection showed a tall elf with the pointiest of ears wearing the leafiest of clothes.

Logan approached the fountain. "Hey, turtle guy, we're here for our eleven o'clock slot. We good?"

The stone turtle coughed on some leftover water. "You are good, Logan and Inga. Though this is strange. Only one of you can take control of the dungeon at any one time. You know that, right?"

"Mr. Turtle," Inga said in her crisp voice. "That is our business, if you don't mind. We know what we're doing."

“Just don’t make me spit you out,” the turtle said. “I do enough of that all day long with this fountain gig.” He stopped talking to let water gush from his mouth and into the basin.

Logan and Inga pushed through the huge doors into a plain room of chiseled gray rock. A beaten bronze pedestal, sturdy but not pretty, stood in the center of the generic dungeon room.

Logan found himself nervous again. Talking about joining his core with Inga’s was one thing. Actually doing it was another story altogether.

Again, Inga felt his anxiety. “It’s fine, Logan. I’ve already seen your Guardian Form Matrix. If anyone should be nervous, it should be me. I’ve learned about your guardian form from Inkboon’s book. You don’t know much about me. I fear what you’ll see. And what you’ll think of me.”

Logan could relate. “I won’t pry into your past, Inga. Don’t worry.”

They approached the pedestal. Logan wondered aloud, “So these are the Tartarucha Cells. But it’s a single room. I wonder how that works.”

Inga’s antennae were curled up against her head. Her wings were flat against her back. “We’ll find out soon enough, I imagine. But first to the matter at hand.” She was practically quivering. “Well,” she said after a moment, “don’t keep me in suspense. Please, let’s get this first part over with. The anticipation is positively killing me.”

Logan just hoped that he didn’t actually kill her. He had no idea how Symbiosis worked or what they would experience once joined. There was only one way to find out, though. He took a deep breath, steadying himself and steeling his nerves, then released the Symbiosis spores from his gills. They glowed whitely, and Inga leaned in to breathe the dust in.

Her eyes swelled, glossy and distant.

His Guardian Core Matrix popped up of its own accord and a message flashed bright and bold.

*Inga Thosa Therian has accepted Symbiotic Bonding!*

*Notice: As the Infecting Agent, you alone can terminate the Symbiotic bond; in addition, you will receive 10% of all Apothos*

*cultivated by Inga Thosa Therian from this point forward. Bonding initiating in 3... 2... 1...*

Inga doubled over, clutching her stomach in pain as tiny crystalline mushrooms sprouted along her shoulders, while what looked like a living crystal crown formed around her head, fungal roots digging down.

A heartbeat later, Logan got flashes of memories that didn't belong to him. He saw a vast library with shelves several hundred feet high. Inga, with big eyes, feathers, and a beak, flew to retrieve books and to reshelf titles. She'd been the Grand Archivist of the Eastern Aerie Archive, and seeing the mountaintop library in all its splendor took Logan's breath away. The other Okitori were perched in the center on hanging platforms, like a collection of nerdy owl people. Inga would fly to give them their books, and everyone looked at her with such love and admiration.

A second later, he saw Inga flying through a snowstorm, on her way to a cave set in the side of a rocky cliff, miles above the ground. A collection of tall, older owls stood on steel bars set into the rock wall. This was some kind of test for her, but then Logan felt himself shoved away.

Inga's disembodied voice hit his brain. <That's enough, Logan. I don't want to remember the day of my Stringentia Strigiformes Exam. I don't ever want to recall that. So, please, try not to invade my privacy.>

Logan had been curious, but he hadn't wanted to see her memories. <Sorry, Inga. I'm not here for that.>

He blinked his eyes. <Did I just talk to you?>

<Yes, we can communicate in this fashion very effectively.> The moth girl was covered in a fine white powder, which made her sneeze. He saw her sneeze, and he felt it at the same time.

He removed his core gem and let it float onto the pedestal. He got that lightheaded feeling again, but it was better this time, because Inga's gem joined his to drift lazily over the pedestal.

With all his practice with the Boundless Wheel, he could sense the Apothos in both gems joining together through a thin tether. She had so much more Apothos than him!

Inga was strangely quiet.  
<Are you okay?> he asked.  
Her response was immediate and somber. <I am. I think you can access my matrix. Why don't you look it over, and I can answer any questions.>

<<<>>>

### **Astral Moth**

Astral Moth Guardians are as rare a sight as an Interplanar Eclipse. These beautiful-winged creatures have a unique ability to traverse the multiverse without the aid of the interplanar BYE (Branches that Yield Everywhere) System. With enough concentrated Luminosus Apothos, Astral Moths can migrate along the solar currents, tending to the Tree of Souls wherever the need is greatest. Though their appearance may make them seem harmless, Astral Moths can harness the power of the Thousand Moons, shaping it to their will. They can also call upon the deadly insectile inhabitants of the Pteryx Hive Enclave, unleashing pincers, poison, and thousand-legged horrors against would-be invaders.

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### **Inga Thosa Therian Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Astral Moth

**Current Evolution:** Mothmancer

**Cultivator Class:** Iron Trunk Cultivator; C-Class, Rank 3

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Vita/Luminosus

**Racial Abilities:**

Flight, Astral Migration

**Racial Skill:**

Breed

- Golden Centipedes
- Spike Flies

**Path of Transformation:**

- Reflective Sight

- Chrysalis Swords
- Metamorphosis

### **Path of Propagation:**

- Insect Infection
- Lepidopteral Reflex

### **Path of the Moon:**

- Moonlance
- Lunar Aura

<<< ☀ >>>

Logan saw how her matrix was similar to his. Of course, she had more options, since she was an Iron Trunk cultivator, and a fairly high-ranked one at that.

Inga's body stood stock still. Her gem, however, was alive and active. <Is everything all right? Do you see anything that troubles you?>

<No, I'm just impressed with how much you can do.> Logan was also stunned by how easy it was to take over the Tartarucha Cells. Back in the Under Stump dungeon, the experience had been overwhelming. Since then, he'd progressed a long way, and now he had Inga's core to keep him steady.

Inga's voice was amused. <Yes, my countless hours of work and study has paid off. As you well know. So, let's get to work. For now, we'll keep it simple—a simple room and a simple trap that combines both our powers.>

Logan thought that was a great idea. Best to learn to walk before trying to run a marathon. <Let's create a room off this one so we can practice hallways. Why don't you open a corridor on the west wall?>

He was met with Inga's dorky laughter. <I can't do much in this situation. You're the primary core. I'm your infected thrall. My sinuses are never going to be the same.>

<Funny. And slightly troubling,> Logan sent. <Okay, where can we access the blueprints to craft a hallway?>

Inga's gem clicked against his. Her moth form tapped his mushroom body on the head. <The Tartarucha Cells are merely simulation, so the items don't exist in any real sense. This is perfect for us since we don't have as much Apothos as some of the more advanced dungeon cores . Remember how you created that little mushroom in the Under Stump? It will work similarly here, but will require far less Apothos since we are not actually engaging in Endogenous Apothos Manifestation.>

<Someone's been paying attention in our Fiendish Fabrication class.>

Logan had gotten good at channeling Apothos through the meridians in his fungaloid form, so it was easy to concentrate on the western wall and open a hallway there. The dungeon was his body now and had meridians of its own. He chose a wide, friendly corridor with vaulted ceilings, wide arches, and iron candelabras jutting from the walls at evenly spaced intervals. Professor Arketa said that an inviting wide space was good because it gave dungeoneers a false sense of security. A narrow hallway often meant a trap.

He extended his corridor out twenty feet, then shaped a room on the other side. Doing this by himself would've weakened him completely. Maybe even incapacitated him. However, he was sharing resources with Inga, which made all the difference in the world.

He added a pit in the center of the room, then threw in some flourishes for good measure: alcoves in the walls, some shelves where he could grow mushrooms, and a few ornate stone cornices. He and Inga moved their guardian forms into the room, but there was a sense that the moth and mushroom were just more aspects of the dungeon. They each controlled their own guardian form respectively, but at this point, he and Inga were really more stone than flesh.

<The moth and the mushroom?> he thought. <That sounds like a new show on Disney Plus.>

Inga wasn't amused. <Culturally specific references will not aid me in liking you more. I feel both ignorant and alienated.>

<Sorry.>

Inga had other suggestions. <From the reading I did on the Tartarucha Cells, you need to add an entrance, then, from there, we can choose a simulated dungeoneer. We only need one at this point, though as we advance, we can add more. From my exhaustive studies of the available practice dungeoneers, we should choose Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter. He's an old favorite, a Cavalier Mage from Bharoosh. We'll keep that character class, and we'll make him a low-ranked, B-Class raider, with good strength and good intelligence.>

<Since you've obviously invested a *lot* more time into this than I have, I'll defer to you. Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter it is.>

Logan quickly crafted an entrance with a nice big archway set into the stone and a very narrow staircase descending to their trap room. With luck, Sir Brandybutter would waste a spell on the staircase and then die in their trap room without ever getting close to the inner sanctum.

With a thought, Logan summoned the Cavalier Mage, who stood under the archway in silver plate mail. He had a big backpack, a bit cartoony, a kite shield, and a thin silvered rapier sheathed at his side. A thick head of salt-and-pepper hair matched an equally salted goatee. The only thing wizardly about him was the gnarled staff in his right hand. He stood there, not moving, a scowl etched into the lines of his face. Logan would trigger him once they had their trap room set.

He re-centered his consciousness in the trap room.

Regarding the trap room, Inga was positively full of ideas. <We should grow a great many mushrooms in the alcoves on either side of the corridor that leads to the inner sanctum. Then we can hide there and pounce on the raider if he gets past our trap. I can breed Golden Centipedes for the pit, which you can then conceal with a fine layer of Mucal Film.>

Logan packed the alcoves on either side of the inner corridor with Opal Truffles. The Truffles littering his attic room had taken days to get large enough to harvest, but he hoped these would grow tall enough to hide them. Was it hope or wishful thinking?

Inga stood in front of the pit. She reached into the pocket of her robe. Tiny centipedes scuttled around her fingers. She dropped the insects into the pit with a flick of her dainty wrist. They immediately grew into four-foot-long monsters with dagger-like mandibles and hooked, razor-sharp feet. Since between them, they had plenty of Apothos, Logan added spikes. It was a six-foot drop to the bottom, and if Brandybutter survived the spikes, he'd have to fight the giant insects.

If the simulated raider somehow avoided the pit and killed Inga's scampering minions, then the mushroom and the moth girl would jump out to finish the job. At this point, the only thing Logan could do was harden himself into a target or spam Pollen at the raider. Inga, though, had other options. Not that Logan knew what those other options were. Chrysalis Swords seemed cool. But what was Metamorphosis? Would she devolve into a giant caterpillar? Or was this more of a Franz Kafka thing? Maybe she'd become a German-speaking Bohemian novelist.

Logan had no idea, and they were running out of time.

Inga walked back to him and surveyed the tiny mushrooms in the alcoves.

<Is that it?> she asked, arching an eyebrow.

<Yeah, I thought they would grow faster.> He walked into the mushroom patch covering the floor of the alcove. His feet were hidden. Nothing else. <You know, I could try putting some Ghoul's Snare in the stairwell.>

Inga's eyelids flickered. <And how long will that take? No. Perhaps Braincaps are a better option. They are your level-two spore culture, correct?>

<Yeah, but I don't know how long those will take either.>

She sighed and shook her head.

<Sorry.> Logan winced. <But no one said this would be easy, Inga. Patience.>

She shrugged it off. <It's fine. It's all fine. We'll manage. But we only have ten minutes left, so we must hurry. We can use my Lunar Aura instead. So long as we don't move, we'll be invisible. We'll stand in the alcove on the right together.>

She hustled in and cast a shimmering silvery dome over them. Logan stood awkwardly, pushed up against one of her thighs. He gripped his small shield and the dagger.

<Now, don't move,> she sent.

Logan made sure his fungaloid form stood stock-still. With only ten minutes left, it was going to be close. Most likely, the turtle would spit them out. He just hoped the raider would be dead by then.

It was time to see if their impromptu dungeon could hold up against a real foe. Taking a deep breath, Logan sent a thin trickle of Apothos into Brandybutter.

The spectral dungeoneer sprang to life at once.

“Jolly ho, a dungeon!” he exclaimed. “Huzzah! And I’m just the dungeoneer to destroy it by destroying the gem in the inner sanctum. Pip, pip, I daresay it is a good day to steal Apothos from the universe for my own selfish needs.” The guy talked like an Englishman who had left his manor house, his butler, and his accountant to go fox hunting.

Inga sighed. <They’re laying it on a bit thick with this gentleman.>

Brandybutter cast a Find Traps spell at the top of the steps leading down. “Drat, I was sure this narrow staircase would turn into a slide and drop me into a series of well-placed spikes. Well, onward we go. This dungeon won’t plunder itself.”

The Cavalier Mage reached the room and glanced around. His eyes brightened. “What do we have here, now? Opal Truffles? My, my, my. Why, my Nana Beerbutt had a delicious omelet recipe which requires such mushrooms. But no! I must resist the urge to indulge in such delicacies! It is my solemn duty to soldier onward and slay the dungeon core.”

Logan didn’t have breath to hold, but it looked like their trap room was working...

Right up until Brandybutter stopped and frowned. “This feels too easy.”

He slammed his staff on the layer of Mucal Film covering the pit. It promptly turned into a sludgy brown goo dripping from the end of the staff.

The Cavalier Mage gazed down at the centipedes that were already climbing the walls to get to him. "Egad, spikes and centipedes! Avoided the one, but not the other. Perhaps a fireball can clear the way!"

He spun up a spell in the air with his staff and sent an orange orb of death spiraling down into the pit. It landed with the force of a bomb blast, the ground shaking, plumes of gray smoke rolling up along with the smell of fried bug and roasting fungus.

Inga wilted, clearly defeated.

Logan reached out to her. <Don't worry. We'll stop him at the last minute. I'll be the bait. You have your Chrysalis Swords ready. >

<Very well. I shall be ready. >

Logan added several layers of hardened fungi to his skin.

With the centipedes cooked, Brandybutter eased around the side of the pit, heading toward the hallway.

Once the raider passed the pit, Logan waddled out like a three-year-old in a snowsuit two sizes too big. His normally white skin was a dark gray from the hardened layers of chitin. He raised his shield and his dagger as high as he could, which wasn't much, and belted out his best monster scream. He sounded about as intimidating as the Pillsbury Doughboy.

The Cavalier Mage dropped his staff and drew his sword. "Well, now, a mushroom man and a moth lady. First, I'll handle you, my fungal friend. You are precious, and yet your cuteness will do nothing to slow the fury of my blade!"

He brought the sword down on Logan, cutting through his thickened skin and hacking off the arm holding the shield. On a backslash, Brandybutter smacked the dagger out of Logan's hand. The raider then hewed off a leg as well.

Logan lay on the ground, but he still had one good arm. He hooked it around the cavalier's leg.

Inga leapt into action. Her slender arms were gone, replaced by razor-sharp blades made from silky white metal. From the elbows down, she could have passed for a T-1000 cosplayer, with his liquid metal sword arms. From the elbows up? Eh, not so much. She shot

in like a bolt of lightning, wings fluttering madly. She flew in from over the pit and flanked the raider.

“What the devil!” Brandybutter called out.

He tried to step forward, but Logan wasn’t about to let go. Inga landed. She brought one sword arm screaming down, slashing at his exposed face, but he was far too quick. Faster than Logan’s eye could follow, Brandybutter had his rapier free of its scabbard, deflecting the blow with a resounding *clang*. Inga danced back and forth, as graceful as a ballerina, both arms flying in a flurry of precise cuts, thrusts, and slashes. But despite Logan’s grip, the dungeoneer managed to repel every attack.

Inga was good—way out of Logan’s league—but surprisingly, so was Brandybutter.

If they were going to win, Logan needed to pull his weight, and not just as the dead weight pinning Brandybutter in place. He might be able to reach his fallen dagger, but he didn’t have the limbs to use it, not without letting go. But he did have his new Athlete’s Foot ability, and he was perfectly placed to use it. With a thought he released a gangrenous cloud of green spores, dusting the tops of the dungeoneer’s boots until they looked like sickly powdered donuts. Logan wasn’t sure this would even work since the man’s boots covered his tootsies.

But after only a few seconds he got an answer.

“Blazes all! What is that infernal itching?” Brandybutter started to fidget, trying desperately to shake Logan free.

Inga capitalized on the opening. She feinted, then bounded back at the last second, opening up some space between them. Her left hand morphed and changed as she lifted it, palm up, fingers splayed wide. Pale blue-white light coalesced in the center of her hand for the briefest moment before rocketing out. A lance of pure moonlight shot toward Brandybutter’s face. The dungeoneer was so preoccupied with his itching toes that he noticed the blast half a beat too late. The light slammed into him like a laser beam, slashing skin and blinding him in an instant. Inga charged, driving the tip of her remaining sword arm through his breastplate. She flew back, pulling the Cavalier Mage with her.

Logan felt the raider's weight shift. He let the Cavalier go.

Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter fell face forward into the soot-covered spikes. "Curses! Foiled again!"

Inga fluttered over the pit, looking down, the ghost of a smile on her lips. Logan crawled over. He wanted to see the impaled dungeoneer.

Before he was given a gory sight to remember, both he and Inga were spit out into the undercroft lobby. Their gems were back in their bodies as they slid across the floor. Logan's shield and dagger came clattering after them. The doors slammed shut. A second later, the doors reopened. A severed arm and leg hurtled out, smacking Logan's face.

"I do apologize," the turtle fountain said. "But it's midnight, I am tired, and so I had to close the Tartarucha Cells. Congratulations on besting the dungeoneer. I witnessed the whole exciting encounter."

Logan fell backward onto the ground, holding his severed leg. He was breathing hard. "Inga, we did it. It was close, but we got him." Talking felt so inconvenient now. He missed their immediate telepathic connection.

"For our first time?" Inga giggled. "We did amazing. And that was without your Braincaps and all the other various enhancements at our disposal."

"Inga, what were your swords made out of? Also, what is Metamorphosis? Or Insect Infection?" Logan had a thousand questions and two thousand ideas to improve their dungeon.

He couldn't stop smiling. This was a thousand times better than playing a video game. Yes, he was going to have to find medical help in the middle of the night since he still wasn't quite skilled enough to reattach or regrow limbs, but that seemed like a minor detail. His stumps throbbed but not as bad as when he'd been human. All in all, it had been one of the best nights of his life. He'd made the right decision with Inga.



## Chapter Eighteen



PROFESSOR YULLIS ROCKHEART stood on the Iceblade grass of the Akros Coliseum. A light snow covered the ground. Winter had come, and while that meant fires and hot cocoa, it also meant snow. Rockheart crossed his arms, a tad chilly and silently regretting that he'd left his embroidered scarf back in his office.

Logan went screaming by on the dirt track, waddling as fast as his legs could carry him. It wasn't fast enough. A doomhound pounced on him. Golden spores leaked from the fungaloid's gills, which caused the devil dog to sneeze. A burst of flame hit Logan, scorching half his face and a good portion of his toadstool head.

"Yes, Logan, I'm sure if you keep giving the doomhound a runny nose, you will be able to repel A-Class dungeoneers." Rockheart shook his head and shooed away the doomhound before it could again dismember the pathetic dungeon core.

The rest of his students in the Core Calisthenics class had already handled their doomhounds. The satyr had produced a flute and was piping a song that had his dog on the ground, paws over his ears, whining. The astral moth had wrapped her dog in a silky chrysalis. Even the minotaur had used some of the moth's thread to bind his own dog on the ground. The minotaur's muscles bulged nicely as the doomhound threw Rockheart a pleading look.

The First Cohort had already graduated from doomhounds to actual hellhounds, which were bigger, hairier, and could hurl lava with their tails. Even with the greater challenge, Chadrigoth and the other three master students were sitting on the stone seats waiting patiently. There was some laughter and some eye-rolling as Logan struggled with the level-one monsters.

Logan got up on his feet. He wiped some of the soot off his forehead. "You know, Professor, I'm only two ranks away from

getting my next evolutionary form. Then we'll just see how we do."

Rockheart knew exactly where Logan was in his levels. The gargoyle-griffin had been tracking both the Terrible Twelfth and its leader, the worst student in the school. However, Logan had jumped from being a Rank 9 Deep Root cultivator to a Rank 4. He would move into his next body when he reached Iron Trunk.

Five ranks in two months was impressive. Rockheart couldn't help but be moved by the dedication and the work ethic of the fungaloid. Logan and his cohort were waking up early six days a week, practicing their cultivation techniques, and spending each evening in the library before it closed. Then, on Monday nights, Logan and Inga had their usual time in the Tartarucha Cells. That, though, was troublesome. Two cores working together? It wasn't natural. However, it had become a phenomenon at the school. All of the professors—from Shadowcroft to Arketa the Hellgazer to John Toothbyte—all of them were fascinated by the antics of the two.

Rockheart had his own opinions.

Yes, the astral moth had promise, yet she lacked focus as well as social skills. She was not well liked. And yes, perhaps the minotaur, Treacle, wasn't so bad—he had managed to get some time in the simulation dungeons, and he was progressing quickly in his crafting class. But their satyr friend was unbearable. He did the bare minimum unless it involved trips to the Wayfarer Inn or boozy adventures in the town of Vralkag.

Rockheart was scowling when Logan approached, walking on the Iceblade grass and making a number of annoying sounds. "Oof. Ouch. Ack."

The toadstool came up and put his hands on his little hips. "Listen, Professor, I hope to do better when I go from a Toadstool to a Shroomian Acolyte." The fungaloid seemed cheerful despite the burns, the missing limbs, and the heinous slashes from the bladed grass.

The gargoyle-griffin sniffed. "Yes, yes, your progress is amusing, and I do appreciate your efforts. In fact, the entire Azure Dragon Clan is mildly impressed. At least you haven't actively lost us any points. However, the same cannot be said of your satyr friend. He is

late, he is obnoxious, and he takes nothing seriously. Any points you have won for the Azure Dragons have been taken away by the satyr.”

“I’ll talk to him,” the mushroom man said solemnly. “But my progress is weighed in the ranking. I’ve been doing my part.”

“You’ve studied hard in all your other classes,” Rockheart agreed begrudgingly. “Too bad you are failing in *this* one, which is the single most important class of all, Mr. Murray. As a dungeon core, it’s critical that you be a living weapon. In the real world, you won’t have your astral moth friend to help protect a Celestial Node.”

Logan shook his head. “Maybe not, but I’ll find someone to partner up with. Here’s the thing. I don’t want to do this stuff alone, and I don’t have to. So I’ll suffer through your class, Professor, because in the end, I *will* pass it. No matter what. I’m not going to be winnowed out during finals.”

Rockheart bent down on both eagle knees so he could lock eyes with the fungaloid. The gargoyle-griffin kept his voice low. “Oh, but you will fall to the Winnowing. And you shouldn’t blame yourself. The Reaper Box should’ve known better. You don’t have the Apothos to succeed here, and you never should’ve been selected. And if you were to succeed? It might encourage others of inferior stock to attend this fine school. Rest assured that I will not allow that to happen. Not under my watch.”

The fungaloid had the audacity to laugh in his face. “Professor, I didn’t ask for this, but now that I’m here? I like it. And I like the idea of protecting the Tree of Souls. I’m going to fight to stay, so you better get used to the idea of me being here.”

“And you had better get used to beatings.” Rockheart straightened, smoothing out his stony feathers. He turned and walked on eagle talons and lion claws back to the track where the First Cohort sat.

Logan yelled after him. “I’ll do you one better, Professor. I’m getting so I like the beatings. They’re forcing me to really improve at directing my Apothos through my meridians. I can heal myself now.”

“But you still need Ned and Zed to put your limbs back on,” Rockheart growled over one shoulder, irritated at the gall of the little

fungaloid. And also at himself for allowing this miscreant to get under his skin.

“You’re not wrong,” the fungaloid said with a sigh. “But once I hit Iron Trunk, Rank 5, I’ll unlock Replicate.”

“Assuming you make it to Iron Trunk,” Rockheart sneered. “Now, who here wants to give Logan his next lesson in humility?” he asked the First Cohort.

“I’ll do it!” the satyr yelled happily. The others of the Terrible Twelfth had come forward. The doomhounds and the full hellhounds had run back into their kennels.

Logan squinted at his friend.

The satyr gave him a big toothy grin. “I’ll be gentle in my beatings, almost loving in the way I’ll tear you limb from limb.”

“Really?” Rockheart asked a bit too eagerly. The fungaloid would surely fail without the support of his cohort.

“Ha, gotcha!” the satyr laughed, slapping at his fur-covered knee. “No way. Logan is my buddy, the most fungi to ever fun it up in an attic. You should see his room. It’s a mushroom mansion.”

“No puns!” Rockheart thundered.

Chadrigoth stood. “I’ll give him his daily pounding, Professor. Poor guy. I kinda feel sorry for him, and then, like magic, I don’t.” He paused and stared coolly at each member of the Terrible Twelfth in turn. “I could care less about any of these dweebs.”

Inga wrinkled her forehead in thought. “A dweeb is a boring, studious, or socially inept person.”

Treacle raised his hand. “Boring.”

Logan followed. “Studious.”

Inga sighed. “Socially inept.”

Marko laughed. “Ha! I’m not a dweeb! Just a drinking goat with a party problem. Or is that a party goat with drinking problem? Heavy drinker with a goat problem?”

The fungaloid stepped forward. “How about I choose my opponent?” He walked in front of the First Cohort.

Tet-Akhat licked the back of her hand and fastidiously smoothed the fur on her cat face. “Don’t choose me. I’m not in the mood to tear you apart, mushroom guy.”

“Hey, Tet, do you know my name?” Logan asked.

“I don’t. Sorry.”

“I shall eviscerate this little person,” Lady Elesiel offered. The green fires in her hauntingly dark eyes flared.

“Here’s my problem,” Logan said. “Chadrigoth is too flame-y. Mushrooms don’t like fire. Tet is too fast. Lady Elesiel is too undead for me. Or is it not undead enough? Either way, I want Magmarty. I think under the right conditions, I might be able to take him.”

The earth elemental got to his feet, shedding a few pebbles and leaking mud from the cracks in his body.

“My pleasure.” He opened his mouth and let out a roar of fire.

“You forget. I’m both Terra and Magma, stupid shroom.”

Logan shed a weak rain of pearlescent spores and hardened his exterior form. Magmarty paused for a second, eyed the cloud, and then walked right through it. Nothing happened. However, it did buy Logan the second he needed to draw the rusty dagger from the sheath on his little belt. Logan darted in low, hoping to drive the blade into the behemoth’s knee.

Not a chance. The fight was over before it began.

Magmarty reached down and grabbed the fungaloid in one meaty hand, scooping him into the air and shaking him like a rag doll. Instead of stopping—having made his point—the earth elemental ever so casually tore the arms off the mushroom man like a sadistic toddler with a daddy longlegs. The elemental hurled what was left of Logan to the ground.

The rosebush medics came running to fix him up.

Rockheart went and stood over him. “You might succeed in your other classes. You might impress people with your antics in the Tartarucha Cells. But if you can’t win a fight, alone, with only your own powers, then it would be better for you to fall prey to the Winnowing. Not better for you, personally, but better for the universe.”

Logan laughed weakly, a somewhat crushed mushroom lying in the dirt. “You keep telling me that, and I keep coming back for more. Wait until next week, Professor. For a second there, I had Magmarty right where I wanted him.”

Rockheart didn't find this weak creature amusing in the slightest. If he had been in any other clan, Rockheart wouldn't have cared. But Logan was part of the Azure Dragon, the finest clan at the school. The gargoyle-griffin wasn't about to suffer four years with this annoyingly plucky nuisance. Four years of him and his lackeys smearing the clan's good reputation and costing them points and leaderboard position.

No. Even if Logan somehow survived his freshman year, Rockheart was determined that the fungaloid would not be coming back to this esteemed academy. The universe needed wandering monsters, too, and that fate was all that the inept toadstool deserved.

Rockheart might not wait that long. Could he somehow get rid of the Terrible Twelfth on his own? It had been done before.

He turned away from the students, rubbing his rocky chin, pondering his options.



## Chapter Nineteen



LOGAN AND THE REST of the Terrible Twelfth sat in their crafting class, far across Arborea, nestled deep in the fiery expanse known as the Heckish Hills.

Professor Crucible's classroom was about half a mile away from the entrance of the Bloodrock dungeon. In *theory*, not a terribly far distance to navigate. In *reality*, however, it was half a mile of sheer terror and near-certain death. A series of stone corridors, steep narrow stairs, and bridges spanned deep gorges with rivers of lava glowing far below. The Heckish Hills were all about the lava. The place stank of sulfur and felt like an oven on perpetual cleaning mode.

Logan had to peel off his coat and scarf, both blue and gold and slightly imbued with magic to keep his mushroom form cool. He liked it cold, but not freezing—anything below thirty-two degrees or above eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit was dangerous for a fungal entity.

Luckily, Crucible's workshop was more cave than classroom, so it was relatively cool. Stalactites reached down while craggy stalagmites crawled their way upward. Some walls leaked water, while others were scalding hot to the touch. Open pits burned with green flame, giving the place an otherworldly feel, while also making it far hotter than Logan would've liked. One whole wall was a workbench, carved out of the stone itself, covered with tools categorized and organized by height, weight, color, and functionality. Not that tools were critical. They were creating objects out of Apothos itself—the tools simply made the process easier.

The professor called them Foci.

Opposite the immense wall of tools was an abrupt cliff face that dropped off into a yawning pit with no bottom in sight. Definitely not Logan's aesthetic, but it fit the professor to a T.

Logan tucked himself into a gloomy corner and stood in a few inches of water, which trickled down and disappeared into the cracks of the wall. Marko lingered nearby, because Marko didn't care about school, but he loved his friends. Inga sat with Treacle, way up front, as close to the teacher as they could get.

Professor Ronnalg Crucible sat on his stool, custom crafted to hold up his massive ogre body. The stool was a piece of art. The gleaming shadbush wood was etched with runes of power, and the legs were painstakingly engraved, making it seem as though living vines were holding the seat up. Professor Ronnalg's face was a series of wrinkles, each deeper and more perturbed than the next. They culminated in a luxurious brown moustache that matched a dark brown crew cut. His brow was permanently upset. Pale blue eyes, forever stern, stared from under a thick brow.

He crossed his arms. "Now, class, you've been working on your chair for months. Today we're going to see if they're any good."

According to their professor, a finely made chair was one of life's simple pleasures. Crucible's list of simple pleasures was short: three-legged stools, the love of a well-trained hunting dog, beautiful women, and a hearty steak.

The students held their newly crafted chairs, waiting to be graded. Logan had kept his project simple. It was the first time he'd ever made something out of thin air. His chair was wooden, just four legs, a seat, and a back. Classic. Certainly not lavish, but functional. Inga had gone with a reading chair that included a gently curved arm where you could hang a lantern. Treacle had built a small steampunk wheelchair, with various gadgets and gizmos, cogs and wheels. Logan wasn't sure why it was so small, and again, he didn't see a steam engine.

As for Marko, he'd spent forever crafting a baroque throne that was ridiculously ornate. On the back was a carving of the Gelatinous Knight raising a goblet in front of a stag that was being killed by the goddess of the hunt.

Whenever Crucible looked at Marko's monstrosity, the professor sighed. The mustached ogre was very adept at sighing. "Yes, class,

we'll get to the chair evaluations. First, however, we'll review what we've learned so far. Who can tell me—”

Treacle beat Inga at raising his hand. Not that either of them knew what the question was. When it came to their crafting class, the minotaur came alive. It was the only time Logan saw a spark in Treacle's eyes—the rest of the time it was all sighing and waves upon waves of existential dread. But not in shop class. There, at least, Treacle had real purpose.

Crucible gave the former gnome lord a weary look. “Would it be too much to ask for you both to wait until I finish the actual question?”

Inga lowered her hand.

Treacle didn't.

Crucible squinted at him. “What's the problem, son?”

“If you'd like a review, Professor,” Treacle said, “I can provide one. Crafting is based on three important things—blueprints, Apothos, and raw materials. As long as we have all three, we can create anything, as often as we like. Raw materials are usually based on raw elements like water, dirt, fire, metals, glass, things like that. There are some precious metals that, of course, can be used as lures in and of themselves.

“We can use our Apothos to create most things like hallways, rooms, and traps. If we need to, we can reabsorb that energy back into our cores with a slight loss of energy. This brings us to the two basic kinds of objects. Endogenous Apothos Manifestations are items that cannot be removed from the dungeon core's sphere of influence. Such items will melt like dust in the wind. Your words, sir.”

Crucible frowned. “Yes, son, I understand, but—”

Treacle wasn't about to stop. He snorted and forged right on ahead. “Exogenous Apothos Manifestations, on the other hand, are more difficult to build, because they can be removed from dungeons. This allows advanced crafters to create valuable magic items both for themselves and as lures. You yourself built the Glaive of Kings, which was a polearm known for being useful against any cultivator below your class.”

“I get it, Mr. Glimmerhappy, you like—”

The minotaur was actually smiling. “I would stop, Professor, but truly, this is the part I like the best. Once you slay dungeoneers, you get to keep their items. The items themselves can be used as lures, or dungeon cores can reprocess them, transforming them into two of the three basic components: their blueprint and their Apothos. The third component—the raw materials—are destroyed in the process. You used the example of the Helm of Darkness—a classic cap of invisibility. If you were to absorb that item, you would get a great deal of Apothos and the object’s blueprint. There is also a slight chance that you would get the *glyphic signature*, which would then mean you could bestow that invisibility enchantment on subsequent items.”

“Treacle Glimmerhappy!” Crucible thundered. “How old are you, man? Or rather, how old were you when you were Reaped?”

The minotaur looked confused. “A hundred and two. Middle-aged. Why?”

“Because you’re popping off like an excited schoolboy. Look, I know, you chose the toro guardian form for a reason. You’re a what, a Horned Artificer? Low- to mid-range C-Class?”

“Almost a Torrific Artificer, sir,” Treacle said.

Marko spit out a laugh. “He’s gonna be a Terrific Artificer!”

Crucible shut the satyr up with a look of pure silent rage. “You be quiet. I like the Horned Artificer. I’ll be patient with him. Not you, goat boy.”

“Goat man, sir.”

The professor’s forehead doubled in wrinkles. He let out a low growl. Then he turned his attention back to the minotaur. He considered Treacle for several long moments. Then he nodded. He addressed the rest of the class. “It seems we’ve had our review. Thank you, Mr. Glimmerhappy. Are there any further questions?”

“Can you go over the purpose of Foci once more, sir?” Inga’s wings buzzed behind her in anticipation.

Professor Crucible grunted, folded beef-slab arms across his enormous chest, then nodded.

“Mr. Glimmerhappy is correct in that we dungeon cores can create with only the essentials. All you need is Apothos, a blueprint, and the necessary materials. But we can also create specialized

Foci that aid in the creation process—reducing Apothos costs, production time, or even in some cases reducing material component costs. Foci are rare and extraordinarily hard to make or find blueprints for, but they’re worth their weight in gold. Some Foci can even increase your odds of capturing an item’s *glyphic signature*.”

He reached into one of the deep pockets adorning his leather apron and pulled out what looked like a complicated jeweler’s loupe. “I crafted this once I hit Heartwood cultivator. It took three months to forge, and it gives me a sixty percent chance to analyze and capture a glyphic signature. But I wouldn’t expect anything like this from any of you. I teach first-years the bare-bones basics. We don’t get fancy with glyphs and enchantments until years two and three, and only the most talented crafters learn to create Foci in year four.” He paused and stared down each monster in the room. The look on his face said in no uncertain terms that he expected none of them to make it so far. “Now, anything else?”

This time, everyone chose to remain silent.

For the next half hour, they took turns bringing their chairs to the professor. He would stand, walk to the bottomless pit, and stick the chair out to see if it vanished. Most items created within a dungeon were Endogenous Apothos Manifestations—constructs of pure energy, which could never exist outside the walls of a dungeon proper. But Exogenous Apothos Manifestations, such as their newly minted chairs could, in theory, be removed by potential dungeoneers. In essence, this was the process of creating *loot*. And Professor Crucible’s test revealed just how successful they’d been. If the “loot” survived being held over the pit, then it would also survive a trip outside the walls of a dungeon.

For Treacle’s weighty contraption, Crucible asked for the minotaur’s help in holding the chair over the edge. They both struggled to keep from dropping it. The wheelchair was small, but solidly built, and Crucible nodded in satisfaction. That was about as close as you’d get to praise in the class.

Logan approached, nervous.

His chair passed just fine. Crucible grunted. “It is an adequate chair, Mr. Murray, one that would not hold my weight, but would probably seat the mediocre just fine. Now, where is the goat boy’s work?”

Marko danced up, holding his masterpiece.

Crucible took it in one hand.

Logan watched Marko’s face light up. “See how pretty it is. And that carving is in homage to my buddy GK. I made it just for him.”

“Uh-huh.” Crucible held the gaudy piece of furniture out. It turned to dust in his hands. “We needed an Exogenous item, Mr. Laskarelis, not Endogenous. This will not help your grade, the ranking of your cohort, nor the ranking of your clan. I’m sure Rockheart will not be pleased.”

Marko put his head back. “Dude, I worked so hard on making it pretty. I didn’t think about the blueprint matrix of the thing. Do I get any credit?”

“Pretty is for dinner dates, fine dogs, and sunsets, son. Pretty is tolerable if there’s function first.”

With that, Professor Crucible stalked off, leaving the class alone. Not even bothering to dismiss them—not that he ever bothered to dismiss them.

Logan considered his adequate chair. “What do we do with them?”

Treacle pushed a button and his chair chugged to life. A hidden electric heart, like a small sun, buzzed merrily along, powering the engine’s army of pistons. “We get to keep them. Take a seat, Logan. I was getting tired of lugging you around when we had to run someplace. Here’s your Forevergreen gift by the way.”

Logan climbed up and realized it fit him perfectly. That was why it was so small. “Forevergreen? What’s that?”

Marko got on the back and shouted, “Joyride!” Then he reached and hit a switch. The wheelchair went screaming off as Inga covered her hands with her face.

Logan couldn’t see it, but he was pretty sure that Treacle was grinning.

That night, over dinner in the Golden Serpent Hall, Logan heard all about the Forevergreen Festival. It was basically Christmas, a holiday in the middle of winter, when snow was everywhere, and spring seemed like a dream too good to be true. That weekend, Shadowcroft's would be celebrating the festival with a big party, food, drink, and dancing. According to Marko, GK was brewing up his own hooch, which would consist of distilled Hydra tears, soonerberries, and GK's own slime. Which didn't make it very appealing to anyone not made from living goo.

Logan didn't eat dinner. He only had a little cup of old coffee, left over from the morning, though he would've liked for it to age longer. The fungaloid sat and watched Treacle happily eat his hay, Inga pour honey on her roast beef, and Marko create a pattern on his plate using rice, green beans, and a liberal amount of gravy. Marko would eat eventually, but he was more interested in his artistic masterpiece.

Inga had a book open, reading while they munched, but she shot a sidelong glance at Logan. "Why aren't you eating?"

He didn't know what to say.

Marko tried to explain. "It's kind of gross, Inga. No offense, my fungal friend."

"None taken." Logan paused and knew he had to say something. "I actually am eating, just not here. It started with eggs."

"The egg phase didn't last long," Marko said. "I was glad. The rotten eggs did nothing to help the smell of our rooms."

Inga grinned, her solid black eyes full of wonder. "I understand, Logan. You're using Digestion. You don't need to eat here. You can eat anywhere. So you started with eggs, but now what are you using? You get both Apothos and nutrients, right?"

Logan opened his mouth. Even then, he could feel the energy and food filling both his gem and his form.

Marko, again, beat him to the punch. "One whole chicken, recently deceased, that he keeps buried somewhere in his mushroom mansion. I don't smell it. I don't like to think about it. I don't wanna know."

"Where is it?" she asked.

Logan shook his head. “Not telling. It’s my business. We don’t tease Treacle for chewing his cud. We don’t need to talk about my dietary habits.”

Marko let out frustrated yelp. “Don’t. Wanna. Know. Moving on. Are we giving each other Forevergreen gifts? Because, you know, funds are tight, can’t really craft anything, would probably only give you booze anyway.”

Inga lowered her eyes. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but yes, I have gifts for you all. Books from the library, pulled from the shelves, special reserve.” She snorted a laugh. “Yes, I know, extravagant, but important. Shall we go now? The anticipation of seeing the glee on your faces has been killing me.”

Marko closed one eye and gritted his teeth. “Not really into the Forevergreen Festival. I have some unprocessed holiday trauma, which I kinda want to keep unprocessed.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Treacle said.

Inga wasn’t about to be denied, however.

Logan drove his new wheelchair to the Stairwell of True Seeing. He left it there while they made the trip down to the undercroft. Both Inga and Marko kept their eyes forward and hurried down after him. For Inga, it was about her new appearance. For Marko, it was all about avoiding his past, which seemed to involve the winter holiday.

They’d been going to the library for weeks now, since Chadrigoth and the First Cohort had taken over the Azure Dragon common room like they owned the place. That was okay since the Codex Athenaeum was a good place to study.

However, it was like no library Logan had ever been in. For one thing, the librarian, Madam Orry Gammy, never left the place. She was a rare guardian, a Papyrus Harpy, and her body, head, and wings were made from what looked like folded paper. She was silent, scolding, and she ran the library like it was her own personal dungeon. That meant traps in periodicals, random monster encounters in the stacks, and some peculiar ideas on sorting. She used an ancient version of the Dewey Decimal system that only she and Inga could understand.

Of course, Madam Gammy loved Inga more than anyone, and most of the time, she would only talk with the astral moth. It was love at first book.

The Terrible Twelfth had their own little space reserved at the far end of the library. They had to cross old wooden planks that spanned a dark abyss. The rickety bridge led to the private carrels and tables near windows carved into the cliffs of the island. When the wind was right, the water of Loch Endless blew against the panes.

Most nights, they had the place to themselves.

Once Inga got them situated at their usual table, she went back and got the books she'd put on hold. She had three big volumes, which she handed out in turn. Logan loved the look of happiness and expectation in her eyes.

“For Treacle, I have Tigg Allegg’s heretofore unpublished crafting book, *Don’t Stand Naked on My Blueprint*.” She gently placed a leather-bound tome, nearly as big as Logan, on the desk.

“For Marko, I have Obb Roso’s lesser-known text, *Painting for Joy and Murder*.” His book was slimmer, but far more grandiose, with a crushed red-velvet exterior edged in gold.

“Lastly, and the book I’m most excited about, for Logan I have Immelda Menagerie Inkboon’s only published appendix that focuses on plants and fungal guardian forms. It’s called *A Forest of Screams and Silence: Deadly Flowers, Terrifying Trees, and Mushroom Magics*.” She showed Logan the spine. “It has never been opened. You’re going to be the first person to ever read this.” She snorted in excitement once more, obviously tickled with herself. “You might be the only person to ever have read this. It is *exceptionally* rare.”

From somewhere in the library, someone wailed, “By the dark gods, I’ve been shot!”

Madam Gammy was there to shush them with a voice that sounded like an octogenarian smoker—two packs a day at least. “Hush, child.” Her words floated to them like the rustling of book pages. “I will take the spear out of your back. No need to make a fuss.”

Logan took the book from Inga, who couldn’t stop smiling.

Marko grinned. “So you aren’t giving us these books. You’re checking them out for us?”

“No,” the astral moth returned, “you’ll have to check them out. However, I risked my life to get them for you. These were buried deep in the stacks, and the challenges that I faced getting them were...” She trailed off, lips pursed. “Formidable,” she finally finished. “Well worth the effort, though. They are absolutely perfect, aren’t they?”

“It’s the thought that counts.” Treacle perused his book. “I, for one, like a gift I don’t have to store or pretend to use when the giver comes over. Being polite is a terrible burden. Still.” He paused and flipped to a page displaying an elaborate schematic. “I think I might just like this Tigg Allegg. Thank you, Inga.”

“You’re welcome, Treacle,” Inga said, beaming.

Marko adjusted his book on the table and laid his head on it. “Oh, so comfy. The crushed velvet really is delightful. Best pillow ever.”

Logan punched his buddy’s arm. “Be nice.”

The satyr leaned back, opened it up, and let out a happy laugh. “Hey, pictures. Aww, Inga, you know I like pictures.” His whole demeanor changed in a second. “These are actually very well done. There’s a happy tree. A happy cloud. And a way to paint shadows so they come alive to stab raiders in the back. Wow! Joy and murder!”

Logan’s tome was as thick as a dictionary, made from something that didn’t feel like leather, but rather more like someone took tree bark and hammered it flat. He opened the book, and it fell right open to a page that was made from a single flower crushed perfectly flat until it was the width of a single page. When the air hit the flower page, it plumped out into a delicate white display of petals and a yellow disc.

Suddenly, Inga’s eyes were the size of frisbees. “No, it can’t be.” She inched closer, inspecting the page with wide eyes, her antenna quivering. “My word. That isn’t a simple flower. I believe it’s a cultivation bloom.”

“That would be awesome,” Marko exclaimed. “Sometimes cultivation blooms have more recreational effects. You should just

eat it, man. Or we can share it, go on a trip, get trippy, listen to music, and look at my book.”

Treacle sighed. “Eat it. Don’t eat it. But please, quiet down. I’m enjoying my book.” He licked a broad finger and flipped another page.

Logan knew a little about cultivation blooms. Some were beneficial, some were dangerous. They were similar to the cultivation pills and elixirs that they would learn to make in their third year, except these were natural and unrefined. That made them more powerful in many ways, but also more dangerous. Purified elixirs lost a bit of their juice, but they also weren’t liable to poison you. He wasn’t about to add anything to his core just for kicks. He turned to the front page and read the introduction while Marko and Inga watched. Plumped up, the flower could now be felt in the middle.

“Well, what does it say?” Inga asked.

“Ms. Inkboon warns against anyone choosing a plant guardian form because they are so weak at first. And she says her publisher didn’t want her writing this book because it wouldn’t sell. People like dragons, liches, and goblin kings, not killer cacti. I’m trying not to be insulted here.”

They all returned to studying until Logan couldn’t stop himself from pumping a fist in the air. “Yes. This, this is going to let me take out Magmarty. Oh my God, I can’t believe it.” He turned to the middle of the book and carefully removed the flower. It looked freshly plucked, not dry as it had at first.

“Is it okay if I eat this?” he asked. “Will I get in trouble from the librarian?”

Inga nodded. “I asked Madam Gammy about magic items we found in the book. She said if you can retrieve a book without dying, the spoils of war are yours. What does the bloom do, Logan?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Logan popped the flower into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed the bitter bud down. For a second, nothing happened.

Marko gazed at him expectantly. “Do you see rocking horse elves eating marshmallow pies? Am I all trippy?”

Logan went to answer, but before he could get a word out edgewise, pain hit him like a Mack truck. He was pretty sure he'd just made a terrible mistake.



## Chapter Twenty



THE FOREVERGREEN FESTIVAL was Saturday, but that Friday, Logan was trying not to lose his mind. He sat in the worst class possible for someone in agony.

At the front of the classroom, the vulture-headed Professor Bartholomew Nekhbet rested on his big feathery butt, droning on about the Tree of Souls. Logan was having a hard time following. It felt like spiders had spun a cottony web of confusion at the very center of his mind. A four-alarm fire burned in his sunken chest. His gemstone felt like an arctic blizzard in his belly. He went from suffocating heat to coffin-cold ice in seconds. And this was actually a significant improvement.

He'd spent a sleepless night, shivering on his bed, trying to process the cultivation bloom, which Inkboon referred to as the Verdant Ascension. That energy floated outside his core, a bright shining star of white energy, connected only by a hair-thin tether of Apothos. The new energy seemed to be Vita-based, which was diametrically opposed to Morta—one of his two main elemental Affinities. So, he not only had to convert the energy but, according to Inkboon, he had to then form that energy into a pattern. A knot. Trying to tie his first knot as a Deep Root cultivator wasn't going to be easy, though, since the first knot typically didn't come until C-Class.

But that would come later, Inga assured him.

First, Logan had to peel the energy apart like an onion, stripping it down a molecule-thin layer at a time, then folding that raw power into his churning green-gold core. Once the energy was stripped of its Vita affinity, it would be cycled back out and transformed into a thin cable that could be knotted in accordance with the instructions secreted away within the cultivation bloom itself. The process was

exhausting, both mentally and physically, and felt a little bit like trying to eat an entire elephant in a single sitting.

Thankfully, Inga hadn't left his side.

She'd talked him through every step of the process, whispering encouraging words whenever he felt like curling up into a ball and dying. It took most of the night to process the first half of the cultivation bloom, and as he incorporated the influx of energy, his own core compressed. Shrinking down, down, down. Inga said it was all part of the refinement process. Ultimately, a cultivator's main goal was to shrink their center into a small, dense object and then tie the energy circling it into an ever more complex series of "knots." According to Inga, those energy knots allowed the cultivator to drastically alter the way they consumed Apothos. By using a certain configuration, a cultivator could become exponentially stronger or faster. They could unlock unheard of abilities or reduce the amount of time it took to process Apothos with elemental affinities.

Knot theory was complex—even Inga seemed daunted by the notion—and it left his thoughts in a knot of their own.

Logan slipped in and out of consciousness during the ordeal. For a time, he hallucinated an old cartoon of an atom he'd once seen. The nucleus was a happy yellow smiley face, and the electrons were giggling silverfish swimming around and around. In this case, the nucleus was his core and the electrons were Apothos.

He'd not really slept, but he'd still gotten up early for their normal cultivation work at the Akros Coliseum. That actually felt good—all that raw energy had given him something to focus on other than the pain.

Logan had limped through their morning discipline, sitting cross-legged in the Iceblade grass, reinforcing his vulnerable skin with the onslaught of excess power. By then, he'd managed to peel back and flatten out the cultivation bloom until it looked like a thick halo of white light burning around his core in a ring. Particles of energy fizzled off that halo at random intervals, transforming into thin wisps, which he constantly had to capture and cycle back into his center. It was daunting and miserable in equal measure, but also strangely

hopeful. The bloom wasn't only power—it was that, of course, and a lot of it—the bloom was *wisdom*.

The flower was the remnants of a dungeon core, distilled and passed down for future generations. The wisdom of the ancients. With each molecule he digested and incorporated, new knowledge bloomed inside his head like the bud of a delicate flower unfurling its petals. He saw glimpses of another world, one with towering mushroom spires covered in glimmering silver bark. A world of wide-open skies the color of a ripe peach. Of swaying grass as blue as the ocean, and enormous purple-petaled flowers big enough to swallow a man whole. It was a feral world of wild wilderness and gargantuan plants—a world where the foliage ruled with an iron-leaved fist.

Logan walked those forest paths in his mind, and as he did, he gained snatches of insight unique to the Verdant Ascension cultivation bloom: The life cycle of Weeping Milfoil, a carnivorous plant that could last decades without water or blood. The defensive mechanism of the Spikejack Palm. He learned about Crassulacean acid metabolism and new ways to adapt to arid climates.

Eventually he found himself in a clearing, the lush canopy overhead giving way enough for a shaft of sunlight to land on three overgrown mushrooms nestled inside of a fairy ring. The first was a squat mushroom with a bulbous brown top speckled with flecks of gold. The second was a willowy violet mushroom, its cap slender and silver. The third was a stately golden fungus, regal and nearly as tall as a man. Logan immediately felt drawn to the golden fungus, carefully tracing through the clearing, then gently trailing his fingers along its frilled cap.

There was power in the knowledge the bloom brought, even if Logan wasn't entirely sure how to apply it.

Once they finished with training, Logan silently suffered through breakfast, digesting the Apothos roiling within him, not wasting even a single thought on food or notions of eating. After the strenuous morning, he crashed in Nekhbet's class. Crashed *hard* with a capital H. And Inga wasn't going to be able to help him. She sat in the front row, eyes on her favorite professor, sighing and swooning in turns.

Marko was in the back, head reclined, snoozing. Treacle's job was to make sure the satyr didn't snore.

Logan, in the middle, was curled up in his desk, holding his stomach to keep the remainder of the swirling, circling energy from slicing up his core like a set of Ginsu knives. Inga suspected it would take him days more to incorporate the remainder of the bloom, which normally would've been fine, if not for the fact that their afternoon class was Rockheart's Core Calisthenics. Which meant doomhounds and dismemberment. He had to get the Verdant Ascension bloom figured out before then. Had to.

Trying to cultivate so much energy in a single go came with the risk of irreparably damaging his core. Logan needed complete focus, and he'd found dismemberment was terrible for focus. If he strolled into Rockheart's class with a belly full of unprocessed Apothos, it could be the end of him. Logan continued to grind away, trying desperately not to fall asleep.

Nekhbet wasn't helping on that front. Thanks to his dry and monotonous delivery, the vulture man could seriously make any subject about as interesting as tax disclosures.

"And class, speaking of branches," Nekhbet droned, "it's important to note that our Dungeon Interchange of Entrances is a poor imitation of the BYE system, which is a vital part of the Tree of Souls." He paused to stroke the red waddle on his chin. "The origins of BYE are shrouded in mystery. The Branches that Yield Everywhere. That is the acronym. B.Y.E. If a world is connected to the Tree of Souls, you can go to that world. For example, you could travel to the cafes of Haven's Home in Eritreus. You could walk the sacred limbs to see the crypts of Bharoosh. Even the beaches of Sangretta are not out of reach," he said wistfully.

Nekhbet continued to list worlds and far-off places Logan had never heard of. Somehow, he made even foreign worlds sound boring.

Logan knew about the BYE portal in Arborea, which was on a narrow spit of land separating the waters of Loch Endless from the abyss on the other side. In February, Professor Arketa and Professor Rockheart would be taking them on a field trip to see an actual

frontline dungeon. Then Logan would get to experience the BYE system for himself and not just hear about it in theory.

Mercifully, the class ended.

Logan limped to the door and slumped into his wheelchair.

Marko came strutting out with the minotaur behind him. "Treacle, your steampunk chair is amazing."

"It's not steam," the minotaur grumbled. "And it's not punk. My engine is based on a Fulgor construction. The lightning Apothos is exceedingly powerful."

The satyr obviously wasn't listening. "You can do so much with steam nowadays. But hey, did you hear Neckbutt talk about the beaches of Sangretta? That's my homeworld, and yes, the beaches are delicious."

That surprised Logan. The satyr had been paying attention, however slightly. Just when you thought Marko couldn't care less about school, he'd do something that completely surprised you.

Marko bent and touched Logan's head. "Hey, guy. You don't look so good. You know, we can go to Ned and Zed. They might be able to help you."

The hall filled with students, and Inga finally came out, looking worried. "Is he any better?"

"No," Logan said, shaking his head slowly. "You guys head to lunch. I felt the best at Akros Coliseum. I got a new chicken a few days ago, so I'm good."

It took some convincing, but he finally forced his friends to go eat while he chugged out to the coliseum. Another few inches of snow had fallen, and the air was cold, made even colder by the frigid wind sweeping in from the south. The heat from the wheelchair's fulgor engine helped him not freeze to death, but it was still a deeply unpleasant ride.

Logan closed his eyes, taking in the raw Apothos and forcing it into his messy insides.

This wasn't the first time he'd been in pain, and it wouldn't be the last. He recalled the hospital room, Sergeant Major Baker, and everything the man had told him. Don't second-guess yourself. Life was precious. The injury didn't need to ruin his life.

Logan would live in gratitude. And he would make his own luck.

He went deep inside the Coliseum, breathing in the Apothos-rich air and centering himself. He cleared his mind of every concern and found the iron will that had kept him going through the darkest hours of his life. In less than an hour, Rockheart and his pets, the First Cohort, would come out. That was the reality. Cold hard facts. If he managed to bend the Verdant Ascension to his will, he had a plan to defeat Magmarty. If he failed, not only would he get more pain, he'd also get a beating. Rockheart would never go easy on him.

More and more Apothos flowed into him. Flexing his internal might, Logan condensed his core from the size of a softball to the size of a tennis ball while simultaneously flattening out the brilliant white halo circling his center into a thin line, just as Inga had instructed him to do. But before he could fully incorporate the bloom and unlock its full store of knowledge, he needed to tie the damned knot. He'd learned to walk with a prosthetic. He'd started his own landscaping business. He'd made it profitable with endless hours of work, employee drama, sweaty days, and sleepless nights.

He could do this. Eyes closed, he pushed away his fear and worry. Rockheart was a distant thought and so was the pain and exhaustion rampaging through him. In his mind a picture formed, and he found himself once more among the towering Silverbark spires. Beneath his feet was a narrow path, hidden in the foliage, barely visible if you didn't know to look for it. Some part of him instinctively knew this was the way forward—the only way forward. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a white edge of light waiting for him.

He licked his nearly nonexistent lips, reached back, and sunk pudgy fingers into the light. It felt like grabbing ahold of a downed power cable. It squirmed in his hand and sent jags of bright pain zigzagging up his arm and through his body. He ignored the discomfort, refusing to drop the line. He turned back toward the path and began to trudge, pulling the line after him, stretching it like a rubber band as he followed the rough trail through the undergrowth. The first few steps were easy enough, but as he rounded the trunk of a particularly tall Silverbark tree, the progress slowed, each step more difficult than the last.

First, it felt like walking through waist-deep water. Hard, but not impossibly so.

After a handful of feet, the water seemed to transform into a quagmire of sticky molasses, resisting him every inch of the way.

He rounded another trunk, this one gnarled and strung with wispy cobwebs, and found himself staring at the beginning of the path once more. He'd transcribed a circle of sorts—more of a figure eight in retrospect—and now he was almost back to where he'd started. Less than three feet away, though the molasses had shifted once more, this time turning into a chest-deep pool of rapidly setting concrete. Every step was agony. Inches crept by at a snail's pace, but still he pushed.

From far away, a sound tickled at his ears—a gruff voice, barking at him. Logan knew that voice somehow, knew that it mattered and that it meant trouble, but he ignored it, straining the final inch, towing the line of power behind him.

“Mr. Murray!” the voice rumbled again, much louder now. “Don’t you dare ignore me!”

Rockheart. That was Rockheart’s voice.

Logan didn’t care. He stayed focused, pushing, straining, fighting against the resistance. Then, in an eyelink, the pressure vanished, and he connected one end of white light to the other, completing the circuit. Everything snapped into place around him, and the forest vanished, replaced instead by his burning green-and-gold core. Much smaller now than it had been before, about the size of golf ball. Energy circled his core in a looping arc that looked like an infinity symbol made of blinding light. He had no idea if he’d tied his first knot correctly, but he *did* know three things without a doubt:

One, he’d shot up not just one rank, but two—Deep Root, Rank 2.

Two, he felt like he could take on the world and win.

Three, he was finally going to put that jerk Magmarty into his place.



## Chapter Twenty-One



LOGAN'S EYES SNAPPED open just as Rockheart came slamming down on the ground in front of him. His wings grated as they closed, rustling against the subdued leather doublet covering his chest. Logan could hear the smile in the gargoyle's voice. "Your lack of respect is noted, Mr. Murray," he grunted. "But since it seems you're finally ready to join us, may we begin today's lesson?"

Logan didn't answer. He slowly stood, straightening himself to his full, though rather unimpressive, height, and offered the grumpy gargoyle a half smile.

"Sorry, Professor, just preparing for today. I was cultivating deeply."

"An A for effort. Not that it will make any difference," Rockheart replied. He pointed toward the shield and dagger on Logan's chair. "You should get your little pig sticker and trashcan lid ready."

"No," Logan said. "Don't waste my time today, Professor. I don't want to deal with your dogs for once. I want Magmarty. Right away."

The First Cohort strode up with Tet-Akhat behind them, reading from her DCG like a teenager with a new phone.

The earth elemental had heard Logan. "Good, Professor. I was getting tired of the hellhounds. Why don't I fight all of these losers at once?"

An extra bit of fire burned around Chadrigoth's head. "No, if anyone is going to take on all four of these dweebs, it should be me."

Marko ran over and slapped the Abyss Lord on the back. He jerked his hand back and blew on a burned finger. "Ouch. Not a dweeb, demon guy. And you are extra charbroiled today. I'd go with a bit more shadow, but then, I like the Umbra, brah."

Chadrigoth made a fist and a huge iron broadsword, wreathed in fire and smoke, lengthened in his fingers. "I know who I'm going to

cut into pieces today. I want the satyr. I want to teach him some manners.” He stomped forward, casually raising the massive sword, preparing to hack Marko in half.

A fine silver blade struck Chadrigoth’s cleaver aside. Inga, both her arms weapons, stood with her wings spread, her knees slightly bent. Her antennae were trained on the demon. “Not today, Prince. Today is about Logan and Magmarty.”

Treacle nodded at Lady Elesiel. “Hi. I guess you’re going to kill me at some point.” He burped up some of his lunch and chewed as if death meant nothing to him.

The undead queen rolled her eyes and folded her arms.

The cat woman continued to read from her grimoire, an ear twitching. She seemed uninterested, all things considered.

Rockheart took control. “Enough! This class will start out with our regular calisthenics. Release the doomhounds!”

The professor dropped his hand. A section of the bleachers rose, and doomhounds came storming out, yipping, yapping, and yelping. Rockheart shot up into the air to watch the ensuing carnage.

Logan darted from the grass and beelined for his chair. The second he was seated, he hit the switch and took off with wheels spinning. Inga soared into the air, wings pumping, kicking up flurries while the rest of the Terrible Twelfth scattered like the dust beneath Inga’s wings.

Pistons whooshing furiously, Logan raced ahead of the slavering doomhounds for the first time.

Marko and Treacle kept pace. Inga flew low.

The minotaur gave Logan the side-eye. “You look better, Logan. Too bad you’re going to be in pieces soon.”

“Maybe eventually. But I’m not going to get a better shot at Magmarty. I’ll need your help to take him out, though.” Logan wanted to face the earth elemental while he was riding the rush of power from tying his first knot. He didn’t want to waste even an ounce of Apothos.

“Hey, tag me in! I’ll take one for the team!” the satyr offered. “And how about we consider this my dang Forevergreen gift to you?”

Treacle, let's give these dogs something a bit spicier to chew on, shall we?"

"I'll get you to Magmarty, Logan." Inga reached out and grabbed Logan, her fingers digging into his armpits.

The minute the fungaloid left his chair, Treacle grabbed the contraption and hurled it into the incoming doomhounds. The chair hit like a mortar, exploding in a barrage of debris, a plume of greasy black smoke rising into the chilly air. There went Logan's fancy ride. Well, most victories required sacrifice. He just hoped his shield and dagger had survived.

Inga sailed Logan back over the dogs. The First Cohort had already dispatched the hellhounds and reduced them to steaming piles of Apothos, inhaling the Ignis and Umbra like potpourri.

Inga dropped Logan. He landed in front of Magmarty, doing his best to stick the three-point superhero pose. As far as Logan was concerned, he *nailed* it.

Rockheart followed, wings flapping lazily. "What is the meaning of this?" he snarled from above.

"Professor, do I have your permission to beat this little toadstool into paste?" Magmarty stared daggers at Logan. Mud dripped from the cracks in the elemental's stony skin. That mud looked damp and slightly delicious.

"Very well, Mr. Magmarty. I'd say this act of insolence requires retribution. Let the pummeling begin in earnest." Rockheart's voice was as cold as the stone of his gargoyle-y skin. "And if his gem gets cracked? What a shame that would be."

A cracked gem could kill Logan—or, at least, cripple him beyond repair. In essence, Rockheart had just okayed his murder.

Logan would need to be on his toes. His entire plan hinged on avoiding Magmarty for one critical moment because the Verdant Ascension had imparted him with the gift of Rapid Growth—a Spore Halo ability that normally he wouldn't get until he became an Iron Trunk cultivator. Inkboon had written that Rapid Growth was key to any plant or fungal guardian's survival.

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**Rapid Growth:** Use specialized spores to trigger the rapid growth and spread of true fungi. By pumping domesticated fungi with specialized stored Apothos Catalyst Spores, a fungaloid can transform a simple spore into a full-grown mushroom in a matter of seconds.

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Logan had seen the ability for himself while wandering the Silverbark Forest. All of those giant, man-eating plants had gained supremacy through their ability to rapidly grow to an enormous size, and now he could do the same for his mushrooms.

Logan released a burst of Mucal Film spores in front of them and then released Rapid Growth, pumping the film full of the pent-up Apothos coursing through his meridians. A thin layer of brown goo spread across the arena floor like an oil slick. Without wasting a beat, Logan darted forward and slid between Magmarty's legs, just like Marko had skated through the Gelatinous Knight's slime trail.

The elemental grunted. "What's this?"

"Behind you!" Chadrigoth called out.

Logan smiled and turned on a heel, spewing Opal Truffle pollen from his gills. He'd tried this move before with Magmarty, but the dumb mushrooms hadn't grown fast enough. Now, the spores took root in the damp recesses of Magmarty's cracks. The pearlescent fungi appeared as little growths not even a quarter inch long.

The elemental looked down at the Opal Truffles and actually laughed—and with good reason, since Opal Truffles were hardly an offensive powerhouse. Then he raised his blazing eyes at Logan. "You're dead."

He tromped forward with those big rocky hands ready to rend Logan limb from limb.

This time, though, Magmarty was the one who never had a chance.

Logan released Rapid Growth spores from his gills. A gust, courtesy of Inga's flapping wings, swept them directly into the earth elemental. In an instant, the Opal Truffles doubled, tripled, then quadrupled in size.

Magmarty let out a shriek of pure pain. First, he dropped to his knees, then sank onto all fours, howling. The mushrooms continued to grow, spreading like a plague thanks to the Rapid Growth.

An arm cracked off, then a leg.

The elemental's head rolled off like a bowling ball.

Logan stepped to the side, watching in mute fascination as the earth elemental became a mound of broken rock and creeping mushrooms.

The rest of the First Cohort watched with gaping mouths. Even Tet was looking up from her DCG in disbelief.

Rockheart momentarily lost control of his wings—something Logan had never seen from the professor. He landed and stood there blinking dumbly.

The fight had lasted less than a minute, yet it had resulted in the complete destruction of Magmarty.

Logan waddled forward and rummaged around in the mound of delicious mushrooms and crumbled stone. He unearthed Magmarty's gemstone and tossed it to Rockheart. "I don't feel like killing him today. It is a holiday tomorrow. Consider this my Forevergreen gift to the clan."

The professor caught the gem, still utterly speechless.

Logan hadn't taken two steps when he felt a tingling start in his fingers. He looked down and watched blisters cover his arms, legs, hands, everywhere. That tingling turned into an itch and then into pain. Black spores poured down from his gills, covering him in a layer of dust. His heart beat like a jackhammer, and his lungs worked overtime to pull in enough oxygen to keep him conscious. Logan fought to stay on his feet, but his body was far beyond his control. His core was syphoning in the Apothos from Magmarty—not from his gem, but rather the energy that had made up his guardian form. There was so much of it. Almost too much.

It felt like trying to drink down a hurricane all at once.

Logan fell to his knees, his body convulsing, arms and legs flailing wildly. The Terra Apothos wasn't hard to digest, but the Ignis Apothos was a different story. Sucking in a breath felt like inhaling hot coals. People were yelling, his friends were crowding around

him, wondering what was happening, and all Logan could do was concentrate on pushing a rush of Apothos through the knotted band of energy circling his core, stripping out the elemental affinity as he drew the power downward.

He could do this. He'd survived everything else and processed the Verdant Ascension bloom, he would survive this too. Somehow, though, he knew that this time around he wouldn't just gain a rank or two... No, his victory against Magmarty was going to take him to his next evolutionary form.

Inga held his hand. She knew exactly what was going on. "Process the energy, Logan, let it flow through your meridians. It's going to hurt. It's going to be like drinking fire, but the more you can channel through your meridians, the harder your skin will be. Your body is purifying itself, getting rid of flaws, and reorganizing your cellular and muscular structure. If you survive the process, you'll be bigger, better, and as Marko would say, more badass."

Treacle sighed. "I dunno, Inga. It's an awful lot of Apothos to take in at one time. I would imagine it will kill him."

"Not helping!" Marko said with real concern. The satyr scooped Logan up. "We'll take him back to our room. Out of my way, Chadrigoth."

Logan couldn't talk, and he couldn't open his eyes. Everything depended on his absolute concentration. Thank goodness he'd spent months cultivating.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed like that—time was slippery as he further refined his core. Snatches of imagery would float in and out of his consciousness as he worked, just as they had when he processed the bloom. Some of those images were from his past life. He watched himself clamber over the high tower on the Nasty Nick obstacle course and run the night raid at Camp Mackall. He envisioned the time he broke his arm in four places and when he'd woken up in the hospital, his leg missing. But there were also glimpses of faraway lands he was sure he'd never visited. Places with towering horrors, cascading emerald waterfalls, and untamed swatches of jungle.

Branded across each vision was the image of a stately golden fungus as tall as a man.

At some point, Logan woke up in darkness, not having slept, but fallen into a trance, moving the energy through his body. Normally, he would've gotten the knot when he'd progressed to Iron Trunk. Inkboon's gift had given him both the knot and Rapid Growth early—a fact that had likely saved his life during his first ascension.

He cracked his eyes open and found himself in Marko's bed. A little fire burned in his stove, not too much, so the room was cold. Inga lay sleeping with her head on Treacle's thigh, her wings wrapped around her shoulders like a blanket.

Marko had pulled up a chair—the one that Logan had crafted. He sat, elbows on his knees, head down. The satyr spoke in a low voice. "It's after midnight, Logan. Happy Forevergreen Festival. By the wine god's bad liver, I hate Forevergreen." He faltered, running a hand through his shaggy locks. "You know, Logan, there's something I have to tell you."

A hard crust of black fungus covered him and moving was impossible. So was talking. He could only listen.

The satyr let out a deep breath. "I'm a guy who knows how to have a lot of friends. I'm not so good at having good friends, though. So the Terrible Twelfth is important to me. I might not show it, but it is." Marko laughed a little. "I liked you right away. You're funny. That's important. You know what's more important? You're focused, and you're nice. You care about other people. That's rare." He deflated a little, slouching forward, chin resting on one palm.

"Take me for instance. I don't even know GK's real name. I guess it's just easier not to care. It's just easier to keep the party going, keep the music playing, because when the music stops? Well, then I have to get real. Then I have to remember. And that hurts, man. You have no idea how much that hurts. At some point I'll tell you what happened. Maybe you can help me make sense of it."

Marko raised his head. "Until then? Get better, Logan. We need you. Inga might be the brains of the operation, but you're the heart and soul of this team. And, for what it's worth, I know you're worried

that Treacle and I are jealous of this Symbiosis thing you have with Inga. We're not. We're good. I think we're both resigned to our fates."

Logan wanted to reach out, wanted to move, but all he could do was slip back into cultivation, channeling his Apothos through his body as it went through monumental changes. He was turning into something. What that something was? He had no idea.

He did know that he couldn't lose heart. He had to prove to Marko and Treacle that they weren't destined to fail. After all, the worst student at the school, an E-Class cultivator, had just taken apart a B-Class dungeon core. At the Shadowcroft Academy, anything was possible.



## Chapter Twenty-Two



LOGAN FINALLY FOUND sleep, deep and dreamless. He'd slept like that before, but not since his time in Iraq. True, he'd worked some grueling hours in his landscaping business, but nothing had compared to coming in after a three-day patrol, then collapsing onto his lumpy mattress, body worn out and mind broken from the prolonged stress and anxiety. Those had been difficult days, but he'd never slept sounder.

He woke with a start to a warm room smelling of food, his friends eating. Inga was in her reading chair, with a lamp burning over her head. She had a tray balanced on her lap, with a plate full of colorful cookies and a glass of chocolate milk.

Treacle's tray had three kinds of grass: red, green, and blue. The minotaur sighed. "I don't like the blue grass. But it's good for me, so I eat it. Every meal is such a chore."

Marko had a huge goblet of mead and a big turkey leg. He saw Logan's eyes open. "Hey! Our guy is awake! And so very yellow!"

Logan pulled himself up and noticed his hands, which were big and wide with three long, thick fingers. They looked like teenage mutant ninja turtle hands except he was the color of a lemon. Apparently, when life gives you lemons, those lemons also occasionally dyed you neon yellow. Around him was the black husk of the cast-off crust from his evolutionary cocoon.

Logan grimaced. Being a mushroom had its perks at times, but it could also be pretty gross. "Sorry, Marko, I'll wash your sheets for you."

The satyr wrinkled his goat nose. "What? You don't wash sheets. Is that even a thing?"

Inga sighed. "You're so disgusting."

Marko waved his bird leg around. “Kidding! Kind of. Not really. How you feel, buddy?”

Logan’s yellow feet were off the bed, and they were also very TMNT, three thick toes dipped in C-3PO paint. He was wearing a pair of Marko’s linen pants.

Wait. How could he fit in Marko’s pants?

Logan slid off the end and stood. He raised his arms. His forearms were thicker than his biceps. Then he noticed the golden ridges of hard chitin lining his body. That hard skin would give his rubbery body some much-needed solidity. Interesting. Certain parts of his body had been reinforced with what looked like additional layers of overlapping plates of fungal mail: The lower portion of his left leg, his left shoulder and forearm, and the knuckles of his right hand. All places that he’d sustained serious trauma back in the real world. It seemed the Iron Trunk transformation had not only made him stronger overall but had actually turned his greatest weaknesses into strengths.

Incredible.

He touched his cap and felt the hard ridges up there as well. His head was less round and more flouncy, like he was wearing a yellow sun hat. He gazed down at his friends. “I’m huge! I grew like five feet!”

“Two feet, short stuff,” Marko said. “Not that tall. But I like the new look.”

“I need a mirror!” Logan touched his face and felt a little nose and thin lips. He had lips again!

Marko shuffled through some drawers and gave him a mirror.

Logan instantly recognized the regal yellow mushroom from his visions. It was him. Or he was it. At least partially. He also saw that, in some ways, he had his old face back, but now he was a golden yellow mushroom man, thinner than his old Toadstool form, but with bigger hands and feet. The change was striking, but not altogether unwelcome. He was less cute toadstool and more fearsome dungeon core, which was certainly a nice change.

The gem in his belly glowed as he accessed his matrix for everyone to see:

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**Logan Murray**  
**Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Fungaloid

**Current Evolution:** Shroomian Acolyte

**Cultivator Class:** Iron Trunk Cultivator; C-Class, Rank 10

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Morta/Toxicus

**Racial Abilities:**

- Digestion

**Racial Skill:**

- Domestic Fungi

**Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Opal Truffles, Mucal Film, Ghoul's Snare, Outstanding Allotment!

**Level-Two Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Braincaps, Outstanding Allotment!

**Level-Three Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Outstanding Allotment!

**Fungal Form (Active):**

- Exoskeleton

**Fungal Form (Passive):**

- Fungal Vision
- Disease Immunity
- Poison Immunity

## **Spore Halo:**

- Pollinic Affliction
- Symbiosis
- Athlete's Foot
- Rapid Growth

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This wasn't the first time he'd shown them his matrix, and it wouldn't be the last. These were his best friends, and every day he felt closer to them—especially after Marko's confession the night before.

Treacle sat eating the blue grass and viewed the information without comment.

Marko was drinking from his goblet when the matrix filled the air. He spit out a mouthful of mead. "Shroomian Acolyte? That was my favorite emo band in high school. Oh my gosh. You're almost impressive."

Inga approached the glowing information. "Yes, a C-Class, Rank 10. Now he is immune to poison, and yes, I do believe his Digestion skill has improved exponentially."

Logan chose the Digestion ability and read through it with his friends.

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## **IRON TRUNK DIGESTION**

- Digestion converts 10% consumable mass directly into additional Apothos.
- Digestion *instantly* converts 60% of all Apothos with an Elemental Affinity into pure Apothos.
- Create up to (2) Acidic Digestion Pits in your dungeon to aid in your digestion efforts!

- **Ability Gain: Reclamation/Reconstitution.** Now the fungaloid can consume inorganic matter such as weapons, armor, metals, and fabrics, breaking them down and reclaiming the items as base usable crafting components. Reclaim 40% of the item into raw material!

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Treacle stopped chewing. Long stems of the blue grass hung out of his open mouth. “Raw materials? Raw materials from inorganic matter? Am I reading that right?”

Inga clapped her hands together. Bits of sugar and cookie crumbs went flying. “Yes! This is amazing, astounding even. And your skin, it has the beginnings of an exoskeleton. Those ridges will make you far more durable.”

Logan focused on his Harden ability and realized that it had indeed been replaced by a new ability called Exoskeleton. He activated it out of curiosity, and the lines of dark gold chitin spiderwebbed across his skin. His whole body widened. He took a step. Yes, he would be a tad slower, but he had his own suit of armor, light but resilient, reinforcing his body without being too cumbersome.

Inga wasn’t done. “I also believe your Pollen ability changes with your new form.”

Logan checked.

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**Symbiosis:** As an Iron Trunk cultivator, it is possible to use the Symbiosis ability with more than one host. You may pair with multiple dungeoneers—acting as an Eldritch Patron—or use your ability in tandem with additional dungeon cores, creating a unique relationship where a single dungeon could host multiple cores.

**Alert!** As Iron Trunk cultivator (C-Class, Rank 10), you have the ability to bond with up to three different hosts at the same time.

**Restrictions!** All fungaloids can naturally bond with one Prime Host, but maintaining a symbiotic connection with more than the Prime Host is a taxing process that can only be maintained for a limited period of time. *Note*, when the time allotment elapses, the

secondary Hosts will be released, though the Prime Host will remain infected! *Note*, to increase your infection time allotments, cultivate more Core Knots, which will allow for greater focus and more efficient Apothos utilization!

**Prime Host** = Permanent Bond

**Prime Host + 1** = 4 Hours

**Prime Host + 2** = 2 Hours

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Logan read and reread the text. Now that was interesting. It was limited for the time being but, if he could tie more knots, he would be a force to be reckoned with. Even better, he could bind with everyone in his cohort—at least for a little while. Sure, four hours was hardly long enough to set up a proper dungeon, let alone run one, but that would change as Logan became more powerful over time. The possibilities were endless.

With a grin, Logan moved on to the next ability:

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**Pollinic Affliction:** As an Iron Trunk cultivator, the fungaloid's pollen will swamp the eyes, nose, and lungs of their enemies. This cloud of spores has the possibility of disabling or even killing.

- 10% chance of causing shortness of breath
- 5% chance of causing blindness
- 3% chance of anaphylactic shock
- 1% chance of mortal sneezing

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Logan had to joke, “So, yeah, now I won’t have to worry about Sir Benadryl undoing all my evil plans.”

No one got it. Because, as Inga would say, *Culturally specific references aren’t helpful.*

Marko tilted his head and mused out loud. “Aren’t those percentages kind of lame? I mean, a one percent chance of anything isn’t very world threatening. Though”—he shrugged—“mortal sneezing *does* sound pretty bad. Death by achoo.”

Treacle shrugged. “A one percent chance isn’t zero. As for fungal infections, I used to get athlete’s foot as a gnome. My boots would get very sweaty.”

“Not anymore,” Marko said cheerfully. “Having hooves rules.” He clopped his feet down.

Inga couldn’t stop smiling and shaking her head. “You get so many more Proto-Spore Cultures to choose from, including a level three. This is very important, Logan. This changes everything. Your powers are significantly more impressive.” She paused and glanced down, not willing to meet his eyes. “You know, if you don’t want to continue our symbiotic relationship, I would understand.”

Before he could answer, Marko, oblivious, settled an arm over Logan’s shoulders. The satyr was still taller, but now Logan felt more like his brother than his five-year-old son. “This is all great news, Logan, my mushroom mate, my blinding yellow boy, but really, we need to get to the party. A few weeks ago, I had Chef Treegee put aside a pot of coffee for you. There’s a fine layer of muck on top. You’ll love it.”

Treacle grabbed their empty trays. “I don’t much like parties. But it’s too early to go to bed. I might as well be miserable in the Golden Serpent Hall.” He ducked out of the room. Marko left with the minotaur, leaving Logan and Inga alone.

A worry line creased the skin between the astral moth’s eyebrows.

“Inga,” Logan said, “I told Rockheart, and I’m telling you. I don’t want to do this dungeon core stuff alone. Back on my planet, we had a saying, *esprit de corps*, which basically boils down to the feeling you get when you’re with a team, working together. It’s what has kept me going.”

Her antennae shrank. “But if you knew about me, if you knew how often I fail, you wouldn’t want me in your team. Besides, I’m so ugly now.” That crease between her eyebrows deepened.

Logan tried to soothe her. “You’re not ugly, and even if you were, I’d make you look good in comparison. I’m a yellow mushroom guy with a skin condition. Granted, the skin condition gives me armor, but

it still isn't all that easy on the eyes. Bottom line, we're partners. I want us to take the Winnowing exam together. If you're willing."

Inga searched his face to see if he was serious. When she saw he was, she nodded, and her demeanor changed. "Of course we'll take the Winnowing exam together. And you were right with all your talk of the law of diminishing returns. Now, let's go watch Marko dance. I find it both amusing and slightly disconcerting." A small smile crept across her face when she talked about the satyr. It was a far tamer version of the look she usually reserved for Professor Nekhbet.

Interesting.

Logan put on one of Marko's Azure Dragon robes, and they made the trek to the Golden Serpent Hall. The place had been transformed, with tall trees of every kind growing straight out of the floor. Candles were attached to their branches, giving the place a nice, Christmas-tree light. Not Christmas-y? A strange band of slug people played music on the raised platform at the front of the room.

Treacle stood in a corner, disgruntled as ever, while there in the middle, Marko cut a fearsome rug. He was both funny looking, not caring at all what people thought, and strangely graceful, keeping time, working his arms, bobbing his head, and having the time of his life. The Gelatinous Knight danced near him. He was an awkward, gooey affair.

As Logan and Inga made their way over to Treacle, Ed the Rot Troll came up to him. The huge green thing nodded. "Mushroom. Yellow. Flouncy." He flicked Logan's cap, sending wobbles across his head.

"Me like." Ed kept on walking.

The First Cohort stood across the room with Professor Rockheart. Ned and Zed had done a good job of putting Jimi Magmarty back together. The earth elemental towered over the rest, and it was comical how the gargoyle professor and his favorite band of butt-kissers kept their eyes off Logan and his friends. As if Logan cared. Tet-Akhat stood with a bored look on her face. She caught Logan's eye and nodded at him.

He nodded back. They both smiled, sharing a little moment.

Inga convinced Treacle to dance with her, and they left their corner. Treacle figured he'd be equally miserable dancing as standing, so it didn't matter. And it would make Inga happy. They joined Marko, and the satyr let out an elated yell. Alphonse the Spice Mummy and Yellsa the Lady Ice Dragon joined them. They all danced in a big group, swaying and spinning in ways no human could ever move.

Logan was left alone, tapping his three-toed feet.

Shadowcroft was going around talking with professors and students, making sure everyone was having a good time, though the treelike headmaster would sometimes blend in too well with the various types of trees.

The old tree man happily let out a hoot and spread his arms when he saw Logan. "Yes! You have reached Iron Trunk and a new evolutionary form, Mr. Murray. And my, how yellow you are. Remind me again the name of an Iron Trunk fungaloid."

"Shroomian Acolyte," Logan said.

Shadowcroft circled him. "Yes, I see your Harden skill has improved, and I'm sure that's not all. We haven't spoken, but I wanted to congratulate you on your many achievements. What you are doing with Inga Thosa Therian is remarkable. Really, truly remarkable. You two have all the professors talking, you know. How wrong I was about fungaloid. But of course, I thought you were a normal core. You are not. You are so much more." He tapped the side of his gnarled crooked nose conspiratorially.

Logan offered him a lopsided shrug. "That's what people keep telling me. I like working with Inga. And I love my friends. Honestly, I'm just happy to be here."

"Friends." The smile on Shadowcroft's face dimmed. "Yes, friendship can be a blessing in this world." A few flowers on his grassy skull withered. "It can also be a curse. I wish you luck in your friendships, the field trip, and the Winnowing. We're halfway to the end of the school year, Mr. Murray. Halfway to the Winnowing." Shadowcroft patted his back. "You've come a long way. You're not dead, and so you can continue to do wonderful things!"

With that, the headmaster moved on, robes swishing around him as he vanished into the crowd.

Logan wondered at the strange encounter. The headmaster had wished Logan luck with his upcoming field trip. It was just a trip to Eritreus to see a real dungeon core in action. That couldn't be that dangerous, right? Logan wasn't sure, but he liked Shadowcroft, so he chalked it up to the headmaster's eccentric nature.

Marko came over with a cup of old coffee. "Did someone order coffee? Extra bacteria?"

Logan laughed and took the mug. He sipped and enjoyed the bitter spoils of percolator warfare.

The two stood shoulder to shoulder watching the party unfold in all its monstrous, otherworldly glory.

Marko sighed. "I love a party. Love those slug guys. They can keep a beat like no one's business."

Logan nodded. "I feel bad I didn't get you guys any Forevergreen gifts."

Marko knocked him playfully with an elbow. "Don't worry. You surviving your guardian form evolution is a gift enough. You might not see it, but you're giving Treacle hope, and you've given Inga focus. Remember how scattered she used to be?"

Logan laughed. "Yeah, I guess."

The two fell into an awkward silence. Logan sipped his bacteria coffee. Marko gulped wine from his goblet.

Finally, the satyr chuckled nervously. "Okay, so, you were awake last night when I got all mushy, huh?"

Logan nodded. "Yep. Totally awake. Heard every word."

Another beat of even more awkwardness.

Marko didn't know how to move forward, but Logan did. He leaned against his satyr friend. "It's cool, Marko. We're friends. I don't need to know about your past. We're in this together, and in the end, we'll have each other's backs."

The satyr turned deadly serious. "This time, yeah, Logan, I'll have your back. As long as I'm here, as long as I'm alive, you and me, man. You and me."

They clinked their cups together.

“*Esprit de corps*,” Logan said with a happy sigh.

“What’s that?” Marko asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Inga and Treacle were dancing their way over, and Logan knew what that meant. He was going to have to shake his fungal groove thing. “The Terrible Twelfth. That’s *esprit de corps*.”



## Chapter Twenty-Three



LOGAN ENJOYED HIS VICTORY for three days, until the next Core Calisthenics class. Chadrigoth hacked off his left arm with a broadsword while Magmarty watched, quietly chuckling with satisfaction. The earth elemental's trash talk was subdued because Logan had reduced him to a rocky mound of mushrooms. Chadrigoth, on the other hand, seemed bound and determined to prove that Logan was just as worthless as ever. And unlike Magmarty, who was about as dumb as the rocks he was made from, the Abyss Lord was whip smart.

Chadrigoth kept his distance when necessary, and always kept an eye out for spore clouds. Often, he would hide behind an invisible wall while he let his hellion imps do his dirty work for him. The little fiends would come leaping out of the Abyss Lord's flames, reeking of sulfur and gnashing their obsidian-black teeth. As a high-ranked B-Class dungeon core, Chadrigoth could fill the field with his minions. A small army willing to do his bidding at a thought or flick of the wrist.

Logan never stood a chance. And yet, since evolving into a Shroomian Acolyte, Logan had picked up some nasty new spore colonies to add to his ever-expanding list of abilities.

After consulting with Inga, he'd chosen a level-one Blister Wart Proto-Spore Culture and a level-two mushroom set called Gem-Studded Puffballs, which had real promise. Roughly the size of a human skull, the puffballs were a beautiful amethyst color and studded with brilliant multicolored spikes that looked like gemstones. Beautiful, except that they exploded like claymore mines at the slightest provocation, blasting out fragments of crystalline glass. He also unlocked his first level-three Proto-Spore slot, which he'd filled with his first minions! Spore Wargs. Those vicious little critters were as mean as half-starved junkyard Dobermans.

Even with the Spore Wargs, though, Logan couldn't hold a flame against Chadrigoth. Besides, his Warg minions were an ace in the hole. No one had seen them, save Inga, and Logan intended to keep it that way. Never knew when having a trick up the sleeve might come in handy.

Of course, Chadrigoth pounded him into the ground. Still, Logan wasn't too concerned, because in half of a year, he had progressed to an Iron Trunk dungeon core. If he kept up this pace, he might reach Heartwood by the time he graduated.

The next few weeks passed in a blur of work and training.

Six days a week, the Terrible Twelfth was up early, out to the Akros Coliseum in the bitter cold, cultivating. Six days a week, they closed down the Codex Athenaeum, studying. Every Monday, Logan and Inga spent the night in the Tartarucha Cells, murdering Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter in new and interesting ways. They refined their dungeon, worked and reworked the layout, honed the traps, and drilled down on their fighting style. That last was the most important part. Inga could handle herself in a brawl, but even as a Shroomian Acolyte Logan was pretty squishy in the battle department. Harden had evolved into Exoskeleton, which was nice, but he was still too slow and clunky to do any real damage.

Thanks to his level-two Braincap mushrooms, however, Logan could attach spores to Inga's minions and take them over. Learning to do battle as a centipede with a hundred legs was an entirely odd experience.

During school hours, they sat through Shadowcroft's ponderous, rambling discussions on ethics and duty, and did their best not to doze off during Professor Nekhbet's bone-dry history lectures. Well, everyone except Inga; if anything, she was even *more* smitten with him than she'd been at the beginning of the school year. Professor Crucible's classes were challenging but also interesting, and Treacle was leaps and bounds ahead of the other students in the class. Professor Crucible had even begrudgingly said, "Nice work, son," once. Only once, but that was practically an award from him. Rockheart's course continued to be lessons in suffering—lessons that Logan endured with as much good cheer as he could manage.

Professor Arketa took them on field trips to most of the dungeons on Arborea. The Blasted Barrows was one crypt-like dungeon in the low hills to the west of Vralkag. The Bone Vaults were the other. While they were drier than the forest dungeons, there was still enough moisture for Logan to grow his fungi. There were a couple of dungeons, though, which would be brutal for him to tackle. One was the Bloodrock, in the Heckish Hills, while the real challenge would be the SandScream—one of two desert dungeons. While a handful of fungi could adapt to desert conditions, most couldn't. The SandScream was all about the sand and the rock, and the deeper you went, the hotter it got, unlike most caverns, which were a constant temperature.

The dungeon was aptly named—you either got sand in your eye or you felt like screaming because of the heat. There was an Anakin Skywalker joke in there somewhere, but the place was almost too awful for humor.

Even the Chaos Oasis, another dungeon nestled deep in the World Forge Wastes, would be easier for a fungaloid. That place had water and some plant life, though not much. Logan didn't know if his spores would even take to palm trees.

Visiting the Arborean dungeons was fun—especially for Marko, who soaked up the lessons like a sponge—but Logan and the Terrible Twelfth were far more interested in their first off-world field trip.

They'd be going with a big group, led by Rockheart and Professor Arketa, which meant they'd be there with Chadrigoth as well as Ed the Rot Troll. Those two couldn't be more different. Unless you were talking about Inga and Marko. The more the astral moth studied, the more the satyr slacked off, until even Treacle was worried. Then again, Treacle was basically the living embodiment of existential dread.

Whatever Marko's history, it was clear that he wasn't going to stress about anything. Worse, the Gelatinous Knight was proving to be a terrible influence on the satyr. GK had a work ethic similar to Marko's, but GK was also a highly ranked B-Class cultivator who would almost certainly pass the Winnowing with flying colors.

Logan suspected Marko's issues were somehow tied into the past he was so insistent on avoiding, but Marko wasn't talking, and Logan didn't want to push too hard.

It was mid-February when the four cohorts going on the field trip met at the BYE Portal across the lake. They appeared on a weed-filled patch of gray stones that surrounded a silver-colored tree as thick as a redwood. Only it wasn't a tree. On closer inspection, the bark, branches, and leaves were the very tip of a limb that dropped down through a hole in the world.

To the west, across the waters of Loch Endless, stood Castle Shadowcroft. The sun was shining on the soaring ramparts as well as the library windows set in the cliffsides below the main keep.

Loch Endless looked especially cold, with little whitecaps traveling across its surface. All the dungeon cores had come wearing their warmest clan robes. The wind was bitter. The dry red and gold leaves of the giant limb clattered, and Logan kept expecting them to drop. They never did, though. According to Nekhbet, the dead leaves stayed connected year-round, but they leaked Morta Apothos during the fall and winter months.

Logan was spellbound.

He wandered around the ancient tree's limb, brushing it with his thick, three-fingered hands. He could feel the Apothos coming off it in waves—ebbs and flows of both Vita and Morta—and so much of it. He drifted over to the edge of a low wall and saw the rest of the limb descending into the swirling mists of wherever they were.

As impossible as it seemed, the realm of Arborea was flat. Which was terrible in its own way because it meant there was a dimension in existence where the Flat-Earthers were at least partially correct.

A bunch of students, including the other members of the Terrible Twelfth, were clustered by the water gushing from the lake. It cascaded over the edge of the world and into the endless abyss beyond. It was momentous waterfall, so beautiful and so strange. Why didn't the lake drain out completely? And where did the water go? Did it simply fall forever?

Logan couldn't even hazard a guess.

Across the channel was the Bogbottom Swamp, though most students at the school—and even most of the professors—referred to it as the Boogerbottom Swamp. Logan and Marko called it the Boogerbottom to annoy Inga. Worked every time.

Rockheart clapped his hands together, instantly drawing in the gazes of the milling students like a magnet. Everyone knew that when Rockheart spoke, you listened. “Yes, yes, I know, you are captivated by the beauty. But focus. We are going to Eritreus to see a real dungeon core in action. We have no time to tarry.”

The students gathered around the gargoyle-griffin and the other chaperone, Arketa the Hellgazer. She was decked out in the Vermillion Phoenix’s clan colors. Her headscarf matched her dress, both a rich red, while her gloves matched her shoes, the deepest of blacks. Rockheart, wore a matching outfit, though in the colors of his clan—the two of them looked like a terrifying, monstrous version of doddering old couples who pick matching outfits every day of the week. Was it possible Rockheart and the Hellgazer were an item? That was a strange pairing, though with her love of interior design and Rockheart’s odd obsession with fashion, Logan could kind of ship it.

Honestly, the whole thing would’ve been sort of endearing if it was anyone other than Rockheart.

Arketa’s headscarf bulged for a second—an unruly serpent, no doubt—but she smoothed out the disturbance with a practiced hand. She smiled from behind her dark sunglasses.

“Well, this is exciting.” She caught Logan looking. “Good morning, Mr. Murray. I do like your new form.” She motioned to the thick chitin plates covering random parts of him. “I will say, your asymmetry is *daring*.”

Marko laughed because he’d said something similar.

Rockheart cleared his throat loudly and touched the bark of the tree branch. “Thanks to Arketa, you’ve all taken trips from the DIE Pavilion. This will be a similar experience, though perhaps a bit more... *turbulent*. We’ll be going to the Slaughter Pits of Kyvandry Spencer. It’s one of several S-Class dungeons on Eritreus.”

“Kyvandry Spencer?” Inga glowed. “He’s a blade ghoul. He was one of Inkboon’s primary sources for the various tortured undead guardian forms. I’m very excited to see him in action.” She was nearly bouncing on the balls of her feet in anticipation.

And maybe it was well-deserved anticipation since even Chadrigoth and his cronies seemed impressed.

They shuffled forward one by one and touched the tree. Logan was near the end of the line, so he watched in fascination as each guardian glimmered briefly in a wave of energy before vanishing, whisked away to another world. He also checked his gear while he waited.

Not that he had much gear to check, unlike some of the other guardians. Chadrigoth had a veritable arsenal already, and his rune-etched ebony armor looked like it was made for an underworld god. Logan had a pair of rough linen pants held up by a cracked leather belt. That was pretty much it, although he *had* managed to craft a simple leather sheath for his pitted dagger in Professor Crucible’s class, and it hung on his side. Unfortunately, his pitted dagger looked more like one of Haven’s Home’s famed butter knives in his newly evolved hands. Better than nothing, though. Logan double-checked his silver shield, secured to his back, one last time. The shield was more of a buckler in his larger hands, but with its magical force field, it was still the single best piece of gear he owned.

Finally, it was Logan’s turn to transport. He took a deep breath and stepped forward, but Arketa’s hand flashed out and caught his wrist before he could touch the activation rune. “Try to focus on a single spot,” the gorgon professor said. “The trip can be very disorienting, especially at your current level.”

Logan nodded and offered her a quick smile and a *thanks*. He slapped his hand down on the rune deeply embedded into the wood.

*How bad can it be?* he thought.

A spike of energy shot through his arm and into his body like a jolt of lightning, and the ground dropped out from beneath his feet while his stomach leapt up into his throat. One moment he was falling, only to be flying the next, while every color known to man—and several known only to mushrooms—washed over him in a wave

of tie-dye and stained glass. His eyes bulged in his head as his arms and legs stretched and contorted in impossible ways. He flipped, spun, and suddenly was surrounded by funhouse mirror versions of himself. Some short and squat, others tall and willowy.

Others were far more horrifying. Visions of himself with three heads or a hundred arms. Versions with antlers, wings, plated scorpion stingers.

Eventually those vanished, swallowed up by the void of creation, and Logan managed to glimpse the vastness of the universe. An endless blanket of crushed velvet, studded with stars, planets, and the swirl of whole galaxies, all interspersed by tubes of chaotic light snaking across the cosmos. And there, like a shadow, was the Tree of Souls, connecting those living worlds, bright with Apothos, to each other. Planets like Mercury and Venus weren't connected, but those worlds heavy with life, like Earth, hung from the shadowy tree like ripe fruit.

The wild ride of sensation and color ended as quickly as it started, and Logan abruptly found himself standing at the entrance of the famed Slaughter Pits. It took him a full thirty seconds to realize he was shrieking at the top of his lungs.

“That will be quite enough, Mr. Murray,” Rockheart growled. He leaned over and whispered into Logan’s ear, “Please comport yourself with a little dignity. If not for your own sake, then for the sake of our House.”

Logan snapped his jaws shut and said a silent thank you to Professor Arketa. At least she’d tried to warn him. As the world stopped spinning like a top hat, Logan took a minute to get his bearings. It always paid to have some measure of situational awareness. They stood on the rocky crags of a wasteland mountain range. Hateful black clouds ruled the lightning-strewn sky. Thunder boomed like the world was about to break. A vicious wind blew in the foul stink of a Death Valley blood bank without air-conditioning.

They stood on a ledge next to a blank, rocky wall. Half-hidden stairs, treacherous at best, descended to a foul-looking river below. Next to the river was what looked like a long-dead tree growing up

the side of the cliff. It looked dead, but it wasn't—it was part of the Tree of Souls, and it could take them back to Arborea.

However blighted the landscape, Logan was thrilled to be on another world, and one so rich with Apothos. He felt the thirteen Apothine energies thrumming in the air, and when he cycled Apothos from his core to his eyes, he couldn't help but gasp at the swirls of primal energy blowing in the wind. Painting the air itself. Inga's mnemonic came back to him: *I make coffee and tea for Grandfather Tiberius and make lemonade under the Velveeta moon.* Ignis. Magma. Corrosivus. Toxicus. Fulgur. Glacies. Terra. Aqua. Mallus. Luminosus. Umbra. Vita. Morta.

It did work wonders.

Arketa had brought an umbrella, which she raised high above her head. "Welcome to Eritreus, though this isn't one of the more scenic areas, I assure you. However, this is one of the most famous dungeons in the entire realm. And the Serpent Shields of Infinity—one of the five most powerful dungeoneer guilds across all the multiverse—has sent hundreds, if not thousands, of raiders to their deaths trying to take the Slaughter Pits."

Logan had learned about the dungeoneer guilds in his History of the Tree of Souls class. Serpent Shields of Infinity. The Sun Fist. The Sages of the Golden Thread. The Hermetic Order of Davos. The Scarlet Paradox. The Glorious Sunrise of the Golden Dawn, also known as the GSGD—two different groups of raiders, both who liked sunrises, apparently, had decided to join together. Neither wanted to abandon their name, and so they had embraced the redundancy.

There were hundreds, maybe even thousands of guilds, all started by entrepreneurial dungeoneers who had the will and hubris to charge money to would-be raiders in the guise of helping them save the universe from evil monsters lurking in dungeons. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Rockheart nodded. "Yes, we'll be taking the back way to the inner sanctum."

He touched the blank wall, tracing an elaborate pattern with his stone talon. A crack opened, and that crack split wider until it would allow even the biggest among them—Chadrigoth and Magmarty—to

pass unhindered. They entered a room filled with crouching hatchet ghosts, vicious undead creatures, human-shaped, with axes where hands should've been. They had massive, fanged maws, but no eyes to speak of.

A dozen of them stood amongst the remains of raiders, all long dead. Rusted armor, broken swords, and decaying wizard robes dotted the floor. They didn't attack, but motioned to a twisting corridor that led to another corridor, which went past a gruesome torture chamber lit by flickering candelabras, which led to a long ladder going down, down, down to the second level. The whole place smelled like dried blood and coffin dust.

Logan could feel the Morta Apothos gathering around him, battering at his skin, desperately burrowing toward his core. It wanted to be consumed. It was nice, cool, dark... Yes, he could find a nice home in a place like this. The hatchet ghosts were a little grisly for his tastes, but then he was a mushroom man who digested unwary adventurers in acid pits. At this point, he was well beyond casting stones. Besides, if his time at Shadowcroft had taught him anything, it was that looks meant absolutely nothing.

Some of these hatchet-handed horror shows were probably perfectly nice over a couple of pints.

Arketa nodded at the aesthetics. "Yes, I like this room. It's classic undead dungeon material with the minions to match. And don't anyone worry. All the traps have been turned off and the minions tamed for us. For the raiders?" She tapped her bottom lip, a sly grin stretching across her face. "Now that is a different story."

Through a labyrinth of nightmare rooms, narrow hallways, and broken-stepped staircases, they finally reached the inner sanctum of the Slaughter Pits. The central room was the Buckingham Palace of underground torture chambers. Chains, complete with jagged hooks, hung from the ceiling. There were racks, iron maidens, and rusted spikes everywhere. The central pedestal, surrounded by hooks, knives, and all things pointy, looked like a newly used butcher's block. On all four sides of the pedestal hung long, serrated daggers. Each one had a hilt studded with a different gemstone. Those were obvious magic items and definite lures.

A glossy onyx gemstone, powering the dungeon, floated above the grisly altar.

From out of the shadows shambled a guardian form of truly horrific proportions. He was a bloated creature with a big sloping scarred belly the color of a maggot. Rotten leather overalls, like an 19th century Liverpool butcher's, mercifully covered some of that bloat. Instead of a left hand, he had a collection of knives sprouting from his wrist. He was bald, with terrible slashes across his scalp. His ears looked like they'd been severed with a chainsaw. Rusty barbed wire had been wound around his head and covered his eyes. How did that thing see? Its sense of smell couldn't be too good, since it had a tiny nose resting above a huge mouth. Underneath flabby lips were yellow teeth like a shark in need of an orthodontist. Any dentist would run screaming.

Hell, anyone *sane* would run screaming. Period. End of story.

The big-bellied blade ghoul raised an oversized coffee cup. On it was printed: *YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE CRAZY TO WORK HERE BUT IT HELPS*. He sipped loudly. "Yullis, Arketa, good to see you guys. Do these poor students know what they're in for? Anyone try to talk them out of the life?"

"Now, now, Kyvandry," Arketa said, smiling. "Stay positive."

"I'm positive that today isn't going to be much of a show. Like most days." The blade ghoul sighed, then chuckled. "You little dungeon cores think it's all cocktail parties and saving the Tree of Souls, but it's mostly middle-management headaches."

Rockheart cleared his throat.

The blade ghoul laughed. "Sorry, Yullis, I'll stick with the party line. Lo, young dungeon cores, it is up to us to keep holy the Tree of Souls and smite unto thee any dungeoneer who comes a-dungeoneering. See? I still know the party line."

Inga elbowed Logan in the side. "You're staring."

Even with that warning, Logan couldn't stop. The guy was at least seven feet tall and must've weighed a thousand pounds.

The blade ghoul came forward on huge, slapping feet. He grinned at Logan and sipped his coffee. "Wow, fungaloid, that choice took some sack. I'm Kyvandry Spencer. Do you do those Opal

Truffles? My Uncle Elliott makes a mean mushroom soup. I'm basically dead, but the taste of that dang soup brought me back to life for several delicious seconds."

Logan's mouth never felt dryer. He was both disgusted and a bit starstruck. "You're the blade ghoul who worked with Immelda Inkboon? I'm Logan Murray. It's great to meet you."

Kyvandry hooked his coffee cup on one of his steak-knife fingers and stuck out a big mitt. "Great to meet you, Logan. Seriously, anyone try to talk you out of this gig?"

Treacle, standing behind Logan, sighed. "It was either this or death. Or we could become wandering monsters. Though that might happen anyway," he muttered darkly.

Logan found Kyvandry's hand cold and rubbery. It matched his own, because mushrooms and decay went together like almond butter and vegans.

The blade ghoul laughed heartily. "The Winnowing! They're still doing that? Gods above and below, but Shadowcroft hasn't changed a bit."

"How was it working with Inkboon?" Inga asked, wings buzzing. One of her many tells.

"Immelda?" The blade ghoul clicked his knife fingers together. "We had some great times together. Wine, butter, butter knives... We did the cutlery tour of Haven's Home. We didn't sleep for a week."

Inga smacked Logan's arm. "See? And you teased me about reading that book on butter knives."

"I stand corrected," Logan said, mystified.

"Mr. Spencer," Rockheart growled. "Please, you must be concerned. You have active raiders in your dungeon!"

"Geesh, it's always Mr. Business with you." The blade ghoul charged over, clearly wanting to put Rockheart into a headlock.

The gargoyle moved back and spread his wings. "Now, Mr. Spencer, I'm not just another student. In fact, I'm the academy's rector prime."

"No way!" Kyvandry erupted. "Skip put you in charge? Well, old Flower Skull has been busy lately, running around, fundraising, and recruiting."

Marko's mouth fell open. "Skip Shadowcroft? We know what the S stands for!"

Chadrigoth flamed and shadowed his way forward to introduce himself to the blade ghoul, who took time to meet all the students. He lingered with Arketa, kissing her hand, which made the Hellgazer chuckle.

"That's enough," Rockheart said a little pointedly.

Arketa laughed. "Now, Yullis, you know that Kyvandry has always been such a flirt." She then sobered. "K, we are here on business. We want to show our freshmen how you deal with dungeoneers. We'd rather not miss a single kill."

Kyvandry shrugged. "Too late for that. I got lucky, killed one on the first level a little while ago. Plucky bunch, though. They managed to circumnavigate some rooms to get to level three. Not that I'm worried. If they do manage to survive the third level, there's big plot *twist* on the fourth floor. As in my buddy Rosie, an abattoir ogre, who likes to twist the heads off raiders." He sighed, smiled, and wiped a tear from under the barbed wire digging into his eye sockets.

"Probably won't need Rosie. Presently, I have two dozen torture orcs ready to descend on the raiders. Not sure I'll need them, since they're five seconds from butchering each other. I hate it when heroes murder each other. I get my fair share of the Apothos, but still, it's kinda disappointing. I like doing the slaughtering. I have the knives for it." He motioned to the four daggers on his altar.

The floating black gem flashed. A holographic scene appeared in the air above them, and Logan was reminded of Shadowcroft's light show back on his first day dead.

Five raiders stood in a medieval kitchen. It was a scorched stone room full of ovens, meat hooks, blood sausages hanging from the ceiling, and bundles of herbs tied together. A fire roared in an enormous stone hearth, and on it, something turned on a spit, juices dripping into the flames. Was it a pig? Logan winced. Yeah, he didn't think so.

Picking out the character classes of the dungeoneers was easy. The first in was obviously a tank, with a tower shield big enough to cover a child and her thick plate mail glimmering with runes. She

was built like a Valkyrie juiced up on gorilla steroids. Then there was a powerful magic-user with a gnarled staff, an oiled black beard, and ornate gem-encrusted robes that screamed warlock or wizard. A leather-armored rogue equipped with two short swords shadowed the tank—probably searching for traps. Bringing up the rear was a chivalric cleric with chain mail and mace, and a weaselly-looking guy with a moustache, who held a bow with an arrow nocked. Hanging from his shoulder was a lute. Bard. Bingo.

“These clowns are delusional. Those patches there mark them as members of the Tremblecloaks. Not even a top one hundred guild. These jokers are B-Class Azure Branch cultivators with eyes that are bigger than their stomachs. Even if every one of them were A-Classers, they never should’ve come here. This is firmly an S-Class dungeon.” Kyvandry scratched his big decaying belly and shook his head. “That’s the third-floor kitchen. Notice that body turning on the spit? It’s mostly for show, we don’t eat the bodies, but the aesthetic of your dungeon is very important. Remember, it’s crucial to demoralize the raiders as much as you can. Actually, that’s probably the most interesting part of the job... you know, the psychological torment you can inflict on these pests.”

Marko nodded. “Yeah, K, I keep telling my buddies it’s all about the aesthetics of the dungeon. It’s the art.”

Kyvandry clacked his knife fingers. “Hey, goat boy, Arketa can call me K. For a satyr like you? It’s Mr. Spencer, sir.”

“Sorry,” Marko said. “And I prefer goat man.”

“Sure you do, junior!” The blade ghoul laughed. “I’m just kidding. I had a satyr buddy who did well, went the Liber Pater route, and his dungeons were magnificent. He and his garden of living statues killed so many dungeoneers.” Kyvandry lifted a hand. “Wait. Listen.”

“We will not turn back!” a voice echoed through the room.

“But that’s Canarom on the spit!” another voice boomed in horror.

The dungeoneers were shouting, and from the sound of it, they were several bad seconds away from turning their weapons on each other.



## Chapter Twenty-Four



“WHO’S CANAROM?” LOGAN asked.

Kyvandry shrugged. “One of their party, an Azure Branch Dread Totemist who didn’t duck my level-one saw trap. I had Petunia grab his corpse. Petunia, she’s my torture orc chieftess. Big. Mean. Pretty. Don’t get me wrong, I love Rosie, but Petunia is my little angel. You’ll see her in a minute. But let me catch you up. The magic-user there is Linraist Erejam, he’s a Vampiric Runecaster. He’s also the worst. Keeps trying to plunder my dungeon, but the thing is he has trouble working well with others. I won’t list off the names of the other raiders because they won’t be around much longer. It’s Thursday. The raiders never do well on Thursdays. Keeping track of my stats is the best way to improve and optimize, I say.”

Marko nodded. “Thursday is Friday’s Friday, so it’s like the weekendiest weekday of the week.”

The blade ghoul hooked a thumb at the goat man. “Where did you get this guy? ’Cause him? He gets it.”

“He came with a six-pack of beer,” Logan said. “Liquor store was having a sale. Buy one, get one goat man free.”

That made Kyvandry laugh.

Then they were drawn back into the action.

The B-Class tank was furious, and she stormed into Erejam’s face. “Canarom was your nephew!”

The magic-user shrugged. “Half-nephew. Once removed. No blood relation, and not a relative I was particularly fond of. Canarom Erejam was rather dim, and he embarrassed me on my ninety-fifth birthday. I feel like I’ll be able to move on from this pretty well.”

Both the rogue and the bard sniggered.

The cleric, a square-jawed true believer in chainmail, nodded. “His soul will find peace in the sainted embrace of Cuthbald the Kind.”

Cuthbald, whom we all will serve in the end.”

Kyvandry belched. “Actually, Canarom found peace in my core. He was a foul bit of work. Embarrassing his half-uncle, once removed, was the least of his many, many sins. And I’m pretty sure Cuthbald the Kind would agree. His cleric is as nasty as the rest of them. Watch.”

The tank scowled and backed away. She took a fresh grip on her sword and tower shield. “Fine. But I want to know which of you jackals took the ghoul tooth we found. Canarom had it, and one of you stole it.”

The rogue touched his chest and looked shocked. “Why did you look at me? Just because I’m a rogue doesn’t mean I steal all the time.”

“Just most of the time,” the bard chipped in.

The rogue tried hard to look innocent and failed. “Most of the time isn’t *all* of the time, you know.”

“You’re all cold-hearted ruffians,” the tank said with a scowl. “That’s the last time I trust the Tremblecloaks to organize a party for me. I’m finally beginning to see why your guild is so lowly ranked.”

“I organized the party,” the wizard said snidely. “You were chosen to stand in the way. Less talking, tank, and more tanking.”

“We are not cold-hearted,” the cleric insisted. “We are here to end the evil of this wicked place. It is our job as heroes to rid the universe of such places.”

Erejam smirked. “Yes, right. Heroism. We are here for heroism. Not to grow in power by collecting the Apothos at the core of this wretched place. Such wonderful, altruistic heroes are we.”

“We collect the Apothos, and we collect the gold,” the rogue said with a little laugh.

The bard wheezed snide laughter. “I’m here for the ultimate prize of the Slaughter Pits, the four Butchery Blades. I could do such interesting things with those daggers.”

Back in the inner sanctum, Treacle snorted and flared his nostrils. “Those sound like lures to me—Exogenous Apothos Manifestations.”

“That’s taking the bull by the horns,” the blade ghoul joked.

The minotaur gestured at Logan. “The mushroom does the puns. I just like crafting.”

Logan wasn’t in the mood to joke. He saw the raiders for what they were: greedy, self-interested monsters who could easily shrug off the death of one of their party. The fighter was the only one who seemed to have a soul. Possibly, the cleric was okay, but something seemed off about him.

Kyvandry flicked a knife finger at the rogue. “Canarom did take the ghoul’s tooth, by the way. And my Butchery Blades aren’t the only lures. I crafted some magical items out of the dentures of this old wizard who bought the farm a few months back. My ghoul teeth are jammed full of vitamins, minerals, and your daily dose of Apothos.” He paused. “And before any of you think the tank is a good guy, she pushed Canarom into the sawblade to save her own skin. It’s probably why she feels bad... and that she wasn’t the one who looted the Dread Totemist’s body.”

The five raiders left the kitchen and wandered into a natural cave, where more desiccated bodies hung from the ceiling. A central trough, three feet wide, running with black sludge, split the cave in half.

Marko rubbed his furry chin. “Yeah, see there, Logan? He’s managed to split the attention of the raiders. Are they going to focus on the hanging bodies? Or are they going to worry about whatever is in that trench?”

Kyvandry went to slap Marko’s back with his knife-y left hand, caught himself, and knocked him with his elbow instead. “Nice, goat man. Hey, Arketa, I bet you love this guy.”

Arketa put up a dainty gloved hand. “Like him. No love. Just like. I have to be very careful about my wording where our dear satyr is concerned. But you are correct, Mr. Laskarelis. Such flourishes are meant to keep the dungeoneers on edge.”

Rockheart stood with his arms crossed. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Mr. Spencer, but neither are important. This is your hidden door room, right? This is where you strike the spell-casters and missile-throwers from behind.”

“Yep, your ranged types,” Kyvandry agreed. “Like that bard with the bow. And by the way, that trench is an open sewer. While I love my torture orcs, my Petunia doesn’t always smell like the sweet flower she is.”

Logan saw it. “That’s why the cleric is holding his nose.”

The ghoul blade grinned and pointed. “Watch now.”

Several stalagmites tipped forward on noiseless hinges, and long, lean orcs, adorned with rusted metal, emerged. The monsters were armed with cleavers, meat hooks, and bone saws. One of them, a tall pig-faced female wearing an iron bikini, held two rusted scimitars. Her hair was white, matted, and greasy. She led the attack.

Petunia and the torture orcs hit from behind, cutting down the bard in a sneak attack.

The gem glowed brighter. Kyvandry’s guardian form swelled as he drank in Apothos from the kill. “Yeah, Sorrel Songfingers, your days of raiding dungeons are over.”

Linraist Erejam wheeled, his staff glowing. He cast one hand forward, launching a wave of bloody red magic at the oncoming torture orcs. Meanwhile, Petunia had engaged the rogue from behind, but her scimitars clanked off his short swords. The rogue didn’t have much by way of armor, but he moved like a greased pig, dancing forward and back, his blades a whirlwind of motion. The she-orc batted his blades aside, waiting for an opening. After a long beat, she saw it. She feinted right, then lunged forward, driving one of the spikes on her shoulders through the rogue’s leather armor. She left him wounded, retreating before he could swing again.

With a series of grunts and squeals, she sounded the retreat.

Arketa clapped her hands. “See there? The chieftess is pulling back. This is why having floor-level bosses is important. Without leadership, the other torture orcs would’ve fought to the last man... er... orc. But they’ve done all the damage they needed to do—including a hefty blow to morale. Now, they’ll pull back and redeploy to another room. This way, the dungeon core is conserving resources.” She sighed and shook her head. “We haven’t covered minion management as much as I would’ve liked. See, Yullis,

sweetie, this is why we need to add another class to the freshmen curriculum. We haven't even touched on the formation of floor-level bosses."

"Arketa, darling," Rockheart growled, "we've talked about this. Minions aren't critical for first-years."

Logan exchanged glances with Marko. *Sweetie? Darling? Is it possible... No. No way.*

Erejam did not take the death of the bard well. He and the tank yelled at each other more while the cleric of Cuthbald attempted to heal the rogue. The cleric stuck a needle into the thief, but it must've been poisoned because the rogue's eyes slipped closed, and the black gem radiated dark energy.

The cleric rifled through the dead man's clothes, pulled free the ghoul's tooth, and secreted it in a pouch at his side.

Kyvandry winced. "See, told you. If you didn't see that coming, you should've—Cuthbald the Kind is kind of the god of irony. His Battle Paragons help people with their pain by killing them, since the dead don't feel pain."

"The kindness of killing," Marko breathed. "Twisted."

The tank came over, crouched, and felt for a pulse. "What happened?"

The cleric shrugged and offered his most winsome smile. "His wounds were too grievous, I'm afraid. I am sorry. I shall say a prayer that he finds peace in the light of my god."

The tank started going through pockets, searching, and then let out a roar. "Where is it! Where is the bloody tooth?"

The cleric shouted back. "I don't know! I am a holy Battle Paragon of Cuthbald! I would never steal—you must believe me!"

Kyvandry made a face. "It's true. He murdered and then took the item, which isn't exactly stealing. It's looting. Two totally different things. Hey, do you guys still have to suffer through Shadowcroft's Ethics of Murder?"

"We like that class," Logan protested.

"Takes all kinds," the ghoul blade replied with a lopsided shrug. "Now, they'll loot the rest of the bodies and then search the cave because the trench makes them curious. They want to see where it

leads. Which is not something I would recommend, for any number of reasons."

The tank and the cleric did indeed loot the bodies of their friends, until the magic-user, Erejam, yelled at them, his face beet red as he commanded that they keep moving. The party followed the trench to the back of the cave. That was when the stalactites fell and impaled the tank.

Arketa quizzed the students. "Who can tell me the name of that monster?"

Inga belted it out before anyone else could. "Those are fallusks, mollusks that form like stalactites and then fall on dungeoneers. Even if you survive the impact, the fallusks cause acid damage. To be honest, though, I would not have expected them inside a tortured undead dungeon."

"Always keep 'em guessing." Kyvandry grinned.

This time, the cleric did heal the tank, though the wound was so grievous, the tank wasn't healed fully, even when the cleric ran out of Apothos.

The tank was done. "I want the ghoul's tooth! Give it to me now, or I'm leaving!"

"You won't make it to the surface without us," Erejam sneered, stroking his oily black beard, curling the tip around one lanky finger.

"Watch me!" The tank turned and stomped away, armor rattling with every step.

The cleric watched her go and then sized up the magic-user. "Mr. Erejam, I trust the tank far more than I would ever trust you."

Without another word, the cleric turned on a heel and chased after the fighter. Neither was interested in going on, not even to get the coveted Butchery Blades.

Erejam's face turned purple with rage. He shook a fist at the ceiling. "Damn you, Kyvandry Spencer! I will be back! I will win your daggers and your gem, or my name isn't Linraist Gandolfini Erejam!" He twisted a ring on his finger and vanished in a sooty cloud of gray smoke.

The blade ghoul laughed. "That's what they all say. I've seen 'em come, and I've seen 'em go. Good ol' Erejam hasn't even made it to

the fourth level. He gets down to three and then uses his gimmicky little Ring of Astral Port to get back to the surface. Those other two, though, might have a tough time of it.” Kyvandry zoomed out to show the two remaining raiders trudging back to the surface, oh so carefully retracing their steps. The pair walked in the circular glow of the cleric’s lantern.

“I’ve got a few nasty surprises waiting for them. I’ll probably let one live. It pays sometimes to let word spread. Remember, it’s a balance. We want dungeoneers to come, so we can reclaim their energy for the Tree of Souls. If you make the dungeon *too* hard, no one will want to even make the attempt. But if you leave survivors, it lures ‘em into a false sense of security. They’ll say, *oh, if that clod made it out alive, I probably have a decent shot.*”

“Fascinating,” Inga said, bobbing her head, then jotting down a quick note.

“Indeed,” Arketa said, arching an eyebrow. “Now, would you mind showing us your entire dungeon, K?”

Kyvandry agreed and gave them a virtual tour of the place. The dungeon was massive, six levels, over fifty rooms, and the torture orcs were just the level-three monsters. There was a series of bigger, more horrifying creatures the deeper you went, until you reached Kyvandry Spencer himself. His other minions included Rosie and a band of head-twisting abattoir ogres, hulking hook wretches, and lightning-fast demonic knifelings. The traps were everything from sawblades to living chains to traps that sent you plummeting down into pits full of the hatchet ghosts.

Logan took in the spectacle of the well-crafted dungeons, one of the best on Eritreus. Finally, he raised a hand to ask a question.

Kyvandry sipped his coffee. “Oh, look, an inquisitive mind that needs some enlightenment. Whatcha got for me, fungaloid?”

“Why the horror show?” Logan asked. “Why be scary? I mean, we’re the good guys, right? We’re obviously not like Erejam and those murderous, backstabbing asshats, so why don’t we look more heroic?”

Chadrigoth laughed. “Shut up, fungus. That’s such a level-one question. We all know you’re a dumb newb, but don’t embarrass us

all.”

Kyvandry lifted his non-knife hand. “Wait, Prince. And yes, I know who you are. Your father and I golfed back when you were a humanish little squirt and your father was on his second wife. He’s very happy with wife number three, I’m sure, and very proud of you.” The blade ghoul scratched his scarred head with his knife hand. “It’s a fair question. I mean, I chose blade ghoul because I liked the aesthetic, and I liked the traps, and come on, this place is scary as hell. It’s meant to be.

“A big part of it, I think, is that I want to scare off normal people. People aren’t bad, they’re a natural part of the universe and have a place in the grand order of things. I don’t want that sort wandering in here by mistake. If this place was all delicious appetizers, puppies, and rainbows, your everyday joe would come in here looking for hen wings and hot sauce. As well as Apothos. But my Slaughter Pits? No one without an agenda comes down here. The dungeoneers say they are making the world a better place by destroying the dungeons, but we know better. I’ve never killed anyone who wasn’t trying to do the Tree of Souls harm.”

Logan could see the logic. Kyvandry had the carrot to attract raiders, but he also had the stick to keep civilians away. Logan had another question. “Do you ever worry about a Crown or Immortal Crown raider coming down here?”

The blade ghoul smiled, gently, peacefully. “At some point, that may happen. I’m going to give you the truth. My day-to-day is pretty boring. Chat with Rosie and Petunia. Give my hatchet ghosts some rotten meat. Trim the torture orcs’ toenails. Sharpen my saws and rust up every inch of metal.”

Kyvandry sighed. “And yet, at the same time, I’m living the dream, baby. I’m a successful dungeon core, keeping the Tree of Souls safe. But if a Crown-level cultivator decided to destroy my Slaughter Pits? It would be a wild ride, man. It would be exciting. I would fight that motherlover with everything I had. And if I died defending the Tree of Souls? Eh. So be it. I died righteously doing something I loved.” The monster grinned. “And believe you me, I

love this place, every rusted bit of chain, every dull hook, and every last one of my horrific little minions.”

The entire class went silent.

Arketa reached under her glasses to wipe away a tear. “K, you are so inspiring.”

The blade ghoul laughed heartily. “For the love of the wine gods of Sangretta, A, you have got to talk these poor pups out of the life. It’s not worth it!” He contradicted what he’d just said with a goofy smile, showing his yellow shark teeth.

Logan had known happy old grumps like Kyvandry all his life. They talked bad about their jobs while at the same time loving them. Soldiers were just like that, too. A soldier would do anything, go anywhere, take any hill, secure any objective, as long as they could complain while doing it.

Would Logan be able to craft such a dungeon with the sole purpose of murdering raiders? If they were anything like that rotten Linraist Erejam and his soulless cronies, he could. The field trip had been eye-opening indeed.



ROCKHEART KEPT TRACK of the tank and the cleric, watching them as they made their way up the levels, back to the surface. They had to take a route that would bring them close to the back corridor on the second level. If Rockheart timed it right, he might be able to be free of the Terrible Twelfth before the end of the year.

While Logan asked his insipid questions, Rockheart pulled Chadrigoth to the side. He pointed at the path of the raiders making their way to the surface. When the rector prime leaned in close, the Abyss Lord’s flames warmed his face. “I can’t sully myself with any sort of unfortunate accident. However, my friend, this might be our chance to remove these... I think you used the term *newbs*... from our school and from our lives.”

Rockheart motioned to the hallway with a trick door. “If someone were to accidentally push them through that portal, then they would be tested by the raiders. In theory, if such an unfortunate mishap

were to happen to you and your cohort, you could deal with such dungeoneers easily. Rightfully so, since you belong at the academy. There are others among our number, however, who clearly do not belong. They are not bad or evil, but they are liabilities. They risk the Tree of Souls by their very existence and sully the names of their betters. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if their inept stench were cleansed from our clan. In theory, of course."

"Of course," Chadrigoth replied with a telling smile and a conspiratorial wink.

It was obvious to Rockheart that Prince Chadrigoth of the Eritreus Elite knew exactly what needed to be done and had zero qualms about doing it. Just as it should be. Rockheart didn't hate Logan and his compatriots, not exactly, but they *didn't* belong in the Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons and certainly not in the Azure Dragon Clan. He was a utilitarian at heart—he worked for the greatest good for the most people—and their removal would be best for everyone.



## Chapter Twenty-Five



LOGAN AND THE REST of the Terrible Twelfth walked at the rear of the group. Rockheart had insisted they come last, since they were the most pathetic cohort at the academy. Logan wanted to stay longer, but they had to get back to Arborea.

Logan was ambling with his friends down a straight corridor when he noticed the wall on his right wasn't made of bloodstained stone. It was a wooden wall with nails and spikes pounded into long planks. It didn't look right. Logan spewed out more spores, and he saw it was some kind of trap. A second later, his Fungal Vision showed him an invisible wall sliding toward them. That force field was very similar to the ones Chadrigoth could throw.

Logan was too surprised to call out a warning. The invisible wall slammed into Treacle first, throwing the minotaur back. He crashed into both Inga and Marko, who hit the wall next to them. Logan managed to trigger Exoskeleton just in time, the ridges on his body hardening around him. The wall had a central pivot, allowing it to spin. All four stumbled into a room off the main corridor.

They fell in a pile right at the feet of the tank and the cleric. The two dungeoneers must've gotten lost and pushed through another false wall. The tank was still wounded from the fallusk attack, and the cleric was dangerously low on Apothos. Logan thought the Terrible Twelfth had a chance, especially since he and Inga had been working so closely together. With that said, the tank and cleric were still B-Class dungeoneers, which meant things could go sideways in a heartbeat.

They needed to work as a team, and unfortunately, Treacle had taken the brunt of invisible attack. He seemed to be unconscious and had somehow managed to fall on top of Marko, who was struggling

to get out from under Treacle's formidable bulk. The satyr wasn't quipping, so Logan knew things were dire.

Logan had his exoskeleton. Inga, with her Lepidopteral Reflexes, had the instincts of a fly about to get swatted. She was on her feet in seconds.

Damn it. Logan and Inga were going to have to face down the Azure Branch dungeoneers on their own. And since their cores weren't tucked safely away in an inner sanctum, defeat meant death. If the tank and cleric bested them, the raiders would crack their gems and siphon off their energy, and they would die. No second chances. No respawning. Game over.

There was room enough to fight, though they had to be careful. Every wall was made of the wooden planks, showing the pointy ends of oversized nails so rusty just looking at them would give you tetanus. A skeleton hung on one wall, his shabby wizard robes in tatters.

The cleric's lantern gave the place a dim light.

The tank snarled and drew her sword. "I thought we cleared this level! I guess we missed this bug and her mushroom boyfriend?"

"We're just friends!" Inga hissed.

Inga reached out with her right hand, hurling Moonlance. Her left arm transformed into a length of razor-edged quicksilver.

The blinding attack struck the cleric in the face, burning his exposed skin like acid. "Cuthbald damn you!"

The tank charged forward, her face a rictus of hate, her sword aiming to take Logan's head from his shoulders. Logan pulled free the silver shield he'd earned back during his first dungeon run and summoned a flickering dome of red light. The sword smashed into the energy shield, sending up a fountain of crimson sparks. The attack was a powerhouse, and hairline fissures snaked their way across the energy dome. Chances were the shield couldn't survive another direct hit like that. Logan needed to act now.

He dismissed the red dome and let his Pollinic Affliction flow. A cloud of yellow spores exploded into the air, and the tank swayed, raising her shield arm and wiping at her face. Her eyes were puffy and red, and her nose was releasing a small river of clear goo.

The cleric was also in the area of attack, and that guy got unlucky. "I can't see!"

Logan felt like pumping a fist in the air. His blindness attack had worked!

Tears streamed down the cleric's red, blistering face.

"Damn my allergies!" he wheezed.

The battle was far from won, though. It wasn't like the tank was simply going to sneeze and run away. She aimed her next attack at Inga, but Logan raised his thickened arm, and that blade chopped into his chitin. It got stuck in his layers of extra-hard fungi.

For once, Logan wasn't dismembered! Score!

That didn't last long, though. The tank roared and flung him to the side, clearing her blade. Logan flipped ass over teakettle and smashed into a jagged spike covered in a fine layer of bloodred rust. It bit into his chitin and held him in place.

"Cuthbald give me sight!" the cleric barked. A magical light glowed in his eyes. He could see again, but it seemed Cuthbald didn't make his followers Claritin-clear, because his face was still cartoonishly swollen.

The tank and Inga were exchanging a flurry of blows, Inga's blade clashing off the tank's shield and narrowly turning vicious sword swings. Inga was too busy defending herself to cast any of her spells or get to the insects in her pocket. This was one of the drawbacks of being a dungeon core. Many of their best abilities had to be prepared in advance.

Logan tried to pull himself off the nail, but he couldn't get free to help Inga. Worse, the cleric of Cuthbald was closing in, which meant the astral moth was about to get double-teamed.

The tank raised her shield, golden ponytail swaying, and waded forward.

The cleric rushed Inga with his mace raised.

A rhythmic clapping echoed off the walls and resounded off the ceiling. The sudden noise, unnaturally loud, made everyone in the room pause.

Marko was on his feet, clapping and keeping time with his tapping hoof even as his goat eyes glowed with spectral black light.

He seemed taller, far more menacing, casting fearsome shadows around him like a halo of darkness. Everything about him seemed diabolic suddenly, from the curve of his horns to his leering smile.

And that clapping was oddly mesmerizing.

A stupid look came over the cleric's face. He stopped and lowered his mace slowly. After a beat, he dropped his weapon altogether and started to clap along. His eyes were blank above his dizzy smile. Unbelievably, he started dancing, poorly. Logan had seen nerdy groomsman at Lord of the Rings-themed weddings with more rhythm.

"By the gods! What is wrong with him?" the tank shouted, then ducked as Inga nearly took off her head with a flawlessly executed pivot and slash.

Logan finally ripped himself off the spike. He staggered into the fighter, using his momentum to push her away from Inga, giving Inga a split second of breathing room.

Inga's untransformed right hand darted into a leather pouch at her belt, and it came out covered in flies. She flung them into the air, then caught the tank's next slash on her left sword arm. The flies circled around the tank's face, biting at exposed skin, burrowing into her eyes and nose, fighting their way into her mouth. They weren't deadly, but they were distracting as all get-out.

The tank swatted at the swarm and lashed out blindly with a side kick that caught Logan square in the chest, tossing him aside like a rag doll. His rubbery body, however tough now, simply didn't weigh very much. It wasn't like he had any bones to add density. He landed with his limbs splayed out all around him.

Inga was pressing her attack, and doing a fair job, but impossible as it seemed, the tank was still fending off the attacks.

They needed an edge, and Logan thought he just might have the trick. His ace in the hole. A couple of them actually.

Logan pushed himself up onto his palms and released a pair of spiked violet spores, each about the size of a peach pit, which pulsed with a gentle light. As they drifted toward the ground, he rained down Rapid Growth spores, pumping stored-up Apothos into the purple pits. This wasn't so different from what he'd done to

Magmarty, but this time he wasn't raising up a bunch of Opal Truffles. This time he was summoning his first real minions: Spore Wargs. Since the minions were tied to his core, at his current level he could only produce and control two of the creatures, but hopefully that would be enough.

The swirling spores burbled and morphed, expanding rapidly as they neared the floor. In seconds rudimentary limbs sprouted from the pod, followed by a snout and muzzle. In less than five seconds, the Spore Wargs were as large as bulldogs, with the same squat frame, beefy chest, and powerful limbs. Though most fungaloid minions weren't known for being fast or agile, these beasties proved to be the exception to the rule. They were pale, their skin hairless and rubbery. They had no eyes but enormous bat-like ears that allowed them to navigate through a type of super echolocation. Best of all, their bite was highly toxic and could induce seizures or even temporary paralysis under the right circumstances.

Logan had come to learn that they were also oddly affectionate and seemed to retain crude memories even after a death-and-respawn cycle. These two he called Booker and Noodle Doodle—both named after the pups he knew he would never see again.

The deadly wargs didn't need any instruction, but leapt forward, claws scrabbling across the floor as they launched themselves at the tank. With wicked fangs, one latched onto the tank's ankle, while the other jumped, crunching down on the tank's shield-bearing forearm. The tank let out a grunt of pain and tried to shake the swinging hound away, but ol' Noodle Doodle had a bite like a bear trap. She just dangled there, legs swinging, paws scratching at armor, refusing to drop. It was an awesome distraction, and one that gave Inga the opening she needed.

She spun left in a flourish of wings and hurled another Moonlance, slashing across the tank's exposed face and eyes. The fighter screamed and recoiled, temporarily blinded and beset by Logan's hounds. Inga darted forward and leapt up, legs cartwheeling through the air as she flipped over the tank and landed behind her before driving a silvery sword arm through a vulnerable joint in the

tank's armor, deep into the flesh beneath. Inga pulled her arm free, covered liberally in blood, but the tank just kept right on fighting.

That Valkyrie could take a beating. She was a B-Class cultivator, though. So, even tired, she was easily ten times more powerful than any of the dungeon cores in the room.

"I have had just about enough of this!" the tank shouted with a growl. She brought her foot straight up, then slammed it down with a *thud*. Brown light rippled out, the stone floor underfoot quaking and creaking, razor-sharp spits of rock shooting up.

The rock lances missed Inga and the others, but poor Booker—clinging to her ankle—wasn't so lucky. The hound took a spike through the throat that neatly decapitated him.

"And now for you," the tank said, turning her furious face on the remaining dangling pup. She twisted at the hips and drove her sword into the creature's torso, dispatching it with pitiful ease.

So much for that.

Marko still had the cleric ensorcelled, which was good, but they needed to find a way to take this damned tank out. Inga was giving it her all, but it didn't seem to be enough, and with Treacle still firmly out cold, it was up to Logan to even the playing field. The question was, how? Trying to respawn the Spore Wargs wasn't realistic—they took too much of his usable Apothos for that—but Inga's Spike Flies had grown considerably larger since she'd first summoned them. They were now each the size of a quarter, and there were easily thirty or forty of them.

That... Now that Logan could work with.

He'd never used his Braincaps outside the simulated dungeon, but there really was no time like the present.

"Keep him dancing, Marko!" Logan called out.

The satyr laughed. "Obviously you've never partied with me before—I don't ever stop! My Father used to tell me I had a real problem, but who has the problem now, huh!"

Yeah... Logan didn't want to touch that with a ten-foot pole. He put the goat man from mind and sped over to the cleric's lantern. At the same time, he exhaled a wave of Braincap spores into the air

through his frilled gills, right where Inga's Spike Flies were coalescing, growing bigger and more fiendish.

Logan used the last of his Apothos reserve to create Rapid Growth spores, and he added them to the fungi that were already latching onto Inga's insects. Small, ghostly green mushrooms bloomed from the back of each Spike Fly. Exhaling and clearing his mind, Logan took control of the tiny critters. It was harder to do in real life than it had been in the simulated dungeon, but their time practicing had paid off in spades.

The flies finally reached maturity, and they looked like flying devil-head thorns—big soft-ball-sized flies with huge eyes, whirring wings, and spikes sticking out in every direction. No legs. Their attack style was simple. They dive-bombed their enemies and slammed into them, like living throwing stars. The Spike Flies then puked digestive acid onto their victims. It was gross, but effective. As a fungaloid, Logan could appreciate gross and effective.

Logan turned off the cleric's lantern, plunging the place into darkness.

However, the Spike Flies were infected with his Braincap mushrooms. Glowing green lumps of fungal growth covered their black bodies, giving them some of Logan's powers, including his ability to see in the dark.

Logan could also take over one of them, and suddenly, he was seeing through the eyes of a Spike Fly. It was dizzying, showing him a world of whirring movement in basic colors, but with enough clarity that he could discern the difference between a dungeon core and a dungeoneer.

The Battle Paragon was still clapping along, but it was clear he was about to try to cast a spell to light up the room. He never had the chance. Logan used the Spike Fly he was controlling and slammed it into the chest of the cleric. Half of the flies followed suit. *Smack, smack, smack*, the barbed insects punctured the cleric's armor, skewering him on their thorns.

As for Inga, she, too, could see in the dark. She noiselessly moved to the side and leapt up again, wings keeping her aloft. The tank's armor was far too thick to penetrate directly, but her face and

neck were exposed. Lining up her blade, Inga dropped all of her weight down, driving the tip of her sword at an angle through the tank's neck and deep into her chest.

With a thought, Logan directed the rest of the flies to hit the tank from the rear. The tank fell forward onto her face as dead as dead could be.

A cloud of Apothos rose from her corpse—Vita mixed in a cocktail of Mallus, Morta, and Terra. Treacle was a Mallus and Terra cultivator, so Logan focused on the Morta energy filling the room. As he'd done a thousand times before, he drew the streams of energy into his center. There, it mixed with his core, adding to the knot. He wasn't the only one to eat. Inga's gem glowed with a lunar light as she took her fill, though it would take some time to cultivate the sheer glut of energy.

Except... Logan wasn't getting very much Apothos. After taking out two B-Class dungeoneers he should've been rocketing up in rank, but he would be lucky to even get a single rank off of these kills. Then it occurred to him—neither he nor Inga were in charge of the dungeon. Kyvandry would get the lion's share of the kills since they were in his domain.

One of the walls swiveled open, and everyone's favorite blade ghoul stepped forward. "Hey, guys! Funny that you tripped into my trap room at the same time as the raiders. But dang, you took care of them in a hurry."

Kyvandry knelt and turned up the cleric's lantern. "You guys won't mind if I keep their bodies and equipment, right? It's nice to have a couple extra corpses to throw around here and there. And I love me a good knickknack or three. However, I will give you all a little something-something. You earned it." He bent down, rifled through the cleric's pouch, and removed the ghoul tooth. From the pocket of his leather butcher's apron, he removed a little tin, which he shook, smiling at the rattle. "You get the cleric's goodie, but I'll throw in three more. I imbued them with Morta Apothos, so they should be perfect for a couple of you guys. Watch out, though, because they pack a helluva punch, believe you me. There's a reason why the tank was so hot to get her hands on one."

Inga took the tin and stuck it in a pocket. Idly Logan wondered if there were fly larvae or baby centipedes in the pocket. He promptly decided it was probably best not to think about that. Also, Logan was a little wary of swallowing teeth. That was rather disturbing. But then, pretty much everything that had happened since being eaten by the Reaper Box was disturbing.

The wall to the corridor opened on the central hinge, and Professor Arketa stood there, sunglasses tipped, her headscarf writhing. “Oh, there you four are. Goodness. Is Treacle okay? What happened?”

Logan knew what happened. Chadrigoth had forced them into the trap room. Somehow, the Abyss Lord had timed it perfectly so the raiders would kill them.

But what proof did Logan have? None. None at all.

The blade ghoul bent and touched the minotaur, who was slowly coming around.

“Well, that was terrible,” Treacle moaned. “Did I break a horn? I hope not. That would be so depressing. I like having a matching pair, and my life has so few pleasures in it.”

Marko went over and helped their friend up.

Inga scowled. “An invisible wall pushed us into this room. At the same time, these two found us. We managed to best them, but if they’d have been at full power, we’d surely be dead.”

“Unlikely,” Kyvandry said. “I didn’t catch all the fight, but I caught enough. They never had a chance. Not only were they not the sharpest tools in the shed, but you dungeon cores working together would’ve given even Linraist Erejam a run for his money.” He nodded conspiratorially. “These are monsters to watch, Arketa.”

The professor slipped her sunglasses back onto her face before adjusting her bulging headscarf. “I agree, Mr. Spencer. But you didn’t have any random traps, did you?”

“Every bit of torture, every trap in my dungeon, is meticulously planned, A. You know me. I’m not sure what happened, but I’m glad we didn’t lose any students on this field trip. Remember last time?” He winced and shook his head. “Ouch.”

The professor frowned. "We try not to focus on the students who die." She turned cheerful. "Well, all's well that ends well. Come on, you four."

The blade ghoul waved enthusiastically. "Bye, guys! If you see Erejam outside, make sure you kill him good." He turned to take care of the fresh corpses.

Logan and his friends returned to the corridors, stairs, and ladders out of the Slaughter Pits.

Logan did take a moment to punch Marko lightly on the arm. "Nice going back there. For a second, while you were casting that maniacal dancing spell, you looked like a true dungeon lord."

"That was awesome!" The satyr smiled. "It was fun using some of my other abilities... other than drinking, of course. I'm just glad that Nataraja's Wretched Rhythm worked. There was a percentage chance that the cleric would've ignored me. That would've been embarrassing... clapping like an idiot while you two were cut down. Not sure I could've lived with myself." Those last words came out with a little more emotion than the satyr probably would've wanted.

"Well, the important thing is that your spell *did* work," Inga called over her shoulder. "You saved us. You're something of a hero in my book. Though, Logan's Spore Wargs were quite impressive as well."

Treacle sighed. "Not only did I get knocked out, but I can't get that damn rhythm out of my head." He patted his thigh as they made their way out of the Slaughter Pits.

The Terrible Twelfth found the rest of the group standing on the rocky ledge of the back door.

Chadrigoth didn't even throw them a glance. The Abyss Lord stood with an arm around his undead girlfriend, chatting with the rocky Jimi Magmarty. Tet, though, had another look for Logan. She tilted her head, widened her eyes, and shrugged.

He nodded, and she nodded back.

Maybe she knew more about what had happened.

Logan would ask her once they got back to the relative safety of Shadowcroft Castle on Arborea. He was learning, though, that the life of a dungeon core was anything but safe.



## Chapter Twenty-Six



IT TOOK SIX WEEKS FOR Logan to talk with Tet Akhat alone. The cat woman was always either out of sight, in her room, or with the First Cohort. And if he went to her room, or asked to talk with her in private, that might raise all sorts of red flags and put her in an awkward position. Something shady had definitely gone down at the Slaughter Pits, and Logan suspected Chadrigoth was behind the incident. Logan had seen the Abyss Lord use a variant of the invisible wall spell more than once during their Core Calisthenics class, but outside of that he had no real proof, and the last thing he wanted to do was make Tet's life more difficult.

Logan finally timed it so that he and Tet were alone in the Codex Athenaeum together. He found her in periodicals. She had swung across a bottomless chasm using one of the ropes—a real rope, not a snake mimic. Logan had learned about the snake mimics the hard way during his third trip through the library.

Tet was pursuing the magazines—*Dungeon Core Quarterly*, *Monsters Weekly*, *The Inside Tree*—which were bound into books on the other side of the pit.

“Hey, Tet, can I talk to you for a minute?” Logan asked from the edge of the chasm, since swinging across was always a serious health risk. He was willing to do it, sure, but not if she was going to turn him away without an answer.

She turned, her eyes flashing. “That might not be a good idea.”

“You knew this was coming,” Logan said.

“I did.” That admission was followed by a heavy sigh.

Logan checked a dangling rope for teeth before swinging across. He was strong enough to swing across without losing a limb or falling. He did wobble a little on the dismount—certainly enough for him to get a low score from the Russian judge—but he’d come a

long way since he first started at Shadowcroft's. As a lowly Toadstool, he wouldn't have been able to pull off that little display unassisted—not in a million years. He straightened and brushed his palms against his rough linen trousers.

“Look, I know how awkward this has to be for you. We're not friends. You run with the top-ranked cohort, and I run with the last. I know what you and the rest of the First think about me and my friends. So, I'm just going to get to the point and forego the small talk. I'm here about Chadrigoth. What did you see that day at the Slaughter Pits? You threw me a look. Maybe it was pity, or maybe I just imagined it. But me and friends nearly died back there, so if you know something, I'd appreciate you talking to me.”

“Bold,” Tet said, offering Logan a ghost of a smile. “Direct. Does that tend to work on most women in your experience?” she asked, quirking a manicured eyebrow.

Logan shrugged. “I've been told it can be a little off-putting, but I thought *you* might appreciate it since neither of us have time for games. Not with the Winnowing coming up. So, do you know anything?”

She paused, canting her body and staring side-eyed at him. “You're a curious creature, Logan. Small. Weak. Yet indomitable in ways that I can appreciate. And I can appreciate direct talk when it's necessary. As for the information I have, I imagine it's less *robust* than what you'd like. But I'll share it all the same.” Tet turned. Her ear twitched and her tail flicked. She crossed her arms. “The truth is, I don't know anything for sure. But Chadrigoth *did* leave us for a few minutes. He said he needed to run an important errand. You guys were gone when he returned.” She offered a lopsided shrug. “I figured he was messing with you. He's the type to bully the less fortunate.”

Logan squinted. “What can I say, we're the Terrible Twelfth, but we're getting less terrible all the time.”

“We've noticed,” the cat woman replied evenly. “As I said, you are indomitable in ways that I can appreciate. Ever since you destroyed Magmarty, we've been taking the four of you more seriously. And yesterday, what did you do to that poor doomhound?”

“Gem-Studded Puffballs,” Logan explained. “It’s warm enough that I started growing them near the bleachers before class. I lured the hound in, and my mushroom grenades did the rest.”

Tet offered a wicked half smile. Her sapphire green eyes lit up with an amused light. “This ability to rapidly grow your mushrooms has drastically helped you. And I’ve noticed you’re a lot tougher than you were at the Slaughter Pits. You got some sort of tincture there, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” Logan said coolly, not wanting to tip his hand. In fact, those ghoul’s teeth had knocked him up two ranks. He was sitting pretty as an Iron Trunk cultivator, Rank 8. He’d benefited the most from the blade ghoul’s gift since it was Morta Apothos, and that was one of his two primary Affinity types. He also processed it far better than his friends, thanks in part to his increased Digestion ability.

Unlike the others, he could instantly convert sixty percent of the incoming Apothos into pure Apothos, which gave him an enormous leg up. Inga, on the other hand, had been so nauseated from the ghoul’s teeth that she hadn’t been able to eat for three days. Even Marko’d had to take a night away from the bottle to recover. Treacle had wandered around, belching, chewing cud, and looking miserable.

At least, more miserable than usual.

Even though they’d struggled with the ghoul’s teeth, the Terrible Twelfth had been riding high since their victory on the field trip. They’d taken down two Azure Branch cultivators, and though they didn’t get much of the Apothos, taking out real live dungeoneers just felt good. No one else in their year had managed to accomplish that. Not even the venerable First Cohort. So, Logan and the Terrible Twelfth might’ve been the worst, but they also had bragging rights of sorts.

Even Marko had been taking his schoolwork more seriously, and not just Professor Arketa’s dungeon design class. He was crafting better, eliciting fewer sighs from Crucible, and even paying more attention in Rockheart’s Traps, Pits, and Pendulums class. He still slept through Nekhbet’s history lectures, though. Logan couldn’t really blame him.

Tet looked too skeptical to even roll her eyes. “You don’t need to tell me a thing. It’s none of my business, and it will remain none of my business. What else are you wondering about?” she asked. “Since we have this special time together, do you have any more questions?”

Logan wasn’t sure if she was being sarcastic or not. She seemed simultaneously flirty and deadpan. But it was worth rolling the dice in case she was being genuine. It had taken him six weeks to get the cat woman alone. It might not happen again. And there was a good chance he’d either die or be a casualty of the Winnowing. He might as well get to know her. “Okay, Tet, what do you think about being a part of the First Cohort? You’re what, an A-Class like Chadrigoth?”

“Please, he wishes he were A-Class. Everyone thinks he’s an ascended Jade Leaf, but he’s B-Class, Rank 1. Though”—she shrugged—“he probably will hit A-Class by the time finals are through. As for me, I’m a B-Class, Rank 3. When I evolve, I’ll be a greater scorpion *hemet-netjer*.” She caught her tail in her hand. “My tail will transform into a stinger. It will be much bigger and much deadlier.”

“Half cat, half scorpion?” Logan nodded. “Pretty cool. I think I just become more fungal. So I got that going for me.”

Tet actually smiled and relaxed some. “To answer your question... I like being among the elite. I’ve trained my entire life to attend this school, you know. That wasn’t the case with you, was it? Uroth barely has any Apothos, if my studies into your world are correct.”

Logan shot her a finger gun. “You’re not wrong. I didn’t even know about the Tree of Souls.” The fact that she’d researched Earth at all was interesting. Maybe she was more interested in him and the Terrible Twelfth than she’d let on.

Tet’s ear twitched. “And yet here you are, progressing, evolving, becoming a champion in your own right.” She paused to take him in. “I grew up in the Spectral Deserts of Eritreus, a wasteland on a continent far from Haven’s Home.”

“I’ve heard the butter knives there are amazing,” Logan joked.

“Nekhbet can be such a bore.” This time the cat woman did roll her eyes.

Logan took a second to clarify something he'd been pondering. "So, Haven's Home is what exactly? The largest city on Eritreus for dungeon cores? What is the big dungeoneer city? No one seems to talk much about that."

Tet answered with a shake of her head. "Aurora is the grand city of the dungeoneers. Home to the thousand guilds and the Castinus Dynasty. It lies on the Golden Harbor, across the Dawn Sea from my home continent, Kemet Kemal. I visited Aurora once. I went as a disciple of the Coptic Champions to see the greed, the selfishness, and the chaos. The emperor tries to keep order, but the Dynasty is weak as an aging trawhella. The real power lies with the guilds. Everything is carved up into warring fiefdoms vying for power. The result is chaos enough for the mercenaries, cutpurses, and cutthroats to have their way."

"It's all bright and shiny on the surface of things. A paradise. A utopia. But when you scratch the surface just a little, you can see the rot beneath. When I saw their lawless evil, it was clear what I needed to do with my life and with my eternity. I spent every waking moment working, always working, so that I'd be a good enough cultivator to get into Shadowcroft. Actually, the only reaping dungeon on Eritreus is in the Spectral Deserts of Kemet Kemal."

The very idea blew Logan away.

"Wait." He pressed his thick fingers against his temples. "Let me get this straight. You went *willingly* into that reaping dungeon knowing that... best-case scenario... you'd be murdered horribly, so you'd get a guardian form and come here?"

"All victories require sacrifice," Tet said.

Logan blinked. "Wow. That's *super* metal."

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "My primary affinities are Morta and Terra. There isn't any metal involved. That's more up Magmarty's alley."

"Not what I meant. It's just like, you're the ultimate goth chick. You were part of a death cult, for crying out loud."

Tet shrugged it off. "You must understand something. The Coptic Champions have nurtured the best and most powerful disciples from across the multiverse to become dungeons of note. There are two

great lines of guardians on Eritreus, my people, and the Diabolus Diaboli, based in Haven's Home. That's Prince Chadrigoth's line. He thinks the Diabolus has the most powerful cores, but he's mistaken. More Coptic Champions have become Heartwood and Crown cultivators."

To Logan, it seemed like a lot of posturing. Then again, back on Earth, in politics, sports, and art, dynasties always rose. Even in the military there was competition. Army versus Marines. Coasties versus Navy. Chairforce versus everyone else. And it got even worse when you got down to the battalion, company, and platoon levels. This was no different, he supposed.

And the existence of the old guard didn't stop upstarts from making a splash.

Tet turned, perused the shelf, and pulled out a collection of *The Tree Inside* from several years back. She ducked as a poison dart came shooting out.

Logan wasn't so lucky, but he did get a hand up just in time to catch it in his palm.

Tet blanched. "You need to get to Ned and Zed. Madam Gammy tips her darts with Coptician viper venom from my home temple."

"It's okay," Logan said. "I have poison immunity."

He plucked out the dart and tossed it over his shoulder. Madam Gammy wouldn't mind. She would just craft more since they were Endogenous Apothos Manifestations.

Tet swung back over the chasm. "I must go, Logan. This has been a nice diversion. In the end, however, I am a solitary creature. The Coptic Champions trained their disciples to be that way. I will stay focused. I will stay at the top of the leaderboard. I will get my own dungeon, and I'll protect the Tree." She went to walk away, hips swaying, tail twitching.

He grabbed a rope and swung back over with her.

"Mind if I walk you out?" he asked.

Tet smiled wryly. "I suppose we can let the diversion continue for a little while longer. We can't be friends, though. I don't mind a diversion every now and again, but I do mind *distractions*."

“I’m too mushroomy to be a distraction. And I’m friends with Marko, and he is like the Greek god of distractions.”

Tet’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what Greeks are, so I will agree and smile politely.” That wry smile never left her face.

After Tet checked the book out, she and Logan walked to the Stairwell of True Seeing.

At one point, they stopped to look at one another in the mirrors around them.

Tet Akhat’s true form was human, a twentyish-year-old woman with dark skin and a Cleopatra haircut. Her eyes were the same as in her cat form, like emeralds.

She smiled. “I must admit, you were rather handsome before you became fungal.”

Logan brushed a hand over his floppy yellow cap. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I rock the fungal look. And before, I wasn’t immune to poison, so I consider this an upgrade.”

“You are not wrong there.” Tet nodded. “That is precisely why we needed to shed our former bodies. So that we could become more than human. Immortal in a way, though different from the immortality the dungeoneers seek.”

She trailed off, falling into comfortable silence as they ascended the rest of the stairs. Eventually, she bid him goodbye with a raised hand and departed, bound for the Azure Dragons dormitory wing.

Logan, still reeling a little from the conversation, walked through the Golden Serpent Hall, letting his feet guide him while his mind worked. A few bushy Treegees were cleaning, and the tree-like kitchen staff were putting away the day’s coffee. It wasn’t as old as he liked, but Logan went over to grab a cup all the same. He was hard pressed to pass up coffee of any variety.

Cup of joe in hand, he wandered outside to the DIE Pavilion. It was a warm spring night, a little humid, which he liked now. He sipped the old coffee and then inhaled, taking more life energy from the chicken in his room. It was getting fuzzy—that would be *mucor muceda*, a type of mold, delicate and delicious. Like nightmare cotton candy.

His thoughts restlessly circled Tet like a ship caught in a massive whirlpool. She had trained her entire life to get into Shadowcroft. Logan had stumbled into their situation after a few beers and finishing a bloodthirsty video game. Life was weird. The afterlife was weirder. And yet he felt grateful for meeting such good friends and having such an interesting experience. He felt connected to the school, the professors, even the other students. Like Tet for example. They weren't friends—she'd made that abundantly clear—but maybe they could be under different circumstances.

Idly, he wondered if there was any chance of romance. Then he had to pause. How would he be able to kiss the cat woman? Neither had the lips for kissing.

No. No romance. Not only was it wildly impractical, but it would actively get in the way.

He needed to focus on the here and now. Tomorrow night, there was an all-academy meeting in the Golden Serpent Hall. Rockheart would be explaining the leaderboard and the Winnowing in more detail.

Logan both dreaded it and was excited about it. That basically summed up his experiences at the academy, though it was far more excitement than dread.

As he killed his coffee, his mind wandered from Tet to Chadrigoth. Even with the very limited info he had, it was clear as good Kentucky moonshine that the Abyss Lord had tried to kill them. Well, that chucklehead was going to have to learn to live with disappointment, because Logan and his friends weren't going anywhere.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven



THE NEXT NIGHT, LOGAN sat with his friends, near the back of the Golden Serpent Hall. Naturally, the First Cohort sat in the front, close to Skip Shadowcroft and Professor Rockheart. The headmaster and the rector prime stood on the dais of the main hall, presiding over the evening's proceedings like a battalion CO and the sergeant major giving the weekend safety brief. Shadowcroft was as regal if absentminded as ever, while Rockheart looked like he was ready to smite the next person to look at him wrong.

Logan had filled his friends in about his conversation with Tet. Their reaction surprised him. Marko laughed it off, just like he laughed off pretty much everything else. Treacle sighed and said it was only a matter of time before they were killed. Inga shrugged. She looked at the situation in a completely logical manner—they would become so powerful and earn so many points for the Azure Dragon Clan that Rockheart would eventually love them as much as he loved the First Cohort. Then both the rector prime and Chadrigoth would leave the Terrible Twelfth alone.

Either that, or they would all die, and then the point was moot anyway.

It would be a steep hill to climb, but Logan agreed. Part of him, though, wanted to tell the headmaster or another professor, maybe Arketa. But what proof did they have? Tet wouldn't want to get involved.

Shadowcroft raised his hands, and the entire hall quieted. He said what he always said. "Welcome! You've all come a long way. You're not dead, and so you can continue to do wonderful things!"

That basically summed up the academy: don't die and do wonderful things.

Well, Chadrigoth's attack hadn't killed them, so wonderful things Logan would continue to do.

A light gleamed under Shadowcroft's robes, bleeding from his gem, and he threw that light out across the room to show a large display. Each of the four clans was listed:

The Azure Dragon, the Vermilion Phoenix, the Crystal Tiger, and the Onyx Tortoise. Underneath the names were numbers, all swirling around.

Marko made a face. "What's this? It looks like a combination of unhealthy competition among our fellow students and math. So much math."

Inga's antennae stuck straight out. There was fury in her black eyes. "Marko, you have to pay attention. That's the leaderboard."

While Shadowcroft praised various students, cohorts, and clans, Inga went over the basics in a muted whisper. For Logan, it was a review. Then again, he hadn't been out drinking in Vralkag with GK most every night up until recently.

There were four parts to the leaderboard scores, each worth roughly a quarter of the overall score.

Twenty-five percent were teacher evaluations—sometimes referred to as the intangibles. This could really help you or hurt you. For example, Arketa loved Marko, and so that helped him, the Terrible Twelfth, and the Azure Dragon Clan as a whole. However, both Rockheart and Crucible couldn't stand the satyr, to say nothing of Rockheart's loathing of Logan. This was the most subjective aspect of the leaderboard, and professors were watched carefully. If Rockheart had given Logan glowing marks just because he was in his clan, Shadowcroft and the other professors—especially the clan leaders—would put a stop to it in an instant. Thankfully, no one would be accusing Rockheart of playing favorites with Logan.

The other parts of the score were far more objective.

Twenty-five percent of the leaderboard score was based around a category called the Raw Strength Index, which took into account overall strength compared to the other guardians in your year. Each level of cultivation was worth ten points. Each rank was another point. For example, Logan was an Iron Trunk cultivator, Rank 8,

which meant he himself was worth twenty-two points. Once he was Rank 7, he would be worth twenty-three points. A bruiser like Chadrigoth was worth almost twice that, since he was a high-ranked Azure Branch cultivator.

Chadrigoth had started out at the top of the leaderboard, and his position hadn't wavered even a little.

Another twenty-five percent of the leaderboard score, however, was based around a category called the Improved Strength Index. Logan never stood a chance in the Raw Strength Index, but in this category, he *shined* like the rising sun. Each level gained gave you *double* points, then triple, then quadruple, and so on. Logan had started as an E-Class, or Deep Root cultivator, Rank 10—the absolute bottom of the barrel. He'd leveled up twelve times to get to be an Iron Trunk, Rank 8.

Shadowcroft was quick to point that out. "Ah yes, and one of the most powerful examples of optimism meeting grit is our resident fungaloid, Logan Murray. He started as little more than a Dirt Digger, and yet look at his progress." The tree man beamed in satisfaction. "Why, he has earned the Azure Dragon a hundred and ninety points through his relentless efforts at self-improvement! Most impressive."

The Terrible Twelfth clapped, as did a few of their friends from other cohorts in the Azure Clan, but very few added to the applause. Rockheart himself was scowling, and he shouldn't have been, since he was the Azure Dragon clan leader.

Shadowcroft smiled so much he grew a few new skull flowers. "Yes, it is amazing how determined the Terrible Twelfth are. And yet they are no longer at the bottom of the barrel, so to speak. They are ranked eleventh in the Azure Dragon Clan and one up from the bottom across the school. Perhaps they might need a different name."

"Never!" Inga shouted in an unexpectedly loud voice. "We're terrible! Terrible for raiders! Terrible for our enemies! Terrible for anyone who crosses us!"

Marko and Treacle sat with their mouths open.

Logan laughed. "That's right. We're the Terrible Twelfth, and we're here to stay!"

“Perhaps.” Rockheart stepped forward. “And yet, twenty-five percent of your grade—of our standing, of the leaderboard—is your performance in the Winnowing. As you know, the four worst students, in each clan, regardless of cohort, will be expelled. These wretches will be forced from our vaunted academy. Relegated to wander the endless worlds as dungeonless monsters. An outcast. A creature too weak to serve the Tree of Souls as a true guardian. True, you will still be able to do your part in stopping raiders, and yet you will do so with only a fraction of your power—with a gem easily taken, destroyed, and cultivated.”

Shadowcroft threw up his hands. The display showing the various numbers and clan ranking winked off. “Please excuse me, students. It appears I have a bit of a crisis I must attend to. Rockheart will take it from here. Again, my dear students, as long as you live, you can do wonderful things.” He promptly turned on a heel and hurried off the dais and out the front door.

Rockheart’s own gem winked on. He took over seamlessly. “As you can see, the Azure Dragon is ahead by two hundred points. However, that can all change with end-of-the-year evaluations and poor performances in the Winnowing.

“As of now, here are the standings:

“The Azure Dragon = 2158

“The Vermilion Phoenix = 1909

“The Crystal Tiger = 1856

“The Onyx Tortoise = 1855”

Logan liked that his clan was at the top, and that his cohort wasn’t at the bottom. Actually, the last-ranked cohort in the Azure Dragon was known as the Franklin Four, and it was full of dungeon cores Logan didn’t know. A Brood Witch with eight spidery legs jutting from her back, a Pyro Ifrit known as a Wishcaster, a green-skinned Toad King, and some sort of iron golem with wards inscribed over every inch of his metallic skin. Logan had no idea which one was Franklin. They had slipped into last place, mostly because Logan had been leveling like crazy.

“There are two parts of the Winnowing,” Rockheart continued. “There is the Placement Exam and the Final Exam. The Placement

Exam will take place in the Tartarucha Cells. You will have six hours to set up a simulated dungeon, which will be proctored by myself and Zhen Ikgix, the venerable Threshing Tortoise. The exam is straightforward and rather simple, though it will put everything you've learned this year to the test. You will be facing a classic raiding party of five: a standard tank, another fighter class, a cleric, an unspecified variety of spell-caster, and a rogue. Those are the basics, but the actual character levels will be randomized. There will be three C-Class raiders and two B-Class raiders. You will have to destroy them to pass. Who here has booked time in the Tartarucha Cells?"

Everyone in the room raised their hands except for Marko and the Gelatinous Knight. That wasn't so promising. Logan could have sworn Marko had logged some time in the simulation dungeon.

Rockheart nodded and made sure to throw the slackers a well-earned glare of disapproval. "We will be using the introductory settings, so the simulated raiders will be far less intelligent than any dungeoneers you will face in real life. Even Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter will be that much less clever. Not that he was particularly clever to begin with during his tragic and ill-begotten life."

Logan turned to Inga. "Wait, I'm sorry. Brandybutter was alive at one point?"

She nodded. "The Apothos of the raiders was collected, enchanted, and turned into simulations. Their classes can be changed, and their stats adjusted at will, but each one is based on a real raider who was unfortunate enough to be captured."

"So you're telling me they're ghosts," Logan said flatly. "We've been fighting ghosts all this time?"

Inga nodded and shushed him, clearly not as interested as she should've been.

Rockheart was in full lecture mode now. "Those who do well on the Placement Exam will be rewarded with a draught of Red Lotus Juice." He revealed a cloudy glass bottle with a flourish. The bottle itself glimmered with ethereal light, and the red liquid within the bottle seemed to burn with pent-up energy.

Inga's antennae went wild. "That could really help us."

"I'd rather have beer," Marko said with a dopey grin.

Rockheart silenced them all with a lingering stare. “Yes, the tincture is powerful, to be certain. But, the benefits of doing well don’t end there. Those with the best scores will get first choice when it comes to picking the actual dungeon used for the Winnowing. The world is a hard and unforgiving place, and Shadowcroft mirrors that reality. Do well and you will get to choose any of the thirteen dungeons on Arborea—the one most favorable to your guardian form. The top scorers will also get extra time—nine hours instead of six to prep those dungeons and to alter them and outfit them in any manner they deem appropriate. And you’d do well to choose wisely since you will be facing *real* dungeoneers.”

“Did I hear him right?” Logan asked.

“Yes, you heard me right,” the rector prime spat. “We are abducting real dungeoneers as we speak, stolen from across the multiverse... That is what called Shadowcroft away. The Final Exam will be in a real dungeon, with real threats, and there is a good chance if you fail, you will die with a cracked gemstone and your Apothos will be devoured by these supposed heroes, who will return to their various worlds.

“The dungeoneers will be fighting for their lives, not mere simulations of the Cell. As for you, you all will be fighting for your place at this school. Again, you might survive your Final Exam, but if your scores put you at the bottom of your clan, you will not survive the Winnowing.” His eyes shot to the Terrible Twelfth and seemed to linger for a little too long. “Expulsion shall be the reward for your failure and weakness. You will become a wandering monster. You will have no minions, no home, no hope.”

That idea hit Logan hard. Tet-Akhat might be a solitary creature, but he wasn’t. Being alone, without friends, wandering forest paths of some forgotten world, would be hell for him.

He raised his hand.

Rockheart sneered and folded his arms. “Yes, Mr. Murray.”

Logan stood. “I’m assuming Inga and I will be able to take both parts of the Winnowing together.”

Whispers, laughter, and gasps erupted from the student body.

Rockheart hushed them all with a violent look. “That would help you, Fungaloid, but what of Inga? She is a promising dungeon core. Do you even know what you are suggesting?”

Inga stood next to him and grabbed his hand. “I know exactly what Logan is suggesting. We’ve spent the year working together. Yes, I’m a promising dungeon core, but I also know an opportunity when I see one. It would be my honor to throw my fate in with Logan Murray.”

Logan felt a knot of emotion fill his throat.

Chadrigoth burst into laughter and so did the rest of his cronies. All except Tet.

The cat woman merely looked at Logan, shaking her head.

He didn’t care. He nodded at Inga.

“We’ll do this together... if you’re sure.” Inga’s brow furrowed as her antennae shrank and she anxiously bit her bottom lip.

“Sometimes I’m not too terribly good on tests. Performance anxiety.”

“Of course we’re going to do this together,” he said, letting confidence fill his voice. It may have been unearned confidence, but he’d learned that one of the most important aspects of leadership was giving people hope. And nothing inspired hope more than confidence.

He did have to wonder what she meant about not taking tests well, though. Would she find the nerve to tell him?



## Chapter Twenty-Eight



IT TOOK ANOTHER MONTH for the students to get through all the material in their classes and the teachers to work through the seemingly endless sea of students who needed to take their Placement Exams. The staff ran the Tartarucha Cells twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to get through the whole school.

For Logan and his friends, it was largely business as usual—cultivating in the Akros Coliseum in the morning, perfecting the Boundless Wheel technique, studying in the Codex Athenaeum at night, and doing their best to survive Rockheart's Core Calisthenics.

The stony-faced professor had become even more vindictive since their trip to the Slaughter Pits, pushing them to the very limit of their capabilities. Obstacle courses. Duels. New monsters. Even an Inferno pit, designed to roast Logan alive—he had to constantly circulate Apothos along his meridians and through his skin or risk being burnt to a cinder. Yet instead of breaking Logan and the others, it only pushed them to excel. Logan had climbed his way up to Iron Trunk cultivator, Rank 7, and even Marko had reluctantly started to give half a damn.

The satyr still spent far too much time getting blackout drunk with the Gelatinous Knight, but his attitude had shifted since the field trip. Seeing a real dungeon core in action had seemed to spark something in him. Either that, or the fight against the dungeoneers. Either way, he was taking their morning meditation seriously. The Boundless Wheel hadn't really been working for him, but he'd stumbled upon a different technique called Drunken Master Falls Down Well—not a joke, an *actual* technique—that seemed to do the trick. Marko was also putting in extra hours at the library and had even started fiddling around with dungeon designs with Professor Arketa.

Logan was feeling better than ever about their chances, both as individuals and as a team.

The opposite seemed to be true for everyone else at Shadowcroft, though.

Once the rest of the first-years started taking their Placement Exams, an air of darkness and stress filled the hallways and dormitories. Even though the weather was warm again—the chill of spring rains turning into the furious blaze of summer sun—everyone was working too hard to really enjoy it. Also, rumors ran rampant. There were stories of dungeon cores who completely failed, botched their Placement Exams so badly they never stood a chance in the upcoming Winnowing. Other gossip told of students who did so well it spelled doom for one cohort or another. It was hard to get to the heart of those rumors, but one thing was certainly true: the standings on the leaderboard seemed to change nightly.

Logan and his cohort checked their DCGs for their schedule, and of course, the Terrible Twelfth would be going last. First Marko at six a.m., which was a recipe for disaster, then Logan and Inga as soon as the simulated dungeon was cleared and reset, which generally took an hour. Then Treacle would go dead last—a sign that the gnome lord turned minotaur insisted was a bad omen. But then he sort of thought everything was doom, gloom, and bad omens by the bucketful. The days leading up to the exam were hard, and some cohorts had a hard time staying focused.

Not the Terrible Twelfth.

Marko was handling the stress relatively well. Yes, he'd been spending time with the Gelatinous Knight—drowning out his worries—but he'd also worked in the library, sketching out the dungeon for his exam. Meanwhile, Treacle spent untold hours at the World Forge, crafting gear. Logan and Inga hunkered down on strategy and cultivation. There was very little chance that Logan could advance to Rank 6 before the exam, but he certainly tried his best. Any extra bit of Apothos he could access might mean the difference between success and failure for the pair of them. Time seemed to pass in a herky-jerky fashion, both too fast and too slow all at once.

The day of their Placement Exam dawned bright and hot, turning Arborea into an oven, which Treacle also insisted was a bad omen. It only got progressively more bizarre from there. Logan had been tossing and turning all night, restlessly worrying about both his own survival and that of his teammates. Although the Placement Exams and the Winnowing were individual tests with individual results and consequences, the Terrible Twelfth had spent nearly every waking moment together. Working. Studying. Bonding. Logan felt responsible for each of them.

So, at a quarter to five, Logan headed into Marko's room, fully expecting to have to drag the satyr out of bed... Only to find the goat man not only awake but *alert*, a book spread out on a narrow wooden desk while he gently finger picked at a lyre he'd crafted.

Stranger still, Marko was *sober*.

The satyr seemed remarkably clearheaded—he'd skipped drinking the night before, which never happened—and excited about the exam. Over breakfast, which consisted of a loaded omelet for Marko and decaying vegetables for Logan, the satyr confessed that he and the Gelatinous Knight had actually been studying for the past month instead of drinking. Marko had been too embarrassed to ask for help. Besides, Logan and Inga were so busy he hadn't wanted to impose, and trying to get Treacle to leave that damned forge was the next best thing to impossible—though the minotaur had helped him craft the lyre.

Still, GK was rather accomplished so long as he was sober, and Marko felt like he actually had a decent chance to pass.

Unfortunately, Marko's good attitude had vanished when he stepped out of the Tartarucha Cells several hours later. The man looked deeply shaken, his hair wild, his eyes strangely hollow. He mumbled a few vague words to Logan and the others before taking off to Vralkag. He left what remained of his broken lyre lying on the floor. The tests were proctored by the professors, so students couldn't watch what happened. Since Marko wasn't talking, there was no way for them to know what had gone down inside his test.

Logan wanted more than anything to chase his friend down and demand some answers, but he had less than forty minutes before

his own exam began, and he couldn't risk taking off for Vralkag. Everything was riding on this, and Inga was depending on him. He wanted to help Marko, but not at the expense of his other friends. After sharing a few quick words with Treacle, the minotaur lumbered up the Stairwell of True Seeing in pursuit of the satyr. His own exam wouldn't start until around 8 p.m., so he had the time.

Logan's thoughts were still lingering on Marko when Professor Rockheart appeared like an avenging specter, ushering them into the Tartarucha Cells with a sneer.

Doing some simple deep breathing techniques, Logan cleared his thoughts, banished his worries, and became fully present in the moment.

They had to jump in and get to work.

Logan and Inga were used to rushing through their hour each Monday night, barely having enough time for Brandybutter to run through their creation. Six hours of prep time seemed positively stress-free by comparison. But they had far more to do this time around, Logan reminded himself as they worked. They weren't going up against a single dungeoneer, but five, all of them far more powerful than anything they'd faced before. Thankfully, he and Inga had already workshopped this scenario a hundred times over and knew exactly what to do. At this point, it was just grit and elbow grease.

After assuming control of the simulator, Inga broke off to carefully build the inner sanctum, while Logan created the antechamber that had killed Sir Rosencrantz Brandybutter so many times before. If it ain't broke, don't fix it was an adage Logan still adhered to. From there, they added a minion room, a funnel with a kill room, and a nonstandard trap room, which was nearly an exact copy of the swiveling walls chamber that they'd stumbled into in the Slaughter Pits. Logan also added a trapdoor in the ceiling, which would send three giant centipedes cascading down into the room if the raiders weren't killed by the spiked walls or the grenade mushrooms.

While Logan and Inga had improved drastically over the past months, they still didn't have a ton of Apothos to play with. They both had many brilliant ideas, but they didn't have the space or resources

to craft them all. Every creation, every crafted item, took precious energy from their gem cores.

So, they kept the design simple but efficient, as all good tools were. Sure, it would've been nice to have something a bit more elaborate, but a meat cleaver did its job well enough even if it wasn't particularly fancy.

They positioned the entrance at the top of a corkscrew staircase that would dump interlopers into a hallway that split off to the left and right—that was Inga's idea. She wanted to see if they could split the party. Logan was against it. But partnerships were about both teamwork and compromises. She wanted the T-juncture, so he conceded.

The hallway to the right led to a small room with an enticing lure set out in the open. A gleaming silver sword. The sword wasn't magical—neither he nor Inga had managed to inscribe runes yet—but it was an *Exogenous* manifestation that would fetch a pretty penny. The only problem was, there was an artfully concealed trapdoor, which would send the hapless heroes plummeting into a kill room full of gleaming spears of spun moon glass sharper than any scalpel. However, if they somehow survived the fall, there was a narrow corridor that led to the antechamber with the Mucal-Film floor and the two mushroom-filled alcoves on either side of the short hallway that connected to their inner sanctum.

The sanctum itself was filled with Inga's Spike Flies and Logan's Spore Wargs, all tucked away within a veritable forest of fungal growth, which included Ghoul's Snare and Blister Wart. Logan didn't have the juice for that forest, but Inga did, and she willingly donated the energy.

Placing the majority of their minions in the inner sanctum was a risk, but it was also something the dungeoneers wouldn't expect. Their presence not only protected the room, but if things went south, they could also summon the mushroom dogs and flies to help in the antechamber. They could even flood the narrow corridor that led to the kill room with their minions.

Logan was hoping the dungeoneers would take the left hallway, which connected to another staircase. That led to a snaking hallway

filled with blind corners, switchbacks, and the conveniently placed swivel-wall trap room. Eventually, the hallway doubled back, through the minion room, then around to the front end of the antechamber. In essence, they had five rooms, including the sanctum, which wasn't that many. What they lacked in space, they made up for in triggers, traps, and minions. And given that Inga was Inga, they had contingency plans for their contingency plans.

Once they got their setup taken care of, it was mostly a matter of waiting for the mushrooms to grow. Logan helped that along with a little aid from Rapid Growth, but he used his power sparingly since he wanted to save as much Apothos as possible for the battle itself. Rationing supplies was one of the pillars of success in tactical warfare.

It was late afternoon, they still had nearly half an hour to spare, and Logan was amped up and ready to rock and roll.

Inga, though, kept sighing. Well, as much as she could sigh as a shared entity inside their respective gem cores, which floated over the pedestal. Their guardian bodies waited patiently in the antechamber's alcoves, hidden by huge Opal Truffle mushrooms. Logan's fungaloid form still wasn't all that impressive, but he did what he could with what he had. He was wearing a pair of rough-spun pants, thin leather boots, and a leather bandoleer that offered virtually no protection at all but secured his ruby shield. The shield on his back, combined with his fat fingers, made him look comically like a mutated turtle of the teenage variety.

He also had his rusty dagger sheathed at his side, but that wouldn't do much against a real dungeoneer. Eventually he'd need to get some actual armor and a weapon that wouldn't induce laughing fits when raiders saw it. But that was a worry for another day.

<Are you ready?> Logan asked.

Instead of answering that question, Inga lost it. <Very well, Logan, you don't need to pressure me! I'll tell you about the Stringentia Strigiformes Exam!>

This was one of her most violent non sequiturs to date.

He kept calm. <Not sure I was pressuring you. I was just growing some Proto-Spores, kicking it, relaxing a little before we take the most important test of our lives.>

<Kicking what?> Inga sent that thought with a great deal of annoyance. <Never mind. It is probably one of your backward world's idioms. No matter. You know when Tet said she'd trained her entire life to prepare herself for the Reaping?>

<Yep. Like a pianist with a tiger mom. Another culturally specific reference from my backward world. Go on, Inga.> He tried to make a joke, to lighten the mood, but it didn't help.

Still more sighs. <Well, this was never a part of my plan. The only reason I'm here at all was because I failed the single most important test of my life. Once upon a time, I was the Grand Archivist of the Eastern Aerie Archive. As you can rightfully imagine, such a position made me incredibly wealthy, famous even. But I wanted to be so much more. I had my sights on the coveted position of Imperial Bibliognost. A Libro Generalissimo of the Sacred Tombs of Books. Perhaps the single most coveted position on Toriopa.

<It takes *decades* to accumulate the knowledge to pass the Stringentia Strigiformes Exam, which is the only way to become an Imperial Bibliognost.> She snorted virtually. <It is a grueling exercise in alphabetizing, synthesizing, indexing, and collating information across the world, across history, across reality itself. It is a working knowledge of the Brusalka Concordance.> This she followed up with an even bigger snort. <I don't have to tell you how many people have been driven insane by trying to remember even the first volume of the Brusalka.>

Logan wasn't going to argue... but talk about culturally specific. He simply agreed, and then let his consciousness float through the halls, stairs, and rooms of their dungeon. It was almost time. While he drifted, he listened.

<When we first bonded symbiotically, you saw me enter into the Sacred Tomb of Books, yes?> Inga asked.

Logan remembered the cave entrance at the top of the mountains, with the other owl people perched regally on hanging platforms. <Yeah, I did, and it looked as intimidating as hell.>

<Worse than you can imagine, Logan. I didn't emerge for three days. I didn't eat. I didn't sleep. Instead I worked. Worked my fingers bloody alphabetizing and cataloging. I believe I did more in less time than any exam candidate before me. It was a triumph...> She seemed to preen at the words, despite not having feathers anymore.

<Right up until the very end,> she finished, deflating.

<You see, in the end I had to select a specialized field of study, and because I'd excelled beyond all imagining, I had forty-six different areas to choose from. And I couldn't. The idea of picking only one area of study forever crippled me, Logan! It crippled me. I spent the rest of the exam reading through all the possibilities. I ran out of time and failed the test because I couldn't make a choice. Which technically meant I had failed. The most important test on my world, of my life, and I failed.>

<What happened next?> Logan asked. He'd figured something like that had happened. Inga could be so scattered at times.

If Inga had been in her body, she would've been crying. <My superiors were shocked. All the Archivists on Toriopa were shocked. It shouldn't have happened. I should've been better. And yet there I was, a failure.>

<Could you have gone back to your old job?> he asked.

<No.>

Inga didn't send any more to him for a long time. He waited; he wanted to make sure she knew he was listening and that he cared. He moved his fungal form out of the Opal Truffles in the alcove and went to Inga's astral moth body. He took her hands in his.

Inga gripped his thick-fingered hands. <An Acolyte of the Word may only take the Stringentia Strigiformes Exams once. Many do not survive the attempt, but those who survive and fail are cast out from the ranks of the Archive. Knowledge is a powerful tool, the most powerful, and only the humble should wield it. Overestimating one's own abilities is the height of hubris and proof that such an individual is not worthy of the knowledge of the Archive. I could go back to my home, to my family. But I would never be allowed to set foot in any Archive again.

<The thought of failure was more painful than you can imagine. So many of the elite on Toriopa were counting on me. I'd disappointed them. Then there were all these people who were so jealous of me. Remember, not only was I rich and successful, I was also a beauty queen, with my fine beak, my elegant plumage, and my well-shaped talons. My enemies took this opportunity to ridicule me. But worse even than that was the thought of never having access to my books again. That was unbearable. Shadowcroft has the finest library of all the dungeon academies. So I decided I would rather live in a monstrous form with the light of knowledge than live as a queen in the darkness of its absence. Using my vast stores of information, I found the nearest reaping dungeon, and the rest is history, as our people say.>

<How did you finally decide on your guardian form?> Logan asked.

She answered morosely. <I spent a year analyzing the various dungeon cores available to me. I still feel like I rushed the decision.>

She went silent, obviously upset.

Honestly, Logan was impressed by her story more than anything. She'd crushed her test, and even after failing to make a choice, she was dedicated enough to learning and growing that she was willing to *die* for it. That was dedication.

Still, his thoughts didn't matter right then, because clearly *she* thought of herself as a failure. Logan wanted to comfort her, but he wasn't sure how. So he told her a story. <Listen, my Uncle Bud failed at more things than anyone in the history of failure. He wanted to be a doctor, but he failed Organic Chemistry. Twice. He wanted to be a lawyer, but he couldn't pass the bar. He took it three times. He wanted to be an Air Force pilot, but he was color blind, and between you and me, a bit too girthy.

<The point is, Uncle Bud found his home in business, and when I started my landscaping company, he helped me even though he thought mowing other people's lawns was beneath me. Then it was my turn to fail, over and over. I lost clients. I killed lawns. I lost not one but two lawnmowers because I didn't change the oil. And every time I wanted to give up, Uncle Bud would say that you fail your way

into success. For him, that meant changing careers. For you, that might mean changing everything.>

<I understand most of what you said.> Again, she was quiet.

<Listen, I'm sorry you didn't pass that exam,> he said after a time. <But I'm not sorry that you wound up at Shadowcroft. And come on, Inga, people like Tet worked and prayed to get into this school. For you? This was your plan B. You're amazing. I'm so glad that you agreed to join up with me.>

<I'm glad too.> Her guardian form smiled. <Still, I'm nervous about tests now. What if I break under the pressure like I did then?>

<There's a difference, Inga. You aren't alone now like you were then. And I may not be a Grand Archivist or even the sharpest tool in the shed, but if there's one thing I can do, it's make a snap decision. That's why we make such a good team, and that's the reason we're going to crush this thing.>

She sniffled. <I suppose having you here does make me feel better. I never had to be a Grand Archivist alone—we always had a team—and I don't want to be a dungeon core alone.>

<Neither do I.>



## Chapter Twenty-Nine



ROCKHEART'S VOICE BOOMED through their simulated dungeon. "All right, Logan and Inga, your six hours are over."

Both dungeon cores returned their minds to the gems floating over their pedestal, which was surrounded by an underground mushroom forest. Some of the fungi were decorative, but others had a definite sinister purpose. Strands of purple-black Ghoul's Snare covered the ground, especially near the entrance, where Logan had sprouted a ton of Blister Wart. The Blister Wart was a fairly innocuous looking mushroom with a thick white stalk and a spotted red cap, like something out of a fairy tale. But if an interloper accidentally brushed up against those crimson caps, they would find out they were in a Grimm's fairy tale instead of a Disney one.

Thanks to his symbiotic relationship with Inga, both she and her minions were immune to the negative effects his mushrooms dished out. Just one of the many perks of the bond.

The Blister Wart uniformly covered the walls and floor of the short hallway that connected the sanctum to the antechamber. If the raiders made it that far, he wanted them in pain. And if they started hacking through the towering toadstools in the sanctum, the ceiling was a carpet of black Spike Flies ready to descend in an instant. Their inner sanctum was likewise packed full of insects and fungal fun.

The rector prime still didn't like the idea of the astral moth lowering herself. "Inga, are you sure you want to throw your lot in with this fungaloid? I wouldn't normally ask, but you have so much potential, it seems a shame you are about to waste it."

Her response was immediate. "Don't be tiresome, Professor. I know what I'm doing. If you had any sense, you'd see that."

“Very well. Then let your fate be his, Astral Moth. The Placement Exam begins now!” Rockheart’s grumbles were lost as the five adventurers appeared at the entrance.

Sir Brandybutter was there, but he was so different now—an archer instead of a cavalier mage. Clothed in studded leather armor, he looked like a middle-aged Robin Hood with a beer belly, a scraggly white goatee, and a longbow. Brandybutter was joined by Arfgar of the Hill People. Even at a quick glance, it was clear Arfgar was the tank of the party. Huge metal plates covered his chest and back, all tied together with leather thongs. He gripped a stupidly large single-bladed battle-axe. He also had a series of gleaming daggers sheathed on an oversized belt. Both men were C-Class, middle-ranked fighters.

Powerful, but not terribly so.

And Brandybutter knew it. “Drat! My powers are minimal, my intellect is restricted, and I fear that I shan’t prevail!”

Arfgar raised his axe. “Find me skull to split, old man. Me bathe this dungeon in the blood of my enemies. Me rejoice in the lamentation of the women.”

That made Logan laugh. <Wow. Some references are not so culturally specific.>

Inga thoughts were full of smiles. <This is excellent news. The fighters are C-Class, which means this won’t be a melee-heavy scenario. That is incredibly lucky for us since we are terrible in close-quarters combat! Even better, Arfgar is dumb even with his intellect turned up, though he has far more charisma than poor Brandybutter, who looks silly without his plate mail.>

The other C-Class raider was a Harbinger of Illumina Pate, the Bald Phoenix—a type of cleric class that could deal damage, but mostly focused on healing and defense spells. Her real name was Lindarval Lanathandyx, but the students just called her Feathers due to her ornate golden plate mail armor sculpted to look like the magnificent plumage of her patron god. A long cloak, also covered in red and gold feathers, trailed down her back, swirling about her ankles as she moved. She fought with a mahogany cudgel sculpted to look like a bird taking wing.

The two B-Class dungeoneers were a rogue and a spell-caster.

Daggers McFinn didn't try to hide the fact he was a thief. His leather armor was black and sleek, and his soft shoes allowed him to walk without making a sound. His short sword and dagger were perfect for backstabbing, and he'd brought a short recurve bow perfect for taking out unwitting targets at range.

The other raider was the real firepower of the group—the Magnificent Morty Mercutio Mimsy. Though, honestly, Mimsy looked more like a creepy uncle than a mighty sorcerer. He had thinning brown hair, a wispy beard, and robes that were more monkish than wizardly. He had a sheathed dagger hanging from his belt, which struggled to keep his prodigious gut in check. He looked doughy and nonthreatening, but as with everything at Shadowcroft, looks could be deceiving.

Logan saw the problem right away. <Daggers McFinn, even with his introductory settings, is going to sniff out our traps in a heartbeat. Looks like we'll be fighting after all. And dodging spells. Mimsy might not look like much, but an Azure Branch mage is nothing to laugh at.>

Inga agreed.

Arfgar beat on his metal chest plate with his axe. "Arfgar says we should split up. Me go to the right with small man and feather girl."

Brandybutter pinched his nose. "Tut, tut, Arfgar, we will not be splitting up the party. Even in my reduced state, I know that."

"Cover more ground that way!" the barbarian insisted, brows furrowing as he scowled.

Daggers McFinn rubbed his chin. "Splitting up, eh? I'd get to take what loot I found. How about I go right, and the rest of you go left? I can walk in shadows. I can move silently. I am the night."

Brandybutter sighed. "Oddly enough, my good man, I am the day. Is that why I never see you at any of the meetings?"

<Speaking of day and night, Inga,> Logan sent to his comrade, <both you and I can see in the dark. That means we need to turn off the lights as quickly as possible.>

For now, the adventurers stood in the torchlight at the dungeon's entrance. Mimsy took one of the torches out of its sconce, while

Feathers cast a spell to make her cudgel glow.

“Whether we split up or not, Illumina Pate will guide us and protect us upon this venture!” Feathers offered enthusiastically.

Daggers shrugged. “No, no splitting up. Gods, but you lot really are dumb.” He pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. “Listen, without me none of you will ever survive, and I need you armor-wearing morons to keep me from getting my skull caved in right and proper. So, we all stick together, and I’ll get my loot the old-fashioned way. When one of you rubes die, I’ll go through your pockets. Now, let’s head out, eh?” He made a get-along-with-it gesture with one hand. “Fighters first now. Don’t be cowardly.”

The barbarian snarled into the face of the rogue. “Arfgar will do this one thing for you, small man, but Arfgar is leader!”

The rogue winced. “Perhaps Arfgar can find some mint. I hope this is a minty dungeon.”

After a bit more bickering and back-and-forth, the party set out as one, following the forking path that angled left. Much to Inga and Logan’s disappointment, Daggers McFinn proved to be an exceptionally competent thief who found their swivel door in a matter of seconds. “See, right there, that’s a trap. If one of us gets too close, the wall swivels out, spikes us, and then Bob’s your uncle, we’re down one dungeoneer.”

“Bob is not uncle!” Arfgar roared. “Uncle is Ymir. Ymir is good uncle!”

Brandybutter shook his head sadly. “This quest, my comrades, doth weary me. I long for the sweet release of death.”

*<Sounds like something Treacle would say,>* Logan sent.

*<Concentrate,>* Inga returned, attention entirely fixed on the invaders.

The raiders retreated and started down the hallway, which led away from the trap room. After snaking this way and that, it doubled back and wrapped around to more stairs, which ended in the antechamber. However, Logan knew the final fight might take place in the inner sanctum itself. That would hurt their grade, since the whole point of a dungeon was to keep the raiders away from the pedestal where their gems floated.

He and Inga needed to take out the rogue or the spell-caster since they were the most powerful cultivators in the group. The spell-caster would no doubt deal the most DPS—damage per second—but he was probably also as fragile as a porcelain tea set. He'd make an excellent target, though dispatching Daggers first would open up the rest of the party to the nasty assortment of traps they'd carefully laid out.

Logan grinned, an idea forming in his head. <We can't waste resources. Since we couldn't bring the raiders to the trap, I say we bring the trap to the raiders.>

Again, Logan felt like the dungeon was a part of him, an extension of his body like an extra limb. He reached out with his will and undid the secret ceiling in the swivel-wall trap room. With a thought, he reached out to the centipedes waiting within, already covered in Braincap spores. Logan took control of one fungal servant. Slipping into the inhuman body was always strange at first—everything moved wrong and alien thoughts buzzed in the back of his head.

Thankfully, the feeling faded after a moment, and he skittered over to the Gem-Studded Puffballs waiting in the trap room. They were beautiful, amethyst orbs covered in glittering multicolored spikes, resting atop delicate black stems. Deadly treasures that could maim or kill with equal ease. Carefully, so *carefully*, he calmed the quivering spheres to stop them from exploding. He then moved the centipede under them, transferring the deadly puffballs from the wall to the chitinous back of the bug. This was ultra-risky, but in the end, he got lucky. None exploded.

Inga saw what he was doing. <Yes, wait until they are distracted, and then hit the raiders from behind.>

<That's exactly what I'm thinking.>

The five would-be heroes entered the minion room at a crawl, the rogue searching for traps while the others scanned for deadly monsters and/or seductive treasure. This was where the adventurers would face Inga's newest set of minions. They were invisible in the bright light filling the room. Not only did the raiders have their light sources, but a central fountain of gleaming white marble glowed with

a blinding light all its own. A red glint topped the tumbling water. Marko had suggested the water feature. The satyr had an uncanny eye for elegant dungeon design.

Above the interlopers, clinging to the ceiling with spindly legs, were dozens of Tsuki Ants, each about the size of a kitten, though no one in their right mind would want one of those nasty little buggers curling up in their lap. In bright light, the ants couldn't be seen, but in darkness, they would glow with an otherworldly lunar light.

The creatures waited motionless, thanks to Inga's perfect control. At higher levels, they could become smaller and more plentiful, with diamond-sharp mandibles capable of piercing even spell-enchanted metal. Even at Inga's level, though, they were difficult to deal with.

Misdirection was everything. When raiders concentrated on the burbling marble fountain, the insects would strike.

Arfgar stood spellbound, watching the fountain gurgling, the light dancing in the water. "Pretty fountain," he crooned like some giant, armor-clad baby staring at a fancy crib mobile.

"This all seems rather curious to me—" Brandybutter started.

The Tsuki Ants attacked at Inga's command. They dropped onto the assembled raiders, and while Inga aimed for the rogue and the spell-caster, Arfgar took the brunt of the assault. He danced around, fruitlessly swinging his huge axe with one hand, swatting at the biting creatures with the other, desperately trying to free himself from their deadly mandibles. Once they fell, once they started squirming, the ants could be seen.

With a roar, Arfgar dropped his axe to the floor with a clatter and started to pop the ants with his bare hands. After a moment, he slammed a booted foot down, sending out a massive earthen shock wave that knocked more ants free. The other dungeoneers leapt in to help him. Brandybutter rapid-fired his bow, a look of distaste plastered across his face. Daggers McFinn didn't draw his bow, but he hardly needed it. The man could move like the wind. He waded across the floor, slashing with his short sword while simultaneously flicking blades of pure Apothos from his off hand, impaling the ants at a dizzying rate. Any time the pinching creatures closed in, he leapt

through the air like an acrobat, landing safely behind either Arfgar or Feathers.

Not very heroic, but extremely effective.

The Magnificent Mimsy kept his torch raised even as he conjured blazing violet bolts of power, which he cast with uncanny precision. Ants exploded like fireworks, sending chunks of charbroiled carapace flying. Those pieces of smoking ant peppered both fighters, slashing open bare skin, but Mimsy didn't seem particularly bothered by that fact and kept right on casting.

Feathers, though, was the real MVP of the party. "Grand phoenix of little plumage, scatter our enemies so we might slay them!" she crowed, head thrown back.

Her cudgel flashed, and a ring of blinding golden energy exploded out from her, not affecting the party members, but violently hurling the ants into a corner of the room. A lance of flame as thick as a telephone pole from the good ol' Mimsy finished most of them off. Any that happened to escape met their fate at the end of a conjured knife blade or Arfgar's crushing mitts.

The barbarian ripped the very last ant apart. "By the High Hills of my people, this was too easy. Me want glory, not bugs."

Daggers frowned. "Agreed. Bugs don't have treasure. What exactly is the point of raiding this dungeon again?"

Brandybutter rolled his eyes. "Well, for one thing, my good chap, there, at the top of the fountain, is a gemstone." He wasn't wrong. Suspended above the waters by flows of magic was a blood ruby the size of a golf ball. "And from the rumors I've heard about this place, there are Opal Truffles in this dungeon to boot. I enjoy such delicacies in my nana's omelets."

Arfgar roared, veins bulging in his neck and temple. "Me hate mushrooms!"

"Heathen," Brandybutter muttered with a grimace.

"Opal Truffle cream sauce, a nice wide noodle, some wine, and any number of lusty inn wenches." Daggers nodded. "But let's see about this gemstone first." He padded forward on perfectly silent feet and plucked the gem from the top of the fountain with nimble fingers.

<See?> Inga sent. <We needed that lure there.>

If Logan had possessed lips, he would've smiled. This was only going to help their grade.

While the raiders were distracted, Logan focused, sending his consciousness back into the overgrown centipede, who had a very special delivery for those raiders.



## Chapter Thirty



LOGAN WAS GRATEFUL for every Monday night he'd spent using his Braincap spores to inhabit the bodies of Inga's centipedes. Moving all those legs in unison was a tricky bit of business, but he'd taken the same lessons he'd learned during physical therapy and applied them to the creature. Now, it felt almost as natural as walking on two legs. He slithered forward, the rough stone floor sending minute tremors racing up his many appendages. The centipede's vision was rather lackluster, all things considered, but the vibrations he felt painted a picture of their own.

He could sense the heartbeat of each dungeoneer, could feel their feet shift and sense each of their positions throughout the room. And thanks to the gnarled Braincaps growing from the centipede's back, Logan also had access to his Fungal Vision, which allowed him to see even in the dark.

He crept forward, slow, steady, and patient, not wanting to draw attention to himself before the time was right for his ambush. At five feet out he reared back, his mandibles silently opening and closing in anticipation of the kill to come. He carried two of the Gem-Studded Puffballs, cradling them like eggs that might break at the slightest provocation. He hurled both puffballs directly at Daggers McFinn with his many jointed arms. Then without a moment of hesitation, Logan launched his insectile form at the Magnificent Mimsy.

He bowled into the sorcerer in the same instant that the puffballs landed. They exploded like frag grenades. One puffball was a direct hit, vaporizing Daggers McFinn where he stood, turning him into little more than pink mist and gory armor. The other sailed past Daggers and smashed against the base of the fountain, sending out a wave of glittering shards of glass in every direction. They weren't powerful

enough to penetrate Feathers' plate mail, but Arfgar and Brandybutter weren't so lucky.

Logan expected to get a dose of Apothos from the kill, but then he remembered this was just a simulation. He had to be content with the kill.

As for Mimsy, Logan wrapped his body around the spell-caster's legs, using his momentum to bear the sorcerer to the ground. Mimsy let out a terrified squawk, shocked at finding himself at the mercy of such a creature. He seemed too flabbergasted to cast a spell. Logan didn't wait for him to gather his bearings, but rather lashed out with his mandibles, clamping down on one of Mimsy's forearms, slicing through fabric and drawing hot, metallic blood. He reared back, clawing at Mimsy's vulnerable face with his spike-tipped legs. He blinded the sorcerer in one eye and left a deep gash across his forehead.

But just as he was preparing to end the spell-caster, he felt the heavy pounding of footfalls followed by the sharp edge of steel biting into his neck.

Things went momentarily dark, and a heartbeat later, Logan found his consciousness back in the inner sanctum.

Wow, that had been one heck of a rush. Although he hadn't killed Mimsy, the sorcerer was in a bad way. Arm bleeding freely, face shredded, legs peppered with fragments of glass. Logan felt extremely satisfied with the battle.

Better, the action wasn't over. Two more centipedes, waiting in the wings, charged in, beelining toward the downed spell-caster. If they could end Mimsy here and now, this would pretty much be a wrap. Logan held his breath, his guardian form tense as he waited.

He let out a disgruntled sigh as Feathers darted in from seemingly nowhere, positioning herself between the incoming bugs and the downed caster. She moved with speed and intensity, easily batting away the bugs with her glowing eagle cudgel. Brandybutter was also back on his feet and was launching volley after volley of arrows. Many of the feathered shafts bounced harmlessly off their chitinous exoskeletons, but one skewered a centipede through the center, pinning it against the far wall.

Arfgar charged, axe raised high. He brought the blade down in a wicked arc, finishing off the pinned centipede while Feathers killed the other with a lance of brilliant golden light.

With the insects dead, the barbarian strode over to retrieve the ruby lying in the bloody mess of what once was the rogue. "Thief wanted to loot us. We loot him." The giant barbarian pointed at Feathers. "You heal wizard." Not a question but an order. "We go. See? Arfgar in charge."

"We should go slowly," Brandybutter cautioned, pulling a piece of glass from his arm. "We lost our thief, and this dungeon is obviously more than it seems at first glance."

Arfgar didn't agree. He gave the archer a sneer and then strode down the corridor, strutting like he owned the place.

Inga saw the injustice. <If only we had put our trap room along that hallway.>

<Don't worry,> Logan sent. <They're on their way to the antechamber. We'll let them go past into the inner sanctum, then hit 'em from behind. They've already shown that they aren't too good with surprise attacks.>

<If they get to the pedestal, we'll fail.> Inga sounded scared. She had a right to be.

Their best bet was to cut down the sorcerer and Feathers the Harbinger since Arfgar and Brandybutter weren't as bright or as powerful. Speaking of which, both fighters entered the antechamber while the servant of the Bald Phoenix was still busy patching up Mimsy back in the minion room.

Brandybutter saw the alcoves full of mushrooms, and he glanced down to the Mucal Film covering their pit trap. He grimaced. "Good heavens, those Opal Truffles have given me a level of excitement that I cannot contain." It was almost painful watching him embrace his stupidity. "Although it seems counterintuitive, I must press forward! True, this floor looks suspicious, but the allure of the Truffles is simply too powerful for me to resist. Such a shame, really, that I am so daft."

He strode forward while Arfgar watched, not even attempting to stop the foolish archer.

Brandybutter tumbled through the Mucal Film, impaling himself on the spikes below. Three more centipedes attacked with hungry fervor, mandibles chewing through his armor and taking his life. Logan didn't bother inhabiting them, since the kill was over as quickly as it had started.

Mimsy and Feathers entered into the antechamber to find Arfgar with his axe raised. "See! Mushrooms bad! Mushrooms always bad!"

The Magnificent Mimsy cast a spell to divide himself into three different casters, all doughy and nonthreatening. All three of the pudgy wizards raised their hands and flung javelins made of light into the centipedes clambering out of the pits. All three of the bugs met their end with the perfectly aimed flashes of deadly magic.

"Me wanted to kill giant bugs!" Arfgar thundered, staring daggers at the sorcerer.

Mimsy shrugged, the two copies of himself merging seamlessly back into the chubby mage. "Give it time. I'm sure you'll have your chance yet, friend." He eyed the alcoves where Logan's and Inga's guardian forms stood motionless in the tangle of fungal growths. The wizard raised his torch higher, squinting to get a better look. "Well, there are only three of us left, but the inner sanctum looks like it's on the other side of those alcoves. Just through the mushroom forest, there. Though I'd bet every copper to my name that there are more creatures waiting for us in there. If I had to guess, I'd even wager that's probably where the dungeon guardian is hiding."

Arfgar sneered at the spell-caster and stomped forward without a care in the world. "Me no afraid." He strutted along the right side of the pit. Logan's side.

Logan made sure his fungaloid form didn't move a muscle. Not a twitch. Mimsy was mostly right, but there was one crucial detail he'd missed. He thought there was only a single dungeon guardian. That was a mistake.

Logan was going to make sure those three raiders stayed mistaken. <Inga, change of plans. Stay hidden. You'll know when to attack.> Logan leapt out with a mighty cry. He brandished his rusty dagger and waved the ruby buckler, which glowed with a dark scarlet light.

“Arfgar of the Hill People!” Logan roared. “You will not plunder this dungeon. I am the Shroomian Acolyte of this realm, and I will smite you!” Sounded a little stilted, but he wanted the stupid barbarian oaf focused on him, and a little monologuing seemed like the best way.

The Magnificent Mimsy struck Logan with a dispel magic spell. The ruby shield’s light winked off like a flashlight with a dead battery. Huh. Hadn’t seen that one coming.

Arfgar grinned. He dashed forward like a whirlwind and brought his battle-axe careening down. Logan tried to backpedal, but he was far too slow compared to the C-Class brawler. The axe landed, slicing and dicing Logan as efficiently as one of those hibachi chefs. In seconds, Logan was little more than a pile of limbs and rubbery flesh. Admittedly, not his best moment.

Logan’s guardian form lay completely useless on the ground. However, it was all part of the plan to make the raiders overconfident.

“Easy dungeon boss.” Arfgar stepped over the ruins of Logan’s form.

Mimsy and Feathers followed the barbarian right past where Inga waited in her alcove. The minute they walked past, she shot out behind the caster. She raised her hands while her entire body radiated a blinding light that stunned the raiders for one key second. Inga drove her sword arm directly into Mimsy’s chest. The sorcerer let out a surprised cry and fumbled his torch, which immediately was snuffed out in the dank fungal growth covering the floor of the short hallway.

Feathers turned, ready to engage, but Inga was already on the move, darting inside Feathers’ guard using her Lepidopteral Reflex ability. The astral moth batted the eagle cudgel out of the cleric’s hand. In seconds, the place was plunged into darkness.

Logan let his gem core gleam on the pedestal, casting just enough glimmer to offer some hope to the barbarian tank. Oblivious to the trap, Arfgar rushed toward the gleam since he had the brain of a gnat.

The barbarian had breached their sanctum, but he was only able to take a single step before he was stopped. The black-and-purple Ghoul's Snare coating the floor activated, tendrils of fungal growth shooting out, wrapping like pythons around Arfgar's legs. At the same moment, Booker and Noodle Doodle came hurtling out from beneath a pair of swaying toadstools. Both jumped and latched onto the barbarian's arms. Arfgar's woes were just beginning. The Spike Flies descended, striking the blinded Arfgar from the left and the right.

He never had a chance.

Once he was dead, the bulldog-shaped Spore Wargs bounded over to the badly wounded Mimsy. The wizard was frantically trying to cast a spell when the Wargs bowled him over. Not only was his magic disrupted, he was sent face-first into the Blister Wart covering the walls. Since Logan wasn't doing much good lying in literal pieces all over the floor, he forced his mind into Noodle Doodle's body, co-opting the doggo's senses. The world blurred on the edges as his point of view radically shifted. Suddenly he stood on four sturdy paws, only three feet tall. His canine mouth was open and salivating.

"Illumina Pate!" Feathers cried out. "Heal the Magnificent Morty Mercutio Mimsy with your balding love!"

Her armor glowed golden, and that gold light filled Mimsy's chest. He might not be bleeding to death, but from this close up, Logan could tell the guy didn't look good.

The harbinger wasn't done casting spells. "Now, my loveable phoenix of the pure skies, thin my despair and give me a weapon of light!"

Logan canted his doggy head and watched as a new cudgel appeared in her hand, this one gleaming gold and spitting sparks like a Fourth of July sparkler.

Inga stepped back and wrapped her wings around herself. From out of thin air, silken thread swept around her, encasing her in a six-foot cocoon of gossamer thread that covered her completely. Inside, dull moonlight pulsed, growing brighter and brighter.

There was plenty of light to see the Magnificent Mimsy's ruined face, swollen so that once again his eyes were closed. Even more

gross, the blisters were starting to fill with pus. His hands were equally useless, huge balloons of red, angry skin. He tried to talk, but he couldn't form words. Was it just the Blister Wart? Or did he get unlucky with the bite from the Spore Wargs?

"I will heal you again, Wizard!" Feathers called out. "But first I will slay these vile mushroom dogs!"

She turned her back on Inga's cocoon. The cleric swung her cudgel and bashed away Booker, quickly turning him into a quivering pile of meat, but Logan was quicker. He dodged left, avoiding the attack, and took cover behind a towering Opal Truffle. His heart was racing, and his tongue lolled out as he panted. After a beat, he turkey peeked around the corner and saw that Feathers was once more focusing on Inga. Her shimmering cocoon had doubled in size, but she was still defenseless. Logan needed to buy her time.

With a howl, he broke cover, lupine legs eating up the ground as he hurled himself like a missile at the armor-clad harbinger. Feathers turned on a heel and thrust one hand out, letting loose a bolt of golden glory. Logan feinted and juked, narrowly avoiding the blast. He leapt, his powerful legs carrying him high into the air as his jaws opened wide—

Feathers' enchanted cudgel whipped through the air, smashing into Logan's skull with a sickening crunch that killed Noodle Doodle in the air. The Spore Warg body flopped to the ground, and Logan's consciousness returned to his gemstone, giving him access to the dungeon as a whole. Although he hadn't even laid a single claw on Feathers, Logan had done his job.

The cocoon split, and twelve feet of angry heavy metal caterpillar came spilling out. This was Inga's Metamorphosis ability at its best.

She was an armored worm, clothed in the same silver metal that she used for her Chrysalis Swords. Both her back spikes and her mandibles looked like chrome sharpened into razor-sharp points.

Feathers held up her puny stick, but the caterpillar smashed her like a pesky fly, crushing the harbinger beneath her steely bulk. Feathers was dead in seconds, and the spell-caster followed shortly, as Inga's mandibles finished off what the Spore Wargs and Blister Wart had started.

Logan couldn't believe the carnage. Then he remembered, unlike him, Inga had chosen a powerful guardian form, and this was why he had teamed up with her in the first place. Sure, he could grow a bunch of mushrooms, but for pure physical power? That was all Inga... all the time.

Inga inched her way into the sanctum and wrapped herself around the pedestal in a gorgeous if creepy display of victory.

Logan watched the tableau she created. Their gems glowed, creating shadows in the mushroom forest even while her chrome caterpillar body glowed, ghostly and grotesque, covered in the blood of the raiders.



PROFESSOR YULLIS ROCKHEART watched the astral moth's victory dance for the tenth time with an uneasy feeling in his stony belly. He sat at his pristinely clean desk, in his perfectly ordered office, near the top of the Shadowcroft Castle. His office was packed with books, statues of his ancestors, portraits of former students who had become Heartwood-level dungeons, and of course, the paperwork that went with being the rector prime of the best dungeon core school in the multiverse. Everything had its place. Excellence required order and discipline.

Rockheart was alone for a moment, though he'd been meeting with other professors all day long, to go over grades, to evaluate students, and to review footage from the Placement Exams in the Tartarucha Cells. The exams were finally finished—the last student, Treacle Glimmerhappy, had run his course over an hour ago. Rockheart should've been relieved that the testing was done, but he wasn't. He'd been shaken.

Nothing had prepared him for Inga Thosa Therian's dance. It was impressive... as was the sanctum itself, with its fungal threats and those Spike Flies. Both proved deadly.

Yes, technically, Arfgar of the Hill People had made it to the inner sanctum, but he'd been killed almost immediately. All in all, the dungeon had been mediocre at best, without much style or pizzazz,

except, of course, for that sanctum, which was the stuff of nightmares.

Far more impressive was how the two dungeon cores had used their resources. Their strategies had been impeccable, especially killing the rogue first. Their performance had been exemplary. And troubling.

Could he be wrong about these poor, Apothos-starved students? Without a doubt, Logan Murray had helped the Azure Dragon Clan on the leaderboards. The fungaloid had proven himself, again and again, as being a most worthy opponent. He'd passed the Threshing and even defeated the dungeoneers in the Slaughter Pits, which was no small feat. After that, Rockheart had pushed them to the limit in Core Calisthenics, forced them to endure a grueling level of training, all in a bid to break the Terrible Twelfth. Yet exactly the opposite had happened.

They'd grown closer together, worked harder, and exceeded even Shadowcroft's expectations for the quartet. And yet Rockheart couldn't let go of his utter disdain. True, the Terrible Twelfth had improved, but they shouldn't have come to Shadowcroft in the first place. Shadowcroft needed to recruit the best and the brightest. What should happen if word got out about Logan and the others? Their unorthodox tactics could result in the besmirching of the vaunted Shadowcroft name. It was unseemly and unbecoming for a school as prestigious as this. Perhaps it would even push potential candidates to consider other, inferior schools.

That he could not abide by.

Still... He was reluctantly coming around to the possibility that he'd been wrong about Logan. And most certainly about Inga. If there was one he hadn't been wrong about, though, it was that disgusting satyr, Marko.

His performance had been a disgrace.

A knock at his door brought Rockheart out of his reverie. He waved a hand, opening the door with magic.

The clan leaders all rushed in: Professor Arketa of the Vermillion Phoenix, Professor Suresh the Merciless from the Crystal Tiger Clan, and lastly, Professor John Toothbyte of the Onyx Tortoise.

Arketa's headscarf bulged with her excitement, and she kept having to adjust her sunglasses.

John Toothbyte's normally dead shark eyes actually glittered enthusiastically. Even the haughty and distant Suresh the Merciless appeared to be blown away. The tiger-headed man kept twitching his ears, and by the Tree, the rakshasa was purring.

"Did you see what those two did?" Arketa cried. "And we both know Daggers McFinn was unusually adept today. Still, it was a complete murder, and I daresay Inga could've taken on another few raiders. Yes, Logan had to sacrifice his guardian form, and yet if these had been real raiders, he would've been able to heal himself, because each kill would've given him Apothos. Plus, his possession of the minions was brilliantly executed. That bit with the Spore Warg at the end was inspired."

Professor Ronnalg Crucible ambled into the room. "I have to disagree, Ms. Hellgazer. The mushroom man was diced up into Eritreus stroganoff."

"Aye," John Toothbyte agreed. "Besides, is it fair for the pair to be running a dungeon together? They have pluck to try it, but it bends the rules, if not breaks them altogether."

Suresh the Merciless nodded his feline head. "I agree. And why are we even talking about these less-than-stellar students? Your other Azure Dragon students did very well, did they not?"

Rockheart didn't need to comment. All of the First Cohort had passed the Placement Exam. Prince Chadrigoth and the others rightly knew that they could easily take out the raiders in their inner sanctums, and they did, personally, with very minimal risk. In a way, their performance had been dreadfully *average*.

On the other hand, Logan and Inga had utilized every resource brilliantly.

Crucible frowned so deeply his forehead wrinkled into green hills. "None of us had doubts about the First Cohort. They're fine. They did fine. I'd like to mention how well I thought one Treacle Glimmerhappy did. Nothing fancy. Just a finely crafted dungeon. That's what we need more of."

Rockheart had to admit that the minotaur's dungeon had also been superior. He'd created a number of ingenious traps that had wiped out half the party before they reached the inner sanctum. Treacle had grown by leaps and bounds over the past few months, spurred on by Logan's exemplary leadership. However, the final battle *had* been close.

Treacle's sanctum had been a death trap of whirring gears and random sawblades buzzing out of the floors. The last two raiders—Sir Mediocritus and his wizard friend Hallsee the Sad—had won their way to the sanctum's pedestal.

Treacle had fought them off with the last of his minions, two Ugknot Calflings. The short minions, half calf, half machine, had overwhelmed Sad Hallsee while Treacle plunged his battle-axe into the skull of Sir Mediocritus.

Suresh stopped purring to growl, "The minotaur did passably well, I suppose. I would like to return to this Logan creature and his moth girlfriend."

"They're just friends," Arketa chimed in.

Rockheart sighed and shook his head at the Hellgazer.

Suresh pressed on. "I care nothing about the romantic lives of our students. I am more worried that this might become a precedent. Dungeon cores working together? It is a travesty, Rockheart. A travesty. Why anyone would want to work together is beyond me. Nevertheless, it is happening, and on your watch, no less." He paused and regarded his claws. "Perhaps you've gone soft, Rockheart ol' boy. Maybe Shadowcroft will consider a *new* rector prime come next year."

Of course Suresh would use this as an excuse to angle for position. Rockheart and the rakshasa had history, centuries of hatred, infighting, and rivalry. Yet—and Rockheart almost couldn't believe this—he found himself agreeing with the blustering, image-obsessed halfwit. Such teamwork was unheard of and potentially dangerous.

Arketa, as always, stood up for Logan and his ilk. "People, remember, we are less about rules here than about results. We haven't had a fungaloid in generations. Mr. Murray is utilizing one of

his unique abilities, and both he and Ms. Therian are benefiting. Should we not reward cleverness, however unorthodox, at this institution?"

Rockheart showed Professor Arketa any number of courtesies... for various reasons. This time, however, he lost his patience. "If the fungus can't stand on his own two feet, he doesn't belong at Shadowcroft." He slammed a fist down on his desk, rattling a stone inkpot. "And neither does Marko Laskarelis for that matter."

That last comment was a definite dig at one of Arketa's other favorite students.

She winced. "Yes, I fear you are not wrong on that count. Marko has proven to be gifted in some areas, but a complete disaster in others. And his time is running short. He's at the bottom of the Azure Dragon Clan, is he not?"

"He is," Rockheart agreed with a curt nod.

Crucible let out a sigh that turned suspiciously into a growl. The ogre stood at the back of the room, leaning against a big bookshelf stuffed with tomes.

"That was the goat lad, wasn't it?" Toothbyte laughed and waved his anchor arm. "No kills. Not a single kill! I ask ye, have we ever had a student who did so poorly?"

Arketa's cheeks colored under her dark glasses. "Now, from a stylistic standpoint, his dungeon was *excellent*. There was a unified theme, a consistent aesthetic. Art has the power to kill."

Crucible let out another annoyed growl.

Arketa turned. "Do you have something to add, Ronnalg?"

The ogre nodded. "Yes, I do. The goat boy's dungeon was pretty. Pretty might kill you on a Saturday night in Vralkag, but it won't kill a raider. If we're talking about who needs to go, that goat boy is it."

"And what is your stance on Logan and Inga sharing the victory?" Rockheart asked. Ronnalg Crucible was known for his unbiased opinion. In fact, if it hadn't been for the Placement Exams, the crafting professor wouldn't even be in the castle.

Crucible shrugged. "Whatever works. If Murray and Therian have figured out something that works, good. The goat boy hasn't."

"Goat man," Arketa muttered.

Rockheart gazed at the faces of all the professors. Other than Suresh, none of the professors seemed to care much about Logan and Inga. On the surface, that made the rector prime's job easy—he would award the students who did well and punish the students who didn't. At a deeper level, though, Rockheart knew the truth.

He cleared his stony throat. "Marko's performance is an embarrassment. We all agree on that, at least. Not a single kill. For his Final Exam, he'll only have four hours to prepare his dungeon, and he'll get the last pick. Also, I'm going to make sure he faces seasoned dungeoneers. As for Murray and Therian?" He paused, clicking his stone nails on the desktop. "I will give them a single draught of the Red Lotus Juice for their accomplishment. They ran a single dungeon, so they will receive a single reward."

"But what about their Final Exam?" Arketa asked. She tilted her head and pouted—a sign he was well-familiar with. If he went against her, there would be hell to pay... Again, for a variety of reasons.

"Fine," he growled under his breath. "The two will get the works. Nine-hour prep time. First pick of dungeons. But by the Tree of Souls, I'm giving them raiders that will truly challenge them."

Perhaps this was a fluke. The Winnowing would prove one way or another whether they deserved a place in his school...



## Chapter Thirty-One



THAT SATURDAY, AFTER the last of the Placement Exams, it seemed all of Arborea was shut down. Breakfast was a ghost town, lunch was leftover breakfast, and Logan was going to skip dinner completely. Logan had no idea where the academy staff were, but the majority of the students were either sleeping after the exhausting tests, or they were out in the Xiru Forest, drinking and celebrating at the Wayfarer Inn. That or tearing it up in Vralkag—heaven knows that was where the Gelatinous Knight was.

He'd passed his Placement Exam easily. No surprises there.

The big surprise was that Marko wasn't with him.

Marko had vanished after epically failing his exams, and no one seemed to have a clue just where he was holed up. Logan, Inga, and Treacle had spent that entire Saturday looking for the lost satyr. The three started a systematic search of Arborea, checking all his common haunts first—the bars, pubs, and inns—then moving on to increasingly more unlikely locations. The towering trees of the Xiru Forest, the burning furnace of the World Forge, even the white-capped mountains of the Grimjour Bluffs. No sign.

They feared the worst.

Honestly, Logan couldn't blame the satyr for wanting to disappear. Marko hadn't just failed the Placement Exam, he'd sent his personal ranking plummeting to the bottom of the leaderboard. The Terrible Twelfth had slipped back into last place, which made the Franklin Four happy. Marko had done so poorly that the Azure Dragon Clan had even fallen out of first place. Rockheart was beside himself with rage, and the First Cohort threatened to serve barbecued goat that night for dinner. Well, at least Chadrigoth and his lackeys had. Tet clearly thought the competition was insipid.

By twilight the following day, Logan got lucky.

He finally found the satyr staring out over the Bogbottom Falls, near the BYE Portal that had taken them to Eritreus.

It had rained that afternoon, a warm early summer shower that left the trees dripping and the air heavy.

As a fungus, Logan loved the humidity, but he would've liked it about ten degrees cooler. He was in his linen pants and short shirt. The sun was setting into the fog of this pocket dimension. The sky was a gorgeous red, streaked here and there with bands of orange and neon pink. In the shadows, it was cool. Near the Tree of Souls, the entire world vibrated with energy as the day came to an end, the sun shutting its eyes on the world, making way for darkness.

Marko rested on the stone wall overlooking the roaring falls. He was kicking a tune out with his hooves against the rock. Next to him was a big green bottle, a golden chalice, and a wicker basket.

The bottle wasn't a shock. The fact that it was full, however, was another matter entirely. Marko hadn't touched a drop as far as Logan could tell.

The fungaloid walked over and plopped down next to his friend, not saying a word. The water of the lake was dark as it tumbled over the literal edge of the world. Then it became a white froth before disappearing into the abyss, swallowed by the void.

On the other side was the Bogbottom Swamp. Every so often, the trees, drooping with moss, would rustle as some monster pushed its way through the black water.

Logan kept quiet, letting the silence say everything that needed saying for the time being. He wanted to let Marko know he was there, but he didn't want to push him to talk. Besides, that swamp looked so inviting. Fungaloids had an affinity for delicious marshes.

After a while, Marko finally stopped kicking his hooves against the stone and uttered a sigh. "So, Logan, you're all quiet. It's freaking me out. What are you doing here?"

Logan nodded his floppy yellow cap. "Just taking in the sights. Like you, I guess. I like it out here. I could totally rock a swamp dungeon, I think. Or is that rot a swamp dungeon—as in rot 'n' roll? It's a long way to the top, if you want to rot 'n' roll." He grinned and shook his head. "Either way, it suits me now."

Marko smiled, though his eyes remained sad. “Shadowcroft said puns would be a problem. Long live rot?”

“Long live rot,” Logan agreed. “*Carpe carrión*. Seize the decay. I think that might just be my new motto.” He reached for the bottle, uncorked it, and took a sip. It was strong wine, dark and red like fresh blood. “Did you know that alcohol is more about yeast than bacteria or fungi? Though I consider yeast to be my cooler second cousin. More people like beer than they do mushrooms.”

“Funny,” Marko said.

Logan offered him a thin smile. “Saying funny and not laughing means it wasn’t that funny.”

The satyr couldn’t help but chuckle for real. Then he sipped from the goblet. Logan’s heightened senses told him it wasn’t wine, but plain old water.

“You know,” Marko said, “I grabbed that bottle from Vralkag last night. I figured I’d come out here, get drunk, maybe throw myself over the waterfalls and see if I’d fall forever. Normal Friday night. No big deal.”

“Sounds like a big deal,” Logan said quietly.

“Yeah. Probably.” Marko set the goblet down with a *clink* on stone. “I couldn’t do it. I like the party, Logan. I’m all about the party. On Sangretta, we have wine gods and beach parties, and it’s all so much fun. We enjoy life. Me sitting here alone? There’s no fun to be had in that. I just couldn’t bring myself to drink the wine. Didn’t even want to.” He shook his head sadly. “Worst. Party. Ever.”

“How come you didn’t come find us and talk to us?” Logan asked.

“I meant to.” The satyr turned to look at the Tree of Souls, the single branch piercing the flat world of Arborea. A stone wall surrounded the sacred wood. “But I couldn’t leave. Sitting here, I feel the Tree. I feel how connected we all could be. Every time I stood up to walk to the portal to go and find you guys, I ended up back here. This dungeon business is important. I see that now, though I didn’t when we first started. I understand so much more. I guess I absorbed more of Shadowcroft’s stupid Ethics of Murder class than I’d realized. Unfortunately, my enlightenment came too late.”

“It’s never too late,” Logan replied.

Marko threw his horned head back and let out a frustrated grunt. “Don’t play that game with me, Logan Murray! This is not the time for any sort of cheerleader speech. I’m screwed. Take one look at the leaderboard and that fact is completely self-evident. There is no way I can create a dungeon in four hours, with my cultivation abilities, in the worst location on Arborea. You know I’m going to get the SandScream in the World Forge Wastes. *The SandScream*, Logan. There’s sand. There’s me. Screaming.”

In his gut, Logan knew Marko was right. Unless you were Tet-Akhat, or another Egyptian-themed desert dungeon core, the SandScream was a brutal place to craft a dungeon. And Rockheart was pissed beyond belief at Marko. Rockheart would ensure that Marko had the worst possible dungeon for the final.

Despite that, Logan *still* wanted to launch into a cheerleader speech. He wanted to talk about his combat experience or the fact that he’d progressed so far at Shadowcroft or that they’d survived the dungeoneer attack in Kyvandry’s Slaughter Pits.

He wanted to tell Marko that anything was possible.

Now wasn’t the time, and this wasn’t the place.

So instead, he simply nodded and sipped more of the wine, wincing. “The alcohol can’t kill my spores, but it sure is killing my stomach. I’m pretty sure you could use this to clean a carburetor.” He paused and glanced down at the bottle. “I suppose that’s what Inga would call a culturally specific reference.”

“Inga,” Marko said sullenly. “She hates me now. But you have to know something, Logan. You have to know I tried. I truly did.”

“I know,” Logan replied. “You’ve been different since the Slaughter Pits. And from what you told me, those nights we thought you were out partying, you were actually studying with GK.”

“Never party with someone who is smarter and more responsible than you. Always drink with stupid people you can feel superior to,” he said in all seriousness.

“Too late. I’m best friends with Inga Thosa Therian.”

Marko exhaled long and loudly. “You got me there. For most of the year, I figured GK was as hopeless and messed up as I was. Nope. All along, he was this secret genius. He passes easily, and I’m

at the bottom of the barrel. It figures. I shouldn't be surprised. Yet somehow I still am."

Logan let a beat pass. "Listen, we saw you trying. All of us did. And I know I can speak for both Treacle and Inga. We want you to keep trying. We have two weeks before the Final Exams start. You'll get another chance. We can work with you, maybe help you find a way to survive this thing."

The satyr gave him an annoyed look. "And there's the cheerleader speech."

"Guilty as charged. My punishment? More of this stuff." He sipped more of the wretched wine. "Also, what *is* this stuff?"

"It's Enrico Kagster's finest vintage, known as Liverkill. It's designed to kill you, *slowly*, especially on Monday mornings. Bottled last night in Vralkag, it's basically fermented Coptician viper venom, aged in Bone Vault coffins. Kagster might've eaten grapes while mixing it up, though I'm pretty sure grapes aren't involved at all." Marko sat back, bracing himself with his arms, and gazed up at the swirling red of the sky. "I thought things had changed after the Slaughter Pits. I mean, I helped defeat those raiders. I kinda saved you, Inga, even Treacle."

"You did save us," Logan said. "But this isn't about that, is it? It's about your past."

Marko turned and gave him a sly smile. "Ah, my mysterious backstory, the roots of my tragic self-destruction, and the source of all my miseries. I like drama. Perhaps it's time you finally heard about my dramatic redemption arc. If you're up for it, that is."

"Give me a good redemption arc any day of the week," Logan said.

Marko turned away and ran a hand through his tousled hair. "It's all such crap. Why I'm here? What happened? It's dramatic, but it's also *stupid*. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the story of Marko Laskarelis. Dramatic, but stupid."

The satyr sat in silence a long time.

Logan looked down between his feet at the water running under them, headed toward its own destruction. The metaphor was kind of *too* on the nose. No wonder Marko had sat there for so long.

The satyr finally braced himself and started talking, fast, like he knew if he stopped, he wouldn't be able to start again.

"And the story begins, ladies and gentlemen, with the Forevergreen Festival Feast on the Peach Beaches of Sangretta. The sand was peach, the drinks were peach, we ate peaches. It was all peaches, all the time. And one young handsome man, Marquess Marko Laskarelis, the life of the party, was there, with his friend Emilio. Although *best friend* is more accurate. They were mates. They were brothers. No, closer than brothers. I have brothers, and I never felt for them what I felt for Emilio.

"We were friends until the end. Until the very end. At the big holiday party filled with peaches, Marko and Emilio happened to run into some old university acquaintances—the Dukane brothers and some of their cousins. We all go way back, though I never cared much for the Dukanes. Anyway, they talked about the Calavera Caves down the coast, and the riches therein. So much gold. Fame awaiting the bold and the brave. A den of wicked, monstrous things that needed slaying.

"And before you can ask, my little mushroom friend, the Calaveras Caves were actually one of Shadowcroft's reaping dungeons. And now that I've spent nine months learning about dungeons, I can definitively tell you a Toad King ruled there. The Dukanes painted me an exquisite picture of his cruelty. He raided the nearby towns, they said. Burned vineyards, pillaged crops. Ate the choicest cows and dumped out the rum! At least according to them, though now I understand that was just the story they used to justify their raid. It wasn't true. How do I know? We'll get to that, Logan Murray. We'll get to that."

Marko took a moment to sip his water, while Logan took another swallow of the Liverkill. Enrico Kagster should be put in prison for crimes against humanity.

The satyr took in another breath and rattled off more of his story. "After too much peach wine, our bumbling hero reluctantly agrees to join the raid and finds himself in the Calaveras Caves. He comes out of a blackout, and there, dead on the ground in a pool of his own blood, is his best friend in the world, Emilio Joesha Kradenza, the

duke of the Emerald Coast. Did I mention I was royalty? I mean, I was *disgraced* royalty, but I still got invited to all the nicest Forevergreen Festivals."

"I'm sorry," Logan said.

"You and me both, brother," Marko said in a lost little voice. "Never raid dungeons drunk. Both me and Emilio knew how to use a sword, we'd be trained, and we knew some simple spells, but we shouldn't have been there. We weren't powerful cultivators or members of one of the dungeoneer guilds. The Dukanes put in for membership with the Serpent Shields but got shot down with a form letter. I think raiding the caves was their way to prove they were good enough. Obviously, they weren't. *We* weren't."

"The Dukanes said I tried to save Emilio from bullywogs—those are Toad King minions—but I don't remember any of that. It's all just this ugly black space in my mind. All I know is that I failed my best friend in the world. Then? It got worse. I couldn't leave the dungeon. The Dukanes said if I tried to bail, they'd kill me and blame it on the dungeon. I had no choice."

"But I knew the bullywogs weren't bad. I found one, wounded, and he begged me to stop my friends. They weren't my friends. I never liked the Dukane brothers or any of their kin. Then the bullywog talked about the Tree of Souls. I'd heard stories... never believed them... until right at that moment. Long story short?" He inhaled, held the breath, and closed his eyes. "I helped the Toad King wipe out the raiders. I turned on them, killed Danzi Dukane, but not before he stabbed me, right there in the inner sanctum. I did so well that I wound up here. By accident."

"Like Treacle," Logan whispered. "Like me."

"You're right," Marko agreed. "And as your reward, you don't have to take another sip of the Liverkill."

The satyr got to his feet, walked away, and then came back. Logan peeked into the basket. It was full of cheese, crackers, and grapes. The satyr had packed a picnic, but hadn't touched a bite. Logan stood next to his friend. It was getting dark, the air wet and cool. This was fungal weather all right.

Marko turned and looked Logan right in the eyes. “I was devasted over Emilio. I didn’t want to be a dungeon. I didn’t want more flippin’ school. I was never good at school, you know. Only the parties. Yet here I was, determined not to take it seriously.”

Logan could argue that point. Marko had gotten up early, day after day, to cultivate. He’d hung out with the Terrible Twelfth at night, in the library, before he went to party in Vralkag. It was clear that some part of Marko did want to do well. It was only his sadness that held him back.

Marko finished his story. “Things changed after the field trip, though. I save you in the Slaughter Pits, so I think to myself, maybe I can do something to save the Tree of Souls. Maybe my life can mean something. So I try. I commit for the first time ever. I’m doing it for Emilio. I’m doing it for you guys, because, come on, Logan, I love the Terrible Twelfth. Then? I fail.” He slumped forward, broken and defeated. “Miserably.”

“What happened in the Tartarucha Cells?” Logan asked.

He shrugged and shook his head. “I got lost in the art. I made this gorgeous dungeon, intricate, elegant, with a unified theme. Aesthetically, it was *perfect*. Professor Arketa reached out to me, you know. She told me she appreciated my efforts. She also warned me that next time, it has to be function over form. Though it won’t matter. I’m done, Logan. There’s no way I can build a decent dungeon in the SandScream in four hours.”

Logan searched Marko’s face. A million thoughts hit the fungaloid’s mind at the same time. He pressed his lips together and stopped himself from grumbling out loud. He then sank back down, drumming his heels against the stone wall. Logan opened the basket, took out a piece of cheese, and unleashed his digestive spores on it. It grew into a fuzzy little snack. He popped it into his mouth and chewed.

Marko stood over him. “Well?”

Logan kept chewing. He took out another piece of cheese and went to town.

The satyr tapped his foot. “You can’t just sit there eating. For one, what you’re doing to that fine cheese is disgusting. For another? I

just told you my situation is hopeless.”

“So are you giving up?” Logan asked.

“I should.”

“But are you?” Logan tried a stale cracker. The cheese was better.

Marko waved a finger at him. “Oh, so that’s the game, is it? You want me to give myself the cheerleader speech? This is the real cheerleader speech?”

“That’s up to you,” Logan replied around a mouthful of delectable cheese.

Marko grumbled and narrowed his eyes. “Well, I’m one step ahead of you. What would I say if I were you, eh?” He tapped at his chin. “I would say, ‘We have two weeks until the Final Exam. Between you, Inga, and Treacle, I’m thinking we might figure out a way for me to survive the Final.’”

“You’re right.” Logan nodded. “That’s exactly what I’d say. But you need to believe it. I can’t believe it for you. So, what’s it going to be? Do you believe?”

He huffed and folded his arms across his chest, goat ears twitching madly in annoyance. “Fine. I believe. I’m not giving up. Also, for what it’s worth, cheese is mostly mold anyway. So what you’re doing isn’t that impressive.”

Logan grinned. “Best. Cheerleader speech. Ever.”

Two weeks wasn’t much time, but with a sober Marko, anything was possible.



## Chapter Thirty-Two



THEY HAD FIFTEEN DAYS to prep their Final Exam dungeons. That evening, the studying started in earnest, and it didn't stop for a solid week. They barely left their seats in the back of the Codex Athenaeum, and the piles of books grew steadily higher around them.

Seeing Inga attack this problem was truly epic. She went through indexes, concordances, and encyclopedias. She paged through bound copies of *Dungeon Core Quarterly* from the past century, looking at blueprints, dungeon schematics, and any piece of trivial information that could mean the difference between life and death. She read the latest copies of *Monsters Weekly* and *The Desert Dungeon Review*, where she found an interesting article called, "Making the Most with the Least." Logan, Marko, and Treacle helped her by cross-referencing different dungeon strategies, focusing not only on the dungeon satyr guardian form, but also researching lesser-known varieties of the satyr: the Pan Piper, the Horned Trickster, the Ember Tail, and the Winter Dancer.

Madam Orry Gammy allowed them access to some questionable materials with questionable titles. *Quick Core Creation* by M.E. Velocity. *A Better Abyss Faster* by Andale Getright. And then there was *Dungeon Shortcuts the Elite Don't Want You to Know* by Venthia Phauxa. Those books were trash. Absolute dumpster fires.

Madam Gammy herself suggested a book that came bound on the spine of a millipede. This book would crawl back to its shelf every night, which was both irritating and disgusting—though admittedly ingenious. It was an old classic called *The Art of the Dungeon* by Diplox Poda, an S-Class insectile dungeon lord who had been killed five thousand years ago.

But even the information in that book wouldn't help them.

Logan wondered whether there was something they could do with Marko's core to get him access to more Apothos. He'd significantly improved his energy flow using the Drunken Master Falls Down Well technique, but it wasn't enough to make any sort of real difference.

The following Sunday night, Treacle was studying up on how Marko might be able to change the sand into something more useful. There was a book called *Lemons to Lemonade, Trials of Transmutation*, which might allow the satyr to tweak the dungeon habitat. Logan was eyeballs deep in another book on core cultivation for party-based guardian forms, and Inga had a big dusty book called *Tons of Tinctures and Pools of Potions! Improve Your Core with Magic and More!* This was another questionable book by someone named R. Hope Eternal.

Inga had grumbled at all the exclamation points. She also mentioned that the author regularly used the interrobang—an exclamation point paired with a question mark—which made her physically ill. An unforgivable sin, she insisted.

Marko sipped coffee that he'd sneaked inside his silver flask. Treacle chewed cud; it was noisy, but it kept the minotaur awake.

Logan closed his book and rubbed his eyes. “You know, from day one, I’ve thought of how I can use my Symbiosis ability to bring in Marko. The three of us, working together, should be able to pass the Final without a problem. I just don’t have the Apothos. We’d get like four hours, and it wouldn’t be enough.”

“Four of us,” Treacle said over the sound of his chewing.

Marko’s mouth dropped open to show his big teeth. “What’s that, my bull guy?”

“It would be the four of us working together.” The minotaur swallowed and smacked his lips. “Logan can do up to three cores given his level—I remember reading that after he advanced. Plus, Inga and I have been talking about it. I don’t want to be left out.”

Even Logan didn’t see the sense in that. “Why, Treacle? You’re doing amazing on your own.”

Treacle shrugged, keeping his lips sealed about the matter.

Marko remained flustered. “I’ve thought about asking you, Logan, but come on. You can’t risk yourselves like that for me. No way, no how. You’re doing enough as it is. Besides, it’s irrelevant. Logan and Inga have been working on their dungeon all year, and he can’t bring me on long enough for it to matter.”

“We could try giving Marko the Red Lotus Juice,” Logan suggested for the tenth time.

And Inga said what she always said. “The Red Lotus Juice is powerful, granted, but its effects vary based on the user’s guardian form. For a satyr, it wouldn’t be as powerful as it would be for Treacle, for example.”

“That figures.” The minotaur made a face. “The irony is not lost on me. Still, I wouldn’t accept the gift.”

“For me or Logan, it would help,” Inga said, “but it wouldn’t be enough. Although...” She paused, eyes wide, mouth agape. “Wait. Hold on!”

“Hush!” The word was followed by an arrow that flashed over their heads and slammed into the wall, quivering from the impact. Madam Gammy appeared in the stacks like an avenging angel, a bow in her paper hand. She frowned her folded paper face into even more creases.

Inga blanched. “I am so sorry, Madam. I am shocked at my own outburst.”

Madam Gammy nodded at them and then folded herself sideways and disappeared back into the shelves.

Logan felt the excitement growing. “What is it, Inga? What did you find out?”

She lifted *Tons of Tinctures and Pools of Potions!* “The answer is not in this book. This book is terrible and has too many exclamation points. Not to mention those terrible, terrible interrobangs. But it does talk about contraindication when it comes to core enhancers.”

Marko blinked and his lip quivered. “Contra indictment what?”

“Contraindication,” Inga said. “It’s how medicines, potions, and other magical properties interact. By my sharp beak, it’s a long shot, but we have to try.”

She leapt up and went fluttering off on her moth wings.

Marko wrinkled his nose. “She doesn’t have a beak. Right? Am I missing something?”

“She’s from an owl-like race... you know, the Okitori,” Logan said.

Treacle was rubbing his hairy cow chin. “Hmm, you don’t think she’s onto something, do you?”

Marko closed his book with a sigh. “I am clueless.”

Inga didn’t just come back, she came back with half the library. Her Spike Flies helped her carry the weight of a dozen dusty books.

She slammed them down, toppling several other piles of books in the process.

One exploded in a cloud of dust. She didn’t even seem to notice, which said exactly how excited she was. She loved books more than almost anything else in the universe. She’d literally died to have access to books.

Inga waved the dust away, already madly flipping through pages. “The Red Lotus Juice is very particular on how it works with guardian cores. Bad for satyrs, good for minotaurs, but very good for astral moths and fungaloids. Best yet? If you’re a mushroom-based dungeon core, and you’ve already enhanced your core, say with ghoul’s teeth, then you might be able to tie another knot.” She went through the index of a book, closed it, found another, closed it, and then grabbed a third.

Her antennae waved and quivered in manic excitement. “The Red Lotus, when used in conjunction with a knot-intensifier, will give the user additional power, especially for fungal-based dungeon cores. That’s you, Logan. This will work. You can drink the Red Lotus, tie another knot, and that should, *in theory*, give you the ability to infect Marko with your Symbiosis Spores for longer.”

“And me,” Treacle said sullenly. “Like I said, I want to be infected as well.”

Marko shook his head. “No. Never. I won’t allow it.”

Inga put the delicate tips of her fingers together. “Honestly, the more power we have, the better. Remember, Logan gains a passive portion of the energy we cultivate. He siphons it through his hosts, so the more hosts, the more power for him and all of us to pull on.”

That didn't silence Marko's protests. "We can't all four take the final together. Shadowcroft and stupid Rock-face would never agree to that."

Logan raised his thick yellow hands. "But we've already set the precedent, Marko. Rockheart tried to shoot this down when Inga and I tried it, but we got a pass. This is exactly the same, just more. If it was just Rockheart, you're probably right. But with Shadowcroft? They'll let us. They'll have to."

Inga removed the glowing red vial that contained the Red Lotus Juice. "First things first. We have to make sure this will work with Logan's core. It should. But we can't go to Rock-face...er, the rector prime without knowing for sure."

Logan took the vial and shuddered.

If it hurt as much as the ghoul's teeth, he'd be looking at days of agony. He'd do it for his friend, though. It was either that or Marko would die. Not on Logan's watch. He popped the bone cork with his thumb, and the sludgy red liquid let out a hiss and a curl of steam. Very encouraging.

"Here's to you, Marko. Here's mud in your eye." Logan downed the vial. It tasted like pink cotton candy.

"What's mud in my what?" the satyr asked.

Logan wanted to explain, but suddenly couldn't talk. He could barely breathe. The Red Lotus Juice might be sweet, but it hit his core like an atomic bomb. He probably should've waited, but the sooner he started working on processing the energy and tying another knot, the better. Who knew how long it would take?

He could feel the pulse of the juice vibrate through the gem in his belly. The magic flamed red and angry around his core like an infection in an open wound.

Inga saw how hurt he was. "Quickly. Let's get him back to his room. I'll reshelf these books."

Marko's voice came out urgent. "But Inga, that will take hours!"

"Not for me, Laskarelis. Not for me." She said those words like the Grand Archivist she was.

Logan felt Treacle pick him up—Logan's spongy yellow body weighed next to nothing, especially compared to the minotaur. In

short order, he was in his bed in his attic room. Marko stooped to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling and opened a window to let the cool night air in.

For Logan, the minutes felt like hours, while the hours stretched into days.

He was in a fever dream, the world spinning around him, his body shivering and burning in turns. He never left his room—it was surreal, seeing the daylight in the window melt into darkness only for the sun to rise again. A single candle flickered, more for his friends than for him, since he had his special sight. Mostly he laid on his bed, though occasionally he mustered the strength of will to sit on the floor in a meditative pose.

The Terrible Twelfth checked on him constantly.

It felt like Logan had dipped his dungeon core in hydrochloric acid then fried it up in a Taco Bell fryer—heavy on the hepatitis A. One day turned into two turned into five. He didn't really sleep. He didn't eat—couldn't even bring himself to Digest. The energy in his system was its own meal, and he needed complete focus to consume it. If he hadn't gotten so good at Boundless Wheel, the extra energy would've burned out his core—like a bag of popcorn in a microwave once the pops stop. Then add five minutes.

Boundless Wheel helped, but he also had his Digestion ability.

With Digestion he could immediately convert 60% of all Apothos with an Elemental Affinity into pure Apothos. It was an amazing trick to have up his sleeve, though the sheer *amount* of energy was still overwhelming.

Night after night, the heady hallucinations of the familiar Silverbark forests grew more intense. At first, there were only flickers of Silverbark spires, towering mushrooms, and the green foliage covering the ground. The days passed in fits and starts, and he found the real world vanishing for hours at a time. In his mind, he walked the glimmering white path he'd painstakingly forged while processing the cultivation bloom. But as he processed the Red Lotus potion, absorbing more and more of its potent energy, the path began to change. With every pass, the color slowly shifted, becoming a little pinker. Then a washed-out red.

Each pass also became progressively harder. By the time the path was a solid crimson, it felt like pulling a monster truck through the Silverbark forest. It was both exhausting and frustrating. Most frustrating of all, though, was that once the color had finally stabilized, the path itself changed—twisting in a place it had never twisted before. Still, part of him figured he'd just walk the new pattern like he had last time. Maybe it would be an uncomfortable day or two, but he could do that, no sweat!

Yes to the sweat.

After five days, he'd managed to complete about half of the new arc. Before, it was like pulling a monster truck through Silverbark, but following those new twists was like pulling an M1 Abrams tank through quicksand. Barefoot, blindfolded, and with only the aid of dental floss. Frustration quickly turned to low-grade madness.

The saving grace was the forest itself.

It was so beautiful—those tall spires of fungal growths reaching into a sky milky with stars. Smaller crystalline mushrooms caught the light and glowed like captured rainbows on emerald grass. The dirt of the trail was soft and fragrant, like potter's soil, a rich earthy scent. Above was the infinity of the multiverse, all possible worlds, surrounding every type of star, all connected to the shadowy branches of the eternal Tree of Souls.

That connection, that beauty, kept him walking, even when he was only moving an inch at a time.

At one point, Logan had dug down into the soil, and uncovered bark. The Silverbark fungal forest was growing on the Tree itself. The power was rich, and he felt so in tune with reality. The visions offered him some needed respite. In many ways, it was better than sleep, and far better than the torture of waking.

Especially Marko.

Logan kept the Boundless Wheel spinning. That kept the energy flowing, but to forge the rest of the path and tie off that final knot? It was torture. And time was running out. They had to let Shadowcroft and Rockheart know they were going to take the Final Exam together as a cohort.

Why was dealing with the Red Lotus Juice so difficult?

*Because it's out of your league*, Logan reminded himself.

It was just like Inga had said: He was dealing with energy that was meant for people at higher levels—dungeon cores that would've already used magic items to tie a knot in their core. No Iron Trunk cultivator, in the history of Shadowcroft, would've scored so high on the Placement Exam if they hadn't been working with a partner. The Red Lotus Juice was meant for high-ranked Azure Branch cultivators, like Chadrigoth. Inga insisted that even she would've had the same reaction. That would've been fine, if they weren't on a time crunch before their Final Exam.

Marko felt terrible, of course.

Treacle, though, took it in stride. Just more of how life was miserable and failure was inevitable.

That didn't help the satyr any.

Friday night, Logan's three friends stood over his bed in his attic room while he passed in and out of consciousness. Treacle kept scratching up the wood of Logan's ceiling. Inga crouched over the foot of his bed. Marko sat on the floor near his fungi-covered headboard.

Marko moaned. "I'm so sorry, guys. Logan never should've drunk that dumb potion."

"That's apparent." Treacle chewed cud.

"Treacle!" Inga said, exasperated. "This is not the time to be negative. We have to remain positive. Logan would want us cheering him on."

The minotaur swallowed his cud. "Yay. Go, Logan. You can do it." It was the flattest, most unhelpful cheer in the history of pep rallies, letter jackets, and beer bongs.

Logan couldn't respond. He was focusing on breathing, cultivating, and trying to get back into that peaceful vision of his Silverbark forest.

His friends continued to talk, planning out their combined dungeon, and hoping that Logan tied another knot. If this worked, then in theory that would permanently increase his Apothos processing power, which—again in theory—would allow him more symbiotic bonding time with his teammates.

Logan focused his thoughts, shutting out their chattering voices. Suddenly, he found himself under the swirling galaxy light, with the silver fungal towers rising up from the soil covering the Tree of Souls. He was so tired, and though he'd made significant progress along the new path, he still had a good three feet to go. Three feet to connect the new section of path to the original. Three feet didn't seem like much, but these were the hardest of all. But he couldn't give up. Not now. Not after how far they'd come and how much they'd all sacrificed to be here.

He gritted his teeth and pushed against the terrible, invisible resistance holding him back. Every inch felt like it sapped the last of his strength. How would he find the energy for the next step?

He couldn't think about the steps. That was the answer. Instead, he focused on his friends. On his *why*. His Uncle Bud used to say that if your *why* was big enough, nothing could stop you from achieving it. He couldn't dwell on the difficult, but on the reason why that difficult thing was worth doing.

*Step...*

He thought of Treacle's pessimism. What if they were able to pass their Final Exam? How would that change the minotaur's attitude?

*Step...*

He thought of Inga failing the Stringentia Strigiformes Exam. Her life had been destroyed. And yet she'd believed enough in him to join him. He risked her life and her fate, and he couldn't let her down.

*Step...*

He thought about Marko. About the sad, drunken tragedy of his life. The satyr had grown, matured, and Logan wanted to do this for Marko. He wanted them to win, together. Marko had mourned his friend, but he'd also felt the Tree of Souls, the beauty of being connected to the source of life itself.

*Step...*

And that was the biggest why of all. Logan needed to do this because the Tree of Souls was bigger than him. He knew he could help protect the Tree and that he could help restore Apothos to

Earth. He could save his world from withering and dying. If that wasn't worth the pain and the hardship, then nothing was.

Logan steeled himself. It was time to solve this problem, tie another knot, and be the hero. He gritted his teeth and pushed—not just with his physical strength, but with the strength of his will, intention, and determination. He pushed with his whole being and completed the final step, connecting the path into one beautiful whole.

The result was immediate. The red blazed gold, a bright yellow color, a bit brighter than his skin, but not much.

He stood there, glowing, and suddenly, the multiverse wasn't light, with the shadow of the Tree of Souls reaching through reality. It was the Tree that gleamed silver, and all else was shadow and darkness. The Tree vibrated with all the Apothos in the universe. It was aware of Logan. He felt the presence of this living thing—gigantic, unfathomable, and ancient—and he felt its gratitude.

In a blink, it was gone and he was back in his fungaloid form, lying on his bed. His eyes winked open. No headache. No pain. Nothing but a feeling of being the most powerful being in existence. That was laughable because he was only an Iron Trunk cultivator, Rank 6 now. He didn't get extra goodies, but he did have Apothos to spare.

Hopefully, enough to pull them all together. He pulled up his Guardian Matrix and toggled over to his Symbiosis ability, muttering a silent prayer under his breath. He scanned over the description until he got to the Restrictions section.

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### **Logan Murray Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Fungaloid

**Current Evolution:** Shroomian Acolyte

**Cultivator Class:** Iron Trunk Cultivator; C-Class, Rank 6

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Morta/Toxicus

**Racial Abilities:**

- Digestion

### **Racial Skill:**

- Domestic Fungi

### **Level-One Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Opal Truffles, Mucal Film, Ghoul's Snare, Blister Wart

### **Level-Two Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Braincaps, Gem-studded Puffballs

### **Level-Three Proto-Spore Cultures**

- Spore Wargs

### **Fungal Form (Active):**

- Exoskeleton

### **Fungal Form (Passive):**

- Fungal Vision
- Disease Immunity
- Poison Immunity

### **Spore Halo:**

- Pollinic Affliction
- Symbiosis
- Athlete's Foot
- Rapid Growth

<<<>>>

**Alert!** As an Iron Trunk cultivator (C-Class, Rank 6), you have the ability to bond with up to three different hosts at the same time.

**Restrictions!** All fungaloids can naturally bond with one Prime Host, but maintaining a symbiotic connection with more than the Prime Host is a taxing process that can only be maintained for a limited period of time. *Note*, when the time allotment elapses, the secondary Hosts will be released, though the Prime Host will remain infected! *Note*, to increase your infection time allotments, cultivate more Core Knots, which will allow for greater focus and more efficient Apothos utilization!

**Prime Host** = Permanent Bond

**Prime Host + 1** = 10 Hours

**Prime Host + 2** = 6 Hours

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Logan shot up, leaning against his palms, and couldn't suppress his grin. "Guys, I did it! It nearly killed me, but I tied that knot like a kindergartner lacing up their sneakers."

"Sneakers?" Marko asked

"Kindergartner?" Treacle asked.

"He is speaking nonsense! We have our Logan back!" Inga tried to dance, but instead, she stumbled against Treacle, whose horns put more scratches in the sloping ceiling.

Logan hauled himself up. "What day is it?"

"Friday night," Marko said. "And notice, I'm not in Vralkag. I'm with you, in a cramped attic room which smells basically like a graveyard."

"A delicious graveyard," Logan countered. "What time is it?"

"It's past ten," Inga said.

Logan winced. "Rockheart isn't going to be happy to see us."

Treacle came up with an odd joke. "I don't know. I'm very handsome."

"Bovine eye candy!" Marko yelled. "Come on! Let's go ruin Rockheart's night!"



## Chapter Thirty-Three



PROFESSOR YULLIS ROCKHEART studied the four troublesome students who stood before his desk at an inappropriate time on a Friday night, with an inappropriate request. He was already in his housecoat for the evening, lush slippers covering his stony feet, yet here these *miscreants* were, disturbing his routine.

“The four of you... a single test... your Final Exam, together.” He gritted his stony teeth until he could taste the dust. “Why?” he growled.

The yellow-headed mushroom man squinted. “Because we’re in this together. Marko messed up his Placement Exam, and we don’t want him expelled. Or dead. It would probably be death for him. And that’s unacceptable. Where I come from, we have this saying: *No soldier left behind*. Marko’s part of my squad, and I won’t leave him. Period. End of story.”

Marko scratched his head between his horns. “Let me just say for the record, I agree, Professor. This is a terrible idea. If I didn’t like life so much, I would be very against it.” He shrugged. “Logan does have this way of pulling you into things, though. He’s oddly charismatic for a mushroom.”

Rockheart held up a stone claw. “That is enough from you. You will not talk any more. Not in my presence. Nor will you, Fungaloid.” He glared at Logan. “As bewildering as it is to me, Inga chose long ago to tie her fate to you, and while I fear she is a lost cause, I still have some hope she’ll come around. Actually, my question was directed at the minotaur. *Why?*”

Treacle Glimmerhappy stood. Somber and serious as a heart attack. The fact that the minotaur was *always* somber and serious as a heart attack was one of the things Rockheart liked about the man.

His cohort looked at him as he cleared his throat, coughed, and then said in a loud, powerful voice, “Because I like Marko Laskarelis. I find most people tiresome. I find most of life tiresome. But this satyr has a certain spark. Maybe, one day, I could be like him in some small way. If that spark dims, or if it is snuffed out, then perhaps my own uncertain spark will dim and vanish.”

Tears glimmered in the black eyes of the astral moth. The goat boy had a surprised look on his face. And Logan was smiling at his minotaur friend in silent encouragement.

Rockheart found it all nauseating. The whole affair. Emotional and—an even worse transgression—entirely *impractical*. Sentimentality had no place at the Shadowcroft Academy. Laskarelis was a loose end and a liability. He deserved failure and death in equal measures. Had Treacle Glimmerhappy learned nothing from Rockheart this year?

The mushroom pest turned. “We’re in this together.”

“Despite this ridiculous scheme, the fact remains that you don’t have the power for a sustained bond with three other dungeon cores, Mr. Murray.” Rockheart had studied up on the fungaloid’s strange Symbiosis spores. They were as unprecedented as they were vexing. This whole situation was intolerable.

Inga snorted out an awkward laugh. “You’re telling me. Normally, you’re right. But the Red Lotus Juice works well on an already modified core. It nearly killed him, but Logan has spent the last week tying another knot. He’s boosted his power, tripling the timeframe of the multiple-core Symbiosis. He can bond with up to three cores for a total of six hours. Long enough for us to design and run our dungeon.”

Rockheart stood up from his desk, roaring. “I tolerated you two taking the exams together, but I will not let this travesty continue! All four of you are insane! Insane!”

Treacle popped a clump of grass into his mouth and crunched as if he didn’t have a care in the world. Why was this promising minotaur throwing his life away? Why were the others in the Terrible Twelfth willing to sacrifice themselves for this goatish fool?

The rector prime couldn't stop himself from shaking. "Well, we'll just see what Shadowcroft has to say about all this. He couldn't possibly agree to this nonsense. It's been pointed out by other professors that it's not fair to have multiple dungeon cores running dungeons. You're quadrupling your power."

"Please, let us consult Shadowcroft as soon as possible," Inga said coolly, folding her hands together primly. "I would very much like to know his thoughts. From his class, and I quote, 'The Shadowcroft Academy, above all, is a utilitarian institution, focused on what works, not what's in style.'"

The insolence of the astral moth infuriated Rockheart further. He swept out of his office—never mind that he was in evening wear—and tromped up the steps, to the very top of the castle. The Terrible Twelfth followed in his wake.

The rector prime didn't pause as he stormed through the waiting room outside the headmaster's office. He didn't even knock.

This was madness. Madness and foolishness in equal measure! Shadowcroft could've ended the fungaloid's shenanigans and he hadn't. That meant he approved, because nothing—not a single thing—happened at his school that the headmaster didn't know about.

Shadowcroft's desk dominated the room, strewn with ivy and linked to the Tree of Souls itself. Behind was his pedestal, where his gem spun slowly. The headmaster himself sat in a chair next to his Crystal Terpsichorean, who was sleeping in a plush little red chair. The dancer obviously needed the rest after a long day of pirouetting, but she woke with yawn at the intrusion. As for the Rosaceae Flysnag, she was awake in her pot, watching her Treowen master read with a look of adoration on her flowery face. The flysnag's fangs looked particularly sharp. She flung the intruders a nasty glare.

A reading lamp hung over Shadowcroft's shoulder, illuminating his book with candlelight. Reading glasses were perched on his wooden nose. Shadowcroft didn't seem a bit annoyed—likely because he had known this debate would end up on his doorstep.

"Yullis!" Shadowcroft was smiling. "I heard both your enthusiastic shouting and your passionate footsteps. Careful, friend. Don't crack

your gem core over this. We'll suss out this matter like we always do. We're alive, so we can do wonderful things."

Rockheart stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed, wings folded back like a stately cloak.

Behind him, Inga and Treacle looked vaguely uncomfortable because they were disturbing the headmaster on a Friday night between exams, which was stressful for everyone, especially the person in charge.

Logan and Marko, however, were their usual arrogant selves. They didn't know their place in the grand scheme of things—that was their real problem. They thought of themselves as special snowflakes, when really they were as replaceable as the numerous cogs Treacle used to build his fanciful machines.

The satyr raised a hand and waved. "Hey, Skip. Kinda cool I know your first name. I'll call you Headmaster or Mr. Shadowcroft, don't worry, but I had to call you Skip at least once before I die."

The mushroom stood with his hands on his hips. A power stance. It was ridiculous because the fungaloid had little of his own strength; he was shamefully relying on his friends for everything.

"Headmaster, I want to use my Symbiosis power for the Final Exam. All four of us would like to take the exam together. We've talked about it extensively, and we understand the risks. Either we all pass together, or we all fail."

"Or we die," Treacle pointed out in a morose voice. "Remember death is an option."

"Or we die," the fungaloid agreed. "But we die together. We're the Terrible Twelfth."

"And sitting at the bottom of the leaderboard." The headmaster gestured to the image of the clan rankings shining from his gem. "Without help, it seems likely Marko would fall prey to the Winnowing." He seemed genuinely concerned. A skull flower drooped.

Of course he was concerned. Shadowcroft loved his students. He played the kind headmaster and left all the unpleasant tasks to his rector prime. Rockheart would never complain. Their work was important. Vital. For the good of the universe.

“We have the Winnowing for a reason,” the gargoyle-griffin insisted. “If Marko cannot rise to the occasion, he should fall. It is our way. Has always been our way. You know this as well as I and have approved the deaths of thousands of students.”

“But he has risen to the occasion,” Shadowcroft replied serenely, arching a leafy eyebrow at Rockheart. “His entire demeanor has changed since the field trip to the Slaughter Pits. And, even more importantly, he has acquired friends who are willing to risk their lives for him. It is impressive.”

*No, no, no!* Rockheart saw this was a losing battle, and that Shadowcroft, ever the utilitarian, would side with Marko Laskarelis and his wretched comrades.

“If we allow this sham,” Rockheart said, “then we will be brutal about it. They will be given the SandScream. They will have four hours to prepare. Then they will face the most difficult dungeoneers we’ve captured. That includes the Jade Leaf spell-caster. Normally, we would reserve that for Prince Chadrigoth, but if you combine the ranks of the Terrible Twelfth, all four of them, it would be almost equivalent to a Rank 1 Azure Branch Abyss Lord. Suffice it to say, the Terrible Twelfth will be given no mercy.”

Shadowcroft rose, his stately robes billowing out around him.

Both the Crystal Terpsichorean and the Rosaceae Flysnag gazed expectantly at their master. The headmaster combed twig-like fingers through his mossy beard. “A splendid idea, I think. And pragmatic. Four cores have access to a variety of skills, and with their Apothos pooled, that does give them a certain advantage. Some of these professors won’t think this is fair. But what is fair, Yullis? Raiders band together all the time to attack dungeons that are beyond their individual abilities, and dungeon cores are murdered in return, by dungeoneers several times their level.

“It seems to me that Logan and his cohort are simply doing what we taught them to do—using their abilities to the utmost to protect the Tree of Souls. You are right, though. We must show no mercy. I want them to succeed, but it is true that there must be an impartiality to it. Your terms, old friend, seem like an excellent crucible in which to forge these four.” He rubbed his hands together. “Hold nothing

back, understand, old friend? We will try them, and perhaps they will fail and die. But what if they don't? Well, it is a grand experiment, worthy of the finest dungeon academy in the multiverse."

Yullis kept silent, but the wheels in his head turned and turned and turned. *Hold nothing back.*

Shadowcroft knew everything that happened here, Rockheart reminded himself. That also meant the headmaster knew exactly what the rector prime had forced the Terrible Twelfth to endure throughout the year—and hadn't made a move to intervene. Reading between the lines, it could be reasoned that Shadowcroft wanted Logan here, but that perhaps he still held reservations. If the fungaloid died Shadowcroft would merely shrug and move on. Such was the way of their academy—victory through strength. Better a few dead students than a lost Celestial Node.

Marko raised a hand. "Uh, Rector, shouldn't you be happy about us doing well? It does help the Azure Clan and the leaderbread."

"Leaderboard," Treacle corrected.

The satyr thrust out a finger and said, "Points!" as if that explained everything.

Rockheart ignored the fool. He lived for the Azure Dragon Clan. Yet the standing of his clan paled in comparison to preserving the sanctity of the school.

The gargoyle raised his hand to show four claws. "Four cores. Four hours. They will face six heroes. And I will not be overseeing their exam. Zhen Ikgix can do the proctoring. I refuse to be anywhere near this travesty."

The rector prime turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, wings flaring out behind him.

He knew what he had to do.



THE FINAL EXAMS STARTED that Monday. With thirteen dungeons to use, they went through the students far faster than the Placement Exams. The school buzzed with the thrill of the exams. Students chattered in the Golden Serpent Hall, discussing how they'd undone

the evil plans of the raiders or toasting fallen cores who had been killed.

It happened every year. It was part of the Winnowing. Freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, all died. Of course, the freshman class lost the most. This year, Rockheart would see that Logan, Inga, Treacle, and that insufferable fool Marko were among their number.

Forty-eight hours later, on the eve of the Terrible Twelfth's Final Exam, Yullis Rockheart used the DIE Pavilion to whisk himself to the entrance of the Chaos Oasis. Its sandstone corridors were empty for now, the various traps and minion rooms quiet and lifeless. At the bottom, in prison cells, were the most powerful dungeoneers. The raiders didn't have their weapons or their armor, and their cores were temporarily crippled with powerful elixirs, so they couldn't cast spells or use any of their cultivated powers.

The grimy men and women glared at Rockheart. They saw him as the evil monster.

The gargoyle-griffin strode up to the bars of a cell. He glanced around at the six wooden beds, their mattresses thin, but their blankets clean. There was food and water for them, even some wine, because the academy wanted the would-be heroes healthy for the trials to come. Iron sharpens iron. The only way to improve was to be pressed.

At the back, sitting at a table, was Linraist Erejam, the cowl of his cloak pulled up to conceal his face. He was a Jade Leaf raider—the very same Vampiric Runecaster who'd failed to plunder the Slaughter Pits. Kyvandry had captured the impudent dungeoneer and delivered him by hand for use in the finals.

But Rockheart's real quarry slept on one of the beds, purring softly. A type of cat man, called the Ferox. Tetsukya "Tearclaw" Cratris was a B-Class Azure Branch cultivator who hailed from Kitterxob. The fur-covered War Sentinel could cast a myriad of deadly spells as well as fight with his long claws. Tetsukya had a Terra and Mallus Affinity, like Rockheart himself. The perfect dupe. He had the markings of a jaguar, gold and black, with cat ears, no hair, and feline features, though he wore pants, which were very, very red. Too red.

He needed to die.

The midnight-haired rogue of the party, approached the bars. He wore fine silken clothes with muted colors, so as to emphasize his bright smile. “Well, now, a monster. I’m Flynn Corry, and I’ve been told by a tall, tree sort of person we can win our freedom if we plunder a dungeon. I’m assuming it will be this dungeon. Can you offer any more details?”

“It won’t be this dungeon,” Rockheart said. “I’m here to discuss something with Tearclaw. Wake him for me. Now.” Not a request.

The cat man rose, swept his legs to the side of the bed, and stood. With a flick of his hands, he exposed his enormous talons. “I am here. I will talk with the gargoyle.” He padded across the floor to the bars on silent feet.

Flynn Corry grinned. “Please, Mr. Gargoyle, tell me something. When we go a-plundering, will we get our effects back and will our cores be restored to full strength? We won’t have much of a chance if we feel like hell.”

Rockheart nodded. “You will have your spells, your skills, and all of your armor and weapons. Now, stand back. If you don’t, I will kill you where you stand.”

Rockheart knocked some dust off his arm, and the dust grew into his Rockling Bonebreakers, a dozen of them, in seconds. The gem in his belly glowed with a dark light as Rockheart felt Apothos drain out of him to create his faithful underlings.

Flynn winced. “I’m guessing you’re a Jade Leaf cultivator, at least. Maybe even a Heartwood.”

Rockheart was rather flattered, though the man was far from his mark. He was a high-level A-Class cultivator. He’d been stalled out at Rank 2 for the last decade. Gaining even a single rank at his level was a chore of years—part of the reason it rankled so to watch Logan advance by leaps and bounds. Even if Rockheart could make it to Rank 1, the chances of advancing to S-Class were minuscule. That shift required more than mere power. There was a mental and spiritual component to it that few ever understood or overcame. It required *Revelation* to forge the knots necessary to complete the

task, which was the very reason there were less than fifty S-Class dungeon cores in all the known multiverse.

Shadowcroft was certainly among their number—as were the other dungeon academy headmasters—though it was rumored he was actually an SS-Class Crown cultivator. Whether that was true or not, no one could say for certain. Shadowcroft only laughed whenever someone asked him about it.

“Tell me the dungeon we’re facing isn’t going to be an S-Class dungeon,” the rogue said. “How’s about a bit of bloody good news, eh, my rocky friend?”

The man was smarmy. Normally, Rockheart would’ve wanted to watch him die slowly and horribly. In this case? He had definite plans for Flynn Corry and the rest of his ilk. “Don’t worry, Mr. Corry, the dungeon you face won’t be an S-Class. There will be four C-Class dungeon cores, all working in concert with one another. If you succeed in plundering the inner sanctum, you’ll get all their Apothos and your freedom. I wish you well in your endeavors.”

Flynn scratched his head. “Really? Multiple cores in a dungeon? I’ve not heard of such a thing.”

“And you won’t ever again,” Rockheart growled opening the cell door. “Not if I have a say in the matter.”

His Rockling Bonebreakers led Tetsukya “Tearclaw” Cratris out of the prison, down a hallway, and then down a set of steep stairs to the very bottom of the oasis, where a swampy room full of alligators waited, a central pedestal rising out of the swamp water. It was nice having thirteen dungeons on Arborea—they always had plenty of cells for their captives.

For now, the pedestal was empty. It would stay empty, so no one would get suspicious about why Yullis Rockheart was at the bottom of the Chaos Oasis.

The rector prime’s Rockling Bonebreakers latched onto the cat man in a flash, gripping his legs and arms in their stony grip.

“Why have you brought me here?” Tetsukya asked in a silky voice, unafraid.

Rockheart approached the cat man. “To kill you, obviously.”

He drove his stony claws into the heart of the cat man. Tetsukya was dead in seconds. Rockheart inhaled the dead raider's Apothos while his own gem gleamed.

As a gargoyle-griffin, he could alter his shape, and while he hadn't used his stone mimic ability in eons, becoming a copy of Tetsukya Tearclaw was easier than he would've thought.

His bonebreakers all grinned at him. One came forward with a shirt for him so he could cover the core gem gleaming in his belly. Another offered him the core crippling potion.

Rockheart took the vial in his cat paw. Logan and his cohort were cheating, even if Shadowcroft couldn't see it, but going against them as a Jade Leaf cultivator would arouse suspicion. With this nasty elixir, he could temporarily cripple himself, dropping his level to Azure Branch for the length of the exam. He would be considerably weaker, with the same general abilities as the Jade Leaf cat man. Still, he had no worries about his chances against Logan and the others. Not even as a lowly B-Class.

After all, he knew everything there was to know about dungeons.

With that knowledge, he was going to help those raiders destroy the Terrible Twelfth.

A bonebreaker held up the red pants.

"The things I do for this school." Rockheart sighed and put on the wretched garments.



## Chapter Thirty-Four



THE WINNOWING. THE Final Exam. It all came down to this single Monday, probably the most epic Monday in Logan's life.

Their four hours wouldn't begin until they took control of the SandScream, and the very second their time elapsed, ruthless dungeoneers would be ushered in to kill and destroy, whether the Terrible Twelfth were ready or not. The deadlines were tight, and the work would be brutal. Especially considering the dungeon environment they had to work with. The inner sanctum was just sand, sand dunes, sand drifts, sand piles, and extra sand on the side. Sandstone ceilings hung over a sandstone floor where a pathetic pedestal stood—just a block of stone. No frills. No carvings. As boring as naptime in a kindergarten classroom.

But that was all about to change.

While Logan had spent a week in agony, processing the energy of the Red Lotus and forging a new knot, his friends had been busy designing a new dungeon—one that incorporated all of their unique abilities into something better than the sum of their parts.

Logan gathered his friends around him. "You guys ready?"

Marko smirked. "When am I not ready to be infected by my own personal mushroom lord? Hit me."

Steeling his nerves, Logan let his Symbiotic spores come drifting out of the gills in his floppy yellow cap. "Make sure to breathe them in. We don't have any time to waste. You'll be infected, but it's a good infection."

Marko inhaled and held the spores in his lungs. "Yep. Good stuff. Symbiotic spores." He had to choke out each word.

Treacle's nostrils widened as he let the spores fill his lungs.

*Marko Laskarelis and Treacle Glimmerhappy have accepted Symbiotic Bonding!*

*Notice: As the Infecting Agent, you alone can terminate the Symbiotic bond; in addition, you will receive 10% of all Apothos cultivated by Marko Laskarelis and Treacle Glimmerhappy from this point forward. Bonding initiating in 3... 2... 1...*

Inga stood by, watching with an amused expression. She'd been bound to Logan for most of the year, and even after the effects of the Symbiosis wore off on Marko and Treacle, she would continue to be his partner in crime.

As the spores took root and spread through his two new hosts, tiny crystalline mushrooms appeared on their shoulders. After a beat, each grew a crown of delicate, crystalline mushrooms, until it looked like they were wearing fuzzy gold tiaras. Logan shuddered as energy and life flowed from his friends and into him, suffusing him with new Apothos. He'd grown accustomed to drawing a minute amount of residual power from the bond he had with Inga, but basically tripling that power in a matter of seconds was a heady rush. And unlike raw Apothos, siphoned off a dungeoneer, this energy didn't need to be processed.

It was a part of him, because it was a part of them. Their cores were doing the work, while his reaped the reward.

Once the euphoric sensation passed, Logan took charge. As one, their gems detached from their corporeal guardian forms, floating over the pedestal. Logan's a glimmering citrine, Inga's a vibrant amethyst, Treacle's a deep emerald, and Marko's a pale blue aquamarine. At first, the four dungeon core gems drifted randomly, bobbing and weaving drunkenly, until they finally started to spin in clockwork unison. The energy flowing into Logan increased even more, and with it came connection.

It was like they were having the best conversation of their lives. It was like midnight in a coffee shop, getting lost with friends. It was what Logan had been missing since his time in the Army. *Esprit de corp.*

He was overwhelmed with the sudden surge of information he was given on Marko and Treacle. There was so much to go over—their guardian forms, their guardian core matrices—an encyclopedia worth of data each.

He would've liked to spend days poring over all the ability descriptions, analyzing their spells and powers, but the clock was ticking. In four hours, not a second longer, the worst of the worst dungeoneers currently imprisoned in the Chaos Oasis would be coming for them, guns blazing. Metaphorically, at least.

First things first. Inga summoned her centipedes, but they weren't going to be used as soldiers, not all of them. They were the raw material that Logan needed to grow his fungi. The harsh reality of a desert dungeon was that it had nothing but sand and sandstone. No water, no moisture, no life. It was so dry and so oppressively hot that Logan couldn't just bring out his badass spores without some serious help. But as the great sage of his time, Jeff Goldbloom, had once said, *Life finds a way*. That was where the insects came in.

Logan created a digestive pit in the inner sanctum, a burbling three-foot wide moat of acid that surrounded the pedestal. Not only did the thick black ooze of his digestive juices break down the insects, Logan would have moisture and materials to grow his fungal forest in the heart of the desert.

The antechamber? That was going to be all Marko's creation. He would use something he called Summon Feast to create a horrible banquet that, according to Marko, would be both deadly and delicious.

Logan pulled the satyr's introductory information:

<<<>>>

**Dungeon Satyr:** Descendants of the High Lords and Ladies of the Fae, the goatfolk of the green places love to drink, feast, and sing under the light of the stars. Although they are often considered to be gentle and carefree, those that step onto the darker paths can be fearsome creatures to contend against. Along the Shadowed Path of the Muse, Dungeon Satyrs can charm, entrance, and seduce with equal ease—often leading dungeoneers to their demise all while dancing and singing to the merry tune of this deadly piper.

*Would you like to know more? Yes/No*

<<<>>>

Yes, Logan absolutely wanted to know more—he wanted to know *all* the things—but once again, he only had a few minutes to get the

basics down. He reluctantly hit *No* and went on to view the satyr's matrix:

<<< ☘ >>>

**Marko Laskarelis**  
**Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Dungeon Satyr

**Current Evolution:** Dark Muse

**Cultivator Class:** Iron Trunk Cultivator; C-Class, Rank 5

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Aqua/Umbra

**Racial Abilities:**

Silver Tongued, Blood of the Fae

**Racial Skill:**

- Spectral Song
- Unrelenting Debauchery

**College of Rhetoric:**

- Vicious Insult
- Ventriloquist
- Language of Dance

- Nataraja's Wretched Rhythm
- The Dumbshow of Burguk

**College of Shadows:**

- Living Artistry
- Shadow Betrayal
- Summon Feast

**College of Form:**

- Mannequin
- Mimic Form

<<< ✩ >>>

Marko giggled in a high voice. <Oh, you're looking at my unmentionables—seems like you should buy me a drink when this is all said and done. Assuming we survive. Now, how's about I get started on the feast table? It shall be my masterpiece... Though I'll also be setting up a little chandelier surprise. Think of it as your Aunt Agnese's chandelier only crossed with a bloodthirsty crystal spider.>

<Hold there. Let me get the room fixed up first,> Treacle sent back.

Their consciousnesses all shared the dungeon while their guardian forms stood dumbly, waiting for instructions.

Logan moved from Marko's info to Treacle's.

<<<>>>

**Minotaur:** These bull-headed creatures are often known for their unmatched strength and brute instinct, but when paired with the keen intelligence of an Alchemic Machinist, the trundling minotaur is transformed into something far more deadly... a masterful mechanic capable of amazing feats of mystical engineering while simultaneously perfecting monstrous internal and external sciences. Minotaurs have a driving need to forge deadly labyrinths filled with twists, turns, and traps that can put even the most seasoned dungeoneers to the test.

*Would you like to know more? Yes/No*

<<<>>>

Again, Logan couldn't read more. He reviewed Treacle's basic character sheet:

<<< ✩ >>>

### **Treacle Glimmerhappy Guardian Core Matrix**

**Base Race:** Minotaur

**Current Evolution:** Horned Artificer

**Cultivator Class:** Iron Trunk Cultivator; C-Class, Rank 3

**Primary Elemental Affinities:** Mallus/Fulgur

**Racial Abilities:**

Beast of Burden

## **Racial Skill:**

- Gore
- Labyrinth Sense

## **Internal Alchemy:**

- Clockwork Organs
- Engineered Anatomy

## **External Alchemy:**

- Rabid Mutagen
- Electric Alchemist
- Arcane Transmutation

## **Machinist Mastermind:**

- Blacksmith Marvel
- Engineered Weapons
- Mechanical Monsters

<<< ☀ >>>

Honestly, it was a damned good thing that Treacle had joined them. Aside from massively contributing to the Apothos pool they had to work with, he had also saved them worlds of work.

His Arcane Transmutation—one of his most potent abilities—would allow them to turn the sand into harder stone and shape it into a vast labyrinth, separated into two levels, with numerous blind corners and dead ends. Since the timetable would be so tight, the Terrible Twelfth planned on keeping the heroes busy on the top layer of maze while they finished working on the second level. Not only would it buy them some time, but Treacle said that a labyrinth was the optimal way to use the space—they could have corridors right next to each other so that they utilized every square foot.

Treacle also had a racial skill called Labyrinth Sense, which would make it impossible for him to get lost. Logan would share in that ability thanks to his Symbiotic infection.

Still, though they had big plans, and even with all the energy Logan was siphoning off from his friends, they would need more to support all of the minions, traps, and rooms they had in mind. Not to mention the sheer raw energy and focus it took to keep all four cores bonded and working. He couldn't have done it without the additional knot in his core, but they would still need a kill almost immediately to keep it powered.

Logan took charge as soon as Treacle shaped the simple stone corridors of the top floor of the labyrinth. <Marko, we're going with your Dark Muse theme for this dungeon. Your job, once you get your basic feast room set, is to create statues, paintings, and works of art. Some will attack and some won't. Remember what Kyvandry taught us, '*it's crucial to demoralize the raiders as much as you can.*' The more we can keep the raiders on the edge, the more we'll slow them down, which will give us time to perfect our garden of insectile death and the inner sanctum.>

<On it, boss!>

In Marko's feast room, gilded tables appeared, as well as an ornate marble fountain that wouldn't be pouring water, but some kind of edible wonder. The satyr wouldn't say what it would be, but he had a plan. Always a plan. He loved surprises, did Marko. Everything in the dungeon would be Endogenous Apothos Manifestations. Since the raiders were fighting for their freedom, they didn't need lures. That freed Logan and his friends to get creative.

Once Marko finished with the rudimentary dishes for his feast table outside the inner sanctum, he got to work painting the hallways of the labyrinth's first floor. He summoned a pair of paintbrushes from thin air and began dancing through the halls, singing, and laughing while ghostly music bled from the air itself, giving them their own haunting montage music to work to. Marko was a whirlwind of paint and artistry. It looked exhausting, but Marko never tired thanks to his racial skill, Unrelenting Debauchery—as long as he was

singing, drinking, partying, or dancing he suffered no negative exhaustion effects.

The dude was literally a party animal.

Treacle summoned his Ugknot Calflings for his own minion room, but spent most of his time and energy on a trap room designed to split the party. Inga loved the idea of splitting up the raiders, and since they had four guardian cores, it wasn't a bad plan.

Logan felt the minotaur's excitement pounding like adrenaline through his veins. The former gnome was excited to break out his new Internal Alchemy abilities, which basically made him like Iron Man, only Treacle's gadgets would emerge from his own flesh. He could snap a flamethrower out of his right forearm with minimal gore or summon a screaming buzz saw at will.

However, the minotaur was even more thrilled to be working on his musical puzzle room at the center of the first floor's maze. Treacle and Marko had spent hours designing it while Logan was down for the count. The satyr had no trouble dividing his attention between sculpting statues, sloshing mystical paint on murderous canvas, and helping out his bull-headed buddy.

Marko was born to multitask.

Inga focused on the entryway, which would set the tone for the entire dungeon. Usually the entryway was a ruse meant to ease dungeoneers in—to give them a false sense of security. Knowing that, they planned to subvert expectations. There was no need to lure these raiders in, so it was wasted effort anyway.

Instead, their entrance would be a death trap in every sense of the word and would feature a huge heavy metal surprise amidst the mushrooms and insects. That was also where Logan put his second digestive pit covered by a Mucal Film. Secret passageways embedded in the walls would give Treacle access, so he could drag bodies there easily. More Apothos for Logan and the others to use. And thanks to Digestion, they would have instant access to a huge reservoir as soon as the bodies hit the acid. Marko also sent some of his energy there, to craft the entryway plaque and to animate several small, weird statues that reminded Logan of the Jigsaw puppet from the *Saw* movies.

Logan would grow Gem-Studded Puffballs on the puppets, turning them into creepy grenades. They were going to pull out all the stops for their Final Exam.

With five minutes to spare, the first level was done. Marko then resumed work on his feast room, tweaking this and adding that, while Logan, Inga, and Treacle stood in the inner sanctum. Their starter centipedes were long gone, and the digestive pit moat was a couple feet wider and a foot deeper. Statues covered in fungal growths filled the sanctum, all standing motionless.

Even to Logan, the place looked terrifying.

<Marko!> Logan sent. <Focus here for a second.>

<I wanted one more variety of canape. You know, I was going to go with stuffed, deep-fried mushrooms, but that's just... oh, you know, overkill. I went with fried peppers with spicy saffron breading. Spicy and delicious and perfect for dipping in the fountain.>

Logan couldn't believe Marko's plan for his food fountain. But he had to get the satyr's attention. <We don't have much time, and Inga has to get ready for her ambush in the entryway. Real quick, though, we need a contingency plan. It's likely at least one of their Azure Branch cultivators will make it to the sanctum. If that happens?>

<If that happens, we'll die.> Somehow, Treacle managed to send them a despairing sigh.

Logan disagreed. <Nope. Not after making it this far. We've done some excellent work, and I know the second level isn't finished just yet, but all in all, I think we have this. Remember, any kill gets dumped into a digestive pit, either on the first level or the second. I'll need the energy.> His core was burning like a V8 engine gulping down nitroglycerine. He was running his core into the red, and the spikes in energy left him dizzy.

<I'll deal with the bodies,> Treacle agreed.

<I... I won't be.> Inga's fear came through her thoughts. If all went to plan, she'd go down early, and she'd go down hard. It would be for the best, though. After that, they had some diabolical traps, most of which relied heavily on Marko's Dark Muse magic.

<Don't worry,> Logan sent. <Once we eat the last raider, we'll fix your guardian form. We're going to win this. But while we were

working, I had an idea. A nasty surprise in case everything falls apart and one of the raiders manages to get into the inner sanctum. This is what I'm thinking...>

When he told them his plan, Marko burst out laughing, Inga went silent, and Treacle grumbled.

<How do I get out of this chickenshit outfit?> the minotaur asked, oddly quoting a movie there was no way he could've seen.

Logan didn't answer because it was too late. With seconds to spare, Inga moved her guardian form into place while Logan and Marko worked on the surprise to end all surprises.

Logan prayed they wouldn't have to use this last ruse, but in his heart of hearts, he knew there was no way they would get lucky enough to kill all the raiders without at least a few hiccups.

They had six raiders to kill: four C-Class Iron Trunks and two B-Class Azure Branch cultivators. Hopefully, Inga would be able to level the playing field early, but at least one of those Azure Branches would get to the inner sanctum. Logan could feel it. If everything went according to plan, however, they wouldn't be leaving alive.



## Chapter Thirty-Five



YULLIS ROCKHEART FALTERED the moment he stepped into the SandScream. Nothing was as he expected it to be. He squinted his stolen feline eyes, ears laid back against his head in agitation. Absently he adjusted the leather jerkin armor hanging over the truly awful red pants and studied the entryway. He'd anticipated a desert lord dungeon, a pyramid tomb of scarabs and a mummy or three. Standard stuff for someone unused to working with dusty earth and shifting dunes.

There was none of that, however.

There was sand, to be sure, spilling onto the floor and narrowing the wide corridor, but neither sarcophagi nor scarabs. Instead, at the front of the hallway was an arch where grisly piles of dead giant centipedes rotted into mere husks. They created a slop of fungal growth on the floor, but that wasn't all. Little puppet creatures stood in the stinking filth, covered in jeweled mushrooms—those would be the fungaloid's Gem-Studded Puffballs. Garish paint had been splashed at the top of the arch, splashes of color, along with more mushrooms. The words were clear, however inane the script:

*Welcome to the Mad Party of the Dark Muse's Depravity!*

An entry room was an important statement in a dungeon. Rockheart was of the mind that the entry was meant to be welcoming in its way—to lure the prospective dungeoneers deeper into the labyrinth, before springing shut the jaws of defeat. That was how Arketa taught the introductory Underground Feng Shui course, which naturally meant most first-years employed those same tactics in their Winnowing final. Yet there was no reason to do so. These dungeoneers didn't *need* to be enticed—they were running the dungeon as a matter of survival—so putting them at ease was wasted effort.

The four troublesome cores had been smart to realize that.

Erejam stood with this gnarled staff, the tip glowing and making his oiled black beard seem even more oily. His jewel-encrusted robes glimmered. He frowned as he read the name of the dungeon. “The Dark Muse. So, there will be artwork. Artwork displeases me.”

The Vampiric Runecaster shot Rockheart a glance. “Feel free to use your talons, Tearclaw, to rip apart any paintings we find.”

Rockheart nodded. He was trying not to talk. It was a good thing that the cat man he was impersonating hadn’t spoken much before Rockheart had assumed his identity. He’d had to alleviate the fears of the other raiders when he returned, but he’d won their confidence with ease. He had spent more years as a professor than most of them had been alive, and he knew all the words to speak. All the lies to whisper. *He was giving intel*, he’d said. *Apparently, the gargoyle has a vendetta against whatever dungeon we’re running. He wants us to succeed. And he says it’ll be worth our time if we can win.*

They were fools, easily manipulated.

“Gods, but this place is awful,” the rogue, Flynn Corry, said, glancing around at the nightmarish dungeon entrance. The man carried no apparent weapons and wore no apparent armor. But Rockheart noted the eight rings sparkling on his fingers—three of which were magical in nature. “Puts my teeth on edge.”

The thief wasn’t wrong. Truly unsettling work, and Rockheart was grudgingly appreciative of the mastery at play. The rector prime turned his gaze away from the room and took stock of the rest of his comrades, wondering if they would have the skills and power to finish the task.

Orem Leadblade, a dwarven Earthbinder in heavy plate mail, stood ready to fight with both an enchanted stone hammer and a shield crafted from crystalline glass. Ekli Oreniel, a half-elven Wood Warden, held up her rune-etched scimitar, which cast watery blue light across the ground. Their heavy hitter was a half-orc Blademaster called Lyndagg the Skinner. She had an armory worth of obsidian knives sheathed on every part of her sleek ebony armor, striking against her green skin. Besides her knives, she had a curved

sword riding one hip and a wicked serrated buckler strapped to one beefy forearm.

They were certainly formidable in appearance, though in truth, those four were only C-Class raiders. All highly ranked, true, but C-Class Iron Trunks, nonetheless. Only Erejam and Rockheart were B-Class. Still, these were the most dangerous of the lot. If they couldn't beat Logan and his ragtag crew of misfits... Well, *that* didn't bear thinking on.

Flynn Corry adjusted his well-coiffed hair, making sure it was as dashing as ever. "Well, I'm not sure what's going on here, but I'm glad we have two Azure Branch cultivators with us. Especially the great Linraist Erejam." He tipped his head toward the Vampiric Runecaster. "How many times have you survived the Slaughter Pits?"

Erejam scowled. "More times than I can count. Nasty place, the Slaughter Pits. Each time, though, I delve farther in. Unlock more of its secrets. I will be victorious one day."

"I have no doubts on the matter, good sir," the rogue agreed. "But first, you're going to get us out of this mess, right? You and Tearclaw?"

"Of course," the Vampiric Runecaster said. "This is an odd sort of place, but it holds no danger to one such as myself."

Lyndagg banged her weapon on her shield. "Well then, why do we tarry? This talk does nothing. And I, for one, am not afraid of dead bugs and a jester's puppets!"

From somewhere in the darkness beyond the archway, a slow rhythm started. Closer, far closer, an eerie disembodied flute started piping a maddening tune.

The eyes of the two white-faced puppets suddenly gleamed scarlet. Red swirls painted their cheeks, giving them a weirdly cheery appearance. The puppets, only a few feet tall, shivered to life in strange herky-jerky movements. Both danced out of the slop and started to sing along with the tune.

*Welcome you!*

*Welcome to...*

*The mad party of the dark muse singing!*

*The mad party of the dark muse bringing...*

*Death and darkness to all you heroes*

*We'll kill you quick and then have beer, ohs!*

The puppets danced closer to the party.

At the mention of beer, Rockheart rolled his feline eyes, ears twitching in disgust. The rhyme was forced, and so very, very Marko Laskarelis.

Before Rockheart could cast a spell that would perfectly imitate Tearclaw's Ferox sorcery, Erejam summoned living shadows from the air—a trio of twisted creatures with blazing purple eyes, conjured with Umbra Affinity, then given the semblance of life through stolen Vita Apothos. Vampiric Runecasters were a mishmash of Summoners and Blood Elementalists with a number of potent abilities. Shadow Life was among their most basic. The Runecaster flung the shadow demons at the puppets. The impish shades struck the puppets with tearing claws and inky-black teeth.

The Gem-Studded Puffballs exploded, obliterating the attack shadows and spewing their deadly crystalline shards into the air.

Erejam called forth a blood shield with a flick of his hand, preventing the glass shrapnel from getting anywhere even close to the rest of the raiders.

An insane voice broke from the darkness beyond. "My darling little darlings are dead! You will join them before long. Now come into the darkness, my friends, for there are more songs to be sung! And more fun to be had!"

The voice belonged to Marko, though it was echoing and unnatural.

Rockheart sneered even as a feeling of dread filled his belly. "The dungeon is trying to demoralize us," he said. "We can't let this fool frighten us."

Erejam strode forward on supremely confident feet. "Never. I saw those puffballs on the puppets right away. This is a contemptuous attempt at a trap. They have no idea who they are dealing with. We are the best of the Tremblecloaks, the very finest new dungeoneering guild in Aurora and on Eritreus!"

That was laughable. The Tremblecloaks were nothing more than a bunch of upstarts. However, Erejam wasn't wrong about being the best of their guild. The academy had managed to capture the best the Tremblecloaks had to offer. Too bad the guild's standards were so... substandard. Save for the Runecaster, who truly was powerful.

Erejam pushed even farther into the entry chamber, raising his gnarled staff overhead in defiance. He turned, offering his back to the dungeon in a display of complete contempt. "I am a Vampiric Runecaster! I can draw the power out of their very blood. I can summon shadows that will kill and kill again. I can divide my form to confuse and confound my enemies even while stripping the flesh from their bones with my all-consuming sorcery! I am death incarnate. I have no equal!" he crowed, throwing his head back.

He had a perfect view as the ceiling opened up above him and disgorged a deadly surprise.

Erejam let out a startled squawk as Inga dropped down with an audible *thud*. But this wasn't Inga in her beautiful moth form. She'd used her Metamorphosis ability to transform into a gigantic steel-encrusted caterpillar—twenty feet long, as thick as the dwarf was wide, and covered in razor-sharp spikes. The chrome larva's spikes ripped through Erejam as the sheer weight of the thing crushed him into meat paste.

And just like that, in the blink of an eye, the party had lost one of their Azure Branch cultivators.

Rockheart was dumbfounded.

This was the astral moth, using her Metamorphosis ability, right away, in the first room! He'd expected them to divide their dungeon into four floors, where each core would be a floor boss. Simple, straightforward, and practical given the circumstances and time restrictions. But no, they had committed one of their most powerful resources early and most unexpectedly... A bold move, yet one that had paid off. They had removed Erejam—arguably the most powerful of the actual raiders—from the equation before the man could do more than sling a handful of spells.

Orem Leadblade howled, "By my beard! A fight, and this is a dungeon boss, or else I'm an elf!" He waded forward with the half-orc

skinner by his side.

Orem dug his fingers into the ground, and it parted for him like hot butter. He scooped up a boulder that must've weighed half a ton and slammed it into the side of Inga's caterpillar head as though he were tossing around a feather pillow. Such was the power of an Earthbinder.

The great metal worm reeled from the blow, and Orem followed up, leaping forward to bash in her skull with his wicked hammer. Inga thrashed her head left at the last moment, goring him with her spikes. She nearly eviscerated the man, but suffered a grievous wound for her considerable efforts.

Orem dropped, alive but in pain, clutching at his ruined belly.

Lyndagg had used the Earthbinder's attack to maneuver around the guardian. She shot in like an arrow, peppering Inga's side with a wave of Apothos-conjured Glacies daggers. Green blood splashed against the wall in a sheet.

Even badly wounded, Inga fought on, swinging her head toward the half-orc like a battering ram. Lyndagg brought her shield screaming forward, catching the astral moth's deadly spikes on her buckler. Swiveling, the Blademaster smacked off one of the caterpillar's mandibles. Then, in a flash, Lyndagg dashed up one of the piles of sand, leapt, and brought her sword down, carving through the caterpillar's thick hide like a surgeon's scalpel through silk.

One of Flynn Corry's rings flashed, and ornate armor appeared, covering his clothes perfectly in bands of hardened black lacquer and soft but sturdy leather. Another ring flashed and two silver, rune-etched short swords filled his hands. He didn't rush forward, though. He yelled at Rockheart. "Tearclaw, you should probably do something, eh? This is a straight-up fight, and I'm not too good at those. I prefer a nice, safe back to stab!"

"Coward," Rockheart spat.

The thief was right, though—he *should* act. It was just endlessly amusing to watch the astral moth so thoroughly thwart the raiders. Rockheart had no love for dungeoneers of any stripe. Still, he was on a mission, he reminded himself. With a flick of his hand, he threw

golden glowing claw missiles into the caterpillar, sizzling her undulating flesh and melting her metal spikes in a wave of searing heat.

Inga turned and tried to get at Lyndagg once more with her one good mandible, but she mistakenly exposed her belly in the process.

Ekli Oreniel seized the opportunity to slash through Inga's underside, spraying the room with more of the sludgy green blood.

Inga then did something unexpected.

She straightened, retreated, and used her bulky tail to push a mound of sand aside. A section of sandstone slid back into the wall. Below was a fungaloid's digestive pit. She was bleeding out—nearly dead—but somehow still managed to shove Linraist Erejam's body into the black fluid. Immediately, the fluid started to bubble and churn.

Inga let out an insectile screech as Lyndagg drove a sword into her side over and over again. Meanwhile, Ekli continued to slash with her scimitar, carving great gashes into Inga's unprotected belly. Even Flynn Corry rushed forward, dancing around her spikes and mandible, laying into her with twirling silver blades. As for Rockheart, he saved his spells. This fight was as good as over, and though the astral moth had lost the skirmish she'd certainly won the war, no matter what happened now.

After a few more moments of fruitless fighting, the metal caterpillar slumped forward, life draining from her inhuman eyes. Even with her guardian form gone, Rockheart knew Inga's core would continue to float on the pedestal in the inner sanctum, feeding Logan both Apothos and intel.

Still, the Terrible Twelfth had just lost their best dungeon boss...



## Chapter Thirty-Six



ROCKHEART HAD NO IDEA how the four cores would fare without Inga's rather impressive guardian form. To lose a dungeon boss in the entry room was a devastating blow.

Yet...

Yet it was also a daring ploy, and Rockheart couldn't help but respect her sacrifice. He wouldn't show her mercy, though. He was more determined than ever to reach the inner sanctum, smash her gem to pieces, and then inhale her Apothos. She had talent, no doubt, but she'd made a mistake supporting the fool goat boy. Mercy had no place in a war zone, and this was but one front in a much larger war. A war for the Tree of Souls itself. He was obligated to honor the Tree through action and save it from those too weak to serve. He would do his duty, even if he might find pieces of it... distasteful.

Ekli Oreniel stood at the edge of the digestive pit, staring down at the disgusting, burbling goop. It was too late to retrieve Erejam's body. Already, Logan and his friends would be gathering fresh energy from the Azure Branch cultivator. The rank smell of the Runecaster's corpse being broken down into its component energies filled the room. Logan would get sixty percent of Erejam's Apothos immediately thanks to his unique digestive abilities. Since Erejam had Vita and Umbral Affinities, the rest of the energy would take longer to process, but the annoying fungaloid would manage it in time.

The Terrible Twelfth were already feasting and growing stronger, no doubt preparing to turn that power against the raiders at the most inconvenient opportunity.

"Argh, lass," the dwarf cried, still clutching his ruined stomach. Inga had done a number on the Earthbinder. "Ah could use a healing

spell, if ya have a minute.”

The half-elf turned and glared at him. “And why should I, you bearded heathen? You said something nasty about elves.”

The dwarf was pale under his beard. “All Ah said, lassie, was that the big bug was a dungeon boss. Ah didn’t mean it as an insult to yer people.”

“Oh, it was an insult. I heard your tone,” the Wood Warden said in a deadly voice, crossing her arms like a petulant child. “Don’t you know how terrible my backstory is? I’m half elf. Which means I’m also half human. It was hard growing up. I was a stranger to both worlds.”

The dwarf winced, obviously in great pain. “Aye, sounds tough on both of ye. But a little healing would keep me from dying, and then ya can tell me more.”

The Wood Warden sighed and rolled her eyes. “Fine, I’ll heal you, but I want you to *beg* me.”

Orem Leadblade gulped, fingers digging into the earth. His blood continued to drip onto the ground. “Ah beg you, Miss Oreniel. Ah’ll die if ya don’t, and if Ah die, there’s a better chance that ya will, too. That we all will.”

The half-elf sneered but drew a ruby amulet out of her leathers. “You get the blessing of more life, Orem Leadblade. But you’d best keep a civil tongue.”

Lyndagg the Skinner wiped her curved sword off on the dead caterpillar. She came forward and smiled, showing her tusks. “I don’t mind being half human. Most years, I celebrate the Forevergreen Festival twice, so twice the gifts. And I won’t be begging for a healing, half-elf. And the dwarf shouldn’t have begged, either. You should be begging us to protect you. He is right, without us death awaits you. Just how long do you reckon you would last here on your own?”

Ekli lashed out. “I am a servant of the Autumnbrook forest. This roseflower amulet has life itself inside it.”

“It’s a trinket, fit only for a C-Class dumbbell,” Rockheart barked, already tired of the Wood Warden’s dramatics. “If you had half as much cultivated Vita Apothos as you do attitude, you wouldn’t need

such silly toys to do your healing. Now silence your tongue before I take the amulet from you and throw you into the pool to join Erejam."

That got her attention, and she finally shut her mouth, though she didn't look happy about it.

The rogue cleared his throat before tension could escalate further and pointed at the fungal growths around the entrance.

"Those are Blister Wart. If we had more time, I'd collect some and sell them to surgeons. Once processed, they have formidable healing powers. As it is, we'll have to be careful passing through this way. Also, with Erejam gone, we'll need another light source. So far, I can guess three out of four of the dungeon cores we face. There's the insect creature we just killed, the dark muse, and then of course, some kind of fungus lord. I'm not very partial to mushrooms, myself..." A sly grin slipped across his face. "Though I have to say, I did date this girl who made an amazing Opal Truffle soup."

Rockheart regarded Corry. He was a smarmy thief, but he was better than the three other bickering dungeoneers.

With the dwarven warrior healed and casting nasty glares at the Wood Warden, they chose a marching order. Lyndagg the Skinner would go first, armed with Ekli's glowing scimitar for light. Orem, the Earthbinder, would go next, followed by Flynn Corry the thief. Rockheart would take up the rear, walking behind the Ekli the Insufferable, who would have her roseflower amulet out as their second light source.

They were careful not to brush the Blister Wart mushrooms on the walls of the entrance, and soon found themselves in a massive labyrinth of sandstone.

Flynn Corry laughed. "Ah. Well, that makes it clear as the sun at high noon. The fourth dungeon core is obviously a minotaur. Don't worry... I've beaten a labyrinth before." He paused and scratched at his chin. "Though I don't suppose anyone has any golden magic thread? It would save us a lot of time and trouble."

None of them did, which meant they would have to map the warren of passages the old-fashioned way: trial and error.

Onward they pressed, moving slowly through arched tunnelways filled with twists, turns, choke points, and blinds. Strange paintings in

a variety of eye-jarring colors tattooed the walls in chaotic arrangements. They were off-putting in the extreme. Some were of mad bull-headed men murdering innocent people in what looked like a wedding. Others were of mushroom people, with fangs and slits for eyes, devouring corpses. Then there was the Dark Muse himself, a goat-headed fiend who made puppets dance under a bloodred moon. Besides being utterly bizarre, the paintings made it hard to focus. The images somehow invoked *movement*, so it seemed as though the walls were alive.

They turned corner after corner, and Rockheart's fury increased every time they had to switchback. With only four hours, Logan and his cohort would've been hard-pressed to complete a passable dungeon, which meant they were likely stalling. Right now, the Terrible Twelfth were using Erejam's Apothos and the extra time to finish their dungeon. Were they adding corridors even now?

Again, begrudgingly, he had to admit it was a good strategy. Shrewd.

Another hallway brought the raiders to a dead end. It was full of motionless plaster mannequins, all faceless, standing in various poses, their lifeless hands raised above their heads. Was that in fear? Or were they about to attack? Either way, the sight of those mannequins, motionless in the dark, was disturbing. And, as with the painting in the hallways, it was hard to focus. They all seemed on the verge of springing to life any moment.

“Bloody hell,” Corry whispered, “but I don’t like this place. Everything about it gives me the chills. Liable to have nightmares about this place for months, assuming we survive.” He licked his lips nervously and gave his short blades a twirl. They pressed farther into the room, padding forward on silent feet, giving each of the statues a wide berth in case they proved to be touch sensitive.

“Pretty pictures and silly statues aren’t anything to—” Lyndagg started.

She didn’t finish.

The moment everyone was in the room, surrounded by the army of grave-still mannequins, the statues attacked in force.

This time, Rockheart took a more active role in the battle.

He forced Apothos from his core, cycling it into his limbs and imbuing his claws with the power of both Terra and Mallus Affinity, transforming them into shards of obsidian glass capable of cutting through even stone or steel. Next, he summoned more Apothos and sent it coursing just beneath the surface of his fur-covered skin. He channeled that power with a whisper of will, reinforcing himself with rose quartz in a spell form often called stone-skin. He would be slower now, less dexterous than the generally nimble cat creature, but he would also be far tougher.

That done, he stormed forward, arms and legs churning, effortlessly avoiding sloppy, unwieldy strikes while carving through plaster limbs. In seconds, he'd slashed apart every single one of the mannequins' sculpted bodies, leaving dusty ruin in his wake.

The thumping music started again, and the piping, and the laughter. The dissonant voice resounded through the halls, eerie and distant. "My friends are dead! And you will be too! You will dance in your coffins, and you will jig in your graves, and when you drink, the wine will pour from the holes in your belly! The wine! The dancing! The singing! Dead, you will be my friends. Once dead, we can be the best of friends."

More maniacal laughter.

Rockheart saw fear in the eyes of the raiders. Except for Flynn Corry. He was listening closely. "That voice came from this way."

"No. We can't trust it," the rector prime said, shaking his head. "This Dark Muse can use a skill, Ventriloquism, to throw his voice. It's a lure. I think I know the way."

Rockheart had kept track of the twists and turns. He'd been teaching dungeon crafting for a long, long time and worked with more than his fair share of minotaurs.

They came to a long hallway, a fresh new corridor, which meant they were on the right track. Here, bright lights glimmered from the floor, illuminating paintings on either wall. Along the left-hand wall were more faceless plaster mannequins, a dozen of them, all standing in front of a hellish mural. In the painting, horned demons tormented the souls of various races—humans, elves, dwarves, and orcs, all burning in a lake of fire. On the right wall, there were clouds

and cute chubby cherubs strumming harps. Their faces were innocent. Their wings were perfect. Their appearance welcoming.

An obvious trap. The question was, were the mannequins the trap or were the paintings? Marko did have the Living Artistry Skill from the College of Shadows. It was possible that both statues and paintings were rigged, but considering Logan and company had a limited time frame and stunted Apothos reserves, Rockheart found it unlikely.

Before he could determine where the danger lay, Lyndagg the Skinner let out a ferocious roar and charged, slashing apart mannequin after mannequin with Ekli's glowing scimitar and her razor-sharp buckler.

Flynn Corry winced. "Oof. I hate raiding dungeons with orcs, she or otherwise."

None of the mannequins had come to life. They were simply statues.

"You're welcome," Lyndagg said over one shoulder.

Corry turned up the smarm. "Well, Miss Skinner, you definitely showed the plaster people who was boss. How can I ever thank you?"

The half-orc growled, "You just thanked me, idiot, by asking the question."

"Of course, such a blundering oaf I am at times." Corry caught Rockheart's gaze and shrugged.

The rector prime found himself liking this thief. However, Rockheart still didn't entirely trust the hallway. "This still feels like a trap."

The half-elf laughed. "Lyndagg is halfway down it. Nothing has happened. Keep walking to the end, Miss Half-orc. And good for you. You were probably happy your whole life. Not me. To be caught... between two worlds. Alone."

"Or perhaps you're just a delicate, arrogant elf child. I, on the other hand, am a ferocious warrior, and I have a warrior's heart." The half-orc strutted the rest of the way, smug and self-satisfied. She'd made it to the other end without incident.

“See, idiot?” Ekli smirked at Rockheart. “How did you even make it to Azure Branch being so timid?”

Flynn Corry went to the mural of the cherubs in the clouds. “There isn’t any canvas, just stone. We could wash off the paint. That would be the safest bet, since we’re dealing with a Dark Muse.”

“I agree,” Rockheart said. “It will slow us down further, but it’s better than being caught unprepared.”

“This is stupid! You’re wasting our time. Obviously, it’s safe.” The half-elf called to Lyndagg—“And for your information, I have a warrior’s heart too!” The Wood Warden went storming after the half-orc in a huff. That, it appeared, was the wrong choice.

The wall art shimmered and morphed. The demons changed into laughing people, the lake of fire became a beach, and the tortured people turned into happy satyrs drinking wine and eating mushroom canapes without a care in the world. In seconds, the mural went from a hellish eternity of torture to a Sangretta beach party. Because of course it did.

On the right? The happy cherubs turned into fat little imps, their fluffy wings becoming leathery bat wings and the golden harps transforming into wicked bows.

A barrage of arrows shot out of the painting.

Lyndagg and Orem had their shields to protect them.

As for Flynn Corry, his armor ring flashed, and shafts bounced off his black lacquer armor.

The arrows might as well have been sticks on Rockheart’s reinforced skin.

The tragic half-elf wasn’t so lucky. The arrows pin-cushioned her. She hit the ground, eyes glazed over in death, feathered by a dozen shafts. That was no coincidence, Rockheart was sure. Once again, the dungeon cores were aiming well, eliminating the most powerful raider first, and the healer second. A textbook play executed to perfection.

Once the imps ran out of arrows, they froze in place, and the music started again, deranged and deafeningly loud. Drums and piping and laughter.

Flynn Corry strutted over, seemingly without a care in the world, and rifled through Ekli Oreniel's pockets. He took the roseflower amulet, but he tossed it to Rockheart. He had to shout over the thunderous music. "You're our last spell-caster, Tearclaw! I'm hoping you can use this to heal!"

Rockheart turned the item over in his hands, letting his senses delve into its magic. The amulet was a simple core enhancer for a C-Class druidic spell-caster. It wouldn't help him at all. Nor would it help the other raiders since they weren't magic-users. Technically the Earthbinder was a body and elemental cultivator, but his skills were focused in the wrong areas. Rockheart tossed it back to the thief. "I'm no healer, and that amulet is worthless to me. If we get out of here, you can sell it."

The rogue brightened. "I misjudged you, Tearclaw. Thanks. When I buy my next wench with the proceeds, I'll think of you." He laughed and shot Rockheart a wink. "I'm hoping to get another wench at some point, though things seem dire. We're down to a party of—"

A groan cut the thief off before he could finish. Flynn Corry sprang back, executing a perfect backflip, as the sandstone floor tipped. In a heartbeat, the Wood Warden's body slid down and was gone, the floor sliding back into place on well-oiled hinges. There must be such hidden passageways tucked away all over the place. It reeked of Treacle's handiwork.

Corry closed an eye and rubbed at his temples. "Alright. So, I'm thinking that losing the bodies of our comrades is not helping our cause, yes? The fungaloid is eating them, growing stronger, isn't he?"

"You're not wrong," Rockheart growled, hands balling into fists.

Lyndagg had ventured forward, and she came sprinting back, eyes wide as teacups. "I found the center of the maze. Looks to be a trap room, or maybe some sort of puzzle."

"Finally, some good news." Rockheart scowled. "So far, this dungeon has been one step ahead of us the entire time. But if there is one thing I know, it's trap rooms." Then, under his breath, "I've spent the year teaching traps to these *whelps*."

The central room of the labyrinth wasn't the inner sanctum—there had to be a second level tucked away below, since that was where they'd taken Ekli's body. Instead, Rockheart and the three raiders found themselves in the middle room of the maze, facing an iron cube the size of a normal dungeon room. The walls were welded together and studded by brass rivets. There was a door leading inside the cube, but it was closed.

Lyndagg burst forward to pull open the iron hatch. Unbelievably, she was going to waltz into the iron cube without a second thought. The stupidity of these dungeoneers was impressive. Perhaps he had been too hard on the goat boy, considering just how moronic their competition was.

Rockheart caught her arm. "No. One does not simply *walk* into a trap room. Not without consulting me first. I'm taking command of this party. We've lost our wizard and our healer, all because of blundering and impatience."

"Ah won't miss that woman." The dwarf's frown was lost in his beard. He gripped his stony hammer tighter. "And Ah say we let our last Azure Branch lead us."

"Fine." Lyndagg shoved Rockheart away. "It will be as you say."

Corry nodded. "I'm assuming you want me to go into the room first. Check it for traps? Leap out if anything goes boom?"

"Do it," Rockheart ordered.

Corry carefully opened the metal door and slipped inside. He came out a handful of minutes later, scratching his head in bewilderment. "I scanned the floors, ceilings, and walls for pressure plates, trip wires, and hidden runes. Nothing. From what I can tell, it's as much a puzzle room as a trap room. There are musical instruments welded all over the floor and walls. There's also another sign, courtesy of the Dark Muse: THE LUCKY PIPER CALLS THE UNLUCKIEST OF TUNES. There's a door on the other, side but it's locked tight. Seems we have to solve his little riddle before we can move on."

Rockheart's mood didn't improve. This was the minotaur's doing, working in concert with that buffoon Marko.

Once all four of the adventurers were inside the room, the entry door slammed shut, which was no surprise. The iron room had slits as well as round holes in the walls. From his time working with Treacle Glimmerhappy, Rockheart knew deadly saws could come buzzing out of the slits at any minute. Those holes were no doubt for spears or spikes. A keyboard stood on a metal stand in the far corner, with a series of panpipes nearby, also welded onto a platform. Trumpets, a brass pipe organ, a flute, a steel lute, and a variety of other instruments were spread across the room.

A single note, from the metal piano, rang out, reverberating in the air like a struck gong.

“The luckiest piper calls the unluckiest of tunes,” Rockheart murmured to himself. It was a clue, but it wasn’t much of one.

For a moment, nothing happened, and then the entire room rumbled and shifted to the right with the groan of gears and the rattle of chains—the floor abruptly becoming a wall, one of the walls now the floor. Razor-tipped spikes erupted from beneath their feet. Corry executed a flawless handspring to a flip, grabbing hold of a brassy trumpet welded to a stand. The dwarf would’ve fallen on the spikes if Lyndagg hadn’t grabbed him by an armor strap. She herself clutched one of the pipes of the organ, formidable biceps bulging. As for Rockheart, he had anticipated the whole room turning, and so he simply walked onto the new floor.

After a few seconds, the spikes retreated, leaving the party unscathed. Definitely needed improvement, Rockheart thought.

The panpipes flashed, playing a low, sad note in a minor key. This time, Rockheart knew what to do. He jumped, caught hold of the pipes, and blew through the largest tube, echoing the note.

The room reverted, righting itself.

“The piper calls the tune,” Rockheart said. “We merely have to repeat whatever note and instrument is played.”

The next note sounded as he finished.

And so it went.

An instrument would flash, they would have to mimic the tune or else the room would turn again. Or saws would come roaring out of

the walls. Or spears shot out to clatter onto the metal. Or a cloud of spores that left everyone, except Rockheart, sniffling and sneezing.

Luckily, no one was killed... or even hurt. The puzzle was cunning in its way, but not especially dangerous. It was a bit of a disappointment really, after all of the other clever things his students had done so far.

Too simple, really.

As the instruments flashed faster, the four divided up the work, to make sure they didn't miss a note. Two notes became four became eight, and Rockheart knew there would be thirteen notes in all—the unluckiest of tunes. By the time the last run of notes sounded, the four remaining raiders all waited in separate corners, ready to play their notes on cue.

Rockheart took the large brass organ, pressing keys that lit up. Down the wall from him, Corry strummed the steel lute. Across the room, Orem blew on the trumpet, while Lyndagg used an obsidian dagger hilt to strike a xylophone made of yellow human bone or blew through the twisted panpipes.

They were going to beat the room.

As Rockheart played the thirteenth note, the door on the far side of the room swung open. He grinned in victory. *Too easy.* But that grin slipped a notch as a tremor passed through the floor. His eyes widened in shock as he realized what they'd done. This room wasn't truly designed to kill. The traps and weapons—spikes, saws, and spears—were little more than distractions. Clever sleight of hand designed to herd the dungeoneers. Rockheart watched as a metal wall rose from the center of the room, splitting the party in two before anyone could react.

Marko's insanely amplified voice filled the puzzle room. "I'm the lucky piper, and you four have played the unluckiest of tunes. Winning is losing, in this case, but our little party is only just beginning. You survived the first level of my amazing maze. But will you survive the second?"

Corry threw Rockheart a weak grin. "Looks like it's just me and you, Tearclaw." A previously hidden iron door slid open, revealing

stairs leading down. The thief laughed weakly. “Now, cat man, which one of us should go first?”



## Chapter Thirty-Seven



SO FAR, LOGAN MURRAY couldn't believe how well things were going. He also couldn't believe how much Marko's plaster statues looked like the theater mannequins from *Layers of Fear 2*. Creepy. Creepy and *amazing*.

Granted, Inga had only killed one of the raiders, but that had been Linraist Erejam. When Logan first laid eyes on the Vampiric Runecaster, fear had hit him hard. This was someone who'd tackled Kyvandry's Slaughter Pits repeatedly and had managed to survive. Deploying Inga so early had been a terrible gamble, but it had paid off in spades as far as Logan was concerned.

They'd also gotten fortunate with the Wood Warden, though her death was really her own fault. If this had been *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, there would've been an Oompa Loompa singing a song about being difficult to work with and not following simple instructions. Like the rogue had suggested, she should've waited for them to wipe the magical paint off the wall. Had the half-elf just had a *little* more patience, she would be alive right now instead of dissolving in a vat of digestive acid, providing Logan with a burst of much-needed energy.

Things had turned out well for the Terrible Twelfth, even down to splitting the party in Treacle's puzzle trap, which Logan had called the *Bop-It* room.

Inga had been thrilled to split the party—that was kind of her thing. While her guardian form lay dead at the entrance, her consciousness still swam in her gem floating over the pedestal. She was still helping Logan, both with ideas and by feeding him more of her Apothos.

But there were still four raiders left to deal with, and the next big test was right around the corner. Using a set of secret passageways,

Treacle had dragged the Wood Warden's body from the hallway all the way back to the digestive pit in the entrance room. Now he was hustling back through the twists and turns, beelining to take his place in the right arm of the labyrinth's second level. He had to move like the wind, but thankfully the minotaur didn't get lost because of his special racial ability: Labyrinth Sense.

Treacle's boss room on the left had been placed closer to the puzzle room stairs than Marko's feast room outside the sanctum on the right side of the maze, because Logan and his cohort didn't want to juggle two major battles at the same time.

The dwarf and half-orc would have to fight through Treacle's boss room and then pass through a warren of passages filled with Inga's minions before eventually arriving at the sanctum. Assuming they made it that far. Meanwhile, it would take a bit for the cat man and the ever-smiling rogue to reach Marko's feast room. More paintings and mannequins would be there to slow them down, not to mention hallways full to bursting with Logan's fiendish fungi: Gem-Studded Puffballs, Ghoul's Snare, and the Blister Wart. Unfortunately, they didn't have the Apothos necessary to make the artwork deadly, but the mushrooms were armed and ready. All in all, those would be a delaying tactic.

If all went according to plan, Treacle would join them in the feast room for the final fight.

They were trying hard to keep the raiders out of the sanctum.

Treacle's boss room was more ironwork, only this time, there were paintings of sawblades set in the metal walls. Real sawblades lay behind them. Ghoul's Snare covered the floor in vile purple-black patches, and the ground was uneven, making it difficult to walk.

His Ugknot Calflings stood ready, hidden inside the walls and covered in Braincap spores. The Ugknots were miniature, mechanical versions of Treacle. Four feet tall, the little minotaurs balanced on metal hooves and mechanical legs, driven by pistons, cogs, and gears. Pale white mushrooms sprouted from horned bull heads, though, honestly, they looked more machine than animal. Metal plates covered ropy muscles, brass tubes snaked along their backs, and clockwork gears spun merrily away inside of glass-

fronted torsos. They carried pint-sized battle-axes, spears, and tridents, perfect for keeping opponents at range.

Their job was to wait until Treacle rose from the floor to show the dwarf warrior and the half-orc knife lady the power of his Internal Alchemy.

<Treacle, are you going to get into your loading chamber in time?> Logan asked.

The minotaur answered in a huff. <Yes, of course, I have a ladder down from the entrance. Almost in position now.>

<The timing should be perfect,> Inga sent. <Orem and Lyndagg have figured out the left side of the labyrinth. They'll be there in *three, two, one...*>

The dwarf and the half-orc entered the room carefully. They were clearly on edge, and for good reason. Sections of the floor were metal, but others looked like black mold. Logan hoped the pair wouldn't recognize his Ghoul's Snare.

The Ugknot Calfings stood tucked away behind swiveling iron panels.

In a flash of electricity, a *whoosh* of steam, and the grinding of gears, the entire room lumbered to mechanical life. A cloud of white steam crept along the floor as Treacle rose from the center of the room. He was a terrifying sight to behold, a monster of muscle, fur, and metal, and instead of a minotaur's typical battle-axe, he had something a lot more interesting in store.

Goggles snapped out of his face to cover his eyes, and armor appeared right out of his flesh. He flipped up his left arm, and a spiked morning star exploded out of his arm, sparking with electricity. From Treacle's right arm, a metal tube, covered in gore, appeared, spitting fire. Yep, his left arm was a combination of morning star and electrified Taser while his right was a legit flamethrower. The fearsome beast stepped forward, razor-edged hooves ringing out against the floor.

More gears churned in the walls, and hidden apertures swiveled open, revealing the Ugknot Calfings. The pint-sized mechanical minotaurs rushed forward, weapons raised and ready to kill.

Logan tapped into his connection to the Braincap mushrooms and sent his consciousness into a Calfling with a golden trident. The creature was of a comparable height to Logan, but its center of gravity was off thanks to the odd inverted mechanical legs and the hooves. Unlike the countless hours Logan had spent possessing Inga's centipedes, this was a whole new ball game—a culturally specific reference no one else would understand—and he was extremely unsure on his feet.

He didn't need to do the bulk of the heavy lifting, though, he reminded himself. That was why Treacle was there. All he needed to do was keep the raiders on their toes, distract them whenever possible, and herd them toward the horned artificer.

But the raiders were smarter than they looked.

Instead of closing the distance with the ferocious dungeon boss, the dwarf and half-orc launched a barrage of ranged attacks. Lyndagg hurled deadly daggers, while the dwarf smashed his earthen hammer into the floor, sending a shock wave of energy across the room.

Treacle stumbled forward, blood dripping down his armor, one leg bruised, if not broken, from the hammer's shock wave. That Earthbinder was a powerhouse in his own right, and it was high time they did something about him. The minotaur retaliated with a gout of flame aimed at the dwarf, but he was one step ahead. He dropped to a knee and took shelter behind his heavy shield.

The half-orc went to rush forward, but Logan bolted right to meet her, lashing out with his trident.

The half-orc batted the pronged weapon aside, but Logan wasn't really wanting to kill her, just push her back a single step. She backpedaled as Logan feinted right, then lunged straight in, trident outthrust like a spear.

Her foot landed firmly in a patch of insidious Ghoul's Snare. Inky purple-black tendrils burst to life, mindlessly wrapping around her studded leather boots and crawling up her legs. She fought and bucked, slashing at the creeping vines, but the Ghoul's Snare spread too quickly to be stopped. A spinning buzz saw erupted out of the wall and bit into her arm with its whirling metal teeth. She let out a

growl, fruitlessly trying to raise her sword as Treacle barreled toward her.

The minotaur dropped his head low, goring her through the belly with his horns, then pulled back and removed most of her face with his morning-star arm. The spikes tore through muscle and obliterated bone, and the electricity added enough juice to steam her skull like an Instant Pot.

“By my beard, I shan’t be killed by no cow!” The dwarf slammed his hammer on the floor again. This time, the shock wave rippled through the entire room. Logan’s Ghoul’s Snare withered from the raw surge of Terra Apothos. Treacle stumbled and dropped to one knee, while the Ugknot Calfling Logan was riding around in toppled to the floor. Its nervous system had collapsed along with most of its spine. A number of Calflings had survived the killing blow, but Logan didn’t much like their chances against the bearded raider.

A sawblade rose from the floor, but the dwarf was angry now, and hell hath no fury like a scared dwarven Earthbinder fighting for his life. Did Shakespeare write that?

Orem carelessly backhanded the blade with his hammer, stopping its spin and making it wobble. It exploded a moment later, the saw debris killing more Calflings.

Treacle got to his feet and sped forward in a blur of metal arms and augmented legs, raising his morning-star. The flamethrower was sputtering flames—useless now. He brought the spiked ball screaming down, but Orem sidestepped the attack.

With a mighty yell, the dwarf bashed through one of Treacle’s horns and turned his skull into hammer soup. That was the end of the minotaur. Treacle hit the ground, tongue out, as dead as steak. All the sawblades screeched and stopped spinning.

With a thought, Logan took control of another Calfling—but instead of engaging, he rallied the two other remaining minions and pulled them back into their respective hiding spaces. There was no way they would be a match for Orem, and they couldn’t afford to throw away resources needlessly. The gears turned, the doors closed, and the murder room fell quiet.

Orem went to the half-orc's body and knelt, bowing his head for a beat before making some sacred series of gestures. A blessing of some sort. "Sad for ya, Lyndagg, but Ah still live. And Ah'll just take your gold, some jewels, a knife or two, and that glowing scimitar. Ah can see pretty well in the dark, but not perfectly." He stood and checked his new gear. "Now, to get out of this madhouse," he grumbled with a nod.

Marko, right on cue, hit the dwarf with crazed laughter. "Not a madhouse, my friend, a mad *party*. Mad, I tell you. *Mad! Mad! Mad!*"

Orem let out a roar, his face beet red, a vein pulsing in his forehead. Seemed like their handiwork was really starting to get under his skin. That was good. Angry, demoralized people made mistakes, and mistakes on a battlefield resulted in casualties—a lesson Logan had paid in blood to learn back in his real life, before Shadowcroft.

<That's like seventy-five percent fear,> Inga sent, <and thirty percent anger.>

Treacle didn't agree. <That doesn't add up.>

Inga was the one to send her sigh. <I was using hyperbole. It was an attempt at mathematical humor.>

<I do not appreciate such inaccuracies,> the minotaur sent back.

Logan tried to focus the troops. <The dwarf is hitting our room, Inga. I'm going to take control of one of your Tsuki Ants.>

<There is no way our little minion room is going to take out that dwarf and his Earthbinding,> Inga complained.

<Never underestimate the power of ants. We have a culturally specific saying where I come from, that I think applies here: *All the ants weigh more than all the elephants*. Let's show this joker how dangerous small things in great volume can be.> Logan sent his consciousness questing out, and suddenly he found himself upside-down, clinging to the ceiling with stout, segmented legs. This body, though different from his own, was far more familiar than the Ugknot Calfing had been. Not far off from Logan was a blinding light source—equal parts Treacle's engineering and Inga's Luna power.

Below, Orem entered the room, holding up his bulky shield and squinting against the terrible light.

Big mistake there. Long strings of Blister Wart hung from the ceiling, dangling at eye level. Almost impossible to see in the harsh glare.

The dwarf pushed his shield against the dastardly hanging mushrooms, clearly not realizing what he was brushing up against. The fungi strafed his face and his eyelids.

The effects were immediate. "Ack! Me eyes! Me bleeding eyes!"

Perfect. Logan released his grip on the gritty stone and dropped from the ceiling, landing on the dwarf's shoulder, conveniently near his unprotected neck. Logan squirmed forward and chomped down using the Tsuki Ant's formidable mandibles, slicing into the dwarf's throat. Other ants fell around him like rain, one after another, and the dwarf let out a gurgling scream, batting at the swarming bugs.

Orem did his hammer trick, smashing the ground and sending out a rippling wave of Apothos, shattering the glowing orb overhead in the process and plunging the room into darkness. The shock wave killed most of the ants, but it also caved in the walls, and then, the ceiling came crashing down. An avalanche of sand poured in. This, admittedly, wasn't part of the plan. They hadn't known that a blinded dwarf would have a shock-wave hammer, and he'd use it in a room with a thin ceiling that wasn't directly under the first-level labyrinth.

Whether by hook or by crook, in a fight, you took every victory you could come by.

With the powerful Earthbinder dead and buried, it was time to deal with the last two raiders.

Logan recalled his mind from the humble Tsuki Ant and focused his attention on the cat man and the smarmy thief. It was slow going for them since Flynn Corry couldn't see, but the cat man could. Tearclaw was leading the thief through the maze, heading for the feast room. The cat man might've used his claws as a light source, and the thief had his rings, but both were probably saving their power for the final confrontation. A wise choice, considering what awaited them up ahead. As for the dead Wood Warden's amulet, that must not have been an option.

<Okay, guys,> Logan sent. <We're down to two raiders. They're about to reach the feast room. Marko, are you ready?>

The satyr's voice blasted his brain. <I've never been more ready! I'm going to murder them with both my chandelier and my fountain!>

Logan figured that was the strangest threat that had ever been made in a dungeon, but hopefully it was a threat that proved to be true. They were doing well, but the Tearclaw character was the one to watch. Actually, both the thief and the cat man were surprisingly competent. Almost suspiciously so. Without the other dungeoneers, those two easily avoided the mushroom traps on the Mad Party's second level.

Treacle piped up. <Logan, there are three Ugknot Calflings left thanks to you. Should I send them to the inner sanctum for the final fight, or should we drag the dwarf and the half-orc up to the digestive pit in the entrance?>

It was a critical decision. Logan made his choice. <Let's assume Marko's feast room will at least slow the raiders down. Get those bodies to the upper pit. We'll use the Apothos for my grand surprise.>

The minotaur responded morosely. <It's very hopeful. I find hope distasteful. But we'll do it your way.>

<The dwarf didn't get all my Tsuki Ants,> Inga sent. <They're digging out the body now, and then I'll send them to the feast room.>

Now *that* was overly optimistic. The whole dungeon might be undone by the time the translucent insects trundled into the sanctum. They were powerful thanks to their sheer numbers, but they weren't particularly fast.

Tearclaw and the thief rounded the last bend, which dumped them out into the feast room. And what a room. Marko had really come through with his interior design—the mannequins, paintings, music, and riddles had tied everything together, but they all paled in comparison to the feast. The banquet table was an ornate carved monstrosity of opulence, easily large enough to seat thirty guests. Covering the table was enough food to feed a small army.

Silver dishes of fruit—golden Lalini, vine-ripened Dragonwelsh, star-shaped tangerines—and endless varieties of cheese. There were baskets full of warm, fresh-baked bread, fried peppers, bowls filled with soups, and platters heaped high with fish, succulent ribs,

wine-glazed pheasant, watercress lobster, and, of course, Opal Truffle *everything*. Sauces, pies, bakes. It was a foodie's dream, though the *piece de resistance* was the tiered silver fountain, which dribbled molten cheese into a central, steaming basin.

It was a nacho cheese fountain, but it was also so much more.

Candles flickered on the table, casting uncertain light on the food, every bit of it alluring. And poisoned. More candles flickered from the huge crystal chandelier up top. There were other varieties of mushrooms in the room, of course, decorating the corners and the walls.

Corry approached the table as though drawn there against his will. "Well, if you're hungry, there's enough food for us, Tearclaw. Or do you prefer cat food?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Tearclaw glanced around. "Turning the SandScream into this? Impressive. The four dungeon cores have worked together, and of course, it's the troublesome fungaloid's digestive ability that is powering most of this. That... and the cores of the astral moth and the minotaur."

The way the cat man was talking made Logan pause. It was like he was grading them or something. And how did he know Inga was an astral moth? He'd fought her as a heavy metal caterpillar.

Something was strange... off...

"I'm just going to have a little bite." The rogue eyed a fresh loaf of bread, a stick of butter, and some very stylish butter knives.

"No, no you're not."

The cat man sniffed, to his left... to his right. "The food is spelled. It also happens to be near to bursting with poison." He pointed to the archway connecting the feast room to the inner sanctum. "There, across the room, is our quarry. The pedestal will contain the four gemstones. It would be easy to walk directly there, too easy. This room is trapped. We'll stay near the walls, because I don't trust that damned table."

"What about the mushrooms?" Corry asked, nervously twisting a ring on his finger.

"The fungaloid ran out of power a while back, I suspect. We'll have more dangerous fungi in the sanctum, but these are safe."

Likely, this is all for show—meant to push us toward the grand feast.”

The cat man fully extended his claws, and he walked in a crouch. Corry trailed close behind him, gripping his dual silver short swords in white-knuckled hands. The pair moved through the piles of mushrooms along the wall, crushing them as they walked.

Marko’s feast room was about to fail on every level.

Logan didn’t want to face off against both of the wary raiders in the sanctum. He was about to get Marko to do something rash when the satyr himself rose from the table, from where he’d been hiding under the food. Watching him emerge from the poisoned banquet was a bizarre, surreal sight.

“Would you be so rude that you’d ignore my feast?” the satyr thundered, his voice bleeding power into the air. He stood on the table, a tall, wild-eyed goat man, his clothes wet with fruit juices and covered in buttercream frosting, cake smearing his hair. Despite that, he looked positively terrifying. A wild fae godling, ready to strike down rude interlopers. He snatched up a goblet and raised it in salute. “But I’ll toast you two. I’ll toast you to your death.” He drained the cup, threw it to the side with a clatter, and drew a thin silver rapier from his sheath. He leapt from the table, his face monstrous with a shadowy power.

He danced forward on expert feet.

The cat man snarled, hate contorting his feline face, and hurled projectile claws of golden light. Marko ducked them and drew both of the raiders forward with a skill Logan wouldn’t have expected.

Then he remembered that Marko had grown up as royalty, and he’d been trained in fencing. He dodged the rogue’s thrust and kept the man between himself and the Ferox, with his wicked, glowing talons. The minute they drew close to the table, the satyr dodged back, and the chandelier came unhooked from the ceiling. It didn’t smash into the table, but descended like a spider on its silver chain, morphing and shifting into a thing of nightmares. It was a mimic, not so different from the purple box that had eaten Logan what felt like years ago and set his feet on this new path.

A single bulging eye appeared in the center above a wide maw filled with a slavering tongue and hundreds of needle-sharp teeth. It

moved on eight legs of brass covered in winking jewels and smoking candles. Those eight legs all had sharp, spear-like points, perfect for skewering pesky raiders.

In short order, both the rogue and the cat man were forced to engage with the chandelier as Marko fell back, posting up like a sentinel in the sanctum's entryway. The satyr started to laugh and jeer at the adventurers, his voice booming. Again, Logan marveled at how Marko changed when he truly accepted his Dark Muse persona.

The rogue dodged back, avoiding the chandelier, but drawing too near to the fountain. It exploded, sending a wave of scalding hot cheese cascading over the unfortunate rogue. He screamed in pain, clutching at his face. He never even saw the mimic close with him before it impaled him on one spidery leg.

The cat man also had the misfortune to catch some of the nacho napalm. It did damage, but then Tearclaw's entire body glowed, and his burned skin was lost in a blinding light. When the scuttling chandelier hit him like a Mack truck, that light blasted the mimic in a tsunami of Mallus-infused Apothos. Raw force tore the creature apart at the seams, and in seconds, what was left of the creature curled up like a dead spider.

The cat man let out a howl, took hold of the half-destroyed table, and flung it on its side with a flick of powerful arms. He then strode across the sandstone floor, a look of absolute fury painted across his face.

That look was oddly familiar.

Logan's own guardian form was inside the inner sanctum, waiting. It was clear to him that Treacle's Calflings and Inga's ants weren't going to make it back in time.

Logan watched with a knot in his stomach as Tearclaw stormed toward the inner sanctum. He didn't give Flynn Corry's body a second look, which was a mistake. He should've picked up those rings. But not Tearclaw—he was a man on a mission.

Marko danced a little jig, laughed, and swept his rapier through the air. "I like a spirited guest! And you've turned out to be a reveler after my own heart, kitty cat."

“Cut the nonsense,” Tearclaw snarled. “The raiders are dead. And I’m here to undo your dungeon, Marko Laskarelis. This charade is over.”

That voice... it couldn’t be ... It was Rockheart’s voice coming from the Ferox warrior-mage.

Logan didn’t have a throat to gulp in fear, but cold terror filled his core.



## Chapter Thirty-Eight



YULLIS ROCKHEART STILL had most of his power left, even after the skin-blast that had taken care of the chandelier mimic, though the little maneuver *had* cost him his reinforced stone skin. Being back at Azure Branch was terribly annoying, but he would make do. Besides, he wouldn't need much to finish his work. Killing Marko Laskarelis would be easy, and then only the fungaloid would be left. And though Logan had proven to be formidable in some ways, he was no melee monster.

Still, Rockheart would not underestimate them. This dungeon had been a rather pleasant surprise, and some of the flourishes had been deviously unexpected. The decorative mimic, for example, had been a nice touch to the feast table. And Corry would've sampled the bread and Opal Truffle butter if Rockheart hadn't been there to warn him away. But the fun was over, the game played nearly to its end. The Terrible Twelfth had played well, and even though their destruction was assured, it seemed only right to at least tip his hand and show them who they truly faced.

There was a certain honor in it.

He expected Marko's bravado to crumble at his revelation, but instead, the satyr laughed. A strange fire lit up the horizontal slits of his goat eyes. "Yullie? You don't mind if I call you Yullie, do you? Well, this is a surprise. You've embraced your inner lion, I see. From griffin to cat man! Would you like me to scratch your chin, kitty?"

Why wasn't this imbecile frightened of him?

Rockheart powered up his talons, making them gleam, before sending them flashing across the room into Marko. The satyr dodged some, but not all, of the glowing claws. At the same moment, Rockheart increased his speed. He blurred forward, powered by a

surplus of Mallus Apothos, crossing the threshold of the sanctum in the blink of an eye.

The cavern was full of towering mushrooms and more of the satyr's mannequins, dripping with various fungal growths. At the center, surrounded by a digestive pit moat, was the pedestal, carved into the semblance of a grand grail, overflowing with wine, while the four gems spun in elegant swirls above.

Rockheart raked his talons down the satyr, sending him flying. The goat boy smashed through a mannequin and made a towering mushroom shake as he slipped to the floor. He lost his rapier in the fall—not that he ever would've stood a chance, even with the sword. He was a better duelist than Rockheart had suspected, but the rector prime had hundreds of years of combat training under his belt.

Gore stained Marko's face—a revolting mixture of blood and cake—but the satyr continued to bray laughter even as he sat sprawled out and mortally wounded. “To think, Yullie, you'd ruin the Azure Dragon Clan's standing, you'd risk your job to come and kill us yourself. How pathetic! I have no idea what Arketa sees in you! Yes, I know that you and the Hellgazer are an item. That's convenient. You're stone, and she can turn people into stone. It's probably a relationship based around convenience, not passion. I bet, deep down, she gets tired of your cold skin. I'd keep her warm.”

The words struck Rockheart's soul, infuriating him. Dimly, he thought this might be Marko's Vicious Insult ability, part of the College of Rhetoric, but it ultimately didn't matter. He was going to murder the satyr's guardian form and then waltz right up to the pedestal and crush the satyr's core into powder.

With a snarl, he advanced, ready to rip Marko's head from his annoying shoulders, but then Spike Flies struck like a hailstorm. Rockheart heard their buzz seconds before he felt them hit. He spun around, conjuring forth a Mallus Tornado of Force that both he and the cat man shared. In that swirling typhoon of power, the Spike Flies lost their wings and then their bodies. Pathetic. They dropped to the ground, little more than dust.

Rockheart turned to finish the job of murdering Marko, but the satyr had somehow managed to gain his feet. He was sprinting back

toward the feast room, clearly trying to buy Logan more time. Still entranced by Vicious Insult, the rector prime turned and gave chase, but two Spore Wargs leapt out of the tangle of mushrooms, colliding with his legs, teeth snapping at his skin. Rockheart barely felt them. Even as a B-Class, he was far outside their league. With barely a thought, he ripped them to shreds with his claws, then ducked as Gem-Studded Puffballs exploded around him in a series of brilliant pops.

The satyr stood shaking, barely on his feet. He started clapping, but Rockheart threw more golden missile claws to spoil the spell.

Marko stumbled backward and fell onto his furry butt. He was barely conscious.

“Rockheart!” Logan thundered.

The rector prime turned, and there, standing between two mannequins, was the fungaloid, nearly lost in a cloud of floating fungal spores. Rockheart gave in to his rage. “You! You were an embarrassment at first, Logan Murray, but then you became something much worse. *A thorn in my side.* For the briefest of moments, I thought maybe you could be something special. But no. You disappointed us all by joining with the fool goat. This ends now, with the death of you and your friends. You are not worthy! Not worthy of the academy. Not worthy of the Azure Dragon Clan. And not worthy to protect Ashvattha!”

Rockheart powered up his skin-blast, but he didn’t set off the charge. He used the energy to burn off any spores that the fungaloid might be throwing his way. It would be rather simple to conjure another concussive blast. Or he could rip the yellow mushroom man’s body apart with another whirling force tornado. But the seething, irrational rage in his belly insisted that the fungaloid was unworthy of such a quick end. Rockheart wanted to feel the fungaloid’s pliant body come apart in his claws.

Then... then it would be a quick trip to the pedestal.

“Yullie?” The fungaloid’s flouncy top cap wiggled as he smiled. “You have no idea how much I love that fool goat. Marko Laskarelis is the best of us. Inga agrees, as does Treacle, and you should love

him, too. And he wasn't wrong... he and Arketa would make a much better couple than you."

Rockheart started for the mushroom man, lips pulling back from his feline fangs. "It won't happen. All four of you are done. Your spores won't help you, I won't get Athlete's Foot, and I have no allergies. There will be no mortal sneezing for me. Do you really think you can best me in open combat?"

The fungaloid laughed. "I prefer closed combat!"

"What does that even mean?" Rockheart thundered, feeling his blood boil. "And why are you joking? You sound like the stupid goat buffoon!"

The rector prime increased his speed, rushed over, and drove a claw into the heart of the fungaloid. Only, he didn't feel the rubbery flesh of a mushroom. He felt the plaster of a mannequin. He shook what should've been Logan Murray but wasn't. No, up close, in a haze of spores, he saw that this was but another mimic, one crafted into a rough semblance of the fungaloid. And that voice.

*Ventriloquism.* That was why Logan had sounded like the worthless satyr... because they were one and the same.

Rockheart pulled his hand free, but the mimic struck at the same moment, its arms and legs wrapping around him. A mouth appeared, full of vicious teeth, and they sank into the meat of his shoulder.

The creature wasn't powerful enough to seriously harm the rector prime. With a roar, Rockheart let out a wave of power, ripping the creature's arms off and forcing it back. But he'd been so distracted that he heard the approaching footfalls a moment too late. He turned.

Just in time for a dagger to punch through a seam in his armor and into his ribs. There was the real Logan Murray. The fungaloid removed the blade and stepped back, armed with his ridiculous ruby shield and that pathetic dagger.

Rockheart's laughter boomed through the sanctum. "A single knife thrust will not end Yullis Rockheart!"

Then he saw there wasn't just rust and blood on the blade. It was also covered in Blister Wart.

“This one worked on Magmarty.” Logan exhaled, releasing a cloud of Rapid Growth spores into the air at close range. “Let’s see how you handle it.”

Rockheart gasped in shock. Then the pain hit, and he fell to his knees. He could feel the Blister Wart burning his insides, but it was more than just toxic chemicals. There were Blister Wart spores in there as well, and he could feel them growing like tumors. He clutched at his chest, claws digging down as fungi exploded out through his trunk like some grim flower blooming in the spring.

And that was the end of Rockheart’s stolen body.

He fell dead, all his plans foiled by the moronic satyr and his fungaloid friend.



LOGAN WATCHED AS ROCKHEART lost his cat man form and morphed back into a gargoyle-griffin. His stone wings ripped through the leather jerkin and his legs burst the red pants. That was a kindness—those pants were awful beyond words.

Shadowcroft’s rector prime lay dead on his side, body riddled with Blister Wart. His chest cavity looked like a baby xenomorph from an *Alien* movie had come bursting out.

Logan bent and used his trusty if pitted dagger to pry out the rector prime’s gem.

Marko crawled over, covered in cake, a little cheese, and liberal gobs of his own blood. The satyr collapsed onto his face at first, but then managed to push himself into a sitting position, offering Logan a lopsided grin. He spoke through his near-dead guardian form. “All in all, that went well. I’d offer you a victory feast, but every bit of food out there on the table is poisoned with Coptician viper venom.”

“Those fried peppers might be worth a little death.” Logan laughed and held Rockheart’s gem in his thick yellow fingers.

Inga’s voice floated to him. <What are you going to do with his core gem?>

Treacle had the answer in an instant. <We should process it, share the Apothos, and when they ask, we say we have no idea

what happened to Yullis Rockheart.>

Marko had the strength to reach over and roll the dead gargoyle over onto his back. “Eating ol’ Rockheart is one option, and he would deserve it. Coming at us like he did was messed up.”

“And I’m thinking this wasn’t the first time,” Logan said. “I bet you he and Chadrigoth planned that little ambush in the Slaughter Pits. So, we’d be justified in digesting him.” And if they digested him, it would push them all up at least a rank, maybe more. Rockheart was a high A-Class Jade Leaf cultivator—consuming his Apothos would give them a tremendous boost. But if they let him live, they would only get the relatively small amount of manifested Apothos stored in his physical guardian form.

“But,” Marko countered, seesawing his head, “if we let him live, and if we don’t tell anyone, then we’d always have something on the rector prime. You know, there’s nothing that a little blackmail can’t fix.”

<We’ll call it leverage,> Inga sent, obviously shocked.

<Or extortion,> Treacle added.

Logan laughed. They would take the gem to Ned and Zed, and Rockheart could work with those rosebush doctors to get his body back. Because even now, the Blister Wart was doing damage to the stony body sprawled out in the inner sanctum.

Around them, a sudden wheezy voice, ancient and turtleish spoke: “And so, you four have passed your Winnowing. Again, the final battle reached the inner sanctum. However, you faced villains far above your level. You have done well, my friends, so very well. And as my dearest friend always says... *You still live! You can do wonderful things!*”

“Like loot the bodies!” Marko erupted. He was looking better. Already, he was using the Apothos in their combined pool to heal his badly damaged guardian form. He managed to get to his feet, only limping a little.

Zhen Ikgix, the venerable Threshing Tortoise, chuckled. “We’ll give you a couple of hours to put yourselves back together, gather your loot, and go through the magic items. Might I suggest you retrieve Linraist Erejam’s staff from the entrance room, hmm?”

Logan wasn't about to leave *anything* behind in their dungeon. However, he could let go of some of the corridors, rooms, and artwork. The walls began to tremble and turn back into sand and sandstone. Marko's feast table wavered before vanishing, but they kept the two digestive pits working in overdrive, funneling sweet, pilfered Apothos into his core.

Logan shivered.

He was on the cusp of leveling again, and after all the kills and experience in the final part of the Winnowing? He was sure to increase his cultivation abilities at least to Rank 5, which would come with some benefits and new abilities.

He and Marko slid Rockheart's and the rogue's bodies into the digestion moat. Logan might not eat the professor's core, but there was still loads of manifested Apothos in his guardian form, and that seemed like fair game. Treacle came staggering into what had been the feast room, drawing on the sudden influx of Apothos to repair his guardian form. He still looked worse for the wear, though, his head partially caved in, one horn hacked off. Inga joined them as well. She was missing some teeth and had some serious gashes covering her arms and chest, but she was up and moving about thanks to their colossal win.

But they were gloriously alive, and that was all that mattered.

The four went through the gold, jewels, magic items, and loot from the raiding party. Marko sighed over the cat man's red pants. "They're ripped beyond repair. I'm heartbroken. I loved those trousers."

Inga threw him Erejam's jeweled robes. "None of us would be caught dead in this. It's not magic, but it's gaudy enough for you to enjoy, I'm sure."

"Gaudy? I think you mean great-y." Marko slipped on the roseflower amulet. "And this little baby goes well with my new ensemble. Bam! I didn't think I could be cooler or more awesome, but apparently even I am sometimes wrong."

Inga took Erejam's staff. They weren't sure what it did yet, but she jumped at the chance to study it.

Treacle pondered the Wood Warden's magical scimitar. "I'll break this down, maybe get the blueprint so we can copy it. It's relatively nice. I'll also want the dwarf's Terra hammer. I'm thinking I might be able to add it to my Internal Alchemy."

"So you can drop the hammer?" Marko asked. "Will you get hammered with me on Friday night?"

Treacle let out an annoyed grunt. "Puns. Gross."

Lyndagg the Skinner had a trio of magical throwing knives, which Marko called dibs on. No real surprise there.

As for Logan, he took Flynn Corry's three magical rings. He'd be able to summon the silver short swords now, though the rusty dagger would always have a special place in his heart. It had helped him kill not just any raider, but Yullis Rockheart himself.

Logan had the idea that the Threshing Turtle knew what had happened but wouldn't be telling anyone. In the end, Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons was a utilitarian institution. Whatever worked was fair game. Rockheart had tested them to the best of his ability. Inga was pretty sure the rector prime had even crippled his core to do so—at least temporarily—since they wouldn't have been able to best him if he'd been an A-Class cultivator.

Logan slipped on the armor ring, which expanded to cover one of his three thick fingers. He felt his core respond to it, and he realized in a flash of insight that he could customize his own armor, and it would look like the real thing. Finally, *finally*, he would have real armor to go with his exoskeleton. His friends—mostly Marko—helped him design his new look. Once done, he looked down, impressed.

An enormous leather war belt, covered in opal glyphs, concealed his gemstone core. The belt worked with a fur-lined leather skirt called a pteruges—Marko swore by them both for their maneuverability and for the breeze. Logan added a pair of light leather greaves and matching fur-lined bracers to cover his vulnerable legs and forearms. A single spiked pauldron also decorated his right shoulder.

Logan laughed. "I can always have armor when I want it. And I get swords, magical swords."

“What about the third ring?” Marko asked.

Logan shrugged. “Not sure. Looks like we’ll have to do a little research. And since we have the best crafter at Shadowcroft with us, it won’t be long until we unlock its mysteries!”

Treacle sat, head bandaged, holding the hammer and scimitar. “Logan... my friends...” the big bull-headed man started. Then he couldn’t talk. Tears flowed down his cheeks.

That made Inga choke up. “Treacle, what is it?”

The minotaur blinked. “We’re alive. I didn’t think we would... that we would survive our freshman year. But we’re alive, my friends. My good friends.”

Marko, who wasn’t afraid of showing any emotion, leapt to his feet. He danced a little jig as tears dripped down his furry face. “You ain’t seen nothing yet, my bovine friend.”

Logan thought his smile might break his face. Their Final Exam dungeon was done, the Mad Party of the Dark Muse’s Depravity was now just sand, stone, and an inner sanctum with a bare stone pedestal. The only sign they’d ever been there at all was the two digestive pits, still burbling away. Everything else might’ve been gone, but what they’d managed to accomplish would stick with Logan forever. Choosing the fungaloid class had been a gamble, but in the end, it had been a jackpot. And Marko was right—this really was only the beginning.

And Logan was still only an Iron Trunk cultivator. They all were. Who knew what was possible once they ascended? The dungeoneering guilds would tremble, and he might even find a way to save his homeworld. Earth.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine



LOGAN SAT WITH HIS friends in the Golden Serpent Hall for the graduation ceremonies. The seniors were leaving for their own dungeon assignment... Well, the ones who had survived their four years. There were fewer than fifty. Far fewer. It seemed the Winnowing had taken out a few of the seniors as well. And the four worst-performing students of each class had been expelled to become wandering monsters on far-flung worlds.

From the Azure Dragon Clan's freshmen, a couple of the Franklin Four were sent out into the cruel universe. Logan felt bad for them. At the same time, he was grateful to be sitting there, sipping coffee. Most were guzzling wine, beer, Liverkill from Vralkag, and even some of the Gelatinous Knight's soonerberry hooch.

Other freshmen had been murdered by raiders and their cores absorbed. It was tragic in its way, but Shadowcroft had a brutal logic to it—better to lose students before they found themselves in dungeons protecting the Tree of Souls.

The Terrible Twelfth was finishing off the year with far more power than they'd had when they'd first been thrown together back in September. Marko had advanced to Iron Trunk, Rank 5, and Logan had skipped all the way to Rank 4, which gave both of them a bunch of new abilities. Logan wasn't going to rush to choose his next mushroom powers—there wasn't a need. He had two months before the next school year started up again in earnest. Two months to decide. Shadowcroft needed time to reap new souls and prepare for the new year of incoming guardians.

Marko, as impetuous as ever, wanted to choose right away, but Inga talked him down.

Treacle ended the year as an Iron Trunk, Rank 3, and he looked forward to spending the summer getting special tutoring from

Professor Ronnalg Crucible. Crucible had taken a shine to the minotaur. Both could sigh like professionals, and both loved crafting. It was a match made in heaven. The minotaur was confident that he'd be able to unravel the mysteries surrounding the magic items they'd won in the Winnowing.

As for Inga? She was one rank away from leveling to an Azure Branch cultivator. She was a C-Class, Rank 1, and she was looking at trying out new cultivation techniques to break through to B-Class. That was Inga—unable to focus and always looking for the new shiny idea. She'd managed to get a job with Madam Orry Gammy for the summer, which would give her access to the bowels of the Codex Athenaeum and an array of new books. Naturally, she was thrilled.

Logan was a little less pleased about his summer situation.

Most of the third- and fourth-year students would abandon Arborea, sent off into the multiverse on epic quests to hone their skills, help them cultivate more power, and acquire rare items to use in their future dungeons. First- and second-years, however, weren't trusted with their freedom, so they had to help pull their weight around the academy grounds by helping the staff. Inga and Treacle were both set, and Marko was going to be working with the Gelatinous Knight at the Wayfarer Inn, deep in the heart of the Xiru Forest.

Logan, however, still hadn't been offered an assignment, which was a little concerning.

"I think we're going to hear from the rector prime," Inga said, drawing Logan out of his thoughts. "He's saying he had a little accident during the Winnowing."

"Yeah," Marko spat. "That accident was us—kicking his ass!" The satyr wore the bright, gem-encrusted robes they'd taken from the Vampiric Runecaster, and he actually was dramatic enough to pull off the look.

Logan wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not.

Yullis Rockheart leaned heavily on a ruby-topped cane as he limped across the raised dais at the front of the hall. The rest of the faculty sat in their clan robes on gorgeous thrones, with a smiling

Skip Shadowcroft in the center seat. Arketa the Hellgazer was there, in a fashionable scarf and sunglasses, sitting next to the vulture-headed Bartholomew Nekhbet in wrinkled robes who looked as dull as ever. That didn't stop Inga from crushing on him.

The shark man, John Toothbyte, was grinning and drinking from a big flagon, while the rakshasa, Suresh the Merciless, frowned. His clan, the Crystal Tiger, hadn't won. Toothbyte hadn't won either, but the underwater dungeon master was too good-natured—and tipsy—to care. The sharkish professor obviously loved GK's soonerberry moonshine.

Rockheart tapped his cane on the dais to silence the students. "I have some announcements to make. As you all are aware, the Azure Dragon Clan has won the year, with over four thousand points!"

His core flashed, showing the leaderboard and the cohort standings, as well as the Winnowing grades.

The Azure Dragon = 4379

The Crystal Tiger = 4285

The Vermilion Phoenix = 4199

The Onyx Tortoise = 3956

Toothbyte let out a hoot. "If ye lose, lose big, says I!"

His clan hooted and hollered and stomped on the floor.

Rockheart didn't like that at all. "Now, now, no sore losers." He turned to give Suresh the Merciless a long look.

Suresh grimaced and licked his big tiger chops.

The rector prime turned. "For winning the year, all members of the Azure Dragon will each get a turn in the Sacred Hollow, which as you know, is a wonderful gift. I'm sure."

Logan had no idea what the Sacred Hollow was. He threw Inga a questioning look. She mouthed: *We'll talk later.*

Rockheart cleared his stony throat. "Yes, and we have Soul Powder elixirs for the cohort who won the overall rankings. That would be the Azure Dragon's First Cohort, led by Prince Chadrigoth of the Eritreus Elite!"

The Abyss Lord, the Archduke Jimi Magmarty, Her Lady Elesiel of Everstar, and Tet-Akhat of the Coptic Champions all rose and

walked up to claim their prize. Of course they had won. Logan was pretty sure Chadrigoth was within spitting distance of becoming a Jade Leaf cultivator, which put him *well* ahead of the rest of his year.

A Vermillion Phoenix cohort won the second prize, which was Purple Animus Potions for all. Professor Arketa was thrilled that a group from her clan had done so well.

Rockheart paused. "This next cohort has been troublesome." He glanced down at Logan. "They were in my clan, and yet I will openly admit that I have loathed them to their cores. I know many of you have pitied them and their various weaknesses."

Marko rammed an elbow into Treacle. "He's talking about us. I mean, you guys. Everyone pities you guys, but I'm still *super* popular."

Rockheart pounded his cane on the floor to silence the murmuring. "On a personal level, I would've expelled them all. Don't think I haven't tried." That required another glare.

Shadowcroft put a stick hand up to his face and sighed so hard a skull flower lost a petal.

"However," the rector prime said after an overly long pause, "I was wrong about Logan Murray, Inga Thora Therian, Treacle Glimmerhappy, and even Marko Laskarelis." Rockheart nodded. "Yes, even the drunken satyr won me over. All four have worked harder than anyone at this school to improve their ranks and to embrace their mission to protect the Tree of Souls. Truly, their solutions have been innovative, their strategies sound, and as I have said, their work ethic beyond compare."

"What's a work ethic?" Marko asked.

"It's what we make you do," Inga snapped. "Now hush."

Rockheart stared into Logan's face. "Logan Murray, the headmaster and I are excited to see what the future holds for you and your friends. Most fungaloids die early. But those who find friends, good friends? The future is theirs for the taking. Come, you four, come and receive your hard-won prize."

Logan couldn't believe it. They'd risen in the rankings to become the third best cohort in the school. Mostly it was due to how much they'd leveled, but there were also teacher evaluations, which meant

Rockheart must've given them glowing marks for his end-of-the-year evaluations. In the end, it had taken killing the rector prime to win him over—who ever would've guessed that would be the solution?

Shadowcroft, Rockheart, and all the teachers gave Logan and his friends smiles as they applauded. The First Cohort hardly clapped. Except for Tet. The cat woman was practically beaming at Logan. Which meant she had the faintest ghost of a smile on her lips. It was still a victory.

Logan and his friends were given something called Psuche Powder in little ornate golden tins.

When Rockheart handed the powder to Logan, he nodded. “I meant every word I said, Mr. Murray. From here on out, I will be your cohort’s biggest advocate. I have seen how powerful and merciless you can be, and to that end I have decided *you* will be my intern for the summer break. Prepare yourself to be honed into a weapon of unimaginable power.” He clamped a hand on Logan’s shoulder and pressed down. “Great things are in store for you, I think. Great things indeed.”

Logan offered him a thin smile and mumbled some vague platitudes. *Prepare yourself to be honed into a weapon of unimaginable power.* Logan was glad he’d finally earned the prime rector’s respect, but he couldn’t help but wonder whether having Rockheart in his corner was going to be more difficult than having him as an enemy.

After the ceremony, they left the Golden Serpent Hall. Banquet tables had been set up in the northwestern fields, near the DIE Pavilion. It was a warm night, but torches still burned, and a big bonfire was lit. A band of dungeon core creatures struck up a rhythm which brought out the dancers.

Of course, Marko was the first person to shake his groove thing.

Logan didn’t sit to eat. He was still digesting the dungeoneers he’d stuck in the digestive pits. Rockheart allowed him to keep one pit in the SandScream until he’d chewed through all the adventurers. Since he wasn’t eating, and he wasn’t ready to dance, he wandered up onto the northern castle walls. There he was given a fine view of the ice capped Grimjour Peaks and a starry sky.

A tall figure swayed down the ramparts, coming toward him. It was a mixture of limping and shuffling, kind of like how General Grievous walked in *The Revenge of the Sith*. That would be the headmaster. Shadowcroft towered over Logan.

The yellow mushroom man glanced up at the towering tree guy. “You know, I was super happy to get taller. But still I feel so short next to you.”

The headmaster chuckled. “You’ve come a long way, Mr. Murray. I wanted to congratulate you personally. You’ve won over the rector prime, which I thought would not be possible your freshman year. And I know Yullis well enough to know that he cares more about the students at this school than clan or cohort standings. The leaderboard is fun, but your ultimate destiny is far more important. You have done well. All of you. Again, my sincerest congratulations.”

Logan grinned and touched his mushroom cap. “Thank you.” He paused, to remember his long, very strange year at the academy. It had started in the teeth of a Reaper Box, and it had ended with him not only passing all his classes but saving his friend from certain death. He thought of home... his dogs, his business, his Uncle Bud.

He pondered aloud. “So, Shadowcroft, one of the reasons why I’ve worked so hard this year is because I’m worried about Earth.”

“Erf?” The headmaster opened his mouth but butchered the pronunciation. “Ert? Urth? Oh, you mean Uroth. Yes, Mr. Murray, it will be up to you to save such an out-of-the-way place. I’m afraid no academy nor dungeon core cares much about it.”

That stung Logan. But it also hardened his resolve. “I’ll get there, Shadowcroft. I’ve come this far. But what kind of wicked hijinks am I going to be facing my sophomore year?”

The headmaster laughed. “I do enjoy you, Mr. Murray. You, Marko, Inga, even Treacle, have brought a certain life to my old school. There will be both highs and jinxes in your sophomore year, granted, but I would hope there will be far less wickedness.” Shadowcroft paused, and it was like he knew about Rockheart’s various gambits to undo the Terrible Twelfth.

He stroked his mossy beard. “Things won’t get easier, though, I’m afraid. We need you as strong as you can be. For in the span of

three short years, which will fly by, you'll find yourself holding the Tree of Life in your hands. Have a good night, Mr. Murray. And again, congratulations."

Shadowcroft swayed away, his limbs creaking a bit, like a stiff wind against a tall cottonwood.

Logan inhaled, taking in the scent of the night. The world was alive around him, in the peaks, in the forests, on the castle grounds. He turned to gaze down into the courtyard, where the party went on in full force. Hundreds of monsters danced, drank, and feasted. He saw Rockheart dancing with Arketa, despite his weakened body.

Tet-Akhat stood back from the First Cohort, looking alone, but happy, at the party. Chadrigoth and Magmarty were clearly talking smack about their fellow students, with Lady Elesiel standing there to chortle at their terrible jokes.

The Abyss Lord caught Logan looking. Chadrigoth pointed at his eyes with two talons, then pointed them at Logan. Yes, the prince would keep his eyes on Logan. Well, Logan could handle anything the asshat threw at him. He wouldn't be bullied. If he could beat Rockheart—even in a weakened state—he could take Chadrigoth, too. Maybe not in a toe-to-toe fight, but he would find a way. Guys like Chadrigoth relied on their formidable strength, and as a result, they never thought outside of the box because they never had to.

Logan *lived* outside the box, and that was his greatest strength.

Inga and Treacle shuffled and twirled near Marko, who danced up a blinding storm in his jeweled robes.

Inga noticed Logan up on the wall. She waved him down, and by the look in her eyes, it was clear she wouldn't be denied.

Logan took in the night air one last time. He'd get himself a beer, he'd dance a little, and he'd enjoy his victory. Then? Maybe he'd take a week off, study up on the Psuche Powder, and then he'd get back to work. He was sure Rockheart would push him, and he intended to be ready.

Shadowcroft had said it. The next three years would fly by, and in the end, Logan would be in a dungeon, stationed at a Celestial Node, protecting the Tree of Souls from the foul dungeoneers bent on destroying the universe. Logan swore that he and his friends

were never ever going to let that happen. And along the way, he would find the means to restore Earth. In a very real sense, he held the fate of the planet in his thick, three-fingered fungal hands. He might not look like a conventional hero, but he was all the Earth had, and that would have to be enough.

### **THE END OF YEAR ONE**



# Dungeon Core Grimoire, Appendix 1



## *The Heroic Members of the Terrible Twelfth*

**LOGAN MURRAY** was human. Eww, gross. He's former army being a radio operator and a combat veteran. He survived Iraq but lost his leg and then was eaten by a strange thrift-store video game mimic. At Shadowcroft, he chose to become a fungaloid, a little mushroom man who has a grand destiny with decay. After Year One he raised himself all the way to an Iron Trunk, Rank 4.

**Inga Thosa Therian** was the most beautiful, the most talented, and the smartest librarian owl woman on her home planet. Insert tragic back story. Now? She's an astral moth dungeon core, and after her adventures at Shadowcroft, she's a Rank 1 Iron Trunk dungeon. This is a luminous being that can bring down a million insectile monsters on the evil dungeoneers to end their plundering. She is Logan's right-hand woman.

**Marko Laskarelis** grew up as the prince of parties on a beach paradise planet, but his good times ended when a good bender went bad. At Shadowcroft, he became a satyr, the dark muse of dungeons, where he will beguile you with his art, then take your life with a chandelier mimic. Trust nothing beautiful. He has leveled up to be an Iron Trunk, Rank 5, and he's Logan's best friend.

**Treacle Glimmerhappy** was a somber gnome with a wife and a workshop on his sweet, sweet world. He wasn't happy then, he's not happy now, but at least he has cud to chew. At Shadowcroft, Treacle chose to be a minotaur, with a focus on alchemy and electricity. He's a super-charged engineer, an Iron Trunk, Rank 3, and he's Logan's most bovine friend.

## *The First Cohort Delta Bravos*

**Prince Chadrigoth** – He grew up rich and powerful on Eritreus, but that wasn't enough. Now he's the baddest Abyss Lord at

Shadowcroft, an Azure Branch Cultivator who's immune to non-magical weapons, able to summon hordes of demons, and nearly undefeatable. Nearly. Imagine a bully with horns, wings, and talons sharp enough to shred a Buick.

**The Archduke Jimi Magmarty** – This Earth Elemental is Chadrigoth's bad buddy, a big rock-covered bruiser dripping mud. He's as dumb as a runaway cement truck and as unstoppable as one.

**Her Lady Elesiel of Everstar** – This lich queen is as thin as a desiccated corpse and as beautiful as a moonless night. She's Chadrigoth's girlfriend, but when it comes to dungeoneers, she harnesses the power of death itself to destroy them all.

**Tet-Akhat of the Coptic Champions** – This powerful cat-headed Egyptian goddess grew up in the desert wastelands of the most powerful world in the multiverse. There, she joined a death cult to become the best of the best. She's not thrilled to be a part of the First Cohort, but she is happy that she'll one day get to rip apart raiders with her razor-sharp claws and even sharper mind.

### ***Featured Faculty at Shadowcroft's Academy for Dungeons***

**Headmaster S. Shadowcroft** – An ancient Treowen entity who started the Shadowcroft Academy ten thousand years ago and has ruled its ancient halls with a steady wooden hand ever since. His cultivation level is unknown, but some think he might be a Crown or SS Class Cultivator.

**Professor Yullis Rockheart** – The rector prime of Shadowcroft, Rockheart is a griffin-shaped gargoyle, a high-ranked Jade Leaf cultivator. He's a hard-nosed professor, literal stone, which makes him a perfect teacher at a school where murder is on the curriculum. In his free time, he's the master of the Azure Dragon Clan.

**Professor Arketa the Hellgazer** – Master of the Vermillion Phoenix Clan, she wears a headscarf and dark glasses because she's an A-Class Gorgonic Enchantress. Simply put, she's a gorgon with both fashion sense and an eye for home décor.

**Professor Ronnalg Crucible** – This crafting ogre is an A-Class genius with a luxurious moustache and a permanent frown. And you

don't even have to ask. You did it wrong. Always says "Good day" but rarely means it.

**Professor John Toothbyte** – He's a massive shark man with a hook for a hand, wielding a spiked anchor. When he's not running Shadowcroft's underwater dungeon classes, he leads the Onyx Turtle Clan. He's a high-ranked Azure Branch cultivator.

**Professor Suresh the Merciless, the Cunning, and the Bloodthirsty** – This is the tiger-headed rakshasa and clan master of the Crystal Tiger. He'd like nothing more than to become the rector prime, and he has the arrogance to prove it. He really likes his titles.

**Madam Orry Gammy** – This Papyrus Harpy looks like paper and smell like books. She's the head librarian of the Codex Athenaeum, where the card catalog has never been more dangerous.

**Zhen Ikgix, the Venerable Threshing Turtle** – This mysterious entity at the school not only chooses cohorts but also runs the dungeons and oversees the Tartarucha Cells. He is Shadowcroft's very good friend. The old turtle looks at least ten thousand years old, and those years couldn't have been easy with all those wrinkles.

### *The Four Clans of Shadowcroft*

**The Azure Dragon of the East** – Decked out in blue and gold, this clan favors the bold, loyal, and disciplined.

**The Vermilion Phoenix of the South** – This clan is for those of a virtuous and fiery nature and for those who enjoy the colors black and red. Delightful.

**The Crystal Tiger of the West** – This clan focuses on the headstrong and brave mavericks, determined to carve a different path for themselves. Why else would their colors be orange and white? I mean, orange. Really?

**The Onyx Tortoise of the North** – With their cool heads and kind hearts, Headmaster Shadowcroft was a disciple of this clan back in the day. He looked smashing in his black and silver robes.

### *Cultivation Levels and Rankings*

**Ranks:** All classes are subdivided into ten ranks, starting at level 10, then proceeding incrementally to level 1. When a dungeon core or dungeoneer surpasses level 1, they advance to the next class and begin the process over again.

**U-Class (Foundation / AKA Dirt Class Cultivators):** These are normal people that barely have enough Apothos to be alive.

**E-Class (Deep Root Cultivators):** This is a starting hero. An advanced Earth Athlete or elite soldier might qualify as an E-Class Rank 10 or 9. Certainly nothing higher than that. Most E-Class heroes die young and easily.

**C-Class (Iron Trunk Cultivators):** This is the “average” Hero. They are just starting out, but are still much stronger than an average citizen. Their bodies are harder and more powerful, and they have begun to cultivate the energy, putting them firmly on a class/cultivation path.

**B-Class (Azure Branch Cultivators):** The third-strongest class. These heroes are very powerful, and a group of B- and C-Class heroes is nothing to scoff at, especially for a new dungeon without a lot of experience. These are your mid-ranged heroes, successful and working their way up but nowhere near the top.

**A-Class (Jade Leaf Cultivators):** The second-strongest class. They are incredibly powerful and can clear many dungeons single-handedly. They often serve as powerful lords and ladies to the Monarch-Level S-Class. Think Justice League, B-Squad.

**S-Class (Heartwood Cultivators):** The strongest and rarest class of heroes and dungeon masters. Every S-Class hero is equivalent to a small army, complete with assault weapons, tanks, and aerial bomb support! They are basically Justice League-tier superheroes, better than the best.

**SS-Class (Crown):** There are less than a handful of SS-Class heroes, and they rarely involve themselves in typical human affairs. Some dungeons, however, do achieve this ranking since they are capable of fighting more than one S-Class hero at a time. The strongest S-Class hero is approximately ten times weaker than the weakest SS-Class hero.

**SSS-Class (Immortal Crown):** Mythical beings with god-tier power.

### ***Cultivation Terms and Conditions***

**Apothos** – The fundamental energy of creation

**Apothos Affinities** – All life in the universe is filled with Apothos, but there are different kinds of the mystical energy, each with an elemental affinity. There are thirteen different meta-affinities, which include: Ignis, Magma, Corrosivus, Toxicus, Fulgur, Glacies, Terra, Aqua, Mallus, Luminosus, Umbra, Vita, Morta. To remember this, just use Inga's simple mnemonic, *I make coffee and tea for Grandfather Tiberius and make lemonade under the Velveeta moon.*

**Ashvattha** – Also known as the Tree of Souls, a living tree of invisible dark matter that holds the multiverse together and provides all worlds with Apothos

**Knot Theory** – Dungeons and dungeoneers all have Apothos cores that give them power. Cultivators can knot their cores, which alters the way they consume Apothos. By using a certain configuration, a cultivator could become exponentially stronger or faster. They could unlock unheard-of abilities or reduce the amount of time it takes to process Apothos with elemental affinities.

### ***Notable Worlds in the Tree of Souls Multiverse***

**Bharoosh** – The homeworld of everyone's favorite practice dungeoneer, Sir Rosencranz Brandybutter

**Earth** – Otherwise known as Uroth, this is an Apothos-poor world, in the butt-end of the multiverse, and a place of zero importance

**Eritreus** – All versions of this world are at the center of the multiverse because this realm has the richest Apothos around and all the cool dungeons and diabolical dungeoneers live there.

**Kitterxob** – This is where the Ferox hail from, cat people who can destroy a scratching post with either spells or claws

**Plimpkinny** – If you're standing in Castle Candylick, you're on this world of gnomes, and you might just see Treacle Glimmerhappy. He was a gnome lord here before he got recruited by Shadowcroft.

**Sangretta** – A world of beach parties and royalty and the home of Marko Laskarelis

**Toriopa** – A world of mountains, libraries, and the Okitori, owl-like people who adore books, sharp beaks, and soft feathers. This is the homeworld of Inga Thosa Therian.

### ***The Geography of Arborea***

**Akros Coliseum** is an Apothos-rich arena in the northeastern part of Shadowcroft Castle

**Arborea** is a flat pocket-dimension connected to a very powerful limb of the Tree of Souls

**The Bogbottom Swamp** drips off the southeast corner of Arborea near the Vralkag grasslands. Most people refer to it as the Boogerbottom, and it houses two dungeons and numerous poisonous snakes.

**Bogbottom Falls** is a beautiful waterfall that pours off the western part of Arborea

**BYE Portal** (Branches that Yield Everywhere) is a narrow spit of land separating the waters of Loch Endless from the abyss on the other side. This is the way off Arborea. From there, you can go anywhere.

**Castle Island** is where you can find Shadowcroft Castle, where the academy is! There are two bridges that cross to the land, the North Bridge and the South Bridge.

**The Codex Athenaeum** is Shadowcroft's grand library filled with endless manuals and cultivation texts, traps, and other dangers. You better want that book bad to brave the dangers to get it.

**DIE Pavilion** (Dungeon Interchange of Entrances) is a pavilion in the northwest courtyard of Shadowcroft Castle and is a portal that transports people to the dungeon entrances across Arborea

**Golden Serpent Hall** is the central feasting hall and auditorium in Shadowcroft Castle

**The Grimjour Peaks** are a spine of mountains separating Loch Endless and the World Forge Wastes and are pretty on winter mornings when snow glistens atop dungeons full of evil

**The Heckish Hills** are the volcano-wrecked mountains of the World Forge Wastes

**Loch Endless** is a seemingly bottomless lake in the western part of Arborea, and is the home of Castle Island

**Sweetwine River** drains from Loch Endless off the southern edge of Arborea

**The Tartarucha Cells** are a simulation dungeon filled with a wacky host of virtual dungeoneers taken from actual dungeoneers,

and so, yeah, they're ghosts

**Undercroft Lobby** lies underneath Golden Serpent Hall by way of the Stairwell of True Seeing and leads to a tasteful turtle fountain, the library, and the practice dungeon

**Vralkag** is the only non-academy settlement on Arborea and houses many of the staff at Shadowcroft Castle. The town offers a vibrant nightlife and endless amounts of shopping in a quaint medieval village.

**Vralkag Grasslands** fills the southern part of Arborea

**The World Forge Wastes** are the northern deserts of Arborea

**The Xiru Forest** dominates the western part of Arborea, and it's mostly Tallwood trees, which are similar to American redwood trees. If you're going to the Xiru, check out the Wayfarer Inn.

### *The Thirteen Dungeons of Arborea*

**Blasted Barrows** – A crypt-like dungeon in the low hills to the west of Vralkag

**Bloodrock** – A mountain dungeon in the Heckish Hills of the World Forge Wastes

**Bone Vaults** – An undead paradise north of Vralkag

**Chaos Oasis** – Near the only water in the World Forge Wastes, and there are palm trees but it's not pretty

**Cruelwood** – A nasty dungeon in the forests near Vralkag

**Mines of Madness** — A dungeon on the western slope of the Grimjour Peaks

**Root Kill** – The northernmost forest dungeon in the Xiru Forest

**SandScream** – A sandy hell in the eastern part of the World Forge Wastes

**Skullsplatter Morass** – The eastern dungeon in the Bogbottom Swamp

**Submerged Hell** – The underwater dungeon in the middle of Loch Endless

**Twisted Vine** – The western dungeon in the Bogbottom Swamp

**Under Stump** – The southernmost forest dungeon in the Xiru Forest

**Winterdark Halls** – A dungeon in the central peaks of Grimjour Peaks



## Books, Mailing List, and Reviews



IF YOU LOVED *Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons: Year One* and would like stay in the loop about the latest book releases, promotional deals, and upcoming book giveaways be sure to subscribe to the Shadow Alley Press mailing list: [Shadow Alley Press Mailing List](#). Sign up now and get a free copy of our bestselling anthology, *Viridian Gate Online: Side Quests!* Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time. You can also connect with us on our Facebook Fan Page: [Shadow Alley Press](#).

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Word-of-mouth and book reviews are crazy helpful for the success of any writer—or, in our case, Publishing Company. If you *really* enjoyed reading about Logan and the rest of the gang at Shadowcroft Academy, please consider leaving a short, honest review—just a couple of lines about your overall reading experience. You can click here to leave a review at Amazon, and thank you in advance: [Shadowcroft Academy for Dungeons: Year One](#).

Looking for more dungeon core, and need it right this minute? Check out: [Rogue Dungeon \(The Rogue Dungeon Book 1\)](#). Or keep reading to take a sneak peek.



**ROARK VON GRAF—HEDGE mage and lesser noble of Traisbin—is one of only a handful of Freedom fighters left, and he knows the Resistance's days are numbered. Unless they do something drastic ...**

But when a daring plan to unseat the Tyrant King goes awry, Roark finds himself on the run through an interdimensional portal, which strands him in a very unexpected location: an ultra-immersive fantasy video game called Hearthworld. He can't log out, his magic is on the fritz, and worst of all, he's not even human. He's a low-class, run-of-the-mill Dungeon monster. Some disgusting, blue-skinned creature called a *Troll*. At least there's one small silver lining—Roark managed to grab a powerful magic artifact on his way through the portal, and with it he might just be able to save his world after all.

Unless, of course, the Tyrant King gets to him first ...



## Chapter One: Heroes and Cowards

THE LAST FIERY RED light of sunset glared over the peaked roofs of the village of Korvo, just violent and desperate enough to tear through the dark storm clouds that had been looming all day. In the snow-blown streets, women in brightly colored dresses decorated with shiny tin coins and men in dark jerkins over vibrant shirts rushed home from the afternoon's errands, heads down, eyes on the cobblestones. The beggars and street urchins common to every settlement since the Tyrant King came into power had quietly disappeared into the dark, dank hideaways where they took shelter in times of inclement weather.

If not for the furtive glances at the heavily armed Ustars patrolling the village, the citizens could almost have been hurrying to beat the coming snowfall. But Roark von Graf knew better. The shoulders hunched as if awaiting the fall of an Ustari ax. The skirts clutched just so to muffle the jingling of the coins and avoid drawing the patrols' attention. The silence, that cursed silence, which filled the streets. All were dead giveaways to Roark's sharp eyes. These cheerful, friendly mountain folk didn't fear snow—they were bred for cold nights and snow-filled days—they feared the fist of a merciless tyrant.

Roark sunk back into the shadows of the narrow alleyway as a pack of Ustars tromped past, fanged halberds in hand, snake-jawed

helms all facing forward. Thick woolen cloaks emblazoned with the Tyrant King's winged serpent whipped along behind them, protection from the cold, and one more testament to the fact that they did not belong among Korvo's hardy people.

With all the noise they were making, passing undetected was almost too easy. Roark listened to the clank of the patrol's heavy armor get farther away, then slipped across the street into the alley behind the butcher's. The cold mitigated the stench of the day's refuse, but not by much. Feral cats and a mangy stray dog looked up from the entrails, regarding him warily as he passed. A battle-scarred tomcat laid back what was left of its ears and yowled a warning to stay away from the food.

A bad omen if the Lyuko travelers who came through every year could be believed.

"This was my city before it was yours, Tom," Roark murmured to the territorial old grouch as he passed. "And it'll be mine again after tonight. All of bloody Traisbin will be free, and you won't even have to thank me."

The stench of rotting meat faded behind him as he followed the alley to its end. From there, a sharp left took him behind the motley collection of businesses that lined the street. No glow lit the windows of the dwellings over the businesses. No laughter, no children playing, no idle music or clinking of pots as food was prepared. Tonight was a night of silence, of fear, of anxious listening at the door for the sound of heavy Ustari boots thundering up the stairs.

Roark stopped in the shadows along the rear of a fabric store, searching the alleyway and darkened windows for spying eyes. No witnesses who could later relay his whereabouts to the Ustars.

As he ducked inside, a minor writ scrawled hastily at the bottom of the door caught his attention:

*Shoulde any baring the wingd serpente of the Tyrante King cross this thresholde the shelfs of fabrik along the walls of this store shall colapse with a great combustione.*

It was meant to sound the alarm if Ustars crossed the threshold, but it was done so badly that only someone displaying the winged serpent prominently would set it off, and then, the shelves which

were supposed to collapse noisily—causing what the half-literate idiot who'd written it had probably meant to be a great *commotion*—would instead catch on fire, taking everyone inside the fabric store and half of the town with it.

Probably more of Albrecht's work, that careless buffoon.

Shaking his head, Roark knelt inside and quickly rubbed the mess away with the palm of his hand. With his penknife, he carved a corrected writ into the wooden planks, adding a clause to make the carvings appear as nothing more than the scratches of a family pet begging to come inside. The moment he sealed it with the punctuation, the magick went into effect, the letters becoming incomprehensible canine scratches in the wood.

Before the Tyrant King came to power, only the nobles and wealthy in Traisbin could afford to send their children off to learn the magick of letters. Since then, only those children the tyrant handpicked to be groomed as mages for his armies were taught to read and write. The odds that a literate Ustar would happen upon the writ were nearly zero, but if one of the Tyrant King's guards recognized it as writing, his forces would converge on the fabric shop and execute everyone inside, literate or not. Mages who didn't bow to the Tyrant King often found themselves without a head to bow.

Potential village-destroying fire and bloody executions averted, Roark slid the penknife back into the hidden pocket inside his jerkin and eased the door closed.

As he walked through the empty store, Roark ran his fingers over the many textures of fabric. It was an old habit from childhood, back when he couldn't believe so many different tactile sensations could exist in one place: smooth, coarse, knobbly, velvety, gauzy, woolen, ribbed, woven, embroidered, satiny. Korvo, being on one of the few roads that led through the mountains, was uniquely suited to sell goods from both sides of the continental divide—a fact his merchant-minded mother had once been quite proud of.

Behind the seller's bench, Roark found a thick carpet pulled aside and a trapdoor leading down into the cellar. With a shake of his head, he banished the bittersweet memories and returned his mind to the matter at hand.

The stone stairs had worn uneven over the centuries, but he took them two and three at a time with the easy grace of a child of the mountains. The murmuring of voices carried into the dark corridor, ghostly whispers compared to the solid clunk of his boots on the stone. A line of jade light leaked from beneath a door up ahead.

Roark threw open the door, revealing the green-lit war room. Frightened gasps went up, hands grabbed frantically for maps, and chairs scraped away from the huge central table. Ancient tapestries flapped against the old stone walls, and the emerald *burung* fire burning in the sconces flickered before returning to full strength once more.

A dozen pairs of wide eyes settled on Roark's lean form. Only a dozen. This was the *T'verzet*, the Rebel Council. The last unified resistance against the Tyrant King, Marek Konig Ustar. And they were cowering in a basement like kicked dogs.

"Graf, you nearly gave us a heart attack!" snapped Cambry, the elderly owner of the fabric store. The old man slammed the maps clutched in his hands back onto the table. "Shut that damn door!"

"Is it true?" Roark kicked the door closed behind him with a heel and strode farther into the room. "That he's in Korvo? That he's staying at the Graf Manor House—" He slammed his fist on the table, rattling the cloudy glass panes in the *burung* lamp at the center. "My manor house?"

Across the table, the scar-faced Albrecht snorted imperiously. "That house is as much yours as the Seat of Power is the Council of Ancients'."

Roark raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to point out Albrecht's similar position in the von Herzog family's former coastal holdings, but was cut off by an aged voice from his right.

"You walked the same streets as we did, Roark, you saw the patrols," Morgana said, folding her gnarled, arthritic hands on the table before her. She twisted the opal ring on her thumb absently as she spoke; the fat gemstone was proof that she'd once sat on the true council, handing down decrees for the entirety of the country. "The caravan was supposed to travel on to Moseley, but they can't

get through the mountains with the blizzard coming in. They're waiting here for the pass to clear."

"This is it, then," Roark said, excitement fluttering in his chest. "We couldn't ask for a better chance. I know that manor better than anyone. All the back ways, all the ins and outs. I can get to him, kill him now before the weather clears and they move on—"

"Absolutely not." Morgana sat back in her seat, pursing her wrinkled lips. "We've no plan in place for this. It's too much of a risk. If you fail—"

"I won't," Roark said, brow furrowed.

Albrecht threw up his hands. "Here we go! The lost noble of Korvo knows better than the combined experience of the entire *T'verzet* now."

"I know better than that gibberish you scrawled on the door up there," Roark said, infusing his voice with a lightness he didn't feel. "It's a wonder you've only burnt off half of your face so far."

"Know-everything poseur," Albrecht snapped, kicking up from his seat. "Acting like you're not as self-taught as the rest of us—"

Roark snorted. "Can you even say your letters, mate?"

"You'll want to watch that big head, Graf, before somebody kicks it in."

"Both of you bullheaded pups shut your yaps!" Cambry boomed with a strength that belied his aging body. He gestured to Morgana. "What the councilwoman was trying to say is, so far, we've been blessed lucky in hiding the seat of the resistance. One slipup—one hint that we're here—and every Ustar in Traisbin'll descend on this city like flies on a rotting corpse."

"I won't slip up," Roark said with every ounce of the confidence he felt. "I know that manor like the back of my hand—I could walk its passages in my sleep." In fact, he often did when he slept long enough to dream. "I can get in and back out again before Marek himself knows he's dead."

"The risk is too great," Morgana said, shaking her head.

"But the payoff is everything we've been fighting for!" Roark tried but was unable to keep the desperation from his voice. "Twenty years of the Tyrant King's oppression, and we could end it tonight!"

“Would you see Korvo burned to the ground?” Bran, the barrel-gutted innkeeper, asked, speaking up for the first time since Roark’s arrival. He leaned forward in his seat, bracing his meaty arms on the table, and continued in his quiet, measured voice. “Her people turned against one another as informants and snitches, turning their friends and neighbors over to the Tyrant King to save themselves and their children? Because that’s the price of failure, Graf. That’s what you’re gambling with here.”

“Laying aside the fact that this is hardly a gamble considering my familiarity with the manor house,” Roark said, “isn’t it worth at least that much? Did any of you join the resistance without realizing you were risking your life and the lives of everyone connected to you? Because you’re in the wrong line of work if you did.”

“Dammit, man, I’ve got a family!” the usually soft-spoken innkeeper thundered. Bran looked as taken aback at his outburst as anybody else. He lowered his head, collected himself, then went on in a voice once again calm. “I’ve five children and a wife to look out for, haven’t I? You may have nothing left to lose, Graf, but we do. You wouldn’t be so quick to throw it all away if you did.”

Roark felt his lips pulling up in a contemptuous snarl. He pushed down the sudden urge to leap across the table and punch Bran’s teeth into the back of his skull.

“You all feel this way?” His dark eyes slid from face to face in the green-lit war room, seeing nothing but fear and weakness reflected back at him.

One by one, the so-called rebels lowered their eyes or glared back at him as if he were the one who couldn’t understand.

“Cowards,” he spat. “If you aren’t ready to risk everything to free your people, then you don’t deserve to call yourselves *T’verzet*. When the right opportunity presents itself, you can’t hold anything back.”

Unable to look at them for a second longer, Roark turned on his heel and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

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