

## Interlude – Mining in the Under

The sounds of picks hitting the dark rock echoed in the cavern as Genissa passed through. She made her way toward one of the tunnels, her tail swinging from side to side in nervousness. The tunnel she was about to enter was the one from which most of the noise was coming from. Behind her followed two krecean, each carrying a large box in their four arms filled to the brim with clay rods. Genissa led them into the tall and wide tunnel, expanded so that it could accommodate all the members of the company. The sounds of mining tapered off and eventually stopped as she and her escorts arrived at their destination.

A group of miners, a few humans, some demasi, and a lone cthull looked at the dozen or so holes that they had drilled in the wall at the end of the tunnel. It had taken them months to drill even those shallow holes. The dark blue wall had proven extremely resistant, only a constant barrage of mining abilities and perks was enough to even dent it. All the miners in their company had been rotating and using their cooldowns as abled, and still it had taken them months to reach this point.

Genissa looked at the strange wall, the way that light broke strangely on it and was half absorbed and half reflected at odd angles even though the wall was smooth. They didn't know what it was for sure, but they suspected that it was the outer wall of a wild dungeon. It was a great find, something that could benefit the entire company. The issue was that they couldn't find its entrance, and they had tried excavating around it. It seemed like it had no end, like it stretched for an infinity. Which could be the case, the Infinite Realm was filled with an infinite amount of secrets and all kinds of strange things. This wasn't even in the top 10 of the weird things that she had seen down here in the Under.

“Are we ready?” She asked.

“We are, ma'am,” one of the miners answered.

“Good, load them up, the big boss wants this wall opened yesterday,” Genissa said.

The miners nodded and then hurried to take the clay rods and load them into the openings that they had drilled. The rods were the latest from

the Support branch of the company, devised by the alchemists. This wasn't the first time that they used explosives to try and get through a wall, but it was the first time that these particular rods were going to be used. Untested they might be, but none of the other explosives were powerful enough to even scratch this wall.

They were hoping that these new ones would be enough to get through. Once the rods were loaded and the triggering gem placed on the fuse that connected to them all, Gen and the miners retreated back into the cavern where they had their camp.

Support beams and reinforcements were checked again—they couldn't have the cavern ceiling dropping down on them. Once everything was ready, the miners turned to Gen and spoke.

“Are we going to wait for the boss?”

Gen grimaced at the question, her fur rippling. None of their previous attempts at breaching the wall had been successful, and she didn't want to waste the big guy's time. The boss had found a nice vein of precious ore that he had decided to mine with one of their mining teams. She could call him back, but if they don't get through... Well, he could get pretty testy when he was called from his work for nothing.

“No, let's see if we can even get in first. We can easily call him back if this works,” Genissa said.

The miners and guards around her nodded their heads in understanding. She had everyone take positions at the end of the tunnel, barricades erected and their guard get ready. One never knew what could lurk behind a wall in the Under. While their primary goal was to mine ore and look for treasure, the reality of the Infinite Realm was that there were always monsters around.

Once everything was set up, she took the activation gem into her hand. The formation inscribed there ready and waiting for her to activate it. She took a deep breath and pushed a tiny bit of her Qi into it. The gem flashed and then a few seconds later an explosion rocked the cavern. The shaking lasted for a few seconds, sending a shower of debris from above, but nothing larger than a pebble. The cavern held, and Gen gestured to the guard. Four

of them raised their shields and readied their spears as they started walking down the tunnel, and quickly they disappeared behind a bend.

Gen and the others waited for a long few minutes in silence. And then, sounds started coming from the tunnel. Power use, shouts, screams, and then, wailing.

Gen realized immediately that whatever was behind the wall, was hostile. She started shouting orders and everyone got ready, picking up their weapons as one of the Guards ran back out of the tunnel. The human was wounded, his armor had a gash in it and blood seeped through it.

Following behind him, came being seemingly made out of black stone. Gen's senses told her immediately that they weren't monsters, but rather spirits. She grimaced, but she had no time to warn anyone. The spirits unleashed their elemental powers and the ground shook. Their fortifications around the tunnel entrance crumbled as the ground rippled and broke them.

The guard unleashed on the spirits, breaking chunks out of the elemental bodies, and Gen joined them. She pulled out a large oval object out of her storage and leveled the opening with one of the rock spirits. Her Qi flowed out of her body and into the cannon, the charging gem flashing and then a wide beam of deep blue flashed across the distance.

The spirit's body crumbled, but she knew that she hadn't killed the spirit. It could easily create a new body for itself from the ground around them. The only way to kill a spirit was to use Ethereal damage, and they had only a few people that could do that. The spirits kept coming and she saw new types emerging from the tunnel, ones wearing bodies made out of rotting monster parts. Grotesque and deadly, she aimed her cannon at them as soon as she was able.

These spirits shouldn't be able to get their bodies back quickly, although that depended on what kind of spirits they were. They were lucky that they hadn't encountered any of the more powerful spirits that could manifest their own bodies in the real world. But the lesser spirits were trouble enough.

Quickly Gen realized that there were just too many of them spilling out of the tunnel. Most were elemental type spirits, whose bodies could easily be destroyed, but they could also regenerate them quickly. The ones wearing

monster parts were probably death or decay spirits, harder to kill, but they would need time to possess and craft new bodies.

Gen kept firing her cannon as the spirits pushed forward and into the camp, and she knew that they would quickly be overwhelmed. They just didn't have enough people who could deal with the Ethereal to be able to put up more of a fight.

And then, one of the cavern walls cracked and exploded inward. The debris hitting the spirits and destroying their forms by scores. From the large hole a big shape walked through. A War Form kreature, with four arms in which he carried two large cannons. He wore a black and purple armor that looked as if it was crafted out of crystals, with a big blue gem nestled in the center of his chest.

A cheer went out as the big boss stepped into the cavern, his two cannons firing at the spirits and blasting them to pieces. Gen added the fire from her cannon, which was a much smaller and weaker version of the big guy's.

A fresh party of guards and miners entered the cavern behind the boss, and started fighting the spirits.

Big boss demolished them with his cannons, the gem in the center of his chest getting brighter with every kill. Then, finally it was glowing as bright as the sun. A moment later he lowered his cannons and a massive beam exploded out of his chest, sweeping across the spirits destroying most of them utterly. The camp cheered as the spirits died to Gemheart's attack and their charge got broken.

Gen sighed in relief, her haste hadn't cost them everything. She glanced at her adoptive father as he started walking across the room to reach her and then she heard a shout.

She barely had the time to turn around as one of the surviving monsters wearing spirits reached for her. It grabbed her shoulder, the claws piercing through her skin and she screamed in pain. And then it pulled her back, dragging her across the ground. She heard her dad shout, saw him aim his cannon, but then lowering it and leaping forward. But he was too slow.

Gen tried to use her powers, but found that she couldn't. Something that the spirit was doing was making it hard for her to focus. She was dragged

into the tunnel as the surviving spirits retreated into the tunnel, toward the wall. Gen saw a few more people get dragged with her and she saw people charging after them.

Then they reached the wall, and were pulled through the hole that their explosives made. They entered a large room with no light, her ravzor eyes and her eye skill letting her see only shadows around her. They were pulled out of the room and into a smaller corridor that led to another larger chamber. There, Gen could see more spirits standing next to what could only be described as a tear in space. An Ethereal Rift. It looked like a crack in space, rough and uneven, like someone had sunk their claws in the tapestry of space and ripped it open.

Gen tried to struggle, but she could barely move her body. The claws inside her body were doing something that almost paralyzed her. She didn't know of a spirit that could do that, but that didn't mean that a spirit that could didn't exist.

She tried to think and form a plan. She knew that she and the others needed to escape as soon as possible. Whatever they had stumbled into wasn't a dungeon. They didn't have spirits as part of their mobs, this was something else. She knew that her dad was going to come after them, there wasn't any question about that. They just needed to survive until then.

The spirits around her were lesser spirits, usually harmless as they rarely interacted with the real world unless summoned. The fact that they had worked in concert meant that a higher tier spirit was controlling them. And that made her worried. More powerful spirits were often extremely malicious.

The spirits dragged them to the rift, and inside. One moment they were in the real world, and in the next they were in the Ethereal. As soon as they were through, the spirits released them and she could move again. Gen looked around and saw that there were eight more people next to her.

She tried to stand, but felt weak. The spirit had for sure done something to them, since she saw the others having difficulty as well. Their surrounding was a blazing room that stretched far into the distance. All around them were glowing walls, everything tinted in gray and green, pale and almost insubstantial looking. The walls had lines all over them that gave off the light.

The spirits moved around them, their vessels breaking apart around them as they assumed their real forms. She didn't recognize their types, the ones that had worn the monster flesh were tall and dark, with long limbs and claws, their heads elongated and seemingly without a mouth. A single eye stared at the nine of them on the ground.

And then Gen noticed someone—or something—else present. This being was tall as well, almost as tall as her dad. It had a long quadruped lower body with legs that had hooves. Its upper body was more person-like, with a torso and two sets of arms. Its head was strange, looking almost as if it was carved in stone, and it had three faces. Each facing in one direction, forward and two to the sides. She couldn't see any of their screens, not that there would be much to see.

Gen immediately knew that this was a higher spirit. But what really made her blood freeze were the two beings standing next to it. They didn't resemble any of the nine races, but rather they resembled some of the intelligent monsters that could sometimes be found in dungeons or scenarios. Those that resembled people. Genissa knew that some people had theories about them, that some even thought that they were members of races that hadn't been chosen by the three to gain Framework and access to the Infinite Realm.

What she saw before her seemed to confirm the idea that they weren't monsters at all, but rather real beings. Because the two were shades, and only people could become shades. Their eyes glowed with malevolent intelligence, the signature concentric circles of the shades glared down at her and the others.

She tried not to think about the fact that if she died and her soul got trapped here, she too would turn into a shade. That she would become a monster that sought only to cause suffering, and that could only hate.

She expected the shades to jump on them as soon as they saw them, but they only stood there glaring at them. Gen realized that they were subservient to the spirit in between them. And that made her wonder how that happened. Shades were notorious for not working together and for refusing to follow anyone or anything. They only wanted to inflict pain.

The spirit raised one of its four arms and closed a fist. A moment later Gen felt a strange sensation, almost as if suddenly there was less air to breathe. She turned her head and saw the rift closing. Immediately she knew that there wasn't going to be any rescue. Her dad couldn't open rifts into the Ethereal realm, nor could any of the other people in the company. She and the others were on their own.

Fear settled into her bones, and a helplessness spread through her mind. She was trapped in the Ethereal Realm, in a structure that was filled with spirits. She and the others had entered it in their own flesh, so they wouldn't turn into shades. But if their bodies were killed? If their souls were released... then they would need to find a way to the afterlife or suffer the cruel fate of becoming hate-filled monsters. She turned her eyes to the spirit that seemed to be in command, they had to have been brought here on its orders, and that meant that there was a purpose to their kidnapping.

The spirit studied them for a second and then it spoke, its voice echoing through the chamber.

“Welcome, little souls, welcome to Felltower—The Prison of Ages,” the spirit said. “You’ve broken through the walls of our anchor, weakened the defenses, your lives will serve as a sacrifice for the healing of the anchor.”

Gen blinked at the spirit's words, not understanding. The way that it spoke, the way that everything around them looked, it all resembled a dungeon. But she had never heard about a dungeon in the Ethereal Realm before.

Before she could speak, the dark spirits that had worn monster parts in the real world turned on them and started pulling them away. Then, suddenly she could see their screens.

<p><a href="#">Prison Warden Spirit</a> (LVL 242-Peak Lord)</p>
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Quickly Gen turned her head and looked at the big spirit and the two shades. She read their screens, and then shuddered, bowing her head down in defeat.