

## 47: Core

"Hey, I think he did it!" Carten said, clapping his hands together.

Rain dropped Essence Well and quickly pulled open his notification log.

**Your Party has defeated [Dire Darkmonk] — Level 5**  
Your Contribution: 0%

"Yeah, he got it. Come on!" Rain started gimping toward Val as quickly as he could with his weakened muscles. They hadn't had the best view of the fight, but he'd seen enough to leave him as pale as a sheet with worry. Val's health was critically low, and his light had gone out just after he'd finished the Darkmonk off in a final, blinding flash.

Ameliah was already past him, racing down the tunnel faster than Rain had believed a human could move. Carten was close on her heels, but Jamus thankfully stayed with Rain as he hobbled along. He followed in Carten's wake as best as he could, wishing that his staff wasn't lying at the bottom of the cavern somewhere—he could have used it as a crutch. By the time he got there, Val's health was already back to full, though he was looking considerably worse for wear. The entire front of his jacket was shredded into tattered scraps and there was blood everywhere.

Despite all of this, Val was laughing.

"Guys! I got it!"

"Don't move," Ameliah said. "You'll tear your wounds open. They only look like they've fully healed on the surface. Those cuts were deep. If I hadn't been here..."

Val ignored her, pumping a fist into the air. He shouted in pain as a fresh wave of blood spewed forth from his chest, a huge gash opening as the fragile skin tore. Ameliah shook her head and sighed.

"I didn't want to heal you twice, but you leave me no choice. Don't blame me for this."

She pressed her hand to his chest and his wounds closed once more. His eyes rolled backward in his head and he collapsed. Ameliah caught him before he hit the ground, then lowered him down gently so he didn't hit his head.

Rain took a step forward, concerned, but Val was already coming around. His eyes flickered and he opened them, looking confused as to how he had ended up on the floor again. His smile returned.

"Sorry, I guess I deserved that," he said.

"Yes, you did," Ameliah said. "I hope you're happy. Now we've got two people with soulstrain."

"It won't happen again," Val said, still grinning. He struggled to pull himself into a sitting position, but stopped when Ameliah growled at him. He lay back with a sigh. "I did it. I finally did it."

"So, what'dja get?" Carten asked.

"Carten, give him a moment," Jamus said. "Our bet can wait."

"Wait," Rain wheezed, still out of breath. He shouldn't have tried to run. "What...bet?"

"Oh, on his class, of course," Jamus said.

"You knew?" Val asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't tell them about it, Val, I swear," Rain said, trying to get his breathing back under control. "Also, congratulations. Now, never do that again."

"Ha," Val laughed. "Don't worry about it, Rain. I know I swore you to secrecy, but it wouldn't have been that hard for them to guess, given what I've told them."

He turned to look at Carten and grinned. "I'm not telling you what it is, though."

"Wha? You can't do that!" Carten spluttered.

"And just like that, I win." Jamus smiled. "I knew he wouldn't tell. Pay up, Carten."

Rain shook his head. He was starting to think that Carten was a bad influence on Jamus. He ignored the arguing pair and wearily lowered himself down the wall to sit next to Val as Ameliah used Purify to clean up the mess.

"Ha, what a pair of fools we make," Val said, feebly lifting an arm to punch Rain in the shoulder.

Rain laughed. "Yeah, I suppose. I'm just going to rest here a minute. My legs feel like wet...hey, what's the word for the food that goes with tomato sauce and meatballs?"

Val shook his head. "I have no idea."

*Damn. Either spaghetti isn't a thing here, or they don't eat it the same way. To-do: invent spaghetti and meatballs.*

"Okay, you two," Ameliah said after a few minutes. "Up. You need to rest, true, but we need to get out of here first. We're at one part in ten after you killed that thing. We should be pretty close to the core."

Rain accepted Ameliah's offered hand and allowed her to pull him to his feet. "Did it drop anything?" he asked, gesturing to the former location of the Darkmonk. Ameliah shook her head.

*Damn.*

Carten bent down and grinned at Val. "I'll carry ya if ya want. You gotta tell me though."

"No way. I'll walk," Val said with a laugh. He managed to get back to his feet on his own with some assistance from the wall. The group set back off down the tunnel, moving slowly to accommodate their two infirm party members.

"What are we going to do if we run into anything?" Rain asked. He and Val were hardly up for combat at the moment, suffering from soulstrain and practically out of mana. The mana thing, he was working on, but he had no idea how long it would take for him to recover from the rapid healing.

"I'll handle it," Ameliah said. "I've got enough Endurance to tolerate a little dehydration, but that doesn't mean it's fun. I'm not holding back over a measly one part in ten. You can get your experience on the next run."

"I'm fine with that," Carten said. "Us turtles still feel hunger and thirst, even if it won't kill us."

"I'm not a turtle," Ameliah said.

"Might as well be," Carten said. "Jack, right? That means ya got some of everything. That still true, or is your Silverplate class different?"

"Stop fishing for classes, Carten," Rain said. "It's rude." Even if he thought the taboo was a little stupid, he could see why people would want to conceal things like that.

*The Bronzeplate classes have got to be common knowledge, barring crazy shit like whatever Val just unlocked. Silverplate...yeah, probably not so much. At least around here, anyway. This is kind of a backwater, and they don't exactly have the internet. I wonder if Staavo has a class encyclopedia or something. I'd like to know what's in front of me for once.*

The question of classes wasn't immediately useful, so he decided to change the subject to something else he had been wondering about.

"So, the core," he said, "is it like a crystal or something?"

"Yes," Ameliah said. "It's usually on a pedestal in the middle of a large room."

"Why?" Rain asked. "I'm pretty sure people didn't build this lair, so..."

"It forms naturally," Jamus said. "Something about mana dispersion."

"Ok, sure. I guess I'll buy that. What about this whole place, though? Did the lair form those tiled hallways 'naturally'?"

"Later," Ameliah said. "I can see it ahead. We really were close."

"I don't see anything," Val said.

Carten laughed. "Try squinting."

Soon enough, the light revealed an opening in the tunnel in front of them. The passage emptied out into a large natural-looking cavern. Ameliah brought them to a stop just before the threshold. The infuriating drip of water was back, taunting him as he licked his dry lips. He could see no obvious source for the sound as Ameliah sent her light around the room to scan for threats. The only notable feature was a narrow column of stone in the exact center. It looked like a stalactite and a stalagmite had grown together and captured a dark *something* in the center. The core was about the size of his fist and so black that it looked like a hole in the universe.

"Ok," Ameliah said. "I don't see anything, so it doesn't look like this lair has a boss."

"How do we get out?" Rain asked. "I thought we weren't breaking the core."

"When we go in there, it will cause a core panic," Ameliah said. "Anything left alive in the lair will rush in to defend it. Once we've killed every last monster, the portal should appear."

*Core...panic? Wait, defend it? Are lair cores...*

"They're not...alive, are they? Cores?"

"No," Jamus said. "They follow simple patterns that can make it seem that way, to the layman. Staavo would be happy to go on about it at length."

Rain considered this. "You're sure? I don't want to break it if it's alive. Maybe we could... negotiate?"

Carten exploded into laughter. "Haha, Little Mouse! You're such a softy! Negotiate with a rock... Ha!"

"No, I'm serious, if there's any chance it is alive—"

"There isn't," Ameliah said. "And it didn't bother you when we killed the monsters, so why should the core be any different?"

"It's..." Rain struggled to explain. "If it thinks, it's different. The Dark Hounds, the bats, hell, even the Kin, they were just...animals. They just...attacked. There wasn't any strategy. If the core can think..."

"So what?" Val said. "You're telling me that if you were attacked by bandits on the road, you wouldn't kill them?"

Rain nodded. "Yeah, probably not."

"...Why?" Jamus asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You can't just go around murdering people!" Rain said, incredulous.

"Well, sure," Carten said, "but if they try ta steal your shit, I say that makes em fair game."

Rain looked around at his companions. They were all staring at him the way Ameliah had when he'd tried to explain the moon landing.

*I mean, I kinda knew this was coming. I shouldn't really expect them to share my values... But still, killing people? That's not something I ever want to do.*

Rain sighed. "Never mind. This isn't the time for this discussion."

"Damn straight," Ameliah said. Rain looked at her in surprise. He hadn't expected her to use an expression like that, or for the expression to even exist in common, for that matter. "When we go in," she continued, "get over to the side and stay out of the way. Someone take my pack."

Rain accepted the pack and settled it on to his own shoulders. Thankfully, it wasn't that heavy. He was feeling weighed down enough by his armor, and his weakened body was complaining loudly after the short walk. "Wait, where is my pack?" he asked, suddenly realizing that it was missing. There wasn't much in there, but still.

"It's inside mine," Jamus said.

Rain nodded. "Oh. Thanks."

Ameliah motioned them into the room and they followed her instructions, moving over to the left of the door. As they entered, Rain felt a strange disturbance rush past him. It felt like a wind, but he didn't feel it with his skin. It felt like it tugged on something within him as it rushed past.



*Was that...mana?*

Rain didn't have time to ask any questions before the howling of Dark Hounds came echoing toward them from the tunnel.

*How does stuff keep getting behind us? First that ram came out of nowhere, and now these hounds. In the maze, sure, but this cave-like area has stayed stable, so I don't think it is subject to the same space warping insanity. Is the core spawning them in or something?*

Rain's train of thought was abruptly derailed as Ameliah burst into flames. He'd expected this based upon Carten's description of her fight in the chasm, but seeing it for real was another matter entirely. The fire covered her from head to toe, burning strongly despite the light-suppressing effect of the lair.

She launched herself down the tunnel, her Lunar Orb following as she raced to meet the hounds. It wasn't even a contest; the hounds had no hope of matching her speed or power. She danced between them, sending them flying with kicks, punches, and the sound of breaking bone. Those that did somehow manage to evade her strikes were struck with blasts of fire that split off from her flaming cloak, seemingly of their own accord.

Rain checked her status. Her stamina and mana had barely budged. Either she was holding back, or she had an ungodly quantity of the two resources. She'd be able to keep this up for hours.

"Fuckin' amazin', ain't it?" Carten said. "You should have seen her before. She was movin' even faster than that."

Rain stared. "It's like when I use Velocity, except more so. It must be a skill. Nobody can move that fast without magic."

"True enough," Jamus said. "Strength and speed go together, it's true, but there's a difference between raw speed and, well, that." He gestured as Ameliah backflipped off the ceiling and sent a hound ricocheting down the tunnel with an explosive whip kick. "That," Jamus continued, "is grace."

It only took Ameliah a few moments to finish off the last of the hounds, as well as one or two of the Tenebre Bats that had crawled awkwardly toward her, the ceiling of the tunnel too low for them to fly. As she killed the last of them there was a soft rushing sound, as if a window had been opened to let fresh air into a long-stagnant crypt. As it did, the flaming cloak surrounding Ameliah grew brighter by several orders of magnitude, the light of the flames blasting away the darkness and filling the entire tunnel with crimson. The two Lunar Orbs also flared, the white light of Val's expanding to fill the entire chamber.

"That's done it," Val said with a relieved sigh. "The darkness is gone."

Rain looked at his display and saw that it was true.

### Everdeep Fortress

Rank 5

0%

*Huh. I guess it can't sustain the suppression effect anymore. It probably can't warp the tunnels around either. I guess this is how you get out if all else fails.*

The crimson light vanished as Ameliah dropped her flaming cloak. She was completely unharmed, if drenched in gore.

*Why don't her clothes burn?*

Rain jumped as a wall of white light suddenly appeared racing toward him. Just before it hit him, he realized what it must be. She'd used Purification Nova. The spell was blinding in the darkness, no longer dampened by the lair. It was like looking straight into one of the Lunar Orbs, comparable in intensity, but far greater in scale.

The wave of light lasted for a few seconds, vanishing before his eyes had a chance to adapt completely. The group was left blinking in the dimly lit tunnel, the light of the Lunar Orbs not seeming nearly as bright as it had before she'd used the skill. Ameliah summoned the scattered Tel to her hand now that the corpses had been dealt with.

"Who has the bag?" she asked. Jamus unfastened it from his belt and handed it to her. Rain noted that it was definitely more full than it had been before the chasm. She added in the latest spoils and tied it to her own belt.

"How much did we get?" Carten asked.

Ameliah shook her head. "Once we're out. Come on."

She walked past a disappointed-looking Carten and skirted around the pillar in the center of the room. She was heading for the portal, which had appeared on the far wall. The group followed her, chatting happily at the prospect of fresh air and sunlight.

As Rain passed the core, he paused. It was at around eye-level, and despite the lightening of the lair, it still looked unbelievably black. It was so dark that he had trouble telling if it was three dimensional, all sense of depth having been swallowed in its reflectionless surface. Only the shape of the stone holding it allowed him to get any sense of its form. It wasn't perfectly spherical, more of a lopsided oval. He couldn't tell if—

"Rain," Ameliah said.

He turned to see her waiting for him at the portal. The others had already gone through. "Come on. We'll come back for it later."

"Right," he said, hurrying to follow. He stepped through the portal after her and found himself back in the tiled stone hallway that had led to the entrance of the lair. He turned back to look at the portal. It appeared exactly the same as it had before. He placed his hand on it and the same glowing symbols appeared: the five, showing the lair's rank, and the percentage, now reading as zero.

"How long before it's back to full?" Val asked.

"It depends," Jamus said. "This was quite an adventure for a rank 5 lair. I'd expect it would take a while. Ameliah?"

"Yes. This was unusually difficult. A maze type, with several distinct monster varieties, a blue, and several traps. I'd say at least a month."

"What!? A month?!" Carten roared. "You never said we'd be out here a month!"

"Quiet," she said, staring at him. "No need to overreact. It will take a month to get back to full, yes, but it should recover enough by tomorrow for it to be worth coming back. Lairs recover quickly when they are fully depleted. However, I wouldn't expect it to recover enough to resummon the maze for at least a week. Longer if you want any hope of another blue."

"Oh," Carten said, mollified.

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The walk back up the tunnel had been slow and excruciating. Rain was in constant discomfort the entire way, and from the look on Val's face, so was he. The feeling was odd; it wasn't like soreness after a workout or anything else he had experienced before. It wasn't just tiredness; everything felt weak and tender. His muscles and bones ached with every movement. He'd asked Jamus about it after hauling himself up the ledge that led back into the mine. It turned out to be something about the differences between the different types of soulstrain. The mage had been happy to explain as they slowly wound their way back up to the surface.

Health soulstrain caused weakness like he was feeling. It could be triggered by losing too much health all at once, or by excessive healing. Stamina soulstrain was characterized by soreness and lethargy, and you could get it in a similar way. Mana soulstrain, on the other hand, caused crippling headaches and sensory problems.

Jamus apparently had issues with something called 'mana starvation', saying that he got cranky and sensitive to light if he got below a third of his maximum mana. He said it was a related effect to mana soulstrain, but not entirely the same thing. Rain had no idea if he was right, his own headaches having gone away completely somewhere around the 100 Clarity mark. They hadn't even been that bad to begin with.

There were other types of soulstrain as well. Experience soulstrain caused intense nausea, sweating, and a whole litany of other symptoms that he'd already had the pleasure of sampling. Equipment soulstrain was an interesting one that Val had told him about, lamenting the untimely death of his jacket. Apparently, there was a maximum combined strength for enchantments worn on your body that had something to do with your level. It was the reason

a random farmer couldn't just pick up a legendary sword and go kill a dragon—also, dragons were a thing.

Eventually, they made it to the entrance of the mine. They hadn't encountered any monsters along the way, nor run into Tallheart, though there were signs of his activity in the form of pulverized walls and piles of rocks lying around. He wasn't a very tidy miner, it seemed.

Carten pushed open the wooden door to the mine and sighed in relief at the sight of the evening sun. Rain followed him out. He shivered as he moved out into the open. The cold was quite painful to his tender skin as he blinked in the evening light.

*Oh hey, it's snowing! I guess that means we're in winter now.*

He looked around at the thin blanket of white powder covering the ground. There were more slow, lazy flakes falling from the sky.

"Gah! Fuck that's cold!" Val said as he followed Rain out. His entire chest was bare due to the damage to his clothing. Rain could sympathize. His own skin felt frozen and raw, as if he'd been out in the elements for hours, not just a few seconds.

*Damn soulstrain.*

Carten stomped down the slope, following a set of boot tracks. Rain trailed after him, eager to meet up with Tallheart, then get something to drink and sit down beside a nice warm fire.