After leaving the gunman dungeon, we started driving around, wanting to look for at least one more dungeon before heading back, just in case we struck the jackpot. It took a little over half an hour before we detected another dungeon, by which point we were driving along above the ground anxiously, worried that we'd run into more terrible rust monsters.

Instead, what we got was a bolt of lightning fired from the direction of the dungeon, straight at us. This bolt was strong enough that it instantly shattered all but one of my shields, leaving me momentarily dazed from the mental backlash.

As soon as I had my wits back, I grabbed the wheel and gave a *hard* turn. "Nope!" I said aloud, erecting a crystal barrier between us and the direction that the attack came from to buy time for me to remake my other walls. "Back to Fallcry!"

In the backseat, the other two gasped out in shock, looking at the barriers crumbling. Diane transformed into her draconic form just to apply an extra darkness barrier behind us as I pushed the car to its maximum speeds in the opposite direction. "Diane, how long until the rift connects to Chimeris?"

"About an hour and a half, I think," Diane responded, pulling up an information screen. "But if we get there in the next ten minutes, we can go straight through Aurin to reach Chimeris afterwards."

That was enough for me. Because we hadn't been driving in a straight line previously, in order to explore more territory, it was much faster to get back to the rift. When we arrived, the rift was a brilliant, warm gold. I drove through, putting the hazardous landscape behind us and appearing above a golden field lit by twin suns.

In Aurin, whether it was the plants, the clouds, even the animals in the distance all had a touch of gold. Trees shimmered with a metallic sheen that made me think its leaves were made of solid gold. "...Why can't every realm be as nice as this?" I asked aloud, earning a low chuckle from Diane.

"There are a few really nice ones, I'll say that. In retrospect, we got pretty lucky with Chimeris. Just imagine if the first place we entered after the update was Thalassia?"

When she said that, I shuddered. "Speaking of, you mentioned that Ferrumnis was one of the top five worst? Since we've got a moment where nobody is shooting at us, what are the others?"

"Well, number four is Thalassia," Diane chuckled. "Disregarding the fact that most players don't have skills to breathe underwater, Thalassia is almost completely pitch black, and there are extremely high level aquatic horrors swimming around everywhere. There was one guy who tried his luck making a kingdom in Thalassia, but his entire island was shattered when one of the bigger monsters came by and crashed into it during the starter trial."

“The other three of the top five don’t connect to our rift. Number three is Tidebreak. At first, Tidebreak didn’t seem all that bad, until people learned why it was named that. There are giant waves that roll over the planet, demolishing any structures on the ground. The natives there have tamed water elementals, allowing them to live on the rolling waves.”

“Number two is Mistralis, a realm covered in a thick mist. Unless you have exceptional detection skills, you won’t be able to see beyond a few feet in front of you. Worse yet, there are countless incorporeal undead that hide in the mist, waiting to attack.”

“As for the last one, it is called Feycross. This one doesn’t actually look scary at all, but its inhabitants… they are little pixie creatures that are masters of runes. At first, they just used this to play a few pranks on players, but the players thought that they were harmful monsters and started eradicating them on sight. There are a few that have come around and begrudgingly shared some information. However, most of the time, when you see one pixie, there are ten more preparing a ritual to transform you into a teapot. Or a shrubbery, depending on their mood.”

Listening to the descriptions of these three realms, I was immensely glad that we were not connected to them via our rift. After all, there was nothing stopping creatures of one world from invading another, aside from the outposts stationed around each rift.

As we were talking, the rift shifted back to the familiar mismatch of colors that I associated with Chimeris. “Let’s make a stop by Fallcry before we head to the Sunset Isles. Nuoda wanted to talk to me about the dungeon stuff.”

The other two nodded in agreement, so I drove off to the south. Along the way, I was quite surprised to see what looked like an elongated balloon flying through the air. There was a thin barrier around it, and it was carrying a large, sealed basket of people, with the basket itself surrounded by turrets.

“They have blimps now?” Diane asked in surprise, causing the two of us to look at her for an explanation. “It’s an outdated form of air travel for players. They’re not particularly safe, since they stay aloft due to highly flammable gasses. Still, it must have been more convenient to drive these through the rifts as opposed to planes.”

“If they’re flying this towards Fallcry, then someone has probably built a docking station just outside of the city.” As she said that, I spotted Fallcry in the distance. Sure enough, there was a large, tower-like structure just past the northern gate. It didn’t seem particularly stable, as if the exterior were still only half-built, but there were people actively working to complete it.

I shook my head, driving past the blimp and over the city. To avoid making a scene, I had activated my Ghost Zone again, and sent Nuoda a message saying that we were almost to the palace.

Once we arrived, Diane and Bella left to go see if there were any new stores in the city, while I made my way inside after stowing away the car. Thankfully, it seemed Nuoda was free, though it was her Chosen that was present, as opposed to her Player. When I found her in her office, her brand was dime and she was looking through a stack of reports.

“Sorry, my Player had to log out early to get ready for dinner,” she spoke up as soon as I entered. “Still, I know the contents of what she wanted to share with you. First of all, is the building secure?”

Catching something in her tone, I closed my eyes, pushing my True Sight to its limits to cover the entirety of the palace. “There are only a few servants on the first floor, nobody using any kind of stealth skill that I can sense.” As I said that, I closed the door, before giving the entire room a light sweep with my Martial King skill, just to see if there were any solid entities that I couldn’t detect.

Nuoda hesitated, but gave a small nod. “That’ll have to be good enough. Wisteria told me to make sure and share this information only when the area was confirmed safe, and not to use the private messaging system. Apparently, there are some high-level methods that let you intercept those messages, and she was worried that the other party might have them.”

I perked a brow, surprised by this level of secrecy. “So, they’ve found something by now, then?”

“It’s been almost three weeks,” Nuoda pointed out. “If they hadn’t uncovered anything by this point, I’d be even more concerned. First of all, they’ve confirmed the existence of the dungeon cities, and even sent an infiltrator in. For confidentiality sake, Wisteria wouldn’t tell me the identity of the infiltrator. All I know is that they weren’t sent in through this dungeon.”

“You mean they’ve found other entrances?” I asked in surprise, and Nuoda confirmed it.

“They seem to have a pattern when choosing dungeons to connect to. First, the dungeon’s monsters must not be a type that have blood in their bodies. This means that they primarily target undead, golem, elemental, or mechanical dungeons. Secondly, they space their dungeons out for safety, to make sure that players don’t just accidentally stumble on them.”

“In order to enter the dungeon, a monster’s fresh blood has to be smeared on a certain area, marked with a small symbol of two intertwining horns. This causes a gate to open, much like the gate of the League of Assassins. Because of this, Wisteria believes that each city is, in fact, its own organization with a powerful monster force backing it.”

I considered this information, but it left me more confused. “How do they actually make the connection, though? Did a monster just sneak into our skeletal dungeon while nobody was looking? Given where the other dungeon the monster trio mentioned was, that doesn’t really seem feasible.”

“My Player asked this as well, and Wisteria had another theory,” Nuoda explained. “She said that they might have someone at the highest level of the ‘architect’ skill.”

“City Planner?” I blinked in surprise, but Nuoda shook her head.

“City Planner is the ‘imperfect’ grandmaster level. She said that the highest level, raised from the basic Architect, is Labyrinth Master. This skill lets you create your own dungeons. According to her, if you save a dungeon blueprint without actually creating it, there is a low chance that it will just spawn somewhere naturally in the world over time. So, she believes that these organizations have Labyrinth Masters who create various dungeons with the gates already installed, and then just wait for those gates to become active.”

“When they do, they likely send someone through to investigate its location. This way, they can have dungeons appear in distant areas without needing to do the legwork themselves and risk exposing their upper management.”

That was… honestly terrifying to think about. I was sure that there were restrictions on the mechanics or monsters that you could place within a dungeon, but even so, imagining that these dungeons were created by monsters with the intent to act as a front for hiding monster cities…

“I see… is there anything else?” I asked, but Nuoda denied it.

“That’s all that Wisteria has shared with me. We haven’t noticed anyone going in or out of the dungeon city linked with our dungeon that I’m aware of, though we’ve only been able to passively observe it to avoid alerting the other party.”

Hearing that, I turned, preparing to leave, before pausing. “By the way, that landing tower outside the city..?”

Understanding my question, Nuoda readily explained. “A few days after you left, a player came to mine and asked for permission. My player understood what it was, so she agreed. Every couple of days, an airship will come by and let people travel between Chimeris and the prime world.”

“Right. Good to know,” I smiled, checking the available nobility ranks. We had managed to get quite a few more people into the nation, so more ranks had opened up. “I’m going to make you a Duchess. Afterwards, I want you to find ten players to bestow the rank of Lord. That should get them to realize the benefits of joining Fallcry a bit more clearly.”

Nuoda blinked at that, but quickly agreed. “Alright. Is there anything else that you want me to do?”

After thinking about it for a moment, I came up with an idea. “Give the ten new lords a mission to settle two new cities in total. If they can bring me a blueprint for the city that they want to create, as well as necessary resources, I’ll build it for them. Right now, we need more people, and also more cities. Especially now that we have a stable income.”