

Leveling up 211

Chapter 211: Tough as Nails

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 10%

Always cover your back, Spike shouted, amused.

Unlike the rest of the group, he found it funny watching Dallion get punctured by swamp mosquitos. The rest of the party was hesitating between pity and despair. Everyone knew that Dallion didnt have the skills to match them, and still they hoped he would do a lot better.

As it turned out, the lieutenant was the best judge of abilities, which was why he had forbidden Dallion from joining in until most of the threat was dealt with. When it came time to kill off the last part of the final swampa mere puddle compared to all the ones beforehe had allowed Dallion to join in. The result was horrifying.

Five minutes in and Dallions health couldnt rise over fifty percent, and that was with Lux constantly helping out. In normal circumstances Dallion would have been defeated ages ago, which only made him even more frustrated.

The zig-zag attack that was so efficient in sphere item explorations was completely inadequate for the current swarm. Or rather, it wasnt fast enough to keep up with the mosquitos movements. Watching the elites deal with them made the action perceptively easy. When Dallion tried to do it on his own, though, it proved way more challenging. Constant splitting was necessary for him only to survive.

It was in moments like these that Dallion saw how right Vend was to focus on training his splitting endurance. Even after the relatively small number of sessions, Dallion was able to handle it much better, and for one thing, the headaches werent as strong as before. Unfortunately, they still persisted.

Less splitting, more hacking, Spike shouted.

Give it a rest, White said. Hes at his limit.

Well, thats pathetic, Spike shrugged, although Dallion was able to glimpse that he didnt mean it, at least not fully. Part of him was still confident that improvement was possible.

All he needs to do is survive this round, the lieutenant said. If he manages that without help, hell do.

Always the optimist.

No. Im just better at judging people

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 10%

Damn it!

Dallion cursed.

He still wasn't able to get the hang of it. His front and peripheral vision were perfect, letting him evade most threats, but there was a spot just behind the back of his head that he could do nothing about. The single solution he had found to work was splitting, but that was becoming more and more exhausting, and on occasion he'd forget about it altogether.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has been increased by 5%

Good thing you're here, Lux.

Dallion slashed through another insect with his Nox dagger.

You too, Nox.

The crackling let out a semi mew in response. It didn't enjoy having to fight dirt. After having to face a lot of interesting guardians, Dallion couldn't blame him. Hopefully, after this mission was over, there would be more interesting opponents.

Shield, can you become a helmet? Dallion asked, twisting around in an attempt to utilize his guard skills.

The Shield's lack of response suggested that the answer was no. It would have been too good if it were otherwise.

Keep it up, Spike shouted. You've got less than a dozen left.

Less than a dozen?

Dallion slashed a few more mosquitoes and looked around. Even a non-awakened could easily see that there were more than a dozen; it seemed more like there were a hundred. Confused, Dallion gave Spike a quick glance.

Okay, so I miscounted? Spike shrugged.

I thought you said that leveling up deals with a person's shortcomings. Dallion slashed another wave, then leaped back, starting a guard sequence. Three quarters in one of his instances was interrupted. The other one, though, managed to pull through.

Time slowed down; not by much given the speed of the creatures, but enough to give Dallion a slight advantage.

Several more insects were poofed out of existence.

Guard and attack

, Dallion said to himself. No markers appeared, but they didnt have to the patterns were in his mind, allowing him to follow them flawlessly without issue.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has been increased by 5%

Mosquitos died, one after the other. For a moment, it seemed that Dallion had gotten the rhythm and would manage to kill them off in one go until another one caught him by surprise, dealing another minor wound. Time returned to normal, ending all his work.

He choked again, Alera sighed. Seriously, cant we just kill the pests? Itll be faster and its not like hes learning anything much.

No, the lieutenant said firmly. He keeps on going till the end.

The encouragement gave Dallion his second wind. Gritting his teeth, he slashed on. His actions werent graceful or particularly fast, but he tried to be as efficient as possible. After a while, the more creatures he killed, the more hesitant they became. Their attacks took longer, the coordination was less, giving him the advantage he so desperately needed.

Five minutes later, the battle was over. And not only that.

Tough as Nails

(Body +2)

It takes endurance and determination to see something through, even when you know youre not capable of it. Just be sure not to break in the process.

An achievement? Spike arched a brow. For that?

Its not always the action, the lieutenant said. Sometimes its the state of mind.

That sounded deep in a sort of cringy way. Back on Earth, Dallion had found similar pieces of wisdom in fortune cookies. As a child, he used to find them amusing. That was before he had grown up to be a cynical college boy who knew all the answers in the world. However, that was only his past on Earth. On this planet Dallion had treasured everything that remotely sounded like a saying, especially if it came from a monk of the Order. Come to think of it, the few months that had passed through Dherma had said little else or maybe they had, but Aspions limiting echo had made all their words sound like gibberish.

You should have used your music, the lieutenant told Dal. Getting them dizzy helps a lot.

I know, but Im not that good at wielding a harpsisword at such speed, Dallion replied.

You could still sing, cant you? Next time do it.

After a few more tips, the group went on to get rid of the last shoal of cracks, leaving Dallion behind. If in the past he would have taken the time to watch what they were doing, now he took full advantage of the calm to get some rest.

Giving his all was draining. No wonder large explorations took weeks or even months to complete. How long would a world item take, though? From what Dallion had managed to find out, the guild

had been exploring it for years and still had barely managed to get one third of the way there. Of course, there was no guarantee that they only did that, but Dallions gut told him that the exploration must have continued decades in true time.

In some aspects it sounded like an expeditionary group of travellers charting an unfamiliar land in the hopes of finding knowledge, and potential riches. At least Dallion wouldnt mind getting something good out of it.

The party managed to finish off the last remaining cracklings in the area five faster than Dallion had killed the mosquitos. Barely had he managed to lie down and catch his breath when he was back up again and walking towards the single enormous mountain in the realm.

According to Nil, when it came to the look of an area, there never was a firm rule. Some houses were insides of mountains, others were endless plains with multi-leveled mountains that represented the higher floors, in other cases still the real had the form of a multilayered cake in which each layer was different from the next. Here, the real was considered classic. However, that also meant that in order to complete the job, they would have to reach the peak of the mountain.

Seventeen percent left seems a bit fishy, Skiv said. It cant be that easy, can it?

In some of these old houses, most of the mess is in the basement, White replied. After that, its just going through the motions. Of course, there could be surprises.

What sort? Dallion eagerly asked.

Traps, protective echoes, or something left behind by the Star.

The name made Dallion feel chills. The Star has been here?

It doesnt have to be the Star, the old man replied. We have cultists to thank for that.

White, the lieutenant said in warning fashion.

If hes becoming an elite, he should

Thats enough. The tone was unmistakable. A few quick glances were exchanged between the two men, after which White capitulated.

Pay no notice, he replied.

Surprises are rare, June said. Though not too rare. The key is not to approach anything that doesnt look like it belongs here. Especially treasures. If you see a treasure in a realm, nine out of ten times its a trap.

What about the tenth time? Dallion pressed on.

The tenth time its usually crap. No one has gained anything from treasures in a realm. Its not how things work. Youre lucky to get an achievement. Thats the greatest reward you can hope for.

That and a healthy bonus, Spike added.

By the time they reached the foot of the mountain, nighttime had already started. Dallion proposed that they leave the realm and simply go to the second floor to make things faster, but the rest of the party refused. The time it would take getting from one floor of the building to the next in the real world was going to have a much greater effect in the area realm, causing part of the muck theyd

killed to reappear. The better solution was to take longer to climb up, but remain inside. Only after everything was done were they to return.

Going up a mountain, though, proved easier said than done. In this case Dallion wasn't just slow, he slowed the entire party down. The delay could easily have been avoided if someone just picked up and carried him uphill, but this was another thing on which the lieutenant was adamant about: Dallion had to manage on his own.

Well, his is torture. He could at last have let someone throw me a rope. What's the good in trying to climb, when everyone knows I don't have the skills?

So, you think it's a waste of time?

The goal, dear boy, is to have you face adversity. You don't only have to be prepared to face new enemies. Sometimes you need to know how to cope when you're in a situation that requires a group of skills that you don't have.

Of course, you will. Until then, though, you have to settle for a few lesser victories such as climbing to the next mountain level.

Chapter 212: Up the Mountain

The further Dallion went up the mountain, the more difficult it got. That was until he came to three simple realizations. The first one was that parts of the mountain were made of solid metal allowing him to see their composition and weakness. The second was that using his Nox dagger, Dallion could easily etch footholds in certain spots and that wasn't exclusive to metal in order to help him climb faster. The third, and most important of his discoveries, was that there was no rule or reason preventing him from having Lux fly him up to the first mountain platform. In fact, that was exactly what was expected of him.

The lieutenant had no idea that Dallion's familiar was capable of this, but he didn't have to be. All he wanted was to see Dallion adapt, and Dallion had.

Did you have to wait till now to do that? the lieutenant asked once the party had all gathered. That was as much a compliment as he was capable of. However, it was also a very valuable piece of advice. In the realms, the only fairness was the proper use of skills. In normal circumstances, a guardian wouldn't hesitate to attack. Thus, there was no point in holding back.

Healing, flight, and music. Spike grinned. You're like a bona fide mage. Any other tricks, you know?

I'm learning to cook, Dallion quickly changed the subject. At this point, he definitely was going to keep Nox a secret for as long as possible.

Save me a portion. Spike said. Everyone in the group stared at him. What? With so many hidden skills, maybe I'll get lucky and the food will do something.

If there was a moment for a mass sigh, this was it. Despite his good combat qualities, Spike's humor remained terrible.

Seriously, Spike Alera shook her head. Level up.

So, what now? White asked. Seventeen percent is pretty thin.

The usual. We scout, then move to the next platform. The lieutenant glanced at Dallion. You're good at finding cracks, right?

Sure. Dallion nodded.

Think you can spot moldlings?

The plants and the bog? Yeah.

What about rustlings? June asked.

That sounded outright scary, even if it was an extremely rare occurrence. Of course, Dallion knew perfectly well why both Nil and June were bringing it up: the world item remained an item, but with the properties of an area. All rust, corrosion, and other effects were likely to take form in an area setting, and that would make the exploration significantly more dangerous.

I'll be able to spot them, Dallion replied with a confident smile.

Good. You and June go counter. Alera, you're clockwise. The rest of us will head for the next platform. Let the rest know if something happens. If not, we'll meet at nightfall.

An interesting approach, no doubt. If it were up to him, Dallion would just have the entire group spread out and continue clockwise in parallel. While they were technically on a mountain, the area

was still huge, likely a third of the area below, and that itself had been enormous. Granted, it was smaller than the Stone Garden that realm would have taken weeks to cover without Lux's help.

After a few follow-up instructions, the party split up, each group continuing its respective way. Initially, Dallion was afraid that June wouldn't be able to keep up with him, so he had Lux move him forward in small bursts. That proved ideal, as it matched the woman's running speed.

Looking from Above, Dallion was able to see the differences and similarities between the first level of the mountain and the plains below. Both were made of bricks, but those on the mountain had a more elaborate design on them. Going up high enough, the whole thing looked like one giant mosaic, although much to Dallion's disappointment, there were no hidden clues or messages written on it.

The further they went, the more it became clear that the realm wasn't supposed to have plants. That was somewhat unusual. While on the first floor it was normal to expect that the swamps, fields, and even the large tree-like plants weren't supposed to be there, on the first mountain level which corresponded to the ground floor of the house even beautiful single trees, bushes, or patches of grass were mercilessly sliced up by June. The fact that they quickly poofed out of existence indicated that the decision had been correct.

Those are moldlings? Dallion asked while they were taking a quick break.

Some. The rule of thumb is when in doubt, attack it. If it's not meant to be here, it'll react. And if it is, you'll have a bit of repairing to do.

There was no denying that logic.

Are there any other ways of dealing with such creatures? Dallion asked. Offering a truce or something?

Offering truce to a stinky? June stared at him. That's weird. Ever tried it?

I've offered a draw to guardians and blocker creatures, he said. Isn't it the same with these?

No. There's no trusting these. They are created by the Star. Their only role is to spread decay and ruin.

So much for flexibility

, Dallion thought.

Hmm.

Thats a bit extreme.

It all depends on what circles youre in. For the moment, youre fine. A double digit is the start of the path. The further you level up, though, the more eyes youll attract. Do you think its a coincidence that the nobles behave the way they do?

You tell me.

The short answer is no. The long answer is: thats something youll have to learn on your own when you level up.

As long explanations went, this one was rather short, but it conveyed exactly what the echo had in mind.

How often do you get such jobs? Dallion asked,

Full house cleaning? One every few years. Those who can afford it prefer to deal with the problem on their own, and those who cant Well, they resort to other options. The guild usually gets districts or entire road sections or sewer sections.

Dallion instinctively winced.

Sewers arent that bad. The reals are much better than the real thing. There's a lot of hacking, though. Mostly roaches. The city made sure not to allow cracklings to gather strength in vital infrastructure.

That made sense with one exception as far as Dallion was aware, the city didnt have plumbing. It was a simple slip of the tongue, but it suggested there was still a lot to the city that Dallion didnt know rather, a lot he hadnt been told about. Possibly it had to do with the next awakening gate.

Curiosity lit up in Dallion, making him eager to level up until he reached level twenty.

Youre not cut out for it, June said all of a sudden.

Huh? Dallion tensed up.

Sanitation. Mending areas is not something youll be happy doing. Youre an adventurer and adventures want to keep going forward. There was a slight pause, accompanied by a smile. And youll get there. You might be pathetic now, as Spike would say, but youve done a lot for a newbie. Match wouldnt ask us to take you on this mission, if you didnt have the stones to cope with it.

And here I thought it was all about potential. Dallion let out a nervous laugh.

Its never about potential. The woman shook her head. Its about the potentials limit. Some have the ability to see anothers potential just by looking at them. The same as you see emotions with your music skills.

That was a skill Dallion hadnt heard of before.

The echo remained silent.

You can see the limit of my potential? Dallion leaned forward. His pulse had doubled as he voiced the question.

There is no limit, June replied. You'll reach far, unless something stops you.

Isn't that the same for everyone? We all go far unless something stops us

No. Most people have a wall they cannot break through a limit set from birth. A single grain of regret appeared in June's chest. For a few moments Dallion saw it form and grow, then disappear again, hidden by other emotions. Some try to break that limit, others don't. In your case, you don't have to.

A limit that he didn't have to break. This sounded so very different from everything Dallion had been doing until now. Everything he had learned through experiences or scrolls suggested that with enough skill, smarts, and persistence, he could fight through his flaws, becoming better in the process. The thought that there were others who couldn't do that was outright disturbing; just as disturbing as the fact that Nil hadn't said a word.

I have. But I still don't like it.

Let's get going, June stood up. We've a lot to cover.

As they continued heading counterclockwise, a rectangle appeared, indicating that another four percent of the realm had been repaired. One of the other groups must have come across something and dealt with it. Along with the cumulative one percent that Dallion and June had cleared by destroying a stray tree or patch of plants here and there, that left twelve percent to go.

By nightfall, the number had shrunk to eight. Much to Dallion's regret, he hadn't gotten to see a rustling, although Nox had sniffed out a small nest of crackling rats that he had taken care of. At this point, all that remained was up the mountain two more layers as well as the peak.

Get some rest, the lieutenant ordered. Two shifts. Dallion, you'll sleep all the way through.

Are you sure? It's not a problem for me to

First thing tomorrow, you'll be heading to the peak. I need you fresh if there's anything there.

Chapter 213: Secret's Protector

Morning came slowly. Dallion spent the greater part of the night trying to get answers out of Nil about the invisible barrier and everything that was beyond level twenty. As expected, Nil was tightlipped, always shifting the conversation to something more practical, such as the levels leading to level twenty.

The echo had also chosen a selection of area mending scrolls for Dallion's benefit. Compared to other things in the library, there weren't a lot of them. Clearly Nil and captain Adzorg respectively wasn't interested in talking on the subject.

As the party prepped for another day of cleaning, Dallion felt the first signs of hunger kick in. His body level managed to numb the sensation, but a prolonged stay in a realm had its effects. The fact that he had fought a lot only had hastened the effect of hunger.

Take this. White tossed a small object to Dallion.

Dallion caught it on instinct, then opened his hand. No larger than a button, the object was a small piece of leather, threaded so as to act as a mini stress ball.

Whats this? Dallion asked.

Candies, the old man replied. Chew on it and it makes the hunger go away.

Dallion looked at the thing suspiciously. He definitely didnt want to chew on that, given the choice.

Its fine, Spike said a few steps away. We share them all the time.

Dallion felt his stomach churn. The thought of chewing something that someone else had chewed didnt fill him with confidence. If anything, he felt disgusted.

This is a realm, so hygiene is perfect here, Spike went on. The only disgusting still is the one trying to kill you. You can lick the ground and nothing will happen. It doesnt even taste bad. Actually, it doesnt taste at all.

Thats a bit too much information. Dallion moved the leather button further away from his face.

Get used to it. The elite laughed. Theres no food on expeditions. You either eat what you find or find a way to trick your mind into not eating.

As true as the explanation was, inspiring it was not. Dallion looked at the item. It didnt even look like a candy. He would very much prefer a stick of chewing gum, but such things didnt exist in this world, and even if they did, he wouldnt be able to take them into an awakened realm.

Whats it made of?

Spirit leather, White said. Not only metals can be taken into the realms. There are animals that can be as well. That piece of leather costs more than the entire group makes in a month.

Really?

That was outrageously expensive. Dallion tried to calculate the exact price. Considering how much he had received for mending the Stone Garden, the final sum had to go into the thousands of gold coins. For that much money, Dallion could buy his own house in one of the acceptable neighborhoods of the city. In fact, everyone in the party could.

Gift for my service, the old man said with a note of bitterness.

Point is, use it for a few hours, then give it back, Spike said. Youre not the only one whos hungry.

After such a request, Dallion had no choice but to reluctantly comply. To his surprise, the texture wasnt terrible and there even was a faint taste like dried jerky.

I know. I must get a whole lot of things. In order to do that, though, Ill need to rack in some gold.

Lux, Dallion said.

The firebird appeared directly on his back, boosting him a few feet off the ground. All the flying about the previous day had made him eager to do it again. In contrast, Nox had resorted to lazing around with an occasional meowy grumble. Exploration without enemies to fight bored him to the extreme.

I go to the peak and back? Dallion asked.

Theres a bit more to it than that, the lieutenant said. Keep an eye open for cracklings and the like. Also, be careful with things that shouldnt belong. If theres a secret compartment in the attack, itll be near the peak.

So, just scout, then come back to you and report. Dallion nodded. Got it.

Meanwhile, the rest of us will continue as before. We go up to the next level. June goes counter, Alera goes clockwise. The rest of us move forward. This is smaller, so I expect everyone to be done by noon.

Dallion waited for a few more seconds, just to be certain that no one had anything to add, then zoomed up into the sky, boosted by his familiar. The sensation was uniqueair pressing against his face, while the ground darted away. The level of cooperation between Dallion and his familiar had improved to the point that he only had to think of what to do and Lux would do it for him. Furthermore, thanks to Dallions level of mind, he could easily give precise instructions. Aerial combat would still prove a slight challenge, though.

In less than a minute, Dallion had already passed the second level of the mountain and was heading on. For some unknown reason, each level was twice as elaborate as the last. The second level had golden designs in the tile patterns, while the bricks on the third were like one giant tapestry. The people here definitely had strange tastes.

What do you think the attic will be like, Lux? Dallion asked.

The firebird chirped, the sound barely audible due to their speed.

I think itll be like the basement.

That was the one universal certainty about housesbasements and attics were always alike, and without question much crappier than every other part of the building. In this instancevery much to his surprisethat turned out not to be the case. The final level of the mountain, although far simpler in design than the previous one, was tiled with fine silver. Dallion could see the metal composition through the combination of his music and forging skills. Even more unusual, a short distance away from the edge, there was a large blue sphere half buried within the tiles.

Normally, Dallion would consider that to be a type of crackling he hadnt seen before. But neither Nox, nor Lux seemed to be agitated by it. For all intents and purposes, that was part of the building, and something that definitely didnt belong there.

Thats what everyone says at first. This isnt your house or your job, remember? Youre only to check if there are any cracklings on top, which there are. Everything else is up to the party.

So, youre suggesting I ignore this?

Im hardly in a position to do anything else, but yes, Im saying that you should leave it alone and report to your party leader. For all you know, it might be a trap.

True, there was that possibility, but there was also the question of what could be found within the sphere. The surface seemed completely smooth and made of blue marble. There were no markings, scars, or uneven areas anywhere on its surface. In another time or place, Dallion would have said that it was a force field. Here, though, he had no idea what it was.

The firebird obeyed, almost crashing him into the object. Dallion made a note to specify the type of steps. Lux definitely wouldnt be called a tiny bird, but his steps were a tenth of Dallions.

Look, Im fine, okay? Im not that stupid to play with something I know nothing about. All I want is to get a better look and maybe learn what the big deal is! Why is it a secret if someone is keeping a giant ball in their attic?

It isnt about the object, its about whats inside. Secrets are made to keep the item hidden both in the real world and in the awakened realms. What you see is the outside of a safe, and only the owner has the means to open it.

A safe? Why are you so worried then? What do you think Ill do? Slice it open with

Before he could finish the sentence, a loud clawing sound filled the air. Dallion froze. Terrified, he slowly looked at the side of the ball. A second series of noises followed, and their source was exactly what he had feared.

Sitting innocently by the ball was none other than Nox. The cracklingreckless and curious as its ownerhad been unable to resist the temptation and had snuck out to play with the large, giant object. And as everyone with cats knew, in the feline world, playing often equaled clawing.

Two sets of four lines ruined the flawless surface of the ball, crisscrossing in a way that created a natural tic-tac-toe board.

Nox Dallion managed to utter at a complete loss of words.

Completely oblivious of the harm it had caused, the crackling looked at him, then lay its paws on the floor with a loud meow. As he did, a piece of marble chipped off from the sphere. Moments later, without warning, the entire object contracted to half its size.

COMBAT INITIATED

You mean like a guardian?

Dallion Summoned his harpsisword and Armadil shield. Meanwhile, both Lux and Nox had prepared for battle. The creatures knew what was to follow and were looking forward to it as familiars tended to do.

No, not like a guardian these dont just throw you out of the realm, they can hurt you in real life. In some cases, they can even maim you to the point that you cant use an arm or leg in the real world.

That didnt sound good. Of all the times Nox had to show some initiative, why did it have to be now? It had taken Dallion so much effort to get to this point. He had finally become accepted as one of the team, not to mention he had learned a lot that would help him in the world item exploration. Instead, it was looking as if all that effort was thrown away... all because of the curiosity of a cat!

The sphere contracted again, and then a third time. Now it was no larger than a bowling bowl, glistening in bright cyan blue. Not waiting for it to attack, Dallion made the first move, splitting into two instances of himself and throwing his training dagger right at the target. The years of training had helped him perfect the action even without the help of athletics.

Just as the tip of the blade was about to hit the ball, an arm emerged from it and grabbed hold of the weapon.

Dallion swallowed, moving the shield to protect his head and upper torso. If there was a time for the sphere to counterattack, it was now. Fortunately for him, that did not happen. The blue hand released the weapon, letting it fall to the ground. After that, a second arm appeared as the ball morphed into a creature or rather a person.

PROTECTOR

Species: Nymph

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% Health

Skills:

- **Wind slash**

- **Emotion slash**

- **Sound entangle**

Weak spots: none

Chapter 214: External Consequences

Upon its creation, the world of awakened had held seven races, or at least that was what Dallion had been led to believe from the tomes and scrolls he had read in the ring library. It was said that half of these races had been corrupted by the Crippled Star: the copyettes, the dryads, and the nymphs. Each of them had nearly succeeded to conquer the world as a result and each of them had failed.

Specifics remained vague other than battle accounts, but what was made very clear was that the entire races were banished to act as guardians in the millions of items and areas of the world, along with less civilized creatures.

To this point, Dallion had faced two of them in the realmsthree if the slime in the first awakening shrine was taken into account. Technically, he had been victorious in each of his encounters. However, that was only because of the awakening rules limiting the power of his opponents. In this instance, hed receive no such advantage.

The nymph looked at him with curiosity, her eyes falling on the harpsisword Dallion was holding. There was no doubt she had recognized her, and possibly had even started a conversation Dallion couldnt hear.

A melody formed, creating the word no.

Dallion swallowed. So much for the easy way. If the protector was half as strong as Harp, he was in a lot of trouble. To be on the safe side, Dallion split into three instances. One remained where he was while the other two tried to escape in two different ways.

Im not here for the secret, Dallion said.

In the instances he had tried to escape, the nymph had attacked him with a flying blade of water, dealing him several medium wounds. In the instance he stayed, though, no attacks followed.

Ive been paid to mend the house. He paused, waiting to see what emotions would form within the protector. The nymph was still doubtful, though the size of the emotion had diminished somewhat. I was just going to the roof when I saw this, so I got curious. I guess my familiar got curious as well. Thankfully, the nymph considered all of this true.

Not to worry, though. I can heal you. My other familiar

No, the nymphs voice rang, echoing with the sharpness of a hundred blades. Dallion felt the cuts. Most of them were absorbed by his clothes and armor. The few that got to him just broke the skina reminder that Dallion wasnt the only one who could use music as a weapon. The protector wasnt as good as him in emotion manipulation, but she could cut things with her words.. as well as emotions. Dallion hadnt missed the attempts to instill some fear in him through the sound as well.

I dont want to fight you. Dallion struck back with some music in his words as well. In his case, he attempted to create more of an understanding in his opponent.

The nymph must have caught the attempt instantly, for a layer of vibrations surrounded her. Having the ability to combine water with music had its advantages. Thinking about it, Dallion was thankful he hadnt come across a fury with such skills. If he had, the fight would be over before it started.

Ill probably lose, Dallion went on, keeping up with his music attacks. But Ill also hurt you. He pointed to the claw marks on her left shoulder.

Only fools have a crackling as a familiar. The protector narrowed her eyes. Fools or something else.

What if I'm neither? Dallion asked, only to have Nil laugh at him from his awakening realm. Call it a draw?

You're not here for a draw. Not with her here.

This was the second time someone had referenced the guardian of Dallion's harpsisword.

What am I here for, then? Dallion persisted with his attack. Despite his efforts, nothing was able to penetrate the nymphs' defenses. Even so, this way he had her occupied on defending herself, instead of attacking.

You're here to get what I'm protecting. A saber made of water appeared in the nymphs' hand.

Dallion put in all his effort to create another instance, then had two of them attack while the rest retreated. Both attacks were parried in nearly identical fashion, followed up by a merciless attack that cost him a third of his health. During one of his retreats, though, the combat exchange resulted in Dallion receiving a serious wound, while also inflicting a medium one. Since there was no indication that the wound was anything serious, that was the instance he picked.

The sword didn't reply. So much for the option of her engaging the protector directly. This battle was going to be won or lost by Dallion alone.

The option was tempting. More than that, it was logical while Dallion might get a grumble or two from the lieutenant, and possibly an earful from March later on, he would remain healthy and in good condition. It would have been better if Dallion exited on his own, but given the nymphs' skills, the chances of him going through with a full guard sequence to trigger the realm escape was unlikely.

The protector made another attack. Dallion split into three instances. Each received a wound, but in one case Dallion saw a rectangle he had never seen before.

PERMANENT EFFECT LIMP ARM

Your LEFT ARM has been permanently made limp. You will not be able to use your arm until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

Naturally, Dallion switched to one of the two alternatives, but the result was chilling all the same. Fear sparked in him. Such a wound was almost as bad as getting his powers sealed a fear Dallion hadn't experienced in a very long time.

No

, a voice composed of music said.

Harp?

You need to fight on. If you stop here, it will be very difficult to continue.

I hear what youre saying, Harp, but I have no chance against her. Youve seen what shes capable of.

Dallion wasnt exactly sure what that meant, but he knew that his guardian wasnt lying. Hope was vibrating through her very being, as was confidence in his abilities. For a moment Dallion felt as if he had been caught by his mom doing something bad. Harp was likely going to support him no matter his choice, but she was going to be very disappointed if he gave up.

The attack was easily avoided/ Nox took advantage of the situation to appear on Dallions head and leap at his target, claws at the ready.

The protector hesitated. For a single second, she was unsure which of the two to attack. Dallion saw her split into two instances, and just as Vend had taught him, this was when he made his move by creating two new instances of himself. One of the instances blocked the nymphs attack, while the other two slashed in arc fashion so as to protect Nox.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage has been increased by 200%

The harpsisword struck the protectors arm. The flesh hardened to stone, preventing the harpsisword from sinking in more than half an inch. Nox, however, remained three to continue with an attack of his own, which he did and severed the arm off.

In normal circumstances, the battle would be considered over. The protector had an arm severed, while Dallion was out of reach and at a tactical advantage.

Draw? Dallion offered, while another five percent of his health increased thanks to the firebird.

Without saying a word, the nymph created a ball of water around what was left of her arm. After several moments, her hand reemerged again along with a rectangle, stating that she had restored ten percent of her own health.

Before Dallion could even mentally complain, a series of daggers split the air, aiming for him.

Shield! Dallion moved the shield in front just in time to block half a dozen of the weapons, although three managed to fly past, thankfully without causing any further wounds.

The protector didnt let it end there. With one strike stomp of her foot, she shattered several of the silver tiles of the ground. A stream of water emerged, shooting out like a dragon emerging from its lair, and just like a dragon it swerved, making its way straight for Dallion.

Spinning in the air best he could, Dallion attempted a series of skewer attacks. While effecting against the living water stream, the action left him open just enough for the protector to bury a dagger in his shoulder. Even with his armor, that further reduced Dallions health by twenty percent, although thankfully, there were no other effects.

Damn it!

If the lieutenant were here, hed tell Dallion to use his music, but Dallion had already seen that music had no effect on the protector. If Vend were nearby hed suggest that Dallion split more, even if that would mean going beyond his limit. Negotiations had also proven ineffective.

This wasnt an awakened realm, so there was no guarantee that the situation was winnable, but even so he had to do something. The only thing worse than losing was losing without trying.

The crackling let out an annoyed meow, but complied. Dallion then summoned the dagger in his left hand.

Shield, can you shrink a bit?

The armadil shield contracted slightly, although that didnt make holding the dagger particularly more comfortable. Still, that was the price Dallion had to pay for his plan. Now it was time to go on with his absurd plan.

Focusing all his energy, Dallion split into four instances. In each case, he swooped right at the protector, dagger and harpsisword at the ready. The recklessness of the attack surprised the nymph somewhat, for she took a step back instead of immediately attacking. That single second was all that Dallion needed.

All four of his instances threw the dagger at the nymph. In all four cases, his aim was off. However, that was the entire point.

Lux, hop out of me and guild Nox to hit her! If you miss, just keep going, then turn around for another go!

No sooner had he said it than Dallion felt his body getting heavier. Without the firebird, gravity had taken hold of his body, pulling it back to the third level. No doubt it was going to sting quite a bit when he made contact. Even so, it would be worth it.

The last time Dallion had tried to copy technology from Earth in this world, he had ended up wounding a chainling. Back then, it was more luck than anything else that the plan succeeded at all.

Now, though, there was far more luck involved: there were two familiars seeing to it that the weapon found its target and dealt as much damage as possible.

Chapter 215: Planned Surprise

The dagger zipped past the nymph, then swirled in place doing a hundred-and-eighty-degree-turn and thrust right at her once more. In all the movies back on Earth, guided missiles were depicted as devastating weapons that could never miss. Thanks to Nox and Lux, Dallion had transformed that fiction into reality. Despite all efforts, there was no way to counter that weapon. The guidance system had a mind of its own, making complex decisions on the spit, while the blade thanks to Nox had the ability to shatter pretty much anything blocking its way. To make matters worse for the target, the body of the dagger itself was indestructible a quality that Vend had described as useless back when Dallion had fulfilled the daggers destiny during his selection trial.

In several regards, the plan was perfect except for one minor flaw. Without Lux Dallions ability to restore health or fly had been removed. When combined with the fact that he was at forty percent health, that forced him to take a defensive stance regardless how many opportunities for attack emerged.

However, despite his best efforts, Dallion found that he was unable to stick to his plan. Each time the nymph evaded the flying Nox dagger, put her at a slight disadvantage. On two occasions, Dallion was able to see an obvious opening for him to take advantage of. On the third time, he could hold back no longer. Using what mental strength he had left, he created another instance of himself and attacked.

The result was far less than what he had hoped for. Not only were all the attacks blocked, but the nymph counterattacked, dealing him more than a few serious wounds.

Realm section mended!

Overall completion 96%

A large blue rectangle popped up. At least the rest of the group was doing something right. Part of Dallions mind considered whether he shouldnt just cocoon himself in the shield and wait until the rest of the group finished with the job, or his flying dagger managed to deal with the protector. Doing so, though, would get the harpsisword guardian upset, and not only her. At the end of the day, if Dallion couldnt defeat a surprise enemy in an area realm, what good would he be in a world item exploration? Also, he still had the option to hide within the shield if things got worse.

For a single moment, Dallions head felt as if it would explode. Several sets of markers appeared, only to disappear moments later. Another second later, the music markers reappeared, indicating the nymphs current emotional state. Suddenly Dallion felt like an old PC trying to run a current gen game. If he were to be competitive, he had to increase his mind, and given his direction of development, that wasnt going to be easy.

Dont be afraid. Im with you.

As reassuring as that sounded, Dallions doubts didnt disappear. Still, he had gotten a boost of moral support that pushed him to try an all-out attack. Singing and playing his harpsisword, Dallion moved forward in the only two instances he could create. As one of the tactical scrolls in the ring library had stated: the best way to take advantage of an opportunity is to create your own.

The attack was by no means flashy or graceful, nothing but a piercing strike followed by a sidestep and a quick retreat under the protection of the armadil shield. While the attack was too slow to do any harm in itself, it managed to distract the protector just enough for the Nox dagger to get closer and even cause a minor wound in the process.

Forty percent versus seventy-five not exactly good odds, but it was better than he had initially expected.

Following with two variations of a triple spin lunge, Dallion had another go. One of the strikes was not deflected, allowing him to net another minor wound. The counterattack that followed was so fierce, however, that it was only thanks to the shields quick action that Dallion got away with only being pushed on a dozen feet back. If it werent for that, the battle would have been over.

Thanks, he whispered as he got back to his feet.

The harpsisword vibrated in support.

And yet, Dallion couldnt kick the feeling that the idea wasnt reasonable in the least. If it were up to him, he would have played it safe and retreated the first chance he got. True, it was desperation that had given him good idea after good idea, but even so, he remained completely outclassed. If this were a computer game, Dallion would run to the edge of the boss attack zone and call his entire guild for help. What did the harpsisword see that he didnt? As a battle gear with thousands of years of experience, she had an idea of what to do. It had to be it. She was Dallions trusted weapon, after all. If she didnt

A realization suddenly swept over Dallion. Creating another instance of himself, he quickly retreated as far back as possible. In tune with his suspicions, the protector followed, yet didnt attack, still diverting her attention to the dagger.

Im not listening to you anymore, he said loudly, armadil shield still held in front of him.

At those words, the protector turned around facing him. Taking advantage of the situation, Lux thrust the dagger forward, striking her in the back between the shoulder blades. A red rectangle appeared, indicating Dallion had dealt a lethal wound. Even so, the nymph didn't disappear.

You're just water, Dallion lowered your shield. You never were part of this realm to begin with.

The nymph remained speechless.

Were you, Harp? Dallion summoned his Nox dagger. Feeling Dallion's hand, Lux moved from the dagger back to his back, starting the health restoration process.

The protector smiled, then contracted back to the blue marble ball she had been before the battle.

You have broken through your barrier.

Your level has increased to 15.

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

Without hesitation, Dallion increased his mind to eleven. While that was going to delay the perception level needed for him to use the sky silver hammer, combat splitting was of a much higher priority right now.

What do you mean, dear boy? I clearly warned you not to get involved.

A sad chirp told Dallion that he was wrong about the last part.

I didn't even know that guardians could help level me up?

That thing about the permanent effects was just made up, right?

Unfortunately, no. The danger is very real, even if it's unlikely you'd come across anything as dangerous as I've already explained many times. In this case, however

Harp, would you have hurt me?

Dallion shivered. Tough love didnt begin to cover it. Despite the guardians appearance, she was combat gear through and through.

Give me some credit. Its not like

Dear boy, youre already far more attuned to guardians than a lot of people I know. You trust them, which I suppose is fine, but there is such a thing as being gullible. Guardians have their opinions as well. Combat gears like fighting. Granted, your harpsisword is far more sophisticated than most, but how are you to know that? What will happen if your dartbow whispers that it would be better if you shoot a bolt in someones head. For the moment, nothing much, since we are in the realms, but if you get into the habit, youll start doing it in the real world as well.

For half a minute Dallion stood there, thinking things over. He had already come to the same conclusion, otherwise he wouldnt have been able to level up. Seeing how this would impact an entire society, though, was an entirely different thing altogether. Back on Earth, Dallion had heard his mother occasionally say that people were becoming slaves to objects. Never was that phrase meant to be as literal as it was here. Apparently, this was another danger of accepting to become a double digit.

If items could have such an effect on people, though, could the same be said about areas? Was it possible that a city made its owner do things? Its inhabitants? Where did it all end?

Thanks, Nil. And you too, Harp.

An annoyed meow sounded in Dallions realm.

Now that was done, all that remained was for Dallion to fly back up to the peak of the mountain and check that everything was alright. Hopefully, there wouldnt be any further surprises this time round.

What reward?

The reward you fought so hard to get. The blue marble, dear boy. Now that youre level fifteen, its yours. Go ahead and break it.

Any chance I can keep it as it is?

There was something magical about having a large blue bowling ball. Granted, it would only be available in the awakened realms, but it was quite catchy, to say the least.

I suppose you'll also want to keep all the coins you've earned in their pouch because the pouch looks nice and plump?

The echo had a point. Looking at the ball one last time, Dallion went to it, then slammed it into the ground. Blue dust spilled in all directions like thousands of fading pixels. Along the dust, a green rectangle also appeared.

ACROBATIC skills obtained

That was definitely a welcome surprise. After craving for another of the basic skills for so long, Dallion had finally gotten one when he least expected it. The good news was that now he would be able to combine it with the skills he already had. The not so good news was that he had a lot of items to level up until he could see the skills pull potential.

Chapter 216: Old and New

Realm fully mended!

The GILION HOUSE is flawless.

A single blue rectangle marked the successful end of the mission. There were no achievements, rewards, even the party didn't seem particularly celebratory. With little commotion, they discussed a few details of the job and then once all the deformed elements were fully restored to their previous state returned to the real world where the final steps of the cleaning took place.

Initially Dallion expected this to be a long and boring process, but to his surprise it was over in twenty minutes. The elites used their awakened skills to gather all dirt and muck, and Dallion's job was to take it out, just as the lieutenant had said. Annoyingly enough, it was Dallion who proved to be the bottleneck, struggling to keep up with everyone else.

Once that final step was done, the lieutenant went through every room of the house one final time. The inspection lasted only a few minutes, but for all Dallion knew, the lieutenant could have spent months within the realm fixing some problem or another.

Alright, we're heading back, the man said.

Dont we get a well done or anything?

These are elites. Its expected that their job is well done, dear boy. At this level, words are exchanged only when something goes wrong.

Dallion remained quiet. It was sort of anticlimactic. Barely had he said it when White gave him a pat on the shoulder. That was pretty much all that Dallion got, but it felt to be enough.

So, we have a feast when we get back? Dallion asked. His hunger had grown quite substantially after his last fight.

You can, if you want to, Alera replied. Ill be going to my own spot.

Ill skip, Spike said. I usually sleep after morning missions. Keeps me fresh for the evenings.

Guild food isn't to my taste, the lieutenant said. But as Alera said, there's nothing stopping you.

You're telling me

, Dallion smirked involuntarily. Since he had upped his perception past fifteen, food that had previously tasted well had aftertastes that made him reconsider his diet. Thankfully, Aspans means had retained their appeal.

It's acceptable, but people start acquiring certain caprices once they start working on the big missions. The same will likely happen to you.

The shield was remarkably quiet during the entire walk to the guild. On a few occasions, Dallion tried to crack a few jokes, but to little effect. When he asked Harp what was going on, only to get a vague reply that the shield wasn't feeling too well after the sanitation job.

Veil was at the guildhall when the group arrived. The blond had finished another mission and was receiving the usual degree of compliments. Unlike Dallion, he had quickly made the transition from pack rat to regular explorer. The combat skills he had displayed were exemplary, if Estezol was to be believed. If it weren't for the fact that Veil remained a level ten, he would have been made a party leader. The fact that he was used to mending and improving layers also helped. Dallion still couldn't figure out why Veil kept postponing his awakening test. In his place, he would have gone to the shrine a hundred times by now.

Hey, Veil waved as Dal approached. Job done?

Yeah, something like that. Dallion looked over his shoulder. Everyone but the lieutenant had gone off somewhere; as for the lieutenant himself, he was having a conversation with a scheduler in the lobby. Where's Estezol?

Got called up for something. Doesn't matter, because I already got my money. You waiting for anything?

Nah. It'll take a bit longer to get paid on this mission, he lied. Where's Gloria?

At a theatre, Veil put in a measured amount of disgust in the word. I don't see what's so special about it. The fighting was okay, and the acrobatics were actually good, but all that singing and playing instruments it was almost as bad as you during lunch hour.

Thanks a lot. Leave it to Veil to make a compliment sound like an insult. The more Dallion thought about it, the more he suspected that Veil was doing it on purpose. Any plans for today?

Other than work? Not much. You?

Eat. Dallion grinned. After that we'll see.

The feast was somewhat modest considering the guild's standards not that Dallion was given less food, but rather because there weren't that many people joining in.

A friend of yours asked me to join them on a future job, Veil said as Dallion ate.

Falkner? Dallion asked between bites.

Nah. His invites are reserved for my sister. Dallion could see that Veil didn't approve, but he didn't say anything. Being outright hostile to a noble's child was never a good idea. Bel. She seemed okay.

She is. Handles herself well in battle. Did Falkner invite Gloria to the theatre?

She got invited by that sleazeball from the plaza. The work offer turned out to be the real deal. Well, an invite for an audition, at least. The Falkner kid had a few fancy tickets, so there was no saying no. I was invited as well five rows behind them. Veil snorted. I still went, though. Wasn't anything much.

You mentioned. So did you

Hey, Dal, a familiar voice said as someone joined the table. Will you introduce me to your friend?

Dallion choked. He still wasn't used to people sneaking up on him, but that wasn't the reason that he swallowed his bite. The person who had just joined them was none other than Eury.

You're a gorgon, Veil said, brimming with astonishment.

Good eyes. A few clusters of snakes moved in Veil's direction, most focusing on Dallion, however.

Clearing his throat with a full glass of water, Dallion quickly proceeded to introduce both parties. As bad as the situation was, it could always get worse if things weren't presented in the correct light.

This is Veil, he's the childhood friend I've been telling you about. Currently the village chief.

Half village chief, Veil corrected.

Veil, this is Eury. A gorgon and a thread forger. I go to her when I need wearable gear.

If someone had introduced Dallion in such a manner, he would have felt insulted to say the least. For some reason, Eury not only didn't feel upset, but she was rather amused.

You can say that. She put her arm round Dallion. Just to let you know, my work doesn't come cheap. And I don't make discounts for blonds.

If I'd need a discount, it won't be for being blond. Veil smiled. When he did, Dallion could already see he was in deep trouble.

Despite appearances, and the gorgon's casual flirting, Veil had come to suspect the very thing which Dallion hoped he wouldn't—that Eury was his lover. The suspicion remained uncertain, but it was practically ringing like a church bell amongst the rest of Veil's emotions.

I didn't come here, Dallion said, trying to steer the topic of conversation away.

I still have some relations with the guild. When I heard that you'd survived an elite mission, it was normal for me to come to congratulate you. Show moral support and the like, she clarified to Veil, who only nodded. What are you two doing? Not starting another job, I hope?

Cant. Ive reached my daily limit. I'm just sitting here, waiting for dal to finish eating so we can go somewhere.

Any place in mind?

No, not really. Do you have anything in mind?

As a matter of fact, why not come to my workshop? I have some new things, and Im always happy to help a friend of Dallions spend a bit of money. Maybe youll see something youll like?

Im sure I will.

Dallion growled.

Just some friendly advice. Ill shut up now.

What do you think, Dal? Eury pulled him closer to her. Think hes ready to enter my lair?

No, but thats never stopped him before, Dallion replied with a bit of regained confidence. Can you give me a minute to finish eating?

Take your time. Eury stood up. I have some work here, anyway. Shouldnt be gone long.

Ill be here.

Well be here, Veil corrected. Im not missing this for the world.

The gorgon laughed, then ruffled Dallions hair and entered the guildhall. For nearly a minute, no one said a word. Then Veil crossed his arms, looking at Dallion with a wide smirk.

You and a gorgon, Veil said, more to himself than anyone else. Im impressed. And all this time I thought you were giving my sister puppy eyes.

Puppy eyes? Dallion thought. He didnt remember doing anything of the sort. In fact, as far as he remembered things, Gloria had been the one giving him signs even since the acknowledgement. The irony was that back then Dallion was so calm and confident in himself that he wouldnt have been bothered hooking up with the woman. Now, when he was pretty much a couple with Euryale, he felt like he owed Gloria an explanation.

How long has this been going on? Veil pressed on.

A while. The important thing is that you dont tell your sister.

Veil arched a brow.

You know how she is. Besides, youve seen how people react to her in the city. Saying that shes just a friend might be taken the wrong way and I really dont need other complications right now.

Dal, youre making absolutely no sense. Still, if you want me to keep it a secret, Ill keep it a secret.

Thanks. Dallion returned to his food.

Still, I wont run to save you if you mess up. Understood?

Dallion nodded. The crisis had been averted, or at least postponed, for a few more days. For several minutes, he continued to eat in silence. Every bite seemed to stick to his throat as he tried to swallow it.

Hannah doesn't like her much, Dallion decided to give a few more important details. Eury used to work at the inn at some point, before something happened.

What? Veil leaned forward.

No idea. All I know is that since then, Hannah and Eury aren't on the best of terms. Another reason not to talk about her at the inn.

Got you.

Also, she's a hunter.

Veil's eyes widened.

She was out doing a job in the wilderness, when you two showed up. Don't know any details, so don't ask.

That wasn't what I was going to ask.

Well, don't ask anything, Dallion quickly cut him short. He had been around Veil long enough to know where the conversation would have gone. All you need to know is that she's a very high level and could snap both of us like twigs if we get her upset. Got that?

That was probably the worst warning Dallion had given in his life. Back on Earth, he'd feel ashamed of saying this. Right now, though, he wasn't particularly picky.

Almost on cue, the gorgon returned, carrying a rather large leather backpack. Veil had openly asked what was inside, and to Dallion's surprise, the gorgon had shown them. Within the rough backpack were several ingots of exotic materials. Some Dallion recognized immediately as being sky silver. The rest, though, remained a complete mystery. His forging skills told him that the material was in perfect condition, whatever it was, and while they weren't sky silver, they were likely just as expensive.

Just something I have to build in a few weeks. The gorgon closed the backpack. Veil, tell me, have you seen an awakened forger in action?

You'll be the first. We don't have many awakened or blacksmiths back home.

In that case you'll be in for a treat—you'll see me teaching Dallion to become a proper forger.

Chapter 217: Forging Apprentice

Learning magical forging was supposed to be a dream come true. Both on Earth and in this world, children and apprentices dreamt of having the ability to create magical items that had the power to destroy mountains and split seas in two. The only problem was that in order to reach that level, one had to start with something significantly simpler. In Dallion's case, since he had been too smart for his own good upon selecting his first hammer, that meant learning the most basic of the basics: how to keep a forge fire going.

You're getting the hang of it, Eury said, sitting a short distance away, focusing on a rather small dagger she was making. After a bit of aggressive price negotiation, the gorgon had agreed to make

Veil a blooming dagger that would have the ability to turn into a sword in any awakened realm. From what Dallion had heard, the agreed upon price reached fifty gold coins, a quarter of which had to be paid in advance.

It was remarkable how the gorgon had the ability to give the weapon shape only by using a hammer, without any need of heat whatsoever. Meanwhile, Dallion was sweating next to a large kiln, trying desperately to keep the temperature right. Very much to his disappointment, music skills were of no help at all.

Maybe we should have done this in a realm? Dallion brushed the sweat off his forehead.

We could have, but then I wouldnt have been able to see you sweat, the gorgon replied. Besides, youll need to get a basic understanding of the craft before you start using the shortcuts. Otherwise, youll become like one of those wannabe forgers that have their stuff pre-made by common blacksmiths.

That happens?

Of course it happens. Its far easier to have someone do the rough work for you.

Dallion didnt reply. This was an argument he wasnt getting involved in, even if he was pretty certain that Eury couldnt hear his conversation with Nil.

Try out the grip. The gorgon handed the dagger she was working on to Veil, handle first.

The blond took it, then moved his hand around a bit. He didnt complain, but even Dallion could see it wasnt his first choice. After a few slashes and stabs in the air, Veil tossed the weapon to his left hand and repeated the process.

Give it here, Eury said. Ill fix the problems.

It feels a bit light, Veil said as he gave it back.

Its supposed to. You want it light in the real world. Itll be different in the realms. Dal didnt tell me youre ambidextrous.

This made both Dallion and veil blink in surprise. Dallion had no such knowledge, and veil had the look of someone who had kept that as a treasured secret.

Dont forget the bellows, Dal, Eury reminded. It needs to be hot enough for the ore to get smelted.

Isnt there some other way to get this done? Dallion rumbled.

Do I look like a dwarf to you? Eury mocked. Just keep on going, youre doing great.

Dallion gritted his teeth. There were a lot of things he wanted to say on the matter, but for the moment, he decided it would be wiser to remain quiet. After all, she was doing him a huge favor.

Dallions grandfather hadnt had that problem. From what Dallion had seen in Aspions memory, the old man had been taught how to forge weapons at an early age by the village blacksmith, and apparently had picked it up remarkably fast. In contrast, Dallion knew as much about the process as someone who had watched a few YouTube clips on the subject, and even then there was nothing mentioned about smelting.

Veil, you really dont need to stay here, Dallion suggested with a hint of music in his words. Itll be a long and boring process, and

No way Im missing you suffer. Veil smiled. It might be even worth skipping work just to see if you flop.

How about now? Eury finished her adjustments to the dagger.

Veil grabbed it and did a few movements. Better, he said, tossing it to his left hand. Still doesnt feel right.

You have a deep grip. Ill fix the handle, but you better take care of that. Its a bad habit to have. Youll get your wrist sprained or broken a lot more often that way.

Maybe, but only if Im blocked.

Its your hands. And your money. Ill have it ready in a few days. Sooner if Dal manages to make his first forging step by then.

The comment felt outright embracing. When the process had initially been explained, it had sounded a lot easier. Not to mention that Dallion had cheated a bit by combining his music and forging skills to get better nuggets of ore to use. So far, he hadnt even reached the step at which that would make any difference.

Time passed. Conversations jumped from topic to topic. Occasionally Dallion made certain to veer them back to matters he considered safe, especially when they touched the matter of his growing up in Dherma. In truth, it wasnt only the matter of Gloria that concerned him, rather it was any hint relating to his grandfather or the village chief. As much as he loved and trusted Eury, this wasnt something he felt comfortable sharing yet.

On several points, Veil got sent out to get some water and something for them to eat. Dallion, of course, could only partially enjoy it, because he had to keep his eye on the flame all the time. Finally, the first step of the process was complete: enough of the metal had melted for Dallion to pour it into a cast.

Nah, you got a kiln in your room. And some bellows. Still at level one, though.

Great

Dallion felt like crying. All that effort and he barely had anything to show for it.

Let me see. Eury went to the cast with Veil casually following after.

Doesnt look like much, the blond said.

It still has a lot of impurities. Itll need to go through a furnace for you to get rid of those.

I have to do all this again? Dallion felt like fainting; either that or flipping the kiln.

Proper forging isnt a simple thing. Do you know how long it took me to reach this level?

Ten years?

Try a hundred, the gorgon said, making Dallion freeze for a moment.

A hundred years of forging sounded quite extreme. He hoped that Eury was exaggerating things and hadnt really spent that amount of time. He definitely hoped he wouldnt have to.

Anyway, dont quit now. Finish the ingot.

After waiting for a few minutes for the metal inside to cool off, Dallion took the cast with a pair of tongs and put it on a bucket of sand. He was about to leave it there for quite some time when Eury told him just to dump it in a bucket of water after a few minutes. If he was going to go through the entire process again, he didnt have to be so careful. After some hesitation, Dallion did that.

Steam hissed up the moment the ingot fell into the water. This was the first satisfying sound Dallion had heard. After returning the cast into the sand, he then took out the ingot with the tongs. Not in the least impressed, Eury took it with her bare hand.

Youll need to get your forger's hands, she said, then held the bar in front of Dallion. What do you think?

Dallions first thought was to claim it was perfect. After using his magic skill to get a better look, he quickly changed his mind. Apart from the cracks, there were quite a lot of impurities clearly visible. If this were a weapon, Dallion could easily break it into bits by targeting specific spots.

Its not that good, he admitted.

Ive seen worse, Veil said, making it impossible to say whether he was trying to encourage Dallion or make him feel even worse.

Its terrible. Eury laughed. As usual, she didnt sugarcoat things. But at least you got it done. Thats important because you got the basic knowledge of how to do it.

I have a kiln in my realm, Dallion said. And some bellows.

And some tongs, Gen said.

And some tongs, apparently, Dallion added.

In that case, lesson over. Eury gave him a surprise kiss, not in the least bothered by Veils presence. You owe me a favor. Now get to work before that harpy wrings your neck for being late.

Veil scratched his head.

Hannah, Dallion said beneath his breath. Shes talking about Hannah.

Ah, time for work already?

Almost, but I need to wash up after this.

Well, dont let me keep you, Eury focused her attention back on Veils dagger to be.

Of course you arent, Dallion smirked. Ill be back as soon as I can.

Spend some time practicing in your realm. And get a lot of sleep. Forging is usually rough the first few days. It might hit you in a few hours.

Dallion didnt feel tired in the least, but promised he would take care of himself. Despite the torture he had gone through, he did feel a sense of pride. Even if he didnt think it had a lot to do with actual forging, at least not what he thought as forging, it was a good first step, and something he could train. With luck, he might even be able to train in his realm.

Smelting? That is a bit too physical for me, dear boy. I do have a lot of scrolls for the later stages, including instructions on how to forge several of the basic weapon types.

Of course there is. All you need is to be at a relatively high level of writing skills and you can add any book you wish.

Clearly, the answer was a no.

The gorgon is correct, though. You could use some dedicated training, and not only in forging. I have noticed you have neglected your standard combat skills, not to mention your music skills need a bit of brushing up. Oh, and maybe continue with the physical exercises in the real world? You have been neglecting those as well.

All those are excellent suggestions, and I would commend you for doing them, but there is one matter I think that couldnt be delayed. Just tell Gloria about your lover.

Dallion felt a block of ice form in his stomach.

Even if that was the case, Im not the one with the problem. You are. If you want my advice, do it the moment you get back to the inn. If not, wait for fate to play its hand and be ready for the consequences.

Chapter 218: Private Performance

Whats wrong? Hannah approached Dallion after the lunch customers had left. The pace was off. Twice I thought youd end the song and leave.

Leave it to Hannah to notice these things. Dallion was aware he didnt play at his best, but he could tell that none of the customers were close to noticing maybe because all of the attention remained focused on Veil and Gloria. Despite that, the innkeeper had picked it up, and Dallion was certain she wasnt an awakened.

Just not feeling too well, Dallion replied with a smile. I might be coming down with something.

Well, you better find a way to get back up by evening.

I will. Dallion sighed through his smile.

Oddly enough, he was thankful that the innkeeper was so harsh in this instance. Having her be supportive and poke around what the problem was, as when he had failed his first guild test, would have made matters far worse for him.

That much was true to a degree. Dallion knew that he didnt have more than a passing fancy for her. However, he still felt that might not be the case for her. The times she had asked for help could well have been to trick the awakening shrine trial and allow her to get an advantage when negotiating with her grandfather. Yet, what if he wasnt only that? She had mentioned back then that she didnt want to have an arranged marriage, so did that mean that

Dal, you ok? Gloria asked, shattering his train of thought.

Yep. Dallion replied instantly, almost jumping to his feet. In fact, one instance of him did that, but the ridicule received was so great that Dallion decided to go with the alternative. Sure. Just something on my mind.

No one replied.

Hello? Anyone?

Right. Maybe I have delayed it a bit longer than I should.

Regardless, he was going to fix that now. All he had to do was to take Gloria somewhere private and

Dal, theres a favor I need to ask, Gloria whispered in a way that ensured that people with less than ten perceptions wouldnt even notice. Join me outside?

Sure. This was bad. Dallion was able to hear shyness and uncertainty resonating from her. Ill go get Veil. He stood up.

No need. She grabbed him by the sleeve. I need to tell you alone.

Definitely not good. All of Dallions plans and preparation vanished in a puff of smoke as he was dragged outside, mandolin and all. In his mind he was already going through ways to reject her request, from the blunt, to the casual, to the sympathetic one.

The two a few buildings passed the inn, to a stall that usually sold handkerchiefs. It was a stall that Dallion had seen every day and continued to wonder how they hadnt gone out of business, considering there hardly were any customers.

Cloud, Gloria said. I brought him.

The only customer who was at the stall turned around. The moment she did, Dallions fight-or-flight reaction kicked in. The woman Gloria had referred to as cloud wasnt a customer, she wasnt a human either rather, she was a fury that Dallion knew better than he hoped.

I never doubted you for a second, the fury laughed.

Not wearing her disguise rings, she could pass as a quite charming fury who arrived here for the festival. Quite a few people would even be hard pressed not to ask her out. Sharp ears were tucked in her crimson red hair, giving her an exotic look, though without going overboard. Having had a taste of what she was really capable of, Dallion knew to keep his distance. Having a perception of fifteen, he could also see signs of knives hidden in her clothes.

Dal, this is Cloud. We met at the theatre.

She wasnt hard to notice, the fury laughed. Being the only pure blonde in the room, half the people were secretly hoping she would be the one to go on stage.

Yeah, she has that effect, Dallion said stiffly.

Cloud offered to sponsor my theatre career, Gloria said. After a lot of thinking I decided to agree. I know its reckless, especially with all the responsibilities I have back home, but I wanted to at least try.

The worst cages are those we build for ourselves, the fury nodded. Im sure your brother can handle things for a few months. At that point youll know if the theater is something for you or not.

Are you sure? Thats a pretty serious step

Money isnt an issue. The fury smiled. Any troupe owner would be an idiot not to have a pure blond join. I just happen to know the right people, and as a fury could teach a thing or two about grace and speed.

As she said that, Cloud gently touched one of her knives. The Threat was clear. If Dallion were to try something stupid in the open, someone was going to pay the consequences.

I want to try this, Dal, Gloria said firmly. And I dont want my brother to know.

I think its a mistake but if youre sure about it. Dallion did his best to appear calm, but underneath his heart was pounding like a drum. I guess you want me to cover for you when youre out performing or practicing?

No. I mean that too. Cloud needs a favor, and I thought

A private performance, the fury interrupted. Its for an old friend. Our usual bard got snatched with all the preparations of the festival starting, so Im in desperate need of a replacement. After chatting with Gloria, she mentioned that you might be of some help.

Sorry for imposing on you like this, but I really dont have a choice in the matter.

No worries. Dallion forced his smile wider. Whens this supposed to happen?

This evening. Or rather, tonight. I dont want to get you in trouble with your innkeeper, after all.

That was to be expected. From the little Dallion knew about the mirror poll, they acted in the very last moment, and only showed their hand when they had to.

Not a problem.

Thanks, Dal! Gloria hugged him, though his mind was not on that. Ill let you two discuss details. Youre really a lifesaver. She let him go and walked away figuratively walking on air.

I gotta hand it to you, you have interesting friends, the fury whispered as Gloria disappeared back in the inn.

If you

Tut, tut, tut. Cloud interrupted. Ring first. We dont want there to be any confusion during our conversation.

Dallion hesitated for a few seconds, then slid on the blocker ring.

Better, the fury said.

Isnt this a bit too public?

The pool owns this stall and several like it. Great to keep an eye on things and set up discreet meetings in the open when needed.

I take it youre not afraid to go against two hunters?

The deal was that youre out of bounds. Your friends are a different matter. Dont get me wrong, I like them much more than I like you, so I wont do anything unless you make me.

Dallion didnt comment. They had him and he knew it. Now the question was how much down would he have to be dragged.

Now that we understand each other. My boss wants you to clear the item in question. Tonight. Given the familiar you have, that shouldnt be a problem for you.

They already knew about Lux? That was incredibly fast. Dallions suspicions instantly fell on the party members hed been with on the sanitation job. Thinking about it, though, they werent the only ones who knew about Lux. The Luors also had seen the familiar in action, as had Vade, not to mention the noble. Considering the bet, it wasnt outside the realm of possibility that the old woman had blabbered out to all her friends, possibly in the presence of a servant or two. Either way, Dallion was at a disadvantage.

I guess this is an offer I cannot refuse? Dallion asked.

What? the fury blinked.

Never mind. Sadly, some phrases werent universal. I just have to go there and clear the item.
Anything else?

You arent going to ask for details? The fury arched a brow.

Youre going to give me any?

Kid, were going through all this trouble and humiliation because we want you to get the job done.
What do you take us for?

Dallion suddenly felt stupid. Of course, this would be important for them. If they purely wanted to punish him, there were other ways, and they wouldnt have to go all cloak and dagger about it.

Right.

The fury rolled her eyes.

Seriously, Ive no idea what anyone sees in you, especially Jiroh. Anyway, as I said before, a few people tried to clear it and in all cases things ended badly. Not as bad as they could have gotten, but one person can no longer walk in a straight line and three more are in a sleep state.

How could things have ended worse, exactly?

Were very interested in the item, just as we want to know whats the thing killing off our awakened.

Will I get paid?

The question caught the fury by surprise. Dallion felt the emotion burst through her, replaced shortly later by a grain of respect. Apparently, showing he had the stones for it was enough to get him some respect.

That depends on your performance. Solve this, and you definitely will. Merely survive and most likely not.

When do you pick me up?

When you finish your evening shift, go to your room, prep your equipment and open the window. Ill take you from there.

Ill be blindfolded, I assume?

Why? The fury stared at him. Youll be in far more trouble if you go to the guard. Besides, the order changes buildings whenever theres a risk. How do you think weve survived so long?

Anything else?

One thing, Dallion said. How many others did you get to try?

This item? One. Other items over a dozen.

And all of them died?

Strictly speaking only four of them died. A few others died as a result of their mess-up, but dont worry, that wont happen to you. Youre still protected by the hunters deal. As long as you dont bullshit us everything will be fine. There are no guaranteed jobs, as youve shown me Do anything funny, though, and we wont go against you. Well go against your friends.

So thats how the mirror pool works?

Thats how the world works. The fury took a handkerchief from the stall, then tossed a silver coin to the seller.

Dallion was familiar with the girl. Theyd greet each other throughout the day, Dallion even had a conversation on how handkerchiefs were selling. All this time, he had never suspected she was linked to the mirror pool. It just went to show that there was much more under the shiny surface of Nerosal that Dallion knew.

Slowly, Dallion took off his ring.

Given the person you were talking to, I already assumed that, dear boy. A few details on the matter will be greatly appreciated.

Remember the real-life effects you told me were unlikely for me to come across? Well Ill need to know a bit more about them.

Chapter 219: A Debt Prepaid

Every city had its dark underbelly. Nerosal was no exception. The major difference from Earth was that here even the underworld was strictly organized. It wasnt so much a matter of hierarchy, although that too existed as well, but rather of a formalized behavior. As Nil had explained, there were only two people that didnt conform to any established rules: lowlifes and monsters of the wilderness; one category was a mild nuisance that was mostly ignored; the other a threat that had imperial and provincial armies constantly go on expeditions in the wilderness to keep it in check.

From everything Dallion had heard, the closest way he could describe the mirror pool was the mafia if they had to pay taxes. They were pretty much free to continue with their activities as long as they were discreet and did not harm the nobles, the city, or any of the large organizations.

Dallion didnt share his meeting with anyone, spending most of his time in his room instead. Veil came by a few times, concerned about what was going on, only to be told a convenient pack of lies. At least in that regard, Dallion could rest assured that Gloria was going to back him up she had her own secrets, after all.

After a few hours of stressing out, and attempting to improve his mood using music, Dallion decided to do some forging training to get his mind off things. The blacksmith tools were waiting for him when he got there. Other than the Anvil, the forging wall had a small kiln and a set of tongs, and a bellows waiting for him.

Summoning a clump of ore at seventy percent purity Dallion started to work.

The process was just as long and uncomfortable as in real life. Dallion could feel the heat wrap him like a wool blanket in summer. The only difference was that he didnt sweat. A short distance away, Nox had stretched on the ground, enjoying the new source of warmth and waving his tail lazily.

Im glad youre here for moral support, Dallion grumbled. The crackling just yawned. Yeah, sure. Why not? Why dont you have a nap after all your hard work?

A few hours in, Gen also arrived in the room. He had been reading books in the library, as he did most of the time, much to Nils approval. In his mind, Dallion had already pictured the day when Nil started comparing Dallion with his own echo. In a way, it was a valid point of criticism, but on the other hand, Gen had no life outside of the awakened realm.

Need a hand? Gen asked.

I got it, Dallion replied, summoning a mold, then carefully pouring the molten iron in it. Done, he looked around for a bucket of water. However, there wasnt any.

You cant summon water, Gen said. Its explained in one of the scrolls. If you summon a bucket, I can fetch you some from Harps section.

Dallion felt somewhat silly being told basic things by his own echo. He felt even sillier for not thinking of this before.

Sure, Dallion said. It needs a while to cool off, anyway. Lux, will you help out as well?

The firebird was all too glad to comply, zooming Gen out of the room in a flash. Moments later, Dallion had to tell Lux to return Gen, so the echo could actually get a bucket to gather the water with. Half a minute later everything was in place: all Gen, Lux, and a full bucket of water were in the room. Carefully, Dallion emptied the mold on the floor with his tongs, then took the ingot and placed it in the bucket.

A cloud of vapor emerged with a poof. Moments later, the water was entirely gone, and a perfectly formed ingot remained in the bucket.

IRON SMELTING!

You have made your first iron ingot! Make another nine and youll be able to summon iron ingots without having to smelt them.

That was an interesting rectangle. Completing the requirement would definitely make things faster, although there was still no indication when Dallion would increase his level or get an iron hammer. Just for the sake of it, Dallion summoned the sky silver ingot. The wave of notifications hadnt gotten any easier.

Up for another? Gen tried to encourage Dallion. Nine isnt that much. Youre already ten percent there.

Maybe later. The mirror pool remained on Dallions mind. He looked at the ingot for a while longer, then left his realm.

A few minutes later, confronted by the seemingly impossible combination of boredom and anxiety, Dallion entered his training stiletto to do its daily leveling up. The battle with the guardian remained laughably easy to the point that Dallion didnt even bother using his music skills, trying out acrobatics instead.

The new respective markers were a combination of orange footsteps and arrows indicating how to move and twist in three-dimensional space. Combining the skills with a dartbow turned out to be quite deadly, especially with Dallion's high level of perception. Given what was in store for him that night, Dallion made a note to increase them to level ten during his evening shift. If there was anything dangerous, it was always a good idea to be able to run away as quickly as possible, combining the ability with guarding.

In the mid-afternoon, Dallion went to Hannah to ask that he not perform that night. The innkeeper didn't appreciate the sudden change of plans, but after Gloria backed Dallion up with the excuse that she wanted to try a dancing performance, a compromise was reached. The trio would serve, mend and upgrade items together for the most part, but there would be three performances, each lasting about ten minutes. During those performances, Dallion was going to play and sing while Gloria was going to dance, putting her athletic skills to use. Veil started to complain that he was the only one who wouldn't show off, but a warning glance from both his sister and Dallion made him quickly shut up.

As evening came, so did the crowds. If there was any decrease in customers, as Hannah insisted there was, Dallion couldn't see it. The place was backed as usual, with more people waiting to be served outside.

Dinner started noisily with everyone calling to order or to have an item or two mended. After one hour, things started to calm down, then simmered down to a nearly total silence, as Gloria prepared for her first performance.

Just look at her, Veil whispered to Dallion, who was also tuning his mandolin. Finally, she got to show off the skills she's been practicing for decades. If this is actually good, she'll become impossible to live with.

Maybe that's a good thing, Dallion replied absentmindedly.

You really need to get a grip on yourself. Veil shook his head.

He had noticed a familiar face join the crowd, or rather, it was more appropriate to say that the face was semi-familiar. At some point Falkner had managed to join in the event, securing a discreet outside table for himself. Given the wealth he commanded, that came as no surprise. Unlike before, though, Falkner was dressed in all the pomp that came with his title. Just with one glance, Dallion was able to see threads of three magical metals composing his clothes, not to mention a few rings that were made entirely of diamonds.

Dallion knew full well that if Falkner wanted, he could give a tip that would be ten times the inn's monthly earnings. Part of him wished for that to happen. For the most part, though, Dallion was concerned about the whole thing. This had all the signs of a crush going too far, but with Falkner being of noble lineage, telling him outright was not recommended.

You really dont know anything about his father, do you, dear boy? Oh well, ignorance is bliss, as they say. Let me note that nothing happens to any of the family without the lord learning about it. The fact that Falkner is heredressed in such fashion, no less means that he has somehow earned his fathers approval.

Oh, him, Veil grumbled. It didnt take an awakened to see that he liked Falkner less with each day. I knew hed show up. I was hoping he wouldnt make a scene.

Only yours, I hope. Veil gave Dallion a weird look, then walked away, returning to his normal duties.

Dallion sighed, then checked the tone of his strings. The sounds were flawless, as far as he could tell. Even so, Dallion pulled the strings a few more times, before giving Gloria the nod. Then, he started playing.

Bitter sweet sounds filled the air, mixing joy and sadness. Just for good measure, Dallion had also added a few notes of lightness to exaggerate Glorias flowing effect. All customers held their breath, along with quite a number of onlookers from the street. Then Gloria began her dance.

The first few actions were calm and measured. It was like watching a person walk at a slightly faster pace, and yet the rhythm of the motions was so precise and in tune with the music that one could not help but become mesmerized by it.

For over a minute, Gloria walked between the tables of customers, going in and out of the inn, then all of a sudden, without any warning, she leapt in through the air. With ease, she ran along a wall, then jumped off, performing a triple axel and landing down without as much as a sound. It was like watching a butterfly flying in waterutterly inconceivable until one saw it for the first time.

People gasped in amazement, forgetting their orders for a moment as they followed Glorias movements.

Thats why Hannah had limited the performance to short bursts: the longer this lasted, the fewer people were inclined to order food or drink.

If someone were to reach a mid-twenty level, they had pretty much made it in life. In his mind, Dallion tried to picture the movements. It was like writing a complex physics formulaevery body part had to turn at the correct angle at the right moment for things to function in such fashion.

In theory, Dallion had the same level of acrobatics as Gloria, not to mention that his stats and levels were far greater. However, he couldnt even dream to match what she was doing.

People held their break for almost the full ten minutes before the spectacle continued. Then, when Gloria was back on the ground and still, and Dallions music had ended. Then the applause started, and they were very much different from what Dallion had expected. There were no shouts or clapping. Instead, a buzz of whispered compliments and thanks filled the air, followed after a while by the sound of coins being placed on tables.

Dont I always?

As evening continued into night, Hannah agreed to increase the number of performances from three to four, to the great joy of all patrons and onlookers. Each time Gloria did her magic, she experimented more and more, until she was at the limit of her strength. Then the shift ended. Seeing her condition, Hannah rushed the girl into the kitchen, where she had enough food to restore some strength, then off to her room to sleep. Taking advantage, Dallion asked to do the same and was allowed with a grunt.

Upon entering his room, Dallion locked the door, left the lute in its place, and took his gear. Making sure everything checked out, he went to the window and opened it.

Nice performance, the fury said almost instantly from the darkness. A bit flimsy near the end, but she'll learn.

I do this and she's off the hook, Dallion said.

That's an option. A gust of wind pushed Dallion slightly back. Let's get to work.

Chapter 220: Vermilion's Tears

Furies are creatures of the wind.

That was written in one of the scrolls in Nils' library, as Gen had found out. It wasn't much, but it described the nature of the beings perfectly quite well. Why wasn't there more, though? According to Nil, the library was well stocked with all important books on humanity's past and present, yet somehow lacked nearly everything beyond that. There were hundreds of scrolls on etiquette, poetry, and awakened philosophy, but nothing relating to sanitation work, full item mending, cooking, or non-human races for that matter. Nil himself had said that it was through accounts of human wars, personal memoirs, and epic poems that most of the information had survived. All additional details regarding the other races, for whatever reason, could only be found in the records of the Order of the Seven Moons.

The fury glided through the air, dragging along Dallion, creating the sensation they were sliding on water. Keeping their distance from the city guard forts, the pair made their way to one of the affluent neighborhoods on the northern side of the city, landing in a rather creepy-looking mansion.

The creepiness came from the fact that while in perfect condition, it seemed uninhabited, unlike all other buildings in the neighborhood.

Nothing like a city hopper to give us a temp base, the fury said as they waited at the front door.

City hoppers?

Put your blocker on, the fury said. The fun ends here.

Dallion did as he was asked.

After a while, the door opened, revealing a short muscular figure. Giving Dallion and the fury a nasty glance, he stepped to the side, arms crossed.

You're late again, the creature grumbled, then turned around, leading the way further in.

Minor complications, the fury replied with a slight hiss. There was no love lost between those two, it seemed.

Dallion closed the door behind him, since no one else bothered to, and followed along. Passing through the finely decorated foyer, the group went through the salon, then along a short corridor that led them to a small study. Three people were already waiting for them there. One of them Dallion recognized as the tattooed barkeeper he'd seen in Gray Haven. The other two he had never seen before in his life, although he knew what one of them represented—the attire she wore had the distinct symbol of the Order of the Seven Moons embroidered on it, along with the corresponding emblem hanging from her neck.

Nice to see you alive and well, kid, the tattooed man said with a blank expression.

He must have had some trinket to counter Dallion's music skills, for there were no emotions coming from him. Investigating the others, the fury screamed annoyance, the muscular man disgust. As for the cleric, Dallion could only get a vague sense of duty mixed with extreme boredom, like a clerk five minutes before the end of a night shift.

The last person had a defocus artefact on. As much as Dallion tried, he could see the person's face, or clothes, for that matter. It was like looking at a silhouette.

You know the details? the tattooed asked.

One level item killing awakened, Dallion replied. I'm to go inside and find out what's going on without getting killed.

And level up the item, the fury added.

And level up the item, Dallion repeated. Will I be getting any help from the Order?

Your emblems should be enough, the tattooed man said. The Order is only here to observe. With the number of accidents on the rise, one can never be too careful.

Comforting if Dallion wasn't the one risking his neck. If anything, it was more likely that the cleric was here in case he turned into a chainling.

Wheres the item?

The people looked at one another. Finally, the silhouette was given a nod and placed a ring on the small study table. The ring was unlike most Dallon had seen, made of seven separate pieces wrapped around each other, similar to those annoying trick puzzles that were popular in gimmick shops back on Earth. No gems were visible, but the metal was pure sky silver. Looking at it through his music and forging skills, Dallon could see that while the pieces managed to make a whole, they werent in fact touching.

The awakened before me Dallon approached the table. How did they enter the ring?

The usual way, the tattooed man replied. They put a finger on it and then faint.

At least they didnt stop breathing, Dallon muttered. Focusing as much as possible, he created three instances. The instance that tried to awaken the item through one part immediately vanished. The one in which he put it on the palm of his hand before awakening, managed to enter inside.

Here goes

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

Dallon found himself in a world of islands in an endless sea. Colorful, lush vegetation was everywhere, transforming the surroundings into a fantasy painting. Birds ranging from small to large flew about, chirping in exotic fashion, completing the illusion that Dallon was on some tropical retreat. All that was missing was a five-star hotel and a shack selling surfboards to turn it into a tourist trap. Even so this was the same realm that had caused at least half of dozen people to enter a coma, possibly more.

You are in the realm of VERMILIONS TEARS

Clear the level to fulfil VERMILIONS destiny.

Dallon had no idea who or what Vermilion was, but it definitely was more than a simple ring. The only certainty at this point was that he would have to find and defeat the items guardian. It was just like improving a normal item and that was what worried him.

More often than not, when something appeared easy, it was difficult. So far, the realm had proved to be unique in many ways, especially considering the creatures within. They werent blockers, some of them didnt even have anything but a white rectangle with a name and health percentage. There were no weak spots to be seen, and no attack skills.

There was no response. The ring he was wearing in the real world was still in effect. Fortunately, there was a way around it. After a few seconds, the firebird appeared on his shoulder.

Lux, lift me up a bit. I want to see whats out there.

The firebird chirped and shot up like a space rocket, carrying Dallon along. In less than a second, the entire chain of islands was visible. As Dallon suspected, there were seven in total, each a

slightly different color. Initially, he wondered if there was some connection with the Seven Moons, but the colors didn't match in the least. Rather, the creator of the realm had wanted to make the perfect resort and focused on a specific color of plants for each island. From what Dallion could see, there were three shades of green, one red, one orange, one purple, and one white. Two of the islands had mountains, three had ponds, and one had a nice patch of beach.

The islands no longer looked like separate land masses, but formed one giant circular pattern, like an intricate emblem. Dallion tried to memorize the intricate elements, but the fine details ranged into the hundreds. He could still remember the basics: three circles of various sizes intersecting in a small square.

Looking at the point of intersection, two large glowing eyes formed staring back up.

COMBAT INITIATED

Get us higher! Dallion shouted.

Part of Dallion's mind had already recognized the guardian, even if the rest of him didn't want to come to terms with that knowledge.

Islands sank and rose as the two eyes emerged from the sea, revealing an eighth island, or rather the head of an enormous sea serpent, whose body was composed of the remaining seven islands.

VERMILION

Species: Island Snake

Class: Origin

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills: Unknown

Weak spots: Eyes

Oh crap, Dallion managed to say as Lux thrust him up, just in time to avoid the jaws of the giant snake.

This was the very first time he had fought a creature this size. Even the colossus was smaller in comparison.

Summoning his dartbow, Dallion shot a few bolts at the snake's eyes. All projectiles missed their targets, bouncing off scales the size of buildings. Right now, he could really have used a crossbow, or maybe even two.

The snake extended upwards in another attempt to bite Dallion out of the sky. Failing, it descended back down, splashing into the endless sea.

This definitely presented a challenge. Without solid ground, Dallion could not use his homing dagger attack. Actually, if it weren't for Lux, he would have been ejected from the realm by now. Only people with the ability to fly would be able to survive a realm such as this. As to fighting back, Dallion still hadn't figured out that part.

How the heck do I defeat an entire realm? Dallion asked as the fine spray of water reached him. Attacking directly was dangerous, but attacking from a distance was useless. He couldn't let the familiars try to do anything on their own because of the water. Two options remained: music or the unlikely chance that the snake would accept a draw.

Just as Dallion considered making his offer, the snake emerged from the water in another attempt to snatch the human from the sky. It was starting to look that things were at an impasse: neither of the two opponents could get close enough to effectively harm the other, and neither was willing to back down.

From experience, Dallion knew he could withstand hunger for over a week, possibly more, if he had something like Whites chewing gum button. On its part, the snake had been existing in the realm since the items creation.

It's a draw, Dallion shouted. You can't defeat me and neither can I!

Looking down, Dallion thought he saw the snake smile.

Are you so certain? the guardian asked. This wasn't the first time Dallion had spoken to a creature, but there was something disturbing in having a chain of islands respond to him. Sooner or later, you'll give in. I can wait.

I can just leave the realm, Dallion said.

Not this realm. There was a glint in the snake's eye.

Is that why you crippled everyone before me?

Those before you were twisted and crippled before they set foot here. And you are no different. You might be unbound, but that doesn't matter.

The snake coiled back down, disappearing entirely in the water.

Get us higher, Lux! Dallion said, fearing that the guardian would try to leap out again.

He was half right. The monster emerged from the sea like a released spring, but instead of leaping up, it projected a spray of venom from its fangs.

Shield Dallion shouted, holding it in front of him. The armadil shield formed a semi sphere protecting him from the poisons effect. In doing so, though, it suffered the consequences.

ARMADIL SHIELD CORRUPTED

The Durability of the ARMADIL SHIELD had decreased by 20%

While in this state, the ARMADIL SHIELD will lose 1% durability every second