

## Leveling up 291

Chapter 291: The Minion

Spread out! Vend ordered.

All members of the party dispersed as they kept climbing the mountain at lightning speed. Like hyper goats they went up and up, not stopping for an instant, hot in the pursuit of the root. Most of them knew they couldn't take a guardian alone, but together, they had more than a fighting chance. Only four people remained in the cave: Dallion, Agnii, and two backup guards with shields at the ready.

The adrenaline in Dallion's veins was so much he could practically taste it. In contrast, Agnii seemed calm, almost bored with the unexpected development.

It won't try again, she said after a while, breaking the silence.

What? Dallion blinked.

The guardian, it won't try again, not with so many people after it. Of course, March chose the ideal time to go off scouting, the woman grumbled. Always eager to do everything by herself, even when it isn't needed. If she hadn't bothered with that nonsense, this never would have happened.

Grab the essential and let's get going, Agnii said.

The two guards glanced at each other.

Vend said we must stay and Dallion began.

I know what he said, the woman snapped. We're climbing to the top and we're doing it now.

That was the end of the conversation. Dallion hesitated a few moments more, then went on to prep his backpack and follow the rest outside onto the cliff side. All the way up, Dallion kept five instances of himself, always ready to react. From when he could see, the others did the same. Fortunately for all of them, no further attacks followed.

*Climbing under pressure. This won't be the first time you'll be targeted. It's always better to get the experience in a safe environment. This way, even if you fail, you'll gain valuable insight on the matter.*

Dallion didn't agree, but remained silent. There was nothing especially challenging in climbing a mountain, not with the skills he had. All it was was repetitive and exhausting. There was no rest, no talk, no sight of anything out of the ordinary. By now the rest of the group had probably reached the peak, although there didn't seem to be any indication they had engaged the guardian.

### COMBAT INITIATED

A new rectangle appeared.

A member of the group turned around, aiming at something in the darkness, then shot a pair of bolts. A loud pop sounded a short distance away.

Echoes, the awakened said.

Pick up the pace. Agnii sounded calmer than she should have been, as if she were dealing with a minor nuisance rather than a real threat.

In one of his instances, Dallion turned around, spotting a dryad a short distance away. The echo wasn't attached to anything, slowly floating down what could be best described as a makeshift parachute of leaves.

Without hesitation, Dallion summoned his dartbow and fired a bolt at the target. A wooden shield formed in front of the dryad, extending so as to cover the entire upper half of its body. Dallion's bolt hit the wooden surface, dealing no damage whatsoever. A second bolt coming from the side proved more lethal, hitting the echo in the shoulder and causing it to shatter into grains of light.

Just keep going, kid, the awakened shouted. We'll take care of these.

*Shield, cover my back*

. Dallion thought.

The armadil shield disappeared, then reappeared on his back, extending slightly to protect him better. Not too long after, several projectiles bounced off, followed by a popping sound.

Another echo? Dallion asked, using an instance to look back. The sky was empty as far as the eye could see. Where are they coming from?

They're just falling from the sky. The other party member replied, just as surprised.

We're halfway there, so there's no point in stopping, Agnii said. Our best bet is to get to the top as fast as possible.

How are they getting here? I thought the rest of the party were up chasing the guardian.

*It worked, didn't it? It's good to create chaos and one can never tell*

**MINOR WOUND**

## **Your health has been decreased by 5%**

A sharp piece of wood hit Dallion in the ankle. Dallion bit his tongue, holding firm to the cliff face. The pain was immense, though quickly vanished after a few seconds. Had his body been a few levels lower, there was every chance he would have let go. Not that it would have killed himLux would have rescued him way before that. Instead, it would have provided the guardian more information that Dallion was willing to give.

*Lux, some help here.*

The awakened quickly changed positions. One of the guards jumped next to Dallion, while the other moved next to Agnii. Every few seconds, while climbing, one would turn around, aiming broadly at the sky, but not once did anyone shoot.

Anything? Dallion asked, climbing up as fast as his body would allow. Fatigue kicked in, filling every action with pain. However, there was no option to give up.

Keep climbing!

Initially, Dallion did, but his slowness proved to be such a liability that soon enough the person guarding him grabbed him and started leaping from hold to hold with incredible ease. It was obvious that their stats and skills were at least in their thirties, if not higher.

Hold tight! the awakened told Dallion, then against all odds started running up the cliff.

Sooner rather than later had become the key phrase lately. Not too long ago, Nil had been grumbling at Dallion for trying to recklessly rush things more than necessary. Right now, Dallion felt he was falling behind. There was so much he had to learn, most of which he could have easily achieved if only he had focused.

However, as impressive as wall running up a mountain was, Dallion also felt down, probably as much as March had when she had used her skill. Clearly, every awakened in the party was able to do that, but they had preferred to take the slow and laborious route to hide their advantage. Now, as a result of Dallion being attacked, the advantage was revealed. The guardian had managed to get them to show part of their hand.

It took close to an hour for the group to reach the summit. To Dallion, it felt much shorter, especially as he had to fight the constant fear of being dropped.

Several groups had already gathered there, talking amongst themselves on the ground. Upon seeing Agnii, they quickly stood up.

Wheres March? the woman asked.

Not here, someone replied. I think shes ahead to check the temple.

Agniis expression hardened.

And Vend?

He's up ahead leading the chase.

Anger formed within Agnii, like a cluster of grapes. There were a lot of things she disapproved of, but Vend seemed to be the focus. This was a tense situation, but Agnii remained a captain. In March's absence, it was the crafter that could take over and based on her reaction, she did.

Everyone, were heading to the temple. She strode forward. Keep an eye on Dallion, he's the guardians target.

Half a dozen people moved closer to Dallion. In other circumstances, he would have called this overkill, but right now he knew better. It was true that each next guardian was far stronger than the last. So far, he'd only seen guardian echoes, and still he was close to getting his health reduced to zero.

Clearly there had to have been some sort of fight here, otherwise she wouldn't have lost ten percent of her health. The firebird was all too happy to be of use, shifting from Dallion to its next patient with a series of chirps. At least some things never changed.

Dallion felt like rolling his eyes.

*I must say that he finds you interesting.*

*The guardian. He sent echoes specifically for you. He must find you as a threat for some reason.*

*Yeah, right.*

Or maybe he's just bored beyond his skull. Being locked up in a realm tends to have that effect. After a while, you can never tell. The only thing certain is that you and Eury are the only new things that have appeared in the world for a while.

That's wrong. Some of the others also

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Enemies! Dallion shouted, summoning his harpsisword.

The awakened near him instantly summoned their shields, moving them above Dallion in near perfect unison. Several others summoned dartbows, aiming at the sky. This time, though, it wasn't echoes that appeared.

## **GUARDIAN MINION**

**Species: Vine-whale**

**Class: Minion**

**Statistics: 100%**

**Skills:**

- **Levitation**
- **Vine Mesh**
- **Torrent of Leaves**

### **Weak Spots: Eyes, Mushrooms**

The new creature was as large as the name suggested, covering an entire moon in the sky like a giant blimp. Dallion had neither faced nor read about any creature such as this. Normally, it would be considered a guardian in its own right. Covered with vines and mushrooms, and kept in the air by some unknown force, the creature tilted forward.

Scatter! Agnii shouted as she fired at it with a crossbow.

Bolts split the air, just as the vine-whales mouth opened, releasing a torrent of leaves. Two opposite forces clashed with one another in a giant flameless explosion, sending shockwaves throughout the area.

The shield extended just in time to block the dozens of leaves that hit it with the speeds of flying daggers.

What is that? Dallion shouted, running away from the creature.

Never seen it before, Ezra said from nearby. At least now I know why weve never seen a minion here.

That also explained why there were no settlements, either. Something this big could destroy an entire city unopposed.

*Easily, if you let Lux carry you up. Otherwise you have to be a very good shot and quite lucky.*

More bolts flew up at the whale. This time, they were blocked by a mesh of vines that sprouted around it. The perfect attack and the perfect defense. If there was a way to defeat this monstrosity, Dallion couldnt see it. Given enough time, maybe he could use his music skills to add weight to the vine-whale until it got crashed into the mountain, but that didnt seem likely.

*Its just a minion. Save Nox for when you need to fight the guardian.*

*What if I dont make it to the guardian?*

Normally, the chances of him losing all my health with so many people protecting him were low. Facing a flying creature such as this, though, they seemed more like fifty-fifty.

Just as Dallion was thinking on the best course of action, a line slash split the air, striking the minion with full force. March had arrived.

## Chapter 292: Familiar's Assistance

Another torrent of leaves hit the peak of the mountain, shaving off chunks of rock. Party members scattered like ants, leaping off the mountain edge, and grabbing hold of the cliff until the wave passed. Everyone else sought shelter behind massive summoned shields. There was no elegance in their actions, they could even be described as cowardly and inefficient, but it was done all with one thing in mind: protect the secret of the party's advantage for as long as possible. It wasn't an easy task, but in the long haul, it was going to produce results.

Two line-strikes hit the massive minion, pushing it back hundreds of feet at a time. The mesh of vines surrounding its body proved too thick to let the attack through, regrowing quickly after each hit. Anyone would be concerned with such an opponent, but for some reason, March was happy. Dallon's music skills let him see the grain of joy that appeared in her head; it wasn't much, but the first time he had seen anything of the sort.

Stay down! Euryale pulled Dallon back down behind the protection of the cliff edge. It's too early to have a death wish.

I leave you for a few days and you still manage to get in trouble, the gorgon joked.

In typical fashion, she hadn't displayed any shock or concern at the sight of him being targeted by the guardian's minion. Dallon didn't know much about gorgons, but from what he had seen and heard their emotional attachments were different from those of people: they were much faster to form emotional attachments to things they liked, while also not worrying overly much when they were in danger. In fact, the only time that Dallon had seen Eury really worried about him was when she had learned he was dealing with chainlings or the overseer.

I'm getting better at it, Dallon smiled, earning him a punch in the shoulder. Shouldn't we do any fighting, by the way?

No, that's March's show. A few of the gorgon's snakes stretched up, so as to get a better view of the fight. She's been hoping it will happen for a while.

Oh. Dallon frowned. Using me as bait again.

Not that part. She was hoping the guardian would attack her. That's why she kept leaving the party, so she gave it the chance to act. Her, or me.

You? Dallon blinked.

What do you think a scout does in realm expeditions? There's more to getting info than making maps and observing. The whole point is putting myself out there so the guardians tip their hand.

More blasts echoed in the sky. Someone was using a crossbow again, with limited results. Shortly after, a few more party members joined the rest, holding on to the cliff. Interestingly enough, Vend wasn't there, and neither was Agnii.

Just as Dallon was thinking of taking another peek, Euryale put her hand on his shoulder.

Not yet, she whispered. Wait till the guardian falls.

Will you remain here till then?

There was no answer.

Whats the big deal with the minion, anyway? Its tough, but its just a minion. That said, it was also true that the guardian did massive area damage, putting even a group at risk.

Not quite. Eurys snakes moved about, looking in all directions. There were too many other people nearby to be sure that even a whisper would remain unheard. Grains of hesitation appeared throughout her face. Its not a minion, she whispered, moving closer to Dallion until her lips were almost touching his ear. Its a familiar.

In that instant Dallion froze. With all of Nils talk of familiars being rare, he had never considered such a possibility. While he knew he wasnt the only person with one, on some level, he believed himself to be the only person in the city. If anything, he hadnt seen any other minion up to this point. Of course, it was possible that those who had them were simply less reckless than him, hiding their advantage until they really needed it.

*Shield, is that true?*

The armadil shield didnt respond, as if he hadnt heard the question. Apparently, limitations held not only for Dallion, but for other echoes as well.

Time to go, Euryale said, then kissing Dallion on the cheek, pulled herself up the cliff onto the mountain summit.

Wait! Dallion shouted, but it was already too late.

*You think that might happen?!*

*No, but it makes for good conversation. Seriously, chill a bit. The most important quality during a battle is to keep a level head. Even great generals mess up when under stress.*

*I guess that makes you some military genius.*

*Who knows?*

Now that his girlfriend wasnt here, Dallion peeked again. The fight was still going on. March and half a dozen people continued with their attacks in the sky. With the exception of March, everyone else was at about three quarters health. Having Lux for support was truly a huge advantage during battle. The trick was that for the firebird to remain, so did Dallion if he was to get thrown out of the realm, his familiars would go with him. Did the same hold true for the guardians minion?

*Hypothetically.*

*Well, yes. The moment the owner is defeated echoes and guardians vanish as well.*

*Thanks, thats all I needed to know.*

*Youre going to do something reckless again, arent you?*

*Just a bit.*

*Sure. Well, dont let me stop you. Its always interesting with you around. Of course, I used to say that to most of my owners centuries ago.*

*A really tangled web of affairs, triangles, and mutual manipulation. Most of them ended okay in the end.*

In the air, the fight continued. For a while, both sides were content exchanging ranged attacks with neither moving any closer to the other. A tentative stalemate was created in which both sides were striving to gain a positional advantage. That was when Euryale stepped in. Waiting for the precise moment when another series of bolts were fired at the vine-whale, she leapt up in the air, using the bolts as platforms to jump off from.

From what Dallion could see, that hardly was the case. In a matter of moments, the gorgon had reached the minion. A large halberd appeared in her hands, its blade created of transparent material that glimmered in the background.

The creature didnt remain inactive. Sensing the threat, several of the vines shot out in her direction. With a twist and a technique quite different from Marchs, the gorgon sliced up the approaching strands of wood like a meat grinder. However, even her speed proved to be insufficient to fully stop the whales attack. With a spin twist, the gorgon positioned herself at just the right angle to have the vines bounce off the thin armor of her clothes, pushing her away without a wound. Almost on cue, March performed another sword line slash, putting the minion back on the defensive.

Tough nut to crack, the gorgon said, as she landed back on the ground. Doesnt do much damage, but hinders movement. It can keep us here for days.



Ignoring shouts and warnings, Dallion pulled himself onto the summit, then rushed to where March was. As expected, it took everyone less than a second to notice. What he didnt expect was March ending up next to him in the blink of an eye.

I can get rid of the minion, he instantly said, overcoming his surprise. Without anyone getting hurt. Dal, you idiot! Eury shouted. She too was dashing towards him, though nowhere as fast as March had been.

I only need your tower shield, Dallion insisted. Trust me on this.

Telling a captain, and an imperial army veteran, to trust him wasnt the most convincing argument Dallion could make. There probably were a lot of other approaches he could have taken, some involving persuasion from his music skills. However, there was no need for that right now. Dallion felt a deep conviction in what he was going to do, and wasnt going to let it slip through his fingers.

In Dallions mind, time stopped. He was imaging Marchs reactions, coming up with explanations and assurances to convince her he was right.

A massive shield appeared between March and Dallion. It was far bigger than he imagined a solid chunk of metal that extended seven feet high and three feet wide.

Go ahead, March said, moving the shield to the side as if it were made of plastic.

The firebirds flames moved from March to the shield. A blinding flash followed, propelling the shield into the sky. It was fast, far faster than even March could handle. No longer afraid of harming anyone, the firebird gave it its all. Without warning, the shield crashed against the minions protective mesh, pushing it several dozen feet back.

The shield disappeared from the sky.

It wasnt like the shield was necessary, after all. This was a world, so March could summon it again at any point. Still, it would have been more impressive if Lux had returned the shield as well.

Explain, March said, looking at the sky. She wasnt the only one. Several more of awakened were staring in the air. Euryale was the only exception, but she always looked in every direction, so it didnt count.

The minion was only trying to delay us, so I did the same, Dallion said. Lux can act as he paused. Explaining propulsion principles in this world wasn't the best idea. Lux can move things from place to place really fast. I won't be able to use this trick again, but you won't need me to. At least this guardian will think twice before sending it to stop you.

Dallion didn't mind the compliment, although he would have preferred that Nil acknowledged the fact that he wasn't a child.

You'll still have to take care of the guardian, but now you'll lose less time.

Interesting. March said. Everyone, prep up! We're heading for the temple! She ordered. Leave everything behind. We'll get it when we're done.

A flaming tower shield appeared in the sky above them. Seeing it, March unsummoned the gear, leaving a somewhat confused firebird in its place.

### Chapter 293: Moon Cleric

The Green Moon's light fell upon the temple, causing the structure to emanate a gentle glow. The very air flickered with green particles, creating the illusion of soft serenity. However, that was far from the case. The dryad responsible for the third region of the world stood a dozen feet from the entrance, patiently waiting. There were no weapons on him to be seen, no army of minions, just a long-sleeved monk-like outfit that flowed down, taking the color of the moon.

Meanwhile, the party of awakened kept approaching. They had gone past the second mountain peak, barely visible in the distance. Even from this distance, however, they weren't out of its reach. Roots emerged from the ground, breaking through rock in their attempt to impale the invaders. With everyone in combat splitting, there were instances in which the surprise attacks were successful, but in the chosen reality, none of them were even close to getting hurt. The only exception was Dallion, who had his pride bruised all over. Being carried wasn't a dignified way to enter battle. Being impaled, though, was definitely worse.

Several of the emerging roots burst into pieces. Wooden fragments around like shrapnel, dealing minor damage to everything in close vicinity.

Two line-strikes flew forward. March didn't bother hiding that skill anymore, using it purely for a tactical advantage. The timing was perfect. Several layers of emerging roots were sliced as they

emerged ahead. The slices continued on, directed at the temple. A few dozen feet from it a wall of vines appeared along with the vine-whale.

Dont worry, Ezra said, carrying Dallion. Hes out of tricks now. From here on itll be easy.

Hope so, Dallion said.

It was all a numbers game now, just like during his trial. March and the party had revealed some of their skills, but in doing so had forced the guardian to do the same. By the look of things, this was the first time he had fought with his familiar, not to mention the echo attack and the vine mines.

Dallion tried to concentrate forward and get a glimpse of the enemys white rectangle. Even with his perception at twenty, it was impossible. Based on the previous guardians, some of the skills were obvious. The mines were a new touch, and so was the familiar, but was that everything? Somehow Dallion doubted it.

Three lines of roots emerged from the ground simultaneously like a fence. Failing to achieve anything, they then burst into a storm of wooden fragments, combined with the wind torrent of the vine-whale.

Lux, repeat! Dallion shouted as everyone summoned shields to protect themselves.

Taking the initiative, the firebird flew off March to the nearest tower shield, then disappeared with it without asking. Moments later, the shieldsurrounded by blue flamesmashed into the whale familiar, before disappearing with it off in the sky.

March split into instances, one of them turning around to give Dallion an annoyed look.

I guess some people never learn, Dallion said.

Always reckless, Euryale shouted as she dashed past. Thats what I love about you.

Nothing but space separated the group from the temple. Taking advantage, the gorgon doubled her pace, moving ahead of everyone else. As an experienced scout, she was the most suitable to probe the dryads defenses, just in case he had another skill in his sleeve.

The borrowed flaming shield appeared in the sky once more. With a chirp, the firebird released it, then flashed back to March. The shields owner didnt even let it hit the ground, unsummoning it on the spot. Shields were no longer needed for this part of the fight. Now it was an all-out attack.

The battle seemed to pause. No more roots appeared, nor attacks on either side. The guardian just waited for the Euryale and the rest to approach him. He took a calm step forward, then just as the gorgon drew near, he summoned his weapons. A pair of wooden sickles appeared, as large as crescent swords. That wasn't the only thing special about them; the areas of them glowed in bright green.

Divine weapons was something that would have sounded awesome, except when one was on the receiving end. A normal weapon in the hands of an awakened was capable of all sorts of things. If this guardian had a divine weapon, then fighting it was going to be a lot more difficult than Dallon could imagine. It was a miracle that March had managed to defeat it so many times before without using all her skills.

The clash between Euryale and the guardian sounded like an airplane breaking the soundwave. All the inertia she had gathered in her approach vanished in a single instant, blocked by the sickles...

### **WORLD GUARDIAN - LUNA**

**Species: MOON DRYAD**

**Class: SHADOW**

**Stats: 100% HP**

**Familiar: Vine-Whale**

**Skills:**

- **Attack**
- **Guard**
- **Acrobatics**
- **Entangle**
- **Sever**

**Weak Spots: joints**

The dryad didn't waste any time, going immediately on the offensive. Twisting in place, he made a three-sixty arc strike, aimed at Euryale's neck. The attack was fast, just as fast as Euryale's block. With an equally impressive action, the gorgon grabbed hold of the blade. A faint smile appeared on the gorgon's face. Sadly, it didn't last long. Her gauntlet cracked.

### **HAND SEVERED**

**EURYALE will no longer be able to make use of her LEFT HAND.**

Gauntlet and hand dissolved as the sickle sliced through it like butter. The gorgon didn't budge. Her snakes move about, making sure that no one was looking at her face, after which she opened her eyes. However, the dryad merely looked back.

Sorry, it said. You're not strong enough to petrify the world.

The second sickle split the air, aiming for the gorgon's forehead. This time, Euryale didn't block, choosing to jump back instead. Her face-eyes closed instantly, as she continued leaping backwards. Crossbow bolts filled the air, aiding Euryale to increase the distance from the guardian. However, none of them exploded. Faster than the eye could see, the dryad sliced them into pieces, letting them fall onto the ground. It was as if the weapon had stolen their momentum completely.

Defensive ring, March ordered, breaking off from the party. It was clear to everyone that she wanted to take the guardian alone.

Time to run on your own, kid, Ezra said, letting go of Dallion.

The sudden change forced Dallion to run clumsily, trying to keep his balance. Markers appeared, indicating where and how he was supposed to step in order to do that. Even given the present circumstances, the sequence proved to be easy, letting him handle the situation like a pro.

Looking back, there was no denying the fact. Back when Dallion was in Dherma village, he used to think that level five was the pinnacle of strength. At the time, he had even challenged the village chief at that level. How naive. Dallion cringed at the thought. Even with the village chief's punishment, it was pure luck that he had managed to win during that battle.

It took Dallion close to a minute to reach the barrier of people. Each of them held a tower shield, their eyes glued to March and her opponent. The interesting thing was that neither of the parties had initiated an attack.

Dallion's first reaction was to go join Eury. The gorgon was also intent to jump in if needed, although she was missing a hand. Interestingly enough, there was no sign of Vend anywhere.

How serious is it? Dallion whispered.

Just an inconvenience, Eury replied. I didn't lose any health, just got this. She raised her injured hand.

Lux will fix it once the fight is over.

That doesn't make it any less humiliating. Anger bubbled within her, even if she managed to hide it on the surface. After all this time hunting, you'd think I'd know better.

*The closest thing you've got now is the Order of the Seven Moons. I cant be sure, though. The general didnt deal with them much.*

Cold chills went down Dallions spine. He knew exactly how strong those were. That meant that March was stronger, possibly stronger than even Dame Vesuvia, who had led the hunt against the chainling. But if that was the case, could that mean that March was a noble?

Why isnt anyone attacking? Dallion asked.

No one wants to tip their hand, Eury replied. The guardian will, though.

How can you be sure?

Dawns approaching. Hell be at a disadvantage, then. He knows that, but is still waiting till the last moment.

Somehow he could feel that despite everything, the guardian didnt want to fight. He had used his familiar and his echoes to attackspecifically to target Dallion himselfbut there remained a sense of reluctance within the dryad pragmatic pacifism, one might say. Recently, after receiving the Moons boon, Dallion had had a conversation with Nil on the topic. The topic of discussion had been whether someone could be strong without actually fighting. At that Nil had asked one question that had illustrated the point perfectly: could someone who has never fought become the greatest warrior? The same could be said for the guardianhis skills had to have come from somewhere, even if he was reluctant to use them.

You can hear me, cant you? a voice said from behind.

Dallion briskly turned around, the harpsisword appearing in his arm.

Dal? Eury asked. Whats wrong?

There was nothing to be seen, just rocks as far as the eye could see. Or wasnt there?

Dal? the gorgon repeated.

I heard something, Dallion said. He knew that telling a lie in his state would be caught straight out, so he chose to remain in half-truths territory.

Nice save, the echo said. Its voice and fashion of speaking reminded Dallion of the armadil shield. How long have you been able to hear guardians? Always?

Carefully not to attract attention, Dallion shook his head.

You dont have the attribute. And yet The echo shifted position, moving beneath Dallions feet. The ability to understand guardians and star spawn familiars. I dont know what you are, but youre not supposed to exist.

Chapter 294: March's Duel

The first strike occurred a few minutes from dawn, just as Euryale had predicted. The dryad was the one to start with a simple vertical strike. Of course, simple was a relative term. The speed was too

great for Dallion to see. However, there were two far more important details that he did notice: both March and the guardian were combat splitting, and also the dryad was covered in a faint layer of light, indicating that he was from another world.

This was the second member of an imprisoned race that Dallion had seen to be like him. Going by sheer volume of the dryad race, there probably were hundreds, if not thousands, more just like him sentenced to an eternity of guarding items.

Thinking about it, that could have been the reason the guardian had sent echoes to Dallion. Though, if that were the case, why did he want to get rid of Dallion? If beings from other worlds were inclined to attract each other, the guardian was supposed to help him, not act like this. The ominous phrase of the echo didnt help, either. Moments after uttering it, the emotional outline beneath the ground vanished. Dallion was unable to tell whether the echo had dissolved out of existence or had just put on some blocking item.

Youre drifting again, Eury said. You sure everythings okay?

Discovering a dryad from another world that had a relation with the Green Moon, and that had casually mentioned through an echo that Dallion wasnt supposed to exist, couldnt be described as okay in any stretch of the imagination.

Just thinking about something, Dallion replied instead. Whys March fighting alone? he changed the subject.

Because shes March, Eury smirked. She could do anything she wants.

Dallion stared at the gorgon.

It just saves time. If you get a guardian who prefers fair play, its always good to take advantage. Less losses that way.

A circular line-slash followed, dealing a minor wound to the dryad, but also slamming against the entire ring cordon of the party. The person in front of Dallion was pushed several steps back, a small crack appearing on the front of his tower shield. Being in proximity to a duel, apparently, was dangerous for everyone.

Runes shot up from the ground everywhere around March. Their goal wasnt so much to hit her than limit her movementa tactic that had been used against the previous two dryads. The logical choice was to combine acrobatic and defense skills and leap up to safety. March did nothing of the sort, remaining firmly on the groundand taking the respective damagethen doing another circular line-slash. This time it was the dryad who leaped out, avoiding the strike.

You dont need to heal her, the guardian said in a voice that only Dallion could understand. You only risk getting hurt.

It took less than a moment for Dallion to figure out who the guardian was addressing. The fact that he could was unthinkable.

The firebird chirped. Apparently, the action had consequences, for the guardian did a series of strikes, aimed specifically at Lux. Their speed was far too great for Dallion to see specifics. However, what he could see were the red rectangles indicating the damage his familiar had suffered.

Hes aiming for Lux! Dallioh shouted.

A ball of concern formed within March.

The sword she was holding vanished. Seeing that, the guardian briskly moved back, increasing the range between him and the captain. Both split into dozens of instances. Dallion was barely able to catch sight of five, in each of which March shot at the dryad with her bladebow, only to have the guardian evade them. Clearly, he had missed quite a few, for the attack that followed was unexpected.

A massive ball of sky silver on a chain smashed into the guardian, barely blocked by the wooden shield that formed in front of it. Even so, the strength of the attack was powerful enough to deal a minor wound.

However, the guardian wasnt the only one hit. Three red rectangles appeared above march, along with the three sharp pieces of wood that had managed to pierce her armor. At this point, the fighters were getting serious.

Everyone from the party stepped back, increasing the ring.

Leaping and twisting like an acrobat, March grabbed the massive ball, then swung the other part of the chain like a whip, latching on to the guardians left forearm. A burst of instances flashed for a moment, ending with the dryad severing his own arm off.

**ARM SEVERED**

**GUARDIAN will no longer be able to make use of its LEFT ARM.**

The blue flames surrounding March vanished, though that didnt affect her fight. Vines and the chain kept on bashing against the tower shields, pushing them back even further.

The fight had become so fast that it was little more than a blur, like watching fruit get mixed in a blender. Then, suddenly, everything froze in a perfect image. The guardian was on the ground, Marchs sword in the chest. The white rectangle showed that he was at three percent health and decreasing. March herself was barely at twelve.



You win this one, the guardian said, letting go of its sickle. A pity. Its been so long since I talked to someone new. Good luck, Dallion Darude.

**LUNA has been defeated!**

**Continue on to fulfill the AURA SWORDS destiny.**

A few months ago, Dallion would have been gripped by fear at the guardians words. Now, he rather felt extreme curiosity. On the surface, it seemed unbelievable that the guardians last words would be addressed to him, especially using his real name. However, as Sherlock Holmes liked to say, there was always an explanation, even if it was improbable.

*Shield, did you speak with the guardian during the fight?*

Dallion asked.

*How come the moon didnt tell me anything about him?*

Apparently, it mattered if one was only favored by a Moon or was in its service. Seemed that the Order of the Seven Moons wasnt only for showthey really could converse with the deities.

*What did you talk about?*

*The good old days, more or less. The changes since then. Youve no idea how many limitations there are. When we find someone interesting who is subject to the same restrictions, we tend to take advantage. Why do you think Harp and I chat so often? There are things we cant discuss with you even if we wanted. In this case, we talked about my home.*

*Your home?*

*Luna was born there as well. And no, I didnt know him. I was in a pretty big city. It was impossible to know everyone.*

That was somewhat of an interesting coincidence, although there was one thing Dallion was sure that the world guardian hadnt sharedthe fact that Luna came from another world.

Head in the temple, Agni shouted. Were resting there till evening. Then she looked at March well see what follows. Gather all equipment thats left and bring it there. And look out for minotaur groups. Some might try to cross.

Shes taking charge? Dallion whispered to Eury.

Who else? March is seriously hurt, the gorgon replied.

As much as he tried, Dallion wasnt able to tell that. While her health was quite low, there was nothing else indicating she had suffered a major woundno red rectangles, she had no difficulty standing, even the armor appeared completely unscarred. Looking closer, though, Dallion was the minuscule grains of fatigue and pain that were forming. The only reason he hadnt noticed so far was because March somehow managed to make the grains disappear before they became large enough.

Lets go. Eury went onward. Its best to rest first. Well have more time to ourselves that way.

While that had its definite advantages, Dallion was impressed how sneaky the gorgon had become. This attitude was completely unlike her. Still, it was better than climbing back down to the cave.

No one stopped Eury and Dallion as they entered the temple. On the contrary, Agnii made a point that they eat and get some rest, especially Dallion. With the guardian gone, the next part of the trip was going to rely on him that was to say, on Lux much more than before.

Dallion ordered Lux to heal March, then everyone else before returning, then proceeded to curl up at the base of one of the columns in the main hall. On the positive side, this time, Eury curled next to him. It had been a while since he'd felt her warmth, even if she dozed off moments after they had lied down; after all, there was a bit of pain and a lot of exhaustion visible in her as well.

The battle over the party went back to common activities. Six people remained outside of the temple keeping guard, while the rest took turns to retrieve and carry back whatever backpacks were left behind.

Hour passed. By the time Dallion woke up, everything useful was piled up in the temple. People were sleeping everywhere, a few were reading scrolls or scribbling something on pieces of parchment.

Eury, he whispered.

The gorgon's snakes moved faintly about, their eyes still closed. Normally, she was a light sleeper, waking at the slightest sound. Whatever she had been doing during her scouting, it had been quite exhaustive.

Eury? Dallion shook the gorgon gently. Still no reaction. Waiting a while longer, he carefully moved her arm off his shoulder, then stood up. It's fine, he whispered. Sleep a bit. I'll look around and be right back.

Unlike the previous two temples, Dallion went directly for the corridor he knew to have the wall carvings. For the most part, they were as expected: scenes of the moons and the dryads worshipping them. The Moons were still eight, though there was nothing unusual about them. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion made a mold of all their depictions and sent them back to his realm.

*Think it has something to do with the sword world?*

*That's a given. Other than that, were clueless. Nil is going through the poetry scrolls again, but it's a long shot.*

*I guess well wait for the next one.*

Here you are, a familiar voice said nearby.

Dallion briskly turned around. Agnii was standing at the start of the corridor.

Been searching for you. I need to have a word about the next part of the trip. The trick you pulled back there with the firebird. Itll be quite useful.

Oh? Cool. Dallion smiled. Useful for what?

Useful for crossing the sea.

Chapter 295: Down the Mountain

Moving on from the temple proved much faster, especially with most of the party seeming to jump off the cliff and use a combination of athletics and acrobatics to bounce off the cliff as they went down. It was outright scary that a mountain that had taken days to climb was descended in less than half an hour.

Several people offered to carry Dallion again, but he refused, choosing to have Lux help instead. Before he started the descent, though, he looked in the direction they had come from. Clouds and mist made it impossible to see any of the previous temples at the moment, even with the temple glow being substantially stronger than when the first guardian was defeated.

*Do you think its a straight line all the way?*

*It vastly depends on the person who created the realm. Normally, thats the case. However, if someone is skilled enough, they could bend the rules a bit. Take the training realms I construct, for example. They dont look like pyramids, cubes, and spheres, do they?*

That much was true. They also were nowhere as elaborate as this, though.

*Based on what youve been through so far, Id say that the creator follows the item shape. However, following the sphere item principles, its also possible that each part of the world is larger than the last.*

*How will that work? The world is already huge. I cant even see the bounds.*

The clouds werent particularly helpful in this case, but while getting here, Dallion had tried to see the fake part of the realm. So far, every area realm he had entered was roughly composed of two parts: the walkable realm and an endless area of illusion wrapped around it. It looked real, smelled real, even felt real. The only catch was that it was endless. No matter how many steps one took beyond the invisible barrier, they would find out that they had only taken one. After a few times in the realms, one tended to see the difference, even more so with the new sight Dallion had gained. Here, though, there had been nothing of the sort so far.

*I have no doubt. Academics and philosophers have spent their entire real time lives exploring world items, trying to come to some conclusion. So far, theres pretty little that has been confirmed. The change in size is one of them.*

*But?*

*But there might be hidden sections.*

*True, but world realms are different. They are much larger. Besides, theres a lot of rust and decay covering it. Clear that and who knows, maybe something interesting will shine underneath.*

There was no sign of March while Dallion went down the mountain. She and Vend seemed to be nowhere to be found again. That left Agnii in charge of the party something she was used to, but found annoying nonetheless. While March would remain quiet for the most part, occasionally giving out a few orders, the crafter captain was a control maniac. Possibly it was a crafter thing, as Nil suggested, but she liked to know what everyone was doing all of the time, and grumbled when something wasnt done according to her specifications.

The people didnt seem to mind they were used to going on expeditions with her in charge. Now and again, someone or other would drag a bit slower in a sign of micro-rebellion, but they were also sure not to push it too far.

That was the attitude of professional explorers. Expeditions were too tough for there to be infighting for stupid things. At the same time, letting off some steam every now and again was also good. In a way, Dallion felt a bit sad for them. Every member of the party had probably spent decades on item expeditions. After so much time, there was no doubt that they had become jaded. This wasnt a new exciting new world they were walking, it was just another job and the quicker they got it done with, the better.

For Dallion, it was the opposite despite the difficulties and the clear indication that was way out of his league, everything seemed new and interesting. If it were up to him, hed remain here for months, maybe even years, until he explored everything there was. Again, that was the completionist in him talking.

Settlements started to appear at the base of the mountain. Most of them were mining and forging villages going into the rock itself. Agnii had allowed one of them be explored mostly to scavenge ores and ingots. After a lot of pleading, Dallion had joined in the event, only to end up utterly disappointed.

As it turned out, there was nothing of particular worth or interest in the abandoned structures. Most of them had already been ransacked by minotaurs by the looks of it. A few centuries ago, this probably would have been a thriving industrial area. Now it was no different from a series of empty storehouses.

Once again, the backpacks were filled with materials, although now they were metals and not lumber. The party continued on. After about half an hour of walking, a blue rectangle appeared in front of Dallion.

## MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

(Body +2)

**You have braved the mountain separating the world. This a good first step on your journey, just be sure you dont stumble.**

Hey, Ezra said. Kid got his achievement.

Several more people added an encouragement comment or two, making Dallion feel utterly uncomfortable. However, it also told him that certain worlds came with their fixed achievements. Traversing this mountain had to be the equivalent of climbing Everest back on Earth. And while a two-level advancement on body didnt seem as much as Dallion thought it was in the past, it remained the equivalent of two awakening levels.

The achievement also posed the question whether there would be a similar achievement upon crossing the sea, and if there was, what attribute would it affect?

After a slight pause, the party went on.

Thick clouds covered the sky, making even noon feel like evening. And just as Dallion feared, an hour later, rain poured on them with such force that several people had to summon a shield to cover their heads while walking. Dallion was among those people, much to the displeasure of the armadil shield. It wasnt so much the raindrops beating onto him, but rather his annoyance at the fact that he couldnt feel them first hand. Funny enough, the complaining got the dryad an invitation from Harp who had offered to create the equivalent in her part of Dallions realm. The thought was mildly disturbing.

Dal, Agnii walked up to him. Of the entire party, she was the only one that didnt give a damn, leaving the rain to fall on her unprotected. You feeling okay?

Err, yes? Dallion was taken aback by the question, mostly because his music skill failed to show any concern in the woman.

Look, Ill be making a boat at port. The plan was to make a solid ship to cross the sea, but given what your firebird did, well be going with something else.

Ah. Dallion smiled. I was thinking the same thing. A raft propelled by Lux should be able to get to the other side in a few minutes.

Will be more than a few minutes. Also, cant be a raft. At that speed, everyone will fall off. And even then, all it would take is to hit something to send everyone flying.

The image popped into Dallions mind, making it seem far funnier than it was.

What I want to know is if your firebird can handle it. He got hurt during the fight, and I dont want everyone to end up stuck in the middle of the ocean.

He can. He did fine with the whale. Then again, while pushing the vine-whale, Lux didnt pay attention to the creatures wellbeing. Might be a bit rough, but nothing we cant handle afterwards.

Okay.

Why doesnt he just carry the entire boat? Dallion asked. It doesnt have to be on water. All we need is"

March's orders. We must float across, and for that, the boat has to be floatable and somewhat sturdy. We won't need oars or sails, but everything else is a must.

Your call. Dallion shrugged. On that note, where is March. I haven't seen her and Vend since the fight. Everything going, okay?

She's gone to check out the minotaur settlements. They came from this side of the mountain. That's why I was against dealing with all of the cracklings.

That explained the minotaurs sudden expansion tipwards. They must have lived in small settlements on the edge of the world on either side of the main path. With the cracklings gone, they had spread to fill the vacuum, even crossing the mountain. And since they were local to this world, the summit temple guardian didn't see them as a threat.

You think they're up to something? Dallion whispered, moving closer.

It's nothing that we can't handle. The point is to find out if they know anything from across the sea.

You can't be sure they came from there. The minotaurs didn't strike me as crafters or swimmers.

Still a rookie. The woman smiled. You still think in terms of normal time. They don't have to have crossed recently. They could have done so thousands of years ago. If they did, it's likely they have some legend of myth, or something passed down, possibly some heirloom or artifact. As long as it's in one piece I could find out things.

And while she and Vend have fun, we walk through the rain and build a ship, Dallion said.

Fast learner. I see why my kids like you. But you're wrong on this one. We don't build a ship, we just modify one.

Huh? What does that mean?

As it turned out, the answer was far simpler than Dallion imagined, simpler and more fascinating. After several hours, the rain stopped. Sun shone through the cracks in the clouds, making the surroundings much more visible. For what was important, a river became visible a few dozen miles away. It trickled down the mountain, continuing on into the distance.

Dallion was never particularly good in geography, but there were some things he had picked up from school. For instance, he knew that rivers tended to start from mountains and in nearly all cases went on until they reached the sea. He also knew that throughout human history, civilizations more likely than not tended to build cities next to a river or coast. Half a day later, the party came across exactly that the world's first port city.

Even before reaching it, Dallion could tell that it was far greater than anything else he had seen in this world. In fact, it seemed larger than Nerosal. The Town of Tears appeared like a hamlet in comparison. Structures of white stone rose several stories up, packed within a band of grey walls. The river entered from one side, passing through the stone marvel, continuing to the sea itself, all

part of the city. There was no way to tell how much time had passed since the city had been built, but it had been kind on it. The only thing missing were the people.

Welcome to Lastport, Ezra said next to Dallion. Last place well be able to get some rest before moving on into the unknown.

#### Chapter 296: Lastport Vista

Seeing Lastport up close was as inspiring as seeing the Egyptian pyramids back on earth. Even after all that time, the undoubted looting, the passage of time, and the cracks that filled the area, one could see its magnificence. The gates were made of the same material as the houses in Nerosals noble neighborhoodclean, smooth, impervious to cracks or other decay creatures. The finer detailsdoors, windows, decorations, furniturewere long gone, leaving only the base behind, but even so, it remained a sight to behold.

The first thing Dallion asked was for a few hours to look about the town. After several minutes of arguments, during which his music powers were also used, Agnii finally gave in. Dallion was warned not to wander off too far away, and always be ready for a fight. The warnings were ignored completely. For the most part, he walked around like a tourist, or a child in an empty candy shop, helping himself to anything he saw.

It didnt take long for him to spot the dangers, or rather annoyances, the city held. As Agnii said, there were creatures there. Neither minotaur, nor crackling, they were the equivalent of rats or coyotes scurrying around in what they believed to be their domain. The good thing was that while they remained highly territorial, the creatures didnt wander beyond the buildings they viewed as theirs. According to Nil, Dallion had the skills to take a few on if needed, even without Luxs help. Even so, Dallion preferred to avoid conflict, coming to an unspoken agreement with the creatures: he wouldnt bother them, as long as they didnt try anything against him. Sadly, there were a few cases in which that wasnt possible.

The first pair of creatures that attacked were dog-like rats with fangs and claws that were the size of a small pony. The fight had been short and uneventful, and while Dallion had to put a bit more effort into that usual, it was nowhere as challenging as fighting guardian minions.

That wasnt the topic and everyone knew it. Dallion didnt merely want to go up the tower for the vista. There was that, but his main reason, and hope, was to see whether there were any hidden realms left within the city. Given the time past, the prospect was unlikely, but even so, getting a look would get rid of any future regrets he might have.

Fighting a pack of creatures wasn't going to be easy, even if they weren't terribly strong. Dallion would have preferred that Eury was somewhere around, but alas, she had gone off to do her own thing even before they came close to the city.

There was a brief moment of silence, after which both guardians replied positively. Shield was a bit more reserved, but he was confident enough that his assistance against city pests would be enough to ensure Dallion's safety even if there was trouble defeating them. That was all Dallion needed to hear.

Combining his athletic and acrobatic skills, Dallion parkoured his way onto the roof of the nearest building. Given that he had the ability to do so, it made little sense approaching the building along the road. Besides, he had always wanted to do this in real life. Back on Earth he had even done a few attempts to learn parkour, though sadly he had quit in a few weeks—the average time it took a wannabe to give up. Here, markers took care of the difficult part, making the entire process as simple as in YouTube videos.

Reaching the building itself took less than two minutes along the rooftops. Once there, Dallion directly leapt towards the nearest window opening. The recent body leveling up made it all the easier. For a moment, Dallion considered whether he could simply try and climb the building on the outside without having to face any of the creatures within. While it was technically possible, he had no dedicated wall scaling sub-skill, which made the process tricky. Rather than risk it, it was safer to deal with what he knew—combat and music.

The inside of the tower was pretty much what one would expect: a wide stairwell on the outside and openings on every floor leading to the chambers within. Knowing that once the local critters would attack him from all sides, once they sensed he was there, Dallion proceeded to clean the nearest floor.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The red rectangle emerged the moment he passed through the doorway. A swarm of a dozen creatures or so were there, growling at him with bared teeth.

**Species: Ratayou**

**Class: Dust**

**Statistics: 100% HP**

**Skills:**

- **Blunting**

- **Devour**

**Weak spots: Head**

The names of the skills didn't sound overly pleasant, making Dallion summon his standard short sword.

We don't have to fight, you know, he said, adding the sensation of calm in his words through the use of music skills. I just want to reach the top.



Clearly, the effect wasn't enough, for the creatures merged into one large coyote-like rat. At this size, the creature looked even more like a dust deposit, as if someone had painstakingly gathered all the dust off an old desk and arranged it to form a sculpture. Particles fell off at every step, only to float up back to the creature's body moments later.

*Well, I doubt they'd want to have a pet like this.*

The creature leapt forward, several mouths forming on its body. Before they could reach Dallion, however, it was already too late for them. Dallion had split into four instances, each performing a series of dicing attacks combined with an acrobatic jump.

Four different attacks were performed, each dealing a series of moderate wounds, killing the creature outright. This was pretty much the first instance Dallion had difficulty deciding which instance to choose, because all of them were so good.

Moments later, he was standing alone in the room, sword in hand. For several moments, he stood there, but no reinforcements came. The creatures from below had scurried down, while those above remained perfectly quiet.

The compliment was a much-needed ego boost, but it didn't deny the fact that Dallion had failed his last leveling up several times so far. Taking on weaker enemies, even in large numbers, wasn't going to prove much use if he couldn't advance.

Sword in hand, Dallion went back to the tower staircase and continued up. There were a few scuffles along the way, mostly creatures scared that he might enter their floors who decided to attack preemptively. Thanks to the constant use of combat splitting, Dallion got to no harm.

*There was nothing special about going up the mountain either*

*No, the mountain was made by the realms creator to be of major significance, and that was acknowledged by the Moons. The achievement wasn't for you reaching the top, it was for crossing the highest point of the world for the first time.*

*Does that mean that captain Adzorg can add a few achievements in the training items in the basement?*

*So, in theory, if I were to reach a high enough level and am granted the knowledge from the Moons, I'll be able to give away achievements to people?*

*Dear boy, if you reach the level at which you can create world items, you'll be able to do quite a bit more than that.*

Reaching the top of the tower yielded no achievements. What it did give was a clear view of the entire city. Even without music skills, Dallion was able to see several party members most of them were at the main square, resting at a large well as well as every building there was. He could see the palace with towers higher than he was on, a number of large mansions that once must have belonged to local people of importance, guard forts, gardens, shops, but most of all, he was able to see the shipyards. Giant quays of wood and stone extended into the calm waters. Once they probably were bustling with people and trade, now they were little more than a memory, but even so, not all ships were gone.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, Dallion knew that Nil was right. Even so, he looked around carefully, combining his music and forging skills. From what he could see, there were several dozen hidden realm spots, all at the city piers. Whatever good and not only good there had been was long found and taken, leaving only potential ships behind.

Suddenly, something caught Dallions attention. Strictly speaking, it wasnt a hidden area. Instead, it was a metal item with its own emotions that flickered like a glowing needle in a haystack. What more significance, though, was that the light surrounding it clearly showed that it, too, didnt belong in this world.

Chapter 297: Second Key

*No, its not that unusual. During the war we had to adapt our technology to be multi effective. The guardians in this world seem more traditional, but that wouldnt exclude the use of metals.*

*How many of them used metal not from this world?*

The armadil shield said nothing.

The point of interest was a fair distance away. If Dallion gave it his all, he probably could reach it within fifteen minutes, give or take. That means that it would likely take him about an hour to meet up with Agnii. That wasnt going to make the crafter pleased, but then again, the ship was going nowhere without Dallion. Besides, March, Vend, and Eury were nowhere to be seen.

Reciting the names of the Moons, Dallion leapt to the nearest roof to the tower, then continued on towards the mysterious metal. The entire trip there, Nil kept talking, explaining in greater detail that just because something was made of weird metal didnt mean it was useful. Examples of ancient teapots were mentioned on more than one occasion, including a terribly boring story about how a war had taken place due to bad intelligence on the empires part. Apparently, one of the early emperors had been left with the impression that a neighboring kingdom was hiding some treasure of otherworldly origin, resulting in a seven-year war and the utter annihilation of the kingdom in question. In the end, it had turned out that the item was nothing more than a kettle most likely from Earth if Dallion would venture a guess.

The building the mysterious metal was kept in turned out to be a smithy. That wasnt particularly good. After going through the rooms in search of the item, though, it turned out that the prize was hidden within the wall and judging by the size was a safe. That was far more promising.

Carefully, Dallion slid the tip of the blade along the wall in the area of the safe. Cracks followed, soon forming a rough square. After several more passes, Dallion casually slid the blade over the inside of the entire surface, then gave it a strong kick. The material shattered, revealing a large metal box with three dials a combination safe. It wasnt a model Dallion had seen in the past.

*Theres no accounting for luck. However, you still havent achieved anything. True, you found the box, but its still closed.*

*Not for long.*

Dallion slid the tip of the Nox Dagger along the surface. However, this time, nothing happened.

That was true. Despite his early fascination with safe cracking and lock picking, Dallion hadnt gone beyond watching a few weeks of videos online. He was ashamed to admit that his fascination was entirely due to video games, where he was annoyed at his inability to open chests due to minigame limitations. In this case, he was hoping that Lux would get a better understanding of things and be able to work as an automated safe cracking device.

*If anyone locks you up in a room, youll have a lot easier ways to escape than resorting to this.*

The firebird emerged on Dallions shoulder, then slid into the safe through one of the dials, like a trail of blue flame. Before Dallion could start giving instructions, the safe door swung open.

Proud of its achievement, the bird flew out of the door returning to Dallions shoulder. Chirping filled the room, followed by incessant flapping around. All the praise during the recent fights had gone to Luxs head; he was acting like a child waiting to be complimented for a job well done.

Yes, Lux. Dallion laughed. You did a good job. Im sure that Nox thinks so as well.

A semi-annoyed meow sounded from Dallions echo. By the sound of it, Nox thought that the younger familiar had a lot to learn. That didnt sour the mood of the bird one bit. Beaming, brighter than usual, the firebird calmed down, returning to Dallions shoulder yet again.

Now, the time had finally come for Dallion to see his prize. There remained a slight fear that the safe might be empty. Thankfully, that turned out not to be the case at least not exactly. Within the thick metal walls there was a small square ingot of metal, the likes of which Dallion had never seen before, as well as a glowing crimson sphere of light.

The moment Dallion reached for it, the sphere darted towards him, disappearing into his forehead.

Shield! Dallion jumped back, but it was too late. The sphere was gone. Has anything entered my realm? he asked out loud.

*Then what was it?*

*That remains a mystery. Maybe a practical joke, or maybe*

**You have received Centors Boon!**

A blue rectangle emerged in the air.

**Follow the instructions to fold the Moon Platinum into the destiny it holds.**

*I think I know what you found. If Im right, youre one lucky kid.*

Some details would have been nice, but knowing the restrictions of the world, Dallion just did as he was asked. There were a few grains of doubt that emerged within him, but so far the shield hadnt led him astray, so he decided to trust him.

Slowly, he took the unknown metal from the safe. A bouquet of markers emerged indication how Dallion was supposed to fold it into shape. It resembled a complex origami, but unlike the sky silver instructions, Dallion could actually follow them.

Cautiously, he followed the first few steps. The piece of metal changed shape appropriately, as if it were a ball of putty or an extremely strange and complicated rubix cube. Once Dallion was done with half of the instructions, more appeared, letting him know he wasn't finished.

This was unexpected, but also enjoyable. The markers seemed to know his limit, making sure to provide just enough instructions at a time for him to follow. Minutes passed. The piece of metal turned and twisted. Dallion stopped wondering what he was creating and just went on with it, more eager to reach the end than anything else.

Finally, he did. The moment of joy was short-lived, though. The item flashed. The metal he was holding changed into a multitude of other metals seven, to be exact. And as for the item itself, it was something that Dallion had already seen.

### **You have created Tears of Vermilion**

Dallion felt as if a lump of ice was stuck in his throat. The last time he had seen such an item was when the Mirror Pool had forced him to find out whether it was killing their members. Dallion had entered the item, of course, only to find out a very lethal island snake guardian. In fact, he too would have suffered permanent effects if it hadn't been for the armadil shield. What was such an item doing here, though?

In its current form, the item resembled a ring. Only once it was activated would it change into its real form. Dallion still wasn't certain what its function was in that form, but he knew it was important enough for the Order of the Seven Moons to be involved; not to mention that there was someone out there willing to kill indiscriminately to obtain it.

No one in Dallion's realm uttered a word. Even Lux had stopped chirping. Sensing its owner's fear, the firebird returned to the realm, where it remained close to Gen in order to get a sense of what was going on.

The truth was that the ring had brought back concerns Dallion had put away. Being one of two people who were present at the leveling up of the other ring was alarming enough. Having found one on his own filled him with mixed feelings.

It took Dallion half an hour to reach Agnii. The crafter captain wasn't at the main square, deciding to start preparing the ship at the piers. Most of the other party members didn't seem to bother too much. Few of them had any crafting skills, so all they could do was carry whatever materials the woman wanted. It was an open secret that none of them particularly enjoyed that task.

Finally here, Agnii said as Dallion approached. Enjoyed the sightseeing?

Dallion wanted to reply that he didn't, but only smiled instead. Didn't think there'd be so much left of it, he said. How come it wasn't destroyed?

The usual reasons. Luck and good materials.

Same goes for the ships? Dallion glanced at the nearby vessel. It looked just as a seventeenth century ship should look minus the sails and a few masts. Not that they were broken rather, they had

never been put in place. It was as if the builders had constructed the parts, but left them unassembled for some reason.

The ships were gone when we got here. We were lucky to find some spare parts. This Agnii tapped the side of the hull never was a ship. Its just a lot of spare parts put together. I spent months figuring that out, while March was busy killing any nasty on this side of the sea. And when she was done, she started fighting things off the coast as well.

You assembled all this?

Impressive work, to say the least.

Yep. And its seaworthy. All of them are. We left them here during the last expedition to be sure they wont sink. Nice to know that some of them havent.

It was difficult to tell whether that was a joke or not. More than likely some had, though not overly much. The only thing of importance was that the ship they used on this expedition didnt share such a fate.

You think your firebird can handle that? Agnii asked.

Think so, Dallion replied in absentminded fashion. Not sure about the steering.

We have a scout for that. Eury will take care of it when she returns. Until then, I want to do a few test runs. Nothing big, just a few miles here and there with us inside.

No problem.

Want us to start now?

No time like the present. The woman nodded. Let me just do a final check and well be off.

## Chapter 298: Ocean Travel

The ocean wasnt the destination; it was only the means to reach the other side. Initially Dallion felt some slight regret he wanted to go on an exciting sea voyage, something this world hadnt offered so far. After spending half a day zipping through the water on a firebird propelled vessel, he changed his mind.

Seasickness, as it turned out, was alleviated by the reaction attribute the one that he had neglected for some time. The worst thing was that he didnt even see how he could catch up. Even if he spent all his points on it from now on, it would take at least five levels, ten to be certain, for him to become adequate. The only solution, according to Nil, was to do the thing that Dallion had been warned against: achievement hunting. For that, though, he needed more information. Despite its vast selection, the ring library didnt have what he was looking for.

Sure you dont want a bite? Ezra asked.

Dallion waved his hand in an attempt to keep what little was left in his stomach from exploding outside. He could tell that the question was deliberate. Over half a dozen people had taken turns offering him food since he had returned to the pier. Also, he could see the amusement blossom within them each time they spoke.

Suit yourself. Ezra shrugged with a smile, then went back to the section of the docks where the group had made their campfire.

Eyes closed, Dallion took a deep breath. The ocean air seemed to have a slightly calming effect. At present, this was the only thing that helped. Even reciting the names of Moons did nothing to calm seasickness. Either there were some things beyond their power, or they just had a wicked sense of humor.

Unfortunately, seasickness wasn't the only concern. The series of test boosts had shown that the sea was a horrifying place. Among the calm waters were patches of decay in which a new type of cracklings had formed. Nox had felt them, of course, but that hadn't prepared Dallion for the sight of monstrous piranha squids attempting to devour the ship whole.

In his mind, Dallion knew that the size was nothing but the result of hundreds or more of smaller cracklings merging together. However, seeing it made him think of something that came out of the Cthulhu mythos. Agnii, in contrast, had kept her full composure, summoned a crossbow, then fired everything at the crackling squid while Lux pushed the ship on to another spot.

Morning came and went. By the time Dallion woke up, it was already noon. There was no shouting, no yelling. The only thing Dallion saw upon opening his eyes was Vend.

Time to go, the elite said.

Yeah. Dallion yawned and stretched. Been waiting on me long?

Not exactly. The advantage of splitting. Vend offered a hand. Come on. Everyone's waiting.

There was alarm in his voice. Possibly Vend was also afraid of the ocean trip, or maybe just from the unknown that they would find on the other shore.

Where's Eury? Dallion asked as he stood up. He had slept for over ten hours by the looks of it, and despite that, his head felt as heavy as lead.

Getting a quick course in ships. It'll be her job to get this coffin to the other side of the ocean.

The description sounded ominous. There were a lot better ways to describe the ship, even if according to the plan, everyone except Eury were supposed to remain below deck until the end of the trip.

*Usually, he doesn't,*

*I thought people get used to reality shifts.*

The conversation shift wasn't particularly subtle, making Dallion uncertain if Nil was talking to him or giving more information about Vend than he should. Something was definitely going on. Either that, or Dallion was still suffering the effects of seasickness.



Dallion yawned again, then followed Vend onto the ship. March was already there, as was Eury at the ships wheel. Given the speed at which the boat was about to go, using the wheel wasnt recommended. Dallion suspected that wasnt the point, though. The wheel was the only point that provided a perfect view of the entire sea and relatively good stability.

I think I should be fine, the gorgon said. Will be a bumpy ride.

The main point is to never stop, March said. Making note of Dallion, she paused, then made a sign for him to approach. Vend did so as well, but a second sign indicated he wasnt to join. Feeling in shape?

Yep. Dallion said, looking at the horizon in the hopes that would make him seem more knowledgeable about sea matters.

Lets hope so. The point is to cross the sea fast. The less we stay on water, the greater the chance of success.

Got you. Dallion nodded. Ive seen what the crackling patches can do to it.

No, you havent.

The captains tone was such that even half of Eurys snakes moved Marchs direction.

What you saw were the small ones, March continued. Weve done a lot to try to clean the sea of nasties. All that we managed was to push them further in. I spent two expeditions trying to cross. The creatures hid beneath the surface until I failed past. A few days in, there arent just patches of cracklings. The patches are spots that have clean water.

Dallion swallowed. That explained why no one had come from the other side of the ocean. Potentially, it also explained why March was so interested in the minotaurs she was hoping that some of them sailed through.

Theres no point in cleaning the entire ocean just to get a glimpse of what is out there. I expect that the next temple will be somewhere on the coast. Well take it, then start cleaning the other side. With both sides of the ocean clear, well know better how things stand.

The plan was reckless even for Dallion; it was also largely a lie. If everyone was to be believed, March had her eye on Dallion ever since he had joined the guild, which meant there was no way she could rely on a firebird-propelled ship. The party would have had to sail and fight their way across slowly and methodically advancing, as was the way. The sudden rush suggested that there was something more to it.

When you say ocean, how big are we talking about exactly? Dallion asked. The distance between the second and third temple?

More likely ten times that. The first time we tried to get to the other side, we thought like you. As it turned out, we were mistaken. We didnt even see the shores in the distance.

That suggested that the realm was curved. Quite unexpected, to be honest, since there was no reason for that. A flat plane would have been much easier to create and much more practical unless the creators wanted to be as close as possible to the real world. Or better yet, maybe that was one of the Moons rules.

Dallion regretted not paying more attention in math class, or he could have potentially calculated the size of the ocean or at least come up with an estimate. In turn, that would have let him know how much travel time it would take Lux to push them across.

You'll sit there. March pointed at a rather uncomfortable block of wood nailed securely to the deck. Eury will tell you where to go and you'll tell the firebird.

Will that be safe?

Being one of two people on deck while Lux was pushing didn't seem like the best idea. During the practice course, Dallion had nearly fallen off several times, and that was at much lesser speeds. In order for this to work, he was going to have a long talk with Lux about gradual acceleration. Given the situation, though, that didn't seem like a valid option.

That's why you'll be tied to the deck, March said without batting an eye. Euryale has enough strength to hold on to the wheel.

This was going too far. If Dallion didn't know better, he'd think he was in some kind of comedic parallel dimension.

Sorry about this, Dal, but it's the fastest way.

*Wasn't that the plan all along?*

*Dear boy, the promise March gave was to reach the other side of the ocean. The entire expedition was supposed to be about cleaning a path, or more if possible.*

*That you did. And March is not the sort of person who'd settle for the minimum. Show her the impossible, and already she starts thinking how to use it on a constant basis. When you set off this morning, her goal was to defeat the fifth guardian by the end of the festival. Thanks to what you've given her, she wants to do it on this expedition. If possible, of course.*

*So, I'm the victim of my own success*

*In a way. Dealing with the vine-whale made her rethink her plans. Getting the guardian to reveal the creature was already good, but seeing Lux move the minion to the starting temple gave her an idea something crazy enough to work.*

Alright. Dallion made his way to the block of wood and sat down. I'm ready.

March nodded.

I'm counting on you. She gave Dallion and Eury a final glance, then went below deck.

Soon after, Dallion was all set. As it turned out, the point never was for him to sit on the block of wood. Rather he was to the floor, and the heavy rope was more like a safety belt, allowing him to stand up whenever he chose; it was much better than being tied to the mast, as he had imagined he would be.

All set, Vend said from the door to the lower decks. Its all you, now.

The door slammed shut. Dallion could hear that it was also barred as well.

Nervous? Euryale asked once only the two of them remained above deck.

Me? Nah. Were only sitting on a firebird powered wooden coffin. And lets not forget we have no idea whats on the other side.

Do you really want me to answer that with everyone listening? Euryale looked in his direction. Her expression made it clear that she was about to say something best kept private.

Maybe later.

Ill be telling you which way to turn in case we need to, but keep your eyes open just in case.

Gotcha.

Well, lets go.

Chapter 299: Sword's End

The firebird emerged, then flew to the rear of the ship, just as they had practices with Agnii. Blue flames covered the entire section of the ship, after which the vessel propelled forward like the cork of a champagne bottle.

Dallion felt his stomach cave as if he were on a violent roller-coaster. The sensation was made worse by the boat splashing rocking up and down along the water. There was no way he could endure a few hours of this, which was why he had no intention of trying.

*Just a few inches above the surface.*

Finally, after all this time, Dallion had found a practical use of knowing about resistance. As long as the boat wasnt in the water, there would be no shaking. Instead, it was going to be like a speeding bullet. What was better, being above the surface, meant that the sea cracklings wouldnt sense it until it was too late, making it possible for Lux to gradually increase the speed without anyone noticing.

You're wild, you know that? The gorgon laughed. It was inevitable she'd notice what Dallion was doing. Most likely so had everyone else, but it would take them a while to get out from below, that is if they even wanted to risk it while the ship was moving. Another thing I love about you.

It didn't take long for the water to change color. At first only the occasional black patch appeared. With time, though, they grew. After about a minute, Dallion turned around to look back at Lastport. The city wasn't visible, and neither was most of the land. Only a few mountain peaks remained on the horizon.

Things are getting sticky, Euryale shouted, which was code for Dallion to pay more attention to what was ahead.

The seawater ahead had become black and tar-like like a living nightmare. If all the cracklings in the area combined in one, they could easily form a kraken so large that it could smash Nerosal with one tentacle. Maybe at one point the creature had done just that? In theory, it was the guardians' job to protect the realm, but even they would eventually become helpless against such brute force.

Any sign of land? Dallion shouted.

Not yet. But it's difficult to say with all that muck!

*Higher, Lux.*

The firebird obeyed, lifting the ship several feet above the surface. This proved to be a tad challenging. Despite its strength, the firebird wasn't used to carrying so much weight for so long. Determined not to let Dallion down, the familiar persevered, giving its all.

Anything? Dallion asked.

Muck upon muck, came the reply.

This was getting concerning. The ship was supposed to have crossed the ocean by now. By Dallion's rough estimations, they had passed half a dozen times the distance from the starting temple to the port, at least. And yet, there was nothing but an endless horizon of tar in all directions.

*Chirp!*

*Okay, but if you feel you can't but the boat back in the water Gently.*

Clear patch! Euryale shouted, pointing slightly to the right.

Nice!

Dallion wasn't even able to see it, but the fact that it existed meant that they were on the right track. Maybe the local inhabitants across the ocean had taken care of the crackling problem on their side. Either that, or it was the fourth guardians doing. Either way it was a big win.

And another one, the gorgon shouted.

Big enough for the ship?

Not yet, but I think there'll be more.

Thankfully, she was right. The number of clear patches consistently increased. Soon, there was enough clear water for Lux to slow down and lower the ship into the ocean once more. The firebird was almost completely exhausted, but the effort was worth it.

We've passed the crackling zone, Dallion shouted. I know you can hear me down there. Better get ready to descend unless you want to miss the fight.

He laughed, feeling light as a feather. All fear, doubt, and other dark thoughts had vanished, replaced by a sense of euphoria. There was a deep sense of achievement. Logically, there was no reason for him to feel this way. The trip had taken less than ten minutes, there had been no battles, and at no point did Dallion feel remotely threatened. If anything, Lux was supposed to get the prize for doing the actual work.

Flattery worked miracles. The speed of the ship decreased, but didn't stop. Meanwhile, Dallion felt he could remove the safety rope and go next to Euryale. As he did, the gorgon didn't stop him.

The crackling mewed negatively.

You're drifting again, Euryale said.

Just talking with my familiars and Nil, Dallion replied, putting his arm round Eurys shoulders. We did it.

Still no sign of land.

It'll be there along with another fierce battle I'll have to observe on the sidelines.

Not the worst place to be. At least there's no danger here. If you get to be a hunter, you'll do the same for the first few years.

That much was true. Fights in the real world came with actual danger. Here, one only had to be careful not to stumble upon chainlings or something that could inflict permanent effect wounds.

So, you think I'm ready?

No chance. The gorgon's snakes moved about. Dallion almost swore he heard them laughing, though more likely it was the sound of splashing. You might be good enough to join in the crackling fights here, but that's it.

Not even fight minions? Dallion asked in mock outrage.

**Swords End**

**(Mind +5)**

**Through cleverness and persistence, youve reached the end of the world! Not an easy task. Many have tried, few have succeeded. Now that youre done with this world, you better start thinking what to do with the next.**

Dallion stared at the blue rectangle. His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing. There was no way this could be the end of the world, not the ocean. March had been adamant that there were ten temples. Surely there had to be some mistake. Thinking back, it was possible that Lux had veered off course slightly taking the ship to the side of the world. It wasnt like the firebird came with its own gyroscope.

It wasnt. Looking slightly to the side, Dallion saw that Euryale had also received the same achievement. The gorgon spent a few more seconds looking at hers, after which she smashed the rectangle with her fist. One didnt need to have magic skills to know that she wasnt happy, either.

It didnt take long for the rest of the party to appear on the deck. They too had reached the achievement, and knew perfectly well what it meant.

Vend was the first to emerge once the door was unbarred. He was pale as a sheet, walking slowly, as if struggling not to collapse after each step. Whatever he had been through the last real time week had been a lot. The rest of the party appeared no different. The pain and fatigue they had been keeping at bay with the sole goal of reaching the other side of the ocean were now back with a vengeance.

March, Dallion began as he saw the captain walking towards him. It seemed like we were getting there, when"

Without a word, the woman walked past him, then drew her sword and did a line-strike. The attack flew towards the horizon, visible as a line in the sky. For several seconds it went further and further until it disappeared altogether. March, however, didnt quit. The sword disappeared, replaced by what could only be described as a large harpoon. On any given day, it would be enough to sink entire forts or pierce a hole through a fortress wall. Today, March walked to the edge of the deck, then shot straight down. Nothing followed.

Theres no point, March, Agnii whispered. Theres nothing.

Dallion could see everyones internal conflict. His music skills allowed him to visualize the disappointment, the regret, the outright pain that some were going through. So many expeditions, probably decades, spent in this realm, fighting guardians, minions, cracklings, and what else not only to find that the final seven temples could never be reached.

The Star wanted to enter this world, March said. Thats no coincidence.

Dallion felt sick. One word from him and March would be vindicated. All he needed to do was to tell everyone about the ring he had found in Lastport, as well as its properties, and everything would become clear. However, a voice deep inside told him that he couldnt. He needed the ring. More than

that, he needed it to remain a secret from the world. If he showed it now, rumors would spread and in a best-case scenario, it would be taken away.

Do you think the cracklings destroyed the rest of the world? Dallion asked. With this many in one place, maybe they destroyed the cities?

Everyone except March looked at him.

There had to be more cities, Dallion continued. Someone must have used the weapons in the plains, and"

Dal, March interrupted. Its alright. Not every expedition ends as we expect. We have learned everything there is and now its time to go back. There wont be more world expeditions this week. The captain turned to the rest of the party. Ill tell the guildmaster what happened. Its up to him to decide what to do with the sword.

Not a favorable outcome by any stretch of the imagination, but the people understood what March was saying. There was a long moment of silence broken by Eury, who in typical fashion asked whether shed still get paid. That proved enough to get everyone to snap out of their dark state. Several people made a few bad jokes, even more laughed at them, or at least pretended to. Bit by bit, things returned to normal.

The ship was left floating at the end of the world. It didnt have an anchor on it, and no one wanted to let Lux propel them back to the port. The only thing left was to exit there and then.

A moment later, everyone was back in the sword room at the Icepicker guild hall.

Taking a while to readjust to the real world, Dallion stared at the sword. Despite the rust, decay, and damage covering large parts of it, there was no doubt that it was whole.

*Do you think it has to do with the eighth Moon?*

*That's a question youd be wise not to ask in future. Danger aside, I think its entirely possible. After all, who knows? Maybe the Moons themselves decided to flood the realm? Its in their power. At least you have what the Star was after. Now all you have to do is learn how to use it.*

Chapter 300: Vision Picnic

Everything seemed different, almost to the point that Dallion hadnt returned to the real world, but instead entered another realm. To some degree he knew that this was the world that he was supposed to bethe city was bustling with far more people than he had become used to, all the shops and stalls were there and full of goodsand still he couldnt be fully sure.

Every few minutes Dallion would stare at a person or try to climb a building wall, expecting to see awakened markers. When none appeared, he would relax for a short while, before the doubts returned, forcing him to repeat the experience.

Better from then on. Dallion understood the words, but was unable to grasp their meaning. Part of him was unable to tell whether this was part of the dream as well. Even the constant shoving and pushing in the crowded streets wasn't able to let that sink in.

At one point, Dallion found himself in front of the Gremlins Timepiece. There were a number of people seated outside, even if it was still morning. The building seemed like a distant memory from the past.

For several minutes Dallion stood there, unwilling to enter. He would have stayed minutes more if Jiroh hadn't emerged carrying two trays of drinks.

Dal? The fury looked at him. You okay?

Sure. Dallion smiled, reminiscing about the time he had spent in the inn.

What are you doing here? Jiroh continued serving the drinks. Her multitasking ability was unparalleled. Thanks to his high perception, Dallion noticed that all the drinks she served seemed to float along the table the moment she let them go. Aren't you supposed to be at the guild?

I was. The expeditions over.

One of the glasses trembled slightly, almost spilling.

You're back from the expedition? There was concern and a note of sharpness in Jiroh's voice. Where's Eury?



Eury had to stay with March. Theyre"

Just hold on a moment, Jiroh interrupted. Stand there silently for a few seconds, okay?

Okay. Dallion found the request amusing.

Perfect.

Remaining perfectly still, Dallion watched how his friends served the tables, collecting a substantial amount of tips in the process. Inadvertently, Dallions mind wandered once more, thinking why he hadnt been getting such tips lately.

Lets go, Jiroh grabbed him by the hand.

Dallion didnt even notice when she had approached. One moment she was several steps a way and the next she was leading him into the building.

Thats it. Up the stairs to your room.

Youre floating, Dallion said as they went up. Youre floating things around you.

Thats right. You already know that.

Am I drunk? A wave of fatigue hit Dallion, making his body feel like lead. I dont remember drinking Maybe it was in the food?

The answer that came was unintelligible, as if someone was talking to Dallion through a water tank. It was impossible to determine whether they were questions or not.

Dallions vision became blurry. He opened his mouth to give a reply, but the words never came. The floor without warning rose up in an attempt to smack him in the nose. Moments later, everything was gone. There was no floor, no corridor, only a wooden table in the middle of a meadow.

There was no response. Dallion looked around. The place looked familiar. He had gone there several times as a child with his family. He couldnt remember how exactly he had spent his time there, but he had a feeling it hadnt been any fun.

Always a critic, the petrified dryad guardian said. Instead of focusing on problems all the time, why not focus on the positives for once.

Positives? Dallion asked. What positives are there?

Dont be like that, the second guardian said. Itll be fun. If you want, you can walk Lunas pet. Just dont feed it.

Why must I always walk it? Dallion crossed his arms.

A loud sound came from the air. The massive whale floated above everyones head, flapping as it did. Dallion could tell that it liked playing with him, even if he had only walked it once. For some reason, it liked him most animals liked him.

You dont have to, the third guardian said. It might be good for you. At least itll give you something to do until lunch. Unless you want to get back to doing your homework?

You know, I was thinking of having a pool built in the backyard, the first guardian said. What do you think? I think I have a way of getting a discount.

We dont need a pool. The second guardian gave him a side glance. Dallion cant swim.

I can too! Dallion pouted.

He can, the first guardian continued. And if he cant, its time for him to learn. Hes not a child anymore. Every person his age should be able to swim.

I prefer having the yard

The yard is full of moles, the third guardian said. Vine cant take care of all of them. Putting in a swimming pool might be a better solution. Its not like we can call the exterminator now that Dallions gotten into a fight with him.

That felt like a low blow. Dallion hadnt started the feud, the exterminator said. Actually, he hadnt even said he was an exterminator when they first met, pretending to be just a friendly neighbor instead. There was no reason Dallion should feel guilty about the things hed said and done. If anything, he would have preferred if the exterminator just stopped coming about the house altogether.

Hey, the third guardian whispered. Dont feel bad. It isnt your fault. You did the right thing.

I know, Dallion replied.

Just try to look at things less seriously. Take it easy, especially when dealing with things beyond your control.

But if I take it easy all the time, how will I get anything done?

Just because you take it easy doesnt mean you have to slack off. Keep a cool mind. Everything will fall in place on its own, eventually.

And dont fall back on your studies, the second guardian noted, pointing at Dallion. Your latest report card was well, it was an earful. Mister Adzorg told me youre falling behind in history. Thats not something Id like to hear.

Of course, it had to be Adzorg. Just because he was Dallions homeroom teacher, was no excuse for him calling Dallions family each time Dallion forgot about his homework. It wasnt like he was the only one doing it. Lots of his classmates knew nothing about history, they werent even interested in the subject.

Alright, Dallion looked down at the table. Ill study more.

Glad to hear that, dear boy, Adzord said across the table. I never had any doubt.

Just remember to always lock behind you and dont lose the key again like last time.

He turned to his left to ask the third guardian, but the dryad was no longer there. Confused, Dallion turned to the other side then he woke up. There was no park, or field, or table, Dallion still in his clothes lay on his bed. His gear had been removed and carefully on the small table that Dallion was using as a bed stand. More unusual, or rather alarming, was that Aspan stood there.

Can you sit up? the cook asked.

Dallion was confused. Even so, he did his best to comply. It took more effort than he would have liked, but ultimately, he managed to lift himself in an upright position.

Here, Aspan handed him a cup of steaming liquid.

The vapors smelled like boiled oranges mixed with watermelon. Seeing no hostile emotions within the cook, Dallion took a sip. The liquid was warm, though not as hot as he feared. The taste was as he would expect it to be perfectly exotic. After a few more sips, he felt that much better, as if starting to recover from a phantom hangover.

Careful. Don't drink all of it at once.

Dallion nodded, still taking a few more small sips. After a few seconds, he stopped.

Thanks, he said, holding the cup with both hands. I feel like I was at a massive party last night. Problem was, I know I wasn't.

Soul confusion, the other explained. It's not only a way to describe us. I heard you experienced your first expedition?

Uh-huh. Dallion remembered there was something he was supposed to ask Aspan from back during the time the cook tried to take over the world. As much as he tried, though, Dallion couldn't remember the exact question.

It happens sometimes. Usually it's rare, but you're a rare case as well. Can you see colors?

I think so. With the curtains drawn, it was difficult to tell. Yes. I think yes.

It's fine then. Just some minor trauma. You'll feel tired and confused for a few days. It'll come in waves, so I suggest you stay in bed at least for a day. After that we'll see how things are going and you can return to normal activities.

Now you're a doctor too?

I've been a field surgeon, the cook replied with a smile. It was advantageous to know many skills.

Must be fun. Dallion handed back the cup half full. He no longer felt thirsty. Rather, he was starting to feel tired again. Thankfully this time it was the nice kind of tired.

Alright, I'll be back down. Don't worry about performances today, the others will handle it. Jiroh will bring your food for when you feel like you're in a condition to eat. I'd advise you don't go to the kitchen until you're fully okay, but knowing you, I suspect you'll be there sooner.

Most likely. Dallion cracked a smile. Aspan. Do you know of moons flooding world item realms?

Flooding? First time I hear about it. That's no guarantee, tough. The Moons have lots of powers. If they want to flood a realm, they can do it easily.

So, nothing like this happened when you were trying to take over the world?

Nothing. Thats not saying there werent cases. Normally such a catastrophic event should affect the items shape.

The shape was fine. Dallion yawned. Perfect sword.

Thats weird. The Moons cant be ruled out, of course, but the only thing I can think of is magic involvement.

Not the Star?

The Star has a very specific behavior. Things would have been different if he was involved. The best bet is battle mages. Back in the day, those were the military powerhouses.

Battle mages That was what they were capable of, at least back at the time of the world item. The questions relating to them now were, given they had potential power to flood the realm, why had they, and also were they as powerful today as back then? With the festival nearing, Dallion wanted to know what to expect in the case of the mages arriving in the city, especially after a mage had given him a very specific warning.

It seemed that the expedition wasnt fully over.