

Leveling up 391

Chapter 391: Syllablighs

Aquilo

Species: Storm Eel

Class: Water

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Combat Splitting**
- **Frost touch**
- **Storm**
- **Ice scales**
- **Water manipulation**
- ???

It had become second nature for Dallion to split into a dozen instances each time he was about to do something important. However, it was quite rare for a guardian to do the same. Even stranger, the guardian didn't make any attempts to attack, but rather positioned itself in front of each of Dallion's instances, indicating that it would take a lot more effort for someone to get past it.

Fighting the guardian was going to be tough. Fortunately for Dallion, his music skill told him that the creature had no intention of fighting him, at least not yet. Rather, the eel was more curious to see him. However, the creatures that composed the labyrinth were a different matter. From his current position Dallion wasn't able to spot any of them, but he could still see the spots of bloodthirst went on as far as the eye could see, like thousands of blue droplets on a white napkin.

So you're the human empath the eel asked. You look a lot smaller than I imagined.

Without hesitation, Dallion summoned his harpsisword. Instead of the weapon, however, the nymph within it emerged, dressed in combat armor. Seen her, the eel violently recoiled; its scales fanned out, making them look like razor blades all over its body.

This wasn't the first time Dallion had seen others have such a reaction upon seeing Harp, making him believe that she had been a force to be reckoned with while in the real world. There was every indication that she could be as strong as Vihrogon, or even stronger.

Behave. The nymphs skin vibrated to form the word. That didn't make it sound any less threatening.

I'm not here to fight, Dallion quickly added, seeing the terror within the eel. I just want to decipher the scroll.

The eel's scales lowered halfway, although it still kept its distance.

Harp's my guardian and friend, Dallion went on. She's only here to make sure nothing happens to me. She won't hurt you unless you try to harm me.

That was supposed to reassure the guardian, but for some reason it didn't. Dallion watched as spheres of fear appeared throughout the eel's body.

Harp tried to block his path, but Dallion gestured for her to let him through. Normally, this would have been a huge risk on his part, but this wasn't the real world here, the only punishment Dallion could suffer was to have to try and enter the real world again.

Can you order the creatures to decipher the text? Dallion asked.

The eel remained silent.

Harp, you can go back, Dallion said.

The nymph gave him an are-you-sure look. Receiving a nod, she then went back to her harp's word state, returning to being a weapon on Dallion's back.

Feel better?

The eel's scales returned to normal, but Dallion could still see traces of fear within it.

It was much more fun talking to you on the outside, it said cautiously.

I told you she won't hurt you. Now, can you help me? Dallion waited. She won't do anything bad to you, if you say you can't.

I can't. The Eel relaxed, then flew around Dallion forming a double circle. I'm only here to protect the scroll itself. You're not the first to have entered, although those before you didn't fly or talk. Watching them was boring, so I didn't intervene. You, on the other hand, are interesting.

I get that a lot. Dallion looked down. So, there's no way for me to get the creatures to show me what I want?

You'll have to ask them. They're part of the labyrinth.

Clearly, the guardian wasn't of much help. It had given Dallion an idea, though.

Lux put me back at the beginning, Dallion said.

Gently, the firebird did just that, while the eel continued to fly and observe the situation, flying along a pattern eight in the sky.

Sorry, Harp, Dallion tapped the hilt of the harp's word. I'll need Gleam on this one.

The whip blade appeared in his hand, then immediately extended.

Let's go through the labyrinth.

COMBAT INITIATED

The message appeared the moment Dallion stepped out of the starting zone of the labyrinth. However, it wasn't the guardian that had attacked him. Rather, bricks from the very maze had jumped out, charging straight at him. Visually, they were like small bricks and pebbles, the upper part of which was made entirely of stone jaws, while the lower had two sets of flea-like legs allowing it to cross large distances in a single leap.

The whip blade acted on its own, slicing through creatures by the dozen. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion kept splitting into instances to evade any creatures the blade had missed. Soon, it became

obvious that there were two distinct creature types: gray and blue syllablighs. The gray ones were larger with block-like bodies, while the blue were significantly smaller and pebbly in nature.

Finding himself overwhelmed, Dallion focused on his defensive skills, leaving Gleam to handle the attack. With the amount of attacks he was subject to, it was easy to slow time five-fold, all thanks to his guard skills. One more defense sequence and time stopped completely.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to end combat and escape, smash the window.

The rectangle appeared, just as it was supposed to. If he wanted, Dallion could easily exit the scroll. That wasn't his goal, however. Instead, we went closer to the nearest syllabligh and summoned his Nox dagger.

Dallion's heart tightened, as if it were squeezed by thorns.

Black and white dotted lines covered the creature, marking where he had to make the incision. This had been the main reason Dallion hadn't increased his zoological skill so far: similar to forging, the skill could only be increased after successfully dissecting a creature type; so far Dallion hadn't had the stomach to do so.

With each cut, more lines appeared on the creature. Parts of the creature moved to the sidelines and arrows indicating where it had come from, as if Dallion was looking at a schematic in an instruction manual. The difference was that he was creating the schematic as he went along. Body parts and inner organs floated in the air, not releasing a single drop of blood. After a few minutes of chest squeezing pain, Dallion had finally succeeded.

Your ZOOLOGY skills have increased to 2.

The coveted rectangle finally appeared.

KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED - GRAY SYLLABLIGH

Syllablighs are parasitic creatures that can be found in underground veins or certain metal ores. Highly aggressive and territorial, they spend most of their existence moving ore fragments between parts of the vein, multiplying in the process.

Discovered and domesticated by dwarves, syllablighs were used to cypher important text information due to their ability to constantly change their location within the mending labyrinth of the item in question (as long as the item is composed of metal). They are trained to return to their original location upon hearing orders from the echo that originally placed them there, or anyone else, the echo approves of.

While in the awakened realm, Syllablighs cannot be destroyed, since they have become integrated with the labyrinth itself.

The information was a lot more than Dallion expected. From this point on, the creature was an open book to him: he knew everything about it, from the way it behaved to every part of its anatomy.

Taking a short break, so that the pain in his chest could loosen a bit, Dallion then went to the nearest blue creature and repeated the process. Alas, there was no new message or skill increase.

Apparently, the species were considered too close to one another, for Dallion to be granted a reward.

Dallion didnt say a word, returning to standard combat instead. The whip blade spun like crazy, slicing syllablighs by the dozens, while Dallion kept evading them and blocking them with his shield.

Blue flames extended from Dallion, covering the walls. For the most part, nothing happened. Healing flames covered the gaps caused by the syllablighs, incapable of filling them in. After a while, though, Dallions efforts paid off. A single block appeared in a space of the wall, filling in a single square hole. Considering the mass of holes nearby and the miles of labyrinth Dallion hadnt even gone through, the success was minuscule. In truth, it was astonishing Dallion had just found a way to restore the original state of the labyrinth, and by extension, the message on the scroll. This meant that Dallion could decipher the message without using an unlock item. It was going to be long and difficult, but it was possible. Unsurprisngly, Dallion continued doing just that.

Hours became days. Fighting the constantly increasing hunger, Dallion kept at it. Once he had gone through half of the labyrinth, the syllablighs started filling up the holes at an increasing rate. Even the scroll guardian still a bit timid due to the harpsiswords presence would give Dallion some encouragement while roaming the skies above, watching him engaged in battle with the creatures.

On the eighth day since he had entered the item, the labyrinth was finally in order.

BRUTE FORCE DECIPHERING

(Mind +5)

Brute force is the least efficient way of deciphering a message, but it works. Just make sure you have the strength to read what youve deciphered.

An achievement rectangle appeared in front of Dallion. It had been a while since she hed received an achievement, and a five point one at that. Exhausted, he leaned against the silver wall, breathing heavily.

Speak for yourself, Dallion said between breaths. He wanted to rest, maybe even sleep, but knew he couldnt take the chance. For all he knew, that pause might cause the syllablighs to change position again.

Dallion closed his eyes and concentrated. Then, upon opening them again, he left the realm. Reality around him shifted. Once more he was with the hunters party, Euryale next to him, holding the other scroll. Largo was still walking away, as he had been over a week ago.

Youre back, Euryale said, able to tell that Dallion had returned even after a mere second.

Largo, Dallion shouted. Take a look now.

The words were magic, causing the large hunter to combat split and get back to Dallion at extreme speed. Dallion was able to see several of his instances reading different parts of the scroll at the same time.

Sea currents, Largo said. The chart is nothing but sea currents.

Sea currents the most valuable information for a maritime power, and also an explanation why there were next to none nymph cities remaining. Everyone had assumed that the cities had been destroyed, but they were never on land to begin with.

Trade routes to nine cities, Largo kept reading. Some on land, others in water. Can you decipher the other one?

Not a chance, Dallion almost snapped. He wasn't willing to go through what he just had. Not without getting a week of rest before that.

Then we have one location with enough information to find more. We really hit the jackpot for once. The man patted Dallion on the shoulder. Are you fine with that, princess?

After the Glass Mounts, the fury replied. Depending on what we learn, we'll see.

I'll hold you to that. Largo pointed at her. I hope you don't change your mind.

Chapter 392: Army of Clerics

It was a five-day walk to the nearest town. Villages were scarce and mostly avoided, especially by hunters. Even since Dallion had joined the hunting party, the group had only gone to a village twice and, in both cases, it was at the local chief's request. Villagers didn't particularly trust hunters, seeing them as mercenaries that stirred up trouble, and hunters knew that even a wealthy village didn't have the means to hire their services. As Euryale had put it, there were only three cases in which to consider passing by a village: when scouting for information, when the village hired their services out front, and after an extremely bloody and exhausting battle when there was no other choice. Dallion found the attitude somewhat callous, but he understood the logic it was pointless trying to mix oil and water unless absolutely necessary.

Smoke column, the gorgon said, pointing at the horizon. Better be on guard.

Dallion tried to focus, but he still couldn't see it. Even after all his training and improvements, he couldn't hold a candle to Eury's perception.

Think it's something interesting? Rei-Alika asked. Officially, she was designated as the group's sharpshooter, although her weapon of choice was a heavy crossbow and enough ammunition to bring down a mammoth.

Unless it meddles with us, we don't get involved, Eury said firmly.

What if the village needs help? Dallion asked.

Several people sighed. Despite keeping his empath stat secret, it had become obvious to everyone that he had a rather helpful nature. Back in Nerosal that might have passed as a compliment, but in the world of hunters, it was an outright insult.

We're no longer in the empire, the gorgon replied. It's up to their army to fight terrors.

The same old story: traders trade, hunters hunt, and the army does everything else. The issue was that because of the Nerosal event and following the imperial announcement most of the armies were focused on remaining in readiness rather than focusing on chainlings and other creatures roaming their lands.

I'll take a look, Jiroh said. Keep going to the town. I'll catch up to you.

A blink of the eye later, the fury had vanished from sight. The town they were headed to was called Merr. Supposedly, it had been a dwarf fortress at some point in the past, but right now it was just a common fortress town, occupied predominantly by humans. This was supposed to be the first stop on the party's journey to the Glass Mounts. The plan was simple: go in, rest, restock, potentially find a quick job, then leave.

Reality proved slightly different. As the group moved to the town, a gathering of clerics from the Order came into view, waiting at the gate. This wasn't a simple case of a small procession of monks making their way through the wilderness, as they sometimes did; the people gathered were several hundred battle-clerics, clad in full metal armor. Several of them held banners of the Order, along with the flag of the Applicio kingdom.

So, they just go about building shrines and monasteries in the wilderness?

That's oversimplifying it quite a bit, dear boy. They are one of the major powers in the world. Say what you will about it, the Order is one of the reasons humanity has achieved its dominant status. Were the weakest race, so our strength is entirely dependent on our relationship with the Moons.

While that made sense, Dallion still felt uneasy. When Dame Vesuvia had come to Dherma village, she had brought a single cleric and several dozen soldiers for just one wounded chainling. If this group was here to hunt a monster, there was no telling what that creature was capable of.

There was a brief gust of wind, after which Jiroh had once again joined the group, appearing just as suddenly as she had left.

Creature attack, the fury said.

Any survivors? Dallion asked.

Hopefully. Everyone was gone. None of the area guardians made it, that's for sure. Half the buildings were burned down. The place is just part of the wilderness now.

Dragon? Rei-Alika asked. Maybe that's what they're here for?

Could be. Hopefully, it stays away.

The closer the group got to the clerics, the more tense they became. Dallion could feel the air thicken with tension and it wasn't coming only from his party. The clerics also seemed displeased with the chance meeting.

Dal, Euryale whispered to him. Leave us do the talking, and whatever happens, don't get provoked.

Before Dallion could ask why anyone would provoke him, one of the clerics waved, politely ordering the hunters to approach. That was one thing Dallion knew even back in his home village: when a member of the Order asks for anything, the only option was to obey. Even Aspion, when he was the village chief, didn't dare do anything against the visiting monks.

Blessings of the Seven Moons, the cleric said.

Blessings, Initiate, Euryale said. May we be of service?

What's your business here? the cleric went directly to the point.

Restocking. The gorgon didn't have any intention of playing his game. If you're willing to spare some food and water, we'll skip the town altogether.

Where are you going?

The Glass Mounts.

The answer was plausible enough to be accepted and removed enough to be deemed insignificant. There was a bit of a stir, after which the cleric who had been asking the questions looked at the rest of the hunters one by one. Most were given a glance, but when his eyes fell upon Dallion, the cleric stopped. The instant that happened, Dallion already knew that there would be trouble.

The hero of Nerosal, the cleric said, as he walked past Euryale. Destroyer of chainlings.

Dallion recited the names of the seven Moons. This had to be the provocation the gorgon warned him about. Not that there was any reason for the order to be annoyed with him. As far as they were concerned, Dallion saved the city without any external help. However, standing in front of the initiate now, there was little doubt that he had attracted a lot of attention.

Do you have the device with you? the Cleric asked.

Always, Dallion replied. He was quite confident that the device in question was the kaleidervisto, and if so, he indeed kept it close at hand.

For several seconds, the cleric kept glaring at Dallion, then he turned around without a word. As much as Dallion would have liked to say that his witty answer had to do with that, he knew better. The Cleric had just issued him a silent warning: don't cause ripples or there will be consequences. It was bad enough that it was officially known that the Star had appeared several timestwice, as far as the public was concerned, although that still made it two times too much.

There've been cult activity in the region, the cleric said, the hundreds of his subordinates still quiet. Be careful when you're in town. And guard your items. Imps are known to sneak into items around here.

We'll keep that in mind, initiate, Euryale said. May we be of service in some way?

The lack of an answer suggested that the group was free to continue, which it did.

Congratulations, dear boy. You just had the pleasure of seeing how the Order deals with Starspawn.

Am I in trouble?

I doubt it, but they are keeping an eye on you. The quick chat was to tell you that much.

What was that about? Largo asked once they had entered the Merr.

They were checking to see whether we were corrupted, Jiroh said. That's why they've left a group outside the city: they want to be sure they check everyone who comes and goes. There'll likely be a lot more of them here.

Change of plans, Eury said. We get food and water, try to find a gig, and move on. We won't be spending the night here.

Soon enough it became obvious that that would be a bad idea. Walking through the crowd, Dallion found that there were more clerics than common people. All had identical clothes to the people outside. There were no fights, no threats, no questions, just clerics in full metal armor with the symbol of the Order woven in, walking about, carefully observing everything around.

The prices were exorbitantly high, even for a town on a major trade route. It didn't help that there wasn't a dedicated hunter inn. Ultimately, everyone had to pay a bit more to get the supplies needed. Dallion wanted to get some basic hunting equipment, but Euryale was against it, ordering him to buy some temporary armor, instead. Several of the local smithies and armories were checked out, but none offered anything remotely useful. Dallion considered buying a pickaxe or a shovel, but in the end chose against it he wasn't going to the mountains to mine.

During that time, Jiroh and Largo had gone off in search of potential jobs near the region they were going. According to the party's maps, the fastest way was to continue east along the trading road, until they arrived in the town of Croyathe last settlement before the mountain chain.

Several guilds, taverns, and merchant representatives were visited and, in the end, an acceptable job offer was made: a convoy task, requiring that the group protect a caravan traveling between Mer and Croya. The merchant was only going to provide food, drink, and a modest sum for each hunter. The benefit was that he was also going to provide them with horses for free, reducing the time it would take by a third.

By evening, the caravan, along with its normal and hunter escorts, was on its way. Everyone, including the merchants themselves, felt relieved once they were as far from away from the battle clerics as possible. Everyone, except Dallion.

In the last few months, he had made vast strides when it came to real life hunting and fighting. However, at the same time, he felt he was lagging behind. He knew first-hand that Euryale had been increasing her level a few times per week. The fight against the Overseer had also been a watershed moment, showing pretty much everyone in Nerosal how weak they were in comparison to the creatures of the wilderness. That had made the gorgon do everything in her power to improve as fast as possible. In contrast, the effect it had on Dallion was to replace his focus on internal training with external or rather, that was what he tried to convince himself. The truth was that it had made him wonder whether it wouldn't be better if he remained at his current level, if only to avoid attracting more attention. For a while, the logic had worked until the conversation with the cleric showed him the obvious: he already had gathered too much attention. From now on, people would be watching him, regardless if he tried to hide or not.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The green rectangle disappeared, replaced by a blue one that hovered in the air above Dallion's head.

YOU ARE LEVEL 31

BODY: 20

MIND: 30

REACTION: 18

PERCEPTION: 20

EMPATHY: 9

SKILLS

- GUARD: 40

- ATTACK: 40

- **ACROBATICS: 40**

- **ATHLETICS: 40**

- **MUSIC: 40**

- **FORGING: 24**

- **ZOOLOGY: 2**

Back at last? Gen asked the moment Dallion appeared in the realm. All the echoes, guardians, and familiars were there, eagerly waiting for him to make the next move.

I dont know, Dallion said. But Im willing to try.

He looked around. Five walls stared back, displaying the various skills he had learned throughout his awakening. There were a fair number of them, though not as much as Dallion would have liked. His zoology area was particularly empty, containing the picture of a syllabligh in a metal frame.

Lets face the next trial, Dallion said, and walked into the corridor.

Chapter 393: Shadow of the Past

Having three familiars and two rare skills would normally be enough to ensure victory in most circumstances. When it came to trials, though, the logic was reversed. The more and stronger skills an awakened had, the stronger the enemies would become. Also, there were other drawbacks. Ever since Dallion has started walking along the Path of the Empath, he has been careful not to destroy items in battle, including enemy armor. Sadly, the same didnt hold true for the echoes the trials created.

As usual, Dallion walked along the corridor until he reached the door without a room.

Your building sense is crap, the shardfly said while fluttering next to Dallions head. Harps domain is way better.

I know.

Why dont you do anything about it?

Ill fix things up once I pass through the next gate, Dallion lied. In truth, he was going to leave everything to Gen, who already was doing a good job trying to make up for Dallions poor design choices.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and stepped in.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

A blue rectangle blocked Dallions way. When he waved his hand through it, the rectangle shattered into a cloud of blue dust, revealing a cave-like tunnel.

So, were going with a cave again, Dallion said. This was the third time in a row that his challenges involved a cave-like setting. According to Nil, there was no significance in thatwhile the actual challenge was based on the particular person, the surroundings had no relation to it whatsoever.

Medieval torches lit up one after the other for the next twenty feet, after which they suddenly stopped. In the past, Dallion would have been concerned. Now, though, he had both the skills and the perception to avoid most traps. Also, he had a firebird.

Lift me up, Lux.

Within seconds, he was in the air enveloped by a layer of blue flames.

Give me some light.

The flames got brighter, lighting up the section of the cave. Even so, there was nothing but darkness ahead.

There are a lot of other things that steal light, dear boy,

At first, there were only sounds. With a bit of imagination, one could mistake it for rain or rustling trees. Slowly, however, they changed. Sounds became words, then sentences. And as the sentences became understandable, the first wound occurred. It was little more than a pinprick, but when Dallion brushed his hand along his cheek, there was blood on his fingers. As he looked, another scar appeared, this time on his hand.

The first part of the trial was already clear the cave of cutting sarcasm. There probably was a better name, though this seemed fitting. From what Dallion could determine, the words were aimed to be attacks. Individually, they didn't cause much harm not enough even for a red rectangle. Together, however, they were a lot more lethal, and just like thousands of ants could devour any creature, so could a torrent of words cut through Dallion, dealing enough damage for him to fail the trial.

Focusing on the sounds, Dallion started singing. As he suspected, this proved not to be enough. While the words emanating from his song were enough to offer some protection, they didn't stop the attacks, which were constantly increasing.

The darkness inside him lit up like a techno dance club. All the sounds became visible now, starting as a single dot, then expanding like a sphere just as a soundwave would behave before fading away. Based on the pattern, Dallion could use Lux to evade them, by flying wildly in various directions. However, he chose not to. Remembering his middle-school physics classes, he knew that a sound wave could be negated by creating an identical soundwave that is a hundred and eighty degrees out of phase. In this case, since each soundwave carried an emotion, all he had to do was create a sound with the polar opposite emotion.

Summoning his harp sword, Dallion played a chord, all the time continuing to sing. Waves emanated from him, expanding like bubbles until they touched the whispers, causing both to pop out of existence. There was still the occasional comment that made its way through, but between Dallion's actions and Lux's healing, he was quite safe. Now the more complicated part began solving the actual puzzle, as Nil would put it.

Even using his music skills, there was nothing to see in the surrounding darkness. Trying to set a baseline, Dallion had Lux fly him forward. Initially, nothing changed, but after a while there was a noticeable reduction in whispers. Not only that, but Dallion found that they were twice as abundant on the left side.

His gamer mind kicked in. Back on Earth, some games relied on enemies and items to lead the players along the correct path. From what it looked like, the trial did the same, or as Nil would put it, the only way to reach your goal is to take the challengeswhispers in this casehead on.

Dallions hunch turned out to be correct. The moment he changed direction, the whispers intensified. What was a trickle became a pouring flood.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

Dozens of attacks bled through his defenses all at once, enough to cause actual damage. This made things a bit more complicated. Even with Luxs healing ability, there was no way hed last more than ten seconds.

The armadil shield extended, creating a sphere around Dallion. Meanwhile, Lux jumped off of him, in order to keep the shield in the air.

Its a bit complicated to remember.

Thats what I get for indulging you early on.

The whispers bounced off the exterior of the sphere like hail on metal. Even with this protection, Dallion kept on playing his harpsisword. That was one of the qualities of soundeven special armor didnt stop it completely, only diminished it.

The pressure outside continued to build up. At one point Dallion felt as if he were back at the arena with the crowd roaring all around. Once again scars formed on him, despite all his efforts. Then, all of a sudden, the whispers vanished.

For several moments Dallion kept what he was doing, expecting a second wave.

Dallion did just that. The next thing he did was to order the shield to contract to its original form.

The surroundings were much different from what he expected. The darkness had vanished completely, replaced by endless whiteness.

Oh, I have a pretty good idea, a voice said. Between two blinks a new figure appeared in the white space, facing Dallion. It too was able to float, only the wings it had werent made of flames, but smoke and shadow.

Seeing the Star, Dallion immediately split into a dozen instances, all but one moving as far away from the Star as possible in every direction. Surprisingly, the Star didnt move, remaining where he was, a cocky smile on his face.

Quite the greeting. I see youve missed me.

So, youre my trial, Dallion said, mentally reciting the Moons names.

Oh? The Stars smile widened. Thats the logical thing to say. Flaws represent our greatest fears, and I would be that. Of course, its only that a fear. I cant do anything to harm you. At worst, Ill prevent you from leveling up for a day.

Dallion swallowed. Everything the Star was saying was true, including it being Dallions greatest fear. Hed feared the same ever since he saw the memories of his grandfather. There was a time back in Nerosal during which he thought he had dealt with the issue, but clearly, he hadnt not completely, at least.

Its not a serious punishment, the Star continued. Hardly punishment at all, come to think of it. One single day for messing up what could be a life-breaking decision. But and this is the big one, what if it isnt part of the trial?

Thats what an echo created for the trial would say. Just like the echo of my grandfather.

Ah, yes. Your old man the one who was so happy to help you take your first steps in the world of the awakened. Why do you think his attitude changed when you went back? You saw it yourself. He wasnt happy you were there. Why do you think that way? Because you went back to the dump that was your village? No one would be upset about that. He was upset because he saw my influence within you.

Didnt the same happen before? the star asked, ignoring the attack completely. Ever wondered how I entered the training dagger? After all, I wasnt physically there the captains would have noticed if I had been. No, I was already in your mind. You simply didnt notice.

If you were in my mind, why did you try to kill me?

Did I try to kill you? The Star tilted his head. All I did was try to change your way of thinking. The only reason it didnt work was because you somehow became a favored of the Moon. Of course, that changed when you decided to save that ridiculous shardfly. The moment that happened, there was nothing protecting you.

Dallion struck again, this time spinning the whip blade around him, in order to sever his enemy. The razor-sharp fragments sliced through the torso of the Star, but the parts didnt detach.

I defeated you at the arena, Dallion said.

The copyette defeated me. Smart move bringing it along. I knew you didnt kill it, but I didnt imagine youd carry it in public and at the arena of all places. Some things really defy logic.

Reality and fear merged. Dallion knew that this was a trial, it had to be the Star was repeating the exact same fears that Dallion had been fighting with for months. However, the question remained: what if they were true? The Star had managed to worm its way into the mind of many throughout the ages. It had tricked the nymphs, it had tricked the dryads, even the copyette that had tried to take over the world. Why should Dallion be any different?

The Star laughed. There were no weapons on him he didnt need any. Facing him without the support of the Moons was the same as fighting an Overseer one on one. There was no chance of a simple seer to succeed.

I cant win against you, can I? Dallion asked, flicking his weapon back, so the blade assembled.

Not even theoretically.

Then I wont fight you.

An interesting approach. But theres a small flaw. Youre not the active party. Im not the one burdened by empathy. You are.

Youre right. But I didnt say there wouldnt be someone else fighting instead of me.

The entire room turned green.

Chapter 394: Unburdened

Dallion felt a sense of serenity as green light surged through him. It was very different from what he imaginednot strength, or power, just the sensation he was part of everything and everything was part of him.

PATRON POSSESSION

The Green Moon has shared its strength.

Calling a Moon to fight your battles? the Star asked, its mortal face twisted with anger. Some things never change.

Dont they? Dallion looked calmly at his opponent. Ill be fighting the battle, only with a bit of help. After all, it was you who gave me the idea. You kept going on and on about how there was a part of you deep inside my mind I could never remove. I have a fragment of a Moon as well.

The heart of Felygn, the Star hissed. The biggest joke of them all. You should have gone with Berannah. At least shed be able to talk me to death. Felygn cant do a thing.

Hes still a Moon, Dallion unsummoned his shield and sword; he wasnt going to need them for this fight. You arent. He flew forward.

Dozens of instances flashed into existence, each like a silhouette of smoke. Even with his Mind increase, Dallion didnt have a hope of matching the number of instances, so he didnt even try. Stopping mid-flight, Dallion waited, the energy of the Green Moon pulsing through his veins. A few seconds later, just as the instances vanished, the Star split again. This time Dallion was prepared. The split second before the Stars instances could unfold, Dallion was in front of his enemy, striking at his stomach.

Contact was achieved. Dallions fist struck the black t-shirt, sending the Star flying a few feet back. While that happened, all the instances faded away. But that wasnt the only effect of the attack. As if granted life, the t-shirt Arthurows was wearing stretched out. Threads emerged from it, then spun to create ropes that twisted around the Star.

Before he could get any answer, jets of black in burst through, covering the Stars entire torso, then drained away, bringing back the t-shirt to its former state.

Someones getting cocky, the Star hissed, not a hint of a smile on its face.

It was at that precise moment that Dallion received the answer to his question as hundreds of images flickered through his mind, like the images of a game tutorial. He had no idea what the skill was called, or how to activate it, but he was fully aware of what it did: grant complete freedom to a

guardian. The moment he had come in contact with the Stars t-shirt, the Green Moons power had set the shirt free and it, in turn, had rebelled against its owner.

The wild chaining Dallion had hunted way back, had similar abilities; or rather, it had the polar opposite ability consuming everything it touched and making it part of itself. Consuming versus freeing. There was no telling which would be stronger in a hand-to-hand battle, even if the Moons were supposed to be superior to the Star.

A crossbow appeared in the Stars hands, instantly firing a multitude of bolts in Dallions direction. Dallion didnt falter. The moment the tip of the projectiles touched his body, they instantly changed material, transforming into items of foam. Getting hit remained slightly painful, but no more than getting by a nerf gun.

Dallion felt confused. Was this part of the trial? The ability was way too powerful for him to have. And yet, he had just seen its effects twice. It was stronger than the line-slash, stronger than the spark, stronger than anything conceivable.

Youll pay for that, the Star hissed, then burst into dozens of echoes, each flying towards Dallion.

Initially, Dallion thought of summoning his shield and have Lux move him back. Before he could, a new wave of deep serenity and calm swept through him. There was no reason for him to fight in such fashion. He had already asked the Green Moon for help, and the help had been granted. From here on, the only thing he had to do was follow the Path of the Empath, and that simply meant fighting by turning the Stars guardians against it.

No matter the strength of an enemy, it would never be more than what the awakening trial thought Dallion could handle. That means that his reaction speed was adequate to deal with his current opponents.

Three of the nearest Star echoes performed a series of combined slash attacks, all aimed at his neck. The weapons used were identical scimitars, long enough to ensure that Dallion couldnt reach them before they finished the attacks.

Instead of evading, Dallion let the attacks hit him, focusing on the moment of contact.

There was no pain. All three scimitars bounced off as if theyd hit industrial rubber. Free of the influence of their previous owners, the swords rebelled, twisting around mid-air and slicing the arms that held them. Three loud poofs followed, filling the air with black smoke.

That was the problem with echoesno matter their strength, they could only last a single hit.

The blue of the firebird amplified the green glow of the Moon, spreading the smoke away like dust in a hurricane. The three scimitars, however, remained. They were free nowsevering their link to the Star and his echoesand thanks to the power of the Green Moon, also capable of flight.

Here goes, Dallion smiled.

Time froze, then sped up tenfold. Dozens of echoes descended upon him, each attacking with different weapons. Dallion, in turn, would change the loyalty of the weapons, forcing them to attack, or block any attacks he could not. When that failed, he focused on the moment of impact changing the nature of the weapons so that they didn't cause any damage or pain. It was a constant exercise in matching the precise moment with the decision what to grant to the guardians. Everything felt easy, almost natural, as if someone else was guiding Dallion's body.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 15%

A series of spikes shot out of one of the swords moments before Dallion could transform it, piercing the left side of his torso in several places. The moment after that happened, the hard material turned back into rubber, but it was already too late, the damage had been done.

It was at that point that Dallion noticed one of the echoes he was fighting wasn't an echo, but the Star himself. Also, unlike his echoes, the Star had the ability to consume and change any weapon that Dallion had set free. As if to confirm his point the Star grabbed hold of one of the other levitating weapons that hovered around Dallion. On the second, the sword turned pitch black, then elongated, darting towards its target. Dallion twisted in the air, avoiding the thin long blade by the skin of his teeth, only to have it strike another of the hovering weapons, corrupting it as well. A new series of spikes emerged, catching Dallion by surprise.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 15%

The fight continued. There were no more echoes now, just two opponents, each with the power to transform the cloud of weapons swirling between them. On the surface Dallion was supposed to have the upper hand he had the power to transform every item into an ally, while also granting them the ability to fly. The Star, however, had the ability to corrupt everything he came into contact with, modifying its shape in any way he chose.

A complex game between three-dimensional chess and martial arts took place in which both sides aimed to gain control of as many weapons as possible, while also attacking their opponents directly.

You're still new to this, the Star said, his hands moving so fast that Dallion could barely keep up. Even Moons could only help so much.

Arcs and lines were everywhere around, faster than markers could follow. Dallion's recent mind improvement allowed him to split into a lot more instances than before, although that was only a temporary measure. The Star had proved he had a greater capacity, and that means that in the battle of endurance Dallion would lose.

There had to be one final thing that would help defeat his opponent and complete the trial. Already he knew that the main point of the trial was fear, something he had been suppressing since leaving Dherma village. The Star had been right in that regard, but that was supposed to be over. Dallion

had found the strength inside him to let go of that fear and make use of the Moons help. There had to be another reason that was keeping him back, something small and obvious, yet overlooked something created by achievements, or a new regret that had appeared.

Another red rectangle appeared, this time above the Stars head. After having his health reduced by thirty, Dallion had finally managed to reduce the Stars by five.

The problem continued to be the items. They were useful while being on Dallions side, but a pain in the neck when corrupted by the Star. And as much as Dallion tried, he was incapable of paying attention to all of them at the same time. All he could do was deal with the damage his opponent caused.

Dallion had tried unsummoning the weapons or even tucking them in his belt. Neither worked particularly well. No matter what he did, the weapons seemed to have a mind of their own, charging at the Star with no regard for the logic of self-preservation.

If only there was a way for Dallion to grow two extra hands, everything would have been resolved by now.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 15%

Another surprise attack struck Dallion from behind, reducing his health total to half. Four more strikes and the trial would be over and Dallion would continue the trip to the Glass Mounts, one level lower than he should have been.

The more effort he put, the more the Star gained the upper hand. Defeat seemed inevitable. A moment of desperation set in, and in that moment, Dallion got his simplest and most reckless idea yet.

Instantly, the firebird thrust him down. In that single moment, he was completely out of reach of the weapons, leaving them all within the Stars grasp. Then Dallion attempted the thing he should have done since the very beginning he freed the weapons.

Right there and then he could suddenly hear all of them. Their voices no longer sounded like annoying background noise; each of them had their own personality, each of them was simultaneously audible individually and together as a whole. There no longer was the need to choose between them.

I can hear you. Dallion smiled. All of you.

The moment he said that, all weapons simultaneously turned towards the Star and in unison pierced through him. Each hit stacked a red rectangle above the Stars head in rapid succession, until at one point they all disappeared, along with the Star itself.

You have broken through your thirty-first barrier

Your level has increased to 32

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

Dallion increased his empathy to ten.

Chapter 395: Solo Hunt

Balance gave Dallion a slight nudge as he returned to the real world atop his borrowed force. Before anything could happen, his acrobatics kicked in, preventing him from falling off or even swinging significantly. Anyone not paying attention would just attribute it to him adjusting on his saddle, but the awakened knew.

How did it go? Rei-Alika asked.

Good, Dallion replied.

It had been a painful experience, like most trials lately, but the results were worth it. His greatest fears had been put at bay, also the remnants of guilt had gone as well. For all practical purposes, it was as if he had taken the final step forward, leaving his past life behind. Dallion, of the Icepicker guild was no more; now he was Dallion the hunter trainee, and if he was going to make it to full hunter he had more than enough to worry about other than his past.

Did you get some sleep? Euryale rode closer. Dallion could sense the animal being freaked out to the point that it was terrified into submission. For some reason, animals didn't react well to gorgons. Possibly they could feel what the species was capable of?

No. I'm fine, though. It was more puzzle than fight.

Several of the gorgons snakes moved about. After spending several months with her, Dallion had started to catch the emotions behind some of the snake movements. The one just now was annoyance at lies. He also knew from experience that at this stage, it was better to shut up and avoid getting into further trouble.

You better be. There are critters out there.

And just when I thought you were starting to have a better opinion of me.

Opinion has nothing to do with it, dear boy. Unless you think you have the strength of an army of battle clerics?

Very funny.

The slow journey to Croya showed Dallion the barrier that existed between merchants and hunters. There was no doubt that they were happy to have adequate protection and for cheap, at that. However, all of them kept their distance. Words were only exchanged when needed: letting Eury know when the caravan was stopping for food, responding to any questions that the hunters had, or sharing their fears of dangers.

Scares were few and far between, most often ending up to packs of animals relatively harmless for hunters or the occasional small pest that quickly fled as a group of hunters got close. As Nil pointed

out, for better or worse, the trip so far was mostly uneventful. And that left Dallion more than enough time to practice, both in his realm and the real world.

With his major mental blocker gone, Dallion managed to grow by two more levels, dumping all his gained points on Reaction to get a round twenty. The trials themselves were quite easy compared to the last. Both were skill and combat based, testing whether he had what it took to defeat packs of animals while also not hurting them. The latter was a bit tricky, but he was starting to get a much better idea of how to use items to achieve things that would otherwise be close to impossible. In game terms, it was the same as creating critical failures using unconventional means. Getting a pebble to turn just enough to cause an enemy to slip, having the area blow up dust in a non-existent gust of wind, even have mini sink-holes form under a creature trapping it a few feet in the groundall could be achieved through a kind request from the item or area guardian in question. Naturally, it worked much better in the realm trial than in the real world. Unlike the settlement areas, the wilderness had no guardians. Rather, the guardians were there, but sealed in such fashion that they couldnt be felt or interacted with. The only way to do so, according to Nil, was to enter their realm and break the sealwhich was reserved for awakened higher in level than anyone here.

I know. As an awakened, he couldnt disagree. As a hunter, however, he had to make do with whatever was given. That was another reason hunters referred to area-awakened as sheltered.

Back in my day, I would have kicked the butt of the cook that made this. Even if it was a hunter.

Does that mean you were a cook?

Define nastiness!

I didnt sense anything.

Thats because its careful to stay far enough not to be sensed. The rest of the hunters know about it, but it seems theyve chosen not to talk about it as long as the thing keeps its distance. Forcing it to attack is in no ones interest.

Dallion kept eating. Having a wilderness beast follow the caravan was somewhat concerning even if it was keeping its distance. Up to now, Dallion hadnt seen too many of those. The reason was that

his travelers emblem kept him relatively safe, acting like a warning sign to every creature that he was under the protection of the Moons. Only creatures that were seriously bad newslike roaming chainlings and the likewere a serious threat. Most beasts knew better than to mess with those protected by the Moons without a good reason. Hunter emblems, in contrast, were made so as not to be sensed. Their purpose was to protect their bearers from the wilderness itself and the creatures attempts to forcefully enter an awakeneds realm.

Dallion finished his food, then stepped away from the fire to wash the bowl. A few moments later, Euryale joined him.

Once youre done, get your combat gear and come along, she whispered.

Huh? Dallion asked, confused.

Well be going through some practical training.

There was no need for the gorgon to elaborate what that meant. Given the creature the armadil shield had told Dallion about, it was safe to assume that theyd be fighting it. The fact that Eury had approached Dallion alone suggested that she might have him do a solo hunt.

A sense of joy filled Dallions chest. A solo hunt, even with the gorgon overseeing, was a pretty big deal. It marked the first step one had to make in order to become a full hunter. At present Dallion wasnt even an official trainee. The title had been given because he kept tagging along in order to learnsomething he definitely needed. If he managed to pull this off, hed officially become a hopeful and after that, Moons willing, the real thing.

Washing off the last remnants of thin soup, Dallion went back to his backpack, whipped the bowl carefully with a dry rag, then took all his weapons and the armadil shield, and went back to Eury. Without turning around, the gorgon nodded and walked into the night.

Five minutes later, when the caravan campfires were too far away for the pair to be seen, the gorgon made a sign for Dallion to stop.

Ready? she whispered.

Mustnt I spot it first? Dallion whispered back.

Not before your first fight. Besides, this one is different. Its been stalking the caravan, so its eager to attack, just too weak to go all out against so many people. When it senses youre alone, itll dash directly for you.

Dallion nodded. He also assumed that would happen, which was why he had split a few times to look around while walking.

Main thingdont be a hero, the gorgon went on. I know itll be challenging for you, but if it turns out to be something too strong, rush back and leave me to take care of it.

Ive been in a few fights, Dallion said, his ego slightly bruised by the remark.

In the wilderness, theres no telling what you might come across. It might be a stray crackling or it might be the monster that destroyed the village a week back. Never take anything for granted.

That was part of the hunters mantra. The wilderness had its own rules which were much more chaotic than those in the city. The only principle that held true was that strength determined the outcome.

Say when I'm good to go. Dallion took out his whip blade. In the open that weapon was a lot more useful, not to mention that the familiar within was able to see through illusions.

From here on, it's all you, Euryale said in stern fashion. Do what you think you should.

Dallion took a deep breath, then slowly released it. For just a second, he closed his eyes, mentally preparing for the fight that was. When he opened his eyes next, he dashed forward. In the darkness, he was unable to sense the creature, but that didn't matter. If Euryale was right, the creature would find him. All Dallion had to do was to get far enough from the main caravan to appear defenseless. In the eyes of the creature thanks to his medallion he was nothing more than a stranded traveler.

For every second Dallion spent running, he'd split into eight instances, looking in all directions. Euryale was no longer anywhere to be seen, but Dallion knew she was keeping an eye on him. After close to a minute, Dallion finally felt a cold void in the distance. In some ways, it was similar to the chainling, but also quite different stickier, more malicious. It was as if the creature had started changing, but stopped half-way.

Instinct stepped in, causing during Dallion's next split to have his instances dash in different directions. That turned out to be the correct move.

The creature emerged out of nowhere, tearing into one of the many instances. The darkness of the clouded night made it impossible for Dallion to see the monster's actual shape. What he knew was that the creature was rather large eight feet tall, at least and extremely fast.

The whip blade extended, slashing through the darkness of its own accord. Not leaving anything to chance, Dallion quickly raised the shield in front of his chest. In less than a second a force pushed him back, as the beast slammed against the shield.

A blood freezing scream filled the air, combining growling, barking, and yelping all in one. Not waiting to see what would follow, Dallion leaped back, gripping his dagger tightly. He could still hear the whip blade rip through the air. The sound of metal slashing flesh was everywhere, however, with each strike, the creature seemed to grow quieter.

Blue light shined from the device, enough for Dallion to get a good look at what he was fighting. The creature was grotesque, as if someone had mixed claws, fangs, and blades of bone with darkness and quickly sculpted a cross between a bull and a wolf.

A cutling.

Chapter 396: The Cutling

Anger and viciousness pulsed from the creature as it glared back. In the realms Dallion had seen his fair share of scary creatures from blanks to guardians, even Star-spawn. This was on a completely different level. It wasn't as strong as a free chainling, but enough to tear Dallion to shreds the moment he let his guard down.

The cutling snarled, circling Dallion from a distance. Fangs and knife shards moved throughout its body as if they were swimming in tar.

The realization of what he was facing made him feel sick to the point he had to struggle to keep himself from throwing up. The creature in front of him was a familiar? It wasn't the creature's nature that shocked Dallion; after all, two of his three familiars were linked to the Star, one being an outright crackling. Rather, it was the experience the cutling had been subjected to in order to come into being.

The cutling charged at Dallio, the ground beneath its feet splitting in long straight lines, as if a giant invisible blade had cut it open. Instantly, the whip blade reacted, slashing the creatures back. However, that seemed to make the cutling stronger.

That was less than ideal. It also meant that Gleam had been strengthening the creature all along. Even so, the whip blade provided a much-needed distraction.

Gleam, focus on

It was quite the creature that Eury had chosen for his first solo hunt. Given that the gorgon was nowhere to be seen suggested that she believed that Dallion had what it took to defeat it. That was a positive notion, although Dallion had no illusions that it was going to be a difficult fight.

A creature that got stronger the more it was cut Normally Dallion would just go ahead and bash it with his shield, as he had done while fighting slimes. However, as he had seen, that was doing to result in a lot of damage to the shield. Not only did the cutling have the ability to slice through anything non-indestructible, but it only needed contact to do so.

At first glance, it didnt seem like there was any way Dallion could win or even wound the creature, and yet he had managed to do so. It seemed that Nox had retained his power to inflict damage to cracklings. It was possible the Lux would have some effect as well due to his healing ability, but the kaleidervisto wasnt a thing that could easily be used as a weapon.

Getting a sense of Dallions doubt, the cutling went for him again, this time leaping off the ground in his direction. Lines covered the ground in criss cross fashion. Faced with such a threat, and with no obvious means of defense, the logical thing to do was to move away. Dallion, however, did the opposite, leaping straight at the cutling. He knew all too well that when it came to movement he didnt stand a chance against such a creature. Maybe hed be able to avoid combat for an hour, maybe two, but ultimately, hed lose the stamina contest.

When the two were a few feet apart, Dallion held the kaleidervisto in the creatures direction. A bright flame emerged, propelling him away, though not before the results of the flame became visible. As Dallion suspected, just as healing abilities had the power to remove cracks and wounds, they had the power to deal damage to creatures that embodied them. Part of the cutlings torso bubbled like cheese scorched by a flame. The pain was enough to force the creature to twist away

from Dallion without even getting a chance to strike. That suggested two things: that Lux was more efficient against this sort of enemy than Dallion had hoped, and also the cutling had never been subjected to it. Based on its general reaction so far, it was even possible that the being had never experienced pain in its entire existence. All its victims so far had done the obvious and tried to slash, claw, bite, or pierce it. Alas, for them, that had only strengthened it.

Dallion felt a shiver down his neck. Hearing guardians talk about their demise so casually frightened him, and not only because of his relation to the Green Moon. Even so, there was no way around it the shield was going to block an attack, maybe two. Hopefully, that would prove enough for what Dallion had in mind.

A dozen feet away, the cutling snarled, now hesitant to blindly attack. Having come across a creature that actually fought back confused it. Thanks to his zoology skill, Dallion was able to tell that the creature was considering running away to focus on easier targets. At the same time, the combination of aggression the creature was made of, prevented it from doing so.

Dallion took advantage of the moments hesitation and charged forward, splitting into eight instances. In most cases the cutling managed to react: either leaping away or shredding Dallion to pieces with one strike. However, there was a case in which it didnt react at all.

You have a blind spot, Dallion thought as he struck the side of the creature up, burying the entire blade of the dagger. The response was immediate. Enraged by the pain, the cutling leapt around, its massive body pressing against Dallions shield. Fangs and short blades went through, some even piercing into Dallions arm. The pain was much less than what he had experienced in the awakened worlds, although it didnt fade away after a moment.

Gripping the kaleidervisto tightly, Dallion pulled out the Nox dagger and struck the side of the beast several more times. Each time, a loud screamy yelp filled the air. Dallion, however, didnt stop, striking on and on until the cutling was forced to leap back.

Blue light leaked through the fingers of his hand, slowly healing his arm. Without the notification rectangles, there was no way to tell how much health had been restored, but slowly the pain began to decrease.

This isnt the realms, Nil. Wounds matter in the real world.

That could be said for you. When it comes to cutlings, you might as well be in a realm. You cant even make it bleed.

I never wanted to.

Pure unadulterated anger cracked through the sticky void that represented the cutlings emotions. Right now, it was more like a common beast than a Star spawn creature. This was precisely what Dallion had been hoping for. The next attack was going to be the one to determine the outcome. Either Dallion would be victorious or Euryale would step in, saving his skin again, and proving beyond a doubt that he wasnt suited to become a hunter.

Raising its horned wolfs head to the sky, the cutling let out a howl. By now, everyone in the caravan was probably running around in panic, while the guards and hunters stood in front of the wagons, ready to meet any attack.

Go for it, Dallion whispered, raising his dagger.

The provocation didnt pass unchecked. Its entire torso shaking, the cutling dashed forward, almost faster than Dallion could see. Aware that the hand with the dagger was the source of pain, the creature went for the shield arm, opening its massive mouth wide open as if to swallow the shield whole.

Darude, Dallion said, and put his plan in motion.

Splitting into fifteen instances, Dallion leapt back, then threw the kaleidervisto straight into the beasts maw. Of all the instances, he picked the one in which the throw was best, then quickly leapt back as far as he could.

The massive jaws snapped, just as a ray of bright blue light shone through. A split second later. There was a loud pop. Had this been the realm, the creature would have burst into a cloud of particles that would have quickly faded away. Here, it merely dropped down like a sack of potatoes.

Combining his music and zoology skills, Dallion looked at the creature. The emotions were gone, including the sticky void that surrounded it. The only thing he could sense was the energy coming from the kaleidervisto.

Cautiously, Dallion split into instances, then prodded the creature multiple times. Nothing happenedthe creature remained very much dead.

Gleam, can you do the honors? Dallion asked as he stood above the massive corpse.

Good job. Euryale appeared without warning, standing a foot away from Dallion. Definitely not the way I would have done it, though.

A win is a win? Dallion asked.

No. The gorgon shook her head. You won, but youre still relying too much on overpowered items. If you had won this in the normal way, youd have passed. If you had lost, it would have been clear you arent fated to be a hunter. Now she shrugged. Now youre still a big unknown.

All the euphoria that had gathered within Dallion fizzled away.

You didnt think Id win?

I was hoping youd win. Just not like this.

Chapter 397: Harsh Love

Dallions realm was full of commotion. It wasnt often that one of his familiars gained a level, and since this had occurred to Luxthe most cheerful entity in the realm everyone had quickly come to the conclusion that the best way to stop him from constantly flying about from constantly showing off was to mark the occasion with a celebration. On first glance, the leveling up didnt seem to have changed the firebirds appearance. Lux was the same plump firebird chick he had always been, although now his flames were considerably stronger. If one were to give a number value, the firebird was able to heal wounds twice faster. Considering how useful such an ability was, Dallion was supposed to be overjoyed. Unfortunately, he had other things on his mindnamely, being told by his girlfriend that he still wasnt ready to become a hunter apprentice. That was the thing about the gorgon; when it came to professional matters, she was direct as a brick in the face.

The caravan camp was in a state of panic by the time Dallion and Eury returned. It was only when Eury showed them the cutlings head that they calmed down.

The irony was that while zoology could help him against any creature, Dallion had first to defeat the creatures in question so he could improve his skill to the point they would be useful. This was the perfect catch twenty-two situation.

Dal, Largo rode by. I heard what happened.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion put on a smile. I must learn to rely less on gimmicks.

No, thats not it. The large man moved closer. You should have gotten the emblem, he whispered. Ive no idea why Eury has it out for you, but its not due to lack of skills.

She doesnt have it out for me, Dallion laughed, even if it was done in whisper. She just wants me to win the proper way.

Thats crap and you know it. There is no proper way. Surviving is a win. Thats all theres to it.

By that logic, losing meant death. Dallion had heard the talk before. Back when he had left the guild, hed had a long discussion with Euryale on the topic. Initially, he wanted to become an awakened forger, just as he had promised a while back. However, as more and more objects had learned of his empathic stat, things had quickly changed. At times it had gotten so bad that Dallion would hear roaring while walking through the streets. It was at that point that he had requested to join Euryales hunting team, and she had agreed. Of course, the agreement came with a condition: Dallion was to prove that he had what it took before he could officially join. If he failed that hed lose his chance forever. At the time, he thought that was the standard way hunters went a show of commitment was the very least a candidate could do. Could it be that there was more to it?

Just wanted to know that I have your back, Largo said. This isnt the only hunters group.

I thought that if a hunter fails their entry trial, that was it.

Thats only for the real thing. Thereve been many whove been rejected as an apprentice in one group and been accepting in the next. Keep it in mind.

Dallion could see that the man wasnt lying. According to the emotions within the hunter, Dallion strongly suspected that something similar had occurred to him at some point in the past.

Thanks, Dallion whispered. I will.

I think you should come join in the fun for a bit

Thanks, Gen, but Im not in the mood.

I can see that.

I just need to focus on the real world for a bit. Maybe later.

Sure.

The following morning, the caravan was back on track. Nothing of remote interest occurred on the way. There were signs that another caravan had passed by a few days ago and had moved on. By evening, the lights of the city were visible in the distance. It was at that point that the hunters and

the caravan parted ways. While they were grateful for the escort and the killing of the cutling the caravan master preferred not to be seen entering town with mercenaries.

Dallions music skill told him that the man was lying. Before he could say anything, Jiroh put her hand on his shoulder and shook her head.

Dont, she whispered. Everyones guided by their own superstitions. Besides, were getting quite a lot of guilt money from this.

Its always all about the money, Dallion whispered back with a sigh. That was the part about being a hunter he enjoyed, least of alleverything had a price.

I feel the same way, but we can use a bit of that right now. Hunting clouds doesnt come cheap.

The apology from the caravan came with a hefty sum, which was instantly split among the hunters. As an unofficial trainee, Dallion only got a fifth. Jiroh gave up her cut, having it split among the rest. Given that she had dragged the party on a profitless mission, no one argued.

After the profits were split, the group set camp for the night. The agreement was that they wouldnt enter town until the following day. The caravan master had also given the cutling head to sell when they had the chance. Dallion was uncertain who would buy such a thing, but Nil had explained that there were plenty of mages, nobles, and alchemists that would gladly buy it either for materials of bragging rights.

Most of the night Dallion spent pressing the kaleidervisto against the holes of the shield. It took hours, but one by one the damage was mended. Dallion had offered, of course, to mend things the old fashion way, but the shield guardian was against it, explaining that he still wasnt ready to tackle some as difficult with at his current level.

When morning came, Dallion finally entered his realm. His intention was to do a quick level up, but before he had the chance, he was greeted by a very chirpy Lux, who was all too eager to show off his new abilities. Apparently, his healing had improved to the point at which he was able to smooth the rough walls of Dallions realm, giving them a pleasant shine. The ability was greatly appreciated by everyoneNox most of all, since no longer did he have to be careful not to claw things.

Once the small celebration was over, Dallion went to the familiar corridor and into the new door. However, unlike all previous times, he refused to have any of his familiars accompany him.

The trial was simple compared to what Dallion had faced in the real world. All that Dallion had to do was fight an eel guardian. Understandably, he failed. Apparently, fighting a flying creature without having wings or a weapon that would slice through any armor was quite difficult. In fact, it bordered the impossible. Everything Dallion had done so far, all the decisions made, every conscience choice had to do with the familiars in mind. Having to go on his own now was it was as like Dallion trying to un-Dallion himself.

And? Oh, wait, dont tell me. Based on my experience, Id say you were pretty crap.

Do you want to hear a secret? Something than no one, but Zora would know.

Your new eating bowl. Thats her name. Im unsure you should link her this soon, but visiting her might be a good idea.

Ill consider it.

Youre wondering why your gorgon didnt give you a pass?

Dallion remained silent.

Are you saying that Eury wants to fail me?

You catch on fast. Eury loves you and is also skilled enough to see that you wont manage to defeat monsters on your own. However, shes looking at the world as anyone without empathy stat does. Relying on familiars, gear, and your surroundings is how youre supposed to fight, and youre already pretty good at it. Not as good as I was, but youve got plenty of time to improve.

It had been a while since Dallion had a serious talk with any of his guardians. Usually this was something hed go to harp for, but the armadil shield had jumped in. Despite everything, he continued to be a companion fear, and as such, it was his nature to get to know more about his owners than they themselves knew.

No problem. And rememberempaths never fight solo. They are always surrounded by armies.

That was a rather good phrase that even got an approving grumble from Nil.

It took a few minutes for the hunting party to prepare. Since they were near a town, a few used the last of their water to wash up faces before heading in. Jiroh didnt. Being a fury, she had the advantage of never getting dirtyan ever-present layer of air prevented dust, rain, and drops of blood to reach her or her clothes.

We havent been here before, so Largo will do the talking, Eury said as she put on a hooded vest. Dal, if anyone asks, youll be his apprentice.

Okay. Think theyll have something against gorgons?

Wont be the first time. People tend not to like mercenaries that could turn half the town to stone.

Im counting on you to catch any lies. Largo turned to Dallion.

Sure thing.

Two caravans passed by the group as they were walking to the gates. Being part of a trade route, it wasnt unusual. The one thing that stood out was that both caravans had double the number of guards they were supposed to. Things were getting more tense, and it was starting to look like the Tamin empire wasnt the only one to blade for it.

The town of Croya appeared far smaller than expected. Its walls, however, were as thick as they came and a perfect example of dwarven architecture. Three solid iron gates were positioned at the entry tunnel, ready to slide down at any time. And while all of them were raised at present, Dallion noticed several pairs of guards standing ready at the release mechanisms.

Hunters, Largo shouted, holding his emblem to display. That seemed good for most guards, for they redirected their attention to the entering caravans. Apparently, wagons were considered more suspicious than people walking on food.

All of you? one of the guards asked.

Immediately Dallion was able to catch the note of music in his voice. The guard was an awakened and while his music skill was no higher than level five, he still had it.

Almost, Largo grinned, putting his emblem back on. Kid is in training. Too early to say whether hell make the cut.

The guard nodded. Business?

Work, the hunter replied vaguely. Came across a cutling out there. Thought wed sell the head while dealing with other tasks. Any open bounties here?

Nothing you can handle.

You sure about that? We can handle a lot.

The guard took a step forward. His eyes moved from person to person, measuring them up. Upon reaching Jiroh, he abruptly stopped. Just for a moment, Dallion was able to feel a sense of aw coming from the man.

Dragon rumors, the guard said. The Order has already been informed, but if theres an open bounty, youll be sure to hear. He waved, indicating they could move on. Welcome to Croya and dont go too deep underground.

Chapter 398: Western Echoes

Dwarven citiesthe real ones, at leastwere different from what humans were used to. The best way to describe them was like land-icebergs: seven-eighths of the city was below ground, and those were the parts occupied by the wealthier individuals. Since ores, minerals, and food roots were valued far more than anything that could be found above ground, the powerful families lived close to their mines, while the less esteemed were further up, or even above the ground itself.

When the guard had warned Dallion and the hunting party not to go too deep beneath ground, he was in effect warning them not to trespass in the nobles neighborhoods. Fortunately for all

concerned, the group had no intention of doing so. The plan was for everyone to spend a night at a proper inn, get some rest, a nice wash, then stock up on provisions before moving on to the last part of their journey. Plans, however, had a way of changing, especially after they tried to sell the cutling head.

It turned out that the majority of merchants above ground were only interested in exchanging ores and weapons for food and fabric. The single merchant above ground who dealt with any other type of product didn't have nearly as much money to afford the prize, nor anything worthwhile to barter with. The only thing he did was to give them the name of someone who might potentially be interested. While the name came for freemercants didn't want to get on a hunter's bad side, reaching the person in question wasn't. Apparently, the name belonged to a noble family that lived on the third underground level of the town, and reaching them was only possible by invitation.

I'm going to find us an inn and arrange the supplies, Eury said upon leaving the merchant's shop. Dal, coming along?

Sure. Dallion knew exactly what she meant, and after a long trip, he welcomed it as well.

We'll search for a way to get the invitation, Largo said, utterly disinterested.

I'll search for a guide to the mountains, Jiroh said. Possibly a guide to take us part of the way.

It's your show, princess. Largo shrugged. Meetup at the gate at evening.

Without another word, the group split up. Jiroh disappeared within the second, while three went with the cutling head to seek an invitation. Eury and Dallion, on their part, headed to the center of town. With this being a trading town of dwarven design, the central area was the cheapest. Merchants needed to be able to come and go quickly, so their warehouses and representatives, as well as most of the expensive inns, were on close to the city gates.

Now you don't. But you were considering asking afterwards. Trust me, let it go. You'll have your chance later.

What's the matter? Eury asked.

There was a time when Dallion would have immediately said nothing. Now, though, he had matured to the point that he didn't have the need or desire to hide that he was having conversations with his realm.

Just have a slight argument with my gear, he said. Nothing serious.

You're doing that too often. You need to be more focused and not have voices distracting you all the time.

For the moment, the city was quiet, but it was only a matter of time before the local guardians found out that he had empathized somehow they always did. After that, a bubble of voices was going to surround Dallion every step he took. Fortunately, he had become much better at ignoring them.

It's been a while, Dallion said. We should spend more time in towns. Despite Eury's efforts, he could feel her passion thanks to his music skills.

Once we're done with this, we'll head straight back for Nerosal. We'll spend a few good weeks there before the next trip.

That brought some mixed feelings. While Dallion could appreciate spending some time to unwind and spend some quality time with Eury at a familiar place, he still preferred not to stay in the city for too long. It wasn't so much the events that had taken place, it was the people he wanted to stay away from. Seeing them reminded him of all the good times he'd had as an inn awakened and an Icepicker guild member all of which belonged to the past.

It didn't take long for the pair to reach the first inn, and even less to reject it. The owners had made an effort to keep it clean, but not nearly enough to be suitable for awakened, even if they were hunters.

The next few inns were a bit better, but still not a place awakened would like to stay at unless given no choice. There was an option to go on the first underground layer, where some of the more expensive inns were located, but Eury refused outright. Instead, she kept on searching until something adequate was found.

Three rooms? the innkeeper asked, wanting to make sure he heard right.

Are they all full?

No, it's just he looked at Euryale. Even in her disguise it was clear that she wasn't human. However, for the most part, people preferred to believe that she was a scarred fury. People use this place as a warehouse. There are enough rooms on the upper floors, but are you sure you want to be there?

We just need to get some rest. Do you have a washroom?

Yes, but it doesn't have any water the man said. I can have someone bring some buckets, if you want.

Do that. The gorgon placed a gold coin on the counter in front of her. Will that cover it?

There was no response. The man looked at the coin, then back at Eury, an apologetic smile on his face.

A second gold coin joined the first.

And bring some food.

Okay, but the innkeeper hesitated. For that much money, you can rent a nice place underground.

This was unexpected. Dallion could tell that the man was trying to get rid of them, going so far as suggesting they go to his competition. One thing he didnt know was why. Taking a deep breath, he split into two instances.

You have something against my money? Euryale asked.

Its not the money or you. Merchants store things here all the time. They know the risk, so if something happens, they just lose some merchandise. With you if something happens, youll lose your life.

Has anyone died here before?

No, but"

Well be fine, Dallion said, using his music skill to add some calm in his words. The effect was immediate. The innkeeper paused, as the sounds resonated with him, establishing a link. Nothing bad will happen for one night. Trust me, you wont risk a thing.

I suppose nothing can happen as long as youre here for a night, the innkeeper changed his tone. But youll be gone by the morning.

Of course, we will. Dallion pushed the two golden coins forward towards the man. Well be gone first thing in the morning.

Ill go fetch your keys. The innkeeper snatched the coins, then went to the backroom.

You didnt have to use music, Eury whispered.

He wouldnt have let us stay here otherwise, Dallion whispered back. He has a limiting echo. I split and checked him out with the kaleidervisto.

Here we go. The innkeeper returned with three large keys made of bronze. Each of them had a symbol on them. You have East, West, and North, all on the third floor. Ill send someone to get you some heated water.

Well be in North. Euryale took the keys. The rest of our group will join us later this evening.

Ill be sure to welcome them, the man said, slowing slightly. Now that he had given them rooms, his attitude had significantly changed. He was treating them as if they were his most valued customers, and as far as Dallion could tell, he actually believed it.

Dallion and Eury quickly went up the staircase to their room. Just to be on the same side, Dallion asked a few doors along the way about other visitors. As it turned out, there were none.

Once inside, Euryale locked the door and took off her blocker ring. Next, she kissed him on the mouth without warning.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed, taking Dallion into a realm he had been before.

The RING is Level 23

You are in a vast metal domain.

Defeat the guardian to change the RINGs destiny.

The gorgon would usually invite Dallion to this realm to spar or practice his forging, though never for fun she strongly preferred to do that in the real world.

Sorry about that, Eury said, taking off her hood, so the snakes on her head could move a bit. As much as I want you, it'll have to wait. Were there any echoes in the room?

I didn't check. Were the only people in the inn, other than the innkeeper. I know that much.

What was the echo like?

It looked normal. Like some old scribe I'd never seen before. Each time the innkeeper thought of gaining some money, it filled up a new scroll, making him think it'd be highly risky to have us here. Do you think we tumbled upon anything serious?

Might be a local version of the mirror pool. I haven't traveled this far west before, so I don't know all the players.

By the sound of it, the group could kiss their invitation goodbye. Awakened criminal organizations didn't like others messing in their business. Normally, they didn't go against hunters, though one could never be sure. Of course, there was another option one which was significantly worse. The echo might have been placed there by the town's ruler. If that was the case, the noble in question would be sure to make his displeasure known.

Best thing is not to jump to conclusions. Once we're back, split and check the room for echoes. If we've messed with something serious, they'll let us know. If not, we'll pretend nothing is wrong and continue on our way.

This didn't sound very comforting. Unlike in Nerosal, if the party got into a fight, there wouldn't be anyone to back them up.

You're more reckless than I am, Dallion said.

No one is more reckless than you, the gorgon laughed. I'm just very good at determining others' pain threshold, and organizations are no different from people. There was a long pause.

Dallion didn't say anything.

I know what you're thinking, but it wouldn't matter, the gorgon continued after a sign. Someone was already unhappy the moment we entered town. Even if we picked another place, there's still a chance we'll get paid a visit.

You're wrong, Dallion said. We'll be given an invitation. People can't put an echo in the realm of an unawakened. Not without getting the Moons pissed. The only person who could do that is the town domain master. And if that's the case, he knew about us the moment we went through the town gates.

Nice, Euryale smiled. You're catching on.

The conversation over, the two returned to the real world, where the gorgon finished her kiss. Less than a minute later, there was a knock at the door. The innkeeper had arrived, carrying a parchment with a wax seal stamped on it. The seal was the crest of Duke Montagneruler of the region.

Chapter 399: Cave of the Duke

A pair of soldiers were waiting to escort Dallion and Eury to the Dukes estate. It was all very civilized, one could say, even polite. The major difference was that the guards in question were both awakened, and as such didnt have the limiting echoes Dallion had found to be present in the rest of the locals. There was no question that compared to this place, Nerosal could be considered a free city.

The guards led the pair to one of the entrances to lower Croya. This was the closest thing to modern infrastructure Dallion had seen in the world so far. A wide paved road went beneath the surface. Light crystals were placed on the walls and ceiling every six feet, making sure that everything was visible. There even were metal signs giving directions to the various districts one might want to reach.

First time underground can be uncomfortable, the gorgon said. It was clear that it was for her.

Its not that, Dallion replied. It reminds me of home.

For a moment, Dallion imagined what it would be like if Earth was on the other side of the tunnel. This was the first time he thought about it. Up till now he hadnt missed his home particularly. Half his memories being of this place, he didnt have a reason to.

They went on to a small guard station at the entrance, where the rest of the hunting party sat waiting.

Nice to see you got the invitation, Largo said. There was no hint of mockery or sarcasm in his words. Incidentally, he didnt have a cutling head either.

Wheres the trophy? Eury asked.

Being inspected. Hopefully, well get a little extra for it.

We will, dont worry.

Vow to the Moons that you wont harm his grace or anyone else in his presence, one of the guards said. By the way, he did it, this wasnt his first time.

I vow we wont attack unless provoked, Eury said.

The answer made the guard pay a bit more attention, though not enough to be alarmed. After a few moments of consideration, he nodded.

Lets go. Ill take you to the third level.

The Montagne estate ended up being on the fifth and lowest level of the city. The initial set of guards only escorted them to the third, after which the party was handed over to a new set of far more pompously dressed guards. These too, only took them one level lower, there the personal guards of the duke were expecting them. Unlike all the ones before, the final set of guards were dressed in clothes of red and gold luminescent fabric with the Montagne crest embroidered on the left side of the chest. Also, they were dwarves.

Take this, one of the guards handed Eury a staff with a light crystal on top.

But why is Eury the only one getting one?

Clearly, they consider her the leader of the group.

That was both unexpected and alarming. As far as the town was concerned, Largo should have been seen as the leader. The local duke had more than a few skills up his sleeve.

The tunnels were wide and dark, though filled with the sounds of forging and drilling. Dallion was even able to recognize some of the tools used. True to expectations, this was the industrial part of the town the heart that beat with a thousand hammers. There were moments at which Dallion was tempted to ask some questions regarding the local process, and from what he could see thanks to his music skills, the guards would have gladly answered. However, this was Eurys show, and he didn't want to undermine her authority before the meeting with the duke.

After a while, the hunters were taken to the face of a large mansion etched in the rock itself. Upon arriving, one of the guards knocked on the massive iron door three times. There was a slight delay, after which the door opened, bleeding bright white light into the cave. For a moment, it felt almost as if they had reached a magic portal to the surface. When Dallion's light adjusted, however, he saw that the entire ceiling was covered in light crystals.

This way, the man said. One could instantly tell that he was a noble, potentially in his mid-thirties. Thin and elegant, he was wearing a finely crafted uniform of white and red, covered entirely with a golden motif. Other than that, his appearance seemed quite average. And remove that ridiculous hood. He eyed Euryale. We know perfectly well what you are.

And what are you? the gorgon asked.

Internally, Dallion smiled. This was the part of awakened etiquette he enjoyed: the verbal combat that had both parties vying for dominance over the other. Usually, it was a lot more subtle, but even a crude exchange of verbal blows was amusing to watch.

In his graces chamberlain, the man replied with barely a moment's hesitation.

And in Euryale O'Stheno, leader of this hunters party. Eury removed her hood, the snakes on her head stirring non-stop to make her point.

Don't toy with my subjects, a deep voice came from within the building. Dallion could tell that the voice came indirectly from the light crystals. Carls will be glad to escort you to the feast hall, where we'll have a proper discussion. Won't you, Carls?

Your Grace, the chamberlain bowed.

That's cynical, even for you.

It might be, but in this case, I'm right.

Leading the group through a corridor of light, the chamberlain continued up to a door of pure gold. There, he straightened his white shirt and opened it. A vast garden emerged within. There were trees, pushes, even grass, all beneath a ceiling of blue light that mimicked the sky. Sitting on a wooden throne in the middle of a meadow, not too far away from a small brook, sat the Duke himself. To Dallions great surprise, the noble was human.

Not what you expected, I know, the duke said, in a combination of snobbery and elegance that reminded Dallion of the general in Nerosal. I had the place redecorated, but tradition demands I still refer to it as the feasting hall. If it were up to me, Id call it the garden.

A clear display of power. The amount of money the man had spent to get a few trees down here must have been astronomical. The same thing could have been done easily on the surface for no cost, but then it wouldnt have the desired effect. Plaques with monster heads hung on the walls surrounding the garden. The cutling Dallion had killed was also there.

I was rather surprised to sense you enter my domain, the duke said, before sipping from a golden glass. We dont get a lot of hunters here. In fact, we barely get any. So, what brings such an illustrious group such as you here?

Were passing through, Eury replied, keeping her calm. All we came for was some rest and provisions. And to sell our kill.

Ah, the cutling. Marvelous find. I had been trying to get one for ages, but its next to impossible to find them fresh. Youll get a good price, of course. The least I could do. Oh, and youre welcome to stay the night in my estate. Free of charge, of course.

I prefer the surface.

Of course, you would, the man smirked. Nothing less for the hunter gorgon.

I didnt think youd have heard of me.

Given your fame in Wetie province, its natural that I showed some interest. Youll find that dealing with merchants gives me a huge advantage. Everyone needs ores and crafting skills, especially in times of uncertainty. I have plenty of those.

And you use them to gain influence and information.

Precisely. After all, what better currency is there? Artifacts? Creatures? They are an amusing hobby, but one quite dangerous, as youve recently seen.

What is life without a bit of thrill?

The duke smiled, then laughed for several seconds.

Well played. The noble rose his glass in Eurys direction, then took another sip. Thrill and convenience are the salt of life. And no matter how well ones doing, we could always use more. I know youre skilled, and Im willing to hire you for a job.

That seemed too convenient to be true. Such a request didnt require all this theater. The same could have been achieved by having a member of the guard make the same request on the surface.

As I said, were only passing through, Euryale said. We can look into it if we pass through on our way back.

That would be unfortunate. The dukes expression remained unchanged, but one didnt have to have music skills to tell that he wasnt pleased by the answer. The task is rather time sensitive.

All tasks usually are, the gorgon held her ground.

I can force you to do it, you know. This is my domain and not even the Moons have dominion here.

The Moons have dominion everywhere, Dallion couldnt stop himself. Strangely enough, that seemed to lighten the mood.

Ah, the hero of Nerosal, the duke noted. Quite the honor to have you here. Although, I didnt appreciate you looking in the minds of my subjects.

Your subjects have limiting echoes.

On their own volition. Limiting echoes are part of the price for living in Croya. Iron grip in a velvet glove, as they say. It makes things a lot more efficient, not to mention that everyones happy.

The excuses were the same the general in Nerosal used as well. There, the man claimed he was giving purpose to the homeless furies that served him. Here, the duke explained away the limiting echoes by suggesting that they improved efficiency.

Maybe not all, but some clearly are.

A compromise, Jiroh said all of a sudden. Half will continue with our original task and half will deal with your task. That should be adequate.

Three go, three remain. The duke put a finger on his chin, thinking. Will three be enough for the task?

Depends on the task, Eury took over.

Sanitation, the noble said. Theres some creature thats been collapsing side tunnels. Nothing that cant be handled, but its getting annoying. And as I said, one can never have enough thrill or comfort in life.

We dont do jobs in the realm. Youll have to find other awakened for that.

Thats not what I heard. The duke frowned.

An air of tension emerged as several more snakes turned in the direction of the noble, engaging in a stare off.

Not that it matters. Surprisingly it was the duke who gave in. The creature jumps between the two just long enough to crack a few walls, then hides again. Its more a nuisance than anything else. Carls tried to take it, but there was a sigh. Let's just say that theres a lot to be desired regarding his services.

Largo. A cluster of Eurys snakes focused on the hunter. Can you handle it?

A jobs a job. How do we split?

You take Rei and Shai. Ill take care of our other job.

I love it when a plan comes together. The duke smiled.

Chapter 400: The Glass Mountain

He could have given us a guide, Dallion said as he walked behind Euryale.

According to the maps, Croya had roughly the same latitude as Nerosal. In theory, the weather was supposed to be the same as elsewhere in the wilderness. In reality, all weather in the wilderness was quite similar: dry, hot, and windless. The gorgon, though, had insisted that Dallion buy a set of fur clothes from the city, as well as an entire pelt for the night. Trusting her, he had done so, even if he soon came to notice that he was the only one who had packed extra clothes. Both Eury and Jiroh had the same equipment they always did.

Or even a horse, Dallion added.

You'd trust anything that came from that duke? A third of the gorgons snakes moved to the side, staring at Dallion.

He didn't seem to be lying. I trust he wants to get his creature problem dealt with and doesn't care about us.

He's not. He was wearing a defocus item. Maybe more than one.

Come on.

Can you remember what the noble looked like? Eury asked. Clothes, hair, eye color

Dallion tried to think back, but for some reason, the details skipped his mind. No matter how hard he tried, the only thing he knew for certain was that there was someone in the underground garden seated on a throne. Everything else was a blur in every sense of the word.

Do you think Largo will be alright?

He'll be fine. Eury paused for a moment, then continued walking. He asked for a high-paying job and he got it. I just hope it shuts his mouth for a few weeks.

At noon, the group stopped for a bite. Before Dallion could swallow a single bite, his heart tightened for a moment. The sensation quickly went away, but he knew its significance: the Green Moon was giving him a friendly warning. It had been months since he had been roaming the wilderness with Eury's hunting party, and none of that time had been spent seeking out the dragonlet.

There was no response. Despite serving as his protector and patron, the Green Moon never made an appearance. The only times Dallion saw him were in dreams and awakening trials.

He hasn't sent anyone after us, Eury said, looking in the direction of Croya. He's either smart or really clever.

That's a good sign. Jiroh nodded.

How do you want to go about this?

We'll dash to the mountain after we finish eating. The fury looked at Dallion, then at Eury. I think I'll be able to carry you both.

I can get Lux to help, Dallion offered. Hes not too good in directions, but hes good at boosting.

Thanks. Ill manage on my own.

Do we know any specifics? The Glass Mounts sounds a bit vague.

Its not. Therere only a few abandoned villages in the mountains, back when mining glass was profitable.

I never heard about that, Dallion said, a clear hint for Nil to step up.

It did really well for a while for a very short while. Glass mining was a royal game. Even most nobles couldnt afford it. The workforce had to be all of awakened forgers preferably a whole legion of troops had to guard them, and logistics were a nightmare. The mounts are difficult to reach, not to mention that nothing lives there. Furies were hired to do most of the work, but when the wars started, there was a better market for their combat skills. Since then, the mountain has remained abandoned. The fury took a gulp from her flask, then put it away. If Fevre is still in the mountains, hes in one of the abandoned settlements. He must have stocked up on food to come here, so I doubt hell move on so soon. The question is, will he agree to help us?

Maybe.

You know better to delay it till later.

Im not delaying. This isnt a repeat of last time. I have my reasons for not telling them, not yet, at least.

The old echo grumbled, but didnt say anything more.

In a matter of minutes, when the tasteless rations were done with, the group prepared to go on with the journey. Dallion was asked to put on the set of fur coats on top of his current ones, despite the heat. Doing so made him feel as if hed crawled in a bakers oven, closing the door behind him.

Ready? Jiroh asked.

Dallion was about to respond, when he was grabbed by a sudden gust of wind and pulled forward. There was a time when this would have caught him by surprise. Now he saw it as a slightly more exotic mode of travel, or as Lux in the real world as he liked to say. There was one major difference when the fury flew really fast, a strong smell of ozone filled the air.

All surroundings zipped through. It was just like being on a plane with the windows rolled down. The features of the wilderness slowly changed. The steppe-like ground became stonier. The mountain range in the distance came closer and closer. Within minutes, the group was already on it, climbing along the cliffs as if it were nothing. Dallion initially expected this to be the start of the glass mounts, but as it soon turned out, he was very wrong.

Jiroh didnt even reach the peak, choosing to fly to the side of a much lower summit. Once they passed over, the real destination emerged.

Strictly speaking, there was a small mountain chain made entirely of glass before them. However, that was ignoring the fact that the mountain was located in a vast valley of glass within a much larger mountain chain. Now he understood why there were so many stories concerning its origin.

Looking at it, however, Dallion could come with a single explanation: nuclear explosion, or the local equivalent. Whatever had struck the mountain had turned, scooped a ball of rock from the very mountain, transforming everything beneath into glass. Even the existing mountain in the middle of all this seemed to have been created as an afterthought a wave or liquid glass that had risen up in the center of the vast depression and solidified there.

What do you think of the view? Eury shouted.

Definitely not what I expected.

The gorgon smiled and pointed at something at the base of the glass mountain. Dallion focused. From this distance, he could barely make out two small dots ruining the smooth surface. After a few moments, he saw that those had been quarries. The awakened who had worked here must have painstakingly chipped off slap after slap of glass to be transported to a nobles palace elsewhere in the world.

On closer examination, a few makeshift settlements became noticeable not too far away the only presence of stone and wood within the entire valley.

Not stopping to catch her breath, Jiroh flew past the stone summit, then along the wall of glass that marked the start of the depression.

The one to the left, Eury shouted. There's smoke.

Dallion concentrated, trying to spot what the gorgon had seen, but failed. Even at its current level, his perception was no match to hers. It was only after a few more minutes that he saw the thin thread of black smoke trickle from one of the stone buildings.

Several more minutes later, and the world stopped moving. Gasping for air, Jiroh fell to her knees. No one rushed to her to help. Her companions knew better than to offer help. That was one of the unspoken rules when it came to hunters: never offer help unless it was fighting something else. Hunters kept their guard and their distance at all times.

You're pushing yourself too hard, Dallion said.

Dallion wanted to say that this was untypical of her, but that would be a lie. Generally, she was extremely calm, even more so than Eury. When it came to information regarding her home, though, things suddenly changed. It was almost as if there was some deadline she had to find her home by or the whole world would crumble to dust.

Anyone here?

Dallion asked. If there were any guardians, they didn't respond.

Despite the alien beauty of the place, it remained the wilderness. It was also extremely cold. Once the adrenaline of the flight had worn off, Dallion was glad to have put on all the clothes. His companions, on the other hand, didn't care; furies could wrap themselves in a bubble of warm air, and gorgons weren't affected by cold.

Dallion was just about to make a comment when he sensed combat splitting in the vicinity.

Splitting! he drew his sword, splitting into a dozen instances. Barely had he done so, when eight foreign instances of a dwarf with a halberd came charging at them out of nowhere. A series of

clashes followed. Each of the dwarfs instances was blocked by one of Dallions. The initial clash done, all instances vanished into nothingness.

Were hunters, Jiroh shouted. Were not here to fight. Weve come to buy some information from you. There was no answer.

Thats not to say that we cant fight if we need to. I dont know you personally or by reputation, but I doubt that youll be able to take all three of us.

I could, if I tried, a gruff voice said. It had a slightly strange accent, with the rs pronounced and the vowels nasal. If Dallion didnt know better, hed say it was some form of French. Why are you ere?

Just for a talk. Hunter to hunter.

Im no unter anymore. And Ive already sold everything I owned. There was a slight pause. And theres nothing you can tempt me with!

Not even furs? Euryale asked. It can get pretty cold here, I hear.

There was no telling whether that was meant as a joke, but it did the trick. A door of the stone buildings creaked open, revealing a sturdy dwarf. He was every bit what Dallion imagined. Of all the faces hed seen so far, dwarves matched the mental image Dallion had from Earth.

Fevre was somewhere round four feet tall, muscular enough to show through the many layers of woolen clothes he was wearing. His beard was long and dark, possibly to compensate for his slightly balding head. It was a good guess to say that in his youth the dwarf must have been quite the dandy. Given how rare awakened were for the other races, it was no wonder.

Furs? Fevre asked.

Euryale pointed at the pelt rolled above Dallions backpack.

Just one? the dwarf grumbled, even if Dallion was able to sense the joy within him. Come along. He turned around and entered the building. The others soon joined him.

The dwarfs abode was beyond spartan. All the furniture was made of glass. The bed and a few of the chairs were covered with fur scraps, although most werent. A small fire was burning in the fireplace, providing some degree of warmth.

Where do you get the wood from? Dallion asked, looking around for a suitable place to sit.

I climb up the mountain every day and get some from there. Fevre looked at him. Just a little umor. I bought enough to fill five houses. It isnt much, but itll last me for a few years. Same for the food, so Im not offering any!

Understood. Jiroh used her air control to take the pelt from Dallions backpack and place it on the floor in front of the fireplace. As I said, were here to talk. Well give you what food we have. All I need is for you to tell me one thing.

The dwarf made a circle in the air with his left hand, telling her to continue.

I learned that you found the ruins of a cloud castle. I want to know where.