

## Leveling up 401

### Chapter 401: The Nymph Prophecy

The palace of clouds the dwarf sighed. Ill get us a mug of spirits.

With a heavy step, Fevre walked out of the building, only to return shortly later with a large bottle. The moment he uncorked it, the smell of pure alcohol filled the room. The dwarf took an unapologetic swig, then brushed the top of the bottle with his sleeve and handed it to Jiroh. Much to Dallions surprise, the fury not only accepted it, but took a swig as well.

Strong, the fury said, then placed the bottle on the glass table.

And so are you, Fevre grinned. A quick glance was given to Eury and Dallion, but neither took on the challenge. So. The cloud city. Why do you want it?

There might be something Im searching for there.

Cloud cities dont give away their secrets. Being a fury isnt enough to reveal what it olds. Even one such as you. I didnt get much further than the main entrance.

Thats my problem. I just want to know where to find it. As I said, Im willing to pay.

Hah. Do I look like someone who needs elp? Or gold? I sold everything I own. I ad enough gold to life a undred years like a king!

Then why didnt you? Euryale joined in. For someone of your skills, you could have retired as an adviser to any minor noble. There are many in the empire that would love to have a dwarf awakened join their house.

Bah! Fevre waved a hand, then grabbed the bottle of alcohol again. I never liked the empire. Big, bossy, always causing problems for everyone else. Im fine where I am.

Youre in the middle of a glass crater, the gorgon reminded. Theres nothing living for miles. The closest town is a sleaze pit that sells ore for trinkets. The only reason youre here is to hide from someone. Just give us a name and well settle this for you.

Dallion felt a slight shiver pass through him. This was the first time that Euryale openly said shed be willing to kill someone. There were signs back in Nerosal that she was partially involved in such a kind of work. The way the city guard came to her, her relations with the mirror pool, not to mention the determination with which she had attacked the first time Dallion had discovered a hidden chainling. This wasnt someone whod only gotten good from hunting animals. For that matter, neither had Jiroh.

You think Im iding from someone? The dwarf laughed. If that was it, Id gone to Duke Montagne. No matter ow strong you are, youre not stronger than an army. Im iding from the world.

Silence filled the room, broken only by the dwarfs drinking.

What do you mean? Jiroh asked.

The world is coming to an end. Again. Fevre looked around. You think Im crazy. He laughed, pointing at each with his free hand. You think Im just another unter that list it and became a ermit? I found things near your cloud fortress, things that were enough to show me whats to come. The

Crippled as come out to play, and each time e does, theres chaos, war, and a race gets banished. Its appened three times before and each time no one learns a thing.

We didnt say you were crazy, Jiroh said diplomatically. We just"

Dont believe the things you do, Euryale finished for her.

Oh? Then ow do you explain the ero of Nerosal showing up ere of all places? Fevre pointed at Dallion. Do you think I agreed to this because I you ave anything to offer? Or that Im a coward scared to face you? You ave potential, but youre still a while to go till you can take me. ow do you think I made all this furniture? the dwarf asked proudly. The signs are all there. If you go to the place, youre asking about, youll see as well. But maybe by then itll be too late!

Dallion could feel the bouquet of emotions coming from Fevre, all of them strong, all of them conflicting with the rest. There was acceptance, fear, calm, anger, and the faintest hint of hope. The ex-hunter had without question seen something that had tarried him to the point that he had quit his profession and hid away from everyone else.

So, you know me, Dallion said.

Of course, I know you! I recognized you the moment you split. When the three of you approached, I thought you were some pesky merchants, and I wanted to scare you. When I saw it was you

What did you find? Dallion asked.

Fevre looked Dallion in the eyes, then the fury. Finally, he took another large gulp and slammed the bottle back on the table.

I found the cloud fortress by accident, he began. I ad gone there to explore a nymph city. The river snake that I was hired to kill by a port city ad something very interesting in its stomach. There were ships and pier pieces, but there also was something different, something that only nymphs had done. The people of the port town were too pleased to investigate. Even the noble didnt notice, so I took it as part of my reward: part of a stone arch. I knew that it ad come from a building, and that it ad to be somewhere nearby, so I started searching the sea nearby. It took me months, but in the end, I finally found itthe spot that id an entire nymph city beneath the surface. And it wasnt alone. There was a whole cloud fortress crashed into the sea.

A cloud fortress crashed into the sea? The picture had to be something that had come out of a fantasy artbook. It also explained why no one else had found it before. For whatever reason, sea travel in this world wasnt practiced a lot. There were a lot of river boatsDallion had seen dozens of them at Nerosal itself. If the history scrolls in the ring library were to be believed, the eighth Tamin emperor had personally created a complex network of waterways between the major cities by improving streams and rivers to the point that they were large enough to hold dozens of ships side by side. Provincial nobles had carried on with the tradition, increasing the network in their land to the point that virtually every city had a port of its own. When it came to the sea itself, it was largely ignored by all but fishermen at coastal towns.

When I saw that I thought I ad it made, the dwarf continued. I could get enough to but my own town by selling the location of the cities alone. Maybe I should ave done that. owever, I chose to go and search. He let out a heavy sigh.

I tried with the cloud fortress first. There were enough gaps in the wall to let me slide past the outer walls. The main gate took a bit of work, but I managed to open it too. It was after the second courtyard that I couldn't go any further. There was no door, you see. The dwarf turned to Jiroh. I didn't want to smash any of the walls, so I decided to go through the nymph city first, then come back.

And then you found it? Dallion asked.

The dwarf nodded. A feeling of sadness and regret engulfed him for several seconds, then released its grip.

It was magnificent. More beautiful than I can imagine. I had read scrolls depicting what nymph cities looked like, I had seen sketches in old scrolls, but I never expected it to be what it was. Even after spending thousands of years underwater, filled with fish, crawling with corals and seaweed, I could see the brilliance. Every shape was precise, perfectly sculpted of stones that seemed more watery than the water itself. There were no statues or paintings or other decorations. The walls themselves were the masterpieces, made of mosaics, each piece of which was smaller than a pea.

I spent our olding my breath just looking at the scenes on the walls. There was nothing much there. Time and fish had taken everything else away. In one room, though I sensed metal.

Dallion tensed.

*Dear boy, most dwarves have forging skills. For their race, its as common as attack or guard. It creates quite the advantage when working metaltheir awakened powers tell them how to create an item, and their hands allow them to merely stretch the metal in that fashion.*

And it wasn't just one piece. There were dozens of them, all on the floor of a room. The moment I saw them, I knew that they were metal scrolls. I gathered as much as I could carry and swam back to my boat. I wanted to fill it up with all of them, but curiosity made me take a peek.

And you found that ciphered, Eury finished the sentence.

The smile that appeared on Fevres face clearly showed that she was wrong.

They weren't? The gorgon asked.

Oh, there were. Anyone would have had a difficult time breaking in the cipher. However, not everyone is a dwarf. After so much time, the syllable lights inside were overjoyed seeing one of the race that had created them. All I had to do was ask then they move into place, and they did.

That's convenient. Euryale crossed her arms.

I told you I had more skills than you'd think. Writing doesn't make a difference, but it helps. Throughout the years, I've learned all main languages of this world, except one. Fevre crossed his arms as well, giving the gorgon a glare. The scrolls were a warning about the Crippled. They explain what signs to look for, and what to do should the stars emerge. The nymphs were much more enlightened than

most. They had learned the lessons of the copyettes banishment and had prepared. They built their cities to withstand the changes, scattered them throughout the world, and they waited and they still failed. He grabbed the bottle, but seeing that there was nothing inside, grumbled and put it on back on the table again.

The nymphs tried to take over the world, Jiroh explained. They worked with the Star. Of course they would get b"

They weren't the only ones! Fevre suddenly snapped at her. The gorgons tried to take over the world as well right after the copyettes downfall.

Dallion stared at the dwarf in disbelief. Jiroh was also fighting with the idea, while the snakes on Euryales head were moving about in warning fashion. No one had expected such a revelation.

He's not lying, Dallion said after a while.

Didn't know that, did you? The dwarf asked with a bittersweet smirk. The nymphs did and had come to the conclusion that it's all based on the stars whim. Wars don't cause banishment; they just speed it up. And, more importantly, there always are exceptions. There still were copyettes in the world after the fall of the race, just as there are nymphs and dryads. When the world changes again, and another race gets banished, I plan to be here.

*Everyone who talks about the end of the world is convincing, dear boy. After a while you just get used to it. I don't doubt that such theories circulated during the height of the nymph race. I strongly doubt that there have been nymphs, copyettes, and dryads running around in the world in secret since then.*

Fevre went to the fireplace, extending his hands forward to get some warmth.

The cities are thirty-seven degrees west by southwest, he said, his back to the group. Go far enough into the sea and you'll find your sunken cloud. Since you're a fury, it should be easy. Now leave.

Jiroh opened her mouth, about to say something, but ultimately chose not to. There was a lot to unpack, even if she had received the information she had come for.

Thank you, she managed to say after a while. I wish you luck. The fury left the building.

Let's go, Eury told Dallion.

Go ahead, he replied. I'll be with you in a bit.

Catching that he wanted to remain along with the dwarf, the gorgon nodded.

What was the sign? Dallion asked.

You really want to know? Fevre didn't move from his spot.

Yes.

An otherworlder will help the Star to pull the whole cities into the wilderness. The dwarf looked over his shoulder. You stopped the star from destroying Nerosal, but for a moment, you caused the city to be pulled out of the world. Didn't you, otherworlder?

## Chapter 402: Unwanted Welcome

Little was said on the way back. With Jiroh being exhausted from the previous push to carry people, the group had to make their way back the old fashion way. No one complained particularly. It also gave Dallion time to think.

The meeting with the hunter definitely hadn't gone the way he expected. Learning the information virtually for free was better than anyone could hope for, however, it had come with a lot of baggage. The more Dallion thought about it, the more difficult he found it to disprove the dwarf's words. Everything seemed to match: during the fight at Nerosals arena, the Star indeed had managed to pull the entire city domain into the wilderness, and Dallion had been instrumental in finding the Vermillion rings that had been used to achieve that.

Do you believe him? Dallion asked Eury. About the end of the world?

If I believed every prediction about the end of the world, I'd never have time to do anything else, the gorgon replied. You've no idea how much warning I've seen in ruins, and I don't even know writing.

That didn't sound at all right, but Dallion knew what she meant. There was a major difference between writing and the awakened group of skills. Hopefully, at his next gate he was going to learn it.

The important thing is that we got the location. Isn't that right, Ji?

Close enough, the fury replied in reserved fashion. Can you make it to Croya on your own?

Sure.

I'll see you in Halburn. The fury vanished, leaving nothing but the smell of ozone behind.

Is she alright? Dallion asked.

Even before joining the hunter group, Dallion knew that Jiroh would do her own thing. However, lately it seemed she was becoming more and more detached from the rest of the group. In the last month alone, she had spent more time than not on her own, either working in the Gremlins timepiece inn in Nerosal, or on some solo job.

She doesn't want to get her hopes up, Eury explained. She's been burned a bit too often. We've been along this track a few times. We'd find a promising lead just for it to turn out to be a dead end.

Were any of the leads this close?

This one isn't particularly good either. All we know for certain is that there was a nymph city, or at least the remnants of one. Fevre said he'd seen a crashed cloud fortress, but he didn't have anything to show for it. If I know Jiroh, she's back at Halburn to find the merchant that gave us the info.

*Not to see her sister?*

Dallion wondered. In that regard, the fury was quite like him. Dallion didn't go out of his way to see his brother, either. Not that he thought ill of Lin. The kid adored him, and the Dallion prior to awakening did as well. After arriving in this world, however, Dallion's attitude had changed.

This means a lot to her. In the end we all have our obsessions. Ji's obsessed with finding her home, you're obsessed with the Star"

I was obsessed, Dallion corrected.

And I just want to focus on whats important in life.

That was rather surprising. After such a buildup, Dallion had expected something huge and controversial.

Whats important in life?

Maybe one day youll find out. The gorgon smiled. Lets keep going. You wont like staying on the mountain after dark.

Eury turned out to be right. Despite all his current body level and all the clothes, he still felt cold. The entire night was spent walking, or rather running, down the mountain. It was only the next evening, when they were at the foot of the mountain, that the two stopped for a short rest. They made a small campfire, and since it was only the two of them, Dallion and Eury slept together to share some warmth; rather, so that Dallion could get some warmth. Gorgons, it seemed, were impervious to temperature fluctuations. The next day, the walk continued.

Soon enough, Dallion could sense the presence of creatures in his general surroundings. They had left the dead zone that was the Glass Mounts and were back in the common wilderness. Never had he imagined that hed miss it, but compared to the lifeless domain of glass, hed prefer the wilderness every day of the week.

As they approached Croya, a whole platoon of guards marched out of the gate. This would have been a cause for concern if Dallion wasnt able to see their emotions thanks to his music skills.

Largo must have succeeded in catching the critter, he whispered.

Either that or they're here to arrest us, Eury replied.

The dukes chamberlain emerged from the city. Despite his efforts, everyone was able to tell that he found coming above ground demeaning. A frown covered his face that even dark spectacles were unable to hide.

The duke welcomes your return, the noble said. His Grace trusts that your trip was successful and wished to invite you to"

Apologies to his Grace, but were only here to pick up the rest of our party and be on our way, Euryale cut him short. Unless the task that we were hired for wasnt completed?

The chamberlain froze. This had to be the first time anyone of lower status refused the dukes invitation so openly. Dallion could feel confusion surge throughout him, as if his mind had short-circuited. That was the problem with the shelteredit was difficult for them to imagine anything beyond their small bubble or rules. Looking at the painful display, Dallion almost pitied him.

Told you shed refuse, Largo walked out of the city behind the unfortunate noble. The rest of the hunting party accompanied him. Was a nice try, though. He tapped Carls on the shoulder as he passed by.

The man was in such shock that he didnt even notice, still staring straight forward as his mind tried to break the mental loop Euryale had put it in.

Got what you needed? Largo asked as he got close to Dallion and the gorgon.

More than expected, she replied. You?

More than expected, he smiled. You could say this trip wasn't a total loss.

You three keep everything you've earned. Eury turned around and walked away.

You sure? The large man raised a brow. It's quite a bit of money. Between that and the head"

Keep it. We got our payment.

You! the chamberlain shouted. It had taken him half a minute, but in the end he had managed to break through his initial shock and now was a bundle of anger. Do you know who you've insulted?!

Just you, the gorgon said without turning around. The duke knew we'd refuse the moment he saw us. All he wanted was to get rid of the critter. And have a laugh at your expense by sending you to ask what he knew I'd refuse.

You low-ranking scum! There was a combat split.

The chamberlain split into eight instances, each throwing a dagger straight at the gorgon's back. The moment they sensed the shift, everyone in the hunting party split as well, scattering in all directions as they took defensive postures. Only Eury remained where she was, not even bothering to slow down. Unlike the rest, her splitting was so discreet that it was barely noticeable. If one concentrated very hard, they'd only see multiple instances of her left arm moving about to slap the instances of the dagger safely off to the ground, as if she were swatting an annoying fly.

I wouldn't try that again, the gorgon said. This time, several of the other hunters had their weapons, including the person with the crossbows. But hey, you do you.

Carl's clenched his fists. He had just been insulted in public for everyone to see. At the same time, even he could see the difference in skill. There was nothing remotely refined or noble in the gorgon, yet the way she handled herself suggested that her level was in the fifties, if not more.

I'll remember this, the man hissed through gritted teeth.

I doubt it. I bet you'll get in trouble with the next hunters you see and then the outcome might be very different.

Turning around in a false display of power, the noble walked back into the city. The guards, who had a much better idea of how things were in the world, waited for a few more moments and did the same.

You could have let it slide, Largo grumbled.

I doubt we'd get any more jobs here even if we'd gone to the duke's banquet, the gorgon said.

Yeah, maybe. The large man cracked his neck. I guess we know why they don't get hunters here too often.

The next half day, the group walked cautiously. There was always the possibility that the duke, or his chamberlain, sent a small detachment of troops after them in a futile show of force. Thankfully, that turned out not to be the case.

Evening came and went, but the hunters didn't stop walking. Since they didn't have horses this time, all eating was done on foot and all sleeping in the awakened realms. The only pauses were made for Eury to check their location based on the night stars and local landmarks. Being the group's only awakened with high art skills, she was also the group's navigator.

After an uneventful week, the party was back at the town of Merr. Normally reaching a town was a time of joyadequate food, soft bed, and even a bath. However, there were thoughts on everyones mind.

So, Jiroh will be waiting in Halburn? Rei asked.

Thats what she said, but dont count on it, Eury replied. If the merchant isnt there, she might have gone chasing after her.

Yeah Largo sighed. Sounds about like her. Will we be taking both locations when we get there?

I doubt there will be much left in the nymph city. Dwarf hunters dont tend to leave as much as they claim they have. Either way, well see when we get there.

Always the ray of sunshine.

Its whats kept me alive. There was a sudden chill in Eurys voice. Our priority for the moment is to get to Nerosal, and thats it. Everything else can wait.

The conversation quickly ended. Dallion secretly hoped that Eury would ask him to follow her away from the camp and have him do another solo fight. Sadly, that didnt happen. She clearly wasnt in the mood, but even if she was, there didnt seem to be any creatures in the wilderness. Dallion had asked his guardians several times, but neither them nor even Gleam had sensed anything remotely dangerous. The cleric army of the Order had clearly been diligent enough to kill off anything remotely troublesome. There always was the option for something to pop up near Halburn, but the likelihood was small.

The offer was tempting. After all, leveling never went to waste. However, Dallion preferred to wait a bit longer. There were only six levels until his next barrier. With enough skill and a bit of luck, he could easily complete them all next time he was in the city, then try to pass the gate. Thinking about it, that was pretty much a must. Next time the party went out, they were going to an abandoned cloud fortress, and there was no telling what creatures had made it their home.

#### Chapter 403: Proof of Worth

Jiroh wasnt at Halburn, when the hunter party got there. Once they reached the Five Eyes Tavern, her sisterwith little fanfarelet the group know that Jiroh had set off after a merchant with no idea when she would be coming back. The thunder fury had, of course, paid for the beds, and left a message for everyone to wait for her at Nerosal. This didnt bode well for some members of the group. No one was particularly vocal about it, but Dallion could see that their patience was running thin. Good thing that the mission was over. Duke Montagnes surprise request also helped. There was no way anyone could claim that the trip wasnt profitable. Anyone except Dallion, that was.

He had been almost certain that hed gain his apprentice status on this trip. Instead, he remained hopeful.

Im thinking of going about during the night, Dallion said while most of the rest were unpacking or resting in their beds. Maybe Ill come across something interesting.



Theres nothing out there, Euryale replied as she held one of her gauntlets. Dallion watched the cracks and chipped elements get mended before his very eyes. A few seconds later, the gorgon tossed the piece of armor on her bed and took hold of the next one. Nothing interesting, she added.

Let the kid go. Largo sighed. It wont do him any harm.

He doesnt have what it takes.

He has what it takes to become an apprentice, the tank raised his voice slightly. Seriously, whats it with you and Jiroh? She doesnt give a damn, and youre smothering everyone.

Dallion would have been worried if one of the party crossbows hadnt shared that this was common, especially after the end of a trip. After weeks of exhaustion, tempers were running high, and argumentsometimes accompanied by lots of shoutingwere not only common, they were expected. The only thing that wasnt allowed was fighting. Being a hunter gave a person a new perspective on life. In the wilderness, a fight ended with the death or capture of one side. To start a fight, one had to be willing to kill or die.

What followed was entirely unexpected. Instead of continuing the argument, the gorgon finished mending her other gauntlet, then put it on.

Lets go for a walk, she turned to Dallion.

Not waiting for his response, the gorgon put on the rest of her gear and left the room. Dallion hesitated. He glanced at the rest of the hunters present, waiting for some explanation. Everyone silently gestured to him to follow herthis was an opportunity that wasn't likely to get again anytime soon.

Grabbing his gear, Dallion rushed out.

*That would be nice.*

*And you could also show some support*

*Youre really dumb sometimes. Eurys perception is far better than yours. When Fevre gave you the warning, she most certainly heard it as well.*

*Thats no surprise. I dont see*

*Shes also an otherworlder that helped the Star pull Nerosal into the wilderness. She was the one who gave the rings to the overseer, which triggered it all. If you thought you felt bad, how do you think she feels?*

Dallion felt mad at himself. Of course, he knew that Eury came from another world. While the gorgon didnt like talking about her own world, shed spend nights asking Dallion about his. Theyd spend almost every night doing that when they were in Nerosal. Among all that, Dallion had never once considered that she might have anything to do with the happenings at the arena.

The gorgon was already outside the tavern by the time Dallion caught up. She didnt seem burdened in any way, but with her blocker ring on, Dallion could never be sure.

Ready? Eury asked.

Dallion nodded. They went through the town and out of the hunters gate.

You think it isnt fair, the gorgon said once they were a safe distance from the town walls.

I think I earned the emblem, Dallion said. Being so close to her, he didnt have to worry about sugarcoating things. Gorgons, in general, preferred to be direct. I dont know what you want.

You have to work on your perception, then. Or your mind.

Dallion chose not to comment.

I want to be sure that you survive. Getting a hunters emblem, even an apprentice one, means that you can go out on your own. Most people wont hire you, but those low on gold might, not to mention you can roam the wilderness on your own. I wont be there to keep an eye on your all the time. If you get in serious trouble, that would be it.

I know. Defeat in the real world is the same as death.

No. She shook her head. You think you understand. You havent lost anyone yet. Youve been in a hunt, but that was an army hunt. Losing someone with skills with whom youve spent years hits hard. I dont want to go through the same again.

You lost someone? Dallion asked.

My mentor. I didnt choose to become a hunter, I was found, as was Jiroh. My mentor was an old hunter who roamed the region doing any job the provincial nobility would give him. He found quite a lot of artifacts for the archduke, a fair number for the countess, as well. The Five Eyes was his originally.

This posed a lot of questions. Dallion suspected that he had been the one to find Jirohs sister. It made sense that he would leave the tavern to the child. It also meant that he had died barely a few years ago.

How? Dallion asked.

I dont know. Some say a dragon, others claim it was an aetherling, or even the Star itself. The point is he died.

And youre worried the same will happen to me?

What will happen when you cant rely on your familiars? the gorgon asked. There are creatures that cause metal to decay. There are some that heat it up to boiling point. Indestructible gear doesnt amount to much if it kills the person who wears it. There was a brief pause. I know youre different. Eury turned her head towards Dallion. This was rare. Normally she didnt have to, relying on her three-sixty snake sight. I know about the sixth stat. Ive known for a while.

At this, Dallion stopped in his tracks.

Since when?

The Overseer told me the day you relinquished control of the city domain.

That felt slightly awkward. All this time Dallion had been dropping hints and thinking up absurd explanations to explain the fact that he could talk to guardians. Strictly speaking, no one was supposed to have learned. The Green Moon wasnt in favor of Dallion sharing the secret with anyone, and outside of the Order, there was no reason to think anyone would ask. The overseer, on the other hand, had turned out to be an unexpected loophole. The moment Dallion had defeated her, he had become her new owner, which had allowed her to see all his skills and statistics. Apparently,

the knowledge remained after he had transferred her to Countess Priscord. That had allowed her to share the information with others, including Euryale.

You're supposed to fight in ways I can't imagine, Eury went on. And that's why I have trouble letting go.

But you've changed your mind. Dallion hazarded a guess.

Sort of. She put on her gauntlets. I tried thinking about it and there's no way I can convince myself to let you go hunting on your own. You'll have to convince me, instead.

A smile-smile appeared on Dallion's face.

It's been a while since our last spar. Back then, he was a hopeless case. Then again, he had a lot fewer skills and familiars at the time.

Three clean hits, the gorgon said. That's all you'll need. One can be luck, but not three.

The fight was clearly unfair, but that was the point. Most creatures in the wilderness were far beyond Dallion's level and he was going to have to resort to smarts and gear to gain the upper hand.

You can use all the weapons you have. I'll be using only my gauntlets. Go ahead.

The gorgon had barely finished talking when Dallion split into fifteen instances, all but one charging at her. The goal was to overwhelm her with instances and hopefully get lucky.

Unfortunately, when it came to Eury, there was no such thing as luck. All of Dallion's attacks were easily deflected, in some cases the gorgon even did a counterattack, slamming him to the ground.

Dallion winced. That was another drawback of splitting: the pain felt, even if momentary, felt very real. The gorgon knew that all too well, which was why she resorted to inflicting as much pain as possible.

Go, Dallion said. Reacting to his words, the weapon extended forward.

However, just as Eury had evaded Dallion's previous attack, she had no trouble evading this as well. Even the shardfly guardians' speed proved not to be enough.

Keep the pressure, Dallion ordered as he drew his Nox dagger. Following one of the hundreds of attack sequences he knew, he then charged forward. The hope was that the whip blade would be able to create a good enough distraction to allow for a surprise attack in the meantime.

The first few attempts were unsuccessful. The third, though, was spectacularly disastrous. Eury had managed to disarm him with ease, then proceeded to slam Dallion—the real Dallion—to the ground.

Jumping back to his feet, thanks to his acrobatic skills, Dallion quickly split into a dozen instances, pulling back. The action proved successful enough to allow him a momentary reprieve from getting pummeled.

His girlfriend wasn't toying with him, but for all practical purposes, she might as well have been. Otherwise deadly attacks had been rendered useless, turning Dallion into a defanged kitten. No matter what approach he tried to take, Eury was always there to stop him. Dallion had tried high attacks, low attacks, acrobatic attacks from above—none of them worked.

You'll never make it out in the wilderness with those skills alone, the gorgon said. Without an emblem's protection you won't stand a chance.

That made a cluster of anger form within Dallion. He knew her words to be true, and that infuriated him even further. There had to be a weakness of hers he could exploit. For a moment he considered whether Gleams' illusions wouldn't help, but given the gorgon's perception level, it was unlikely.

*This isn't a realm, Nil. In real life there aren't always solutions.*

*You're missing the point. You were never going to win against her head on. The gorgon is twenty levels above you, and has stats at levels that would make you cry. In order to win you'll have to use your brain.*

*What do you think I've been doing?*

#### *Chapter 404: Dallion's Brand of Combat*

It had been a while since he'd done that. When it came to the wilderness or awakened abilities, the gorgon outperformed him in nearly every regard. However, an area in which she didn't compete was one in which she couldn't compete: his knowledge of Earth.

Euryale tensed up a bit. She had seen all too well what the firebird was capable of in the real world. In theory, its speed was greater than Eurys, though Dallion had never put the matter to the test. Now was as good a chance as any.

*I know. But it'll make it more difficult for her to react.*

I'll allow it, the gorgon said. Three hits from you or your items. However, they must be direct hits. No gentle grazing or such.

Dallion nodded. She had no intention of making it easy for him. However, he didn't expect any less. Taking a single step back, he split into a dozen instances. However, instead of attacking, the instances rushed to each side, aiming to create a circle around the gorgon. The exercise was more exhausting than it initially seemed.

While Dallion had gotten quite good at splitting into large numbers of instances, the amount of time he could hold them remained quite short. Normally, an instance would easily last several seconds, five, if he pushed far enough. After that, they would snap out of existence.

It took three seconds for the Dallion's instances to form a semi-circle arc around the gorgon. Some kept on running, in their attempt to form the full circle, but vanished well before that could be achieved. In the process, Dallion felt a dull pulsing in his temples: an indication that he had tried to go beyond his limit. It had been a while before he had felt this sensation. Normally that would be a good thing, but as Vend liked to say: the lack of pain was a clear sign that one was getting soft.

Half a circle, Dallion thought as he tossed his Nox dagger from one hand to the other. That was the area with which he had to work with. Hopefully, it was going to be more than enough.

A semicircle of Dallion instances formed facing the gorgon, as well as a semicircle of whip blades behind her. The only things that remained in the same position were Euryale and the kaleidervisto above her.

Then the fight began. Years of playing games back on Earth had taught Dallion the ability to control single units as well as entire armies in order to achieve such a task. There was no reason this shouldnt work here, and thanks to Vends training, he had the means to achieve it.

Twelve instances gave twelve sets of instructions to his familiars. Whip blades slashed forward, while the kaleidervisto propelled down at its target like a bullet. Meanwhile, all instances of Dallion remained safely away. Through this, he combined a perfect attack and defense. Eury would have to evade two simultaneous attacks per instance, while also keeping an eye on Dallion in case he joined in as well. At the same time, should she try to attack any of his instances, Dallion would simply choose the one that was furthest away and repeat the process once more.

Combining athletics, acrobatics, and guard skills, the gorgon twisted in such fashion as to avoid all the twenty-four attacks. It was an impressive feat, sadly it didnt give her any advantage whatsoever. Since the gorgon was technically evading only two attacks, she couldnt complete a full defense sequence and take advantage of the bonus it provided. Dallion had already given strict instructions that Gleam retreat after performing a single attack. The shardfly didnt particularly enjoy it, but complied.

Half a minute of constant splitting ensued. A casual observer would probably note that during this entire process, the gorgons reactions werent getting slower in the least. However, that had never been Dallions plan. He knew that Eury could outlast him in terms of stamina. The goal was for him and his familiars to get better, and slowly he was. Attacks that used to be inches off now missed by a hair. There were even a few cases in which the whip blade had grazed the gorgon, as she avoided the brunt of the attack.

*Now make the real one invisible.*

That was one of the principles Dallion had learned about the wildernessnever be afraid to exploit every advantage. Fair fights were only for fair rules. In an environment where everything went, keeping oneself at a disadvantage was the same as arrogance.

A total of seventy-eight extended blades flew at Euryale throughout twelve instances. However, it didnt end here.

A series of bright flashes followed. Being used to hearing dozens of items talk to him at almost any moment, Dallion was easily able to make out the twelve chirps and react accordingly in each instance. Euryale, however, didnt fare as well.

On the very first combat split after the change, she was caught off guard, resulting in an opening. It wasnt a large openingsomething any double digit would easily miss. Dallion, however, had been honing his skills for the opportunity.

Displeased by the outcome, the gorgon burst into instances to try and reduce the odds against her. Unfortunately, splitting wasnt her strong suit. Even with all her levels, she didnt create more than eight. This wasnt a huge issue for Dallion, who simply created a dozen more. The pressure in his

temples was building up, but as long as he kept the session length to four seconds, it wasn't going to be an issue.

Instances clashed with instances, creating a cacophony of images. Instances and illusions merged on top of each other, forming a bubble of business around Euryale. It was only a matter of time when she'd create her next opening... and a minute later, she did. This time, it was Lux who had the honor, striking her in the back of the head. The firebird had been cheeky enough to flash shortly before hitting her, then when a section of snakes on Eurys head closed their eyes struck the back of her head.

Two. Dallion shouted.

Eury tilted forward. It was clear that if things continued as they did, she'd lose. Much to her surprise, Dallion had proved to be stronger than she had expected. However, that was only because she remained at her weakest. Even with all those tricks, if she fought at her full potential, she'd likely win. In this case, the gorgon decided to pick it up a notch.

During Euryales next combat split, she dashed forward. Following Dallions logic, eight instances rushed towards eight parts of the semicircle. This was no matter where Dallion ended up being, she was certain to reach him.

Dallion was, of course, expecting that from the beginning. Immediately, he resorted to another of Vends teachings, ending his combat split prematurely and starting a new one before Euryale was anywhere close. That was enough to render her own actions meaningless, though not enough to make her give up. Rather, she did the same.

A series of re-splittings followed, with each ending their instances and starting it anew, vying for an advantage. However, with each time, Euryale was getting closer and closer.

Everything started the same as all the previous times, but on this occasion, Dallion didn't end the split. Instead, he stood there, letting his girlfriend get close.

The firebird obeyed. In twenty-four instances, the kaleidervisto burst through the air, like a missile. In twenty-three of them, it missed its mark, often causing the gorgon to leap to the side, but in one it didn't. In that single case, the snakes on Eurys head took an instant longer to open their eyes after the flash, and she wasn't able to move fast enough to prevent Lux from hitting her right arm and cracking her radius.

The sound was loud enough for Dallion to hear with his current level of perception. Beyond any doubt that was a hit. However, not one he wanted to see through.

It was almost natural that it would come to this. In fact, it was almost as if he was going through an awakening trial in real life. Here, as there, he was given a simple choice: earn his chance to become a hunter apprentice, or spare Euryale from having her arm broken. Logically, the best solution was obvious: he had everything to gain by letting the attack go through. A broken arm wasn't that much of a big deal, especially now that Lux had leveled up. At most it was going to take the firebird an hour to heal the damage, and it wasn't like Eury hadn't had anything broken in the past. Still, was that the right thing to do? His heart didn't feel tight, which meant the Green Moon didn't have any concerns on the matter.

The sound of a bone cracking followed. All other instances disappeared, as neither Dallion nor Eury went on for another round.

Thats more like it. Eury smiled. You were something else just now. Why dont you normally fight like this?

I dont know, Dallion replied. The truth was that he had become too complacent with the new elements of this world, that he continued to forget everything he knew before. Lux. He reached out. The kaleidervisto flew into his hand.

No need, the gorgon said. Ill be fine. Were not in the realms here.

Your arm is broken

Cracked. I know.

Suddenly an interesting thought came to Dallions mind. Exploring it further only made it more logical. The idea was ludicrous, far more reckless than he was. And still

The third time, Dallion began. Did you let yourself be hit on purpose?

What makes you ask that?

Ive never seen you get wounded. Not to such a degree.

Theres only one type of victory in the wilderness. Eury put a hand on Dallions shoulder. You won. Lets leave it at that.

If I didnt choose that instance. Would you have failed me?

There was a long moment of silence.

Well never know. The smile remained on her face, but Dallion thought he saw a hint of internal conflict. Lets go back to town. After this, I think the both of us have earned some rest, and some alone time, if we can find it.

Chapter 405: Back to Business

Here we are, Largo said, looking at the distance. Good old Nerosal.

He was voicing what was on everyone elses mind. Even ignoring the series of disagreements, the party had been outside far too long. Usually, a hunt would last a few weeks at most. This time, they had been out there for over a month. Thankfully, the amount of money earned was worth it for most. Dallion had no idea what everyone did with their money, but even he could see that it vanished faster than it was supposed to. Hunters definitely had a different view on life. Back when Dallion had been in the Icepicker guild, most of the people discussed how theyd save enough to buy their own home, possibly in one of the better neighborhoods, and potentially their own inn or tavern. It was no secret that the majority of awakened taverns were, in fact, run by former guild members who had gone into semi-retirement. The more industrious even went on to create their own guilds. Hunters had no such plans for the future. They were very much for the moment.

Ill drop some armor that needs fixing at your place, Rei-Alika told Eury. No rush.

Ill have it done by tomorrow, the gorgon replied. evening.

Several people of the party let out a snort. That was one of the gorgons peculiarities. The moment she went back to the city, her whole attitude changed. Always the early bird in the wilderness, shed spend the majority of the morning in bed. So far, even Dallion hadnt managed to get her to break the habit.

Next hunt should be a few months away, unless something comes up, the gorgon continued. So everyone has a chance to rest up a bit.

What if the princess thinks otherwise? Largo asked.

The question filled the air of unease.

I doubt it. Either way, Ill let you know if there are any changes.

Youre the boss, Eury. The large man shrugged.

The city had changed quite a lot since its latest upgrade. Already a major city of the county, now it was elevated to co-capital, which meant that the countess own troops were also present, occupying five new forts built just to serve as their barracks. On the surface, everything continued as normal. The former Lord Mayor continued to govern in the countess name, the city guard kept doing their usual patrols and doing their best to minimize the mirror pools activities. In reality, everything was different. Most of the old deals done between the local nobles and members of the public guilds, organizations, merchant alliances, or others were on shaky ground.

Hey, Dal. The usual guards greeted them at the main gate.

This was one of the things Dallion still couldnt get used to. No matter how much he insisted, they continued to refer to him as the hero. In fact, the city guard was the main reason that the phrase had caught on. Being subordinate to the overseer, a vast number of them felt personal gratitude at his actions. Thankfully, none of them knew that Dallion had almost shared family ties with her.

Keeping the world safe from the Star? one of the new rookies asked. What made it sadder was the awe and honesty streaming from him. Right about now, Dallion would have very much preferred a dose of irony.

Just some standard hunting, Euryale replied with a smile, making the rookie tense up. She, too, was well known in guard circles. Given the lieutenants and captains turned to her for help was enough to scare most of the common guards. For a while Dallion had wondered why until a rather talkative breastplate had shared that the rumor was that Eury was believed to be the overseers fixer. Did anything new happen while we were gone?

The rookie immediately looked to one of the older guards for help.

They made the palace bigger, the other guard said. And added two more barracks. With the countess spending more of her time here, I suppose it was to be expected.

The captain of the east fort was looking for you. Didnt sound urgent.

Dallion sighed. When a guard stressed that something wasnt urgent, it meant that it was. Dallion had deciphered that months ago, as had everyone else of the party.

I guess I better go see him. She turned to Dallion. It should only take a few hours. Youll be fine?

No worries. Ill change and get some rest.

All the hunters said a quick goodbye and split up, each doing their own thing. The first place Dallion went was to the gorgons workshop. The route he took was the same as always, fewer people would chat him up that way, and more importantly, fewer guardians. Even so, hed get the customary greeting by houses as he passed by. Apparently, there seemed to be an unofficial guardian hierarchy: area guardians took precedent, causing item guardians to wait their turn.



The more he walked, the more he felt the trappings of the city: fine smells of food, flowers, and spices, cool air, and a general feeling of life. All that was lacking in the wilderness. At the same time, Dallion could also feel the effects of the city domain. The countess and the local nobles pretended to cast a blind eye, but he knew that they were keeping tabs on him, as they were keeping tabs on all of the powerful awakened in Nerosal. It was all part of the usual game, though Dallion wished he hadn't been forced to join it so early on.

Excuse me, Mister Darude, a clear female voice said.

Turning around, Dallion saw a fury. She was dressed in a fine set of clothes, but Dallion knew them to be a servant's uniform, just as he knew who had sent her.

The general would like to invite you for afternoon breakfast. The offer was polite, but just as Euryale had her form of coded conversations, so did Dallion. This wasn't a request he had the privilege to refuse.

Of course. There was no use arguing or even asking whether he could wash up. For the general to want him now, the matter had to be urgent. Lead the way.

It seemed a lifetime ago, when the Star had taken Dallion to see the general for the first time. Back then, Dallion didn't suspect the true nature of his acquaintance. The only thing he wanted was a proper shield to be able to pass his guild entry trial. He had gotten the shield for which he had been grateful but also his first taste at crooked deals. Now, he was going there again, and he still owed the general two favors.

Despite the many changes of the city, the club which the general liked to frequent had remained the same. That is, all but the general's personal room. It had gone through a new remodeling, as it often did. With artifacts falling out of favor due to recent events, the man had replaced them with the next craze of the day: ancient paintings and exotic pets.

The general will be with you in a moment, the fury said with a slight bow. Would you like me to bring you anything?

I'm good, Dallion replied. As much as he hated the general, he felt sorry for the fury as well as all the rest forced to work for him.

If you change your mind, don't hesitate to let me know.

The door closed without a sound as the servant exited. Left alone, Dallion took advantage to look at the new samples of the general's collection. All the creatures were in cages of gold and crystal. At first glance, they seemed quite peaceful, even fragile, but as Dallion knew well, some of the most dangerous things in the wilderness had such an appearance.

Most of the creatures were far too exotic for him to make out, but there were a few he recognized, more specifically a crystal shardfly locked in a cube of pure transparent crystal. As far as Dallion could tell, there was no way of opening that cage, leading to questions how the creature could survive inside.

*What's the point? I don't know her. And she certainly is nothing like me.*

*Aren't you being a bit harsh?*

*Shes never seen the wilderness. I doubt she can even talk properly. Whoever found her caught her as a chrysalis. She was born inside that cage.*

The notion made Dallion feel his heart tighten. The Green Moon didnt appreciate that. However, there wasnt much Dallion could do at the moment. At his current level, he doubted he could even scratch the crystal cage, let alone smash it.

The door suddenly opened, putting a quick end to Dallions thoughts.

Sorry about the wait, the general appeared, wearing an expensive suit made entirely of black opal threads. Had to wrap up some negotiations. Of course, when I learned that you were back, I simply had to see you. Couldnt have you go off on another month-long trip throughout the wilderness.

*Im sure,*

Dallion thought, but said nothing.

Admiring my new acquisition? the general asked as he went to his desk. That too was new, made entirely of crystal. As usual, two male furies accompanied him a constant reminder of what would happen to Dallion if he tried anything. It was quite difficult to procure. It was caught in the wilderness of the Calum province, all the way north.

Its not. Dallion stepped away, making his way to the desk. It was bred in captivity. They must have found the chrysalis.

Are you sure?

Pretty much.

Well, thats a bit of a disappointment. Then again, you cant win them all. Im sure Ill find someone to sell it off to, or make a swap. Now that artifact value has dropped, its almost no longer fun dealing with them.

There it was, the word that hinted what the generals next request would be.

Let me guess. Dallion slid his fingers along the desk. It didnt seem to have a guardian. You found something you like?

Actually yes. Im still negotiating for the exact location, but its likely Ill have a job for you in a few months.

See you in a few months, then? Dallion began to turn around, when suddenly one of the furies emerged next to him.

Not so fast. The generals tone changed. The pleasantries were done with. Now he was no longer a charming host, but the man who was owed a debt. I heard that youve found the location of a cloud fort.

Im not interested in the location. What I do want is something from the fort.

I dont know if Ill be part of that hunt, Dallion said. I havent earned my hunters emblem yet.

Then, I suggest you do something about that, and quickly. The general leaned forward.

Dallion nodded.

Even if I go, theres no guarantee the city will have it. Theres every chance the place has been looted.

Im sure that it has, but what Im seeking isnt something that could be obtained easily. At least, not unless you have very specific information. Very specific and very expensive.

The man nodded to one of his guards. The fury disappeared for a moment, then reappeared again, holding a small cube of crystal.

You can say that crystal is the flavor of the day. Its quite expensive. There are only three places in the world from which you could get it. And the most special thing about it is that it has the power to encase absolutely anything. I bet that even if you put the Star in one of those, he wont be able to escape.

The cube looked pretty average. No bigger than a persons fist, it had a slight purple tint to it. More importantly, though, there seemed to be a piece of cotton encapsulated inside.

Ever wondered what clouds are made of? the general asked. The fury type of clouds. Even in the past, it was never common knowledge, known only to a select few of the most powerful furies. According to legend, all it takes is air, water, and the living heart of a cloudfish. Now, there are no cloudfish. I havent even found a valid picture of the creature, but their hearts remain. This he pointed to the cube is a heart fragment. It cost a tremendous amount to get. I want the real deal a whole heart encased in aether crystal. And you will be the one wholl get it for me.

#### Chapter 406: Old Friends

The heart of a cloud fort. Dallion kept thinking about it as he washed in his usual city lake. Normally, people wouldnt be allowed to do that during the day, but both the city guard and the guardians in question turned a blind eye.

*That sounds a bit cynical.*

Dallion didnt reply. He knew that better than anyone. However, he had no choice in the matter. The debt had to be repaid, especially since Moon vows were involved. Back when Dallion had gone to the general asking for help to save Nerosal, he knew that he would get a bad deal, but he didnt think hed end up sacrificing one city to save another. If the heart was the force that held the cloud fortress together, removing it was essentially the same as dissolving the fortress itself. The only alleviating circumstance was that he was sacrificing an abandoned city.

Submerging one final time, Dallion got out of the lake and put on his clothes. Done, he left his secluded spot and went back into the streets of the city. Strangely enough, those hadnt changed some of them were still small and crowded, full of the same stalls, shops, people, and items. There were a lot of mirror pool members as well. Dallion was almost surprised how many of them were hiding in plain sight. Thanks to his empathy stat it was childs play to find out who they were. The sloppy ones he could tell at a single glance the blocker rings they wore were an obvious sign, rendering them incapable of emitting internal emotions. As for the good ones no matter how careful each had at least one item they were attached too, and despite what people thought, items had a tendency to speak a lot.

Dal? someone yelled.

Dallion turned around to see a young woman wave at him with a smile. Her hair and clothes were completely new to him. Her face, however, was quite familiar.

Hey, Bel. He forced a semi-smile.

She had been one of the people he had taken his first guild admission trial with. Back then, she had a much punkier appearance. Now, she had turned her hair black and short, traded her often wild clothes to a more respectable travelers outfitrealm travelers, that wasand had had procured her a rather good set of combat gear. A quick chat with it, let Dallion know that the armor and weapons found her quite passable, even if there was a lot she could learn.

Didnt know you were in town.

I just came back, Dallion said, flanking in the rough direction of the town gate.

Tough ride in the wilderness, eh?

Something like that. Silver emblem? he pointed at the guild sign hanging from her neck. You must be rising in the hierarchy.

I wish. At this point, Im just the newbie. I got moved to building duty. Its she paused, trying to come up with the words. different. Much better than sanitation and a lot more difficult than item exploration. It has its charm, though.

That it does. It felt like ages since Dallion had been on one of those. Tell the band hi from me.

Definitely. Actually, why not do it yourself? Looking at you, you could use some real food, not the roots and twigs you eat out in the wilderness. Theres always a feast going on at the hall. Im sure everyone will be glad to see you.

There was a long pause. This was the sort of question Dallion feared he might be asked. He feared it, because the answer could only be one and the same.

Maybe some other time. He shook his head.

Right. Bel caught the hint.

To a degree, Dallion still felt guilty about his decision while being in the guilt. However, that wasnt the main reason he was avoiding it. The Icepicker guild was the source of a lot of good moments, and a few bad, but it wasnt part of his life anymore. More than likely, Jiroh and Eury had gone through the same. Maybe in a few more months hed be able to pass by the guild as they did, but that time hadnt come yet.

Did you manage to become a hunter?

Soon. Dallion said with a faint chuckle. Was nice seeing you, Bel. You take care of yourself.

When have I done that? The woman laughed, but knew that the conversation was over. Catch you again sometime. Aware of the awkwardness of the situation, she walked off.

*I was rather serious, dear boy. If youd stop ignoring me, Id have shared all my knowledge on the topic, including*

*Another time, Nil. Ive already got too much on my mind.*

*I suppose youre right. Its not like your first months in Nerosal, when you rushed after every task or whim.*

The echo kept talking, but Dallion had gone to ignore mode. Right now, the thing he needed was real information, and there was only one place he could trust to get it. Unlike the guild, it was a place he had continued to frequent, more or less, ever since leaving the guild. Also, it provided the best food in the Nerosal.

It remained a mystery why the inn was called The Gremlins Timepiece. Each time Dallion asked Hannah, shed either shout or grumble at him, then come up with a completely different story each time. In some versions, it had the name when she had bought it, in others she had named it as a way to mock the world. In a third instance, it was named so after losing a bet. Personally, Dallion liked that version most.

All of the tables in the street that were present during the festival were long gone. Upon stepping inside, Dallion saw the same few regulars hed served upon first coming to the city. Having grown accustomed to him, a few waved or gave him a nod in greeting.

Back already? Hannah said in her usual fashion. The woman was nothing if not consistent. She never hid the fact that she didnt appreciate him leaving, and especially moving in with Eury. However, thanks to his music skills, he could tell that the innkeeper cared about both of them just as much as she cared about Jiroh.

It took longer than expected. Dallion placed a gold coin on the counter.

The woman glared at it.

Ill need a bit more food this time, Dallion said. Was a tough trip.

Aspan, get something ready for Dal! Hannah shouted. You can go get it in a bit.

Dallion smiled on the inside. Aspanthe so called cook of the innwas rumored to never have left the kitchen. That was untrue, of course. He had left it on at least three occasions in the last year. What most didnt know was that he was a member of a banished race, probably the only one who had managed to escape his banishment and return to the real world. What most didnt know either, was that he also was an otherworlderthe fifth in Nerosal.

Hannah took the coin, then slid a half full glass of light green liquid to Dallion.

Lime, she said.

Thanks. Dallion took a sip. The taste was outstanding. The place looks a bit rough. I can mend it up for you.

I dont have the money to hire an awakened.

You dont have it. Im a future hunter. Ill put it on your tab.

The woman snorted.

If you want to fix it for free, thats your choice. I didnt ask for it.

I know. Dallion placed his hand on the counter. Moments later, all cracks, chips, and scratches were gone. Ill take care of the rest after I get my food.

Uh-huh. Hannah had her doubts.

Really, I will. Dallion gulped down the glass, then upgraded it.

The innkeeper grumbled, and took it from him, before Dallion changed it into something even fancier.

I met Diroh when we were out, he said, testing the waters. I didnt expect that.

Give it time. Youll learn to expect the unexpected.

You know?

I heard a year before you came to the city. Its her business, so it didnt concern you.

That wasnt the answer Dallion wanted to hear, but one he could understand.

Fair enough. Dallion mended the chair and was about to make his way to the kitchen, when the innkeeper grabbed his hand.

What about you?

Hmm? Dallion didnt know how to react. He had seen the woman shout a lot, sometimes hed seen her get tough on people who had a few drinks too many. Her speed, however, surpassed everything that he had seen so far.

Is becoming a hunter all you want?

Yes. You know that.

So, youve given up on the idea of going home.

I dont fit in there anymore. Its Veils place now.

Im not talking about the village. Im asking about your real home. Are you thinking of going back there?

The question echoed like thunder in a clear sky. Had she just asked him whether he wanted to get back to Earth?

No, Dallion replied. I thought it was impossible.

How would you know? Have you tried finding a way?

Another good question. The short answer was no. The longerthat Dallion had no inclination of doing anything of the sort. In fact, he didnt have any inclination to seek out other people from Earth. There was no logical reason for it, simply something that had never crossed his mind. After all, half his memories were of this place, so, if anything, if he were to leave, hed miss this place even more.

Theres no way back. He pulled his hand away, putting an end to the conversation. Thanks for the drink, Hannah. Dallion made his way to the kitchen.

Dont waste too much of his time, the innkeeper said, before he could enter. Aspans got a lot of work.

Ill do my best not to bore him.

You should let him talk about his home sometime when hes less busy. Im sure both of you would find it interesting.

The innkeeper wasn't one to delve into one's past. That was pretty much the firmest rule. Everyone had their past, according to her, and as long as they were in the inn, they were free not to share it. Maybe the fact that Dallion had become a hunter had changed her view a bit. As far as Dallion could tell, thanks to his music skills, the woman had suddenly become saddened by something. Saddened and concerned. And it all had to do with him.

#### Chapter 407: Advice from a World Conqueror

Diplomatic as usual, I see, Aspan greeted Dallion as he entered the kitchen.

At first glance, the cook looked like the average person. All people knew about him was that he was an excellent cook, even if a mouthy, who preferred to rarely be seen and always worked alone. In truth, he was the leader of the copyette race who had tried to take over the world millennia ago. At one point, Dallion had almost killed him, back when he feared that Aspan had aspirations to conquer the world again. As it turned out, the copyette only wanted to keep a low profile in the real world in the city built on top of the ruins of his former capital.

Not you too.

I know, I know. Aspan split into two copies. One continued cooking, while the other sat at the kitchen table. So, what do you want to talk about this time? The Star? Artifacts? Old combat tactics?

Cloudfish, Dallion said.

Cloudfish, the Aspan at the table scratched his chin. Haven't heard that in a while. You've actually found the city Jiroh is looking for?

We might have. Dallion considered. Maybe it was a good idea to ask Aspan about the warning the dwarf hunter had given? If there was anyone who knew, it would be the copyette. It's supposedly near the ruins of a nymph city.

I take it that's rare?

A rarely seen fortress crashing in the sea next to an unfindable submerged city? I'd say it's rare.

Quite tasty today. The cooking Aspan went to the table and placed a bowl of porridge in front of Dallion. It didn't look much, but the aroma was better than anything Dallion had sensed in months.

Sorry. It's been a long day, and it still isn't over. Dallion took a spoonful of the food. It was magnificent, as expected: a nice full texture, and a taste of grilled peppers, pumpkin, and herbs. Thinking about it, he'd never suspect such products would remotely go well together, but they did. I've been asked to get the heart of the cloud fortress.

And you don't like that?

No. Dallion shook his head. I don't know almost anything about furies, but I'm pretty certain that's not a good thing.

Well, you're part right. It takes the heart of a living creature to get the cloud fort be what it is. A cloudfish, as you mentioned. The thing is that the fort doesn't kill the cloudfish, it just imprisons it in another body.

A shiver went through Dallion, causing him to visibly tremble at the thought.

Yeah. The Aspan copy sitting across him nodded. Cruelty isn't reserved to the human race. The only way to create a cloud fortress is to catch a cloudfish and use its living heart to transform a normal cloud into something people could live in. You know that furies can manipulate clouds, right?

I thought it was air.

Airs part of it. In the old days, they used to flaunt flying all the time in their attempt to show that they were the superior race. There were many more of them back then. The skies would constantly be filled with cloud forts fighting each other over dominance of a region. When I first came to this world, furies were considered the greatest power there was. People would often joke that we had to be thankful that they were so obsessed with the skies, for if they stopped fighting and turned their attention to the world below, there wouldn't be anything to stop them. Of course, back then it was seen as ludicrous that humanity would amount to much.

Clearly, things hadn't turned out that way. The empire aside, humanity was the dominant race by far now. Even most of the countries rivaling it were human dominated or mixed at best. Dallion's knowledge of world geography and politics were still poor, but he didn't know any real non-human powers. The furies could have presented a threat a few centuries ago, but at present they were little more than mercenary kingdoms for hire. The dwarven dukedom the true dwarven dukedom had isolated themselves or become vassals of other kingdoms, and as for the gorgons, they were in too small numbers to make a difference.

The furies' real power was to command clouds. And I'm not talking about the puff of steam you see in the sky today. They could capture and take cloud creatures.

Hearing that, Dallion's imagination ran wild. Images of animals made entirely of clouds appeared in his mind, running throughout the sky in cartoon fashion. Knowing this world, he had no doubt that it was a lot more fascinating and deadly than that, though.

There used to be a lot of those as well, Aspan continued. The furies used them for bets, for attack creatures, but they also used them to build their cities. All they needed to do was catch the animal they wanted, shave off everything but the heart, then merge it to a large cloud they had constructed.

Dallion's spoon froze in his hand. The process wasn't supposed to be graphic, but because of his empathy stat, he imagined it exactly like that.

Well, it's a bit more complicated than that, but you get the idea. The heart remains, and as such, the creature as well. If you bury it out, it could return to being itself. I haven't seen it happen, personally. When I started stirring up, the furies decided to remain neutral in a way.

You made a deal with them, didn't you?

It was the only way to get everything underway. Of course, the Star suggested I betray them the first chance I got. To be honest, I never needed the sky. As long as I got all the land, everything was supposed to be fine. Of course, that was before the massive failure. You know the result.

The Star again Dallion knew that there was a lot that Aspan couldn't share. Even mentioning as much as he did was on the verge of going against the Moons. Given his involvement in saving the city, the deities were probably willing to give him some slack.

You think they have survived all this time? Dallion asked.



As long as the cloud fortress is whole, they have. Thats the only thing that keeps it in the air, and intact.

And if its no longer in the air?

It could mean a lot of things, the copy of Aspan said. Most likely its sick or dying. Theres a chance that by the time you reach the location, there will be nothing left.

It all depends on the creature in question. Most last a few thousand years. Some last tens of thousands, and some they are virtually eternal.

Dallion thought back to the crystal cube the general had shown him. Was the creature trapped inside alive? And if so, what creature was it? As long as it was another piece of merchandise, no one would find out. Dallion so much wanted to go back to the general, break his nose, then free all the exotic creatures just for the sake of it. He knew, however, how reckless that would be. Even if he had the strength to do it, releasing wilderness creatures in a city domain was not advisable. In a best-case scenario, the creature would slowly die faster if the overseer intervened; and in the worst case, it would go on a rampage, attacking everyone on sight.

What were you given to capture it with?

Nothing, Dallion replied. The general will only give out the device once I was on my way. Its something expensive so he doesnt want to risk losing it.

More likely, he doesnt want to risk you poking it. Both Aspans in the kitchen chuckled. Hell probably give you some more instructions. Other than that, I dont know what to tell you. Just dont do it with Jiroh around.

That much was a given.

Theres something else, I wanted to ask you. Before you set off to conquer the world, were there any prophecies or warnings from the Moons?

Interesting question. The Aspan copy at the table looked at Dallion straight in the eyes. Truth is Im not sure. When we joined the Star, we werent that keen on continuing with the Moons. All Moon Clerics sealed themselves in the temples and waited for us to be done. I was a bit overoptimistic back then; I believed I could conquer the world in a year. So, I told them that the war would be over in five. Sadly, they believed me.

So, no warnings

If there were any, I didnt get to hear them. I guess you heard something different?

The person who found the cloud fortress told me that the end of the world is near, and that I triggered it by allowing the Star to pull a city into the wilderness.

Thats one of the things about prophecies they always have just enough truth to possibly be real. Ill assume the person in question has something to base his gears on? Getting a hunch isnt something Id be worried about. Personally, Id say the chances of that occurring are negligible. Besides, it wasnt the Star that caused me and my entire race banished.

What was?

Thats something I cant share. Not yet, in any event. Let me just tell you, if a vague worded warning is all that you have to worry about, youve lived a pretty comfortable life. A moment of sadness

flashed through the copyettes, vanishing the moment it appeared. I dont have the knowledge or the freedom to give you advice, but I can say that there were no warnings or prophecies warning me of what might happen. All I had was the Stars assurances, and as it turned out, they werent much.

So, youre saying just be me?

The answer made Dallion feel slightly better, although it wasnt what he was hoping for.

Youre always you, the copyette said. Do what you feel is right, and dont worry about what could happen. Just dont fall into the trap of thinking you know everything. Empathy is a good stat to have it shows you things that others cant see. However, that in itself doesnt make you good or evil, to use your terms.

The advice was good, almost as if it had come from Nil. No, it was better than Nil. Despite his looks, Aspan was thousands of years old, millions if one considered true time.

One final thing, Dallion said as he went back to eating his porridge. What are thunder furies exactly? I know they command lightning, and that makes them special, but How do they become that way? Is it an awakening power or something?

No, just a natural gift, like the color of ones eyes. Thats not what you really want to ask, is it?

The other copy of Aspan put a large dish on the table. Todays specialty seemed to be seafood. With Nerosal increasing in status, so did the types of food that were shipped here. Things which in the past were delicacies, now were merely very expensive. It was still impressive that Hannah spared the money to buy them, given what a miser she was.

You want to know about Jirohs past, the copyette continued.

There are a few things Ive been curious about.

I made a promise not to share certain things, but I can tell you this. What she wants above everything else is to return to her real world. More importantly, however, shes found a way that might make it happen.

Dallion jumped up. His mouth moved, attempting to ask a dozen questions all at once. However, each sound that came out of his mouth was instantly destroyed. After a few seconds, Dallion stopped. There was a glowing pattern of light in the air above him; Aspan had resorted to casting magic.

Thats something you best not share. And no, I dont know whether its true or if it will be able to help you. All I know is that supposedly, it would only help her go back. Anything else youll have to learn from her directly.

Chapter 408: New Tactics

Unfortunately, the voice didnt belong to the gorgon, but to her workshop.

*How was the walk? Bought any interesting materials?*

Dallion sighed internally. He knew from experience that there wouldnt be any chance of peace and quiet. Most of the other guardians in the workshop knew not to make too much noise, but the workbench never seemed to get the hint.

*Nothing interesting, he replied. Has Eury been back?*

So much for that notion. The discussion with the overseer had to be pretty important. Putting the food he got from Aspan on a shelf, Dallion considered his options. Given what was expected from him, it was practically a must for him to pass his next gate before setting out, as well as finish the construction of his next gear. The latter was moving slowly since despite his improvement in forging, sky silver was quite finicky in real life.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Once the awakening room appeared around him, Dallion didnt waste any time returning to the challenge he had previously failed. Since this time, he didnt impose any handicap on himself, defeating the eel was elementary. The tactic he had learned when fighting Eury gave him such a massive advantage that Dallion felt bad for the trial echo. The creatures health was considerable, but even so, it took less than a minute for him to win. If anything, choosing which stat to increase proved a greater challenge. With mind being so far ahead, it was clear that wasn't an area which he'd advance in in the near future, and while it was tempting to keep advancing his empathy stat, that wasnt something terribly useful in the wilderness, at least for the moment. After considerable hesitation, Dallion finally increased his body to twenty-one. Body strength was starting to become a must.

The praise was meant as encouragement, but in the back of Dallions mind, a voice whispered that he should go on. While it wasnt generally recommended, this wouldnt be the first time he tried to do two level ups in a go. Besides, this had turned out so easy that he hadnt even broken a sweat.

The more he thought about it, the more Dallion was convinced that was the right thing to do. He had food, and enough time to rest afterwards, so the way he saw it there could be no downside.

Youre right, Dallion said. Im capable... Without further explanation, he went back into the corridor and straight to the new door that had appeared on the wall. Before Nil could even say anything, Dallion opened it and stepped inside.

**Youre in the halls of destiny.**

**Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future.**

That was different. Dallion walked down the corridor. I acted out of desperation back then. Now I just want to push myself a bit more.

*Isnt that an act of disceptation in itself? You just faced a problem you cannot resolve and hope that by leveling will get your mind onto other things. I can tell you from experience that never works.*

I guess Ill just have to find out on my own.

The further Dallion went, the more cracks became visible on the walls. If past trials were any indication, he was no doubt going to face a crackling again, or possibly a cutling. The stone walls, brightly lit by light crystals, continued to get more and more scarred, until the arch or an opening emerged further again.

Constantly splitting as he walked, Dallion had instances of him look in every direction. It wasn't long before he spotted his enemy: an echo of himself, seated on the top of a broken column, not too far away.

Long time no see, the echo said with a smile. He was wearing Dallion's wilderness outfit, complete with armor and weapons.

I had a feeling it might be you. Dallion approached. I see you got the new gear?

This? The echo looked at the whip blade in its sheath. It's just for decoration. You, on the other hand, have done quite well for yourself. Three familiars, two indestructible weapons he nodded as he spoke. You've even managed to level up some of your familiars a few times. Given what they are, that's more difficult than you thought.

Am I seriously giving compliments to myself? Dallion would have found it amusing if this were anything but a trial. Here, he had to see all the comments as warnings. Most likely, the echo was going to use familiars when fighting him.

Always so serious. Well, I guess I'll leave you to your trial, the echo said, then leapt off to the next column a short distance away.

Seriously? Dallion grumbled. I have to chase you to start?

Me? the echo asked, surprised. I'm not your opponent. I'm only here to observe.

Using his music skill, Dallion could tell that the echo wasn't lying.

If not you, then who? he asked.

I thought you'd have noticed by now.

Almost as he said it, Dallion did in fact notice he noticed that despite asking his familiars to get ready, they weren't. His weapons and items were still on him, but there was no trace of the familiars themselves. Lux hadn't appeared nor had he given Dallion wings. As for the other two, they had been uncharacteristically quiet since he'd entered the battlefield.

Cracks rose up from the bottom of the column, quickly moving upwards. Dallion was barely able to leap back, when the stone remnant collapsed, crumbling to bits. The silhouette of a creature became visible behind. As the dust settled, Dallion saw what he had feared.

Nox he whispered.

Yep, Dallion's echo said a safe distance away. Little Nox. Of course, he's not so little anymore. And just for the sake of fairness, I'll let you in on a little secret: this is what your crackling might look like when he reaches level twenty.

That was no secret, it was another attempt to put Dallion at a disadvantage. He had sensed the note of surrender that the echo had weaved into his words ever since it had started speaking. All this was made to frighten and intimidate. Seeing the crackling fully grown definitely had that effect.

This wasn't the first time Dallion had seen a grown puma crackling, of course. The pack he had faced before finding Nox had been just that. However, this creature was different. Lean, athletic and large as a horse, he looked at Dallion with understanding, yet determination. It was almost as if he were saying sorry, nothing personal.

So, this is what you'll become when you level up? Dallion asked.

The crackling tossed its tail about. Dallion was just about to continue the conversation when the crackling combat split into four instances.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Quickly, Dallion summoned his dartbow and fired two bolts at the large body of the puma, once all instances had faded away. The attack was easily evaded, though that gave Dallion enough time to resort to his next strategy: if he could make use of his splitting-familiar combo, he was going to go back to true and tested methods.

Harp, Vihrogon, are you still with me? he asked, summoning the harpsisword and amadil shield.

Harp?

The strings of the harpsisword vibrated to confirm.

It had been a while since Dallion had fought like this, often resorting to his newer weapons and items. Having the old set felt good and quite reassuring. And that was not all; thinking out of the box, he had already thought of a new crazy combo to try out. There remain serious doubts whether it would work, but given the rules of the realm, it was worth being brave enough to have a go at it.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion focused on the crackling, then played a chord. Establishing a music link with the creature wasn't easy a large part of Nox was void, while the flickers of emotions within moved about too fast for the link to gain gold. That was an interesting effect, Dallion didn't know cracklings had or maybe it was just Nox? Still, as long as there was a target, there were options. Splitting into eighteen instances, Dallion targeted various points on the puma's body. One of them made contact, hitting Nox's determination. The moment that happened, Dallion played another chord, only this one was imbued with a bit of extra energy.

While energy ran along the thread of music like electricity, striking the crackling.

## **CRITICAL WOUND!**

### **Dealt Damage is increased by 200%**

The crackling turned into a puff of smoke from which a dozen cublings leaped out. Like any crackling, Nox had the ability to break into a swarm. Twelve cublings meant that he had the strength of a level twelve crackling.

Shield! Dallion shouted as he split into instances, leaping back.

The amadil shield extended, covering almost his entire left side. Keeping up the momentum, Dallion played another set of chords, trying to connect with one of the many crackling cubs. Most of the attempts were unsuccessful and, in the case of the few that were, Nox merged with another cub of himself, breaking the music link.

You've become sneaky, Dallion said, as he changed tactics, performing a horizontal arc slash with the harpsisword.

The attack was successful, poofing away two more Noxs into smoke. The rest, however, quickly merged in one and clawed at Dallion. The shield managed to block the blow, but the claws pierced through in part, causing a spider web of cracks to form on its surface.

Splitting into eight instances, Dallion twisted around and slashed at Nox again. Before the haprsisword could reach the crackling, a layer of blue flames appeared around the creature, pulling it briskly out of reach.

Lux? Dallion leaped back.

This was a surprising and very unwelcome turn of events. It was difficult enough to face one of his familiars, but two at the same time

Suddenly Dallion froze. The logical question popped up in his mind. If there already were two, who was to say he wasnt facing three?

Gleam? Dallion asked, concentrating on his sight as he looked around. Are you here as well?

Youre not hopeless on your own after all, the shardflys voice echoes, as if coming from several places at once. As much as Dallion tried, it was impossible to determine where she was hiding. You managed to win in our last fight, but itll be a bit tougher now. At my current level, I can create more than illusions of light.

#### Chapter 409: Fighting Familiars

Another of Dallions instances managed to fire a bolt from point blank range, reducing Noxs health by a tenth. It was a slow and laborious process, but at least he was getting somewhere. Having to fight without the ability to restore health was a significant hindrance, although Dallion was somewhat used to it thanks to his wilderness activities. Thankfully, due to their natures, Lux and Nox werent a good match together. The firebird couldnt heal the crackling without harming it. Sadly, that still gave Nox the ability to fly and almost instantly move from place to place.

Six pumas appeared, surrounding Dallion. Normally, this wouldnt be a cause for concern. However, unlike before, these werent instances.

Damn it! Dallion shouted, protecting himself with the shield best he could.

#### **MEDIUM WOUND**

**Your health has been decreased by 20%**

A red rectangle appeared, as one of the cracklings managed to exploit an opening Dallion had left in his defenses. Dallion, of course, was quick to slice the creature, along with a few more, but the damage was already done. This attack marked half of his health gone and more followed.

Several of Noxs copies moved through the air. Dallion immediately recognized the type of the attack: it was the same he had used when fighting the Vermillion. Since Lux was unable to combat split, he was shifting from crackling to crackling, giving them an aimed shove in the right direction. While a bit clumsy, that allowed all the crackling fragments to act as if they had flying. Definitely a sneaky plan, but it had one major flaw.

Focusing, Dallion managed to see the trail of light between cracklings. It was barely visible, but more than a perfect indication of what to do.

#### **CRITICAL HIT**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 200%**

The assumption was correct, but Dallion didnt rejoice yet. Not wasting a second, he slashed again, striking the ground beneath him. Then again, and again. To most of those watching, it would have seemed that he had lost his mind, or was waving the harpsisword aimlessly in a desperate attempt to keep Nox from nearing. However, with each hit a new red rectangle appeared in the air. Moments later, a ball of blue flame exploded, sweeping through Dallion and everything else in the area.

### **LUX has been defeated!**

### **MODERATE HEAL**

### **Your health has been increased by 15%**

Destroying a firebird had an effect? That was good to know, especially if Dallion ever had to fight one in the wilderness. In this case, the death damage was to his advantage since Lux only had the ability to heal. Nox, on the other hand, suffered significantly more. The wave of flame had passed through three of his fragments, effectively halving the cracklings overall level. From here on, it was pretty much the same as fighting a cub.

What trick did you use? Gleams voice echoed all around him.

Why dont you come out here and Ill show you? Dallion asked as he split into ten instances.

Instead of an answer, a wave of crystal razor blades tore through the battlefield. Dozens of columns, as well as eight of Dallions instances, were shredded to bits. It was pure luck that the last two happened to be out of reach.

*What the heck?!*

Not wasting a moment, Dallion split again. This time, nothing followed. Several of his instances examined the marks. The area was as wide as a highway, and by the looks of it just as long. There was no telling what exactly Gleam had used, but Dallion was pretty certain that it was more than her wings. Or maybe it wasnt?

Playing a series of chords on his harpsisword, Dallion stepped on the road still combat splitting. At this point he really hoped that his familiar couldnt split or, more importantly, see his instances.

Without warning, another wave of razors passed through. This time, Dallion paid attention, checking which of his instances died first. Out of fifteen, only four remained, but it was worth it. Dallion was able to determine the direction of the shardflys attacks. Out in the open, this would have resulted in almost certain death. Even with experience and improved stats, Dallion didnt have the physical speed to avoid such an attack. By the looks of it, he didnt have the perception level required to see it before it was too late, either. That was why he wasnt able to spot the familiar: the creature was miles away, attacking from a distance that would make sharpshooters envious.

Concentrating, Dallion doubled the speed at which he was playing his chords, and split into instances yet again.

Youve become a lot sneakier, Gleam said.

I was about to say the same. Dallion continued along the road of scars. I dont remember seeing you do that when we fought.

I dont remember you doing successful line attacks, either. The shardfly countered.

That much was true. Unfortunately, the trial hadn't allowed Dallion to perform that skill, while it had boosted the abilities of his familiars. One thing was interesting, though. The increase of their abilities was quite disproportionate. While stronger than before, Lux hadn't shown anything new. Nox had performed combat splitting, and swarm merging, as Dallion expected he would. Meanwhile, Gleam had displayed abilities Dallion had never imagined. Normally, the abilities of the beings in his trial were based on his thoughts on the matter. In this particular case, that wasn't true. Dallion had often wondered if Lux would act as a flame thrower when leveling up. That hadn't occurred, and neither had Nox released tentacles as a chainling would.

Slowly, Dallion went back on the road and continued forward. For close to half a minute nothing happened, then the usual attack followed. If nothing else, the shardfly was consistent. The fact that she kept to a single attack, strongly suggested she had more up her sleeve. At the moment, this was more than enough. After all, Dallion didn't even know what the attack was, even after experiencing it several times.

This is your ability, isn't it? he asked, walking on. The ability that you remember from before you were captured.

And you're using music to try and get me to show myself, the response came from everywhere around him. It won't work.

Sooner or later, it will. There's only so much you can do.

Nox was able to take half your health and you think you stand a chance against me?

If it were the real Gleam, I probably wouldn't have. However, you aren't her. You're nothing more but an echo created based on her thoughts and memories. That's why you can use abilities I couldn't imagine. It was also the reason why the other two familiars were so limited in their repertoire. In theory, they were supposed to be level twenty familiars, but in practice, they were nothing more than a boosted level four and a boosted level two.

Who says there's a difference? Am I any less real? I have the appearance of a shardfly, and I have her thoughts, memories, and skills. Who is to say I'm any less different?

I've already passed that gate when I became level five. Dallion smirked. An echo isn't the original, it's just an echo.

That doesn't make it any worse.

It doesn't make you any better, either. Just different.

A new wave sliced the battlefield. This one was twice as wide as the previous ones, also it was perpendicular to the last. However, the surprise attack failed to achieve its goal. For one thing, Dallion had already determined that the familiar couldn't sense his instances, so he had spread them as wide as possible. Also, he had been consistently linking dozens of music strands to objects throughout the battlefield every second. The chords he had been constantly playing were never aimed at revealing Gleam. Rather, they were to establish a parameter. He had felt several of them snap as the attack had proceeded. Interestingly enough, even then, he hadn't felt the weight of the attack, just its force.

So that's your trick. Dallion smiled, as he split into a dozen instances, yet again. The familiar was right when she had said that her illusion doesn't affect just sight. A good illusion could trick other



senses as well; it could create fake sounds, fake sensations, and sometimes, when it was powerful enough, it could even cause damage to items and areas as well. After all, people weren't the only ones to be tricked by illusions, guardians could be as well.

Figured it out? Gleam asked. She sounded slightly disappointed. Would have been fun if I could play a bit longer.

I know you. It was never about play. You like to win quickly and crush your target.

Just a bit. Can you blame me? I haven't led a charmed life the last few millennia.

That's a lie, Dallion said. Gleam hasn't. But you're not Gleam. Even if you appear to have the same thoughts and memories, your actions are your own. And that means it's also mine.

There was no response.

You could have attacked me early on, Dallion continued. You'd have hurt Nox and Lux in the process, but so what? You'd have still won.

It would have been stupid to waste allies.

That's not it. You didn't do it because you didn't want to, and the reason you didn't want to was because your thoughts are based on me.

That's a bit meta for my taste.

Finally, he had found what the question of this trial was. On the surface, it was facing the fear that his familiars could turn against him. However, that was not the whole of it. Fighting alone was definitely part of the answer. The more important part was reducing the advantage ranged creatures had. Most likely, this was what Euryale had expected him to achieve in order to become a hunter. That was also the challenge of the previous challenge as well, Dallion had simply misinterpreted it and found an alternative way to succeed.

The sad truth was that while he had started to follow the Path of the Empath, he remained too weak to use it for all of his battles. There would be times when he wouldn't be able to rely on guardians, there would be times when he wouldn't be able to rely on familiars even. That was why he had to have the strength to win until that time when his empathy stat became high enough.

Dallion took a deep breath.

Line strike, he said, then weaved his harpsisword.

#### *Chapter 410: Third Wind*

A thin line continued towards the horizon, slicing columns along the way. In his single strike, Dallion had formed a perfect circle. This time, the attack was entirely his doing. Harp hadn't helped, but had been an instrument of his attack.

The air shattered, forming thousands of glittering fragments, as if dozens of invisible windows had been broken. However, those weren't windows, they were the illusions that Gleam had created.

**TERMINAL STRIKE!**

**Damage dealt has been increased by 1000%**

## **GLEAM has been defeated.**

Barely had the rectangles appeared, that Dallion fell to his knees. Even here, within the safety of his realm, the attack proved taxing. His entire right arm was shaking to the point that he could barely hold to the harpsisword.

*Huh?*

*The attack that got rid of Lux. Im curious.*

Some things never changed. Clearly, the trial echo of the shardfly shared her curiosity.

Somehow, that felt as typical as a curious teenager suddenly losing interest. Attitude aside, Gleam was right, though.

Using every last ounce of strength, Dallion pushed himself back up to his feet. He had huge qualms using the harpsisword as a shield, but Harp insisted that he do it. At the end of the day, this was just the awakening realm representation of her, not the actual weapon. Unsummoning the armada shield, Dallion grabbed the weapon with his left hand.

Now was a good time to be ambidextrous. Come to think of it, Dallion had never tried fighting with his left hand. Even in the few times when he fought with two weapons, his right always was the leading one. Now was a good reminder that it was high time he did something about it.

Nox, I've taught you better than this, Dallion said, infusing his words with as much honor as possible. Sneaking gives you an advantage, but the proper thing to do is face me head on. I'm not that weak to fall asleep and give you a chance to attack.

As expected, there was no reply. However, Dallion had taken advantage of the fact that he knew the frequency with which to establish a music link with his familiar. Even without seeing Nox, there was a pretty good chance that his words had affected the creature.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion took a step forward. His legs felt like lead, but still obeyed his command. He had gone beyond exhaustion at this point. The only thing keeping him standing was pure stubbornness, and the knowledge that he'd have to go through the entire fight again if he failed.

The minutes passed like years. Or maybe they were years? In the realms, one could never be sure. Dallion felt the numbness in his body subside, replaced by pain. It was as if every fiber of his body yelled in agony. Combat splitting in this state was beyond extreme. While the act itself was still possible, the pain was compounded, forcing Dallion to rely on three instances, just like when Vend had started teaching him for the first time. It was natural that Nox would choose this point to act. What Dallion didn't expect was that the crackling would actually go all out. Three cubs leaped out of different piles of rubble, each targeting a different instance. In all the cases Dallion suffered a significant wound, however, in one of them, he managed to destroy his attacker. Given no choice, Dallion had that become reality.

It was one against two. Both cracklings dashed into nearby rubble with the goal of disappearing among the natural cracks. At that point, Dallion decided to risk it. Using his athletics skill, he threw the harpsisword at the spot in which one of the Noxes had vanished. Almost instantly, a red rectangle appeared.

In his mind Dallion cheered, yet his chest and mouth muscles didn't have enough energy to convey the thought into existence.

Keeping his guard up, Dallion summoned his dartbow in his left hand. One shot was all he needed. A few moments later, he summoned the kaleidervisto in his right hand as well. Slowly and painfully, he lifted the small object to his face and looked at the spot at which the last remaining Nox had vanished. It wasn't a surprise that the cat wasn't there.

Dallion looked around, gradually increasing the area of interest in spiraling fashion.

I take it you won't accept a draw? Dallion asked. The lack of answer told him that the crackling had its pride.

The difficulty of the situation aside, Dallion was quite proud of the creature. He knew that this wasn't Nox, but the things it did would be the same, and that meant that the crackling had grown a lot since it was the small cub Dallion had taken with him in Dherma.

Unable to bear the weight, Dallion relaxed his hand, letting go of the kaleidervisto. It was difficult to maintain even two instances, but he kept doing it. His health had been reduced to dangerously low levels, and there was no telling whether the next successful attack wouldn't be the end of it.

Suddenly, a thought came to mind. Once again, he summoned the kaleidervisto, but this time, instead of looking around the battlefield, Dallion focused on the ground beneath his feet. Less than half a dozen steps away, he found the familiar who was just as determined to win as its owner. Seeing that the game was up, Nox leapt out of the ground, deciding to go for it. It was a good tactical decision. Dallion was weak and was still holding the kaleidervisto in front of his face.

Claws sliced through clothes and flesh, dealing the final blow to one instance. The other, however, managed to raise the dart bow before that could happen.

**NOX has been defeated.**

Finally. Dallion collapsed to the ground.

### **THIRD WIND**

**(Body +2)**

**It was a draining experience, but you endured through pain and exhaustion to achieve your goal. Once is good. Just be careful, it doesn't become a habit.**

Rectangles floated Dallion's face, paying no notice to his semi-conscious state. The sudden boost in body granted him just that infinitesimally small amount of strength that made it possible for him to wave the rectangles away.

**You have broken through your barrier**

**Your level has increased to 36**

**Choose the focus that would serve you best**

Moments later, everything lost color, fading to black. Next thing he knew, Dallion found himself in a soft bed. Initially, there was nothing strange about that. The bed felt familiar, more importantly, it was comfortable. Instinct made him turn to the other side. Only then did he realize that he had never gone to bed. The last thing that Dallion had done was to defeat Nox in an awakening trial.

Good morning, a familiar voice said. Dallion could easily tell that the voice belonged to his girlfriend. To his surprise and relief, she didnt sound overly upset.

You did something stupid again, didnt you?

I went through two trials, Dallion replied directly.

Thats a yes. Good thing you did it here. Get up. You need to eat.

The first few moments Dallion didnt feel hungry at all. After realizing that he hadnt eaten for over a day, not to mention had completed two awakening trials, hunger struck with a vengeance. The only issue was that when Dallion tried to get up, he found that his body still felt heavy.

Pushing through the sensation, Dallion went to the other room. Clothes and pieces of armor were everywhere. The gorgon had clearly taken the opportunity of Dallion being out to get some work done. The food he had brought from Hannahs was still where he had left it, although part of it was missing.

Dallion gobbled down what was left. The sensation of taste was almost lost as his body demanded energy. The hunger didnt vanish completely once he was done, but it was at a lot more manageable level.

How is Hannah? Eury asked, adding leather to the inside of a neck guard.

She seemed more or less fine. The inn is back to what it wasmostly empty. You should go sometime.

No. Things between us go deeper than you think.

She told me something interesting about Jiroh, Dallion continued. That she had found a way to go home.

Euryale froze for a moment. If Dallions perception had been any lower, he would have missed it.

Is there a way?

There might be. If anyone could find it she left whatever she was working on and turned to face Dallion. Ji isnt like us. She never talks about her world, but I know she had a much worse life there than here. Even being a thunder fury wasnt enough to get things going for her. If anyone would be happy to have arrived in this world, it would be her. And yet, she isnt. Ever since I met her, shes been trying to find a way back to her world And I promised to help her.

Why? This was impossible to believe. From everything Dallion had seen, Jiroh had everything one might want here. She had friends, people who respected her, as well as family. Among her race she was even considered potential royalty.

Because this isnt her world. The gorgon sighed. Its not my place to understand. That was her reason I became a hunter to help her find what shes looking for.

Never tell her you know. That will only make things more difficult. One day Ji returned from a solo job in the wilderness escorting a caravan. She wasnt even a hunter back then. The job had failed, but she was so sure she had found a way to return back to her own world. The answer lied in the city she was awakened. Ji never told me the details, but she insisted it was possible. That was the same day that she stopped using her awakened powers.

Dallion blinked. There had been so many times during which he had wondered whether she had her powers sealed. Apparently, that had never been the case.

She used to say that since there was no such thing as awakened powers in her world, she might as well get used to not having them. That's the level of dedication she has. And that's why we must help her.

Dallion nodded.