

Leveling up 411

Chapter 411: Ancestral Forge

The sound of carts filled the air. With the leveling up of Nerosal, the area of the domain had grown, which meant there were all those new empty areas to be filled up. The initial additions were easy: the countess had taken the opportunity to construct the forts of her army in the available locations. A few more were in the process of being turned into residential and workshop areas. More people meant a greater need for weapons. It also meant a greater need for food fields. Without a doubt, after the chaos of the failed festival and near annihilation the city was in for a prosperous decade or two. However, now everyone was pleased.

As the usable area increased, areas that were previously considered to be in the gray zone had shifted as well. Gray Harbor, for one, had become an official part of the city and that had brought to some changes, especially for the mirror pool. The ultimatum was clear: tone things down, move elsewhere, or be destroyed. The countess had made it very clear, and considering her increased strength, the leaders of the mirror pool had no choice but to comply. That meant that establishments like at the harbor would see a sudden change in clientele and a lot of the old practices would cease, at least for the time being.

Damned noise, Alabaster grumbled. Still can't get used to it.

Given that he was the forge-master in one of the busiest workshop districts in Nerosal, that was a weird statement. The man was set in his ways and every slight change to the routine was seen as a bother.

It'll be over in a few months, Dallion said as he hammered on the blade he was making.

While in Nerosal, he had been spending a lot of time at the man's forge. Alabaster wasn't an awakened far from it, he was as common as they came. Broad, even slightly fat, he had been working as a blacksmith for over thirty years. That was the entire reason that Eury had sent Dallion to him. After covering the basics with him, the gorgon had insisted that he learn the craft from the person who had taught her. The catch was never to use his forging skills unless Alabaster allowed it. That still gave Dallion a huge advantage having the speed, sight, and reflexes of a mid-level awakened, he could do in hours what it took others weeks. However, there was a thing about experience that even stats couldn't beat.

Yeah, yeah. I keep hearing that. The man grumbled. You're hurrying too much. Forging isn't about getting it done. It's about getting it done right.

It's close to perfect, Dallion protested. Look.

Nice try, kid. Alabaster smirked. You're just like that girl. Always trying to pull a fast one. The point isn't to convince me, it's convincing the metal. I'm not an awakened and even I can tell by your actions that you're trying to get this done with. Working metal isn't to release stress, it's a craft like anything else. With my eyes I could never see the flaws, but you know that they are there even if you try to cover it up. Start over.

Dallion didn't protest. He knew the old man to be right. The discoveries of the past week had made him question a lot. In the end, though, that was life. Every week brought new things he'd never

considered before. When Dallion had joined the hunter party, he was clueless regarding the wilderness. Now, he had learned a few things, though not much by any extent of the imagination.

Without protest Dallion tossed the nearly complete blade in the scrap pile, then went to the ingo section of the forge for new materials. As he did, several of Alabasters apprentices along with their tools let out the standard joking remarks. After all this time, they had started viewing him as one of them, rather than the hero of Nerosal. For that, Dallion was grateful.

The selection of ingots was impressive: hundreds of ingots of the main seven metals in different combinations. Even gold and silver were readily available, since this was one of the main forges that produced weapons for the non-awakened, and even those awakened that couldn't afford their own special weapon yet. One thing was missing, however there were no special weapons.

When will you let me bring my own metal? Dallion asked openly.

All the jokes and laughter suddenly stopped.

This again? Alabaster sighed. It'll do you no good. Even with your skills, you can't make a special sword using those tools. Well, with luck maybe you'll make a nice alloy, but the changes would be so insignificant it would be wasting material.

Would you look at that? the old smith crossed his arms. You've been here four months and you think you can dish out advice?

I'll sing for you, Dallion said. A few hours every day when I'm in Nerosal.

All work stopped. There wasn't a person in the city who didn't know the effects awakened music had. That was why Performers Plaza was such a frequented place. A few had even heard Dallion perform in the Gremlins Timepiece, back when he used to work at the inn for a living. Everyone was fully aware that there was no way that the master smith would agree, yet they were secretly hoping he would.

And play the mandolin, Dallion added.

Ringchord, Alabaster corrected.

Eh? Dallion turned around. That wasn't a response he was expecting.

You'll play a ringchord a few hours every day while you're here until I say it's enough.

The offer was too good to be true.

Deal, Dallion said. It'll take me a while to get used to it, but I'll practice here.

Good enough. Come along.

The man took Dallion outside, then circled the massive building of the forge until they reached another section of it. It was something that Dallion had seen before, though only from the outside. Ever since he'd known it, the place had been barred shut. From what some of the older smiths said, that used to be the initial forge built generations ago. It had belonged to Alabaster's grandfather, but with time and new forging technologies hadn't seen use in generations. Even so, it remained to remind every generation of great smiths where they had come from.

Ready? Alabaster asked, then opened the door.

No lock?

Dallion wondered.

Combining his music and forging skills, Dallion looked at the lock. To the untrained eye, it looked like any normal lock. In truth it was an extremely complex mechanism, created by an awakened no doubt. While the keyhole was fake, the gears and levers inside weren't. The balance was perfect, ensuring that the slightest shift of rose in one peg would cause the bolt to slide to lock or open the door.

Why are you just standing there? Alabaster asked, confused. You want to get working, don't you?

You are quite welcome.

The inside of the ancient forge was smaller than Dallion expected. However, he instantly noticed the differences. Everything from the floor to the bellows, the tools, and even the stove itself was made for an awakened. Even the anvil was a solid slab of glass, similar to the one he had seen in the Glass Mounts.

I know, I know, Alabaster said, a trace of shame and sadness in his voice. My great-great-grandfather was an awakened. A quite good one, too. He used to make weapons for the local nobility back in the day. In fact, he was part of the nobility. However, none of his children inherited his awakened skills.

You're a noble?

Not anymore. His children were on paper, but even that could only last so long. When there were no awakened among the third generation, my family was stripped of their name and title and made into respected artisans. It isn't too bad. The man crossed his arms. Although there are times when I'd really like to know what my family name was.

How come so many people have their names erased?

You'll find it has everything needed to craft masterpieces, Alabaster said. Outside of myself, only three people know of the existence of this place. My kids, who will inherit the knowledge, and Eury. You're next.

This is where she made her tools, Dallion said.

It definitely is. When I agreed to show you the ropes, I also promised that when I thought you were ready, I'd let you in on the secret. Well, I've broken that promise.

Slightly confused, Dallion looked at the man.

You aren't ready. You're not far off, but you're not there yet. However, given what you're about to do, I thought I'd cut a corner.

Wasn't it bad to cut corners?

Give me some credit, Alabaster grumbled. Think of it as a transfer of pain. You could spend a few more months perfecting the small things there, or you could do the same here. Here, you'll get used to the tools faster. It'll be a bit harsher to you, but faster. So, from now on you can come here any

time you like. Dont worry about the door. My great-great-grandfather made it. Itll only open to people who should be here.

Dallion was left speechless. Each time he thought there was nothing left in the world to surprise him, something would catch him completely off guard. Close to two years ago, Dallion was fretting about not being able to choose forging skills, since he needed attack skills to survive. Now, he had access to an awakened forge, as well as the skills to form sky silver.

So, what will you create first?

A hammer, Dallion said.

In the awakened realm, that was the heart of the skill. So far, he had a total of eight hammers which he used for forging. That was a bit too much for the real world. Here, he would have to create one to do all the work. It was going to be a hammer that no one had seen before, made of hardened sky silver. It was the perfect tool that he needed to construct two other items that would help him in the wilderness.

So cliche, Alabaster laughed. Alright, Im leaving you to it. Have fun, and remember your promise. A few hours every day youre here.

You got it. Dallion slid his fingers along the anvil slab.

Chapter 412: Hammer Time

The sound of hammering echoed throughout the city. There was something about the sound, as if tuning forks were dueling, letting out emotion at every strike. Ambition, determination, desire all of those echoed from the noise as if the hammer was made of them.

Confused, Dallion continued along the road. People chatted away on either side of him, ignoring the sound as if it didnt exist.

The further Dallion went, the fewer people there seemed to be. By the time he reached the forge, the neighborhood was virtually deserted.

Even the tiles didnt respond. Looking closer, Dallion saw that the tiles had no guardians within them nothing around him did. And yet, he was sure that things had been different yesterday. The forge had been full of guardians, most of them just as mouthy as their owners.

All the apprentices and journeymen were gone. Even Alabaster was missing. One single person was working, hammering away at a large piece of red-hot metal in the fat part of the forge. Dallion felt deep unease, but also an unexplained sense of familiarity.

Always late to the party, the person said, not pausing to turn around or stop his work. Looking at him, he had an average build, and from what Dallion could tell was roughly the same age as him.

I was busy. Dallion felt the need to defend himself.

Busy saving the city. The other laughed. You come up with the best excuses.

Dallion didnt agree with that. If anything, saving Nerosal wasnt an excuse. It was what happened. And he had saved it, or at the very least, played a crucial role in saving it. Still, he went closer, stopping a few steps from the man.

What are you making? Dallion asked.

The chunk of metal was far larger than necessary, almost the same size as the anvil itself. The shape was largely deformed, but Dallion somehow knew that it was the local province.

Forging Wetie, Kraisten replied. Ive been at this for a while, but each time I almost get it right, something comes up and messes it up for me. Take it from me, never forge a province its more trouble than its worth.

So, what mess are you going to start today? Kraisten asked.

I was thinking of making a hammer, Dallion replied.

Its about time. You should have had your own ages ago.

I told you I had other things on my mind.

I know, I know. You had to save the world. Thats why youll never amount to anything. You lack focus and ambition. Still, its your life. Who am I to tell you whats right?

Ill make an all-metal hammer, Dallion said louder, as if volume would prove how right he was.

A hammer to end all hammers? Kraisten glanced over his shoulder. As he did, part of the province twisted off the main block, like a corkscrew. Ive heard that before. Lots have tried to make it, few actually succeeded. I think I have one lying about somewhere. Want it? Itll be faster than making your own. Besides, mines already tested. He pointed at the wall behind Dallion.

There, among the other instruments, was a small metal hammer. It didnt look special at all. Rather, it looked like a sharp-edged metal cube. Using his forging skill, Dallion could see that it was made of a perfectly measured alloy of all basic and awakened metals. Unlike Dallions design, this hammer didnt rely on its shape, but rather its composition.

I prefer having my own, Dallion said.

Your choice. Kraisten returned to forging the province. You can never go wrong with metal. If things dont work out the first time, you can always reforge them later. Make something youre comfortable with. Once you do, youll see I was right all along.

If you say so. Every fiber of Dallions body disagreed. There was no way that Kraisten was right. If he were, that would mean that

Dal! a sharp female voice sounded, shattering all reality.

Next thing Dallion knew, he was in bed, gripping the pillow lightly with both hands.

Pillows cost a lot in this world, the gorgon reminded.

Dallion looked down and released his grip. Moments later, Euryale took it from his hands and placed it back on the bed. That was the thing about her always perfectly calm. There were times that Dallion missed her initial flintiness, although he acknowledged they had moved to a new stage in their relationship. Also, it wasnt completely gone.

Dream from your world? she asked.

Local nightmare, Dallion replied. I got advice from someone on how to forge my hammer.

Was it any good?

No, Dallion lied. He wanted me to make an alloy of all metals, normal and magical.

Thats an odd one. Ive heard that its been done in the empire. The alloy, not the hammer. They say its invulnerable, but I have my doubts. The gorgon went to the other room and finished putting on her light armor. Judging by her clothes, Dallion could tell that she had been called to do something for the overseer again. Her putting on armor meant that it wasnt going to be hazard free. Ill try to catch you at the forge before evening, she said. Unless youre off somewhere else.

No, Ill be there. Though maybe after increasing another level. Forging gear was a must, but since he was going to increase his body, it was going to benefit his work. Take care.

The gorgon chuckled, then left the workshop, leaving Dallion alone with the guardians.

In this particular case, morning was closer to noon. Thing back, last night had been a bit of a blur. He remembered going to an inn with Alabaster. He remembered insisting hed only have a few quick drinks and then Eury had joined in, bringing a quick end to his best laid plans. Still, taking a moment or two to destress was always a good thing.

After finishing his biological needs, Dallion washed up, got dressed, and quickly rushed to the forge. On the way, he passed by Hannahs inn to grab some food. The innkeeper grumbled that she was going to start charging him, but let him pass through the kitchen nonetheless. The funny thing was that Dallion had been leaving a few gold coins each time he returned from a hunt.

Once at the forge, Dallion didnt enter the main building, but went to the back, where his personal room workshop waited. The lock let him in with a kind greeting, and didnt forget to mention that Alabaster had stocked up on coal and wood. That only left Dallion to actually start the fire, and since he was going to shape sky silver, it was going to have to be quite hot. That was another reason why only awakened worked with those metals. In order to reach the desired temperature, several shifts of blacksmiths had to work on the bellows for a few days. An awakened could do the same in a few hours.

As time trickled on, monotony slowly took hold. While the first half hour Dallion was excited thinking of what hed do with his hammer to be, his enthusiasm quickly evaporated. It was at that point that he noticed that Nil had been remarkably quiet until now.

Why? What happened?

Ive had a bit more time to look at your hammer design

But I havent shown it to anyone, yet.

Gen gave me the details. And let me tell you, both of us are concerned regarding the usability of the thing in question.

That didnt sound too good. However, Dallion found it more concerning that one of his echoes had shared his thoughts regarding something he hadnt yet constructed. Maybe he was going to take a leaf from Euryales book and start wearing a blocker ring more often.

Innovation has always been difficult to accept

Nil, Ive already been through all the forging materials in the library You were there for Moons sake.

Internally, Dallion sighed. On the one hand he was glad that his echoes were concerned about him to such a degree. Listening to them was like listening to criticism coming from two extremely good friends. However, Nil and by the sound of things Gen as well failed to see the obvious. That was to

be expected, of course. Nil had never had the empathy stat, and Gen had been created way before Dallion had acquired it. Everything they said was perfectly logical and would have made perfect sense, if it weren't for one thing: Dallion was going to rely on the hammer to help him while forging. That was why he had gone through the trouble of spending a fortune on high grade mercury last night. The metal was far less toxic than on Earth although the fumes still caused sickness used primarily for complex mechanisms. As far as Dallion was aware, no one used the material for weapons and with good reason: a mercury core served no benefit while only weakening the overall item. Sky silver, however, took care of that problem. Extremely hard and durable, it was going to safely contain the liquid metal without compromising the integrity of the hammer. More importantly, the intricate waver-like latticework that Dallion was planning on making, was going to allow the mercury to flow almost chaotically within the hammer's entire head; and, of course, thanks to Dallion's empathy stat, he was going to ensure that the randomness was no randomness at all.

I know what you're trying to do, but if there ever was such an art, it has been long lost.

Dallion only smiled and kept on working the bellows. The truth was that he'd had a chat with Aspan on this topic right before going to the forge. If there was anyone who understood how fluids worked, it was a copyette. It was a pity that only Dallion had any memory of the real events that took place in the kitchen. Even after the events at the arena, Aspan preferred to keep his existence secret.

That, dear boy, is what concerns me the most. Each time you've said that, things have either ended in absolute failure or something worse. While I encourage you to think out of the box, sometimes you think way out there

The work went on. When the temperature had reached the right point, Dallion melted down all the sky silver he had not a large amount by far. While that took place, he focused on making a mold of the shape from wax with all the minute details then placed into a wooden crate of ash-sand.

Then came the complicated bit. The pouring of the metal in the cast was considered the moment when an item guardian came into being. There were several theories on the topic Nil had tried to explain them in some detail but the bottom line was that, for a predominantly metal item, this was regarded as the moment of birth. In order for Dallion's plan to work, the guardian had to help with its own formation, which meant the first instructions had to be given simultaneously before and during the realm was being created.

Chapter 413: Realm Guardian Onda

There was always something magical in hearing the first words of a guardian. Even veteran awakened relished the moment knowing that their efforts had gained form. Often, they'd spend seconds, or even minutes, disconnected from the world, focusing on the item just created. Dallion didn't have that luxury. Barely had he heard the voice than he gave instructions to the guardian how to shape its realm.

Eleven instances had failed to match the correct moment. Nine proceeded with the instructions, although in three cases, the new guardian was too confused to follow them adequately. At this point, only six remained.

The molten metal moved about as it hardened, crackling in the process. This was unusual, but Dallions forging skills told him that everything was going on as expected. Every now and again unfortunate bubble would form, ruining the shape, and causing another instance to be discarded.

Had the dream been a warning about this? Forging was surprisingly close to forging a province. The only difference was that no people or politics were involved here. Sadly, that didnt make it a lot easier.

The seconds passed slowly and tensely with Dallion using his focus, as well as music and forging skills to monitor the guardians progress and instruct him when needed. Instances faded away by the dozen, only to be replaced by more.

Sweat covered Dallions forehead, caused just as much by the heat as by the pressure. Time ceased to have any meaning, all that mattered was to construct the hammer head according to specifications. Then, finally, it was done. Out of habit, Dallion kept on splitting for half a minute more, to be certain that there were no surprises. Then, once he saw that nothing bad had happened, he lay on the floor, grabbed hold of his kaleidervisto, entered into the item, and promptly collapsed.

The first thing Dallion noticed upon waking up was the blanket of blue flames that covered him. Lux, in typical fashion, had made sure that he remained warm and healed, even if the realm was by no means cold.

Thanks, Lux, Dallion stirred. Instantly the firebird moved off from him, taking its avian form. Did anything interesting happen while I was asleep?

There was no telling how much time had passed. If Dallion were to guess, hed say hours. Not that it mattered. The only reason he asked was because he wanted to have a rough estimate of how angry Nil would be with him. The old echo was far from overprotective, but got especially annoyed when basic logic wasnt followed. In this case forging until fainting.

Lux flew around Dallion, forming the number nine.

Taking a few steps to adjust, he then returned to the real world. With only the moment passed, the hammer head was still scorching hot, even if it had gained solid form. Now was the time for it to be quenched. Since the hammer head was made of sky silver, there was one peculiarity. Quenching wasnt done in oil or water, but the air itself. That was another of the reasons why the metal was so durable.

Taking a pair of large tongs, Dallion pulled out the hammer head from the sand mold. Seeing it for the first time brought mixed feelings. The hammer glistened with raw brilliance, making the already unusual shape look as if it had been cut out of with a laser. Unfortunately, it was slightly small for a hammer. That was another of the reasons that Dallion wanted to give it a quicksilver core.

Twice did Dallion return the item to the oven and twice he quenched it in air. Each time it became slicker and slicker. Euryale would probably grumble that it would need a few areas ground down, but all in all Dallion was pleased with the result.

Once the hammer head had fully cooled down, it was time for phase two. With extreme care and attention, Dallion poured the quicksilver into the head. This time, he only used half a dozen instances. Luckily for him, there were no incidents.

When the liquid metal had filled its container to the brim, he removed his leather gloves and touched the side of the sky silver.

ITEM AWAKENING

The forge disappeared, replaced by a vast three-dimensional maze. Just looking around was enough to make anyone dizzy, as if the internal decorator had been M.C. Escher.

The HAMMER is level 1

You are in an intricate metal room.

Defeat the guardian and change the HAMMERs destiny.

You wish, Dallion smirked at the blue rectangle.

Lines of quicksilver flowed along the floor, walls, and ceiling, just as was intended. Dallions instinct was to stay away, but his curiosity drew him forward. In the end, he was unable to resist, stepping onto a pool of silvery liquid. The sensation was unusual, as if he were walking on firm jelly.

Hammer, Dallion said out loud. Ill be heading for the labyrinth. If you can, give me a hand.

Instantly, all the quicksilver around Dallion pulled away, creating an empty circle. This wasnt exactly what he had in mind, but Dallion decided to take it.

At first, the mending labyrinth was quite small no larger than a tennis court. That was to be expected; the item was brand new and there were no areas that needed mending. As Dallion pushed against one of the walls, however, the room expanded tripling in size. Silver markers emerged, standing out from the metallic background thanks to their deep glow. Dallion examined them carefully, then summoned his Nox dagger.

Keep it even, Nox, he said and started cutting.

Back on Earth, Dallion would have said that the procedure required surgical precision. As an awakened, he was more than a surgeon. Aided by the forging markers, he sliced through metal with ease, taking out sections to assemble later. At first glance, it seemed that he was destroying the realm, but in truth he was merely rearranging it in such a fashion so as to bottle the mercury inside the sky silver. Doing so in practice was like rearranging a wall of Rubik-cubes, the sides of which moved along with their location.

It took several long hours of insanity, and a lot of help from Nox and Lux, but in the end he managed to rearrange the sections of the labyrinth and weld them in place.

I just want to see the guardian Ive made.

You cant say youve made him just yet. Youve completed the hammer head, but youre still lacking the handle. You cant call it a full hammer in its present state.

When Dallion stepped through the archway leading to the guardians chamber, he expected it to be the same as every other part of the realm. That turned out not to be the case. Sea and blue skies continued in all directions for as far as the eye could see, broken up only by the occasional set of cliffs emerging from beneath the surface. The only solid surface for miles was a clocktower made of sky silver and mercury, emerging from the surface and rising hundreds of feet in the air.

Hey, a nymph said, dressed in what looked like steampunk attire. The race aside, the guardian looked quite young and extremely geeky. All that was missing were a pair of thick goggles and he would be at home in a LARP convention or a Jules Verne novel. You thought of this place? the boy grinned.

HAMMER GUARDIAN - ONDA

Species: Nymph

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% Health

Skills:

-Water control

-Forging

-Carving

-Guard

-Attack

Weak Spot: Unknown

Did you? the guardian repeated his question.

Yes? Dallion wasnt sure whether that was a good thing or not.

Sweet. The nymph grinned. Cool design. Havent seen something like this in ages. You must have an idea of ferrofluid behavior.

Sorry, old habit. I was a gearworks apprentice in the past. he looked at the floor. You have no idea what its like to end up in a realm such as this.

Youre aware that youre a hammer? Dallion asked.

Hey, no ones perfect. Besides, so much thought went into creating this that I wouldnt call it just a hammer. Anyway, when will you link me to your realm?

When I get you a handle, he said reluctantly. Keep in mind there are a few other guardians linked already.

Nice. Any nymphs?

One. Shes a harpsisword.

The eagerness that filled the guardians chest suddenly vanished, replaced by equal parts fear and uncertainty.

Combat gear, the guardian said. I can work with that.

Ive also have, a companion shield and youll see when you join he realm. I also have an old echo, whos the resident librarian. Feel free to chat with him on any topic, though most of all forging. I plan to start making items pretty soon and Ill rely on you for assistance.

I figured as much. Dont worry, Ill be here to help you out. He took a few steps to the edge of the terrace and looked at the horizon. Combat gear and a companion shield. It wont be boring, thats for sure.

You have no idea Dont worry though, I wont take you on the trips in the wilderness. Youll be entirely focused on crafting things.

And for starters, Ill see how good you are at shaping an emblem.

Chapter 414: Emblem Troubles

Pride was a weird thing. Dallion used to claim that he didnt consider himself to be anything special, other than extremely lucky. There was no denying that a lot of things had gone his way: him buying the harpsisword, him being hired to work at The Gremlins Timepiece inn, the attention of the Moons, even him joining the Icepicker guild. As it turned out, there was a reason for most of that, rules of the world that remained in effect regardless if he knew about them or not. Affected by Dallions character and personal choices, the rules had led to a favorable outcome, elevating him from a vast unknown to a rising star at the tournament arena, as well as a hero of Nerosal. From that perspective, having to resort to busking in Performers Plaza could be seen as a significant fall from grace.

While somewhat encouraging and a tad disturbing that didnt keep Dallion from seeing himself as a beggar. Having spent all his sky silver to create his hammer, even if that was considered a masterpiece, had left him lacking material to do the other items he needed. With the city garrison growing, not only had the prices of special metals gone through the roof, but finding it at all had become exceedingly difficult. It was no wonder that people preferred to buy whole items with the goal of melting down the metal an option that Dallion could never agree to. Unwilling to ask for assistance from the general or the mirror pool, Dallion had resorted to the next best thing: he had asked the overseer to buy a small amount of sky silver, for starters.

Fortunately for Dallion, the overseer after confirming with the local nobles had agreed. Unfortunately, Dallion was asked to pay market prices for it. Thus, he found himself sitting in a corner of Performers Plaza, playing a ring chord for spare change.

Another silver fell into the wooden bowl that Dallion had placed in front of him.

Dallion felt like crying. Fifty-seven wasnt bad for being at it for less than an hour. Strictly speaking, hed make ten times more as a guild member exploring items. Of course, that was half a year ago. Item exploration was not nearly as big now to the point that a guild got one or two artifacts per month. City sanitation and item improvement remained in demand, but even there the competition was increasing. At present, even the top five guilds were doing things they wouldnt have considered worthwhile before the last festival.

Do you do requests? a familiar voice asked.

Dallion looked up to see Vend standing there. The Icepicker elite appeared unchanged both in appearance and attitude. One would almost say that he had come to give Dallion a task from the guild and to remind him not to slack at his training.

As long as I know it, Dallion replied.

There was a sudden burst of instances. Dallion managed to get a glimpse of Vends instances for a few seconds, but lost track after a matter of seconds. Clearly, his former teacher still had the upper hand when it came to splitting.

I thought you'd do better than that, the elite said. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion knew he was jesting.

One day I will. You still want me to play something, or are you here for a chat?

Vend tossed a gold coin into the bowl.

Just talk. I'm on my way to the nobles sector. Apparently, there's some mending I need to do.

No gold clothes? Dallion arched his brow. It was a huge deal getting invited by a noble, to the point that guilds dressed their members in gold and silver just for the occasion. In the past, those used to be major events observed by hundreds of people. Lately, the nobles tended to deal with their problems on their own.

Lady Marigold wants to keep a low profile.

Given that she was a family member of the previous owner of the city, it stood to logic. There was no word as to the views Lady Marigold and Countess Priscord held concerning each other, but Dallion suspected that they weren't the best. Possibly the countess blamed the locals for the failure that had occurred during the festival. It was also possible that there was bad blood that ran a lot deeper.

Still improving your training dagger? Vend asked.

I stopped at level thirty-nine, Dallion replied.

Close to gold. Vend nodded. Not bad. He tossed another gold coin into the bowl.

People usually toss a coin after they've heard the music, Dallion noted.

In truth, he was a bit annoyed about not being able to progress further with his training stiletto. Vend had given it to him as a means to practice his awakening discipline. The goal was simple: try to improve the weapon once every day, though never more. Things were easy when the weapon had been made of tin. However, once Dallion had improved it to the silver, and later partial gold alloy, the improvement fights had turned into attempts.

Who says I haven't? Vend tossed a final third gold coin. You need to learn more songs, he said. The last two were a stretch. In any event, good luck.

It was just like Vend to split into several dozen instances and have Dallion perform a song in each. Given how gifted the elite was in the area, there even was a chance that he was underpaying. Sadly, there was no way for Dallion to ever be certain.

Say hi to Eury for me, Vend said as he walked off.

Sure. Dallion watched the man disappear in the crowd.

Without question, the ring chord was an exotic instrument. Even now, the best way Dallion could describe it was a set of guitar strings attached to a ring on either side. The sound the instrument made was nothing special, the skill required to have it play, though, was what set it aside from any

other instrument. As the old man, who had given it to him, had said, playing a ring-chord was mostly a visual art; and in a plaza filled with hundreds of sounds, performance was a huge draw in.

By evening Dallion had filled several pouches of coins, even if, with the exception of the ones Vend had given him, all of them were silver. The sum was no laughing matter, yet all of it, along with Dallions previous savings, went to procure little more than a thimble of sky silver. The emblem was going to end up slightly smaller than Dallion wanted, but enough to create what he had in mind. The bladebow, though, was going to have to wait.

The Moons gave this to me for a reason. Better be prepared than annoyed later on.

The echo didnt argue.

Going to his forge, Dallion got to work. This was the first time he was going to use his new hammer, which made him equal parts eager and nervous. Logically speaking, there was nothing to be worried about. Dallion had linked the hammer to his realm and introduced the new very geeky guardian to the other inhabitants of his awakened realm. Things had gone as well as expected. The initial meeting between Harp and Onda was on the tense side. Everyone could tell that the hammer guardian was slightly intimidated by the harpsisword, but he had relaxed soon enough. The greater disappointment came when Onda found that the companion gear guardian to be a male druid. In turn, Vihrogon had suggested that Dallion name the hammer the Tri-force. The temptation had been considerable, but Dallion had managed to resist. It was enough that he had taken on Darude as his name and battle cry.

After giving Onda a quick tour, Dallion spent a few hours going over the details of the emblem the guardian was going to help him create. Technically, the item was going to be a pendant until Dallion could get it blessed by the Moons in a temple of the Order. Despite that, the shape and dimensions had to be perfect.

The two had gone through a lot of discussions as to the method of creation, even going through several practice runs. The results were close to flawless, but many things in the awakened realms were. Here, there was no hint of the chaos of the wilderness that had an effect over everything in the real world, even within the domain of a city.

Now it was time to see what the real results would be. Once the metal was heated to the point of being malleable, Dallion took it out of the oven with a pair of tongs, carefully placed it on the anvil slab, and started hammering.

A jeweler, especially one from earth, would faint in anger seeing how Dallion set out to make the emblem. However, they would be wrong. Emblems were not jewelrythey had to be strong enough to contain the order of the Moons so as to counteract the effects of the wilderness. As a rule, each emblem was at least three times smaller than the volume of the original material used. The chunk of material Dallion had managed to procure from the overseer was originally enough to make half a golf ball. At the moment, he was doing his best to squeeze that into an item the size and shape of a penny.

Talked down by an eternal teen guardian of his own creation Neither Dallions skills, not focus, not even the twelve instances he used at every strike, seemed enough to keep Onda content. In this

aspect, the little geek was worse than Nil. However, that was a good thing. Despite his pesky remarks, he compensated for Dallions faults, shifting the weight of the hammer ever so slightly at precisely the right moment.

No markers appeared around the piece of metal as he worked on. The first two hours passed in savagely beating the shape into submission, which had to be done in ten-minute intervals, since at that point the sky silver had to be heated again. By midnight. Dallion had managed to get the rough shape, but still had to shrink it in size.

Fatigue had started to rear its ugly head, but was kept at bay by sheer determination. Another couple of hours later, and the basic shape was readya thin, flat disk, no wider than Dallions thumb nail.

Like a cat on water. Seriously, gramps, chill a bit. You want to get it done right, right?

It was unclear which was worse: the hammers comments, or the Vihrogons laughter in the background. While Dallion had made a point to leave most of his gear at Eurys workshop, the guardians had snuck into Ondas tower just to listen to the banter for their own amusement. That was one of the risks of linking items to ones realm.

I said, I can do it! Dallion yelled.

Do what? A voice asked at the door.

Dallion briskly turned around. Euryale was standing near the entrance, leaning at the door.

Eury? Dallion blinked. How long have you been there? He hadnt even noticed when she had come in.

Enough to see you lose it, the gorgon replied. Another critical discussion with Nil?

Something like that, Dallion said, doing his best to ignore the gossip session which had started in his awakening realm regarding his relations to Eury.

The gorgon moved away from the door and went to take a closer look at the sky silver disk.

Steady work, she saidthe first actual praise Dallion had received on the matter. The hammer as well. The compliment didnt pass unnoticed. What are you making exactly?

An emblem shell. I was thinking of having it blessed after I pass my trial gate.

Not a bad idea. The gorgon took off the gear she was wearing and rolled up her sleeves.

What are you doing? Dallion asked, knowing exactly what she was going to say.

Just the bellows. A smith must make their own gear alone, but theres nothing against assisting with the annoying stuff. Especially since youre still my apprentice. She went to the bellows. Put it in and take a few minutes. This is going to be a long night.

Chapter 415: The Way Forward

The night turned into most of the day. Even with Eury taking care of all the auxiliary things: working the bellows, bringing food, not to mention providing constant advice, the work was gruelingly hard. On several occasions Dallion felt exhausted to the point of fainting, but each time he would keep on.

Finally, by the next evening, the item was complete. Having to etch an intricate design on a material as hard as glass on a disk the size of a penny was extreme, requiring that Dallion measure every hit precisely and only use the sharp edge of the hammer.

Once he was done, holding the small element in the light of the forge, carefully held between his fingers, one thought passed through Dallions mind: he wasnt going to do that ever again, or at least not in the next few years.

Let me have a look? Euryale said, reaching out.

Dallion gave her the emblem, then went to the bucket of water in the room and splashed some on his face and neck.

Rather well done, the gorgon said, clusters of snakes extending to view the emblem better from all sides. Youve got the lines quite well. Id have made the ear a bit bigger. I assume youll use a sky steel chain to hold it?

Ive no idea. Dallion replied, leaning with both hands against the workbench. The thought of having to make a chain crossed his mind, sending waves of utter terror through his soul.

Ill try to find something. The gorgon flipped the emblem. Itll be my gift.

Youre the best, Dallion said with the enthusiasm of a snoring cat. I think Ill wash and go to bed.

Eury must have replied something, but Dallion could no longer register it. The next half hour passed in a blur. In some capacity, he remembered what had happened: they had cleaned up the forge, left home, even met some old acquaintance Dallion was in no condition to place. When he next woke up, though, it was morning and he was once again in bed. The major difference was that this time, legs, back, and entire right arm were screaming in pain.

This was the first time in quite a while that he had felt overworked, and by doing non-awakened activities at that. Normally, it was his head that wasnt able to handle things using too much focus, trying to maintain his combat splitting for too long, or merely relying on his music skills a tad too much.

Its my first time working sky silver,

Dallion replied. There was no way he could remain mad at the guardian. Despite his cheek, the nymph had no ill intentions.

Dallion knew the feeling. Back on Earth, he had met one such person while participating in a puzzle tournament. His name was Michael Gray, and he had been utterly obnoxious. While everyone else was preparing to solve warm up puzzles he had spent his time walking about and commenting on how simple the puzzles were. Then, when the official part of the competition had started, Michael had completed the challenge in under five minutes, then left to get a nap. It was only later that the boy and Dallion had become friends, or rather close acquaintances. The truth was that Michael was just extremely bored with everything and criticized everyone not on his level. By the looks of it, Onda was a similar case. Then again, that was the perfect fit for a hammer.

There was no sign of Eury other than a note next to a basket of food. It was no surprise that she had been called by the city guard to deal with something again. Dallion suspected that despite the victory against the Star, not all cultists had been dealt with. Either that or there were troubles of another sort. Either way, he had the day to himself.

The first thing that Dallion did after having a bite was to go to Alabasters forge and start fulfilling his part of the deal by playing music for a few hours. While playing, he chose to add a lot of enthusiasm and speed in his tune. The gesture was very much appreciated, although sadly Dallion didnt receive any tips. This wasnt an inn after all.

Following the performance, Dallion went back to practice his own forging skills. While he didnt have any special metals, he did have everything it took to work on normal items, which he did. Each success steadied his hand and helped him improve his skill level. As all crafting skills, forging was affected by real life achievements as well. Each time Dallion managed to make a new masterpiece in the real world, it would increase his skill level. Initially, Dallion had mostly done so in the awakened realm, but soon after, he had started with the real deal.

The next creation was to make a crescent blade bow of iron. The design was rather complicated, but working standard metal proved much faster and easier. After half a days work, he had already composed most of the body parts. Only the mechanism remained, which Dallion decided to leave for later.

After sufficient progress, Dallion spent what was left of the day at one of the park areas of the city, returning to the workshop by evening. It wasnt until well after dark that Eury returned. As usual, she didnt mention anything about her work, choosing to keep the focus mostly on him. Several enjoyable hours were spent talking, after which both went to bed to be ready for the next day.

The days became a perpetual routine divided between the workshop and the forge. Occasionally Dallion would pass by Hannahs inn to have a chat with her and Aspan, but there were seldom any major deviations. After a bit of fiddling, the blade bow was complete along with a stack of bolts for the test. The results were far from optimal, though that was because such a weapon was required to be made out of proper material.

The hammer guardian kept insisting that Dallion melt down his standard dartbow and use the material to create a new weapon, but Dallion refused. Item melting wasnt something he was prepared to do, although he considered transforming the item from the inside. At present that was beyond his skills, but potentially when he passed the next awakening gate it could turn into a valid option.

Dallions leveling up also continued. The decision to level up once every two days proved to work surprisingly well. What was more, Dallions choice to try out the hammer as a weapon wielded even more unexpected results. For one thing, it turned out that combining forging and attack skills made it possible to shatter enemy shells and hard armorsomething Dallion had further tested by improving a few more glasses at Hannahs inn to her annoyance. That was only the start, though. The hammers metal core allowed Onda to shift the center of gravity, in effect transforming the weapon into a real-life version of Mjolnir. The only part missing was the hammers ability to return, but Dallion could easily do that on his own by summoning it to his hand as any other item. At one point, he had used Lux to move the hammer around just for fun, but had decided against the practice. Being able to fight himself provided a far better advantage.

The second trial was facing a pack of cutlings. While Dallion knew that these were only mental constructions and far from the real thing, it was almost laughable how easily he had defeated them using a combination of a blunt weapon and his zoology skills in the area. Sadly, it also reminded him what was required for that particular skill to advance further.

In the second week after his return from the wilderness, Dallion finally approached the subject of him gaining his apprentice emblem once more.

Are you ready for this? the gorgon asked, several of the snakes on her head twitching as she did.

Im close. Ive got two more levels until I reach the gate. In theory, he could continue trying to create forging masterpieces, but that was becoming more and more difficult. He had already created everything he had seen other smiths do, as well as the blueprints he was given including a metal whip blade, although it too wasnt as remotely efficient as the one that he had given to Gleam.

Pass the trial, then Ill let you go on a solo hunt. There was a slight pause. This time I wont be there with you. Succeed or fail, its all up to you.

Dallion was fully aware of what she was saying. There was a real possibility that he might not return. That was what a real hunters trial was. There was a time when he wouldnt have dared. Now, though, he felt adequately prepared.

Thanks, Dallion whispered. Any news about Jiroh? She hasnt been to Hannahs.

Shell be back. Eury chose not to give any details. Ill make you some armor for when youre ready to set out.

The issue was that Euryale had been serious a lot lately. It was normal for the near destruction of the city to affect her, but it was almost as if she had turned into a different person. The whole end of the world prophecy hadnt helped either. Whatever the gorgon had on her mind she wasnt sharing it with anyone very much like Dallion hadnt shared in the past. Always wearing a blocker ring, Eury tended to focus on the moment, taking it a day at a time. Now and then shed give a vague explanation as to what was concerning her, but even that involved a lot of guesswork.

The fact remains. Hunters arent the only ones whome seen otherworlders. Ive had friends as well. Some tried to. It didnt work out very well for all.

That was slightly ominous. Dallion understood the point, though. There were a lot of things on Jiroh and Eurys minds and he couldnt rely on them to get him out of trouble anymore. Passing the game and completing the solo hunt were proof that he had what it took to take care of himself. He had been given a chance to achieve that. Now all that remained was for him to actually do it.

Chapter 416: The Unexpected Choice

PERSONAL AWAKENING

There was something special about that number. Somehow it made him more nervous than the final one. Based on past experience, the final level before the gate was the most difficult. However, thanks to his new skills and items, he felt quite overpowered for the task. As most things with leveling up, once he had dealt with the serious blocker stopping his progress, things had moved on quite smoothly.

So, what are we fighting today? Onda asked. Looking at him, he was far too enthusiastic for a simple tool. If anything, Dallion would have thought of him as being a combat weapon.

The same thing we fight every trial, Onda, Dallion could stop himself from saying. Flaws.

The nymph looked at him in a confused manner, as if Dallion had walked out into the street without his trousers.

Just run with it, July walked in with the shardfly on his shoulder. He thinks weird things sometimes.

Dallion laughed, but deep inside, he was extremely tense. As much as he tried, he was unsure what fear he might face. Arguably, the last ones dealt with his doubts of making it as a hunter, as well as the fear of facing others who could combat split. However, none of those were really serious. There were several people he feared facing in the real world, so maybe he'd have to fight one of them? Either way, he'd soon find out.

Summoning his gear and weapons, Dallion went into the corridor and straight for the new trial door. The familiar blue rectangle appeared once he stepped inside, only to be quickly waved out of existence.

No, not a swarm. I think it'll be ranged, though.

The corridor was well built, forming a perfect square. Light crystals were on the ceiling of the recent changes that had become commonplace. It made the whole thing look less fantasy and more modern, in a manner of speaking. If Dallion had the option, he would have replaced all old corridors with this method of lighting. Sadly, that wasn't possible for the moment; the room and corridor was a snapshot of his understanding of the world. Before he had seen light crystals, Dallion couldn't have imagined such a light source. Hopefully, when he passed the gate, he'd gain the ability to customize his realm or, realistically, let Gen do that for him.

After probably half a mile, the corridor made a sharp right. About a dozen steps further, a large metal door blocked all progress. Covered with finely engraved patterns, it resembled the combat arena of the realm of the many areas that Dallion never visited. Moving closer, he placed his hand on the metal surface and pushed. The whole thing spun around a central metal pillar instead of moving to the side.

Ignoring both, Dallion stepped through, entering a large oval room. Initially, he thought the place was empty. However, soon enough he found that there were five more metal doors, almost blending with the internal wall decorations.

Hi, Dal, a voice said behind him.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion turned around in a few. Jiroh was there, dressed in a flowy outfit made entirely of clouds. It wasn't the case of clouds forming one robe, but rather each piece of clothing was made from a different piece of floating fluff.

Surprised to see me? the fury asked.

Surprised at the clothes, Dallion said. While doing so, he had his instances form a circle around her. If it came to a fight, he knew what he had to do.

You won't be needing those. Not that they'll help you. My levels in the sixties. Sixty-seven if you want to be precise.

Dallion blinked. That was a pretty high level. Of course, there was no telling whether the real Jiroh was anywhere near there. For the purposes of the test, she was more than halfway to the next. Undoubtedly that was a lot of strength, and yet she refused to use it.

By now, you've heard bits and pieces of the situation. Well, I'm here to tell you how things really stand.

You're not real, Dallion corrected.

True. But the information I have is. The Moons tell you more about the world as you grow. Why do you think each trial is based on the thing that keeps you back the most? It's all a customized tutorial created by the deities of the world. And like any other deity, they do it with something in mind.

Tutorial? That wasn't a word Jiroh should be aware of, unless her own world was game heavy as well.

They haven't asked for anything so far.

That's a lie. Jiroh's blouse darkened until it reached the color of her skin. Thunder sparks danced throughout it, as if a storm was about to start. One of them has asked you for something very particular. And that's not all. All of them have things planned. As the saying goes, when you use a service that has no cost, you are the product. That's what the awakened powers are: one big service that grants you abilities that break the laws of nature. In return, you are expected to entertain the deities. The stronger you become, the more interesting you get. Haven't you wondered why you have been so favored? Or all otherworlders, for that matter? When one's eternal and demands new entertainment, they tend to snatch people from other worlds to provide it.

There was a certain logic to that explanation, though it wasn't something that Dallion was ready to believe. However, it was true that the Moons constantly looked at the world, often very literally.

Doesn't sound all bad.

Being an unwilling participant in a deadly soap opera? If that's not bad, what is? Why do you think the nobles are always plotting against each other? They know what the deal is, and don't want the good times to stop. Remember, once someone gets boring, they no longer receive the gifts needed to move ahead.

And what's the grand prize?

Does it matter? Thousands are trying to get it, killing tens of thousands along the way. Duels, assassinations, political intrigue, wars, all is done with the sole aim of gaining a bit of favor in the eyes of the Moons.

If that was true, this was a much crueler world than Dallion believed it to be. Focusing, he used his music skills on her, but as far as he could tell, apart from a bit of answer, the fury didn't seem to be lying.

The end of the world is just the end of a season, Jiroh went on. It has happened many times before. Sometimes old favorites return. Why do you think races were banished and not destroyed? At least one copyette has already made its way back into the real world. That can't have happened without the Moons' blessing. Maybe the dryads will be next, and the dwarves and humans would end up being banished for a few epochs.

That was the problem with the control of information. The version of Jiroh before Dallion could be lying, or she could be telling a truth that Dallion didn't have the level to hear before.

Is that why you want to leave? he asked. Because you don't want to be part of this anymore?

This is all fake, but no, that's not the reason. The real reason I want to go is that now I know how to.

The sensation hit Dallion like lightning. So, it was true after all? She had indeed found a way to return to her world.

Its quite simple, really. Any awakened can do it the moment they become a seer. Theres one condition, however.

You have to ask for it. And Im not talking about just saying that you wish to go home. You must be very specific and ask the Moons for their blessing to step back into your old world.

As the fury spoke, one of the doors across the domed chamber spun open. Dallion was able to get a glimpse of a world of clouds. The opening was enough to make his mind imagine what the world of the furies had to be like: mountains and endless skies full of cloud cities floating about. In a way, it reminded him of the battle against the giant colossus hed had when a semi-awakened. Fighting that monster had been monumental, done very much above the clouds. Could that have been a look at Jirohs own world?

Or, if you wish, you can be asked to be taken to the rest.

The remaining doors opened, revealing different scenes behind them: a sunny tropical beach, a dryad filled forest, a dark cave lit up by light crystals, and a road intersection of a street in the world Dallion knew all too well.

Earth? he asked, unsure if he was seeing right.

All the worlds that you could go to. Jiroh smiled. All you have to do is ask and go through. Since Ive already done the first part for you, you only have to decide on the second.

The sudden burst of euphoria quickly faded away.

This is the test, Dallion said, disappointed more in himself than anything else. Somehow, he had allowed the echo representing Jiroh to put the itch in him, making him want to return to his own world, even if that wasnt possible. Dallions grandfather didnt know of a way to return home, and he had seen and achieved a lot more than Dallion at his current level.

Of course, this is part of the trial, but its the part that allows you a way out. Jiroh placed her hand on Dallions shoulder. The Moons want entertainment, not half-hearted actors. This is why they have provided you with this option. If your heart isnt in what youre doing, all you have to do is go to the place that you think youll be suited best.

It sounded suspiciously good to be true. And yet, as flimsy as the explanation was, Dallion found himself wanting it to be true.

I take it, a trial visit isnt possible? he asked. Sort of a demo preview or something similar?

This is all the preview you get. You can look for as long as you want, but once you step through, its over.

Six worlds Dallion went to the door that led to Earth and stopped there. Buildings of glass and concrete rose in the background. From this section, there was little more to be seen other than the street intersection, a few buildings, and part of a gas station. Objectively, the place was utterly unattractive and could lead anywhere. And yet, Dallion felt a strange attraction to it.

What about my powers? he asked.

They are the Moons gift, so they remain behind. Think of them as props. If you dont want to use them to be entertaining, theyll simply give them to someone else.

So, potentially, thats how Dallion had found himself here. Maybe someone had stepped through, leaving all skills and abilities behind, and Dallion had dropped in to fill in the void.

What about my memories?

Oh, youll keep those. After all, theres always the chance that you ask to return and that would cause quite a stir. Not because its you, but because you returned. Who knows, you might even get to become the Moons favorite again?

It definitely sounded tempting. However, Dallion had to be sure. In the off chance that this was actually real, there would be no redos.

Chapter 417: The World to Enter

Any world? Dallion asked. If I go to a world with no humans, will I change bodies again?

The fury laughed.

Youre afraid to be the only one of your kind? Eury didnt seem too bothered. But no, youll remain what you arehuman in every way. That means you wont be able to use magic like the race that inhabits the world. Sometimes you might risk being killed or captured for research. After all, what would happen if I suddenly appeared in your world?

That was a good point. If an elf appeared on Earth, the world would go mad. With everyone having mobile phones, such an event would break the net. Following that, most likely the elf would be captured and taken away for research. Thats how it happened in nearly all games and movies, and there was no indication real life would be any much different.

Going into a world other than your own comes with its risks. Theres always the chance you get lucky, although dont count on it too much. Your luck wont be as good as its here.

Theres a hidden luck stat?

No, Jiroh laughed. There might well be, though. The Moons grant greater luck to the ones they find interesting. Havent you noticed how easily you found certain things? Your harpsisword, for one thing. By now, you probably know you dont have nearly enough money to buy that. Even the general will have a difficult time finding one. Not to mention your familiars, and all the times you survived when you shouldnt have. The Moons dont want to carry a person too much, but every now and again they give a substantial shove forward.

Entering an unfamiliar world with no special items, skills, or luck not to mention that hed be treated as a monstrosity. Then again, maybe it would be a place worth visiting. The sad truth was that he needed to know a lot more about the worlds before venturing there.

Theres always the possibility you will manage to find your way back here, Jiroh continued. Personally, Id advise against venturing into another world. Not unless you have a very good reason.

Whats your world like?

The fury sighed, her clothes changing color to the point they became pure white.

You know I cant tell you that? In the end, Im not Jiroh, just your mental image of her with a few pieces of information given to me by the Moons. I know as much about the worlds as you see. I can tell you a lot about your own world, though.

He spent a while going from door to door. From what he could see, every world seemed a hospitable place, with the exception of that belonging to the dwarves. Underground tunnels were just not Dallions thing, and if he had to spend the rest of his life there, things would be pretty dark in every sense of the world.

If there was any time for the Moon to be helpful, now would be it. However, after waiting for several seconds, Dallion found that this time he was on his own.

What about Eurys world? Dallion asked once he got back to the door hed come in from.

No one can return to the gorgons world. Why do you think shes so set on staying here? Its not just because she has achieved something. There simply is no way for her to do so. She used to search, hoping that shed find a way. After a while, she just gave up.

So going with Euryale was no option. That was unfortunate. Her world was one of the ones Dallion wished he could visit, only with her, of course.

Can I take Eury to my world?

Jiroh shook her head. The offer, most probably, was only for the awakened taking the trial. Both Jiroh and Eury had been offered and had rejected it, for whatever reason. Maybe that was why the fury had been searching for a way back half a lifetime of regrets for not making the choice when she had the chance? Either that or she needed a while to prepare for losing her awakened abilities. There was no argument, having the powers felt good. Losing them was a sacrifice in every sense in the word. Until now, Dallion had been spared the dilemma by the fact that the choice never existed.

What if I dont choose? he asked.

You can spend the rest of your life going throughout the world trying to find an alternative way to your world. There are a few. I assume the Moons like to offer their favorites a way out. After all, what more interesting than watching the strives of someone?

So, there still was a chance for Dallion to get lucky. Or maybe hed keep on living with regret. One thing was rather interesting, though: why was this challenge given to him now and not on the next trial? This sounded like a gate challenge: a choice that he had to make so as to continue with his advancement.

I just walk through? Dallion asked.

Thats the idea.

Is there a time limit?

Nope. You can stay here for centuries if you wish. It doesnt change the fact that youll have to return to a world, whether its the world you are in now, your own, or one completely different.

Waiting wasnt going to help Dallion make his decision. Even so, he did that anyway. Hours, possibly days, passed with him looking through the arches at the worlds that could be. Little new happened as he watched. The weather changed in a few of them, as did the day and night, though

again there was no telling whether he was seeing the actual world, or what he imagined it would be like.

After all that time, Dallion had cut down his choices to three. He could go back to his world. That was the safest bet. Everything experienced would have been like a dream, although his memories and the flaws he'd defeated would be the same. In a way, it would feel like having a second life: knowledge he'd acquired through experience would be available to him while before college. Dallion had chuckled at the thought of starting college after already having saved a city.

The second option would be to forego his chance of going home and continue in this world. He already had an established path, and he had achieved a fair number of things. The only issue was that he had no idea what the future held. If the Star ended up being successful, there was the risk that another race possibly humanity would end up banished. In that case, he'd be stuck as an item guardian for a very long time.

Finally, there was the wildcard option: going to the world of the furies. While he would be the only human in that world, the general similarity between him and the locals would allow Dallion to remain undetected, at least from a distance. That was also the option of relying on Jiroh for help and shelter. The fury was more than likely to make it there as well, so if the standard rules were anything to go by, her entering her own world would happen the same time as Dallion, regardless of how many years had passed.

You've come to a decision? Jiroh asked. All this time, she had remained in the room, sitting quietly in the center.

You're an echo, so you know I have, Dallion replied.

I still have to make sure it's final, the fury insisted.

I know. There's no turning back. But does that make it a trial? Dallion asked. No matter what I choose, I'll succeed.

In a way. If you show your dedication to this world, the Moons would have considered you making the correct choice and will reward you. In all other cases, your leveling will end and you'll lose all that you've achieved. That's clearly a loss, I'd say.

From the view of this world, it was. At present, Dallion had to agree.

Thanks, Jiroh, he said, then split into a dozen instances and walked out with two of them the same way he had come in. The fury didn't attack, but surprisingly, the moment one of Dallion's instances walked past the door's threshold, he was forced into it.

You've broken through your thirty-ninth barrier.

Your level has increased to 39.

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

Maybe I could have. But there are more things here than back on Earth. For now.

As long as you're confident in your choice, that's what's important.

Were you given a similar trial?

Not wishing to have a long conversation with his guardians, Dallion returned to the real world. The trial had been completely non-physical, but he still felt starving. Apparently, he had spent more time making his decision than he originally thought.

Since he was still a bit low on funds, after his sky silver purchase, Dallion went to Hannahs inn to get some food. The usual long conversation with Aspan followed, during which a lot was discussed about life and the various worlds.

Aspans home world was at the same time far more technologically advanced than Dallions and far less. Physics, molecular biology, and genetics as far as Dallion could make out had reached their pinnacle due to the copyettes nature, allowing for the creation of non-sentient automated devices in society. Electricity and electronics remained largely ignored, even steam was regarded more as a means of amusement than anything serious. However, that didnt stop from a bustling entertainment sector to focus on organic computers and displays, using a combination of vibrations and pheromones for wi-fi. On Earth that would have created huge lags, but having entities that created copies of themselves for thousands of miles provided a pretty good equivalent. Aspan referred to it as the copy-network and it allowed virtually anyone to interact with one another via pools that constructed physical, organic copies of the person in question. The closest thing that Dallion could imagine was virtual reality, but in which everything was real. In turn, Dallion explained the wonders of the internet and electricity. Aspan seemed to get a general grasp, but didnt see the technology as impressive or even remotely suitable for his world.

Shortly after noon, Dallion left and went back to the forge, where he spent the day mostly doing nothing. There were a lot of things he could forge, but he had no desire to. After everything he was feeling anxious, waiting for midnight so he could complete his final leveling before the gate.

The hammer guardian didnt respond. Slowly, he had started getting used to the banter of Dallions inner realm. For the most part, hed started to feel at home, although he was still extremely cautious in front of Harp. One might also say that he behaved as if in the presence of royalty. However, Vihrogon was close to that as well, and didnt receive the same reverence.

Dont worry, youll have plenty to do in a bit, Dallion whispered, looking at the sky through the small window.

Three of the Moons were up, including the Green Moon. Soon they would pass the point of the sky marking the midnight hour, and then the final trial could begin.

Chapter 418: The Final Trial

Leaving his hammer and shield on the anvil, he went outside of the forge and looked at the sky. All of the moons were visible now, although some were far brighter than others. A common person would most probably see two at most.

Are you looking at me? Dallion asked.

The conversation in his last trial had gotten him to think about their role. Being the deities looking over the world, it was clear that they were the most powerful and most terrifying entities of this world. However, Dallion had never considered their reason for bringing him here. After the end of

his fortieth trial, he was going to be able to ask them in person. After each trial, there was a deity. This time, the conversation was going to be a bit more interesting.

Taken away by the moonlight shadow, Dallion said, then went back inside. Mentally prepared, he rested his arm on all the items he had placed on the anvil, while also maintaining contact with the rest he had brought along, then entered his realm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

All the guardians and familiars were waiting for him as he appeared in the room. Like him, they knew the significance of this trial.

Lets go, he said, leading the way. As he walked, the familiars attached to him. Lux surrounded him with his flame, ready for battle. The shardfly sparkled away, becoming a whip blade on his hip, even Nox leapt at Dallions belt, transforming into the Nox dagger.

The guardians did the same, although in a far more dignified fashion they merely disappeared in a flash of light emerging as gear on Dallions body.

LEADERSHIP PRESENCE

(+2 Empathy)

You have achieved the respect of everyone in your realm. Their faith in you is complete, so you better not disappoint them.

That wasnt a stat Dallion expected to increase, though he wasnt going to turn it down. Briskly, he made his way to the new door in the corridor and opened it. This time, however, there wasnt a corridor. Instead, he was immediately greeted by a vast space of constantly changing structures.

Standing at the very edge of the vast space, Dallion watched as vast floors, walls, and roofs moved around in constant motion, merging together and splitting apart. This wasnt the first time he had gone through a paradox cube trial before, but this one seemed on a whole different level. For one thing, the environment seemed just as deadly as the opponents he was likely to face.

Feel any rewards, Nox? Dallion asked.

The crackling mewed, indicating that there was a lot.

Good to know.

Unfortunately, having that many suggested that Dallion could have far greater problems. If there was one thing that he had found, it was that the trials werent generous towards him. Everything earned was earned through skill, effort, and luck. This wasnt going to be any different.

Nil, Dallion began. If a familiar finds an item, does that count as the owner finding it?

Given that it was mostly nobles that had familiars, it was natural that they wouldnt share the information.

Nox, break up and find some for me, Dallion ordered. Gleam, you okay to lend a hand?

Shouldnt be difficult. The whip blade floated out of its sheath, extending as it did. An illusion is an illusion even here.

Good. Go, too, but be ready. I might summon you for the fight.

Four copies of Nox leapt onto the floor, then split up, taking different paths towards the central parts of the room. Meanwhile, the whip blade rushed through the air, weaving like a water serpent. Dallion watched them go, then split into a dozen instances.

Lets go, Lux, he said in each.

Ill let you and Gen to handle it once this is over, Dallion said.

When has that ever worked?

When has being tense helped? As they say, if you cant get worse, you might as well relax.

Easy for you to say.

Youve grown a lot since you first rented me. Give yourself some credit. Itll be a tough trial, but nothing you cant handle. Remember

Trials are only things that could be handled, Dallion finished the thought for him. That doesnt make it easy, though.

Making his way forward, Dallion passed through a pair of walls that merged mere moments later. Thanks to his firebird familiar, his advanced perception, the ability to see layers, as well as his combat splitting ease, he was able to navigate an otherwise harsh environment with absolute ease. Thats what made him even more nervous. In the past trials, the environment was often part of the challenge. If this were any other trial, Dallion would simply say that this was due to him being overpowered. Given the importance of the trial, however, he feared there might be a lot more.

LIGHT SUN GOLD TRAVELING BOOTS BLUEPRINT

Knee-length boots capable of traversing nearly any terrain. Composed of a series of intricately woven segments, the boots have the ability to adjust to their surroundings, particularly in the awakened realms.

That answers the question, Dallion said.

The blueprint found was exceptional, but Dallion couldnt feel joy. Deep inside, a fear had started to form, and the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it would be related to his trial.

Nil, is there some ability that lets someone see their fears before the trial? he asked.

I think I do.

No sooner had Dallion said so, than he felt an explosion of instances resulting from a powerful combat splitting. Seconds later, hundreds of instances came into view. They were everywhere: on walls that were floors, on floors that were rooftops all of them having the exact same face.

Vend, Dallion whispered.

The instances of the elite disappeared, leaving only his true self.

Surprised to see me? Dallions former mentor asked.

I was expecting March. I thought shed be the one to keep me moving on.

Wow. Vend laughed. Directly aiming for the big guns. Even in your mind, you arent strong enough to handle her yet. Dont be too disappointed, though. I was made lieutenant, so it should be something of a consolation.

Youve not Vend.

True, but I am created based on what you know, and since Nil is in your realm, what he knows counts as well.

If the old echo was here right now, Dallion would have turned to glare at him. Nil had known about Vends promotion and hadnt said a word? The fact that he was aware was understandable. After all, Nils original was a captain and, as such, was supposed to know who got promoted to an important position. The point that bothered Dallion was Nil not saying a thing about it. Come to think of it, Vend himself hadnt said a word when he had gone to see Dallion in Performers Plaza.

All that was true, although Dallion would have still preferred to find out in some other fashion.

So, youre my final trial. Dallion kept his composure.

Final is a big word, but yes, Im the one keeping you from reaching the next gate. But youre already figured that out, havent you? Thats the reason you never came to visit. Deep inside, you feared that something in the Icepicker guild would pull you back, preventing you from going forward. You know its irrational, right?

It wasnt irrational. In fact, it was a lot more complicated than the Vend echo was making it out to be. It was true that Dallion still felt some guilt about leaving the guild as he did. However, he was also afraid of being betrayed by people he considered close or, in turn, betraying them.

Does it matter? Dallion drew his harpsisword. All I have to do is defeat you.

Not quite.

Without warning, Dallion felt a brief but sharp pain in the upper area of his back.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

A red rectangle appeared in front of Dallion. Immediately, he split into six instances and looked in all directions. There was no one to be seen. However, reaching for the source of the pain, Dallion felt the hilt of a dagger. As was normal, he attempted to pull it out.

Stop! Vend said sharply. At least for the moment.

Dallion paused.

Thats a dagger of betrayal, Vend explained. You never know when itll happen, but when it does, theres no defense. Or rather, no obvious defense. There are only two rules: while the dagger is in you, it permanently decreases your health so that even Lux cannot heal you.

That was annoying. It meant that the more betrayals Dallion received, the greater his disadvantage would become.

The second rule is"

That I cant take it out, Dallion finished the sentence.

No. Betrayal cannot be contained, so the moment you take it out, youll hurt another. That might not sound too bad until you factor in the pure meaning of the world. The only people you can betray are friends.

A chill swept through Dallion. Quickly, he let go of the hilt. In the context of the trial, he had realized exactly what that meant: by removing the daggers, he would be harming his familiars and guardians. From a gamers point of view this didnt sound too bad. All that was necessary was a bit of math in order to distribute Dallions overall damage among him and his team. However, in reality, it was still going to be a betrayal, and the ones he did it to would remember it, even if they didnt immediately say a word.

Whats the catch? Dallion asked.

Youve become remarkably suspicious. Has that nave boy who thought he could defeat March during the guild entrance test finally grown up?

Im still me. I just know theres always a catch.

Not so much a catch than a solution. As I said, betrayal can only be done to someone close. It can also only be done by someone close as well. Theres one or more entities in your group that are secretly betraying you. And no, you wont be able to use your music skills to determine who. As long as that entity is on the battlefield, youll continue to get a dagger in the back every now and again. Of course, if you remove the guardian, or familiar, in question, they wont be able to keep hurting you.

That was the reverse of the phrase keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer. In this case, the enemies were already too close. It would be simple for Dallion to unsummon everyone and attempt to take on Vend one-on-one. Rather, it would have been simple if the battlefield wasnt an ever-shifting paradox cube.

Everyone has a different solution to passing the trial, Vend said. Theres no right or wrong about it, as long as you cope with the consequences. Why do you think Eury avoids echoes like the plague?

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

Another dagger pierced Dallion, right beneath the left shoulder blade.

Dont take too long, Vend said. Betrayal has a nasty habit of stacking up until youre done.

Chapter 419: Double Hilted Daggers

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 15%

A third dagger appeared in Dallions back, sending a wave of pain throughout his body. The pain was momentary, but it was without question that each time Dallion experienced betrayal it was getting stronger, radiating not only from the new dagger but all the previous ones as well.

There was a certain degree of truth in the guardians words. All the guardians had been banished as a result of the Stars betrayal; however, if Dallion was to rely on that, it made him no better.

SUN GOLD ATTACK GAUNTLET BLUEPRINT

Made exclusively for combat, this single gauntlet has three layers of spikes that emerge when the fist is fully clenched. With the appropriate strength, the gauntlet could easily punch through armor or shatter massive objects. It also allows its wearer to perform line attacks.

A blue rectangle appeared, but was quickly shattered by one of Dallions instances. Benefits were all find and good, but winning the fight was the main focus.

This was the second time he had to remind the crackling that the priorities were shifted. While it was true that a sudden stat increase would give him an advantage, especially if his reactions got boosted, having even one of the cublings copies do a solo was ill advised.

Having problems controlling your familiars? Vend asked as waves of instances attacked Dallion from all sides, overwhelming him. That sounds like a betrayal to me.

Fortunately for Dallion, no new daggers appeared in his back. Unfortunately, that didnt prevent Vend from using an instance to throw two daggers in his leg. Two red rectangles stacked up, each a minor wound, dropping Dallions life to a quarter.

Taking the opportunity, the tip of the whip blade darted forward, right at the elite. The moment it struck him, though, the man had already burst into instances again. No wonder he had been made a lieutenant. If anything, the guild had waited too long to do so.

Combat splitting is always faster than any action, Vend said. I thought I had taught you that.

The splitting is, Dallion replied, using his music skill to add slowness in his voice. The speed of the instance is your own speed.

You actually listened? Vend smiled. Nice touch with the music, there. It wont work. In case you have any doubt, Im wearing a blocker ring. And no, it isnt metal, so you wont be able to find it either.

Dallion gritted his teeth and swung the harpsisword around him. For a moment, all strength left him, as he performed a line-attack. The action was exhausting, though not to the extent of having him lose consciousness. Relaxing in the air, Dallion watched the thread of destruction move forward, slicing through instances of Vend, and structures alike. A whole segment of the paradox cube burst into bits. The initial inertia forced it to continue in the direction it had been going before, while the lack of firm attachment made it impossible for them to take the turns required.

For several seconds Dallion looked in hope at the floating debris as they slowly made their way to the outer walls of the cube. Alas, no red rectangles appeared.

Nice execution, Vend said. Thats at least one area in which youve reached me. Maybe you even surpassed me. Attacks are more Marchs style. I focus on my own thing.

A dozen more instances emerged on larger chunks among the debris, leaping from fragment to fragment.

Theres one thing I didnt tell you about split negation, the elite continued. Its extremely effective against a person like me, without a doubt. However, it still requires you to get close enough to use it. Thats what I kept pushing you to increase your splitting length. Having a hundred of instances is nice, having ten that can last five seconds is better.

Thanks, lieutenant obvious, Dallion grumbled, waiting for Luxs healing effect to restore his health back to eighty-five percent.

Slice the instances that are heading towards me! Your goal is to control his movement, not deal damage.

The familiar didnt reply. She was both annoyed that he was right, and also impressed at his strategic thinking. In the coming months, Dallion was going to have to spend a while teaching her to be more of a party hunter. Strategy was the only way to defeat enemies like Vend. He couldnt hope to out-split them, he didnt have the stamina to use destructive strength like March did, and his empath abilities were seriously hindered because of the blocker item his opponent was wearing.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion switched hands, moving the harpsisword to his left.

Ill be fine. Im used to it now.

No, youre not.

Both of them knew that he was lying, just as they knew that Dallion didnt have much choice in the matter. In order to win, he had to use anything and everything to gain an advantage. Well, almost everything.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 15%

Stings, doesnt it? Vend asked. Some say that betrayal is a dagger with a second blade in the place of a hilt. Maybe thats true in the long run. Ive found that isnt the case in the immediate future. The hand that holds the blade might tremble the first few times, but the back that receives the strike will bleed much longer.

Focusing all his strength, Dallion did another line attack. This one was aimed more at Vends surroundings, slicing off another vast chunk of buildings as they were splitting apart. As in the previous time, several dozens of Vends instances disappeared. Quite a few more were slashed out of existence by the whip blade, however, the elite himself remained unharmed.

Dallions vision blurred.

The flames holding Dallion became brighter. Sensing the state of his owner, Lux focused on his efforts on performing a healing flash. This wasnt something the firebird had done before; it wasnt something the creature even conceived until now. However, spending so much time with Dallion had left its mark. Slowly, even it too was learning how to think outside of the accepted box. The attempt paid off. Within moments, Dallions vision returned to normal. He was still exhausted, but at least he was conscious.

MINOR FAMILIAR WOUND

GLEAMs health was reduced by 20%

Without hesitation, Dallion unsummoned the whip blade. If things got more difficult for him, he could summon her back, but for the moment, she had done her job.

I need you fresh, Gleam, Dallion replied, himself still drained of energy. Even after Luxs help, both his arms felt numb and his heart was beating like a drum. According to Harp, it would be still a while before he could get back to normal. The logical choice was for him to have the firebird fly him around, changing location frequently so that Vend couldnt take advantage of the situation. Unfortunately, that wasnt an option. Dallion already had four daggers in his back. Another six and his health would be at fifty percent, which meant that Vend could take him out with a frontal attack.

The acceleration felt like a kick in the lungs, but within a few moments Dallion was where he wanted.

Now let me down, then go and thrust all the debris in the area where hes at. Dont target Vend even if you see him, just clear the space.

The firebird let out a reluctant chirp, but did as it was told, vanishing from sight. Moments later, Dallion could see the effect in the distance, as chunks of stone flew like hail smashing into the walls and in other buildings. The space of emptiness that had already formed within the everchanging paradox cube after Dallions line strikes now grew, removing more and more. This was definitely a step in the right direction, but Dallion continued to worry about the trial puzzle. Sometimes things were straightforward, but this time he was reluctant to assume so. Vend had said that by defeating him, Dallion would get rid of the doubts that kept him back. However, there was no way that would deal with the betrayal.

There were different ways to pass the trial. Defeating Vend was the simplest, relatively speaking. Stopping the betrayals was potentially a second option, although that was yet to be determined.

Dallion opened his eyes. Time had slowed down to a crawl. He was able to see Lux jump from chunk to chunk, propelling the debris through the air in slow motion. A moment later, things had returned to normal. The firebird was moving too fast to be seen, even with Dallions perception focus.

The harpsisword disappeared. Soon after, its guardian emerged, a step away from Dallion. There was a hint of fear moving throughout her, like a firefly in the night.

I doubt it. Dallion smiled. The only way to stop betrayal is to prevent it from happening. I trust you, but this goes beyond my trust. I want you to trust me. As the saying goes, better clear enemies than false friends.

There was a moment of seriousness, after which the nymph shook her head. Clearly, the speech wasnt considered to be Dallions strongest points, but his determination was. With one swift action, she removed a dagger from his back. Instantly, his health rose by five percent.

Chapter 420: Ace in the Sleeve

A clowder of Noxes ran the edge structures of the paradox cube, crumbling walls along the way. As an additional result of the leveling up, not only did the familiar gain the ability to swarm, but each individual member had the same destructive power as the group. While Gleam and Dallion had been focusing on limiting Vends reach, Nox had slowly been moving closer and closer, slowly destroying the terrain in the process. This was part of Dallions long-term strategy to reduce the places Vend could go to up to the point that it wouldnt matter how many instances he created. In effect, everything Dallion had done so far, even the seemingly reckless line attacks, and Luxs destructive involvement, were with that purpose in mind. Now, finally, the results were starting to show.

Immediately, the armadil shield extended, forming a metal sphere around him. Moments later, a series of flying knives bounced off the hard external surface.

Despite his present state, Dallion couldn't help but smile. There were a lot of things he imagined about this fight. Being taunted by throwing knives wasn't one of them.

While waiting, Dallion attempted to raise his arms. Part of his muscles still felt sore, making it feel as if he were moving through jelly. However, he was at least able to move them freely now. It wasn't much, but enough to allow him to hold a sword adequately.

You're not ready to use line strikes. You've learned the ability, but even with my help you have to train a lot more.

I'll have to use line attacks in the wilderness. That's the entire point.

That's why I'm telling you that you're not ready. You can do one strike, possibly two. If you attempt a third, even Lux won't be able to keep you conscious.

And falling unconscious on the battlefield is the same as death. I know.

All the harp's words strings vibrated, displaying her discontent. As always, she was concerned for Dallion's life well beyond the realms. The scary part was that in some regards, she knew him better than he knew himself. Up to a moment ago, he hadn't even considered using line attacks in the real world. However, he also realized that once the trial was over, it was likely he would have. That was an attack too powerful to ignore, even if it still had serious drawbacks. Regarding his immediate challenge, though, it was out of the question. Dallion didn't have the strength to go for a third strike. His battle against Vend was going to have to be far more traditional.

Ready, Onda? Dallion asked. I'll need you in a bit.

When I throw you, I want you to follow a curve. Vend won't be caught in a direct attack, so you might have to do a few ricochets to reach him.

I don't think I'll hit him even with an indirect attack. The guy simply is too good.

He is, though, not that good. By now he's realized that I'm aiming to limit his movement. However, he won't be able to protect both himself and the surrounding terrain. Aim for his feet. If he runs off, just hit it as hard as you can and tell me. I'll summon you back.

There was a moment of silence.

Shield

You don't have daggers in your back anymore. You've pretty much won.

I'm only halfway there. I still have to face him. Open up.

The sphere detracted, returning to its original shield state. Dallion moved his shield arm around. The motion was mostly fine, even if it was a lot less comfortable than usual.

Lux, get back here. Dallion let go of his harp's word. Just as the weapon disappeared, he summoned the hammer into his hand.

In the distance, the debris stopped bombarding the walls of the room. A bolt of blue light flashed onto Dallion, surrounding him with warm flames. Now, it was time for the final phase.

Dallion waited for a few seconds for the dust to settle. In the distance, Vend seemed to do the same. Suddenly, a green shield marker emerged in front of Dallion. Splitting into six instances, he rolled to both sides, and also raised the shield in front of his face. A knife bounced off.

He always was serious against you. You're like, his star pupil and such.

I was his only pupil

Nah. He liked the other two as well, but didn't think they could reach his level. You, he thought, would surpass him. Not today, though. You're still too slow.

Slow wasn't the word Dallion would use, but he got the point.

Boost me forward, Dallion ordered. As fast as I'd handle it. Take me straight through the dust cloud.

The firebird hesitated. The dust cloud was a reference to the area that had been pommelled by debris fragments. As such, chunks of stone still floated freely, not to mention that crashing in any of the smaller elements at such a speed would feel like going through crossbow bolts.

Lux, Dallion adjusted his grip on the shield.

The order was absolute, and since Lux trusted his owner a lot, the familiar propelled him straight forward. The armadillo shield extended, covering the entire front side of Dallion. Fragments of various sizes from peas to basketballs slammed into the hard metal surface in an attempt to push it back. However, that didn't happen. Instead, thanks to the firebird's propulsion, Dallion pierced through the cloud as if it were a sheet of paper. When he did, he found that Vend was standing there, patiently waiting him on a floating piece of roof.

There were a lot of things that they could have said to each other: banter, friendly comments, even reminiscing about the past. As far as health was concerned, they were on an equal footing. Without the daggers in his back, there was nothing to reduce Dallion's health; and thanks to his splitting skill, Vend had avoided any potential damage from Lux's orbital bombardment.

A thin smile formed on the lieutenant's face, followed by him splitting in thirty instances.

Focusing every drop of mental fortitude at his disposal, Dallion split to match him. This was the limit of his present abilities. If he was in better physical condition, potentially he would manage about a dozen more. However, his illusions that he could go toe to toe with his former teacher were quickly dashed, when Vend doubled the amount of his own instances. Even with the vastly diminished battlefield size, facing that was going to be a problem.

Harp, Vihrogon, I need your help, Dallion said, his voice brimming with determination.

That's right, and not trusting you when I'm supposed to is a betrayal against myself as well. Dallion removed the shield from his arm and summoned his initial buckler. I don't want you to win the battle for me, just even the odds, so I can.

Harp was the first to emerge. The nymph stood beside Dallion, a four-foot saber made of water in her hand. The dryad was next, wearing his usual light armor of a sword marshal. Unlike the nymph, Vihrogon immediately split into a hundred instances, significantly surpassing those of Vent. Not for

long, though. There was another massing combat split, only this time it was Vend who had added a hundred instances to the scene. The ultimate split fight had begun.

Split-fighting was always a weird thing. Dallion had only marginally experienced it so far, mostly as an observer when Vihrogon had faced the last of the World Sword guardians. Back then, Dallions only goal was to disrupt one of the instances of the enemy, so that Vihrogon could gain the advantage with his instances and break down the others defenses.

In reality, wiping an instance from existence didnt cause any damage; what it did was eliminate part of the options for the party involved. Remove one weak link and suddenly several instances had a much greater range of flexibility, and in turn eliminate even more instances. Dallion and his dryad guardian were doing precisely that, attempting to outplay their opponent in a vast game of chess. Meanwhile, Harps only goal was to defend Dallion in the time between instances. That was a good strategy, especially since Vend had several attempts to break Dallions instances, thus shifting the distribution of power on the field.

Not bad, Vend said. Youve put everything on the line for this.

Daggers were flying all about like rain: a dozen thrown every second by every instance of Vend. All of them had one single targetDallion. That wasnt fair by any stretch of the imagination. However, fairness wasnt the point. Vend didnt need an instance to survive, he needed one to manage to deal damage to Dallion at a low enough cost. And on one occasion, he managed to do just that.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 10%

Two red rectangles appeared in unison as both Vend and Dallion got injured. Normally, that was supposed to be to Dallions advantage. However, after a few moments it became obvious that Lux was incapable of restoring his health.

A friendly piece of adviceyoure not the only one with fancy weapons, Vend said.

A second dagger made its way dangerously close, but this time Harp reacted, slicing it in two before it could deal any damage.

Dallions heart froze. Although the dagger was only broken in an instance, he felt the pain as if it were real.

Dont break them! Dallion shouted to Harp. Just deflect.

The nymph looked at him with a look expressing nothing but deep sadness then obeyed. She wasnt going to destroy any items in this fight, even if she very well could.

Youll have serious difficulties following that path, Vend said, while pushing on. He had started to slowly retreat, pushed back by the combined instances of his opponents, but despite that was still attempting to sink as many daggers in Dallion as possible. Even the dryads chosen fell in the end.

Dallion didnt respond, even if he found it amusing that Vend was tempting him to betray the Green Moon during a trial that dealt with betrayal, among other things. Gritting his teeth, he kept fighting on, guiding each of his instances in such a fashion as to slowly chip away at his opponents

advantage. It was starting to look like victory would be his. At this point, Dallion was fighting on will alone. Pain and fatigue had long become a thing of the past, his only focus was to achieve victory. Just when it was almost in his grasp, Vends instances suddenly vanished.

What happened? Dallion asked. Did any of you do anything?

It was unlike Vend to have such a low exhaustion threshold.

Thinking the same thing, the dryad attacked the lieutenant with three dozen instances. In a sudden blur of motion, all of them vanished. For a split-second Dallion thought he could see multiple instances of Vends arms performing multiple actions, as if they had multiplied.

Sorry, Dal. Vend took a step forward. There are still a few tricks that I only shared with Eury.