

Leveling up 441

Chapter 441: Destination

Several visits and no one could remember what the merchant who came here looked like. Initially, Dallion thought that there were limiting echoes involved, but after using his kaleidervisto, he saw that there wasn't an echo to be seen in the entire town. Something else had caused the locals to forget, and that made him feel uneasy.

What do you think? Largo asked, as Jiroh kept on staring at the horizon.

After spending a bit of money on fish and information, the hunter party had settled on one of the piers, waiting for the fisher boats return. With everything in the town was cheap, relatively speaking, it was no issue buying an entire boat. The only catch was that none of the locals were willing to guide them anywhere. It was the wood and sails that were for sale, not the services of the crew.

It's a big catch, the fury replied. It's normal for others to want to reach it first.

That doesn't help much. The large man sighed. Think they will cause trouble?

The question remained unanswered. To make matters worse, none of the guardians Dallion had asked remembered the visitors either. They were perfectly happy to explain in great detail everything that had happened in the town for the last half year, but when it came to the mysterious merchants, it was as if the people never existed.

There are far easier ways to achieve compliance. Moon vows, realm invasion, even good old-fashioned fighting. If this was an attempt to take over the town, it was poorly executed. With the funds these merchants commanded, they could have bought the place outright and even vassalized the local nobles.

Are you going to eat that? Eury asked, looking over Dallion's shoulder.

Do you dare eat anything in this place? he asked, then threw the fish remains in the sea. I'm just practicing my skills. Might be good to have some underwater knowledge before we head out.

You won't be needing it.

Dallion kicked the rest of his basket into the sea, then joined the rest of the group.

It took close to fifteen minutes for the fishermen to reach the port. All of them were surprised to see foreigners at one of the piers, and were quick to offer their catch at a discount. After they were told what the situation was, they quietly got back to unloading the fish, while the captain of one of the boats a miserably looking wreck that was barely seaworthy invited them aboard.

You want the nets? he asked, looking at Jiroh.

We just need the boat and the sails, the fury replied. You can take everything else.

If that's what you want, the man replied, but Dallion could feel that he was happy with the deal. No doubt all those items had been included in the initial ship price, but he was trying to make a bit of profit on the side. Given the state of the people in Bevanna, Dallion decided to remain silent, focusing instead on the fishing boat instead.

The sadness in her voice made Dallions heart ache.

He could feel the boat smile.

I remember when awakened used to mend me every month. I used to be quite a beauty back then. That was a long time ago. Even back then, I dont remember seeing an empath.

Two, three hundred years Time becomes all the same after a while. In the past, nobles used me for joy rides. Theyd go out into the ocean searching for adventure. Usually, theyd come back a few weeks later, sometimes with a large fish or two. But at least they were happy.

Well, old girl, youll go on your greatest adventure yet.

With a smile, Dallion made his way to Eury.

Shes in pretty bad shape, but its fixable, he whispered. Well have to go on an expedition once we go far enough.

Thats a given, the gorgon replied. Anything else interesting?

Not as far as I could tell. She used to be a noble ship. Other than that he shrugged.

I see. Check for echoes, just in case.

Unloading the cargo, and everything else that wasnt nailed down, took half an hour, even with the added incentive of a silver coin. Dallion took the time to diligently look over the boat, and what remained on it, with his kaleidervisto. Just as before, there was no echo to be seen. Just to be on the safe side, he also checked the people nearby as well. None of them turned out to be cultists.

Once the last valuable was taken off board and the Seamoan was officially given to the Jiroh, the voyage officially began. Fevre had given very specific instructions in which way they were supposed to sail, however, the fury directed the boat in a slightly other direction. If anyone was watching them from town, it was better not to provide them with any free info.

Every few seconds she would increase the speed on the wind, progressively making the boat sail faster and faster, until at one point the port town could no longer be seen. Just to be on the safe side, the trip continued for another five minutes, after which the boar came to a complete stop.

Anything? Jiroh asked Eury.

Nothing as far as I can tell, the gorgon replied. If anyones spying on us, theres nothing we can do about it.

Okay, lets get to work.

Dallion expected all of them to go on a mending expedition. However, before he got a chance, the ship around him had already transformed. Not only was all the rot removed and cracks erased, but the vessel had been improved as well, making it much closer to the luxury yacht it had been in the past or at least the local equivalent.

Thanks, guys. Dallion crossed his arms.

He could tell that they wanted to get things done as quickly as possible, but it would have been nice if they had at least told him. The boat, on the other hand, was overjoyed, regardless of who had

done the mending and improving. And since Dallion was the only one who she could speak to, spent over a minute thanking him.

With the change done, Jiroh raised the sails and started the actual part of the trip. Now the moment of truth approached.

For over an hour, they sailed in the direction the fury had determined. The sun had long passed its zenith and was now on its way towards the horizon. By Dallions estimates, there were about five or six hours of sunlight left not a lot, considering they were in the middle of the ocean.

Each time a cloud appeared on the horizon, everyone would look at it for several minutes, trying to determine whether it was in the water or not; each time, it turned out not to be the one they were looking for.

Maybe I could ask some fish? Dallion suggested.

You can do that? Largo asked, impressed.

I can try. You just need to"

Some other time, Eury cut him short. The fact that Dallion had earned his hunters emblem had made her no less protective than before. We follow the instructions.

What if the cloud citadels completely underwater by now? Dallion asked.

The gorgon didnt give an answer. That annoyed him slightly. Moving to the front of the ship, Dallion took out his kaleidervisto and looked through it at the horizon. If there was anything he expected to happen, he was bitterly disappointed. There were no telltale signs leading to the nymph city or the cloud citadel. In contrast, he had a very clear idea of the exact distance they had traveled from the port to their current location. It was almost as if had an automatic mapmaker in his head.

Thats not writing! It should be called differently!

And how exactly do you suggest you call something thats used for all forms of communication?

Dallion had no answer. Even back on Earth, there were many who liked to say that math was the universal language.

I see something! one of the party shouted. I think its it.

Instantly, everyone rushed to the respective side of the ship, looking at the horizon. Initially, Dallion thought it would be a cloud like all the rest so far, but soon enough, he saw that it could be the real deal. Even from this distance, it was clear that the cloud wasnt in the sky, but floating on the water itself, like a ball of mist.

Eager to get a closer view, Jiroh used her powers to give the boat a thrust forward. Moments later, there was little doubt.

Towers, Dallion said, still in disbelief.

Yes. Towers. The fury agreed, joy flowing through her words.

Long before setting off on this voyage, Dallion had seen pictures of cloud fortresses and citadels. There werent many in the ring library, but Hannah had managed to find him a tome from somewhere so he could get a glance. The illustrations were as one might expect vast fortresses atop of clouds. Seeing the real thing, however, made all those illustrations look like stick figures. The

castles and forts weren't on top of the cloud, but part of it, made of the same matter as it had been, only with a finger shape. Looking at them, they seemed both wavy and straight, messing with the mind of the observer to the point it couldn't make a decision.

As the boat got nearer, details began to emerge: individual structures separated by walls and connected by a network of cloud bridges. Everything looked sculpted of a material somewhere between white clay and cotton.

Is that it? Dallion asked, his own enthusiasm resonating with Jiroh's.

Yes. I can recognize the crest.

Dallion focused on the buildings in an attempt to see it, but failed to do so. Still, he took the fury at her word. No doubt it was there somewhere. The entire cloud was larger than six neighborhoods in Nerosal, and to think that was only the part that was above the surface. Based on the arc of the cloud itself, Dallion suspected that five-sixths more had been submerged.

Are there any more left? Dallion asked. Flying, I mean.

It's said there are a few, mostly abandoned, Jiroh replied. Several fury dukedoms are scouring the skies, searching for their home. Whether they found them, your guess is as good as mine.

The boat dropped anchor half a mile from the citadel. This was the maximum distance that was deemed to be safe. Jiroh put an end to the wind. From here on, everyone who approached had to do so on their own.

Two teams were formed: one to go underwater in search of the nymph city, and another to enter the cloud citadel. Largo was to be in charge of the underwater team, as expected. Initially, Eury was supposed to join the fury back to her home cloud. However, Dallion felt he couldn't let that happen. It wasn't only the general's request that compelled him to do so, he wanted to see Jiroh pass through to her own world with his very own eyes.

No, he said, just as everyone was preparing to leave the boat. I'm going to the fortress as well.

Chapter 442: Necessary Sacrifice

There were moments in life when unexpected, even unimaginable, events took place. While stubborn and reckless in his own way, Dallion had always acknowledged the difference in experience and level. It was normal to let people who knew what they were doing make the decisions, and so far, Dallion had agreed with most of them. This was the first and only time he had shown open opposition to a decision made. Not only that, but an air of certainty emanated from him, making it clear that his demand couldn't be brushed away.

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the sound of the sea.

Only one can join Jiroh, Euryale said at last. Dallion expected for her to add that he wasn't ready, but she didn't.

Then it will be me, he said, adding confidence to his voice with his music skills.

The gorgon's snakes moved about. There were dozens of reasons for her to refuse, dozens of reasons for everyone in the party to ignore Dallion's request, with several valid reasons. However, no one did so.

I have to be there, Dallion added.

The gorgon opened her backpack, took something, then tossed it to Dallion. The only way it could be described was like a strange armor add-on or a medieval exoskeleton of sorts.

Well both go.

Didn't you say that only one could join? Dallion asked. While he wasn't complaining, the gorgon seemed to have agreed far too easily.

I lied, she replied. Put that on. You'll need it.

Whose going to watch the boat? Largo asked.

She'll be here, Dallion said.

That settled the discussion. The boat's anchor was dropped, after which half of the team jumped off. At their level, they could last several hours without air easily. Meanwhile, Eury and Dallion got ready for their trip.

The armor additions were quite strange. Dallion could see that they were composed of large sea iron segments held together with sky iron wiring. There were eleven pieces in general: two gauntlets, two elbow protectors, two shoulder protectors, a belt, two knee protectors, and two iron soles. Attaching them felt weird, though once everything was set up, they didn't feel particularly uncomfortable. It was interesting to note that Euryale had a pair of her own. Apparently, the gorgon suspected that Dallion might pull off what he did and had come prepared. That didn't make her pleased with the development, however.

Once everything was ready, and all the elements were checked, the three otherworlders went to the edge of the cloud fortress. Jiroh was the one doing the heavy lifting, using her fury powers to effectively levitate them on the edge of the cloud.

Stepping on felt weird, as if Dallion was trying to balance walking on water with balloons on his feet.

Careful, Eury grabbed hold of his shoulder. If you trip, you'll splash down to the ocean. I didn't have enough material for a full set.

Grasping what she had in mind, Dallion removed his left gauntlet, then passed his hand through the cloud surface. Nothing stopped his hand from passing through.

No one can touch it? he asked.

Furies can, Jiroh replied as she made her way to the citadel's walls. No one else.

That was slightly problematic. Dallion should have expected this. Since furies lived in the air, it was normal for their homes to be only accessible for them and in more ways than one. Unfortunately, that made Dallion's task of collecting the heart a whole lot closer. When he had started this trip, he thought that the thread splitter was to slice through materials that would otherwise be indestructible. It was the opposite: the weapon was made so as to allow him to affect the cloud itself.

Getting used to moving in such an environment, Dallion walked on, stopping a few steps behind Jiroh.

Get ready, the fury said. I remember there used to be guards.

I'm not sensing any emotions, Dallion said, focusing on the clouds.

Im not talking about people. Jiroh placed her hand on the wall of cloud, an opening formed, as if a huge force had punctured the cloud in a single go. Things didnt stop there. The edges of the opening changed as well, shaping into a well-defined archway with banners, statues, as well as the symbol of a crown prominently displayed in the arch stone.

Vapor doesnt stick to one shape at all

, Dallion replied.

He had to admit that hed seen water do it, though. This was no different. This had to be one of the strengths of furies: fighting with objects that were in constant flux. The thought sparked Dallions imagination. In his minds eye, he could see Jiroh fighting with armor made of clouds: light as air, hard as ice, it would constantly shift and change, turning into a weapon when needed. He could picture a cloud fragment turning into a throwing knife, homing towards its target, then flying back in the form of a buckler and attacking itself to the womans arm.

Dal? A hand grabbed onto his shoulder. All the images of furies fighting vanished, fading away like pieces of a dream.

Yeah? Dall looked to his right. Eury was there, a concerned expression in her face.

You were drifting.

Im fine. I was just thinking about something. He had to focus on the here and now. Even so, the image had been so real too real. Its nothing. Dont worry about it.

Do you know where to go? Eury asked loudly. She didnt seem to believe Dallion fully, but was willing to let it slide for the moment.

Sort of, Jiroh replied. Its been a while. Im not even sure what part of the city this is. Well just have to figure it out as we go. She took a few steps forward. At least there dont seem to be any guards. Still, stay close.

The remaining two did just that.

Walking through a cloud citadel was every bit straightforward and complicated, as Dallion imagined it would be. The closest thing he could compare it with was walking through a mending labyrinth. On the surface there seemed to be streets and structures, yet each time Jiroh moved passed by everything changed. Archways appeared where there were none. Streets that used to be a dead end, opened up, or changed into a staircase and all the time there was no clear indication how far in they had moved. Dallion was certain that they had been walking for an hour at least, yet even with his writing skills, he had no idea whether they were a hundred feet from the entry point or several thousand.

Two things were certain, though: the citadel seemed to recognize Dallion, and also the further she walked, the more she started recognizing it as well.

This is the armory, Jiroh said, as another wall transformed, providing access to a rather large and well decorated room inside.

I think you should skip that, Eury said. Armories tend to be protected better than anything else.

Maybe, the fury didnt sound convinced. Thats not the important part, though. I remember playing in the armory. That meant it had to be close.

In this place does that mean anything? Dallion asked. It could have changed three times over.

You're right. However, it'll change back for me.

There wasn't arrogance in her voice, just a calm of fact. And just to prove the point, she walked into the armory. The dozens of shelves and columns disappeared, revealing nothing more than a bare, empty room. A few steps later, however, a single table of cloud material emerged. On top of it was what appeared to be a cube of cotton.

Hesitation swept through Jiroh. Her right hand trembled for a moment, as if remembering something, then moved forward to touch the cube. Before she could even touch it, the cube moved, changing into a cluster of threads that moved up her arm and onto her armor. As Dallion and Eury watched, a new layer of armor took shape.

This was made for me by the citadel's thread forgers, Jiroh said. Armor that would grow as I did. I must have been five or younger. I can't believe they still kept it.

Are you sure it's the same one?

It is. The moment she said that, the armor shifted, transforming into a thick white belt. It's not far now. We just have to"

How do you plan to go back? Dallion interrupted.

Jiroh looked at him.

You said that you found a way to go back to your home. What is it?

You really know how to make things complicated. A sad smile appeared on her face. The moment you walked into Hannah's inn, I knew there was something about you. However, even I didn't think you'd end up walking the path of the empath.

That's why I didn't want you to join us on this. It won't be pretty.

In what way?

The reason I was searching for the cloud citadel I was born on was because it knows me, the fury said. Because only a citadel that knows me would be willing to do what I ask of it.

Dallion's heart tightened. He already got a sense where this was going.

It takes a lot of energy to have someone cross worlds. Even the Moons can't do it all the time. And you've seen how difficult they are to convince in anything. The only realistic way for anyone to go back is to sacrifice a magic creature, but not just any creature. In order for the portal to give me that single second between worlds, I need the magic of a citadel.

Why didn't you tell me? Dallion managed to ask. The real question he was wondering was why she had told him at all. If it was about sacrificing all the creatures that maintained the shape of the citadel, she could have done it without revealing anything. By the time Dallion figured it out, the fury would have been gone, and nothing in this world would have mattered.

Because I know what hearing it would cause you, she replied. You're not the only one to be a chess piece of the Moons. My Moon found me interesting enough, so she gave me a gift as well.

Dallion gasped.

That's right. I'm a favored too, and the path I follow is the Path of the Traveler. My purpose is to travel as much as possible, never stopping for long. The irony is that I could never make use of this gift, for by the time I received it, I had stopped using my awakened powers, so as to get used to my old life back home.

There has to be another way.

Always thinking like an empath. Jiroh said right next to Dallion. Her normal movement speed was greater than he could follow. Combined with the blessings of the Orange Moon, it was as if she had teleported next to him. I'm not going to harm the creatures in the cloud. She put her hand on his cheek. I'll just ask them to rest for one last time.

Suddenly, a blue rectangle emerged.

Chapter 443: Jiroh's Story

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Whirlwind Citadel, 20 years ago

She's awakened, a large fury said. Of the entire room, he was the only one whose skin was dark, almost pitch black, as were his clothes. Get the king, he ordered the armored furies behind him. And her parents. Don't tell anyone else.

Where am I? Ji asked. Her voice was different, softer, more high-pitched, as if belonging to an infant.

The black-skinned fury turned to a female fury with a silver mask. Her clothes were white similar to most of the people present; however, there also were additional elements: one large yellow circle surrounded by seven colored dots.

Soul confusion, she explained. It'll pass.

That will complicate things. The fury in black crossed his arms. She's awoke too young.

Who are you? Ji asked.

The man opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, the fury in the silver mask gave him a sign to remain silent.

Were the awakening council of the Whirlwind Citadel, the masked explained. Were here to help you understand things.

The more she thought about it, the more logical it seemed she was still dreaming. That was the reason how they knew her name, it also explained the strange room she had woken up moments ago. Still, everything seemed so real. Ji looked at her hand. It was by far smaller than the hand of a child of five at most. Also, its color had changed to dark charcoal.

You're an awakened, the person in the mask explained. That means you have been granted powers by the Moons that normal people don't have.

What powers? Ji asked, her voice ringing. Despite the Floran part of her conscience being in its late twenties, her local part was that of a child and brought with it a sense of vast curiosity and wonder.

Speed, mind, body, the silver masked fury knelt down next to Ji. The ability to see better than normal people, and the greatest gift of all. She tapped Ji on her forehead. As she did, a small sharp emerged. The gift to control thunder and lightning.

Before Ji could ask another question, the door swung open and an old fury with grey hair entered the room. The gold that covered him immediately made it obvious that he was royalty. His face was smooth and sharp, like that of any other fury; his hair, however, appeared tattered, indicating he was well in his nineties.

Immediately, everyone with the exception of the black fury fell to one knee.

Is that her? the royal asked, hardly paying attention to guards and servants.

Yes, majesty, the black fury whispered.

The woman in the silver mask quickly floated away, still kneeling. As she did, Ji felt a force of air lifting her up and moving her towards the royal.

Shes four, the black fury said, while the royal examined her as if she were a rare piece of furniture.

Awakened at four, the king mused. And an otherworlder.

And also a thunder fury, the other added. Shell be a boon to the citadel if she received proper training. Ive sent for her parents.

Awakened? the king asked, moving his hand near Jis face. The action was scary, causing a series of sparks to light up on her, zapping the approaching hand.

One of them, but just a semi. Both of them are cloud sculptors.

Cloud sculptors are blessed with a gift like this? There was a clear note of anger in the kings words.

Ji didnt know why the fury was mad, but could see it was intense to the point that it showed through his calm exterior. Thinking back, she remembered her fatherher local fathersaying something about all the royal heirs failing to awaken. She couldnt understand the implications fully, but it seemed like the ruling family of the citadel had yet to find someone to take the reins of power. Could it be that the king wished to have someone like her as a daughter?

You understand me, dont you? the king asked.

Ji nodded.

Starting today, youll be my daughtera princess of the citadel, with everything that involves.

Majesty, shes still confused, the fury in the silver mask attempted to protest. She needs some time to"

Shes next to no memory of her life here, the royal interrupted with cold logic. The little she has will fade away in a few years. Make the arrangements. The king turned around, leaving the child to float back to the ground. Teach her what she needs to know and start the training. I want her to fully awaken by the time shes five.

The door swung open, allowing the king to leave, then slammed shut again. There was a moment of silence in the room. No one was sure how to react. They knew what they were supposed to do, but

had mixed feelings. Having a thunder fury princess was undoubtedly a reason for celebration. The citadel had hoped for such an announcement for the last five decades. Having one now, even if it was clear that she wasn't related to the royal family by blood, was a huge boon for all. At the same time, the thought of having a child taken from her family while still in her moon years, was unheard of.

Tell the parents, the black fury said with a bitter sigh. It's not like we have a choice.

The Seven won't be pleased by this, the silver-masked whispered. Only gorgons send their young off before their eighth birthday.

It's done, the black fury said. We have our orders. Tell the rest of the family and build her a room in the citadel's keep. She'll start training in a week.

If that's what I must. The silver-masked stood up, then made her way to the door.

See that her room has an altar, the black fury added just as the other was leaving. She'll need it.

One by one, everyone left the room, leaving only Ji and the black fury behind. Waiting a few moments longer, just to make sure no one would come back, he moved closer to Ji and picked her up. This time, no sparks came from the girl.

It won't be easy for you, he said. Trust me, I know. You had the misfortune of awakening too soon, so even more is expected of you, especially since you have thunder.

Why?

Only the Moons can answer that. There was a time when the skies belonged to us. No one, not even the Star could compete, but as all who have more than they could handle, we wasted it all on nonsense. Do you know what a cloud citadel is?

Ji nodded. Strictly speaking, that wasn't true. She was more than aware what cloud cities were, but had never heard the term cloud citadel. Back in Floras history, there were times when the floating settlements were called cloud forts, or even cloud bastions. That was before the age of modernization, when warfare changed to such an extent that walls no longer provided as much shelter as they should. That was one of the reasons that thunder furies and cloud riders were no longer the most powerful entities in the skies.

Do furies live on the ground? the girl asked. Of all the possible questions she could ask, that seemed to interest her the most.

Judging by the sad expression on the man's face, it was one worth asking.

Yes, he said, his tone changing. Most furies live on the ground, and more are joining them every day. The time of the cloud citadels is over. There are no cloud creatures left to make more, and the few that still fly are still fighting each other for dominance.

Why?

If I knew that, I wouldn't be still here. He replied.

The answer didn't make any sense, but Ji didn't press on. Things were confusing enough without her having to annoy the only person who had volunteered to give her an explanation.

Will I be sent to the ground?

That will never happen, he said adamantly. You are a princess now, a member of the Roh family, and next in line for the throne. As long as you develop your powers and your awakening skills, you will be the one who succeeds the king, and do whatever you think is best.

I can do anything?

The girl's eyes twinkled with hope.

Yes, you can do anything.

Then I can get back home?

The question was surprising enough to make the black fury pull his head back an inch. This was something he didn't expect. Only the innocence of a child mixed with the confusion of an otherworlder could result in uttering such things. This wasn't the first time there were otherworlders; the citadel had a few of them before, but they had always awakened at such an age that they had enough memories of the world to know basic things. What was more, upon awakening, they already had a life in this world. In the case of Ji, she had neither.

Anything except going home, he said directly. The Moons won't allow it.

If I become powerful enough, can I change their minds?

You can try. A thin smile emerged on his face. Others have. Once you become strong enough, you can try anything you wish. Your skills will determine whether you achieve it or not.

The answer seemed logical enough to not merit a follow-up. Even so, Ji still had a burning desire to find a way back to her previous life despite the hardships there. Drawn up on Fauna, it was every child's dream to be a prince or princess. Some even claimed to be the descendants of such. Ji herself had often gone to sleep, praying that she would wake up a princess and do what she wanted for the rest of her life. However, now that her childhood wish had come true, or sorts, she no longer wanted it.

And the other heirs? she asked.

The black fury looked at her.

You said I'm next in line for the throne. Her child's voice made everything she said seem ridiculous, even if she were older than the person standing over her. Won't the rest be upset?

Why should they? You're a thunder fury and the youngest awakened in living memory. In a way, you're the epitome of the entire citadel's dream.

Are you sure none of them will hurt me? she clenched her fists.

You've nothing to worry about. The king will never allow it, and even if he did, the person second in line won't. He moved closer. I was also made to join the royal family. I might have even succeeded him in a few decades, but all that doesn't matter. You don't have my limitations. You're the clear choice for the citadel forward. Keep that always in mind, Jiroh.

Chapter 444: Jiroh's Story - War Plans

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Whirlwind Citadel, 18 years ago

Hurry up! Jiroh whispered as loud as possible as she ran through the walls of the citadel. Normally, that was considered poor form children had to know which spots to use and when. However, as a royal princess, those rules didn't apply. Walls, floors, and even ceilings would open up for her, allowing her to pass freely.

Flying behind her, almost at the same speed, was a small cloud puff. Originally, the creature had been assigned to serve as her protector in the city, however, the girl had quickly convinced it that playing was a far more fun, and more efficient, way of keeping an eye on her. As a result, she frequently sneaked out of whatever she was going and tried to hide in the city.

Two years had passed since Jiroh had officially been proclaimed princess of the citadel. Most of that time had been spent learning about the world, the awakened powers, and her own thunder abilities. To everyone's surprise, the first skill that Jiroh had been granted was attack. Many saw that as poor since, since it was the most common of the common. However, half a year later, upon the furies full awakening, she had also been granted a second skill: carving. When that happened, it was a cause for celebration. Not only was it a crafting skill, but one relatively rare for furies. It was whispered that the skill had come from her father's line her real father among which there had been many gifted cloud sculptors. The explanation didn't matter. The only thing that did was that she was progressing better than expected and by the looks of things had no restrictions whatsoever.

It was this skill, and the child's curiosity, that had led her deep into the citadel's cloud, where she had met the one of the creatures that kept the citadel in the air.

Come on! Jiroh told the cloud behind her. They'll catch us if we don't hurry up!

The cloud entity didn't have the heart to tell her that it was the one that was supposed to catch her, so it played along, following her to the very edge of the citadel. There, once Jiroh made sure that no one was watching, she combined her carving and attack skills to slice an opening in the ground.

Ready? she asked the cloud.

The entity twirled in place. Just as Jiroh was about to jump in, however, both her tiny arms were caught by a strong hand, leaving her dangling in the air. The fury instinctively tried to let out a bolt of lightning at the person holding her, but to little avail. The zap of lightning, as powerful as it was, bounced off, hitting the ground instead.

I've warned you about this, a black fury said in a stern voice.

But, Geroh Jiroh pouted. Part of her cringed that she had to go through this, yet even that part had to admit that putting was extremely effective. You told me I could play!

I told you, you could play in your room, the larger fury corrected, letting her go. The king has forbidden you from talking to the citadel.

But why? It's not like anyone else does! All I wanted"

Jiroh! the fury said sternly, pronouncing every syllable of her name. When you take the king's place, you might change the laws, but until then you have to do what he tells you. I've long given up hoping that you'll do what I say. He crossed his arms. However, the king is the king.

Jiroh didnt say anything. There was no denying that. Despite all her powers and abilities, she was no match to the king or any of the high nobles. For that matter, she wasnt even a match for the common guard. It was only thanks to her lightning that she could stand her own.

Come, now, Geroh said. Weve been asked to join a war meeting.

Must I? Jiroh sighed audibly. Both her six-year-old self and her twenty-eight-year-old self found the experience tedious, to say the least. The room was cramped with lots of people inside, and all of them talked about war all the time. It wasnt that Jiroh was afraid or way. So far, shed witnessed seven major raids on the citadel itself. It was the strategic discussions and constant arguments that bored her.

The king has ordered that we be there so we must. The black fury knelt down so as to look her in the eye. Just hang tight for a while, okay? Once its over, well go back in the awakened realms.

That didnt seem as thrilling as talking to the citadel, but Jiroh nodded. She didnt want to cause problems for Ge. While the fury had been cold to her after her initial awakening, at present he was the closest thing to a friend she had. One could even say that she thought of him as a brother. The only other thunder fury in the citadel, he was always there to guide and train her, putting up with her pranks and tantrums. The sad thing was that while he was far more experienced, he had already peaked when it came to awakening powers. At present, his awakened level was twenty-four more than twice that of Jirohs and likely that was where it would remain. He had already reached the limit to which he could increase his body trait, and without a substantial boost there, it was looking like hed never complete his next awakening trial.

The two went to the kings war room the usual way. There were no shortcuts, no flying through buildings, just a gentle floating along the stairways and corridors. A squad of guards stood to attention as the two royals passed, letting them walk through the opening that led to the room.

Jiroh, King Alroh said with a slightly displeased tone. Its unprincesslike to be late to a war meeting when invited.

That was my fault, Geroh intervened, his hands on the childs shoulders. I took a bit longer to discuss strategies that would help with the next breakthrough.

Hmm. The king was not convinced. Still at nine? he asked.

Ten, Jiroh replied instinctively. I just havent defeated it yet

An undefeated ten is a nine. The King waved his hand, no longer interested in the conversation. As he did, two chairs of cloud matter emerged from the ground, for the thunder furies to sit.

There were sixteen people in total in the room: the king, Jiroh, Geroh, and fourteen furies with gold and silver masks. Each of them was in command of a squadron and as such were here only in official capacity. As the laws stated, if someone represented a post, they were to wear a mask symbolizing that post. It was only the king and the royal family that had to be seen.

The Tamin Emperor has killed another of our squadrons, a male fury in a gold mask began. Officially, the empire claims that they had nothing to do with it, but"

Of course they would, the king interrupted. Theyve been hiring other citadels to attack us for decades. Now thats failed, hes finally decided to get his hands dirty. Who did they send?

Were not sure, the other fury replied. Theres no trace of our squadron or a battle ever taking place.

It has to be mages, another fury, in a silver mask, said. Only they have the power to do such a thing. The Order will not get involved. Not with their eyes set on the Tamin throne.

The Academy has always been neutral. The king brushed his chin with a hand.

It might not have been Academy mages, the golden masked fury said. There are enough rogues to cause an issue. Also, there are those who serve the imperial family directly.

Imperial mages, the king mused. Jiroh, what will you do in these circumstances?

Everyone turned towards the child. This was the first time the king had asked her for advice. Deep inside, Jiroh was screaming in anger. This was exactly what she wanted to avoid. There was no way a child of six would come up with a better plan that dedicated flight generals hadnt already considered. The king was merely testing her to determine her level of leadership and strategic thinking.

The proper thing to do was feign ignorance. Being a child, she could easily pretend she didnt understand the question, or give a half-assed answer that would keep the king from asking her for advice for the next year. However, her pride didnt let her.

We engage in all out war against the Imperial capital, Jiroh said, her sweet voice contrasting with her words. We send messengers to all citadels and ground dukedoms, telling them that were attacking the citadel. Once we do, theres no chance they wont follow.

Total silence filled the room. For the slightest of moments, Jiroh managed to see a faint smile on the kings face.

Explain, he said.

Since our messengers reached them, there would be no way for them to convince the Tamin Empire that they werent involved. Should we fall, the empire is certain to go after them, so the only option they have would be to join in.

Because only if the empire falls can they be safe. The king nodded. And what if the Order or the Academy decide to help them?

They wont. Not if we attack the Imperial capital directly. None like the meddlings of the emperor, they just dont want to enter a conflict because of it. The Archdukes wont be in a hurry to do anything either, unless they have to.

Youve been reading, the king noted.

Ive been teaching her world politics, Geroh said.

In truth, Jiroh had shown no interest in the subject whatsoever. As any child, she strongly preferred reading to anything else. However, the echoes she had created were much closer to her Fauna self, and they loved to read, viewing world history like fantasy novels. If Jiroh herself didnt have the freedom that she had, shed probably agree with them as well.

Very well. Lets see what happens. Send messengers to all citadels and ground dukedoms, the king ordered. Let them know were going to the Imperial citadel, and if they wish to be left behind, they are free to do so. However, also remind them what is likely to happen should we fail.

Not a single fury argued with the order. Half of them immediately left to execute it, while the rest remained focusing on other discussions. Logistics were discussed, troop mobilization, attack methods, and intricate issues that had to do with the practical minutiae that went along with the decision.

Can I go to talk to the citadel now? Jiroh whispered to Geroh.

We cant just leave. We must remain till the end.

But others left. The child pouted.

They had reason to, the thunder fury tries his best to keep his tone calm and voice down. Think of it as a challenge. Bear it until the end.

If I do, will we go then?

This was an unexpected question. On the one hand, it ensured calm until the end of the discussion, but on the other, it was still against the kings orders. If Jiroh wasnt a child, one might call it blackmail. However, what she really saw it was a compromise.

Why do you want to talk to it so much? Geroh asked.

Because its lonely. No one talks to it anymore.

That was strange. In the last few generations, that had never been a problem. There werent any indications whatsoever that the creatures that were used to form the citadel were in distress.

Why are you so sure? the black fury asked. Did it tell you?

Yes. Jiroh nodded. It said it liked talking to me because it didnt know if it would be able to talk to anyone again.

What do you mean?

It said that its dying and there are no others to replace it.

Chapter 445: Jiroh's Story - Whirlwind's Fall

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Whirlwind Citadel, 18 years ago

A ray of energy pierced the cloud surface from below, making the entire citadel shake. Cloud matter moved about chaotically, filling in the hole and trying to keep the structures stable. Despite that, its inhabitants were in a state of disarray. No one expected this to happen. The cloud forts were built to withstand such attacks easily, and this was no mere cloud fort this was the Whirlwind Citadel, one of the five strongest ones to remain. For millennia, it had withstood all sorts of attacks and remained unsaved and victorious. Now, it was looking like this might be its final battle, not a grand battle in the heart of the enemy empire, but just beyond its border in an ordinary province.

After forming what seemed like a united front, king Alroh had gathered all his troops and attacked with full force. He had been aware that the empire was waiting, he had even prepared for the possibility of some of the fury mercenary kingdoms taking the enemys side. However, neither he, not anyone else could have expected devastation to such a level.

Lightning and thunder filled the sky as the citadel retaliated, scorching the ground beneath it. However, it didn't seem to matter. The war had already been lost.

Jiroh! Geroh appeared in front of her room. Despite the danger, the wall moves aside, creating an opening for them to see each other directly. Come, the thunder fury reached out to her. We need to go.

I passed the trial, the child said, as if that had any significance. I stepped through the gate
Yes. Geroh grabbed her hand. You can't stay here.

Part of Jiroh was in shock. Strangely enough, it was her grown-up part. The child that had been born in this world had seen bloodshed before, though never to such a degree. Back when she was the daughter of a pair of cloud sculptors, it was common for skirmishes to affect her. The Floran part of her, though, didn't know how to react. She had never seen anything resembling war. The closest she had come was historical dramas and fantasy novels. All this was too real for her to handle.

Another ray of light broke through, vaporizing an entire structure. It took seconds for the building to be recreated, though not the furies that were inside.

Jiroh! the black fury said sharply. Come along.

Three more squads of furies flew out of a surviving garrison tower and darted towards the ground. From what Jiroh could gather, they were attempting a suicide attack on the attackers below in order to draw the attacks away from the citadel. Based on their clothes, several of them were awakened.

Where are we going? the girl asked, allowing herself to glide as Geroh rushed through streets and buildings.

You're getting off the citadel, the fury explained. I sent a few people to be ready for you. They weren't cheap, but they're supposed to get the job done.

You want me to go on ground. Jiroh suddenly stopped in place, as if an anchor were holding her there. I don't want to go down there.

There's no time for games! the black fury snapped. The king has already been wounded. Half the war council is gone. Forget attacking, it's not even sure the citadel will manage to escape.

The Academics taken sides, Geroh said. Everyone thought that they would remain neutral or support us, but they ended up joining the emperor.

There was no possible way they could win at this point. Escape was the only possible option, and yet Jiroh felt that she couldn't.

No! she said adamantly. I want to talk to the citadel.

The citadel? Geroh blinked. That's what this is about?

It's dying, and it needs to talk to me.

It's as good as dead. Most of the seeds are gone. There's nothing left to prevent the mages from destroying it. The longer you're stubborn about it, the longer"

I want to talk to it! Jiroh shouted, unleashing a massive storm of lightning in all directions. Their strength was more than impressive for someone her age. The power was enough to be felt even on the ground, causing the human forces to momentarily stop with their attack.

If the king was able to see this, hed call it magnificent. It was far greater than anything Jiroh had done in the past, far greater than what Geroh could achieve. Knowing this, the black fury took a step back.

Ill wait for you here, he said, himself too stubborn to give up. Dont take long.

The child glared at him for several seconds, then took a deep breath. There were many things she could do, from using logic to unleashing her power on him again. Given his experience, Geroh would probably be able to survive, though hed be knocked into the sky, possibly even partially dazed. However, what point would that achieve? He knew well enough to acknowledge her powers were superior. It was sad in a way he had trained his whole life with the goal to get where he was, and in two years Jiroh had already surpassed him in many ways, all thanks to her coming from another world. Limitations that had crippled his development didnt exist for her, giving her a greater boost than any fury could be born with, and that was not all. What Jiroh hadnt shared with him, or anyone; the one thing that she couldnt share was that she had been chosen by the Orange Moon, gaining his favor. While her awakening level was just ten, her attack and carving skills were in their fifties, not to mention that she had been given guard skills not too long ago as well.

With a nod, the child sliced through the ground and jumped inside.

Cloud matter shifted as she floated through it, transforming into a river. In that single moment, the war outside had ended. The screams and battle cries, all the noise of destruction had vanished completely. It was tempting to imagine that everything had been one big nightmare and just remain here for a few hours, or even days, but Jiroh kept swimming on. She knew that the beings that supported the citadel didnt have long to live, and she wanted to talk to them, hoping that there could be a way to change their fate.

Youve come, shimmering child, a deep voice said, surrounding her.

Jiroh looked around. There was nothing but white, but she was certain that the source of the voice floated about her, like a cloud guardian.

I was hoping Id get to see you, another voice said. So young, and yet so gifted. Its a pity you werent born five thousand years ago.

Or even one thousand, the first voice said.

So much would have been different. You would have seen us fly in the sky, the second continued.

Or fight, a third one said. We loved to fight. But even when we lost, we werent completely devoured. Hunters changed that.

Fury hunters.

Dryad hunters.

How do I help you? Jiroh went directly to the point. There was a lot she couldnt understand, but she was fully aware that getting sidetracked by distractions wasnt going to do anyone any good, least of all herself.

So eager to help, one of the voices said.

So eager to leave, added another. You can do both, you know, if you just put the effort into it.

The words seemed to ring in Jirohs mind. Going home. The first few months after arriving in this world, she had hoped to find a way to get back to her own world. When it turned out that no one knew a way, she turned to the Moons, praying against hope that they would let her return. Months had passed, then years, and all that time she had found no indication that returning to Flora was even possible.

Shes happy, one of the voices said.

She should be, but also not. Another sighed. Youre too weak, child. We can help you return to your world, but not when youre this weak. You need to get stronger, much stronger.

It will take you years, maybe decades, to reach the strength needed, but youre resourceful.

Whats the price? Jiroh asked. There always is a price. That was something she knew even back from her own world. No one offered anything for free, especially if the offer sounded too good to be true.

Youll have to free us as well.

Yes, youll have to kill us.

The request hit Jiroh like a lightning bolt. This wasnt what she had expected. Even if she had her doubts about the offer moments ago, sacrificing all the cloud creatures in the cloud was it wasnt that she even wanted to consider.

Dont be sad. The head of a cloud dolphin gained form in the whiteness. Its what we want.

You wont be killing us. Were nothing but echoes of our former selves. Hearts existing to keep the citadel whole.

When there were more like you, we did that willingly, but as the awakened in your race waned, so did the people that could talk to us.

You can only hear us because youre from another world. The restrictions dont apply to you. For everyone else, were nothing but a bunch of hearts.

A bunch of dying hearts.

No! Jiroh almost screamed. Theres a way to save you. There always is.

There is no way. Only the Moons can save us.

And even if they did, wed only be alone. Even if all the creatures of all the citadels were freed in the forms we were before, wed still be alone.

This is no longer our time. The skies are different now. We dont belong in them.

You do belong!

Goodbye, shimmering child.

Jiroh felt a force pushing her back up the way she came.

Dont forget what we told you.

Survive and become stronger. And when you do, find us. We'll be waiting for as long as we can.

Like a jet of hot air, Jiroh was propelled through the tunnel clouds. The child fought as hard as she could, but ultimately, it proved useless. As fast as she had improved her trains and skills, she was far from being a match to the entities that had been holding the cloud citadel in the air for millennia.

In mere moments, she was back out on the surface. The sound of thunder ripped the sky another desperate attempt of the citadel to delay the next attack. Jiroh, however, wasn't thinking about that. Jaws clenched, she flew towards the ground again and struck it. This time, nothing happened. For a second the child froze, as if trying to come to terms with the fact that her attack had failed. Then, all chaos broke loose. Bursting into a fit of rage, the young fury hit the ground again and again as fast as her body would allow her. Sparks emerged from the end of her fingers. Alas, the result was the same: the hearts within the citadel didn't want to let her in again.

Jiroh, Geroh said a few steps from her. Jiroh, it's over. There's nothing you can do.

No! The child persisted, putting in as much strength as she had.

Her tiny hands moved so fast that they could barely be seen. Suddenly, a pair of hands held her firmly by the arms from both sides. Instinctively, Jiroh struggled in an attempt to break loose, but Geroh's persistence rivaled her own, not to mention that his strength was still greater.

Let it go, he whispered. There will be other times. The citadel will be waiting for you.

Jiroh gritted her teeth, angry at the entire world. Then, seeing the futility, burst into tears. Her hands relaxed, combining with sadness and exhaustion. For the first time since she had been in this world, she felt completely powerless, and that hurt her.

Let's go. Geroh lifted her up. You need to be safe. As long as you're safe, you'll be able to return. Do you understand?

There was no response.

You'll understand, the black fury said, then dashed to the edge of the citadel where a group of mercenaries was waiting.

Chapter 446: Confrontation

The memories ended gradually, as if Dallion was looking like a fading picture. At first, he didn't know how to react. The only time anything of the sort had happened was back in the awakening room of Dherma's former village chief. There, a metal echo of sorts had shown it as a form of punishment. To have it happen in the real world, though

I can read minds?

No, dear boy. You can empathize with a person, learning exactly what made them become what they are.

Dallion shook his head. The experience was overwhelming, far more so than entering the awakened realm. His head wasn't pounding, nor was his body sore, but he felt a deep sadness, as if all his emotions had been drained.

You wanted to go back ever since you were a child, Dallion said. Ever since you awakened.

Jiroh froze for a moment. By the look in her eyes, Dallion could tell he'd hit a nerve.

That was the last thought when you left the citadel, he went on. That was what the hearts of the citadel told you. Theyve been waiting for you all along.

There was a moment of tension in the air. Dallion could feel it better than anyone. Even Euryale took a step back, knowing what Jiroh was capable of.

Empathy really is a powerful trait, the thunder fury said. Yes, thats what they told me. All I had to do was get stronger, and theyd help me return to my world. In exchange"

Theyd be free, Dallion finished the sentence. Thats why you became a hunter. It wasnt by choice. You needed to be a hunter so you could find the citadel.

Its just as I told you.

That was true. Jiroh had never lied. She had very specifically told Dallion that she wanted him to help her find the citadel she was born in. At the time, Dallion thought that she was searching for it in the hopes of finding clues as to the location of her family. He couldnt have been further from the truth. Even her sister was a surprise discovery that had nothing to do with her real goal. Did that make her evil, though? Most probably not, but it had also made her harden her heart out of fear that attachments might make her change her mind.

You think of it as an obsession, Jiroh said. It isnt. Youve gone through enough awakening trials to know that wouldnt stand. It wasnt a trial that made me stop leveling up, it was my own decision, and yes, Im at a point at which I can make the difference. Ive had a lot of memorable experiences in this world, more good than bad. Ive made good friends, achieved things I never thought I could. However, this is all a dream, and all dreams must come to an end.

But must it end now? Dallion asked.

Yes. Jiroh knelt down and tapped the floor. They dont have much longer. Theyre so weak that I dont even hear them anymore. Why do you think the citadel hit the ground? The hearts that beat within it are too weak to keep it in the air. In a few more years the city would sink completely beneath the sea. A few more years after that itll dissolve like sugar in a drink.

Dallion clenched his fists. Everything she said was correct, yet he still felt conflicted. He wanted to see her go even if he knew hed miss her. At the same time, he didnt want any creature to sacrifice itself in order to make that happen. As tempting as it was to use pure logic to defend the action, Dallion felt that there had to be a better way.

Theres nothing you can do, Jiroh said. Theres nothing any of us could do. It was cruel for the creatures to have been captured in the first place. Back in my world, things werent like that. We used magic crystals to keep the clouds stable, not living creatures.

That was good, though little relief.

That wasnt necessarily true. While he indeed had a skill combo that would allow him to understand any animal, he had never spoken to cloud creatures, or furies for that matter. If he knew a bit of Jirohs language, there was a chance that the clouds would understand him and vice versa. Alas, the seriousness of the situation had kept him from openly asking to practice with her on their way from Nerosal here. Looking back, he regretted not doing so.

What about your sister? Dallion asked. Or the rest of your family? They might be alive somewhere. And I hope they are, Jiroh replied. Though my relations with them were complicated. I was treated well, some I found even close, but I still dont know whether the king saw me as anything but the means to lead the citadel forward. Apparently, the defeat changed his views on life. The irony was that the only person who was so eager to enter the war was the one to least suffer its consequences, while those who were dragged into it all without a choice

Jiroh didnt finish. Even so, Dallion knew exactly what she meant. The fury war wasnt discussed much in Nerosalmostly because Wetie province wasnt involvedbut between the occasional remarks at the Icepicker guild, and Hannahs reluctant recollections, Dallion had gotten to know a bit. From what he had pieced together, the fury kingdoms that hadnt taken a direct part had retreated, becoming mercenary kingdoms backed by other great powers. Those who had were scattered about, working into human cities as guards or servants. Often Moon vows were used, ensuring that they wouldnt attempt to go against their new employers. That explained why the general had so many protecting him. It was entirely possible that someone else in his family had the same knack for business, and lack of scruples, taking in a lot of furies from other provinces. The sad thing was that with anger running high among the affected part of the empire, that was probably the best deal theyd get. Jiroh herself had been treated as a war orphan. Gerohs plan had worked, but only to a certain degree. From what he had glimpsed in her memories, Dallion could assume she had successfully been taken off the citadel, though not to safety. Somehow, she must have been attacked in the attempt. The mercenaries had been killed, allowing the child to escape. Or alternatively, the fright might have triggered a self-preservation response, releasing a wave of lightning around her. Whatever the case, Jiroh had managed to make it all the way into the province and all the way to Nerosal. There she had been taken in by Hannah and become the person Dallion knew today.

However, the story of her father didnt end there. Somehow ,the king and his citadel must have managed to escape. Fearing reprisals, they had probably kept hidden somewhere, and eventually continued with life. Based on the timeline, Dallion couldnt be certain whether Di had been born then, or she had been a baby during the fateful attack. Either way, she had been raised as a normal child until it became obvious that the citadel wasnt in condition to remain flying for much longer. Then she had left the cloud, like everyone else, and joined the many furies living on the ground.

My life isnt here, Dal, Jiroh said. It never was.

Thats why youve cut all ties to this place. Dallion looked at the ground. How do you plan on getting to the hearts? They didnt let you last time.

Back then, I was weak. Ive improved a lot since then. The fury knelt down. Her hand moved slowly through the surface, as if it were jelly. You asked me my level once. Now theres no point in keeping the secret. Im Fifty-seven. Her hand kept sinking in. However, all my skills are at a hundred. And as you know, that gives me certain

Run! Eury shouted.

Instantly, the gorgon and Dallion burst into instances, running in all directions. Jiroh didnt have to. At a speed faster than the human eye, she flew out of the room just as a ray of light pierced through the building and the cloud surface below it.

Gleam! Dallion ordered, constantly splitting into instances.

The whip blade flew out of its scabbard, extending to the point that its segments slashed through entire buildings in an attempt to slice through the attacker. Before reaching its target, however, it bounced off a solid wall of air that glowed in green symbols.

Crap, Dallion whispered as he looked at a figure in blue robes floating a hundred feet in the air. Circular patterns of symbols made it clear that it was a mage, but that wasn't the shocking part. The most unnerving of all was the thin layer of shimmering light around it. This wasn't just a mage, it was a mage that at some point had come from Earth.

Isn't this a nice reunion? the figure asked in a female voice.

The whip blade made several more attempts to attack her from a different side, but to little success. It was as if the mage had surrounded herself by an invisible cocoon of air. In response, the mage drew a pattern of symbols in the air in front of her, causing a ray of light to emerge, aimed right at the weapon. The entire citadel was punctured once more to the point that fresh steam shup up from the hole, caused by the scorched area of the sea below. The strength of the attack was powerful enough to melt anything in its path, anything except something indestructible.

I guess you're a slow learner, the mage said.

At first Dallion thought that she was addressing Gleam, but the wave of annoyance and anger that followed was too intense for something as trivial as a simple counter attack. It seemed that for some reason, the mage was targeting her wrath at Dallion himself.

You were warned not to meddle in things that didn't concern you, and yet you still did.

A new pattern was drawn in the air, at which point over a dozen swords emerged around the mage, then thrust in all directions. Dallion split into instances once more. However, to his surprise, so did the blades targeting him. That changed things considerably. Resorting to his guard and acrobatic skills, Dallion managed to twist just in time to avoid one of the blades, while deflecting the second with his armadil shield.

How should I know?!

That's not some random mage going on a treasure hunt. That's a full-fledged member of the Academy. She has the authority of a countess! People like her don't go about in the open unless there's a very good reason, so what did you do?

Chapter 447: Closing the Gap

The conversation in question had taken place in Belaals Druma gambling den and pawn shop with the appearance of a high-class tavern that belonged to the mirror pool. Before the days of Nerosals leveling up, the tavern had entered the domain of the city, losing its ability to do illegal activities and, through that, its charm. From what Dallion heard, the ownera nasty piece of work by the name Belaalhad sold the establishment, and started construction of a new one a distance away along the river.

Back when Dallion was still in desperate search for a kaieldervisto to spot the free copyette, that he had gone to the mirror pool to acquire one. As a result, he had been challenged to participate in the

gauntlet: a mending game in which he tried to mend items given to him by the Drums hosts, and patrons bet on whether he'd fail or not. Incidentally, that had gotten him to come across Gleam back when she had been imprisoned in a hand mirror. It was also during that time that Dallion had seen a mage for the first time. Rather, it was the first time a mage had outright threatened him with sealing if he didn't stop meddling with events in Nerosal. The mage's name was Alien Eval, as Dallion later found out. Officially, he was on loan from the Academy, tasked with the trivial task of guarding the life of a minor member of the imperial family who had come to the festival. At one point Dallion had even suspected him of being a Star cultist, but as it turned out the man was just extremely bad at his job, resulting in the death of the imperial during the arena incident. For that reason, he had completely forgotten about the warning, believing the mage to have been punished for his failure. Judging by the current situation, however, there clearly was more to it.

Rays of energy kept on flying about, piercing anything in their path. They were much smaller than before, but the mage was clearly intent on killing everyone present. At present, her target seemed to be Jiroh, though. The only thing that distracted her from going all out was the whip blade that kept attacking like an annoying immortal mosquito.

A new pattern of symbols emerged in front of the mage. Moments later, large cubes of ice formed around every segment of the whip blade, causing it to fall down through the cloud citadel and into the ocean.

A gust of wind sliced through the buildings like a blade, directed at the mage. Using his layer vision Dallion was almost certain that the openings formed on the structures before the wave hit them.

The attack was flawless, however, it too failed. The mage had managed to draw not one, but five patterns in the air, surrounding herself by five energy cocoons. Her speed was outright impressive.

Eury, Dallion said, relying on her perception level to hear him. Right now, he really wished they had exchanged echoes. It would have made teamwork considerably more efficient.

Several more torrents headed towards the mage from multiple sides, while she countered with shields and magic rays of her own.

The whole encounter really was something else. So far, Dallion had often worried that his empathy trait might have made him overpowered. Looking at things unfold, he had nothing on mages. They completely transformed the type of battle. Up to now everything hand to hand fighting was pretty much it, even when furries were concerned. Mages were the equivalent of using fighter jets to fight knights. They didn't rely on strength, combat splitting, or even perception. However, their abilities to break the laws of nature, when combined with fast reactions, made them a force to be reckoned with.

Is that unusual?

There aren't enough mages to say whether it's unusual or not. She's not an apprentice, I'll tell you that much. As for anything else, your guess is as good as mine.

Without warning, Eury leapt in the air some twenty feet away. Her back was deliberately turned towards Dallion, suggesting she was going to attempt to petrify the mage with her glance.

The action seemed to catch the enemy by surprise, for the mage turned around to face the gorgon. In a flash, all that was flesh turned to gray stone. The moment he saw it, Dallion felt relief and a sense of victory bubble within him. Unfortunately, the celebration was short-lived. No sooner had the mage turned to stone, that cracks emerged, causing the outer layer to crumble off like thin plaster.

Why? Whats

You need to think how to survive this and you wont get a chance to do so unless youre in your awakened realm!

The idea was valid, though Dallion didnt understand the urgency. Regardless, he did as the echo suggested.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The cloud citadel disappeared along with the fight that was taking place on it. While Dallion remained within his realm, the real world was going to remain frozen in a fraction of a moment. It was definitely going to give Dallion enough time to come up with a plan, although

Nil, he said. Why did you make me come here?

I would have thought that to be self-explanatory, dear boy, the echo said, rocking a few steps away in a wooden chair. When facing an unexpected opponent, its beneficial to enter your realm and gather your thoughts.

Right. How come youve never told me to do it in the past?

The old echo immediately went still. It was obvious that something was different this time. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could see the hesitation appearing within Nil like cells of a honeycomb.

I can see when youre hiding things from me. Dallion crossed his arms. Whats the matter?

You arent ready to face a mage in your current state, Nil said. Not even close. In the past, it wasnt a problem because you had the protection of the Moons. Ever since you became an initiate, youre on an equal footing, and thus"

Im on my own, Dallion finished the sentence.

He had been warned of this, not once, but several times. Dallion thought he knew that that meant, he thought he was prepared. According to Nil, however, he wasnt.

Mages are like people: they dont like to waste time unless they are amusing themselves. Fighting three otherworlder initiates, including one favored, is a challenging task, even for a mage, so shell go for the weakest link.

You want me to multi-level, Dallion said. I thought you disapproved of the practice.

I do. Its a terrible idea. But I didnt expect youd end up facing an Academy made in the middle of the ocean. This isnt like fighting a chainling in the middle of Nerosal. No one will come to help you here. Even if the rest of the hunter team manages to learn whats going on and somehow climb on the cloud citadel on time, they wont be of any help.

This sounded serious. The echo rarely got involved to such a degree. The fact that he suggested, was a very good reason to.

Harp

Knowing the harpsisword that pretty much meant a yes. Dallion couldnt help but smile internally. The last time he tried something of the sort, the roles were reversed: he had been the one trying to boost his stats quickly, while everyone else was telling him not to do it. Then again, he had learned a lot since then.

How far do you think Ill be able to go? Dallion asked.

Two, Nil replied without hesitation.

Just two levels? That sounded a bit insulting.

Awakening isnt like the real world. The higher you climb, the more difficult it gets. With your current skills, youd pass ten levels if they were the same as when you were around twenty. Now, though, I think youll pass two.

Well see, Dallion smirked. In his heart, though, he was a bit afraid of what would happen if he only managed to pass one. So far, every level he had completed past the last gate had been on the verge of his capabilities. It was impossible to say for how long the trend would continue.

Taking a few more moments to admire the view, Dallion then left his henge of skills in search of a trial area. Gen had assured him that the location didnt matter, but that didnt stop Dallion from being stubborn.

The first ten minutes passed by like a flash. Dallion felt that he had barely started, when Ariel showed up, arms crossed to urge him to make a choice. The latest echo didnt seem to be the patient type. In all honesty, neither was Dallion, unless he was deliberately delaying something.

You know, your fight was much more fun than the real thing, Dallion said.

You had more imagination when fighting against me, the echo said. Ariel had retained his white clothes and hair, making him stand out among the vibrant colors of Dallions realm.

Its not always about imagination. Just walking about in the citadel was a challenge. Maybe the next trial was going to give him some insight.

You want me to join you? Ariel asked. I can combat split, so I dont risk getting"

Its fine. Dallion interrupted. Ill go on my own. If Im worn out before the next one, I might call you, then.

After a while, Dallion decided that a mountain trial was the way to go. Not that entering the trial from a mountain made any difference. It was rather that Dallion needed some more time to himself before starting the trial, and that was a good excuse.

As before, a stairwell marked the entrance to the trial. Taking a deep breath, Dallion went along it. The usual blue rectangle appeared on the second step. Dallion brushed it away before the words could fully form.

Lux, Nox, Gleam, Dallion said as he walked down. Stay close.

All three familiars appeared in their creature forms. Lux immediately leaped on Dallions back, surrounding him with blue flames, while the other two moved alongside their owner. A few more steps and Dallion summoned his harpsisword and the armadil shield as well.

Any chance you might help me in your true form? he asked.

Only if you cant handle it, the shield replied. But not if youre about to lose.

This sounded more like an answer Nil would give, but Dallion understood what he meant. They could only help, but not do the job for him. It was the same in real life: as his weapons, they could occasionally act on their own, but Dallion was the one who had to do most of the work.

Hold tight, he entered the darkness. This time there werent any torches of crystal lights. From this point on, Dallion was venturing into the unknown yet once more.

Chapter 448: Finding the Glass

Dallion kept on walking deeper and deeper, descending into the darkness to a point that even Luxs flames werent enough to light up the area.

When Dallion determined he was no longer progressing, he stopped walking. There no longer was any point. The trial had already begun and now it was only a matter for it to reveal itself to Dallion. Given everything had to go through so far, Dallion drew the harpsisword and prepared for combat.

Seconds passed without anything happening. Then, suddenly, the darkness expanded to the side, changing Dallions surroundings into a room. That much he had expected. However, it was the contents of the room that caught him completely off guard. There was no endless battlefield, no swarm of enemies, no opponent to face. Instead, Jirohs sister sat at a bar, a bored expression on her face. Seeing Dallion, she used her powers to move a bottle off the counter behind her and moved it onto the bar along with two small cups.

You took your time, the girl said, pouring an orange liquid in the small glass. I still think you made a mistake.

A mistake? Dallion asked as he split into a dozen instances. One of them went to the bar, facing the young fury.

My sister. I think you two would have made a cute couple. Diroh finished pouring the drink. The second glass remained empty, though. Never thought that Eury would find anyone with her temper.

Still, whats done is done. The fury nodded at Dallion. Arent you going to drink that?

Should I? Dallion asked. He had instances, but only they lasted a short distance in the future longer for him to be able to save himself from the effects of even fast acting poison.

No, not really. The fury grabbed the glass and turned it around, slamming the top onto the wooden counter. The moment she did, both glasses turned orange. The trial is very simple, she said, turning around the other glass. All you have to do is guess which glass holds the drink.

Dallion crossed his arms. As far as he could tell, there was no difference between the glasses. Both were of the same color, material, and size. There was no variation in terms of shape, damage, or even dirt. Even so, he knew perfectly well which one contained the drink in question. Even better, he could guess even if he didnt.

That one, he said, placing his hand on the right glass. Meanwhile, a second instance of him placed his hand on the left, just to be on the same side.

With oneriest action he lifted the glass, expecting the liquid to splash all over the counter. Interestingly enough, it didnt. Instead, it remained floating in the air, like a thick puff of orange smoke.

Using splitting already? Diroh asked, not in the least impressed.

You didnt say that I couldnt.

I didnt think you would find something so easy to spot. She grabbed the other glass and scooped the floating liquid. The moment she did, it regained its usual properties. At least you understood the rules.

That was it? Dallion asked in disbelief. There were trials that required a simple choice, but in those cases they had focused on complicated psychological questions. This was Dallion didnt even know what it was. It wasnt even luck, that was for certain.

Thats the start. Two more glasses floated to the bar counter. The moment they came into contact with it, their color shifted to orange. You have to do a few more rounds. This is just the obligatory build up.

The glass in Dallions hand wiggled free, then turned around on the counter, as did the three others. After a momentary pause, the glasses started moving about, like in the popular gambling scams.

Nope, no catch, Diroh replied. Its a test of skill. If you have the skills, you have what it takes to move on. The glasses stopped. Choose.

Four instances of Dallion picked a glass each. One of them was correct, and that was the one Dallion chose to become reality. As the liquid remained in the air, four more glasses floated to the counter.

Good, the fury said as she scooped up the liquid again in an empty glass. You get the idea.

A test of perception. Dallion felt glad that he had improved his perception, although he wished he had upped up by another ten or so. How many rounds are there?

As many as it takes, Diroh replied. Its not like you have anything else to do. In here were just having a game. Theres no mage casting spells all over the place.

This isnt a game.

Yes, it is. Its a game against yourself, and possibly the Moons.

Dallion frowned.

Youre thinking it, and youre right. In one way or another, its all a game to the Moons.

That made Dallion think. If this was a Moon reference, maybe it had to do with the number of rounds? Based on those calculations, the first four rounds were going to be easy, the fifth doable, but the last two were outright impossible. Dallion was incapable of splitting into over a hundred instances, and relying on luckas tempting as it was didnt sound like the solution.

You could have stopped her, Diroh said as the glasses twirled. She would have listened to you.

We both know that's a lie. Dallion kept his concentration on the glasses. Focusing on his layered vision remained exhausting even now; it felt like an itch in the eye after a long sleepless night. Still, he was able to follow the glasses without issue.

Once they stopped the fury crossed her arms, expecting him to find the right one. As before, Dallion split into instances. In his mind, however, he was certain that it was the second on the right. There was a moment of suspense as that instance of him lifted the cup. Thankfully, the liquid floated out yet again. He had been right.

Lucky guess. Diroh shrugged. As she did, all glasses split into two, then reformed.

Interesting trick.

Echoes of glass are still glasses, the fury said, then continued with the usual shuffle. And you're wrong. She might have listened. Eury did.

Eury hasn't made up her mind to leave this world.

True, but she hadn't made up her mind to remain in a relationship with anyone, either. She's been with you how long? Nine months? Do you know of anyone else with whom she's been so long?

Dallion's initial reaction was to immediately respond. However, that was the point at which he sensed jealousy, subtly woven in the girl's words. That was a nice sneaky touch and a lesson for Dallion just because the echo had the appearance of someone without music skills didn't mean they couldn't use them.

Nice try, Dallion said, counteracting the music attack. Sounds and emotions clashed in the air, negating each other. That won't work on me.

If it did, that would mean you're not ready to pass the trial, the fury said unapologetically. Moments later the glasses stopped moving again.

Splitting into sixteen instances, Dallion lifted each cup. Just as before the drink was in the place he expected it to be.

There still was a chance that you could have stopped her. You didn't even try. There was nothing special in her voice this time, just a standard distraction. Even so, Dallion had to admit that she was right. He could have made an effort to be closer to Jiroh, even if it was obvious that she wanted to get Eury and him together. Thinking about it, maybe the reason was precisely because she was leaving this world.

Just because you fear it doesn't make it less true. You'll never know whether you could have stopped her or not.

That's not the focus of the trial. And it isn't the point. A lot of things could have happened, but her life is not mine to live.

At that, the fury frowned. With a slam, the glasses divided, filling most of the counter. There was a momentary pause, after which they started shuffling again, only this time at three times the speed. At this point, just looking at them wasn't enough. Dallion had to split into three instances in order to follow everything. His eyes were starting to hurt slightly.

You're still reactive, Diroh said. Not all the time. That's why you passed the gate and got your hunter emblem, but you still are.

Dallion didnt reply. He didnt even think of an answer, focusing on the glass he had set his sights on. It would have been so much easier if it had some tell or marker, but for all practical purposes, the glasses were absolutely identical both in appearance and behavior. Even using music and forging skills didnt help distinguishing between them. Everything depended on Dallion following the right glass until the end.

The glasses continued moving for about half a minute. It was almost as if the fury was doing it on purpose to exhaust Dallion. Given that this was an awakening trial, it was normal to expect it would strain Dallion in some way. Doing it in such fashion, though, seemed outright petty.

What will you do next time? The fury asked before Dallion could pick up the glass. There will be more glasses than instances you can make.

Maybe Ill just make a dozen echoes as well? Dallion suggested, his hand still gripping the glass. If each echo has even a quarter of my splitting potential

How many instances can an echo instance, if an echo could instance instances? Diroh asked. The question was catchy. Maybe at some point Dallion was going to use it.

Or maybe I wont have to. He raised the glass in all instances.

As usual, he managed to find the correct one. However, chills ran down Dallions spine as he found that the glass, he thought would have the liquid, ended up being empty.

Overconfident as always, the fury sighed. I guess youll have to resort to echoes, after all. Well, thats if you can trust the echoes. Since this is a trial, how can you be sure that you actually created them and not me?

Dallion kept staring at the empty glass, while holding the correct one.

How did you do it?

Is it okay to ask? Diroh smiled. Figure that out and youll figure the trial. Ive already given you more than enough hints. All the rest is up to you.

Maybe the trial wasnt this simple, after all.

Chapter 449: Eyes of a Fury

Three echoes appeared in the room, just as the glasses doubled again. With not enough space left on the counter they formed a second row floating in the air. The rules, however, remained the same.

Ready? the fury asked.

Before Dallion had a chance to respond, all glasses began moving about like butterflies. If the past shuffle was difficult, this one was outright impossible. Dallion did his best to follow what he thought to be the glass with the liquid, but after a few seconds, his eyes were stinging him so much that he had to blink.

Want me to stop talking? she asked. Or do you want me to continue? Youll lose either way, but this way youll feel a bit better about yourself.

Wow. Glad you have a high opinion of me. Dallion gave up. With his perception level, it was impossible to keep up, not with her speed.

Im not Diroh, remember? Im just your thoughts and fears.

You still get some outside help, Dallion said, referring to the Moons. That was the wildcard that made this so much more complicated. If Dallion was certain that he was only dealing with his own fears, he could dismiss a lot of things as outright false and act accordingly. However, each trial had just enough doubt to make him wonder whether there was some truth to it.

That's the nature of the trial.

The glasses kept on floating and sliding until at one point they all froze in place. Giving into temptation, Dallion created an instance to look underneath the floating ones, but all he saw was a layer of glass. The trial had thought of something so simple.

Can you guys check a quarter? he asked, his echoes.

Sure.

No prob

Alright. Dallion took a step back. On three.

He split into twenty clones: sixteen to handle his section of the glasses and four more to observe the reactions of the echoes. The prize wasnt in Dallions section, which was bad. However, in one of his remaining instances, he heard an echo shout out it was among his glasses. Naturally, he switched to that instance.

It's here, the echo said loudly, then turned the glass around.

There was nothing there. Not only that, but the echo who'd said so disappeared, leaving the glass to fall and smash into the floor.

I told you not to rely on echoes, Dirroh said. And just to confirm the point, all of Dallions remaining echoes vanished as well. One of the remaining clones turned around, revealing the shimmering orange liquid. This time, though, it didnt remain in place, but darted at Dallion, hitting him in the shoulder.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

A red rectangle appeared in front of him. Its mere presence surprised Dallion. With the level he was aiming for being so far up, he had assumed that he only would get one shot at this. Apparently, things werent as harsh.

Why so surprised? The fury smirked. The point isnt just checking if youre good enough to go on higher, but to teach you if you arent.

Isn't that too much in my favor? Dallion waved the rectangle away. Completing trials in ways that they werent meant to be completed and such.

You cant cheat a trial. Either you succeed or you dont. That's the only thing that matters. If you use a crutch, youll have more problems later on.

How many times do I have?

Youre good at math, cant you calculate? The damage doesnt change.

Nineteen more times. It sounded like a lot, but without a plan, it didn't matter if Dallion had nineteen times or nineteen thousand. The end result was always going to be the same. There always was the option to rely on luck. If he pushed himself a bit, he could split into forty instances, which gave him more than a fifty percent chance of success. That was better than the odds on a roulette table, and yet Dallion still thought it wouldn't be of any help.

Naturally, since this was a learning exercise, he had a go at it. Three times he chose two-thirds of the glasses and three times he failed. The result was always a sharp sting in a part of his body and five percent damage.

Want a break? Diroh asked. It won't count against you in the trial.

Dallion gave her a suspicious look. From what he could tell, she wasn't lying. Just to be on the safe side he had one instance check out his suspicions. The trial didn't end.

A break's fine, he said at last.

All the glasses shifted to the sides, opening a clear space between Dallion and Diroh.

Want something to drink? she asked. It won't be the best. You don't have to level to make things taste nice yet, but it's okay. You've had worse as a hunter.

Maybe later. Dallion couldn't help but smile.

He'd had a lot worse as a hunter indeed. That was one of the differences between a hunter and a sheltered awakened. The sheltered created things that matched their high perceptions of softer clothes and fabrics, tastier food, stronger oils and ointments while hunters worked to ignore the sensations. Sleeping in the wilderness wasn't comfortable in the least, but Dallion had grown to accept it.

How much do you know of what's going on outside? he asked.

As much as you know. You're in a tough situation fighting a crazy mage.

Nothing more?

Instead of answering, the fury floated a bottle of lime green liquid and poured herself a glass. A deep smell of thistles and ozone filled the air. It wasn't a combination that was common, even if the sensations mixed rather well. Without doubt, one had to be a fury to feel the full effect.

Furies were not like humans. They had a lot of shared characteristics, but above all, they were beings of air. Their entire perception of the world was different; it wasn't only land, and plants, and buildings, but also air currents. Hundreds and hundreds of air currents that went everywhere all of the time. They were the invisible strings that moved any object that the furies desired. All this time, the truth had been staring Dallion in the face.

Several strings on the harp's word moved on their own. On cue, Dallion concentrated. Initially, there was nothing to see, however, soon he saw it: the bends in the music sounds. In the past, Dallion had seen sound as nothing but threads attaching to a target. Back on Earth, every child knew that sound wasn't a string, but a vibration that spread as an acoustic wave. What Dallion had been seeing so far was, in fact, a marker representing the connection between the sound source and

the target. Now, he was seeing the entire field, and in that field was affected by magic the natural magic that furies used to control air currents.

I should have been looking at you, Dallion said. Not the glasses.

Good catch. The fury finished her drink and floated the bottle back on the shelf behind her. The air currents she used to do so were clearly visible as pale lines lacking the background's color. It won't help you, though. Dozens of more emerged, each connecting to a different glass.

Without warning, the glasses started shuffling again. Like ballet dancers, they moved from thread to thread, swapping and turning. A breathtaking sight, to be sure, but not one that helped him. Diroh had been right to say that seeing the threads wasn't of any substantial help.

It was natural Dallion wouldn't be able to guess which glass held the liquid; after all, he hadn't seen where it had gone. Unfortunately, the next few times proved that wasn't the only reason for his failure.

Soon enough, half his health was gone and the pain in his eyes was back. Using music to find the liquid didn't work either. The trial had made it the same consistency as air, and the harp's word refused to let him know if there was a way to detect it.

Pushing through the pain, Dallion persisted. No longer splitting into instances, he focused on only following the glass. The level of his body trait made it possible for him to keep on staring for over a minute without blinking.

Finally, the movement stopped.

That one. He pointed, tears streaming from his eyes.

Are you sure? Diroh asked.

When she didn't receive a reply, the fury flipped the cup. A ball of orange liquid floated from it.

Six so far. All the glasses split again, forming three rows above the counter. There were a total of a hundred and sixty-four glasses now, all ready to start the game. Ready to go on?

Give me a minute. Dallion closed his eyes.

The strain was too large for him to handle. In a few weeks, or maybe days, he'd undoubtedly be better at this, but that was too far away in the future. There was still the trial to go through, not to mention the fight going on in the real world. The whole point of leveling up now was to be able to survive the encounter against the mage. By the looks of it, things weren't going well. Dallion had doubts he'd be able to complete the next round, let alone be up for another trial.

Right. Would that be enough, though?

If it weren't enough, I wouldn't have insisted that you attempt it in the first place. The possibility is there right in front of you. Everything else depends entirely on you.

It always does.

A minute passed, then a few more. When the pain in the back of Dallions eyeballs had diminished enough for him to think straight, he opened them. Diroh was holding the glass with the orange liquid in it, patiently waiting for him to give the okay.

Go, Dallion said, playing a chord.

Faster than anything shed done so far, the fury threw the glass among the rest. Over a hundred pieces of glass moved about, bouncing between threads of air. For several seconds, the speed was on the verge of Dallions perception. After that, it became even faster. Everything disappeared in a general blur above the counter.

There was no way for Dallion to be able to track that, and with so many glasses he couldnt rely on combat splitting or echoes.

Youre pushing me to improve, Dallion said, more to himself than to her. All the rounds so far were to get me to think in a certain direction. And each time I failed to do so, you raised the stakes to get me to think.

No smile appeared on the furys face, but Dallion wasnt expecting one. He had already figured out what to do, or at least he thought so. If he was right, it was never about the numbers or the speed.

Chapter 450: Invisible Choices

Extending to five times in size, the whip blade twisted through the air, slashing the threads of air currents that held the glasses in the air. However, it wasnt the endpoints that Dallion was targeting, but rather the source. Razor sharp fragments of indestructible sky silver sliced inches away from the furys body. Losing their connection to her, the glasses poured onto the floor and counter like puppets that had had their strings cut. One of them spilled the orange liquid, creating a small puddle. However, this time Dallion didnt lose any health.

That one, he pointed to the glass.

Just as he expected, all the glasses merged into one.

Good guess. The fury used a thread to put the glass back on the counter. The moment she did, a green rectangle emerged in front of Dallion.

You have broken through your forty-fifth barrier.

Your level has increased to 45.

Choose the trait that will serve you best.

Thats it? Dallion asked in near disbelief.

You thought theres be more? The fury filled the glass, then poured herself one as well. Youve figured out the principle. From here on, itll all be the same. I can fill this entire room with glasses and youll still guess which one has the drink.

Because Im proactive and not reactive, Dallion said, remembering her words.

Like with all trials, it made a whole lot more sense now that he had completed it. This was a test of many things, but most of all, it was a lesson on how to deal with the mage in the real world. Dallion didnt know magic, he didnt even know what was possible and what not. The only thing he knew for

certain was that in order for a spell to be cast, a pattern was needed. If he could find a way to disrupt the pattern, he'd ruin the spell.

What trait should I value the most? he asked, looking at the five options beneath the green rectangle. Reaction?

Reaction is good for bards and mages, not so much for you. Not now, at least.

Why do you think so?

Because you're thinking it, she smirked. I'm an embodiment of your thoughts, remember?

That she was, which meant that her answer was as good as Dallion's. After close to a minute of hesitation, he decided to go with reaction after all. There was no way he could go wrong with having fast reflexes, especially since that was a trait he had been neglecting lately.

The moment he made his choice, Diron disappeared, along with the bar and all the shelves. That was a pity Dallion could have used a bar in his realm. Maybe at some point he'd have Gen make one.

I'm glad you have such a high opinion of me. Dallion closed his eyes again. Even after the end of the trial, the pain hadn't gone away completely. What's next? Do I get to face the rest of the hunter party?

What's next is you getting some rest. You're given the option to rest between trials, so take advantage.

As tempting as that sounded, Dallion would have preferred if he didn't. Every moment here made his return to the real world more difficult. That was one of the basic principles of awakening: don't level up during a fight unless you absolutely have to. In more cases than not, it was the slight disorientation after leaving one's personal realm that brought defeat.

Ariel was waiting for Dallion as he left the trial room. The echo didn't seem the least concerned with that which had happened, as if he'd known the entire time that it would be a success.

The next will be physical, Ariel said with certainty.

You know something I don't? Dallion asked, shielding his eyes from the sun. Bright light didn't help the pain he was feeling.

Because you're weak.

Harsh. One thing about echoes was that they always spoke their mind.

Okay, you're weakened, Ariel corrected. Your greatest fear right now is to face something that would take advantage of that weakness, and so it will.

You make it sound so simple.

It's usually simple when you think about it. Nils, right, by the way. You need a bit of rest. You've already been in the real world long enough to forget the real world, so at least maximize your stay.

There was no point in arguing. Dallion conceded the point and agreed to be taken to the realm's bedroom. The building had been built exclusively for him. Echoes, guardians, and familiars with the exception of Nox didn't sleep. Awakened, in contrast, usually had to. Originally, Gen had built it so that Dallion could rest while walking through the wilderness. As such, he was still annoyed that Dallion preferred the traditional methods of sleeping in items. There had been a few discussions on

the topic, but no matter what was said, Dallion stuck to the old tried-and-true methods, despite having no logical reason behind it.

The bedroom was the top of a three-story tower one large circular room with a single large bed inside. All the walls were made of water that thoughtfully turned opaque when one wanted it to.

Sleep caught up to Dallion the moment he lay down. And with sleep came dreams. This time Dallion found himself in the middle of an ocean on a raft made of clouds. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but water. There was no sun, not even moons, the sky was covered with thousands of stars forming constellations. Looking closely, Dallion could see that part of the stars were green, while all the rest were the usual whitish-yellow.

Not a bad view, a voice said beside Dallion.

Turning around, he saw an old man in a green mage's robe. There were a multitude of emblems embroidered on the green fabric: symbols, numbers, even what looked like chemical formulas. Despite that, Dallion immediately recognized who he was talking to.

I must be in trouble, he said.

What makes you think that? the green mage asked.

You only show up when I'm in trouble. So, what did I do wrong this time?

Nothing yet. You've not done anything right, either. The mage summoned a staff, then raised it to point at the stars. Do you know what those are?

Your stars? Dallion asked.

The question made the man smile. It was definitely an amusing take, created by accident. That was one of the things about this type of dream: here, Dallion could do nothing but speak his mind without anything to hide.

They're skills you have learned.

And the yellow ones?

Those that you can learn.

Dallion stood up, as if to get a better view. Compared to the skills he'd learned, everything else was an ocean. It seemed that he hadn't learned even a percent of what there was. Thinking about it, that was to be expected. Lately he had been focusing on increasing his traits and existing skill groups, rather than exploring new individual skills.

You're very lucky, the mage continued. There's almost nothing you can't learn. Most people in this world would have most of the sky in red.

So, everyone has this dream?

The dream is a metaphor, a metaphor of you. At present, you're focusing on making the stars brighter, rather than making more of them green. The man lowered his staff. I'm not here to tell you what's right or wrong. I'm just here to show you what you are up against.

The mage knows all that? Dallion should have felt terrified, but in his dream, he only felt impressed.

The world knows all that. The mage is just part of the world. You've already gone beyond the point that you need our protection. You're just a small spark, but people are starting to notice you. And there's nothing more than most wouldn't like than to snuff you out before you become a threat. The mage is nothing in the grand scheme of things, although she must still get to end you.

You're dark today.

That's the price of talking with you through dreams, the mage frowned. If we were in an awakening shrine we'd have a normal conversation. Instead, I have to be like this. He pointed at his robe.

I don't know. I think it suits you. Dallion chuckled.

I can't help you on this one.

Why are you here, then? Doesn't that defeat the purpose?

I can still warn you. The mage raised his staff and poked Dallion in the chest. You're still focusing on the wrong things. Just like you were in your trial.

I passed it, Dallion countered. That means I've learned what to focus on.

You're only proving my point. You're focusing on a puzzle piece, nothing more. At this point, you don't even know the big picture despite all the clues you've already been given. From your perspective, they don't even seem like clues, but random events by no means connected to one another. That's not how life in this world works.

Are you saying that everything is preordained and things are fated to happen?

Quite the opposite. I'm saying that there are forces constantly pulling you in different directions. I'm doing it and I'm a lot less subtle than most. You're like the ball in a pinball machine. The only moment you're fully free is when you first awaken. After that, all you could do is choose which stream to follow, whether you recognize it as a stream or not. You still have a choice, you just don't make it. The best you can do is find the choices others offer that coincide with your own.

Maybe it was due to the effect of the dream, but the explanation sounded deep. All this time Dallion had been doing exactly what others wanted him to do. The really mind-boggling thing was that he wasn't following one person, or even a group of people with similar interests, but he was following everyone around him. Every single person, item, or area he'd seen had had an effect on him. That's why he had joined the guild, why he had become indebted to the general, why he was living with Eury even. That also explained why powerful races at the peak of their might followed the Star into banishment and near obscurity.

Do I ever get to create choices for myself or just for others? he asked.

It's too early for me to give you an answer, the mage replied.

That sounds like a yes.

Then consider it a yes.

There was a small burst of euphoria, yet it quickly faded away. Even with such an answer, Dallion was left with enough doubt to remain unsure.

Will you tell me when I find the dragonlet? he asked.

You seem to have things backwards. I've already given you a reward for that task. At the end of the day, debts are nothing but rewards for tasks not yet completed.

But when I find it, I can ask for another boon and pay back my debt later? Dallion persisted.

Sneaky. The mage smiled. Though not as sneaky as you think you are. You're not the first to come up with this idea. My answer is that when you fulfill your promise, then you'll learn. Of course, in order to fulfill it, you'll have to survive. The man drew a pattern of symbols in the air and levitated upwards. See you next time you're in trouble.

Was there any point in this conversation? Dallion shouted as the mage moved higher up into the sky.

Of course, there was, came the reply. What you do with it is up to you. After all, that's the choice you're allowed to make.