

Leveling up 451

Chapter 451: Personal Decision

The windows went transparent, letting sunlight flood into the room. While it felt that the conversation with the green Moon had only lasted a few minutes, it seemed that almost a full day had passed. Dallion had skipped evening, night and even next days morning without even noticing. The pain in his eyes had gone, along with the exhaustion. Unfortunately, the faint sensation of hunger had made itself known, reminding that even mental trials were exhausting.

Dallion stood up and looked outside. Everything seemed calm. Birds from the Vermillion islands flew in the sapphire sky, making their way to the high points of the main island. A dozen feet from the tower, Dallion could see all three echoes of him, playing some sort of game with dice and coins. He vaguely remembered it being a game popular in Nerosal, but had never bothered to learn the rules. Life in this world was way more interesting than a game. Given that the echoes were effectively trapped in his small domain, there was nothing else they could do for entertainment. Thinking about it, that explained Gens near obsession with fixing the place. As the oldest, he had spent a vast amount of time in a series of dark rooms and tunnels, connecting to the oasis of light that was Harps tower. No wonder he, like everyone else, preferred to spend so much time at the beach.

Looking at the three echoes side by side, it was apparent how different they were. All of them shared Dallions face in various stages of his life but their personalities were nothing in common. Gen was the mechanic, or fix-it guy. When he wasn't improving something in the domain, he would spend his time reading in one of the two libraries. July, in contrast, was the one tending to the familiars. Initially, Gleam had been his favorite, but with time, Nox and Lux had taken a liking to him as well. And finally, there was Ariel. The white-haired echo didn't seem to be particularly interested in modeling or animals, preferring to keep to himself for the most part. However, Dallion knew that if anyone were to try and invade his realm, Ariel would be the one to stop them.

You're up, the white-haired said. Ready for the next trial?

As ready as I'll ever be. Dallion was starting to have second thoughts.

Have some faith in me, dear boy.

Want to join in? July asked. It's boring with three.

That was a peculiar thing to say. Not knowing the rules, Dallion had to take the echo's word for it. Sadly, he wasn't in the mood for games.

Maybe later.

No explanations were necessary all three echoes knew precisely what his thoughts were, so none of them persisted. Gen even made a thumbs up gesture for good luck.

It didn't take long for Dallion to pick a spot for the next trial. Since he wasn't as picky as before, a doorway appeared in the first solid piece of rock he walked past. Taking a deep breath, Dallion summoned all his gear, then opened the door. A blue lit tunnel continued forward to infinity, as if someone had taken a wormhole and placed it there. All that had to be done now was one step and the next trial would likely start.

Another level and Dallion could increase his reaction even more. If he were lucky, he could even come across an achievement that would boost him even further. And, if this trial was successful, why stop here? He could easily go on with a third trial, a fourth, maybe even a fifth? With that many advancements, it was virtually guaranteed that he'd have the skills and traits to tip the scales in his favor, if not outright defeat the mage.

Sorry, Nil, Dallion said all of a sudden. One trial is enough.

A single level won't change the odds.

You won't gain just one more level! I've watched you. I know what you're capable of. It won't be easy. Without a doubt, it will be back-breakingly difficult, but you can reach fifty.

Didn't you say that I'm only good for two?

And after those two I'd have told you to go for one more, and one more, and one more. It's all about psychology here. The more you've convinced of your success the less fears you'll have and the less you'll have to face.

I thought cheating wasn't possible.

It isn't cheating. It's an early boost. After fifty, you were likely going to hit a brick wall that would take you a while to break through, but being at fifty would be enough.

It was difficult to say whether Dallion was supposed to be glad or upset. The old echo had told him indirectly that there was something awaiting him upon reaching fifty. Nil wouldn't be so insistent for a mere train increase. In a way, that made this even more difficult.

Sorry, Nil. Your choice doesn't align with mine at this stage.

Some advice I got recently. Thanks for the help, though. I appreciate the intention.

The door in front of Dallion disappeared. Moments later, so did the rest of the realm. Dallion was back in the cloud citadel. The return was accompanied with the usual shock, although it took Dallion less time to get adjusted to his surroundings. Most likely, the awakening level made switching between realms easier.

Euryale was in front, her back turned to him. She had tried to petrify the mage, though that hadn't worked out. The effects had only lasted a few seconds, after which even they had faded away.

The mage had already started drawing the next series of patterns around her. Unlike the fury in the awakening trial, there were no such things as mana threads that could be cut. Despite floating in the air, the mage wasn't a fury, thus she didn't react as one; and that meant that Dallion didn't have to view her as one.

A mage's strength was in her spells, which meant in her speed and fingers. Since the protective shields made it impossible to reach her directly despite the whip blades' persistent efforts, it suggested one possible node of attack. It all mattered on how the mage had improved her traits. Since she was from Earth, she undoubtedly had a basic idea of game mechanics and leveling. Even so, it was possible she had gone along the specialized route. Dallion knew that if he had started with the empathy trait right off, he'd have spent all his points there to gain a maximal advantage.

Barely had Dallion made a step back, when an entire cloud tower crashed onto the mage. There was no physical impact, rather it was like watching something be swallowed by fluff, obstructing all view.

Dont fight her. Jiroh appeared on the scene. Join Eury and get out of here. Ill take care of the rest.

Shes a mage, Dallion kept on gripping the hammer. You cant take her on your own.

I dont have to. Ill be gone before she could do me any harm. Shes here for whats left in the citadel, probably the awakening altar or some other device that the king had stashed. Keep low, join the rest of the party and youll be"

A strong gust of wind emerged, bursting the cloud surface around the mage. Clearly, the opponent was well prepared and battle hardened. The blue robe was now covered with a large semi-transparent suit of flowing purple armor. Above it was a whole ring of glowing spears the instantly flew towards their targets, splitting between Eury, Dallion and Jiroh.

Adrenalin made Dallion want to block the three spears heading his way. Training made him combat split and jump to the side instead, further deflecting them with his shield. It was a good thing too, for apart from everything else, the spears had a sort of electric charge. The instances in which Dallion had gone in contact with them immediately froze up, paralyzed. If this had happened in reality, hed probably get stuck in the cloud, or worse, be on a one-way trip in the ocean below.

Both Eury and Jiroh had reacted in a much more sensible fashion, evading or blocking the spears without actually touching them.

The action didnt phase the woman in the least. Acknowledging the attack, she remained where she was, focusing on casting more spells. Several new layers of shielding appeared around her defensive cocoon, positioned to cushion the hit. Alas for her, she had made the mistake that Dallion was hoping she would: it wasnt about the blow itself, it was about the inertia.

So far, all attacksflying knives, clouds, whip blade slashes had the goal of cutting or puncturing her. Defending them was easy, since the kinetic energy was so low. Having a hammer be propelled at her with such power, however, was something completely different. The impact was far from enough to harm the energy shield in any way, however, it thrust the entire cocoon backwards, causing the mage to slam into its inside like a fly on a windshield.

Blood shot out of the mages nose, briefly splashing into the magic shield, before it too dissolved alone with all her other magic spells. The spears, the armor, even her ability to remain in air were completely gone, allowing the whip blade to finally bite into her leg.

Get to the hearts of the citadel, Dallion told Jiroh. There wouldnt be any better chance than this.

The fury had realized it as well, for she was already clawing at the ground. The speed and intensity were such that Dallion could see nothing but a blur. Blue sparks appeared, growing in size and intensity. Yet, despite all of Jirohs efforts, the cloud surface remained unchanged.

No! she yelled.

Whats the matter? Dallion asked, while still having half a dozen instances ready in case the mage wasnt alone.

The creatures are too weak. They arent letting me through.

Move back, Dallion said, drawing his thread splitter from the place he was hiding it.

The blade gleamed with a gold light as Dallion pulled it out of its sheath. With one precise strike, he opened a cut in the cottony surface, opening a path in as if a zipper had been pulled open.

Where'd you get that? Jiroh asked.

I made a gamble, Dallion lied. Going into the history of the item was the last thing he wanted right now. Lets just go in and"

High-intensity flames filled the area. All but two of Dallions instances were instantly melted away, along with a large part of the cloud. Only those standing close to Jiroh managed to survive unscathed. Flames, while destructive, were incapable of harming a fury. At the end of the day they remained nothing but currents of ultra-hot air, and air was controllable.

Chapter 452: The Step Beyond

Fire streamed around Jiroh for several seconds, melting entire sections of the cloud away. Dallions heart sank. Euryale had been a few dozen feet further ahead before the blast. The moment the flames were gone, Dallion split into two dozen instances, rushing in her direction. A large hole loomed in the ground of the citadel, reaching all the way down to the ocean itself. As for the gorgon, there was no trace.

Unwilling to accept this, instances of Dallion leapt into the ocean in an attempt to spot any trace of her. Unfortunately, there was nothing.

Eurys fine, Jiroh said. While she wasnt using her awakened powers, she still had the ability to see others split. She jumped through to avoid the blast.

Are you sure? Dallion felt a boost of hope fill his chest.

I felt the vibrations, the fury replied.

You pieces of shit! the mage screamed.

She had fallen considerably, almost reaching the ocean itself. Her entire right sleeve was shredded, along with her arm. Her legs and torso were only in slightly better condition. However, she had managed to use her left hand to cast a protective sphere around her in time to save herself from Gleam.

You think thatll take me down? she asked, breathing heavily.

Thanks to his music skill, Dallion could tell that she was still scared, though there were signs of relief. For a moment, there had been a real possibility of her dying, but no more. Still, it had suggested that she was overly reliant on magic. One single hiccup and not even a good one and she had ended up in such a state. No doubt the fire blast had taken a lot of her. The only reason she had resorted to it at all was out of desperation to get rid of any attackers. That had only worked in part. The power of the blast had thrown Gleam a fair distance away, but since the whip blade was invulnerable, it had flown back, and was now still slamming against the protective magic sphere.

Sadly, that was easier said than done. While wounded and shaken, the mage was starting to regain her self-composure. Already she had created a healing pattern in the air Dallion could easily recognize it from his fights at the arena. In five, or ten seconds at most, she would be back on the offensive and this time she wouldnt be just toying with them.

Quickly, Dallion used his thread cutter to slice another opening beneath him.

Lets go, he whispered to Jiroh.

In his mind, Dallion was almost sure he saw the fury smile a barely noticeable curve of the lips just before he was pulled down into the cloud. The sensation was like flying through vapor and light water combined. Most of him barely felt any pressure, while the sea iron elements on his armor pulled him back, offering significant resistance. Jiroh was in front, flying forward like a comet.

Within moments, a wave of energy passed through everything, causing the cloud matter itself to vibrate.

The mage had no intention of giving up, even if she had to destroy everything in the process. Not long after, there was a second set of vibrations, though considerably weaker.

Judging by the tension in his voice, that was more than a metaphor. And just to confirm it, a new set of vibrations passed through Dallion, this time strong enough to make his teeth rattle.

How much further? he shouted.

I dont know, Jiroh replied. They were everywhere before. A lot of them must have weakened.

Move closer to the water! Dallion shouted.

What? Jiroh hesitated. Why?

The creatures, theyve been wanting to pass on for hundreds of years. If they had a choice, how would that do that?

Dallion felt his entire body twist as the fury changed direction. It had taken her a few moments to figure out what he was telling her. Lingering doubt could still be felt emanating from the fury, but she had decided to put her trust in an empath.

The further the pair went, the darker the clouds around him became. Soon enough, Dallion could feel an unmistakable chill they had gone underwater. Despite that, there seemed to be a faint sensation of life.

Theyre sleeping! Dallion said, astonished. Theyre at the very bottom of the citadel sleeping.

Someplace calm and dark the only place the beings that could be creatures could go to sleep, far away from the pain of reality. Even in this world, everything slowly got old. Clouds were no exception. It had taken them millennia to reach this state, but in the end, they had.

Theyre here, Dallion said.

Jiroh needed no telling, she already knew. Emotions stronger than Dallion had ever felt: memories of childhood, the joy of finding friends, and the sadness of losing them. What was more, they werent all emanating only from Jiroh, but from everywhere around. What remained of the cloud creatures had woken up. Pulses of energy could be felt flashing through the area, like synapses firing up.

Youre back, a voice said. It wasnt in any language Dallion had spoken, yet he still understood it. We didnt think youd come.

When the other took you away, we thought wed be alone.

Im back, Jiroh replied, her voice sounding almost identical to what Dallion had seen in her memory. I told you Id come back.

And stronger, another voice said.

Much stronger. Do you still want to go back to your home?

We can open the path for you.

Dallions heart tightened. They were truly hoping for this the chance to transform into pure energy and help someone in the process. Did they consider Jiroh a friend? From what he could see, they felt so. What would happen to them after, though? Would the energy simply be used up and vanish? Or would it banish them so they could return as a guardian?

How do you know where I am?

Half the citadel lit up a moment ago! And Im not talking about the part above water!

In his mind, Dallion imagined things very differently. There, the clouds had moved him in the direction he had arrived, allowing him to have one last faceoff with the mage, while the fury was sent off to her world. Normally, thats what would have happened as well if only he hadnt combat split.

Indeed, part of his instances were thrust away, and even faced the approaching mage. Others didnt. Unfortunately, him being an otherworlder combined with the sacrifice the cloud hearts made, created for a whole different experience. In that one second, all instances were real, and not only his. The massive cloud citadel imploded, creating a bubble of energy no larger than a room. Left without protection, several instances of Dallion got the air kicked out of their lungs. A short distance away, the mages protection sphere shattered. Spells and magic alike vanished, leaving her completely defenseless. A few more moments and she would have drowned, but Dallion didnt get to see that. Just dozens of him were dying, one was swallowed by the bubble of energy. That was the instance that counted the most.

Suddenly everything disappeared, and Dallion found himself in the middle of an endless star-filled sky. The only difference was that the sky was white.

Youre not supposed to be here. A Moon appeared a Cyan Moon.

And he isnt, Felygn said as his own form emerged from the whiteness.

Hes here, and hes not, the Orange Moon said. Leave it to otherworlders to gather together to create such a mess. I suppose it could have been worse.

Thats the question, Felygn said, far less amused than Dallion expected him to be. Youre nowhere at the same time.

That didnt even make sense. Thinking as hard as he might, Dallion tried to decipher the meaning behind the Moons words. He could understand being nowhere, he could also understand being everywhere at the same time, but the combination of words Felygn used was meaningless no matter the context.

There could be a loophole, the red Moon said as it appeared. Its been done before.

Its already happened, a voice much stronger than every other said.

Looking above, Dallion saw the blue moon hovering in the middle of all the rest. That was the Moon of Awakening the most powerful moon of all, and the one who looked over humans and awakened alike. Under normal circumstances, Dallion would have expected the Moon patroning his race to be more favorably inclined. From what he could sense that wasn't the case, though.

What's done is done, the Blue Moon boomed. From here on, it's for them to settle things. None of us are to get involved.

Wait, Dallion rushed to add a word in. What is"

The moment he blinked, the whiteness had gone. He was on the cloud once more, with Jiroh beside him. Yet, this wasn't the cloud citadel he knew; this cloud was far smaller, barely the size of an indoor swimming pool. And that was just the start of the difference. The landscape was nothing like it had been moments ago. The ocean was replaced by a vast sea of lights covering land, clouds, and mountains alike. Looking at it made Dallion think of a sci-fi version of New York. Thousands of clouds, creatures, and people moved about, flying from one spot to another along invisible lanes of air. The thing was that all the people were furies.

Dal? Jiroh asked both confused and alarmed. Why are you here?

Dallion looked around. Jiroh's clothes had changed to something more akin to a shirt and jeans. She was no longer shimmering, indicating this was the place she belonged in. He, in contrast, was exactly the same as he had been before entering her world, complete with the sea iron additions to his armor. The only difference was that other than the thread splitter he was holding, none of his other weapons were here.

I don't know, he replied, fighting the panic within him. The only thing that partially calmed him down was the fact that he could feel the emotions within the fury. Apparently, access to his realm was all he had lost. Is this your world? he forced himself to ask in an attempt to focus his mind on something else.

You can't be seen looking like that, Jiroh said with the same calm connectedness she had back in the awakened world. There aren't any humans on Flora. If people find you

I get the idea, Dallion interrupted as he looked at the ground. That's not our biggest problem, though.

Jiroh looked in his direction. Down, lying on the ground ten feet below, was none other than the mage that had attacked them. And she was completely unconscious.

Chapter 453: World of Stone and Clouds

Mind your head, Jiroh said as they made their way into the small building.

Back on Earth, Dallion would have called it a storage tunnel, though here it was the equivalent of a shack or cottage if one wanted to be extremely generous. Since they had the ability to control air currents, furies predominantly used two types of materials: cloud matter and stone. Anything made of wood or metal was considered too much effort and reserved for the well-off. For some reason, that made Dallion think of the fantasy myths he'd read online as a child. There it was said that elves didn't get along with metal either.

Just put her there. The fury pointed to what passed as a bed etched into the stone wall. It was going to be extremely uncomfortable by human standards, but beggars weren't choosers, and it wasn't like

Dallion had any warm feelings towards the mage. While she appeared helpless and unconscious now, she had still tried to kill them.

Gently, he placed her in the sleeping alcove then looked around for a place to sit. Although not particularly small, the room was quite empty. Or rather, it was filled with various cloud objects stacked on one another or placed on stone shelves, as if he had walked into a cotton factory.

Are you sure well be okay here? Dallion asked, still looking around.

No one has come here since my grandparents, Jiroh replied. Most of the stuff is old or trash, so they wont Just sit down, she said, annoyed. Ill make a chair.

There was a slight moment of hesitation, but Dallion did as he was asked. The moment he did, he felt that there was something beneath him. It felt like a water chair, but without the chair; or rather, like one of those inflatable pieces of furniture. Definitely an experience that needed getting used to, although it did the job.

As he tried to adjust, his eyes fell on the stacks of clouds, wondering how they could go old. From his perspective, they looked almost identical. Clearly, furies had different standards.

So, whats the plan? he asked. I havent been able to enter my realm or anything else here. I cant sense area guardians either.

I havent tried, but I think itll be the same for me. What possessed you to follow me? Id have told you this isnt a place for humans.

It wasnt planned. Dallion had thought back to the moment many times and he still couldnt figure out exactly what had happened. He had replayed the final moments dozens of times in his mind, and still couldnt come up with anything concrete. At this point, he wasnt even sure whether the entire scene with the Moons wasnt a case of him losing consciousness and imagining it.

By any logic what happened shouldnt have happened: Dallion had split into instances in order to fight the mage at the same time Jiroh was pulled back to her world. He should have been able to choose an instance to become reality, but instead it appeared that one was chosen for him.

Is there anything I could eat here? he asked. Furies dont survive on air alone, right?

We eat, Jiroh chuckled, though her smile faded away soon after. Most of my family are farmers. Thats why we live on the ground.

I take it thats a bad thing?

Thats where the expression dirt poor comes from. Only those who cant afford it live in girt. Crop yields are good when you can influence the weather. In most cases, furies only swoop down a few times per week to check on things and then during harvest. Those without the means just stay on the ground and do all the work there.

So, this is your world, Dallion sighed. Back in his mind, he thought it would be a lot different a lot more magical and full of adventure and mystery. In truth, it could be said the world was very much like Earth, only developed in a different fashion.

Also, he still couldnt picture Jiroh as a farmer. In Neorsal, he imagined her anything but that. She was the epitome of adventure: the fury that did pretty much whatever she wanted, a hunter that

roamed the wilderness with ease, a royal princess by adoption with the power to scorch entire neighborhoods if she wished. Here

So, what do we do now? he asked.

For the moment, you stay here and keep an eye on her. The fury glanced at the mage. I've entangled her with air currents, but you'll need to find something more solid when I've left.

Dallion nodded. He had enough clothes for that. The important thing was not to allow the mage to move her fingers. If he had retained his awakened skills, so could she.

I'll go back home and see how things stand. For all I know, centuries might have passed. Either way I'll try to come back with some food. If I'm not back in five days, it means things have gone wrong and you're on your own.

Your clothes are the same, isn't that an indication that everything is back as if should be?

The fury shook her head.

My skins still black. I wasn't a thunder fury when I left this place. Not everything is the same.

That much was true. With as little as a goodbye, the fury left the cottage. As she did, she closed and locked the cloud door that was at the caves entrance. Apparently, even if the place was full of trash there were people who would steal it.

Moments later, Dallion felt the air currents beneath him weaken. The chair was also made by Jiroh, so with her gone, they had returned to normal. Immediately, he stood up. This was a good reminder for him to tie up the mage's hands. The easiest option was to tear off a sleeve, but with normal fabric being nonexistent in this world, he opted to just take the entire shirt off and tie up her hands with it. Given how weak she was, that was probably going to hold her, although Dallion also considered using some of the wiring of his additional armor as well. A quick look at the clouds around him quickly made him reconsider. This was a fury world. Without the sea iron gauntlets and the ore armor pieces, he wouldn't be able to interact with most of it.

You better not try anything, he said, just in case the mage was listening in.

Time passed slowly. Back when Dallion first wakened, he thought that spending time in a small doorless room was small. Now it felt twice as bad at least back then he wasn't aware of what was outside.

A few minutes in, he attempted to combat split in order to explore while also keeping an eye on the captive. Alas, that proved impossible. No matter how hard Dallion focused, the result was always the same.

Curiously, he tried to stretch. That came easy, at least he hadn't lost his athletic skills. Just to be certain he attempted a somersault, then a wall run. There was no indication that his skills had ever been lessened. If there was someone to fight, Dallion could check if the skill bonuses were still in effect. That would have to wait till Jiroh came back. Come to think of it, that wasn't her name in this world. According to the memory fragment, her first name remained Ji but the rest had to be different.

After half an hour, Dallion was going through the clouds stored in the room. There was no telling what they would be. From the looks and sensation, he gathered they were clothes and mattresses,

though even that was a stretch. Their colors were mostly the same a dull white with a slightly gray hue. Instinctively, he tried pressing his face against the fabric. Nothing stopped him. The only sensation was a slight cold softness along with the faint smell of ozone. He was tempted to taste it, but ultimately decided not to. There was no telling what the effects would be, and even if it ended up being safe, eating other peoples clothes and furniture wasnt going to make for a good first impression.

An hour passed, then another. The boredom was so extreme that Dallion felt like hed been there for days. The room didnt have any lights per se, but enough of the cloud matter emitted a strong enough glow to create the impression of a semi-dim neon light.

If Dallion had the ability to enter his awakened realm, he would have at least spent part of the time learning new languages, or reading dryad scrolls. Heck, if there was anything remotely similar to a book here, hed have tried to read it as well. The sad thing was that there was no guarantee that there werent books among all the other clouds. If dryad books were wooden scrolls, there was nothing keeping fury books from being cloud matter. Thinking back, he hadnt actually seen any fury books or scrolls in the awakened world, either. Most had been human with a smattering of dwarf. Dryad and Nymph ones were exceedingly rare, and Eury never spoke gorgon writing.

As Dallion was thinking, a change in the mages breathing caught his attention. Grabbing the thread splitter knife, he briskly turned around.

The mage looked at him. She was still on the bed alcove, hands tied up, and very much so awake. Her glance moved from Dallion to the weapon he was holding, then back to his face.

Well? she asked, fear ringing through her entire body.

Looking at her, she appeared in her thirties, slightly plain, though some would describe her as cute. Her skin was relatively pale, though not so much so as Dallions, and her jawline was quite sharp. Without Gleam here, Dallion had no way of knowing whether that was her real appearance or an illusion. One thing was for certain her hair was definitely not normal. During the fight Dallion was certain that it was black, but here there also was a dark blue reflection to it.

I wont hurt you, Dallion said, lowering the knife.

The mage didnt say anything.

Cant say the same for you.

Are you kidding me? The mage frowned.

Dallion didnt respond.

You really dont know? she asked after a while. Try awakening.

Part of our powers are sealed. I know.

That includes magic.

That made Dallion look at the mages fingers. While her hands were still tied, the fingers were unmistakably free.

Ive been trying to cast a spell for a while. Nothing works.

By the sound of it, only the supernatural skills were limited. That gave Dallion the clear advantage. His body trait was clearly superior.

Congrats on sending Jiroh away. You won't get to enjoy it long, though. Harm me and the circle will get you in a month. Let me go, on the other hand, and maybe I'll be able to explain things away. You're a rising star, after all.

The circle? So, there were indeed several mages involved. That was bad, but at least it gave Dallion a hint of what he was dealing with. Judging by the feat still within her, it might have even been involuntary. Considering her state, maybe now was a good time to check if his music skills were still effective.

Sure thing, he said, adding calm and overconfidence in his voice. All I have to do is let you go?

That's right. I'll even vow to the Moons.

Go ahead. Dallion crossed his arms. Either his skills had worked, or the mage was really desperate. Either way, he waited for her to finish her vow, then untied her.

The woman wasn't grateful in the least. Massaging her wrists, she got up and walked past Dallion, as if he were a houseplant.

So, where did you take me? she asked, heading towards the door. Some underwater cave?

Not exactly. Dallion followed her.

When the mage reached the door of cloud, she glanced at Dallion, giving him a smirk, then walked out. Mere seconds later, she rushed back in again.

What did you do? she reached to grab him by the collar. While her reaction speed was high, her body movement was almost sluggish in comparison, allowing Dallion to grab her hands before she could reach him. You took us out! Now we're stuck here and there's no way back!

Chapter 454: Fury Reality

It took close to an hour for the mage to calm down. Despite everything she had attempted to do to Dallion, he couldn't ignore the sheer terror that emanated from every fiber of her being. It had taken half an hour of talking while also using the appropriate music skill just to get her out of her panic loop. The state of dread was the same that someone experienced after learning their awakened abilities had been sealed. Initially, Dallion thought that had been the case; for a mage, maybe not being able to perform spells was on par with losing their awakened skills. However, after a while, he was starting to think that couldn't be true. After all, the panic had only occurred after the mage had found them to be in another world.

Not too long after, the door swung open and Jiroh came back. The fury was carrying two large cloud bags, as well as a stone tray beneath her arm. Upon seeing the mage untied, she instantly collected several air currents and wrapped them around the woman's fingers. The mage barely gave her a glance.

You must have been busy, Jiroh said as she placed the tray in the air a foot above the floor. I brought you some food. It's not much, but all I could sneak from home. She emptied the cloud bags on the tray.

There was fruit that Dallion hadn't seen before and also, thankfully, clearly recognizable bread.

I expect shell have to eat as well? Jiroh asked.

At some point, Dallion replied, taking a piece of bread. It wasnt much, but having something to chew was very welcome. How are things outside?

Fine, more or less Jiroh sighed. Ive been missing for over three years. There even was a brief inquiry. The only good thing about coming from a farming family is that no one cared particularly. When I let the constabulary know Im alright they pretty much told me not to do it again.

As much as that was a relief, it was also harsh. Normally, Dallion expected there to be an inquiry, or at the very least a brief talk to find out where shed gone for the last three years. The local authorities had treated Jiroh as if she were a runaway. Well, in some aspects, maybe she seemed like one.

Three years? Dallion asked. He couldnt be sure, but at least seven times as much had passed in the awakened world. Why the same clothes, though?

Because they were the clothes I had when I vanished. Did you get any sleep?

Dallion looked at Jiroh, then at the mage.

Right.

Once he finished the bread, Dallion ventured to try one of the fruits. As he did, the mage joined in. Jiroh probably took that as a provocation, for several air threats wrapped around the mages neck. It took Dallions assurance that the woman couldnt cast spells for the fury to loosen her hold, although even then she didnt completely remove it.

Quiet, the mage took one of the remaining pieces of bread. After a bite, she spat it on the floor.

Disgusting! she coughed, trying to get all taste out of her mouth.

Sheltered. Jiroh sighed. Whats your level?

The mage glared at her.

Name and level, Jiroh repeated. An aid thread pressed against the mages throat, indicating that it would be better to answer the question.

Katka, the mage said. Katka, level sixty-four.

Sixty-four. Jiroh nodded, slightly impressed. Whats a sixty-four-level mage doing hunting us?

It was never about you. I didnt even know you existed. The only reason I know about loverboy there is because of the Nerosal mess.

So, you were after the citadel.

The creatures that held the citadel, Katka corrected. The merchant told me someone else was looking for it. There was a slight pause. I thought it was something else. But after what you did, it would have been better if I came upon them.

Oh? Jiroh had caught the note of spite in the mages voice. Tell me about that.

You destroyed a dozen hearts in order to get back to your shitty world! Only an idiot would do that! And to top it all, you dragged us along with you! Have you any idea what youve done?

She already asked me that, Dallion said, hardly paying any notice. The fruit, though sour, was not terrible.

We're not from this world. It's more than just being out of place or having our powers sealed. This world is actively fighting to remove us from existence. It won't start immediately, but eventually it will.

You mean freak accidents will happen? Dallion asked.

This isn't a horror flick! Katka snapped at him. There's no hive-thought. We're just an element that cannot exist and as such will slowly be eradicated or broken down to other elements. Otherworlders can't just visit each other's world. Every moment we're here, we're slowly getting poisoned. Maybe it'll take months, or maybe decades, but in the end the mage forced herself to try another bite of breath, this time managing to keep it in her mouth.

Poisoned. Dallion wished Nil was here to offer some clarity. There were no indications that the mage was lying, but no one could rely on her world, either.

What did you need the hearts for? Jiroh pressed on.

Skill gems, what else? Tears were visible in the corners of Katka's eyes as she swallowed the bite of food. For a while, it seemed like she would vomit it all out, but that didn't happen. Cloud creatures condense into gems. Unless you waste their energy on something stupid such as this.

If I had my magic, I'd be able to get us back. Or at least get in touch with someone who could get us back. After what you pulled, no chance of that.

Why? Dallion asked.

What do you mean?

Why can't you cast spells?

If I could have cast spells, I wouldn't be wasting my time here, eating this crap.

I mean why can't you on a technical level, Dallion clarified, ignoring her crap comment.

No idea. Maybe this world doesn't allow magic? Maybe there's a negation field. Maybe passing through drained all the magic from me. Whatever the reason, I don't have the skills anymore.

Maybe you do, Dallion said. You tried to make a pattern when you were tied up. What if you're just lacking magic energy?

The point was interesting enough to spark a conversation on its own. It was outright impressive how mortal enemies of hours ago slowly focused on exploring the topic in an attempt to find a solution. Possibly it had to do with the fact that both of them were human, and as such quick to adapt when their survival was on the line.

The discussions continued for a long while and resulted in two conclusions acceptable by all: one both Dallion and Katka had to find a way to leave this world; two they had to find more information in order to do so. For the second to happen, they had to find a place to stay and somewhere different from this storage cave.

After some consideration, Jiroh agreed to have them stay at her house. During her three-year absence, quite a lot of changes had taken place. Two of her sisters had moved out, while her brother had built a place of his own several miles from her parents main house. That left enough space for Dallion and the mage to move in as guests, and since the house was made largely of stone, staying wasnt going to be an issue.

To mask the humans appearance, Jiroh dug out some old hooded cloaks. Thanks to Dallions sea iron exo-armor, it was possible to shove it on with some minor adjustments. The biggest problem turned out to be the hood which kept falling through his head, though that problem was solved by dismantling part of Dallions gauntlet and placing it on his head. In the case of Katka, things were a bit more complicated. Dallions iron soles had to be used to keep the whole thing in place. That made her appear much stiffer, though she could compensate due to her high reaction trait.

The disguise was farcical no matter how one looked at it, but Jiroh assured them that such instances werent rare on the ground. Moon sects, funnily enough, were quite common there, although the term was quite different. The sects philosophy was of a simpler life on the ground beneath the moonthe single one that existed in this worldin the belief that would bring real freedom to an individual. They were mostly harmless, although a large number of countries on Flora accused them of being undercover agents of one government or another. Even so, as long as they remained on the ground, virtually no one cared.

To make things more believable, Dallion and Katka would claim that they had taken a vow of simplicitywhich meant not using air currents. And just to be on the safe side, Katka would pretend to have taken a vow of hunger as well.

It took a while for the humans to get used to their new clothes. Sitting was the greatest problem, followed by walking. After considerable practice, both of them managed to pull it off. Even with diminished powers, being an awakened had its benefits.

Learning fury speech was even longer, at least for Dallion. While both of them had writing skills, Katkas were several dozen levels higher than those of him. All in all, it took her fifteen minutes to learn the grammar of the language and a large enough vocabulary to get by in most situations. Dallion, in contrast, required hours. On the plus side, he was the only one to get the pronunciation right. That was of extreme importance, since it was going to be his role to deal with all mishaps using his music skills.

When Jiroh was satisfied that both humans could pull off being moon followers, all three started the trip to her house.

Normally, the distance could be passed for five minutes. Walking, though, increased the time to almost an hour. As they made their way through the countryside, Dallion noted how similar this world was to Earth in a completely different way. It was as if ground and sky had been flipped. Wherever he looked, the land seemed in pristine condition, covered in meadows, forests, and more plants he could identify. It was the sky that had been built up, full of layers upon layers of clouds, like clusters of industrial islands filling the sky. In some spots, far in the distance, the clouds were so thick that even the ground beneath was starting to go barren. Jiroh had explained that to be the major problem of modern times: static cities. Their presence created patches on the land that couldnt produce anything, however, at the same time, this was the only way to guarantee proximity to earth resourcesmore specifically metals. With the boom of the metal industry, more and more furies wanted to buy luxuries made of the material, not to mention that the war industry heavily

relied on such supplies. Even technology had started incorporating metals, and lately lass, in exceedingly complex devices, creating automated devices that made life easier for millions.

One last thing, Jiroh said as the large stone building she called home became visible in the distance. My family drinks a lot. That comes with living on the ground.

Do you get drunk a lot? The mage smirked.

I used to.

Chapter 455: The Eccentric Moon Follower

Here she is, Jirohs father said. His tone wasnt disapproving, nor was it enthusiastic. Rather, it was as if he was discussing a cat walking in through the window.

Dallion could feel a deep sense of apathy in the room. It was coming from everyone, even those who were glad that she had returned. This had to be what it was like living on the ground.

Yes, I am here, Jiroh replied, keeping her calm. These are the"

Before she could finish, one of the clouds lumps in the room leapt up and darted at Dallion. The speed was incredible faster than more enemies he had fought. Even with his layer vision, Dallion was only able to catch several frames of the thing. In those few moments he glimpsed a silhouette appear, as well as a large mouth full of alarmingly sharp and pointed teeth.

Instinct made him try to split into instances. Reality quickly let him know that was impossible. As Nil had warned him back in the awakened world, while any awakened power presented a considerable advantage, over-relying on it was a weakness.

Stop! Dallion ordered, combining his zoology and writing skills. His gamble was that the creature was similar to a dog, and would probably understand an order given to it in the language of a cutling.

He never got to learn if he was right, for Jiroh used her air currents to entangle the cloud mid-air, a step away from Dallion. The action was close to instantaneous, making several of the furies at the table look in her direction. Even the cloud which now had acquired a semi-feline form glanced at her with a sad expression and an innocent meow.

No, Jiroh said in a firm tone.

The cloud struggled a bit, then seeing that the fury meant business curled back up into a pure cloud form. That seemed to be good enough, for it earned the creature its release.

What happened to no pets in the dining room? Jiroh looked at her father.

The old fury, like all the rest, presented a visual paradox that Dallion was still having trouble with. Like everyone round the table, he had the clear majestic appearance of an ageless elf. He had perfect facial features, perfect skin, long white hair, and unnaturally clear green eyes. At the same time, he was dressed in what could only be described as a pair of baggy jeans and a loose shirt, all made of cloud fabric. One didnt have to be a fury to tell that the material was old, cheap, and worn.

Skyes usually well behaved, Jirohs father said, barely given her a glance. Shes just forgotten you since you ran off for four years.

Three, Jiroh corrected, making her way to the table.

A noticeable frown appeared on her mothers face. From what Dallion could tell thanks to his music skill, everyone was surprised that she spoke back. That suggested that the thunder fury had been a lot meeker in the past. To an extent, there was even pride and envy, mostly among the older members of the family. The young ones sisters and brothers, from what Jiroh had told Dallion were nearly awestruck even if they wouldnt be caught dead showing it.

As I was saying, these are some friends of mine.

Some friends of mine, one of the young furies mimicked, trying to keep from chuckling. Funny accent, sis.

Reading the atmosphere in the room, Dallion decided that now was the right time for him and Katka to take their seats. This was going to be one of the more challenging parts of the introduction. From what Jiroh had assured them, they would spend most of the time in one of the rooms freed by Jirohs sisters. However, it was expected that during the first introduction that any potential guests joined the host family for dinner.

Slowly, Dallion approached the cloud furniture. If there was anything that could go wrong, it would be now.

Reciting the names of the Moons out of habit, Dallion reached for the back of the cloud chair, all the time making sure that the sleeve of the robe he was on covered his hand completely.

Stop! Jirohs father said before Dallion could touch it. Silence filled the room. All eyes were on Dallion or the head of the family.

Ati, the fury said. Bring the stone chairs.

Dallions pulse quickened. Were they uncovered? That wasnt good. In his mind, he started calculating the odds of him and Katka being sold off to a lab or local government. Given their level of poverty, one might suspect theyd do anything to get out of it.

I almost joined a moon cult when I was young, Jirohs father said as the chairs were brought in. They were massive enough that even an awakened would have a difficult time carrying it. Thanks to air currents, though, it was done by a child of ten. Please, he invited them, moving the cloud chairs out of the way.

You honor us, Dallion said, the first thing that came to mind.

Ji got your accent from you, her father noted. What was she doing in your order?

The funny thing was that it had happened the other way around. Dallion had copied Jirohs accent, which she had likely picked up on the cloud citadel.

I thought you werent interested in such things, Jiroh intervened.

The day you vanished, you stopped pulling your weight. The money that was supposed to come didnt, so we had to adjust.

Three marriages? Youre probably heartbroken.

Stupidity doesnt break the heart.

This was potentially the most passively-aggressive raw Dallion had seen in his life. Given that he knew what furies were capable of, a real fight could easily destroy the entire building and

everything in it. Back in the awakened world, nearly all furies Dallion had come across had been highly subservient, due to unfortunate world circumstances. As mercenaries, though, he had heard they were highly sought after. Here, the society was a lot more civilized, so they had found new ways to express their temper.

Guess theyve taken from you.

A pity thats the only thing they took.

No need to look at the path twice treaded. Dallion pointed up at the ceiling in an attempt to put an end to the rather uncomfortable dinner conversation. The phrase in itself was the most stupid, jumbled combination of words he could find. However, he also used his music skills to add some calm in it.

The effect was marginal at best. At the same time, in his attempt to appear more mystical, Dallion had accidentally revealed part of his hand while pointing. In itself, that wasnt terribly significant: the hand of a human was essentially the same as that of a fury; the iron metal gauntlet, on the other hand, wasnt.

Metal? Jirohs father asked, astonished.

Im a forge apprentice. Dallion immediately took advantage. Only a notice. That is why we keep ourselves hidden from the world.

Everyone stared at the metal fingertips visible beneath the sleeve. From their perspective, he had just transformed from a weird peddler with weird views of the world, to a rich eccentric wishing for a simpler life. With the local industry only lately starting to focus on metal and glass, only certain people could have it in large quantities, let alone use it for luxuries such as gauntlets. Even the cloud-cat changed form, curious of the shining metal.

Lets finish our food. The moon followers would like to rest, Jirohs father said after a while. Ati, Siri, youll be sharing a room with your sister.

It was quite clear who he was referring to. To Dallions surprise, there were no arguments, even internal. Jirohs younger sisters accepted it as normal. If anything, they were even enthusiastic that their room had been chosen/

And Ji, just because youve become a thunder doesnt mean a thing, her father continued. While youre here youll pull your weight.

The rest of the meal continued in silence. The only point of interest was the cat creature. Extremely hostile moments ago, it was now acting like a perfect pet.

The moment dinner was over, half of the furies disappeared along with the dishes. Jiroh remained for long enough to get the nod from her father, then took Dallion and Katka to their room on the second floor. From this moment, their stay had officially begun.

Youll have to be very quiet, Jiroh whispered after she closed the door. Furies hearing is almost as good as yours.

For non-awakened, that was outright impressive.

Ignoring the cloud elements, the room resembled more the undersection of a bridge than an actual room. One door led in from the inside of the building, and at the same time, the exterior wall was missing altogether.

I'll make sure you aren't cold, Jiroh said.

Breaking the fourth wall, Katka noted, staring at the open space. So, what now?

Now you two remain here while I try to figure this out.

How exactly? There was no indication the awakened world existed back in our world. Why should here be any different?

I don't know about your world, but there was an extensive mythology selection of literature. I used to read a lot at my previous job. Now I'll just have to read the slightly more specialized section.

Not a bad plan. Of course, everyone could see the obvious problem. While it would be impossible for Dallion or Katka to get a job in any capacity, the same could almost be said for Jiroh herself. As far as the world was concerned, she wasn't particularly educated, didn't have any special skills or talents, and didn't come from an important family. If only this world knew how wrong it was.

Will you get your old job back? Dallion asked.

There's no point. They don't like timewasters. Not to mention, they can't tolerate employees with an attitude. It was pretty bad before, and now I doubt I'll be able to take it for half a week.

I see your point. Dallion nodded.

With her current character, she'd probably drive management crazy.

What about a research lab? the mage asked. You have those, right? There's a better chance they to find something we might use than books about ancient fairytales.

They'll never let anyone like me near.

None of them? Katka turned towards Jiroh, an annoying smirk on her face. Don't you have any confidential projects or secret societies you can impress with a piece of metal?

Several threads of air gently formed around the mage's neck, reminding her that the fury was in control.

A piece of metal won't be enough, Jiroh replied. Anyone with enough power can get their hands on metal.

But how many can forge it? Dallion asked. You can. Eury must have taught you at some point. Even without awakened skills you have the know-how and we'll help you make the initial load of ingots to give about.

You will, Katka said. Both Dallion and Jiroh stared at her. I don't know forging. The woman shrugged. Learning it was a waste of time. I focused on spellcraft, and if there's one thing that's ideal for is finding links and patterns. Get me all the information this world has and if there's a way out, I'll find it without spending decades on it.

That sounded like a good idea. The only reason Dallion was hesitant was because of the person who had suggested it. As far as he could tell, she wasn't lying, but it was almost certain she had some other agenda in mind as well.

Then we find a way into a library.

It'll be a waste of time. Katka looked out of the room at the clouds in the distance. That's the thing about secret societies. They have many names, do different things, but there are two constants: they always form in places where there are advanced societies, and they're always the ones best informed.

Chapter 456: Plan to the Clouds

The nearest cloud city was a two-hour flight away, but before they could go there, there were a few things that had to be prepared. The first was finding an adequate iron deposit. Due to the furies way of life, technology of that aspect was beyond crude. In theory, a number of scientific methods were devised, but from Dallion understood the practice was: if one could see evidence of ore veins that was considered good enough. It was no coincidence that most contested areas were mountains. On the bright side, that gave the group an advantage, although it was uncertain whether Dallion's forging skills would be of any help. Jiroh whose local name turned out to be Jikaifa appeared to have lost all the special bonuses of her own skills. She could still perform the actions and the knowledge, though not at a rate she could in the awakened world. She wasn't able to sense metal, either.

This looks like a good spot, Dallion said, as they passed over a piece of land. Now that none of Jiroh's siblings were tagging along, he had returned to using the human language common in Nerosal.

You sure? Jiroh flowed the air currents, putting him and Katka gently down.

Concentrating, Dallion combined his music and forging skills. Back in the previous world, he would be certain of something down there. However, there was no telling whether he was right in this one.

Feels like tin, he said. It's not too deep, although there'll have to be some digging. Keep a lookout for me.

Dallion took a deep breath, then struck the ground with his fist.

The force went through his entire arm, resulting in a near explosion. Dirt rose up in the air like a mini-geyser as a five-foot hole had formed in the ground with Dallion standing in the middle of it. One thing was for certain, he hadn't lost his ability to perform point attacks. And just as before, his entire right arm felt slightly numb from the experience.

It's definitely here. Dallion leapt out. Might be deeper than I thought.

Alright. I'll take care of this. You two step back.

Things like picks and shovels didn't exist in this world they would be considered a huge waste of metal. What furies did instead, was use air currents to do the same work when preparing the ground for their crops. In this case, the digging had to go a lot deeper, but Jiroh had experience with such matters.

Meanwhile Dallion and the mage sat on the ground a short distance away and waited.

If I had my magic, I could have dug all this up already, Katka said in a critical tone. I could even have extracted the ore without having to dig the place up.

You dont have magic, Dallion reminded. He felt the internal pain the comment had caused her, and in that precise moment, he was glad. You killed Armalion, didnt you? he asked.

Armalion? Surprise echoed through the mages being. Im impressed you know the name. Yes, I did. It wasnt particularly difficult, either.

Why?

Huh?

It wasnt the skill gem I needed, Katka replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Armalion was a good candidate, but didnt pan out. There was a chance that the cloud citadel might have been, but now well never know.

Dallion couldnt believe it. The mage was actually blaming him for not being able to extract a skill crystal from the cloud creatures. She was just as bad as the Star! If Nil were here, hed probably come with some valid explanation to make the distinction, but one thing was for certain: the old echo didnt like the Academy much either, and now Dallion could see why.

Youre thinking of killing me, arent you? The mages lips curved into a smile. Good. Thats the only speck of joy I get from being here.

Youre betting a lot.

Actually, Im not. It took me a while to figure you out, but now that I have, I know that staying close to you is the safest place to be. She turned towards him. You want to go back. Even if the world wasnt poisoning us, youd still want to go back to the place where dreams are possible. Ive no idea what you were back on Earth. Maybe you were rich, maybe famous even, but you definitely were no god. In the awakened world, you might well become one.

That was exactly the type of arrogance Dallion expected from a mage. He had heard it from the stories about the mage incident in Nerosal. And that had only been apprentices who had shaken an entire city. Katka was a full mage with powers that he couldnt imagine. If she had even a trace of them now, there wouldnt even be this conversation.

The truth is that you need me to get back, she continued. I still have the knowledge to open a path back, I just need the energy.

Then why not run off? If theres a secret organization, as you say, theyll make it so you reach them and then you can make your demands.

Possibly, but risky. I prefer to be in control. Besides, its always nice to hedge my bets. Youre still favored by a Moon. Itll try to pull you back stronger than any spell could.

The digging continued for half a day. It was little wonder that Sirione of Jirohs sisters managed to find them. Dallions knowledge of metal explained away why they were digging for ore, but still everyone had to switch back to fury speech.

Eager to impress, the young fury had initially offered to help Jiroh out. Soon enough, though, she had gotten to what her goal really was: to learn as much as possible about the fake moon cult that Dallion was part of. Thus, he had found himself forced to come up with a backstory for something that didnt exist. Katka would have been far more suited for the task, but she conveniently hid behind the silence vow story that Jiroh had come up with and let him suffer.

All explanations followed nonsense logic that Dallion came up on the spot. Many aspects were taken straight out of what he remembered from net browsing and shows from Earth. While coming up with ludicrous stories, an interesting thought came to mind. It was clear that Flora had a moon of its own, and while it was difficult to say for certain, it seemed to be within the size range of those in the awakened world. If so, was it possible for there to be a link between the two? Possibly even a living Moon entity that helped with the transfer? That was definitely a notion worth exploring.

By nightfall, well after Dallion had come up with an elaborate system of rules and philosophies, it was decided that digging would end for the night. Jiroh had managed to go deep enough to reach rock, which means that in a day or two the actual ore extraction could start.

Everyone went back to the house, where Dallion was politely, but firmly, asked to join the family for dinner again. Kafka wasn't, but to be on the safe side, Jiroh made sure to tie her and her fingers up while lasted, lest she got any ideas. Fearing what the fury might do if she didn't comply. The mage didn't argue.

I hear that you'd be teaching Ji to forge metal, Jiroh's father Kaikenfa said.

Only if it doesn't cause issues with her family, Dallion replied.

They say that metal forging is the job of the future, the fury said reluctantly. Nothing good will come of it, but if there's an opportunity, why not take it? If one's forced to live on the ground, best make the most of it.

An unusually strong sense of pain filled the room coming from Kai. Something had happened in the past, something heartbreaking and life changing. Unfortunately, without his awakened abilities working at their best, Dallion couldn't know what exactly had happened.

Becoming a thunder fury is a good start, Jiroh's mother said. This was the first time she had spoken since Dallion had gotten to know the family. A few job offers arrived today, including from your terrible job you used to have.

Anything good? Jiroh asked, marginally intrigued.

Waitress, the older fury said with a sigh. Thunder furies have become fashionable lately.

There was something that she was hiding, though. Dallion could feel it emanating from within her, including a faint sense of guilt.

They're in your room, if you want to look through.

Thanks. I will.

The rest of the dinner focused back on metal and digging. Kai did most of the talking, with Dallion doing his best to reply. The younger members of the family tried to ask a few questions now and again, but they were quickly shut up. When it was all over, Dallion went back up into his room, where Katka was patiently waiting. Shortly after, Jiroh joined them as well.

You took your time, the mage grumbled the moment she was able to speak. Anything to worry about?

My father's too interested in the forging, Jiroh replied. That's untypical.

A lot could have changed in three years. Your kid sister also showed enough enthusiasm to seek you out and find the dig.

Thats different. Theyre young and want to get out of this place. It was my dream as well when I was young. Thats why I took all sorts of terrible jobs in the city, as long as it was far away from here. I even tried to rent a place, but that didnt turn out well.

How many siblings do you have? Dallion asked.

Nine. More relatives used to live here as well, but even before I went to the other world, they started moving out.

I guess you living was the trigger for a lot more to go, Katka said, somewhat amused. All the better for us, and you respectively.

She was lying, Dallion said all of a sudden. Both Jiroh and the mage stared at him. Your mother was lying when she said that you didnt get any interesting offers. There was something, but I couldnt tell what.

There was a long moment of silence. Various emotions rippled through from everywhere.

I was wondering when that would happen. Im surprised it took so long.

Barely was the able finish when an invisible thread tightened around her neck making her choke. Katka desperately grabbed her throat, in an attempt to loosen the thread, but to no avail.

What did you do? Jiroh asked.

N-nothing, the mage managed to reply, struggling for air.

I find that very hard to believe. The fury tightened the air currents. Do you know the main reason I went on so many solo hunts back in the awakened world? It wasnt because I was dragging the rest behind. It was because most of the rest couldnt keep up, even when I wasnt using my awakened powers. Hurting someone is only difficult if one has to constantly hold back from killing them. Am I clear?

The mage eagerly nodded. A few moments later just to make her point Jiroh loosened the air currents. Meanwhile, Dallion remained perfectly still. He had felt the explosive anger that had come from the fury, just as he knew that she had no intention of killing anyone. However, that also explained why she had been the leader of the Nerosal hunters. Euryale was strong without a doubt, one of the strongest beings Dallion had seen. Yet Jiroh had been the real powerhouse.

Electricity, Katka coughed, her hands still on her throat, in an attempt to protect it from further harm. Electricity goes with metal. Thunder furies make that. Since the furies have started to discover metal, its only a matter of time before they start combining it with electricity.

In which case, theyll need thunder furies once more, Dallion finished the thought. So, we go to them directly.

No. Not yet. The mage cleared her throat, attempting to act as if nothing had happened. Even after everything, her pride remained bigger than the world. Not before we get some metal. Offers will keep piling on. If she responds to the first ones, itll be on their terms.

I dont like this. Dallion shook his head. There are too many uncertainties. We should"

We continue with the original plan, Jiroh interrupted. We should find enough ore tomorrow for an ingot. Ill use that to buy when we need to make more. If by then no one from the cities has come to us, well go up to them.

Chapter 457: City of Clouds

The day stretched to three. Even with Dallions forging skills, finding enough ore wasnt as easy as initially thought. The individual quantities were small, and each had to be heated to the point of melting by Jiroh using lightning. The process was cumbersome even by ancient standards, though fascinating for the furys entire family. Only Jirohs mother would occasionally remind her youngest that they had to check out the crops. Every now and again, Jirohs younger siblings would appear with the in groups to observe the scorching process.

Everything would have been much easier if Dallion had his hammer with him. Sadly, other than his clothes and armor, the only item he had in his possession was the thread cutter. Even his coin pouch was gone which would have been quite useful about now. A silver coin wasnt much back in Nerosal, but here it would have saved them a lot of work.

At the end of the third day, once enough metal had been gathered for a five-ounce ingot, Dallion went to bed early. The preparations were all done, so he wanted to be fresh for the trip to the city. However, although he slept he didnt get to rest.

Barely had he closed his eyes that he found himself on the roof of the house, sitting on a balcony of cloud matter. It was evening. The sun had almost vanished beneath the horizon, granting the moon control of the sky. Rubbing his eyes, Dallion went to the edge of the cloud to get a better view. It was at that point that he realized that he was barefoot.

No sea iron, he said to himself as he looked down. The cloud felt soft, like captured wind and an extraordinary sensation, but also one that was completely impossible. This is a dream.

No, a new voice said behind him. This is a conversation.

Turning around, Dallion expected to see one of the many forms of the Green Moon. Instead, there was a tall woman with fiery orange hair, wearing full metal armor or bright orange, as if it had been made from the evening sun itself.

Youre not Felygn, Dallion said.

Dararr. The woman moved closer. And youre in big trouble.

Because I saved Jiroh? Dallion asked. Even in his dream state, he knew exactly what the Moon meant, but didnt agree.

You let yourself be dragged in. She was one of my chosen. It was my decision to let her travel back to her home. It wasnt supposed to be easy, but like you, she chose a path that she could handle. She disappeared in a blur, appearing on the other side of Dallion.

Even if you messed up, you helped Ji find a way to get here, the Moon went on. So Im standing in for Felygn.

He has no presence in this world. And yes, youre very much in trouble. Look at your hand.

Dallion did so. Initially, there didnt seem to be anything wrong with it: all five fingers were there, there were no apparent wounds or weird sensations. Suddenly, he noticed that areas of his skin had turned orange. At this point, it wasnt much just a few spots on the tips of his thumb and index finger. However, even he knew that they werent supposed to be there.

The mage was partially right. This world isn't meant for humans. You came here uninvited, so it's treating you as an irritant.

A speck of dust in the eye of creation, if you want to be melodramatic. And as all irritants, there are only two courses of action: spit them out or encapsulate them with enough layers so they aren't a bother anymore.

Like a pearl.

The Moon nodded.

Exactly like a pearl. You haven't been here long, so the layers aren't taking an effect still, but slowly they will. Your skin will become orange, then harden, then you and the mage will feel like you've been incased in amber.

The notion made Dallion shiver. That didn't sound appealing in the least.

You won't die, of course. Not at first. As an awakened otherworlder you'll remain surrounded by layers of reality. You won't be able to see, or move, or breathe. You'll feel first and hunger, but they won't kill you. Each day you'll grow older, as you normally would have, and as you do, your presence will be erased from the memories of everyone in the world. Ji will be the only exception. Knowing her, she'll probably come talk to you every day, or even take you with her as she travels throughout her world. I guess you could call yourself lucky.

Lucky? I don't see that as being lucky.

The mage won't have anyone. Since she pissed me off, I won't allow her to talk to others, even in dreams.

Dallion swallowed. The Moons were definitely not beings one had to mess with. If he found a way back, the first thing he would do was start seeking out the dragonlet for Felygn.

That will continue for decades, possibly a century, after which you'll die and leave nothing but a shell behind.

One thing was for sure. Dararr didn't have Felygn's bedside manner. The Green Moon was vague in his explanations, but never so dark.

Is there a way back? Dallion asked.

That's not something I can say. There wasn't supposed to be a way in, but you're good at finding loopholes, it seems. I always thought the mages would be the annoying ones, but you proved me wrong. Annoyance is not exclusive to spellcasters. She disappeared again, reappearing behind him, on the other side of the cloud. I'm only here to give you the warning.

That the world is going to kill me? Dallion had hoped for a bit more than that.

You're gotten far too used to dream conversations. The Moon tilted her head to the side slightly. That's interesting. She disappeared and reappeared next to him. However, you're wrong, like the mage was. The world isn't trying to kill you, just to make you less irritable. The more you interact with it, the more it'll affect you. Good luck.

That's all?

Keep an eye out for loopholes. While you cant use some aspects of your awakened abilities, you can use others.

Does that mean theres a way of leveling up while Im here?

That would be telling. The Moon said with a blank expression.

Wait! How do I"

Dallion found himself back in the room given to him by Jirohs family.

Nightmare? Katka asked from the other side of the room. According to their arrangement, they had split the room into two zones with the mage keeping to hers. Looking at her instinctively made Dallion uneasy. It wasnt that he feared she would kill him, but rather her way of life. Even since arriving to this world, the woman hadnt bathed or taken her clothes off once. From what Jiroh had shared, she had refused to do so, even after Jiroh had taken her alone to a pond with considerable privacy.

Something like that, Dallion replied.

Get back to sleep. You must be in shape for tomorrow.

While Jirohs role was to find the people involved, Dallions was to be the hook, for which he was going to use his music skills. Kafka was going to come into play later. There were a lot of things that could go wrong, not to mention that he still didnt trust the mage. However, there were no better alternatives.

Closing his eyes, Dallion attempted to go back to sleep. The attempt ended in utter failure. All that he managed was to remain still for two hours, until the sun mercifully brought the start of the day.

Like any other day, Dallion rinsed his face and hands with the water Jiroh bought. As he was washing his hands he noticed a small patch of orange skin appear. His initial reaction was to try to wash it off, but no amount of rubbing seemed to do any good.

You were right, Jiroh appeared in the room without even knocking. My mother has been hiding offers from me. A few were from the Patricians office.

Oh? The mage sounded intrigued. Whats the position?

Assistant speaker of the army core. Its not as important as it sounds.

Have they made a similar offer to you before? Katka asked.

Jiroh shook her head.

Then its important. Its just a pretense to get you there and"

You really think Im stupid, dont you? The furys tone was calm, but it quickly made the mage recoil back in fear. I know exactly what it means. I also know thats not where were headed.

Isnt the government the place to go? Dallion asked.

No. Its powerful alright, but only in one city. There are hundreds of cloud cities in the skies, each with their own Patrician. The place were headed to is the citys grand library.

As it turned out, the library wasnt anything like Dallion had imagined it. For one thing it wasnt a single organization, but an alliance that spread throughout nearly all clouds. For another thing, they

didn't provide only books, but entertainment a three-dimensional equivalent of television created out of ever-changing cloud matter to be precise as well. Jiroh's family had been subscribed to one, when she was younger, but that was before the family purse had shrunk, forcing them to do away with certain luxuries.

The city that controlled the region of sky above Jiroh's house was called Thundervein. Arguably, it was one of the bigger cloud cities, though all tended to make that claim. Reaching it was a few hours flight, mostly because the fury had to make sure that nothing disturbed the hooded robes of her companions.

Did you get the ingot? Dallion asked a few minutes after they left.

Here. Jiroh used a few air currents to float it in front of him. It was crude and uneven, as if someone had stuck together various pieces of different colored clay in an attempt to make a brick. The important thing was that it was made of metal. Its enough to buy my own place on the cloud outskirts.

When we get there, stay away from all creatures and statues.

Why statues? the mage asked.

There are no statues, Jiroh replied, annoyed. If anything attacks, I won't be able to stop it like I do back home.

You mean the city is full of cats?

Not only cats.

After a while, Dallion and Katka saw exactly what the fury had in mind. The cloud city was nothing like the citadel they had come from. Comparing the two was like comparing a palace to a sand castle. Thundervein was many times larger than any cloud fort Dallion could imagine. Buildings rose up at regular intervals, separated by roads and ponds of water. Vertical movement was absolutely taken for granted. As far as one looked, there were no concepts as a plain wall. Shops, cafes, and restaurants were stuck to the sides of buildings just as they were on the ground. But the most impressive thing of all was the sheer number of clouds and furies. It was like looking at a snow globe after it was shaken.

Discreetly, he glanced at the mage. This was a world that had retained its creatures, and if Katka had been willing to destroy an entire citadel in order to obtain some power, there always was the possibility she might try something similar here as well.

See the pyramid? Jiroh asked. That's where we're headed.

Chapter 458: The Library Alliance

Stay close, Jiroh whispered.

An entrance appeared on the face of the pyramid as they approached. Unlike the other structures, this one didn't seem to have any other way of going in. The moment the trio arrived a few steps from the entrance itself, a tall fury dressed in a dress of cloud fabric appeared. The difference was that the dress was deep green.

Good morning, she said. There was a smile on her face, but Dallion could sense that she was far from happy to have them approach. Rather, she was like a shopkeeper who wanted to appear polite, but was doing everything possible to get rid of a potentially problematic customer.

How may I help you? the fury asked the universal question that aimed at getting rid of people who weren't wanted.

I was offered to apply for a job here, Jiroh said with icy calm. Just to stress the fact, she took out a ball of cloud matter the size and shape of a hand-full of cotton.

The fury in the yellow dress pulled it towards her with an air current, then stretched it as if she were about to start a game of cats cradle. The moment he saw it, Dallion's writing skill kicked in. So, that was what fury writing looked like.

I see. There was a note of disappointment in the fury's voice. Unfortunately, today isn't a good time. You'll have to come back tomorrow and"

We're not here for that job, Dallion interrupted, filling his words with curiosity and compromise.

On cue, Jiroh took out the ingot. Back on Earth, or even in the awakened world it would be treated as trash. Here, though, the fury's eyes widened as if she'd seen a flawless twenty-four carat diamond.

Our reference, Dallion added with a smile, as he added fear of missing out in his voice.

May I? the fury in the dress asked. It was normal to snatch a work application; when it came to a piece of metal, one always had to ask permission.

Jiroh nodded and allowed a new air current to grab the ingot.

Fifty grams, the fury said, closely examining it. Multiple metals. Might I ask where you found it?

We forged it. As he said it, Dallion knew that the fury was hooked. And we'd like to share the method with someone who would appreciate its value.

This was the moment of truth. Despite all their preparation, the offer remained a bluff. A piece of metal was impressive, but they didn't have the means to offer more, not without Dallion surrendering his entire armor outfit. Doing so, though, would result in a long fall and a quick death.

Every second was agony. Had they approached the wrong person?

This way, please, the fury said as she returned the ingot to Jiroh. With a slight nod, she then turned around and proceeded forward.

The cloud matter that composed the door rolled to the sides. The moment everyone was inside, it filled up again, becoming indistinguishable from the wall.

Two giant lion-like creatures growled deeply from their places. Each was a ten-foot reminder of what would happen if the group overstayed their welcome. Instinct made Dallion reach for his thread splitter. Reason kept him from pulling it out.

Would you like some refreshments while my superiors arrive? the fury asked, leading them down a large hall. The ground was smooth as marble, but Dallion knew that it was still made of cloud.

Sure, Jiroh replied in the same fashion she dealt with merchants in the awakened world. Clearly it had an effect, for the other fury didnt add anything more.

They continued, walking past a corridor leading to the inside of the building. Another wall opened up, revealing a far smaller hall, though there was no question this one was designed for VIPs. For one thing, the floor was covered with a thin layer of metal. Back on Earth, one would call it tin foil. Here, it passed as opulence. Stone frames hung on the walls, holding modern art statuettes made of solid metal. In the center of the room, between several large cloud couches, was a round metal podium, on which a movie was running.

Seeing cloud entities form like in a three-dimensional video game caught Dallion off guard.

The latest model, the fury said, catching his interest. Thanks to a revolutionary metal-glass core, it can allow plays to come in all colors. Itll be a few years before it becomes available to the public, of course.

Maybe well get to improve it, Jiroh said, bringing Dallion back to reality.

Im sure. The other fury smiled. The metal, if you please.

Once again the ingot floated into her hands.

Thank you. If you would wait just a few moments, please. Ill be right back.

A few minutes passed, then a few more. A large fury dressed as a butler walked through the door with a large tray of refreshments. Carefully, he placed it near the cloud theater where a table appeared from the ground then left the room again.

How long do you think theyll make us wait? Dallion asked in fury. He was aware that they were being watched, so he couldnt afford to get out of character.

Maybe half an hour, Jiroh replied. Theyre trying to find anything they could about you.

Thatll be tough.

About ten minutes later, a wall opened up again. The fury who had greeted them had arrived, and this time she wasnt alone. A fury dressed in red was also with her. To Dallions surprise, he was a thunder fury.

Apologies for the wait, he said in a deep voice. I had to do some checks before our meeting. Im sure youd understand.

Im sure, Dallion replied, adding trust into his words. Did you find out anything interesting?

Quite an interesting piece of metal. The funder fury said, holding the ingot. Crude, hastily made, no consistency to speak of. And yet its a hundred percent metal. He tapped its surface with a finger. Where did you say you came by it?

We didnt, Dallion corrected.

Ah, right. You forged it. The last few years, weve had quite a few people make that claim. Most of them were liars and scam artists. A few actually believed they could. But then again, you shouldnt have such issues. After all, youre not a person.

Spikes emerged from the walls and ceiling. Seeing the game was up, Dallion prepared for a point attack. Jiroh too sparked up, lightning covering her hands. However, she was matched by a similar reaction from the man in the red suit.

You might be able to burst through the floor, but that wont do you any good, the thunder fury said. Our weapons are not that harmless. Not to mention we have a numerical advantage.

If Dallion had all his awakened powers, hed laugh at the threat. Unfortunately, as things stood, he was at a disadvantage.

What are you? the male fury asked.

Ill still take you out, Dallion clenched his fist. In his current state, he could manage three, probably four point attacks. Each one of them had to count.

A bolt of lightning flew through the room, disintegrating the theater as it went straight for the thunder furys chest. On his part, he managed to deflect it with his own lightning bolt, sending both up through the ceiling.

Weve come to make a deal! Katka shouted in a thick, almost unnatural accent. You cant capture us and youll gain nothing by fighting us. So, lets just take a step back and do what we came here to do.

There was a pause. Dallion could smell the ozone build up in the air. Thankfully, the thunder fury pulled back his lightning sparks. A few moments later, Jiroh did the same.

Youre right, he said. The spikes in the walls and ceiling went back in. Theres nothing to gain. Please, he extended his hand to the cloud couches.

Everyone took their seats. The floor had already swallowed all the debris, and soon enough, a new tray of food and refreshments was brought in. Once everyone had calmed down, and the serving staff had left the room, the real negotiations began.

You can call me Olm, the thunder fury began. Im the head of this library.

Dal, Dallion replied. I take it Im not a complete surprise.

Weve been tracking you for the last few days. Now one can just start digging for metal unnoticed. The impressive thing was that you actually found some.

Its not that difficult once you know how. Dallion glanced at the fury in the yellow dress. Why the issue with getting in, then?

There are certain things that even librarians dont know. She had to be briefed before we could have our conversation. He grabbed a glass of sparkling liquid and took a sip. What do you want out of this? You didnt go through all that trouble to impress us with an ingot for our benefit.

Isnt it obvious? Dallion asked, injecting a feeling of inferiority in his words. Information. From what I know, its your stock in trade. We need information regarding certain matters and in exchange, well provide you with the knowledge of how to extract and forge metal at a much faster rate.

There was no mention of finding ore deposits, but Dallion had agreed to keep that as a bargaining chip for further on.

Despite what you have heard, we don't have access to all the information in this world, Olm said. It was a clear lie that emanated from him as loud as a church bell.

We're not asking for any present-day information, Dallion said, using his music skill to make the fury more agreeable. What we're looking for is information about your past, your distant past. Myths, legends, early history, that sort of thing.

If there was anything that would confuse them, this was it. No doubt they were expecting some military secrets or political details. It was natural to jump to such a conclusion. From the view of the furies, Dallion and Katka were trying to go into this world. The reality was that they were trying to get out.

Unfortunately, that was only going to further raise the furies' suspicions. Already they were half-convinced that the pair were scouts of a hostile race. Having them refuse military information might have put those fears on pause, but the effect would be temporary.

Do we have a deal? The mage pressed on.

I'll need some time to discuss your offer with my superiors, Olm said. From my perspective, it seems fine, but I'm not the one making the decisions.

Alright. One other thing. I'll require some metal and tools to illustrate the process. You know that metal can't be destroyed, so you can always melt it back if I do something you don't like.

That might be a bit more complicated. Olm sighed. It's not about the material, but about finding a place where you won't be seen.

I'm sure you'll figure it out. Dallion stood up. He could feel the discussion was over. Katka and Jiroh did so as well, following his lead. We're free to leave, right?

Oly will show you out, the thunder fury said. Just one last thing. You never told me what you are.

Does it matter?

It might.

We're travelers who came here by accident. That's why it took us so long to find you.

That was such an obvious lie that a five-year-old would figure it out. However, when facing an unknown of such proportions, the fury couldn't dismiss the possibility. They didn't believe Dallion's words, but weren't ready to dismiss them either, as if they were seeking the grain of truth that was hidden in them.

Anything else? Dallion asked, his smile visible beneath his hood.

That's all for now. Have a safe trip. We'll be in touch.

Thanks. Dallion turned towards the wall they had entered through.

You're not going to take your ingo?

Keep it as a token of our good will. Next time it's your turn.

Chapter 459: Not the First

Despite Kafka's protest, Dallion spent a large part of the day in the cloud city. The rhythm of the place fascinated him. The contrast with Jiroh's family on the ground was astounding. It was as if

someone had drained all the joy from the furies living on the ground and placed it here. People felt free, almost careless, cheer emanating from them like radio beacons. It was slightly different inside. As back on Earth, the service industry had a far less enjoyable time. Jiroh never hid that her job hadn't been the most enjoyable, although even that seemed better than being a farmer. It seemed that it wasn't so much the work, but the attitude everyone had a mutually agreed feeling that furies on the ground were outcasts from the rest of society.

Going through the shops, Dallion regretted not asking for some pocket change for their deal. Exotic and highly questionable food aside, the shops sold everything from clothes, to furniture, to cloud pets. Jiroh had made a point to warn Dallion to keep away from them, but for some reason, most of them seemed to like him a lot. If anything, he had trouble getting them away from him. On several occasions, embarrassed owners rushed to him, pouring apologies and forcefully dragging their clouds away. Onea mother of five even offered to give Dallion a cub from her cloud litter. It was a tempting offer, but Jiroh made the firm decision to decline.

Come afternoon, the group was back on their way to Jiroh's home. The sensation of joy and euphoria quickly vanished, replaced by realistic pessimism.

Dont trust them, Katka said.

They weren't lying, Dallion said, just to oppose her. It was self-evident that the library alliance wasn't to be trusted. Even so, something in the mage made him want to take the opposite view just on principle. If this were the awakened world, this was definitely a flaw he was going to address in the next awakening trial.

You can avoid the truth without lying, the mage openly scoffed.

The library's show of good faith came by evening. Two furies arrived with a series of books and what appeared to be local currency. In his mind, Dallion imagined them as people in suits and glasses, carrying a black suitcase. In reality, they were dressed in elegant casual wear made of light gray clouds, pulling a medium-sized cloud along through air currents.

There were no pleasantries, no long conversation or requests, just a mention that Olm had sent this with his compliments. Moments later, they were gone.

Jiroh's family kept the money with her taking half out of principle and the rest was given to Katka. Dallion took one of the books, though mostly to learn how to read fury. He was also forced to give his left gauntlet to the mage so she could interact with the fury books. At that point, the reading began, continuing throughout the night. Despite all her faults, it had to be admitted that the mage excelled in what she was going. Unlike Dallion, who was reading one book at a time, she spread out a dozen around her, reading them simultaneously. The speed at which she was doing it was outright impressive, almost giving the impression she was combat splitting.

Complete trash, the mage said one hour before morning. Some gift of goodwill. They probably just sent this to keep our interest. Anything good in what you're reading?

Not sure, Dallion replied. He had gone through three quarters of the book. Despite the apparently small size of fury books, they packed in far more words than one would have thought possible. Im at the third age of creation. Things are a bit unclear.

Give that here, Katka said with the annoyance of a middle-school teacher.

Dallion didnt protest. He wasnt in the mood to read more, anyway. Right now, he had far more pressing concerns, namely the patches of orange on his fingers. For the moment, there didnt seem to be many, but they were definitely spreading.

Another creation myth. The mage sighed, moving the book to the side. This world has a lot of them. More than usual?

A lot more than back home, and definitely more than the awakened world. All the books I read were creation myths. Up to now Ive read over a hundred accounts, dozens in the same book. The worst of it is that all of them are painfully similar.

Fun. Dallion liked down on his back, staring at the ceiling.

That doesnt mean I didnt find anything useful, Katka added.

This caught Dallions attention, making him instantly sit up.

Its mostly guesswork, but I think that most of the ancient heroes were awakened. The descriptions are embellishments, of course, but a lot of the small details wouldnt make sense unless they were awakened.

Fully awakened? Dallion asked. So, Jiroh wasnt the first to go back.

Seems not. Makes one wonder how much of our own myths were actually real. There was a slight pause. Anyway, there seem to be a lot of them returning, often after a long absence, with new and unusual powers. So far, I havent seen any mention of them disappearing. My guess is that theyre keeping that part.

Awakened returning to influence things. It was one of those things that made sense, but also didnt. On the other hand, maybe that would explain the obsession with alchemy that had taken place on Earth. The ability to transform one metal into another was deemed impossible unless tremendous amounts of energy were used yet even a third gate awakened could achieve it easily. Out of all the awakened powers, however, that was one of the least that Dallion could use. Using music alone, he could do pretty much anything he wished, even without the help of telecommunications and social media. Within weeks, he could learn pretty much everything there was to learn in the world, in any language. He could go around the globe without the need of planes, or cars, or even ships. Most of all, he could create devices that would have revolutionized everything. None of the mythological heroes or deities to have done anything of the sort, he had to come to the conclusion that no one had come back.

You think they know about the awakened world? Dallion asked.

Unlikely. Rather, Id say they are afraid that if we find a way to go back, we might bring hordes of invading armies and take over the world.

Dallion gave her a blank stare.

Im serious, the mage insisted. They werent surprised that we were from another world, nor that we were able to find iron where there shouldnt be any. That means they know a thing or two. I wouldnt be surprised if they knew you were hiding armor beneath your robes.

I doubt it. Dallion lied, but he was thinking the same thing. As much as he wanted to claim that it had all been thanks to his music skill, everything had been a tad too easy. Ill try to get some sleep. He turned around.

Morning came and went. For a moment, it almost seemed like Dallion would get to sleep late until he was woken up by Jirohs younger siblings. The furies were more curious about last nights visit than were healthy. Of course, Dallion couldnt tell the real story, so he stuck to vagueness, trying to mimic most of his conversations with the Moons. Thankfully, he didnt have to do it for long. Less than an hour after dawn, a new set of furies appeared. This time, they had arrived with their own cloud platform.

There was a quick conversation between the furies, Jiroh, and her father to which Dallion wasnt privy. He made an attempt to listen in, but his perception level wasnt enough to pick up anything that was said.

Youre strange, one of Jirohs younger brothers said, as he floated down from the roof.

Ive been told. Dallion put on a smile as he still tried to hear what was going on.

Why do you use water to wash?

The moon controls water, so it is only"

Father says youre different. You dont use air for anything.

Hes right. The conversation wasnt going the way Dallion wanted it. Ill always be different, just as Ji is. We all become different when affected by the moon.

Usually, such an explanation would be enough, but this child wasnt buying it. Dallion could feel more than doubt, more than suspicion; the young fury was outright convinced that he was lying. If there was anything the child was uncertain of, it was the truth behind the lie.

Dal, Jiroh shouted, waving to him.

Moon blessings with you, Dallion said to the child, then walked off to join Katka on his way to the transport cloud.

Trouble? the mage asked. She had put the sea iron gauntlet on her left hand, and didnt seem to have any intention of returning it.

Nothing serious, he whispered back. Did you find anything in the last book?

Just more trash. This time, she was the one lying.

Both Katka and Dallion climbed into the cloud. They were soon joined by two furies from the library alliance. Interestingly enough, Jiroh remained outside.

Jis not coming along? Dallion asked.

Shell be going to the Thundervein library to look through our book archive, one of the furies replied. Well be going somewhere else. Dont worry, youll have plenty to do there.

The higher the cloud rose into the sky, the faster it seemed to get. Within minutes, it was faster than Dallion felt comfortable.

Youre sitting on iron mesh, the fury said. No need to be tense.

The cloud kept on accelerating on a course towards the horizon. Clods flashed by, as did the land below. Mountains emerged in the distance, then slowly grew higher and higher. It didnt take long to figure out that was their destinationa resource deposit. The lack of nearby clouds suggested that the place was kept secret from the majority of furies.

Nearer and nearer the cloud kept going to the cliff, until suddenly it stopped without warning, changing shape in the process. A net of air currents prevented the passengers from flying out, keeping them in place, like giant air cushions. The experience wasnt pleasant, but it was over.

Once that was over, part of the cliff changed color, revealing a large opening for the cloud to gently glide in.

Welcome to Mount Seven, Olm said in greeting. Strangely enough, other than the pair of furies that had driven Dallion here, there didnt seem to be anyone else. Given that it was a secret mining facility, Dallion expected there to be at least several dozen people. I hope your trip was pleasant.

It was fast, he said, stepping out.

A while later, so did Katka. Remembering the mages reaction to Dallions combat tactics back in the awakened world he could see she was handling it far worse than she was letting on.

I have already set up everything you might need, including a furnace, the thunder fury was quick to say. Ore isnt an issue, and"

Do you have clay? Dallion interrupted. Ill also need water and wooden tools.

Clay? the fury sounded confused. He knew what clay was, since the word existed in the Fury language. However, the request was unexpected.

And wax. That wont be a problem, right?

No. Olm nodded to the pair of furies, who expediently darted out of the mountain. Youll have your materials. Anything else?

Just take me to the forge.

Do you have any books here? Katka asked, her voice still slightly shaky.

We have something better. A theater that can create a perfect copy of any book in all of our libraries. Selections are being made as we speak. Theres just one minor detail, however.

For some reason, Dallion felt a chill down his spine. Old had deliberately separated them from Jiroh, so if it came down to a fight, he was almost certain to win.

As you explain the method to me, a cloud copy of you will be sent to a few other facilities. Needless to say that if they cannot achieve the same results following your process, we will consider our collaboration over. That wont be a problem, right? A sarcastic smile appeared on the thunder furys face.

Chapter 460: Fury Forging

Gently, Dallion said as molten iron was poured into a mold.

For the achievements the furies had managed to accomplish, their forging equipment was beyond pitiful. In fact, it could pretty much be said that they didnt have a forge at all. When he and Jiroh had come up with a plan to extract metal from ore, he thought they were thinking out of the box. In

another world, that probably was true. Here, though, all furies did the same. Once gathered, thunder furies melted the metal, then using air currents, modified it in the shape they wished. Things such as forges were exotic, to say the least. Nothing but fruit was consumed, and cooking was done solely with warm air currents or steam.

Given that they had the ability to control weather pretty much, Dallion would have suggested using lens-furnaces, but for that they had to have glass, which was even more difficult to achieve.

This is a lot of iron, the thunder fury said. From his perspective, it must have seemed as if Dallion was making a throne of solid gold. Are you sure you want to mix it with smoke?

Thats the only way.

Strictly speaking, he was far from a master forger. Despite being awakened, Dallion heavily relied on so many instruments he took for granted. Individually, he could create each of them. However, creating them all at the same time proved a challenge. Even so, there was something fascinating about the way furies worked metal.

Olm increased the strength of lightning he was emitting, wrapping around the molten white ingot. Every drop that came from it was taken by a scorching hot air current and gently poured into the mold Dallion had made using clay, sand, and wax. While it did, several streams of smoke were also mixed in, coming from a nearby log fire.

Observing from a safe distance, Dallion was extremely glad for all the pain and training Euryale had put him through. Back in Nerosal, he had expressed doubts whether he needed to know all that stuff before getting to the actual shaping. If anything, now he wished she had taught him even more. Even with his combinations of awakened skills, getting metal of a certain purity was more than a bit difficult; not to mention that without echoes, he didnt have any do overs.

Is everyone keeping up? Dallion asked, wiping the sweat off his face.

For the moment, the thunder fury replied, finishing with the last iron ingot. Strong doubt was emanating from him, along with a hint of fear. That was all well and good, but Dallion would have preferred to know a bit more details.

Well, its time for a break.

Olm stared at him, as if Dallion had broken some taboo.

It needs to cool down gently, Dallion explained. It must stay in the mold for at least an hour or two before its broken. Dont you shape clouds the same way?

No, the fury replied laconically. If Dallion had hoped to get any information on the topic, he wasnt getting it. It seemed that Katka was rightthey were being treated as potential enemies.

Will Ji be joining us? Or do you intend to keep us apart?

Theres nothing your friend can offer, Olm insisted. I have the same skills she does, and we cant let you attempt anything. If what youre offering holds up, the library alliance will be all too glad to"

Cant you just make her vow not to help me escape?

Vows are spoken to be broken. And thats not the only issue. You arent the only ones being assessed. Some of my superiors are assessing her potential. She has been with you for three years and seven months, after all. Before she disappeared, she was nothing more than a third-rate farmer. Now shes a thunder fury with vastly superior skills and attitude to match.

One didnt have to me a mind reader to tell that Olm despised her, not to mention that he felt personally threatened. The short exchange of lightning a day ago had shown to all that the two were evenly matched. If so, that meant Olms position could suddenly end up being threatened.

Is it alright if I join my friend? Dallion asked. The one from my world.

Go ahead. Olm gestured. Theres nowhere you could go.

As far as threats went, that one wasnt too bad, although after a while in the wilderness Dallion had heard a lot worse. Counting to five, he left the chamber of the mountain, heading towards the one Katka was kept in.

One would think that having no guards was a good thing, but in practice, it only created a sense of isolation. As the fury had said, there was no chance of escape. Without magic, jumping out of a mile high mountain in the middle of nowhere wasnt a good approach.

When Dallion got to her, the mage was busy reading over twenty books, all floating above the theater platform. Unlike Dallion, she hadnt been openly monitored, and instead was surrounded by a vast assortment of food and drink. Despite that, she had barely touched any of it.

Hows it going? the mage asked, constantly moving the cloud threads around with her left hand.

Slow, Dallion replied. Im teaching them to make an anvil. Any luck on your part?

A bit. There were a few interesting bits among all the trash. An account of the early life of the goddess Minfalin patron of wisdom. She has been touted as the great enlightener that taught furies how to capture cloud creatures and build cities out of cloud. Apparently, before that, they were at the mercy of nature, living like nomads on clouds that could disappear at any moment, metaphorically speaking. Katka closed a ball of fluff and pulled it away. The moment she did, it broke down and a new one emerged in its place. Originally, the good goddess was nothing but a traveling storyteller, moving from tribe to tribe. At one point, she had a dream in which she spoke to the Mother of Sunrise and was taken to a far away land, where everything was different.

This wasnt much to go on, but it did sound like a conversation with a Moon.

According to the text, the goddess went to sleep one morning in the middle of the tribe and was gone the next morning despite none of the guards noticing anything. She returned a decade later, unchanged physically but with great wisdom and brought many changes to the world. Poetic embellishment aside, I think that describes the process pretty well.

That still doesnt say how she got moved there. For that matter, Dallion had no idea how he himself had been transported to the awakened world. The only thing he knew for certain was that it had coincided with his doppelganger awakening; thats why he had memories that had never been. Since he was taken out of the world in an unexpected fashion, however, the way to go back had to be different.

Nothing so far. Once again, there the sensation of lies emanated from the mage. Its a start, though. We know that its happened, we just need to be persistent and fast. How long do you think you can keep them occupied?

A few weeks, maybe more, Dallion replied.

It should be enough.

You think?

Dal Katka gave him an annoyed look. If we dont find a way by then, it would no longer matter.

The discussion went onto more trivial matters, after which Dallion finally went back to the forging chamber. Work resumed.

The slab of metal had turned out adequate. Dallion had the thunder fury use air currents to shape it up a bit, after which he proceeded with making the head of a hammer. That process was considerably quicker, though Dallion still refused to use them with some vague excuse that they had to remain a day unused. That seemed to satisfy Olm, and more importantly his superiors, so Dallion was taken back to Jirohs house. The following day, the process continued.

Each morning, a team of furies would come to take Dallion and Katka to the secret forging facility, while Jiroh was sent to one library or another. From what she had shared, while officially her goal was to select the books for Katka to read, in reality, she was undergoing a long interview process. It seemed that Olms fears were well founded.

By the end of the first week, Dallion had pretty much helped create most of the basics of a proper forge. Fury lightning remained the main driving force, though fire was also starting to be used, mostly for the carbon. The resulting metal was of a much lower quality as anywhere else, but compared to what Flora had produced in the past, it was a veritable industrial revolution.

All that was good and well, but Dallion seemed no closer to finding a way back to the awakened world. What was worse, the orange patches on his skin were spreading.

Every night Dallion tried to have a conversation with Dararr, and each night the Moon refused to appear in his dreams. Whatever he was trying to do, he had to do alone.

Put this on. Olm tossed Dallion a crude ring mail shirt. It was outright scary how fast the furies had learned the basics of forging, especially since they had no prior knowledge.

Some kind of reward? Dallion asked. Spending time in this world, he too had started looking at metal as some sort of valuable commodity.

The library alliance has been exclusively working on this for a while. Itll allow you to interact with clouds.

Youll be covered with static clouds so your actions can be copied and displayed in the theater.

Dallion tried not to smile. They were putting him in the local equivalent of a VR suit. The notion was utterly fascinating, but also terrifyingit suggested that Dallions usefulness was coming to an end. The moment they stored all his actual actions, there was little more he could offer. The only ace up his sleeve was the fact that he had a way of finding metal ore deposits. If they ever found that such an ability couldnt be taught, the library alliance was going to drop him. In a best-case scenario, Dallion was going to be cut off from their resources and information.

Cool. Anything I need to do?

Limit sudden movements as much as you can. Thats it.

The weight of the chainmail felt almost welcome in this world where most things had no weight. Dallion spent a few moments moving around in order to get used to the limitations. The thunder fury waited patiently nearby.

Ready to be wrapped, Dallion said.

Olm didnt laugh. If anything, the more he had gotten to know Dallion, the more serious he had become. One could only suspect that it had something to do with Jiroh rising up the ranks pretty fast. For one thing, she had already been granted enough money to buy her own place in a cloud city, and even one for her family as well.

Clouds move about, covering every inch of the metal shirt. Strangely enough, they also covered Dallions feet, knees, and gauntlets.

Anything particular you want me to make? Dallion asked.

A gear, the thunder fury said.

Okay. That was a rather peculiar choice, and once more not something a fury would have thought of on their own.

The moment Dallion grabbed the hammer, a slight electric zap passed through his entire body. When the fury had said that those were static clouds, he had meant in terms of electric charge. It wasnt painful or particularly uncomfortable, but would need some getting used to.