

Leveling up 461

Chapter 461: Return Options

Even so, he was certain that he heard the voice of his echo, as if from somewhere far away. Somehow, for a single moment in time, Dallion had managed to establish a connection with his realm. He tried entering there or any item in his possession, but to no avail.

Anything the matter? the thunder fury asked.

It just takes a bit getting used to, Dallion replied. Does it always send jolts?

For the first time in a long while, a smile appeared on Olms face. It wasnt a pleasant smile, rather he seemed internally happy that Dallion had felt the zap.

I wouldnt know, he replied. Ready to start?

A simple gear, Dallion repeated. Lets get this done.

It took the larger part of a day to get the gear done. It was an extremely crude gear with less teeth than a cartoon character. Even so, it required a lot of effort and cooperation. Back in the awakened world, he would have been ashamed of such a result, but under the present conditions, he saw it as a masterpiece to the point that he didnt want to part with it. Unfortunately, Olm took it as soon as it had cooled enough to the point it was no longer glowing. The fury had gotten well versed in the principle of temperature transfer, making him able to carry something while simultaneously letting it cool down evenly and ever so slightly. There was no doubt that control of air currents was an overpowered ability. No wonder that in the history of the awakened world, many feared that the furies could take over the world.

Tomorrow, youll make a smaller one, Olm said. With twice as many teeth.

Itll help if you tell me what youre trying to make. I might know a better way to achieve it.

Its not my decision. Strangely enough, that rang true. The point is just to see you work. That, however, was a lie.

Do I have to teach the principle of gears to anyone?

Were already familiar. That was the truth as well. Ill have you returned to your home.

The cloud matter peeled off Dallions armor, then moved to the floor not too far away. With a slight sigh of regret, Dallion removed the ring mail shirt and placed it on the floor as well. It was true what was said about beauty and value: it was always in the eye of the beholder. However, could Dallion be sure that was what really was going on, or the world had started to influence him?

And yet, he was certain he had heard Nil. Was it because of the electric shock? There was no logical reason for that to be the cause, but weirder things had happened. Maybe when he went back, he could

What happened? Katka asked as she walked by.

Huh? For a moment, Dallion had completely forgotten about her.

You usually come to get me before we go.

Yeah. I had something on my mind.

The mage didnt press on. Both of them calmly stepped onto the cloud and had the same two furies as usual take them to Jirohs place. It was only once they had arrived and Dallion had gone back to his room that he spoke.

Did you find anything useful? he asked.

In fact, I did. Most of the heroes that went on a voyage before returning were losers.

That didnt seem at all helpful. Dallion gave her a critical glance.

No, hear me out. Katka said defensively. They were all furies with potential, who had some problems. Just like those who came from Earth.

I think we have more than enough problems as it is. Not to mention the world trying to kill us. How can you be sure everyone from Earth has problems?

Youre missing the point. The mage said, annoyed. Its not the problems that are the focus, but the fact that they had a reason not to return. Now do you get it?

It was just like in one of Dallions awakening trials. If the Moons really were using otherworlders to make things interesting, it was normal they would choose individuals that didnt want to return to their old worlds. Jiroh had to be an outlier. Awakening too young had kept her from establishing roots in the awakened world, seeing it as a dream. Dallion, on the other hand, still had no desire to return. Even now, he wanted to go back to the awakened world, and not Earth. Looking at Kafka, she was likely in the same boat.

How does that help us?

Magic aside, only the Moons have the power to transport beings between worlds. So, our solution is to find a way to get in touch with them. According to one of the books, there still are divine artifacts scattered throughout the skies. I requested to see one, but the alliance werent willing to show it to me yet. A slight push on your part and maybe well get there.

Just a little push. It sounded simple, but from Dallions experience, simple things usually ended up being the most difficult of all.

They asked me to make a cog, he said.

So?

If theyre already at that level, there isnt much more I can teach them. Not with these tools, anyway. Once they grasp the principle of making mechanisms he didnt finish the sentence.

Then think of something else to provide. The mage pressed on. Were this close. You cant just quit now. All we need is an artifact. If it acts as a sort of key, Ill use my magic and get us back. If its a phone to a Moon, you get in touch and we get back. Thats all theres to it. Youre the only one in position to make demands, so if you dont get it, well be stuck here for the rest of our lives, which wont be long.

Her entire body was oozing desperation to the point that Dallion could almost see it. Part of him was still uncertain whether he could trust her, yet there was that voice in the back of his head telling him he didnt have much of a choice. Remaining in this world was certain encapsulation. Being betrayed was only a fifty-fifty chance.

I have to talk to Jiroh about it.

Sure. The mage shrugged. Talk to her, do what you have to do, but get them to give us a divine relic. Or better, several. It doesnt matter where or how well they are guarded.

Nodding absentmindedly, Dallion walked out of the open walls, straight outside. As an awakened, the fall didnt hurt him in the least. He landed straight on his feet and kept on walking. After a while, he found that he wasnt alone.

Still curious about me? Dallion asked.

Are you from the sky? a young fury asked.

It was the same one who had been pestering Dallion about it each day. After about a week, the novelty had worn off, and Jirohs family treated Dallion and Katka like distant relatives who had come for a visit. Conversations had become a lot more casual and less awkward with the exception of one. In some aspects, the child reminded Dallion of his brother.

You dont give up, do you? Dallion smiled.

Are you?

There was no point in lying. Dallion could feel the conviction coming from the fury. He could use his music skills to put in doubt, but what would be the point?

If I tell you, will you believe me?

Only if you say what I suspect, the fury replied plainly. The logic was laughably childish, which made it so amusing.

No, Im not from the sky.

The answer was what the child expected, though not the one he accepted. For several more minutes, he continued to silently follow Dallion. No doubt he would have done that for more, if Jiroh hadnt appeared on the scene.

Kin, stop bothering, she said in a firm voice. Do help dad rearrange some stuff.

Normally this would be the time for a mini-teenage rebellion, at least if this were Earth. The fury, however, didnt say a word. One moment Kin was there, and the next he had vanished, nowhere to be seen.

Sorry about that. Hes one of the quiet ones, so he could become obsessive with things.

I know what its like. How were things today?

Interesting. They stopped making me go through books. At this point, we all got tired of pretending, so we went directly to business.

They offered you a job?

Sort of. They want to gauge how much I know.

I wouldnt be surprised. They asked me to make a gear today.

A gear? Jiroh sounded surprised. They shouldnt be aware of that technology.

Clearly, they are. That means that you might not be the only one who has done back.

Either way, I stalled. I told them that their questions were too complicated for me. I've no idea if they bought it, but at least they stopped. I won't be surprised if they have me do tests tomorrow.

Tests. That sounded so innocent. In truth, it was another step to rendering Dallion obsolete. Jiroh was fully aware of that, so she was doing to make herself appear stupid for as long as possible. However, that came at the price of her own future. The higher opinion of her the library alliance got, the better she and her family would be taken care of. And that was only the tip of the iceberg. With luck and good guidance, Jiroh could shape the entire fury civilization. Dallion wasn't ready to let her sacrifice for him.

Katka thinks that she could get us back if she has access to a divine relic. I don't know what to think of it, but she's pretty convinced she can pull it off. Any chance you can get access to it?

I'll ask. I don't think it'll be a problem. Olys been open with me about lots of stuff.

She's not a thunder fury.

That's true, she isn't. Jiroh looked at the horizon and smiled. Who would have thought that thunder furies would even become important again? Before my awakening adventure they were little more than fashion models.

Without warning, a cloud appeared, making its way towards Dallion at great speed. The situation would have been frightening, if this had been an isolated occurrence. The family pet had taken a liking to Dallion and would decide at random intervals that it needed attention. Its behavior was a complete mix of feline and canine characteristics that Dallion still couldn't make up his mind, whether it was a cloud cat or a cloud dog.

Eagerly, it pounced at Dallion's chest, knowing that in such fashion, he would pass through it.

Skye, Jiroh sighed. Really?

The cloud made a sound that was vaguely similar to a purr as it spiraled around Dallion. As any shapeshifting entity it found it difficult to stick to one form, constantly switching from one to another as it moved.

We all know you can play, but we need to have a few words with Dal, okay?

For several seconds the creature pretended not to have heard her, but one sharp remark from the fury and it was clear the game was up. With a whimper, it moved away, floating back into the house.

It's developed quite a liking to you, Jiroh remarked. Anyway, I'll get you your relic. I just really hope that's what it takes.

So, do I. Also, can you do me two favors?

Two? That's oddly specific. Usually when you get specific you get yourself in trouble. Tell me the fury floated in front of Dallion, staring him straight in the eyes will you get involved in any trouble this time?

I want you to make me a stone weapon, Dallion continued. I'll tell you what it must look like.

That should be easy. What else?

I want you to zap me

Chapter 462: The Cloud Factory

You look like crap, Katka said as Dallion came back into the room.

Dallion didnt even bother to grumble a reply. The zapping experiment had been a complete failure. Jiroh was skilled enough to start slow and gradually increase the power, all the time careful not to harm him. Near the end, when his hair had started to suffer, she had called it off. The results were always the sameDallion could feel the sensation, yet at no point did he hear Nils voice.

Jiroh will get your artifact, he said.

Argument? Despite her conniving nature, or probably because of it, the mage seemed to love intrigue. Dallion could feel curiosity emanating from her very being, almost deafening all other emotions.

I thought getting zapped would let me connect with my realm, he said. Seems I was wrong.

I could have told you that, Katka smirked.

For a moment earlier today, I was able to.

The comment immediately changed her attitude. The mage briskly sat up, looking at him straight in the eye. The casual curiosity coming from her was instantly replaced by hope and fear. It was quite peculiar how often those emotions went together.

When I put on the electric clouds, I heard the voice of my echo, he went on. Did you feel anything when you played around with the theater thing?

No, the mage replied. She didnt seem to be lying. I had a similar idea, but nothing happened.

Something must have been different. Dallion lay on the floor of the room, preparing for sleep.

From what Jiroh had told him, electricity was far more important in the fury world than he initially thought. Thunder furies had the power to cause massive devastation, but that wasnt the main reason they had historically been feared and revered. Lightning was the equivalent of life. A lot of modern fury scientists and scholars believed it was through lightning that life on Flora began. The spark of life, as they called it, had brought rise to the very first creatures in the sky and them on land. Todays clouds had been tracked to be the remnants of massive beingspossibly the equivalent of dinosaursthat roamed the skies millions of years ago. All modern clouds and cloud creatures came from them. And the thing that granted them life was the electricity coursing through them.

There was no way of telling whether the process was identical to Earths, but one thing was confirmed: the cloud creatures gained their charge from the planet, consuming it in the atmosphere as they flew about. They also gained their matter from water vapors. The difference was that unlike dead clouds the living beings were good at maintaining both energy and water: not consuming more than they needed and not releasing more than they could afford.

It was precisely that power that had given rise to the furies civilization. Initially, the cloud creatures had been used as beasts of burden and occasionally weapons, but it was not until the discovery of their electric properties that things really changed.

Similar to the awakened world, the process was crude and bloody. In the distant past, creatures were captured and incorporated into clouds to form cloud cities. This led to hunting expeditions and even wars to capture the creatures. Supply was abundant, so for several centuries there were no issues. It

was inevitable that things would change. Seeing what fate expected them, the creatures moved away from areas frequented by furies. Natural selection had made only the fit survive and they were becoming more and more difficult to capture. At one point, it was more economically sound to simply capture other fury cities than spent resources on seeking and capturing wild cloud creatures. In such conditions, everyone was seeing a game changing practice, and one was found. One of the smaller cloud cities ignored since it was considered too small for an all-out attack and too large for a forced alliance made the desperate move of splitting the clouds hearts of the creatures maintaining its cloud, in order to create a second city. To everyones surprise, while the attack power of the city was weakened, the cities appeared no different in any other way. The creatures had died in the process, but since that would ensure the clouds survival for millennia, it was estimated, it didnt matter.

A population explosion followed, and the power shifted from cities with powerful clouds to those with large populations. The once undisputed powerhouses were swarmed by more numerous, though weaker enemies. Once conquered, the energy of their clouds was dispersed, creating even bigger cities that could hold more furies.

The process of heart splitting went on and on. New methods were developed to split the energy in smaller and smaller chunks until one day it was found that it was possible to extract enough from a creature to have everything possible without killing it. That was the age of enlightenment, during which cloud creature culling ended. Creatures were caught and released with only a small amount of their energy being taken. Seeing that they were no longer hunted, the cloud creatures gradually moved closer to fury domains until the relations of centuries ago were restored completely.

At present, cloud hunting was a crime, and no one lacked any energy. If anything, it was other resources, such as food, that had become an issue leading to the establishment of farming communities, and all the problems that came with them. However, fury society was left with more energy that it needed, which led to experimentation, thus the cloud theaters.

Part entertainment, part internet, the theaters had become a key part of society. Using an abundance of energy, they allowed for the creation of cloud objects according to templates. With some clever usage of air current manipulation, they were even able to emit sound, becoming a home theater for all to enjoy and use. It was the energy scraped from cloud creatures that kept everything running. Incidentally, it was exactly the same amount of power that had allowed Jirohas well as Dallion and Katkato reach their present destination. If that were so, maybe the way to returning wasnt in divine artifacts as the mage suggested, but the theatre system itself.

Dallion had no dreams that night. His attempt to have another conversation with the local Moon failed. The morning was quiet. Jiroh was quick to get dressed, preparing for her trip to the library. The last few days, she had been allowed to do so on her own reconnaissance. Dallion and the mage, on the other hand, were quietly waiting for the cloud with the furies to arrive.

Youve been washing your hands for ten minutes, Katka said. Just stop it.

Rinsing, Dallion corrected. As suspected, the process of interacting with the water of this world had made the orange coloration of his skin grow. All tips of his fingers had changed color, as had the palms of his hands.

Just stop it.

After one final rinse, Dallion nodded.

The furies came not too long after. The trip had become pretty routine at this point: a rapid acceleration to the mountain, after which Dallion was taken to the forging chamber perfectly cleaned and set up while Katka was taken to one another chamber nearby, where she spent her time researching books. This time, though, things didn't go that way.

This isn't the way to the mountain, Katka noticed. Her special orientation was far more developed than Dallion's.

We're not going there, the fury replied.

Anyone's immediate reaction was to ask why. However, both otherworlders knew it would be pointless. Their initial advantage had diminished. From this point on, their keep was almost as much as their worth. Without a significant game changer, they'd become expendable.

The cloud went to a small cloud city not too far from Thundervein. It was significantly higher, surrounded by a lot of dead clouds. One single structure was on the building: a giant cloud pyramid.

The cloud landed on the edge of the city, disappearing into the floor. A pathway made of metal foil led to the building. The interesting part was that the foil allowed Dallion to walk freely on it. Concentrating, he could see that it was made of sea iron alloy as well, and quite recently at that.

Follow the path, one of the furies said.

You're not going to join us? Dallion asked.

Instead of an answer, both furies disappeared in the blink of an eye.

What's going on? Katka asked. Despite the shiver in her voice, Dallion could feel no fear coming from her.

Guess we'll find out.

Both made their way towards the pyramid. Upon approaching, an opening formed, allowing them inside. The difference was that this wasn't a library, nor was it an administrative building of any sorts. Rather, it was a giant factory. Cloud-made machines with metal-covered parts were everywhere, ready for activation. Dallion recognized parts of them: metal presses, industrial furnaces, conveyor belts—all were things that made perfect sense being here, and at the same time weren't anything that the furies were supposed to know.

No more than five furies were present in the vast building: Olm, Oly, two others that Dallion had never seen before, and, surprisingly, Jiroh.

Welcome to the cloud forge, Olm stepped forward to greet Dallion. I thought it was time that we showed our crown achievement.

As interesting as that was, Dallion couldn't help but notice that there was no forge set up for him.

A floor completely covered in metal, Dallion noted. And it wasn't just foil-thick. He could feel its firmness, as if he were walking on tiles of material. Quite extravagant.

Out of necessity. We'll need to store the parts that are produced. Quite a magnificent achievement, and it's all thanks to you.

Dallion didn't like the sound of that. It was usually the villains that made such speeches and always before an act of betrayal. Still, the emotions he was getting from the furies were conflicting. Some

didn't like him, though they didn't seem openly hostile. Even Olm himself wasn't giving off anything remotely close.

All that remains is for you to teach the machines to function. Nothing to be scared of. You've already been doing that for the last week.

There never were other furies watching me. Dallion shook his head. All this time, you were just teaching the factory to work on its own.

And it worked. After today, there will be nothing left for you to teach. Still, let it not be said that we don't keep our word.

Olm gave a sign to the furies standing a short distance away. A cloud with a dozen stone objects on it floated down to Katka. Several were weapons, others bowls, decorations, and even a closed stone jar. The one thing in common was that they had been crated through air cutting.

The artifacts that you requested, selected personally by your fury friend. I trust that is what you wanted?

Katka? Dallion glanced at the mage. The woman nodded. Looks like. So, where's the ring mail?

There's no need for one.

A large metal podium floated down from above. A cube of cloud matter glowed on top of it, like styrofoam.

We've adjusted the theater as well. All you need to do is go there and do what's needed. The foam matter will adjust to your requests forming into any tool you might need.

It won't have the appropriate feedback, Dallion resisted. Only metal can act like metal.

We know how metal behaves, so the cloud matter will mimic it. We only need you to help create the shapes.

If that's what you want

Dallion took off his cloud cloak and made his way onto the platform. As Olm had said, the cloud matter reacted, transforming into a copy of the mountain forge chamber. While it did that, there was a zap

Nil? What are you

There's no time! You've been betrayed, dear boy! Get the

Suddenly, the dagger Dallion had concealed floated out of its sheath and away from him. Two bolts of lightning descended from the air simultaneously. However, these weren't bolts created by a fury. Black clouds surrounded them, carrying with them full sapience and aggression.

Before Dallion could react, one attempted to slash the four furies that remained a short distance away. Thankfully, Jiroh had ended up being faster, enveloping them in a protective bubble of air and electricity.

Sorry, but we can't have any interruptions, Olm said as he grabbed Dallion's dagger from the air. I'd hate for you or anyone to ruin this moment.

Chapter 463: Flash Reversal

The large thundercloud lion growled, its massive jaw a few steps away from Dallion. With its speed, it could easily slice through Dallion or pierce him with a thunderbolt. In normal circumstances, Dallion could have taken his chances. Without combat splitting, however, the risk was far too great. Hoping against hope, he glanced at Jiroh. The second thunder beast was keeping her and the other furies in check. None of them seemed to know what was going on. Unfortunately, that didn't matter.

You made a deal with him, Dallion glared at the mage.

There was no surprise emanating from her. There wasn't even a lot of regret. She was somewhat sorry about what was going on, in the same way one regretted losing a stick of chewing gum. Strangely, Dallion wasn't as upset at her betrayal as he was about her stupidity. She had no doubt figured out the effect the cloud theaters had on magic. All she had to do was to use that and gain enough power for a spell back. Dallion would gladly have helped her. Instead, she had made a deal with one of the worst possible people in this world: ambitious, arrogant, with a sense of superiority.

You knew. Dallion turned to the thunder fury. Even before we asked, you knew what we wanted.

The smug smile on the other's face told Dallion that he was on the right path.

You're an awakened. Dallion hated himself for being so stupid right now. All this time he had assumed that since Olm didn't shimmer, he had to be from this world. The truth was that an awakened stopped shimmering upon returning to their world of origin. Jiroh was no longer shimmering. There had already been proof that historically she wasn't the first to have come back. What if there had been another who was back not that long ago? You never wanted to stop us from finding a way back to that world. You wanted to go back there with us.

Close. Olm tossed Dallion's dagger to his other hand. I suspected it existed, like some of my superiors did. Unlike them, though, I wanted to go there. And I was made an offer. He glanced at Katka.

The mage was already going through the artifacts one by one. While she held them, the fingers of her other hand were moving in the air, as if drawing symbols.

Step onto the theater, the thunder fury said. I don't care how the path is opened. I just want to get there.

Is that fine with you, Katka? Dallion asked.

You'll need me either way. The mage took another of the objects, repeating the process. I'm the key, I just need a power source.

The thunder creature next to Dallion growled again, letting him know that further delays wouldn't be tolerated.

What will you do once you get there? Dallion asked.

The fury was just about to give an answer, when Dallion resorted to his awakened skills. Combining athletics and acrobatics, he leapt up in the air as fast as his reaction would allow him. Instead of leaping away from the thunder monster, however, he went straight for it. That caused both it and the thunder fury to lose a second, to determine what his plan was. By then, however, it

was too late; Dallion had already taken out his secret weapon with his left hand and shoved it into the body of the thunder beast.

There was a sudden pop as the large creature was sucked out of the air and into the aether cube. The generals toys had proven useful for a change.

Seeing that its twin was gone, the second thunder lion turned around, redirecting its attention onto Dallion.

Stop! the thunder fury ordered. At that point, though, the first domino had fallen. The plan he had created was quite good, but there always was a way to break it, and Dallion had done just that.

As the lion dashed at Dallion, Jiroh flew at Olm. Bolts of lightning flew everywhere.

Dont get hit. Dallion told himself, as he removed his right boot, tossing it at the approaching creature. The speed at which he did it was adequate, though the material not so much so. Lost its sea iron sole add-on, the boot passed straight through the thunder cloud without causing any harm. The creature lost shape briefly, but quickly regained it. As any being created out of hatred, it paused to enjoy the desperation of its victim.

Dallion felt fear bubble within him. He strongly suspected that the thunder hurry had ordered his pets merely to stun Dallion. After all, he would still need the human to open the portal, and Katka had shown that he couldnt be trusted. Even so, what Dallion was about to do next terrified him. Gritting his teeth, he held on to the weapon he had hidden in his booth and struck the lion, while also doing a point attack.

Waves of pain swept through him one after another. Dallion felt the shock of electricity pass through him to the point that he almost fainted. Instants later, he felt a wave of numbness and exhaustion, only followed by a second zap. On some level, the zap was weaker than before, but still close to Dallions pain threshold. Thankfully, the thread-splitter had done its job, piercing through the thunder lion, as well as the cloud structure behind it. When it came to Flora, this was a weapon of vast power that was unseen before, mentioned only in legends.

How?! Olm shouted as he pulled away from Jiroh. I took it from you.

That had been one of the things he had asked Jiroh to make for him: a stone dagger that resembled the thread cutter as much as possible. Katka had seen him using during their battle on the cloud citadel, but she hadnt managed to get a good look, so there was no way she could describe it in detail to Olm.

However, that wasnt the only item he had asked her to make. The second was a stone jar. Whole not completely uncommon in this world, it had the advantage of being mistaken for an ancient artifact. There was no way to tell the age of stone, especially in a world in which the local inhabitants controlled the flow of air. Furthermore, it had the advantage of hiding something that no one would expect.

Skye! he shouted.

At that point, the lid of the stone jar flew off, and a white cloud emerged, surrounding Katka.

What the heck?! the mage tried to get creature off of her, but without Dallions sea iron gauntlet, she might as well try to punch vapor. A constant mix of hissing and growling came from everywhere, depriving her from the rest of her senses.

Stop them! Olm shouted. Even with all the unexpected events taking place at once, he managed to see what the real danger was. Dont let them get to the podium! We still need"

Torrents of air pushed Dallion and Katka into the cloud matter before anyone else could react.

Luck, Dal! Jiroh shouted. That was her final favor she could make. After this, they would be in separate worlds once more, linked only through memories. One could always hope that the Moons would allow them to meet each other occasionally through dreams, but the Moons were unpredictable beings at the best of times. While hope remained, for all practical reasons, this was goodbye, a far briefer goodbye than Dallion had hoped hed have.

An electrical zap enveloped Dallion. However, it wasnt as painful as the experience moments ago. Rather, it felt like static. Then, suddenly, the whiteness extended everywhere. All sound disappeared, along with every other sensation. Dallions initial thought was that he had fainted, when he suddenly found that he could see his body floating in the endlessness.

YOU ARE LEVEL 46

A large blue rectangle emerged in front.

Thank you, Dallion whispered. There was no doubt about it. He was finally back.

You are in a small, dark room.

Smash the window to choose your destiny!

This seemed oddly familiar. Thinking back, it reminded Dallion of the first time he had awakened. The realm had urged him to do that at the time, but why was he going through the same process twice?

Not having any other option, Dallion gently tapped the rectangle with his hand. Just as before it shattered into pieces, only this time there were five options presented: body, mind, reaction, perception, and empathy.

Choose the trait you value most so you can continue into the halls of judgement.

He was offered a free level up? That was a gift in itself, but what was even more astonishing was that all of his traits had advanced by three as well.

So, this is a loophole. Dallion smiled.

The first time he had entered the awakened world, he had been granted one level and three at all available stats. Now, due to his unexpected departure and return from the world of furies, the awakened world applied the same logic as if he had just awakened again. It was definitely a cheat, but not Dallion even wanted to repeat.

Mind, he said as he pressed the cyan rectangle. Just as before, he couldnt resist increasing his trade to an even forty.

The surprises didnt end there, however. No sooner had the rectangles disappeared than a new one emerged, only this one didnt have text in it, but rather an object: a paintbrush with yarn around the handle.

ART skills obtained!

Youve broken through your forty-sixth barrier!

A green rectangle emerged, with all of Dallions skins beneath it. There were nine of them now in total. The physical skills and music were most developed of all, of course, but the crafting skills had also started to pick up. It was good to see that all the activities Dallion had done while in the world of furies had also had an effect, boosting his zoology to nine and writing to seven. It was forging that had seen the greatest increase, though. All the instruments and parts Dallion had to make as part of his arrangement with the library alliance had pushed up his forging to thirty-eight.

Lucky, a voice said.

Dallion turned around to see a large green Moon floating in the distance. This wasnt just an image or a representation, but the real thing, located hundreds of thousands of miles away.

Eleven have used this loophole. None of them got lost.

Havent figured it out? A shame for all those points on mind.

Normally, Dallion would consider that an insult, but he knew the Moons much better now. There was a hint in it somewhere. All that he had to do was look. Sadly, this time he was coming up with a blank.

Dont worry, the Moon said. Itll come to you. Just remember where youve been.

A sudden force of cold hit him from all sides, knocking his breath out.

Chapter 464: New Reality

Snapping out of an awakened realm was something getting used to. Leaving another world, though, was on a whole new level. Reality knew no mercy as it returned Dallion to the ocean. In a single moment, the pressure squeezed him, before physics and the natural reaction of the body pushed back. His instinct was to gasp for air, but he had the foresight to know what doing that would only make things worse.

Slightly fearful, Dallion split into three instances. There was a moment of doubt whether he would be able to use that ability. Thankfully, it seemed as if all his awakened powers had returned.

Relieved, he then quickly split into two dozen instances and looked about. There was no sign of Jiroh or Eury. However, there was what seemed like a figure a short distance away a figure wrapped in cloud matter.

The moment he approached, the cloud matter extended, moving towards him for comfort.

Its fine, Dallion managed to say. Talking underwater was difficult and far from pleasant, but he could feel the strong fear and discomfort from the creature. More than most animals, cloud creatures didnt like getting wet.

The mage was still inside. Being weaker physically, the change of world had rendered her completely unconscious. Pretty much the only thing that saved her from drowning was the creature around her. At the end of the day, cloud matter had more air than water.

Go straight up and take her with you. Dallion patted the being. That was all it took for it to jet up like a torpedo in a war movie.

Dallion waited for the water to calm down, then swam up as well.

Can anyone see Eury?

He asked.

Normally such a comment would get a response from Dallion, but right now wasn't the time. While he was relieved that he had managed to go back to the awakened world, he was still in the state of processing the realization that Jiroh had gone. What was more, he still had no idea where Eury was. According to everyone, she had to be okay, but that didn't get rid of the tight sensation he was feeling. It seemed that worlds came with their own set of fears, and now that he was back all the fears had re-emerged.

The first thing Dallion did when he reached the surface was to call out for the boat. With the last cloud citadel gone, the small vessel was the only thing that still remained. To his relief, the boat was still there and in perfect condition. To his greater relief, Eury was already in it.

Eury! Dallion shouted, as he swam towards her.

The faintest of smiles was visible on the gorgon's face as she turned to face him. There was no way she could know the adventure he had been through, but thanks to her perception level, she could easily spot a few differences. Chief among them was the cloud creature flying above him, carrying a mage in it.

Is that all that's left of the citadel? Eury asked, as a cluster of her snakes turned in its direction.

Unable to understand the gorgon's language, the cloud creature relied on what it usually did back home—reading others' emotions. In this case, Eury confused it even more.

She's Jiroh's friend,

The explanation sufficed. A brief wave of sadness emanated from the creature. It too had lost Jiroh as well as its entire world.

It's Jiroh's pet. Dallion replied, as he was pulled onto the boat. From her world.

So, she made it there, after all

She did. And she thanks you.

There was no immediate reaction. After half a minute Jiroh nodded, then went back to removing her sea iron elements. With the cloud fortress gone, there was no longer any need for them. Also, she didn't seem to like to have the reminder just now. Dallion also decided to remain quiet for a while.

All his guardian items were slowly returned, courtesy of Gleam mostly. Katka was also dropped aboard. This time Dallion made special care to tie up all her fingers so that she couldn't perform a spell. If he had received a substantial boost to his skills for returning to this world, she must have as well.

Once all that was done, and Dallion and Eury had changed into a set of dry clothes, there was nothing left than wait for the rest of the hunter party to emerge.

How long do you think they'll take? Dallion asked after a few hours.

Knowing Largo probably till evening. Nymph cities tend to be large, and he won't be pleased until he's searched as much as possible.

Does he even have that much air?

They're hunters, they'll be fine. The gorgon replied a reminder that Dallion still had a lot to learn. You were curious about the statues, she said after a while.

Huh? Dallion blinked.

The statues in front of my workshop. You thought I had made them.

The thought had crossed Dallion's mind. Seeing perfect stone statues of people and creatures in front of a gorgon's workshop was certain to make people come to specific conclusions. The first few times he'd gone there, Dallion had been more than slightly concerned on the matter, but had trusted Jiroh enough to believe he'd be fine.

Ji made them, Euro went on. That was her little joke. She'd use her powers to make perfect copies and place them in front of the workshop at night. It used to freak out the city guards a lot at first. Even now, some of the newbies call me in for questioning about it. The veterans find it hilarious.

I endured. The gorgon leaned back against the boat's railing. It didn't bother me to the point that I had to prank back. That only made her continue until it became a sort of tradition. I never knew when something new would appear, or something old would change. I just continued with stuff, rearranging them when needed. I kept telling her she could make a living selling them. She could have made a living as a hunter as well, but she lived working at Hannah. I guess in a way, the old witch was the mother Ji never had.

That was true, but also wasn't. Jiroh had a family, and while they were rough round the edges in a very fury-like way they were what she wanted. There was no telling how things would turn up now that she had been instrumental in letting two otherworlders escape. Dallion could hope that she'd be able to handle it.

Do you even think about going back? Dallion asked.

No. The response was immediate. Do you?

That was a somewhat more difficult question. Seeing Jiroh return had made Dallion think of his own friend and family. So much time had passed since then that most of the memories had faded. From their perspective, he likely would have been away for a few months at most. As far as he was concerned, counting the time he had spent in the realms, centuries had passed. Dallion wasn't even the same person. Even if he lost all his awakened skills and abilities, he never would be. Going back would be like meeting strangers.

My place is here, Dallion said. I have promises to keep. And there's also the Star. And now the Academy. He looked at the unconscious mage. She wasn't here for us. She was skill gem farming. Killing magic creatures drops skill gems. The Academy needs them for some reason, or at least a group within the Academy. She's very picky about it.

The Academy is always up to something. A mage hasn't stepped foot in Nerosal since the incident, and yet one came for the festival. Coincidentally, that was the one time the Star tried to take the city down, killing a member of the imperial family.

You think it was on purpose? From what Dallion had seen, he wouldn't put it beyond them.

However, he couldn't imagine anyone going against the Emperor himself. The man was arguably the

single strongest awakened there was, and one who didnt like being challenged, destroying entire countries when provoked. Why?

Ive no idea, but youve seen first-hand how strong a mage is. It took the three of us and an entire cloud citadel to take her down. Do you think theyd lose to a few chainling pups? They werent even fully developed and not even focusing on him. The overseer was the target, and still she didnt finish the sentence.

That was a good point, raising a number of questions. Mostly, what was the right way to respond? Up to now, the Academy hadnt been involved directly. Dallion had been given a warning, but there had been no action since. Katka didnt seem to mind attacking him, but even she had never set off with the intention of hunting him down. Should they do something more rash, things could change.

The more Dallion thought about it, the more he came to the conclusion that the only option was to let her go. The mage had already made a vow not to interfere with him. Given that she had two Moons upset with her, she was likely going to stick to that promise. That was going to give Dallion some breathing space, but till when.

Untypically, the old echo didnt respond.

You never explained how you managed to get us back here. If Katka was to be believed only Moons and magic are capable of that. So, unless youre a Moon

That depends entirely on you. Maybe your destiny will move in that direction. If not, its best to keep things as they are. Either way, things havent changed. You still have a lot of potential, dear boy. And Ill be here to guide you when needed.

But not answer my question?

In this world, there are many things youre not allowed to know until you reach a certain awakening level. Thats not the only limiting factor. Ones past is ones secret, and even empathy wont let them reveal it to you unless theyre ready. Youre a pleasure to watch, but at this point you still havent reached that level. Its best to leave things at that.

Chapter 465: Hunter Party's End

If you dont stop pretending, Ill break your fingers then turn you to stone, Euryale said with a perfectly calm voice. And if you keep pissing me off, Ill do it in reverse.

Instantly, the mages eyes popped open. Dallion could have sworn that she had been unconscious her breathing pattern and the emotions emanating from her didnt give any cause to suspect anything else. Clearly, he was mistaken, although the gorgon wasnt.

Thats better, Eury said. Had a fun time?

Katkas eyes screamed not particularly but her lips didnt move.

So, now that the cloud citadel is gone, what should we do? Weve no intention of getting involved in Academy business. However, we dont want the Academy to meddle in ours.

Everything in the world is Academy business, the mage replied. Now that she was back in the awakened world, a lot of her confidence was restored. You know what happens if you kill a mage.

From what Dallion had heard, meddling with mages was never a good idea. The Academy didnt appreciate anyone meddling with their own, even if they had been outcast. Exceptions were few and

far in-between and always relied on other powers. There was talk that several powerful guilds and trade organizations attempted to hold mages accountable with mixed results. The hunters were a highly valued and well-knit group, but they had no chance of facing off to the Academy itself.

I've heard, Eury admitted. Well be hunted down and killed, or worse. However, that wont matter much for the mage that is dead.

Katka's smile quickly vanished. That was one of the things about Eury: she didn't bluff, but what was more, she did it in such a way that people knew the fact.

You've already vowed that you won't hurt me, Dallion said. Vow that you won't hurt anyone else in the group and we'll let you go.

Just like that? The mage narrowed her eyes.

Just like that. Eury crossed her arms. As I said, we don't want to meddle in the Academy's business unless you want to hire us to find something. Then we'll decide on a case-by-case basis.

Hunters code, Katka scoffed. Alright, I vow not to do what was said.

It wasn't much of a vow, but it didn't have to be. The intent was obvious and as far as the Moons were concerned, the vow was binding. In fact, the fact that Katka didn't try to hide behind complex and elaborate phrasing suggested that she had no intention of breaking her word. It wasn't so much out of gratitude, rather that she didn't consider them worth the time or effort.

Getting what she wanted, Eury untied the mage's fingers. There was a moment of silence during which time Katka massaged her hands. Done she drew a series of patterns. A large green circle with symbols appeared above her, erasing any wounds and tears she had. No one would ever suspect that she had been in a fight, let alone lost it. But that wasn't the goal of the spell. Similar to Dallion, the mage wanted to be sure that she still had the ability to perform magic while in this world. Now that the spell had proven successful, she let out a sigh of relief.

Our business is concluded, she said, drawing another pattern that lifted her in the air. I hope never to see either of you again. Still, Dal did help me out a bit, so here's a free piece of advice. Don't go hunting magic creatures. You'll always arrive late and if you don't, you'll wish that you had.

Without another word the mage then flew straight up, then zipped away across the sky with the speed of a comet. There was a time when Dallion would have been impressed by the speed. After living in the world of furies, however, he viewed it as passable at best.

You'll have to get rid of that, Eury said, giving the cloud a glance. At least we get back. There hasn't been a cloud creature in the open for centuries.

You think someone will steal her? Dallion asked, instinctively petting Skye.

You know what nobles are like. We don't have the same protection as we do in Nerosal. And I know how heartbroken you'll be if something happens to it.

Please, Skye

The cloud hesitated. It hated to stay in tight spaces, yet it could also tell that what Dallion was saying to be true.

Well, if its so important, I have no choice. But no talking! I plan to catch up on some much-needed beauty sleep!

With a loud pop, Skye whooshed into the flask. Resisting the urge to shake it, Dallion put the item back in his backpack. Somehow, he had just acquired a cloud. That wasnt a phrase he thought hed even have to use, but there it was.

You really can talk to it? Eury asked.

Yep. Its similar to fury speech. That wasnt exactly true. While there were some general similarities, it was thanks to the combination of music, writing, and zoology skills that he was able to communicate to the cloud and potentially any other creature. It was interesting that in this world, the method of communication was closer to that of talking to guardians than actual verbal communication.

What do you plan on doing with it? Therell be questions when people see you with something that only nobles are supposed to have.

It wont be the first time. Besides, its not for me.

The snakes on the gorgons head stirred.

Jiroh asked me to give it to someone, someone close to her.

The gorgon nodded. She knew perfectly well who that someone was, and it wasnt her.

A few hours before sunset, the rest of the hunters emerged. Their haul was impressive: artifacts, jewelry, and a large amount of nymph scrolls. Everyone laughed and joked as they put the finds aboard, but Dallion could feel that it was fake joy. A dull sadness was emanating from all of them. Everyone was perfectly clear what had happened, yet chose not to address it. Either way, one thing was for certain: the hunters of Neorsal were no more. It was as if a void had formed without which the team could no longer stick together. Largo had often mentioned he was considering going to the provincial capital, and now he could well do that. The other two hunters were likely going to follow suit, leaving Eury and Dallion alone in the city. One could claim that it was for the best that the hunter party at least went out with a bang, finding a nymph city, a cloud citadel, not to mention defeating an academy made. However, that would be a lie.

The group took a different route on the way back. Avoiding the sickly port town, they continued further north until reaching land. There, Dallion convinced them to leave the boat in the sea. The vessel was already thankful for the massive repair and upgrades she had received. She offered to link to Dallion, but he refused. It would be a while before he decided to soul off the continent. Joining the rest, he then continued inland.

The first few days, the group was as talkative as could be. Theyd share old stories of the times they had formed as a team, their first commissions, each big mess up, and a lot of inside jokes that Dallion knew nothing about. Sitting a slight distance away, hed listen in, trying to picture what was being said.

Beyond doubt, Jiroh had led more than an interesting life. She had one goal since childhood, and still she had managed to achieve so much and help so many. Finding her sister had come as a near shock. Knowing what she had been through, the fury had no obligation to someone with whom she

wasnt even related by blood. Still, she had taken her in and seen to it that she was not only protected and looked after, but prepared for this world as well.

Dallion attempted to level up several times as they traveled, but without success. His heart wasnt in it, leading to him failing miserably in the trial. The echoes and guardians tried to cheer him up in their own way, but that didnt work. Dallion just needed some time not doing anything. Back on Earth, he would have said he needed recharging or alone time, but the truth was that he wanted the exact opposite. At one point he was even tempted to ask whether Jiroh had placed any echoes in old items shed owned, just to be able to speak with her. Deep down, he knew that was a bad idea.

Two weeks after leaving the coast, the group came to a crossroads. There was nothing in the terrain that indicated it: they were far from all the trade roads, with wilderness going on in every direction. However, they had reached a point at which an important decision had to be made.

Its a week from Nerosal, Eury said. Faster if you can make it.

You dont have to do this. Largo sighed. The princess means a lot to all of us. Well all"

Im going to tell her, the gorgon interrupted. Shell expect to hear it from me. All youll do is say the same, and that would make it redundant.

Eury

She doesnt need to hear it more than once, Largo. All of us were close, yet some were closer to her than others.

The large man looked down. He knew what the gorgon meant, just as he knew that she was right. Regardless of anything else, the person closest to an otherworlder was another otherworlder.

And the kid? he asked.

Dals coming with me. He has a message to give.

Thought youll say that. Large adjusted his backpack. Well leave your share at the overseer, in case were gone before you come back. Shell make sure you get it.

You keep the share. That was the deal. Its how Ji wanted it to be.

A little money never hurt anyone. Besides, maybe Dal will finally get enough metal to forge a proper set of armor. He laughed, ruffling Dallions hair.

That was part of the weirdness living in this worldpeople born within months of each other could have an age difference of centuries when it came to true time.

See you in the wilderness, the large man said, then walked away.

That was the last exchange the hunter group ever had. They might continue to be friends in future, but their destinies were no longer aligned.

Chapter 466: Fox's Keeper

No entry after sunset, the guard said adamantly from the wall.

Were hunters, Eury raised her voice. At the hunters gate.

The argument had been going on for over a minute, to no result. Tensions between the empire and its neighbors, as well as the spreading sickness among crops, had made the town nobles rather

cautious. One could blame them. From what was known, nobility were usually the first to die, making them slightly concerned. As a result, arrangements that had lasted for decades had suddenly changed.

No exception, the guard said. Come back in the morning.

Come back from where?

There was no way to respond to that. Dallion had offered to convince the guard with his music skills, but Eury had been against it. Using awakened powers in a domain controlled by paranoid nobles was going to make things worse by far.

We wait by the gate? Dallion whispered.

Not in the domain. If they dont want to let us through, well keep our distance till morning. One thing though. The gorgon turned around. Only you sleep. Try to gain a level as well.

That was expected. It was natural for one of them to be on guard while the other rested. However, Dallion didnt use the time to try his awakening trial again. Instead, he had something else in mind.

Even with the constant walking, sleep didnt come easy. Being so close to his goal made Dallion more than slightly anxious. For what seemed like hours, he lay still, eyes closed, trying to trick his mind into sleeping.

Okay, but seriously, why not? Doesnt have to be me? Sis can play a tune and make you faint. Shes got skills. If you ask her, shell

For a few seconds, it seemed as if the hammer was going to concede the point. He stood there, dressed in his steam punky outfit this time it had twice as many gears as usual, making him look like a wannabe cyborg. Instead of doing so, though, he just crossed his arms.

Whatever you say. Onda smirked. Wouldnt matter, anyway.

Felygn, Dallion whispered. Unlike all the previous times, he took a step back.

Scared? the Moon asked, as the hammer guardians face transformed, gaining dryad features. Thats an indication that youre smartening up. You dont have to be. It makes things boring.

I need some help. Dallion felt a lump in his throat.

Help, not a favor? Thats a good start. Question is, what are you more afraid of? That I might refuse or that I might grant it?

A little bit of both.

So, its purely my decision.

The Moon looked to the side. As he did, Dallion suddenly noticed that they were in Hannahs bar. He had no idea how he had gotten here, but it felt natural. The place was empty. Not a single customer was to be seen, despite it being noon. At one point, the kitchen door opened, and Jiroh stepped out. Seeing Dallion, she stopped, as if she didnt expect to find him there.

Consider this a gift. The Moon tapped Dallion on the shoulder. Have fun, but dont get used to it. You still owe me. In the blink of an eye, he was gone, leaving Dallion and Jiroh alone.

For several seconds, they looked at each other. All the questions he wished he'd asked before leaving her world seemed to disappear. Eventually, one popped into his mind.

Ji? Is that you?

Moon dream? the fury asked. Didn't expect I'd get to talk to anyone else this way.

My Moon talked to your Moon, Dallion chuckled, making the obvious joke.

I guess they have. Jiroh sat at the bar counter.

For a moment, Dallion wondered whether she hadn't spoken to Eury. Given that they were close, that was the first thing he would have asked. Then again, the gorgon wasn't a favorite of any Moon. For all everyone knew, maybe she didn't even dream.

I take it the trip went smoothly? Both of you back there?

Yeah, Dallion replied. Sitting down next to Jiroh. Katka vowed to leave us alone, so there's that. Things alright on your end?

Should be. Olm had done everything without discussing it with the powers that be. Rewarding if he had succeeded, but since you escaped

He took the blame. Dallion shook his head. Some things never change regardless of world. And you?

Free as the wind, the fury said without elaborating. You didn't arrange all this just to ask me about this, though, did you?

Why not? I was worried about you.

When you change worlds, worries are left behind, Jiroh said plainly. You miss the Ji that I was, but not the one I am here. Same goes for me.

I don't believe that. You miss your sister.

A warm breeze came from the south. Dallion was now sitting on a table in the field. Tall grass moved gently, greeting a sound similar to the rustling of leaves.

I'm going to see her, Dallion went on. Halburn. We'd have been with her, but things have gotten tense here. We aren't allowed in till morning. What do I tell her, Ji? I know what I have to do, but how do I say it?

Does it matter?

How do you want me to tell her?

The question made the fury's attitude change. Dallion tried to use his music skills to figure out exactly what she was feeling, but nothing happened. Dreams were one place in which awakened skills didn't always work.

Thanks for the dream, Dal. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Jiroh stood up, turning into a puff of vapor. Say hi to her for me. And tell Eury she still owes me one.

Jiroh! Dallion shouted, jumping to his feet. It was night with nothing but wilderness around him. A single camp fire burned a few steps away with Euryale standing by it.

Nightmare? Eury asked.

That was a good question. Could it be called a nightmare? Could it even be called a talk? Dallion was certain that hed spoken with Jiroh, but it wouldnt be the first time hed have lucid dreams without the involvement of a Moon. Realm jumping tended to do that. The first time after he left an area domain, hed had weird illogical dreams that seemed as real as anything else around him. It was possible that this was something similar as well.

Something like that, he said, rubbing his eyes. How long till morning?

An hour, maybe less. They wont let us in till mid-morning.

How do you know?

No merchants.

When the sun eventually appeared beyond the horizon, saw exactly what she meant. Not a single wagon was to be seen. Worse, the road leading to the city gates didnt seem to have been used in weeks. It was almost as the town hadnt seen any serious activity since Dallion had set off for the cloud citadel. Given Halburns location, that was alarming.

Anything you can tell me, Nil?

Dallion asked.

Good to know.

The hunter gate never opened. At mid-morning, the guard on shift told the hunters that theyd have to use the standard entrance as everyone else. There, they were carefully checked by an awakened member of the local nobility who, after a series of useless questions, let them through. The absurdity was that the same person knew Eury quite well, as did most of the city.

What happened to this place? Dallion asked.

Last time he had been here, the place was packed with merchants, travelers, and hunters, all buying and selling anything beneath the sun. Now, it was as if Dallion had entered a ghost town.

Keep walking, Eury whispered, moving on. A small squad of fury soldiers glanced at them as they walked past. There was no joy coming from any of them.

Fury mercenaries didnt come cheap. Hiring so many to take on the role of city guards didnt make much sense, especially with all of the merchants fleeing the place. The only explanation was that the locals felt threatened.

Reaching the Third Eye couldnt come fast enough. Eury and Dallion passed two more squads of soldiers on the way, this time human. None looked happy to see them, but thankfully, there were no incidents.

There wasnt a single hunter in the inn when Dallion got there. Judging by the change of decor, there wasnt much else, either. Most of the furniture had gone, as had half of the drinks behind the counter. Thankfully, Jirohs sister had remained.

Hey, she said, giving Dallion and Eury a glance. Didnt think you two would show up. Two glasses floated on the counter, followed by a bottle of pale pink liquid. Rooms are full, so itll have to be just a drink.

Full? Dallion glanced about. I didnt see many hunters on the way here.

There are one or two. Theyre not staying here, though. Its the mercenaries. They prefer to be at a place where a fury serves. Trust issues.

That didnt sound good.

Moneys good, though, she filled the glasses. Ive more than I can spend. Stocked up quite well, considering. Dont look at the shelves, thats just because the mercs drink a lot. Most of the stuff comes from themthe only ones that can freely move come and go since the merchants chickened out.

You know why were here, Di, Euryale said, not touching her drink.

The young fury looked at her, then put the bottle away.

She left, didnt she?

Dallion nodded.

She always told me she would, and somehow Im still surprised.

She asked me to tell you goodbye, Dallion said.

Of course she did.

And also to give you something. He took off his backpack. Its something that"

Dont. Diroh almost snapped. Whatever it is, you keep it.

Dallion could feel the conflict brewing within her. Sadness and relief, mixed with determination, swirled about like a hurricane of sound. She wanted to have the gift from her sister, but also didnt.

It was meant for you.

I dont care. Ive more than enough trinkets and money. If you dont want to, just give it to someone, or leave it outside. Someone will pick it up. Thats what this place has become. Itll get better, though. Every town has its ups and downs.

You dont have to be here, Di, Eury said. There are better places.

Ive heard that before Look, I know you made some promise, so just do what you have to do and leave. I have work to do. And dont try your tricks on me! She pointed at Dallion. Ji warmed me about your skills.

Ill make you a deal. He placed a flask on the counter. You have a look at what Jiroh wanted you to see, and afterwards if you havent changed your mind well leave.

The gorgons snakes stirred. She wasnt pleased with that arrangement, even if she didnt oppose Dallion openly. Maybe this was what helped the fury make up her mind, for she nodded. That was exactly what Dallion was hoping for.

At first, nothing happened. But the moment Diroh took hold of the flask, the cloud creature streamed out. There was no haste or rush; unlike Dallions own familiars, Skye emerged with slow

grace as she took the form of a white fox of cloud matter. All this was done with the sole purpose of impressing, and given that the fury had never seen a cloud creature of this nature, Skye succeeded.

Who are you? Diroh asked in fury.

Im one of Jis oldest friends. I found her when she was still a child. She was quite wild, I must say.

You found? The fury blinked. Youre from the other world.

I take it youre well suited for each other, Dallion smiled. The fury remained speechless. As Jiroh liked to say, theres a whole wide world out there. No need for you to remain stuck in this place.

This was it. The ember of joy had ignited within the fury. All it would take would be to

Im sorry. Diroh looked straight into Dallions eyes. Im needed here.

And that was it. She had the same conviction Jiroh did. True, she wasnt an awakened, but that didnt change a thingher mind was made up.

Thanks. Diroh petted the cloud fox. Being a fury, she was able to touch it without issue. I owe you one.

Dallion could do nothing but nod. Beside him, Eury took one of the glasses and downed it in one go.

You know how to reach me if you need help, she said. Take care, Di. She turned around and left the inn. After a few moments, Dallion followed.

Chapter 467: Loose Ends

Are you sure shell be fine? Dallion asked.

Leaving Skye with Di was the right thing to do, but he still couldnt beat the feeling that agreeing to leave her in Halburn was a mistake. The issue with any city that relied heavily on trade was that once the trade was gone, it quickly turned into a hellhole. Halburn wasnt there yet, but the way things were going, it wouldnt be long.

Shes Jis sister, the gorgon replied. Give her some credit.

Its not her. Its everything else.

Dal, youre always cute when you worry, but you cant save the world. She must make her own mistakes or shell blame you for it. And dont worry more than you have to. As my mother used to say, wars are cyclicthey come and go. We must only be tough enough to see them pass.

There was that mention again. Officially, the empire wasnt in war with anyone, but the changes in behavior were noticeable. Nerosal had seen the addition of several garrisons, other towns and cities were no different. There had been rumors that even the provincial capital was arming up, although that was more due to growing internal tensions than external threats. Having a county with two capital level cities was seen as a challenge to the archdukes authority, and although Dallion knew from the memories of his grandfather that the Priscords had backed the current archduke, opinions had a tendency to change.

Dallion made one more attempt to level up on the way back to the city. As all before, it too was unsuccessful. The echoes in his domain had moved from gently criticizing him to outright mocking him. Since they knew exactly what was going on in his head, this was their way of trying to shake

him out of it. Dallion understood it, but still couldn't appreciate their efforts. Right now, all he needed was to get back to the workshop and spend a week doing nothing.

Entry to Nerosal was much faster than the hunters feared. The countess or the overseer must have updated the new guards orders, for they let Eury and Dallion in with only a rudimentary check. Even so, it couldn't be hidden that they were actual combat troops.

I'll need to go to the overseer for a bit, Eury said. I'll make it up to you once I'm done.

Dallion smiled. He knew what that usually meant. Quite often Eury tended to be the epitome of the work hard party hard way of life. Today, though, he had a meeting of his own.

Sounds good. See you in a bit.

Usually, this was where a kiss would follow. With events still weighing on their mind, both chose to pass.

Fifty-seven years, give or take

Talking from experience?

Observations. I never made it past a decade.

Dallion remained standing in the street half a minute longer. Various thoughts went through his mind. In the end, he went in the direction of the general's club. He had a promise to keep. The club seemed one of the things that had remained relatively unchanged from how Dallion remembered it. However, after spending two weeks in Flora, he couldn't look at furies the same way. What was worse, now he knew exactly how they had ended up there. Servants, guards, assistants one could call them mercenaries and hires, but the truth was that most aspects of their lives were owned by the general and the other members of his club.

Good day, Dallion was immediately greeted upon entering the lobby. His ragged and unwashed state did little to lessen his welcome. At this point, he was well known that he too worked for the general, and as such needed to be shown every courtesy. This way, please. I will take you to the general.

Dallion was tempted to respond in the fury's native language, but decided against it. Anything he did here would be reported to the general, and that never was ideal.

Is he expecting me?

The general is always expecting his close associates, the fury replied in almost mechanical fashion. Would you like some refreshments during your meeting?

No. I won't be here that long.

The fury led Dallion to the room in question. There was a discrete knock, then five seconds later, the door was opened wide for Dallion to enter. To little surprise, the general was there along with his bodyguards standing in front of a large cage with his most recent acquisition. Dallion had never seen the creature before, but he could tell it was rare; the being had the appearance of a bird with feathers made entirely of yellow crystal, almost like scales.

Salamandrine, the general said, eyes glued to the creature. Is born and raised in the fire caves and volcanoes. They rarely leave their habitat. Very difficult to find, extremely difficult to capture. Some even call them a Fools Phoenix.

Sounds appropriate, Dallion said, a few steps from the entrance.

The general turned his head at him, then smiled. The insult wasn't missed, but rather than feel annoyed he seemed to be pleased. One of the man's more annoying qualities was him enjoying watching people under his thumb show some spirit.

So, what brings you here? The hunt went well?

Instead of answering, Dallion took out the aether cube and tossed it at the man. Part of him wanted the general to fumble catching it, but that didn't happen. The furies in the room made sure that the cube slowed down while going in the air, then stopped half a foot from the general's face.

A storm creature? the man asked, surprised.

A heart is a heart, Dallion replied, downplaying the significance. That's what you wanted.

Yes. The general gently took hold of the object. Exactly what I wanted. Did the thread splitter come in handy?

Not much, Dallion lied. Strictly speaking, it hadn't helped in the capture itself, but he would never have gotten in the fury world without it, let alone make his way back.

You get to keep it for free, then.

The cube was tossed away with just as much interest as an old toy. The furies, of course, used their control of air currents to place it in the appropriate section of the room, along with several others. There was no telling if the general was ever going to use them for anything other than boasting. Just thinking about it made Dallion sick. Keeping living creatures in magical prison just to show off then again, the general did the same to people to some extent.

I never doubted you'd keep your promise. Just one to go and you'll be free again. Of course, that doesn't stop us from doing business.

Dallion frowned.

Why so negative? Look what happened last time? It's thanks to our cooperation that the city still exists, not to mention that it received a significant upgrade. It's not every day that one wakes up in a capital.

Who knows, maybe next time Nerosal will become the provincial capital.

Anything else? Dallion asked. The quicker he got out of here, the better.

My associates are still searching for the artifact. It's taking longer than I hoped, but they'll find it, eventually. After all, you took a while, but you came through in the end.

No thanks. Once I find the artifact for you, I'm done.

That's what you said last time. And the time before that.

This time it's different.

A smile curved up on the general's face.

Of course it is. Enjoy your rest, Dal. Youve earned it. Ill let you know Ill need you.

It was like experiencing a dj vu. As Dallion left the room, he couldnt help but think of being in this situation before. The shield was supposed to be a one off. So were the fights at the arena. Now he was one task away from fulfilling his promise. It almost seemed as if the world conspired to keep Dallion intended to the worst possible person in existence. Worse, now that Dallion had some experience being a hunter, he saw that people like the general were more numerous than he thought and the more he got involved in the world at large the more hed have to deal with them.

Another piece of awakened wisdom? A bit rich after you refuse to tell me more about yourself.

No one owes you anything, dear boy. Everything youve received youve earned through one way or another, be it luck, birth, connections Do you think people like giving things to the general? Youve done more favors than most. Did you do them because you liked him?

It was natural to say that things were different, but in truth, they werent. A year ago, Dallion thought he was receiving a suspicious number of favors. Now he knew that they werent favors. The people in the village had started respecting him because he had become awakened and managed to bring to positive changes. Hannah had helped him, because he appeared lost to her. Even Jiroh and Eury had initially bonded to him because all of them were otherworldly.

No, but a lot of it is entirely achievable through your means alone. The main thing is never to stop going forward.

The moment Dallion heard that, he stopped. It wasnt unusual for Nil to be so direct with his advice, although more often than not he was taking a subtle approach. Now the message was loud and clear: Dallion had to move on and in order to do so, there remained one final thing.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Day changed to night as Dallion found himself in his realm. Most of the familiars and echoes had gone to sleep or were keeping or remained in their own domains. Nox was the single exception. Not only had the crackling been with Dallion longer than anyone else, but it also was nocturnal.

Hey, Nox. Dallion reached down, scratching it behind the ear. Havent you grown a lot?

Id grow more if you let me hunt, the creature replied amid purrs.

Ill do that. Dallion picked Nox up and put him on his shoulder. The weight was considerably more since the first time the crackling had climbed there. However, Dallions strength had also increased.

Walking through the darkness, Dallion made his way towards one of the nearby mountains. As things stood, the trial area was located at a peak. The entire trip would have taken a flash if Lux was up, but Dallion decided to do it the hard way. At least that way he was going to be able to stop thinking for a while.

Climbing was tough, though nowhere as much as the first time he went up a mountain. Back then, he didnt have anything but attack and guard skills. Now, even choosing the most difficult approach provided dozens of markers to help him speed upwards, with Nox on his shoulder.

You used to enjoy climbing when you were younger, Dallion said in an attempt to keep his mind off things.

Its too much effort. The feline twirled its tail.

I admire your simple way of thinking.

A stone gazebo was waiting for Dallion as he reached the peak. And just as all the times before, when Dallion stepped in, there already was someone there.

Hi, Day, Jiroh looked at him. I see youre back.

Chapter 468: The Unforgotten Moment

You cleared your debt, Jiroh said. Thats good.

Staying silent, Dallion leaned against the colon across from her. The dais wasnt large; barely six feet in diameter, it allowed several people to be there comfortably. For Dallion, though, it felt as if they were miles apart. In a way, that was because he knew this wasnt the fury; she was nothing more than a clone created by her realm based on memories and potentially a little input from the Moons. However, with Jiroh gone, it was the closest there was.

Hopefully youll be able to spend more time with Eury now. She acts like a badass, but shes actually not.

Youre only saying what I think. Theres no telling whether its true.

And youre still choosing to believe me. If you werent, youd just get rid of me and leave this place. But you dont.

That was the issue with the trial, a puzzle so simple than anyone would figure out, yet Dallion didnt have the will to go forward with it. There were no tricks, no skills involved, not even a decent combat. All he had to do was accept the obvious and let it go. There were moments after returning to this world that he thought he could do it. However, he had been proven wrong.

The first time he was caught by accident. He had chosen to have the trial on the mountaintop to change his realm a bit. Having Jiroh appear had shocked him, almost making him think that he had stumbled on a loophole that allowed him to talk to her or at the very least, an echo of hers. It had taken quite a bit of convincing for him to think otherwise. Jiroh had to voice his thoughts proving that she had to be an echo, but even then, he remained unconvinced. Afterwards, things only got worse.

Dallion had both avoided the trial, and become obsessed by it. The possibility of talking to her had become like a minor addiction. Soon enough, he was aware that he couldnt just quit, but even that didnt make him change his habits.

You were supposed to have gotten over this flaw, the fury sighed.

I thought so as well. Reality seemed to have other thoughts in mind if one could call this reality. As far as Dallions mental state was concerned, maybe it was.

You cant stay here, Dal. Its not healthy for you.

You cant cast me out.

Things would be really messed up if I was the one casting you out. What are you trying to prove? That you can live your life at your existing level? You know thats a lie. Even if you pay your debt to the general, even after you find the dragonlet the Moon asked for, youll remain stuck.

Every word she said was true. This wasn't the first time she had asked him to leave, but at the same time, she also made him stay. That was the snare of the trial. Her very presence kept him from moving on.

Taking a deep break, Dallion summoned the thread splitter. On his shoulder, Nox yawned, then leaped off lazily, finding a comfortable spot to curl up. Even the familiar doubted that Dallion had the intention of starting a fight. He had been through this so many times that all his actions had become predictable.

Why can't you have stayed? he asked.

That's the wrong question. You had no problem letting me go. You're just chasing after a ghost.

You think I don't know that?! Dallion snapped. What's next? You'll tell me that this is based on some hidden abandonment issues? A fear deep inside me that I cannot identify?

All I know is that it's based on some fear. And I suspect you know exactly what it is, don't you?

Nil used to say that. He'd always go on and on that every trial had a solution and that it was something that Dallion could achieve. Maybe Jiroh was just a metaphor for something. More than likely, she was, but Dallion couldn't find it.

Back on Earth, it was said that when one eliminated the impossible whatever was left, no matter how improbable, had to be the truth. Jiroh couldn't be linked to Dallion leaving his world behind. It wasn't related to his parents local or those on Earth either. There was no way it could be Eury, so what was left?

Always overthinking it, the fury said in a calm voice. Sometimes it's the most obvious.

And sometimes it's what's not, Dallion countered. Advice from a trial echo wasn't always meant to help.

Why was it that he needed Jiroh so badly? Was it because he feared forgetting something? Did he think there was something only she could help with? No. That couldn't be it. In that case, what else was there?

I just want to talk to you, Ji. This is the only way I could.

That's a lie. You're talking to yourself and you know it.

It's still talking.

Dallion did a slash attack with the dagger, the blade passed inches from the fury's neck, slicing through the stone column next to her as if it were butter. It too was part of the trial, and until over, it didn't fully exit.

When I pass this trial, it'll be over. We'll never talk to each other. I'll have to rely on dreams, never sure whether the Moons made them or if it's really you there.

If you don't know, why not think of the best? Maybe it'll always be me? Will it matter in any way if it isn't? You know I'm not really Jiroh.

That's not the point!

What is then? Weve been having these talks for how many times now and you never get to the point. Were already discussed all there is. Weve gone through every moment we were together since you arrived to Nerosal. What more do you have to say?

I dont want you to forget me! Dallion shouted.

Anger blossomed within him, then faded away, replaced by terrifying fear. The thing that scared him more than anything after his return from the fury world wasnt that he would forget Jiroh, but that she would forget him. No, the real fear was that Dallion himself would be forgotten. All that he achieved, all his accomplishments, could be erased just like that with the snap of a finger, and no one would know.

The knife disappeared in his hand. Feeling a strong pain in his chest, Dallion struggled to remain standing. A few moments later, the pain diminished, but didnt disappear completely.

I want someone to remember me, he said.

They will. Youve already achieved"

Ive achieved nothing. Im part of a world that I dont belong to. The moment I do something wrong, Ill vanish and no one will remember a thing, as if I never was.

Dallion had gone through a lot since he was in this world, but never before had he experienced such a feeling. It wasnt sadness, nor depression, or even hopelessness. Rather, it was like staring in the face of futility. He felt as if nothing he was doing, had done, or was going to do mattered in the least. The world would keep on turning, people would keep on living their lives, the few he had a chance to come in contact with would slowly forget him.

Theres no way around it, Jiroh said. Keeping me here wont help.

That was half true. A fake echo of Jiroh didnt help, it only masked reality, making Dallion come back to it for momentary relief. However, there was a way forward, the same that Nil had told him.

Keep moving forward, Dallion said. He looked at the fury. She was considerably stronger than him. Even as a creation of his mind, he would have a tough time defeating her at present with nothing more than a single familiar. And yet, she hadnt attacked him even once. Thats because it never was her purpose to do so.

I knew youd understand. The trial echo smiled, remaining like a copy of Jiroh till the end. See you around.

See you. Dallion replied, then watched how she walked out of the gazebo, disappearing into air.

You have broken through your forty-seventh barrier

Your level has increased to 47

Choose the trait that will serve you best

The green rectangle appeared, along with the five options. The choice didnt particularly matter. Dallion increased his perception once more, aiming to make it an even thirty. His thoughts remained on Jiroh, though. No longer something that held him back, or a source of pain, but rather as a bunch of good memoriesmemories of the fury from another world that he had the spart and determination to become his friend.

Dallion Darude - Level 47

BODY: 35

MIND: 40

PERCEPTION: 29

REACTION: 25

EMPATHY: 20

GUARD: 47

ATTACK: 44

ATHLETICS: 40

ACROBATICS: 40

FORGING: 38

WRITING: 7

ARTS: 1

MUSIC: 52

ZOOLOGY: 9

Chapter 469: Spring Hunting

The change was subtle, like a firefly flickering near a fire. To someone with experience, however, that was more than enough. Splitting into five instances, Dallion dashed towards the cave entrance from several sides. The hedgerel paused. As a creature of magical nature, it was able to sense his presence along with the instances that were approaching it. Dull gray fur glowed up in bright orange in an attempt to ward off enemies. Moments later, that was accompanied by a burst of instances on the creatures part as well. A wave of hedgerels appeared like a river filling up the cave, then rushed forward like a river of lemmings.

Gleam! Dallion shouted.

All but one of his instances vanished as the whip blade flew out of its sheath. The blade extended forward, slicing through the torrent of creatures as it split it into two parts. Half of the hedgerels disappeared in the blink of the eye. The others continued running forward, keeping their distance from the blade as if an invisible wall had emerged.

Normally, there wouldnt be an issue capturing a hedgerel. The creatures were the size and shape of a squirrel, with hedgehog spines that had a tendency to glow when frightened. Most would call them harmless, but every now and then, there were exceptions as the one that had been terrorizing an entire region of Keliesh County. With several of the empires provinces engaged in open war against the neighboring countries, food was sent to the battlefield, not to mention that the crop poisoning incidents were still increasing, affecting a greater area of the continent. And it wasnt only settlements that were suffering either. Parts of the wilderness, otherwise left to their own devices, had also been affected, along with the creatures that inhabited them. As far as Dallion was aware,

three simultaneous hunts were ongoing through the empire itself, all led by nobles and battle clerics. That left all lesser nuisances to be dealt with by mercenaries and starting hunters.

Once more! Dallion ordered.

The whip blade swung again, halving the stream of instances. As the creature felt boxed in, its spines grew brighter changing into a bright amber, like the top of a candleflame. Focusing all effort on running, it stopped maintaining its additional instances, letting them vanish away a dozen at a time. This was precisely what Dallion was waiting for. The moment there was only one creature in front of him, he ran at full speed and snatched the animal from the ground.

The first moment the hedgerels legs left the ground, the creature froze. Then in a fit of desperation it started fidgeting wildly in an attempt to break free. Unfortunately, that proved impossible. The thunder-hide gloves Dallion had procured himself at tremendous expense protected him from any spines and bites the hedgerel could offer. Holding it tightly, he shifted from a sprint, to a run, and then to a fast-paced walk, as he made his way to the outskirts of the nearby village of Vitanallia.

Is that the last one? Dallion asked.

Gleam. Dallion sighed.

Gleam was one of Dallions familiars, whom he had made guardian of the whip blade. In the real world she had no actual presence, only being able to move about through the weapon that Dallion had with him. In the world that was his awakened realm, however, she was a small, but increasingly beautiful and deadly shardfly with crystal wings. When he had first found the creature, she had been trapped as a guardian of a broken hand mirror, which served as a toy in a criminal gambling den. Since being freed, she had helped him to a great extent, although she kept insisting that Dallion help her improve her awakened level so as to regain some of the powers she used to have.

A few minutes later, the whip blade returned and gently made its way into the empty sheath on Dallions back.

That was everything Dallion wanted to hear. Holding the hedgerel tightly, he continued walking.

Nothing will happen to you, he said, adding some calm to his voice. I just cant have you guys eating all the food there is.

That made the animal pause a bit. In a while seeing that there was no way to escape it stopped fidgeting. Dallion would have preferred that it stopped doing so on its own accord, not do to an obvious threat, but still he had to take the win any way he could.

It was roughly an hours walk to Vitanallia. The village was rather large, some would even mistake it for a town. At any other time, they would have been, but the archduke of the entire provinces had recently declared that no settlements could increase their level without an official permission from him. Given that response was pretty much known before even any request was even made, all minor nobles in towns and villages had preferred not to bother at all.

It's a real shame

Dallion didnt respond. He agreed with the notion, but knew from personal experience that it was better not to meddle in the affairs of nobles. As the saying went, one tended to easily lose his name and head in such circumstances. At present, there had been two cases of nobles making their objections known publicly on the matter. No one knew who they were, for the archduke had used his awakened powers to erase their names from the entire province. No person, creature, or book could remember those names since they had been stricken out of reality itself.

Upon nearing the village, Dallion slowed down, giving the guards a chance to spot him approaching. It was stupid, be if he didnt the people would be alarmed as he had seen the previous few times. And just to make sure he waved in their direction. A short while later, the guard on the village wall responded.

The village gates opened widely, however, instead of a grateful crowd, only two people emerged. Both of them were awakenedprobably the most powerful people in the villageand both had mixed feelings about Dallions involvement. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could feel their internal conflict. On the one hand, they were relieved that the last of the creatures ravaging their crops had been caught. On the other hand, Dallion had cost a lot, even if he were only an apprentice hunter.

Heres the last one, Dallion raised the creature in his hand. You should be good from here on.

Unless some other plague doesnt hit us, the village chief grumbled. She was old enough to be Dallions grandmother, but her awakened powers made her appear in her mid-forties. By Dallions estimate, she was a double-digit level, though below twenty. Not bad for someone in a village, strictly speaking.

The woman glanced at the tall slender man next to her. Getting the hint, the man took out a small pouch from within his vest and tossed it to Dallion.

What we agreed upon, he said. The guards will bring the basket with the rest shortly.

Much appreciated, Dallion smiled.

I still dont know what you need with those pests. They are a blight. Nothing good will come from them.

Even creatures like those deserve to live, Dallion replied. Dont worry, I wont set them free anywhere near. You have my word by the Seven Moons.

My the Seven., Both the village chief and her assistant nodded.

I still dont know what good theyll be. If I were younger, Id hunt them down myself.

And you would have managed, given a bit more time. Dallion smiled, adding a note of cooperation in his voice. One of the best advantages of knowing music skills was that he could see and affect the emotions of others. The trick was to be subtle about it and never abuse his powers. Youll let the rest of the villages know?

Of course. The woman crossed her arms. Although if youve done your job well enough, theyll notice without my help. I just hope we managed to stock up on food before the poison plague hits. From what I heard its moved further north, but who knows. You cant trust anyone these days.

You can say that again.

It had been half a year since the plague had appeared and still no one knew anything about it. The Academy of mages denied any involvement and refused to look into the matter with the excuse that it wasn't their problem. The Order of the Seven Moons had tried to help the affected population within the empire and beyond but even they hadn't progressed much. The cause for plants suddenly becoming poisonous remained a mystery; all the clerics and followers could do was to take safe food to the people who needed it. Even the large cities were getting concerned. So far, there was no case of one being affected, but everyone whispered that it was a matter of time. Even Dallion had to rely on his bowl guardian to be sure the food he was eating was fine.

Any other jobs you have for me? he asked.

No, and even if I didn't, I wouldn't be able to afford you. No offense to you hunters, but you cost more than half the buildings in the village.

Hunters code, Dallion replied. As much as it pained him, there were some things he couldn't go against. Hunters remained mercenaries, and mercenaries had to stick to firm prices. In that case I'll be on my way. The Seven be with you.

The village chief nodded, then briskly turned around and returned back to her village. A few moments later four guards emerged, carrying a large backpack and an even larger basket made of metal. The sound of squirrels was coming from the basket. When Dallion approached though, all the noises died out.

It's fine, he said as he split into a dozen instances and gently removed the cover. Surprisingly, none of the creatures made any attempts to escape, leaving him to release his final capture inside. Once the cover was closer and secured again, the noises continued. I'll take it from here, Dallion told the guards as he took the backpack with the rest of his gear. With a swift action, he put it on his back, then grabbed the metal basket with one hand. One of the many advantages of being awakened was that he had the strength of a dozen oxen.

Well, you'll have to learn on the way. There's been a development in the Icepicker guild.

Dallion paused. The Icepicker guild was the one which had taken him in after he had left his home village for the big city. Certain events had caused him to leave them, almost breaking ties with a few people. Even so, he kept informed of what was going on thanks to Nil, who was an echo of one of the captains there.

I can't tell for certain, but it seems the guild master has asked to see you. And so has March.

Chapter 470: Professional Hunter

Hunter! the one of the guards at the watchtower shouted as Dallion made his way towards the gate of Nerosal.

The practice was annoying to the extreme, even if his title was not accepted. Half a year ago, he had to be stopped each time and go through a ridiculous process. At least now, there pretty much wasn't a soldier or guard in the city that didn't know him by sight.

Despite the tensions in the empire and the rest of the world, the city had remained untouched. In part, that was due to it being in the most southern region of the empire. The new kingdoms nearby had declared neutrality, unwilling to feel the wrath of the entire empire, while the northern provinces were engaged in combat. It also helped that the city was brimming with soldiers and

nearly every noble that had lost favor in the eyes of the emperor. It would be suicide to attack there, especially considering there was nothing to be gained from such an action.

Bringing some critters, Dallion said as he passed through. Several of the soldiers gave the metal basket he was carrying a quick glance, then let him continue on his way unimpeded.

That was another thing to keep in mind. Ever since he had developed his empathy trait, the guardian of every item, building, and area in the city was able to talk to him. The first year had been tough, although now things had started to calm down a bit, mostly because he wasn't seen as such a novelty anymore. As it turned out, buildings were like people: they lost interest after a while.

Merchants complaining about the wilderness and the plague. Nothing out of the ordinary.

That much was a given. Somehow, merchants always found something to complain about. As far as Dallion was concerned, there was no better time to be a merchant. Kingdoms were all too willing to buy their wares at almost any price and always sent large escorts to protect them along the way. The only drawback was that the travel distance always varied. The old trade routes were somewhat disrupted, though not by too much.

As he walked, Dallion got a whiff of a nearby bakery. The bread was freshly baked, and rather good by normal standards, but it wasn't for awakened. The hedgerels, though, went crazy to the point that Dallion had to buy a dozen loaves for them.

The creatures calmed down somewhat, though not that much.

Afternoon, Dal, a stall seller said.

She seemed like a nice young woman with a charming smile. Most of the neighborhood perceived her as such. Dallion, however, knew that she was part of the mirror pool, the sanctioned criminal organization that ran all the city's underworld. Due to recent events, they had been keeping pretty quiet, but now, with the war, things were starting to change again. Every source of information was valued, and the mirror pool had lots of information to offer.

I'm not in need of handkerchiefs today, Dallion replied, keeping up the pretense.

It's a shame. I have some that would suit you. No rush, though. Just arrived from abroad. I'll save it for you if you change your mind.

Dallion made his way to one of the workshop areas. The neighborhood was filled with workshops for tailors and blacksmiths. The owner of the place Dallion was staying had mastered both; she was also a gorgon and Dallion's girlfriend.

Several human-looking statues decorated the small lawn in front of the entrance. Dallion knew that they were sculpted, but each time it made him chuckle imagining that they were thieves who had been caught. Before going to the workshop, Dallion walked to the side of the building and went up to the second floor. As his hunting tasks had increased, his money had as well, granting him enough to rent the space above Euryales' workshop. The reason he needed to was that there simply was no place to put all his catches.

Normally, people needed keys for that purpose. However, since Dallion had acquired the rare ability to talk with items, he let them do it for him. The lock he had installed was forged by him, using a

combination of cast iron and mercury alloys. Just as items could affect minute changes in the real world slip out of someones fingers at the right moment, become misplaced, or even stop functioning when their owner most needed them to this mechanism of this lock could open and close on demand.

A loud click made Dallion know that he could enter, which he did.

Thanks,

Guys Dallion said out loud. Instantly, the noises ended. We've been over this.

At present, there were a total of a total of seven moonlight pups nearly invisible during the day Two sapphire birds, half a dozen sun griffin eggs, several ruby shardflies, a water-snake, and fully grown dust lynx in the living space.

Just great

When someone said that a creature had gone through an artistic phase, that usually meant that it had done a mess. When it came to shardflies, however, that meant a whole lot more. Being the equivalent of large butterflies with razor-sharp ruby wings, Ruby had a tendency of scraping off parts of the walls as she attempted to draw scribbles on them. So far Dallion had had to repair the inside of the building half a dozen times in the last month alone.

Ruby, do I need to tell Gleam to have a talk with you again?

The shardfly in question flapped away from the rest, landing innocently in a corner of the room. She knew the drill, just as Dallion knew thanks to his music skills, that she didn't regret what she had done one bit.

Dallion placed his hand on the wall and used his awakening powers. A second later, all the damage was gone and the walls were as good as new. During that second, though, Dallion had entered the awakened realm of the building a whole world of its own and tracked down and killed all the creatures that represented the scars. It was a difficult task but it had taken him half a day in terms of the realm.

Can you manage a week without scarring a wall? Dallion looked at the guilty shardfly. Just a week, okay? I promise I'll find you a place where you can break loose soon enough.

Why do I even bother? Dallion went back to the hedgerels and tossed in a few more loaves of bread. Ground rules, he began. You stay inside the basket. I'll find a place to put you in the wilderness where you won't have to eat people's crops and set you free there. Okay?

The creatures were too busy devouring the bread to reply. Even so, Dallion knew that they had heard him.

Just show a little patience, okay? he went to the door. And everyone else, try to make them feel welcome. And by that, I don't mean slicing the basket, he pointed at the group of shardflies. Now, I need to go somewhere for a few hours, but I'll be back this evening. Behave till then.

The silence was encouraging, but this wasn't the first time that creatures had tried to pull a fast one on Dallion. Unfortunately, he had business to take care of.

Grabbing his backpack, he then went to the front of the building. The workshop door was locked, which meant that Eury was out somewhere. That wasn't unusual. A relationship between hunters was almost like a long-term relationship. When they went off doing jobs, they were within the realm of some item or other, improving it or themselves. It wasn't rare that they'd spend weeks apart sometimes within the course of a single day. That made the time they did spend together all the more cherished.

That was a rather dubious answer from the echo, meaning either that it had no idea or that the original from whom he had been created didn't wish to share that information. That was the problem with echoes, since they were the equivalent of virtual clones within the awakened realms, they remained close to the individual from whom they were created. As such, they knew exactly when to keep secrets.

The Icepicker guild wasn't particularly close to Eurys workshop, though in terms of the city it couldn't be said to be too far away either. Dallion had passed by it several times. However, entering it since quitting had always been weird.

Standing in front of the entrance of the four-story building, memories flashed through his mind. There was a time when he viewed the people inside the building as his family. They had treated him better than well, and yet he had betrayed them. It had been for a good cause saving Nerosal from being swallowed in the wilderness however, that was no excuse. Dallion felt that he had to take responsibility, and he did by leaving once all the issues were settled. To a degree, he had been avoiding them ever since.

Yes, things worked out.

Dallion took a deep breath, then entered the building.