

Leveling up 471

Chapter 471: Among Icepickers

The lobby hadn't changed one bit since the last time Dallion was here. Even after spending close to two years in the awakened world, Dallion still felt as if he were entering a bank. Four wooden desks were placed at strategic spots, with doors behind, each occupied by an administrator whose job it was to go through the jobs the guild got and assign them to members. Back when Dallion was part of it, he constantly wore a guild ring with an echo of an admin inside. Several times per day he'd enter the ring realm, to check if he had to drop by the guild.

There was one major difference, though: the reaction of the people. From the moment Dallion walked in, several of the guild members stopped what they were doing and looked in his direction. Some knew him from his time at the guild, the larger part had only heard the rumors.

Dal! a loud yell boomed through the room. You're back!

Heya, Estezol.

Estezol was the person who had helped Dallion fill in the application forms all that time ago. He was a small, funny man, with an increasingly large beard, who took care of a large part of the practical administration of the place. Officially, he had next to no power. At the time, Dallion had considered him an over-glorified secretary. However, it had soon become obvious that he had far more access than people gave him credit for. In all his time there, Dallion had only seen the guild master, probably twice from a distance; Estezol had weekly talks with him and everyone else of importance within the guild.

It's so good to see you! The bearded man rushed from behind his desk. So, you're a hunter now? I've been hearing all sorts of rumors. Is it true that you actually fought a dragon on your own?

That's slightly exaggerated. Dallion smiled. While it was technically true, the creature was a shadow of its former self and weakened to the point that Dallion managed to defeat it. What's been going on here? Any new promising newbies?

Compared to you? Estezol laughed. Not a chance! Hey, how are the Lurs? Any chance they'll be joining us anytime soon?

No idea. I'm not as close to them as I used to be.

Oh. The man's smile faded.

It's nothing serious. We just have different interests now. They're working on putting Dherma on the map, and I well, you've heard the rumors.

Estezol nodded.

I heard what happened to Jiroh. Sorry about that. I miss her a lot.

I know. She's fine, though. It's what she wanted. Anyway, I heard that there might be a job for me.

Looking for work here? Estezol arched a brow. Don't you have enough on your plate? Hunters are very in demand lately.

Estezol Dallion whispered. I know there's a job for me. Do you prefer I went home and wait for someone to call me?

Thats not necessary, a female voice said a short distance away. Looking up, Dallion saw a woman wearing full plate armor.

When he had learned that she had asked for him, there had been a moment during which he hoped that his current level would put him on an equal footing. He couldnt have been further from the truth. All the experience hed received, all the achievements, the level increases, even the familiars, and weapons, didnt seem to have narrowed the gap by an inch. March was considered the golden girl of the guild: a current captain and former imperial soldier, she was the main drive that brought recruits to the guild, and unofficially the third most important Icepicker. She was also probably the only person who walked about in full armor more often than not, even when there was no reason for her to do so.

You look well, Dallion, the woman said. Join me upstairs.

There was an awkward moment of silence. People stopped pretending to do whatever they were doing and openly followed the exchange.

Yes, maam, he replied, and followed her upstairs.

The two made their way to the fourth floor.

Thereve been a few changes I see, Dallion said as he saw the single metal door. In the past, all of them had been wooden. This one not only was made of a solid alloy, but Dallion could feel that the walls beyond it were as well, making it more vault than room.

A few changes were needed after your last adventures, March said calmly. There was no anger in her or her voice, although Dallion could sense lingering traces of disappointment. Go in. She pulled the large door open, revealing nothing but darkness inside.

There was a slight moment of hesitation, but ultimately, Dallion did as he was asked. The woman was at least ten levels above him, possibly twenty. That was quite impressive, considering Dallion had reached the mid-fifties; it also meant that she wouldnt have a problem forcing him inside, if that was her intention.

Slightly on edge, Dallion stepped in. March followed and closed the door. The moment she did, the entire ceiling lit up. No less than a dozen light crystals were visible, all glowing in a bright white light. Given the cost of each so far east, someone in the guild had spent quite a lot of money on this. Though that wasnt the most astounding thing Dallion witnessed. He had expected to find the world sword in the room. However, he had never seen two side by side.

Another request from our patron, March said.

I didnt think hed have two, Dallion whispered. He had heard of their existence, but he never imagined hed actually see them.

At first glance, the weapons seemed quite normal, even if skillfully made. What few knew was that each contained a whole world in which millions of dryads had been sent, long before the race had been banished out of existence. It was said that there were a handful of world items in the empire. Two of them were in this very room. It was one of these items that had made Dallion quit the guild a year back. He had been recruited by March to become part of her expedition to explore and restore the world sword. As a result, he had gone solo, all with the goal to gain the skill gem that the

realm hid, and through it gain the zoology skills that allowed him to discern the behavior of creatures, and even talk to them when combined with his writing skills.

We've reached the hilt of the first sword, March said. All cracklings and other nasties have been defeated, though not the last two guardians.

I bet. Dallion hadn't come close to defeating any of them on his own. So you're going to start a new expedition in this one? he pointed at one of the swords. Unlike its neighbor, its entire blade was covered in rust and cracks.

Eventually, yes. That's not the reason I requested you.

So, it sounded that she was the driving force behind that. That was to be expected. The guild master was more of a behind-the-scenes type of guy.

Captain Adzorg is thrilled, I'm sure.

Within Dallion's realm, Nil coughed diplomatically. Captain Adzorg was the original who had created him and given him to Dallion, along with an entire library in the realm of a ring.

The guild master agreed with me on this, so I don't care what he thinks, March's tone became icy. She and the old man had never gotten along well. I need you to find something for me in the wilderness.

The wilderness? Dallion blinked. That was unexpected. Ever since he'd known her, March had rarely left the city, if at all. For her to make such a request, there had to be something serious at play. And you want me? I doubt I can offer any skills that you don't have. Don't you usually use Vend for that?

Your former mentor is unparalleled when it comes to combat splitting, but he's not adequate for this request. Besides, he'll never be allowed a hundred miles from where we'll be headed. And I'm not entirely welcome there either.

Dallion remained silent. There were consistent rumors that March had messed up big time, resulting in her being kicked out of the imperial guard and outcast to Nerosal. That was the role of the city, after all: a place where all awakened that messed up could live and, potentially, get a new start.

My name was erased, she said calmly. Also, I'm forbidden from using my awakened powers to their full extent in the real world without the archduke's permission.

I'm not talking about the name.

You don't need to decide right away, March continued. There's a lot that needs to be prepared, on many fronts. Not to mention that the festival this year will be rather unusual. The countess doesn't want a repeat of last year's chaos.

The woman glared at him for three full seconds, then shook her head.

The imperial family had respectfully declined the invitation, as they have consistently done for years. Archduke Lanitol did the same, though for different reasons. Bottom line, you have until the end of the festival to decide.

That was almost three months.

I was thinking of giving the festival a pass this year, Dallion said.

Wise choice. That's why the expedition won't start immediately after. I'll remain here for a few more weeks. If you're not in Nerosal, I'll assume that you've either decided to decline the offer, or the Moons have done it for you.

That was a good way of putting it. Being the deities of the world, the Moons had the power to do pretty much anything, even if they followed a long set of complicated rules. In this case, though, what March was saying was that there would be no hard feelings should Dallion choose to have nothing to do with the expedition.

Do I get any details or only once I accept the request? Dallion moved closer to the swords on the far wall.

Some believe there's another world sword out there. Supposedly, it was found in the ruins beneath Nerosal and smuggled out centuries ago. There've been hundreds of rumors of such nature throughout the decades, but in this case, our patron believes there's enough to it for us to go on a search. Once we reach the capital, we'll be told what to do.

Red flags popped up in Dallion's mind. There was no way something this important would be entrusted to mercenaries. The only reason that the Icepicker guild was involved had to be that the Archduke couldn't trust anyone else in his immediate vicinity. That opened all sorts of cans of worms.

One more thing, March added. There are signs that the sword might be involved in the poisoned crops.

Just when Dallion thought he had pieced everything together, this caught him completely by surprise.

How? he asked before he could stop himself. The poisonings didn't start in the empire. They began all the way west.

That might be so, but there haven't been any in more cases since then. Most of the new cases are in the middle of the continent, and according to some of the information from our patron, the sword has also been on the move for a very long time.

Chapter 472: New Awakening Trial

Every item in the awakened forge was patiently waiting for Dallion to start work. It had been over two hours since he entered with enough sky silver ingots to make anything his mind could desire short of a carriage. Yet, not only hadn't he struck any piece of metal once, but he hadn't even set up the furnace. Instead, he just sat there, thinking.

An invitation to go to Linatol. As a provincial capital, the city was second only to the imperial capital itself. Granted, the Wetie province was the least prosperous of the seven provinces, but it still was a level exceeding any other city Dallion had visited. However, it wasn't the city that had made Dallion awestruck, but the people in it. March hadn't openly said who their patron was, but Dallion knew it was the archduke himself.

The empire had a total of eight provinces, eight of which were controlled by an archduke. While in their domain, their authority was equal to that of the emperor himself, not to mention that the rumors were that their awakened powers weren't that far off. In Nerosal, everyone trembled at the strength of Countess Priscord, but compared to the archduke, she was like a kitten that had barely learned how to make use of its claws. And then there was the matter of the swords themselves.

When he had reached the final temple of the one at the Icepicker guild, he had found a crown containing two skill stones. One was the zoology gem that Dallion had used, but the other was missing. That one was supposed to give the person who claimed it mastery over plants/herbology skills which coincidentally was related to strange behavior of crops that was taking place throughout the continent right now.

Agēs ago, the dryad had been a sword marshal/one who had led armies, and also condemned millions of his own kind to life within the sword. Originally, they were meant to remain there only for a while, until the war was over, but the Star had betrayed all. As a result, the entire dryad race had been banished to the awakened realms, and all those within the swords were all but forgotten. Since then, Vihrogon had spent his existence as a companion guardian in an armadil shield.

It's possible, though unlikely. It takes someone with empathy to sense the crown, even if they know about it. Besides, there's no guarantee that the gems are intact.

There's no reason to think they aren't

Dallion stood up and looked at the furnace. He had come here to get his mind off things and make a new dartbow. So far, he hadn't achieved either of those things. In the past, he would have kept on drowning in his doubt. Now, though, he knew exactly what to do. Unfortunately, he wasn't going to like it.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The entire forge and everything around it disappeared out of existence as Dallion entered his awakening realm. This was the world that represented everything he represented, from traits and skills to hidden fears locked up in some hidden corner of it. The only way to move on and increase his hidden power was to complete the awakened trials by defeating those fears. However, in the last few months, that had become a lot more difficult.

YOU ARE LEVEL 56

A blue rectangle glowed in the middle of a stonehenge on top of a cliff overseeing an azure sea. Three towers were visible there, along with a silver bridge connecting one of them to an island a short distance away.

Back on Earth, Dallion would have dreamed of going to such a tropical paradise. Here, he could do so any time he chose, which was becoming less and less frequent. Being a hunter, he had spent more time in the real world and the items of weapons he made and repaired. All in all, he had visited the realm less than three dozen times in the last three months, each time to attempt to level up.

Taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the bright sun, Dallion then tapped the rectangle. It spun around, revealing his current traits.

AWAKENING: 56

BODY: 35

MIND: 40

PERCEPTION: 30

REACTION: 30

EMPATHY: 23

The numbers were quite good, although he would have appreciated the perception being slightly higher. When it came to hunting, that seemed to be the most valuable trait of all.

They havent changed since last time, a voice identical to Dallions said.

Standing a few steps away was a copy of Dallion, only with slightly paler skin and perfectly white hair and eyebrows one of his echoes. Dallion had created it using his awakened powers, back when his level was in the forties. The entity shared most of his skills and abilities, though not his health. Also, it was able to read Dallions thoughts as they occurred.

Always nice to see you, Ariel, Dallion said, moving to one of the stone pillars. Several of them were rather wide, containing framed objects within them. Each object corresponded to a skill within one of the nine skill-groups he knew. How have things been here? Dallion took a harpsisword from its frame.

The echo crossed its arms.

No small talk?

Youve been doing this each time you come here, Ariel said. When you bother at all, that is.

Im getting enough training in the real world. You, of all people, should appreciate that.

I appreciate the fact that youre slacking. The others might give you some slack, but not me. You should have been level sixty by now at least.

Youve been spending too much time with Nil. Its not always healthy.

As if youd know.

Suddenly a ball of blue flame appeared inches from Dallions head.

Youre here! the flame transformed into a firebird. Youre here! Youre here! Youre here!

Hi, Lux. Dallion smiled and patted the familiar on the head. At least someone is glad to see me.

Im always glad when you come here! Are we going to a trial? Are we? Are we?

Yes. Dallion laughed. Yes, we are. Just give me a moment, okay?

Instead of an answer, the firebird flew right into Dallion, surrounding him with a layer of blue flames. Moments later, a pair of blue wings emerged from his back, lifting him several feet in the air.

See? Dallion told Ariel. Im already making my way to my awakening trial.

The echo didnt look at all convinced.

Just make sure to pass it this time, Ariel yelled back. And no quitting halfway! Keep on fighting until youve no more strength left!

Do you know whats the difference between a fighter and a soldier? Dallion asked as he flew higher and higher into the sky. A soldier knows when its pointless to go on.

With a sudden burst of fire, Dallion disappeared as the firebird that acted as his wings propelled him to the other side of the mountain, right in front of a door made of solid marble. There were no steps leading to it, not even a ledge. This was the entrance to Dallions trial, and the only reason it was there was because he had chosen so. After getting tired of going below ground to have his trials, he had decided to have them be in the mountains for once. That didnt make them any easier or more difficult, but at least it made them slightly different.

Floating in the air, Dallion summoned his whip blade, armadil shield, Nox dagger, and forging hammer. Each item had a familiar of guardian he knew well inside of it, and each of them was ready to assist him in any way possible during a fight, be it here, the real world, or any other awakened realm.

Ready, band? Dallion asked.

A chorus of positive responses came at once.

Well, then, lets do this, he opened the door.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

A blue rectangle appeared in front of him. With one wave of the harpsisword, Dallion sliced the rectangle in two, transforming it into a cloud of particles that faded away.

Remaining five inches above the floor, he continued forward along a pitch-black tunnel.

Each trial was different. Some were physical, others mental, but in more cases than not, one always had to go along a long tunnel to reach them. This appeared to be a dark trialthats what Dallion called trials that were deliberately wrapped in darkness. Neither his improved perception, nor the bright blue flames of the firebird made any difference. As far as Dallion was concerned, he was in the middle of an eternity of darkness. It was only after a minute or so that dimly lit torches appeared on the side of the walls. The tunnel itself had transformed into a wide corridor made entirely of wood.

Eventually an opening emerged, leading Dallion to what appeared to be the inside of an inn. The size was vastly exaggerated, but it didnt take Dallion long to recognize this place.

So, this is how you want to play it? he asked, gripping the hilt of the harpsisword.

Hannah! he called out the name of the innkeeper. Are you the one Ill be facing this time?

Dallion looked around. There didnt seem to be anyone at the bar or the hundreds of tables that filled the space. Even using all his senses, he wasnt able to detect anyone else.

Dallion hated that sort of answer, but it was the most common hed get. Still, he had nothing to worry about. As long as he remained focused and kept his cool and concentration, he had every chance of getting through this. After all, each trial never was anything that couldnt be overcome.

Its not Hannah, a voice said from one of the tables. Looking down, Dallion saw March sitting there. You? he asked, confused.

Seems you cant get enough of me lately, the woman replied, a cold expression on her face.

Dallion knew that this wasnt the Icepicker captain hed seen today. In this trial, she was nothing more than an echo concocted by his subconscious that represented some flaw or challenge that held him back from achieving his full potential. Even so, he couldnt help but feel intimidated.

Youre not my trial. Trials arent supposed to change.

Normally they dont, the woman replied. However, thats not always the case. Your previous fear was replaced by a new one and so youll have to go through me before things could resume.

Of course, I will Dallion said beneath his breath. And just when he had figured out what he needed to do in order to complete the previous trial. This one presented a whole different puzzle that had to be uncovered and then solved. Any chance its a logical trial?

Instead of an answer, March drew her sword, slashing the air as she did so. Immediately Dallion thrust to the side. A thin line had emerged going all the way along the floor, wall, and ceiling, as if someone had drawn it with a pencil. Dallion, however, knew that to be a destructive effect of a line-attack. Not only had the attack been flawless, but it had sliced everything in its back. If he had remained in its way, he could have been sliced in two as well.

Physical trial it is, he said, tightening his grip.

Chapter 473: Try One's Best

Another line made its way towards Dallion. The armadil shield on his left arm extended to form a semi-sphere of metal, blocking the attack. The force was immense, pushing him several meters back, but that was nothing compared to what had happened to the rest of the room. Unable to withstand two slices, a quarter of the roof section slid off, revealing a clear sky.

Dallion gritted his teeth. This was the first time he witnessed an enemy in a trial actually destroy the trial chamber. He knew that no actual damage had been done to his realmthe moment the trial was over, succeed or fail, everything would go back to its previous state. However, facing such power was more than a little intimidating.

Gleam! he shouted, splitting into three dozen instances.

Each instance was a potential reality of attack, going at March in a different fashion. Slashes, piercing attacks, even a hammer bash attempted to do even a moderate amount of damage, but all of them failed. Despite the heavy armor, the woman was far nimbler than Dallion gave her credit for, not to mention that she could split into instances as well.

Without warning, Dallions whip blade emerged from its sheath and extended its tip towards March. A simply deflected it into the remaining part of the ceiling, causing it to be stuck. Just because something was indestructible didnt mean that it couldnt be dealt with.

Taking advantage of the fraction of a second March took to defend herself, Dallion did two line-attacks of his own. A large section of the flaw ripped open. Unfortunately, none even touched their target. The woman remained there, completely unharmed, destruction all around her.

Commendable that you've learned line attacks, she said. You still have to practice a bit more. You're wasting too much energy.

That was true. Although the attacks no longer caused Dallion's arms to go numb, he did feel them slightly weaker. Normally, it would take him a few seconds to get back to normal. The time was halved thanks to Lux, whose flames had healing properties, even more so now that he had become level three.

You have everything it takes to move forward, March said. You just need to learn how to use it.

Is that the advice you're giving me? Dallion focused, combining his music and forging skills. For a moment, he could see the entire composition of every metal item in front of him. The woman's blade and set of armor were virtually flawless. There were no hairline cracks or weakened areas, and the joint connections are securely covered. Without a doubt, the suit was made by a master craftsman and meticulously maintained.

I'm not giving you any advice. This is a challenge of combat strength. There's nothing hidden about it. All you need to do to break through your next barrier is to prove that you could best me. Simple.

Things are never simple. Although, more and more, it was looking like she was right. Dallion's hidden fear had to be that he didn't think he was good enough for a mission with March. In order to prove himself wrong, he had to defeat his mental image of her. The issue was that his mental image of the captain was much tougher than anything he had faced so far, including the dragon shadow.

With no time to waste, Dallion changed the fashion in which he was holding the harp sword, then with his left hand played a single chord. Strands of music attached to March's shoulder piece, making it vibrate in the same intensity. This was a trick Dallion had discovered recently: after increasing his music level past fifty, he could inflict damage from a distance when combining it with his attack skills. Also, if he also combined his forging skills to the mix

The metal shoulder piece burst into fragments.

MINOR HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Nice trick. March took a step back, then did a series of circular line-attacks, reducing all furniture in the area to bits. But you can't win on tricks alone. A point attack followed, going through the room like a hurricane. Wooden splinters flew everywhere, like miniature bolts.

Instantly, the shield grew even further, surrounding him completely in a metal sphere. Wooden fragments bounced off, creating a sound like hail on a metal roof.

There! That was the precise problem and focus of the trial. It wasn't so much that Dallion didn't have the strength or skills, nor was it that he was incapable of strategic thinking. Rather, it was the fact that he still couldn't shake the mental image of people who had been vastly superior to him in the past. That was the main reason he still couldn't defeat Vendra's first mentor in the guild despite being only a few years younger than him, and ten levels higher. Even with Vendra's uncanny ability to split into hundreds of instances, he wasn't supposed to be a match to Dallion, and yet he remained unbeatable. March was no different.

Given that the whole trial was in Dallions mind, that made things a tad more difficult. However, as he had seen, just because someone was invincible, that didnt mean there werent ways of dealing with them.

Don't. Attack the shield instead.

The whip blade weaved through the air, its fragments moving away from one another. Forming an arc, the blade extended, cutting through all wooden fragments in the air. It passed over a foot over Marchs head, aimint to strike the metal sphere Dallion was in instead. The instant before it could do that, though, the woman struck the metal cord that connected the blade fragments, sending it back again.

Nice try. March thrust the whip blade behind her, burying it in the wooden wall.

This wasnt within Dallions expectations, but there was nothing he could do. The armadil shield contracted, allowing him to emerge on the floor. It was at that precise moment that March thrust forward, striking a series of strikes in rapid succession. Her speed was impressive, making the action seem like a single blur.

Focusing to the point of his eyes tearing, Dallion did his best to counter. Each time his harpsisword struck Marchs blade, a musical chord filled the air. Unfortunately, lacking the time for the chord to be finished no music effects took hold. Dallion kept retreating further and further back. The room that once had seemed enormous not didnt seem at all large. In what felt like mere moments, Dallion found himself almost up against the wall. He had made several attempts to get back up into the air thanks to Luxs wings, but throughout all the instances he attempted, he was struck down by March, often receiving a critical wound.

Red rectangles kept on appearing, letting him know that hed received damage as well as that hed restored his health. The firebird was working on overtime, healing his wounds almost as quickly as they appeared. However, that too was a false sense of security. Dallion knew that two good hits were enough to finish him.

Your footwork has improved, March said as she pushed on. Must be all that hunting in the wilderness. However, youre still struggling a bit when it comes to manmade environments. You wont always have the luxury of fighting in the open. Not where were going.

That was partially true a lot of Dallions tactics were useless here. Thinking about it, he couldnt remember ever fighting in tight spaces. The only exceptions were an alleyway in which he had almost ended up killed and in a tavern, where hed been a spectator rather than anything else. Normally, one didnt expect to get into fights within settlements. The domain rulers of the cities particularly hated anything that could disturb the peace and efficiency, and they also had the means to sense major infractions within their territory. Naturally, that became more and more difficult as the settlements grew bigger, requiring the need of a dedicated city guard of awakened and an overseeran entity which was part human, part guardian, that held the power of the city itself. Could it be that provincial capitals were different? Given the prize at stake, political conflicts were more than likely, and in this world, political and actual conflicts were often the same thing.

Several feet from the end of the wall, Dallion briskly removed the shield and threw it at March.

This was a desperate act, but the best option he had at present. If his back touched the wall, he would be pretty much finished.

The shield flew through the air, expanding so as to swallow Dallion's opponent. For a moment, it almost seemed that it would succeed. The woman had failed to evade or deflect it, and now was halfway surrounded by large metal segments. Alas, before it could fully close, a second weapon was drawn. Or rather, it wasn't exactly a weapon—not something Dallion would consider one in any event. With one swift action, March detached an entire section of her armor. When Dallion had examined it earlier, he had noticed the near clip-on functionality of the metal pieces, but hadn't given it much thought. This was by no means an exception. Many awakened had similar suits, designed for ease of putting on and taking off. In this case, though, something completely different happened. The shin and leg armor that were removed, didn't just remain as it was, but changed form like an origami of metal, transforming into a large mace with blades instead of spikes.

One strike was enough to keep the armadillo shield from closing around March. Another opened it enough so she could step out freely.

Dallion frowned, watching the shield fall to the floor. This was something he hadn't expected.

As I said before, nice try. March took a calm step forward. She had paused her attack. At this point, she could afford to. Dallion had already lost two of his weapons and was in an exceedingly difficult position. Do you know what failure is, Dal? she asked.

When your best isn't good enough, Dallion replied.

Precisely. Now the only question that remains is was that your best?

Chapter 474: Weapon Armor

No one felt more surprised than the one that relied on surprises to win. More often than not, Dallion had relied on out of the box thinking that he'd come up with on the spur of the moment when facing an impossible situation. Thanks to the lack of awakened limits and his time back on earth, he had found several ways to surprise and ultimately defeat his opponents. Even back when he was volunteered to take part in a chainling hunt, he had managed to create rockets out of dartbow bolts. Naturally, in most of the cases, he'd had additional help, but it was his unorthodox thinking that had led him to victory, one of the things he prided himself on having. Seeing March do something that defied his expectations had left him virtually petrified.

There was no reason for him not to have suspected that. He had already seen shapeshifting weapons when fighting in the Nerosal festival tournament. Just because March had never resorted to using that trick up to now was no excuse to ignore it. In hind-sight all the signs had been there. Of course, in hindsight, everything was obvious.

Did the idea come from me or the real March? Dallion asked, trying to calm his breathing.

Does it matter?

It matters for next time, Dallion replied. It matters for the real world. It might change the way I behave.

In that case, consider that it's from the real one and act accordingly.

That wasn't a useful answer, though the lesson behind it was. If he had assumed the same thing at the start of this battle, things would have been very different. At the very least, he would have followed his attempt to cocoon her with a subsequent attack of his own. Instead, Dallion had been so certain that his plan had worked, that he had effectively stopped fighting.

Better luck next time, March said, then swung to strike Dallion with her mace.

Before the weapon could reach him, however, Dallion took a step back, vanishing into the wall. Not expecting such a turn of events, the woman tried to redirect her blow, but it proved impossible. She was already midway through the strike, so doing anything different until it was over proved impossible, even for her. The delay was only going to last a few fractions of a second, but in such circumstances, a few fractions were enough.

Three black silhouette cublings leapt out of the wall, claws bared, aiming straight for March. Normally, that would hardly be a concern. However, in addition to having a cat-like appearance, the creatures were also cracklings; their claws had the power to crack through any non-indestructible material. What they couldn't break, they'd weaken leaving spiderwebs of cracks behind to the point that anything else could break.

One landed on the woman's shoulder, clawing her neck guard off before March dispatched it.

MINOR FAMILIAR WOUND

NOX's health has been reduced by 20%

A red rectangle emerged in front of Dallion's eyes, followed by two more, just as March's piece of armor crumbled to pieces. This was more than enough distraction. If he couldn't win under such circumstances, he deserved to lose the trial.

Bursting into twenty instances, he leapt forward, dagger in hand. The wall, or rather the illusion of the wall, vanished allowing him to go on an all-out attack. His speed, naturally, was no match for that of his opponent, but of twenty possible attacks, two were met with a block. Naturally, one of those two instances was the one Dallion decided to accept as reality.

The Nox dagger sliced through March's gauntlet. Its edge shared the properties of the familiar itself, cutting through sky iron, flesh, and bone.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

You're not the only one with surprises, Dallion whispered, going into a series of counterattacks. One hit was precisely what he needed to keep going, striking at armor joints just as fast as March protected herself.

For several moments, the fight came to a stalemate. After a combination of tricks and good fortune, Dallion had managed to close the skill gap between him and March. Unfortunately, that wasn't to last long. A sharp kick threw him to the side, almost knocking him over. There was no damage rectangle, but the attack had cost Dallion the initiative. Now it was up to March to resume with her attacks, and given that she had two weapons, it wasn't going to be pretty.

The whip blade darted through the air, flying from the other side of the room in an attempt to perform a surprise strike. Unfortunately, the weapon was deflected long before it got close via another circular line-attack.

Three quarters of Dallion instances vanished on the spot, the remaining ones only saved thanks to Lux's ability to fly. Despite that, Dallion didn't give up. Bursting into another set of instances again, he unsummoned his current weapons, dripping a dartbow in his right hand. With a double twist, he moved closer to March, shooting two bolts straight into her torso. The metal projectiles bounced off, merely pushing her an inch back. A counterattack was imminent.

Dallion could feel the intensity through his eyelids. No doubt March would have felt it as well.

At this point, there were many possible ways of attack. Dallion, however, chose to proceed with his original plan. Once again, he summoned the armadil shield, but this time it wasn't strapped to his arm, but rather helped in reverse.

Once more the shield extended, its metal pieces surrounding March. This time, Dallion followed through by having a dozen of his instances dash behind her, firing as many bolts as he could.

One more red rectangle emerged, indicating that the woman had received additional damage. Then, silence. The cocoon closed fully, its prisoner securely inside.

Looks like the tables have turned, March said from inside the metal sphere. Now I'm in here with no means to get out.

You can always surrender, Dallion said, summoning his harpsisword.

Unable to finish me off?

Oh, I can. I just prefer not to. After spending so much time in the wilderness, he had become accustomed to such things. While for the larger part he had captured creatures instead of killing them, there were cases in which he wasn't given much of a choice. At the end of the day, even for one following the path of the empath, it was kill or be killed. Thankfully, the only creatures killed had been Staw spawn. Also, I don't have to kill you to knock you out.

On cue, Lux moved from Dallion to the metal sphere, taking the flames with him.

I can have Lux spin the shield around at mach five speed until you faint.

The wilderness has made you seasoned. Don't let your guard down, though. The higher you climb, the more will try to push you down.

Isn't that always the case?

You have broken through your fifty-seventh barrier!

Your level has increased to 57.

Choose the trait that will serve you best.

Without even waiting, Dallion chose empathy. Now that he had gotten used to it, the trait was a tremendous boon. No wonder it was considered one of the broken skills out there. What was more, it was going to be quite useful when visiting the provincial capital. The more area and item guardians he got to talk to, the easier it would be to obtain information.

I doubt Ill be involved directly. Besides, March will be there. Shell attract a lot more attention than me.

That much is true. Just try not to stand out too much, dear boy. Your level is starting to show.

Dallions surroundings disappeared, returning him to the forge. He felt somewhat relieved after the experience, but still didnt have the will to forge a thing. Apparently, some of his new flaws ran deep. After a few more minutes, he decided that it was better that he went back home. If nothing else, he could grab some food on the way. Things might have changed a lot in the last year, but his appetite after leveling up remained the same.

Despite not having used the forge, Dallion put everything in place, cleaned it to a shine, and only then left. It wasnt even evening outside, the sun still a quarter of its way to the horizon. Last winter and the only winter that Dallion had experienced as an awakened had been rather mild in the area. In Nerosal itself, it was almost as if it hadnt occurred at all. Sure, the wind was a bit colder, and the temperatures were a bit lower, but the city overseer made sure that none of the chill and snow that had been present elsewhere. Even Dallions own village further south had experienced a far harsher winter. All that was in the past, though, for now spring had begun bringing with it warmth, harvest, and a whole lot of magical creatures, not all of them merely mischievous.

The city offered a vast range of inns, taverns, and food stalls for awakened and ordinary people alike. Still, there was one particular place that Dallion liked to pass by each time he had the chance. If circumstances permitted, hed go there every day, but the innkeeper and Euryale didnt get along well at all. As a compromise, Dallion would pass by, have a bite, and take several large portions home. The innkeeper would pretend that she didnt know who they were going to, and Euryale would pretend that she had no idea where Dallion had gotten them from. It was a weird arrangement, especially since both women were quite logical when it came to pretty much everything else. Despite that, the food was worth the minor inconvenience.

The Gremlins Timepiece was one of those inns that people usually didnt notice due to how good it really was. It wasnt at all flashy, located in an ordinary neighborhood, twenty minutes walk from the nearest city gate. Only the local regulars and those whod have the chance to stay there during the festival knew what a gem it really was, more specifically, the food.

Two dozen steps away, Dallion could smell the fine aromas coming from within. He had no idea what the exact recipe was, but instantly recognized it as an Aspan original. A smile on face, went to the entrance and walked inside. As usual, there were half a dozen regulars there. Each of them waved to Dallion as he made his way to the bar. There was a time when he had worked here, though that was before some of the large transformations had taken place.

So, youre back, the innkeeper said with a grumble as she slid an empty mug along the counter in Dallions direction. Tall, red-haired, and with an attitude that could crush stone through sheer will alone, the woman was known for several things, chief of which was her grumpy attitude and always finding a way to remain in the black.

Nice to see you, Hannah, he greeted. Something needs improving? he looked at the mug.

Dont get mouthy with me! she slid a bottle of glowing amber liquid. One of my regulars was short on coin, so he gave me this to make up for the difference. Supposed to be some exotic fruit from somewhere. No one can afford a cup, so youre buying the whole thing!

Sure. After all the favors she had done to Dallion, he couldn't refuse, not to mention that money wasn't an issue right now. Without asking, he emptied half the pouch he got from his last job. Eighteen gold coins rolled out. Enough?

The innkeeper didn't say a thing, instead collecting the coins with one swift action.

He's busy right now. Wait until dinner is over. You can see him then.

Dallion looked around.

Dinner doesn't start in a few hours.

That's right.

So, that was it. He could tell she wasn't upset with him, thanks to his music skills, and still there was a distinct sound of determination coming from her.

I've already prepared a table, the woman said with another grumble. Have a drink of that stuff. You've already paid for it.

And offer you a drink as well, I guess? Dallion grabbed hold of the cork.

No. I need to be sober for what I'm about to ask.

Chapter 475: A Captain's Involvement

I know that you had a run in with the Academy, Hannah said. I had hoped that you'd be the one to tell me that.

The comment didn't make Dallion look away, though it wasn't something he felt happy about. The reason was that he couldn't discuss the Academy without touching upon the Jiroh, and that was a can of worms in itself. He had been contemplating doing so for months. Jiroh hadn't died, she had simply returned to her own world. People were supposed to be happy for her since she'd beaten the odds and achieved what she wanted. Unfortunately, life didn't work like that. Even Dallion, who'd actually gotten to wish her goodbye and even get trapped in her own world, felt the fury's absence.

Maybe I should have told you a lot of things, Dallion said, then took a sip of the expensive drink he'd bought. The taste was strange, constantly shifting so as to complement itself. No wonder it was considered valued stuff. I should have told you about Jiroh.

Jiroh was the first person the innkeeper had helped since arriving in Nerosal. That was one of the innkeeper's faults: her tendency to help people; not just any people, but people that didn't belong to this world. It was unclear whether she did that as a sort of penance, or simply out of desire to give a hand to those who had no one reliable to turn to, but so far, she had risked a lot to help the only four otherworlders in Nerosal. Jiroh was one, as were Eury and Dallion. What was more, Hannah had even granted shelter to a member of the banished copyette race, who, millennia ago, had attempted to take over the world.

Sorry. I

Keep on topic, the woman said in a harsh tone. The Academy isn't something you want to mess with. Stronger people had had their lives ruined for less.

I know all about the apprentice mage incident that happened a while back, Dallion replied instinctively. Frankly speaking, he thought the conversation would focus on Jiroh.

One incident is chance, two are coincidence. Youve created a pattern. They have no choice but to keep an eye on you now. Thats their nature. Theyll remain quitter for a while, maybe years, methodically gathering information, figuring out what exactly to do with you. For the moment, they have bigger problems, but each annoyance you cause will make them decide faster, and youre not ready for that.

There was no argument regarding that. So far, Dallion had faced off a mage twice. The first time was a mere warning, but the second time If it hadnt been for the help and exceedingly good fortune Dallion had received, he wouldnt be here to talk about it.

Is that why you asked me to stay here? To warn me?

Youll be having dinner here, because thats what a certain captain asked me to, Hannah raised her voice.

Concern made Dallion split into instances and look around the room. Strangely enough, no one seemed to be paying any interest in their conversation. It was almost as if Dallion and Hannah werent even there.

Dont worry, they cant see or hear us, the innkeeper said, seeing his reaction. Youre not the only one in good relations with the guardian of this inn.

You know that Jiroh wasnt just doing hunter missions when she went into the wilderness.

She spent a lot of time searching for her cloud citadel.

Yes, but she also went on a few jobs for me.

Dallion had a suspicion that to be the case. While working for Hannah, he had seen Jiroh giving her parcels upon returning from her hunting trips. A year ago, the whole of Nerosal had gone crazy for artifacts. They had flooded the city in such large numbers that even common people had obtained a few. Every awakened guild was working frantically to explore and unlock the artifacts so their owners could sell them at a profit. It was natural to think that Hannah might have joined in on the action. Apparently, that hadnt been the case.

Id like you to take over, the innkeeper said. This wasnt the first time she had offered him a job, though not to this degree. Terms are simple. You find me certain items and in exchange, Ill owe you a favor.

This was a rather unusual offer. Dallion could feel her sincerity.

Its not my place, dear boy. All I can say is that its an opportunity. As you yourself know, favors are more valuable than coins.

Just how much do you know, old man?

More than you think, less than youd like

Pouring himself another drink, Dallion listened to the details. It turned out that Dallions role would be more of a courier than an actual hunter. All that he was supposed to doand by assumption Jiroh had done before himwas to occasionally take certain items and bring them back to the Gremlins Timepiece. There was to be no trading, no barter, or stealing. Everything was supposedly arranged. All that Dallion had to do was to guard the item.

Dallion tried to find out more, including why Hannah couldn't hire someone else for the job. However, all he got was flawed logic and irrelevant answers. If the request was made by anyone else, he'd have left long ago, but since it was Hannah, he decided to humor her. After all, the innkeeper had assured him that he was going to do all that while he was doing other things. She didn't have the means or desire to pay him for a full exclusive work, so this was more in the by the way category.

The conversation gradually devolved into recent events, city politics, and Jiroh. Since Hannah hadn't had that conversation until now, it was like opening the floodgates. Most of the facts Dallion already knew, but there were a lot of insignificant trivialities that made him smile. It was no wonder how the fury had left her mark on so many people.

Several hours later, the first scheduled guest arrived. To Dallion's surprise, it wasn't March, but his very own girlfriend. Seeing Eury enter Hannah's inn was an event in itself. The only times Dallion had known her to do so was back when she was still flirting with him, and even then, she preferred to leave as quickly as possible. This time, she entered calmly and after receiving a nod from Hannah made her way to the table Hannah had set up for the meeting.

After a few seconds, Dallion took his half-empty bottle from the bar counter and joined her.

Hey, Dallion said, giving Eury a quick peck on the cheek before he sat down. As usual, the gorgon reciprocated.

I found the creatures you brought, she said with a calm smile. Her relaxed expression suggested that she wasn't bothered by her surroundings, although Dallion couldn't be perfectly sure. Euryala was wearing a blocking ring that made it impossible to detect her emotions using magic skills. Cute, but pesky.

You say that about everything. I'll release them in a few weeks. I just need to train them a bit first.

Hannah arrived with a platter of food. The cook had put in a lot of effort this time, making a dish that Dallion hadn't seen before. The ingredients were familiar. In fact, they were far less exotic than the inn usually offered, but the way they were prepared was unexpected to say the least. It was quickly noticed that a third dish was added to the table, in front of the empty chair.

You can talk, the innkeeper said. No one will hear you. And with that, she disappeared in the kitchen.

The witch really needs to hire some help, Eury said. Having to serve herself is ridiculous.

I went to the guild today. Dallion changed the topic. March wants me for another expedition.

There was a long moment of silence.

I know. She already told me about it. I was going to tell you when you got back. The gorgon took a bite of her food. How did you learn about it?

Nil told me, so when I saw you were out, I went to check things out. Did anything interesting happen on your end?

Nothing much. Now that the countess's army has relocated here the overseer doesn't need me much. They're sealing off the passages to the ruins again, so I had to help with that.

Have you decided whether to go? Eury asked.

March's request? Not yet. She told me I had a few months to think about it. Looks like she changed her mind.

Maybe she just wants to be sure that you'll say yes.

As usual, you think too highly of her, a familiar voice said. Dallion's first reaction was to reply mentally, thinking he was talking to Nil. However, it quickly dawned on him, that the person who had suddenly appeared a step away from the table wasn't the echo gained real-world form, but the person who had originally made it.

Captain Adzorg? Dallion asked, surprised.

Why so shocked, dear boy?

The man took his seat and was instantly served a bottle of rather expensive-looking brandy. Unlike Dallion, though, he wasn't asked to pay for it. Even after all this time, Dallion had no idea what Hannah idolized the old man to such a degree. Given that this was Nerosal and that neither Adzorg or Hannah were originally from here, a few thoughts came to mind, although Dallion decided to keep them to himself.

I trust you know what this meeting is about, the man said rather than asked, rolling up his sleeves.

I have a gist Dallion began, but was quickly interrupted.

Not a clue, Euryale said.

Oh. Well, let me get straight to it, then. I know you've both been offered to go to the provincial capital Lanitol. I'd advise that you take the job and while there, do a small job for me as well.

For you? Dallion glanced at Hannah. That wasn't at all what they had been discussing up to now. Was she actually acting as the old man's front?

There is a certain rather peculiar statuette I'd like obtained, the captain continued. I'm not asking you to do the negotiations. I'll do that myself. He placed two simple looking rings on the table. Once there, just give this to the people I tell you to and then pick up the parcel they provide. Quite simple, really. All you need to do is to act as my eyes and hands. The echoes I've put inside will make sure the item is real. You just need to bring it back here.

If it were so simple, you'd have done it already. The snakes on Eurys' head stirred.

All that perception and you only see the obvious. The old man sighed. The reason I'm asking you is because you're the only otherworlder I'm willing to trust.

Things suddenly made a lot more sense, but also a bit less. If there were artifacts that were only meant to be used by awakened from other worlds, why was the captain so intent on obtaining them? More importantly, could that mean that Dallion's grandfather was involved in the whole mess in some way? There was no way to be certain whether Adzorg had been in the city forty years ago, but given the level of conflict that had ripped the province, it was a distinct possibility. Not to mention that according to Dallion's grandfather, there had been someone else who had come from Earth

Chapter 476: Moontalk

The dinner was pleasant, at least when it came to food. As for everything else, it was almost as if there was an invisible barrier between everyone keeping them quite polite and understanding, but

not entirely there. It didn't help that both Eury and captain Adzorg had used means to keep their emotions hidden.

Most of the talking had been done by Eury, who was eager to know the practical details of the situation. Apparently, she had been to the capital once before as part of one job. She didn't wish to say who the job was for either during the dinner or after it but it involved a lesser noble family.

Surprisingly, Adzorg didn't seem to have spent a lot of time in Linatol, either. He was fully aware of the political situation in the city, casually making remarks about events that concerned one or other family of nobles, yet without saying anything specific. Most of the discussions had been done remotely through echoes, and it was up to Jiroh to bring back the items the captain sought.

Sometimes, I envy you, Dallion said, tossing another piece of bread in the hedgerel basket. At least in most cases, you know where you stand.

Never to trust anyone. Dallion finished the sentence. It wasn't an answer he liked, but the further he leveled up, the more it became relevant especially once he became a full hunter.

A shardfly landed on Dallion's shoulder.

Hey, Ruby, Dallion said.

If it wanted, the creature could have sliced his entire head off one of the reasons everything from the wilderness was considered dangerous. For hunters, those with empathy especially, she was no more dangerous than a kitten.

Ready to return to freedom?

Ruby didn't reply, though it was obvious she'd miss drawing up the building.

Don't worry, I'll pass by to see you, Dallion went on. I'll even comment on your new art. Think of that there won't be anyone to grumble at you for displaying your artistic talent. He looked at some of the other creatures. You guys will be off as well.

It had always been the plan to return the creatures to the wilderness. However, March's request had hastened the process. With both Dal and Eury out, there was no one left to take care of the creatures.

Dal, Eury's voice sounded through the floor. Thanks to his increased perception, Dallion could hear her in the workshop, just as she could hear him. You can give them to the overseer. Knowing her, she might even find it amusing.

No way. The overseer might find them amusing, but the creatures wouldn't. Close to something so powerful and part chainling, they'd do what any being in the wilderness did: try to fight their way as far away from her as possible. I'll go out for a bit. Can you keep an eye on them till I get back?

When will you be back? We have a bit of food left from yesterday.

I won't do anything crazy, Dallion said. I'll just need to check something in the shrine.

There was no response.

Eury? Dallion asked. You okay with that?

I'll take care of your pets, she replied in a neutral voice. Hurry back fast.

Ignoring the guardian, Dallion threw the rest of the bread in the metal basket and left the room. The hedgerels became slightly agitated for a while, though quickly calmed down. As long as they didn't feel hungry, they were quite docile creatures. One could even call them pets, but that was the issue. The way things were going, more and more creatures in the wilderness would face starvation and do whatever was necessary to survive. If March was right and the third sword was somehow related to the poison plague, he had no choice but to see it through. Was it, though?

The streets were a bit busier than usual. Even with everything going on, preparations for the festival were getting underway. This year, Countess Priscord had every intention of having a flawless event of such splendor that it would wash out the shame of last year. Already she had used the city guardians power to make people think that the festival had well ended before the desirous events of last year. As such, Dallions status as Hero of Nerosal had started to fade from peoples memories.

On his way to the awakened temple of the city, Dallion saw a few members of the mirror pool. All of them were low-level lookouts, but they let him know that the organization was still keeping an eye on him. They knew better than to get involved directly, but they had no qualms about approaching him.

The sound, infused with the desire to stay away from him, had an immediate effect. Two of the mirror pool members disappeared in the crowd, while the third looked away.

A long queue of people was waiting at the temples entrance. As some cynically would say, awakening was big business. Up to level ten, the only way to level up was either through extreme effort and discipline, or visiting the realm of an awakening altar. Thus, all of the single digits pretty much had to pass by the temple, which included a quite pricey entrance fee.

In order to enter, one had to pay ten gold coins. Nothing stopped a person from leveling up as many times as they wished up to ten, of course, but normally no one could manage more than two level ups at a time.

Sorry, Dallion muttered as he made his way to the front of the queue.

Several people gave him a cold look. One of the acolytes whose task it was to let people enter, however, had an entirely different reaction.

Initiate, he said with slight reverence. Is there anything you need?

Some space and quiet, Dallion replied.

The message was received loud and clear. The acolyte nodded, then moved aside so that Dallion could enter. There were a few minor grumblings from the people waiting. Some of them had been waiting for hours, however, such were the rules of this world: higher level came with its threats as well as its advantages. As an initiate, Dallion was partially considered part of the Order of the Seven Moons, and was free to enter the temple as if he were a cleric. Naturally, he didn't have to pay for the privilege either.

It's been a bit busy lately, the acolyte said, leading Dallion along a corridor, then down to an inconspicuous stairwell.

This wasn't the first time Dallion had been to this section. The clerics of the temple claimed that it had been created so they could pray to the Seven in peace, away from the crowds. However, that was far from the truth. According to the temple area guardian, the section had been present during

the temples construction. The intended purpose was for it to be used for blessing and creating emblems. The practice had been abandoned well over a century ago, leaving the room vacant. Dallion wasnt sure he believed that either. Whenever a guardian claimed there was an empty room in an overcrowded building, usually it was never empty.

Here we are, initiate, the acolyte said. Ill leave you to your seclusion. How long will you stay here this time?

AREA AWAKENING

The room vanished, replaced by an endless pavement. That was to be expected. Only, the awakened realm Dallion found himself in wasnt that of the temple. Instead, it was the boundary between it and the realm of the Moons.

You should have let him walk away, the massive form of the Green Moon appeared in the sky.

He has. Youve been coming here a lot lately.

I need advice.

Thats what you always say. I cannot make your decisions for you and neither can the Star. Those are the rules.

Advice on how to find the dragonlet, Dallion said. Ive been accepting every creature job in Wetie and beyond, and still nothing.

Youve been asking for a lot of help lately. The Moon didnt sound pleased.

Strictly speaking, that was correct. Dallion had come to the Moon a lot, but as much as he had asked for help, he hadnt been given it. The conversations sometimes lasted anywhere from minutes to hours, but sooner or later, it always ended the same way. The Moon reminded Dallion that he wouldnt get more help until he had fulfilled his debt, even if he was asking for help for that exact task. The only reason he was getting any leeway was because of Dallions experience going to the furies world and back.

Its impossible to find a dragon. Ive asked every person, creature, and guardian there Ive come by. No one has seen a trace, not even close. There arent even rumors for me to hunt down.

If dragons were so easy to find, they would have been killed out long ago. The Moon glowed brighter. Think of this as a trial. Any task given has a way to be completed. You just need to figure out how.

Its a bit tougher than that.

The reward you were given was better as well. But since youve come here, you have my blessing. You wont be poisoned by any food, so theres one less thing for you to worry about.

And Eury? the question popped out before Dallion could even thank the Moon.

Shell have to rely on herself as usual. No matter how you feel about her, shes no ones favorite.

Dallion suddenly found himself back in the room. The acolyte was standing politely, waiting for his answer. The slight delay combined with the look Dallion gave him said everything there was.

Are you done, initiate? he asked, more out of politeness.

Dallion was left with nothing else, but to apologize for the moment of awkwardness, and leave the temple. Things could have gone a bit better, but at least he had been a piece of information. The Green Moon had seemed convinced that Dallion had what he needed to fulfill his promise and find the dragonlet. Since Moons couldn't lie, unlike the Star, that meant that Dallion had the answer.

For half an hour Dallion walked aimlessly through the streets, then went back to Eurys workshop. It would have been a lot easier if he could use her help, but that wasn't an option. He was forbidden from telling anyone about it or asking for assistance.

Evening came and went, then a new day started. All that time, Dallion kept on thinking how to arrange the puzzle pieces that were his life. Nothing kept him from taking a few months off; he could spend more time with Eury, take care of the creatures he had brought it, and even improve his skills up to the next level cap. It was extremely tempting, but at the same time he felt he couldn't risk it. Even if there was a fraction of a chance that the poison plague was related to the Star, Dallion would prefer to have the full favor of a Moon before setting out.

By noon, Euryale had gone back to repairing and rebuilding the stack of clothes and armor pieces that was starting to pile up. With the festival approaching, a fair number of awakened wanted to have the gear to participate in the tournament. That allowed Dallion in addition to hearing a lot of gossip from the attire in question to go through the bestiary of magical creatures he was given. There were seventeen pages on dragons, of which all but one were unaccounted for. Based on the scant information, the dragon had been seen to the south which was in the rough direction of Dallion's home village. The issue was the south was a vast area and completely unexplored. According to scientific speculations, the area was at least three times larger than the entire empire, and continued to the end of the continent. There were no countries there, just a few isolated settlements remnants of failed expeditions.

Its a dangerous thing trusting the words of a Moon,

I dont have much choice, Nil. Or do you think I should give up?

Not at all, dear boy. Keeping a promise to a Moon is an excellent idea. Even they tend to lose patience, and its never a pretty sight when they do.

Reassuring as always

If I thought you were in trouble, Id be the first to point it out. From my point of view, youre merely taking the initiative, which is commendable.

Theres nothing wrong with that.

That sounded logical, not to mention that there was no way the Moon could know that Dallion would even get such a tome. Back when the deal was made, Dallion was a mere double digit who hadn't even

Almost an entire year, and he had failed to see something so simple. In his defense, at the time, he had more pressing matters. In the end, it was the Moon's hint that had guided him to the answer. There was no guarantee, but as the hunter saying went, guarantees are for the sheltered.

Not the village. The trail of the chainling I had to hunt.

Chapter 477: South of the Empire

Leaving the city was always a joy. There was a time when Dallion could barely endure walking through the wilderness scorching hot in the day, freezing cold at night, and his feet hurt no matter how many times he had improved his shoes. Of course, back then Dallion was barely a full awakened with big dreams of adventure and a traveler's emblem given to him by a distant relative. He knew nothing about the world other than stories and rumors that had made their way to the small village of Dherma. How different things were now

Dallion was no longer bothered by the harsh conditions, but rather come to enjoy them. As much as settlements provided shelter and comfort, they also distorted reality. Everything was changed based on the whims of the ruling nobles. Sometimes that involved nothing more than the certainty that no creator would threaten anyone within the domain, that the crops would grow, and the weather would always be as pleasant as possible. On other occasions, the local noble would flood the minds of all subjects with echoes subtly guiding their way of thoughts. For the most part, the empire frowned upon those practices, but there was no telling for how long that would last. And Dallion had personally witnessed rulers of neighboring kingdoms that had no qualms whatsoever on the matter.

They'll be miserable locked up in Nerosal. Besides, with the festival a few months away, Eury can't take care of all of them.

The cold logic coming from Nil made Dallion laugh. He could tell that the echo wasn't as coldhearted as pretended to be, at the same time, he was clearly worried. If Dallion had to guess, the reason had to do with the Academy. Although Nil denied it, it was pretty much a given that he was involved in with it in some way, almost certain he had been a mage himself. Then again, he did have a point. Walking about the wilderness surrounded by a few dozen creatures tended to attract a bit too much attention. Dallion's hope was that no one would be interested in what was happening so far south.

On cue, the shadflies fluttered off in all directions. Shortly after, they were followed by the rest of the creatures. Of course, there was one that remained nearby, floating above Dallion's left shoulder.

Since the guardian was a shardfly, Dallion could understand the closeness. Though it seemed that Ruby had risen to the level of protg at some point. There was no telling exactly when that had happened, but if someone could manage it, it was definitely Ruby.

Since there was nothing to be done, Dallion walked on.

The journey to Dherma was usually two to three weeks. However, at Dallion's current level he could reach it in half that. At one point, he had considered even sprinting there, to reduce the time even more, but Nil had successfully convinced him not to. There was no telling what he could stumble on, on the way. It was during the trip back that he could run if needed. At least then, he knew there would be food and safety waiting for him at the end of the sprint.

The first day passed without anything out of the ordinary. The second, however, a clumsy attempt of an ambush was made by a back of wilderness wolves. Dallion had sensed the creatures, not even considered monsters of the wilderness, miles away, but never expected them to do anything. It wasn't rare for predators, alone or in groups, to keep an eye on travelers from a distance, before moving away. Normally, they knew better than to attack something clearly stronger, but this time

they did. As a result, most of them had ended up dead long before they could even approach Dallion, all sliced to shreds by the shardflies.

Curious and concerned, Dallion went to the nearest wolf corpse and bent down.

They were starving, Dallion said. Probably hadn't eaten in weeks. If they didn't get something from me, they'd have died soon enough, anyway.

It hasn't.

In that case, why are they starving?

That's a very good question.

Using his zoology skills, Dallion cut in the warm remains. He no longer felt disgust in doing so, although notes of sadness echoed throughout him. As much as he didn't create creatures to die, he also knew that in the wilderness often only one side could survive.

All of the internal organs seemed to be fine, apart from the obvious effects of malnourishment. Water didn't seem to be an issue, which made things even stranger. In the wilderness where there was water there was prey. The wolves had clearly access to water, in large quantities, but it seemed no other creatures had. Or rather, no other creatures they could prey on.

That made sense. The creatures had probably spent most of their time trying to stay cool and close to a water source, hoping something would come to them. That's why they had attacked Dallion so early in the morning: the night had spent in evaluating his strength. When dawn had come, marking the point of no return, they had decided to roll the dice.

That was unfortunate, and also alarming. The plague was proving to be more devastating by the day in a slow, subtle kind of way.

The next few hours Dallion spent skinning, declawing, and burying the animals. None of their meat seemed particularly good for eating, but the rest was useful, so as any professional hunter, Dallion took it. As Eury like to say, hunters weren't allowed to kill creatures that they weren't paid to. There were only three exceptions: food, dead, and creatures who attacked first. As such, the wolf furs were fair game.

I thought you didn't have time for that,

Probably not, but we might need them further on.

Shortly after noon, Dallion was back on his way. If there were any other packs nearby, they didn't show themselves, for the next few days Dallion didn't sense any creatures at all.

On the fifth day, Dallion thought he sensed the presence of something, but whatever it was, the creature was smart enough to run away before Dallion or any of the creatures with him got close. It was also at that point that he changed direction, heading to the southeast.

I might now be the hunter you are, dear boy. However, even I could tell that you're no longer going towards Dherma.

In that case, where are you going? I thought you knew where you'd find

Youll see. I never intended to go to the village. Theres another place I must visit. Besides, these guys will find a great home along the way.

The further Dallion went south, the more the terrain changed. The patch of rocky dried-up steppes gave way to rough, though grassy terrain, and abundant vegetation. Trees remained scarce, though.

The dust lynx was the first creature to set off on its own. Finding the area appropriate, it returned to Dallion for one final acknowledgement of his help, then rushed off, leaving clouds of dust behind. Dallion would have preferred if the creature had stayed one more day, but this area was also well suited for it. There werent too many settlements nearby, and the creature had been taught the importance of keeping its distance from people and their livestock.

Two days later, the moonlight pups and the water snake followed. The snake had apparently found a mate in the form of an underground stream which any good hunter would tell that was a resting spring snake and joined it beneath the ground. As for the moon puppies, the white moon had taken a liking to them, shining a path for them to follow during the night. That left only the flying creatures.

On the tenth day since leaving Nerosal, Dallion decided to get some proper sleep. Nil, along with several others in the awakening realm, were against the idea, but Dallion ignored them. Leaving Gleam and Lux to guard him, he lay on the wolf skins, and slept till morning. Surprisingly, no dreams came to him that night. It was almost as if he closed his eyes, then opened them again nine hours later.

Youre up! Youre up!

Lux flew about, moving the kaleidervisto artefact that he was guardian of. In the real world, he practically had the appearance of a miniature spyglass with the power to see echoes within items, as well as reveal chainlings masquerading as people.

Yes, Im up. Dallion burst into a dozen instances to look around. As far as he could tell nothing of particular interest had happened. Rather, almost nothing. While there was a cluster of ruby winged shardflies on top of his backpack, there was no sign of the sapphire birds. I take it they found their home?

That only leaves the shardflies and the eggs, Dallion thought. Maybe it wasnt such a good idea taking the eggs along, but he preferred not to leave them in Nerosal much longer. The more attached they became to their surroundings, even before hatching, the more difficult it would be to make them leave afterwards.

Anything else I should know about? Dallion stood up, then started gathering the wolf skins.

A few minutes later, they did. Half a day Dallion walked without a word. The wilderness had changed once more, though this time into something that seemed vaguely familiar.

This is close to where I faced my first chainling, Dallion kept walking. Back when I was made to join the hunt under Dame Vesuvia.

That happened here? Interesting. And youre thinking that the chainling has something to do with the dragonlet?

Not the dragon. While chasing the creature, we came upon the remains of a caravan. Back then, no one had any idea what they would be doing travelling so far south. Some said that it could be contraband, or dealings with cultists. Those were no cultists, though. And neither were they a simple caravan. They were part of the Academy.

That is a bit of a stretch, dear boy. Granted that the Academy likes to explore unexplored places, but you cant just assume that

The chainling had learned how to make items and objects explode on touch. Back then, I thought that was normal for such a creature, but Ive learned a thing or two about chainlings since then. The way they attack doesnt involve fire, unless they have taken that power from someone who could use it. And there arent too many of those.

Its still a stretch. Please tell me you havent based everything on a hunch.

I have, but not on my understanding of events. The Moon knew everything Id done when he made the request. This was the only time Id ventured into the wilderness before heading to Nerosal, and the first time Id seen actual magic.

There was a moment of silence. Without a doubt the logic was flawed, but when it came to Moons, all bets were off. If the task given was within Dallions means to achieve, this might well be the answer to the unspoken question.

I just have faith that Felygn gave me a task I have a chance of completing.

Chapter 478: The Tombstone Marker

Merchant Caravan

Killed by chainling

Year of the Seven Moons, 1205

Dallion stood in front of the tombstone. Over a year had passed since it had been erected from the ground and there still were no signs of wear, as if it had just been placed.

This was the single indication of what had happened to the caravan. No names were mentioned nor the number of people who had been killed. The marker didnt include the soldiers or volunteers that had lost their lives either. Looking back, Dallion had almost been one of them.

I know that it might appear a bit self-serving, but do you consider that a sound idea, dear boy? Youve no idea where the caravan was headed or for what purpose. There are no roads south, no trade posts, and no people to ask regarding their destination.

That was true. As far as the world was concerned, there was nothing down south. Back when Dallions village had been established, people considered it the fringe of the empire. All the expansions seemed to be north and partially west.

In Dallions experience, that meant that he knew something but wasnt allowed to share it yet. At the same time, Harp didnt say a word.

Will you be able to tell me at some point?

That part of the dryad still annoyed him. Centuries of being a companion guardian had definitely shaped his way of thinking. Still, he was useful, not to mention one of the few who had lived in a past age. It was unfortunate that Dallion didn't have a chance to have a discussion with Hannah's cook before leaving. If there was anyone who knew about the south and was willing to discuss it, it had to be him. Maybe Dallion should have skipped by the morning before setting off. However, hindsight was always twenty-twenty.

In truth, he still found adventuring amusing, although he had aged a few centuries in true time since then. The current him was far more pragmatic. There was still the desire to help as much as possible, and definitely try to save the world from the poison plague, but he was no longer cursed by burning recklessness. Also, he didn't appreciate having to do so many things at once. Back when he had just become an awakened, he treated everything like quests in a game, accepting as many as possible without any thought of how or when he'd complete them. Now the only thing that mattered was the task at hand, namely finding the last known dragon.

Taking a final look at the tombstone, Dallion walked forward, taking his first steps into the unknown.

That was a rather unusual reaction coming from the guardian of Dallion's hammer. At least, it would have been if Dallion didn't know the exact motives behind Ondas' suggestion. Despite the nymphs' considerable skills when it came to engineering and metalwork, he was hopelessly transparent when it came to asking favors.

It was both amusing and disturbing that a being several millennia older than Dallion kept calling him gramps. For better or worse, he was stuck with an eternal teenager in his realm.

Up to evening, nothing particularly changed: the wilderness remained mostly the same, a bit more abundant when it came to fauna. It was small creatures mostly, living beneath the ground or in patches of vegetation that had started to appear now and again.

Based on his Earthly knowledge, Dallion could well assume that he was entering a tropical region, suggesting he had jungles to look forward to. That would definitely be something new. The east had trees, lots and lots of trees that went up thousands of feet, however, they lacked the distinct feeling of a fantasy jungle. For all intents and purposes, the eastern forests Dallion had been in were more or less normal forests that had grown a lot.

There were no jungles on the first day, or on the second. Rather, the opposite: the patches of vegetation, while steadily increasing, more and more shifted to a strange combination of palm trees and cactuses. Dallion had apparently guessed that he was moving to a hotter zone, though it didn't seem to be a jungle, but rather a desert; or rather, there was every indication that it would become like one. That was slightly confusing. Dherma was pretty much surrounded by plains and forests, giving Dallion the impression that it was a medieval European village. To have a desert start so close only went to show that when it came to the wilderness nothing could be taken for granted.

Another two days later, Dallion decided to have some actual sleep again. Unlike last time, he did so during the day. With so many unknowns, it was better to limit the risk factors. His gear kept a lookout as before, as did the shardflies. For some reason, the creatures stubbornly refused to leave, even if Dallion could tell that they found their surroundings quite pleasant. Quite probably, that had to do with Gleam. Although she had the worldly appearance of a whip blade, she remained a shardfly by nature.

Dreams of chaotic trivialities came and went. They didnt provide any valuable information, but Dallion felt refreshed after waking up. Having a quick bite, he then continued south.

Its already been half a month and you havent found anything of value. Two weeks more and you wont make it back on time.

Ill make it. If I dont find anything within a week, Ill head back. How does that sound?

Like a colossal waste of time.

It was becoming clear that something else worried the echo. Even now, if Dallion gave it his all, he could sprint back within a week or less. If it came to it, he could even have Lux propel him even faster. Nil was aware of those options; he had seen them done several times in the real world. And yet with each step south, he seemed more and more fidgety. Even so, he was right about one thingthere wasnt too much time to waste. Three weeks seemed like a lot, but in the real world, where walking was the fastest mode of travel, they were nothing.

Lux, scout on forward a bit, Dallion said.

The kaleidervisto shot up into the air.

Dont do anything risky, just fly about the and"

A loud pop filled the air as Lux propelled forward. Leveling up had done little to affect his character.

Dallion didnt even bother to finish the sentence, continuing forward instead. To his surprise, about half a minute later the kaleidervisto was back again, stopping a few feet in the air above him.

Lux? Dallion asked. What happened?

What did you find? Each word was said slowly and clearly.

I found the south! Come! Its close by!

There were many phrases that tended to frighten people. Finding the south was one of them. Dallion wasnt sure what that meant exactly, but seeing the enthusiasm emanating from the creature, knew that it had to be important. Just to be on the safe side, he mentally prepared for a fight.

After a few hours, it turned out that close by didnt exactly match Dallions understanding of distance. He had been walking at a fast pace non-stop and there still didnt seem to be any indication that he was nearing anything. The terrain was flat as a pancake, stretching all the way up to the horizon.

Almost there!

Gleam, is there some illusion? Dallion asked.

The whip blade rose up from its sheath, gently flying forward. After a few hundred feet it stopped.

That was two guardians that had acted strangely. Drawing his harpsisword, Dallion split into a dozen instances and ran forward. Soon enough he saw exactly that the guardians before him had, and it left him breathless.

By the Seven, he whispered, staring down.

What he thought was the horizon all this time turned out to be the end of a plateau a very high plateau. Beyond it, several miles below, extended something else entirely. It was almost as massive as the land mass had smashed into the land, creating a canyon hundreds of times larger than the Grand Canyon.

The wonder didnt end there. There were ruins of buildings below, almost entirely swallowed up by what could only be described as a vast desert-jungle. Palms, vines, and cacti rose from dunes of sand continuing for as far as the eye could see. There were small mountains, even what appeared to be a few rivers breaking up the yellowy-greenness.

Has this always been here? Dallion asked.

There was no way the Academy hadnt discovered this. Anyone with flight would have seen it miles away. Or maybe they had. That would explain what a caravan was doing here. The cynic in Dallion also considered that the reason the Order had built a monastery so far from all known civilization might not have been to take care of a few struggling villages. But why hadnt anyone from the empire discovered it? And why had the chainling turned away? If it had continued in that direction, it would have easily escaped the hunting party.

Tell me why and Ill consider it. Dallion stood his ground.

Its said that those who go south never come back.

Someone must have gone back to say that. Dallion tried to make light of the argument, but he too felt uneasy. There was an unsettling calm coming from the land below. It wasnt void, but it was eerily close, as if something within the jungle-desert sucked in all types of emotions, transforming them into sterile calmness. Do you think a dragon could live here?

Its possible, but do you want to find out that badly? Going down wont be easy and getting back out will be outright impossible.

Lux, can get me out, Dallion said. Besides, itll be an excuse to increase my athletic skills.

Dallion didnt like the sound of that, but he had to admit the echo was right.

Sorry, Nil. I didnt expect anything of the sort.

Moving to the edge, Dallion took a silver coin from his pouch and tossed it down. The piece of metal glinted, falling further and further until it finally disappeared in a patch of palm trees. Only a mage with flying would make it all the way down there, not without miles of rope. The edges of the canyon were almost straight, presenting a challenge even to a high-leveled awakened.

Still hesitating, Dallion looked up at the sky. While it was still day, the faint outline of a Moon was also visible in the sky: the outline of the Green Moon.

Chapter 479: Awakened in a Strange Land

Even abandoned, the structures remained in good condition. Given the amount of time passed, it was an impressive feat. Just looking at them made Dallion feel as if he'd ventured into the oldest museum in the world.

However, despite the majesty that shone through the sand, plants, and minor wear, there was no denying the fact that the buildings were dead. None of them had a guardian, neither did any object within the canyon. Dallion had entered a few of their awakened realms to find them completely empty despite the high level. A new message was present on the rectangles upon entry:

DESTINY FULFILLED

That was the polite way of saying that they had been sealed. The same fate had befallen the city beneath Nerosal, and might as well have Nerosal itself, if the Star had succeeded. The thought sent shivers down Dallion's spine.

Soon, Dallion replied.

The euphoria of finding the south had quickly worn off when he found that still didn't bring him any closer to his goal. With no guardians anywhere, there was no one to ask, and all attempts to get the information from the local animals had ended in failure. Still, there was one interesting thing that he had found about this place: there was an alarming number of seagulls everywhere.

While he didn't spend long in the ruins beneath Nerosal, he had seen enough to see the differences. The building style wasn't even close, not to mention that copycats preferred to be in slime form when they didn't have to infiltrate other races.

It doesn't look dwarfish either

Having Eury here about now, or even just an echo of her, would have been helpful. Regardless, Dallion doubted that this was the gorgons doing. Living with her for over a year now, he knew a lot of her habits, as well as a few details about her world. Granted, the awakened world was a far less-modern equivalent, but their nature would remain unchanged. Gorgons disliked sun and sand. And while one could claim that the desert was a recent development, there still was far too much sun to make a gorgon comfortable. That left only one option.

A cynic would say that meant it was their turn to be banished.

Of course, there's one more option

As much as it was tempting to say Minotaurs just for laughs, Dallion knew exactly what the old echo meant.

The Star, he whispered.

Either that or the race of the Eighth Moona race that had completely vanished out of existence. Not banished, not even destroyed, but entirely erased from everyone's memories. That would certainly explain why the land of the entire race had sunk beneath, trapped in a canyon. Maybe the chainlings

goal was to get here after all? It couldn't risk having its hunters find the canyon, so it had decided to kill them off before that.

Growing up I used to hear stories about ogres fighting nearby, Dallion said. Supposedly, they were as big as mountains and made the whole world shake with each blow.

Dear boy, every area has its own blend of myths and legends. If you ever go to the imperial capital, you'll hear all sorts of stories that you wouldn't believe. I admit that our understanding of the world's past is lacking, but not every story holds true. Besides, if the Moons don't want us to know about something, we'll never find out.

I thought that leveling up removes all restrictions.

It removes some, but many have reached their limit without learning answers to those questions. Maybe one day you'll prove me wrong, but you're not the first otherworlder to appear in this world, and you likely won't be the last. And yet the mystery remains.

That was no guarantee, but Dallion understood what Nil was saying. While interesting, such questions were only distractions right now. He still had a promise to keep. Thus, finding information was his main priority.

It wasn't difficult to capture one of the seagulls in the area. The creatures were attracted to shiny objects—especially silver coins and metal objects, it seemed—and eagerly swooped down to snatch Dallion's harp's sword off his back. That proved to be a poor decision on their part. Splitting into twenty instances, Dallion easily grabbed the bird mid-flight, then started the annoying task of learning how to talk to it.

As any wild animal, it was terrified by its capture, making it necessary that Dallion spent half an hour removing its fears with his music skill. Once that was done, the complicated part began. Already knowing how to communicate with several bird species, Dallion tried using those for a basis. The writing skills, combined with his zoology skills, allowed him to quickly find some common elements, but when it came to figuring out the details, it felt like establishing a link between two extremely different dialects of English.

It was late afternoon when Dallion had grasped the basic lexicon and could manage a proper, if limited, conversation. As it turned out the canyon was filled with a variety of large creatures. The seagulls, which were extremely gossipy creatures, had seen pretty much all of them, but their ability to come up with gossip was only surpassed by the skill to forget them. One could almost call them the world's gossip newspaper: the most relevant and topical events were closely followed, while things that had occurred a week ago or more were long forgotten.

The only relevant information that Dallion managed to pull out was that there was something nasty near the pillars again. The pillars as it turned out were what the seagulls called towers. As for an exact location, the seagull didn't have an idea.

The conversation over, Dallion gave the bird some food and a silver coin for its troubles, then let it go.

Enlighten me.

You'll never be able to get rid of them. Once the rest of them hear that you're willing to give shinies to anyone for the one thing they spend three quarters of their doing for free, what do you think will happen?

That wasn't Dallion's only concern, though. While he always had concerns that he wasn't the first person to arrive here, now he had proof: for the seagulls to have acquired a liking of silver and metallic objects, someone must have brought them here.

The rest of the day continued with Dallion walking further south through trees and sand. The positive thing of having a flutter of shardflies with him was that they could pretty much cut through anything blocking his path: large clusters of cacti, impassable patches of jungle, even ruined stone walls left in the land without purpose.

Water was slowly starting to become an issue. Dallion still had several flasks and waterskins in his backpack, but the heat was making him need more. At some point, he was going to have to go to one of the natural water sources of the canyon, and a lot sooner than he initially thought.

Gleam, have you spotted any towers? Dallion asked as the sun was dipping beneath the horizon. Having the Green Moon in the sky, while comforting, didn't provide enough light for Dallion to see what was going on in the patches of sand jungle. Already there had been a few instances when he was only able to avoid quicksand thanks to his habit to constantly combat split while walking.

Lead the way. And let me know if"

Dallion didn't finish his sentence. An unfamiliar presence suddenly emerged, moving towards him at impressive speed. A normal awakened would have paused to determine the exact threat. Hunters knew that in the wilderness, people didn't have that privilege. Like in the westerns back on Earth, if a person wasn't quick, they usually ended up dead.

Bursting into a dozen instances, Dallion leapt in all directions from his current position, drawing his harpsword in the process. The attacker somehow must have sensed him, for it, too, split into six instances, each taking a vastly different path.

Playing a few chords to boost his speed, Dallion then split again, covering the creature's approach paths. Barely had he done so when a large shape leapt at him, devouring two of his instances. For the first time in quite a while, Dallion felt that his reaction time was way too low. Half of his remaining instances slashed at the instances of the creature. All of them but one disappeared. In what was determined to be reality, Dallion cut through the thick skin of his attacker, only to find that there was no effect. The reason: the creature that had attacked him was a cutling.

Crap! Dallion let go of his weapon, splitting into a new dozen instances, all of which dashed away from the creature. The really alarming part was that up till now, Dallion hadn't even sensed it. No emotions were coming from the creature, absolutely none at all.

Lux, Gleam, get back here!

The creature leapt at him again, reducing all vegetation between them to slices. This time Dallion didn't even try to block it, evading the attack, through combat splitting, while also landing a blow with the hammer on the creature's head.

Shards, don't attack it! Dallion shouted to the flurry of shardflies in the air. It only makes it stronger!

Blunt weapons were the only way to deal with a monster such as this. The issue was that, with the exception of the dragon shadow, it was a lot larger than all the Star-spawn Dallion had faced so far. Even a massive blow barely phased it for a few moments, causing it to split into five instances.

Massive claws slammed into the object. Normally such an attack would have been lethal, but since the kaleidervisto was indestructible, it only slammed it into the ground.

Taking advantage of the situation, Dallion charged forward for another strike, hitting the cutlings side with enough strength to push it several dozen feet back. Flying through palm trees like a heated knife through candles, the creature continued for a considerable distance, until it managed to stop. If looks were any indication, the hit had caused precious little damage.

Dallion gripped his hammer tightly. This wasn't the welcome he expected.

Chapter 480: Fighting Anger

Fighting a creature of pain and anger wasn't supposed to be easy. This one, though, was on an entirely different level. Not only did it have the power to slice everything it came into contact with, but also used a fair number of awakened abilities, and did so rather well. If Dallion had come here a few levels earlier, or if he didn't have his hammer, there was no doubt that would have lost long ago. That explained why the Green Moon hadn't urged him to fulfill his promise until recently up to now, Dallion wasn't ready for it.

Another cluster of palm trees fell to the ground, their trunks sliced in a series of circles. And once again, the cutling stood up, not in the least affected by the experience. That was one of the things that made the fight so difficult. Since blunt damage was the only thing that had an effect on the monster, the creature used its powers to slice any obstacle it was going to crush in so as to avoid impact. Weapons got the same treatment, although thankfully, the hammer was strong enough to take it without an issue.

The whip blade extended, surrounding the crackling. Since the weapon was indestructible, this was the perfect way to entangle the creature. Unfortunately, combat splitting made the task extremely difficult. Several times it seemed as if the cutling escaped by a hair. In truth, it was splitting and using the only instance of getting away. Watching it would have been amusing, if Dallion wasn't in such a tough situation. Funnily enough, a year ago, he was the one fighting in exactly the same fashion. Back when he couldn't split into more than half a dozen instances, he made sure to maximize the potential of all of them.

The kaleidervisto popped in the air in front of him. Dallion quickly grabbed it, then split into instances.

While the whip blade continued to try and entangle the monster, Dallion split into twenty instances and charged forward. There was going to be considerable risk involved, but the combat splitting was going to make it more than acceptable.

Sensing Dallion's explosion, the cutling split into five of its own. That was exactly the mistake Dallion was hoping for. Dividing up his instances in groups of four, he rushed at each of the enemy instances. In each group, one of the instances acted as bait only to distract the creature, while all the rest attempted to shove the kaleidervisto in the cutling's mouth.

The process was extremely painful, since unlike health, the pain of the instances couldn't be ignored. For that reason, most of the experience awakened ended the splitting the moment their echoes were

hit, greatly diminishing the amount of pain they suffered. In this case, this wasn't an option. Not only did Dallion have to suffer the pain of fifteen cuts, but he also had to choose one of those instances to become reality.

In thirteen of the fifteen instances the results were less than ideal, ending with Dallion losing his hand. In the remaining two, while the wounds were severe, all of his arm remained functional.

Here goes nothing, Dallion prepared mentally as he chose the instance to become reality. His hand entered the cutling's mouth just as the creature was snapping at him. The timing was perfect allowing Dallion to shove the kaleidervisto in and pull his hand back barely brushing one of the monster's teeth. Unfortunately, just a brush was enough. Every part of the massive black silhouette was capable of slicing wood and stone, let alone flesh. Rips formed on Dallion's hand, moving sideways like tears on a sheet of paper.

The pain compounded, increasing tenfold. Even with a body trait of thirty-five, Dallion felt close to fainting. Despite that, he had to endure.

In ten instances Lux let out a flash of light, piercing through the body of the cutling from the inside, and in each instance that proved not to be enough to kill the creature. Incapable of withstanding the pain anymore, Dallion ended all his additional instances. The relief was instant, creating the momentary illusion that the pain had ended. Not long after, though, it built back up to a somewhat more tolerable level.

The whip blade took the opportunity to twist around the cutling yet again. Even weakened, the monster split into four instances, each leaping off in a different direction. This time, though, its action was interrupted by Dallion who threw his harpsisword at it.

While it was true that cuts only strengthened a cutling, in this case Dallion wasn't aiming at dealing damage, but interrupting its combat splitting; and it worked. The creature's instances faded away like a decaying flower.

Sky silver sword fragments held together by a cord of sun gold wrapped around the silhouette's body, tightening to the point it could no longer move.

The whip blade obeyed, rising up into the sky.

Realizing what had happened, the cutling struggled in a futile attempt to break free, however, it was not to be. Even its body proved incapable of breaking an indestructible object, be it the one that held it, or the one in its throat.

Finally, Dallion whispered as he collapsed to the ground.

The moment he did, the ruby shardflies swarmed above him, determined to protect him from any further threat.

Thanks, guys, Dallion managed to say. I think I'll rest for a bit.

It took seven additional flashes by Lux for the cutling to finally die. Each individual one slowly melted off part of the silhouette's darkness, causing it to shrink. Naturally, the whip blade tightened each time that happened, keeping it suspended in the air, until finally it was no more.

Despite his pitiful state, Dallion couldn't help but smile. The firebird guardian remained very much like a child. There was just no way anyone could remain mad at it for long. Also, it was good that it had grown stronger since it looked like a lot of healing would be needed while exploring this place.

Dallion was the first target for Lux to use his improved healing. The wounds on his hand healed in real time as the kaleidervisto covered it with a layer of blue flame. Onda was next. Being one who had participated the most in the fight, he had a number of small chipped bits here and there. Finally, there was the harpsword.

I need to

It'll be fine.

There was no resisting it. Dallion tried to make a mental note to ask the harpsword about the type of music she was using. When he woke up several hours later, though, the memory had faded. Instead, two Moons were shining above him, clearly visible in the night sky.

What happened? Dallion sat up. As he did, shardflies fluttered off him. Ruby was the only one that remained for several seconds longer, before ultimately joining the rest.

The air was pleasantly cool, full with what could only be described as fragrances of the desert. That only reminded Dallion that he was thirsty. The fight had only made things worse. After some consideration, Dallion went to his backpack and gulped down one of his waterskins. That didn't leave him a lot, which only made it more urgent to find a water source.

Gleam, he said, brushing his lips with the back of his hand. Which way to the broken tower?

The whip blade extended pointing in the distance with its tip.

Thanks.

Given Gleam's strength, Dallion was tempted to ask her to carry him there. However, the sword fragments of her weapon were just as sharp as the cutlings cuts. That was one of the obvious things that people forgot when dealing with indestructible weapons: indestructibility also meant eternal sharpness.

Guys, Dallion said to the shardflies as he put the backpack on. We're going on a short run. Slice a tunnel through the jungle for me, okay?

The creatures fluttered about eagerly.

No, Lux. I don't want to attract too much attention. Since there were cutlings in the area, falling trees weren't considered anything special. Glowing blue flames, though, were certain to attract most creatures. I need you to be ready in case another monster appears.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion rushed forward.

Running through the jungle with a dozen shardflies in front was almost like running through an underground tunnel. Being literal, the creatures sliced up everything in their path like a bag of

razors, forming a path of destruction through the forest. No tree or rock was safe, and as for the sections of quicksand, Dallions combat splitting made sure he didnt become trapped in any of them.

Reaching the tall structure was two hours. There was no telling whether it was worth it, but in a land of ruins, coming across something as majestic definitely could be seen as progress. Even in the moonlight, Dallion could see the amount of craftsmanship that had gone into creating this. Moss, vines, and dirt werent able to hide the architectural beauty. Of course, a large part he could notice that was thanks to his writing skills, which aside from languages and writing, also assisted with other disciplines such as mathematics. Back on Earth, Dallion never considered himself terribly good on the subject. Here, though, thanks to his awakened traits and skills, things were very different.

Dallion had already noticed that, just as he had noticed the distinct lack of windows. At present seventeen floors were visible, each seven following a separate motif. It was logical to assume that the actual height of the tower ranged between forty-nine and fifty-six floors. In diameter, the structure was only slightly smaller than Nerosals palace, suggesting that an entire city could be hidden inside. Had that been the case? There was only one way to find out.

Guys, make some footholds for me, Dallion said. Ill be going to the top.

Oh, Im going inside, just not from the ground.

The top half is gone, so it cant be the end, Dallion countered. Besides, I like starting from the end. It allows me to see the best parts first.