

Leveling up 481

Chapter 481: The Broken Tower

The work of the shardflies was visible at first glance. A bit too eager to please, they didnt just create a series of footholds, but carved a ladder on the side of the tower leading all the way up to the top. As Vihrogon liked to joke, Dallion had that effect on beings. Naturally, there were a few additional decorations that could be described as more artistic, almost modernist. Dallion had no idea what they were supposed to represent, but had no doubt who had created them. Without muttering a word, he started the long climb up.

Even with combat splitting, every few floors hed stop and look around in case some new starspaw creature emerged from somewhere. Thankfully, there was none. Furthermore, Gleam was certain to fly a few feet away from him, always protecting his back.

The top of the tower was exactly what Dallion imagined it would be: a rough layout of what the tower had been before it was destroyed. All that had been walls were less than a foot high, with nothing in-between. In a way, it reminded Dallion of the YouTube videos of ancient ruins hed occasionally seen when trying to fall asleep. Somehow enough dirt had amassed during the years to allow a thin layer of plants to form. That was slightly confusing given the sand abundant in the area. If anything, Dallion would have expected that to have covered the floor.

There wasnt much to be seen. If there were other towers in the canyon, they werent anywhere nearby. He did manage to spot a few bodies of water, though, glistening in the light of the Green and Red Moons. At the very least, water wasnt going to be a problem, and if standard logic applied, there would be some food as well.

I know. Thats why Ill leave it for morning.

Oh? Thats a surprisingly sound decision. Whats the catch?

Nil Ive been a hunter for quite a while. At some point, you should stop treating me as a sheltered freshling.

You are you and no level or real-life experience could change that. Youve dealt with a huge amount of your problems, but your nature is the samethe otherworldly nature that drives you forward even when you dont want to.

Youre saying Im reckless because Im an otherworlder? Thats a bit broad, even for you.

Thats low, Dallion grumbled. You know Ill explore whats left of the tower. If I want to know what Im facing, I should be prepared. You used to teach me that. In fact, whats wrong with you? Youve been jumpy ever since I got here. And dont give me that Ill tell you when youre ready for it crap. Im an initiate. It doesnt work anymore.

There is so much more you dont know. Passing level forty might feel like you have all the answers, but you dont. Im just afraid for you.

Why? Dallion snapped. Thats what I cant figure out!

If you explore the tower, youll find out. And I fear you might wish you hadnt.

The warning was worth some consideration, though at this point Dallion had already made up his mind. As everything else in this world, when a subject was avoided there always was a reason for it. However, the reason could only affect those who weren't ready to hear it. Also, Dallion still couldn't decide whether Nil actually knew something about this place or not.

Reading echoes as a bit more complicated, but Dallion had sensed no doubt or deception when Nil had claimed not to know about the south. At the same time, he knew details relating to it. Maybe he had read it in books, or received second-hand accounts, or even maybe he knew of elements of the south without realizing they were here. Whatever it was, both he and Dallion's ancient guardians were reluctant to say anything specific.

Finding a way into the tower proved more difficult than originally expected. While there were indications of large stairwells, all the openings had long been filled with dust and dirt making them completely impassable. After spending twenty minutes walking about, Dallion decided it would be quicker to make his own entrance, and with some help from the shardflies, he did just that.

I know. That's why I want to keep your claws sharp.

In his mind, Dallion still saw the familiar as the small cub that could barely bite the tip of his fingers. The truth was that he actually was a vicious puma. What was more, if this place was as dangerous as it seemed so far, there would be a lot more chances of Nox to gain a level or two.

Drawing his harpsisword, Dallion split into a dozen instances and jumped to the floor below. The smell of rot kicked him in the nose the moment he landed. The air wasn't exactly stale, but whatever wooden objects had been here had surrendered to slow decay, unlike the tower itself.

Lux, light, Dallion whispered.

Immediately, the kaleidervisto flew up to the level of his chest, then lit up, covering itself in blue flames. It wasn't much, but more than enough for Dallion to see everything around. The room that he had entered was wide. At some point, that must have been furniture in this place, possibly even carpets, but now all that was left was a thick layer of dust and debris.

Better stay up there, guys, Dallion said to the shardflies.

Most of them moved higher up, except ruby, of course.

Gleam, please tell her.

The whip blade extended, moving, its tip stopping inches from the shardfly in question. With a grumble that only one who could understand their language could hear, the creature fluttered back out of the room.

Walking slowly, Dallion made his way to one of the three doorways in the room. The doors that had been there had long since vanished, leaving only bare stone behind.

Nil, what are those? Dallion asked, pointing at one of the many semi-spheres of glass on the upper part of the walls.

Difficult to say. I assume some type of light crystals. The dwarves developed the technology, but they weren't the only ones using them. Some even modified the model.

In what way?

Theres a process to melt the crystal down, then pour it into any chosen shape. The Imperial house only knows the details, but they allow the creation of glowing statues. If youre the emperor, glowing structures are also a possibility.

I thought light crystals didnt go out.

That meant that the tower had to be present during the age of dryads, possibly even the one before that. However, that made little sense. For there to have been a power here, some of the other races would have noticed. At the very least, it should have remained written down somewhere unless the knowledge was erased.

Contrary to expectations, the next room didnt turn out to be a corridor, but an even bigger chamber almost surrounding the first.

Why not?

Do you know anyone else in the world who builds towers of this scale?

What about the Academy? Dallion instinctively asked. He had never seen the place, nor heard it described. Since it had mages, he had assumed all this time that it had to be a tower of sorts, probably as impressive as this one.

There are three towers in my realm Dallion frowned.

That sounds a bit too much. Not to mention that similar rumors circulated about the citadels of the order. So far Dallion hadnt seen an actual citadel, but it was said that they held all books in existence as well, including those that ordinary people couldnt read.

Of course, it is. Its supposed to impress people. Bottom line, it wasnt mages that built this tower.

In that case, who did?

Carefully, Dallion scraped part of the layer of dirt off the floor with his boot. There didnt seem to be any mosaic beneath. That would have been too simple.

If this were an awakened realm, the first thing Dallion would do was to use his music skills to determine if there were any creatures left alive in the ruins. Unfortunately, the realm was completely empty.

For over an hour he went through chambers and corridors, each unique in its own way. Whoever had built this had meant it more than a collection of living spaces. As silly as it sounded, the closest thing Dallion could compare it to was a multi-story mall. He could imagine ballrooms, resting spaces, shops, entertainment areas. While it was difficult to tell for certain with empty spaces alone, Dallion could swear that several of the rooms were designed like movie theaters.

Four large stairwells led to the lower floor. They too were filled up with dirt from above, forcing Dallion to use the Nox dagger to cut his way down through the ceiling. The floor below was no

different, although the smell of rot was noticeably stronger. Just as before, all the rooms were empty without a trace of anything inside.

The next two floors were pretty much the same, until finally Dallion reached a floor on which the stairwells were no longer filled with dirt. Good judgment made him split into twice as many instances before he ventured down. That was a good decision, since the moment he did, he was almost crushed by a strong sensation of voice coming from everywhere around.

Dallion expected to come face to face with a monstera cutling or at the very least a pack of cracklingsbut instead he found the room empty once more. Not only that, but the furniture that was absent on the floors above was everywhere around and in perfect conditions. Chairs, tables, finely crafted cabinets, even statues and paintings decorated the corridor, starting from the stairwell.

Every single piece of furniture was pitch black and emitting a single emotion: void.

As Dallion stood still, reciting the names of the Moons for protection, Lux moved closer to one of the paintings. Blue light fell on the surface, making the black shapes obtain a bit of color. Something similar to a large family portrait emerged. However, there was one thing wrong about it: all the people in the portrait, from the children to the oldest adults, was depicted as having platinum blond hair.

Chapter 482: Land of the Star-Touched

Star-touched, platinum blond, unfallen there were many ways to describe themthe humans that long ago had been tempted by the Star and had turned their back to the Moons. According to what Nil had said a while back, those were the first human cultists that came into being. Unlike the modern equivalents, they had made a vow to remain with the Star, and thus had kept their sanity and consciousness. Sadly, as with more things relating to the star, the arrangement didnt last long.

Tempted with promises of complete dominance, the Star-touched began a rebellion as they charged against the rest of humanity and any that would support them. Aided by the powers granted by the Star, it seemed as if they would succeed, but then the Moons intervened, cutting their powers off. Since then they were cursed never to have awakened powers until such a time when the Moons decided to forgive their descendants.

There were such people in Dallions home village. One of the most important families there had been with such characteristics ever since the village had been established. At the timebefore Dallion the Earth part of Dallions consciousness had arrived in this worldDallion found the characteristic quite unique. Hed even had a childhood crush on Gloriagranddaughter of the former village chief. Never had he imagined that when the village had first been established, not all the inhabitants had arrived from the north. There was no way to be certain, but what if part of them had already been in the area when the explorers had arrived and mingled with them, continuing the Star-touched bloodline?

That was one of the reasons why Dallions blond friends had attracted so much attention upon arriving at Nerosal. Star-touched with awakened powers, not only were an exotic rarity, they were also people who had been forgiven by the Moons.

They were clearly a lot more numerous than the ancient stories suggested, and also, the timing was a bit off. Initially, Dallion had thought that the whole rebellion had taken place well after the empire had formed. Clearly, he was off by a few thousand years, which begged the question: how had the Star-touched been so technologically advanced? Having them removed from the world's history was understandable; either the Order or the Moons themselves had seen to it, less humanity make the same mistake as the blondes did.

No, Dallion replied. Nil, you should have just told me. I'm here to find the dragonlet. This is just something to increase my chances.

Bitterness filled Dallion. He knew why the echo hadn't told him about this place. In part, it was because Dallion might stumble across the Star. There was no denying that even after his level increase, he most likely didn't have what it took to face something of the strength of a fallen deity. Since Dallion was considered a mid-level awakened, he no longer could rely on the protection of the Moons, making any confrontation hazardous, especially in the Stars domain. However, Dallion strongly suspected there was another reason. Nil was probably afraid that Dallion might see something that might make him tempted to join the Stars side.

This was their land, wasn't it? Dallion asked.

There was no answer.

A bubble of rage burst inside of him, furious that the echo wouldn't answer. Thankfully, the anger vanished almost as soon as it had appeared, mostly thanks to the calming melody in Dallion's domain.

As Dallion stood here, a realization came to mind. The reason he was on edge wasn't so much that Nil had hidden things from him. It was Dallion's surroundings that were creating such an uneasy effect. The last time he had felt something similar was during the expedition in the world sword while walking through the battlefield ruins.

The moment he did, he saw that he was right. All the furniture was made of solid void, as if someone had extracted the void that created chainlings and given it solid form. No wonder that there were no windows; moonlight would have destroyed every object without a trace, just like it had on the floors above.

Lux, move closer to the painting, Dallion said.

The kaleidervisto did so.

Now, flash.

As blue light filled the room, Dallion split into two dozen instances.

Without warning, every single piece of furniture shrieked in pain. Forms that had likely remained static for thousands of years sprang to life. Dallion didn't hesitate, plunging the Nox dagger into the middle of the nearest table. A shriek of higher pitch echoed for a second, after which the entire table crumbled to dark ash.

Not wasting any time, Dallion did a circular slash, slicing off the back of a nearby chair. Alas, that didn't bring it to its end. Crumbling in on itself, what was left of the chair transformed into a large cockroachy creature, its legs far sharper than Dallion would have liked. And it wasn't the only one. Everything else in the room was also changing form. Even the doors broke off, becoming large black insects followed by waves of more coming from the corridors.

At first glance, the situation seemed dire, but it could have been a lot worse. The same could have happened when Dallion was several floors down. Then not only would the insects be a lot more, but Dallion's escape route would have been blocked. Still, he had no intention of just fleeing.

Lux, cover my back! he shouted as he slashed at the insectoid chair.

In one of his instances, the insect managed to brush his skin with its leg. The mean was considerable, if but brief. It felt as if melted rubber had been poured directly on Dallion's skin. Immediately Dallion switched to an instance in which he had sliced the creature in two.

What am I fighting? Dallion asked, evading the increasing number of attacks around him best he could. Finding himself in a small enclosed space, he would have done a wall run, or at the very least jumped off of one to get to a better position. Unfortunately, the paintings on the walls made that impossible. They too had come to life, transforming into black wall jellyfish.

This was the stuff nightmares were made of, and in a very practical sense. These creatures hadn't merely taken the appearance of horrors, but rather were the very substance that created those horrors in the first place. The personification of fears that leaked into the real world thanks to the involvement of the Star and his followers.

Nil! Dallion shouted as he sidestepped to avoid a creature attack, then spun in place doing a series of piercing thrusts as he did.

Due to the daggers length, slashing attacks weren't overly effective, and he couldn't rust using a line attack out of fear he'd slice up the entire tower.

Weren't cracklings chainlings without a host? Dallion moved about, following basic guard steps to gain a combat advantage. It had been a while since he had resorted to using simple guard bonuses. Clearly, combat splitting had spoiled him; that also explained why Vend had stopped leveling up. Overusing one skill weakened all the rest.

Cracklings have a sense of being ever since they appear. Think of them as sphere items: the substance is there, but nobody's at home. The only reason they're attacking is because you stirred them up, triggering some deep-rooted self-preservation instinct.

It made perfect sense. The creatures weren't forming any complex strategies, they were simply rushing him, often impeding each other in the process.

Aren't we all? Dallion struck a centipede that was made of an ex-chest of drawers. The instant he did, the dark glow of the Nox dagger doubled in size and intensity.

There was a moment of uncertainty during which Dallion wasn't sure whether that indicated that his crackling familiar had increased in level, or the creatures had managed to affect him in some way. The next time he hit an enemy, it became clear that there was no cause for concern. A spiderweb of cracks spread out from the point of contact, causing an unfortunate ex-mirror stand to break up into pieces before it faded to dust.

Despite having spent far more time in this world than he had back on Earth, parts of his gamer mentality remained. What had been a tower of monsters set on consuming him suddenly changed into a farming area that would help him increase the level of his familiars, at least one of them. All that Dallion had to do was survive.

Well, its just like old times, Nox, Dallion said, bursting into instances. Lets get them.

Now that the initial fear had gone, Dallion found that the fight was rather elementary. Lacking coordination, battle tactics, or any purpose other than swarming him, the creatures were quite easy to deal with. Once he had managed to create enough space around him to maneuver a bit, it was only a matter of taking them out a few at a time. The process was long, and resulted in a few painful wounds, but with Lux at the ready, that wasnt something Dallion concerned himself with.

The flow of creatures became a trickle, then stopped completely, leaving Dallion in an empty room once more. The entire floor was covered in ash that let off the smell of cinders and burned horn. As strong as the temptation was for him to sit down to rest a bit, Dallion chose to remain standing.

Both his hands had burn marks caused by contact with the creatures. The pain was significant, though bearable. Taking the kaleidervisto from the air, Dallion pressed it down on the affected spots and let Luxs flames do the rest of the work. The sensation was instantly soothing.

Thanks for the clarification, Dallion said with a smirk.

When Lux had lit up, the creatures might have confused his healing light with that of the Moon, so scurried towards Dallion in an effort to turn him into a chainling.

The more he thought about it, the more horrifying it sounded. Becoming a chainling was bad enough to feel as if being submerged in acid while that was going on was outright horrifying.

From now on, Ill do my best not to come in contact with Star-spawn in the real world.

Not only the real world, dear boy. Avoid it altogether. I strongly suspect that the reason you were burned by crackling matter was because you no longer have the protection of the Moons. From here on, its up to you to fight your battles. As such

Fun Dallion lifted the kaleideristo from his hand. The skin was new, just as before. Did the people living here have to go through the same each time they came in contact with a piece of furniture?

That sounded like something the Star would domake them suffer just beneath the point that would break them. Or better yet, he could keep them in fear, never knowing when their surroundings might decide to consume them, transforming them into chainlings.

Huh?

The revelation hit Dallion like a thunderbolt. Is that why Countess Priscord had personally sent the Luors of Dherma an invitation to join her for the Nerosal festival? Was that why Falkners father had agreed for his son to enter into a relationship with Gloria? That was also the reason Dallions grandfather had asked Kierra to take the sacrifice somehow he, too, had known.

You were half right, Nil, Dallion said. I would have felt better not finding out.

Chapter 483: Fish in the Desert

The revelation that the Luors were related to every overseer in the empire was enough to send chills down anyones spine. However, that paled in comparison to the realization that one of Dallions friends might end up in that position for their own village should it ever obtain a city status. The worst of all that was most likely the best thing that could happen to them. Given that they had already attracted quite a bit of attention, thanks in a large part to Dallion, they could easily be made overseers of some other city in the province. According to Nil, the practice was all in all rare, and there were no indications that any cities might require one, but the same had been said about Nerosal forty years ago.

Calmly Dallion closed his eyes and recited the names of the Moons. If there was one skill that differentiated hunters from everyone else, it was to compartmentalize pain and fear. Dallions concerns were founded, but they had nothing to do with his current task at hand. When he opened his eyes and finished treating his wounds, he proceeded to explore the floor.

Now that every piece of furniture and decoration had been destroyed in the attempt to turn him into a chainling, the space was completely empty. That presented a curious dilemma. While killing the void insects helped Nox increase his level, it also eliminated any information Dallion could find. After weighing the options, Dallion decided to level up Nox as much as possible. There would be other towers, while having Nox become strong as early as possible was only going to be an advantage.

Floor after floor swarms of insects attacked Dallion, only to be slain. Now that he knew the principle by which they behaved, taking them out was no issue, even if it did cause a substantial amount of pain. It was obvious that Dallions form was lacking. For him to move on, he was going to have to level up a bit. In order to do that, though, hed have to find enough food and water; lately the trials were becoming more and more difficult and he didnt want to gamble that hed end up with a logical one.

Eight floors had managed to increase Noxs level up to seven. It wasnt as much as Dallion had hoped, but he was grateful for it. If things continued at this pace, there was every possibility that the creature got to level fifteen, or even twenty, as he had been in Dallions trial, only stronger. Unfortunately, upon going to the next floor, Dallion found that it had already been cleared. There was no reason or explanation, just a whole lot of emptiness. After checking everything on the floor, Dallion went to the one below. The situation was identical there as well.

Any ideas? Dallion asked, sliding his fingers along the wall.

Nothing that comes to mind. But remember that youre not the first person here.

After a few more floors, the first clue emerged, leaving little doubt to what had happened.

Cutlings, Dallion said, looking at a series of marks on the floor. They must have come from the bottom. I guess thats why theyre so strong here.

It doesnt work that way. Nox and Lux level up because they are your familiars. Normal cracklings dont get stronger by consuming other Star-spawn. Most likely, the creature had a long time to grow undisturbed.

Yeah, thats probably it, Dallion replied, although he couldnt get rid of the uneasy feeling in his stomach.

All the floors were explored, just to be sure, including those that went beneath ground. As expected, there was nothing to be found. The once glorious tower was now nothing, but an empty broken shell.

Getting out of the tower was much easier than entering it. Unwilling to climb all floors, Dallion simply used the Nox dagger to create an opening with one hit. The cracklings new skill, combined with the familiars current level, created a spider web of cracks around the point of impact deep enough to cut through solid stone.

Yay for big bro!

Lux chirped.

The crackling just let out a confident meow in response. Normally he wasnt one that sought attention, but was pleased when he got it.

You will. Dallion patted the hilt of the weapon. I promise. There arent many places for Nox and Lux to level up, though, so Im leaving the Star-spawn to them.

Now, we go to get some water.

Maybe because of the Dallions victory against the cutling, or Noxs level up, no creatures dared attack as Dallion made his way through the desert forest. Dallion could feel many of them, hidden away, he could hear their whispers. For the most part, they were discussing the new visitor ready to flee if he tried to hunt them. That was one of the major disadvantages of the zoology skill. Despite deliberately avoiding learning the languages of food animals, Dallions general knowledge of animal communication allowed him to catch a few words here and there.

The first time it had happened, he had almost been sick. However, Nil had asked the logical question: did you feel better before doing the same? In truth, that had felt even worse. Thus, Dallion appreciated the hunters code a lot more: only kill what attacks you and what you need to survive.

As time passed, the two Moons disappeared from the sky, only to be eventually replaced by the sun. With the sun came a new wave of heat. The temperature increase was far greater than one would expect, now also combined with vast humidity. Thankfully, soon enough, Dallion reached the river itself.

Thanks.

That was good, it meant at least one thing less Dallion had to worry about. Gulping down the bowl, Dallion then scooped another, and another. Funnily enough, that also made him go relieve himself in the jungle almost immediately after. Once that was done, Dallion returned to the edge of the river and started planning his next move.

Lux, Gleam, Ill need you to keep looking around, he said as he started filling his waterskins. Head straight south and let me know if you see towers or anything else interesting.

Youll get your chance, Dallion couldnt help but smile. Just dont fight anything for the moment. I just need to get a lay of the land.

Ill be fine, Dallion lied. Just go.

A split second later, an alligator the size of a small caravan emerged from the water, biting through the patch of land on which Dallion had been standing.

What the heck? Dallion switched to the instance that was furthest away.

The river wasnt small by any stretch of the imagination, but it definitely wasnt large enough to hold such a creature. That was, until he saw that the land bitten off was nothing more than a thin crust covering a far larger pool of water.

Gleam, Ruby attack from the back! Dallion ordered as he drew his hammer. Be careful, there might be more of them!

Like dancing razorblades, the shardflies descended upon the enormous alligator, managing to chip off parts of its thick skin moments before it submerged again.

Wasting no time, Dallion did a point attack on the ground with the hammer, while splitting into instances again. His suspicions turned out to be true as a large part of what he thought to be groundsand, trees and allcollapsed into a vast pool of water below.

Leaping away, Dallion focused on the forming lake, combining his music and zoology skills. At that point he saw themlarge fish and reptiles that had remained invisible up till now. Somehow, thousands of years had managed to have an entire jungle creep over the majority of the lake, holding it hardened sand and earth in the process. Dallion knew of no such things ever occurring on Earth, but clearly here, they did.

Everyone, move away! he shouted as he drew his harpsisword with his left hand and did a line attack strike through the length of the lake.

A line of destructive power sliced through the air, continuing into the water. It was as if someone had drawn upon a picture. There were no splashes, no giant waves, just two tools of water one next to each other with nothing in-between, as if they had suddenly become gelatinized. Moments later, the line disappeared, and parts of large fish floated up to the surface. No alligators, though. Dallion had seen that the attack had annoyed them, probably inflicting some damage, but that was it.

Gleam, get the fish and pull back! Dallion ordered. He wasnt taking a creature of this size today, and using music skills on them was going to be tricky because of all the water.

The last few months he had always been in control when it came to fights capturing small creatures, defeating stronger ones, and outright avoiding things he knew he didn't have the skills to face. Here, everything was either impossibly stronger, or on the verge of his abilities. It was a miracle that the seagulls weren't monstrous entities that caused hurricanes with a flap of their wings.

Can you slice them up now? Dallion asked.

There was no answer.

Moving a mile into the forest, Dallion did another point attack on the ground. This time, the only result was a large hole; the land was solid. Even so, he remained on guard for a while.

Not now, Nil, Dallion grumbled. On the surface he was mostly calm, but deep inside, his heart was beating like a drum. A moment ago, he had almost died. If it weren't for the warning, he would have been crushed by the jaws of the giant alligator with no option to do anything about it.

For over a minute, he stood there, motionless, contemplating what to do. Given what he was about to face, should he continue on, or move back as Nil suggested and return at a later, when he had increased ten levels or so.

The chunks of fish were massive, and not too friendly looking either. It seemed that even the bottom of the food chain had the size and ferocity of great white sharks.

Moments later, the shardflies, led by Ruby, arrived as well.

Gleam, find some wood that would burn, Dallion said. We'll need to make a fire. After that, we'll see.

Chapter 484: Facing Regret

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The jungle disappeared, replaced by the tropical paradise that was Dallion's domain. A deep sense of warm calm filled the air, reminding all that this was a temporary shelter from reality. However, even here, elements of the external threats were seeping through. The sky, usually deep blue, now had several black clouds floating about.

You worry too much, a familiar voice said.

Turning around, Dallion saw Nox confidently walking towards him. The crackling was definitely not a cub anymore. Twice the size of a housecat, one could describe it as a small panther or a fully grown lynx.

Once Nox got within two feet from Dallion, he leapt up, landing on Dallion's head. The action was measured and didn't leave any scars. Also, since Dallion's body trait had improved quite a bit, he barely felt the weight.

I bet we're looking really silly right now, Dallion said, uncertain of what to think.

Who cares? the crackling managed to curl up on his head without falling off. You'll fight soon, anyway. And even before that"

Before he could finish, a blue flame firebird appeared, flying circles around Dallion.

You're back! Lux said. You're going leveling! Right? Right?

The moment is gone, Nox hissed and leapt off Dallion's head, back on the ground. The crackling then stretched, gave Lux an annoyed look, and walked off.

Yes, Lux, Dallion said. I'm going to my next trial. Be my wings.

The firebird flew into Dallion, surrounding him in blue flames. Blue wings of fire emerged, lifting him into the air.

Losing no time, Dallion summoned his gear, with the exception of the Nox dagger. The brief distraction had done him good, but now it was time to get back to his leveling trial. The good news was that he knew what the trial included. Before the sudden change with March, he had attempted to pass it a few times. The bad news was that he hadn't succeeded so far.

If anything, that's precisely why I think I'll face exactly the same trial, Dallion said.

Only time will tell. In any event, you have one major advantage. You get to choose where to hold it.

That was true. Dallion could choose a location beneficial to him. Of course, that would be cheating, and the only firm thing about cheating within his realm was that it never was to his benefit. The more rules an awakened skipped while leveling up, the more difficult he made things further on.

Lux, let's find a cave.

To be certain things weren't too different, Dallion chose the entrance of the trial to be a few dozen feet beneath his last trial. As expected, there was a door there already expecting him. After making one final check of his gear, Dallion summoned the Nox dagger, then opened the door and walked inside.

You're in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future.

The blue rectangle emerged. Giving it no notice, Dallion walked right through it. The rectangle instantly broke down to particles that faded in the air. Just as before, Dallion kept on walking further and further in. No more than half a minute had passed when drawings started appearing on the walls. The drawings were quite amateurish, but still managed to tell a story of what was going on. The interesting bit was that they weren't describing events in Dallion's domain, but rather what was going on outside. The tower, the furniture, as well as the alligators were clearly defined as was Dallion. In addition, there was one other figure: the Crippled Star.

Has this sort of thing happened before? Dallion asked, looking at the final picture: him facing off the Star in the desert.

You have to admit, it's pretty close.

Of course it would be, dear boy. You lived through that.

I'm not talking about the alligators. I mean the Star. This was his land. It would be expected for him to appear at one point. Wasn't that the reason you didn't want me to set foot here?

The echo didn't answer.

Shaking his head, Dallion continued forward. Soon enough, the pictures ended, along with the corridor itself. To Dallions surprise, there was no door, just a dead end. However, it didnt take long for him to figure out what he had to do.

Time to sharpen your claws, Nox. Dallion drew the Nox dagger and struck the wall in front.

A spider web of cracks formed. Light bled through the cracks, no thicker than a sheet of paper. One solid kick later and the entire wall crumbled to pieces, revealing a large and extremely well-lit hall.

That was rather new. However, the trial Dallion had to face wasnt. In the middle of the hall, sitting comfortably on a wooden throne was none other than Veil, a pair of large swords on his lap.

I knew it would be you, Dallion said.

The relationship between the two was complicated. Growing up, Veil had been everything Dallion wasnt: strong, brave, assertive, and, most important of all, awakened. Being a Luor, he took full advantage of the fact, bullying Dallion as often as he saw him. Thankfully, that wasnt much, since the former village chief kept a constant eye on the awakened members of his family.

Later, when the two of them had been volunteered to join the hunt for the chainling, a friendship had formed, eventually resulting in a vast change in Dherma. Unfortunately, afterwards, things had gone poorly, resulting in a rift once again. The two didnt hate each other, but they werent especially close either. Still, Dallion liked to think that things could change again at some point.

It was about time you came back, Veil smirked. What happened? Got lost on the way?

You know what happened.

Really? Because you passed by Dherma a while back and didnt even bother to pass by.

There wasnt time. Or maybe youll tell me that I was supposed to make some?

I wont tell you anything you dont already know. And dont you dare pity me. I know you saw a lot of spooky stuff when you came here. Maybe my grandfather was aware, maybe he wasnt. What difference does it make? Ill still kick your ass. Veil stood up, gripping both swords firmly.

In theory, there was no way for Veil to win. He was capped at level twenty, had no guard skills and no familiars. All he did was focus on his attack skills. However, that was also what made him so dangerous and one of Dallions internal fears: shouldnt he have focused on one trait while leveling up? While it was true that having multiple skills allowed for interesting and powerful combinations, focusing on one skill and trait to the extreme allowed perfect specialization. Veils attacks were stronger, faster, and a lot more complex than Dallions. Furthermore, they seemed to become more lethal as the fight went on.

Each successful strike regardless if affecting Dallion or an instance of his doubled the damage of the attack. Dallion had found that out during his first attempt. He had foolishly relied on Lux to restore his health after a few hits from Veil, but soon enough the damage had grown to the point that even the firebird couldnt do anything about it. To make matters worse, the speed of the attack increased as well as a result of the skills bonus.

The second thing Dallion had learned was that each wound Veil received also doubled his attack strength. This, unfortunately, included successful usage of music skills. That was what Dallion had learned during their third encounter when he had tried to defeat Veil with music alone.

Finally, there was one more thing that an all-out-attack with two swords was capable of: strike ricochet. The skill made attacks entirely unpredictable, allowing Veil to change the trajectory of a strike to the point that he could do a ninety-degree turn without warning.

Naturally, Dallion had asked Nil why he couldn't learn to perform these skills. The answer was that they were only available if a specific skill was the focus of the person. Veil had deliberately kept all his skills other than attack up to ten, allowing him to take advantage of the specialization. Dallion, in contrast, had gone for a full development at least that had been the initial intention. Now, not only had it turned out that he'd never be able to achieve it, but also that he'd never earn the special skill bonuses. Deep inside, his fear was that maybe he had made the wrong choice. The only way to prove that he hadn't was to defeat Veil using any means at his disposal.

Not this time, Dallion drew his whip blade.

You said that last time, Veil laughed. Props for being determined to see this through, though. You always were good at that. You're not bad at fighting, either, but you're just as good at creating barriers you just can't pass.

What does that mean?

In a sentence, you think too much. It's helped you at times, but it's also made things more complicated. If it weren't for that you'd have leveled up much faster.

Dallion knew that to be untrue. While a better attitude early on went a long way, leveling up past level forty was exceedingly difficult. Maybe there were a few awakened who were born to be great but other than those extremely few exceptions, every level was a fierce battle. Truth be told, Dallion wasn't sure he'd manage to level up this time either. As Vend liked to say, the goal was to gain information that would help later on.

The Nox dagger disappeared, replaced by eight cat-sized Noxes that leapt to the floor around Dallion.

That again? Veil shook his head. The swords are indestructible.

That's true. Dallion had tried that as well during his second fight. At the time, he believed that getting rid of Veil's weapons would grant him an instant victory. No doubt that would have been the case if the weapons hadn't turned out to be immune to Nox's claws. But nothing else is.

COMBAT INITIATED

Confusion appeared on Veil's face. While the trial echo was created based on Dallion's knowledge and experience, it didn't seem to read his thoughts. Nox, on the other hand, understood precisely what he had to do. Six of the cracklings' echoes rushed at Veil, but instead of attacking him, they landed, claws extended, on the ground around him. Six spiderweb cracks formed, combining in such fashion that the ground beneath Veil's legs turned to rough sand.

This was the moment Dallion was hoping for, thrusting the whip-blade forward.

The weapon extended, darting forward past Veil, then twisting around. The blond managed to raise both his swords to guard himself against the attack, no doubt believing that the sword would slash him. Instead, the weapon kept on moving around and around, like an unbreakable cord.

Not losing a moment, Dallion drew his hammer and did a point attack right at Veil's chest.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

A red rectangle emerged as Veil was thrown back across the hall, right into the wall. The impact was so loud that it echoed.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by VEIL.

Attack has no effect.

Chapter 485: Paths of Development

The attack was completely unexpected. Not only that, but it did something that Dallion didnt think possible. There was no way he had imagined this! The skill had to be a hint from the Moons of what was possible by specializing in a single skill.

Dallion barely had enough time to jump aside as the corresponding line attack flashed past, splitting the entire hall in two. Unlike his previous trial, nothing broke off, but the power of it was plainly obvious.

Surprised? Veil asked, after he made a side somersault that got him out of the whip blades grasp. You shouldnt be. Being a Moons favorite has its advantages. Normally youd have to learn this through real life.

Specialized skills are a closely guarded secret, dear boy. The same goes for the pathwalkers.

The whip blade contracted, becoming a normal sword once more. Keeping his distance, Dallion went to the left in an attempt to circle round. Veil did the same, walking in the opposite direction across him.

Youve really slacked out. Thats the thing about overconfidence, it always brings you down.

I think Ive done pretty well for myself, Dallion replied. It was an outright lie that he was slacking off. In the process of hunting, he had developed the habit of meticulously researching everything available about his targets, the area of the task, the people involved, even read up more on which skills to use. At this point, the only materials in the ring library he hadnt read were a large part of the poems and a few of the historical sagas.

Since instances dont work on you, how about something else?

Concentrating, Dallion split in two, creating an echo of himself. It had been a while since he had done that. Even now, he preferred to avoid the experience. In his mind, he still considered battlefield echoes things that were created only to be sacrificed. As one who followed the path of the Empath, he didnt like that option too much. As a hunter, however, he had grown to accept it.

Trying new tricks? Veil smirked. They wont work, though. He spun around, doing another line attack.

Immediately, Dallion fell to the ground. His echo, in contrast, leapt up. That proved to be a mistake, since Veil continued his spin doing a second line attack that went through the echos parry and cut through both its shield and sword.

TERMINAL WOUND

ECHOs health has been reduced by 100%

Small hint, even a blunt attack is still an attack, Veil said. When Gleam tangled me, she did over a dozen mini-attacks. Not enough to deal any damage, but you get the picture.

Thats the reason why you keep losing against me. You focus too much on the things you do and not on what could be done on you.

Yeah, sure. Dallion clenched his fist. From here on, one hit from Veil was all it took to end the trial.

Hey, Im trying to help you out here.

Sure, you are. The whole point of the trial was for Dallion to figure things out on his own. Although he had to admit that lately the trial echoes had been getting more helpful than normal.

Green has high hopes for you, so hes letting slip a few hints here and there.

That was a red flag if there ever was one. Dallion was almost convinced that Veil was lying, but even if he wasn't, having a Moon so closely interested in someone was never a good sign. At some point, he was going to have to find out more on the matter, which meant going to the source: The Order of the Seven Moons. That was for later, though.

The whip blade darted at its target. Half of the Noxes joined in. Meanwhile Dallion switched, from his hammer to his harpsisword. Since his opponent was already at maximum damage, there was no point in worrying about hitting him again. All he had to focus on now was to use everything at his disposal to prove to himself that he hadnt made a mistake in following a multi-skill development approach.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion played a chord to establish a link to Veil. Unfortunately, just as the echo was able to negate his normal attacks with his own, he negated the music effects as well.

That was true. Dallion didnt regret his decision. Right now, it didnt matter much, since he could pretty much increase his skills to whatever level he wished. However, back at the time, he could have leveled up them up to a hundred without worrying about level caps. This version of Veil had probably done the same. Or was it only this version? When Dallion had helped his friends go beyond their second gate, he had opened the possibility for Veil and Gloria to become favored of the Moons as well, which meant that they could have done what he hadntreach the peak of their skills.

Watch out!

Dallion told Nox, then did a line attack between two chords.

The line of destruction flew towards Veil, who deflected as easily as if it were a wooden bolt.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by VEIL.

Attack has no effect.

That much was expected. However, it was also expected that the remaining part of Dallions attacks would go through. After all, it was only the weapon in his hand that was doing the attacking.

Cracklings leapt at Veil in unison. Some were instantly cut before they could reach him, though not all.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased 10%

Several red rectangles stacked up. Unfortunately, among them were notifications indicating that Nox had lost 42% of his health.

There was no telling whether the crackling would do as asked, but Dallion couldn't worry about that now. All he had to do was get that final hit. So far, he had already used several of his familiars as well as most weapons. The only logical thing was to go all out. Come to think of it, maybe that was what was holding him back despite everything, he remained a fence sitter. That was the real problem he was fighting, not just the fear of missing out. Thinking back, all of his recent battles included the use of one or two skills those that Dallion deemed the most powerful. Every battle he'd combat split, use Gleam to attack through the air on her own, and resort to line and point attacks. Before that, there was a time when he relied almost exclusively on music. Considering the number of options he had, it was absurd to what degree he was limiting himself. Since he'd become a hunter, Dallion had almost never used his empathy skills to convince item and area guardians to help him, even in the few instances he could do so. He had the forging skills to see weaknesses in metal, and shatter it with ease, but that too was seldom used. While one might argue that metal and item guardians didn't exist in the wilderness, he barely used his zoology skills, either.

Ranged attacks of any sort had been largely avoided, as were acrobatics, and athletics, not to mention that Dallion had neglected his guard skills to the point that until his fighting the tower he hadn't used his guard skill bonuses at all. Even worse, he hadn't even bothered to think how to combine his writing and art skills in combat. There was a time when he had been so fascinated by Eurys intricate way of fighting which combined acrobatics, attack, guard, and art in the form of dancing. He had spent so much effort learning the ability to obtain layer vision, and almost never used it. If he had, he could easily have defeated Veil ages ago!

Markers of various colors filled up the room: green, red, white, orange, and gold. Just like a year ago, Dallion was able to see the areas at which Veil was aiming at, as well as all of his weak spots.

Feeling uppity, eh? Veil asked and spun around doing a series of line attacks.

A minute ago, Dallion would have scrambled to remain alive. Now, they seemed so childishly easy to avoid that he almost thought they weren't real. Putting an end to his combat splitting, Dallion leapt back, then propelled himself off the wall, twisting as he did. All four line attacks missed him by inches.

Gleam, Nox, you've done enough. Dallion said as he unsummoned his hammer. Leave this to me.

The familiars grumbled in response, but disappeared from the room.

You too, Lux.

There was a sad chirp, after which, the flaming wings blinked out of existence.

Finally figured it out, eh? Veil asked with a wink. Took you long enough.

It does sometimes. Dallion smiled. The armadil shield was also unsummoned, as was his harpsword. Instead, a dartbow appeared in his hand.

Back to the classics? Veil took a step forward. Do you think it'll be enough?

If now I can always call the others back. You cant.

That was the pivotal question. Both knew it. A split second later, both charged forward. Markers were moving everywhere, like an eighties disco club. However, Dallion found that he could navigate through all the information with ease. His high mind trait, combined with layer vision, let him keep track of everything without issue. The only thing he had to decide was what to do.

Dallion split into three instances. The number of markers tripled. Each of the instances avoided the primary attack with ease. Two evaded it by moving to the side, while the third parried the succession of strikes, although with considerable difficulty.

Veil continued with his attack, of course, doing a slash and pierce combo. The ninety-degree change in weapon trajectory that seemed so difficult to evade in the past was now clearly visible, allowing Dallion to escape it using a simple jump and twist.

Ill have to start increasing my reaction trait, Dallion thought as he leapt over his opponent. His right arm extended before him, moving the dartblow to a point at which it almost touched Veils head. Then he squeezed the trigger.

FATAL HIT

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

You lose, Dallion whispered, still in the air.

Chapter 486: Seven Days Left

You have broken through your fifty-eighth barrier

Your level has increased to 58

Choose the trait that will serve you best

The green rectangle emerged as Dallion landed on the floor. Veil had already vanished, making Dallion feel slightly sad. He would have liked to have chatted a bit more with the echo, even if he knew that it wasnt the real Veil. Still, there was nothing stopping him from visiting Dherma on his way back.

Without hesitation, Dallion chose the reaction trait, increasing it to thirty-one. It was funny how much he had neglected it. Upon entering this world, it was the first that he had chosen, making him in his mistaken opinion crazy fast. Since then, though, he had only maintained it out of a sense of balance. Now, it was clear that he had to boost it up a bit. Sadly, that wasnt the only thing he had to boost.

There was a time when having thirty on a skill seemed out of this world. Now all his stats seemed laughably low, and not only them. There was no reason for Dallion not to have increased his skills to their level cap. The only reason he didnt was because he considered it a bother.

Is that your way of telling me that Ive become arrogant? Dallion asked.

Deep inside, he knew that he had a bit. Being a hunter came with certain advantages that he now took for granted. In the past, he had to have others vouch for him, even as an awakened. After he received his hunters emblem even that of an apprentice he was pretty much welcome anywhere.

Its not your fault, everyone goes through it. Even I have. Its a normal part of an awakened development.

You keep saying that a lot. Dallion summoned his harpsisword and did a series of artistic strikes and slashes.

The markers had long vanished since the end of the trial, but that didnt stop him from experimenting with certain combos. As he did, Dallion thought back to the time when the village chief had placed a limiting echo in his realm. If memory served, the annoying entity had used quills to attack him.

Nil, any idea how writing can be used for combat?

That would be called gossip and rumors, dear boy.

Very funny.

Actually, it isnt. Its one of the skills frequently used in high society.

I thought that music did that.

The pen is mightier than the sword, Dallion thought. Concentrating, he focused on a part of the wall, thinking of the first insults that came to mind. To his surprise, a series of quills appeared in the air above him, and flew forward, sticking into the wall, like darts on a dartboard.

Poor performance, but you get the gist. Music relies on emotion, writing relies on logic. Combine words with attack and you have a sharp and deadly tongue.

Can I combine them with music, too? Dallion wondered.

You can combine pretty much anything with anything, you just have to know how and be very skilled in it.

Dallion was about to ask something else when his stomach gurgled. Combining so many skills in combat had been quite exhausting, and now his body was reminding him that it needed energy, in the form of food, to make up for the losses. The sensation put a smile on Dallions face. It had been a while since he experienced it. And as Eury liked to say: not feeling tired is an indication that one isnt trying their best.

A moment later, the room had vanished. Dallion was back in the jungle, and eager to start eating. Thankfully, Gleam had managed to find proper wood, the trunk of which she brought back to Dallions section of the jungle. Impressed how powerful she was at level two, Dallion was almost scared to think what shed become at level five. Everything considered, it wasnt a bad idea to let her deal with some of the local inhabitants as well.

It took several long hours for Dallion to prepare and cook the food he had procured. Normally, that wouldnt be a big deal, but with time being limited, he found the process wastefully long. Unlike most other things, cooking was something he had no control over.

The fish were remarkably tasty, even if Dallion didnt have much in terms of seasoning. Most of them were eaten on the spot, almost as he prepared them. The rest were carefully packed and stored

in his giant backpack. For good measure, and a bit of practice, Dallion proceeded to mend his backpack, as well as improve it eight times, with the explicit goal of increasing his attack to eighty. For a moment there was a glimmer of hope that Dallion would be able to do some of the attacks that he'd seen Veil perform, but that was quickly dashed. Clearly, there were some things he'd never be able to achieve.

Once Dallion was done with eating and packing, he continued on his way. Surrounding the underground lake, he continued South. Lux and Gleam were sent to search for other towers, or prominent ruins, while Dallion kept Ruby and the shardflies nearby.

No. I found a temple that is much bigger than the towers! Its a whole pyramid!

The first reaction was disappointment. As Dallion thought about it, though, his opinion changed. Five towers, now a pyramid. Maybe he was reading too much into it, but coincidences kept on piling up. So far, he had seen nothing in this world that remotely resemble such architecture. Towers and pyramids were common, and yet they were largely absent, as was the furniture design he had seen in the broken tower. There was little doubt in his mind that someone from Earth had made this. By all accounts, it seemed that Arthurows was from Earth after all, and had been here for a very long time.

Nice try, dear boy, but youre not a gorgon.

A blue dot of light shimmered in the sky. It only lasted less than a second, but it was enough for Dallion to determine the direction. From there, all that was needed was some actual legwork.

It had been a while since Dallion had combined athletics and acrobatics for such a stretch of time. Doing so was exhausting, but in this instance, it was the best option possible. In passing, he sensed a fair number of creatures, some best left undisturbed. Thanks to his speed, or maybe pure luck, none of them decided to chase after him. To be on the safe side, Dallion told the shardflies not to cut up anything along the way. There were a few cases of something snatching some of Dallion's instances, though thankfully it never came to an actual fight. Given the speed with which the instances were snatched, Dallion found no reason to complain or look back.

After close to an hour, and when he was well out of the jungle, Dallion decided to rest on a sand dune. Naturally, he didn't stop splitting. As Nil had pointed out, it was very likely for there to be something beneath the sand. Just because Dallion couldn't sense it with his present skills was by no means a guarantee.

As he sat down a bit, Dallion used the opportunity to have a bit, and a lot of water. There was still a long way to go, but at least he could see the temple in the distance. Just to make sure he had Lux approach. His suspicions were confirmed moments later when the kaleidervisto appeared a short distance above his head.

Lux, can you find her?

Before Dallion could add anything else, the kaleidervisto had disappeared again. One could only hope that it wouldn't get into trouble. There was such a thing as being too eager.

How much time do you think I have? Dallion asked. A week? Ten days?

A week It wasn't a lot. So far, Dallion had only been in the canyon for two days and already it seemed incredibly vast. For all intents and purposes, it was almost as if it were its own world a place

that the Moons forgot. The only problem was that they hadn't forgotten. Rather, they had deliberately kept it isolated from the rest of the world.

Looking at the tip of the pyramid in the distance, Dallion thought back to what he had seen in the temples within the world sword. There were carvings of the Eighth Moon in a few chambers there. With all ruins here being significantly older, there was every chance that there would be more information. Also, it posed other questions. The Star being from Earth would explain modern at least post-Renaissance architecture and interior design concepts. However, it wouldn't explain how the knowledge was present millennia ago, unless time moved differently between worlds. That could well mean that no one had even noticed Dallion was missing. In fact, it was even possible that he hadn't officially gone missing at all.

It's here. I'm sure of it.

Because you feel so?

Because of the Green Moon in the sky.

The comment didn't surprise Dallion as much as it used to. He knew that the Moons tended to hide from those they didn't want to be seen by. However, why had he seen two Moons? The Green Moon, he could understand, but the Red one? More and more, it was starting to look like this wasn't going to be a simple case of finding the creature and taking it out of the canyon. There was going to be fighting involved.

It's here, Dallion repeated. All I have to do is find it.

Dallion was just about to make the first step, when he felt the harp's word vibrate on his back.

I'm not sure. I'm not as free as I once was. Something is there, and it is linked to the Star, but I don't know if it's him.

Dallion nodded. There was going to be a fight, after all. It was a lot sooner than he hoped it would be, although he had no illusions that he'd be able to avoid it. So far, he had faced the Star twice and each time he had been saved by the Moons' rules. A casual observer might say that Dallion had two victories, but the truth was that they weren't victories, but rather reprieves. If the Star really was there, this was going to be the real thing, and this time Dallion could no longer rely on the Moons to help him out.

Chapter 487: Pyramid Temple

There was no way to be certain what the pyramid looked like when initially built, but majesty emanated from it even in its current half-buried state. Sand and time had failed to blunt the walls and edges of the monumental structure, then proceeded to bury it instead. Looking at it, Dallion could recognize the three distinct balconies on the facade. In the past, they must have been places from which important dignitaries waved to their people. Now, they were the only means of entry into the building.

Sliding a finger on the smooth gray surface, Dallion concentrated.

There was no response to be felt. Just like everything else, this too was lacking a guardian. Next, Dallion took out his Nox dagger and struck the stone. Not even a dent appeared.

Nil, you said that nobles liked to buy indestructible bricks? Dallion put the dagger away.

Was this the place that invented sphere items? Dallion asked.

Why?

That was an interesting hypothesis. Sadly, Dallion wasn't inclined to believe it. He knew that the dryads and the copyettes had created sphere and world items, but it was allegedly thanks to the Stars gifts that they had done so. Still, given that it happened so long ago, and all those that were directly involved were forbidden to discuss it by the Moons themselves, there was no way to know for sure.

Good, Dallion said. He wanted to say that the timing was perfect, but that would have been a lie. He had spent a while waiting for their arrival. On the positive side, that had given him time to think. Since cutting his way in wasn't an option, his only choice was to go down from the balcony. In turn, that means that he had to constantly assess the situation very carefully. If at any point it looked like there might be trouble, Dallion was going to stop and follow his tracks back outside.

Two options were presented to him: use the rope in his backpack to create a makeshift grappling hook and climb up to the smaller balcony, or use the one that was almost at ground level.

Nil, any advice you can give me?

No. Dallion was adamant. I don't want to risk Lux or anyone else.

All of a sudden Dallion felt stupid. He was overthinking things again.

Okay, that's what we'll do, he said, then burst into instances to quickly find the rope in his backpack. Ruby, you and the rest stay outside. If I need you, I'll call you.

The shardflies kept on fluttering in place. A strong sense of curiosity emanated from all of them, making Dallion doubt that they were going to remain still for long.

Tying the rope securely to the straps of his armadil shield, Dallion then threw it like a discus at the balcony. As expected, he hit exactly what he was aiming for. A little help from Lux, and the shield was in such a position so as to allow Dallion to climb up. Rather, it allowed him to run up the wall of the pyramid while holding a rope.

The backpack was left behind, naturally. After some thought, Dallion used the rope-shield contraption to pull it up on the balcony, then told the shardflies to guard it. There were a few valuable items there, including food and water.

A large doorway led to the inside of the pyramid. In better times, the temple must have been brightly lit up by light crystals. At present, it was so dark that Dallion couldnt see a thing, even with his perception.

Lux, you know the drill.

The kaleidervisto floated forward, surrounded by blue flames.

The immediate chamber was rather small and, thankfully, completely empty. If there had been any creepy furniture, it had long been destroyed or carried away by the moonlight that had poured in every night.

One unexpected feature of the place was that the walls were covered in carvings depicting what appeared to be important events of the country: the creation of the first tower, the creation of the first city, the creation of the pyramid-temple, and a figure facing the Seven Moons.

Carefully he looked over every inch of the walls, but there was no hidden Moon to be found. Apparently, five thousand years agoor possibly tenththe Moons had been still seven. Or, could it be that Dallion was witnessing the creation of an Eighth?

Nil, the copyettes were the first race that tried to take over the world, right? Dallion asked.

And humanity had never made an attempt in the past?

I can see what youre going for, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support your speculation. While it is impossible to say when exactly the Star-touched came to be, a major event such as this would have been recorded.

Not unless the Moons didnt want it to be, Dallion said. You told me yourself that the Moons determine what people remember and what not. What if this was the greatest secret: the creation of a Moon that was later cast out?

Youre asking questions that hundreds of scholars have been arguing for centuries. Yes, Im familiar with the Moon Star theory. That the Star was once a Moon that was cast down by the Seven. Im also familiar with the theory that the Star was the thirteenth sun that was cast down, along with all the skills that are now lost.

Skills?

The power of decay and disease, as well as the ability to create cracklings.

That was remarkably close to a sort of necromancy. It was tempting to assume that to be the explanation, but there were still too many things that didnt fit.

A single corridor continued from the chamber further in. Splitting into half a dozen instances, Dallion went on. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred. The walls were decorated with carvings, although these were of a more artistic nature.

After about a dozen feet, the corridor widened, reaching a stone platform. This was somewhat surprising. From Dallions knowledge of pyramids back on Earth, he knew that they didnt werent hollow, at least not anywhere near this extent. However, the even more startling event was that the

moment he stepped on the platform, the inside of the pyramid suddenly lit up. Light crystals that must have been dormant for millennia came to life, filling the vast space with a combination of white and yellow light.

Before Dallions very eyes, the whole interior seemed to come to life. Symbols of various colors lit up, like neon signs. Someone must have put in a lot of effort to create light crystals in that form. Reading the words that were composed was easy, though not because of Dallions writing skills.

Nil, is that the language of the Star? Dallion asked.

I can read it, Dallion interrupted.

If there was any lingering doubt, it was not gone. The Star had come from Earth, and had brought with him knowledge that this world wasnt supposed to have. Dallion had long suspected that, of course, but there was always that grain of uncertainty poking at him.

Taking a moment to wrap his mind around everything, Dallion moved his attention away from the sign and into the rest of the vast chamber. Impressive buildings filled a large part of the space, placed along the walls, as well as the very middle of the pyramid. Most of them were similar in shape, each with their own signs, providing instructions. A single glance was enough to show that the pyramid was a temple system, aiming at preparing priests, or at the very least, awakened. If the signs were to be believed, there were several libraries, training facilities, meditation spots, and three paths of enlightenment. Judging by the numbers on the signs, one could assume they represented an equivalent of awakened shrines that allowed followers of the Star to advance to certain levels.

Four, eight, and twelve? Dallion asked.

Mhm, Dallion replied. He had no intention of trying any of those. However, there were a few other buildings he wanted to check out. The libraries were a good first stop, as was the only cube shaped structure in the distance. The reason it was so notable was because the sign on it read Armoury.

A series of steps went down each side of the stone platform, leading to the floor and other platforms and walkways along the walls of the pyramid. The place was undoubtedly huge, probably the size of a small skyscraper. Dallion could only imagine the amount of effort it had taken to have it built, even if all the builders were awakened. Given the meticulous precision with which everything was built, the person overseeing it had to be pretty strict or feared.

The warning was heard, but completely ignored, as Dallion spotted something shimmering in the distance. Forgetting most of his concerns, he rushed down the staircase. The shimmer was something that Dallion was quite familiar with. He saw it every moment he was with Eurythe indication something was from another world.

Gleam, get the shardflies and come in here, Dallion said as his instances ran down the stairs, making sure that no traps were present.

Chapter 488: Subtle Temptation

Even after all this time, the Armoury remained well stocked. There were dozens of weapons made of sea iron and even rarer metals. The clothes that went with the suits of armor had long rotten and dissolved to dust, leaving nothing but metal fragments on the floor. However, that wasnt the whole

of it. A barred section was further in. A quick glance revealed that the more exotic weapons, such as bows, swords, and even crossbows, were placed there, safely locked away. Furthermore, a large vault door sealed off an entire other section of the building. What was notable was that there were no locks visible on either door, but rather a puzzle combination mechanism. Whoever had designed this seemed to believe in skill: those with the brain and skill to open the doors would merit a better weapon. Everyone else had to make do with what was available in the front end.

Is there any danger taking any of this? Dallion asked as he checked the weight of a sky iron dagger. It was a three-level sphere item with nothing special other than the material it was made of.

Dallion looked at the weapon again. Nothing indicated that he'd be in trouble if he just took it along. That was precisely the reason he didn't. He could always buy special metal elsewhere. Besides, this wasn't the reason he had come to the building. The shimmering he had seen from outside was somewhere beyond the vault door.

Under normal circumstances, Dallion would have entered through the small side window and taken it directly, but as it turned out both the building itself and the bars that covered the windows were indestructible, just like everything else here.

From what he could tell, it was a simple tumbler mechanism that could be opened with a dagger or piece of metal. The mechanism wasn't more than a standard lock. Anyone with a bit of practice, or enough forging skills, would be able to pick it open. Just to make sure Dallion used combat splitting as well.

After half a minute of careful poking, and a series of clicks, the door of bars swung open.

So far, so good, Dallion said. Thanks, Nox. He lowered the dagger.

A dozen racks of weapons, and five rows of ex-armor suits separated Dallion from the vault door. Habit made Dallion check whether the vault wasn't, against all odds, breakable. It wasn't.

The vault mechanism lock was the same that Dallion's father back on Earth had for his suitcase: a combination lock with a six-symbol alphanumeric password. Since it was in English, the first thing Dallion did was to arrange the letters to form the word Broken. Unsurprisingly, that didn't do anything. The solution had to be a bit different.

Dallion tried to combine his music and forging skills to get a sense of the wheels, but that didn't give him any insight. Unlike the previous doorlock, this one had its elements concealed in such a way that no tampering was possible. Using echoes to brute force it was one option, though a rather unappealing one. What was more, Dallion felt that there was a simple solution to the puzzle. It was obvious that the Star had attempted to make a system similar to the overall awakening trials, however, instead of focusing on resolving internal flaws, he had based it on Earth knowledge and ingenuity.

For once, Dallion was the one who knew something that the echo didn't. The notion was mildly amusing.

It's a lock, Dallion replied. An unbreakable lock that only someone who knows the correct combination of symbols can open. There was a slight pause. Unless you can help me out.

Dont worry. I know you cant come out here. Dallion placed his hand on the vault. Thats why Ill be joining you.

AREA AWAKENING

You are in a small metal room.

The VUALTs destiny has been fulfilled.

It was more than that. Like everything before, the realm was completely barren. Endless plains of steel continued as far as the eye could see. The only thing that broke the monotony was a series of hills that rose up in the distance.

Nil, Dallion said.

Instantly, the firebird appeared and surrounded him with blue flames. Moments later, Dallion darted towards the closest hill. Halfway there, it became obvious that his initial suspicion was correct: four more hills had appeared, but those werent hills, they were giant gears emerging from the ground.

I suppose theres a way to shape the inside of a realm? Dallion asked.

Nil didnt say a thing, but he didnt have to. Back when Dallion was part of the Icepicker guild, Captain Adzorg had boasted in person that he had shaped the inside of all training items. Clearly, he wasnt the only one.

Considering the size of the gear teeth, it would have taken an awakened considerable effort to climb to the top, not to mention it would be quite difficult to memorize a symbol the size of the Nazca lines. Having the ability to fly, though, made the task childishly easy.

Sneaky, Dallion whispered, as he ordered Lux to take him up even higher.

The password was both easy and difficult. Looking at the gear symbols, the word EARTH emerged. What made it slightly tricky was that the last hill was completely blank. Most probably, back in the time, otherworlders werent that rare, and the Star wanted to make sure that a random awakened couldnt just guess.

Just something that made me think of my world, Dallion replied.

You arent thinking of going back, are you, dear boy?

Without warning, Dallion left the realm, not even bothering to land. The experience was slightly painful, making him almost lose balance for a few moments. However, since this wasnt the first time he left a realm in such an abrupt fashion, Dallions body had gotten used to the experience.

Earth, eh? Dallion turned the dials, making sure to leave the last one blank. There was a loud click.

Dallion felt a shiver of excitement pass through him. Gripping the vault door wheel, he turned it, then pulled. The massive circle of metal moved to the side held by its hinges. A small room was revealed, its walls made entirely of light crystals. In the center of the ceiling stood a single large barred window, directly beneath a small pedestal with a tin box on it. This was what Dallion had seen from the outside. Even now, the tin was surrounded by the typical shimmering light, indicating

that it originated on Earth. It wasn't anything special, just a cheap biscuit tin like those Dallions grandmother used to keep old photos in. However, merely seeing it created a feeling of nostalgic joy.

That was a rather good question. It was only at this point that Dallion looked around. Near the walls, were rows of display cases. Protected by panes of thick glass were stands made of sky iron, upon which was a crystal gem.

That immediately caught Dallions attention. Keeping his guard up, Dallion went to one of them for a better look. There was no doubt that the prize hidden here was a skill gem. Normally, Dallion would have rushed at the opportunity to claim it or in fact all of them. It was the single drop of blackness trapped within the otherwise clear gem that made him pause.

I know, Dallion replied in a calm manner. Do you think they're actual skill gems? Judging by the color, there had to be several kinds.

They are, but you'll get way more than you bargained.

You're seen them before?

I don't have to have seen them, to know what that in the center is! Like everything else made by the Star, it gives the foolish a little something, while taking a whole lot more. If the followers aren't strong to begin with, they become brainless cultists that barely have any mind of their own.

I don't feel anything.

That's because the skill gem keeps it hidden.

So, if Nox and Lux consume them, they'll get a few more skills?

The echo didn't answer immediately. On the one hand, there was no denying that having stronger familiars would be beneficial. However, no one knew precisely what had gone into creating the gems. It was just as possible that the creatures died or turned into monsters. Neither option was desirable.

Nos, think you can handle this? Dallion asked.

Give me a second, Nil.

Dallion kept contemplating the possibilities. Having Nox learn awakened skills was quite significant. Maybe it was worth the risk?

Dallion

I said give me a moment, Nil! Dallion snapped. This is an important decision! I need a bit to think.

You've been thinking about it for an hour.

The sheer surprise was enough to make Dallion look away. The moment he did, he felt some tension in his foes. Looking down, Dallion found that he had been standing on them. Unsure what was going on, Dallion relaxes. A faint crunching sound told him that there was something beneath his

heels. When he next looked up, he found that the section of glass in front of him was broken. The gem was still there, now less than a hands length away. Not trusting himself, Dallion instantly took a step back. The moment he did, all the gems in the display cases became pitch black.

An illusion? Dallion concentrated, then focused on the walls of the vault again. The display cases were still there, but they were all broken. Dust and glass covered the floor. The black gems, though, were still there, untouched for millennia.

What? Dallion was conflicted. In part, he was certain that he wouldnt have fallen for such an obvious trick. At the same time, he knew enough of this world to know not to take anything for granted. Why didnt you warn me?

Thats just"

Look at your hands!

Despite the sudden wave of fear, Dallion did so. There was no denying itboth his knuckles were covered in scars. It was only now that he felt the pain.

Dallion hesitated. The moment he did, the gems changed color again. Now they were blue, green, red, and orange once more. One could almost believe that they were skill gems created by the Star for his followers to use. Of course, Dallion knew now that to be fake. Looking at them, though, he started having questions. Had the Star really made skill gems? The dryads were able to so if they could, why couldnt the Star? Maybe somewhere in this temple there was a real untainted gem that would let Dallion learn one of his missing skills? If he were very lucky, that gem might even grant him magic.

The armory could well be the means to reward those who were strong enough, but it was also possible to be a way to find those who had a too high opinion of themselves and turn them into chainlings.

What? Has it been another hour?

No, but I really suggest we get out of here. The longer we remain, the more dangerous it will become. And Im not talking about you. I meant for everyone.

I know. Dallion turned around. Theres just one last thing I need to do.

Splitting into three instances, Dallion removed the cover of the tin box. There were a lot of things he expected to find inside: a trap, another illusion, or even a hidden chainling. Instead, there was nothing but a Swiss pocket knife.

Chapter 489: Victory Advice

The old echo was not at all pleased with what Dallion had done, although he had become a lot calmer since they had left the Stars pyramid. Virtually everything in the temple was made to be a trap for suspecting and unsuspecting alike. Dallion had found that the hard way. Even now it broke his heart thinking of the amount of special metals left behind. He knew that was for the best, but there was one he could keep himself from takingthe Swiss army knife from Earth.

Are you sure you want to keep it? You can just toss it in the sand.

Unless the Moons are against it, Im keeping it, Dallion replied. He had every reason to listen to Nil. Normally, he would have. However, this was an item that was made on Earth, and while he saw no particular use of having a tin box, the pocketknife was small enough to take with him. Still, he was going to try and ask the Moons for advice during the night.

Weve six days to find what we came for, Dallion said. Gleam, Lux, go back to searching for towers. Meanwhile, Ill continue heading south.

Crossing the patch of sand was exhausting. Dallion was used to the scorching sun, but nowhere did it feel as harsh as here? Neither the pleasant draft the shardflies caused by flapping their wings at him, not the water skins were barely enough to lessen it slightly. Even so, Dallion kept on.

By evening, the heat had kept up even more. Dallion had managed to reach another part of the jungle, replacing the scorching sun with boiling humidity. After a few hours, he wasnt sure which of the two was worse. Lux and Gleam had managed to scout far enough to find what potentially could be the towers the seagull had described. Given that there were no other clues, Dallion decided to head in that direction. Before that, though, he was going to have a quick nap again.

Guys, you know what to do, he told the shardflies.

Laying down, Dallion expected at least one of his guardians to say something. None of them did. All of them were feeling tense about being here, Harp and Vihrogon most of all. It was almost as if this place brought memories they wished to forget. Onda, on the other hand, had been completely chill seeing nothing special. Given that he was undoubtedly older than Vihrogon by a few millennia, that posed a few questions. Was it possible that he hadnt been involved in the war effort at the time? That didnt make much sense, either.

Resting against his backpack, Dallion closed his eyes. What seemed like a moment later, he opened them again, only to see the entire landscape changed. He was still in a desert, but all the plants were gone, replaced by endless dunes of green sand. A single Moon was in the sky, larger than Dallion had ever seen it.

Felygn? Dallion stood up.

Youve got balls, Ill give you that, the Moon said. A smirk could be heard in its words. The echo was right. There was no point in taking the knife.

Is it corrupted? a wave of fear swept through Dallion, causing drops of sweat to cover his face.

No, just pointless. Theres nothing you can do with it that your other weapons cant. Its doubtful youll even be able to sell it.

How is it here? Dallion asked. I thought nothing could cross between worlds. If that wasnt the case, Dallion would still have his phone, among other things.

Vermilions arent the only things that can pull things between worlds. With enough power, you can take things from other places.

So, the Star is from Earth?

A moment of silence followed.

Everything points to it, Dallion said. His knowledge of events, of technology, the items I found

I know a lot about your world as well. Do I come from there as well?

I dont know. Dallion thought for a moment. You might.

And so might the Star.

Why cant you tell me? Does it make such a big difference if I know? Or do I have to go through my next gate to find out?

Knowing wont help you, neither would knowing the history of this place.

Always the same answer. Dallion was starting to get used to it. There was a time when Dallion was annoyed at people keeping secrets from him. All that paled in comparison to the secrets the Moons knew and kept to themselves. That seemed to be the constant in this world: the more someone knew the more secrets they kept.

If youre not here to help me, why did you agree to the talk? Dallion asked. Normally, when the Moons reached Dallion through dreams, it was on their whim. Will you help me find the dragonet?

You know the answer to that. I cant tell you anything about your task or the nature of the Star. However, I can give you some advice on what to do when you face him?

The Star is here?

The Star is wherever he pleases. At some point, youll cross paths again. It might be here, now, it might be a decade in the future, but at some point, the two of you will collide. Assuming you survive until then.

One had to hand it to the Moons. Their prep talks werent particularly inspiring.

Are you allowed to do that?

Yes, and no. The Moon glowed brighter. As with many things, theres a loophole. I cannot help or guide you. But I can comment on things you have done.

Youve faced him twice before, the Moon continued. And won twice. How?

There were others to help me, Dallion said without hesitation. His victory was largely due to Euryales actions and the copyettes involvement. Dallion had never faced the Star directly. If he had, the outcome would have been obvious.

Thats partially correct.

Whats that supposed to mean?

As much as Im allowed to tell you.

There were a lot of factors involved during a fight in Nerosal. It was like two armies fighting against one another. It wasnt Dallions skills that had brought him victory, not by a long shot. However, if it wasnt the people who assisted him, what was left? Nox? The crackling had been present in both instances. During the first encounter, it had clawed through the void that had enveloped Dallion, and in the second, it had challenged the Overseer, shifting the battle towards her.

Nox? Dallion asked.

The silence suggested that the answer wasnt what the Moon was hoping for.

It was a good try, but apparently not the right answer. Maybe it was a principle or logic of some sort? Some weakness that the Moon had that would help level the playing field? According to the rules of the world, everything had to obey the laws of the Moons, even the Star, so if there was something to grant Dallion the advantage, he could rely on it working every time.

Both of them occurred within awakened realms? That was one possibility, but it didnt help much. The Star was even stronger in the realms than it was in the real world. In both cases, the Icepicker guild was involved. Both times artifacts located there had caused this. Even this time, it was the guild who had requested Dallions help in dealing with another artifact. Or, what if it wasnt the guild, but the person behind it?

Until you stop focusing on distractions, youll never be able to see the core of things, the Moon said.

Dallion frowned. That potentially meant that everything he had thought of till now was false. However, there didnt seem to be any other option. So, it wasnt familiars, it wasnt gear, it wasnt friends

Is there a way for me to become your favored once more? Dallion asked.

There is nothing more I can help with, the Moon replied. Good luck.

Wait! Thats

Dallion opened his eyes. He was back in the jungle with the Green Moon shining above him. This time, there were no other Moons present.

Damn it! Dallion whispered.

His senses told him that a number of creatures had gathered in the area, though were keeping their distance due to the shadflies. In future, though, it would be better if he didnt risk sleeping. The Moon had already told him everything it was willing to say.

Luck was the right word, indeed, but Dallion felt he hadnt had any. There had to be some hint in what the Moon had said, but trying to figure it out was as vague as the guess that had driven Dallion here.

Were heading to the towers, he said, standing up. As if on cue, the hidden creatures slowly moved away. Dallion could sense their viciousness, but also calm. They werent like the ones who had attacked him before. They appeared smart enough to know not to charge foolishly at him. From how on Dallion was going to constantly have to keep his guard up.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion went through his backpack until he found his bestiary. Skimming through its pages, Dallion tried to find clues about the canyon he was in. Unfortunately, of the many species he skimmed through none were said to inhabit this area.

That was good. It meant he had at least one less thing to worry about.

Gleam, anything serious between here and the towers? he asked, adjusting his backpack.

This and that. Nothing significant, although you might have trouble as you are now.

Any water along the way?

A bit. Youll have to take a slight detour.

Thats fine. Dallion had no doubt that there would be a number of unpleasant creatures at the water source, but at this point, he needed the water more than avoiding a fight. The reckless side of him urged him to charge head on and use as many of his skills as possible in unison in order to achieve victory. The hunter, part of him, suggested that he take a measured approach, avoiding combat as much as possible. Ultimately, a compromise had to be made. Dallion didnt have too much time to waste, but he wasnt planning on being suicidal, either.

Gripping the harpsisword, he continued through the jungle.

Chapter 490: Seagull Gossip

Dallions trip through the jingle continued for half a day. During that time, there were several attempts of creatures to kill him. Some relief on their camouflage, choosing to strike from the trees without warning. All, without exception, were capable of combat splitting, attacking with up to half a dozen instances. Unfortunately for them, Dallion had gotten into the habit of keeping twelve instances at all times, rendering their attempts unsuccessful.

The follow up was always the same. The moment the creatures saw that their initial attack had failed, theyd dart through the jungle, quickly getting out of reach and out of sight. That was a good thing, since several of them seemed to be slightly more than Dallion could handle. Dallion suspected the creatures were aware of the fact since they tried to attack, but wisely, none of them were willing to stake their life on it. After all, in such an environment, even receiving a serious wound would put their life at risk, making them someone elses prey.

Several of the butterflies had been injured in the event. While their wings were much harder and more durable than the standard variety, they werent invulnerable. The jungle monsters had managed to crack a few wings. Thanks to his level up, Lux was going to be able to heal them without issue, but the kaleidervisto wasnt nearby at presentDallion had sent it to scout the area in search of other items.

Dont worry, guys, Dallion said. After every encounter, he had made sure to take the injured ones and placed them in the bowl that was in his backpack. She had offered it, after all, and being a dryad had the ability to keep them calm. The only exception, as usual, was Ruby. The shardfly had gotten one of its wings chipped slightly, but insisted on remaining nearby.

Dallion could feel Rubys eagerness, as well as a desire to impress. Hes just a kid, Gleam has said a long time ago, back when Ruby had first started drawing on the walls. Dallion hadnt been pleased, but listened to Gleams advice and let the shadfly be. Now, he could see that was the right choice.

The closer Dallion got to the water pool, the less sneak attacks there were. That was rather alarming, forcing Dallion to increase the number of instances he had through splitting. Even so, he couldnt help but to feel anxious. This place was like a hurricanethe greater the calm, the greater the ferocity of what was to follow.

In Lux terms, that meant that it could take half a day to get from one to the other, or even more.

Gleam didnt answer. An hour later, she didnt have to.

The news that Dallion was giving out silver coins in exchange for talking had quickly spread throughout the canyon among the seagull population. It was just as Nil had feared it might become. The only reason that they hadn't descended upon him so far was mainly because the creatures weren't suicidal and stayed away from the dangerous spots in the area. Also, the news had caused significant infighting among them. Furious flocks had fought one another for the chance of being the first to get their share of shineys.

Only if everyone's quiet, Dallion said.

The noise suddenly stopped. A strong sense of fear emanated from each and every seagull the fear that they would do anything to jeopardize their chance of earning a coin. It was so close to human behavior that it was scary.

Since you're already on my head, you'll start first. What is there that you can tell me? Dallion asked as he took a silver coin out of his pouch.

Dallion waited. So did the seagull. Apparently, it was under the impression that this much information was enough for a reward.

What type of creatures? Dallion asked.

Really big creatures! As big as half the pillars.

Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that the seagull wasn't entirely truthful. The creatures it spoke of no doubt existed, and they were probably quite big, but it was an outright lie that they were as big as half the tower. Still, it was a good idea to have it checked out.

Not now. There were others before. They come here a few times per year. They always leave trinkets behind.

Dallion had spoken to enough creatures in the wilderness to know exactly what that meant. Of the people who came here, a large part probably didn't return. Since none of them had the ability to talk to animals, the only way they could leave something was to leave it to be picked from their corpses.

Did any of them fly?

The seagull flapped its wings, flying off Dallion's head. Terror and hatred came from it, telling Dallion everything he needed to know.

Without hesitation, he tossed a coin in the bird's direction. The prize was instantly snatched as the seagull flew off into the distance.

Anyone else? Dallion flashed another coin.

Seagull cries filled the air. As the flock transformed into a battlefield of feathers. It was starting to look like more than a few of them would end up dead. Just as Dallion stood up, however, the commotion suddenly ended.

Isn't that a good thing?

Is it, though?

You, Dallion pointed at a seagull that looked somewhat larger than its neighbors. You'll be next. Tell me something interesting and I'll give you one coin and two more to your flock.

This caused confusion. If the birds were anything like Nil suspected, they were probably calculating the odds right now. And just to prevent them from getting any more ideas, Dallion decided to add some clarifications.

There will be no other coins for today, but there'll be something tomorrow, he added eagerness in his words. This was the first time he used his music skills to affect so many at once. The effort was considerable, but it seemed to work.

The initial confusion over, the large seagull flapped its wings, flying onto Dallion's head.

What do you mean?

When they come out, they are different. Scarier. You're the same as when you went in.

Dallion didn't say a word. This was a place where cultists came, after all. Maybe it was a sort of pilgrimage, where the deceived went in search of power, but ended up being transformed into chainlings.

And the flying ones?

Several of the seagulls surrounding Dallion flapped their wings, though not the large one. Dallion could feel that the bird was prepared.

The flying ones come to fight, but they go far. They only continued to the point at which they see the northern mountains.

While Dallion didn't know much about the Academy, that sounded like something they would do: test things out cautiously and never put themselves at risk. What were they hoping to find, though? And why keep it secret?

How many of them were there?

The ones on the ground traveled in groups. A few to whole packs. The flying ones always came alone or in pairs.

Dallion tossed a coin at the flock. There was a brief scuffle, at the end of which one seagull flew away, gripping the silver coin in its beak.

Those on the ground. What places did they go to? Dallion asked, holding another silver coin.

The large seagull didn't answer. Displeasure emanated from it.

Tell me, and this coin is for you. And one more for the rest, Dallion said.

That didn't diminish much of the doubt coming from the bird, but the greed increased to the point that it finally gave in.

They all went to the temple. I heard that in the past they used to also go in the stone circle, but not anymore.

Anything else? Dallion asked, playing with the piece of silver. None of them went to the pillars?

No one other than you went to the pillars. They are dangerous. Only the darkness creatures gather there.

That was a bit of a letdown. Dallion would have hoped that at least someone had tried. At the very least the Star should have come here. Apparently, that wasnt the case, or if it was, he had managed to go there without being seen.

Anything else I should know?

The coin flew up in the air. The seagull on Dallions head snatched it and flew off. Moments later, a second coin was tossed among the flock. This time, the fight was far more intense. The seagull that managed to get it wasted no time in breaking out of the fall of feathers and fleeing into the sky. All the other seagulls followed, determined to reclaim their prize from it.

Only whats important, Dallion said.

Now that the flock was gone, the spot was once more calm, almost empty. Looking at the water, though, Dallion was glad that he had filled up his water skins before the birds arrival.

Seems this is where cultists go on a pilgrimage. Dallion crackled his fingers. Any idea what the stone circle could be?

Somehow that didnt stand right. The more Dallion thought about it, the more certain he was that it was a place worth visiting. Of course, that was only if he had time after finding the dragonlet. So far, hed learned two spots that he could find it atfour, if one counted the latest two towers Lux had found.

Yep! Yep!

How large is it?

Not too large! The pyramid is right in the middle. So, its a few times bigger than Wetie province. Maybe ten or less.

Measuring distance wasnt one of Luxs strong points. However, it had told Dallion one thing: the canyon was large enough to have been a kingdom. At some point, it probably was. Some giant spell had been used against it, targeting the Stars pyramid. The blast had been strong enough to incinerate everything and bury the entire kingdom on the ground, transforming it into a crater so large that it couldnt be seen. This was the second such instance Dallion had seen in this world.

Normally, all the buildings should have been destroyed as well. The only reason they werent, was because they had been indestructible. Thats why the broken tower and the pyramid appeared buried: they had been pushed into the ground by unimaginable force.

Nil, is there a way to end indestructibility?

Nil

Theres always a way, though not anyone could achieve it. And no, you wont be able to learn it.