

Leveling up 491

Chapter 491: Realm Invasion

For the first time in a very long while, Dallion found that he could no longer improve any of his skills. The absurdity was that it wasn't a matter of him being too weak to do so. Rather, it was the complete lack of items that was the limiting factor. Everything in his backpack was improved as much as possible without rendering it useless. That had barely been able to increase Dallion's athletic skills to sixty-seven and his guard skills to seventy-two. Dallion's clothes, armor, and several other items made of metal could potentially allow him to increase another fifty levels or so, but that would be a serious mistake. While Dallion could easily turn all of them into gold, that would be the same as throwing them away. In theory, he would go for platinum, which was the metal beyond gold, according to Nil, but the echo was quite certain that Dallion lacked the skills for that yet. When Dallion had asked Harp for a second opinion, she too had been against it, urging him to go for another level up, instead.

You think I should reach sixty before arriving at the towers? Dallion asked.

That'll cost me a whole day.

Does anything special happen when I reach level sixty? Dallion asked.

The harp's word guardian didn't reply.

Nil? Dallion persisted.

It wasn't like Harp to suddenly insist on something like this. She had plenty of opportunities to do so back when Dallion was in Nerosal. He would have listened to her without question back then. At present, though

Are you asking me to go achievement hunting?

Dallion didn't respond, thinking it over.

Please, Dallion. One level now and one tomorrow morning.

And if I fail? That'll only exhaust me before a potential fight.

You mustn't fail.

The nymph's words sounded absolute. There was little doubt that she knew something that the rest didn't. Thinking about it, that stood to logic. She was the oldest being by far, with the possible exception of Onda. In theory, she could have been alive when the kingdom of the stay was still in one piece. Why didn't she want to tell him what it was all about, though?

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Dallion's awakened realm appeared around him, replacing the present reality. Coincidentally, it was night when he went there. Unlike before, though, the sky was pitch black. None of the Moons were present, and not a single star.

Its not clouds, a voice said.

Ariel? Dallion glanced at the echo.

You shouldnt have taken the knife.

I checked it. There wasnt any

It belonged to the Star, Ariel snapped. Isnt that enough?

For a brief moment, Dallion felt concern, even fear that he had made the wrong choice. Almost instantly, the moment was gone.

I dont need this crap, he frowned. He didnt need anyone second-guessing his decision. Ill just get this over with and

REALM INVASION

A red rectangle appeared in front of Dallion.

Do you finally get it? Ariel clenched his fists. You cant start a trial until you deal with this mess. And the best partIm all the help youve got!

We spoke, Dallion said, still unable to accept the obvious. Felygn would have told me if this was going to happen. He would have

Youve no longer under the protection of the Moons. They dont need to tell you a thing! What did you expect? That they were just kidding? That theyll still keep an eye on you for old times sake? If you thought that, you should have stopped at level forty. The moment you stepped through the gate.

His immediate reaction was to summon his entire gear. What he got was a short sword, a common buckler, and a lyre.

What the heck? Dallion stared at the weapons. Once again, he tried to summon any of his weapons, but none of them appeared.

Lux, come here, Dallion ordered.

Youre wasting time, the white-haired echo said. His open gear was no different from Dallions. All domain links to your gear are gone.

Was that what happened during a realm invasion? Dallion had been protected by the Moons for so long that hed never actually experienced one.

All the experience and knowledge he thought hed acquired seemed to vanish like wax in a fire. Once again, he felt like a defenseless level one awakened who had come upon his first guardian.

Dallion took a deep breath, exhaled, then opened his eyes again. A large part of the fear had gone.

What about Gen and July? he asked.

Theyre safe. I sent them to the old mans library just before you took the pocketknife. His glance suggested that Ariel suspected this would happen.

Why didnt Nil warn me about this?

He might be a permanent resident of your realm, but hes not part of it. And neither are the others. There are things that they cant feel.

Everything comes at a cost, Dallion said. I guess its back to basics. Any idea what we must do?

I just know that the knives linked to your realm. Whatever was hiding there is now here. As long as we kill it, everything should be fine.

Dallion could tell that his echo was guessing. Even so, that was as good a plan as any. Splitting into two dozen instances, Dallion rushed along the path to the central area of his domain. Ariel followed.

Lets split up, Dallion said. You go to the beach, and Ill continue inland. My skills are higher, so itll be easier for me to

Before he could finish, a large archway emerged from the ground less than a hundred feet away. In many aspects, it was similar to the ones Dallion had seen in the awakening shrines. The only difference was that instead of leading Dallion into another domain of a realm, it brought creatures in, and did so in vast numbers.

A swarm of giant insects poured out. All of them were pitch black, with bodies made entirely of blades. It was as if someone had taken a pocket knife and combined it with a cockroach to create a nightmarish creature, the sight of which was enough to make Dallions stomach churn.

VOID CREATURE

Species: BLADEROACH

Class: BROKEN STAR

Health: 100%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills: UNKNOWN

Weakness: UNKNOWN

The weapon, while far smaller than those he normally used, was perfectly capable of performing a point attack. The force extended forward, slicing through the stream of creatures until it shattered the archway. Stone and creature fragments filled the air, but even they werent enough to stop the devastation of the attack, which continued on to the nearby mountain, drilling a hole into it.

Splitting into instances, Dallion looked around. This all seemed a bit too easy. A glance at the red rectangle still in the air confirmed his fears.

REALM INVASION

92% ongoing

Five more archways emerged in various parts of the realm. In his minds eye, Dallion could see hundreds, even thousands, of insects fill his realm, slicing up everything in sight. The Star wasnt playing around. It didnt just want to trick him into submission, it was planning on de-lelling him!

An awakened realm was made to endure a lot. The damage Dallion had just caused with his attack could be fixed in the blink of the eye. However, should an invader destroy any of his skill frames, the skill would be lost completely and would have to be relearned from scratch. The same was valid for the level of his skills groups, his traits, even his overall awakening level. And if losing all those wasn't bad enough, there was no way he'd survive in the forgotten land of the Star, if his level was much lower than its current value.

Protect the skill columns! Dallion shouted as he rushed in the direction of the nearest archway. Also, make sure you're safe.

Those are conflicting instructions! Ariel shouted behind Dallion.

Looking at them, they didn't seem too strong. With a bit of luck, maybe he was actually going to survive this.

Holding his breath, Dallion did another point attack. The destructive force flew forward, crushing everything in its path. Sadly, the swarm of bladeroaches had learned from the first group. They were no longer pouring out one after the other, but dispersed as quickly as possible. Although the point attack managed to shatter the archway, destroying many of the creatures along the way, almost as many had filled the air.

REALM INVASION

86% ongoing

Gritting his teeth, Dallion created an echo of himself, then another, and another. Even after all this time, the sensation felt unpleasant, as if he were doing something that he wasn't supposed to. The echoes, in contrast, didn't share his scruples, each rushing towards a different archway.

A line swept through the air, slicing several waves of creatures in the sky. Ariel was no stranger to using line attacks, either. Unlike Dallion, though, his ability to do so was strongly diminished. Back when Dallion was level forty, he could do five such attacks at most before exhaustion cut in.

I can't! Dallion replied. All links to my items have been severed by the invasion.

Then unsever them.

The suggestion sounded so childish that it was outright absurd. However, thinking about it a moment more, Dallion understood precisely what the voice had in mind. The tower that represented the physical embodiment of the harpsisword was plainly visible in the distance. If it were still there, Lux's domain had to be as well, and that meant it could be accessible. It was a tough call: going to the firebirds domain would mean letting more insects invade the realm in the short term, but it might prove worth it. Either way, the decision had to be made fast. Glancing at the red rectangle, eighty-four percent of the bladeroaches remained.

Chapter 492: Desperate Solutions

REALM INVASION

72% ongoing

Entire sections of the realm seemed to explore, ravaged by line and point attacks. In terms of the land itself, the cure was definitely far worse than the sickness. While this was the only method of dealing with vast amounts of enemies, the attacks were indiscriminate, occasionally even threatening the existence of the echoes themselves. So far, none of them had died, but this was just the start of the battle. The difficult part was yet to come. Soon enough, Dallions echoes would no longer have the ability to perform such attacks and would have to rely on close combat. Even now, Ariel sat exhausted on the ground at the skill columns while another of Dallions echoes was protecting the site from the Star-spawn insects. Meanwhile, Dallion was running as fast as he could towards the lighthouse. He had gambled everything on the chance he'd be able to reestablish the link to the item and get Luxs help.

A trio of bladeroaches descended from the sky, flying directly at Dallion. Their actions were sloppy and predictable something a mid-thirty creature would do. Despite that, they remained a pain to deal with.

Twisting around mid-step, Dallion leapt up, then did a series of slash attacks in the air. The first few strikes were easily deflected by the many blades that composed the flying cockroach. However, in doing so, the creature opened a vulnerability.

In his mind, he could already see the strike dissolving the creature to smoke, and was already planning how to continue the attack from there. Unfortunately, moments before hitting its target, the tip of his sword was blocked by the blade of another insect.

Working together?

Dallion spun his sword around, forcing the blade up so he could continue with the attack. The bladeroach in question died instantly, but that wasn't what concerned him. For the creatures to coordinate their actions, they had to have a valid means of communication.

The need to observe the roaches for a bit longer prevented Dallion from killing them on the spot. Instead, he went on the defensive, blocking and evading their attacks, all the time waiting for markers to appear. After ten seconds, it became obvious that wouldn't occur. However, they were coordinating wasn't through standard communication. There were no rhythmic sounds, no released pheromones, not even any chance of emotion. The creatures were nothing more than empty husks controlled by something else.

A dozen more creatures joined it, following an intricate strategy aimed at gradually depleting Dallions health. Unfortunately for them, even several dozen insects weren't enough to match his level or all the experience gained from the wilderness. In fact, it was the complete opposite: the more the swarm focused on him, the better it was.

Evading the creatures attacks allowed Dallion to build up his guard skills bonus. When it came time for him to go on the offensive, he didn't hesitate. Killing them off in rapid succession.

TWENTY-TWENTY FIGHTER

(+2 Body, +2 Reaction)

Building up one skill bonus in order to move on to another is always a good strategy. Just be careful not to die while trying out weird combinations.

A blue rectangle appeared, marking Dallions achievement. It had been a while since hed gotten any of those. Unsurprising considering that lately most of his work was in the real world. If it wasnt for the surprise invasion, Dallion most likely would never have gone through such a sequence. Whatever he needed to capture, he didnt attack; whatever he wanted to kill, he did so swiftly with minimal defense. Apparently, there was a whole new set of achievement bonuses out there as long as his realm survived this.

Focusing on his athletic skills, Dallion sprinted on.

It took him several long minutes to reach the lighthouse, several minutes during which the bladeroads kept on swarming the skill pillars of the realm. Fortunately, none of them had decreased so far. Most of the echoes had gathered on the spot, fighting off the invaders with everything they had. Ariel and another Dallion were playing their lyres, doing the best they could to slow the roads advance. Sadly, even they werent going to hold out for long.

Ready Lux? Dallion asked as he reached the base of the building. Time to let you out.

The lighthouse had gone through a few transformations since it had first been created. Unlike the other guardians in Dallions realm, Lux changed his mind quite frequently, treating the appearance of his item like a shirt. In part, it had to do with his fiery personality, but also, he was too easily influenced by anyone and everyone. The first few times he had changed the lighthouse in order to impress Nox and Gleam. Thenwhen he had leveled up for the first timehe had Gen change it half a dozen times in order to best reflect the firebirds nature. At present, the tower had a more mechanical, almost steam punky appearance, all based on Ondas advice.

Three sections, each twenty feet high, composed the body of the structure. On top of that was the actual section, which at present had the form of a giant light crystal surrounded by a metal casing. Two things were of particular note: the crystal was completely dark, and also there was no door leading into the tower, as if it were sealed off from the realm.

It didnt take long for him to spot the opening. Thanks to his music skills, it looked like a contour in the shape of a door. All that was needed was a way to cut along the lines and push it through. Normally, Nox would easily take care of that. Unfortunately, Nox was sealed off as well.

Think I should use a like attack on this, Nil? Dallion asked as he slid his hand on the surface of the lighthouse.

There was no answer.

Dallion split into five instances. Three looked back, ready to react in the case of more creature attacks. Meanwhile, one of the remaining two used a skill that Dallion had told himself that hed never use: domain invasion.

There was something oxymoronic in the notion that he used this awakened ability to reestablish a link to his own item. Normally, this was used to forcefully enter someone elses domain and mess up as much as possible. Due to Dallions life on Earth, the thought was distasteful to the extreme, viewing it as a sort of mind-hacking. Right now, though, he had no choice.

It was terrifying how easy it was to enter someone elses realm. There were no checks, no logical puzzles, or strength requirements. Part of the wall just lost all consistency, becoming a wall of dust that spilled onto the ground. And to think this was a level ten ability? No wonder nobles had their realms filled with echoes. Even with the Moons protection, virtually anyone could enter anyone

elses realm. Potentially, the Moons kept an eye to make sure that the people didnt abuse this strength, but even so, the prospect was alarming to say the least.

REALM INVADER

(+2 Mind)

Sneakiness and subterfuge have their advantages, just be aware that those who live by invasion die by invasion.

Waving away the blue rectangle, Dallion rushed in. Barely had he done so than a ball of blue flame emerged in front of him.

Dal? The ball gained form, becoming the firebird Dallion knew it to be. What happened? You suddenly disappeared, and big bro

No time! Dallion interrupted. Be my wings!

Lux didnt hesitate, instantly enveloping Dallion. A split second later, Dallion was up in the sky.

Looking at his realm from the air only made things look worse. Half of the area was devastated. The mountains were almost reduced in half, and Dallions forge had been completely destroyed. The achievement building had also seen considerable damage, but since it had a purely ceremonial role, there was nothing to worry about.

What are those? Lux asked.

Invaders. We must stop them before they trash this place. Dallion tightened his grip on the short sword. Fly past the arches, he ordered. Were getting those first.

Yep! Yep! The firebird propelled Dallion down and forward.

At Dallions current level, an ordinary strike would have been enough to destroy the arches. He, however, wanted to be on the safe side, so used point attacks each time. The constructs exploded to bits, creating large craters beneath them. In the process, a significant number of roaches were also killed, though not nearly enough.

With every invasion link that was destroyed, the invasion progress decreased by anywhere between three and six percent. Once the last of them were gone, though, it was still at twenty-seven percent.

It has to be the insects,

Dallion thought. Initially, he thought that breaking the arches would be enough to end the attempt. The lack of rectangles suggested that he still had to deal with the pests already in his realm in order to claim victory.

Lux, take me to the awakening area! Dallion shouted.

Both his arms were almost numb. Never before had he done so many attacks of this nature at once. And yet, looking at the situation, it seemed he had barely made a dent in the enemy forces. His echoes werent faring too much better, either. Ariel was still alive, but half of the remaining four had been killed by the swarm. The survivors were desperately trying to protect the skill pillars, but that too was proving increasingly difficult. Several roaches had attached to the skill pillars, covering several frames at once. The attack section was the obvious choice, but also the zoology one as well.

In a flash the firebird accelerated then topped with such aggressiveness that Dallion felt like puking. Still, his body trait was high enough to prevent such an outcome.

Ariel, play slowness! Dallion slashed at the creatures covering the attack skill pillar.

The melody coming from the white-haired echo changed. A deep slowness filled the air, affecting the invaders as if they had been surrounded by jelly.

The moment he got above the level of the pillars, he did one final line attack, forming a full circle. The thread of death expanded in all directions. Several rows of bladeroaches broke up in pieces, dissolving almost immediately into smoke.

Finally, Dallion whispered, barely able to hold the sword.

Alas, his joy was short-lived. While many of the creatures nearby were killed by his attack, those further away were smart enough to move away just in time. The attack passed by them, crashing into the mountain behind or continuing to the horizon. The end result was that only a fraction of the total amount was killed off.

REALM INVASION

24% ongoing

That wasn't good at all! He and his echoes had spent all their energy and had only dealt with three quarters of the invading force.

Free your skills! Ariel shouted, changing melody once more. You'll need them more than anything.

Right! Dallion looked back down. That was the only silver lining. With most of the creatures in the vicinity dead, he'd have no trouble picking off those who were blocking his skills. Once that was done, all Dallion had to do was hold the line and

Four more archways emerged from the ground. All of them were twice the size of those before, placed in different parts of the realm. Taking them all out was going to be impossible, especially now that Dallion wasn't sure he could do any more like or point attacks.

REALM INVASION

47% ongoing

The numbers on the rectangle changed again.

Crap he whispered. He had been looking at this all wrong. The rectangle hadn't been displaying his progress, but that of the invaders. So far, he had managed to save his realm by preventing the invasion from succeeding, but he hadn't stopped it. All that he'd done was get a slight reprieve.

Chapter 493: Firelight

Think you can manage a few dozen more line attacks? Ariel asked.

It was obvious that he wasn't serious, even if at the present moment there was little else that could deal with the newly emerging swarms of creatures. Unlike before, the bladeroaches hadn't charged forward, but were gathering above the archways, filling the sky like black clouds.

Dallion could tell there was a strategy behind all their actions. The first wave had rushed with the aim of overwhelming all defenses. They had a secondary objective, however: to exhaust all combat capable echoes within the realm.

Big sis can cut them up! Lux chirped. Lets get big sis!

Normally, Dallion would agree. However, the way the clouds of roaches were positioned made that difficult. The shardflys domain was a vast bridge that connected the edge of the cove to the isle serpent. A thick layer of invaders blocked the path there, making it impossible to reach.

In order to reach her, we need to fight our way through, Dallion muttered. And if we can do that he looked at the three remaining echoes. How are you, guys?

Ive enough for one last line attack, one of the Dallions replied. After that Im done.

I might manage two, the other one said. No guarantees, though.

All looked at Ariel.

Im only able to play music, he said at last. Not for long, though. In fifteen minutes, Ill be done.

Fifteen minutes is a long time, Dallion said. If the swarm charged, he doubted that the skill pillars would last even three.

Closing his eyes, Dallion concentrated. There had to be a way to salvage this. If there wasnt, the voice wouldnt have bothered giving him advice in the first place. Its silence now, though, suggested that even it had reached its usefulness quota.

The key had to lie in his familiars. Lux had proved more than useful in stopping the first wave. Gleam could well protect the Dallions skills during the second. Thinking about it, that was a strategic mistake on Dallions part. The optimal solution would have been for him to re-establish as many links as possible after freeing Lux. Whatever was controlling the roaches wasnt focused on the familiars, so there couldnt have been a better time. Sadly, that moment was gone.

Five seconds?

Yep! I can burst and burn a hole through them.

The firebirds high-pitched voice only made the eagerness with which he explained how hed scorch hundreds of insects all the more frightening. He was on the right track, though.

Not long!

A very big flame burst?

There was a moments hesitation.

If I use all my flame A bit longer.

The slight dimming of the flames surrounding him suggested that the firebird wasnt at all convinced. Sadly, that had to do.

Guys, do what you can, Dallion said. There might be

We know. All three replied in unison.

Its a long shot, Ariel said. But good luck.

Thanks. Lux, get me to the lighthouse.

Almost at the exact instant Dallion rose in the air, the bladeroaches commenced their flight. The air was filled with the flapping of thousands of insect wings. The creatures were far slower than firebird, but their approach was merciless. Unlike the previous times, nothing on their path was going to survive.

A strong force propelled Dallion forward, stopping at the top of Luxs lighthouse. The one thing of interest was the large light crystal on the top. Similar to the kaleidervisto, it was flawless, capable of containing the firebirds light. It had one major problem, though: it was meant to serve as a decoration, merely capable of shining in a mesmerizing light. For what Dallion had in mind, he had to make a few improvements.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the metal cap covering the top of the lighthouse. Being the ruler of the realm, it was within his power to transform the appearance of anything within, even the lighthouse now that it was linked to the realm once more.

When he opened them, a second later, the metal top was gone, revealing the entire crystal in its glory.

Not yet, Dallion replied. He still had to add some modifications.

Summoning all his Earth knowledge about lenses and optical physics, Dallion focused on his writing skills. This was the first time he was going to use them for anything other than languages. Thankfully, the skills didnt disappoint, creating a layer of copper-colored markers around the light crystal. A transparent sphere emerged, almost indistinguishable from a hologram. Additionally, cones emerged from it, showing the behavior and intensity of the light rays. The angle was fifteen degrees far too wide for Dallions needs. Reaching out into the air, Dallion took hold of the angle marker and pushed it further in until it became a single line. As he did, the construct around the crystal changed as well.

Got in the crystal, Dallion told Lux. Ill grab the ledge.

The firebird considered the order. A moment later, the blue flames hopped off Dallion, leaving gravity to pull him back down. Expecting that, he quickly grabbed the ledge hanging off the side of the lighthouse.

There was something to be said of the destructive force of a firebird. With the exception of its eyes, the creatures entire body was made of small droplets of flame. In normal circumstances, the bird would disperse the flames, filling even large chambers with a wave of flame capable of causing mass destruction. Dallion had faced a few firebirds when clearing items back in his Icepicker days. In all instances, they used the physical presence of the flame only. Thanks to the kaleidervisto, though, Dallion had used the light aspect as well in order to reveal chainling cubs hiding among the people of Nerosal. This time, the light was used for more than revealing.

Even with his eyes closed from the ledge, Dallion was able to see the blast of blue light. Not only that, but he also felt it envelop his fingers. A normal flame would have scorched them off on the spot. Thankfully, Luxs flame was meant to heal and only burn Star-spawn, which it did with lethal efficiency. The wave of light spread through Dallions domain, reducing the bladeroaches to cinders.

Splitting into instances, Dallion looked around. The invasion progression had gone back to twenty percent. That was likely temporary.

Lux, how are you? Dallion used his realm forming ability to remove the glass ball, then pulled himself up. Lux?

So tired the firebird chirped in a whisper. Want to sleep.

It felt bad having to force the familiar to get back to working again, but Dallion didnt have much of a choice. As one of his instances was able to glimpse, the invasion counter had started increasing once more.

So tired the crystal glowed brighter. Gradually, small flames covered the surface. After ten seconds, there was a large enough quantity to jump onto Dallion.

Thats it. Dallion said, adding lightness and encouragement to his words. The effect took a few seconds, but soon enough Dallion rose up in the air. Now, lets go get Gleam.

The flight was slower than Dallion was used to. Normally, hed be there in five seconds, if not less. This time, it took him almost a third of a minute to reach the entrance spot to the shardflys domain. Meanwhile, roaches had started to emerge from the archways. They were a lot more cautious now, exiting one by one and gathering in small groups.

There! he pointed. Take me there.

Lux obeyed, making Dallions body swoop down to the precise spot he had asked for. An outline emerged, made visible through Dallions use of music skills. A moment later he placed his hand on it again and thought of invading. This time, the process took a bit more effort. For a moment, Dallion felt invisible barriers forming in his mind in an attempt to stop him. Concentrating a bit more, they disappeared, allowing the entrance to be formed.

Before Dallion could say anything, Gleam emerged in her shardfly appearance. That took Dallion a bit back. He was so used to seeing her as a whip blade in the real world that he had started to think of the familiar as one.

How bad is it? Gleam immediately asked.

Roaches, Dallion replied. I need you to protect my skills while I try to get the others. He paused for a moment. Do I need to wake Vermillion?

Dont! Guardians dont handle invasions well. Just get Nox.

That wasnt what Dallion was hoping to hear. Given that Gleam used to be a guardian before she became his familiar, Dallion had to agree. That severely limited his options.

Without another word, the shardfly flew off. Dallion stayed behind.

Feeling any better, Lux? Dallion asked.

A bit, the firebird replied with a yawn. I still feel tired, but I think I can get you to big bro. I just need a little more rest.

We dont have much time, Lux.

The bladeroches had already started their next attack. Unwilling to risk another deadly flash, they were banding in small groups before setting off directly at the realms awakening spot.

Ill do my best, but youve become so heavy. Lux lifted Dallion up into the sky again.

Thats the burden of success, Lux, Dallion said in an attempt to change the mood. Just think how proud Nox will be when he learns you were the one who

Nox? How did you get out?

I cut through the entrance. How else?

But the dagger is indestructible. Youre not supposed to be able to do that.

Give me some credit. Im not a kitten anymore. I saw the part that was added and broke through that.

There was a lot that Dallion didnt know about realm invasion, but that sounded wrong. By every logic, Nox wasnt supposed to be able to do that. That left the possibility that the creature sitting on Dallions shoulder was an imposter. However, there didnt seem to be any deceit or hatred emanating from him. As much as Dallions instinct told him to be cautious of Nox, every skill in his possession insisted that was the cubling from the realm of the well, just grown up.

Are we going to claw some roaches or what? Nox wagged his tail slowly. Dallion could feel him itching for a fight.

No. Were going through the archways to the source of it all.

Chapter 494: Caretaker of Memories

Gleams destructive power wasnt in the least diminished when in her natural form. If anything, the shardfly appeared to be a lot more terrifying, making even void creatures hesitate. And if that wasnt enough, July had also joined in adding his music skills to the mix.

Dallion had no idea why or even how the young echo had joined in the fight. According to Ariel, all other echoes had been sealed off safely. Clearly, that wasnt the case. The only conclusion he could reach was that July had to have been with Nox and not in the ring library, as the white-haired echo claimed.

Where to? Where to? Lux asked.

Dallion was about to tell the firebird to head to the nearest exit, when Nox gave the instruction, instead.

There, the crackling pointed with his paw.

The gateway in question was a considerable distance away. With Lux still being in his exhausted state, it was going to take at least a minute to reach.

Are you sure?

Thats the one, Nox replied. The others are just small fries.

Go there, Lux.

It had been a while since Nox had assisted with directions, but he had a knack for finding crackling nests. In this case, Dallion had no idea exactly what theyd find, but he decided to trust in his familiar.

As he flew, Dallion tried to summon his Nox dagger, just out of principle. Sadly, nothing happened. No matter what awaited on the other side, Dallion would have to defeat it with the weakest of

weapons. In theory, he could manage one last point attack, though that was to be a last resort. The only thing he had to rely on was Nox.

A small cluster of bladeroaches flew in Dallions direction. There were no more than a dozen, all too eager to slice him up. Unfortunately for them, Dallion had gotten to know their tricks. Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion spun around in the air like a screwdriver. Several of the roaches slashed at him with their blade appendages. A one even managed to strike an instance. Their action, however, had gotten them close enough so he could perform a perfect strike. Three of the creatures poofed one after the other, reduced to smoke at each hit. At this point, Dallion took the initiative, directing Lux towards the rest. Surprised by his sudden aggressiveness, the roaches attempted to coordinate a common defense. Sadly, their numbers proved to be too few. An arial sequence of attacks was all it took for Dallion to dispatch eight more of them, after which he threw the blade, piercing the last.

Wow! Thats great! Lux chirp.

Dallion didnt respond. It was his fault that the invasion had taken place and killing a few bugs wasnt going to fix that.

Go a bit faster, Lux, he said.

In the distance, as if sensing him, a new swarm of roaches emerged from the archway. These were no longer the small groups, but a real torrent aimed specifically at stopping him. With luck these were the final reserves the pocketknife had. If not

There was a simple choice to be made: either use what strength he had to do a point attack, and hope he wouldnt faint, or use his shield to thrust through the swarm and into the invading realm. Both seemed like bad choices. Dallion, though, chose the second.

Blast through them! He said, splitting into a dozen instances.

Despite also being on the verge of its strength, the firebird propelled Dallion forward at an even greater speed.

Blades struck the wooden shield, slicing off whole fragments.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

Red rectangle sacked up, despite Dallions combat splitting. At his current stage, Nox was able to restore his health almost at the speed that it was being decreased, but that didnt last for long. The further they went, the more the insect blades managed to reach him. Dallions health fluctuated, moving towards danger levels.

Each second felt like hours. The buckler was all but gone, forcing Dallion to use his sword to parry as many of the attacks as he could. Then, finally, he broke through.

All of his surroundings suddenly changed, as if he had stepped through a dimension portal. In a way, he possibly had; the archway represented the connection between realms, or as Nil like to call it the quintessence that transformed a realm into a domain. Normally, it was the main realm that maintained control, but as it had become apparent, some realms had become Trojan horses.

The pocketknife was not at all what Dallion had expected it to be, on many levels. When he had taken the Swiss army knife from the armory, he had deliberately not entered inside out of fear that something of the sort might happen. Apparently, touching it was all it took for the invasion to be set in motion.

Large metal lines covered the ground. Like railroad tracks, they disappeared into the distance to what seemed to be a city of blades of various sizes. A cold eeriness filled the air, making Dallion feel as if he found himself in an abandoned graveyard. Most surprising of all, there wasn't a single creature to be seen.

Nox? Are you sure we're in the right place? Dallion asked, still splitting into instances every second.

The moment he did, the stone archway behind him tilted to the side, disappearing into the ground like a pocket-knife blade.

You, a female voice echoed throughout the realm. You're from Earth.

There was surprise in the voice's words. Dallion tried to use his music skill to determine the location of the person talking, but to no avail. Whoever was here was hidden pretty well.

If you know that you should know that it's customary on Earth to show yourself to the person you're talking to, Dallion imbued his words with a sense of overconfidence.

It was a long shot, but to his surprise, it actually worked. A multitude of metal lines flipped to the side, in the fashion of falling domino tiles played in reverse. Each segment was a perfect slice of a building. Once the last one fell into place, all the layers merged into one with a loud click, forming a typical urban building. There were no doors or windows. Instead, a girl in her early twenties, wearing black clothes and heavy mascara, stood there, looking at him.

That's better, Dallion said.

In truth, it wasn't better at all. He could see several full finger length rings on the girl's left hand, and his forging skills told him that there were several metal daggers hidden on her body.

Why are you here? the girl asked.

The normal thing to do was shout at her for invading Dallion's realm. Since he had a disadvantage at present, he preferred to take a different response.

You know I came through your portal, he replied.

No one has visited this realm since the Star left, she continued. Even of those who come from Earth.

Aren't you from Earth? Dallion asked.

You know I'm not, a faint smile appeared on her pale face. Just as you know, I'm nothing but an echo.

The facade of the hours folded back into the ground, revealing the rooms inside the building. Among them was a rather messy living room. Looking at it, it was of note that the messiness was fake, as if someone had gone to great lengths to recreate a standard teenager's room based on nothing but a picture.

Please, the girl invited him.

Dallion knew that already, but even so, he walked forward, making his way to the couch.

Whats your name? he asked as the first of his instances passed by her.

Im Goth, she replied. Caretaker of the Stars memories.

That sounds like an important job. Dallion sat down. The couch seemed soft from a distance, but it was made of metal. All the bends and wrinkles had been added there by design, even the texture of cloth. And youre doing a good job, from what I can tell. Dallion reached for the remote control on the table. As expected, it too was made entirely of metal.

I do what I can, Goth sat on the other side of the couch.

Is that why you tried to invade my realm?

I do as Im told. The Star instructed that I attack any realm that links the memory knife, and so I did. You dont need to worry, though. The invasion is over. I stopped it the moment you came here.

Any reason for that?

Its been so long since Ive seen someone from Earth. I know youre not the Star, but youre someone from that world. Even If Im punished as a result, I wanted to see someone from there, someone that would help me remember.

That was harsh. The Star must have abandoned her along with the realm at some point. Or rather, maybe the person who the Star was did so, in order to become what he was today. Dallion still wasnt clear how the Star had come into being; he suspected that no one in this world knew. Piecing together the various historical poems, and other pieces of information he had gathered, he could surmise that the Star had appeared tens of thousands of years ago. It was somewhere around that point that the races started fallingfirst the copyettes, followed by the nymphs, and then the dryads. All had been deceived by the Star in their attempts to conquer the world. However, it was never specified what exactly had he tempted them with? The only mentions were vague references to power, but what if it wasnt a skill, or even something material? What if the gift he had given them was Earth technology? Suddenly, that made a whole lot of sense.

A story was forming in his mind. What if the Star had been a person, just like him, who had managed to level up to a point at which his awakened powers were close to those of the Moons themselves? Or better yet, maybe that was the way he had leveled up so fast. The Moons would have been unaware of the technological advances of Earth. Maybe they observed the planet from the side, without knowing the principles that made human society function. The Star could have offered that and more, earning their favor, and becoming a rising starone of the strongest awakened of all. Through this combination of knowledge and awakened powers, it was conceivable that he was elevated to the point of becoming the Eighth Moon and apparently that hadnt proven enough.

What he couldnt achieve, the Star had asked others to achieve it for him. First, he had tried to conquer the world through technological advances. When that had failedhis kingdom pushed down into the ground, his followers marked and scattered throughout the landshe had tried to have others conquer it for him. That was why the races had been banishedfor their greed and desire to use technology that had no place in this world. And now, the Star was planning to try again.

Dallion looked at the echo. There was no proof that the Star had done all that, but it made perfect sense. One thing was for certain, though, if she had been created by a being capable of so much misery, there was no way she was going to let Dallion go just like that.

You're going to fight me, aren't you? Dallion asked.

Isn't that the duty of a caretaker? Goth didn't deny it. You're free to summon any weapons you have. I owe you that much?

Uncertain whether she was telling the truth, Dallion summoned his dartbow. The weapon appeared in his hand, aimed directly at the girl's temple.

Any chance I can rest a bit before we start?

Sure. Why not? Goth turned her head towards him, eyes staring emotionlessly at the dartbow. The Star would want you to be at your best.

Chapter 495: The Pocketknife Duel

Sleeping on a bed of metal wasn't particularly comfortable, but it was better than nothing. All the time, Dallion had Lux and Nox watch over him, in case the Star's echo proved to be less reliable than she claimed. Surprisingly, she didn't try anything, patiently waiting for the moment they'd officially fight.

There were no further instances of invasion in Dallion's own realm. All item links were re-established, allowing him to summon weapons and familiars freely.

Crimson light shone on Dallion, forcing him to wake up. He had no idea how much time had passed, but it seemed enough for him to be fully rested, at least to the point that he could perform a line attack of two.

You're up! Lux chirped, instantly enveloping Dallion with flame.

Taking a second, Dallion sat up. It took a few moments for the bruising sensation to pass completely. Stretching, he then stood up and looked around. Several more of the house's segments had folded into the ground, leaving nothing but the bed. Blood red rays shone through the layer of black clouds. Considering everything about this place, there was no telling whether that light had any significance or this was an ordinary sunset.

Glad you're awake, Goth said, appearing a few steps away. Her actions were ridiculously fast, but Dallion had managed to follow them. Similar to before, she had popped out from the metal lines on the ground. Ready to start?

There was a faint noise behind Dallion. Instantly, he split into half a dozen instances just in time to see the bed behind him starting to sink into the ground. Instinctively, Dallion knew that was to be the signal marking the start of the fight.

A split second later, the final click was heard. Both Dallion and the goth girl exploded in fifty instances, all charging forward.

As the two armies of instances rushed towards each other, the ground beneath them collapsed into thin lines, revealing an endless chasm of darkness. Thousands of bladeroaches flew up from the nothingness, as if aiming to cover all light. They didn't seem to target Dallion specifically, but they didn't help either. In a flash, half of his instances had vanished, sliced by the swarming insects. Meanwhile, the echo didn't seem to have lost a single one.

The line sliced through hundreds of creatures, turning them to smoke, yet managed to barely affect a dozen of Goths instances. By the looks of it, her reaction trait was at least double that of Dallions, not to mention she had the experience to use it.

Twisting the harpsisword around, Dallion played a series of chords in rapid succession. The first was to establish a link to the roaches; the next three to increase the burden upon them.

For a fraction of a second, a huge section of the insects froze in place, then suddenly shifted down, as if pushed by a sudden force.

Nice skill, the echo said, dashing towards Dallion. She didnt have the ability to fly, however, she was more than capable of using the falling insects as platforms to run over.

Dallion split into instances again, moving back on the defensive. Each of them clashed with Goths. However, despite his effort, the girl managed to pass through. The finger rings on her left hand extended, transforming into claws, then slashed the air, aiming at Dallions throat.

Metal clashed against metal, as the armadil shield extended to protect Dallion from serious damage. In any other time, Dallion would have made some remark, attempting to use his music skills on his opponent. Now, though, he knew that it wasnt going to do any good.

Just get over here!

Spinning through the air, Dallion did a series of circular slashesnormal ones this timemoving in the direction of the echo.

The girl easily moved back, evading every attack with ease. The speed of her actions reminded Dallion of the advantage the reaction trait provided in battle. There was a time, long ago, when he too had danced circles around his enemies. Back then, his reaction was twice as any other trait, even if laughably low by current standards. Now, it had become one of the most neglected aspects of his development.

While he kept on attacking, Gleam emerged, fluttering up from Dallions shoulder. Just as fast, the creature darted at the enemy echo. Dallion could see her entire body become filled with killing instinct.

She didnt react that way when she faced me.

You werent at the level of her current enemy, dear boy. Not even close.

Dallion had no time to reflect on that comment. The roaches were getting free from the effects of his music skill and were flying out of the endless pit once more. The only solution at present was to play a new series of chords to push them back down again. However, when Dallion did that, he found that the insects had developed a resistance. Three chords were merely able to slow them

down. Dallion had to play five more to get them to a state in which they at least wouldn't interfere with the fight.

Meanwhile, Gleam and Goth were engaged in a battle of speed and wits. The shardfly remained incapable of causing any harm, but it successfully occupied Goth to the point that she wasn't able to attack Dallion directly, at least for the moment. This was Dallion's chance, at least the best he would ever get. Within five seconds, or seven at most, the bladeroaches would be able to fly normally once more, not to mention that there was every chance that the echo's surprise would wear off and she'd get back on the offensive.

Time slowed to a crawl as Dallion frantically analyzed the situation, trying to find an optimal point of attack. None of his other weapons were going to be of any use, that left skill combinations he hadn't used in the past.

Maybe there was a way to combine music and attack skills and harm her at a distance? That was a powerful combo, although difficult to pull off still. And even if Dallion managed, it was by no means certain to have any effect. Summoning metal ingots and having Lux propel them at the echo was unlikely to work, either.

That wasn't the response Dallion was hoping for. He could probably insist, or ask, that she helped him perform he was otherwise incapable of, but that wasn't going to help him in this fight, not if she was against it. Gritting his teeth, Dallion wished that Ruby and the rest of the shardflies were here right now. If anything, they could at least deal with the roaches, giving him more time to focus on the echo.

With no objects or guardians present, the empathy trait was useless, as was the zoology skill. The crafting skills also weren't of particular use or maybe there was an option Dallion hadn't tried before.

That was an unorthodox combination, to say the least. Writing was the antithesis of music. However, if Dallion could get words to kill, the same way the chief of his village had back at the time, maybe it would prove enough. In any event, he was out of time.

Writing skills merged with music, allowing Dallion to read what was written on the scroll. The passages were nothing special—historical records of a divided kingdom locked within the realm of a world sword. However, as the words were read out loud, wooden quills appeared in the air.

The wooden quills increased, creating a swarm of their own that flew at Goth. Initially, the girl didnt seem overly bothered, slashing them through the air with the ease as one would swat a fly. Of course, Dallion had never expected that to work alone. The quills merely provided enough freedom to put him on an equal footing. From here on, it was his turn to go on the offensive.

Switching the harpsisword again, Dallion thrust forward. Relying on Lux to move him through the air on his own, Dallion split into a dozen instances once more. This time, though, he didnt spread out, rather tackling Goths instances one at a time. This had now become a tactical battle in which the one who better controlled the battlefield through instances would gain the upper hand.

There was truth in that. Dallion himself had considered it early on, but for some reason, he felt that wasnt the right approach. A deep suspicion warned him that while that looked like the winning move on the surface, this wasnt his realm, and here the rules of nature werent in his favor.

Why are you fighting like this? Goth asked as she blocked the harpsisword with her hand. The Star wouldnt have liked that battle at all.

Spinning her arms like a butterfly-styled martial art, Goth leaped back, landing on another of the roaches. The creatures had started stirring again, but thanks to Gleam and the wooden quills, they proved incapable of getting within striking distance of Dallion.

Youre supposed to be from Earth, the girl said. So, fight like it. She took out a small-caliber revolver from within her boot and unceremoniously shot at Dallion.

Chapter 496: Star Echo

The speed of the bullet was too great for Dallion to react. The bullet pierced the neck of one instance before he could do a thing. Dallion felt the pain of the projectile as it punctured his flesh. It was merely a spheric projectile half an inch in size, made entirely of sky iron, but somehow the pain it caused was significant.

Dallion saw a red rectangle appear indicating a terminal wound, before it vanished along with the instance. Moments later, all other instances vanished as well, leaving only one reality.

A faint click told Dallion that the gun had been reloaded. From the glimpse of it, he was able to make out that it was a revolver or some sort and made entirely of sky iron. The small size and thin shape made him wonder where it kept its bullets, but then he remembered that in the awakened

world, it didn't have to; here items were just concepts, and as long as the echo knew the principles by which an item was made, it could have an endless supply of bullets, just as dartbows had endless bolts.

Dallion burst in instances again. The moment he did, a second shot echoed, taking out another instance. That was close. If Dallion had taken only a moment longer, the instance could have been him. However, that didn't make the situation any better. It was difficult fighting the Stars echo even before she had a firearm.

Fear lit up in the shardfly's body, spreading like growing roots.

Ill make sure nothing hits you. Dont worry.

That was the only advantage he had so far, the reloading time was slow enough so he could combat split right before it happened. Even so, he had to increase the distance. The swarm of wooden quills was preventing Goth from effectively splitting, but if she ever managed to, there would be a whole lot more bullets flying in his direction.

More roaches emerged from the pit below. Dozens of them were making attempts to attack Dallion, though they were easily dispatched by Gleam. Dallion could see the familiar pulsing with rage to the tip of her wings. Being so overwhelmingly pushed back by the Stars echo had made her take out all her anger on anything in the vicinity. However, the creatures didn't only serve as a means of attack; they also allowed Goth to move about.

Hundreds of critters were instantly destroyed, yet Goth managed easily to leap off onto one high enough so as not to be affected. All the time, dozens of wooden quills attempted to hit her, faring no better than the bladeroaches.

Another shot echoed, the projectile piercing through the armadil shield as if it were paper. Naturally, Dallion selected another instance of him to become reality, but that proved without a doubt that there was no protection against Goths weapon.

There had to be something he could do. True, this wasn't an awakening trial, so a solution wasn't guaranteed, but something deep inside told him that there was a way for him to win.

Thanks to the girls weapon, both of them had effectively transformed into echoes. The first one to successfully deal damage to the other was going to be the one to win this. If the winner was Dallion, the echo would disappear and the invasion would come to an end. If nothed be thrown back into the real world with all of his awakened abilities sealed. If Dallion had observed such a battle from the sidelines, hed have said never bring a knife to a gunfight. At the moment, he was the one with the knife and no way to find a gun. Or maybe that wasn't exactly true?

Dallion closed his eyes for a moment, trying to visualize his thoughts. He had no idea how to construct a firearm, but knew the basic principle of how it worked. Anywhere else, that wouldn't amount to much, but he wasn't anywhere else. He was in an awakened realm and here there were several skills that could help him get on an equal footing, or at least something close to it.

Writing skills went into overdrive as Dallions mind composed everything that would be necessary to create a blueprint. Markers appeared in the air, forming his creation, aided by forging and music skills.

BLUEPRINT CREATOR

(+2 Mind)

Creating blueprints is always a major step forward as long as you dont lose yourself in theoretical constructions at the expense of creating them in practice.

Time returned to normal as he split into a dozen instances. This time, each of them also summoned several ingots of sky silver ore.

Hundreds of markers surrounded them, illustrating lines that had to be cut and sections that needed to be bent. There was a time when such a feat would have been impossible to achieve. Now, though Dallion could do it on the battlefieldhe had no choice.

The mind trait not only allowed him to create such a large number of reality instances, but also made it possible for him to perform four completely different activities at the same time. While keeping an eye on everything around him, Dallion kept reading from the dryad scroll tucked in the straps of his buckler and also formed an ingot of metal in the air. Despite his forging skills making it as elastic as plasticine, he still had to constantly summon and unsummon his tools, since he only had two hands to hold three items. At some point, he was definitely going to try and get another familiar that could fly.

Bullets systemically flew Dallions direction. All the attempts to fly away did little to increase the distance between him and the Stars echo. Under normal circumstances, the firebirds speed would have been unmatched, but the air was thick with bladeroaches as far as the eye could see. On a few occasions, he would pause his forging to summon a sword and do a line or point attack so as to think about the swarm, but that resulted in only in partial success.

Something that shouldnt exist,

Dallion replied.

Sweat covered his face. Even with a mind trait of forty-four, the process was difficult. Already he could feel a headache. The longer he kept at this, the stronger it was going to get.

Elements formed in the air, each unsummoned away back to Dallions realm until the moment it was time to assemble them. As the weapon slowly gained form, Dallion couldnt help but think that it would have been so much better if he could have actual gunpowder, but he was going to have to make do with what he had at hand.

It took eighteen agonizing seconds to have Dallions contraption complete. For what had to be done, it felt like hours.

Lux, when I tell you I want you to get inside this and flameburst.

Adrenalin filled Dallions veins, as he turned around, doing the thing that was going to put him the most at risk. Hundreds of roaches filled the distance between Dallion and Goth, so much that most of the wood quills were incapable of reaching her.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion directed Lux to fly him straight at the echo. The distance rapidly decreased. Every second Dallion split into three dozen instances, and each second three-quarters of them were shot down by Goths own instances. The closer the two got, the more of Dallions echoes were shot. Thenwhen the two were fifty feet apartDallion made his move.

Focusing to the extreme, he summoned his harpsword. In the past few instances, when he had done so, he had followed up with a line attack. This time, though, he turned it around and played a series of chords. For a fraction of a second, all roaches in the air froze still. Instead of playing chords that would weigh them down, Dallion did the opposite, lightening them so they went up like champagne corks.

Goth paused. A grain of hesitation emerged within her. At that precise moment, Dallion summoned his rifle and aimed at her.

Twelve cones of fire filled the air, propelling pellets in a vast area.

Initially, Dallion thought that less than half of the attempts would have an effect, but to his surprise there wasn't an instant which missed. One hit was all that was needed, and Goth definitely took more than one, as the roaches in front of her were instantly transformed to smoke.

Thank you, Goth's voice reached Dallion, even if she had already vanished.

STAR CLEANSER

(+1, Awakening +1 Body, +1 Mind, +1 Reaction, +1 Perception, +1 Empathy, +1 ???)

You've killed a Star's echo. Question is, are you ready to do the real thing?

There was nothing that could be said. The slight feeling of sadness Dallion felt upon hearing the echo's last words, was almost instantly replaced by confusion and euphoria. This whole experience was extraordinary in so many ways. Even the achievement was unlike anything Dallion had seen.

I didn't know achievements can increase the awakened level, Dallion said, as the vast swarm of roaches dissolved into puffs of black smoke.

What do you think it means?

To be honest, I doubt it's anything good. You broke something the Star made. He's bound to have some thoughts about it.

INVASION ENDED

You have ended the invasion and broken through your sixtieth barrier.

Your level has increased to 60

Choose the trait that suits you best.

Small rectangles appeared, providing a choice for Dallion to increase traits, only this time there was a new additional sixth box that had emerged. It had no description, just as Empathy didn't have at the time, and the value of one of twenty.

Dallion's heart skipped a beat. He knew exactly which trait that was the only one remaining. As much as it pained him, though, he had no choice but to choose reaction. The final trait was something nice to have in the long run, but for his immediate survival, he had to become as fast as possible.

Chapter 497: Three Towers

Returning to reality after a realm invasion felt surreal. After all that intensity of battle, the calm of the jungle made the real world seem somehow pale in comparison, almost fake.

Dallion remained tense, still splitting in instances and always cautions about the ground, expecting a swarm of bladeroaches to emerge and attack him.

There was no denying that. The experience had given Dallion far more than he could have hoped, both in experience and trait increases. It had also filled gaps that he had sorely lacked. Thinking back, it might have been a good idea to practice realm invasion, both as an attacker and a defender. That required someone who he could trust, but he had that Eury was there with him. Dallion had felt close enough to invite her into his realm, he could have asked her to take the role of an invader so he didnt have to go through a trial by fire.

The harpsisword guardian didnt reply. She had been avoiding him since the invasion. Even back when Dallion went through his realm to check the devastation, she had remained in her tower. Right now, maybe that was the best idea. Hed have a longer talk with her at a later point, possibly when he was back in Nerosal.

Im fine, Dallion said. I just need a few minutes.

As life changing as the invasion was, that didnt put an end to his main goal. There still was the matter of Felygns promise, and the towers that would potentially bring Dallion closer to fulfilling it. Still, there was the incessant desire for Dallion to return to his realm just for a bit to make sure that everything was fine. It was as strong as an itch he couldnt scratch, no matter how many times he tried.

A shardfly landed on Dallions shoulder. Looking at it, Dallion saw that the rest were fluttering not too far away.

Eager to go hunting, Ruby?

The shardfly remained silent. Dallion could feel its determination and desire to face challenges.

Dallion spent the next ten minutes eating and drinking. The invasion defense had exhausted him on several levels. Still, after finishing half his food supplies, he felt considerably better. Once he was set up again the path continued.

His ability to sense creatures had considerably increased since the encounter. It wasnt so much the traits improving, rather Dallion was a lot more focused. Most of the creatures were small, comparatively talking. They knew they were no match for him, so remained hidden, or scurried away as he passed by. The really big and potentially dangerous creatures were a long distance away, and Dallion made sure not to venture into their territory. That made the trip slightly longer, but everything considered it most likely saved him considerable time in the long run.

Morning came and passed, bringing with it the familiar humid heat, and a new set of local animals to be cautious of. On one occasion, one of the jungle creatures attempted to do a sneak attack, but failed miserably. It was sensed long before it neared, and when it split into five instances, Dallion split into a dozen, casually ignoring it without even fighting back.

As Nil had said long ago, that was the measure of true strength: having the power to ignore something completely, even when it was trying to attack. Following that logic, the mage that had

tried to kill him at the cloud citadel must have been not as strong as she was trying to make herself out to be. Even so, Dallion didnt stand a chance against her as he was now. Unfortunately, the same could be said for the Star. It had taken him all his effort and concentration, not to mention knowledge of Earth, to score a victory against a mere echo. Fighting the real thing outside of the realms would be more than challenging. However, that was a problem for another day.

Around Noon, Dallion finally reached the towers. The jungle was rather thick there, forcing him to use the Nox dagger to cut through vines and bushes as he approached. It was immediately noticeable that there was a complete lack of creatures in the vicinity. Unlike the broken tower, beings did their best to stay away, as if the towers terrified them.

That was strange. Dallion was certain that the seagulls hadnt lied. And yet the place seemed completely abandoned. So much for quickly finding the dragons nest. At this point Dallion was starting to have doubts about whether he had made the right choice to venture so far south.

The bottom floors were buried in the ground, similar to the last. The major difference was that no one had sliced any of the three towers in half. What was more, there were a series of connecting tunnels linking all here further up. All was an impressive example of modern Earth architecture, in the worst possible place. Looking at it, Dallion had an instance reach into his backpack for the Swiss army knife.

Neither of you belongs here, Dallion whispered.

Dallion went to the base of the nearest tower and struck it with the tip of his Nox dagger. As he suspected, a spiderweb of cracks emerged extending two feet from the point of impact.

Ruby, guard the outside, Dallion said. Im going in.

I need to take advantage of everything offered to me, Dallion said. Nox and Lux can get stronger here.

Dallion knew exactly what the old echo had in mind. Sadly, he didnt see any way around it. He was extremely fortunate to have gone up two levels, but the present awakening trials were a lot tougher than they had been before.

Ill be fine, Dallion said, and struck the tower wall twice more.

More and more cracks emerged until the spot was weakened enough so Dallion could kick his way in. The shardflies gathered around him. Their frustration at being excluded from the action was quite obvious, thanks to Dallions music skill. Ruby attempted to tag along with Gleam as the whip blade flew by, but the twist of the swords tip made him stay back.

Stepping inside the tower felt rather different from the last time. For one thing, there wasnt any smell of rot and decay. A pleasant coolness surrounded Dallion, as if he were walking into a room with air conditioning. To his surprise, there wasnt a single piece of furniture to be seen.

Nox, do you sense anything?

Gleam, any illusions you can tell?

Absolutely nothing. What you see is what you get.

That was suspiciously easy. Not one to be discouraged, or let his guard down, Dallion spit into instances and started his way through the tower floor.

Five minutes proved enough to confirm that the floor was completely empty. By the looks of it, whatever had been here had been deliberately moved out at a certain point, rather than destroyed. The next two floors fared no different. Going through the rooms felt like walking through a sterile lab. There wasn't a single speck of dust to be found to the point that Dallion left tracks of sand behind as he walked.

Unwilling to stretch himself thin, Dallion kept his familiars close, relying on combat splitting to speed up the exploration. Upon entering each floor, he expected an ambush, and each time he was proven wrong. On the twenty-first floor, Dallion reached the first set of intra-tower corridors. Out of principle, Dallion spent a full hour exploring the floor of all three towers, only to return to the initial one. There didn't seem to be any changes. The towers were one giant empty husk.

There will be. Dallion smiled. He could feel that the shardfly was still angry from the fight against the echo and was looking for any excuse to slice up anything to make her feel somewhat better. Nil said there were creatures in the area. They probably aren't far. Besides, there's always the nest.

You're just saying that to make me feel better. I need to get stronger.

You and me both.

Nothing of interest was found throughout the next ten towers. Increasing the instances he split into, Dallion spent about ten minutes per floor before rushing to the next. Before he knew it, he had already reached the second set of connecting corridors, making two-thirds of the towers full height.

Initially, he expected to find nothing of interest there either, but this time, he was wrong. In one of the neighboring towers, Dallion came upon a locked room. Normally, that wouldn't be anything particular about that. The thing that made it so, though, was the thick layer of sky silver within the walls of the room, just like the vault Dallion had seen in the Stars pyramid. That wasn't the only peculiarity, though. The door to the room wasn't locked by a standard lock; there was no keyhole there, but rather a panel with a number pad.

A lock, Dallion said, pressing the single green button on the pad. To his surprise, it lit up. Even after all this time, it still had energy. Whatever was providing power was rather potent. Either that, or the Star had made sure to construct a system that didn't waste energy when not used. We used to have them back on Earth. Much more secure than a key.

Of course, back on Earth, one didn't have the ability to split into instances. The keypad was of an old version, requiring an input of four digits. Even without safeguards, a person would need ten thousand attempts to go through all the combinations. With Dallion's ability to comfortably maintain forty instances, he needed five minutes. The effort was still considerable. Despite imputing forty combinations at once, he still had to manually do the action, even if the vast majority never became reality. In the end, the door finally clicked.

Two thousand and two?

Dallion arched a brow. That was a rather specific number. Could it be the year the Star was born? Or maybe the year the Star entered this world?

Pushing the door open, one of Dallions instances entered a small, dark room. The moment the instant became reality, lights lit up all over the walls and floors.

Looking at what was around him, the Star hadnt faltered. Most likely he had awakened in a different part of the world in different circumstances, but he had created what Dallion couldnt. Detailed miniature prototypes and finely crafted schematics filled the room. Modern filing cabinets with a local twist covered two of the walls. A large drawing table was in the middle, created almost entirely of light crystal. Glancing at a few of the schematics Dallion recognized watch designs, motorbikes, and a variety of other devices. Most of them couldnt be called modern by Earth standards, but they were definitely a step up from the worlds current level of development. Also, and most alarming of all, he saw something that definitely didnt have any place in such a world.

Weapons, Dallion thought in horror as he stared at what seemed to be a missile adjusted to use magic as a means of propulsion.

You know what a rocket is? Dallion asked.

I know enough to be aware that only the Order of the Seven Moons are supposed to have the knowledge of constructing them.

Didnt the imperial family and the Academy have the knowledge as well? At least Dallion remembered that was what Cleric had said.

They do, but they got it from the Order.

That didnt sound too surprising, come to think about it. The Moons allowed their followers to know things that the others didnt.

Nil, which was older, the Star of The Order?

At some point, maybe I will.

Could it be that the Star had been in the Order long ago until he had grown to the point that he had been acknowledged by them before falling? After all, while Dallion and the beings in his vicinity referred to the entity as the Star the official designations were the Crippled Star, the Twisted Star, the Broken Star all descriptors suggesting that he was less than an actual Star.

It was only knowledge, after all. Not to mention it would help Dallion level the playing field next time he faced the Star. Besides, so many people would lead a much easier life if some of the devices in this room were constructed. Not the weapons, of course, but everything else.

There is, Dallion said in a whisper. Its a reminder that the Star existed and the things he could have achieved. He turned around. Gleam, let out your frustration. Ill wait. He walked outside.

Chapter 498: Dragon Nest

Because its wicked, Dallion replied as he climbed up the staircase. Not his best comeback, but at this point, he didnt particularly care. Part of him still felt regret at not borrowing a device or two,

but the recent experience in his realm had made him cautious. Also, there was the matter of the fate that had befallen everyone who had dealt with the Stars tech. At this point, it was better to be overcautious than to suffer the Moons wrath. There'll be time for that.

There was one thing he had kept. After Gleam had sliced up everything in the room that could be sliced, Dallion considered leaving the pocketknife behind. It served no particular purpose. At the same time, it was a memory of earth, and also a reminder of how easy it was to have a realm invaded. Ultimately, he had kept it as a reminder, although he didn't plan on duplicating it or linking it to his realm. It was going to remain an ordinary trinket, empty and bare, its destiny fulfilled.

There were no further surprises going up the tower. Onda had insisted that Dallion check the other towers, in case of other hidden rooms, but was soundly ignored. While Dallion wanted to be thorough in case of a way to level up his familiars, his other main goal was to reach the top of the towers. Now that he was so close, any low reward detours weren't useful.

According to the seagulls, there was a large creature's nest near the towers. Since nothing was obvious from the ground, Dallion could assume that it would be visible from the sky. Of course, he had one further suspicion.

Feeling better, Gleam? he asked.

Dallion smiled. She felt better, and he knew it. It wasn't about the paper being shredded in real life, it was the thoughts of the Star being turned to slivers.

A thick locked door blocked the way to the rooftop. A few strikes with the Nox dagger were all it took to break it open, letting the sunrays flood down. The bright light blinded Dallion for a fraction of a second, but when his eyes adjusted, he was able to see a sight reserved for the flying. The towers went so high up that they created the illusion that he had stepped in a cloud.

Jiroh would have liked this, Dallion said, admiring the vista. Come to think of it, Eury would have as well. Well, possibly less so because of the such and scorching heat. That were two of the things that gorgons didn't get along with. Lux, any idea where

Dallion stopped, sensing a gentle tap on his shoulder. Gleam had moved the whip blade closer, interrupting him with the end of the hilt. He could tell that she was alarmed. More than that she was ready for a fight.

Where?

Everywhere. The nest isn't down there, it's up here.

Raising up, the whip blade extended, forming an arc around the three towers. Before Dallion's very eyes, a vast nest filled up the space, a nest made of tree trunks instead of twigs. It had to be at least five hundred feet in diameter, holding a single vast, giant creature of incredible size. And the scariest part of all, the shineys" the seagulls had spoken of weren't coins or small trinkets. They were full sets of armor with the skeletal bodies still inside.

In a fraction of a second, the massive creature's tail split into a hundred instances, each slamming down on Dallion's position. Escape was impossible. Neither Dallion's speed nor his mind capacity was in condition to evade the attack. His mind frantically churned ideas as the massive tail fell onto him, and in the very last moment, it came up with one. Fractions of a second before he was crushed,

Dallion raised his hand, striking the tail. The action was nowhere nearly as strong to block such a monstrosity, however, they did allow one course of action.

PERSONAL AWAKENING REALM INVASION

In a flash Dallions surroundings changed. The dragon, however, didnt. It was no longer located on a nest of tree trunks atop three towers, but rather on a vast cliff, but its size, appearance, and even position.

You are in the realm of DERRION

DERRION is level 92

Once in the realm, Lux instantly enveloped Dallion with flames, thrusting him to the side before the gigantic tail slammed into the spot he had been standing on.

The experience caused Dallion to go through momentary nausea, but it was quick to pass.

You entered my realm, the dragons voice boomed as it curled its tail beneath it. What a pest.

Dallion felt like a mouse approaching a lazy cat. The attack that would have killed him that still had the potential to do so in the real world was not done out of fear or acknowledgement. It was done because the creature was annoyed at the disturbance. Clearly, fighting real dragons was very different from facing its shadow. And still, Katka had managed to defeat it with such apparent ease.

Trees grew up from under the dragon, turning the nest it was lying on around. A single giant eye opened from the resting head to take a better look at the nuisance.

Empathy, the dragon noted. But no magic to speak of. You must have a death wish to challenge me.

Dallion swallowed. Putting it that way, he had to agree. Also, try as he might, he couldnt see anything relating to the dragon other than its name.

I didnt come to challenge you, Dallion said. I just came to he paused. What was he supposed to say? That he was here to save it, after it had the power to squish him like a gnat?

To what? The eye closed. Thousands have sought me out throughout the millennia. They had shiny toys, impressive powers, even magic. All of them wanted a part of me. Why should you be different, hunter?

Im here on Felygns behalf.

The name caused the dragon to stir. Reluctantly, it opened both eyes, adjusting its head so as to get a better look at the human. Dallion concentrated in an attempt to use his music skills, but no blobs of emotion became visible within the creatures body.

Youve got interesting guardians, the dragon noted. Very interesting. Two actively helped in the attempts to take over the world. Its eyes narrowed. And have done other things as well. But it seems they are bound to you. Did they tell you to invade my realm?

They must think very highly of you, even if youre from another world. Many of your kind tried to hunt me down as well.

The Star? Dallion asked.

They have different names and causes, the dragon snorted. I've lost track. It doesn't matter, anyway. Being killed for one reason is no better than being killed by another. You even have a mage with you. It's amusing how much he tries to hide from me.

There could be no longer any doubt that Nilor rather Netiello Adzorgwas, in fact, a mage, or rather had been at some point. Dallion had suspected ever since the echo had helped him return from the world of furies, but now he had undeniable proof.

You say you don't want to kill me? the dragon asked.

I was told to Dallion swallow rescue you. By the Green Moon, he quickly added.

Blossoms sprouted on all the trees within the realm, continuing on the horizon. It was impossible to tell whether that was a good sign, or the dragon wanted the air to be fresh because of Dallion's presence.

You're not the dragonlet? Dallion asked.

No one has called me a dragonlet for a very long time. But I see your confusion. Not that it will save you.

When the Moon had told him to save the creature, there was no mention from what. It was looking very likely that the task was to save the dragonlet from the actual dragon and announcing that in the open had the opposite effect of what Dallion intended it to have.

You don't have what it takes to save any of the dragonlets. Maybe if you had magic, things would be different, but not at the moment.

I know music! Dallion didn't give up. And zoology.

I can see all the skills you have, and their levels, the dragon said in an amused tone. Your achievements, your guardians and familiars, as well as their skills and levels. If they hadn't been banished, things might have been different. The dragon snorted again.

Is there anything I could do to have a chance?

Against this one? Frankly, no, I don't see one. On the bright side, it hasn't killed you yet.

That's the bright side?!

It could have done that at any point it wanted. And still, it chose not to.

That was right. The dragon hadn't made a single attempt to attack since Dallion had entered the realm. Considering how it reacted to annoyances, there had to be a reason for that.

You're an empath dragon, Dallion said. And a favored of Felygn.

Good guess, but no. I traded that away. Just like you did.

Like I did?

Yes. I can see what you had to give up and why. So did I.

Nil, what does he mean?

That sounded like a reason for him to have been spared for so long. However, Dallion still felt there was more to the story than that. It felt like the edge of an iceberg hiding beneath the surface.

Interesting story. The dragon raised its head. For the first time since Dallion had approached, it deemed him significant enough to move. Felygn always had a peculiar sense of humor. To think he'd ask you to make that promise when you were but a speck of dust. No matter, a vow is a vow. I won't make it easy for you, though.

Dallion felt a sense of hope. If the dragon claimed it wasn't going to be easy, that meant he was going to be given a chance.

There are seven dragonlets in my realm, the dragon said. Convince one to leave with you using any means, and I'll grant you your request. It lay back down, curling up like a giant scaly cat. You can try for as long as you like. I won't have anything against it. The moment you leave the realm, though, it's over.

You're not blocking me from leaving? Dallion hesitated. Or doing anything to your realm?

Neither will harm me. Besides, I know you won't abuse your welcome. We follow the same path, after all.

Chapter 499: Dragon Swarm

Seven dragonlets in a realm the size of a world. While Dallion was grateful that the dragon hadn't attacked, he was fully aware of the difficulties that awaited him. There was no telling how strong the dragonlets would be. Everything suggested that it would be weak enough for Dallion to win in a one-to-one fight, but that was the issue: he didn't have the luxury of entering a fight: his goal was to free one of the creatures, not defeat them. Also, one thing that the dragon had neglected to mention was that if Dallion happened to die in the realm, he'd automatically be ejected in the real world.

Also, to remove any possibility of answering questions, the dragon had disappeared moments after telling Dallion the task.

I didn't plan on this, Dallion grumbled. I didn't think it'd be so easy.

Starting an invasion is usually easy. It's what happens in the realm that's difficult. If you had a vast army with you, you might be able to cause a bit of ruckus for a minute or two. As you are now, you're stranded in a very pretty deathtrap.

That was true, although, unlike the real world, here Dallion could fly.

Lux, lift me up.

Wings of flame emerged from Dallion's back, propelling him up into the sky. The realm was vast, seemingly endless, but after a while, Dallion was able to spot the pattern. Despite his size and level, the dragon had clearly settled for something small and cozy. Of course, that didn't diminish the fact that the realm was twenty times larger than Dallion's own domain, island and all. There didn't seem to be any linked objects, or any other buildings, just forests, plains, and mountains. Interestingly enough, there weren't any large pools of water. Apparently, the dragon wasn't too fond of such things.

Using music skills didn't seem to work. While the trees seemed real, Dallion could see that they held the emotions of the dragon, making it impossible to spot a thing.

I just have to rescue one dragonlet, Dallion said. That meant finding them as quickly as possible and avoiding all combat. In this sort of situation, there was only one thing to do.

Clenching his fist, Dallion recited the names of the Moons and created nine echoes of himself. In the past, he would have avoided that unless things were serious. If there was anything that the fight with Goth had taught him, it was to make use of anything at his disposal, just not forsake his principles.

Its really fine, one of the echoes said. Youre not sacrificing us.

Yeah. Another him grinned. Its more complicated than you can imagine, so dont worry about it.

All we need is to convince one, Dallion said, changing the subject. Lux, youll have to jump between us all. When someone finds a dragonlet, let me know.

The talking done, everyone set off to their respective areas of the realm. One by one, Lux grabbed one of them and flew them to the point they had to be, after which he returned for the next. The land was divided into eight areas on the periphery and two in the middle.

Based on initial estimates, Dallion expected the greater part of the time to be spent searching. Barely had he started when a red rectangle suddenly appeared in front of him.

COMBAT INITIATED

Splitting into instances, he looked around. Nothing was to be seen.

Come out, Dallion said, infusing his words with pride and arrogance. Im not here to fight you, you know. However, if thats what you want, Ill gladly oblige.

If there was a dragonlet or any other creature, for that matter it was bound to react. Maybe his music skills werent adequate to establish a link to something he couldnt see, but they would have at least made it create a noise.

AVERAGE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 10%

Dallions first thought was to check if he had been wounded. It didnt take more than a moment for him to find that it wasnt the case.

I didnt know I shared health with my echoes.

Normally they dont, but youre invading a realm now. Your total health is distributed between you and all your echoes.

That was a pretty important rule to be kept secret. Then again, it wasnt like Dallion had asked Nil or anyone on the matter. Come to think of it, it sounded logical. Otherwise, there would be nothing stopping someone from constantly creating echoes in order to invade a realm. Clearly, the home team held the advantage.

Lux, find out which of my echoes was killed and tell me

AVERAGE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 10%

Another one?!

I never said that my children would let themselves be convinced so easily, the voice of the dragon filled the air.

Some of them have similar personalities, others do not. The only thing in common is that they want to prove their worth, and thanks to you, they now have that chance.

You made them attack me? Dallion asked, looking up at the sky in one of his instances.

I only reminded them that a real dragon wouldn't let itself be caught by a hunter. There was an almost audible smirk in the Dragon's words. You'll have to up your game if you're to have any success.

AVERAGE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 10%

That marked a third echo gone. From here on, each Dallion had one dragonlet to face. It was more than alarming that they managed to deal with his echoes so easily. Granted that the echoes didn't have his equipment or the total of his powers, but they were supposed to be skilled enough to present a challenge at least.

Guys, dissolve!

There was no telling whether the echoes had obeyed his request; unlike them, Dallion wasn't able to read their thoughts but he definitely hoped so. Having his health chipped down in such fashion wouldn't be a good tactical choice.

Lux, fly to me!

Within moments, the firebird appeared and surrounded Dallion with blue flames. Almost instantly, a new rectangle appeared in front of Dallion. This time, though, it marked him regaining ten percent of his life.

Probably. Then again, the dragon did say that they had different personalities. Maybe some of them would remain in the background while the rest lead the charge.

Dallion was barely able to finish his thought when he sensed something nearby. His improved senses caught the faint sound of leaves stirring moments before a massive entity flew out of the nearby forest and slashed through half of Dallion's instances.

Choosing one of the remaining ones to become reality, Dallion performed a series of strikes and slashes in the direction of the attacker.

MINOR STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

The harp's word sliced through the creature's wing as if it were made of butter. Given its size, that was outright impressive. The name of the creature didn't give it justice. Due to the way it sounded, Dallion had assumed he'd fight something no bigger than a horse or a cutling at most.

The dragonlet was the size of a large house. It seemed a lot more agile than the large dragon, with a long tail, slender body, and vast wings that had yet to be covered in scales. Dallion had only seen a single dragon in his life, but he could clearly see the liveliness shining within the creature; it reminded him of Nox when he was a cub.

You're a dragonlet? Dallion blinked.

The creature gave him no pause, making a loop in the air, then gliding straight at him.

There was no time for markers to react. The dragonlet opened its mouth, releasing a torrent of air.

The strength of the shock was enough to push Dallion back, despite Lux's effort. Done with its main attack, the dragonlet shot up straight for the sky.

Lux, after him! Dallion shouted.

I'll have more of an advantage in the air. Gleam, start pestering him.

The whip blade didn't think twice, flying in pursuit. Even extended, she wasn't able to reach the dragonlet, but Dallion knew that the creature would be back. As the old dragon had said, the dragonlets were determined to impress their father, and that meant they wouldn't run away. All that Dallion needed to do was take advantage and

The cutting line continued forward, however, as it was about to hit the nearest of the dragonlets, it changed shape, curving to avoid the creature entirely, before straightening out again.

That was why the dragon had laughed at Dallion. For someone without magic to attempt to enter such a fight, they would be at a serious disadvantage.

Unwilling to leave things just like this, Dallion followed up with a point attack, aimed directly at a dragonet. The destructive force slid off it, without causing any damage whatsoever.

Not skipping a beat, Dallion spun his harpsword and played several chords. Now that he was able to see the creatures in question, he could match their emotions and potentially start controlling them.

The emotions the dragonlets had were unlike anything he had seen before. They were still overly confident, determined, and extremely competitive, but their emotions didn't remain mostly static as they did with people but constantly pulsed from one to another in a semi-rhythmical fashion. Matching the rhythm wasn't an easy thing to do, though achievable.

The first few chords Dallion played snapped almost immediately after linking to their target. On the following attempt, Dallion managed to match the rhythm.

Concentrating, Dallion kept on playing.

On it, Lux, Dallion persisted. He had caught his mark. Now it was up to him to try and tame it.

Two more dragonlets zoomed between Dallion and the target, severing the music link.

Damn it! Dallion cursed. It was extremely annoying how the creatures worked together to protect one another. At the same time, Dallion could also feel a sense of competitiveness. Each of them wanted to be the one to defeat him, thus proving their worth.

So far, five dragonlets had appeared, flying along in a very distinctive pattern. For every two that were flying away from Dallion, the remaining three were thrusting at him from the flank, trying to catch him by surprise. That didnt work, of course Dallion had enough instances to keep an eye on everything, not to mention that Lux was also making sure to keep him out of harms way.

No, Lux. We need to convince one to let us take it out of here, not kill it.

Shooting at dragons with a shotgun did create a rather powerful image in Dallions mind. However, he summoned his work hammer instead. This was something that required elegance, grace, and a bit of trickery.

Go, get them! Dallion said, then threw the hammer at the nearest dragonlet.

Catching a glimpse of the weapon, the creature in question changed direction, swerving to the side. Unfortunately for it, the hammer did the same.

Chapter 500: The Challenger

Anyone born on Earth had certain expectations when it came to fighting dragons. In all forms of popular media since antiquity, they were depicted as clashes between heroes of steel and creatures of unimaginable strength. Fighting even one of them was on the verge of what was humanly possible, requiring top skills and gear. Dallion had seen that firsthand in the moments hed faced the dragonlets. He knew that it would require a strategy to fight them. What he didnt expect was that hed get to hear a dragonlet cursing after he hit one on the head with his hammer.

Onda had done a good job following the creature as it turned and twisted. What was more, the guardian had managed to modify his trajectory to hit it on the side of the head. Apparently, that turned out to be a weak spot, causing the dragonlet to lose its balance mid-flight, then swoop down, almost crashing into the ground. The only reason it didnt was because two of the other creatures swooped in its direction, stabilizing it before it could happen.

Five against one isnt exactly fair, Dallion shouted, filling his words with spite. If the dragons were filled with pride, this was what hed focus on. Should I wait for the other two to show up?

Your father didnt seem to have a problem with that.

Dallion re-summoned the hammer to his hand. The mishap of the dragon in question had messed up their overall pattern. Picking a new target, Dallion threw it again. This time, though, the dragonlet in question turned around, closing its wings in front of it like a shield.

I thought you hadnt seen dragons.

Point taken.

Dallion summoned his harpsisword. The hammer was a nice touch, but it wasnt going to cut it. Even the damage it caused was insignificant.

The dragonlets readjusted, returning to a circling pattern around Dallion. Now that the initial shock of the encounter was over, Dallion could do what he was supposed to do at the start of any battleobserve, gather information, and form a strategy. After another minute of evasions and blocks, things slowly started getting into place.

The way they behaved, it was obvious that the dragonlets had quite high reaction and perception traits. They were extremely quick to react and only surprised when things didn't behave as they expected. Furthermore, Dallion was almost certain that they had advanced athletic skills. Attack was also a given, and possibly guard. However, it didn't seem they were capable of anything else yet. Line attacks and combat splitting weren't used, and while they were able to notice Dallion use music, they didn't do so in turn.

Dallion remained silent, even if he knew that the echo was just as surprised. The explosion of fear emanating from the echo had been felt throughout an entire section of Dallion's realm.

Come back here, Gleam, Dallion said out loud. They're nothing much. I'll deal with them on my own.

Blue blobs of anger appeared within the dragonlets upon hearing those words—just a few in some of them, whole clusters in others. Despite that, none broke the pattern.

So, you aren't reckless, are you?

Harp? Dallion asked, surprised. What

Before he could continue, he felt a powerful combat split. A swap of dragonlets came from beneath, all flying at him at great speed. Immediately, Dallion countered, bursting in dozens of instances of his own.

In the course of a single second, twenty dragonlets engaged in battle against forty Dallions. In most of the instances, Dallion managed to evade the attack, or even strike back, dealing moderate damage. However, in a few he was the one wounded as the dragonlet clipped him with the side of its wing. Normally, Dallion would have chosen an instance that was best suitable for him. However, on this occasion, he found himself pulled into the worst outcome of all.

Instance pulling? he asked, spinning around while performing a series of piercing strikes.

Two sets of red rectangles appeared.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

MODERATE STRIKE

Damage dealt has been increased by 150%

So, you're the hidden star, Dallion said, looking at the sixth dragonlet. Are you a double digit?

Its skin was a deep emerald green, slightly darker than the rest, partly covered with paper-thin scales. In the real-world Dallion would have assumed that it would be a few years older. Given that this was an awakened realm, it was more likely that appearance was affected by skill alone.

Dallion concentrated, expecting subtle music threads to be included in the trash talk. To his relief, there didn't seem to be any. That was one thing he didn't have to worry about, for now at least.

Im still standing. Dallion burst into instances, then threw his harpsisword at the dragonlet in each one.

To no surprise, the dragon burst into instances again, choosing the one more beneficial for it to become reality.

Nice trick. You know it has a counter, right?

Lets end the fight and Ill teach you.

Hesitation blossomed within the creature, followed by internal conflict. As any young overachiever, it wanted to improve. Knowing a counter to what most likely appeared to be its greatest skill was tempting beyond belief. At the same time, it didnt want to appear weak in front of its siblings, and especially its father.

The ability to break down enemy instances and make them disappear, Dallion said.

Yeah, hes a music user! Just slice him up!

How many magic users have you fought? Dallion asked.

And how many of them did you defeat?

The lack of answer told Dallion everything he needed to know.

Without a doubt, dragon pride was a major factor in play. If there was one clear weakness the race had, that seemed to be it. Katka must have taken full advantage of the fact during her battle against Armalion. The mage was nothing if not manipulative.

I can teach all of you, Dallion said, louder. Not only that, but other things as well. You have a good foundation, and your combined tactics are not bad, but you lack a lot on an individual level.

Thankfully, the dragonlets didnt seem to be of the same opinion. Largely silent, then moved closer, halving the distance at which they circled around Dallion.

Well? Dallion asked.

Sure. Dallion summoned his dartbow.

Thats useless against splitting,

the emerald creature replied.

What better way to prove my claim?

In truth, this was the only ranged weapon that Dallion knew would do the trick. As he was, there was no chance of him getting close enough to deal actual damage. A dartbow was the only option. That or his recently created shotgun, but he didnt want to harm the dragonlet to such an extent. A dartbow bolt would be more than enough.

In response, the emerald creature split into thirty instances. Dallion could tell that it was a double digit, although definitely not a seer. More likely, it had been born with the knack of creating instances, just like Vend had. That made things easier.

A second passed in complete silence, then all instances of the emerald dragonet charged right at him. Every fiber in Dallions body urged him to react. At the same time, his mind had the clarity to keep him perfectly still.

Even with the creatures speed, it took several seconds for it to reach Dallion longer than the dragonlet was able to maintain the instances. Just before any instant could strike Dallion, all but one of them disappeared. As Dallion suspected, his opponent had chosen to pick an instance that was further away, making sure to remain out of reach before a second split. This was precisely what he had been waiting for.

The firebird propelled him forward.

Time seemed to slow down. Two dozen new instances emerged, moving away from the emerald dragonlet like fragments flying away from the center of an explosion. At this precise moment, Dallion aimed at the creatures body from almost point blank range and released a bolt.

MODERATE STRIKE

Damage dealt has been increased by 150%

A red rectangle emerged, reducing the dragonlets remaining health to about fifty percent. Yet, that was not all. In a flash, all of its instances faded away, like soap bubbles popping in the sun.

No one said a word.

Convinced? Dallion asked, still aiming the dartbow at the dragonlet.

Lets stop the fight and Ill tell you.

I cant do that.

That was a surprise. It didnt change things too much, since at this range Dallion had every chance of winning outright, but there was something in the creatures words that suggested that it wasnt its decision.

Youre just the sixth. Dallion lowered his weapon. You might be a star, but youre not the strongest one, are you?

The dragonlet flapped its massive wings, moving ten feet back. It had turned its head away from Dallion in shame.

Wheres the seventh? Dallion split into instances, looking in all directions.

Of course it would. Dallion sighed. Someone has inherited all of daddys skills