

Leveling up 501

Chapter 501: The Hidden Seventh

I see you down there, Dallion let go of his dartbow, then summoned his harpsisword .

Slip next time you strike, a young voice said.

It sounded very much like that of the dragonlets. The notable thing was that it wasnt directed towards Dallion, but his harpsisword.

He doesnt deserve you, the voice went on. Hes just using you.

Amusing child, Harp replied, using her standard form of communication. You need to get out more.

That doesnt work against empathys, Dallion said. Drop your illusion and lets have a proper face off. Or maybe youre willing to learn a thing or two?

A tree beneath transformed, regaining the form of a dragonlet. It was a lot darker than all the rest, even the emerald dragon. Scales covered its entire body, even the wings. A deep sense of rivalry flared up in the creatures chest.

Looks like hes acknowledging you as a strong opponent, Nil said. Of course, that doesnt amount to too much.

I had forgotten how critical you were, Dallion muttered.

Occasionally, someone needs to bring you back to reality, dear boy. In this case, I was being quite literal. Its more than probable that the dragonlets have never actually seen the real world. They have been safely guarded here by the dragon, where their battles were carefully controlled. I suspect that if they come close to being defeated, the dragon would step in. And even if by some miracle he doesnt, all that will happen is they will be ejected out of the realm.

The thought sent chills down Dallions spine. In a manner, the dragon had managed to create a settlement in which to keep his offspring. There werent any buildings, or lairs as such, but it was safe and had everything that was needed for them to grow and develop, anything except danger. However, the realm was also a prison, just as cities were. Dallion knew that firsthand, now more than ever. Becoming a hunter had allowed him to see the invisible cages surrounding every city, as well as help him slide out of them when he wanted.

Is that why you sent me here, Felygn? Dallion wondered. He had always assumed that his task was to save the creature from being hunted. It was starting to look like all the corpses in shining armor had been challengers that had proven to be unworthy.

Dallion felt relieved he had managed to survive the dragonlets initial attack. If not, he too would have become a permanent decoration of the dragons nest. Now all he had to do was keep staying alive.

Am I the first to survive this long? Dallion asked, looking around.

The dragonlets kept flying around him, waiting. Eventually, the dark green one opened its wings and flapped up to Dallions level.

Your guardians must like you a lot, it said.

Were friends. Are you the one who called me? Since it was the only one with a developed empathy trait, that seemed more than likely. Either that, or the old dragon has asked the Moon to help get one of the dragonlets safely in the real world.

Youre not the first, the dragonlet said after a while. Over twenty managed to survive.

They still died, though. Right?

The dragonlet snorted. Dallion could see disappointment appear within it and all the rest. It was obvious what had happened: the previous hunters had focused on killing the dragonlets in order to escape the realm. However, the old dragon hadnt allowed that. The rules of the game were very specific: fail and you die, get close to killing one of the offspring and you die as well.

Did anyone make it out alive?

Just one, the dragons voice boomed throughout the air. She had magic.

By the sound of it, a mage had been here before and it didnt sound like it was someone from the Academy.

So, did I pass the audition? Dallion asked. Or do I still have to face you?

The dark green dragonlet burst into a dozen instances. Instinctively, Dallion did the same, creating twice as many. Once he saw the length of time, this one could maintain its combat splitting, he summoned his dartbow and did the same demonstration he had a moment ago.

The dragonlet barely reacted as its instances faded away, as if it had been expecting that.

Checking if Im lucky? Dallion asked.

I wanted to see if I can learn your trick, the dragonlet replied.

Told you its cheeky, Gleam said.

Do it again, the dragonlet said, increasing the distance between the two.

The exchange happened twice more. The dragonlet would try different approaches, and Dallion would put a quick end to them with a bolt, largely thanks to Lux. After each time, the curiosity within the creature grew. It was obvious that it was determined to figure out the trick, though consistently failed to do so. It was only on the eighth try when the ridicule coming from his siblings finally got to him that he conceded.

The moment that happened, the land beneath rose up, creating a crescent-shaped mountain. On cue, the dragonlets stopped flying about and quickly perched on specific points on the peak.

Does that mean I won? Dallion asked. It seemed suspiciously easy.

Congratulations, youre the first to pass the audition, the dragons voice boomed. Im entrusting my offspring to you. Teach them anything that you think would be useful. After I see results, well talk again.

Sure. Dallion nodded. This wasnt what they had discussed, but saying that openly to the dragon in whose domain he found himself in wasnt the best solution at present. What are your benchmarks?

Youll know when you achieve them. A pillar of rock emerged beneath Dallion, ending in what could pass for a building from a dragons point of view. Clearly, this was to be his home for the foreseeable future.

Well, dear boy, this is a fine mess you got yourself into, Nil said.

Look on the bright side. Dallion forced a smile. At least there wont be any time lost.

Weve yet to see if that holds true.

Training officially started a few hours later. The old dragon was generous enough to provide any structure or terrain modification Dallion requested, as long as it was sufficiently well explained. On the flip side, that significantly limited the excuses Dallion could come up with for not showing results. That wasnt too big an issue, though. Thanks to all the creatures he used to capture from the wilderness, Dallion had become accustomed to training all sorts of creatures, some of them quite dangerous.

The very first thing that Dallion found that getting dragons to do the same thing was as difficult as herding cats. Each dragonlet had its own temperament and understanding what was important and what not. The five weaker ones insisted that Dallion teach them the secrets of combat splitting, while the remaining two wanted to focus on how to cause said splitting to fade away. Not only that, but the creatures were prideful to the point that they refused to be taught by an echo. Dallions attempt to teach everyone at their own pace resulted in him quickly losing half his health as several dragonlets let their frustration known by ganging up and killing off several echoes. A new approach was needed.

Dallion deeply wished that dragons would be more like shardflies. With them, it was enough to illustrate the same thing to dozens, and even more, and they would follow the instructions, with few exceptions.

The first few days passed in Dallion, using Lux to rush from dragonlet to dragonlet, explaining something for a few minutes, before moving on to the next. The progress was poor, but that wasnt the point. Dallion had dedicated the time to get a feeling from each individual creature, and also start thinking how to proceed forward.

The next few days, Dallion came up with names for the dragonlets and gave each of them tasks to complete. There was a lot of grumbling, and more often than not, the creatures would fly over to where Dallion was at, to see what he was teaching their siblings.

Looking at you brings tears to my eyes, Nil said. It brings me such joy seeing that youre starting to get a sense of the pains I had to go through teaching you.

Thanks, Nil

You didnt have any concept of the basics, but at least there was only one of you, so things even out.

You werent the one to teach me combat splitting, Dallion grumbled.

To be honest, Vend didnt either. He just showed you a few practical examples and let you work out the rest. Poorly at first, I must add.

Sometimes, practice is the best teacher.

After another week, Dallion had a sense of the traits of each dragonlet. As he suspected, four of them proved to be single digits and unable to learn combat splitting. Even so, he kept on providing hints for them to make it more difficult for opponents that relied on splitting. That was a thing based on Dallions personal experience, or rather based on the way Gleam fought. Relying on wide attacks increased the chances of affecting several instances simultaneously, not to mention it diminished the enemys options.

Never before had Dallion dreamed that hed end up teaching tactics to dragons, but the here he was. Quite alarmingly, the creatures picked up things fast. By the end of the week, fighting them was significantly more difficult than the initial encounter. In some cases when the dragons were capable of splitting themselves Dallion had to rely on Lux to thrust him out of the fight before things became serious.

Tomorrow youll continue only with three of them, the dragons voice boomed during the night in the realm, while Dallion was having a snack. Food, fortunately, was something the dragon had made sure to provide, even if it was in the form of plants with the appearance of pumpkins and the taste of lawn grass.

Are you unhappy with something?

No. Otherworlders have good teaching skills. Theyve learned all they could in their present state of development. Until they level up another five levels anything you show will be wasted on them. I want you to focus on the rest.

You mean advanced combat splitting?

That will be enough. The dragons presence disappeared, letting Dallion know he was allowed some privacy.

You got it, Dallion thought.

Dallion took a few more bites of his pumpkin, then put it on the side. A single moon filled the night sky. Looking at it reminded him of Earth. Of course, the Green Moon was a lot largernot to mention greenbut it brought a sense of nostalgia, making Dallion think of his youth.

I thought you werent going to think about your home, Nil said.

I thought so as well, Dallion replied. Jirohs return to her world had made him start thinking about Earth again. The forgotten discoveries hed made in the Stars domain had amplified those thoughts. The sad thing was that even with Dallions high mind trait, his memories of Earth were getting more and more jumbled. I feel like Im starting to forget the faces of people.

Its bound to happen. Youve been away for quite a few centuries. Dont worry, though. The more you increase your mind, the

Can magic help me see into my world? Dallion interrupted.

Thats not a good question to ask. Nils tone became a lot harder all of a sudden.

The new trait I got from defeating Goth is magic, isnt it? Its just a fraction, but enough to let me obtain it.

No, youre wrong. What you have is an illusion.

Dallion remained silent. There was a time when he thought the same about empathy. Back then, he didnt even know what it would be, but through persistence and achievements managed to reach a point at which it had become a trait like any other. Why shouldnt it be the same with magic?

Magic is unlike other traits. Its useless without a skill, and unless you already have it, you cant advance it.

Thats not what I saw.

What did you see? That you gained a fraction by killing an echo of the Star? Well, when you next meet the crippled, maybe you could ask him to let you fight nineteen more, because thats the only way youll reach your first point. There are no other achievements that advance magic. Youll have to level up. And even if you decide to sacrifice all other traits for the sake of it, then what? Youll just have it at one. Youve probably seen that your trials are becoming more and more difficult. At some point soon youll hit your limit. It might be thirty levels off, or maybe less, but even in a best-case scenario, youll have the stat at ten, which is just enough to make you noticeable and utterly unable to protect yourself.

Youre probably right, but theres still a way.

Oh? Please enlighten me, dear boy.

Once Ive kept my promise to Felygn, I could ask for another favor.

Chapter 502: Training Realm

Training with the tree dragonlets continued, focusing on the practical usage of combat splitting. The darker two were already familiar with the concept, so Dallion had them do exercises in order to keep their instances for longer stretches of time. Meanwhile, the third was just at the point of learning how to perform her very first splitting. She had obtained the ability to see at least to a degree the splitting of others, but still had issues doing it herself. Thankfully, that was enough for Dallion to train all three at the same time, but continuously splitting himself: a dozen instances focused on practicing with the emerald and dark green dragonlet, while one went over the theory with the paler one.

You just have to imagine yourself in two places, Dallion said yet again. Youre already doing it when youre spotting splitting. Do that and also try to move.

Easy for you to say, the dragonlet grumbled. Due to her nature, Dallion mentally referred to her as Snarky.

Its almost like making echoes.

Weve never made echoes. Snarky flapped her wings, annoyed.

Magic creatures cant easily create echoes, dear boy, Nil said from within Dallions realm. Theres too much magic involved, and if its split in two carelessly They explode? Dallion wasnt able to stop himself.

There was a brief moment of silence.

I think you should focus on splitting for the moment, Nil replied in the end.

That wasnt a bad idea, although Dallion would have liked to hear the explanations why magic creatures couldnt create echoes.

Start small, Dallion said. Try thinking of your wings being in two different places at once, Dallion suggested. Normally partial splitting was considered more difficult than the real thing, but with dragonlets, maybe it was the opposite?

Dallion could see effort building up within the creature, along with annoyance that she couldnt manage what her two siblings were doing so effortlessly. For a full minute she kept on concentrating, wings expanding and contracting, until finally she stopped.

Curse it! Snarky shouted, followed by a series of far more explicit and very specific dragon curses.

The remaining two dragonlets deliberately ended their splitting, just to laugh at hersibling rivalry at its best.

Dallion did wonder what the other four were doing, though. Ever since the old dragon had announced the changes, they werent anywhere to be seen. The only time hed asked, the emerald dragon had mentioned that they were in another part of the realm to focus on other things.

Hey, its fine, Dallion said, adding some calm in his voice. Took me a while to get the hang of it as well.

Youre using music. Snarky narrowed her eyes, though Dallion could see the blobs of anger and frustration within her shrink.

Lets try something different, he said. Ill split into instances and you try looking at me as I do.

Thats stupid.

Only rule: you cant move your eyes and head.

Thats still stupid. The dragonlet snorted, although the spark of curiosity betrayed her in the eyes of Dallion.

Moving directly in front of her head, Dallion added a new instance the next time he split. Unlike the rest, this one only took a single step to the side.

At first, there didnt seem to be any difference. Snarky kept on looking straight forward, with no indication she was doing anything else. Not being discouraged, Dallion did a second step with his instance. Then a third. Slowly, the two instances moved apart from one another, making it more and

more difficult for the dragonlet to see them both. Then, at one point, almost seamlessly Snarkys head split into instances. One of them was looking at one instance of Dallion while the other was beside him. Back on Earth, Dallion would have called the sight disturbing the thing that horror movies were made of here, though, he felt joy and a certain sense of pride.

Thats it! he said. The moment he did, the second instance of Snarkys head snapped out of existence.

Curse it! The dragonlet shouted, snapping her jaws. She had gotten the principle, but failed to maintain it. For the next ten seconds she attempted to repeat what she had achieved to no avail, at which point, her two siblings ended their own exercises and went near Dallion, forming a triable around him.

Hey, Emerald said. Like this! He split into two instances, one looking at Snarky, and the other at Dark. Moments later, Dark did the same.

They really learn fast, dont they? Nil asked. Much faster than you even.

Yeah There was no denying that. Dallion himself had been told that he picked up things remarkably fast, but compared to them he was nothing but a slowpoke. The really impressive thing was that they had reached their present level without the help of awakening shrines. As Nil had frequently reminded, it took a human decades to raise a few levels, prior to becoming a double digit. For them to have achieved the same, they must have gone through considerable training, or alternatively, been at it for so long that awakening skills had become second nature.

Before Dallions very eyes, Snarky managed not only to grasp the principles of a partial split, but also achieve it on her own. Within minutes, all three of the dragonlets had two head instances and were looking at each other.

Very funny, Dallion said, doing his best to sound amused. You got the hang of it. At this point, all you need to do is practice.

What about instance fading? Snarky asked eagerly, attempting to compensate for her lack of splitting experience.

In time. First, you need to be able to achieve a full split, then increase the number of instances and the time you can maintain them.

Yeah! Emerald said, creating seven more instances of his head. His attempt, no doubt, was to show how much better he was at it than her. However, the sight of a dragonlet with a cluster of heads made Dallion feel unwell.

Youll learn more tricks in time. Just focus on splitting for now. Half of your siblings arent able to do even that.

But, I really can

The ground beneath Snarky shook, then sunk down slightly. Likely, her father knew she had reached her limits at present and had indicated there was no point in her to continue.

With a snarl and a tail-snap, the dragonlet flew up, then jetted away to the horizon.

She didnt seem to take it well, Dallion said, looking in her direction.

Shes just annoyed shes slow. Emerald laughed. I was the same when I first started splitting.

Shes no reason to complain, Dark grumbled. Shes cheating. There wasnt anyone to explain things when we were learning.

You have a head start. As long as you keep practicing, itll be difficult for anyone to catch up. Besides, you get to learn how to stop combat splitting.

Yeah. Dark wrapped his tail around his legs. Still. Shes cheating.

After a few more minutes, the training continued.

It took two days for the dragonlets to be able to maintain echoes for a reasonable amount of time. At that point, Dallion considered that they had reached the point at which he could finally teach them the ability they so much craved for. Given how easy the trick was, he thought that it would be a quick lesson. After all, all they had to do was get the timing right and break the splitting as it happened. To his astonishment, that turned out to be extremely difficult for them. It didnt matter how many times he explained or demonstrated; the dragonlets kept missing the moment time and time again. Days passed without success. And the more Dallion tried to figure out the reason for their failure, the more he became confused.

It wasnt a matter of speedthe dragonlets had reactions far exceeding what he had been when he had learned combat splitting. It wasnt a perception, either. It was almost as if there was some invisible barrier made them slow down for a fraction of a secondjust enough to miss the moment.

On the third day, Emerald gave up. Determining that it would be more beneficial for him to focus on increasing the time of his instances, he flew off to the horizon. At that point, only Dark was left. The old dragon said nothing, neither then, nor during the night following the dragonlets departure. That most likely meant that he approved of the decision. From here on, the focus was solo training.

There are other things I can teach you, Dallion said, after another day. Thats not the end all.

I want to learn that, Dark said in a cold voice. His smoldering anger was only surpassed by stubbornness and determination.

Ill need to think how to explain it better, Dallion said, adding a bit of calm in his voice once more.

Dont do that, the dragonlet grumbled. We can tell when you use music. Its not helping.

I can tell you how to combine splitting with your empathy trait.

Initially, Dark just grunted, though just for the sake of it. Dallion could tell that he was intrigued, even if the dragonlet was doing its very best not to show it. Strictly speaking, Dallion wasnt even

sure that was a good idea. If Dark was to start using that efficiently, and there was no reason he wouldn't, he would become a formidable opponent, not to mention capable of defeating a whole lot of hunters, possibly even mages, with minimal effort.

You haven't tried combining them, have you? Dallion continued. What was done was done. Besides, for some reason, he felt that the dragon deserved to know.

How?

I've seen you talk to guardians. Try using instances to do that.

Why do that? Save time?

You'll save a bit of time, but more importantly, you'll save tries. Some guardians like to be addressed with respect, some can be intimidated. Same as people, pretty much. However, if you try one, you can no longer try the other. If you combat split while talking to them, you can decide which conversation you want to continue with.

The dragonlet's tail and wings stirred. It was as if watching someone presented with a groundbreaking concept that changed their entire world explode. Dallion knew that from this point on, nothing would be the same. The funny thing was that anywhere apart from the wilderness, such a discovery would be seen as obvious. Being locked in a realm with no guardians and only one's siblings and the occasional imprisoned hunter to talk to hadn't allowed for experimentation of that nature.

You can try it with me, Dallion said. Try having several conversations at once. Normal things. No cursing or intimidations.

How do you come up with those things? Dark asked, in awe. You don't have magic, you're not strong, you're not fast, and still

Maybe because I thought of them precisely because I started out weak, Dallion replied. At this point, it was better not to mention his knowledge from Earth. If there was one long-term cheat, that was it. I also got a lot of help and experience. You can too if you go into the real world, you know.

Sure. Let's try this out! Dark ignored him completely.

Mentally, Dallion bit his cheek. He was so close to planting the seed of escape, and through that, fulfilling the Moon's promise. Alas, that was going to have to wait for a while longer.

The instanced conversations were clumsy at first. While the dragonlet had developed the stamina to maintain his instances for over two seconds, thinking of different things to say simultaneously proved difficult. Initially, he was only able to maintain a conversation and half. With enough practice, though, his confidence developed and by evening he was easily able to talk simultaneously on three different topics, be it a bit slower than usual.

Things didn't end there. The creature was so eager to keep on talking that Dallion was forced to leave his hammer with Onda. Part of him trembled at the thought of what might happen as a result of leaving two teenagers alone for, but in the end, even that was better than not being able to sleep at all.

You know they'll be at it for hours, Nil said.

At least it'll tire him for tomorrow, Dallion replied. Maybe then I'll have a chance to get him out.

Chapter 503: Provoked Gamble

The next day of training was considerably more annoying than any that Dallion had previously experienced. On the one hand, he was only dealing with Dark. At the same time, the dragonlet had quickly learned to abuse his ability to talk through combat splitting. While one instance of Dallion was yet again going through the basics of split breaking, a dozen of instances of Dark were chatting with items and goofing off. Things became so bad at one point, that Dallion was forced to resort to continuously fading the dragonlets instances just to get some peace.

As expected, that wasn't appreciated by the creature. However, instead of grumbling or swearing like his siblings, Dark focused on finding devious ways to get around his punishment. While for the most part that could be considered a positive, since the dragonlet redoubled his attempts to learn combat breaking, it increased Dallion's fears that maybe dragonlets weren't able to learn the skill in question.

Let's rest a bit, Dallion said after half a day of attempts.

I'm not tired, Dark insisted.

I know. I am, Dallion lied. He could see exactly how tired the creature was, just as he could see that the failure wasn't its fault. Just a bit.

Annoyed, the dragon flew to the sky. Dallion waited till Dark was no longer in view, then went to the shelter the dragon had made for him.

You're the one blocking it, aren't you? Dallion asked as he took a piece of the pumpkin fruit. Hell figure it out.

Not unless you tell him, a deep voice replied. Dallion could feel the unspoken warning within.

If you didn't want them to learn, why have me teach them?

There are many things they could learn. They have already learned a lot. If they learn combat breaking, you'll have accomplished your task.

Dallion froze. This was a possibility he hadn't considered. He knew that failure would be punished, just as hurting any of the dragonlets would. However, he hadn't imagined him being imprisoned in this realm for eternity. The worst thing was that there was nothing he could do. The alternative, back in the real world, was a quick death. Without the help of the Moon, he was no different from a bug. The dragon knew that, which was precisely why he didn't want Dallion to earn Felygn's favor.

Am I still useful? Dallion asked. There was also the option that he had outlived his worth.

There are still things you can teach them. Otherworld hunters have many hidden skills, especially those of your kind.

The Moon won't be pleased that you're keeping me here.

What can one ex-favored do that another can't? As long as there's the threat that I'll kill you, the Moon won't intervene. He knows me well enough to tell what would happen if he does.

I guess I was supposed to see that coming? Dallion asked.

In his mind, he was already going through options to escape. There were several options he could try, but ultimately none of them mattered, since he was going to end up in the same state he was before entering here: about to be squished by the dragons tail.

When he had set off on this expedition, Dallion had a strong suspicion that reaching the dragon would be dangerous. Even without the ruins of the Stars kingdom, the unexplored wilderness was a test for any hunter. It was ironic that the very thing that hed come to help ended up being the thing that would kill him.

Think of it as a gift, the dragon said. While youre here youll have eternal life, food, and also the knowledge that everyone close to you will never miss you.

That was a bit cold and calculating. How had the dragon become a follower of Felygn in the first place?

And also, theres always the chance that at some point in the future I might release you.

Youre asking me to live for a future chance of freedom? Dallion asked.

You wont be the first. Millions of beings do that every day of their lives. At least you have the certainty of knowing that while youre here, nothing bad will happen to you. A piece of the stone floor rose up, transforming into sun gold. Dont think Im ungrateful. While youre here, youll earn gifts that you could only dream of in the real world.

And the dragonlets? Will they get anything? Or am I the gift?

Theyre too weak to survive in the wilderness. The tone suddenly became harsh. Keep on training them, or dont. The choice is yours. Just dont forget whats waiting for you in the real world!

Dallion looked at the lump of sun gold. With such an amount, he could make virtually anything, including a full set of plate armor. However, it was also completely worthless. There was nothing that he could use it for. Like the dragonlets, he was trapped in a utopia without escape. More than likely he wasnt the first; maybe those before him hadnt lasted as long, but they had to have lasted long enough for the dragonlets to pick up swearing.

This is what you wanted all along, isnt it, Felygn? Dallion asked. You want Dark to become your new favored, thats why you made me promise. Time was never an issue, because time doesnt exist in this realm. Just tell me one thing: was I to be expendable?

There was no answer, as expected. In the past, Dallion would have considered that a bad sign. After living long enough as a hunter, however, he was partially relieved. At the end of the day, the Green Moon hadnt said yes.

Dark, Dallion said loudly. Time to continue. He left his home and looked up at the sky. Soon enough, the dragonlet appeared. At that point, the training continued.

For days, Dallion kept on teaching the creature tricks and shortcuts, not only when it came to combat splitting, but other things as well. Line attacks were quickly mastered, as well as layer vision.

As the dragonlet grew stronger, Dallion expected that he would be ordered to train the rest as well, but for some reason, that didnt happen. According to Dark, that was normal. The old dragon tended to encourage a weird mix of favoritism and rivalry: all the dragonlets competed amongst themselves to increase their level and acquire new skills, all in order to gain his approval. Those with the greatest level of success would receive special training, as Dark was getting now, while all the rest were left to figure it out on their own.

Have you ever thought of leaving the realm? Dallion asked one evening.

Sometimes, Dark replied, as he practices combining combat splitting and point attacks. To a casual observer, it seemed as if the dragonlet was laying calmly on the cliffs peak. For those who could see instances, though, dozens of mountains crumbled under the intensity of its attacks. Im curious to see whats out there. Dad used to talk about it more, but he stopped when I learned how to split.

Of course, he would, Dallion thought.

Have you tried to?

A few times. Theres no way to get out of here. Well, unless I can challenge dad, but Im not that strong.

Maybe its not about strength, Dallion said. Say, how do you force someone else to choose one instance?

Dark looked at Dallion in all of its instances.

I know something you dont?

Dont let it get to your head, Dallion laughed, but it was already too late. A sense of pride and mischievous superiority had enveloped the dragonlet, filling its entire body with a bright cyan glow.

I cant wait to tell the others. Dark smiled, ending all of its other instances. Its not that difficult. I dont know how you havent figured it out already.

There wasnt anyone to teach me.

Its simple. All you have to do is choose the instance you like and the realm which has the instance you like.

The realm? That sounded a bit confusing.

Yeah. Dark nodded. Theres always a realm. Its the instance that holds the instances.

The realm Dallion scratched his chin. The dragonlets explanations were terrible, but Dallion was starting to make sense of it. If he was not mistaken, what Dark was trying to say was that he was somehow combining the instances of both. Up to now, all that Dallion had been doing was follow through the splitting only half way. When dealing with other instances, Dallion had only gone so far as to eliminate other instances as well as choose the one that was most advantageous to him, and having to become reality in-between the splitting of his opponents. Technically, he had never

actually fought for imposing an instance. The dragonlet didnt accept that, imposing its preferred choice of instances over that of Dallions.

Just like threading a needle, Dallion thought. The thread was the stances he chose, while the needle was the instance of his opponent, which represented the realm. In order for the correct instance to become reality, Dallion had to select both.

What if the other side also selects a realm? Dallion asked. Who wins?

The one whose instance is stronger, Dark replied, as if were the most obvious thing. Thats why split breaking is so strong. With it, you can just end everything without having to worry about that.

It probably is. Suddenly, everything made a lot of sense. How about we instance duel? Both of us try to make an instance reality. No breaking.

Sure? Dark didnt sound too convinced, but was curious enough to try. How do we do it?

Well start with something simple, Dallion said. Each of us tries to make a step to the side. Whoever manages to do that wins.

Disappointment flared up in the dragonlets chest, but it didnt say a thing. Instead, it burst into a dozen instances.

Dallion did the same. Choosing one in which he took a step to the right, he concentrated. Instead, he suddenly found himself pulled into an instance of him remaining still and the dragonlet having moved.

That was quick. Dallion laughed. See? Youre not the only one who cant learn tricks.

Thats because youre not focusing on the realm. You only choose a grain, but nothing else.

Lets try again.

This time, Dallion decided on a completely different approach. Instead of focusing on himself, he tried to select an instance of everything else. There was no guarantee anything would happen. Vend had never taught him that before. To his surprise, he started noticing some minor changes. While all of his instances remained perfectly still, the world around him reacted differently. He could see the dragonlet move in, but not only that. There were instances in which the breeze was slightly stronger. Instances in which a few additional sounds were heard in the distance As soon as Dallion tried to concentrate on those, the moment had gone. The dragonlet had already chosen the world, winning again.

Youre really bad at this, Dark snorted.

I just havent had a lot of practice. The way we use combat splitting is actually very different. I focus on my instances, and you focus on the realm instances. Thats why Im having problems with instance pulling, and you with instance breaking.

Then youve been doing it wrong. The order of choosing is always from large to small.

I didnt teach your sister that way.

Thats what she did. I thought thats what you were doing as well.

One more time.

Despite the complete lack of interest, the dragonlet indulged Dallion. This time, things were slightly different. He managed to attempt to select a realm instance, but quickly felt the pressure of Darks choice and was forced to let it go. It was as if the air had suddenly become water, causing him to buckle under pressure.

More attempts followed. During the first five, there was no contest. After that, though, Dallion started putting up a bit of a fight. The dragonlet quickly forgot its boredom as competitiveness kicked in. Alas, Dallions mind trait was far greater. Each time the fight was closer and closer until at one point Dallion won. Strictly speaking, he had forced a draw which he had chosen an instance in which the dragonlet hadnt moved. He had been focusing on it so much that he had forgotten to do so as well with his instances.

The mistake was quickly rectified. From the next duel on, Dallion started an almost uninterrupted winning streak. By evening, the roles had reversed: Dallion was the one winning effortlessly, and Dark had become the one constantly challenging him.

As amusing as that was, though, while learning the skill, Dallion had noticed something else they werent the only ones forcing an instant.

I think I now know how to get you to split break, Dallion said casually.

Really?! Now?

Try focusing only on your instances without bothering with the instance of the realm. Just leave it be.

But thats stupid.

Its just an exercise to get you going. Dallion smiled. Once you get the idea, you can add complications.

Dark looked at him for close to half a minute, then nodded.

Get ready, Nox, Dallion thought. Were about to do something wild and dangerous.

Ready, Dark? Dallion asked. Here goes.

He split into half a dozen instances. The dragonlet tried smacking him with its tail, but as all the times before, the attack was just a moment too slow, hitting an instance instead of Dallion at the moment of splitting.

Thanks to his recent training, Dallion was able to see how a new instance of the realm was selectedone in which the air became slightly thicker, deliberately preventing Dark from hitting at the required moment. This wasnt done by accident, though. There was no doubt in Dallions mind that it was the old dragons doing.

The only reason the dragon would do that would be because he didn't want any of his offspring to learn that ability; and the only reason he didn't want them to learn was because a dragonlet with instance breaking had the potential to escape his realm.

Nox, challenge the dragon! Dallion thought.

COMBAT INITIATED

Chapter 504: Promise's End

The sky darkened as the dragon filled it in all his majesty. If the real-world version of the creature was large, this one was ten times so. Dallion was no longer looking at a dragon, but a flying fortress of flesh and scales. Wings the size of mountains flapped, creating a strong gust of wind that pushed Dallion back.

Was that a good idea, dear boy? There was a note of alarm and urgency in Nils voice.

That's the only way out, Nil. Dallion replied. However, right at this moment, he wholeheartedly agreed with the echo.

A single tooth of the dragon was larger than the house Dallion had in Nerosal. Even if the dragon didn't use any of its powers which Dallion knew it had it could easily flatten him along with half the realm. Adding the fact, it probably could use magic, gave the impression this was going to be a short fight. Even if Dallion managed to hit the monstrosity with a dozen line and point attacks, it wasn't going to amount to much.

Dad? The dragonlet asked, confused.

This was likely the first time the old dragon had been challenged within his domain. Or at the very least, the first time he had accepted. That made him visibly confused. Anger and uncertainty lit up within its titanic body.

It would take a lot more than what you currently have to defeat that, Nil said. Even the Academy would have a hard time. And that's not the worst of it. The dragon can eject you from its realm at will, at which point you'll end up being crushed.

Thanks for reminding me, Nil, Dallion grumbled. That's why I have no intention of fighting him. Lux, boost me to Darks back, Dallion ordered.

Instantly, he flashed, moving from his current position to where the dragonlet was. Due to the unusual event that had occurred neither Dark nor his father had done any combat splitting. Grasping the opportunity, Dallion landed on the creature's neck, right above the wings.

Lux, envelop both of us then get us away from the dragon.

You sure? The firebird asked.

Do it! You should be strong enough to manage!

It was the first time that the firebird had wrapped two different entities at once, but that didn't stop him from going on with it. A thin layer of blue flames surrounded Dallion and the dragonlet.

Unfamiliar with the sensation as well as having someone on his back the dragonlet attempted to break free. Unfortunately, it succeeded as much as a swimmer trying to escape the water in which they were swimming. No matter how violently the Dark flapped his wings, the layer of flames remained, attached firmly like a layer of gel.

Confusion quickly switched to fear. Not knowing what to do, the dragonlet attempted to split into instances, but Dallion tapped it on the back of the head the moment it did, causing all instances to fade away.

Sorry, Dark, Dallion whispered. You'll have to put up with this for a bit.

The firebird thrust both Dallion and the dragonlet in the opposite direction of the large dragon. By now, the massive creature had realized what was going on.

A hundred instances appeared, filling three quarters of the entire sky. Many of them breathed tornadoes of destruction in Dallion's direction. Barely a moment later, though, all of them faded away.

I knew it. Dallion smiled to himself. You won't hurt your offspring, will you?

At this point, it's useless to say that you're taking a tremendous risk, Nil said.

All part of being a hunter, Dallion replied.

There was a time, not too long ago, that he would get petrified of the prospect of getting into a real-world fight, or even when there was a risk of him getting his powers sealed. Just one year of hunting in the wilderness had made him fully aware of how dangerous the world was, and the utter uselessness of petrifying fear.

What are you doing?! Dark asked. Dad will kill you!

Hell definitely try, Dallion replied. Hell have to be careful with you being so close.

It doesn't matter! No one can beat him. Hundreds have tried. Just let me go and I'll try to convince him to leave you alone. Maybe even let you go.

There's no way hell listen. And besides, I didn't come here to escape. I came here to free you.

Huh? What are you talking about?

The dragon flapped his wings with such ferocity that the air boomed, as if shattering to pieces. Dallion felt as he and his mount were pushed forward. The dragonlet took the opportunity to split again, but quickly received another tap on the head.

Stop that!

You should know better than that, Dallion said, looking over his shoulder. I'm not letting you split. And thanks to Lux, he wasn't letting him fly either. However, there were more than a few other dangers to look out for.

Sharp peaked mountains shot up from the ground like giant spikes. They didn't target Dallion directly, attempting to trap him into a windy canyon. Lux handled the situation well for the moment,

thrusting in various directions, seemingly at random, or going straight up. Unfortunately, even that decreased the distance between him and the dragon. If things continued in that fashion, Dallion would end up being caught in a matter of minutes.

I hope youre looking out for me, Felygn, Dallion thought.

Concentrating, he summoned his Vermillion ring, then focused on leaving the realm.

A bubble of cyan sparks slowly formed, surrounding him and the dragonlet. Originally, the Vermillion ring wasnt supposed to be used in such fashion. It was one of the rare artifacts that had the ability to transport items, or even people, from one realm to another. That made it sought after by criminal organizations, nobles, and the Order of the Seven Moons alike. In this case, Dallion was planning to have it get him out into the real world.

It would have been far simpler to just bring the dragonlet into his own awakening realm, however, that wasnt going to help him too much. There was every chance that the dragon would follow, and an invasion of such nature wasnt going to be dealt with easily.

Please work, Dallion whispered.

The sparks kept on increasing until a solid sphere surrounded Dallion. Then, without warning, he was back in the real world. For a single moment, time seemed to freeze. Dallion found himself beneath the massive dragon tail that was about to slam onto him. Thankfully, that never came to pass. The speed obtained in the dragons realm safely propelled him to the side out of harms way. Although, even if it hadnt, Dallion suspected that the Dragon wouldnt finish what it started. The reason was that in addition to Dallion, a dragonlet had entered the real world as well.

Darks real form was very similar to what it had been within the realm, although smaller and far longer. In terms of comparison, he was roughly the size of a horse and half, tails and wings excluded. For several seconds, the dragonlet kept on flying, moving further away from the three towers and the dragon nest they held. Astonishment and awe emanated from Darks entire body, as he found himself in a world beyond his imagination.

Where is this? he asked, not even noticing that the firebird that controlled his actions had vanished.

Welcome to the real world. Dallion patted him on the back of the head. The realm of all realms.

Thats a bit forced, dont you think? Nil asked.

Let the kid have his moment, Dallion said. Its the first time hes seen it.

Very well. What about his father? I doubt that hell just let you get away with it.

I dont think he has a choice.

Splitting into three instances, Dallion looked at the dragon. He could feel the creatures rage even from this distance. However, despite that, the dragon hadnt gone to the skies. It would have been easy for him to do so, but if he did, then the remaining six dragonlets might learn the truth. They, too, existed in the real world. Also, and that was the key part, part of the dragon was happy at what Dallion had done. As any parent fighting for their survival and that of their offspring, it was normal

to be extremely protective. At the same time, he also wanted his dragonlets to grow strong enough to survive on their own. That was why he had spent millennia training them, or using any hunters who ventured in his domain to train them for him.

I'll take good care of him, Dallion whispered.

To his surprise, the anger emanating from the dragon instantly faded, replaced by gratitude.

That was quick, Dallion thought. Before he could do anything else, everything suddenly froze. It was as if Dallion had received the benefit from using guard skills. The only issue was that someone else had done it for him.

You kept your promise, a voice echoed throughout the air. Looking up, Dallion could see that the Green Moon was in the sky, shining as bright as the sun. Your debt is paid in full. That means you can ask for another favor. Will you?

The temptation was tremendous. Was it the right time, though?

I take it the dragon won't hunt me down? Dallion asked, just to be on the same side.

Why should he? He was the one that made the request.

Dallion blinked. He had been convinced that Dark had.

You seem surprised? As you said, parents would do a lot for their children. Often, the things they do will be conflicting.

Reading my thoughts again

You'll have to get used to that. We read everyone's thoughts.

I want a way to keep the dragonlet safe, Dallion said. There's a lot I need to teach him about this world. Mostly how to survive while being part of it.

You want for it to be able to enter and leave your realm? How is that different from the situation before?

I've no problem with him flying about the wilderness. It's the Academy I'm worried about. And not only them. I can't return to Nerosal on a dragon.

I'm aware. There are better realms than yours. A circle of light surrounded the Moon like a ring. Mine, for example. This one follows my path, same as you. He can explore the wilderness with my protection. And when you're no longer dealing with your other things, he'll join you.

While that sounded nice, Dallion knew that things didn't work that way in the world. He had snatched the creature from its home, as he had done with many of the creatures he'd hunted. That was part of his job, but it also meant that Dark didn't owe him anything. As far as the dragonlet was concerned, it was more than probable that he'd even hate him. That was part of the price. Dallion was fully aware, just as he was aware that he needed to finish the dragon's training.

You have more important things to worry about than this, the Moon almost sounded annoyed.

Dallion nodded. So, what happens now?

You continue with your life, just as before.

Dont I get any questions answered?

You think that because you kept your promise, youre entitled to a reward? I kept you from being rushed by the dragons tail. Does that count? Or you want something more?

Dallion clenched his fists. In truth, he did feel that he was owed some answers about the souths past, about Star, maybe even a few answers relating to the Eight Moon. Yet, he knew he wasnt going to get them.

No, he said as calmly as he could muster. Theres nothing more I want for now other than your favor.

Once cast away, thats difficult to regain. Ill be watching you, though. Who knows? Maybe youll do something that merits it. Until then, travel safely. The brighter you become, the more people will want to bring you down.

Chapter 505: Main Capital

The trip back to Nerosal was a lot faster than Dallion expected, it was also far more bittersweet than he had hoped it to be. It was no surprise that the dragonlet despised him for what he had done. The worst of it was that Dark had also come to respect Dallion as a mentor, even after a mere week of training. Considering that most of the previous tutors had lasted a day at most and had failed to teach him anything important.

The green Moon had intervened, offering its protection to Dark, which the dragonlet had immediately accepted. There were no conditions or obvious strings, though the deity had requested that Dark help Dallion get out of the canyon. Dark had reluctantly accepted, though making sure not to say a word during the entire trip. On his part, Dallion had thought it better to do the same. He could sense the emotional turmoil within the dragonlet. Considering everything that had happened, the best solution was for the creature to cool off a bit. Hopefully, in a few months, things will be better.

The shardflies had also parted ways. Despite the dangers of the environment, they had found it a lot more suited than the famined north, not to mention there were a lot of interesting things to play with. Dallion wasnt sure that was the best choice, but given that the seagulls had managed to survive, he had little doubt that the shardflies would as well. Naturally, Ruby was the only exception. Going counter to everyone else, he had decided to remain with Dallion. That hardly came as a surprise. Dallion had suspected as much for a while now. The emotional connection between Ruby and Gleam had been consistently growing. The armadil shield called it a classic example of young romance, potentially a phase, but as time passed, there was every chance it blossomed into something more. At least on Rubys part.

It took a day and half of flying for Dallion to reach the end of the canyon. While Dark wasnt as fast as Lux, he had the stamina to keep flying for an extended length of time. Upon seeing the cliffs, a sense of adventure resonated throughout the dragonlets body. This marked the barrier separating the forgotten south with the rest of the civilized world. While not as lethal as the canyon, it came with its own set of dangers.

Heres fine, Dallion said, once they had reached the top. Ill walk the rest of the way.

Dark snorted, although Dallion could also sense the faintest echoes of regret.

There are a few things I need to take care of, but Ill teach you more when I have the chance. Until then, dont approach settlements and dont trust people.

Youve already told me that, the dragonlet said bitterly.

Listen to the Green Moon. Hell take care of you.

See you, Onda, Dark said, then flapped his wings, flying into the sky and out of view as quickly as possible.

Dallion watched him break into a dozen instances, letting out his frustration in some of them.

Hang in there, he whispered.

Hell be fine, Nil said. The Academy wont dare mess with anything that has a Moons protection. Magic can only go so far.

Naturally. One also had to keep in mind that magic also came from a Moon. From what Dallion had seen so far, insulting one Moon was the same as insulting all of them.

*And what about you, dear boy? How do you feel now that youve ended your journey south?
Relieved?*

No.

That is precisely why I told you to turn back once you got there.

That wasnt your only reason, Dallion whispered. At present, though, that didnt matter. What was done was done, and Dallion had a pocket knife to show for it. Lets head to Nerosal.

Even if there was more than enough time, Dallion chose to run all the way there. The fatigue and sense of speed made him think less of what had transpired in the land of the Star. After a few days, it was almost as if he had never been there. Sadly, a few dark thoughts and regrets continued lingering on. At one point Dallion attempted to level up in the hopes hed get rid of them, but the challenge proved beyond his abilities. It was a straightforward combat challenge, however, it showed him that better gear and tactics were needed. Apparently, moving on from level sixty was a big deal indeed.

The closer he got to Nerosal, the more he noticed the changes taking place. Caravans and travelers had doubled their standard guards, even going so far as to pay for awakened joining in. Also, a new term had appeared, used more and more frequently: safe food. From the brief conversations Dallion had had, the plague was spreading more rapidly than before, affecting more kingdoms, even the empire itself. There were even rumors that several cities in the north had seen cases of poisonings, though only through food imports.

Armed caravans werent the only anomaly, though. Half a week from Nerosal, Dallion had come across an imperial patrol. This wasnt a band of hunters or mercenaries, it wasnt even a garrison of the archduke, but a fully fledged company of imperial soldiers. According to their insignia, the vast majority were privates, led by a few sergeants. However, every single one was beyond level forty, all equipped in full moon gold armor and finely crafted weapons that made Dallion look like a pauper.

No words were exchanged. Dallion preferred to keep his distance, and on their end, the imperials seemed like they had better things to do.

What are they doing here? Dallion asked once the company was out of sight. Hunting?

They wouldnt go hunting this far south, Nil replied. Im no expert, but it seems that theyre keeping an eye on the area, in case trouble starts here.

Why here?

The Wetie province was among the most sheltered in the Empire. With no threats from the south, east, and north, only the western had any neighboring countries, and they werent capable of doing anything much. Priscord county could potentially be at risk, but the way settlements were being reinforced, that was rather unlikely. And even if it were possible, the Archduke was the one supposed to send soldiers unless there was a reason for him not to.

Just leave it, dear boy, Nil urged. Besides, youll have a better chance to find out more when in Linatol.

Always looking on the bright side of things, Dallion grumbled.

A new wall was waiting for Dallion as he approached Nerosal. Ten feet high, it surrounded any and all fields the city domain encompassed.

Dallion wasnt sure how to react to this. Considering the danger the poison plague posed, it was understandable that the nobles, and even the people, would agree to such measures. Considering that the plague affected awakened, the mirror pool was probably also alright with the idea. However, once again, Dallion found himself entering a cage, only this time it was made apparent for all to see.

Anything you could share about this, Nil? he asked.

The blasted Festival will still take place, if thats what youre asking, the echo grumbled. If anything, this would make it more popular than ever: a place where one could forget the horrors of reality, all within the safety of Nerosal. From what I know, a few dignitaries from other counties will attend. No imperials, though.

Entrance to the outer section of the city was easy. The moment they saw that Dallion wasnt carrying anything more than a backpack, the soldiers on patrol let him enter with barely any questions asked. It was when he reached the main gate of the old city that the real interrogation began.

Dallion couldnt tell whether the soldiers didnt know him, or were deliberately delaying him. It didnt help that he only had a hunter emblem. Most of the people already gathering for the Festival had personalized build, family, or organization emblems, making it easier to identify. After all the questions were answered and Dallion had dropped the name of the overseer a few times he was let inside. The contrast was immediate, hitting him in the face like a brick. The city was all in festive mode. Streets were starting to become packed with people, all but too glad to focus on the events that were to be. No doubt Hannah had seen her customers explode.

One thing that was noticeably different: the food sellers were far less in number, and accompanied by a pair of city guards.

I guess that's one way to describe safe food, Dallion thought. Think it's a sham?

I fear not, dear boy. It's difficult to say with each noble hiding the real state of things, but I fear that the poison plague might be spreading by more than natural means.

The Star?

No doubt he's enjoying that, but I think that it might be due to a more trivial explanation.

Apparently, this is a rather convenient way to decapitate cities. As you saw in the port town, the nobles are the first to go followed by awakened. Normally, I wouldn't put it past the Academy to meddle with this, but I think their interests are focused elsewhere.

How can you be so sure?

The Order hasn't gotten involved. Yes, their clerics are moving about the wilderness, killing creatures, helping, and whatnot, but they haven't taken any action against the Academy. And trust me if it came to such a confrontation, the Academy would step back.

I thought you said that the Academy is strong enough to hold its own.

Let's just say that no one is willing to put that theory to the test. It's more likely they'd face the Emperor, than the Order.

And Dallion had already seen in Jiroh's memories that they wouldn't dare go against the emperor.

Sighing at the crowds that were to be a constant presence in Nerosal, until the end of the Festival, Dallion made his way back to his house. Ruby had frozen completely still, looking more like a decoration on his shoulder. The shardfly had learned how to behave when people were present, but the current situation made it nervous. Dallion could feel the discomfort emanating from it, similar to a high-pitched whistle.

Just a bit longer, he said. No need to worry.

Moving away from the main roads helped a bit, though there were still more people than a hunter would be comfortable with. On the way, Dallion asked a few of the city guards he knew about Euryale. As he suspected, the gorgon had been hired to assist with the security of the event, and especially the tournament. That suggested that he'd likely be off in the palace or the Arena. Dallion considered checking, but right now he didn't feel like seeing the countess, or the general. Instead, he went straight to the workshop.

The first thing Dallion did upon entering the workshop was to drop his equipment, get a quick wash as much as that was possible indoors, then lie on the bed. According to the area guardian of the building, everything was in order, with the possible exception of the hedgerels, which had gotten used to roaming freely on the upper floor, often running along the floor and walls. After he'd had a rest, Dallion intended to have a word with them. Until then, though, he preferred to have some rest.

Think March will give me a few days of rest before I have to give my answer? Dallion asked.

Considering the entire guilds going crazy with the festival, yet again, I have a suspicion that you're not high on the priority list.

At least there's that. Dallion turned to the other side. Nil, how did the city get this much larger? When I left, they were already filling up the free areas and there was no space for a second wall.

The overseer has leveled up. I thought that would be obvious.

It is, but wasn't the leveling up of settlements forbidden?

Nor anymore. The emperor has allowed, even encouraged, nobles to develop their cities.

Dallion didn't say a word. He knew well that there was only one reason for that to happen: the emperor was expecting a war and was preparing for it.

Chapter 506: The Right Way

Euryale didn't come that night, nor was she there the following morning. According to the house guardian, that wasn't particularly unusual. The workbench who was all too eager to chat explained that it was common for her to be called by the city guard and spend days before coming back.

After having some food, Dallion went up to the second floor to check on the hedgerels. Initially, the creatures didn't seem overly enthusiastic, but the moment Dallion brought them some bread, they instantly rushed towards him. It was notable that Euryale had removed the metal basket that held them previously. Despite her insistence to the contrary, the gorgon was rather good at tending to animals. Being a far more experienced hunter, that was to be expected.

Still hungry after all this time? Dallion laughed, tossing them a piece of bread. The hedgerels didn't fight for it too aggressively, which was a sort of improvement from before. I heard you made a bit of a mess while I was gone.

None of them reacted, ignoring him completely. That was the issue when leaving Eury to take care of animals. She didn't have Dallion's patience, preferring to kill or subdue animals than reason with them. The hedgerels instinctively knew when and when not to press their luck, and right now Dallion had presented them with a rare opportunity.

You shouldn't cause trouble, he said, adding a note of power in his words. The effect was instant. The creature so carefree till a moment ago suddenly froze up. Faint fear emanated from them. For several seconds they remained as they were, uncertain of what would follow. When Dallion tossed another piece of bread. They visibly relaxed, though, remained as obnoxious as before.

Baby steps, Dallion thought.

You keep spoiling them, a voice said, inches from Dallion's ear.

His natural reaction was to split into instances and turn around. As a result, all his instances were matched and stopped; what was more, in each case he received a kiss. Dallion had the power to force one reality, but he didn't, taking advantage to leave all of them to play out.

Missed you, the gorgon whispered. Several of her snakes looked at the hedgerels. Instantly, the creatures retreated to the far corner of the room. Didn't think you'd come before the festival was over.

I was lucky, Dallion replied. This place has grown a lot since I left. Two levels?

One. The countess did it herself. The overseer was against it. She thought it was a bad idea.

I can see why, Dallion said to himself.

With Nerosal leveling up, it had become the capital of the county, and was one step closer to the provincial capital. For some reason, that made Dallion nervous. Forty years ago, his grandfather had joined the army during the wars of succession, which had led to the family of the current Archduke taking the throne. Things were getting dangerously close to events in the past. It was no secret that the current Archduke had no heirs, which left the provincial throne shaky. The greatest contenders were his current relatives, but not all counts were pleased with the prospect. Apparently, Countess Priscord had a thing or two to say as well. Dallion doubted she would challenge the Archdukes authority, but she was positioning herself to become a kingmaker, regardless of who took the throne itself.

I see you released all the animals, Eury continued.

Yeah. Ruby preferred to stay with me.

As long as he doesnt destroy the second floor.

He wont. Dallion paused for a moment. Heard anything from March?

Shes been preparing for this quite a lot. Im not talking about the festival. So far, she hasn't said anything specific, but I think she thinks that well be facing something strong.

The Star, Dallion thought. March probably feared they were going to face the Star. Considering the interest it had shown towards the previous world sword, it was normal to think so.

We probably will Anything else I should know about? Chainlings? Cultists?

Its all been calm so far. With so many nobles at the same place, itll be difficult for them to pull anything off. Not that Im letting anyone slack off. Even the mirror pool is keeping an eye open. The countess told them in no uncertain terms that if the festival isnt flawless, shell personally hunt them down.

That would make it almost worth it. Dallion smirked.

The gorgons snakes stirred, telling him not to continue that train of thought.

Tournament starts in a few days. You can watch, if you want.

No thanks. There are other things I need to do. Will you have some of us time during the festival?

Not much.

The answer was expected, but it still made Dallions heart sink a bit.

I was given a few hours today, though. She placed her hand on Dallions shoulder. The overseer sensed you entering the domain. Of course, she didnt tell me till morning.

Typical. At least we got a few hours, then.

A few hours were barely enough, but it was also an eternity. Part of the time Dallion spent with Eury in their room, weeks more passed in his domain, where they were able to catch up a lot more. That was one of the disadvantages of being a hunter: relationships were a lot more difficult, but even so, they had beaten the odds manyfold. This was different from the fling and charm back when Dallion had first arrived in the city. They were pretty much a couple now, though no one was in a rush to take the final step. Maybe one day Dallion would, though not this day.

Seconds became weeks, when then turned to months, but even so, a time came for it all to end. Eury had work to get back to, and Dallion himself wanted to take the opportunity to check something at the Icepicker guild. A year ago, he had done the exact same thing, only this time he was going to do it the proper way.

Leaving Ruby and most of his weapons behind, Dallion went for the guildhall. The moment he reached the street, he remembered what a mistake it was to do so at noon. The city guards did little to calm the chaos, especially in the more notable areas of Nerosal. It didnt help that a whole lot of guardians greeted Dallion along the way, making the noise even greater.

The twenty minutes it took Dallion to reach his destination felt like an hour. After getting used to the wilderness, the sensation was like being crushed by a river of bodies. On one occasion, Dallion even considered using the rooftops to get to the guildhall. That would have been a bad idea, of course. With the Countess having taken control of the city directly, such behavior wouldnt be tolerated, least of all now.

My original isnt here, Nil said. Neither is March.

Whos left?

Dal? a thin man with spiky blond hair emerged from the entrance. Looking at him, one would think that a punk band member had made a sudden appearance in this world. He looked a bit scruffier than Dallion remembered him, but the same familiar wildness emanated from him. There was a time when the man seemed unreachable a guild elite that spent his spare time seeking out bar fights. He was one of the people who had helped Dallion get his harpsword and shield back, taking on the mirror pool itself. Now, he was way beneath Dallions level.

Hey, Spike, Dallion said. Still stuck with guard duty?

You cheeky kid. Spike laughed.

It was true, though. Since fighting was forbidden during the festival, the guilds were ordered to keep their troublemakers hidden away as much as possible.

Is the vice here?

Thats what you have to ask? Spike crossed his arms. We havent seen each other for so long and this is the hello I get? Seems you havent changed a bit! He moved closer, placing his arm around Dallions shoulders. What mess are you getting yourself into this time?

No idea. For now, I just want to talk with the vice.

After a laugh and some typically inappropriate jokes, Spike let Dallion inside. The building was deserted, as expected. The only ones present were Spike and half a dozen Icepickers, none of which

were the vice guild master. However, thanks to one of echo rings, Spike was able to get a message to the person in question.

In less than ten minutes, the vice guild master had arrived and directed Dallion to his office on the fourth floor. It felt almost nostalgic being seated in the small room facing the massive desk. The last time Dallion had been here, he had quit the guild.

I want to explore the second world sword, Dallion went straight to the point. Ill try to avoid fighting altogether. Theres just something I want to check at the final temple.

There was a long moment of silence. The vice guild master looked at Dallion, then at the frowned. Dallion could tell that the man was strong, probably stronger than him still, but the gap was narrowing.

Whats your plan? he asked.

I cant tell you.

I see

All I can say is that I wont do anything destructive. Or try not to.

Try to, you say. The man sighed. March said you might pull a fast one. After what happened last time, it would have been too easy to hope that youll just go on with her mission. The second sword is a lot worse than the first one. The exploration teams have been doing nothing else but destroy the cracklings and all other crap. If you reach the final temple, youll be the first person whos come into contact with a guardian.

Theyre hiding? Dallion asked, intrigued.

There seems to be a silent understanding. They observe from a distance. We dont enter their domains and they dont stop us from moving on. As I said, for the moment its slow. Were still hiding our skill for the moment our alliance falls apart.

Ill try not to show them any tricks.

Bullcrap!

He got you there, dear boy, Nil sighed. I doubt you could manage half a day without going on a rampage if you tried.

And once you find that thing you want to see, what then? the voice asked. Will you restore the sword? Or just make a deal with one of the guardians?

Depends on what I find, but no. Ive no intention of making any other deals. I just want to see if theres a twi-crown.

In truth, Dallion was hoping for a bit more than that. Now that he had regained his Moons favor, he wanted to have a chance to learn herbology. If nothing else, the skill had the potential of helping him figure out a way to counteract the poison plague. Of course, he was going to have to prove himself to the dryad crown keeper. Given his current level, that was quite doable.

What if I say no? Will you go behind the guilds back again?

I prefer not to.

Oh, you prefer? the man stood up then turned around, looking out of the window. In that case, lets better not find out. Ill take you to the sword. You have one chance to find what you find. Succeed or fail, thats it. Only the guild master can say different.

Sounds good.

Naturally the vice guild master turned around briskly you wont be paid. In fact, this will be treated as your payment for Marchs mission. Youll get some pocket change, but nothing major. Do you agree with that?

Slowly, Dallion nodded. And Eury? he asked.

Eury will get what shes been promised. This matter only relates to you.

Just one question. The second sword. Does it have survivors inside?

No. As I said, its in a worse state than the first one. So far, the only buildings remaining other than the guardians temples are crackling cities. You still want to go?

I dont have much choice.

Alright. In that case, vow to the Moons that after this try you wont try again.

Chapter 507: Second Aura Sword

The right sword shined with near flawlessness. The rust and corrosion had all but vanished. Nothing but a few hairline cracks remained near the guard, marking the last crackling remnants in the world. A bit more effort and the weapon would not only be perfectly mended but also have its destiny fulfilled. Without a doubt, March had done a lot in the time he was gone. Unfortunately, that wasnt the weapon Dallion intended to enter.

Its not too late to change your mind, the vice guild master said.

How far has anyone gotten? Dallion moved closer to the second blade. The patches of metal among the decay only made it look in a far worse condition than it was. There had to be more than crackling cities in that realm.

Theyve gotten close to the first temple, from what I hear. Progress is less structured than during the first sword expeditions. Its difficult to tell. When you go in, youll see what I have in mind.

In that case, lets not keep anyone waiting. Dallion placed a finger on the tip of the blade. See you in a moment.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

A bone cutting chill greeted Dallion as he entered the world. It was colder than anything hed experienced in a while. Thankfully, Lux immediately appeared, wrapping Dallion in a layer of flames.

You are in the WORLD of AURA SWORD

Unseal all Temples to fulfill the WORLDS destiny.

The vast hall Dallion had found himself in shared similar characteristics with the temple of the other sword hed been in. Large columns filled the chamber, covered in long, extinguished torches. What

seemed to be an abandoned altar could be seen a short distance away, the designs covering its side long faded with time.

Why are all the swords so chilly? Dallion asked, rubbing his hands.

That was the limit to our realm creation, the armadil shield replied. Creating a word came with its flaws, and time only made things worse. It was never intended for people to be trapped here for so long.

That was a painfully scary thing to say. Still, Dallion hoped against hope that everyone was wrong and that remnants of the dryad race would be found deeper inside.

Splitting into fifty instances, Dallion proceeded to explore the temple. What in the past would have taken him hours was done in a matter of minutes. Unfortunately, there was nothing of importance to be found. The few depictions of the Moons were faded, and while they appeared to include an Eighth Moon, there wasn't enough detail to make any conclusions. Still, Dallion used the Vermillion ring to make copies, just in case.

Why do you keep wasting time with ancient mysteries? Nil asked.

It's my time to waste. Besides, time doesn't pass here.

Time passes in the mind,

the old echo said. *Diverting your attention dilutes your resolve. I thought you'd learned that lesson.*

Maybe. Sometimes distractions are a good thing, though.

Dallion made his way to the temple's outer door, then pushed it open. He was prepared to find himself in a frozen wilderness. What he saw, however, caught him off guard completely. Ice and snow continued for as far as the eye could see. However, unlike last time, the ice was pitch black. Plumes of black and reddish smoke rose into the sky, removing any trace of blueness. At that moment, Dallion immediately understood why the expedition was making such slow progress.

The cracklings had evolved and spread to such an extent that there was almost nothing left. It was a miracle in itself that the realm hadn't been destroyed. Dallion could only assume that the guardians remained strong enough to guard their temple—the final defense the realm had. If there were any survivors of the former race, they had to be there.

A thick smell of ash and corroded metal filled the air, giving the impression that Dallion was in a chemical plant. In a way, he almost was. Large cities of walls and chimneys filled the landscape. Some of them were so close to each other that their walls touched. Here and there, empty areas were visible, the black ground occupied by a few crackling villages. These had to be the results of March's expeditions. She had no doubt destroyed a city or ten, but the overabundance of cracklings had quickly attempted to fill the void by forming smallish villages.

Were all swords created at the same time? Dallion asked.

Pretty much, Vihrogon replied. Some were made better than others. It's always a matter of the people inside, though. Some tend to get along better than others.

You dont think anyone survived?

Here? Not a chance. In all the swords probably not. After this amount of time, even the best of people tend to fall. Especially when the Stars involved.

Dallion didnt say a thing. At his current level, he could probably combine his line attack with a spark to destroy a few dozen cities. It was definitely going to be easier than sneaking through. However, that wasnt going to amount to much.

Lux, Ill need you to get me to the last temple. Dallion said. Vihrogon, can you direct him to the temple?

Shouldnt be a problem, the armadil shield replied. The structure of the sword words is similar.

Okay, cocoon me, Dallion said.

Youre not going to fight?

Not today, Dallion sighed. I just want to find the crown.

The shield on Dallions arm extended, forming a metal sphere around him. As it did, Lux jumped off Dallion and onto the shield. There was a momentary flash of cold, but it quickly dissipated. Then Dallion felt the extreme acceleration of the firebird propelling the sphere and him with it forward.

There was no telling how long the trip lasted. Dallion felt it continued for far longer than mere minutes. However, he had only his senses to rely on. While it lasted, he kept thinking of the Star. There was no guarantee that the poison plague was created by him, although it seemed like something he would do.

Nil, are you sure that the Academy isnt involved in this?

Thats a difficult thing to answer, dear boy. It isnt something that they would do, but accidents are known to happen. It wouldnt be the first time the Academy did something stupid that got out of control. Just think of the dragon shadow they made? Of course, that was rather minor enough to remain unnoticed.

Minor? Id hate to see one of their serious mess-ups.

Hopefully, you never will. There was a slight pause. Theres always the possibility that its from a rogue mage.

Now it was Dallions turn to remain silent. According to what he had heard, rogue mages were one of the taboos in the world they existed, but the world preferred to pretend that they didnt. Nobles viewed them as a threat, the Academy viewed them as a nuisance in effect, they were high-level mercenaries. Considered too weak, unstable, or disappointing to remain part of the Academy itself, they were left to their own devices. According to the rumors, several of the smaller kingdoms had accepted rogues, providing them a place to stay in exchange for their power.

Youre a rogue, arent you? Dallion asked.

Im but a mere echo, dear boy, Nil replied.

In a way, he was right, but Dallion was convinced that Captain Adzorg was a rogue. That could well have been the reason he had been outcast to Nerasol, spending his time in a small, insignificant guild.

One thing about rogues, despite what is said, they are kept on a very tight leash. The Academy keeps an eye on them all the time. If someone does something that might be considered dangerous, steps are taken to prevent them.

So, youre saying it cant be a mage?

On the contrary. Theres nothing easier than tempting a rogue mage to do something stupid. The reason the Academy constantly monitors spellcasters is the risk that they post. When one is case away, certain restrictions are placed to ensure that theres no chance of a competing organization being born. All the Star has to do is promise to sever the link between the Academy and the rogue to get them to do anything.

A rogue has made a deal with the Star?

Wouldnt be the first time. Youve seen what happened to the south. Why should a single power-reject be different?

That was a very good question. It also suggested two things: the cause of the poison plague was more than likely not natural, and the person behind it was not to be taken lightly.

The sphere suddenly stopped, causing Dallion to be shoved to the inside.

Were here! Were here! Lux said.

Thanks, Lux. Just, next time say it a few seconds in advance.

Sure!

Dappling split into six instances and had the shield open up slightly so he could take a look. The sight had nothing to do with what he had seen before. The crackling villages, the smoke, even the black snow were nowhere to be seen. Instead, Dallion found himself above a white mountain partially covered in forests. While it was a relief that the cracklings hadnt managed to get this far, this made the realization even more painful; the complete lack of large settlements suggested that the world had become uninhabited centuries ago. The only visible structure was a stone temple within the forest. Using his music vision, Dallion was able to see the guardians presence. Solitude colder than the surrounding snow emanated from him.

Bring me down, Lux.

Thats not a good idea, Vihrogon said.

Im stronger than before. Besides, he wont attack me. If there was one thing that he had learned after exploring so many items, it was the guardians desire for conversation. Do you want to meet him in your dryad form?

No, the shield replied. Im good like this.

Do you know the marshal of this sword?

I used to know all of them. Thats not the reason, though.

Lux slowly descended the metal sphere to the ground. Once there, it contracted to shield size, allowing the firebird to jump back onto Dallion.

Nox, be ready. Just in case, Dallion whispered. A few more seconds later, he started his way through the sparse forest surrounding the temple.

Not a single animal could be sensed anywhere in the vicinity. There were no tracks, no burrows, no marks than there had been at all. Even the trees seemed to be in a state of semi-existence. For all intents and purposes, the world had died long ago. At this point, the best one could do was clear the temples and free the guardians from their misery.

As Dallion kept on walking, a dryad emerged from one of the trees. It didnt say anything, just observing him calmly as he passed by. It was obvious that the dryad was an echo, though even so Dallion got a sense that the guardians level had to be in the high forties.

Hi, Dallion said casually, not even looking back. There was a time when youd have whipped the floor with me.

A second echo emerged further ahead.

Right now, youre wondering whether you can take me. Youve no idea what Im capable of, but youve seen me get here with ease. So, was I lucky? Or just really that strong?

Two more dryads emerged. All of them appeared young, on the verge of adulthood, dressed in fine white clothes.

Music wont have any effect, one of them said.

Maybe. Dallion stopped. But it made you take me seriously, didnt it? Now, can we talk or do I have to challenge you? The reason Ive come here isnt to fight you.

What do you want?

Shouldnt we discuss that in the temple?

Theres no one else to hear us. Just say what youve come to say.

I want to see the twi-crown youre keeping, Dallion said firmly. I know you have it.

Wooden sickles emerged in the echoes hands.

Im not here to wear it, just to see it.

Youre lying, the armadil shield told Dallion in his realm. I know you. Theres no way youll give up a chance to claim more skills.

Maybe. But I dont need the crown for that, Dallion thought.

Chapter 508: Cannonball

Dryads kept appearing in small groups, surrounding Dallion. All of them were armed with simple weapons. Based on previous experience, Dallion was aware if there were a battle here, it would heavily involve echoes or instances. Thanks to the skills he had acquired in the last year, neither was going to be of particular concern, but even so, he preferred not to have to fight at all.

How do you know about the crown? an echo asked.

This isnt the first sword Ive been to.

And youre willing to do anything to see it?

Within reason.

And if it isnt, youll just get to do so through combat?

Dallion didnt say a thing. Both sides were aware that was a possibility they wished to avoid. Even so, Dallion could see reluctance bubble up within the echoes, growing steadily like balloons. The only thing that gave him hope were the dots of hope that had also emerged.

Any way we can reach an agreement?

Not using music? Several of the dryad echoes tilted their heads. You say you just want to see the crown?

Dallion nodded.

Then create a path to the next temple.

That doesnt sound difficult, Dallion said. Just a path? You dont want me to destroy all the crackling settlements between here and there?

A path is enough. Once youve done that, get back here.

Normally, one would be overjoyed by such a simple task. Dallion, however, remained hesitant. In his experience, when something was too good to be true, it usually wasnt. Either the task was far more difficult than he assumed, or there was a catch.

Something wrong? an echo asked.

It sounds too simple. Also, it wont be a permanent solution. The cracklings will rebuild over the path.

Maybe, but a few decades of conversation will be enough. Thats the thing about cracklings. Theyre dangerous, annoying, and they prevent us from talking to one another.

Thats new. Nil, anything you forgot to tell me?

Its not something Ive heard before, dear boy, Nil replied.

Thats the price we have to pay. There was a time when we desperately fought to keep them from establishing a large presence. We feared that they might destroy the item altogether. Not that it would have mattered. Everything that was dryad, creature, or building had long been destroyed. We were just fighting a hollow shell. Thats part of the cost of being a guardian.

Chills ran down Dallions spine. He knew that guardians were supposed to protect the item they were in. However, he hadnt considered that they had to keep doing it constantly, against all odds, even after the situation had become hopeless.

Seems the realm was made in such a way that it cannot be destroyed. Ironic, when you come to think of it. The dryads who created it, must have been afraid that someone might Break the item, killing everyone inside. As it turned out, the realm outlived them all. Now the only thing we have to

look forward to is awakened like you clearing enough cracklings so we can have a few more conversations again.

I see. That was beyond dark and depressive. For some reason, it also made Dallion think of the real world. If the poison plague managed to kill all, would that make the Moons the only beings left? Just a path? he turned around. There was nothing but forest in that direction, but he tried to look beyond it, imaging the crackling cities hed have to destroy.

Just a path. Theres no deadline or any other requirements. I just want this small indulgence. Do it and youll have what you came for.

In that case, I better get started. Dallion looked over his shoulder, but by the time he did that all the echoes had vanished.

Not the worst request, Nil said. Just a piece of advice: dont use all your strength. Theyre still watching you, and we cant be sure that they wont challenge you at a later point.

I know. Lux, lift me up.

The trees became a forest that shrunk beneath Dallions feet. From this height, he could see a large part of the landscape. Initially, there was nothing but whiteness all around, continuing until the horizon. Only after a while did he see a thin layer of blackness, like a distant thread. That, however, was an illusion. From what he had seen in the guild room, Dallion knew that the hilt was largely intact. The blade, though, was an entirely different matter.

The guild wont be pleased, Nil sighed.

The vice has calculated the cost, Dallion said. Why else charge me for the experience?

Dear boy, he might have done that just because he doesnt like you.

Do you know something I dont?

A lot of things, no doubt. However, as far as the guild is concerned. The vice guild master wasnt particularly pleased with what you did last time. In fact, he was one of the two people who were against getting you involved in this expedition.

They still called me.

You have your gorgon girlfriend to thank for that. There was the overwhelming opinion that she would be more reluctant to go unless you joined in. In the end, it was considered that having the two of you was better than none at all.

That was an interesting twist. At some point Dallion was going to inquire more. Though not in Nerosal.

Who was the other person? he asked.

Its better than you dont know.

Nil

Trust me on this. I can easily tell you, but itll make you get in one of your moods and

Was it Eury? Dallion asked.

No.

Was it March?

No, it wasnt March either.

In that case, it doesnt really matter. Dallion summoned his harpsisword. Lux, get me to the nearest crackling city.

With a chirp, the firebird propelled Dallion forward. A few seconds later, Dallion found himself right on the border between the guardians frozen domain and the clutter of blight. The cities were slightly smaller here, though more numerous, each belonging to cracklings. The rustlings, it seemed, hadnt managed to gain a foothold here, although that didnt make things particularly easier.

Even with his current level of perception, Dallion could barely see the domain of the next temple. Massive plumes of smoke rose to the sky, creating a wall of smog that blocked the view, like a series of black curtains.

Think Ill be able to destroy them with a line attack? Dallion asked.

No, Harp replied.

Youre probably right. I still want to see how much Ive improved.

Instructing Lux to get him to the ground, Dallion did a line attack, combining it with his spark. A thin glowing line appeared in the air, cutting through walls, towers, and buildings as it erased everything in its path. The amount of destruction was rather impressive until one realized that of the dozen cities it had affected, only two had been destroyed. The rest, while significantly reduced, still had their crackling flames intact. Unwilling to leave things half done, Dallion repeated his attack. Eight more cities were destroyed, opening a wide field between him and the next layer of crackling settlements.

The sound of horns and bells filled the air, followed immediately by heavy clanking from all directions.

Thats new.

In the first sword he had been, the cracklings had taken the form of knights charging at him. Back then, Dallion had avoided a head on battle, choosing to sneak his way to the black flame instead. Now, there was no point in being timid.

Goblin titans emerged from several cities, growing as more and more merged together. There was no question that they were considerably more advanced-looking than Dallion remembered. In a way, it was almost as if they had let Onda forge their armor. More alarmingly, the weapons they were equipped with werent common swords or axes, but massive crossbows.

Dallion didnt flinch. With no effort, he did two more line attacks, aiming specifically for the creatures. Caught off guard a couple of them were sliced in two. The rest quickly assumed a defensive position, blocking the attack with their shields. Several shields cracked, but the massive amount of metal proved enough to save them from the attack.

What did you expect? Nil asked.

Instead of an answer, Dallion split into a few dozen instances as the barrage of massive bolts flew in his direction. The ground shook as they struck it, throwing up whole clouds of dust and dirt.

Up, Lux! Dallion shouted, choosing one of the safe instances.

The firebird shot him up as dozens of the other instances received fatal or terminal wounds.

If it were that easy, March would have killed them off by now, Nil grumbled. Did you finish checking your level?

Yep, Dallion replied. He was skilled enough to see his limitations. Now all that remained was to do what the guardian had asked for. The line attacks useless in the general scope of things had managed to briefly clear the air enough for Dallion to get an inkling of the ninth temple location. For a moment, Dallion considered whether a point attack couldn't do the trick.

Before he could attempt it, several of the giant goblins charged in his direction. From what Dallion had seen, each of them was composed of thousands of cracklings, suggesting that it would take hundreds of hits to take down. The task wasn't overly difficult, but would be excruciatingly long. Even point attacks weren't going to make it possible for Dallion to take all of them out. However, there was another possibility.

Shield, cocoon me! Dallion ordered. Once again, the shield extended, creating a protective sphere around him. Lux, thrust me through the nearest one. Dallion pulled out his hand from the shield's straps. Then go back up.

Okay! The firebird responded without even thinking about it.

The tactic was a bit of a gamble. Dallion had a distant memory that bullets were capable of piercing medieval armor. It had been a while ago, so there was no way he could be sure, but this was a good chance to check.

A series of forces pushed him in various directions as the sphere accelerated, then slowed down on impact. Using a dozen instances, Dallion managed to avoid any serious injuries.

HUMAN CANNONBALL

(+2 Reaction)

It wasn't inconceivable that you'd do something as reckless in battle. Try not to do it again too much.

Good advice. Dallion smiled to himself. Unfortunately, he didn't have the luxury of keeping it. While the method wasn't the most comfortable, it was better than most of the alternatives.

Shield, you okay? Dallion asked.

Just a few scratches here and there. I'll let you know if things get too much for me.

Lux, is everything okay on your end?

Yep! Yep! the firebird chirped.

Good. Continue what you were doing, only try to avoid the armor.

Got you! Lux said with childish glee, as he proceeded to puncture the throat of the next goblin titan.

For ten minutes, the sphere flew through the battlefield, like a self-guiding bullet that struck enemies in their weakest. When it didn't kill the cracklings, it weakened them to the point that they had to break down to their initial size. The combination of speed, hardness, and a flame that only did harm to Star-spawn proved to be more than the goblin soldiers could handle. Different attempts were made: some focused on defense, others merged even more, creating an even greater monster. However, even that proved futile. At one point, Lux suddenly stopped moving, keeping the sphere perfectly still.

Lux? Dallion asked.

There's no one else to fight, the firebird said in a combination of pride and disappointment. Then all vanished and hid in the cities.

And there's nothing in the sky?

Nope.

That made sense. With the cracklings having achieved total dominance in this realm, there was little point in having swarms fly about; everything concentrated in the cities, which was where the remaining cracklings had fortified themselves.

Do you want me to smash through a city?

No! Dallion quickly said. That was the one thing that he had to avoid. At present, his greatest advantage was speed and freedom of movement. If he got stuck in an attempt to puncture a city, things would become quite complicated to the point he'd most likely lose. It's time for a bit of negotiation.

Chapter 509: Crackling Negotiations

Dallion had learned that relying exclusively on instances was never a good strategy. However, they also provided a tremendous advantage. If Nil was to be asked on the topic, they saved time more than anything else. At present, they proved that even after suffering a number of defeats, cracklings tended to be extremely aggressive.

The first dozen instances that landed on the ground were quickly swarmed by a wave of roach-like insects from the ground itself. Apparently, the black flames had a few things up their sleeve as well. Just to avoid any misconceptions, Dallion performed a line attack straight down, creating a crater beneath him. More importantly, through performing a spark attack, he also killed off any traces of cracklings in a hundred-foot radius. The earth beneath him changed from black to light brown, which was then covered in grass in real time—a hint that the guardian had acknowledged Dallion's presence.

The second series of instances that landed on the ground remained unharmed.

You're aware of what I can do, Dallion shouted. And I have a pretty good idea what you're capable of. What do you say we have a chat?

Every work was infused with music, trying to make the cracklings calm down to the point that they were willing to listen. It was a long shot, like trying to harness a flurry of butterflies to pull a sled. However, as a hunter, Dallion had managed to do something quite similar with shardflies, so he liked his chances.

I can't destroy all of you in one go, but I can keep snuffing out a few cities per attack. It'll be long and annoying, but I can do it. Dallion paused for precisely three seconds, giving them a chance to consider his words. Or you can move about, opening a path from here to the temple. A proper path, mind you green grass all the way. None of you will be destroyed, and I'll get what I want.

There was no reaction. Seconds passed, then minutes. All the time Dallion kept on combat splitting, in case another attack was launched. However, nothing of the sort happened.

Nox, did I say it right? Dallion asked.

Yeah. Too many words, but it's understandable.

In that case, why aren't they doing anything?

After another few minutes, Dallion took a step forward.

Lux, get ready to pull me up in the sky. He continued on.

The first hundred feet were easy. There was nothing that could do a surprise attack. Upon reaching the end of the grass, though, things became different. The chances of there being some new cracklings underground were very real, and the further Dallion ventured into enemy land, the less effective his combat splitting would be.

Any words of wisdom you can offer, Nil?

And spoil your fun? the echo mocked. Far be it for me to mention that you're walking on cracklings. I'm sure things will be fine. Isn't that what you usually say?

There was no point in responding. Dallion was fully aware he was walking on a living minefield. In theory, he could fly off at any point, but that always involved a certain degree of risk. After another two hundred feet, Dallion stopped.

Spark, he thought, doing another point attack straight down. Loud screeching filled the air, suggesting that there indeed was something lurking underground, and it was a lot larger than cockroaches.

Look at that,

Dallion said to himself.

If you don't want to take this seriously, just say so, he said loudly. I can do this all day. And even if I can't destroy more than a couple of cities, you can't harm me either. It's what's usually called a stalemate.

This time, there was a response. A goblin general formed in the city straight ahead. Quickly grozing to the side of a castle tower, the creature stepped over the city walls, making its way towards Dallion. Sheets of thick black metal covered him like massive chunks. Given their size, Dallion wasn't certain he could pierce them as easily as before. On the positive side, the general didn't seem to have a weapon.

Reaching the end of the newly formed patch of grass, the giant stopped. On cue, Dallion continued forward until less than ten feet separated the two.

What do you want? the goblin asked in a booming voice.

I told you. I just want a path connecting both temples. That's all.

Why?

So I can walk between both of them when I choose, Dallion quickly replied. And without having to fight in order to do so.

Why do you want to help the guardians?

That's my business. Also, don't take anything for granted. You know I have the strength to take them out, just as I have the strength to annihilate you. I just don't want to do it at the same time.

The reasoning had enough truth in it to be believable, at least that was Dallion's hope. When it came down to it, though, it was nothing more than a bluff. In ideal circumstances, and if Dallion had an infinite source of stamina, maybe he would have achieved what he wanted. In reality, he wasn't even sure he could defeat several guardians in a row. One would be easy, but that would expose his strength to all the rest. Everyone knew that, which was why expeditions had very strict rules of engagement. Their goal was to achieve victory while displaying as few methods as possible. If not, they would have gone gung ho, like Dallion had, from the very beginning.

Just a path? the goblin asked. How wide?

It doesn't really matter. Dallion shrugged. Five feet, maybe ten. You can have walls on either side, if you want. As long as the path is completely uninterrupted.

Hmm.

Oh, and I won't want anything above it, either. No bridges, or archways, or even flying critters. Got that?

If we give you your path, you'll stop attacking?

At least for a few centuries.

It wasn't a good deal by any stretch of the imagination. Dallion knew that. However, after ending up on the losing side of a few deals himself, he knew that the only thing that mattered was the leverage at present. The bottom line was that there was nothing the cracklings could do to stop his immediate rampage.

Just a path, the crackling general repeated.

It was difficult to tell whether that was agreement or displeasure. The void that created them was keeping Dallion from getting any clear sense. Just in case, however, he was ready for a fight. If the deal was seen as unacceptable, the cracklings were probably going to launch a final attack, and

despite appearances, Dallion was going to be forced to retreat. While his arms weren't shaking, he was feeling somewhat tired after all the point and line attacks he had performed. Even if he could potentially pull off just as many before fainting, that wouldn't be enough to end up being the victor.

The giant goblin took a step forward, stopping at the very edge of the green border itself. Then, to Dallion's surprise, split in two. For a moment, both creatures stood side by side, before taking a giant step away from each other. As they did, a crack of brown emerged on the ground, extending forward like a tear. Dallion watched as the tear increased in length, forming a road precisely five feet wide. It went on and on through the black fields until it reached the wall of the nearest city. At that point, the wall itself split in two, letting the road pass.

Didn't think they'd be so literal, Dallion thought.

You didn't think they'd agree at all, Nil grumbled. Apparently, knowing their language proved to be a substantial help.

Yes, Nil. It's all because of that.

Even the smoke in the sky parted ways, forming a hairlike crack of natural blue to form. It was the stuff of fairytales.

You have your path, both crackling giants said in unison.

And you have your deal. Dallion smiled, walking between them.

Err, what exactly are you doing, dear boy? Nil asked.

Walking down the green brick road, Dallion replied, amused at his own humor.

The guardians request was to make the path, not reach the other temple.

What harm will it do? Besides, the cracklings spent all that effort making this. They deserve to see me using it once, at least.

I really can't figure you out. You do the most remarkable things and follow them up with nonsense of an epic scale.

I thought you'd be used to me by now.

Sometimes I wonder why I even bother

The walk was refreshing and quite surreal. Dallion could feel the grass beneath his feet, feel a pleasant breeze of air, while sunlight covered him. At the same time, black walls of decay emerged on both sides. Beyond those walls there, he could feel nothing but void. The closest thing he could compare this to was the realm of the whip blade, only that didn't have sun or grass originally.

It took several hours for Dallion to reach the ninth temple, even when walking at quite a fast pace. Truth be told, he enjoyed the walk, which was why he didn't ask Lux to fly him there.

A wall of trees marked the border of the temple grounds. Clearly, the path had nothing to make them shift a bit. Massive trunks rose up into the sky, so close together that even a mosquito couldn't pass through. Definitely not the welcome Dallion was expecting.

The firebird lifted Dallion into the air, allowing him to fly over the crowns and into the small idyllic patch of greenness that surrounded the temple itself. The guardian was already expecting him there, sitting on a small wooden chair in front of the entrance.

AURA SWORD TEMPLE GUARDIAN 9 - BRIZ

Species: DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Health: 62%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills: UNKNOWN

Weakness: UNKNOWN

Only sixty-two percent? Dallion wondered. Things must be quite tough in this realm.

Hello, he said in dryad. The guardian gave him a blank look.

Not one for small talk, Dallion thought.

Explorers usually come from the other side, the dryad said.

It was faster for me to choose this way. The guardian from the next temple wants to speak to you.

Weve spoken already.

Initially, Dallion thought that the dryad was lying. However, his music sense showed that not to be the case.

When you made the path linking to my temple, you let me make a close anywhere along it, the guardian explained. Were even talking now. The cracklings dont like it, but you scared them enough to keep them from doing anything about it. For that, I thank you.

No worries.

You also asked to see the crown. The dryads expression remained the same, but a ball of anger appeared behind his forehead. I dont approve of that.

A deal was made. Dallion split into instances, in case the dryad decided to attack. I fulfilled my part.

That is why youre still unharmed. A root emerged from the ground, transforming into a chair. Ive seen how strong you are. I have no illusions that youll be able to take me down, though not before I weaken you to the point that you lose your next fight.

Let me guess. Youre the humble one?

I know your level. I can see your skills, your traits, and some of your guardians. You might be stronger, but youve already fought a lot of cracklings. Also, you dont have magic.

And you do? Dallion moved to the chair, but didnt sit down.

As a matter of fact, I do.

The revelation came like thunder from a clear sky. Of all the things possible, this was one Dallion hadn't taken into account. Of course, there was a chance that a guardian might have magic. It was relatively recently that the Purple Moon had hid its face from the world.

You didn't tell me that, Vihrogon, Dallion thought.

Not much, Briz continued. Not enough to win against you, but that's not my goal.

Do I need to do something for you too? Dallion asked.

Maybe, maybe not. The guardian looked straight into Dallion's eyes. What exactly is your relation to the Star?

Chapter 510: World of Futility

You think I'm related to the Star? Dallion asked.

Of all the things that he expected to be accused of, this was the last. If the dryad was an otherworlder, maybe there was some logic to link Dallion to the Star. Or maybe it was because of Lux? A crackling familiar did tend to give the wrong impression to people, which was why Dallion's guild mentor had asked him to keep it secret for as long as possible.

Because of my familiars?

Because of the Star item.

Star item?

Just because it's not in the realm doesn't mean I can't sense it. One of the advantages of being a guardian.

Nil, any idea what he's talking about?

That would be that annoying knife you brought with you, dear boy.

The knife? Dallion wondered. After the realm invasion attempt, he had all but forgotten about it. Initially, he intended to put it away somewhere, but for some reason he had slid it in his holster boot. There was no reason for him to have done so. The item was a hollow shell and nowhere as special or efficient as the other weapons he had. At the same time, it was still made on Earth.

You've seen it before?

There was a time when I considered myself blessed to have. Those even with a trace of magic, were considered important enough to be invited to the hall. Not even the Sword Marshals were there, but I was. I saw the star on several occasions. I felt the item that you now have. So, tell me, how are you related to the Star?

We've crossed paths a few times so far. Dallion summoned the pocketknife. Since it was in contact with his skin within the holder boot, it appeared in his hand identical to its real world form. I found this in a pyramid in the south. It's from the world I came from.

The dryad stood up. Dallion could see clusters of pity forming within him.

The Star said the same. He looked at the knife Dallion was holding. A knife that you could hold in your pocket, the guardian quoted. That was the explanation given. Of all the knowledge that was offered, that was the one item the Star didnt wish to part with. Now you have it.

If this was a trial, Dallion wouldnt like his chances.

You know Im not the Star. Dallion unsummoned the item. Im not a follower.

You dont seem to be, although its difficult to tell. Both humans and Star-spawn are good at deceiving, too good at times.

So, what do we do now?

I expect youll go back to the last temple and Ill remain here.

Were not going to fight?

Youre a human with empathy. If a Moon considers you worthy of that, who am I to say otherwise? Maybe history will repeat itself, but that is now for me to decide. In this new world, Im not even a piece on the board.

How is history repeating? Dallion tried his best to remain calm, but deep inside, he was thrilled. He had been asking questions about the Eighth Moon and the worlds history for so long that he never expected to learn anything. Now, it seemed that hed finally get an answer. By all current logic, he had to receive an answer. He had the level in any event, his level was higher than the guardians the empathy trait, not to mention that he had finally fulfilled his promise. There was no logical reason for the dryad to refuse.

If you dont know already, theres nothing I can tell you.

I know some things, Dallion quickly said, feeling the answers slipping from his fingertips. I know the Star brought machines that this world had never seen. I know he tried to conquer the world several times. He paused for a moment. I know he wanted to become a Moon.

Upon hearing that, the dryad laughed.

Go, claim your prize. Briz waved a hand. I wont stop you.

Tell me about the past! Dallion took a step forward. The moment he did, roots shot up from the ground, forming a wall between him and the dryad.

Naturally, he had no intention of giving up just like that. Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion rushed around the wall with the intention of continuing the conversation. Upon doing so, though, he found that the dryad was no longer there.

Damn it! Dallion thought. Lux, lift me up!

The entire temple came into view. Dallion focused, then split up into instances in an attempt to find the guardian. The effort proved futile. Neither splitting, layer vision, or even music sense provided any hints. One can surmise that the dryad had gone into the temple, but going in to find him was ill advised. Dallion had half a mind to try his luck anyway, but the amount of experience he had earned in the wilderness kept him back. Going in blind was a bad idea, especially after Briz had made a

point that he had the power to weaken him to the point that the other guardian might prevent him from seeing the twi-crown.

Crap! Dallion clenched his fists. He was presented with a choice: learn about the past or see the crown. If he hadn't given his word to the vice guild master in the real world, he could well do both. More than likely Briz knew that, so had put Dallion in an impossible situation.

You really must learn a thing or two about strategy, dear boy, Nil said. You have made great strides on a personal and tactical level, but long term, you're still hopeless.

You mean to say I'm not seeing the big picture?

You're utterly incapable of doing so. What is more, you've no idea how to proceed in order to learn it. At some point, you'll have to learn if you wish to level up.

There was nothing to say. Dallion didn't agree with Nil in the least, but it was clear he had lost this round. There was every chance that he learned more in the third sword, but that still didn't remove the bitter taste of defeat.

Lux, take me to the temple, Dallion whispered. As quickly as possible.

Less than a minute later, he was floating above the final dryad temple, feeling seriously ill. Nothing had tried to stop him along the way, nothing seemed to attempt to do so here. To a degree, Dallion almost wished they had.

Floating back down, he went to the temple entrance.

I did as you asked, he said. Now it's time for you

The massive door opened, inviting him inside. A vast garden brimming with plants and life could be seen inside, much in contrast to the dead world of the realm. Considering the limitations, this had to be the equivalent to a hero's welcome. Still, any welcome would end up being a trap. Dallion made sure to split into a dozen instances, then went inside with half of them.

A bouquet of fragrances surrounded him, creating the illusion that he was in another world. This must have been the world during the time of the dryad ascendance. A gentle warmth could be felt, with just a hint of power. Every plant, every twig, every floating spore was carefully controlled, creating a concert of chaotic order. As Dallion walked by, branches blossomed, then grew, becoming fruit he had never seen before.

A memory of what was. A dryad emerged from behind a nearby bush, more like the guardian created. I've made it to remember happier times.

Fancy.

You managed to do what I asked. To be honest, I didn't think that you'd succeed. Miniature vines spread out from the bush, weaving into a cloak on the dryad's back. That was before I learned about your ability to negotiate with cracklings.

It's a skill like any other. Dallion felt somewhat anxious. I'm surprised you haven't tried it after all this time.

I'm neither human nor an otherworlder. Irony, considering that most of the original inhabitants of this realm were. Then again, seeing that one of your guardians is a Sword Marshal, I suspect you have an idea.

Dallion glanced at his shield. He must have been quite popular.

Not particularly. Mages can do a lot of things, even the weak ones.

Dallion gritted his teeth. Briz was causing more and more problems.

Do I get to see the two-crown? Dallion asked directly.

Why now? Come, this way.

Just like that? Alright.

The echo led Dallion through the garden temple, to the main altar. There, a stairwell formed, descending deeper down. Luminescent plants lit the way, glowing like threads of neon. Dallion tore off a piece in one of his instances, half expecting it to fade away. Instead, it kept on glowing just as before.

I prefer this to torches and light crystals, the echo said, catching Dallion's action. Feels a lot more personal.

I didn't see it in the other sword I visited.

I'm sure the guardians there had far more serious problems.

Oh? I thought you could talk to each other.

Maybe we could.

Reaching the bottom of the stairwell, Dallion found himself in an oval chamber coated entirely with wood. A block of white crystal rose in the center. The moment the echo stepped near it, the crystal became transparent. That was not all, though.

There you are, the echo said. Our very own two-crown. You'll understand that I don't take it out. Since you said that you only wanted to see it, that shouldn't be a problem, should it?

Dallion remained numb. In theory, it could have presented a problem, but given the circumstances, there was a far greater issue staring him in the face: while the crown was there, it was completely gemless.

What about the skill gems? Dallion turned to the echo.

Is that what you were after? If you had told me, you could have avoided that whole battle with the cracklings. Not that I mind. I'm thankful for what you've done. Sadly, the gems have been gone for millennia.

Someone took them?

One of the better kings of the realm. And one of the mediocre ones. Thousands of years is a very long time, even those who share the exact same convictions. After a dozen generations, tensions started to appear. One side or another wasn't pleased with this or that. At that point, we still had the power to intervene, but it was our decision not to. Rather, it was a decision imposed on us, even if I personally agree with it. Guardians cannot rule an item. They are there to make sure that it remains whole.

There was a war between the factions, Dallion said, knowing where this was going.

There were hundreds of wars. At one point, one of the leaders convinced me to grant him one zoology gem to prove he was the chosen one and reunite the realm. It worked. For a few hundred years, at least. The second time, one of the mediocre rulers asked that I grant him the herbology gem, to provide crops for his subjects.

Dallion winced. He could see the idiocy of it all.

Yes, I thought exactly the same, the echo agreed. The cracklings weren't an issue back then, and us guardians were already creating an abundance of crops in the lands around our temples. The monarch, however, insisted that he have the power to create crops everywhere. The skill was wasted in half a generation.

So close, Dallion thought. So close, and yet so far away.

There was no logical reason for the king in question to ask for the gem. He didn't even use it for political gain, or to unite the realm, but out of unfounded fear or selfishness. With that single stupid action, he had deprived Dallion from the ability to potentially end the plague, or at the very least, learn more about it. And to make matters worse, Dallion wasn't sure that the third sword would be any different. Even if he were allowed to enter it, which wasn't at all certain, the chances of finding the two-crown there intact were astronomical. Millennia was a long time, and it was more than likely that some ruler or other had used them for one reason or another.

Why didn't you stop them? Dallion asked.

I hoped they would prove worthy of wearing the two-crown and leading the dryads back in the real world. When I learned that our plans for world conquest had failed, and the entire race had been banished, I realized that they would never be able to return. At that point, the crown became nothing more than a vanity item. The crystal turned opaque again. Is there anything else you need?

No. I've seen enough. Dallion left the realm.

Reality changed, bringing him back to the Icepicker guild. For several seconds, Dallion remained still. Finally, he pulled his hand back from the tip of the sword. A barely noticeable line had emerged near the hilt, moving gone like a single white hair among the corrosion.

Found what you wanted? the vice guild master asked. It was certain that he had noticed the change as well, yet chose not to comment on it.

Yes, Dallion lied. I saw exactly what I needed.

Good. I'll tell March you passed by.