

Leveling up 561

Chapter 561: The Archduke's Game

A cool breeze greeted Dallion as he entered his realm. The echoes had changed things a bit, transforming the landmass into a crescent island connected through miles long suspended bridge to an archipelago of islands. Each of the main guardians had their own domains: the harpsisword had retained her tower close to the shore, Vihrogon had his lodge inland, surrounded by trees. The bowl dryad guardian had a simple wooden dome nearby, next to a small pond. She was the only inhabitant of Dallions domain that preferred to live in the simplest conditions possible. Maybe it was to make her spend as much time as possible in the realm itself.

On that note, Dallion was seriously worried about Vihrogon. The armadil shield guardian was spending more and more time in his lodge, rarely talking to anyone, and even more rarely leaving his domain.

A fair distance away, on the peak of the realms mountain, Luxs new observatory tower rose up. A few months it had been a simple lighthouse. Since then, Dallion had spent a considerable amount of effort and resources to construct a crescent dartblade from sky silver, as well as integrate his kaleirdevisto in it. Nil still wasnt convinced that was a good idea, but Dallion preferred to have the option to use lux for long ranged attacks in the real world as well.

Hey, Dal, Ariel greeted him. Being the highest-level echo in the domain, he had effectively become the unofficial realm guardian in case of invasion attempts. Here to have a go again?

You know Im here, Dallion frowned. You can read my mind. Nil! Dallion looked around. Did you send him to dissuade me from taking the trial?

We felt that you might be rushing things a bit. You just came back from your hunters trial and Lux, Dallion said.

A blue firebird appeared, then immediately perched on his shoulder.

Yes, boss? it chirped.

Take me to a trial location, Dallion ordered, ignoring Ariel altogether.

Blue flames surrounded Dallion. Two wings emerged from his back, then took him into the air. On the way, Dallion summoned the rest of his gear to him: harpsisword, thread cutter, dartblade, nox dagger, and whip blade. It had become standard practice to take all of them into his trials. Often they werent enough.

The firebird propelled Dallion across the mountains to the other side of the island, where a total of thirteen doors were scattered about. Each door represented a trial for one of Dallions remaining levels until eighty. At that point, hed have to go through another gate and have a conversation with a Moon.

New or old? Lux asked.

Lets go with something new. He had failed the last three trials several times already, and although Dallion believed to have caught the pattern of his last attempt, he preferred to try something new. Nil had let it slip that, at this point, the order in which the trials were passed didnt matter.

Ultimately, he wouldn't proceed to the gate trial without completing all of them, so he might as well check out all of them and decide which ones to tackle first.

The door Lux flew to was in the trunk of an enormous tree in the second forest of the island. It was the only one made of wood, far more plain looking than all the rest. Standing in front of it Dallion felt a feeling of calm surrounding him, but he knew better to expect the same would be inside. Once he went through the door, everything would change.

Ready? he asked his gear.

No one said a word, indicating agreement. Taking a deep breath, Dallion opened the door and stepped inside.

You're in the halls of destiny!

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future.

A blue rectangle appeared. Dallion waved his hand through, barely giving it a glance. He had seen it so many times that he knew the message by heart. Wooden steps winded down further into the ground. There were no touches of light gems anywhere. Lux's flames, though, were enough to illuminate everything several steps away.

Keep me a foot above the steps, Dallion said, just to be safe. It wasn't rare that the floor would collapse at the start of the trial, putting Dallion in a difficult position. The danger had largely diminished since Lux had become his familiar.

After several minutes walking down, the stairwell split into two, both sections continuing to wind down into the darkness. The way they split, though, was not something Dallion had seen. It wasn't a standard fork going in two directions, but one of them seemed to spiral around the other.

Seen anything like this, Nil? Dallion asked.

Afraid not, dear boy, the old echo replied. If it's another paradox, it's not one I'd seen.

There was a brief moment of hesitation, after which Dallion continued along the inner stairwell. In his view, it was better to keep close to the heart of the matter rather than get distracted. Another two hundred steps or so, the stairwell split again. This time, the hesitation was less. Dallion barely slowed down before taking the innermost option. He was almost expecting for there to be another split, when the stairwell suddenly came to an end in a small corridor.

Gleam, keep an eye for illusions, Dallion said. The whip blade disappeared as the familiar transformed into her shardfly self. Fluttering half a step in front of him, she led the way.

The tunnel continued to an arch, which then led to a much larger room. The moment Dallion entered, light crystals lit up everywhere.

Crap, Dallion said beneath his breath.

The room was square, hundreds of feet in length, with tilted walls forming a pyramidal space. The worst of it was that he had seen a version of that room before when he had ventured in the fallen southern abandoned temple of the Star.

I must admit, I didnt expect that, Nil said. To be honest, though, you dont have anything to be alarmed about. There are records of trials that have taken place in pyramidal chambers. And rest assured, this isnt the Stars chamber.

As much as he wanted to believe that, Dallion couldnt be sure. For close to a minute he looked around, searching for any sign or indication that this might belong to the Sta. When he failed to do so, he quietly continued forward to the center of the room.

Single-story buildings were everywhere, placed like simple abodes along wide streets. In the very middle, a relatively large square arena was visible, rising three-stories high. From what could be seen through the large archway, there was nothing except an empty town square inside.

Gleam?

Everything is as it should be, the shardfly replied. For a trial.

Bursting into instances, Dallion continued forward. As he made his way, tiles lit up beneath him, forming a light of light. Upon reaching the arena, the entire structure lit up, as if made of light crystals.

Come in, the familiar voice of Archduke Linatol invited him.

An archduke echo? Dallion wondered. This wont go well.

Passing through the archway, he saw that he wasnt mistaken. The archduke was dressed in a rather simple set of elegant white clothes, contrasting with his dark skin.

Hello, Dallion, the man said, standing calmly in the middle of the arena floor. Glad you made it. Im still a bit upset that you didnt come to see me after finishing your task. I would have rewarded you.

No, youre not, Dallion said, as he went up to him. And no, you wouldnt have.

Maybe youre right. The truth is that youll never know. March and Eury came, while you were too scared to admit that you broke my toy.

You arent the real Archduke. Dallion was used to those tricks. Trial echoes always acted as if they were someone they werent. Whats the trial?

So rushed. Dont you want to have a chat? Its almost certain that youll never get a chance to talk to an archduke. Why not take advantage of what youre offered?

There was a theory that every trial echo had fragments of the person they were copying. Neither Dallion nor anyone else was in a condition to confirm that. One thing was for certain: they were extremely convincing. Some even believed that the Moons placed copied the originals, making the trial echoes indistinguishable.

Theres nothing I want to know, Dallion lied. Except the nature of my trial.

If thats what you want. The Archduke shrugged. Youre probably seen this room?

Dallion nodded. He had done more than that. Thanks to his high mind trait, he had memories it, creating an image of it in his head.

Consider this a city, the Archduke continued. And by that I don't mean only the structures. Think of it as a city in every sense of the world: a place with its organizations, guilds, and politics.

So, this is a mental trial?

In a way, but it's physical as well. As the saying goes, you need to master both in order to win in politics: the mind to make the right decision and the strength to achieve it.

Through the archway behind the echo, Dallion saw a few buildings change shape.

Every building houses a person, the Archduke explained. That person could be an ally, an enemy, or both. However, until you go to speak with them, they're neither. Our goal is simply to gather the most support in the city, claiming it for ourselves.

I bet there's nothing simple about it.

And you'd be right. The support a person provides depends entirely on their position. A guild master is useful for doing errands, but they won't be a tenth as influential as the head of a large merchant union. You'll be able to tell the nature of a person by looking at the house they inhabit. Naturally, the houses aren't to scale. A palace is no different from a shop, except in terms of appearance.

That sounded pretty straightforward.

Why is it called a game of politics? Dallion asked.

Because it's all based on choices. You noticed how floor tiles lit up as you passed along them? The same will happen as we move throughout the city. Naturally, neither of us can walk over a line made by the other. Consider it a promise made only to the first one who makes it is believed.

I assume it's the same about houses.

Not quite. Once you reach a house, you have to convince the person inside of your views. You can do it through brute strength, bribery, or manipulation. In short, any method you prefer. However, some of the people will fight back. Since you're a hunter, merchants and other hunters are more inclined to be convinced with little effort. However, guards and nobles, not so much. Sometimes, if you try to convince someone too important without any support, they might refuse to talk to you outright. If, for whatever reason, they fail to convince the person, you must get out of the house along the path you came in. The house, and the person, remain as they were.

How do I bribe?

You bribe them with promises, of course. Every person has a price. Offer that price and they will be yours.

And if I can't pay?

The person will change sides, becoming one of my supporters.

This was a rather intricate game. The really scary part was that Dallion was starting to picture how the game would work in real life. It was simplified, as everything in this world, but it was also quite valid when it came to playing politics, at least on a basic level.

Can I cross my own path?

No. The Archduke shook his head. That would be like breaking your word. You are not to step over the path you've made so far. However, some of the people you have convinced to join you might help you with that problem. That's something you'll have to find out.

Alright. Anything else?

Just two more things. During the trial, speed won't be a factor while walking. If one of us is going too fast, they will be stopped until the other catches up. The same cannot be said for negotiations. If you're slow at convincing people, you'll find that your opponent has made every promise there is and you have no place to set foot.

Sneaky. What's the second thing?

While you cannot break your word, you can take back what you said by walking back. You'll be reducing the path you've made, but sometimes it might be useful to do so.

Got it. Dallion went through all the rules in his head. There weren't many of them, but that's what made the game so complicated. Everything depended on his ability to plan strategically as well as be convincing. Let's start.

Chapter 562: Convincing a City

All four wall segments of the arena crumbled down, revealing the rest of the room. It had changed substantially since moments ago. There were guild halls, two-story merchant centers, three-story guard forts, as well as a few temples, and several noble mansions. One thing that the archduke hadn't explained was those different exits, twisting the path in a particular way. If Dallion were to guess, this would be changing one's behavior based on association with the specific supporters.

As the challenge started, the archduke took the path that was right of the town square. Considering his options, Dallion took the opposite one. There was no point in getting into conflict early on. His overall plan was to gain some merchant and guild supporters early on, then go directly for the nobles. The city guards were right out and the temples of the Order were also not a priority. While it was true that the clerics were quite influential, they weren't particularly fond of hunters, even if Dallion was technically an initiate.

As he made his way towards the nearest merchant building, Dallion glanced over his shoulder. The Archduke seemed to be focusing on guilds as well. Most likely he was going to go for the forts afterwards to achieve military dominance.

That was another thing that Dallion had to keep in mind: the significance of the various factions. Being backed by city guards tended to make convincing merchants and guild masters easier. Nobles and clerics, on the other hand, were more likely to look down on them.

This game really is like politics, Dallion thought. The worst thing was that all the skills that he had painstakingly gathered and improved weren't of any help. Sure, he could probably use them to convince people, but if he took too long, he'd lose the lead to the Archduke.

Why's the speed limited? Dallion asked. In real life, it isn't. The faster one would be able to reach a spot first.

Thats correct, Nil agreed. Speed is important in the real world. However, each trial should allow you a chance to win. If speed were as it should be, youd never stand a chance against the Archduke, or any noble for that matter.

Thinking about it, Dallion had to concede that he most likely wouldnt. For the moment, hed have to focus on targets of his caliber. Being a hunter allowed him to get a glance at the world of power and politics, but even so, he was just a visitor there, not a player. The best he could do was to be familiar with things enough so as to know the repercussions of his involvement, and not just be used like a headless pawn, as he had been back in Nerosal.

The first building Dallion entered was a guild. While a merchant organization was better, this was far closer and also gave him access to two merchant halls later on. From what Dallion remembered of his computer game days back on earth, centuries ago, efficiency was the proper strategy. However, he had yet to see whether it was the right thing in this case.

A single person stood in the extremely plain room inside. He was quite nondescript a person one would see in the street passing by. His clothes were his most remarkable feature, more specifically a bright green vest.

No sooner had Dallion glanced at the vest than a grape-sized blob of disapproval appeared in the persons chest.

Bad first impression, the echo said.

How so? Dallion remained calm.

My clothes are what youve set them out to be. Its your realm, so dont look at them, but look at me.

Duly noted, Dallion thought. That was one lesson to keep in mind: in the real world, the game was always going on. The only preparation time was while being alone.

What do I need to do to convince you? Dallion asked directly.

The direct approach. Good. I know you and I know your reputation. You, though, should know my stakes. If I side with you and you fail, I fail as well.

I didnt think the Archduke was so vindictive, Dallion said while adding a few notes of calm and confidence in his voice.

As he did, the disapproval in the others chest vanished, replaced by grains of opportunity. Dallion knew this was just a trial, but were it the real world, a guild master would be willing to gamble for a chance of better things. With a few notable exceptions, most of the small guilds wanted to get bigger, and the bigger guilds wanted to have more say. The only way either got to achieving such desires was if Dallion were to obtain control of the city.

Hes not, but he might want to set an example, the guild master said.

That will only work if youre the only one supporting me. Dallion used his music skills further to increase the subtle pressure on his target. If he goes against a third of the city or more, hell risk creating a rift.

That only works if you get more than five supporters.

There it was the bribery the Archduke had spoken about. Technically, it wasn't so much a bribe as a promise. In this case, it was a pretty easy one to make. If Dallion didn't have five followers, there was no way he'd win the trial, anyway.

Then I'll get five, Dallion said. I'll get ten.

The entire room lit up in bright white, the same as the path Dallion had created going there.

Fivell do. The guild master nodded. Lead the way.

Apparently, that was how one won a negotiation. Granted, Dallion probably had picked an easy target, but it was a lot easier than he expected it to be, almost anticlimactic. Although, he had to admit that individual wins didn't count. The trial focused on overall victory.

Beyond the other side of the building was another road that went along an entire lane of merchant buildings. Followed by his one supporter, Dallion quickly went to the one furthest to the right. Inside was another echo with an average appearance. The only difference was that instead of a brightly colored vest, he had a green cap in addition to the standard attire. Several of his emotions were visible as colored blobs, chiefly greed, fear, and determination.

Now, do you see why music is such a valuable skill? Nil asked.

Dallion had to agree. While good for entertainment and useful for haggling, it was extremely beneficial when it came to negotiations. A noble with a highly developed music skill would have an overwhelming advantage over everyone else. On that note, Dallion wondered what skills the Archduke Linatol had not only the trial echo, but the real one as well. Maybe he had been too quick to give up his opportunity to ask questions.

I see you've already gotten the hang of things, the merchant said, glancing at the guild master accompanying Dallion. Give me your pitch.

I can personally bring artifacts from the wilderness, Dallion began. However, no new emotions appeared within the other. That wasn't the best start. As a hunter, I also know the importance of he quickly stopped. It was almost impressive how he had managed to make it sound so horrible. I'll make things easier for you and hunters, Dallion added.

Judging by the change of the merchant's emotions, that had done a pretty good job, but it still wasn't enough. The security concerns still hadn't been alleviated. Thinking back to all of Dallion's dealings with merchants, that was their major fear. The creatures of the wilderness were the greatest danger for merchants small and large. Having hunters and mercenaries was one solution, as were guards, to ensure the safety of goods in the city as well as around it.

The guilds will mend your damages and protect you as mercenaries. That should be alright, right? Dallion glanced at the guild master next to him.

You'll need city guard captains, the merchant said firmly.

Then I'll get them. How many do you need?

The one in the district, at least. The more, the better.

Merchants need protecting, Dallion told himself. Got it.

It wouldn't be bad to also get other hunters involved. Dallion couldn't be sure, but he thought he'd seen a hunter's den in the city as well. That was something he'd have to check while getting more followers.

You'll have them, Dallion extended his hand.

With the final concerns of the merchant fading away, the echo shook Dallion's hand, at which point the building lit up. That made two for two. The ease and speed with which Dallion had acquired his initial following made him somewhat suspicious. There was no way a trial of this level could be so easy. Was he missing something?

Going out of the building, Dallion went to the next merchant hall and had an almost identical conversation. Having already one merchant over, the second was much easier. The third and fourth practically agreed to join him before he opened his mouth. At this point, Dallion knew that he'd made a mistake somewhere.

Lux, lift me up, he said. Unfortunately, nothing happened.

That is one ability you're not allowed, dear boy, Nil said. You can only use things in the city itself to affect it.

That didn't seem right, but Dallion knew better than to argue. The puzzles of the trials weren't perfect metaphors.

Can I climb onto buildings? he asked.

Only buildings of people who support you.

That made sort of sense. It stood to reason that people of greater influence would know what was going on in the city. If that was the way the trial wanted it, getting a city guard fort was a rather good investment, not to mention that it was a promise that Dallion had given to the merchants. Continuing along the roads, he went directly to the nearby fort and stepped inside.

The atmosphere was completely different from in any building Dallion had been to. While guild masters and merchants liked him, the guard captain echo absolutely despised him. Dallion could see a bundle of emotions within him, full of spite, annoyance, and disapproval. This wasn't going to be easy.

What do I need to do? Dallion asked, using his music skills to add authority in his words. From his experience, that was one of the things that guards respected almost above anything else.

Do some actual work? the captain crossed his arms. The sword and breastplate suggested that the echo was in condition to fight. The newly emerged emotion in his head showed that he was more than willing to challenge Dallion to a fight.

Does killing chainlings count? Or do you prefer a one-on-one?

The response was instant. Skipping all the banter, the captain drew his sword, making a slashing strike with the same action. He was definitely skilled, probably a level fifty at least.

Blocking with his shield, Dallion drew the Nox dagger.

Ready, Nox, he said, hitting the captain's blade on the side. Normally, the dagger had the power to create cracks on any item, splitting them to pieces. Yet, instead of that, the edge of the dagger bounced off.

Indestructible? Dallion wondered. He hadn't fought with a city guard captain before, but for some reason, he didn't expect them to have intractable weapons. Think about it, though, it made pretty good sense.

Drawing a dagger of his own, the captain continued with his attack. By the way he fought, it looked like he was an attack-oriented awakened. In more cases than not, that was advantageous, especially when dealing with people who hadn't faced one before. Dallion, however, had.

Evading the next few attacks, Dallion managed to complete a guard sequence, slowing down time. Two more sequences followed, bringing it to a near halt. At that point, all that was left to do was to strike. Since Dallion had no intention of killing a future supporter even if it was an echo, he struck the captain's right hand, causing him to drop his main weapon.

Enough for you? he asked, filling his words with the notion of surrender. I can disarm the dagger if you want.

Remaining perfectly still, the captain looked Dallion in the eyes, then at the sword that was on the ground.

No need, he said slowly. You've won this one. But if you lose any of your next three fights, I'll reconsider my support.

Good to know. Dallion took a step back. This appeared too much like a game, even more so than other trials. Every echo was going out of its way to help him, telling him the consequences of his actions and what actions to do.

How do I get to the top of the building? Dallion asked.

There's a staircase, the captain said. As he did, a flight of stairs appeared on the side of the room. Keep in mind that going up is considered movement.

That was the trade-off if Dallion wanted to see what the Archduke was doing, it was going to cost him advancement. It was a gamble, but one Dallion was willing to make. Nine times out of ten, being informed was always better in the long run.

Dallion ran up the stairs until he reached the top. It was a short trip to the top, but it allowed him to get a view of the entire room. Sadly, once Dallion did, he saw what a mistake he had made.

Chapter 563: Order Bound

Oh, crap! Dallion thought as he looked at the actions his opponent had done.

So far, the Archduke hadn't entered a single structure. Instead, he was creating a wide perimeter, circling a large chunk of the room. As he walked, the tiles beneath him lit up in a deep blue. The echo continued for several more steps until he suddenly stopped, then turned in Dallion's direction and waved.

I see you've got a head start, the echo shouted. Good play. I hope I'm able to keep up.

The compliments were false. Dallion could tell that he was in a catching up position. As he had seen, convincing people was easy. A far greater challenge was reaching them. That's why his missions were so insignificant back when he was an apprentice hunter. It wasn't because of his skills; those were good; everything else, though, needed some work. The rest of the hunters Dallion knew from Nerosal had left to other provinces, becoming quite famous. According to the rumors, one of them had even become a count's personal hunter. In contrast, Dallion refused job offers when offered to him.

Dallion rushed back down and out to the street. He had gained the support of five people so far, but only two-thirds of the city to play with. Given the current development, it was too late to carve out parts of it for himself. With the Archduke's head start, the only thing he could do was win enough small battles before the rest of the city was sealed off to him.

Zigzagging through the streets, Dallion convinced another three guild masters and two merchants before he reached the next fortress. The opinion of the local captain was somewhat better than the first, although it still came to a battle one that Dallion won with ease.

The joy was short-lived. It didn't take Dallion climbing up to the top of the fort to find that the Archduke had carved off three quarters of the room.

Everything that's visible is an illusion, Dallion thought.

To a random observer, there would be no doubt that Dallion was favored to win; he had roughly a fifth of the support needed for control of the city, while his opponent had yet to convince a single person. Such reasoning was incorrect.

Dallion considered whether to attack the Archduke directly. There was nothing in the rules that said that he couldn't, although that was a sign of desperation. The worst part was that Dallion knew it, but still wasn't sure that he had any other option. If things continued along the current trajectory, he was certain to lose. Going against the archduke gave him at least a theoretical chance.

Is there anything you can help me with? Dallion asked the small group walking along behind him. It was slightly unnerving having them follow him anywhere he went, but he had started to get used to it.

Every action has its price, one of the guild masters said. I can help you go over the Archduke's path, but it'll cost you my support.

You're going to turn sides because of that?

No. The echo shook his head. If I break promises in your stead, I'll lose my influence, which means you'll lose it as well.

In other words, I'll be sacrificing you.

This wasn't a desirable outcome. Dallion had to think a bit. If he sacrificed one person to go through the Archduke's blockade, he could snatch another group of followers. The issue was that in doing so, he'd only box himself further in.

Dallion went through the calculations. Even in a best-case scenario, it wasn't going to be enough. The Archduke had made sure of that, dividing the room into a series of small segments. In order to go through them all, Dallion was going to have to sacrifice more than a few people, and he suspected that with each next sacrifice, it was going to become more and more difficult to convince

new people to join him. After all, whod want to join someone who would sacrifice them at the first opportunity?

How long have you been playing this game? Dallion shouted in the direction of the Archduke.

I thought you didnt want to ask any questions, came the reply.

I changed my mind.

Ever since I passed the second gate. My father wanted me to feel a bit of strife until I got a proper education. But the real game started once I passed level eighty. Up to then, it was like a large training session. The same youre doing right now.

And Im probably making the same mistakes, Dallion thought.

Do I have a chance to win? he asked.

The trials still going, so who knows? Maybe Im just bluffing and youve been in the lead all the time?

As nice as that sounded, Dallion knew it not to be true. He had messed up in the same fashion hed often done: focusing on the battle while ignoring the war. That was part of the problem. As a piece he only had battles. Up to recently, he couldnt even tell what the wars were.

Arent you going to offer me a draw? The Archduke mocked.

Wont I lose, if I do?

Good catch. Yes, you will. The goal of the trial is to win, so even a draw is considered a loss.

Thats not how real life works

Thats exactly how real life works. The one who asks for the draw is the one whos lost, even when both sides are just as weak. It shows you didnt have the nerves to let the other side make the move first.

The logic sounded twisted, but there was also some truth to it. In this world of concepts and illusions, such an action would indeed be perceived as weakness. Many would constantly wonder whether the other side had accepted due to necessity, or because they had won the war behind the scenes and were giving their opponent a way to save face.

Now you see why so few engage in the game of politics, dear boy, Nil chuckled. Intrigue, manipulation, and strength are all mixed into one, and you must be strong on all fronts, less you fall.

I dont suppose you have any advice for me on this, Nil?

No one else can pass your trials for you, dear boy. I can assist, but not do the work for you.

No, I suppose you cant.

With a sigh, Dallion continued along through the streets. This time he made a straight line of line, blocking the Archduke from entering the territory he had. His opponent understood that and proceeded to enter his first house. Shortly after, Dallion did the same.

A new phase began in which each side went on to gather support in the most efficient way. Once more, the Archduke was considerably better at it. It wasn't that he used as many skills as Dallion, or even had them. All he had to do was merely pointing out how much of the room he had cordoned off for himself to get people to pledge loyalty.

By the time Dallion had amassed thirty followers, the Archduke had thirteen. The difference was that there were three buildings remaining in Dallion's section, while close to fifty in that of his opponent.

What if I refuse to continue? Dallion asked loudly. Won't I win by default?

You're looking at this as a game. It isn't. If you kill a beast in the wilderness, but refuse to hunt again, does that make you the greatest hunter for the next three generations? If you deliberately stall, your supporters will lose faith in you.

You didn't say that before. Dallion clenched his fists.

I didn't know I had to say the obvious. Refusing to go on is the same as quitting the trial. We're not talking about taking some time to think, although in the real world, that would be penalized as well. Whatever strategic mistakes you made, either fix them or give up.

Dallion felt anger built up within him; anger at himself for considering such a way out. It was as if he'd reverted to being the confused boy when he had first arrived in Nerosal.

Stay calm, Dallion told himself. Granted, he didn't understand much about politics, but that didn't seem to be the point of the trial. Having the knowledge always went a long way to completing a trial easily, but it wasn't obligatory. There was always a way to pass a trial, often more than one.

If it were easy, everyone would become a noble, Dallion said, then went in the direction of the temple.

Up until now, he had left the building untouched. When it came to real life, temples were strange. Strictly speaking, they weren't part of the empire or the local noble, but they didn't control anything, either. It was a well-established fact that they didn't particularly like hunters, although they disliked nobles even more.

When Dallion arrived at the temple, the Archduke had gained another five supporters, putting him only ten behind.

Stay here, Dallion said to the crowd accompanying him and entered.

Same as all the buildings till now, this one too was plain, occupied by a single echo wearing a crown. Apparently, Dallion's subconscious viewed the Order as being the real ruler of the world.

Hello, Dallion began. I'd like the Order to lend me its support.

The Order? the cleric asked.

I know a thing or two about the Order. If a city bishop lends me his support, that is the same as all clerics lending it. And half the awakened as well, Dallion added mentally.

You know what youre asking, right?

Perfectly.

And youre still making such an absurd request?

Its not like I have much of a choice.

Begging is the last refuge of incompetence. The cleric found, as a large ball of disappointment and disgust formed in his body.

I thought violence was the last refuge.

Begging is what follows unsuccessful violence.

You havent even asked what I have to offer.

Look. I dont particularly like you. I acknowledge your skills, and the fact that youre favored by a Moon. Aside from that, theres nothing you can do to convince me to lend you my support, let alone ask the bishop to do so.

Ill give the city to the Order.

A dozen of emotions flared up within the cleric. This wasnt an offer someone usually did. The only thing that nobles strived for was control, especially those in charge of settlements. The only exceptions were caretakers and village chiefs, but even they had ambitions to become something more.

Are you sure about this? the cleric asked. Once you make the offer, you wont be able to take it back.

Why would I? Im a hunter. What good is a city to a hunter?

The cleric looked at Dallion sideways, as if trying to make up his mind whether to believe him or not. His emotions, on the other hand, had already betrayed him. For anyone with music skills, it was obvious that the offer was too good to be true.

Do you need me to make a vow? Dallion asked, to get things moving along.

No. You have the Orders support.

The room lit up. Thento Dallions great surpriseit vanished, revealing the rest of the room. The surprise didnt end there. The tiles on the ground also lit up, expanding in concentric circles.

You have no idea what youve done, do you? Nil asked.

Seems like Ive won. Dallion watched as the entire city lit up in his light. There was no possibility of convincing any more people at this point, but neither could the Archduke.

Do, dear boy, you have not won. You merely passed the trial. I just hope you never have to find out what you really did in real life

BOUND TO THE ORDER

(+2 Mind)

Receiving help from the Order is a smart move. Be careful, though. What the Order gives, the Order can take.

A blue rectangle appeared, followed by a green one.

You have broken through your sixty-eighth barrier.

You are level 68.

Choose the trait you value the most.

Finally, after weeks of failed attempts, Dallion had moved one step closer to reaching level eighty. Yet, he didnt feel any joy in passing the trial or his achievement. By all accounts, he should have lost. In fact, he had lost: the Archduke would have easily convinced twice as many people as him, if the trial hadnt suddenly concluded thanks to the Orders involvement. Granted, it was a valid way of winning, but as Nil had said, it wasnt Dallion that had one.

Maybe that was the lesson of the trial: the knowledge that there always were stronger entities that one didnt have to ally with lightly. Or maybe it wasnt

Chapter 564: Back of Halburn

The inns kitchen emerged around Dallion. His eyes moved about, readjusting to the new reality. Even after all this time, he hadnt gotten used to the experience completely.

Did you make it? Aspan asked, as a copy of him placed a plate of food on the table, in front of Dallion.

Yeah. Im sixty-eight.

The food smelled nice, but for some reason Dallion didnt seem hungry. He was still contemplating his decision at the trial. Was it the right choice? Or was it the wrong one?

How was the trial? Hannah asked.

Different, Dallion replied. It wasnt a combat one.

Non-combat trials are usually messed up, the copyette said. Some make sense only after you see how stuff works in the real world. Want some pointers?

Im fine. Dallion stood up, not touching his food. I better get going. Jiroh said it was urgent.

Thats not what I asked.

I know. Dallion replied before leaving the kitchen.

As he did, the fake Hannah passed by him, going in. With the conversation done, the copyette was getting rid of any incriminating evidence. The order was still hunting him, even if they didnt know he was in the city.

That was a bit abrupt, dear boy, Nil said. Still upset with the trial?

No, Dallion lied. Just worried about everything else.

None of the guards stopped Dallion as he left the city. It was normal for hunters to come and go. Plus, with Eury gone, he had become the only hunter in Nerosal. That had increased his value to the nobles, as well as the mirror pool. Now he understood why it had been so easy for Jiroh and Eury to

save him from all sorts of complicated situations. Everyone wanted to be on the good side of a hunter. It wasn't so much about strength true nobles had plenty of that but convenience. The hunters were the ones sent into the wilderness in search of artifacts and creatures; they were the ones to deal with Starspawn that the local and imperial armies didn't want to, especially now that the empire was engaged in war with several other countries. The only person with which Dallion's position didn't hold any new favor was the general. One would think that the sly snob would be overjoyed that one of his debtors had become a full hunter. Instead, he had been avoiding Dallion for months.

Ruby, keep close by, Dallion said to the gem-like shardfly fluttering above him. There are furies where we're going.

The creature flew down, quickly landing on his shoulder. Of all the creatures Dallion had found and released in the wilderness, Ruby was the only one who had remained. One could say that he was Dallion's only real world familiar, and like any familiar, he had grown in strength as well.

Get some rest. You'll need it.

The same thing could be said to you, dear boy,

Nil sighed. *It's been a while since you had some decent sleep.*

I got enough rest

In truth, Dallion didn't want to sleep again for a while, at least not until he fulfilled his promise to Jiroh. There was no reason for him to do so, and it wasn't like the fury could enter his dreams at will, but something told him not to risk it.

The wilderness had changed a lot in the last three months. Most of the patches of plague plants in the area had died out, some with help from Dallion. That had brought a quick return of caravans in the area, traveling all the way to the sea and back, as if there was no tomorrow. Regardless of the occurrences up north, there was no stopping trade. At least, that had been the case. From what Jiroh had said, both the order and the empire were interested in Halburn. As a trading town, it was a nice prize for a local noble, though Dallion could see no reason for the Order to be there.

Has anyone offered cities to the Order? Dallion asked.

Still focused on the trial? Nil asked.

Jiroh said that the only reason the imperials didn't move in was because the clerics were there. Why are the clerics there, Nil?

Even the Academy has no idea why the Order does the things they do. They are far older than the Tamin Empire. It's said that there were temples back when the copyettes tried to take over the world.

Some of the ruins Dallion had seen confirmed that. Even the altar near his home village was nothing like the current temples of the Order. It was universally claimed that the altars were created by the clerics of the Order. The secret Dallion had learned while asking a few items at an Order shrine was that was only true for the past. In the last several hundred years, no cleric had created a new altar. Only old ones were used, which was why they were protected so jealously.

Has anyone tried to destroy the Order?

Thats a question many have asked. There are records of Archdukes trying during the early days of the empire. Lets just say thats the reason why some provinces dont share the name of their rulers. Incidentally, thats also why no one is willing to hand over cities to clerics. The Order never takes, but what its given it doesnt return.

Good to know. What are they searching for in Halburn?

Only two things: something old or something new. I guess youll find out when you get there.

The weather shifted twice during the trip to Halburn. Clouds would appear out of nowhere, then be suddenly dispersed without any warning. From what Dallion had read in his ring library, that was a tactic used by furies during battle. That kept him a bit on edge. Gleam had gone there with the whip blade and made sure that the clouds were in fact only clouds; though. Dallion had been among furies long enough to know that wasnt a guarantee.

A large camp of military tents surrounded the watchtower by the border. The troops were local. Dallion could make out the emblems of the Countess Priscord. All of them seemed skilled and battle-hardened. Something normal border guards wouldnt be.

Mercenaries, the harpsisword said, her voice a combination of musical sounds merged together to form speech.

Dallion nodded. Several of them still werent used to their uniforms, wearing not at all to standard. Some even had their own weapons instead of standard military issue.

Hey! One of them shouted, seeing that Dallion was watching them. Whats your business?

Hunter, Dallion replied casually, showing his emblem.

In nine times out of ten, that was enough to avoid answering any serious questions. Thankfully, this was one of those times. The soldier checked him out, paying special attention to the weapons, then disturbed for him to keep on going.

Interesting, Dallion said to himself. None of the soldiers had warned him about there being imperials or clerics in the town. Was it possible that they didnt know? Halburn was half a day away, so it stood to reason that things there could be kept secret. Something of such importance would have been communicated, though unless it was done without the knowledge of the local Archduke or the countess.

Thats the game of politics, dear boy, Nil said. Better get used to it.

Nil, I chose to become a hunter precisely not to get involved in this. Once Ive gotten Di out of there Ill get back to how things were before.

Things will never be as they were before. I know youll try, but youll see. The more one goes down the path of awakening, the more one sees things that were invisible before.

I know. Possibly for the first time in his life, Dallion missed the days when his awakening level restricted him from knowing things.

As night came, Dallion stopped. He had no intention of sleeping, but didnt want to approach a town surrounded by two armies in the dark. Finding a nice spot, he put his backpack and gear on the ground, then sat down.

Only two of the seven Moons were visible in the sky: the Red and Green ones. Lately, that had been common that only a few of them would be overhead, though never the same. In the awakening realms, that would mean that only some of the Moons were paying attention to what was happening. As for the real world, though, Dallion had no idea.

Gleam, he said. Keep an eye on things. Im going to get some rest.

I thought you werent going to sleep until you got back, the familiar said.

I wasnt. Dallion curled on the ground.

Getting the hint, the whip blade rose from the ground, then extended to form a protective circle in the air surrounding him. Not the most efficient way of fighting, but this way she could see everything in all directions.

Morning came suddenly. The first way of the sun was enough to wake up Dallion thanks to the level of his perception trait. He stood up, stretched, yawned, then went to finish his daily biological functions. Washing up, he then took a few minutes to himself, then continued on. This was going to be a big day.

Several hours later, Dallion was glad that he had waited until morning. He expected there to be a large imperial presence near the town, but even he wasnt prepared for what he saw. Judging by large tents and soldiers gathered near the wall, there had to be thousands, or at least five full legions. That was a considerable fighting force for a relatively small town such as this.

What do you think, Harp? Dallion asked as he calmly made his way to the town gates. Forties?

Some are in their thirties, the harpsisword replied. The officers are higher, maybe close to your level.

A thousand awakened that were all initiates just standing there, waiting for an equally strong army of clerics to leave the city. Something was definitely going on here.

Hunter, Dallion said, showing his emblem to the first imperial he approached. I have business in the city.

The legionary glared at him. Dallion could feel annoyance and confusion emanating from the man; he had no intention of stopping Dallion whatsoever.

Talk to the guards, the imperial said in utter disinterest and went back to talking to the other soldiers nearby.

Seems they arent worried about losing the town to anyone else, dear boy.

With that many of them, I wouldnt be worried, either. Any idea if any of your mage friends will show up?

If youre talking about someone from the Academy, its possible, though unlikely. The emperor doesnt like to have them accompany his troops. Well, unless there was an active war going on, but you know that.

No one stopped Dallion at the city gate or after. Business seemed to have returned to the city. However, the hunters had not. It was difficult to imagine that this used to be one of the hunter gathering spots in the south. Only a few years ago, hunters from all directions would stop here for a few days to get some rest, restock, and learn of new jobs. The only thing that Dallion could see now were war clerics, furies, and a lot of local sellers.

The place seems booming, Nil said. Maybe Jiroh was making a big fuss over nothing?

Jiroh isnt one to exaggerate, Dallion said. Besides, not everything is booming.

What do you mean?

Do you see any open inns or taverns? Dallion asked. Even with the hunters gone, all the merchants that came by would have a place to sleep.

The way Dallion saw it, there were only two options, none of them particularly good. Either the inns and taverns were confiscated by the local ruler, or their owners had left on their own.

Looks like Jiroh was right. This was urgent. Dallion continued forward in the direction of the furies tavern.

Chapter 565: The Empty District

Theres no one there, a mercenary fury said as Dallion kept knocking on the door of Dirohs inn.

Seems so. Dallion turned around. What happened? There used to be lots of hunter inns a few months ago.

Guess you havent been here a bit longer than that. The fury smirked. He looked like a typical mercenary for hire, with a lot of mismatched pieces of armor and custom-made weapons. The one surprising thing was that he also had a spark of awakening in him. It wasnt much a low double digit at most but for a fury that was quite impressive. Your kind stopped coming here for a while. After that, the noble closed most of the inns.

Why?

Do I look like a noble?

The conversation seemed casual, but thanks to his music skill Dallion could tell it was no accident. The calm determination emanating from the fury suggested that he was sent to keep an eye on Dallion. Someone was concerned that a hunter had come to town. Either that, or it was Dis place that was the focus of concern.

Any other place I can use? Dallion asked.

Not with the Order here. With so many of them everything that was open was taken by them. And when theyre gone, the imperials will pour in. Guess youre out of luck.

Quite straightforward. Hes insistently trying to get rid of you, dear boy, Nil said.

How do I get to talk to a noble? Dallion ignored the advice.

You dont. Nobles want their calm. After everything that happened in the last year its understandable. Theres not many of them left.

That came as a partial surprise. Dallion knew for a fact that the poison plague shouldnt have affected Halburn to this extent. And yet, even he had heard that an alarming number of nobles had died.

Then Ill check with the merchants. Plenty of them around.

Seeing that Dallion wasnt taking the obvious hints, flashes of annoyance flashed through the mercenary. There was also hesitation. The hunter emblem visible round Dallions neck not only offered protection, it was a testament regarding his strength. In a one-to-one battle it was all but certain that Dallion would win.

You really should leave. The fury went for the direct approach. Its not safe for awakened like you.

Youre an awakened, Dallion countered. So is everyone in both armies around here. Ill leave when I decide. Keep pressing and I might choose to look into the reason the ruler doesnt want hunters.

The threat was far from subtle, but made its point. With a slight nod, the fury took a few steps back, then disappeared in the blink of the eye. Furies usually did that, but thanks to his current traits, Dallion was able to see the mercenary do it.

Nice person, Nil said. Its doubtful he was the only one, though.

He wasnt, Dallion replied.

If you have something to add, just come down here and say it, Dallion said, looking around.

To the untrained observer, it would seem that he was searching for something. In truth, he made a point of pausing and looking in the eye of the dozen other furies who were spying on him. He had noticed their presence ever since he had entered the old hunters section, which now was little more than a ghost town. All the buildings were closed and barred up, and not a single person in the streets.

There was a moment of silence. Without making a single sign the mercenaries left the rooftops they were hiding on. A few tried to be cheeky and stayed a bit longer just to check whether Dallion noticed. When he proved that he had, they had joined the rest, giving him some space. At least they were skilled enough to know when they were outmatched.

That meant Dallion had to be quick. No doubt right now they were reporting their findings to the noble who had sent them. It was likely that in a matter of minutes he would appear, and that would prove a lot more difficult than dealing with a bunch of mercenaries.

Is Di inside? Dallion asked the guardian of the building.

She doesnt want to see you, the inn replied.

She was happy to see me last time. What changed?

She doesnt want to see anyone. Just go. Youve caused enough trouble by being here.

I cant do that. Dallion grabbed the doors handle. Will you let me in or must I do it myself?

There was no response. Taking that as a no, Dallion took out his Nox dagger and discretely pressed the blade through the point where the door connected to the frame. There were a series of soft clicks. Cracks appeared, allowing the blade to move in further, causing the wooden bar holding the door to snap.

Putting his dagger away, Dallion then calmly opened the door and stepped in.

The place had definitely seen better days. There was no dust or dirtfurries wouldnt tolerate thatbut here was little else, either. What few chairs remained were clustered in the corner and the bar shelves had a single empty bottle on them. Barring the door anew, Dallion went towards the stairs. Barely had he set foot on the lowest one, when a cluster of clouds flowed down from above, changing into a rather large and vicious fox.

Hello, Skye, Dallion said with a slight smile. Been a while.

The creature growled at him for a few seconds more, then relaxed somewhat, although it remained blocking his path. The creature wasnt native to this world, although it seemed to have adapted quite well. Originally, it was Jirohs pet cloud fox from the fury world. When Dallion had come back to the awakened world, it had come along with him to serve as both gift and guardian to Jirohs kid sister.

Youve gotten smellier, the fox snorted.

Still mad at me? She was the one who wanted to be left alone.

You could have insisted more! That never stopped you when you in my world. You went against the odds even when things were hopeless.

Im here now, Dallion said. Ji sent me to get Di out.

Dallion expected the fox to growl, but she didnt. Instead, she shrunk to half her size. Feelings of relief and gratitude streamed through her.

Shes up in one of the beds, Skye said. Be careful, shes gone through a lot.

I will. Dallion walked up. The cloud creature shifted into a cloud and flowed past him.

The room above seemed unchanged since the last time Dallion was here. The only difference was that this time it was Diroh on one of the beds, wrapped in several layers of covers. Dallions instinct was to think that she was ill. Then he saw the state of the covers. All of them were pristine, and far more expensive than they were supposed to be. Also, looking closer, he managed to notice an invisible layer of air between each of the covers.

Youve awakened, Dallion said. That would explain why Jiroh had suddenly contacted him now. The awakening had probably allowed her to get in touch with her sisters dreams, or maybe the Orange Moon had shared the news.

Go away, the fury whispered. Her emotions, however, plead for Dallion to stay. The amount of fear and confusion was so great that it was more noticeable than the covers.

Being a fury, it was most likely that her reaction trait was advanced, although it could be her perception as well. Dallion remembered the early days of his awakening, back when bedsheets felt like sandpaper. If she had to deal with that on her own, it must have been quite unpleasant.

When?

A week ago, Skye replied, wrapping herself around the bundled fury. It just happened. There was no reason for it.

Are you a thunder fury?

In response, Diroh removed enough of the covers for her face to become visible. Her skin was paper-white, as was her hair. That meant she was a normal fury, although not quite. While thunder furies were a rare occurrence, awakened furies were a close second. Numbers varied, but according to what Dallion had heard, less than one in ten thousand furies at present were awakened.

Nil, have you heard of clerics affecting awakening? Dallion asked, approaching Diroh.

There are lots of rumors on the topic, mostly coming from the Order itself, but the short answer is no. If it were the case, the Order would have been full of awakened war orphans.

They do have a large number of awakened

Oh, most definitely. Having an awakening altar at your disposal helps considerably. However, if you note, all of the awakened are human.

Thinking about it, that was right. In fact, that had made Dallion to initially think the Order was an organization created by the Tamin Empire. It was only later that he had learned that it was older, composed of different races from many different kingdoms.

Coincidence?

Coincidences do happen, dear boy. But that isnt the issue. No matter how she became an awakened, neither the empire nor the order will be willing just to let her go. And I dont even know how the mercenaries or their employer will act.

How does it feel? Dallion asked softly.

Terrifying, Diroh replied in a whisper.

The room with walls?

Not just the room. The thing that followed. Id been among hunters all my life I thought I knew what it was. But it isnt. No one said anything about the pain.

Pain? Dallion didnt expect that. There had been no pain in his experience, only confusion. In fact, the greater part of the confusion was due to the sudden shift in worlds. What pain?

Like steel needles going through my veins and eyes. And they never stop.

This wasnt supposed to happen. Dallion put his hand on the furys forehead. She didnt feel particularly cold or warm. There werent any visible veins bulging, any signs of poison, or anything else he could come up with.

Skye, did she eat or drink anything strange before this happened?

No its not the plague, the cloud fox replied. I was very careful. I made sure the food was fine. She didnt do anything differently, she just awakened and then ended up in pain.

Any new strange abilities?

Not that I can see.

Di, I need you to let me enter your awakening realm.

Will it help? A flicker of hope could be felt in her words.

Im not sure, but it might. If somethings causing problems in your domain, I have a few friends that will find it. No need to worry, theyre my familiars. Just like Skye, but different.

The fury nodded. What do I need to do?

Just keep your eyes open.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality changed. This wasnt the first time Dallion was in anothers domain, but he would be lying if he didnt say that this was unlike any he had seen.

The starting room was very much as he remembered it: a windowless room with a single archway to a corridor outside. A blue rectangle with the familiar **YOU ARE LEVEL ONE** message floated in the air. However, the room wasnt made of stone, marble, or any other common material; it was entirely of ice.

Guess you dont see this every day, Nil said.

A single framed ice dagger was mounted to the wall with an ATTACK plaque underneath.

I guess you chose attack, Dallion said.

Thats what I was given. Diroh walked up next to him. She seemed a lot calmer in the awakened world.

Sometimes theres no choice. Do you feel better here?

The pain is gone, but when I go outside, it returns.

And the rectangles said nothing?

They told me to choose a trait, then to go into the halls of destiny. I walked along a long corridor. At the end of it, there was a dagger.

And when you took it, you were back in the real world.

The fury nodded.

Well, lets go through the corridor together.

Chapter 566: The Shadow Inside

Nox, Dallion said.

Instantly, the puma-like crackling emerged, leaping onto the ground a step away. His appearance was very different from the cub that Dallion had taken years ago. The eagerness and enthusiasm had gradually been replaced by lethal predator skills and lots of sleep. One thing that hadn't changed was Nox's desire to be flashy, especially in front of people who could see him.

That's your familiar? Diroh asked as the puma walked around, rubbing against her legs as it did so.

My first familiar. Dallion reached to pat the crackling's head. Nox pulled away like a teenager, ashamed to be seen with his parents. It was only after a few tries that he reluctantly allowed himself to be pet, still maintaining a displeased expression. He's quite strong and helped me unseal awakened.

Wow. Cautiously, Diroh reached to pet the side of Nox's head. This time, the puma didn't play hard to get.

He'll help me find anything that's not supposed to be here.

You think there's something wrong with me? Confusion shifted into anger.

You're not supposed to feel pain in the real world, Dallion quickly explained.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in the room itself. When Nox finished going over it, Dallion summoned Gleam and Lux to check it out as well. There were no illusions, no hidden realms, or anything that wasn't supposed to be there. Even the ice withstood Lux's flames, although it didn't hurt the fury.

With all options exhausted, Dallion stepped into the corridor. Unlike the one he used to have, this was nothing more than a straight tunnel continuing forward from the awakening room. With no limiting echo, the realm was rather dull.

Was the corridor this long last time? Dallion asked. Even with his current level of perception, he could barely see the end and not due to a lack of light.

I'm not sure. I only went down a few times.

That was impressive. When Dallion was level one, all he could do was mend and improve items. It was only later that he was told how to enter his awakened realm. The only plausible explanation was Diroh had picked up enough from the hunter chatter to be able to do this on her own. However, if that were the case, why was she so freaked out?

Felygn, if there's any Moon involved, can you tell me? Dallion asked.

No one answered.

The first few hundred feet or so passed well. There was nothing remotely suspicious. As Dallion approached the end of the corridor, though, he saw the faint shimmering of something that wasn't supposed to be there.

There's something ahead, Nox said.

I see it. Starspawn?

I don't know, but it's not pleasant.

It's not Starspawn, Gleam clarified. It's from the wilderness. Quite strong, though.

Di, Dallion split into instances, grabbing her shoulder in one. Stay back.

Why? Whats wrong?

Just stay here.

Gear emerged on Dallion as he walked to the end of the corridor. There was nothing but a blank wall there, probably the place that had held the dagger. Being new to this, the fury probably hadnt even noticed the shimmering in the texture. Or maybe she didnt have the level to?

Lux, Dallion ordered.

The firebird surrounded Dallion in blue flames.

Gleam, protect Di. Ill deal with whatever this is.

Thats a bad idea, the shardfly complained. Whatever is hiding there is strong. You might need a bit more help.

Its fine. Ill talk to it first.

The argument wasnt at all convincing, but it still got Gleam to flutter closer to the fury. Meanwhile, Dallion drew his harpsiwird.

Aware of what Dallion was about to do, Nox ran to the wall and struck at the hard surface with his claw. There was a sound like breaking ice, as transparent cracks appeared emerged. Normally, it would take a few more claws for anything to happen, but on this occasion, the wall suddenly shattered.

Nox! Dallion shouted.

The crackling lost form, instantly re-emerging on his belt as a dagger. Almost simultaneously, a hoof hit the spot that the puma had been.

SKILL GEM EMBODIMENT

Species: ICICORN

Class: SHADOW

Health: 100%

Traits:

- BODY 3**
- MIND 3**
- PERCEPTION 3**
- REACTION 6**
- MAGIC 3**

Skills:

- ATTACK**

- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **CHARGE (Species Unique)**
- **ICE FLOW (Species Unique)**

Weakness: HOOVES

What the heck?! Dallion couldnt believe his eyes.

The only place hed seen an icicorn was in the magic bestiary hed been given. They were magic creatures rarer than dragons. It was believed they had been abundant in the past until something had happened, effectively almost wiping them out. Now, the only places to frequently see them were within the realm of awakening altars and the occasional artifact.

Whys there a creature in her realm? Dozens of instances rushed to attack the creature, while dozens more held back.

One of the instances proceeded with a series of slash attacks, stacking up five red rectangles of minor damages, before suffering the aftereffects.

PERMANENT EFFECT - FROZEN ARM

Your RIGHT ARM has been permanently frozen. You will not be able to use your arm until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

That was a new effect, and achieved by Dallion attacking no less. Now wanting to deal with such a situation, he switched to an instance in which he was armed with his dartblade. Without hesitation, Dallion pulled the trigger, targeting and hitting the creatures front left hoof.

CRITICAL HIT

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

The entire leg shattered to pieces before Dallions very eyes.

LEG SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its FRONT LEFT LEG.

That, at least, seemed to have remained unchanged. It wasnt much of a consolation. While Dallion had leveled up a few dozen times since his last encounter with such a creature, having to fight in anothers realm made him feel more than a bit uneasy.

Two of his instances turned around to make sure that the Diroh was alright. To his surprise, she seemed to be handling it a lot better than he expected. There was a slight element of tenseness, but no shock or fear, as if she had been through this before. The calmness made Dallion wonder what exactly went on in hunter inns.

Before Dallion could think about it more, the icicorns missing leg regrew before his very eyes. Clearly, he wasn't the only one with the ability to heal himself. Not only that, but the creature slammed both front legs on the floor, filling the tunnel with ice fragments.

Shield! Dallion said as he lifted the armadil shield in front of him. It instantly expanded to the width of the tunnel. Dozens of ice pieces hit the shield, breaking like crushed glass.

Di, go back! Dallion shouted as he split again. Instances ran along the walls in an attempt to drive the creature back. Half of them were frozen solid.

Out in the real world, Dallion wouldn't dream of fighting like this. If Eury were here to see him now, she'd probably be extremely pissed. However, there was a time and place for everything, and in this situation, instances provided the greatest advantage.

Stop! Dallion shouted, using his music skills to instill hesitation into the icicorn. There's no need for this to go on.

To his surprise, the creature did indeed stop. Snorting a few times, it even went back a few steps until its hind legs were against the wall.

Careful, Nil said. It might be preparing to charge.

I know what I'm doing. Dallion lowered his shield.

Thanks, he said. Meanwhile, a dozen of instances were moving back, ready to react should the icicorn attack again. Why are you here? he asked.

I was placed here, the creature replied.

Hearing that, Dallion was glad that Diroh couldn't understand guardians.

By whom?

A hunter. He was very cunning. Tracked me down for months, then caught me. He was strong, much stronger than you.

I'm not particularly strong, Dallion lied.

You're strong, just not as strong as him.

That still doesn't explain what you're doing here. Guardians shouldn't enter an awakened's realm uninvited.

The fury wasn't awakened when I was put here. That is why the hunter placed me in her realm to hide me.

If I may, dear boy, Nil interrupted. I believe you've stumbled on an instance of skill smuggling. It's quite punishable, but some hunters used to place skill gems within non-awakened to transport them. I guess no one expected for the person carrying it to awaken.

Chills ran down Dallions spine. Only a mage would have come up with that. While he was a hunter, hed heard quite a few questionable practices, but none of them came close. Having a skill gem placed in someone sounded as bad as placing a limiting echo inside.

Could that have caused her awakening? Dallion asked.

Its as likely as not. Thats why the practice is discouraged. Sadly, I must admit that the mean reason was that the skill gem could be damaged, rather than anything else. Getting skills in and out of a non-awakeneds realm is not that difficult in itself. You yourself managed to get a dragon in yours. However, the side effects are unpredictable, even when using magic.

Why not just carry it as a gem?

That, I dont know. Maybe it wasnt something that the person wanted to be seen with. Or maybe it was harmful to awakened. I guess youll have to ask the hunter in question to find out.

Maybe one day Dallion would do that. Given how many hunters passed through a hunters inn, though, it was likely going to be a long search, if the hunter in question was even alive. Despite their skills, hunters died every year, especially on tough assignments. Fighting an icicorn in real life would be considered quite a challenge.

Whats happening? Diroh asked. Is the fighting over?

Stay there, Di! Dallion almost shouted. I can get you out of here, he told the creature.

No, you cant.

I have a Vermillion ring. I can

Im a shadow. The hunter I was fighting killed me. He took my skills gem and placed me here, where I grew, following the memories I had left.

How long ago did he put you here?

Its difficult to say. A very long time. I had very few memories at first, but as time passed, my memories grew. I remembered what I was like, how I behaved, what powers I had, until one day I had the strength to make the realm bigger.

There was nothing one could say to this. It was so extraordinary, even to Dallion, that he had no idea if it was the truth, or a weird dream belonging to a guardian. Sadly, that wasnt the toughest part.

You cant stay here, Dallion looked away. I can try to take you to my realm. Maybe there

I cant leave this realm. This isnt my form, this is only what I have created using my power. I am part of the realm, but also separate.

I dont want to kill you.

Youre a hunter, youre used to killing.

Im also an empath.

Clusters of serenity flared up within the creature like grapes. When Dallion saw them, he already knew what was to follow. He had seen enough creatures in the awakening realms to guess.

Shes too young to kill you, he said.

Shes not. And she wont kill me. Ill disappear and become part of her. My memories would be free as they were supposed to be.

Wont you have any regrets?

What are regrets? The icicorn asked, making its way past Dallion.

Gleam immediately fluttered in front of Dihor, protecting the creature. However, Dallion gave her a sign to move away.

Its over? the fury asked, still unsure what was going on.

It will be, Dallion replied.

The icicorn looked at the girl. She was quite small in comparison, rising just slightly above his chest. Slowly, the creature lowered its head, placing it on her shoulder.

Okay, Dihor laughed, reaching to pat it on the side of the neck. Before her hand reached it, however, the icicorn disappeared in a cloud of white dust that quickly faded. Away.

HAILSTORM acquired.

A green rectangle appeared.

Chapter 567: Escorting a Princess

For the first time in quite a while Dallion had witnessed something that not only defied explanation to him, but all of his guardians as well.

Nil insisted that Hailstorm wasnt a skill, and a quick check in Dihors awakening room proved that. Other than the ice dagger, there was no new frame on the walls, indicating that no new skills had been acquired. Dallion uses his layer vision, and even Gleam to go over every inch of the room, making sure that the skill wasnt somehow hidden. If it was, nothing he did managed to reveal it. Thankfully, that was largely irrelevant, for when they returned to the real world the furys pain had disappeared.

Give it a while, Dallion said as Dihor tried to sit up, only to get dizzy. Its a bit confusing at first. Youll get used to it the more you go into the realms. Keep it short for now. There will be time for longer visits later.

Its so messed up, the fury replied. How do you get used to this?

Dallion didnt reply. Instead, he was looking through the gaps in the bored window at what was going on outside. As he suspected, the mercenaries were back. For the moment they were just standing on the rooftops of nearby buildings, not even bothering to hide.

Skye, can you keep the sounds from reaching them? Dallion asked.

Thats what Ive been doing, the cloud fox said with smug pride.

That wasn't good. Not that a slip up would have been better, but at least then Dallion would know why they were keeping an eye on the fury. As things stood, there had to be some other reason entirely.

Di, did you ask anyone for help when the pain started?

No chance. The fury tried to stand up again. This time she managed, even if it was obvious that she was using air currents for support. This is no longer a good place to ask for help. An awakened complained about feeling ill a while back and he was visited by the mercenary squad. Haven't seen him since.

The noble paranoia of the poison plague. There had been a lot of that going in the early days, especially in border towns. That was the whole point that Halburn nobles had hired fury mercenaries: they were the best thing money could buy after awakened. It also stood to reason that they would stop hunters from going through. Unlike sheltered awakened, hunters roamed all over the world.

And yet you chose to hire an awakened fury, Dallion said to himself.

Does anyone know about Skye? Dallion continued going to the other side of the window.

No. I was very careful. She joined him next to the window. It's the inn, not me. They offered to buy it for a ridiculously small amount. The mercenaries liked it, so they didn't press as hard as they did the rest, but I'm pretty much the last one now.

What would they need the space for?

No idea. There are a lot of things that haven't made sense in the last year. The best one can do is be quiet, keep her head down, and create no waves.

Good advice, but Diroh must have broken it somehow. The fury who had approached Dallion a while ago was back, walking along the street, and this time he wasn't alone. It didn't take particular skill for Dallion to see that the person with him was a noble. He seemed rather young. Dallion didn't remember seeing him before, but there was no telling how the local succession went. The only thing he could tell for certain was that the noble wasn't hereditary.

Have anything you value? Dallion asked, stepping away from the window.

Money, Diroh said with a smirk. There was no denying that she was a barkeeper.

Get it and get ready to leave.

The fury looked at him for a few moments. A board in the room moved aside on its own, after which a pouch floated its way to her hand.

Ready.

Get the bottle downstairs. We're leaving.

I have some stuff stashed away if you want a drink.

It's for Skye. Dallion went back to the stairs.

Nil, how likely is the Order to get involved in a fight? Dallion asked.

Thats a difficult one, dear boy, the echo replied. They usually stay out of things unless it affects them or they get too out of hand. In this case, they might side with the noble. Its his town.

What about outside?

Youre on a roll today, arent you? The Order most likely wont do anything that includes helping you. The imperial legion outside it all depends on what they really want. Frankly, itll be best not to rely on anyone for the moment. There are too many unknowns and you dont have the time to figure out what is what.

My thoughts exactly.

Skye wasnt particularly happy she had to hide in a bottle. Dall could fully sympathize. Cloud creatures were known for wanting to keep clean, as were foxes. Taking the bottle, he put it in his backpack. While he did, Dirohs pouch of coins also floated there as well.

Itll be safer there, the fury said.

Dallion couldnt disagree with that.

Have a knife I can use? she asked.

No weapons. Nothing that can be mistaken for a weapon. If theres any fighting, stay close to me. Ill deal with it.

Shouldnt you be telling me to run away?

Only if you want to get caught or killed. Dallion burst into three dozen instances and opened the door.

It soon became obvious that the noble had done the same. Twenty instances were waiting for Dallion.

Hello, hunter, the noble said. Theres no need to enter an instance contest, right? You know youll lose.

Confident, isnt he? Dallion smiled.

He can afford to be. Hes at least fifteen levels higher than you. Even having a quarter of the skills fighting him wont be a good idea.

A mere precaution, my lord, Dallion replied with a light bow. Im just here to escort one of our own out of your town. Ill be gone in a couple of minutes.

Shes a fury, if Im not mistaken. Youre not.

Shes the sister of a hunter. Dallion stood his ground. And a princess.

Confusion emanated from the noble, though not the mercenaries. They knew precisely what Diroh was. If it wasnt for the noble, Dallion would assume that was the reason they were watching her in the first place. Sadly, it didnt seem to be the case.

Interesting, but that doesn't change a thing. The noble quickly regained his composure. She's part of my town, so she stays.

Your town? Dallion methodically kept combat spitting every second. The noble was doing it three times less often. His desire to impress only showed that he didn't have much practical combat experience. Undoubtedly, he had the traits and skills to win in a fight, but there was no telling whether he was willing to go to the end. I haven't gone through here in a while, but I remember the last lord mayor.

The poison plague got him. It was a real tragedy. His niece runs the town now, and I make sure that things go smoothly.

No doubt the country was going through its own political gamespolitics which Dallion knew nothing about and preferred it that way.

My condolences and congratulations, Dallion said. The fury still needs to come to her own. How can I compensate for her absence?

You'll be making her a hunter?

If that's the Moons will.

Dallion Darude, the noble said with a mocking smirk, Known a while back as the Hero of Nerasol. I know exactly what you are and what you've done. That includes your debts. So, don't insult me by saying that you can compensate me. Leave the fury, leave my town and things will be fine.

I can't do that, my lord.

Gleam, get ready. I don't think he's bluffing.

Do you want to have a fight with all the war clerics around?

In his mind, Dallion was already going through the options. The mercenaries weren't going to be an issue, at least as far as Di was concerned. Given that they knew she was a princess, they're not risk harming her even if ordered to do so. Dallion was fair game, of course, but his music skill told him they were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and be less likely to let him slip to a part of the city where there were war clerics. The noble, on the other hand, meant business. Dallion couldn't see any obvious weapons, suggesting that he preferred short blades, or possibly ranged weapons. There was always the chance that the snob had come here unarmed, confident in his superiority. As much as that would match the man's arrogance, Dallion doubted that he would be that stupid.

I'm fine to play, if you are, hunter. The noble smiled. Taking the hint, the fury mercenary next to him moved away.

Two sets of instances filled the scene. Dallion used his normal amount of sixty, while the noble went for a hundred. Back when he was in the part of the Icepicker guild, that would have been extremely impressive. However, after spending a while fighting in the wilderness, he knew that the number of instances didn't always determine the winner, especially when he had learned the ability to force a specific instance taking place.

All of the noble's instances charged forward. Each of them drew a curved talon knife, attacking Dallion's instances at a ratio of three to one. The tactic was flawless. Someone quite skilled must

have trained him to execute such an attack. Three to one was the minimal ration at which a success was ensured. However, when it came to strategy, the flaws were painfully obvious. Instead of grouping his instances to get a better chance of defending himself, Dallion focused on those who were fleeing the scene along with Diroh.

Red rectangles appeared everywhere, stacking up as the attacks continued. Yet, just as the noble felt victory in his fingertips, Dallion forced a different reality. In it, the noble stood, weapons drawn, staring at an empty spot where an instance of Dallion had been moments ago. At the same time, Dallion and fury were ten feet away.

Id suggest we leave it at that, my lord, Dallion said calmly, walking forward. Even so, three instances of him were looking over his shoulder.

If the noble was smart, hed acknowledge what he had just experienced and back off. Unfortunately, the noble wasnt particularly smart. Increasing the number of instances to a hundred and twenty, he charged at Dallion again.

This time, two instances of the noble attacked each of Dallion. Not only was that a mistake, but it was also poor tactics. Dallion could well have defended himself successfully in all instances, however, choosing the tactical play, he only focused on ten. In those ten, not only did he evade the attacks and fled with Diroh, but also landed a kick in the nobles stomach.

Want to continue, my lord? he asked, after he had forced that particular instance.

Get him! the noble shouted. None of the mercenaries moved. I said get him!

They heard you, but no one is willing to risk harming a fury princess. In fact, depending on whether her father is still alive, she might well be a fury queen. Harming one is never advisable. Cities have fallen for less.

That was an outright lie, but as a hunter, Dallion had mastered the art well enough to sound convincing. Besides, it was doubtful that someone as full of himself as the noble would know enough about fury history to be aware.

The district is empty, sir. One of the furies stepped in. The rest is for the Moons to decide.

The noble glared at his subordinate, but didnt say anything. What little sense he had kicked in making him see the obvious: that there was no way he could win under the circumstances.

This isnt the end of this, hunter. The noble pointed at Dallion.

Thats what losers say. Dallion walked away, maintaining five instances, hand on Dirohs shoulder.

Chapter 568: Unexpected Calm

Dont look back, Dallion whispered as they walked away from Halburn. Just keep walking calmly.

Getting into a scuffle with a noble wasnt how Dallion imagined things would go. Based on what Jiroh had told him in his dream, he had pictured it as an infiltration and rescue operation. The rescue part was there, though not from the people he expected it to be. Both the imperials and the Order seemed more interested in the city itself than anyone there. Also, the blocker ring Dallion had given to the fury also helped.

No ones following, Gleam said.

Dallion kept on walking. Experience kept him from combat splitting to check for himself. Doing so would only attract the imperials. Similar to the empire, once a legions interest was piqued, it was going to be an uphill battle to convince them that they were wasting their time.

Every step Dallion felt that something would happen, triggering a massive charge. Thankfully, nothing of the sort happened. For half an hour, he kept on walking on edge, Diroh close at hand. Finally, he glanced over his shoulder. The town was too far to be seen, but more importantly, there was no sign of anyone else.

Can I talk now? the fury asked in her most sarcastic tone. However, Dallions music skills told him that she had been more than a little worried up to now as well.

We can talk. Dallion let out a chuckle. Well even stop to eat. When was the last time you had something?

The fury didnt reply. After releasing Skye, though, Dallion quickly learned that it had been a few days. The pain caused by the skill gem had prevented Di from eating and drinking much. Now that it was gone, though, hunger was rearing its ugly head.

Dallion gave her all the provisions he was carrying, then leaving the whip blade to guard the areaset off to catch something fresh. The wilderness wasnt particularly known for its game, but if someone knew where to look there was almost always enough to get by. In this case, Dallion was lucky to stumble upon some clawsheep.

Technically, the creatures were considered part of the wilderness. Their sharp clawshidden in their wool, not on their legs was enough to dissuade most predators, including people. If one looked beyond that, though, there was plenty of good meat.

The herd that Dallion came upon consisted of a few dozen. Picking his targets, he used the harpsisword to get all the animals asleep, then quietly went and pierced two with a lethal blow. Leaving just enough blood to make it clear what had happened, he then moved away and woke up the creatures with another melody of his harpsisword.

I dont understand why you keep doing this, Nil said. If youre going to leave blood behind, why go through the trouble of putting them to sleep?

Theres no fear then. And the blood is so that the living dont keep wondering what happened. Everyone needs an explanation, even beasts.

Thats borderline philosophical. Then again, youre an empath.

Cooking the meat proved to be far more challenging than skinning and butchering the creature. For starters, it required a fire, which Dallion always avoided unless with a large group. A fire in the wilderness tended to attract attention, especially with Diroh wearing a traveling emblem. Since the furys had been confiscated by the noble in Halburn, Dallion had lent her his old one. He had always kept that close at hand for sentimental reasons, even when he no longer needed it. In his mind, he had always come up with an excuse that if he finds someone struggling in the wilderness, it would be always a good idea to have an extra emblem to help them out. Now, he could say that he was

right. Even so, it was quite concerning that nobles were taking emblems from those that had them. Diroh never had any intention of leaving; her emblem had been from her traveling days, before her sister had found her. And yet, that hadn't stopped someone from effectively locking her up in Halburn. It all sounded a bit too similar to Dallion's home village before he had brought a change to things.

Not eating? Diroh asked, glancing at the meat cooking at the fire. She had already eaten the ready food Dallion had brought, as well as half of the fresh catch he had prepared.

I've had enough before setting out. Have some more.

The fury almost managed to endure a full minute before using an air current to get another slice of meat. Looking at her, one would think she had been starving all her life. Knowing what a combination of awakening hunger and a week of effective fasting would cause, Dallion could only sympathize.

Any idea who put the gem in you? he asked.

Not that I can think of. All sorts of hunters went through the inn. Might have been Ji.

I doubt it.

Jiroh didn't seem like one who would endanger the life of her sister. Unless she knew that she wouldn't be in serious danger. Next time Dallion went to sleep, he was going to ask her.

Anything strange happen before your awakening?

Define strange.

Strange compared to everything else going on. Any frequent visitors? Anyone asking questions?

It's been mostly furies since you last saw me. Hunters became scarce. The nobles didn't like them, and that was before Walorn appeared. After that, he started chasing them out directly. They'd be allowed up to the gates, and that's it.

Was that the one who tried to stop us?

Yep. First time I've seen him back down. You must've gotten quite strong.

Dallion didn't respond. As much as he wanted to claim that he had gotten stronger, it was one simple trick that had gotten the noble off guard. If it had been anyone with actual experience, things would have gone a lot worse. The same would happen if Dallion and Walorn ever crossed paths again. By now, the noble had probably enquired about forced splitting and come up with a counter.

The hunters called you a wannabe, Di said between bites. At least early on.

She was lying. What they really called him was Eurys' pup. It was difficult to deny that his skills and level were vastly inferior, even for an apprentice. If there was one thing that hunters couldn't stand, it was people taking shortcuts when they didn't have the skill for it. It was funny how their opinion had changed overnight the moment he had publicly humiliated Archduke Linatol's son.

How exactly did you and sis meet?

Didn't she tell you?

She never said anything about her life in the city. Liked to keep things separate, she said.

That sounded like Jiroh. She had done well to keep her past a secret from everyone in Nerosal. It was no surprise she had kept a thing or two from her sister as well.

What do you think that thing was? Diroh asked all of a sudden.

The food? Dallion snapped out of his thoughts.

The thing that happens in my realm. You said that it was a skill gem. What skill?

Im not sure. If it were a skill, it would have appeared on the wall of your room. When we get to Nerosal, Ill take you to someone wholl explain it much better than me. Dont worry, youll be safe there.

Leaving again? Typical.

Ill be close by.

Thats not the answer she wants to hear, Vihrogon said.

You told me that lying always makes it worse. Dallion countered.

Most of the time, it does.

Shes lived alone for years. This wont be different.

It will. You also have no idea what that skill is.

I just know it isnt a skill.

Dallion didnt sleep the night. The hunter part of him wanted to teach Diroh how to sleep in the awakened world so that they didnt lose time. The human path of him, though, let her enjoy a bit of normalcy. With all the changes that came with awakening, it would be a while before she got accustomed to it.

The following morning, the walking continued. Every day would pass in roughly the same fashion. Dallion would walk while the fury and they would float beside him. Now and again Dallion would catch somethingmostly small crittersthen cook them on a fire. Hed never eat, keeping an out for threats, animal or other. Diroh, on her part, had quickly gotten used to the concept of not wasting time. All eating was done while walking, and sleep was brief, and talking only took place when the food was cooking.

Each time a caravan or a patrol would pass by, Skye would hide in Dallions backpack, while Diroh didnt say a word. It wasnt something she was thrilled withannoyance emanated from her almost constantlybut she was smart enough to know this was the safest thing to do.

After what seemed like an eternity, the city of Nerosal became visible on the horizon. This was a pivotal moment: Diroh would finally find a new homehopefully, one more permanent than her lastwhile Dallion would get back to his usual work. Still, he had the distinct feeling that Jirohs sister was keeping something from him. Technically, it wasnt his concern; he had promised Jiroh to rescue her from the city, and he had been true to her word. However, he couldnt help but feel that something wasnt as it should be.

You're overthinking it as usual, Nil said.

Didn't think you'd say that after seeing a skill that no one can recognize.

As I told you, dear boy. Putting skills gems in non-awakened had that effect. You might never learn what actually happened. In the meantime, you have made yourself a new enemy. Petty nobles, remember?

How could I forget? Dallion sighed.

Pissing off one noble is funny. Two, though, people start keeping an eye out, looking for patterns. Not to mention that the countess never particularly liked you. If you hadn't become a hunter, things might have been very different.

That was an understatement if there ever was one. It had taken less than a year for Countess Priscord to gain complete control, getting rid of the previous lord mayor and assuming direct control. At present, she was the only noble in the province who simultaneously owned two cities. Everyone who didn't go along with it, was either sent to a smaller town, or had their political career come to an abrupt end.

Dallion knew full well that the countess disliked him since the whole Hero of Nerosal incident. He suspected that even now she couldn't forgive him for the new hours during which he had been the owner of the city. Dallion had, naturally, immediately relinquished that power, but it didn't matter. The deed was done and in the eyes of the countess, an unforgivable act had already been committed.

All I'm saying is that you have enough to worry about right now. Focus on reaching level eighty. When you do, you could look into this. It'll be the best for everyone. If the Academy is somehow involved in this, you need to be at a level to be able to do something about it.

Is there anything you want to tell me, Nil?

Just general advice, dear boy, just general advice.

Apparently, some things never changed.

As Dallion approached the outer gate, he was concerned that there might be issues with Diroh. The guards, however, just glanced at her, then at Dallion's hunter emblem, and waved him in. Furies were common in the city as either mercenaries or servants, and since none of them were awakened, they weren't considered a danger.

Chapter 569: Magic Touched

Entering the Gremlins Timepiece was different from usual. Upon seeing the fury, Hannah promptly chased out the few regulars, then closed and locked the door. Dallion was tempted to use the opportunity to go to the kitchen to get a proper meal. That was going to have to wait, though.

This is Hannah, he told Diroh. She helped me when I first got here. She also helped Eury and your sister.

Diroh looked at the innkeeper, not knowing what to say.

An otherworlder? she asked.

Very much from this world. Hannah smiled in an attempt to mask her rough voice. You're Jiroh's sister, aren't you? She told me a thing or two about you. Said that you had your own inn.

Yeah. It was a hunter's inn. It practically ran itself. I was just there to keep it clean and collect the money.

That's the most important part. Are you hungry?

The fury shook her head.

I'll have Aspan make something for you. She turned towards the kitchen door. Aspan! Make something nice! Jiroh's sisters here, so no skimping!

An appropriate response came from inside. It sounded very much real. All this time and Dallion still wasn't sure whether the shouting matches were just an act or the real thing. Lately, he was inclined to think that they were a mix of the two.

Fine. I'll let you talk about me in peace, she said with just a hint of disapproval, then strolled into the kitchen. A few moments later, Skye emerged from Dallion's backpack in the form of a cloud and followed.

A cloud creature? Hannah asked, not in the least bit surprised.

A cloud fox. Dallion nodded, reaching for an empty mug at the counter. It belonged to Jiroh.

Anything else I should know about?

Can you keep her here for a while? At least for a while. I'll cover expenses. I just don't want her out in the open for now.

I can't hide everything, Dal! the innkeeper grumbled. I can keep her for a while, give her something to do, but despite what you think I'm a place, you can dump stuff on me whenever you feel like it!

The grumbling was just a front, of course. Hannah had risked more than her fair share, taking in people who no one else would. At the time, Dallion thought he had been exceedingly lucky. In truth, it had been a lot more than that. It was easy for awakened to get work, though not under such conditions. Normally, tavern awakened earned good pay, but weren't given special rooms, and Dallion's room was more luxurious than any of the ones available. And then there was Aspan. Whose mere presence in the real world was a crime in the eyes of the empire and the Order of the Seven Moons. Not only was the cook a member of a banished race that had tried to take over the world, but he was the one who had spearheaded it.

Thanks, Hannah.

I bet you are! she snapped at him. Is she alright?

No. Halburn has gone to crap. There's

Halburn became part of the empire a couple of days ago, the innkeeper interrupted. A new addition to Priscord's county.

Huh? That had happened sooner than expected. Dallion suspected conquest might be the reason an imperial legion was there, but none of them seemed particularly aggressive from what he had seen.

Neither did any of the other factions, for that matter. On the other hand, the threat of a legion was enough to make a town preemptively surrender.

Itll be made public in a few weeks.

You learn things fast.

Thats how I keep people safe. I know what to look for and keep up to date with the important stuff.

There was no hint of how she had managed to get the news so fast, though. While Dallion hadnt run all the way back, he didnt take his sweet time doing it, either. She had to have used an echo ring. That was the only explanation possible. And if she could converse with echoes, that meant that she had to be an awakened.

Captain Adzorg told me, Hannah said. There was a merchant he used to do business with there. Learned the moment it happened.

Thats convenient. Any details?

Not much. The Order went out, the imperials came in, and the local ruler pledged allegiance to Countess Priscord and the Emperor. Most likely not in that order.

Dallion snorted.

The captain told me one other thing, though. Apparently, a hunter got a local noble quite upset by beating him up. An exaggeration, to be sure, just as a fury princess that was taken out of the city.

That was more difficult to laugh at. Dallion looked at his empty glass, shook it a bit, then straightened up.

The noble had it coming.

Dal, its not your place to decide that. Not yet.

I know the score. Nobles are petty and powerful.

What was he after? Jirohs sister?

Im not sure. He didnt seem to be particularly interested in her and definitely didnt know she was a princess. Not that made any difference. With the furies all but reduced to servants and mercenaries, even the rulers of the remaining countries werent seen as particularly special. Fury nobility was only a few tiers above a common village chief. I think he was more annoyed at me not playing by his rules.

The innkeeper shook her head in disapproval.

Its the only thing that makes sense. I made the mercenaries back off, so he showed up. If it was anything more, he wouldnt have let me get near in the first place.

Lets hope youre right.

Better tell her about the other thing, Nil urged.

Dallion considered it. Most of his problems in the past had come from him keeping secrets from people that were ready to help him, making the whole matter worse. Keeping the details surrounding her awakening would be risky as well as stupid.

Theres something else, Dallion said at last. She awakened, he whispered.

Cant be. Hannah put her head back. At that age shell have to be an otherworlder, and she doesnt look like one.

Thats not it. Someone put a skill gem in her realm at some point when she wasnt an awakened.

By the Seven. The innkeeper slammed her hand on the counter with far greater strength than Dallion expected. Whichever idiot did that deserves to get his arms and legs torn off.

Theres more

What more can there be?!

The skill gem grew into a creature, an icicorn. I managed to get things right in her realm, but it changed into something different ever heard of a skill called Hailstorm?

Hailstorm? Hannah thought for a few moments. Nope. What is it?

Thats the question. None of my guardians know, and neither does Nil. I hoped that you or Aspan might have a clue.

With a name like that, I can only be magic. Are you sure it isnt?

I saw her awakening room. Shes only got a single attack skill, and only the basic traits. If the gem was magic, it would have appeared and made a trait appear. He looked at his glass again.

Youre worried about something. What is it?

It might be something from the Star.

Oh, come on! Hanna stood up. Youve been obsessed over this ever since the two festivals ago. The Star isnt after you. You were useful while you were in the Icepicker guild. Thats it. Hes not spending all his time watching you. With war breaking out in the north, the Crippleds probably busy convincing some minor kingdom to try to take over the world again.

Those are the only skills that wont obey the rules.

Let it go, Dal. The Crippled isnt out to get you. Go get some sleep, then some food. Ill take care of the girl.

Hannah, I

Rest! she snapped, pointing at the stairs.

Dallion knew better than to argue when she was in such a state, so he quietly stood up. Of course, he didnt go to the stairs either. Walking to the kitchen door, he opened it and peeked inside. Jiroh was there, eating something Aspan had whipped up. The aroma was enough to make Dallions stomach growl.

Things alright, Di? he asked.

Err, yes? The fury looked at him.

I'll go get some sleep. Hannah will explain things. If there's anything, she knows where to find me.

Sure. As she sat, Skye floated down onto Diroh, changing into a hooded cloud cloak with a face.

I'll talk to you later, Aspan, Dallion said, then closed the door again.

Back in his room, the first thing he did was to lie on the bed. His exhaustion was enough to get him to fall asleep at the moment, sadly it didn't help provide the dream he was hoping for. Thoughts and memories merged together, creating the usual chaos that occurred. Dallion saw himself fighting a lake of clouds, talking to a riverboat about chess. It had been a while since he had dreamed things from Earth. In the last few years or centuries, if one counted the time spent in the awakened realms he had rarely dreamt about things from Earth. Having riverboats was an unusual touch. Before Dallion could do anything remotely interesting, though, he woke up. The reason wasn't that he had gotten enough rest, but because he had sensed someone.

Bursting into instances, Dallion jumped off the bed in various fashions. In some he managed to grab a weapon, in others not. When he saw who had entered his room, however, all the instances faded away, leaving the one with Dallion sitting on the edge of the bed.

You've improved a bit, Aspan said. He looked exactly as Dallion had seen him a few hours down in the kitchen, but he knew it was a copy the guardian of the room's door would have said something if anyone had opened it. Next time, try to act before I get in.

Thanks for the advice. Dallion wasn't sure how to react. How bad is it?

Depends. The copyette went to the bed and sat down next to Dallion. The fury's awakened. Also, she's not a fury.

She's a copyette? Dallion asked the first thing that came to mind.

Maybe I should have said that she isn't an ordinary fury.

I'm guessing you don't just mean that she's a princess.

She's an ice fury.

There was a time when Dallion would have kept blinking for half a minute and still remain speechless afterwards. Having seen a lot of impossible creatures in the wilderness, he took it in stride.

I take it those are rare?

They're accidents that aren't supposed to exist. There's always a few every generation. You told me about the blood fury in Linatol? Well, this one is similar, only her thing is that she can start blizzards.

Magic?

Yes, but not the one you're thinking of. It'll take a lot of training, such things usually do, but when she masters it, it'll be almost as devastating as the powers of a thunder fury.

So, that was what the noble was after. It made sense that he couldn't openly admit to having such a being. Unfortunately, it also meant that he'd want her back.

Not impossible, but I'd say unlikely. It takes a lot of time to make such a fury, and trust me, such furies are always made. Thunder furies are the only ones that occur naturally. Everything else requires magic.

The Academy made this

That's one possibility. Magic has changed a lot since my time. Some of the spells are weaker, but there are entirely new fields that are stronger. Someone could have experimented, but that's not the key part. You told Hannah that there was a skill gem involved.

That's right.

That can't be right, either. There's no skill that would bring for the transformation. The only exception would be a gem that grants magic, but such a thing doesn't exist.

Chapter 570: The Countess' Ultimatum

News of a new awakened in the Gremlins Timepiece quickly spread throughout the Nerosal. Fury servants were quite common, but having an awakened one was enough to attract crowds. As a level one, Diroh was only able to upgrade one item per day, and Hannah had restricted mending to only a couple, but that wasn't what brought customers in. It was more about seeing the fury in action. Even old regulars used to there being a fury in the inn were impressed, almost as if they were going through a nostalgia phase.

Diroh, on her part, had a lot to get used to. Back in Halburn, she would frequently use air currents to serve customers, not to mention keep the place sparkly clean. While the latter was vastly appreciated, Hannah quickly shared that the former was a big no-no in the city. Officially, there were no laws in the empire against furies using their natural powers. However, there was an understanding that they were not to use them discreetly and not openly flaunt them. Since Diroh was new, mess-ups were forgiven, and even seen as interesting. It wasn't rare that groups of new customers would arrive hoping to catch her using air currents openly. The demand was so great that occasionally the innkeeper asked the fury to let it slip. As usual, Hannah had an eye for money, and to compound matters, Diroh effectively a former innkeeper herself agreed.

Despite Dallion's questions and concerns, things seemed to get back to normal, when a captain of the city guard passed by. In itself, this wasn't unusual. With Eury gone, and Dallion being the only hunter, it had become common for the city guard to approach him for occasional help, ranging from exploring certain artifacts to checking out food for traces of poison. With the plague all but gone, the star cults had apparently started using it to kill awakened in parts of the empire.

When the captain said that the countess wanted to see Dallion, however, it quickly became obvious that this was all but standard. So far, the only time he had been called to see the noble was after the Stars attempt to take over the city.

There was no point in arguing or attempting to get around it. Leaving all his weapons in his room at the inn, Dallion followed the captain to the countess palace.

The structure had changed considerably in the last few years. It had always been significant when compared to everything else in the city. Now, though, it was absolutely astounding, growing almost to the size of the Archduke's palace in Linatol. What Dallion found even more impressive was that it had completely been made of stones collected from ruins, ensuring that it was completely guardian-free. Even smaller items such as doors, rugs, and statues had been made in such a way to be empty.

There was no telling how much time and effort had gone into making that, but it had required awakened stonecutters and masons building it the old-fashioned way. When it came to expenses, that was only something nobles and few others could afford.

Standard etiquette required that all visitors be escorted through the outer section of the palace by a standard set of guards to the inner courtyard. There, a steward would take charge of the guests, leading them to the countess personal chamber. This time, though, Dallion was greeted by none other than the citys overseer. With a nod, she dismissed the city guard captain.

Hello, Dal, she said in her typically calm voice. Youre been attracting a lot of attention.

The overseer had warned him that this moment would come. The mishap in Halburn had only accelerated things.

Just because you give someone a blocker ring, doesnt mean they become invisible, the overseer continued.

I thought they would. Dallion attempted to bring in some levity to the situation.

People usually do. Come this way.

They continued to the base of one of the towers, then started climbing.

Youre lucky she was Jirohs sister, the Overseer said. Nerosal has a soft spot for her. You still should have told the countess about it.

The implication was clear it was the countess who had called for him. That could mean mostly one thing: she was displeased about something and his recent behavior was an excuse to get Dallion dealt with. The hunter emblem protected him to a very large extent, though not against banishment. Realistically, Dallion doubted it would come to that. Banishment could be done from a distance. The countess wanted something. Given that she wasnt in her usual chamber, this could suggest that it was a matter of considerable discretion.

I planned to, Dallion replied. I just wanted Di to get settled in a bit.

The overseer said nothing.

The stairs led to a single door at the top of the tower. The overseer didnt bother to know, opening it, and walking inside the room. Dallion did the same. Other than an extremely intricate tapestry that covered the entire walls, the room was empty. There was no desk, no chair, not even a rug. Only the countess stood inside. Looking out into the distance through one of the small windows.

Youve been quite busy lately, the woman said, her back turned to Dallion. Despite that, both he and the overseer stopped three steps away from the noble and bowed. Already an official hunter. I expected it to take you a bit longer. If I had taken part in the betting, Id have put my money on next year.

Dallion didnt say a word, unable to tell whether that was a compliment towards him or not.

Reports came that you caused a bit of a scandal in my new town. In fact, one of my new subjects has come to me demanding your head on a platter.

That hardly came as a surprise, although the pesky noble from Halburn had been faster than Dallion expected. It should have taken him at least a month to get to this level.

I made it clear that hes not to touch my toys, no matter the iterations they cause. However, this leads to the real question. The woman turned around, piercing eyes focusing on Dallion. Are you my toy or not?

I remained in the city, countess, Dallion said.

Yes, an admirable task, especially since you were offered to go to the provincial capital. However, does that have to do with your opinion, or on you humiliating the Archdukes son in public? Such an action wont be forgotten. Not until you become a noble as well.

This was an obvious trap. If Dallion were to agree, hed confirm that he was also aiming for the countess authority and, as such, fair game for reprisals.

Ill go straight to the point. Theres a beast that I want caught. Her eyes narrowed as she spoke. I want it caught very much, and before anyone else does. And no need to worry. I know your issue with killing. I want the creature caught alive and brought here. Think you could do that?

That depends on the creature, countess. Im still incapable of taking on a dragon.

The overseer let out a warning caught, making it known that Dallion was not to get too casual in the conversation. The countess herself, on the other hand, seemed slightly amused. Dallion was able to feel the emotion emanate from her, along with the conviction that she deserved more power.

It wont be a dragon. If anything, the creature is said to be more elusive than aggressive. That doesnt mean that it wont fight if found or cornered. It might be even deadly.

Normally, this would be the point at which Dallion asked for details. Sensing that she wasnt particularly fond of or amused by him, he remained quiet, only nodding slightly to confirm he was following the conversation.

People have been trying to catch it for quite a while. Some claim since the early days of the empire. All of them have been only partially successful.

My apologies, countess, but should I be hearing this? Dallion interrupted. I have echoes and familiars, which I dont want to destroy.

For a moment there was a faint whiff of appreciation emanating from the noble, before it vanished, flooded by her standard disapproval of him.

You dont plan to be careless, do you? she asked calmly. There comes a point at which secrets are no longer kept. If someone else is strong enough to obtain what Im telling you, they are welcome to it, just like I am repeating information that is decades old.

Dallion nodded again.

Ill even go as far as to provide some political protection, she went on. Not the least of which will be brushing away messes like the one you recently did. Despite that, its likely that you will be hunted by mercenaries serving other nobles.

Hunters don't hunt hunters, Dallion said out of instinct.

Ah, yes. The hunter credo. Hunters don't usually hunt others, but it's not rare for some to receive offers that would make them risk that. The mentor of your fiancée did it.

The revelation hit Dallion harder than he expected. It wasn't that he doubted that people would break rules under certain circumstances. All the Star-touched and the cultists were clear examples of that. Having the hunter who trained Eury come up, and in such fashion, wasn't something he had foreseen. Thinking about it, though, it was said that he had his name erased. If so, this could have been the reason.

You're on your path to become a noble, or at least reach level eighty. If you do, you'll learn that there's a substantial difference between the two. Just as not all nobles are past level eighty, not all who get there are nobles. Politics plays part of that, but it's not all. If you succeed in finding the creature, you'll have my support before and after passing the barrier.

At least, that was to be expected.

If you fail, your name will be erased throughout my domain. Do I make myself clear?

Yes, countess, Dallion quickly said. Every promise was followed by a threat. This one was slightly more ominous than usual, though not by particularly much. What is the creature you want me to bring you?

The phoenix, the noble said. Sometimes referred to as the aether-bird.

Should have known she'd go for that, Nil grumbled.

I believe you saw a feather be sold when you took part in the night auction in Linatol. As you can guess, the feathers must come from somewhere.

With all respect, countess, won't the Academy intervene?

Of course they will, but even they won't risk openly attacking a full hunter. Why do you think I waited for so long before coming to you with this? And don't think you're the first one, either. Every hunter of character in Nerosal was made the same offer, including Euryale. Since you remember all of their names, it's obvious that they refused.

Refusal was an option? This would be a first. When such demands were made, usually the person in question didn't have much of a choice. Then again, Dallion did get a lot more into trouble than any hunter he knew.

And if I were to refuse?

Normally, I'll just say that you won't receive any future jobs of such significance. However, past events make you a special case. You were in control of Nerosal. That makes you a future threat. Your current emblem protects you, but you've already messed up enough times to merit deleveling. There was a long moment of silence during which Countess Priscord kept on staring right into Dallion's eyes, as if wanting to burn them off his face. Of course, I know full well what's practical and what not. She turned around again. Time isn't a factor. You can take on other jobs, you can even leave my domains, or the empire itself. You can even go to the Archduke for help. If you want, you can even become a noble and challenge me for my county. However, if someone else gets the

creature before me, all your friends will burn, and do believe me, I know exactly who all your friends are. The same goes for your family members, Dallon Seene