

Leveling up 571

Chapter 571: The Trip East

Dallion let out a sigh of relief the moment he stepped out of the countess palace. Whoever had said that there were no secrets for a domain ruler was scarily right. Dallion had always suspected that the nobles secretly knew the link between him and his grandfather. Now he had seen the proof. Countess Priscords parents had been the ones who had promoted Kraisten. Not only that, but it was likely they had turned Aspions sister into an overseer.

Maybe this is a blessing in disguise, Nil said. You have to admit, you had become a bit complacent, dear boy. In the past, there was no stopping you from leveling up. No, its a wonder if you raise a level every few weeks,

As true as that was, the solution wasnt to have the countess threaten Dallions village and everyone he knew. Not only that, but they hadnt provided him with any starting points. As things stood, Dallion had only two clues: the night auctionsince they had information regarding the seller of the phoenix featherand the Linatol hunters den. The problem was that both those things required him to return to the provincial capital.

You can always ask Euryale, Nil suggested. Shes likely to know a lot about her old mentor and keep it quiet.

I can also ask Adzorg, whos been remarkably quiet lately, Dallion countered. Eurys mentor was a touchy subject for the gorgon.

He wont tell you anything. And that is if you can find him. At present, hes not at the guild.

Is there anything you can tell me? How do I find the creature you swore that didnt exist?

You need to understand, dear boy, that echoes are subject to a lot more rules than you might think. There are many things I am not aware of. You remember the guardians echo in the world sword. He too had no idea he was an echo, believing to be a full guardian.

Dallion shook his head. There was no point in arguing. Nil could come up with any excuse, and there was no way for Dallion to tell whether it was the truth or not. As he had found out, his music skills were unreliable when it came to the old echo. Maybe captain Adzorg had made him like that on purpose, or maybe the echo itself had done so because it didnt want others to see its thoughts and emotions. The only thing for certain was that for the moment, he wasnt to be trusted. That was rather disturbing, for Dallion wanted to know that he could trust the inhabitants of his realm.

Is there anything you know about the phoenix? Dallion asked, as he walked away from the palace.

Sadly, not much, dear boy. Its a creature said to be the embodiment of magic. From what is written, it cannot be killed. Whenever someone does, it poofs back into existence. One of the theories is that since magic is the art of finding loopholes, the creature managed to transform the energy released by its death to return to its true form instead of becoming a shadow. No one knows for certain, since

no one has managed to capture it. The academy and all the nobles have been trying to do so for quite a while, though.

Can it drop a skill gem?

No, the echo laughed. Its absolutely impossible that a magic skill gem was placed in Diroh, if thats what youre thinking. One could say that technically, it does release a gem, but it simultaneously uses that gem to regrow, so its pretty much irrelevant.

I guess youre right.

Dallion didnt return to the inn. Instead, he went to the forge to think a bit. Since it had become impossible to keep wilderness creatures in his room with the sole exception of Ruby the thing he tended to do in-between hunts was to forge items. There still were a number of blueprints he hadnt created, and also working tended to get his mind off things.

Night came and went. Dallion had managed to create two pieces of armor that he would likely never wear. It was good practice nonetheless and helped increase his forging skills to fifty-five.

After some consideration, Dallion even went into his realm to try and level up. Sadly, the attempt was unsuccessful once more. The trial he had chosen turned out to be speed-focused. Those were the ones that were most challenging for some reason, despite his reaction trait being the second highest. Nil kept insisting that the reason was a lack of clear focus, and this time Dallion couldnt disagree. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like that the Academy would be involved in finding the phoenix. That would explain the mages from Earth pursuing magic creatures. Katka had said that the dragon shed killed hadnt been what she was looking for. Maybe she was looking for the phoenix as well? Asking directly wasnt an option, but Dallion knew one place that might.

It was midmorning when Dallion returned to the Gremlin Timepiece. The crowds hadnt gathered yet, but Hannah and Diroh were already busy prepping up the place. From the item guardians, Dallion quickly learned that the fury had mended three items last night, and was as annoyed as Hannah that he hadnt been there to do some singing.

Hey, Dallion said as he sat at the counter.

The fury looked at him, then deliberately looked away, pretending to clean some mugs. Hannah was much better than this she could look straight at people and still make them feel ignored.

The countess gave me a task, he said without going into details. Ill be leaving in a bit.

Dirohs actions visibly slowed down.

Guess that might be it, Hannah said. Anything I should worry about?

No, Dallion lied. Judging by the innkeepers expression, she knew he wasnt telling the truth.

Anything you should be worried about?

Its a big task. Might take a bit longer than usual. Do you need anything new brought here?

The captain might have found something. Check with your library echo.

That was the thing about Hannah. Even when the situation was grim and confusing, she still found a way to ask him to go on with her tasks. After what Dallion had put her through, he couldn't refuse, not even now.

I'll be on it. You okay, Di?

I'm used to hunters, remember? You come and go as you please.

Right. Dallion let out a dry chuckle. Take care of things, okay?

Next time you get to sing! No excuses.

I'll do my best.

Just as Dallion was about to head to his room, Hannah grabbed his sleeve.

A nephew of the empire died during a battle up north, she whispered. Keep that in mind if you near the border. The hunter emblem might not be able to protect you for long.

This was the second member of the imperial family who had died in the last two years. The war that had already been going on the northern borders was going to heat up. Alliances would be made, and moving in and our border areas would become a lot riskier.

I'll get my gear.

By noon Dallion had left the city. Aspan had prepared a substantial amount of food portions for him to take on his trip a welcome change from wilderness food. The issue was that they didn't last long. By evening, all the food Dallion was carrying in his backpack was gone.

Initially, Dallion made his way south, but as night fell, he changed the direction to east the real direction he was heading. The eastern forests were sparsely populated. Settlements were few and far between, none of them larger than a level two village. It was a lot more difficult to thrive in the forests, all the more during the poison plague. Initially there had been a huge demand for wood, but once it had been satisfied, fewer and fewer traders ventured there, leaving the villagers to fend for themselves. Some moved west towards the towns and the big cities. Others soldiered on, doing what they always had.

As things stood, no one seemed to be in a hurry to claim the territory for themselves. The north seemed to be the main focus of attention. Strangely enough, the Order of the Seven Stars seemed to be interested in the region as well. There was no telling whether it was a precursor to the nearing war, but war clerics seemed to be spreading in all directions. The first village Dallion passed through had been completely transformed into a temple of the Order. None of the original inhabitants were there. In their place, hundreds of young acolytes were busy transforming the place into what would become its new form. A small regiment of war clerics oversaw the construction, guarding against any threat. Dallion had attempted to obtain a bit more information, but all he had managed to get was that the archbishop himself had ordered the exploration west, supposedly in search of ancient awakening altars.

Dallion had his doubts, but chose to spend a night there, anyway. He would have hoped that sleeping at a temple would let him have a dream with Jiroh again. The Moons did indeed send him a dream, but it wasn't with the person he was expecting.

The moment Dallion came to, he found himself in an old, empty parking lot. The ground was strange. It took him a few moments to remember that it was asphalt.

I must send you these sorts of dreams more often. A jogger in a green outfit approached. You're starting to forget things. Not that long ago, you'd constantly think of your friends and parents. And look at you now.

His parents try as he might, Dallion wasn't able to remember their faces or voices. There were still sporadic scenes of his past, though more feeling than memories. The saddest part was that for quite a while Dallion had started to view them as distractions.

You saved the kid. I'm sure that Jiroh will be pleased, the Green Moon said. Even as a jogger, he emitted an overwhelming sensation of power. And now you're off to find the phoenix. Did you know that it was someone in your world that came up with the name? Before that, they just called it the aetherbird.

Any hints where I can find it?

That's Purple's domain. Only he can tell you. And good luck getting that. Maybe if you reach the next gate, you'll get lucky.

There were twelve levels remaining until the next gate. At the rate Dallion was going, it would take a few months, at least.

Why are you here, Felygn? Dallion asked. Is there anything you want from me?

You're still my favored.

I'm not your only follower.

You never were my only follower, just the first new one in a very long time. Thanks for Eury, by the way. Otherworlders are always a treat, though sometimes things turn out less than ideal.

That sounded almost like a warning.

Enough jokes. I've come to warn you about the Star. People aren't the only ones after the phoenix. The Star is as well.

If he's after it, what chance do I stand?

He can't find it on his own. He can only take it. That's one of the rules of the world. You know how convincing he is, and despite what Countess Priscord thinks, the cultists weren't driven out of Nerosal.

I knew it! Dallion thought. The Star was after him.

He is, and you're right, though not right now. The jogger said. He still wants the two empathy skills you've obtained, but he wants the spellcraft skill more.

I thought there the phoenix couldn't leave a skill gem behind.

There's always a loophole. If the Star gets the bird, he'll get the skill, and then he'll be able to get what he originally wanted—all the skills you have. It's cool that you've gotten so many, but that only makes it so much easier for him. Next time the two of you cross paths might be your last.

Chapter 572: Cult Attack

What do you mean he wants the skills I have? Dallion asked.

Before he could receive an answer, the dream came to an abrupt end and Dallion felt a deep sensation of malice coming from all directions. Fractions of a second later, he sensed something as well the cold sensation of void.

Gleam! Dallion jumped to his feet.

Barely had he done so when the house he had been given to sleep in was split in two. A thread of destruction sliced through the wooden walls, chopping everything in its path. Thanks to his reaction speed, Dallion was able to leap to the ground, avoiding a lethal blow. It was only after that the whip blade flew out of its sheath, extending to create a defensive perimeter around its owner.

Screams filled the air, followed by yells.

Ruby, fly up and be careful! Dallion ordered. Gleam, go with him!

What about you? the familiar asked. They wont stop at a single line attack.

Ill be fine. Dallion rolled to the rest of his gear. He was still in his underwear, but getting dressed wasnt the priority now. There was only one type of creature that released the emotions Dallion was sensing chainlings.

Several more line attacks made their way from the forest, going through the city. They were significantly weaker than what Dallion had seen in the awakening realms, but still capable of leveling an entire settlement. Leaping in the air, Dallion spun and twisted to avoid the attacks, then used his harpsisword to let out two like attacks of his own. Thanks to his perception and scholar skills, it was simple to determine the source of the previous attacks. Dallions only hope was that the enemies werent as fast as he was.

Trees fell down like straw. As they did, a specifically non-human scream filled the air. One of the enemies had fallen. Sadly, there was no telling how many more remained.

Dallion made a note to apologize to the trees later. The good thing about plants was that they were a lot more durable than items and animals. With some quick help from Lux, most of the trees would be just as healthy as before. The structures and people, on the other hand, werent going to be so fortunate.

Bursting into instances, Dallion looked through the rest of the village. Almost all the acolytes were dead, likely killed by the line attacks. A dozen of war clerics were still in shape fighting what appeared to be a dozen cultists. There was nothing in their clothes or appearance that suggested that they were followers of the Star. For one with musk skills, the chill of void was a clear giveaway.

Why would they be attacking a settlement of the Order? Dallion wondered as he charged at the weakest enemy he could find. One thing he had learned as a hunter was that it always paid off to take out the weakest prey first, especially in a large battle such as this.

It all depends on why the Order is expanding in this direction, Nil replied. In the grand scheme of things, there is more than one battlefield and thousands of goals.

The answer didnt amount to anything.

Once Dallion reached the chaingling, one of his instances struck the creature from behind using a spark attack. The tip of the harpsisword pierced through cloth and flesh, sending a shock throughout its body. The sensation of void shattered, replaced by uncertainty. Not wanting to take any chances, Dallion continued with a multi attack, drilling the chainlings back full of holes, then split into instances again. Before the target could collapse onto the ground, he was already on his way to the next target.

The war cleric was clearly a veteran, for he instantly followed Dallions lead, also bursting into a dozen instances. In less than a minute, the chaos of the initial surprise attack was overcome. One by one, chainlings fell, pierced full of holes by Dallion with the assistance of the war clerics. None of them made a break for it. At this point, it wouldnt have mattered. The war clerics had gained momentum and used instances to close off all potential paths of escape. Soon, it was all over.

Stay here, Dallion said. Ill check for more.

Splitting into fifty instances, he dashed into the forest in all directions. There didnt seem to be any trace of any other chainlings. That was the good part. Unfortunately, there were no indications of how they had come here, either. For the next ten minutes Dallion kept splitting, searching everything tree and every patch of each in the surrounding area. The result was always the samething, almost as if the chainlings had appeared out of nowhere.

Gleam, anything on your end? He asked.

Just another missed opportunity to gain some experience, the whip blade replied. Rubys fine, by the way.

Nothing hidden?

I can recognize an illusion if I see one.

All but one of Dallions instances faded away. He had found all that he could. The only thing left was to get back and see what was left of the settlement.

The first thing Dallion did was to get dressed. Apart from the obvious, that allowed him to take a few moments to have the adrenaline high to pass. A hunter needed clarity to assess every situation. Statistically, the most dangerous time for a hunter was just after a win, when the adrenaline made the person overconfident and the euphoria reckless.

Dallion took a deep breath, recited the names of all the Moons, then joined the remaining survivors. A total of eleven people remained alive in various states of injury. Thanks to Lux, Dallion managed to heal most of their wounds. Unfortunately, even the firebird wasnt able to fix severed limbs.

I know you, one of the war clerics said. Youre the Hero of Nerosal.

I havent been called that in a while. Dallion smiled. Any reason why you should be attacked by cultists?

Does the Crippled need a reason? The cleric avoided the answer. He was a massive middle-aged man with no hair and a short beard that had likely seen a lot in his days. The skin of his hands and

face was rough as sandpaper, suggesting it had been exposed to the elements for decades. Every temple we build diminishes his power. He probably didnt want us to expand north.

Dallion could have asked why they were expanding north. Instead, he decided to ask someone whod give him a straight answer.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed to an endless plain filled with gray and beige bushes.

You are in the land of CLOAK

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny

Smart move, dear boy, Nil said.

The cultists might have made a deal with the Star to be consumed by the void for powers. However, they hadnt done the same for their clothes. Hopefully, they hadnt changed those too much.

I challenge you, Dallion said, using one of the abilities of his empathy attribute.

Guardian of the CLOAK has been challenged.

A blue rectangle emerged, joined shortly after by the guardian. The creature, to Dallions surprise, turned out to be a low level porcupine. The moment it saw guardian, blobs of fear emerged within it like bubbles. Both sides knew who would win in a direct fight. Then again, fighting wasnt Dallions goal.

Why are you here? Dallion asked.

The porcupine took a step back. Having an awakened summon a guardian was exceptionally rare. Having him also address the guardian was rarer still.

I mean, why did your owner come here? Dallion clarified.

To kill you and everyone in the village. The guardians voice was unusually deep. Those were the orders he was given.

Orders?

My owner always wears me when he receives his orders. Its what makes me special. Other than the dagger, Im the only one whos present on all important occasions.

That made sense. If there was a ceremony, it would be normal for all the participants to be wearing some sort of official attire. Apparently, in this case, that happened to be a cloak.

Then when that was done, my owner and the rest were to remove any trace that there was a settlement here.

But why?

To kill you.

I got that.

No. My owner was told to specifically kill you the empath. All of the members were.

This Dallion didn't expect. All this time he had been going on and on how the Star was out to get him. As it turned out, he was half right. It was the cultists who wanted him dead. The scariest part was that they were far better organized than one might think. He had left Nerosal quite recently, not to mention that he had initially gone south. Tracking him down in that amount of time and getting a squad ready to attack was outright terrifying.

Why? Dallion asked.

Because you're hunting the aether bird. Many of our groups are doing this as well. Now that several new feathers have emerged, the hunt has resumed.

So, it's been going on before?

The hunt has been going on for decades before I was created. My owner was part of a group hunting it in the west ages ago. This time

Suddenly, Nil appeared several steps away. Without warning, his hands moved through the air, drawing a circle of symbols. Before Dallion could react, a bolt of purple light flew out of the circle, destroying the guardian.

GUARDIAN ANNIHILATED

A red rectangle emerged. Next thing Dallion knew, he was back in the real world. Looking down, the cloak the cultist corpse was wearing turned into dust.

Nil?! What the heck?!

You can't trust anything he said, dear boy. By its own admission, the guardian had been part of several cultist meetings.

I was using music on him, Nil! I could have learned so much!

You would have learned precisely what the Star wanted you to learn. Wouldn't you agree that it was remarkably easy to get information from the guardian? Not to mention the remarkable coincidence that the very first guardian you stumbled upon seemed to have this information so readily. As rare as the empathy trait is, the Star isn't a complete idiot. He'd have protected against such an eventuality.

The logic made sense, although that didn't make Dallion feel any better. At the very least, he should have been the one to make that decision. Now he couldn't be sure whether anything the cloak had said was a lie or not. There was always the option to check with other guardians that belonged to the killed cultists. However, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't stumble upon another trap. Or maybe there was no trap to begin with?

What's the matter? the war cleric asked, seeing what Dallion had done.

Just a precaution, Dallion said. I'll need everything belonging to the cultists. There might be some clues why they did this and what their greater plans are.

As you say, initiate. The war cleric clearly wasn't happy with the priorities Dallion had. Well leave that to you. While we bury our brethren. By the Seven.

By the Seven, Dallion replied. He could feel the sudden hostility emanating from the cleric, but that wasn't his immediate concern, nor was it Nils' unexpected behavior. The guardian had said that the Star was aware of Dallion's mission. If true, it meant that he had changed tactics and decided to eliminate Dallion early. This was no longer just a race.

I really dislike competitive hunts, Dallion said to himself. He'd only taken part in a few so far, all for minor trophies. Even then, things had been messy, going so far as to break friendships. With a prize of such significance that high-level nobles, the Academy, the Order, and even the cult of the Crippled Star were involved. With such competitors, every participant was a target.

Chapter 573: Inner Storm

You're in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

Sharp cliffs went down from the end of the tunnel to a savage sea amid a storm. Waves and clouds clashed together, making it clear that nothing but air and water was welcome.

It's always worse the second time, Dallion said to himself, standing at the end of the tunnel. He had tried this trial before, and it was by far the least appealing. In a way, that was precisely why he had chosen it. Despite Nils' continuous nagging as of late, he was correct on that point; Dallion had become complacent.

Even when pushing himself, he rarely went all out. It was as if he knew that he'd reach the gate at some point and was pacing himself. For others, that could have been a good way to move forward, but at his stage of development, it was as right as it was wrong. As the old saying went: the more one delayed a trial, the more he walked closer to giving up. There was a time when he could barely wait for the failure restriction to pass. Now, he didn't even think about it.

Facing your greatest fears might have gone a bit too far, dear boy, Nil said.

Only if I fail, Dallion replied, and stepped off the cliff.

Without needing a word, Lux appeared, enveloping Dallion with his flames. Even with the firebirds' help, going through the storm was going to be more than a challenge. The abundant amount of water would extinguish part of his flames, and the winds were strong and chaotic enough to pull him in every direction—most often into a wave.

The last time Dallion had used slicing-attacks to try to cut through the shifting mountains of water. Now, he planned to adopt a more precise approach.

I could calm the waves if I was my proper level, Gleam said, fluttering a short distance from Dallion. Using her illusion powers, she had created a bubble of calm around her. Any wave or raindrop that got close was transformed into nothing using her power of illusion. Alas, it wasn't going to be able to help Dallion. Even if she were on her previous level, Dallion wanted to do this on his own.

Stay close by, Dallion said, then burst into a hundred instances.

Thousands of markers of various colors appeared, providing Dallion with all the information he could hope for: the attack areas of the waves, the position she would hold the shield at to protect himself, the spots where he could slice the waves, causing them to collapse on themselves, as well as the vectors and twists he should follow to avoid them.

The only issue was that a mind trait of fifty was only enough to let him see markers just in the immediate vicinity of his instances. Anything more than ten feet away was anyones guess.

It wont be easy crossing a sea this way, Nil said.

Dallion didnt reply. He was fully aware of the strain he was subjected to. The difference was that unlike his past self, his body had reached a stage that it didnt complain about it. The pain was there merely as a reminder. It didnt affect any of his actions.

A hundred instances flew onward. Some avoided the waves, others shielded themselves from them. Over seventy, though, fell victim to the storm, dragged down into the water.

Switching to the instance Dallion found most advantageous, he split again.

Each split was no longer than a second, allowing him to move just over a dozen feet forward. The process was slow and laborious to the point that Dallion considered having the armadil shield cocoon him, then use Lux to propel him forward. Of course, he didnt. That was one of the other things he had tried last time. The flight had been brief. One wall of water had proved enough to cause the firebird to drop the ball into the sea, at which point the trial had failed.

Seconds turned into minutes. Dozens of feet became thousands. Soon enough, there was nothing but sea and storm in all directions, the cliffs becoming nothing more than a memory. This had to be the fear that Dallion was facing: getting lost in a storm. From here on, it was up to him to find the right direction and preserve his strength so that he could make it across.

A trial of endurance and mental fortitude It was just like something like the Moons would throw at him. And still, Dallion felt that something wasnt right. The trial was challenging, without a doubt, as he had witnessed during his previous attempt. However, it still felt too easy and at the same time completely impossible; too easy if Dallion had the ability to fly. If he didnt, would a boat have appeared? Or would he have to swim through the storm?

Gleam, sense anything that shouldnt be here? Dallion asked.

What you see is what you get. There arent any creatures hiding about. Not close by, at least. If theres anything deep beneath the water, I cant see it.

Two waves slammed together, creating a thunder rivaling the sky.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

Red rectangles emerged in front of all instances. In some cases, the wound was a lot more serious, forcing Dallion to pick the one with which he could get away with. Wounds werent as serious as before with Lux around, but even so, they were best avoided.

More waves emerged. Almost shooting up from the sea.

I must be getting close, Dallion thought. From what he remembered from the computer games on Earth, enemies and obstacles increased as he was following the correct path. There were no clear paths here, but the storm might as well have been a neon sign telling him which way to go.

Dallion found that progressing forward by merely evading was no longer an option. He had to use guard and attack skills as well. It was at that point that he found that guide bonuses didnt apply when fighting forces of nature. As nice as it would have been to have time to slow down to the point that the waves became motionless mountains of water, it wasnt going to happen. Attacks, on the other hand, seemed to work just fine.

Picking the most suitable of his instances, Dallion did a point attack. The force of the strike was strong enough to momentarily create a tunnel through several waves. For a fraction of a second, it almost looked like Dallion could fly through it, but that was an illusion. The tip of the waves crashed upon themselves, providing a few moments of breathing space.

I think I see something, Gleam said, flying further away from Dallion.

Gleam, stay close! He ordered.

Waves cant harm me. Ill just check

A water sprout shot up, engulfing the familiar. The action was sudden and merciless, causing Dallion to force split into a reality in which the shardfly had remained behind.

Wow, that was close, Gleam said as the column of water emerged half a dozen feet away from her. The familiars current level didnt allow her to be aware of other instances that had passed, or at least she behaved as if she wasnt.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion performed a vertical line attack. There was no way he could fly through a column of water without losing his ability to fly. This had to be the final part of the challenge. From here on, every mistake could turn out to be his last.

The line of destruction went through the water sprout, but against all expectations, it didnt slice it in two. Instead, a red rectangle emerged.

ATTACK NEGATED!

Your attack has been sliced in two by CAPTAIN ADZORG

Attack has no effect.

Even wrapped in Luxs flames, Dallion felt chills down his spine. This simple message had shown him so many things he wasnt prepared for. The only thing he knew was that he had to shield himself immediately.

Shield! He ordered, just in time to block the explosion of water that followed.

Drops of water hit the shield front of the shield like bullets, creating indentations visible on the other side. Dallion could feel the pain that Vihrogon had been subjected to.

Can you remain? Dallion asked.

Its not the best experience, but Ill be fine, the dryad guardian replied. Dont expect me to go through this in real life, though.

Splitting into instances, Dallion peeked above the shield at where the column of water had been. To no surprise, the only thing there was Adzorg, floating a hundred feet in the air. The old man was exactly how Dallion remembered seeing him last. The circle of glowing symbols around him, though, was quite new.

Halfway there, the old man said. Id congratulate you, but second best isnt best.

Dallion remained silent, trying to determine what was going on.

Nothing to say, seeing me do magic? the trial echo asked. Id have thought that at least youd make a comment, at least. He waited for a few moments. Guess not. The big question is whether your fear is finding out that I am still part of the Academy, or merely facing a mage in a storm. It might be both, of course, in which case, I guess you should consider yourself lucky?

It wont be the first time Ive faced a mage at sea.

And how did that turn out last time? You werent the focus of attention, not to mention you had two others to fight alongside you. And let us not forget how extremely lucky you were. If Katka didnt have such a short fuse, there was no way you could have won.

Just as theres no way to be sure youre telling the truth, Dallion countered. Youre a trial echo. You only say what the trial requires.

Thats a bit harsh, dear boy. I guess you might be right, but even if you are, it wouldnt matter. The trial isnt a mind game. In fact, nothing has changed. You only have to reach the other side of the storm. Make it there and well, you know the rest.

Why do I get the impression that youll try to stop me?

Probably because thats part of the trial. The old man smiled. As I said, thats part of your fear, though not only. If youre to survive further on, youll have to be able to go through this much. Maybe not all of your battles against nobles will be this intense, but the vast majority will be. So far, youve only touched the surface of what real noble duels are. The pompous idiots youve faced still believe in false concepts such as honor in battle. The sad truth is that there is no honor, not when the stakes are high. Lose and you might end up dead, banished, or delevled like your grandfather.

So, this is to prepare me to fight nobles?

Dal Adzhorg shook his head. All your trials are about getting prepared to face nobles. Theres nothing strange or special about it. All nobles have gone through the same. Make no mistake, even inexperienced idiots have a far greater combat potential than you. Now and again, you might be able to pull off a trick to catch them by surprise, but even if you do, it wont be enough to kill them. The noble you faced in Halburn didnt lose because you defeated him. He lost because he defeated himself. If he had just continued with his attacks, there was a very large chance that you would have lost.

Or maybe Id have won? Dallion drew the harpsisword from the scabbard on his back. Well never know.

Quite well put. The thing is that we could very well learn. And while theres no guarantee that if you defeat me, youll be able to defeat a noble. If you lose, its pretty much guaranteed.

COMBAT INITIATED

Chapter 574: Spark and Storm

Rain, waves, and wind returned with a vengeance as Adzorg cast a series of fireballs at Dallion. Looking like flaming orbs, they made their way through air and water, combining every preconception Dallion had about them, along with the annoying ability to home in on him.

The initial reaction was to use the armadil shield to keep them from reaching their target. One single hit, however, quickly changed Dallions view on the matter.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

A moderate wound after all this? Dallion burst into instances, doing his best to fly away while also avoiding the monstrous waves. Neither the shield, nor his sprouting armor had proved capable of stopping the flames. The reduction had to be significant, suggesting that a direct hit risked ending the trial there and then.

Dallion threw his harpsisword at Adzorg, immediately summoning his dartblade and shooting several more bolts in the echos direction. Several spheres of protection appeared around the mage, making him impervious to waves and attacks. Once the threat was over, the spheres disappeared, allowing him to cast attack magic yet again.

Gleam, cut him! Dallion ordered.

From what he had seen, Adzorg didnt have the ability to attack and defend at the same time. Or at least so it seemed. Knowing the man, it was possible for him to fake that in order to gain an advantage in combat. It wouldnt be the first time. Nil had often stressed how important it was to keep his cards close to his chest, not that Dallion needed any reminding.

Youre hesitant, dear boy, Adzorg shouted. Scared of a little water?

The normal answer to give was yesthere was for Dallion to be aware of waves that had the power to rip off limbs. He had never seen such a phenomenon in the real world, but he didnt doubt for a moment that magic could make it happen. For all he knew, the entire storm could be one massive spell. The trial echo only seemed to confirm that by having parts of the waves move away from Adzorg as they passed by. It was like watching a magnet repel ferrofluid.

Tossing his dartblade, Dallion summoned his harpsisword again, then spin in place, releasing a series of line attacks. The destructive lines sliced through waves, transforming them into layers of a jelly cake, yet Adzorgs reaction was faster. Before they reached him, the protective spheres were around him, like a series of concentric bubbles.

Four consecutive line attacks descended on the echo. Three spheres of magic shattered one after the other, leaving the last one pass through.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

A red rectangle emerged. It wasnt by far enough to bring Dallion victory, but enough to give him a glimmer of hope.

So, you used four, Adzorg noted, as the torn section of his robe mended itself. An unconventional approach, although I shouldnt be surprised. You never were one to seriously follow tactics. It reminds me of the time when you barely learned the minimum necessary to get you to move forward.

It got me here, didnt it? Dallion replied calmly. Such simple provocations were no longer able to upset him. However, he couldnt miss such an opportunity to use his music skills. One thing he had learned while hunting, music skills had no downside. Why didnt you tell me youre a mage?

Because people would love knowing theyd have a disgraced mage in their midst? Those whos business it is to know, know. The rest dont need to. And just for reference, its useless using your music skills on me. Even without spells, my scholar skills are high enough to render them useless.

Maybe Ill get lucky. Dallion split into instances, barely in time to avoid another water sprout that shot up from nowhere.

Seventeen of his instances were completely destroyed. Adzorg, on the other hand, had no such issue, flying through the column of water as if it were a curtain. His hands moved faster than Dallion could keep up, creating two new circles in the air.

Chains of water shot out from the surrounding water, all flying towards Dallion. This was rather specific for a spell. Most of the magic he had seen in the past only involved basic forms of energy: spheres or bolts. The echo of the trial was getting more than a bit creative.

Combining acrobatics, attack, and defense, Dallion did a series of slashes with his harpsisword, doing his best to avoid any contact with the watery chains. One splashed into the shield, spreading along it like moss.

Dallion didnt hesitate, unsummoning the shield and pulling back even more. The misshaped chain snapped like a bear trap, teeth sinking into Dallions arm.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

HAND SEVERED

You will no longer be able to use your LEFT HAND

The pain was momentary. The sensation of having his arm bitten off remained. Dallion slashed in the direction of the water chain, making sure that it didnt do any more damage. That proved to be a mistake, for he had missed his window to switch to another instance in which he had both arms.

Why so surmised? Adzorg asked, casting half a dozen fireballs at Dallion. You're not the only one who could cut off appendages.

Lux, fly away! Dallion said, splitting into instances again. Gleam, I told you to cut him!

What do you think I've been doing? The shardfly snapped back. He's using waves to protect himself. I don't have the strength to cut through them!

Not the answer Dallion wanted to hear, but it still meant that the echo was partially occupied. The question was what to do now. Normally mages liked to keep their distance, casting spells from afar. Adzorg, though, was the complete opposite, constantly moving in as close as possible. There was too little information to tell whether that was an anomaly or there were mages who preferred this style of combat. Whatever the case, he was overpowering. The worst of it was that Dallion knew he had a chance of winning. He had managed to land a critical blow once, which meant there was nothing stopping him from doing so again.

And you honestly think you're ready to face the Star? Adzorg frowned. You can't even pass a trial stacked in your favor. What would you have done if you had stumbled across the Star at your level?

In response, Dallion did a series of line and point attacks, all aimed at the echo.

Walls of water emerged from the sea, twisting the lines of the attacks like rubber bands. It was mesmerizing to see the attacks slice and drill the water mercilessly, yet completely avoid their target.

You're too insignificant to attract his attention. The reason your paths crossed at all was because of the otherworlder principle. Coming from the same world, the Star was destined to come across you. He spent some time toying about, trying to tempt you to join his cultists, then when you refused, he returned to more important matters. Why do you think there's a war going on?

The Star started the war? Dallion asked, this time using his music skills to decrease Gleam's weight and fatigue.

That's what you seem to believe. It might be true, or maybe it isn't. The facts are that it wouldn't matter since the next time you come across the Star, you'll lose, and not even your trinket will help you.

Spark! Dallion shouted, doing another line attack.

The line of destruction flew forward once again, only this time, something different happened. The waves that had managed to distort the attack before, did no such thing. Adzorg instantly cast three new protective spheres around him. The attack sliced through them as well.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 500%

LEGS SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of his LEGS

It went through? Dallion couldn't believe it. His main goal was to distract the echo enough so he could get away. Instead, he had done a significant enough damage to leave him to a sliver of health. Not that he could confirm that. Adzorg was somehow managing to conceal the white rectangle displaying his information. According to standard logic, two fatal strikes were enough to take down anyone, provided they didn't have a way of regaining health.

Well played, dear boy. Adzorg smiled. His fingers quickly wrote the symbols of a new spell circle. Green light glowed from the lower part of his body. The stumps grew in size, changing into a new set of legs before Dallion's very eyes, complete with trousers and shoes. In future, when you see a mage go for the hands.

Leaves of deceit appeared within the echo's body. The comment had been made to distract Dallion from the fact that he had found a way around a mage's defenses. The question was why. The obvious answer was that the spark had given the attack a boost, but that wasn't of much help. Rather, it answered the how, not the why.

You said that magic is taking advantage of loopholes, Dallion said, still constantly splitting. The dual might have come to a temporary pause, but the waves were very much there and just as vicious as before. Does that make you a kind of lawyer?

I told you that magic won't work on me, or most mages, for that matter. Adzorg sighed. If you come across a mage whom you can defeat with magic, you'll just as easily defeat him without it.

It means that there are certain laws you cannot change, Dallion continued. That's the answer to the trials riddle, isn't it?

The riddle is facing difficulties, the echo corrected. If you were able to use the spark attack, but no line attacks, would you have achieved the same result?

Yes, because magic cannot go against the Moons. Dallion felt certain of himself. That's why the attack went through.

That might well be the case. The question is whether

Dallion combined another line attack with a spark. The thread went through Adzorg mid-sentence, slicing him in two. Yet, instead of a rectangle marking the end of the trial, both parts of the echo disappeared in a cloud of particles.

That was uncalled for, a new Adzorg said, floating in the air some fifty feet away. As I told you, you should have aimed for the arms, or at the very least, the fingers. A mage with his fingers intact can pretty much do anything he wants, including create echoes of himself at a moment's notice.

It's just an illusion, Gleam said. I've no idea where the real one is, but there are three illusions about. Four now.

So, that's the game, Dallion thought. Now that he had gained the upper hand, his opponent had gone into defense mode. Smart and annoying, as Eury liked to say.

Gripping the hilt of his harpsisword, Dallion split into four eight instances, four of them back to back, looking in all directions. The shardfly had been right: there was more than one Adzorgs about, and growing by the second.

Why dont you just use instances? Dallion asked.

I thought you had learned to manage your resources, a chorus said in reply. Or did you forget that trial already? The mind trait can do a lot, but not everything.

So, it also affects magic, does it?

If you didnt suspect so, it wouldnt be happening in the trial. The Adzorgs laughed. This is also the time I give you another valuable piece of advice youre free to ignore. Close to a dozen Adzorgs turned around and flew away through the storm to the horizon. Once you become the attacker, its your role to defeat your opponent. And just in case you were wondering. Yes, I have the ability to heal. The question is, do you have enough stamina to defeat me despite that?

Chapter 575: Mage Fingers

The further Dallion went, the storm got worse. After discovering a way to get through Adzorgs spells, he had expected things to get easier. As it turned out, he was very wrong. Half-way there meant that it was only the easy part that was over. Now, he had to chase down a mage through a storm that made the one before seem like a picnic. Trying to do so with anything less than eighty instances was virtual suicide. And the worst part of it was that unlike the echo, Dallions left arm hadnt regrown.

In front! Harp said.

Without thinking, Dallion did a line attack combined with a spark. Dozens of waves were slashed in two, along with the form of Adzorg himself. Sadly, yet again no rectangle appeared.

Theres one more, Gleam said. Hes an illusion as well.

Just perfect, Dallion hissed beneath his breath, careful not to swallow any water.

Fighting in freezing rain wasnt something he liked, even if he had gotten used to it. Looking in the distance, there was a chance that the rain might soon turn to sleet. And still, there was no telling where the real echo trial was hiding. The shardfly had been adamant that she had spotted him at the start of the chase, but ever since each encounter had been against a fake. That wasnt to say that the spells Dallion was subjected to werent real. Chains of water, fireballs, and cages of ice had joined the waves and water sprouts, attempting to kill him.

Was this part of the trial? Dallion wondered.

It wasnt reaching the other side of the sea, nor was it facing a mage in a storm. To be more specific, it wasnt only those things. Maybe the main focus was finding a means to locate mages?

Another two waves slammed against each other in a display of raw power that could only happen in an awakening realm. Three quarters of Dallions instances were destroyed, quickly to be replaced by just as many.

Is that the point, Adzorg? Dallion shouted, adding notions of temptation and self-confidence to his words. It was a long shot, but at least it was something. More importantly, it made him feel better. The trial of life? Surviving against all odds, no matter the cost?

Two fireballs curved around an incoming wave, flying directly towards Dallion. Used to the spell, Dallion didnt even flinch. Waiting for the right moment, he let Lux move him to the right, then struck the fireball with a spark attack. As it turned out, spark attacks also had the power to dispel fireballs, at last in Dallions mind.

I thought you were against sneakiness. He looked around. If there were actual spells, the actual Adzorg had to be somewhere nearby.

Found him!

Gleam shouted. *Hes behind the wave.*

Gritting his teeth, Dallion flew in that direction. Moments before hitting the wave, he performed a point attack forward. The force of the strike punctured a hole through the mountain of water, letting Dallion fly through. As he did, the tunnel collapsed behind him as water fell to fill in the void.

The first thing Dallion saw on the other side of the wave was a fireball. Unfortunately, this time, none of his instances managed to escape unscathed.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

The pain lingered on slightly longer than last time, possibly because the fireball hit Dallion in what was left of his missing arm. If it hadnt been for Luxs regenerative abilities, this would have marked the end of the trial. The trial echo knew it, for he shook his head in disapproval.

Even when desperate, you have to keep your guard up, Adzorg said. Otherwise, best just give up. There will be less pain that way.

Is that what you did when you were at the Academy?

Dear boy, you know that the answer I give you will be what you think it to be. I could have been kicked out, or I could have gone on my own accord. The truth is, youll never find out.

Never say never. Dallion flew forward, swinging his blade around like a butterfly. While a line attack would have been simpler, he had done so many of those that his arm was starting to hurt. There was a while to go before it became numb, but there was no point in being reckless.

Surprisingly, Adzorg didnt cast a protective spell, or even move back. Reaching out, he summoned a finely crafted sword and blocked Dallions attack. The most interesting part was that the sword was nothing more than a long, thin piece of metal attached to a hilt. What made the weapon really formidable was the transparent blade surrounding the piece of metal.

Dame Vesuvias blade? Dallion asked.

Yes and no, Adzorg replied as he went on the offensive. The attacks were precise and elegant, although not difficult to parry. That was the only type of magical sword youve seen, so it was normal for you to associate magic with such a weapon. Combat mages used a lot more exotic weapons, attuned to their trait like your harpsisword is attuned to your music skills.

Both sides seemed to be evenly matched. Dallion was stronger physically, but his missing arm negated his advantage. Also, he had two familiars to help him out. While Lux consistently restored

his health, Gleam continued to attack the trial echo, her own attacks blocked by defense spells and water.

The swordplay continued for several seconds, after which yet another waterspout shot up, forcing Dallion to fly back to safety. Naturally, Adzorg didnt have to do a thing.

Holding his breath, Dallion did another line attack reinforced by a spark. And just like at the start of the trial battle, his attack was negated.

I must say, you have a rather high opinion of me, dear boy, Adzorg said. Adept mage and master swordsman. Im tempted to check out what other skills you have granted me.

Why dont you? Dallion charged forward again with a triple slash arc attack.

Each of the swings was deflected with ease on Adzorgs part, after which he counterattacked. The old man tended to prefer piercing attacks, despite his weapons clear slashing characteristics. Multi attack followed multi attack with both sides, increasing the speed and ferocity of their strikes. Red rectangles appeared constantly, stacking up on both sides. Half of them were damage related, while the rest were health restoration.

Annoying, isnt it? Adzorg laughed. Thats why anyone with healing power is so highly valued, especially those who can share that power with others. If you had remained in the guild, you would have become a lieutenant by now, at least. Maybe even a captain.

The last was a lie. Dallion had improved considerably in the last year and so had his ability to judge the strength of others. March, Adzorg, and all the other captains were way beyond him, as this fight was making abundantly clear. The echo simply outclassed him in every possible way, giving him no chance to use any skill effect bonuses.

Combat, acrobatics, and arts, Dallion said to himself.

Many of the awakening markers disappeared, leaving only several sets combining the skills he had said. They were far less than normal, mostly because his art skills were so low. Euryale had told him to practice his combat threading, but since that wasnt something particularly useful when fighting in the wilderness, Dallion had been neglecting it. Now, that neglect was precisely his greatest advantage: it was something the trial echo wouldnt be expecting.

Spinning in the air, several instances of Dallion then flowed forward in a motion as fluid as a wave of water. If Adzorg was surprised, he didnt show it, for he met the attack as he normally did. It was at that point that Dallion tried out a specific ability of the reaction trait he seldom used: simultaneous actions. His left arm moved so fast that it created the illusion that a second arm had grown from Dallions right shoulder. That wasnt all, though. Dallion added one more thing to the mix, taking advantage of his speed to consistently summon and unsummon two weapons: his dartblade and his harpsisword. For a brief moment of time he had entered a state in which he was simultaneously with both weapons simultaneously. Adzorg did the same, protecting himself from the blows of both. What wasnt planned for, was Dallion, using a spark to shoot a pair of bolts from almost point blank range.

FATAL HIT

Dealt Damage is increased by 500%

FATAL HIT

Dealt Damage is increased by 500%

A pair of red rectangles appeared, dealing a devastating amount of damage before the echo could manage to heal himself. A split second later, the storm suddenly stopped. The massive waves froze in place, then splashed down into the sea, making it as calm as a mirror. The clouds had vanished, the wind subsided, only Dallion and Adzorg remained several hundred feet in the air.

Not bad.

Gleam fluttered onto Dallions shoulder.

Dallion burst into instances again. As tempting as it was to thank her, he was still quite tense. After all, his opponent hadnt disappeared.

No need for the long face, dear boy, Adzorg said. You won this one. Which only proves that your lack of progress isnt due to any weakness or low skill. It is your complacency that caused you to stall.

You havent vanished.

I have the ability to take advantage of loopholes. The truth is that I have lost and disappeared the moment you got me with you dartblade. Always good to know youve finally learned how to use adequately. What you see now is just an afterimage of me. Think of it as a future instance.

Alright. Dallion didnt feel too convinced.

You have eleven more levels until you reach the fifth gate. I wont sugarcoat it. Regardless of what you think, each next challenge will be more difficult than the last, and all of them will involve physical survival. That doesnt mean you wont have to think about strategy as well. In short, it will be a harsh struggle for a meager reward, comparatively speaking. However, it will be worth it.

Because of whats beyond the gate?

And there you go again, spoiling your achievement, Adzorg sighed. If youre strong enough to survive your trials, it means youre strong enough to survive similar challenges in the real world. Cultists, nobles, mages, all are still ahead of you, but with every level the gap grows smaller. With luck, by the time you come across someone strong, youll be close enough to fight solo and win.

Dallion nodded. He had a lot more advantages in the real world, but he understood what the old echo meant. At this level, being strong wasnt just about mastering most of his skills, it was about mastering all and, to such a degree, that would compensate for the difference in level. Whatever secret lay behind the fifth gate, it had to be quite significant indeed.

Also, keep your guard up. Splitting must become a constant habit for you, no matter where you go.

Is that real advice or is it my fears talking? Dallion asked.

Next time you see Vend, ask him. That way, youll know for certain.

You have broken through your sixty-ninth barrier.

You are level 69.

Choose the trait you value the most.

The familiar green rectangle appeared. A second after Dallion glanced at it, he noticed that Adzorg was no more.

That was a tough one, Gleam said. Good thing you made it. I wasn't going through this storm a second time. Do you think he was lying about the other trials?

Your guess is as good as mine, Dallion said. They'll probably be tougher. He had chosen this one because he thought it would kick him into shape and it had, but it was also true that he had failed in every other trial he had tried as well.

When the seven rectangles appeared, indicating Dallion's traits, he immediately chose body, increasing its value to thirty-seven. With what was to come, this was his new priority. Now all he had to do was remain alive for the next time he leveled up.

Chapter 576: Canopa Outpost

It took several moments for Dallion to get adjusted to the reality around him. The shift from a sea to a forest was greater than usual, not to mention that he needed to get re-used to gravity.

The clerics were in the process of separating the bodies of the dead in two piles: one for the members of the Order and the other for the cultists. When Dallion attempted to go question some more of the items of the cultists pile, though he was stopped.

I'm sorry, initiate, a war cleric said, with an expression revealing he was anything but sorry. The archbishop has ordered that you don't approach the bodies.

Me in particular? Dallion tried not to sound amused.

Yes, initiate. He referred to you by name.

That made little sense, since the level of Dallion's empathy trait allowed him to talk to item guardians miles away. Still, there was no point in antagonizing the Order, so he just nodded and turned around.

Will you do anything if I start asking questions? Dallion asked.

Depends on the questions, dear boy, Nil replied. Now that I know what you think of me, I know that you suspect I could do something to stop it. Just keep in mind that I'm doing this for your own good.

You tend to say that a lot lately.

The echo had behaved in similar fashion back when Dallion had entered the fallen south. Although, back then, he hadn't done anything violent. To use magic in a fashion to destroy a guardian was untypical. There was definitely something Nil was hiding, but maybe there was a reason to do so.

You win this one, Nil, but there will come a time when I reach level eighty, and when I do you won't be able to hide things from me.

Dear boy, if you reach level eighty, there'll be no reason for me to hide anything.

Before leaving the settlements remains, Dallion offered to help the surviving clerics. The offer was swiftly rejected, although Dallion could feel it being appreciated by some.

An unnerving quiet surrounded Dallion as he walked through the forest. The fight had scared off everything from insects to top predators. Even the trees were shaken up, not saying a whisper. For a brief moment, it almost felt as if he was a non-awakened again. The moment quickly passed, as the insatiable post-trial hunger hit him like a ton of bricks. While the previous trial had been a mental one, the one he had completed just now had exhausted him to the extreme. Hunter training and experience allowed him to endure, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling.

From what Dallion remembered, it was roughly a day from his current position to the Academy's village. If he sprinted, he could get there faster, but that was only going to exhaust him more. The best thing he could do was to go further in and catch something to eat. Unfortunately, as it soon turned out, the lack of animals wasn't merely caused by the battle. Predators that had tried to attack Dallion so eagerly the last time he was in the area were nowhere to be found. Only small creatures were present, far too small to satiate his hunger unless he caught hundreds of them. In the end, he decided that a dozen were better than nothing.

The birds Dallion caught were green-feathered, roughly the size of pigeons, with more bones than bone. As far as his senses were concerned, that was a blessing, for the taste was vilely bitter. Even cooking them did little to help that. Still, they were food and as any hunter knew, food wasn't something that one had to like.

Night in the forest wasn't all that different. A few minor predators had made an appearance, none of them particularly large or tasty. More interestingly, though, it was at this time that the trees started talking again, letting Dallion know that the sudden change had suddenly happened months ago. One day, the majority of the animals just vanished. Dallion was aware that the poison plague had disrupted migration patterns, but this didn't seem to be the case. The plague plants had never gained a foothold in the west, not to mention that the shift had been too sudden. More and more, it was starting to look like the Academy was involved. Officially, the village that they had taken over was meant to help apprentice mages train. The truth was that they were involved in creature research. What kind, Dallion could only guess, although he speculated that they were more focused on magic creatures. However, as Dallion had seen in the memories of a rogue mage, accidents weren't uncommon when it came to the Academy and always it was others that paid the price.

Nil, what are the chances that they had been seeking the phoenix?

Minimal, the echo didn't mince words. High-level mages are just as greedy as nobles. No one would risk having their subordinates find something they want. Not only would it be politically strenuous, but also highly inefficient. Countess Priscord sent you, not her army, to find it. Why would others be different?

Mages are a bit stronger than common soldiers, Nil.

You'd be surprised.

The closer Dallion got to the village, the more things seemed to return to normal. Animal sounds returned, then the animals themselves, all keeping at a respectable distance from him, of course. At one point, a slothbear even had a go at him before rushing off into the forest. The only issue was

that none of the creatures were real. Gleam had been quick to point that out, but even if she hadn't, the trees said the same thing: all the creatures in the area weren't acting naturally, but only mimicking the behavior of others. One particularly weird thing was that none of them seemed to be aware of a settlement in the area. As far as they were concerned, the forest had always been unbreached, and people were scarce. That was clearly false since the path Dallion was following had clearly been made by human hand.

I know you're watching, Dallion said, suddenly stopping. I just want to go to Canopa.

The leaves rustled. In a single moment, all the animal sounds vanished, along with any animals and insects. In their place, a new chorus of voices emerged, voices that only Dallion could hear, coming from miles away.

Hey, it's you! a bow item guardian said. Didn't think you'd be back. How are you? Did you bring the rest of your guardians with you?

Wow, you really must have spooked the mages, another guardian laughed. They don't break the spell for just anyone.

Of course they'll let him in. The old hag likes him.

You think? I didn't know she liked anyone.

Well, she hates him less than the rest. Besides, he's a full hunter now.

A full hunter? Haven't seen one of those in ages. Are you here on a job?

What are you hunting this time?

The voices grew louder and louder, forcing Dallion to close his eyes for a moment. Usually, he could handle a chorus of guardians. These were more overwhelming than the standard variety. Being dryads, all of them had empathy, allowing them to talk to one another without being addressed. Not only that, they were the only instance Dallion knew of in which items of the same guardian type had actively accumulated in one spot.

Give me some space, guys, Dallion managed to say. You've grown a lot more since last time.

Yeah. A lot more people are coming and going, so we got a few new members. Is the shield guardian with you?

Yes, he's here

Dallion wasn't sure what was worse, knowing that his companion guardian was probably going to flirt with some of the local items, or the fact that he probably had been responsible for banishing some of them ages ago. He would have asked, if the armadil shield hadn't become progressively silent. There was a time when an hour wouldn't pass without the companion guardian chatting about one thing or another. Now, he'd remain silent for weeks unless addressed.

As Dallion was standing on the forest path, a blur appeared in the distance ahead. With one swift action, Dallion drew his harpsword. The moment he did, the blur stopped, then transformed into a young woman in a simple cyan and brown outfit.

Lelandra? Dallion asked. Last time he was here, the young woman had the role of village scribe, which in practical terms meant a combination of guide, spy, and secretary.

Welcome again, envoy, the woman said. Anxiety emanated from her so loud that Dallion almost felt pity for her. We were not aware of your visit.

You werent aware last time, either, Dallion thought.

Im no longer an envoy, he said. Just a hunter with some questions. Any chance I can get some food and rest at the village?

Canopa isnt open to visitors at this time. Ill be more than glad to provide you with enough supplies, of course.

So, thats how it was. Dallion knew that his meddling with the Academy would have consequences. Although it was virtually on Archdukes Linatol that he had killed a rogue mage, the Academy tended to be very protective of their own. From what Nil had shared, only mages were supposed to punish mages. Outside actions were tolerated when necessary, but never liked.

I also want to have a word with Eleria, he said in a firm tone. Shes still in charge here, right?

The scribes silence suggested that to be the case. From this point on, the decision was out of her hands. After dealing with nobles and their servants, Dallion had gotten to know a few things regarding how things worked. It was common for subordinates to use their power to keep random people from seeing their superiors, but when the person was noticed, everything was up to the person in charge.

How long will your visit be? Lelandra asked.

Half a day at most, unless Im given a job.

The time was long enough to seem intriguing and short enough not to be bothersome.

The woman remained silent for a few more seconds. The levels of anxiety coming from her grew.

You are most welcome to our village, the woman said reluctantly. Please, follow me.

Thank you.

After less than fifty steps on the path, the front gate of the village was suddenly in front of them. The experience was similar to switching between realms. Instinctively, Dallion split into instances, several of which took a few steps back. As expected, they found on the same path only to see the village gone.

Portal magic? Dallion asked as he made his way forward.

The scribe didnt answer.

Still intent on making a fool of yourself? Nil sighed. It only works the first time, you know.

Whos pretending? Dallion asked.

The settlement had changed considerably since the last time Dallion was here. Rather, it seemed like an entirely new outpost had been built in its place. The walls were far larger, made of stone, the individual houses were gone, replaced by larger structures that held space for more people, and libraries had grown to the size of small forts. The only thing that remained the same was the rural section, although it was no longer simple villagers tending to the fields and animals.

Metalins, Dallion whispered, looking at the metal constructs that moved about autonomously, like rogue suits of armor. I thought that they were only used within the realms.

They increase productivity, the scribe explained, although she too was uncomfortable with their presence. It only takes a few apprentices to control them.

That doesnt sound too reassuring. Dallion meant it as a joke, but his comment drained the blood from Lelandras face.

Careful, dear boy. Dont make new enemies until after getting the information.

Didnt you tell me that those were the Academys crown achievement? Dallion asked.

And they were, but theres also the minor issue that they were based on the Crippleds skills.

Metalins are Star tech?

Why do you think the Academy sent expeditions to the South? Many of the Academys recent discoveries are linked to Star technology. As I said, magic is nothing but the art of finding loopholes. And if one can find loopholes in the laws of nature and the Moons, imagine how easy it would be to find such in the laws of the empire.

Chapter 577: Paradox Remnant

Thank you for seeing me, my lady, Dallion said with a polite bow.

Now that he was a full hunter, and had a bit more experience of the wider world, he knew the importance of behaving properly. It was often that he felt like kicking himself, remembering how he had acted in the past.

Mage would do if you insist on using titles, Eleria Fall said. Neither she nor the room had changed even a fraction probably the only things that hadnt. I appreciate the effort you took to let us know what you were here for. However, you still have the annoying habit of choosing the worst possible time.

Lately theres no such thing as the right time, mage, Dallion said in a firm but polite fashion. Youre probably aware of the wars taking place.

I am, even if they are irrelevant as far as Im concerned. It wont be the first time things have become tense. Not too long ago, all furies united in an attempt to destroy the imperial capital. The Academy was even called to assist, or so the story goes. In truth, the emperor did nothing more but request the aid of a handful of mages, just enough to prove a point.

Is that true, Nil? Dallion asked within his realm.

Its a matter of interpretation, the echo replied. Some say it was half the tower, others say it was less. Shes correct about one thing, though. The Academy has been through many wars, not all of them within the Tamin Empire.

So, if thats all youve come to say, Ill have Lelandra take you somewhere where you can get some food and

There was a cultist attack on a settlement not far from here yesterday, Dallion interrupted. Most of the acolytes were slaughtered, and the settlement destroyed.

The mages expression remained unchanged. The complete lack of emotions emanating from her, suggested that she was prepared for this meeting.

I am aware of the results. Were you there when it happened?

Yes, mage. I was the target of the attack.

Upon hearing that, the womans lips curved into a faint smile.

I see you havent kicked that habit of yours to get in trouble. The Nerosal fiasco, the cloud citadel mishap, Archduke Linatols banquet, the killing of a mage The last was said in a firm tone, making it clear her opinions on the matter. There isnt a mage in the Academy who hasnt an opinion on the matter and none of them are favorable. Do I make myself clear?

Yes, mage. Im on thin ice and should be careful.

Good. What are you here for?

Information, same as before.

And what will you offer in return? Since this is to be a business transaction, it wont come for free.

What can I offer? A hunt? An artefact? Equivalent information?

Who are you working for?

Now it was Dallions turn to smile. That was a question that everyone asked sooner or later. However, it wasnt something everyone could afford to learn. Normally a hunters discretion was highly valued. Thankfully, the countess had told him that she didnt care whom she shared the information with.

That might be a bit too much. Dallion looked her straight in the eyes. Ill need a Moon vow.

Nothing discussed on the matter will be shared with anyone. I vow by the Purple Moon.

Nothing about the workings of the tower will be shared with anyone, Dallion said in turn. I vow by the Green Moon.

Green? Eleria nodded several times. Fancy. I didnt think there were more empaths.

I keep hearing that. Im working for Countess Priscord. The specific request is to find an aetherbird. The.

Sorry?

The aetherbird. There's only one. There's always been only one, it's one of the grand loopholes. Of course, there are some who disagree, but that's the Academy for you. Did she say why she wanted it?

I have a pretty good idea.

And you thought I might help you find it?

No, but I know you could tell me more about it. That's what you do here, isn't it? The bestiary you gave me last time. It turned out that it can't be found anywhere outside the Academy.

There probably are a few archdukes who have a copy in their private collections. The world revolves around threats and favors. I wouldn't be surprised if Priscord has one as well. She has always been ambitious. It won't be the first time an archduke changes. What do you know about the bird?

That it exists and represented the embodiment of magic. It cannot be killed and apparently, it can't be caught either.

Seems you didn't need my help, after all.

Dallion clenched his fists behind his back. While she had vowed not to share anything said, she hadn't promised to give him any usable information. Had he repeated the mistake he made back when he had met the general?

But it can be wounded, he quickly added.

Are you convinced?

I saw a feather sold at the night auction.

A bird doesn't need to be wounded to release a feather, but you are correct. The aetherbird can be wounded. Technically, it can also be killed, although before it dies, it transforms back into itself. That isn't the issue, however. If it was just that, someone would have captured it millennia ago. The bigger problem is that it cannot be caught in the literal sense of the world. Have you tried catching a firebird?

Dallion couldn't keep himself from smirking.

Actually, yes.

And how did you do that?

By focusing on the eyes.

With the rest of the firebird being fire, it was impossible to touch. The eyes, however, were like hard gems. Dallion had defeated his first firebird back when he was part of the Icepicker guild. His job had been to clear artifact items for anyone who would pay, and he did by defeating the guardians inside. It was also there that he had faced, and later caught Lux, making him into his second familiar.

I'm talking about real life. The only way to capture a firebird is to put it in an adequate cage, and the only adequate cages are a form of magic crystals. However, you're not dealing with fire here.

No. Im dealing with magic.

And magic can only be contained by more powerful magic. Trying to lock the firebird in a gem would be like trying to imprison a glass of water in the ocean.

The mages explanation was terrible, but Dallion knew what she had in mind. That made things seemingly impossible. Only seemingly, because Dallion could think of a way to keep the creature containedone that he desperately wanted to avoid.

What about the Order? Dont they have anything that could be of use?

Youll be the first to convince them to do anything. But even if you do, I doubt it would work. Magic is also the domain of a Moon. If my suspicions are correct and the bird is a Moons familiar, the Order wouldnt be able to do anything about it.

So, the Order cant catch it and the Academy cant catch it, Dallion mused. That left the Star, or to be more precise, his cultists.

Youre really determined, arent you?

The woman stood up, then made her way to the far section of her library. Her fingers moved faster than Dallion could follow, drawing a pattern in the air. Once she was finished, one of the books changed appearance, turning into a wooden box.

There isnt much more I or anyone else can tell you about the creature. Eleria pulled out the box, then went to her desk.

Anticipation filled the air. Dallion tried asking the guardian of the box what it held inside, but the entity just snorted at him.

So young and so impatient, the woman said as she opened the box.

Upon seeing it, Dallion froze. The item held nothing less than a phoenix feather. There was no mistaking itthe exact same item that had been sold at the Linatol night auction. Up close, it looked far more impressive. Using his layer vision, Dallion could see that each feather barb was a thin sliver of magic. It was as if the feather was made of light turned solid.

Some would call it magnificent, the mage said. It cost me a massive fortune to acquire it, not to mention the vast number of favors it took me to get to a position just to buy it. Unlike most other items, phoenix feathers are unpredictable. Hunters dont set out to find them, they just happen onto one. Auctions rarely sell them and its always a last-minute event. Usually those who have them dont want to part with them.

I can see why.

You can touch it, if you like.

Dallion was about to thank her, when it suddenly hit him; he wasnt supposed to be able to touch it. If the aetherbird was made of magic similar to a firebird, his hand should go right through it. Even at the night auction, no one had actually done so in Dallions presence.

One of the paradoxes, the mage leaned back. While part of the creature, the feather cannot be touched. And yet, when its dropped, it becomes physical.

The feather gleamed in purple, as if aware that it was the topic of discussion.

Wont I consume it if I touch it? Dallion asked.

Youre already awakened, so no. Thats another paradox. The embodiment of magic has no effect on the trait itself. The only thing it guarantees is awakening for someone who isnt.

After a few moments of hesitation, Dallion reached out towards the feather, half expecting him to be slapped like a child reaching for cookies. No such thing happened. The sensation was quite anticlimactic. The feather felt just like any other feather left to warm up in the sun.

Hello? a voice said, causing Dallion to drop the feather and pull his hand back. His left hand moved onto the hilt of his Nox dagger as he fixed his glance on the mage again.

I see youve seen the final paradox, she said perfectly calm.

Unsure what to do, Dallion remained in the same pose for a few minutes, then cautiously relaxed.

The feather comes with its own guardiansomething only an empath or someone reading a lot of ancient records would find. To oversimplify things, the feather represents the awakening realm of the aetherbird, including its guardian. This isnt an echo, it isnt an instance, it isnt entirely a realm even. Its

An exception, Dallion finished the words for her. And you dont want anything in return for letting me go inside?

What made you think anything like that? The woman reached into one of the desk drawers, then placed a silver ring on the table. Ill be going with you. Needless to say that the realm isnt something that has been explored in the last few millennia. You see, it takes an empath to be allowed access inside.

And I happen to be one. That sounds quite convenient.

Dear boy, how many of the books you see do you think are books? One thing about being a mage that has reached my age is that you amass a lot of things you cannot use until the right key arrives. Right now, you happen to be one of those keys. Id say that the choice is yours, but I doubt youll get a better opportunity than this. Not with what most nobles and members of the Academy think of you.

The offer was obvious: access for information. It was nothing new, all part of doing business, even if it still felt ominously convenient. He knew for a fact that news of him being an empath had started to spread. As far as he was aware, only a handful of people knew, but where there were half a dozen, there was always room for one more, especially someone adept in finding loopholes.

With one swift action, Dallion grabbed the ring, then placed his hand on the feather.

REALM AWAKENING

Chapter 578: Realm of Purple

Realm awakening? Dallion wondered.

It was the first time the rectangles were so vague. Given that there was no telling what the realm was, it was as good a description as any.

You are in the realm of MAGIC.

Defeat the guardian of the REALM to keep its destiny.

Cute, Dallion muttered. Even the rectangles were magenta, unlike all the rest he had seen before. Two things were clear about magic: it was the embodiment and vanity.

There was no indication of level, but looking around, there was no need for any. The real itself was similar to a combination of a sphere item, a paradox cube trial, and possibly something else as well. The surroundings constantly shifted between plains, forests, deserts, lakes, and mountains. Looking up in the sky there was no sun or stars, just a single moonthe Purple Moon.

Is it unusual? a voice asked.

Splitting into instances to look behind him, Dallion saw that the mage was with him, or rather an echo of the mage. He could see faint blobs of emotion within hereagerness, enthusiasm, and unease for the most part.

Wouldnt an in-person visit have been better? Dallion took a step forward with one of his instances. The ground seemed solid enough.

Probably, but it wasnt worth the risk. While causing all sorts of exceptions, the feathers really dont like them. I tried to enter this realm for fifty years, before I gave up.

How long did you give up for? Dallions curiosity got the better of him.

A few decades, she replied in a vague fashion that suggested that it might well have been more than that. From what I have read, the guardian is an identical copy of the bird itself.

So, once we find it, itll tell us everything wed like to know?

You. It will tell you. Im not capable of talking to guardians. You, however, are a different matter entirely.

Lux, Dallion said.

Several moments passed, but the firebird didnt appear. Dallion tried and failed a few more times, after which he attempted to summon any of his gear. None of the items appeared.

I cant summon weapons, he said.

Nil, can you hear me? Dallion asked.

There was no response.

Did you give me a blocker item? Dallion looked at the mage.

Its for your own protection, the woman didnt even feel she had done anything wrong. Theres no telling how the aetherbird would have reacted, especially given that half your gear has guardian familiars.

I could have used them

Do all of them have the empathy trait? The mage looked at him as if he had been the one who had messed up. At best, things would be no different from what they are now. At worst, you would have

been thrown out of the domain. Now, we can keep arguing about nonsense, or we can go ahead with what we came for.

There were many things that Dallion wanted to say, none of which were polite. Considering the number of enemies he had made since earning his hunters emblem, he chose not to. Maybe it was good to have at least someone at the Academy owe him one. Not that he thought that Eleria would even think she was indebted to him. In her mind, she probably honestly thought that she was doing him a generous favor. Hopefully, he'll still get to talk to her once this is over.

It was a relief that instances worked in this world, as Dallion soon found out. Spreading out in all directions more out of habit than anything else one of his instances suddenly found itself falling down a gorge that suddenly had materialized on the spot where the ground used to be. Another found itself impaled in a sudden forest. Given that Dallion didn't have Lux to help him fly about, this place was just as dangerous as facing a wilderness creature or a powerful item guardian. The mage, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any such problems. There was no telling how he managed to keep in sync with all the changes, but there was no sign that she was using magic or combat splitting to do so.

It took close to fifteen minutes for Dallion to get used to the local sensation of travel. There didn't seem to be any pattern or logic to the changes, just complete randomness. The worst part of all, none of the awakening markers seemed to appear.

Music didn't have any effect, either. Other than the echo of the mage, Dallion could see no emotions of any sort, and any singing failed to do anything either.

Time dragged on and on with them going seemingly nowhere. Without any point of reference, there wasn't even any certainty they were going in a straight line. It all seemed like walking on the inside of a bubble. After a while, Dallion stopped as much as the changing environment would allow him.

Why did you stop? the mage asked. We must continue further.

Further where? If there's a path you can see, just let me know. In fact, it'll be best if you lead the way.

Hardly. The woman frowned. I'm still an echo. And yes, there is a path. Rather, there is a thread continuing forward. I suppose only people with the magic trait are able to see it.

That was definitely one possibility, as was Dallion being lied to. It was obvious that she was keeping secrets from him, but there was no telling whether they were related to the realm or not. Her curiosity seemed genuine, but her ability to survive with no effort was highly improbable.

What do you see? Dallion looked at her.

It's impossible to describe and you know it. The magic trait changes everything to the point there's no basis for comparison.

I can describe music easily, Dallion said.

Only because you're anotherworlder and, more importantly, you didn't obtain it during your first trial, did you? Mages enter their awakening with the trait already there. Everything we see is different. I know that there are at least four colors of rectangles. Upon entering a realm, the rectangles are green, and in combat they are red. To all like me, everything is purple.

Purple just like the rectangles here.

I only have your word for that. To me, it's the same as all the rest. You see the realm changing, I trust?

It would be difficult not to.

But you don't see the threads along it?

Are they some kind of strings that hold the place together? The only thing that Dallion could think of was the string theory that had been popular back when he was on Earth. He had no idea what it meant, of course, but from what I could remember, it had something to do with everything being based on vibrations.

No. The mage shook her head. A ball of annoyance appeared in her left shoulder. Imagine a world in which everything has a sign on it. The sign is the thing, and the thing is the sign.

Okay, Dallion said, even if he had no idea what she was talking about.

Now imagine that the words on the signs are constantly changing, but not immediately. I can see what's going to happen and depending on the thread of what has been. I also know when there are certain letters on the signs that aren't supposed to be there, like a trail of breadcrumbs.

You're seeing all that? Dallion looked about with several of his instances. No matter how hard he tried using his layer vision, no such things were to be seen. Apparently, mages were as different the same way empaths were. While Dallion could explain what it meant constantly hearing items talking to him, there was no way he could convey the feeling.

In a way, yes. I know where we need to go as well as how, but I wasn't the one invited here. If I try to interfere, I'll change the threads and that would make things more complicated.

Dallion opened his mouth to ask something, then closed up back again. Trying to figure out magic based on what Eleria was saying was the same as trying to visualize quantum physics. The best thing he could do now was take her word for it and keep on going.

If you've found a loophole to talk to me, I can really use some advice, Nil, Dallion said.

The chance of that happening was one in a million, which is why it didn't happen. Ultimately, Dallion had to keep on walking, hoping that he was heading in the right direction.

Hours passed. The Moon disappeared from the sky, although the light remained. All of a sudden, Eleria stopped in place. Moments later, so did the surrounding environment.

Scrolls saying what would happen, eh? Dallion thought.

What's wrong? Several of his instances walked to the mage.

Nothing. We're at a convergence point, the woman explained.

What does that mean?

Hello, an unknown voice said. It was the same that Dallion had heard upon touching the feather. Now that it was clearer, it sounded a lot stranger than he remembered. It was slightly high-pitched, but also hoarse, passing for both male

and female, and unlike the combination of sounds that Harp used to compose words sounded quite natural.

Hello, Dallion responded. Who are you?

That's my question. No one else can hear me, but you can.

Is that why you let me here? Because you're curious?

You're a curiosity. The woman tried breaking her way through my threads for so long that it became amusing. Even then, she couldn't hear me. You did it from the first try.

That's because I'm not using magic, Dallion allowed himself a smirk. I'm using something else to talk to you.

The language was unlike anything Dallion had used before, and yet it came naturally to him, as if he'd heard it somewhere before. In a way, it sounded somewhat similar to dragon.

Why don't you show yourself? Dallion used a dozen instances to look around. Sadly, even with so many, he had no idea where the sound was coming from. Somehow, it always sounded like coming from the side, no matter in which direction Dallion turned.

Why?

So I can see you as well. Dallion split into thirty instances.

You want to catch me.

The question surprised Dallion. It was only a momentary hesitation, but it turned out to be enough. The entire ground rose up. Soil rose up in long patches, turning into feathers of wings so large that they could barely be seen. The horizon itself shifted, breaking up into chunks.

Crap! Dallion's hand reached for his whip blade, only to find the spot empty.

This was what the mage meant when she said that the realm was the feather. In truth, the realm was also the guardian. All this time Dallion had been walking through the realm, he was in fact walking on the aetherbird itself, going straight towards its head. The mage had probably known this or at the very least suspected and she had still not said a thing. Quite likely, this was her plan all along.

Dozens of instances dashed in all directions, trying to get off the giant bird. Before he could, all of them fell through, as if they were standing on air.

COMBAT INITIATED

A purple rectangle emerged. The instances faded away, leaving one single Dallion. At first, it felt like he was falling into oblivion. Moments later, the direction of the fall shifted, moving him back towards the massive creature.

Just great, Dallion said to himself.

Not only was he about to fight a guardian as large as the realm itself, but one that came with its own gravity. The bigger questions, though, were how exactly the creature was planning to attack and

what his weak spots would be. Unfortunately, something told Dallion that no matter where they were, he wouldn't be able to see them.

Chapter 579: Fighting Chaos

Attracted by the guardians gravity, Dallion split into a hundred instances, each using a combination of athletics and acrobatics to move spread out in a larger area. It was outright impressive how well an awakened could move on their own almost as much as when swimming.

A titanic wing formed a second horizon on the left, slamming into the cloud of instances. Upon being hit, though, there was no immediate damage. It wasn't like any attack Dallion had experienced before. Rather, he found himself falling onto a forest.

All of Dallion's instances hit the forest running forward. Fighting without weapons wasn't something he had done often, but that didn't mean he couldn't. One of the things Euryale insisted when they were living together was that they trained unarmed fighting in case there ever was a situation in which he couldn't use his weapons. At the time, Dallion didn't think that could ever occur, but humored her nonetheless. Now, he was thankful for her insight.

Taking a deep breath Dallion swung the arm of one of his instances, then performed a line attack. The force was considerably less than when he used a weapon, but it still managed to cut down a few trees. Dallion rushed to grab one and use it as a makeshift weapon, but before he could grab hold, the entire landscape changed, turning into a prairie. The trees, respectively, had transformed into blades of grass.

Cute, Dallion thought. In future, he was going to have to be much faster.

Several seconds later the prairie changed into a rocky mountain, pushing him up into the air. This, Dallion had already experienced from the time he was walking around. Rapid changes in altitude tended to be quite deadly if one wasn't prepared for them. This time, the guardian chose a different approach, having the landscape change into an ocean.

If that's the way you want to play it, Dallion said and burst again. The major difference was that he didn't burst into instances, but echoes of himself. Two dozen Dalions emerged from him, all pushing away to increase the distance between them. And then, Dallion performed his first attack. In perfect sync, all twenty-five of him struck the air in the direction of the ocean and performed a point attack.

A cluster of destruction dots flew forward, drilling through the ocean itself like a spread through wax.

MINOR STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

A purple rectangle emerged. To an observer it would seem that Dallion was back to doing minimal damage again, but he felt pleased. At least he knew he could do damage to the creature. All his echoes had popped out of existence due to the stress caused by the point attack. It seemed that was too much for them to handle, at least in such an environment. Dallion made a note to keep that in

mind when creating so many echoes. Meanwhile, he continued forward through the massive hole that had formed. As expected, the environment changed again, but the hole didn't.

You're nasty! the firebird chirped. Most probably this was the first time it had been dealt damage.

For a moment Dallion hoped that would be enough to make the creature quit and end the fight. However, he was wrong. Pain alone wasn't enough to dissuade it.

Interesting effect, Eleria said, floating by him. Good to know that point attacks have such an effect.

Don't all Moon laws still have an effect on magic? Dallion asked, no longer surprised why she was here or how a simple echo had managed to survive such an attack.

Those of the Purple Moon, definitely. The rest are more like guidelines. They have some effect, but not always what you'd think.

Any advice you can give now?

I'm afraid not.

Why? We're already engaged in combat with the guardian. How can it get worse?

You're still in the feathers realm, dear boy. As much as the aetherbird is annoyed with you, it's also amused. If it stops being, it'll just throw you out and never let you back in.

So, what am I supposed to do? Kill it?

That would be one possibility. More realistically, though, I'd say just survive as long as you could.

After about a dozen seconds, the hole came to an end. Dallion suddenly found himself flying up towards the black sky again. The only difference was that this time he could see the Purple Moon in front of him.

This wasn't the first time he had met a Moon, but there was something to be said about the Purple Moon being different from all the ones he'd seen. For one thing, its surface too constantly shifted, creating the impression that it was spinning at weird intervals. In one instance, Dallion could have sworn that the Moon winked at him.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much time to wonder about the deity. Gravity grabbed hold of him once more, pulling him back to the guardian. Twisting around, Dallion found that this time he was flying towards the beak of the guardian; or more specifically, the beak was moving towards him, quickly transforming into a sharp mountaintop. Falling there wasn't going to end well. That was why Dallion created six echoes, split into a dozen instances, and did another point attack straight at the beak of the approaching mountain. The damage done of seven point attacks was too small to merit a rectangle appearing. However, it did exactly what it was supposed to.

Having just had a taste of pain, the aetherbird wasn't eager to feel more. The slight brick caused by the latest round of attacks made it flinch, moving its head and the mountain linked to it away, letting the Dallions fall into a soft field of trees and bushes. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion created another echo from which he could push away from, to a tree. Scholar, acrobatic, and athletic markers combined showing him the way to reduce his momentum so as not to get hurt.

Go for the neck! Dallion thought, creating more and more echoes.

Capable of reading his mind. They instantly did what was asked of them, performing a simultaneous power attack on the ground.

MINOR STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

The ground shook as a painful scream filled the air. The attack had clearly missed its target, but at the same time, it had caused a substantial amount of pain, judging by the guardians reaction. Once again, though, all of Dallions echoes had disappeared.

Splitting into a hundred instances, Dallion prepared for another terrain shift. That didnt happen, or least not in the way he imagined it would. The first thing that he felt was a slight floating sensation. The ground separated from him, moving an inch away. For several seconds it kept that distance, after which it started to shrink. Trees shifted to barbs, then whole feathers, as the aetherbird reduced its size to a point that it was merely three times larger than Dallion.

PHOENIX

Species: AETHERBIRD

Class: MAGIC

Health: 0%

Traits: MAGIC

Skills: SPELLCRAFT

Weakness: NONE

The usually white rectangle appeared above the guardians head. It, too, was magenta like every other one in this realm. It was also quite confusing. The level of Dallions perception trait allowed him to view all the information there, but what he was seeing confused him even more. Having one trait and one skill was strange, but theoretically understandable. Having a health of zero, though not so much. Could it be that he had managed to defeat it with two attacks? And if so, what followed now?

At first Dallion considered whether all of his echoes hadnt dealt just as much damage during the attack. If that had been the case, there hadnt been any other damage rectangles. More importantly, he should have received a bonus for cooperative actions in combat.

Youre strong, the aetherbird chirped with the same admiration the Lux had early on. That seemed to be a characteristic of such creatures: even when aggressive, they continued to be extremely attachable, almost lovable. How did you get so strong?

Through lots of training, Dallion replied. There are a lot of others who are stronger than me.

Nah. Theyre just pretending to be strong. They couldnt even enter the realm. You did, and then defeated me with one strike.

Defeated you? I dont think I did much Dallion began.

You probably killed him with the first hit, the echo of Eleria appeared, floating gently through the darkness. In his case, it just likely took a little longer to take effect.

How does that work?

As a hunter, he had seen a number of unusual things, even by local standards. However, the after-death existence of magic creatures still confused him profoundly. The fact that magic creatures in the real world created a crackling shadow version of themselves was enough to stretch his understanding of the world. Learning that within the realms, creatures be they guardians could continue in the exact same fashion after death, as if nothing had happened, was more than he could picture.

It's not something you'd understand. The mage shook her head.

I could have gone on for days, the aetherbird boasted. But the pain was too much.

So, what now? Dallion asked.

Now? The firebird grew smaller still until he was the size of a hawk. I'll give you a gift. Not her though. The guardian flapped its wings, glancing at Eleria. She didn't do much, just followed you in here.

Clearly, Dallion wasn't the only person who didn't like mages. Hearing that from the embodiment of magic sounded more than slightly funny.

Chance of a gift, Dallion thought. One thing that this world had taught him, when offered something from non-human creatures, the best course of action was to ask the impossible.

Can you give me magic?

Upon hearing Dallion, the mage stifled a chuckle. In general, traits weren't something that could be acquired. The creation of skill gems changed that allowing people to obtain the empathy trait. However, when magic was concerned

No, the aetherbird replied in a slightly sad tone. Anything else?

How about the location of your home?

My home? The aetherbird sounded both surprised and curious.

Where you usually like to stay. Do you have a single favorite place? Or maybe a few?

I used to stay in the forest off Erekol. It was nice, but then it became noisy, so I moved. The bird flapped its wings again, then landed on Dallion's shoulder, expecting praise.

You're really vain, aren't you? Dallion thought. The real aetherbird was probably hunted, but the feather was admired, treasured, and highly sought after. It was natural for it to become like this, especially with what it was capable of. From a certain point of view, Dallion was probably the first person who had stood up to it.

Thanks, phoenix, he said, patting the creature gently on the head. You did well.

There was a chirp of joy. The aetherbird remained several seconds on his shoulder, enjoying the pampering. Then, when he felt he had enough, he flapped off of Dallions shoulder. As he did, fragments fell off of him, as if leaving a trail of fine glittering dust.

You were fun, the guardian said.

Within seconds, the rest of it faded away, taking Dallion back into the mages chambers. The room felt small, cramped, as if someone had stolen the entire space and tucked it away somewhere. Looking at the box, the feather was no longer there.

Not what you expected? Eleria asked. She seemed particularly calm. Well, its not over yet.

No sooner had she said so, when a dot of light emerged in the empty box. Slowly the dot grew, forming the phoenix feather just as it had been before.

As I told you, you cannot kill the aetherbird, just as you cant destroy its feathers. The only way is to have it become consumed by a non-awakened.

Slowly, Dallion placed the ring he had been given on the desk.

Did you get what you wanted? Dallion asked.

To a point. Did you?

That was a good question. The city mentioned wasnt one he had ever heard. He didnt know its location or even in which country it was in. Still, it was a start.

Chapter 580: Clue to Nowhere

The food was strangely bland, to the point that Dallion was convinced that the mages had done it on purpose. Still, it was nourishing and after checking with the guardian of his bowl devoid of poison. No one talked when in vicinity to Dallion, though it seemed more out of concern than dislike. Dallion could still sense the emotions of people emanating around him. It also helped that the item guardians continued to be exceedingly chatty. It was outright scary how much one could learn by having the empath trait. If there had been others with it the empire could have been in serious trouble.

Dallion poured the fifth bowl he was given into his own and continued eating. As he did, he kept on thinking about the encounter with the guardian. Everything considered, it was an impressive victory. And yet, it was only because the guardian hadnt been dealt physical pain at all. From what Dallion could gather, each feather was like a living echo of the original creature, capable of having its own realm. It probably never had experienced battle only the original creature did. That also explained how he had won the fight with a single hit. When dealing with the actual creature things were going to be far more complicated. For one thing there was no telling whether the real aetherbird would allow Dallion to touch it.

You gave too much for too little, Nil grumbled. He didnt approve the deal Dallion had made with Eleria at all. You should have asked for more things in addition.

Im not convinced she would have agreed to that, Dallion replied.

Well, now well never know, will we? I thought that your negotiating skills had improved since youd become a hunter, but it seems thats not exactly the case.

Back to your grumpy phase, Nil? I got what I needed. Besides, I owed her from before.

Because of the bestiary? Its nothing compared to what you allowed her to see. Entering the realm of a phoenix feather Do you know how many have tried to achieve that and failed? I honestly dont know anyone who has? The old hag is probably already started writing a research paper on the subject. I wouldnt be surprised if it gets her the archmage position in a few decades.

It was obvious that the echo was really upset that it wasnt the one who had witnessed the feathers realm. Dallion had tried to explain it, of course. He had even gone as far as to have Gen and Ariel recreate a miniature version of it in his own awakening realm minus the constant changing. That had only annoyed Nil even further.

The main problem, though, was the location that the feather had said. Erekol wasnt familiar to Nil, Vihrogon, or even Harp. The only consensus was that the name sounded copyette, but there was no guarantee that it was. If that happened to be the case, though, it was destroyed several ages ago. As Harp had said, there wasnt even a guarantee that most copyette guardians would know of it. As in any age, cities rose and fell rather frequently. Dallion had the option to return to Nerosal and ask Aspan about it. However, the recent cult attack suggested that the race was on. Going back to the Priscord capital was going to waste too much time. Instead, the optimal plan was to head back to Linatol. There he could ask the guardian of the hunters den, inquire where the Night Auction had gotten its feather from, as well as have a talk with the local bishop.

Might be good to pass by the other settlement on your way back, Vihrogon said. Its not that far away, and you can help regrow the trees. Theyll appreciate it.

Yeah, Ill do that.

Hopefully, the war clerics had time to cool off a bit.

You doing alright, Shield? Youve been quiet lately.

Its nothing, the guardian said. I just have a few things on my mind. Everything thats been happening lately got me thinking about the past. Things that were supposed to be gone, coming back. Once again its a changing world.

Its the first time I see you down. Even when the Vermillion wounded you, you werent like this.

There are all sorts of wounds. You should know that. The dryads tone sounded unusually cold. Sorry. Its not cool to see a companion armor like this. Just give me some time. Thats all I ask. Ill be back to being your emotional support soon enough.

Normally Dallion would make a snarky comment in response. This time, though, he chose not to abstain.

The meal done, Dallion discretely left the village; he had overstayed his welcome as it was. The scribe wasnt there to guide him out, nor was anyone else for that matter. After another chorus of goodbyes from the dryad item guardians, Dallion continued back. One thing he noticed was that despite giving the appearance of not particularly caring about events in the outside world, the local mages were worried enough to post a few lookouts in the surrounding forest. They were making a

good effort keeping hidden. If it wasnt for the comments of one item or another Dallion wouldnt have even known they were there.

It took one day to reach the settlement of the Order. When he arrived there, though, Dallion found it completely abandoned. No one had bothered to fix anything. Instead, they had just buried the dead, leaving a marker, and moved out.

Didnt think the order would just run, Dallion thought.

The order words in mysterious ways, Nil said. They might have been ordered to abandon the place, or maybe a new army is already on its way to turn this into a monastery. One can never be sure.

You dont like the Order much, do you?

Not particularly. I dont dislike it either. Its just something that is. Also, I didnt have the benefit of being an initiate such as yourself.

How come?

Someday I might tell you, dear boy. Not today, though. Today, Ill just remind you not to let your guard down. You were attacked the last time you were here. Whos to say that those were the only cultists in the forest?

The warning made sense. Constantly splitting, Dallion checked the remains and nearby areas for any further clues. The only thing he found were indications that the clerics had removed a few things from the settlement, though thinking back, he couldnt remember there ever being anything special there. Whatever it was, it was large enough to be held in a structure of its own. Thanks to his layer vision, Dallion was able to see the drag marks, even if the clerics had done their best to cover up the ground as it had been before. The Order hadnt chosen this spot at random, after all.

It took half a day to make the stumps sprout. There were more of them than Dallion remembered. Thankfully, doing that gave Dallion time to think and come up with a plan of how to proceed. News of his task had clearly made it out, so it was best if he avoided smaller settlements. Towns and cities had an abundance of guards lately, and even the cultists wouldnt be so brazen to openly attack. On the flip side, every action Dallion did there would be followed. On the other hand, traveling alone would keep him hidden, though vulnerable.

From the settlement, Dallion abandoned the established forest path, choosing to move along the tree branches. The further away he went from the previous settlements, the more he could sense animals in the surroundings, from common animals and predators, to wilderness creatures. However, they werent all. After a while, a new presence became felt. It would keep a considerable distance away. If Dallion had any less perception, he would have failed to notice it at all.

Theyre not giving up, Harp said.

I know, Dallion replied. He hadnt noticed there were more of them. Gleam, Ill need your help with this. You too, Ruby.

Whats your plan? Gleam asked.

Use illusion to make yourself into your shardfly form, then hide in the trees. When you see whos following me, attack. I only need one of them.

Rubys not ready to face something this strong

Thats what youre for. Keep an eye on the kid and teach him a few tricks. Hell have to get stronger if he wants to keep up with everything thats going on.

The ruby shardfly flickered its wings. While still occasionally drawing on the walls of Dallions room back in the Gremlins Timepiece, the creature was doing its best to impress. Flying off Dallions shoulder, he joined Gleam, who had changed the appearance of the whip blade into that of her guardian form, going up along the bark of a tree. Pausing a few seconds, Dallion continued onwards.

The plan wasnt the best he had come up with. Leaving them to deal with a cultist wasnt something he liked doing, but didnt have much choice.

A minute later, the trap sprung. The sound of snapping branches reached Dallions ears. Doing a one-eighty he ran along the branches of the trees as fast as he could. The enemy presence was undeniable at this point.

Gleam, whats going on? he asked in his realm

Hes a tough one. Well deal with it.

Hows Ruby?

Hes a bit startled, but fine. Just get here.

She didnt need to tell him twice. Soon enough Dallion was able to see treetops splinter as shardfly wing slashes filled the area. Avoiding such a combined attack was like dancing through a hurricane of razor blades, and yet the enemy managed to avoid them all. The skills and perception of the person involved had to be spectacular. Furthermore, Dallion wasnt able to sense any emotions outside of those belonging to the plants, suggesting that his attackers were wearing blocker rings.

Why are you here? Dallion asked, addressing any unseen guardians.

There was no answer. Apparently, the guardians werent as chatty as the dryads at the mages outpost. Of course, Dallion had no intention of leaving things there. Drawing his harpsisword, he played several chords filling the air with overconfidence, focusing on guardians in particular. A chorus of trees followed, sharing what they would do to shardflies if they could. Among the trees, there was a single other voice that Dallion knew didnt belong to the forest.

Going for the throat, a dry male voice whispered.

On the second Dallion split into instances, moving in all directions. Hardly had he done so than a flying knife hit the side of the throat of an instance of his; the second attacker had just joined the fight.

Turning in the direction of the attack, Dallion switched the fashion in which he was holding the harpsisword and did a line attack. Tree tops fell off like grass, revealing Dallions opponent. It was just a glimpse, but enough to show that the person was a mercenary, and not only that.

Gorgon? Dallion grabbed his dartblade with his free hand.

In all his travels throughout the province, Dallion had only seen a few gorgon mercenaries. They were rare, extremely well trained, not to mention expensive. He never imagined them to be cultists. Probably when the first attack attempt had failed, the Star had sent in the big guns. That explained why Gleam and Ruby were having such a hard time. A pair of shardflies could be devastating, though not against a well-trained gorgon.

The gorgon who had attacked Dallion was probably thinking the same thing, for he smiled. Then, without an ounce of mercy or hesitation, he opened his eyes.

Just great, Dallion thought as the effects of petrification took hold. It had been years since he had been petrified, but he still remembered the sensation and it was anything but pleasant. Lux, do your thing.

It was time to kick things up a notch.