

Leveling up 601

Chapter 601: Truth and Myth

Fighting bladerers, even with two people, was more difficult than it seemed. It wasn't that they were stronger than Dallion; at his current level he could easily defeat each of them one-on-one. It was their persistence that was perilous dragging people down bit by bit. Bladeres didn't tire, they were capable of great destruction, and half the blades of the ones that were destroyed went to the ones that weren't. Thankfully, it didn't seem they had the ability to merge together.

We need to get that, Havoc pointed at a dome covered in chains.

Even with a number of skills back, he was having a difficult time fending off the bladerers. Despite his impressive skills and high perception trait, he hadn't even passed the fourth awakening gate.

A river of blades circled Havoc and Dallion kept at bay by the air currents surrounding them. Shifting hands, Dallion did another line attack with his harpsisword. Hundreds of blades were shattered and thrown back. A small opening formed allowing Dallion and Havoc to escape. Both of them took it. Dallion used combat splitting to weave his way past the threats, while Havoc surrounded himself with an intense mesh of air currents. It was a good plan, though not perfect.

One of the bladerers split from its group thrusting straight at the large man. In several of his instances, Dallion watched as the construct slashed through Havoc's defenses, then slit his throat dealing a lethal blow. Normally this would be an annoyance, however, Havoc no longer had an awakening emblem. His punishment kept him in the village so no such was provided or needed to be. A death for him would be the same as having his abilities sealed, and that would be ten times more difficult to remove than breaking restrictions.

Dallion had a split second to act. In some of his instances the bladerer focused on him instead of Havoc, in some it didn't act at all, yet in all of them Dallion got wounded. Even with a hundred options there wasn't one in which both remained unscathed. Confronted with that, Dallion chose the least of two evils.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING

You have been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.

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

Two rectangles appeared in front of the instance that Dallion had chosen to become reality. With Lux around the first was of little consequence. The second, though, was serious. Permanent effects remained after returning to the real world. There was talk of people who'd received LAME limbs that made all activities in the real world and awakened realms.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion did three point attacks at the dome. The first two broke through the outer layers of the chains. The third exposed the structure itself, yet still failed to remove the restrictions.

Just as Dallion was about to do a fourth attack, a torrent of air made its way through the opening, filling the space between the dome and its restrictive wrapper. The chains stretched for a second, then burst, unable to sustain the pressure. Next thing Dallion knew he was back in Havocs home, holding his arm.

The sudden change in gravity made him lean slightly before his muscles kicked in, adjusting to the situation.

Dallion turned towards Havoc. The large man seemed a lot more impressive, air currents gently ruffling his orange hair.

Why? Dallion asked.

There was too many of them. Havoc pulled his arm away, then used an air current to pick up the glass flask of alcohol and float it to him. Youre good, but not that good. Getting some of the restrictions removed is better than nothing.

Dallion didnt respond. Somehow, he felt that the attempt had failed.

I can tell you everything you need to know. The man took a swig from the flask. The stench of alcohol filled the room. Besides, you wont have made it much longer.

Why do you think that?

Your arm.

Dallion looked at his left arm. Part of the sleeve was soaked with blood. Quickly he removed it to find a long bleeding scar starting from the wrist all the way up to the elbow. There didnt seem to be any pain, he could barely feel a sensation of warm wetness.

You didnt have to do that, Havoc said, sadness emanating from him.

If I didnt, youd be sealed. Dallion took out his dartblade and pressed it against the wound. Blue flames surrounded the weapon and his arm, yet the bleeding didnt stop. This was what it was like to have a permanent bleeding effect. Have anything I can use as a bandage?

Give me a moment.

The positive thing about having Lux around was that Dallion virtually couldnt get any wounds either in the realms or in the real world. The permanent effect illustrated how complacent he had become. There was nothing in Dallions backpack in terms of medicine or bandages. He had a spare set of clothes on a few occasions his prey had shredded his shift beyond repair, but even that was rare. Now he felt like an ordinary person.

It took a little effort and a lot of alcohol to get the bandage tight enough to reduce the bleeding. Since there was no stopping it, Dallion was going to have to change bandages at regular intervals.

Youll need to drink a lot of water as well, Havoc said. Water, not alcohol.

Look whos walking, Dallion grumbled.

Im not the one who got a permanent wound. Better hope it closes in a few months. If its one of the year ones, itll get annoying.

Ill deal with it. Dallion put on a fresh shirt. The bloody one remained on the table. What did you get back?

Free from restrictions? My level, my traits, my fury ability, a few individual skills, and the ability to tell others what I know.

Just that?

Just that.

So, you cant leave the village? Dallion frowned.

Nope. I cant sell thing I improve either. Thats for the best, though. While Im here, people wont make a fuss that Ive lost some of my restrictions. If I got out there, thing should be very different.

Moons, who did you piss off this much?

Isnt it obvious? Havocs face twisted in a sad smile. The Academy.

Just because you beat up some mage apprentice? I know theyre petty, but

Why do you think it was an apprentice? Havoc cut him short.

Dallion opened his mouth to reply, but then quickly closed it back again. As someone who had experienced how thoughts could be suppressed in area domains, he knew that details around the incident could be untrue. However, he had never assumed that the core premise wasnt. All this time, everyone had insisted that Havoc had gone into a scuffle with an arrogant apprentice mage. It was inconceivable to think he had a chance against a seasoned wizard. Even Euryale herself had told Dallion as much.

He wasnt an apprentice? Dallion asked.

No, they werent. And they werent in Nerosal by accident. Since the city was created, no mage has voluntarily gone there. Given a choice, they didnt even want to pass thought. I dont know what theyre seeing, but theres something in the city that keeps them away. The only exceptions are the banished and those sent to do a job. Back then, they were sent to do a job.

Nil Dallion grumbled mentally.

Im as surprised as you, dear boy. I was definitely not aware of this.

Seems like your original isnt as open as youd think.

Want to buy me some food? Havoc asked. Some of the good stuff. Ive been a bit low on funds lately.

You dont look it.

Just because I have enough to eat doesnt mean it doesnt taste like crap. The man crossed his arms. Besides, the money I got from the hunt is gone.

Didnt you say that you couldnt buy anything with it?

I opened a tab. The moneys gone. The tab isnt. He winked.

The hint was clear. Given how small the mount was, Dallion went to the village tavern. There he gave one gold coin to cover Havoc's tab, get some food and drink, and make sure the man had several years of drinks to look forward to. It was by no means much, but the barkeeper and all villagers present stared at him, as if he were nobility. No doubt they had gotten a completely false impression of how much a travelling merchant could earn.

After returning, Dallion and Havoc spent the next half hour eating. After the partial success at removing the restrictions within his realm, both had developed an appetite. The difference was that while Dallion was used to eating pretty much all sorts of food, regret was written all over the large man's face.

Here's something I didn't consider, he said, stirring his food with a wooden spoon. Gaining my full level shows me how crap the food really tastes here.

You said your perception wasn't affected.

All but taste. I told you the cleric was pleased that someone had messed with the Academy. Now that I have my senses back I think I'll be losing some weight.

I can arrange for you to get good stuff from Dherma, Dallion offered.

Don't tempt me. I'll agree and then have trouble with the locals. He put his plate on the table and took another swig from the tankard. Apparently, his taste for alcohol had remained unchanged. The mages weren't there to have fun, Havoc continued. They despised the place. Drinking was an excuse. Also, we didn't get into an argument about drinks. It was about money. You see, they hired us to find the phoenix.

Dallion remained silent.

Every few years there'd be buzz about a phoenix hunt taking place somewhere in the empire. Usually, it's the big cities. Nerosal didn't get to see a lot of action back then, but my friend the hunter was from Linatol. He preferred to go about and stay in various places, though mostly Nerosal. That time, though, it was different. When the mages came to the city, one of them sought us directly. We were given a time and a place and a promise of an incredibly large sum.

That didn't sound like the Academy at all. From Dallion's limited experience, they were the kind that went where they wished and took what they wanted, as long as it wasn't from the emperor or the archdukes directly.

When we did our task, they changed their mind, just as my friend warned they would. I didn't handle it too well, and neither did they. That's where the web of lies began.

A flash of realization went through Dallion. Once the first few pieces of deception had crumbled, he could see glimpses of the truth. It was almost like unburying a treasure from a collapsed ruin. Going by a more scary comparison, it was like the time he had destroyed the limiting echo in his mind back in Dherma village.

You never defeated them, Dallion said.

Havoc grinned.

Not even close. I never attacked. As strong and cocky as I was, even I knew that I wouldn't stand a chance against a mage. One of the mages caused the mess. I'd have thought they'd be careful about

that sort of thing, but this one wasn't slicing half a tavern out of existence with customers inside, not to mention all the people on the streets. That's when a new story was born: the story of a genius who defeated a group of drunken apprentices and was subsequently dropped by his guild, delevelled, and banished to the edge of Priscord's borders.

The man stopped talking. The silence was so intense that Dallion could hear the alcohol making its way down Havoc's throat. Just when he thought he could no longer be surprised by things in the world, he was proven wrong. It was understood that domain rulers had the power to change thoughts of the people there, but to be able to affect so many at once and awakened as well was mind boggling. Considering that, no wonder there was clear information concerning the Eighth Moon.

And the countess allowed this?

Of course she did. Where do you think she received the backing to challenge the archduke?

Chapter 602: Star Whispers

Back on Earth it was said that hindsight was twenty-twenty. In this world the phrase went a trick is obvious once uncovered. Of course a countess wouldn't go against an Archduke unless she had serious backing. Dallion just never expected the backing to come from the Academy. On the other hand, given the number of mage visits as well as the establishment of an Academy village in Countess Priscord's lands, one could guess she was getting something in return.

If Havoc was to be believed, the confrontation between him and the mages was an unexpected mishap that had provided a huge opportunity. The countess had covered the entire incident and seen to it that the respective people were punished. In return, she had obtained their silent support, and possibly a few trinkets along the way. Having two major cities was a good hint that Dallion had overlooked, focusing on his own problems at the time. To any noble, however, it was clear she was preparing for a higher position.

I'd tell you to be careful when dealing with the countess, but you probably know that, Havoc said. She's staked your life as well as hers. If things go badly, all that were involved in her scheme would suffer serious consequences. Ironically, it's possible that she's the only one that remains unscathed. Even an Archduke wouldn't do against the Academy on a whim. Maybe he'll force the countess to make a Moon vow to serve him, then pretend nothing happened. There's strength in showing everyone that you're too strong to be taken down.

So, I've heard. Dallion sighed.

When he had come here, he had expected to learn practical things relating to finding the phoenix. Instead, he had uncovered a conspiracy around it. Also, he had just received indirect confirmation that the countess had only started the hunt for political reasons—unlike Havoc's story, this time the Academy hadn't openly gotten involved.

Did you find it? he asked after a while.

Oh, we found it. We brought a whole pouch of feathers to the mages, but they expected more.

What more did they want? Dallion asked.

What do you think? They wanted the whole bird. As if its that easy. One of the group died in the attempt. We were the best, but that doesnt mean we were good enough. Only the Moons can do the impossible.

Dallion had no reason to disagree, even if he was getting the impression that the Moons had their own limits as well.

Apparently, the aetherbird appears all over the world at specific times. The mages somehow figured out part of the principle, so they told us where to go. Havoc went on. It was a good offer, at least what they promised. Theyd provide everything necessary to find and capture the aetherbird, we just had to go where they told us and do it.

Why you?

Some of us asked that question, but we never got an answer. Mages really disliked the place. They were stronger than all of us combined, though not there.

Nil? Dallion asked.

Its difficult to come to a conclusion on that little data, the echo grumbled. I can tell you one thing. The Academy didnt have a way of predicting the phoenixs location.

Maybe you didnt.

You dont understand, dear boy. Its not a matter of someone hiding it from everyone else. Mages and scholars hide their ideas every day. The results, on the other hand, cannot be hidden. If there was a way for them to know when and where the creature would appear, they either would have captured it by now, or there would be people going after it all the time. Someone would have noticed something, and if one does, all do.

That sounded like a bit of a stretch, even if Dallion didnt doubt that mages constantly kept an eye on each other. He had seen as much in the memory fragment of the mage that had the plague sword.

You remember your encounter with the shadow dragon? Thats what happens when mages get too enthusiastic. Very much like what happened when this group received the news of the apparent failure? There are many things that a mage can hide. Ego and arrogance are not part of them.

Where did they send you? Dallion asked.

Not far from here. Well, not close, either. How familiar are you with the area?

I was born here.

You were also kept in a brainwashed village, same as most of the places here. It wasnt a big secret.

Ive been about since then.

The look Havoc gave Dallion was the epitome of doubt, like a tiger looking at a cub. In terms of experience, he was right. The man had been assisting hunters at least three times as much as Dallion had. Dallion could feel uncertainty emanating from him, mixed with gratitude and fear.

Continue east from your village, then after half a day go south. After a few days, you'll reach a valley.

The fallen south, Dallion thought. You're talking about the fallen south.

The point from which Dallion had entered the domain was a lot further out, but it stood to reason that it was the same place. The phoenix feather avatar had said that it enjoyed living in a place that was before the world. What if that place and the fallen south were one and the same?

You'll need lots of rope to get down there, Havoc continued. You need to keep on walking until you reach the mountain on the other side. It's not immediately visible, so you'll have to get to the crescent tower first. Things might have changed since then, but if you keep on walking south, you'll reach it at some point. Once you're on the mountain, it should be obvious what to do.

Dallion leaned forward. Now they were getting somewhere. The place was easy to find the way Havoc described it, and thanks to his familiars Dallion was able to reach it by the morning.

Of course, you need to know the precise day and time. The mages were very specific about that.

Care to share?

It's been over a decade. Havoc frowned. And I got delevelled in between. I remember some of the big things, but not a date years ago.

Right. Any memory how you caught it?

No luck there. Our job was to keep the bird from escaping. My friend did the work.

You keep calling him that

How do you call someone who has no name? I knew his name before my banishment. I don't anymore.

The next five minutes, Dallion spent having a bit more food. He had learned a lot of things in this visit, though not everything he had hoped for. While the main questions were answered, a lot of vital details remained missing.

A few more topics were discussed regarding Eurys' mentor and the aetherbird before the conversation moved to casual issues. For someone who couldn't leave his village, Havoc was rather well informed. He knew all the gossip relating to Dherma, including details of Glorias wedding, Veils latest plan to increase the size of the city, as well as the war clerics' armies frequenting the region. The last was increasingly concerning. Everything was moving about with the wars between the empires' battles to the north, the internal aspirations in the Wetie province, and the Academy poking its nose in weird places, but it was the Order that remained of most concern. The rate at which their armies were moving about was ignored during the time of the poison plague. Now it was obvious even to those who weren't looking.

Packing some food for the trip, Dallion had Gleam put an illusion on him and left Havoc's home. It was a quick goodbye with neither of the two having anything more to say.

You could have stayed a bit more, Nil said as the village was left behind.

We didn't know each other that well. We only were together during the hunt.

Thats not how you reacted upon meeting Dame Vesuvia or your cleric friend.

There was no denying it. Upon first seeing Havoc, Dallion had been enthusiastic as well. However, during the conversation, his enthusiasm had decreased. As the saying went, the two never clicked. There was little of the old Havoc Dallion knew, even after he had helped remove part of his restrictions. It was like seeing a childhood friend after a decade, only to realize that everything in common had been lost. Maybe the reason was Dallion, maybe Havoc was still bitter about not being able to leave the village. Either way, he was little more than a distant acquaintance now.

Dallion set off south. When the settlement was out of view, he tried calling Dark. This time, the dragon didnt show up. Left with no alternative, Dallion resorted to using his whip blade as a transport device. It was neither as fast nor as comfortable, but still better than running.

Just for reference, Im not aware of a mountain in the valley, Nil said.

Not even beyond?

No mage has gone beyond. You have a skewed image of mages since the only ones youve seen were rogue outcasts or questionable individuals. Magic requires a systemic approach to things. Bending the rules or finding the right loophole is not a random process. It takes study and experience. Those who wish to try their luck always end up dead.

No one ever wanted to see what lay beyond?

Everyone wants to, but that doesnt mean that they rush on blindly. Havoc himself said that the Academy hired mercenaries for the job. What more could

The echo was abruptly cut off mid-sentence.

Nil? Dallion asked. He was about to enter his realm to see what was going on, when he noticed that time itself seemed to have frozen. Although not Dallion himself.

Gleam? Dallion looked down. The whip sword remained beneath his feet, but stuck in place a foot above the ground.

Dallion tried to split into a dozen instances, but found that he couldnt.

Theres only one instance of an instant, a familiar voice said. The moment Dallion heard it, ice chills ran down his spine. It was the very thing he had been fearing, the very thing he had spent the last two years preparing for. Jump off if you want. The sword wont fly away. Im not that petty.

The initial reaction was for Dallion to resist. However, the urge not to show fear took hold, making him force himself to do the very thing he didnt want to. Cautiously, he stepped off the sword and turned around.

There you go. Arthurows clapped with a smile. A few years ago, Dallion thought of him as just a friend and member of the Icepicker guild. Later it turned out that this was the Star himself. Youve really come far.

The Star took a few steps forward. He was wearing casual denim jeans and a black t-shirt that had Claim All Power written on it in large red letters. Back on Earth, no one would give him any thought. Here, though, he was the embodiment of evil, as Dallion had learned firsthand.

And you actually got the pocketknife. The Star laughed. Thats outright impressive. I always knew youd achieve much. I was just wrong about the time.

The time? Dallion asked.

The time youd agree to work for me. When we were part of the guild, I thought Id convince you there and then. Now I see my mistake. I should have given you some more room to develop.

You didnt give me a thing.

I gave you time, The Star corrected. Did you seriously think I didnt know what you were up to? Your trip to the destroyed country? You taking my empathy gem? I know what youre up to even now.

Everyone knows that.

Probably, but I know what your good friend didnt tell you. The Stars smile widened. You know, one of the locations the phoenix might appear. I know when, and more importantly how to catch it. And Ill share it with you. All you need to do is give me something in return.

Chapter 603: Dark Involvement

Its only fair, the Star said. You cost me a skill gem, so youll help me get a replacement. Herbology would have been better, but Ill settle for spellcraft. He laughed.

Droplets of sweat formed on Dallions forehead. Whatever the trick the Star had pulled off, it had instantly removed all of Dallions advantages. All of his familiars and echoes were frozen, his combat splitting had been rendered useless, and none of his weapons could be drawn. Dallion had discretely tried to draw his Nox dagger, but found that it refused to move from its sheath. The only things that were allowed to move along with him were his clothes.

Did you get rid of the echo? Arthurows changed the subject. She was fun, though I never liked her too much. Goths are so last age, although who knows? Maybe theyll make a comeback.

Dallion still had the means to level the playing field in a fight against the Star. Unfortunately, it was located in his backpack.

Im not giving you the gem. Dallion tried his best to keep voice composed. However, even he could feel the occasional tremble as he spoke. The Star noticed it as well, for he grinned, moving closer.

Its not like Im asking you to join my side or anything. All I want is a skill gem you can never use. Quite a good deal, when you think about it. Do that and Ill get out of your life. You wont have anything to worry about. Ill even include your friends and local family in the deal. Youll get to be with Eury.

The proper thing to do was refuse right out. Yet, fear had a way of tempting people. The Stars power could be felt even now. With Dallion being past the fourth awakening gate, the Moons were no longer watching over him, especially since he was venturing into the Stars domain.

The atherbird cant release a gem, Dallion replied instead.

There we go. The Star clapped. Good point, but untrue. The phoenix is a living exception. It can create a gem if it wants to. The difficult part is to catch it, as Havoc probably told you. That was the reason for the argument, in fact.

You were listening in? Dallion froze.

Had his paranoia been true all this time? He was afraid that the Star was constantly watching him. When sharing his fears with others, all of them had laughed, reassuring him that it was all in his mind. In time he had believed them, only to find that he had been right all along.

Im the Star, Arthurows said with a menacing wink. The last hunt of the phoenix was a deal between the Academy, the hunter group, and yours truly.

Dallion said nothing.

The deal was simple: I help the Academy get the phoenix, they give me the spellcraft skill gem it creates. I shared the time and place, they created a way to keep the bird from escaping, and the hunters were supposed to do the deed.

Why them?

The mages dont seem to like the south for some reason. Cant imagine why. The Star disappeared. So, the hunters went down here, he said, appearing on the other side of Dallion. They found the mountain, and used the contraption to trap the phoenix.

But let it go, Dallion added.

Only an empath would think that. The Star shook his head. They captured it, but refused to give it to the mages. Instead, all they offered was a bag of feathers. You can guess what happened next.

Things made a whole lot more sense now. At such expectations, it was understandable why a mage would destroy a building and go through the trouble to kill or banish everyone involved. The only thing that didnt make sense was the Stars reaction. While it wasnt like he could openly complain, he had the power to exact punishment on the hunters whenever he wanted, not to mention he could confront Eurys teacher directly.

Youre thinking why didn't I get the hunters to reveal the location of the phoenix? the Star asked. The thing is, I did. It took me a while, but I managed to have a chat with them without breaking any of the Moons rules. Three guesses as to how the conversations ended.

You killed them

Got it in one. Dont worry, though. The Star disappeared, then appeared again a step away from Dallion. I told you I wont kill you. He placed his hand on Dallions shoulder. As Earthlings we must stick together. I know it might not seem like it, but I care about you. Youd achieved a lot, much more than the others from back home.

Dallion twisted around, shoving the Stars hand off his shoulder. The moment he did, however, the Star was no longer there.

They have such small ambitions. All they wanted was to become some minor nobles and take part in the imperial game. Some became mages, as you well know. Those guys are amusing, though I wouldnt call them trustworthy.

Youve seen them?

Who do you think made a deal with capturing the phoenix? The hunters werent my idea. The mages were so confident they could find someone competent. I would have gone with someone a lot more driven. Still, it is what it is. The Star shrugged. All thats important is whether youre willing to make a deal.

Part of Dallion wanted to say yes. Doing so would let him find the phoenix, and more importantly give him a break from the Star, at least until he became strong enough to take him on.

I cant trust the Star, Dallion thought. If any of his echoes or guardians had the ability to talk, theyd tell him the same thing.

Having second thoughts? The Star disappeared again. Dallion looked around, only this time, it was nowhere to be seen. Ill tell you when to find the phoenix. If you catch it, I expect to be given what Im owed.

And if I dont find it? Dallion kept on looking around.

If you don't, Countess Priscord will make sure youre not my problem. Oh, and if you find it, but pretend you dont this isnt the first time a hunter tried to con me.

The sun darkened. It wasnt like anything else Dallion had seen even in the realms. It wasnt at all like night falling; rather, the sun itself turned into a black hole in the sky, while its light continued somehow to fall onto the ground.

The next seven days, the phoenix will be at the top of the mountain whenever the Purple Moon is full, the voice of the Star echoed about. After that youll lose it.

Dallion opened his mouth to respond when inertia thrust him forward. Reflexes kicked in, making him leap into the air, then burst into a dozen instances.

Feeling crazy? Gleam asked, more surprised than annoyed.

Once Dallion landed, he watched the whip blade make a turn in the distance and fly up to him. This was strange, as if someone had turned on time again, returning everything as it was except for him.

If you want me to stop, just say so, the shardfly commented.

Is anyone around? Dallion asked, grabbing his Nox dagger. Any illusions or anything?

No I would have said something if there were.

Nox?

Nothing, the crackling purred.

Still gripping the weapon, Dallion rushed back to the spot where he had the conversation with the Star.

What are you looking for, dear boy? Nil asked.

I dont know, Dallion lied. I thought I saw something.

Might be a secondary effect of your bleeding. Sometimes permanent effects are more annoying than they seem.

I'll keep that in mind.

A few minutes later Dallion was on his way again, using the whip blade as a vehicle once more. One thing he had done before stepping on it was to take out the anti-Star artifact he carried and tucked it in his left boot. Nil made a few remarks on the topic only to receive a vague answer.

Seven days that was the amount of time Dallion had to reach the top of the mountain. One entire day went in reaching the valley, even with the help of Gleam. It was at that point that an unexpected discovery was made. The valley itself for the crater as it seemed was not the one Dallion had visited before. The jungle and overall features of the area seemed similar to what he had been to a while back, though not the landmarks.

Any explanation, Nil? Dallion asked, looking at the series of mountains that emerged above the layer of vegetation.

Apparently, more that the Stars kingdom had been buried here, the echo replied. On the positive side, at least you don't get to face the dragon.

The question is what will I face?

That remains to be seen. Or you could summon Dark and avoid the valley altogether.

I don't think he'll show up, Nil.

Then there's no harm in trying, dear boy.

As expected, the dragon didn't show up, leaving Dallion with one single option. The Star must have known about this when sharing the information. There was no way for a normal person to cross the valley in time, let alone climb the mountain on the other side. Gleam could go it a lot faster, though that presented a new problem. Dallion didn't feel it was prudent to fly during the night. As good as his perception was, there were creatures in the wilderness with a far better perception than his. To be on the safe side, it was decided that instead of one long flyover, Dallion would engage in a series of shorter flights from mountain top to mountain top. There he'd spend the night, before moving on the following morning.

The first flight lasted less than an hour. With the sun setting already, Dallion only wanted to get an idea of any potential creatures that could be a threat. Thankfully for him, none of the beasts wanted to climb the mountain preferring the comfort of the desert jungle below. Just to make sure both Ruby and Gleam fluttered about around the resting spot on the lookout for threats.

Meanwhile, Dallion sat down and played a tune on his harpsisword. Chords full of disinterest filled the air, removing all curiosity from the creatures that heard them. This continued for the entire night. At the crack of dawn, the flying continued.

Every now and then, Dallion would catch a glimpse of creatures the size of buildings making their way through the jungle. One even split into instances and threw massive rocks in Dallion's direction. Dallion didn't even bother to do the same, preferring to force an instance in which the creature missed.

Land-based attackers weren't Dallion's major concern. The lack of birds, on the other hand, was. Back in the other part of the fallen south, the skies were full of seagulls. Here, there wasn't a single one to be seen, and Dallion didn't think it was because of rock throwers.

Keep an eye out, he said. There might be something.

The end of the valley became visible in the distance. Focusing, Dallion was even able to see the peak of the mountain he was supposed to climb. By the looks of it, he was going to be able to reach it by the end of the day, giving him plenty of time to find the phoenix.

Gleam? Dallion asked. Anything?

There's nothing up to the horizon, the shardfly grumbled. Why so jumpy?

If flying over this place was so easy, don't you think the Star of the Academy would have done so by now?

The monsters aren't that strong, and they are on the ground.

All mages as well as the Star can fly. There must be some other reason to

An attack slammed into the whip blade from beneath, getting Dallion off balance. It felt as if a threat cutter had slammed into the blade with the intent to slice it and Dallion himself in two. The only reason the strike had failed was the indestructible quality of the weapon.

Where's it at? Dallion split into fifty instances, all of them drawing a weapon.

A split second later, another attack followed, slicing forty-one of those instances. Immediately Dallion did a line attack with his remaining instances. The line of destruction flew forward like a thread, only to be snapped in the middle. In its place another line formed a line of crystal, indicating something hiding beneath an illusion.

Run! Gleam shouted, tilting the whip blade almost directly down. We need to hide somewhere safe!

Why? Who are we facing?

A spectral butterfly. One a lot stronger than me.

Chapter 604: Beneath the Southern Ruins

I can't sense him, Gleam said, fluttering close to the crack in the ceiling. Doesn't mean he's not there.

He's there. Dallion lay on the floor, the dartblade on his left leg surrounded in blue flames. He's just waiting.

Several hours had passed since the encounter, although given the results describing it as a disaster would be more accurate. The shardfly felt stronger than anything Dallion had faced, save for the dragon. It had focused solely on him, ignoring Ruby and Gleam, as if they weren't there. The only reason Dallion had survived at all is thanks to his sword's indestructible nature. Without that, Dallion wouldn't have had the opportunity to run away.

Feeling better, boss? Lux asked.

Dallion couldn't say that he did when it came to long-term goals. He might have survived the initial encounter, but it wasn't looking very likely he'd make it to the aetherbird mountain in six days. In fact, there was no guarantee he'd make out at all.

That's why people generally don't come here, dear boy, Nil sighed in a distinctly told-you-so tone. The creatures that like to hide here are usually strong enough to survive the environment, making them a lot more dangerous than most things you'd come across in the civilized wilderness.

Shut up. Dallion closed his eyes.

It was fortunate that the area had some city ruins. Dallion had found them purely by accident, mostly buried beneath the mountains. Whatever catastrophe had happened had covered up this section of the southlands, which was good since it prevented most of the large creatures from making their lairs there, or so it seemed. With no area guardians, Dallion had had to learn the language of the local plants to get an idea of what was going on. From what he could tell, the ruins were mostly filled with small rodents which avoided anything stronger. The creatures might have presented a challenge the last time he was here, but at his current level, they had quickly scurried away, choosing to ignore a direct confrontation.

Eventually the pain disappeared. Dallion felt he had enough strength to stand up. He had already mended all of his clothes and armor, but it was impossible to remove the bloodstains. Water and food, to a lesser degree, had been of a lesser priority. As a hunter, Dallion could survive about a week without either and had the means to find more in the wilderness. Here, he was the hunted.

Found some water. Ruby flew to Dallion. It's not far.

Any creatures up to it?

Just rats.

You need to move, Vihrogon said. Shardflies get bored quickly, and when they do, they start slicing up buildings.

Great. Dallion sighed, then took his harpsisword. It was time to kill some rats.

The light coming from Lux was enough to scare the rats in most cases, but there would be instances in which the creatures would become cornered and left with no option but to try and fight their way out. Dealing with them was elementary. Dallion could have done so without even using combat splitting, but given his permanent injury, he preferred not to take any chances.

The wound proved another concern. The encounter with the spectral shardly had loosened his bandages, causing the bleeding to increase. Dallion had tried to tighten it as well as use Lux to heal what he could, but that didn't stop the constant dripping. The concern with that wasn't so much that he might start feeling drowsy in a matter of days, but that the blood would attract other, more intelligent creatures to have a go at him. Until he reached the water source, though, there was nothing he could do. Ruby tried to help out. The shardfly flew ahead like a scour, slicing some of the critters up. But he was still young and prone to making mistakes. On one occasion he had

almost collapsed a corridor, forcing Dallion to rush and enter its realm to prevent the ceiling from falling. From then on, he had forbidden the shardfly from fighting until they reached a larger area.

What seemed like an hour later, after hundreds of killed rats and the occasional other creature, Dallion finally arrived at his goal.

From what he could tell, a stream had formed at some point, trickling along the inside of the ruins, filling up rooms as they did. The chamber Dallion reached was probably a conference hall at some point. Now it was a deep pool of murky water.

Bursting into instances, Dallion went to the edge of the pool and scooped a bowl of water.

Nothing attacked him, which was a positive development.

I wouldn't drink this, the dryad guardian of the bowl said.

Taking her advice, Dallion placed the bowl on the floor, then put the dartbow on top of it. The blue flame surrounded the top of the bowl, effectively destroying all the muck in the water, making it drinkable.

The taste remained pretty bad, but at this point, Dallion had no intention of complaining.

After a few bowls, he removed the bandages of his arm. The scar was still there, completely unhealed, as if he had been wounded moments ago. Using a new bowl of water, Dallion cleaned his arm. Once that was done, he rinsed and cleaned the bandages, using Lux to both clean and sterilize them. No doubt about it, having a healing flame was a huge advantage, almost making it unfair for Dallion's enemies. On the other hand, the spectral shardfly had a lot more overpowered abilities. Even now, Dallion couldn't be sure that the creature hadn't cast an illusion on itself to look like a rat, insect, or miniature shardfly and was watching him from somewhere in the ruins. With its level, there was no way Gleam could sense it until it was too late. The only solution was to keep several dozen instances at all times.

Nil, if you have some tricks, I need them now, Dallion thought.

I don't have any advice to give, the echo replied. Other than praying to the Green Moon. The sky isn't an option, and I don't think you'll manage going by land. That doesn't leave a lot of options.

I don't need advice. I need magic.

We've talked about this, dear boy.

You've done it twice before. Why can't you use it now?

I'm just an echo. Some rules I can bend, but this isn't one of them. Sorry.

That wasn't the answer Dallion wanted to hear. For a while he considered checking if the pool would lead to somewhere, but quickly decided against it. Fighting in normal conditions was bad enough. Maybe if he didn't have a constantly bleeding scar, he could have tried to have a go, though not in this muck.

Putting his skills to use, Dallion jotted down a map of the area in his head. From what he knew of architecture, there had to be another way to exit the mountain. Making a door would be no issue: he had already seen that a point attack could easily drill a hole through earth and rock. The problem was how to proceed afterwards. From what he could remember, the next mountain was a fair distance away, and even if the shardfly didnt attack, other creatures were.

There must be an option, Dallion told himself.

He was so close that he could almost feel it. He had seen the tip of the mountain. It should have taken him less than a day to get there. If only he had been faster if only Dark had responded to the call. Or maybe that was the reason the dragon hadnt? The Green Moon would have been aware of the shardflys presence.

Gleam, think you can talk to him? Dallion asked.

Probably. Wont do any good. I know the type. I was like that myself. If hes old like me, hell enjoy fighting anything thats strong and loathe hunters. Youre both.

Im not strong

Youre not as strong as a dragon, but enough to keep him amused. If I was at my old strength, maybe I could have held him off, but Im far from it.

Im not strong enough, Dallion added. Any chance hell give up?

After finding the most interesting prey in decades?

Unfortunately, that was a good point. Dallion purified some more water to wash himself a bit, then went into one of the collapsed corridors. Such a position was good for defense. He ate a third of what food he had in his backpack, then took off most of his gear.

Ruby, you hide somewhere in the corridor we came from. Gleam, youre in the main chamber. If anything budges, engage it and wake me up. Lux, you keep watch nearby.

What are you thinking?

Since theres nothing else I can do, Ill take a nap. Dallion sat down. With luck, maybe someone will give me some advice.

Right Gleam sounded doubtful. Good luck.

Ruby and the two familiars flew to the spots they were instructed. Meanwhile, Dallion closed his eyes. Sleep didnt come easy. At first, Dallion kept going through the fight in his head. Then, he went further back, trying to think of all the conversations hed had with the Star, the Moons, and then anyone else he could think of.

It felt like mentally walking through snow: exhausting, yet not taking him very far. Then, without any indication, Dallion found himself sitting at a picnic table on a meadow. Everything was calm. He could feel the cool night breeze as the flame of the lantern flickered a foot away. Everything was calm, pleasant with the exception of the mosquitos.

How come I never learned their language? Dallion asked himself, as a few of them were sucking the blood from his left arm. Yet, he didnt feel the slightest inclination to swat them.

Hey, whats wrong? a voice said from across the table.

Dallion turned in the direction. For some reason, he was expecting to see a college friend dressed in green. Instead, Jiroh was sitting there. Her outfit was very different from anything Dallion had seen her in the past it was Earth-made. The fury was dressed in a loose white pullover despite it being warm and a part of white denim jeans. While the clothes suited her, they also felt out of place.

Dal?

Eh I. Dallion tried to remember why he was here. He knew he had to talk about something important, but for some reason couldnt remember what.

Is this your world? Jiroh looked around. Its nice. Very different from what I expected it to be.

Its part of it. Why are you here?

The fury seemed surprised. Dallion could feel her confusion, as if it were his own.

I thought you wanted to talk, she said. I thought it was about my sister?

He came to talk to me. A scruffy-looking teen with green hair said, as he sat on the bench near Dallion. He was wearing a green tank top, torn green jeans, and a pair of rollerblades, handing down his left shoulder. Youll need to take care of that. The teen pointed at Dallions arm. A whole colony of mosquitoes had covered it, as if gathered to a feast. Better sooner.

The boys presence startled Jiroh, who surrounded herself with three layers of air-currents. They were invisible, yet Dallion could feel them there.

He wanted to know about the phoenix, the teen said.

Felygn? Dallion asked. The moment he did, some clarity returned to him. The boy was a Moon, and if so, all this had to be a dream. It also explained Jiroh being here. That explained a lot, although it was the first time both Jiroh and a Moon had entered his dream at the same time. Or maybe there were other cases he couldnt remember?

You really messed up this time, Felygn said, rolling one of his rollerblades along the table. And just when I thought things were going your way. Thats the price of passing the fourth gate. A pity it doesnt look like youll be passing the fifth.

Chapter 605: Moon's Warning

Huh? Dallion blinked.

The fact that he was technically asleep toned down the horror he should have felt. It wasnt the first time that Felygn had grumbled at him, but never had there been a warning this serious.

Free will, free consequences, free ability to mess up, the Green Moon said. No more hand holding, remember? I tried to nudge you in the right direction, and you still have the consistency of a stack of billiard balls after a break.

Dallion just stared, desperately trying to figure out where he messed up. There was a wide selection of things to choose from. Maybe he should have taken Clerics offer after all.

You bet you should have! Felygn snapped. Did you think that was made just because you knew each other? Even bishops dont get to invite people to the Order just like that. I made the request and was hoping youd be smart enough to accept.

But the limit Dallion began.

Would have been better than what you have now! If you were there, youd have learned the answer to a lot of the questions that had been plaguing you; Id have trained you to get to a point at which you could fight the Star and win. Youd have been able to talk to all your friends anytime, Jiroh and everyone from Earth included. Instead

The Moon didnt finish. Even without his music skills, Dallion could feel the regret in his voice, mixed with anger and disappointment. Jiroh seemed to have picked it up as well, for she quietly looked at Dallion, the smile gone from her face.

Silence continued for several seconds. No one was willing to say anything more, as if biding their time in the hope that someone else would come with a solution.

You shouldnt have accepted the deal, the Moon said at last. The Star always takes whats his and we cant stop him.

I didnt make a deal, Dallion said instinctively. I can just ignore

You accepted the information, so the deal was made. You think you can trick him with semantics? Youre not even an amateur compared to him. You can only delay it. If you miss this window, hell present you with the next and hell keep increasing the ante until your only choice is to do as he says or give up and die. Its not like you havent made your share of enemies in the world.

That sounded like something Arthurows would do. The Star had proven he could send cultists after Dallion. While one group had failed to achieve their goal, there were more of them hiding like cockroaches in every major city. There was every possibility that sooner or later theyd end up getting lucky. But even if they didnt, the Star could easily make another deal with another person wanting something in return. The nobles had noticed Dallion, and it would be easy for them to lend their ear to anyone willing to do him harm. The Archdukes son was a prime candidate, as was the noble whod tried to keep Diroh from leaving.

I can accept the offer, he said after a while. Ill return to a temple and stay there.

No. The Green Moon shook his head. You cant. If you had taken the offer, all would have been fine. Now that the Star has gotten involved, you cant become part of the Order even as an apprentice. When I said youd messed up, I wasnt kidding.

What options does he have? Jiroh asked.

Even in this situation, she kept taking on the role of the big sister. It was a nice gesture, though not one Dallion appreciated at present.

To be honest, there was only one option remaining: if hiding was impossible, and fleeing would just delay the inevitable, only fighting was left. For that, though, he was going to require another boon.

He knows what options he has. Im just here to make sure he doesnt go through with the deal.

You think Ill work for the Star?! Dallion jumped up, anger filling him like a flame.

You wont be the first. Those that are adamant that theyll never make a deal with the Star usually end up doing so.

That doesnt even make sense! I

Im here to offer you a way out, the Moon interrupted. Not the mess with the Star. I know how to get you out of the south. I can tell you how to get to the mountain, how to get to the dragons area, or to return to the north you came from.

Why cant you tell me all three and leave me to decide?

The teen narrowed his eyes, then grabbed one of his rollerblades and slit it along the table. As he did, marks formed on the wooden surface. The marks turned into lines, which then merged together, forming a map. It was a lot more complicated than one would imagine, but somehow Dallion was able to make things out.

At one point, the entire south was its own kingdom, the Moon said, still adding details to the map. Tunnels connected all points of interest, allowing even non-awakened to go from one end to the other in a matter of hours. Back in the place you visited, these tunnels were destroyed by the calamity that occurred in this place. Those that were deep underground remained, though.

Finishing his sketch the Moon, then pointed at a section of the map.

Youre here. Go deep enough and you should find a tunnel. Moving along south and youll reach the mountain. A few sections are close to the surface, so be careful that the shardfly doesnt spot you. The teen pulled his hand back. If you go north, youll eventually get to a whole lot of smaller tunnels. None of them will take you directly out of the south, but if you move from one to the other, youll eventually get there.

And theres a tunnel that leads east too?

No. Theres a tunnel at first, but it changes into a road that later drills through rock. Thatll take you to the other crater of the south.

The directions werent detailed, but Dallion felt he couldnt miss it. The entire map seemed perfectly clear, as if hed been here hundreds of times before.

Thats all the help I can give. Youre free to make a choice. Make sure its the right one.

Thanks, Felygn. Can I

Dallion suddenly woke up. He was back in the ruins, feeling the cold nibbling at his skin.

Damit! he hissed.

It would have been useful to have a chat with Jiroh, but the Moon had other plans. Dallion suspected that the whole encounter with the Star had put the Moon on edge. If there was a way to obtain the spellcraft gem from the phoenix, and Arthurows managed to claim it, there was every chance that he found a loophole through the rules that governed him. While it was unlikely, that

would be enough to make him equivalent to a Moon, we well could become unshackled to roam freely throughout the world.

Whats wrong? Gleam flew up to Dallion.

Nothing, he replied curtly. Everythings fine.

You dont look it.

There were many ways Dallion could have responded to that, but he chose not to be confrontational. Things were difficult as it was.

I know how to get out of here, he said instead. Well avoid the shardfly, though there might be other critters along the way. Dallion stood up, then stretched for a few moments. Get Ruby. Weve got some work to do.

According to the map, the entrance to the tunnel was several layers beneath Dallions current position. Reaching it required a bit of slicing through stone. Given that shardflies excelled at that, it wasnt an issue. In the spots where razor winds alone were not enough, Dallion resorted to his Nox Dagger to weaken the problematic areas.

Initially, the chambers they broke into were similar to the lastfull of stale air and the occasional group of rats. The deeper they went, though, the material composure began to chance. Stone was no longer stone, but concrete with metal rods added to the mix. While Nil and the familiars found it unusual, even surprising, Dallion knew exactly what this was: reinforced concrete following modern Earth construction methods.

This hardly looks like a good idea, Nil muttered.

All routs start from there, Dallion reminded.

How can you be sure about that?

A Moon told me.

It took over an hour to slice through the concrete and the mesh of steel beams that it encased. Whoever had built that had put in a lot of effort to make sure the tunnel wouldnt collapse. After Dallions involvement, the prospect became a lot more likely.

Lux, I need some light, Dallion said.

The dartblade levitated down, surrounded by blue flames. As far as one could tell, there was nothing down there. Drawing his harpsisword just in case, Dallion leapt down, accompanied by Gleam and Ruby.

The drop was twenty feet at leastnothing serious for an awakened of Dallions level. The more interesting bit was that the floor wasnt stone It had metal tracks on it.

Youve got to be kidding, Dallion uttered, as the realization hit in.

This wasnt a normal corridor, it was a railway tunnel. The south had a functioning subway connecting all parts of the domain. The technology was way too advanced for anything this world could offer. It was obvious that the Star had created that, but given the number of tunnelsif Felygns

map was to be believed the people of this kingdom must have used it a lot. If that was the case, however, how come the knowledge of such advanced technology was lost? The only answer was that the Moons had forbidden it, causing it to disappear from the peoples minds. Or maybe the massive fireball strikes had killed the majority of the people involved. Those that remained had gradually reverted to the medieval society that continued to this way.

The phoenix used to live in a city before the start of recorded history, Dallion thought.

What if that history had been recorded, but forcefully forgotten? It looked more certain than ever that the Star had used his expertise in technology to challenge the Moons, and had lost. If he had the chance to make a second attempt, though, would the outcome be the same? If the firebird was the key to his free reign, he could well restore the fallen south and use his cultists to create a new empire, one that would challenge the Moons themselves for dominion of the world.

Whats this? Lux asked, floating above the side of a rail.

Its a road, Dallion explained. For a very special device. Its similar to a carriage, but uses magic to move.

And it needs this road to move?

Yes.

There didnt seem to be any sign of anything resembling a subway car, or even a broken-up wagon to indicate that this section had even been active. It was entirely possible it was abandoned even before the kingdoms demise.

Dallion grabbed the dartblade from the air, then loaded it and shot a bolt deeper into the corridor. Like a torch, the bolt flew forward, illuminating the tunnel with its blue light. The unmistakable sound of dozens of small claws scurrying away was heard.

Stay close, Dallion thought. Ive no idea whats hiding here.

But youre still willing to go, Nil commented. It was obvious that the Stars technology scared him more than anything else. From the echos perspective, Dallion had taken them into the belly of the beast.

You know the answer.

Dallion let go of the dartblade, then played a chord on his harpsisword. The sounds echoed throughout the tunnel, spreading calm and confusion. Now all that was left was to make a choice and fight to follow it.

Chapter 606: Rat King

Blood splattered all over the wall as Dallion did another triple spin slash. Whoever said that fighting rats was difficult had vastly underestimated the reality of the situation. A dozen rats or slightly more werent an issue, yet it soon became obvious that rats didnt travel in dozensthey moved about in swarms. And these were not mere rats that one would find in the less fortunate districts of towns and cities; each of these specimens was the size of dogs, with five-inch teeth and claws.

Theyre leaking through, Gleam said.

The familiar and Ruby were doing a good job protecting Dallions back from a second flow of rats that were trying to swarm him. While killing the creatures was no issue for them, however, killing all of them was. Already a small trickle of rats was making it through, charging at Dallion from behind.

Damn it! Dallion thought.

There was a mind working against him. This was different from fighting ordinary creaturescommon creatures had a sense of self-preservation, no matter how small. The elements of this swarm viewed themselves as replicable; their only goal was to slowly grind their enemy down to the point that he couldnt fight back.

Dallion had heard talk of such creatures from fellow hunters. According to the stories, swarm entities hid among some of the ruins. Most often, those would be creatures with the ability to control any pack of smaller creatures in the local vicinityinsects, rats, frogs, snakesand use them as a sword and shield when fighting far stronger enemies. In this case, though, things seemed different. The swarm adapted to Dallions tactics on the spot. Not only that, but he failed to notice any communication between them, just the same blobs of emotion within all the creatures, as if they were one organism.

Thrusting forward, Dallion did a multi-attack. Dozens of rats died every second, as he moved so fast, creating the impression he had three additional arms. Sadly, that wasnt enough to stop the flow.

Dont, Nil said, suspecting what Dallion might resort to.

I dont have a choice. Dallion concentrated, then did a point attack forward.

A wave of destruction flew through the tunnel, causing rats to explode by the hundreds. Loud squeaks filled the air. Moments later, the second flow turned around and fled, disappearing into the tunnel. With this momentary calm, Dallion could finally take a breather.

Lux, Gleam, keep watching, he said as he sat on the ancient tracks. There might come for another go.

Point attacks and flimsy tunnels dont mix. Nil sighed. I thought youd learned that much after the wyvern encounter.

Theres no one here but me. Dallion closed his eyes for a moment. The tunnels will hold. Trust me.

Because nothing can go wrong in a place where cutlings and other Star-spawn roam.

The Star wants me to reach the phoenix. Hell keep his critters in check.

To a certain degree, that was the reason Dallion had decided to push on towards the mountain rather than turn back. There was no way to know whether he had made the right choice or not, but he wanted to believe in Arthurows self-serving nature.

Clearing his throat, Dallion lay down on the tracks. It was outright impressive how they had managed to survive for so long. There were moments in which he could almost forget he was in another world, but rather stuck in an abandoned subway back on Earth. All that was missing was a

train cart. After his point attack, there was no chance of coming across that anytime soon. Even if one had managed to survive all this time, it was blasted to splinters now.

What a waste, Onda muttered. Do you know what these lines are made of?

Tracks, Dallion corrected. And yes, I do.

Theres so many things you can do with just a bit of them. Cant you cut off some for back home?

As amusing as it was to entertain the notion, Dallion preferred not to take as little from the south as possible. The entire rails were made of a sky steel, making them virtually indestructible. Whoever had made the subway wanted to make it last forever. Ironically, it was that desire that had likely brought to the destruction of the kingdom and the people in it. At the moment, though, Dallions main concern lay elsewhere.

From what he could remember from the map in the dream, the tunnel continued for several miles before moving beyond the current cluster of ruins. There was no way he could go that far when having to constantly deal with rat swarms. And while Dallion wasnt willing to admit it openly, point attacks werent a solution. Not that Dallion feared that they might cause the tunnel to collapse. Rather, he feared they were more likely to attract more creatures to him.

Gleam, did you see where the rats ran off to?

Not particularly. Why?

Well need to kill the creature controlling them. Dallion stood up. Then played another chord with his harpsisword. No creatures appeared. Apparently, he was going to do this the hard way.

Adjusting his backpack, Dallion continued forward. After a few hundred feet, a faint light became visible in the distance. It was too whitish-blue to be sunlight, leading Dallion to believe that it was a remnant of the past as well. Soon enough, he found that he was right.

An entire platform became visible in the tunnel. In the distant past, it must have been a train stop. People would rush from the building above to the train and vice-verse. It was outright impressive how long the magic crystals had managed to survive. The devastation above ground had done little to affect anything here to the point that even the station sign was fully legible, written in glowing green letters: **Dragon Mound**.

Careful, Gleam said. Therere more rats here.

Dallion nodded. He had spotted the rat excrements on the left side of the station. Most were piled at the base of a staircase leading up into the ruins. Under different circumstances, Dallion would have considered that a trap or a false lead. There was no reason for the rats to do that, though. Even if the swarm entity was smart enough to resort to such trickery, there was no way it could expect a person to enter the tunnels after thousands of years. The pile was there because large quantities of rats had frequently stayed there at some point.

Good, because thats where were going.

Bursting into a hundred instances, Dallion swarmed the section of the station, exploring every part of it. On several occasions, he came across small groups of rats injured survivors of his recent attack. None of them proved useful or dangerous, which was why Dallion ignored them, focusing on other instances of his.

The station level explored, Dallion went up the stairs. Both the whip blade and dartblade were floating in the immediate vicinity ready to protect him from any potential attack. Such attacks didn't materialize, but the further Dallion went, the closer he got to the heart of the rat swarm. Piles of droppings became more frequent, as did creature remains scattered on the floor. Initially, they were small bones of animals unfortunate enough to venture into the swarms domain. After a while, Dallion came across something that he couldn't have expected. Grouped in a corner of a room were half a dozen human skeletons.

What the heck? Dallion thought.

Skeletons were a generous description. A large part of the skeletal remains had been torn off and dragged away elsewhere in the ruins. However, there were just enough bones surrounded by ragged clothes to show beyond doubt that the occupants of the room had been human. Most likely they had been here when the calamity had taken place. Alive, yet unable to escape, they had probably found their death here due to starvation. Not the most pleasant way to go. Dallion could only hope that they weren't devoured by animals in their final moments.

Still maintaining three dozen of instances, Dallion searched through the remains. If they ever had anything of value, it had long been taken and dragged to some spot in the south. It was possible that it lay hidden in the pile of shinies collected by the gulls. Numerous teeth marks covered the bones, all of them made centuries after their demise.

Spending barely a few minutes in the room, Dallion pushed on. He could feel he was close. The air was buzzing with emotions: fear, aggression, desperation. Like an invisible trail, they led on.

Gleam, Lux, let's make this quick, Dallion thought, moving forward with two dozen instances. The focus is on the creature. If we kill that, the rats will scatter. Just be sure

A wave of rats poured in, filling rooms and corridors. It wasn't only Dallion's front instances that were affected, but all of them. The swarm had attacked from all sides, crashing into him with the force and fury of a waterfall.

Immediately, Dallion saw his mistake. All this time he had assumed the rats to be simple creatures incapable of countering his combat splitting. That could well be the case, but the entity behind the rats was awakened. It had probably been aware of what Dallion was doing since the moment he left the tracks and ventured into its domain.

Spinning with his harpsword, Dallion let out a series of slashes as he jumped up into the air. Using his acrobatic skills to evade the main attack, he leapt from wall to wall, while the whip blade extended in order to deal as much damage as possible. Blood filled the room like rain, though even that wasn't enough to think about the swarm substantially.

Think, Dallion told himself, assessing the situation.

Using his scholar skills he thought back, following the flow of the rats. All of them had surrounded his instances at roughly the same time, suggesting that the nest had to be in one of two places: either directly below or directly above.

Gleam, Lux, Ruby, break the floor! Dallion ordered.

That left him to deal with the ceiling. Since this wasn't a realm, he didn't have the time of freedom to draw his Nox dagger. Instead, he was going to use the weapon he already held.

Concentrating, Dallion combined music and attack skills. His left hand slid along the strings of the harpsisword as he struck the ceiling; this time the target of the music effects was the weapon itself. The entire blade of the harpsisword vibrated with such speed, causing it to blur. The last time Dallion had seen that happen, it was Harp who had created the effect.

Was this what you were trying to teach me? he asked.

The tip of the blade pierced the concrete like soft toffee. The pressure was so light that Dallion wasn't sure he had even struck the ceiling, despite seeing it happen with his own eyes. Cracks formed, though they were different from those of a crackling, causing the ceiling to bleed dust as it disintegrated.

The job done, Dallion pulled out the harpsisword, using it to propel himself in the direction of the most distant wall. Barely had he done so that the entire ceiling fell apart, collapsing over the rats. However, that wasn't the only thing that happened. Following the ceiling fragments, streams of new rats poured down like a waterfall, filling the already crowded space.

I was right, Dallion thought.

A grotesque creature composed of six massive rats merged into one let out a blood freezing squeak as it too fell to the floor. Each of the rats composing it had the back of their spines emerge through skin and fur, linking together in a giant knot of bone.

A rat king, Dallion gasped. He remembered hearing stories about them back on Earth. The creatures were said to have exponentially higher intelligence than the common rat, as well as the ability to control swarms of rats with its pseudo psychic powers. Now Dallion saw that the monstrosity wasn't a myth. The only thing that remained was for him to kill it.

Chapter 607: Unnatural Past

The rat rushed to cover the rat king like a shield. Dallion performed a point attack straight down, but it was too late to kill the creature. The destructive force slammed into the cover of rats pushing everything down. The floor already weakened by Dallion's familiars gave in, crumbling into the room below. The rats flowed down with it, creating new layers around the creature controlling them.

Without hesitation, Dallion did another point attack, then thrust the sword into a nearby wall, in order to keep himself from joining the pool of rats and remains.

Gleam, get it! he ordered. Lux, ruby stay close to me.

The whip blade spun in the air, twisting its metal fragments around like a tornado. The rat swarm was on the defensive now, although that didn't stop creatures from leaping up at the weapon. At first

glance, there was no reason for their action. They could do no damage to something that was indestructible. However, every moment they occupied the blade was a moment the rat king had to escape.

Anyone seen anything of the sort? Dallion asked.

No one answered. Apparently, the creature was unique to the world, possibly a result of the Stars influence in the area.

Rats and subway tunnels, Dallion thought. It was almost as if he were back home.

The flow of rats into the room became a trickle, allowing Dallion to land on part of the floor that remained. Looking below, the mass of rats had thinned significantly. Sadly, that wasn't so much due to Gleams efforts, but rather the rat king's escape. There was a choice to be made: follow up and kill the creature, or take advantage of the retreat and rush down the tunnel towards the mountain.

What do you think Harp? Dallion asked. The harpsisword was still vibrating in his hand, but refused to give an answer. That wasn't a good sign. I need your advice, Harp.

You have to decide on your own, the response came.

There was no spite, no disappointment, but rather the acknowledgement that he was mature enough to make his own decisions. The issue was that there was no telling whether those decisions were right.

There's no guarantee in life, Dallion told himself. It wasn't even a matter of taking the easy way as opposed to the right way. Both choices came with their own risks.

Gleam, stay clear, he ordered.

Suspecting what he intended, the whip blade flew up to the ceiling. Moments later, Dallion did another point attack, destroying two more floors.

Lux, go after them, he ordered. Gleam, Ruby, cover my back.

So, you're chasing it, after all, Nil remarked.

I've already started the hunt. Would be stupid to stop now that I have an advantage. He leapt down, then rushed forward.

Following the rat king was easy. The swarm of rats had created a tunnel of their own, going through various parts of the ruins. Had they been any smaller, following them would have presented a significant difficulty. As things stood, Dallion didn't even feel uncomfortable being hunted creatures in far tighter spaces during hunter jobs.

On the way, scenes of the ruins past flashed by. One passing look gave an image of what had been: modern offices, living rooms, kitchens it was as if someone had taken part of Earth and put it in the middle of this fantasy world only to have it destroyed and reduced to ruins. Even with the

catastrophe devastating the surface, pockets had remained intact buried beneath the ruins for millennia.

For a brief moment, Dallion wondered what life must have been when the city was functional. Had it been prosperous beyond today's understanding? Quite possibly, yes. Was it the Star that had achieved that? Or was he the one who had ruined it?

The moment passed quickly as a torrent of rats changed direction, charging directly at Dallion. This time he didn't even pause, performing a series of attack combinations as he kept on running forward. Like in a dance, he spun and twirled, avoiding the incoming critters, while stashing them with deadly precision. If this were back in the realm, red rectangles would have filled the tunnel, potentially even earning him an achievement. Here, they only slowed him down from his real target.

Lux, how are things? Dallion asked through his awakened realm.

Half the swarm is heading your way, boss, the firebird replied. I'll come to help out.

No! Keep on the rat king! I'll be fine.

If what he was facing represented half the swarm, that was good news. The critter was running out of minions.

See, Nil, point attacks can be useful underground, Dallion thought as he sliced through the creatures.

Only for a while, the echo grumbled. Gravity has a way of striking structures where they're weakened.

Splitting into instances, Dallion tossed the harpsword to his left hand and did another point attack. The strike resulted in killing hundreds of rats all the way up to the rat king itself. Unfortunately, it also affected Lux in the process, forcing Dallion to choose another instance to become reality. If he wanted to win this without losses, he was going to have to take the slow and steady approach.

Gleam, anything behind? he asked.

Only the things you let pass, the familiar grumbled.

Good. Lux, can you attack the rat king?

Rats are still protecting it, boss. They've covered it like a cloud.

Speed up and slice through the ones on top. You don't need to kill the creature, just break the spine knot.

Sure thing, boss!

There was no telling whether the creature followed the same logic as was believed on Earth, but Dallion had a hunch that might be the case. Hopefully, the injury was going to be enough to slow the creature down enough for Dallion to catch up.

Have you seen anything similar, dear boy? Nil asked.

That was a good question. Thinking back, rat kings were an urban legend. It had been a popular discussion in middle school, with spooky stories of them infesting subways and controlling the world. The creature was never meant to exist, not on Earth in any event. How come it had appeared here?

No, Dallion replied. Just heard of them.

Its interesting that something else from your world somehow managed to make it here. Just like the knife you carry.

I doubt theres any connection.

Isnt there? Everything in the fallen south seems linked to your world. And you yourself have often considered that the Stars from there as well.

Youve told me there are no ways to get things between worlds, Dallion countered. And even if there were, this isnt a creature that exists there.

Before the argument could continue, a victorious cry filled Dallions awakening domain.

I got it! Lux yelled, his voice full of more enthusiasm that even he was used to. I broke it up in three parts! Theres only two of them attached to the spine.

As he said that, the stream of rats attacking Dallion suddenly dispersed. No longer directed to charge towards their death, the creatures changed direction, doing their best to flee the threat as best they could.

Focusing on his athletic skills, Dallion sprint forward as fast as his legs would take him. After a short while, he came across some of the corpses Lux had mentioned. Bodies of deformed rats with their spike sticking from their backs lay on the floor, twitching in a near-dead state. A few precise strikes instantly put them out of their misery.

I got the last two! Lux yelled again. It was easy!

Good job. Now get back here.

Naturally, it would be easy. Left to its own devices, the rat king wasnt supposed to be strong. It was the swarm surrounding it that was the real threat. Now that the brain of the swarm was dealt with, there was no chance that Dallion would be attacked again. That was assuming there was only one rat king in the ruins.

Deciding not to ruin the moment of victory, Dallion leaned against a nearby wall to catch his breath. A few moments later, all his familiars were there as well. Gleam was first, sliding the whip blade back into its scabbard. Lux followed, almost popping into existence in front of Dallion. Even in the real world, his ability to propel himself was impressive. Last was Ruby, who took almost half a minute more to reach them. The shardfly was by no means slow, but compared to everyone else, he had a lot of catching up to dosomething he was conscious of, for he quietly landed on Dallions shoulder and folded his wings together.

Walking back to the subway station took over half an hour. It was impressive how much distance could be crossed when running at the full speed with a body trait of thirty-eight. The time gave

Dallion a chance to consider the grand scope of things. The political mess he had gotten himself involved with almost rivaled the Wars of Succession the province had seen forty years ago. However, he feared that he was involved in something far greater.

The dwarf hunter he had gone to not too long ago had mentioned a prophecy that would bring the end of the world. Could it be that the prophecy was correct and Dallion could end up being the cause of destruction? If the Star somehow obtained the skill to do magic, would the world suffer the fate of the fallen south? According to the world's history, three races had tried to conquer the world: the copyettes, the nymph, and the dryads. All of them had failed, and yet none of them had suffered the amount of devastation Dallion witnessed in the south.

Nil, what happens if the Star is killed? Dallion asked.

Back to your usual philosophical questions? The echo sighed. The short answer is that no one knows. No one has managed to achieve such a feat.

Even the Moons?

After four ages, there've been so many lies and half truths that even brilliant scholars from the past have no idea what's real and what not. Maybe the Star can't be killed? Or maybe when it's killed, it would be reborn and continue where it left off. There's no way of knowing, which makes your obsession to fight him all the more absurd.

I don't want to fight him. I just want to make sure he doesn't fight me. Dallion said, aware of the paradox.

In his mind, there was no doubt that the Star was from Earth, just as he was pretty certain that the Moons had cast him down in the ancient past. Looking at the remnants of the Star's achievements were enough to convince him of that. All the discoveries in this era, even those in eras past, seemed to be linked to this kingdom: a kingdom that had been destroyed before time.

Two things kept nagging at him: why hadn't the Moons finished the Star off, and given that he was almost certainly anotherworlder why had they let him level up to the point he'd be a threat? Only one answer made sense: despite everything he had done, the Moons still liked him. Or, to be more specific, they needed him to exist. If all awakened were characters in their grand game, there had to be two sides.

The rest of the day proved uneventful. Every hour, Dallion would pause, leaving Lux and Gleam to check the tunnel in both directions. Other than a few lone insects scurrying about, there was nothing of interest. It almost seemed that all the dangers were over until Lux came back with news of sunlight in the tunnel ahead. Upon going close, Dallion felt his heart tighten.

Back in the days of the fallen kingdom, the subway must have connected cities like a normal train. The tracks continued on through the open for several dozen miles until they entered another tunnel in the cliff-face itself. This was the final stretch leading to the end of the canyon and the mountain beyond, and it was completely exposed.

Chapter 608: Taking Chances

It's not that far, Dallion said. I'll there

He's still watching, Gleam interrupted. I can't tell where exactly, but he's there.

That was a rather big problem. Dallions brief encounter with the creature had shown him how powerless he was even at his current level. The distance wasnt much, but more than enough for the shardfly to swoop down and this time slice Dallion in two.

Ill try talking to him, Dallion said, though even he doubted that would have an effect.

The creature was exceedingly bloodthirsty. Dallion knew Gleam well enough to tell how much she enjoyed fighting. Compared to the wild shardfly, she was like a clawless kitten, especially here. The species was quite territorial, and this one had made the entire canyon its domain. Given that Havoc hadnt mentioned it, that must have been a recent development. If Dallion was to guess, the poison plague might have caused the creature to leave its usual location and fly here. Whatever the case, it had no intention of letting its prey escape twice.

That wont help, Gleam said. You sprint to the other side. Ill fight him.

I can help, Ruby said from Dallions shoulder.

Stay put, kid, Gleam said. You wont last a second. Youll be safe with Dal.

Will you be alright? Dallion asked.

Surprisingly, his familiar didnt answer. In the past, she would always remind him that the item he had made her guardian of was indestructible. This time, this wasnt the case. Initially, Dallion thought it was a momentary omission on her part, but when he thought about it further, he found a different possibility: in this world, even invincibility didnt last forever. One thing spectral shardflies excelled at was casting illusions. Thanks to their skill and powder, they could change the appearance of objects to the point that the object would become something else entirely as far as reality itself was concerned. If the skill was developed further, it could transform an indestructible sword to one which was very much destructible. Gleam knew that better than anyone. The fact that she was offering to gain Dallion time despite that suggested that she was willing to sacrifice herself for him to succeed.

Gleam Dallion began.

Before he could finish, the whip blade floated up from its scabbard.

Ill be fine, she said. Thanks to his music skill, Dallion could tell she was lying. Besides, beats being banished in a brush. I just need to distract him for a few seconds. Once youre safe, hell lose interest and go to stalk some other prey, possibly the dragon. Ill join you when that happens.

Once Im done, Ill come back and repair you. That was the least Dallion could do, although he hoped that it wasnt going to come to that. If this shardfly was anything like Gleam, hed lose interest, as she said. Dont take any large risks. He split into instances.

Havent you gotten to know me by now? Gleam asked, then flew the whip blade into the open.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion dashed forward. A hundred instances sprinted beyond his limits, passing a mile in a matter of seconds. Sadly, that wasnt enough. One second later, a hurricane of slashes hit

the ground, destroying three quarters of the instances. Only those at the very frond were left unharmed. As tempting as it was to think that Dallion had beaten the odds, he quickly came to the realization that the shardfly was toying with him, prolonging its enjoyment.

Immediately, Dallion burst into a new set of instances, spreading sideways. A crescent strike followed, destroying all of them except the ones at the very end. Wasting no time, Dallion split again. It was a game of funthe creature was going to keep him alive till the point Dallion almost got to safety, at which point it was going to crush all of his instances. Many creatures of the wilderness behaved this way. Gleam knew it as well, and thats when she was going to interfere. There was, of course, one catch: if Dallion didnt prove amusing enough, he was going to be killed way before that moment.

Get ready, Lux.

The dartblade discreetly adjusted onto the back of Dallions backpack.

Half of the distance was covered. This was the point of no return. From here on, it would be more dangerous to turn back than to keep running forward. And this was precisely the moment he made his move.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Reality changed as the familiar outline of his island emerged around him. In the real-world, Dallion was a second from sprinting forward. That moment was going to last for an eternity here, though.

I dont think thats a good idea, ArielDallions echosaid.

I just need two levels, Dallion replied. Or one and an achievement.

Im talking about Gleam. Shes not strong enough to fight that.

Dallion didnt reply, but he didnt have to. As long as his familiar was the whip blades guardian, her fate was linked to the object. Should the object be destroyed, so would she.

Lux, Dallion said.

The firebird emerged, surrounding Dalloin with its flames, then flew off.

Which one, boss? the familiar asked.

There were eleven remaining doors. Many of them Dallion had tried. Thinking back, he didnt find himself improved to the point that he could take them on.

Something new, he said. You decide.

The firebird propelled him forward to the other side of the island. The door he had chosen was an actual metal trapdoor in the ground in a cliffy area. Waves smashed on gray stones, filling the air with the spay of seawater. Dallion didnt particularly like water trials. His fear of water was long gone, but water reduced the effectiveness of Lux.

You decided to sneak some strength in? Gleam appeared, materializing on Dallions shoulder in her shardfly form.

Hes playing it tight. Thisll confuse him enough to make him slip.

It could work. She fluttered off. Dont make it awkward. I havent survived centuries in the wilderness for nothing.

That much was true, and yet she was still caught by a hunter.

Is he stronger than you were? Dallion asked.

Maybe. Gleam gave a vague reply. I didnt have many like myself when I got to that level. It was more live and let live. As far as my kind was concerned.

Dallion nodded, then opened the trapdoor. A dark shaft led directly down. There was no ladder, rope, or anything that help him get down. The trial expected him to start with a leap of faith. Since Dallion had Lux, he gently floated down instead.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future.

A blue rectangle appeared containing the familiar message. Dallion waved it away, then continued floating downwards. After around fifty feet, he split into a dozen instances. From his experience, whenever things remained the same for so long, usually there was a trap in store. In his mind, he could see spikes shooting out from the walls, bringing the trial to an abrupt end. To his surprise, nothing of the sort happened. Another fifty feet further, the floor became visible.

Cracklings, Nox whispered.

That startled Dallion. This was a trial, so anything was possible and still, there werent supposed to be cracklings within him. The creatures only affected objects.

Gleam, do you sense anything? he asked.

Nothing close by. Youre safe.

Safe that was the last word on Dallions mind.

The shaft ended in a small chamber with four archways. There didnt seem to be any distinguishing markings between them. Yet, when Dallion took a step towards one to take a closer look, it bricked up. In a way, it was very similar to the trial areas in awakening shrines. The only difference was that Dallion hadnt done anything to merit this change.

One by one, he went through all the archways. All of them reacted in identical fashion, causing him to end up in a small room without doors or windows. Instinct made Dallion look up. No sooner had he done so that the opening sealed off as well.

Definitely a new trial, Dallion thought. Know anything about this, Nil?

This would be a first for me as well, dear boy, the old echo replied. Id venture that you need to do something in order to proceed.

The remark seemed obvious, but for once Dallion knew exactly what Nil meant. Taking a deep breath, Dallion combined his layer and music vision. At first, nothing seemed to change, but as he looked around further, he saw a pattern of miniature markings on each of the sealed off archways. The unevenness wasnt random, but created a series of bumps, which formed letters.

What is the point of this trial? Dallion wondered. It was a fact that every trial had a purpose that would help him in the real world. Was this a trial of test his perception? Considering the other trials at this level, this sounded way too easy.

No change, no gain, Dallion read the message of the stone wall in front of him. The one next to it read **two steps forward, one step back**.

Dallion took a step to the side and kept on reading. It was difficult to make out even with all his effort, but the remaining two messages were **one for one** and **sprint on knives**. While there was no way to be certain, it seemed that the paths presented difficulties. The greater the challenge, the greater the reward. Thinking back to the paradox cubes, there was a high chance that Dallion could gain trait boost, item blueprints, or even a skillif Nil was to be believed. Considering that there was only one skill left, other than magic, Dallion would have all but a complete set.

Why now? Dallion asked beneath his breath.

Any other time, hed welcome such a challenge. Right now, though, he couldnt afford to lose. If he failed to increase his body, he wouldnt be able to speed up, making him an easy target for the shardfly in the real world, even with Gleams help.

The trial has started, hasnt it? Dallion asked loudly. As if in response, the walls of the chamber gained a faint, shimmering glow.

Four options, one path Going by basic logic, the no change, no gain looked likely to be the easiest difficulty level. Going that direction would ensure Dallion obtained his next level. Would he be allowed to increase a trait, though? Normally, every trial was supposed to guarantee that. Then again, this was the first time he was allowed to choose difficulty. Completing the trial in such fashion would bring him one step closer to the fifth gate, but that wouldnt be enough.

One for one sounded like the obvious choice. It was straightforward and also guaranteed a reward of some sort. Furthermore, from a math perspective, it was identical to the next option. Two steps forward, one step back, seemed like it would provide the same result but at a higher difficulty.

Finally, the sprint on knives message suggested that Dallion would achieve his goal much faster, though at the expense of hardship and pain. Could there be another interpretation, though? Maybe that meant that hed obtain the level quickly, but receive another permanent effect as punishment?

What do you guys think? Dallion asked.

Back when he was around level twenty, there would be a chorus of suggestions, each giving him opinionated and often contradictory advice. This time, there was silence.

That bad, huh? Dallion forced a laugh.

The daggers, the guardian of the armadil shield, said. Choose the sprint of daggers. Everything else is just prolonging your pain.

That doesnt sound much like you, Vihrogon. What happened to being companion gear?

I know you and I know the trial. If you fail here, youll know youll have to come up with a different plan to survive in the real world. With any of the rest, youll be left with the illusion that you have a chance.

Another high stakes game. Dallion was hoping never to go through anything of the sort again. Last time it had taken a Moon to help him out. Given how much Felygn was upset at him, there was no guarantee hed intervene again.

You could be part of the trial, Dallion said.

I could be, but I also could be right. Your life, your choice. Youre no longer the timid kid you were back when we first met. Youve made a life for yourself, a life youre free to lose as you see fit.

Chapter 609: Attack-Music Fusion

The sprint on knives path was chosen. With one strike of his harpsisword, Dallion broke the thick layer of stones, revealing a long corridor. Instantly, light crystals lit up on either side, illuminating the darkness.

Thanks, harp, Dallion whispered.

It was almost just now that he found how exceptional the weapon was. In the past, he had used aspects of it, focusing on the aspects of attack and music, but rarely had he combined them, and certainly not like this. Now, it was clear why the nymph guardian was so disappointed in him, choosing for focus on other, flashier weapons in his arsenal. For the moment, he was only able to use the harpsiswords properties in the realms, but with enough practice and dedication, he could learn now to slice through stone in real life as well. The sad part was that had he focused on this, he could have mastered it months ago, if not sooner; and all the time Harp had been forced to watch and be ignored.

Gleam, keep an eye out, Dallion said. Nox, you too. If there are any cracklings near, I want to know.

The corridor continued forward into infinity. There didnt seem to be any turns or bends. On several occasions, Dallion looked back with one of his instances, just to make sure the entrance hadnt vanished. It was all still there, reminding him how close to the start he was.

It might be a good idea to check the walls and floor for other hidden signs, dear boy, Nil suggested.

Nil, Im not that stupid, Dallion replied. He had been using his layer of vision ever since hed stepped through the archway. So far, the only thing hed seen was complete smoothness, as if the trial was telling him not to waste his time on this any further. That only made Dallion all the more vigilant.

Minutes passed. There didnt seem to be any changes. Nox could still feel the general presence of cracklings, although they werent getting any closer. After half an hour, Dallion stopped. The entrance was still visible, but just barely.

This isnt right, Dallion thought.

The trial had to have started, which meant he was focusing on the wrong question. Continuing on, he slid the harpsisword along the right wall. It was solid, just as Gleam had assured him it would be.

Sprint on knives, Dallion said to himself. What if that wasn't a difficulty, but an explanation? There were no knives, which meant

Splitting into three instances, Dallion dashed forward with one of them, running as fast as he could. He was just about to use his athletic skills to run along one of the walls when the corridor changed. It wasn't a subtle change, but one that only occurred in the instance which was sprinting. Apparently, it was related to sprinting, which suggested

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 100%

The sprinting instance vanished, leaving the other two intact. Immediately, Dallion stopped, splitting into half a dozen more instances. Nothing changed. Clearly, it was the sprinting that brought on the knives. Come to think of it, the trial was remarkably close to Dallion's real life situation. If so, the Moons had a twisted sense of humor.

Half of his instances dashed forward. Each time one would reach the appropriate speed, a red rectangle would emerge, displaying their death. As hard as Dallion tried, he still couldn't see the lethal blow. He tried looking on either side, up, down, even stack multiple instances together in the hopes of locating the threat. Nothing seemed to work. To make things even more annoying, whenever he resorted to using Lux or the armadil shield, things got back to nothing happening at all. Clearly, it wasn't the speed alone that was the factor, but the process of running.

I guess a line attack will be out of the question, Dallion said, stopping to catch his breath after a while. Sprinting hundreds of times, even for an awakened of his level, was exhausting.

I wouldn't recommend it, dear boy, Nil said.

Great. And just when I thought I had gotten past the mind-twisting trials. He looked at the entrance. Is it too late to choose another path?

You can do anything you wish. It won't guarantee success.

It had to do with knives, or the effect of knives. That was a solid assumption, though there wasn't any evidence whatsoever to confirm it.

Nox, any changes?

Nope. The crackling replied in a lazy fashion.

I'll need your help on this one, buddy. Up for it?

A deep purr suggested that the puma was all too eager. Moments later, the familiar leapt out of Dallion and onto the floor. At his current level, he was a lot bigger than when Dallion had first found him.

Split up, then climb onto me, Dallion said.

Nox tilted his head, somewhat confused. Even in his kitten size, clinging to Dallion was going to be uncomfortable, not to mention painful.

Dont worry it wont be for long. I just want to figure out where the attacks coming from. You wont get hurt. Ill switch the instance.

No further convincing was necessary. The crackling split into seven cublings, which rushed onto Dallion. Once they had settled in, Dallion burst into instances and started running again. Miniature scars formed and healed, subjected to the simultaneous effects of Luxs flames and Noxs claws. Only Dallions arm kept on bleeding continuously. At one point, without warning, the attack struck again. Several red rectangles stacked up, marking Dallions terminal wound, as well as three critical wounds to Nox. That was good: it gave Dallion a direction. Now he knew that the attack targeted the upper part of his torso.

The trials continued. Next, it was discovered that the attack always came from the opposite direction Dallion was looking at. It was like an invisible line attack the struck at a precise moment, though not a location. If Dallion had had several scrolls of paper along the walls, he would have discovered that instantly. Still, in this fashion, he had found the question of the trial. Now all that remained was to find an answer. Since shields and additional speed didnt help, the only thing left was to evade or parry. Combining his guard and acrobatic skills, Dallion decided to try both.

The first dozen times ended in failure. The next, he felt the harpsisword hit against something. The strength of the attack was such that Dallion almost lost balance. Sadly, fractions of a second later, another attack followed that caused his instance to die yet again.

So, thats it. Dallion smiled. Sprint of knives: a series of non-stop attacks that only occurred when he was sprinting at full speed. It was similar to the shardflys attack, but also different. The corridor wasnt playing with Dallion, it was just deathly efficient.

One deflected strike turned into two, then three. At that point Dallion hit a wall. Even with a high reaction stat, he couldnt blindly defend against the attacks. He had to find a pattern, but it kept changing. In order to predict it he needed something more than body speed and reflexes. If Euryale were here, shed probably say something about sensing the attack before it came. Then again, she didnt have any issue looking in every direction at once. Maybe that was why she was so much closer to the gate than him.

Lux, Dallion began, after pausing for some more rest. Can you feel the attacks before they happen?

No, boss, the firebird let out a sad chirp. Theyre too fast.

Dallion looked at the tunnel. The distance between the walls was three meters. Given that the initial attack was always aimed at the torso, it was safe to assume that the strikes came from the sides, moving in towards the center.

I can cover you, Gleam suggested. Thatll be one less side for you to worry about.

No, Dallion said. Thats not the point.

Looks like the point to me.

This is a trial. The attacks either wont occur or theyll slice through you. This is different.

If you say so. You sure you dont want some illusions? I can do that.

Instead of answering, Dallion played a few chords on his harpsisword. A sense of calm filled the air. In the real world, that was everything that it would do, but in the awakened realms, one was able to

see sound as long as one knew how to look. Thousands of minuscule tendrils emanated from the weapon, spreading throughout the space.

While the sound was still reverberating in the corridor, Dallion split into instances and dashed forward. There didnt seem to be any difference from all the previous attempts until the attack struck. The blade sliced through dozens of the fading tendrils, changing the sound by a minuscule degree. This time Dallion didnt have to see the direction of the strike to know where it was coming from. Spinning around, he deflected it with a swift strike, causing the weapon to vibrate in the process. No sooner had he done so than the second attack commenced. It was like a dance of blades, one that Dallion hadnt even seen before. All of a sudden, deflecting the invisible was no longer impossible, just extremely difficult. Instances vanished in the dozens, yet Dallion was still able to deflect seven consecutive attacks, then eight, then nine.

By the tenth deflection, the tunnel suddenly came to an end, entering a large chamber. The moment Dallion entered, the attacks stopped. That wasnt a relief, though, for the chamber wasnt entirely empty.

Theres here, Nox said.

I see that, Dallion said as his remaining instances faded away, leaving one left.

Didnt expect to see me again? An echo of Dallion asked. There was something different this time, though. The echo was half enveloped in crackling matter.

Youre a chainling now?

Chainling, overseer, does it matter? The echo shrugged. Good effort getting here. I thought it would take you a few times.

I cant afford a few times. But you know that.

As usual. Wasnt a good decision to take half of the Stars offer.

I didnt.

The echo smirked.

The both of us know better than that. Not that Im judging, but you should have either taken the offer or refused, not gone halfway. Now no one can really trust you.

Beats joining him outright.

If you thought that, we wouldnt be having this conversation. Youre worried that youll end up joining the Star, just like that rogue mage.

I thought all the remaining trials were skill trials.

Why not both? Besides, didnt Nil explain that trials changed? The fear has been growing for some time. And not only this one, there are a few more up ahead. Good luck going through those. The echo shook its head. That would be a treat.

Ill handle them.

Dal, in your current state, its not certain youll be able to handle me. The corridor you went through, did you think that was an accident? I was doing it.

There would have been a rectangle.

Why? You think I was attacking you? Think again. All you did was go through my defense. Ive been doing nothing but defending myself. No attack, no red rectangle. But that poses an interesting question. If you had all that trouble reaching me, how difficult would things become if I start attacking?

Dallion clenched his left fist. While it was the echo saying it, Dallion was thinking the exact same thing. The trial was an exaggeration of his fears, and one of his current fears was facing himself after joining the Stars side. That was only part of it, though. The bigger question was whether he had made the right choice: should he have rejected the Stars offer? As much as the Moons had promised, they had also said they wouldnt interfere anymore, and seeing the freedom the Star cultists had throughout the world, they didnt.

Youre free to decide what to do, the echo said. But just think about it for a moment. The blondes can merge with the void without losing themselves. That means that any human should be able to, especially anotherworlder.

The Star will never allow that. There was doubt in Dallions voice.

The Stars petty, but he treats those that help him well. Otherwise, hed never get any more volunteers. Remember, people are only willing to betray someone as long as they trust the side theyre switching to. So, which side do you trust?

Chapter 610: Starstruck

Both Dallions burst into instances and attacked. The echo performed the unique type of line attacks Dallion had experienced in the corridor, while Dallion struck with his vibrating harpsisword, this time adding spark attacks to the mix. Red rectangles were everywhere, popping up then disappearing as the respective instances were killed. It was like watching being in the middle of a constant field of very blocky explosions.

I should have studied more grand strategy, Dallion thought as he tried to force his preferred instance. The problem was that his echo did the same. A tug of war ensued on top of everything else as both sides simultaneously fought, while striving for dominance of reality.

Spark versus Star skills. The fight was so dynamic that there was no way of telling who had the upper hand. One moment all but ten instances of the echo would be destroyed, the next Dallion was struggling with five left. It had been a while since Dallion had experienced such a fight. The last time was back in the world swords, facing dryad guardians. This was a lot more intense, and unlike before, Dallions weapons werent jumping in to help. Apparently, passing the fourth gate had put an end to that practice.

I know what youre thinking, the echo said. It wont work.

You dont know everything Im thinking, Dallion replied.

Youre wondering if acting on reflex would give you an edge. It wont.

There was a time when Dallion would have taken that as a challenge to prove his echo wrong. Now he knew better. There were no obvious shortcuts in a fight. If anything, shortcuts created weaknesses. As Vend had once said, it takes a lot of skill and knowledge to make use of a shortcut.

The number of instances slowly increased. Each burst slowly climbed up, in an attempt for one side to gain an advantage. The change was subtle only one at a time meant to give the slightest unnoticeable boost to one side. A hundred became a hundred and one, then two. Around a hundred and twenty Dallion started to feel the strain. In theory, he was supposed to be able to maintain twice the amount of his mind trait, possibly a few more. In reality, he had rarely had to use more than a hundred and definitely not for as long and intently.

Lux, explode! Dallion ordered.

The flames around him expanded, filling the chamber in blue fire. In his mind, Dallion could see the crackling, infested echo shriven in pain. In reality, that's not what occurred. All but a dozen of the enemy instances vanished. The remaining ones, however, sliced through the flames with the darkness typical for a chainling. When all was over there were only eight instances left. Without warning, each of them pulled out a machine gun, filling the chamber with a rain of bullets.

Two can play at that game, the echo said. I can't copy all your skills, but neither can you.

How the heck do you have a machine gun? Dallion thought, hiding behind the armadil shield, which had tripled in size in order to cover his entire body.

It's your fear, the echo shouted while still shooting. The thought that you'd gain the ability to construct tech from Earth is yours. Who am I to say if it's wrong or right? I'm just taking advantage of what you're providing me.

Damnit! Dallion hissed.

The battle against the Stars echo had been ingrained into his mind to the point that he instinctively associated modern weaponry with the Star. There'd been no instance in which Arthurows had used anything Earth-related, other than clothes, but the fear was still there.

Instances vanished almost at the rate that Dallion created them. To make matters worse, his echo was once more steadily increasing the number he had. The dozen became twenty, then fifty.

Lux, again! Dallion shouted.

Flames filled the chamber, reducing the echo's instances once more. The shooting didn't stop, though, as if the machine gun had an unlimited supply of bullets.

Spark! Dallion thought as he played a chord on his harpsisword.

Light extended along the tendrils, causing several more of the echo's instances to wither away. Sadly, the effect lasted barely a few seconds. Quickly fading away. Despite his current train and skill levels, there were still things beyond Dallion's capabilities. Combining spark with music was one of them.

You can't win by being on the defensive, the echo said.

Gleam, I'll need your help.

As soon as he said so, the shardfly disappeared. In her place, the whip blade emerged, extending throughout the chamber. It didnt touch any instances of the echo, but reduced its mobility by a fair amount. Another burst of blue flames followed, though they were quickly cut up by black blades.

For the briefest of moments, an opening formed, a crack between instances that one could take advantage of. It was risky and by no means easy. Dallion decided to go for it, regardless. Combining athletics and acrobatics, he rushed along the invisible path that went through the echos instances, then spun around combining a spark attack with a line attack.

A line of destruction cut into the walls of the chamber, causing all but five instances to vanish in the process.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

A red rectangle appeared as a bullet hid Dallion in his left shoulder. That was unfortunate, but it was too late to have second thoughts.

Lux! Dallion ordered.

Once again, the firebird burst into flames. Almost simultaneously, Dallion did another attack combo.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

A second bullet hit him in the chest. After that, none followed.

Reckless as always, the echo said. There were no more additional instances anymore, just a single opponent holding a machine gun. Cracks of light were covering his entire body. You came quite close. One more shot and you would have failed.

Dallion felt a soothing warmth surrounding him, as Lux covered him in healing flames. Almost instantly, the health restoration effects kicked in.

Youve gained a lot of skill at the expense of imagination. There was a time when youd have been a lot more daring.

Didnt you say I was reckless?

Youll always remain reckless.

The cracks continued to spread throughout the echos body. In places entire pieces broke off, causing rays of light to shine from within.

Youll get a reward, the echo said. Dont worry.

I wasnt going to ask that.

Sure. The echo laughed. Youll get your standard reward, but no hidden prizes and no achievements. Its just another trial. You only won because you put everything on the line.

Thats how it usually goes.

No. That's how the weak do it. Still, even the weak survive, struggling to become strong. Once piece of advice before I disappear again. The echo moved closer. As long as you bleed, the shardfly will always be able to tell where you are. Keep it in mind.

The echo flashed out of existence. In its place, a large green rectangle emerged.

You have broken through your seventieth barrier

You are level 70.

Choose the trait that you value the most.

Seven smaller rectangles were underneath seven choices to make. One of them was gray with three question marks, even if at this point it was obvious that it stood for magic. Regardless, Dallion chose the body trait, increasing it to thirty-nine. An achievement would have been nice. That way, he'd pass forty. Hopefully, he'd be able to do so in future.

You could have done better, Nil grumbled. There were plenty of openings that you didn't take advantage of, not to mention your own defenses were like a sieve.

You're in form. Dallion lay on the floor of the chamber.

The trial had left him exhausted to the point that he didn't even have the strength to argue with the old echo. Instead, he closed his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them up again, Dallion was back on the surface again, just above a vast pool of steaming water. His instinct made him jump up. His muscles screamed in agony, feeling like hard rubber.

I changed the place a bit, Gen said. Now you have a hot-spring bathhouse.

Amusing, Dallion managed to say. The pain was quickly swept away, though the sense of fatigue remained. That was unfortunate, given that he was about to go for a second trial.

You should rest.

Don't have much choice. If I don't boost my body more, things won't be too much fun outside.

I know. You can't complete two trials. You'll fail.

There was nothing that could be said to that. It was one of the damned if you do, damned if you don't situations. Gleam was already at risk. If Dallion didn't improve in his realm, so would he.

Maybe it's not bad to rest a bit more, he thought. At least until his body relaxed a bit.

It was tempting to check out the new bathhouse in his realm. Ultimately, Dallion decided not to do it, but instead sit back on the ground. Lux had done a good job restoring his health. He'd be able to get rid of the muscle stiffness as well. Come to think of it, there was no trace of the firebird. Dallion looked around, then tried calling him, but his familiar stubbornly refused to show up. This was rather untypical. Of all the familiars, Lux was the one who was the most eager to please.

I asked them to give us a moment, a voice said. Rather, it was a combination of musical chords that merged together to form speech.

Harp? Dallion turned around.

The nymph was there, standing nearby, blobs of relief floating throughout her body. She was wearing her full battle gear as well as a harpsisword, though not the one she was guardian of; the weapon she held was made entirely of water given form.

You wont survive the real world if you go back, she said. Not with your skills.

Thats why I need to

You dont need to pass another trial, she interrupted. This one did what it was supposed to. It helped you combine attack and music. Ill help you train that ability so you can use it at will, not only when your existence is threatened.

I wont be able to kill the shardfly with just that.

No, not yet. But youll be able to defend against it. Every little bit helps. Also, maybe if you put in the effort you might earn another body-related achievement?

There was no arguing against that. Dallion considered his options and found himself agreeing with the guardian. An hour later, his training began. It was a lot different from what he expected it to be. Not that the nymph wasnt pushing him to his limitshe was. Rather. It was the apparent lack of focus that confused Dallion. Every other training he had done so far involved repeating similar actions or activities until he got the hang of it. Here, the nymph had him do as many different activities as possible, while also maintaining a vibrating blade. Climbing, running, acrobatics, swimming, were switched every few hours. Each switch his concentration would wane, causing the blade to return to its motionless state.

Days stretched to weeks. At first Dallion was anxious, wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible. In time, his focus shifted from getting it done to getting it done right.

As it turned out, a lot was required to combine both skills. Vibrations had a tendency to die out quickly. The easy way was to strike something every few seconds to keep the vibrations going. The real trick, though, was waving the weapon in such fashion so as to keep the vibration going even without hitting anything.

After a number of tries, Dallion managed to maintain the vibration for five seconds. A few days later, he increased the time to seven, then ten, then finally fifteen. That was his current barrier, but given his other skills, it was more than enough. If he couldnt defeat an enemy in fifteen seconds using this method, he wasnt going to be able to do so for longer.