

Leveling up 321

Chapter 321: Threads and Spiders

Dallion continued walking through darkness like an ant on a chain. It felt as if no sooner he'd enter a chamber when it would end, and Dallion would have to spend close to a minute walking along a bridge to the next.

The next three chambers nothing happened, causing Dallion to wonder what was going on. It was only at the next one that Gleam caught a glimpse of the second guardian. It remained a mystery how exactly she managed to do so. Nox wasn't able to sense a thing and no matter how much Dallion focused he couldn't see anything even using his music skills. Nil had speculated that it could be due to the shardfly's nature. Being a native creature of the wilderness, it was expected she had some sort of mechanism to sense threats and prey, so here it would be no different.

At the threshold towards the new combat chamber, Dallion stopped.

Get ready, he said. Within seconds, all familiars returned to his realm, ready to emerge the moment he gave the order. Until then, Dallion was going to slowly advance, making sure he spotted all the threads that the next spider had placed.

Slowly, Dallion stepped through the invisible barrier that marked the start of the chamber. A tunnel remained until there. At present, the tunnel seemed lit, although darkness continued further in.

Threads of various colors became visible like laser beams in an after-hours disco club. Try as he might, though, Dallion couldn't see the effects the threads would cause when disturbed.

There are a lot of threads this time. A lot more of them are in color.

Dallion looked some more.

Dallion summoned his dartbow. Target markers appeared on the nearest threads. Exhaling, Dallion squeezed the trigger.

The first few bolts acted as Dallion had expected. The moment they touched the thread, they froze in place, remaining motionless in the air. That was to be expected. To his annoyance, though, there was no logic between the colors and the effects.

When the next arrow hit the thread, a blast of fire appeared, expanding rapidly.

Shield! Dallion jumped into a crouching position, holding the aramdil shield in front of him. On cue, the piece of equipment expanded, just as the wave of flame passed over Dallion, escaping into the open.

That was quite close, it also showed that Dallions original plan wouldnt work. No matter their speed, if Nox and Gleam snapped a single thread, there was a high chance that fire or something equally harmful would follow.

Change of plans

There were no two ways about it slowly and methodically targeting thread by thread would have proven a lot safer. The only issue was that Dallion didnt want to remain in the swords realm for weeks. Rather, it was time to combine athletics and acrobatics. A new set of markers appeared, depicting how Dallion should move his body to reach the chambers center. Taking a deep breath, he rushed forward, doing twists and somersaults like a thief in a spy movie. The actions felt remarkably easy then suddenly a blue rectangle appeared.

ACROBATICS SEQUENCE COMPLETED

You can bend your body up to 180 degrees.

It had been a while since Dallion had received an explanation rectangle. Compared to the other bonuses for completing a skill sequence, this wasnt the best, although it didnt stop Dallion from using it immediately to bend while jumping in such fashion that his legs moved above his head and landed first on the spot he wanted.

COMBAT INITIATED

Breaking the next sequence, Dallion leapt towards the nearest wall, just in time to avoid the next guardian. It looked identical to the first, with one minor difference it was half the size.

LEVEL 2 GUARDIAN

Species: BLADE SPIDER

Class: SKY SILVER

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Puncture Strike**
- **Thread Weave**
- **Cyclone Spin**

Weak Spots: None

Normally, if a creature was smaller, that was a good thing. At present, that wasnt the case. For one thing, the spider was a more difficult target, for another it could pass through the gaps between threads, activating them at touch.

A new wave of fire surrounded Dallion, this time reducing his health by half.

All three familiars leapt out. Lux chased after the guardian, flying past threads in an attempt to attach itself to the enemys back. Once that happened the battle would be over. But as Dallion had learned from the expeditionguardians were quick to pick up things. What had worked as a charm the first time, now seemed next to impossible.

A second blast reduced Dallions health by another third, before the music took hold. It only created a moment of hesitation, but that was enough for the firebird to latch onto the spiders back. From that point on, it was entirely Luxs show.

Avoid the threads! Dallion shouted as he continued to play. Smash him into the walls!

With enough weight added to the guardian, Dallion unsummoned the harpsisword and replaced it with his dartbow.

The targeting markers changed, showing the theoretical trajectory bounce off the wall. In the past, Dallion would never have tried such a shot. Now, it was time to do it.

Time seemed to freeze. Dallion split into five instances, each waiting for exactly the precise moment to shoot at the wall so as to hit a moving target from a specific direction. In four of the instances, the shot missed anywhere between inches to half a foot. The last instance, though, was successful.

While no damage was dealt, the bolt hit the blade spider along a free corridor between the threads. Unable to trigger any more traps to gain the upper hand, the guardian was slammed into the wall, receiving just enough damage to get shocked.

Like a ball, the guardian bounced on and on until at one point it finally disappeared, leaving nothing but a blue rectangle behind.

Good job, Dallion said, as the rest of the chamber lit up. Lets rest a bit. He sat on the floor.

Clearing the whip blade was turning out more tedious than he thought. Rather, not tedious, but simply exhausting. The battles were more like puzzles than battles. All that Dallion needed for a victory was one good stun attack. After that, Lux could easily handle the rest. As he had seen, each next guardian would provide its own peculiarities, making the puzzle more and more difficult, but on the whole, defeating all guardians seemed within the realm of possibility.

Five more, he groaned. Still, it was going to be worth it. Do you have any scrolls on fighting with such a weapon, Nil? Dallion asked out loud.

Looks like youre on your own from here on. Gleam landed on Dallions chest as he lay on the floor. With so many booby-trapped threads, the kid and I will cause more harm than good.

The kid? Dallion raised his head up slightly, looking at the shardfly.

Nox, Gleam replied.

Nox a kid? Well, technically, he was, but it was weird hearing the newest familiar address him in such fashion. Not that the crackling seemed to mind. Clearly, the shardfly must have been something very scary in the wilderness, for him to accept this new role.

Im sure youll be useful, Dallion replied. Especially you. I think its time for a few illusions.

Nope. Wont work here. Theyll see through any tricks. Maybe when I increase a few levels, I might have a chance, but right now, you can forget it.

Theres nothing you can come up with?

Hey, youre the brains of the operation! the butterfly snapped back.

No Nox, no Gleam, and pretty much no armadil shield. If the destructive nature of the threads was anything to go by, a shield would be of limited help from the next battle on. There was the option for Dallion to cocoon himself and roll through the threads, but that sounded a bit extreme. Also, there was no telling how much damage the shield would suffer. Lux and Harp seemed to be the ones to win this fight.

After half an hour, Dallions health was back to full, although he still felt slightly tired. While resting more was an option, something drove Dallion to continue. He stood up, stretched, yawned, then continued forward to the next golden bridge.

The further Dallion went, the more unnerving it became not having any common creatures. Nil had explained that there were simply too few adequate artefacts to come to any conclusions. While

some of the basics had become well known, the relation between a sphere item and the creatures within remained a mystery. The only thing that was known for certain was that fulfilling the artifacts destiny would remove all creatures and guardians from the item, transforming it into an empty shell.

Im thinking of creating a connection between the observatory and Vermillions islands, Gleam said. Or better, from the dryads tower to the ocean.

Dallion only snorted. He had given up reminding her that they hadnt even claimed the sword yet.

Better, I'll talk with Gen how to rearrange things. Your domain is rather poorly kept. Some rooms are completely empty, while others are overcluttered.

You like open spaces a lot Dallion muttered.

Everything with wings likes open spaces. Especially those from the wilderness. Even the dryad likes the shardfly stopped mid-sentence.

Dallion immediately split into three instances.

Sense something? he asked. There was supposed to be quite a while before the next guardian. So far, it seemed that the guardian arenas were positioned at every three chambers. Clearly, there were exceptions.

Yes, Gleam replied. And its not a spider.

What is it? Dallion summoned his harpsisword again.

I dont know.

Chapter 322: Hidden Prize

The entrance to the hidden realm was visible as an outline on the metal wall. Dallion was able to see it clearly, but even so he was impressed that Gleam was able to sense the protector beyond. The shimmer was the same as the one was visible in the real world. Whoever had created the weapon had specifically hidden something in one of those segments, likely to make it more difficult for people to find. In that regard, Dallion still had a nagging feeling that things were too easy.

It had been explained that only seers had the ability to see hidden realms, however, even so Dallion found that he was finding them faster than anyone else. The first time he had found a hidden realm within a guild ring, he had been excited. Later when he had a moment to think about it he found it highly suspicious. The Icepicker guild had a lot of seers, yet none of them had chosen to buy or even explore the item. Nil assured Dallion that it had to do with him being an otherworlder. Apparently, not all seers were able to see but rather sense things. Or, in some cases, they had to be really close to the hidden realm to see the opening leading to it. That was all good and well, but it still didnt explain why no one saw them on the items themselves.

Well? the shardfly urged. Arent you going to open it?

The question pointed out a potential problem: how does one create an opening in an unbreakable wall?

Dallion stepped to the outline and slide his fingers along the metal surface. There was a noticeable difference in texture the outline felt warm. Summoning his Nox Dagger, Dallion slowly pressed the tip against one of the lines. The wall gave in.

The knife continued down until it reached the floor. From there he kept on slicing sideways, then up again. As he did, Dallion could almost hear Euryale criticizing him that the correct way to slice a wall was to start from the bottom and then move up.

Any idea how strong the thing will be? Dallion asked as he finished unzipping the opening.

A lot, the shardly replied. Stronger than all the spiders so far.

That wasn't a particularly high bar. Excluding their invulnerability, the blade spiders were pretty weak. If this were a computer game, it would be the equivalent of a first world boss that required a few tries to get the pattern, but was elementary afterwards. Of course, without Lux, the situation would have been quite different.

Better get ready, then. Dallion unsummoned the dagger. Nox, Lux, be careful.

The metal piece blocking the opening disintegrated the moment Dallion pushed it. Beyond, a path continued along a triangular corridor. As a teen, Dallion would probably have found this impressive. Now, he was more worried about how limiting it was when it came to fighting. If something charged Dallion there wasn't a lot of room to do anything about it, not even use the armadil shield to cocoon himself. The only positive thing was that the section continued to be well lit.

After a few hundred feet, the tunnel ended in a large garden. Plants of various sizes and colors continued as far as the eye could see in stark contrast to the rest of the sword's realm. A path of sky silver cobblestones continued on to a golden dais with what looked like an altar.

Probably a fashion statement. They are abundant in artifacts of the period. I suspect if we had the knowledge to create hidden realms today, they would be more in the style of present-day architecture.

Does that mean the protector will be the same?

Your guess is as good as mine.

That wasn't the answer Dallion was hoping for.

Gleam, any idea where it is? Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

Somewhere in the garden.

Last time, the protector had only emerged when Dallion had gone towards the dais. Suspecting that it would be the same here, he cautiously continued forward. Every step was made by five instances, and each time it didn't matter. Halfway there, Dallion stopped. This was the invisible threshold. He had a feeling that if anything happened, it would be now.

I know you're watching, Dallion said. Then, after taking a deep breath, he took a step forward.

The moment he did, a figure appeared in front of the dais, just as he had expected.

WHIP BLADE PROTECTOR

Species: Nymph

Class: Shadow

Statistics: ???

Skills: ???

Weak spot: ???

It was always unnerving when so much of an enemy remain covered. As much as he wanted to deny it, Dallion had become somewhat reliant on the rectangles. They gave a clear advantage in the awakened realms, however, they also created a weakness in the real world.

The nymph was female, clad in full armor made entirely of a non-metallic material. If Dallion was to venture a guess, hed say that it was water. No weapons were visible, but as Dallion had seen, nymphs had the power to transform water into any object. The shardfly probably shaded a similar concern, for she fluttered closer to Dallion than before.

Hello, Dallion said, adding a note of calm. I take it that youre the protector of this hidden realm?

The nymph smiled.

Yes, she replied, her own voice filled with music. Within seconds Dallion felt a huge weight on his shoulders. There was no doubt that the nymph had been following his fights with the blade spiders. And youre the challenger that has come to claim the sword. The weight was lifted.

I wouldnt call myself a challenger, Dallion replied, making sure not to use his music skill anymore. I just want to see the changes that will occur when I fulfil the swords destiny.

For several seconds, the nymph stared at him, then she started laughing.

Thats your take? she asked. I dont know what I expected after all this time. Clearly, too much. Of course, youre a challenger. Otherwise, you wouldnt be here.

Err, well. You see, some time has passed since this realm was created. If"

Arrogant, but with potential, the protector interrupted. Just because Ive been locked away for millennia doesnt mean that Ive no idea whats going on in the real world. Your guardians might humor you, but I wont. I know far more than you can imagine. For one thing, its clear youre an otherworlder. Probably arrived here less than a few years ago.

The unexpected response made Dallion take a step back. If she had identified him, that meant that the protector also came from another world.

Your level is low, though your stats are decent for what thats worth. You have a lot of familiars, each far stronger than yourself. If you ever get them to your level, youll probably be made a commander. The nymph glanced at Dallions harpsisword, only to look away shortly after. Youre also a challenger. Everyone who enters this sword is a challenger. Frankly, I thought youd be defeated at the first guardian. Thanks to your firebird, you werent.

It was a combined effort, Dallion said, feeling somewhat hurt by the remark.

Hey, I don't judge. The realm does. The fact that you made it here is proof enough. Not that anyone else had a chance.

Am I the first one to make it this far?

You're the first remotely qualified. All the rest were two-bit robbers and merchants who only wanted to clear the sword in order to fetch a better price. At least you want the sword for the sword itself.

That was the nicest thing the protector had said so far, but it also posed a lot of questions.

How many tried? Dallion continued playing for time, while in his mind he was hectically going through potential combat scenarios. If the protector was as strong as Harp, his optimal course of action was to snatch the item at the dais and run as he had last time.

Eleven, the nymph replied. All right the moment they found the spider was invulnerable. No one even bothered to try anything beyond the obvious. Compared to them you're adequate.

Thanks.

So, go ahead and claim your prize.

There was no way Dallion could delay the fight any longer. Attack markers emerged, providing him with options. Choosing a few of them, Dallion split into seven instances.

Hey! the nymph said loudly, causing all of Dallion's instances to collapse. What are you doing?

Dallion froze. He hadn't expected his attack attempt to be neutralized with such ease. When Vend had taught this aspect of combat splitting, Dallion had been left with the impression that it was relatively rare. Apparently, not so much.

I guess a draw is out of the question? Dallion said out of habit.

Draw? the nymph frowned. What do you mean?

The surprise seemed genuine, as was the complete lack of hostility. It would have been better if Dallion could split to try a few different questions. Circumstances forced him to try and find out using the old-fashioned way.

Don't I have to challenge you for the reward? Dallion probed.

No. You get this for free. That's the entire point. You don't even know what this realm is, do you?

Apparently not. Dallion forced a smile.

This is a crafting masterpiece. I thought that's why you agreed to enter it. You have the skill to work sky metal, so the requirements were met.

That'll get improve my forging skills?

That hidden realms require certain prerequisites in order to be seen. Maybe theres more than your nature that allowed you to see them. It also explains how ordinary awakened sometimes find realms that others dont.

That made sense. During the expedition, there also was metal involved. Maybe the reason that no other guildmember had seen the hidden ring was because it was a small hidden realm that was visible only by people who were both forgers and came from another world. If Euryale had arrived at the city along with Dallion, there was every chance that she would have found it before him.

So far, it was believed that hidden realms were an isolated occurrence. If our hypothesis theory holds, that might not be the case.

What exactly is the prize? Dallion asked.

Knowledge. Come on, the nymph invited him. Ill show you.

The two continued to the dais itself. The moment they arrived, a chest became visible on the altar. It too was made completely of sky silver.

Ready? the protector asked, then without waiting for a response opened the chest. Rows of metal cubes were stacked inside, filling the space to the brim. You only get to take one, the nymph warned. I suggest you dont get greedy.

Whats the difference between them? Dallion looked at the rows of metal. By rough estimates, there had to be at least several hundred of them, depending on the depth of the chest.

Theres no difference. This is just to make sure that the next awakened that find the hidden realm get a piece of the knowledge as well.

All the same If that were the case, Dallion picked one of the middle cubesspecifically, the fifth cube of the third row. The moment his fingers came into contact with it, a blue rectangle appeared.

WHIP BLADE BLUEPRINT

You have acquired the knowledge to construct a WHIP BLADE of sky silver. To create the item, your forging skills have to be up to the task.

Using other metals to change and improve the design is permitted, as long as you have the necessary skills in the metals in question.

Chapter 323: Whip Blade

Dallion had heard a lot about forging blueprints, but this was the first time getting one. Curiosity made him attempt to use it right away. Unfortunately, that revealed a complex series of several thousand markers that made standard sky silver forging seem like napkin folding. This time Dallion didnt even bother to try and figure them out. There was a time and place for everything, and this wasnt it.

The nymph had proved not to be much help. Satisfied that Dallion hadnt tried to take more than one cube, she had closed the chest, then disappeared without a word. Naturally, the chest had vanished as well, possibly to keep Dallion from falling into temptation.

After spending half an hour resting in the garden, it was time to return to the original goal of fulfilling the whip blades destiny. Since the greatest prize had already been obtainedthe ability to forge the weapon himselfDallion didnt feel as much pressure as before. The third and fourth

guardian were defeated twice as fast with half the effort. Each spider was increasingly more agile than the last, though not to the point to surprise Dallion. Also, he had resorted to the one thing he had been avoiding up till now: echoes.

The third guardian had taken five echoes down before Lux had managed to get the first smash. The fourth barely two, and even one of those could have been saved. When the fifth's turn came, Dallion and all his echoes used combat splitting in unison to create a four-dimensional chess field, successfully predicting most of the spider's actions.

Throwing knives and darts had become the weapon of choice fast to reach the threads while also keeping Dallion from suffering the effects of the threads. The cat's cradle of echoes and instances allowed Dallion to know what the effects of each thread were and counteract appropriately. At this point, he had also figured out the logic. It wasn't the color that determined the spell linked to the thread, but the material it was made of: silver meant freeze, gold explosions, and cobalt released acid spray.

Still like it? Dallion asked, resting on the floor before proceeding to the sixth fight.

It'll do, the shardfly replied, flying in circles above Dallion's face. I don't like the nymph.

She'll probably be gone when we defeat the last spiders.

You don't like the general, Gleam noted. What's the story there?

Unpleasant. Dallion stood up. Let's get this over with.

The next spider was significantly larger than the ones before. It was too strong to be affected by weight, and also followed a chaotic movement pattern, making it next to impossible to predict its movements. The main weakness, however, remained. It took Lux less than a second to attach to the guardian. It was far more difficult to crash him into a wall strong enough for the spider to become stunned. Ultimately, Dallion had to help in. Using his athletic skill to run up a wall, he then did a somersault and struck the spider with a vertical chop, holding the harpsword with both hands. The guardian already accelerated up by Lux froze mid air as two directional impulses of equal force met. The familiar stun rectangle appeared, after which the firebird took over. Since the distance between the floor and ceiling of the chamber wasn't enough to deal any damage, Lux propelled the spider all the way to the previous chamber, where he smashed it into the wall. After a few more times, the guardian met the same fate as all the ones before.

Don't get overconfident, dear boy. The last ones always are the most difficult to defeat.

Bridges and chambers came and went. Before entering the arena of the sixth guardian, Dallion stopped. There was a strange feeling in the air, as if it were heavy with static.

Why did you stop? Gleam asked. The guardians right there.

Something feels off, Dallion said.

Music!

Neither his music nor his forging skills showed anything out of the ordinary. The chamber was no different from the ones before. There were no cracks or other presences, no other creatures, no enemy minions and still, something felt wrong.

Be ready. This one might be different.

Dallion walked onward. There wasnt a single thread to be seen, suggesting that the spider would rely on other skills to fight.

COMBAT INITIATED

A large form came from above, then hit the ground with a loud smash.

WHIP BLADE Level 6 has been cleared!

Continue to fulfill the WHIP BLADEs destiny.

Gleam, beware for chainlings. Dallion gripped his harpsisword while reciting the names of the Moons.

Gleam, know anything that changes the air with electricity?

A lot, but I didnt see any of them here.

You could have missed them.

Oh, absolutely. But no creature I know can kill a spider so fast. I only sensed the guardian. Anything must have come after and killed it instantly.

That was scary enough. Even worse, Dallion could have sworn that for a split second he saw tears along the spiders body, before the guardian disappeared. That wasnt supposed to be possible. As far as he knew there were only a few entities able to destroy the undetectable: the Moons and the Star. If Dallion was lucky all this could have been just another gift from the Green Moon. Somehow, he doubted it.

Lets go on, Dallion said.

Not afraid the mysterious creature might appear?

Why bother? Its not like I can win against it. If it appears, youll have to say goodbye to your future home.

The creature, however, didnt appear. Dallion crossed the next bridge, then two more. In theory this was supposed to be the most important fight of them all the culmination of the exploration resulting in the weapons destiny being fulfilled.

The moment he sensed the smell of electricity, Dallion knew what the deal was. The curious part of him wanted to rush forward in the hopes of getting a glimpse of the mysterious creature and confirm whether it was his darkest fears. The cautious part prevented Dallion from doing so.

Sense anything, Nox?

Meow. The crackling emerged, giving a negative response.

Let me know when that changes.

COMBAT INITIATED

The rectangle appeared before Dallion had even stepped into the chamber.

WHIP BLADE Level 7 has been cleared!

You have fulfilled the WHIP BLADEs destiny.

The WHIP BLADE is indestructible

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Dallion split into eight instances. The pressure brought on a minor headache, though it was quickly ignored. In several of those instances, Dallion rushed in the hopes of getting any information.

All but one of Dallions instances ran up the chamber walls, searching for any indication of what might have happened. The remaining one waited, ready to run off if things got complicated.

Technically, he had cleared the item. Seeing the rectangle meant that in the eyes of the Moons he was responsible for this, and thus to him went the spoils. Of course, in this case, there were no spoils. Dallion had already reached his skill cap, and since he no longer was favored, he couldnt improve any skills. Also, the items destiny had only revealed that the weapon was indestructible, which Dallion knew since the fight against the first guardian.

Five seconds later, all split instances collapsed, leaving Dallion alone. Despite all his efforts, there was nothing to be found. This was the end of the realm, so no creature could have gone further, and nothing had gone past Dallion either. For all intents and purposes, this would remain a convenient mystery.

Unhappy with the situation, Dallion took a deep breath and returned back to the real world. The general and his fury guards were there. From their perspective, no time had passed. Dallions momentary confusion combined with its glowing, however, told them that he had ventured in the whip blade and had cleared it.

Impressive. The general nodded. You managed to claim it. Everyone else so far didnt even get past the first level.

Maybe you should hire better help, Dallion said, avoiding any specifics.

Its not easy getting reliable help during the festival. All the good ones are busy, and I have to rely on questionable awakened with mediocre abilities. Its a good thing that youve developed your skills. We both stand to gain a lot.

Somehow I think youll gain a lot more than me.

Considering Im the one investing in everything, theres no other way. Without my help, your chances of success would have remained slim. Now, they just got a bit better. Go ahead. The general tapped his chin with his index finger. Take your prize.

The moment Dallions fingers wrapped around the weapons hilt, the segments snapped together, forming one blade. Any onlooker would have sworn that the weapon was made of one monolithic piece of metal. Those who had forging skills would have seen the thin lines all over itthe only hint of the whip blades true nature.

Youll need a bit of practice before you get out there, the general said. Theres still time until the grand opening, so it shouldnt be a concern. As they say when in doubt follow the markers or something or the sort.

Dallion pursed his lips. Having the weapon felt wrong on so many levels.

Remember, you need to get to the top eight, the general repeated.

You said that already.

I want to be certain, the mans tone hardened. Before the tournament starts, youll have all your weapons examined. If youre asked where you got the blade whip, tell them that its on loan from me. I suggest you do that as soon as possible. All unknown weapons are examined and if they dont finish, theyll keep the weapon until your next fight.

Good to know.

The only time Dallion had a weapon examined was when he had taken the harpsisword to the city guard fort. Thinking about it, it stood to reason that the festival organizers would check the weapons for special abilities. It wasnt a matter of protecting the noblesthey could take care of themselves; the crowds, however, were a different matter altogether.

Anything else? Or can I continue with my walk? Dallion asked.

Just one last thing. Try to keep a low profile until the first fight. Once that is over, you can go wild.

Ill think about it.

The response made the general smirk. A snap of the fingers later, both he and his guards were no longer in the street. Dallion didnt even manage to catch a blur as they disappeared.

Probably not. Provided that you get some rest tonight. Despite what you think, you still havent recovered.

That was good, but it wasn't going to be enough. Dallion had to boost his stats more, not only to increase his chances of success at the arena, but to be able to stand up to the general in a fight. To achieve that, he was going to have to go achievement hunting.

Chapter 324: Talk with a Table

Seeing the whip blade prominently displayed in Dallion's awakening room was quite the sight. It was the first new exotic weapon he had managed to obtain. However, as much as he looked at it, he could also see the invisible strings attaching him to the general once more. In theory, nothing stopped Dallion from returning the weapon this very day. The new deal had been entirely in his favor. From here on things could only get better. At worst Dallion would have to forge a weapon on his own, at best he'd keep the one he had and officially make Gleam its guardian. And still, in the back of his mind, he had the strong feeling that he was played.

Staring at it won't help, Nil said. If you want to learn more about it, go to the guildhall and ask for some instruction scrolls. My original would be the first choice, but you can pester one of the other captains even March if you have to.

What are the chances of me ending up with such a weapon right before the start of the tournament?

Given who the general is, quite high. The old echo smirked. He's already had dealings with you before. Not to mention that he's probably keeping an eye on all the wildcards. Oh, and one other thing. Did you notice that you cleared an item of his for free?

I know that, but it's not his yet.

Possibly. You can still earn it through your fights. However, can you imagine how many other items the general will gain if you make it to the top eight on your first go? I wouldn't put it past him to have found an item with a hidden realm on purpose. That way he always wins.

Well, in this case I win as well.

Dallion left the realm, returning to his room. Even with his awakening powers, there wasn't enough time in the day. It was almost ironic that in Dallion's effort to compose the perfect plan, he had put more on his plate than he could handle. It had all started simple enough get Lux to light up the kaleidervisto during his fight at the arena and, in doing so, reveal the chainlings hiding among the crowd. The expedition was supposed to help him gain valuable knowledge and experience that would help when facing these chainlings. That plan had failed when Dallion had discovered that two thirds of the realm had been flooded. At the same time through the expedition, he had obtained a key with the power to take things between realms. That, in turn, had led to questions relating to the eighth Moon, which was all the more reason that he did well at the arena in order to win favor from those who could give him an answer. And all that was before his arrangement with Fire Sky and the general. Now, Dallion had two days in which he had to learn forging to the necessary degree to create a temporary home for Lux, find out how to use that to use the firebirds healing boost in the real world, learn to fight with a whip blade and finally complete enough achievements to raise his stats.

If the whole thing wasn't as serious, Dallion would have laughed that all he was doing was stacking up quests.

Alas, sleep didnt come easy. Dallion was either too excited about the things that had happened, too anxious about the things to come, or thinking about Euryale. It was a given that he missed her, but it was in moments like these, when Dallion allowed himself to relax for a bit, that he really felt her absence. To a degree, he was tempted to sneak out of the inn and go to the gorgons workshop. At one point he had almost done so but reason had prevailed. In the end, Eury had more than enough things on her mind as well.

Sleep came abruptly several hours after. One moment Dallion was thinking about all his plans in the inns bed, and the next he was doing the same, sitting at a wooden table. The transition was such that for a long period of time he didnt even realize this was a dream.

Always needing hints, dont you? a voice asked.

Dallion turned to his right. A large man with bright ginger hair and beard sat there enjoying a mug of beer.

Havoc? Dallion blinked.

The last, and only, time he had seen that person was during the chainling hunt back at Dherma village. Havoc was another volunteer, supposedly from another village. Judging by his behavior, though, Dallion suspected there was more to it. Unlike everyone else, the large man seemed to know quite a bit about the chainlings nature.

Didnt expect to see me? the man laughed. Should I be hurt?

I thought you were back"

In the middle of nowhere? The man finished the sentence. Most probably I am. To be honest, since this is a dream, Ive no idea where I am. He laughed again, then finished his drink.

The scene changed again. The table was still there, but this time it was located on the top of an impossibly tall tower in the middle of Lastport.

Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink, Havoc said, looking into the horizon. Its impressive that you managed to get from one part of the realm to the other. It would have been more impressive if you had found the remaining seven temples, though.

Theyre gone, Dallion replied. Sunk underwater.

Just because they are underwater doesnt mean they are gone. Youll just have to work harder to get there.

Youre telling me to fight on the bottom of the ocean? Dallion asked.

Thats a simplistic way of looking at things. Havoc stood up and went to the edge of the tower. Come here and take a look.

There was a moment of hesitation, but Dallion did as he was asked.

What do you see?

An ocean, Dallion replied. An endless ocean that continued up to the horizon.

Why are you sure that is the horizon?

Because I see it? Dallion wasnt sure how to answer.

The point at which water meets sky. It goes on and on and on beyond the end of this world. But does it really? Youve been in a similar situation before. I would have thought youd have learned from it.

Dallion thought back. He remained unconvinced that this was a dream. At the same time, he didnt see any point in Havocs reasoning either. The large man was telling him to search beneath the sea for the temples, but also that the horizon wasnt real.

Are you referencing the realm of well? Dallion asked. The only thing special there was that the final fight against the guardian had taken place on top of the central mountain. Do you mean that theres a passage that leads down from the third temple to the fourth?

Dal. Havoc placed his hand on Dallions shoulder. You really must learn how to think straight. There is no hidden passage beneath the mountain. At least not as far as the temples are concerned.

Then what do you mean? I hate water! The only realms Ive been to that had lots of it were the well, one of the ones at Dhermas awakening shrine"

The mirror. The large man. Im talking about the mirror.

Huh? The lake in the hand mirror? There was nothing special about that. It was just a lake. All the fighting was done above the surface.

Well, of course it would be. What is a lake but a mirror with a bit of illusion cast on it?

Finally, Dallion realized what his friend was trying to say. The reason that nothing happened in the lake was because it couldnt. By the same logic the ocean they had crossed during the expedition wasnt an ocean. Was that possible, though? Even if Dallion was tricked into believing it was an illusion, what about all the rest? The guilds elites were all experienced, not to mention higher in level than him. There was no way they would have fallen for such a simple trick. If they had, though, that means that the remaining temples had been beneath them the entire time. That would also explain why the sword had retained its normal shape while filled with so much water.

Two-thirds of a realm hidden beneath an illusion. It made perfect sense.

So, I use the key to break the illusion, right? Dallion asked, brimming with enthusiasm.

What key? The large man looked at him with a confused expression on his face.

The Vermillion key. Wasnt that the reason it was left at"

Who would place a key in front of a locked door?

Dallion could think of many people that did just that back on Earth. The important thing was that he could see Havocs point. There was little logic for the Vermillion ring to be left there. Finding it was just a lucky break that had nothing to do with the fake ocean.

So what are you telling me? Dallion asked.

Im telling you what you should be doing, not how you should be doing it. Sheesh, even helping you is a burden. Its a wonder that you managed to achieve as much as you did.

The surroundings changed again. Dallion was back in a large hall, though not one he had seen before. Massive windows of stained glass depicted scenes from the Seven Moons Dallion hadn't seen before. Looking around, there were eight in total, although one of them was painted completely white.

Remember, you must separate the things that are important from those that aren't.

Everything's important, Dallion said out of habit.

Everything is important, but not at the same time. You're focusing on things that are important for a minute or two, gambling that they will help you save time on what's really important.

What are you trying to say?

How should I know? It's your dream? I'm not even here.

If this is my dream, I must be talking to myself, Dallion concluded.

Who knows? Maybe this is another vision sent to you by a Moon? Or maybe the Star is trying to trick you? Who knows? Certainly not me. Havoc laughed again.

That was no longer helpful. Dallion felt as if he were on the verge of grasping something profound, only to be dragged away by unintelligible gibberish. He no longer had any idea what Havoc was talking about. The important thing was to remember the hint about the ocean. That made sense. Everything else not so much.

You're thinking of leaving, aren't you?

I have a lot of things to do, Dallion said, although right now he couldn't remember a single one. He was sure he had a lot of tasks waiting. I promise I'll stay longer next time.

You always say that and always do. Take care and try to be less reckless. It's not only about you anymore. Now that you're a big shot, a lot of others are depending on you as well.

You can count on me. Dallion smiled. Just one question, though. If this is a dream, why haven't I seen you here before?

Ah. The large man grinned, then leaned forward. The reason he whispered is because I'm not really Havoc.

Suddenly, Dallion found that he was the only person at the table. There was no sign of Havoc or anyone else, for the matter.

In reality, I'm just a table, Havoc's voice echoed. But I still wanted to help. You're one of those that deserve it. Many have come and gone, many have failed. I'm hoping that you won't.

A moment later, it was morning.

Chapter 325: Achievement Hunting

What's up with you? Hannah asked. I haven't seen so much gloom since you failed your trial.

Which one? Dallion asked as he kept on staring at his food. After the dreams he had the previous night, even Aspan's cooking wasn't able to improve his mood.

Does it matter? The innkeeper shrugged. Seriously, what happened this time? I warned you that hooking up with that gorgon was a bad idea.

What? Shock made Dallion almost jump up from his seat.

For one thing, Hannah had never told him that, for another, it wasn't any business of hers. Dallion had a mind to tell her just that, but the sneaky feeling of fear and curiosity had gotten the better of him. Did she know something that he didn't?

She's just busy right now, Dallion said, which sounded like the worst defense one could think of. With the festival and all.

She's always busy with something, the woman said dismissively. Easy to get infatuated, easy to get bored. That's why she could never keep a boyfriend.

Err? Dallion's interest peaked. He took a bite of his food to try and pretend that he wasn't overly concerned. Even he could tell that his attempt failed. How many did she have? Dallion used a bit of music skill to make his voice sound casual.

Why do you think I made the no-sex rule? the innkeeper grumbled. Things were getting totally out of control.

As bad as that was, Dallion could imagine it. After all, Eury had managed to have her fun even when she was virtually banned from the stepping foot in the inn.

The way you've been stretching yourself thin, no wonder, Hannah grumbled. The expedition, the tournament, that whole business with the overseer. If you ask me, you're not ready for either, but what do I know? I'm just an innkeeper who's seen more things for longer than you've been born.

She looks quite well for her age

In your place, I would have focused to choose a good profession I want to keep doing for the rest of my life and then focus on becoming the best there is, Hannah continued.

Didn't you say that I must be as balanced as possible? Dallion asked, somewhat confused.

You never listen, do you? The innkeeper sighed, rolling her eyes. Balancing is not a goal, it's a means. Look at Veil. He doesn't bother leveling up half his stats or skills, but knows exactly what he wants to be. You seem to want to be everything. The truth is that you cannot be everything.

There was a momentary sound of regret coming from the innkeeper. It wasn't the first time that Dallion had felt regret when he hadn't expected, but there was a sense that this one went deeper.

Do you want to become a hunter? the woman asked. Or are you doing it just to impress the gorgon?

Dallion said nothing.

If you want to get ahead in the guild, focus on the guild. If you want to become a noble, start focusing on leveling up and socializing with people like them. You're lucky to be able to become whatever you want to become, but you'll never become anything until you make up your mind.

I want to learn the truth about the Moons, Dallion let slip. It was a reaction out of anger, but it was too late to take it now. Im late. Dallion stood up. I have some things to do at the guild. Ill try to be back for the performance tonight.

You do that. Hannah crossed her arms. As long as you dont bring doom and gloom to my inn. The only people who like sad bards are other bards.

The street was packed with people outside the inn. Thankfully, at this point, the crowds had organically organized into streams of people, making movement easier. Naturally, Nils cynical nature suggested that it was likely that the Lord Mayor had used his power to temporarily force echoes into the realms of the non-awakened in order to achieve the desired effect. Having gone through a similar experience in Dherma, Dallion didnt dismiss the notion.

The Icepickers guildhall was emptier than ever. There were less than a handful of people left in the entire building. Even Estezol was absent, his tasks handled by one of the guild elites. To his surprise, Adzorg wasnt present, as were none of the other captains. When Dallion asked Nil about that, the echo couldnt provide a satisfactory answer, mumbling something about plans changing frequently during that time of year.

Thankfully, the substitute in the basement section of the guild proved to be knowledgeable enough to find a few of the materials that Dallion needed. The Basic List of Common Achievements was apparently quite popular in any guild. The copy that Dallion was given had seen quite a lot of use, to the point that some of the achievements had scribbled notes in the margins. A scroll explaining whip blade usage proved more difficult. The guild member didnt know any dedicated to such material, so he simply gave Dallion several scrolls, referencing exotic blades and combat practices. With those, Dallion went to one of the free basement rooms and started reading.

Twenty minutes were enough for Dallion to feel despair. There was something about reading lists that made him experience boredom on a whole new level. At this point, he wholeheartedly regretted the scrolls werent made of sky silver so that Gen could go through the list and do a first pass. What made things worse was the lack of search function. All achievements were listed in order of rarity and alphabetical order, though not by stat relevance, making finding anything specific all the more difficult.

Nil had explained that for the most part the authors werent academic luminaries, but rather retired awakened who wanted to help others out. That was the reason for the chaotic arrangement, as well as the general affordability. The comprehensive tomes were difficult to find and more expensive than the sky silver they were written on.

Of the most vital achievements, Dallion had selected three: Double Dash, Redirection, and Quickstart. All of them increased his reaction stat by 2, and all of them were possible to achieve, if not obligatorily easy.

Redirection seemed to be the easiest of them all, requiring that Dallion do a ranged attack on a target, then change its direction by hitting the bolt or arrow with another one. A small scribbled note suggested that the same achievement could be earned by changing the direction of throwing knives, and that was precisely what Dallion went for. After an hour in his awakening realm, he finally managed to fulfill the prerequisites and was rewarded, increasing his reaction to thirteen.

Next was Double Dash following two sets of defense or athletic markers simultaneously. Upon first reading it, Dallion thought it would be impossible, but it turned out quite easy to achieve. The trick

was to make an effort to step on both markers fast enough before either of them disappeared. Doing so, as it turned out, didn't break the sequence and granted Dallion the flexibility of choice. Being able to do that was useless for someone who knew combat splitting, but invaluable to someone who didn't. Dallion earned it only for the increase, then moved on to Quickstart.

Of the suitable achievements, Quickstart was the most difficult to achieve. Unlike the rest, it required a hostile enemy. The method of achieving it was simple: defeat an opponent in less than a second after the COMBAT INITIATED rectangle emerges. The execution was considerably more difficult. It took Dallion over thirty attempts to even get close. It wasn't so much a matter of reaction speed, but focus. The rectangle inadvertently distracted, delaying his action just enough so that he'd fail the achievement; almost as if a giant pause emerged, telling his brain to wait before proceeding with the following action. Only when Dallion stopped considering the rectangle as an external part of reality did he manage to achieve his goal.

True, and that's precisely the point. Achievements bring flaws, and those flaws gather together. Doing them while leveling up is beneficial since you get rid of them. Stacking them as you do is risky.

Dallion hesitated. So far, his morning wasn't half bad. It was much better than the night, that was for sure. Dallion had already increased his reaction thrice and could boost it a bit more the following day. At least, in theory he could.

Spending another few minutes through the achievements failed to provide anything useful. Either Dallion already had them or the requirements were too unclear for him to try. A surprisingly large number of them were marked as unknown indicating that even the person who achieved them wasn't certain how that had happened.

Ultimately, Dallion found another achievement he found worthwhile this one increasing his perception. However, after a few hours of trying without result, he decided to call it a day.

Close of a day after he started achievement hunting or three quarters of an hour in real time Dallion was already famished. Normally he'd have no issue finding something to eat at the guild, but with everyone preparing for the festival, he had to find something on the stalls outside. The issue was that on the streets, the prices had tripled and there always were large queues.

Finding an adequate place to eat turned out to be much more difficult than Dallion expected. The places he used to go were packed, and his perception didn't allow him to eat common food without a strong reaction from his stomach. Ultimately, he had to risk trying out places that he hadn't been to before. Taking note of the orange circles a sign added to the stalls, indicating that they were suitable for awakened Dallion managed to find a relatively quiet place close to the nobles neighborhood. The

prices were abysmally high, ensuring that even with all the people in Nerosal the tavern remained mostly empty.

A barmaid greeted him with a smile, letting him know that his order was already being prepared. Dallion wasn't in the least surprised he had seen her combat split the moment he had stepped inside. No doubt she'd already had a conversation with him regarding his order and ability to pay. Now all that Dallion had to do was wait.

Hasn't it? You haven't been yourself since last night.

As much as he had tried to avoid it, he was still thinking about the Aura Sword realm. If what Havoc had said in the dream was true, it would be possible to enter the other temples. Dallion was fully aware that with his present strength he had no chance of defeating any of the guardians, but even so, he felt a strong urge to check it out. And with most people being out of the guildhall, he had the means to try it.

Chapter 326: The Secret Expedition

The food was scrumptious, coming with an impressive price tag. Dallion had paid less for his harp sword than the current meal. Then again, he could afford it now. In all honesty, Aspa's food was just as good, the products he used, though, couldn't hold a candle to what was served in the nobles' tavern. A third of the meat and vegetables came from the wilderness, specifically procured by hunters. The rest was just really difficult to get, coming from the provincial capital, or even the imperial city.

Having half an hour to enjoy a bite in a quiet new environment was exactly what Dallion thought he needed to relax a bit especially considering what he was about to do.

Leaving the establishment, Dallion returned to the guildhall. There he used combat splitting to check who remained in the building. As before, none of the captains or lieutenants seemed to be there, and neither was guild management.

That was good there was a less risk of Dallion being caught.

Its not the moment Im worried about. Its what follows.

The lock clicked. Considering the skills of the people in the guild, it was surprisingly easy to pick. Using instances, Dallion went inside. The room was exactly as he remembered it, as was the sword.

That made sense. Dallion kept forgetting that each item came with the equivalent of its own security system. Stealing items only made sense if they were shipped to other cities, and considering that travel was challenging, one had to have a lot of backing. Even Arthurows hadnt tried to take the item by force, but rather sneak his way there.

Reaching for the weapon, Dallion suddenly stopped. A thought had crossed his mind.

Your original is the guild expert on modifying realms. Is there some protection that prevents people from entering an item? A list or something of the sort?

If anyone wants to prevent someone from entering a realm, then just put in an army of echoes to protect it. As I said before, the issue isnt entering the realm, its what follows. If a single person could fight their way through all the temples, March would have done it already. She definitely wouldnt have wasted her time and the guilds resources in fighting hundreds of thousands of cracklings, not to mention the considerably powerful world guardians, to make a point.

That was why the Star hadnt sneaked into the temple on his own. Not the cracklings those were likely to be an advantage, if anything, but the guardians. All three dryads had a strong link to the Moons, which meant that Arthurows would have been at a huge disadvantage in the case of a direct confrontation. In normal circumstances, Dallion too wouldnt have a chance, however, he had one thing that the star lacked.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed, taking Dallion into the main chamber of the starting temple. A strong chilly draft greeted him when he was there. It didnt take long for Dallion to discover that winter had fallen in the realm.

Before Dallion could say the word, Lux emerged, wrapping him in warm flames.

Thanks, Lux, Dallion said, then walked outside.

The entire landscape seemed completely different from the last visit. Snow covered everything as far as the eye could see. The rays of the sun bounced off the snow-covered terrain, creating a postcard vista.

I like this place, Gleam said, fluttering over Dallions left shoulder. Its much more familiar than whats out there in the real world nowadays.

Memberberries from the past, Dallion said with a smile.

It was in a place like this that I was captured, the familiar went on. Snow, frost, and dryads.

You were captured by a dryad? Dallion asked, surprised. Somehow, he had assumed it to be the doing of humansit seemed all the more logical. In all the fantasy books, it was humans that were the greedy ones. Clearly, being a fantasy race didnt mean that greed didnt exist. The dryads at the time must have been hunters that captured creatures from the wilderness for the benefit of rich patrons.

There were lots of dryads at the time. Humans lived in kingdoms the size of villages.

Clearly humanity hadnt been among the strong races of the time. Only after they were banished did they rise. Maybe the Crippled Star was involved, or maybe it was the Moons? Dallion had every intention of finding out.

The armadil shield obeyed, extending in all directions until a metal sphere surrounded his owner.

Lux, lift me up, then get me to the port. Dont engage in anything along the way, even the whale.

There was a chirp of disappointment. It sounded like the firebird continued to want to mimic and impress Nox. One couldnt say that the familiar had become overly aggressive, but it was definitely getting more catlike than any bird should.

The inertia felt like a ton of bricks smashing into his chest. It took mere seconds for the shield sphere to move from the starting temple to the ocean. The pain, however, lasted for minutes after that. Dallion felt like he would puke.

The firebird sensed that and gently placed the sphere onto solid land. It was too late to make Dallion feel better, but at least it didnt make him feel worse.

Youre bad at flying, Gleam said. The shardfly had conveniently returned to Dallions realm, only reappearing in the swords one once he had arrived at the port city. You need more practice.

So, what now? the familiar asked.

Check the ocean. I want to know if its an illusion or not.

Dallion expected Gleam to protest, but she didn't, calmly fluttering to the water's edge. For several seconds, she circled around a specific spot, as if performing a ritual. Then without any warning she flew right in. There was no splash, no ripples, as if the shardfly had flown through an open window. Moments later, she emerged again, not a drop of water on her.

You're wrong, she said, flying back to Dallion.

It's not an illusion? Dallion asked, confused.

It's neither an illusion, nor a proper ocean. It's a second sky.

Are you sure you want to go there, though? The place is more than you can handle.

Can you cast an illusion to keep me safe?

Sure. Only as long as you remain on this side of the sea, though.

Go for it. Dallion wasn't fully sure what the familiar meant, but he was eager to see the rest of the realm. For one thing it proved that his dream was true. More importantly, though, it meant that there were seven temples with hints regarding the Seven, no Eight Moons, and who knows what else.

The shardfly landed on his shoulder. A tickling sensation went through Dallion's entire body. The air filled with sparkles, which slowly died out.

Is that it? Dallion asked. I don't see anything different.

Just walk through. Gleam sighed. And be mindful of the drop.

Walking into the ocean in winter wasn't the best of ideas. That's why Dallion had Lux surround him with flames again. Bracing himself, he then stepped onto the watery surface.

Like with the shardfly moment ago, there was no splash. Dallion stepped through an invisible window only to find himself close to the shore once more. The difference and it was a big difference at that was that the number of piers had doubled.

Two seas extended forward, one continued towards the horizon as anyone would expect, while the other stretched above Dallion's head, in effect creating a second sky. Looking closely, Dallion could even see the bottom of the ship that had been used in the journey during the last expedition.

How come no one noticed this until now? Dallion asked.

So, you thought the dream was due to stress?

You have been under considerable pressure, dear boy. It was a logical conclusion. Besides, you wouldn't be the first person to think they were sent dreams from the Moons.

The difference was that in Dallion's case, that actually occurred more often than he liked to admit.

A flock of black dots rose to the sky in the distance. Looking closer, Dallion saw that they weren't birds, but cracklings. This was the first time that Dallion saw such species, and it somewhat horrified him. Fighting standard cracklings was difficult enough, fighting through large amounts of these was more than he could handle on his own at present.

Thinking about it, it was possible that all the sea horrors that Dallion had seen while on the ship before were merely flocks of cracklings that had merged together in order to attack through the veil of illusion.

How many do you think there are? Dallion asked.

Lots, Gleam replied. This is the clear area. The really dark stuff is further on.

How can you sense that far? You're even better than Nox.

Nox is a kitten, Gleam replied. Dallion could almost hear a smirk in her voice. Besides, cracklings are born in small realms. To survive in the wilderness, you have to have really good senses. If you don't, you don't well, you get the picture.

Dallion did. He also caught the subtle warning. The shardfly knew that he was thinking of exploring further and she was warning him that even with her protection that it was too dangerous.

This time it was the echo that didn't reply. No one in the guild had said anything further on the issue, but it was pretty much a foregone conclusion. Finding everything remaining submerged had come as a shock to all, and likely had put an end to any future expeditions. That meant whatever was hidden further on would remain so.

I'll go have a look, Dallion said. Everyone with me?

Everyone responded with affirmative silence.

At least it'll be interesting, Gleam rose up into the air. Let's see if we can find you a ship.

Chapter 327: Beneath the Veil

Travelling across the real sea was very different from the trip Dallion had gone through on the one above. Speed was not a priority. If anything, Lux moved the boat deliberately slowly so as not to attract attention. Gleam had managed after considerable effort to cover the entire boat with illusion glitter, making it appear like a creature of sorts. That, combined with Nox's presence, let the boat float through shoals and patches of cracklings undisturbed.

Hes not. Hes just worried about Gleam.

Dallion suppressed his comment. Out of everyone involved, the shardfly had the greatest chance of survival. Listening to her, it was clear that she was but a pale imitation of her former self, but even so Gleam had the ability to disguise her appearance pretty well. Dallion had a strong suspicion that if he wasn't from another world, he wouldn't even have noticed the creature's real nature; and even when he knew there were times in which her illusions continued fooling him. For one thing, travelling on what looked like a crackling manta ray made him feel nervous, despite being fully aware it was a boat.

What had lasted hours before now lasted days. On a few occasions Dallion had to stop and rely on Lux and Nox for food from the starting areas of the realm. Gleam had offered to go as well, making

a good point that she could catch animals much easier. Dallion, however, preferred to have her nearby in case more illusions were necessary.

Initially, hunting took the familiars a couple of hours. Lux would fly the crackling to the area in question, where Nox could proceed with the hunt. The experience made the creature quite happy. After all, Nox was a hunter by nature and now that he had grown sharpening his claws on more than booksto Nils great annoyance was very welcome.

Having a catch brought to the ship didnt constitute finding food, though thanks to the realm, the cooking process was easy enough. Strictly speaking, Dallion had to follow the same processes like in the real world, or even Earth, but thanks to Lux, there was no chance of getting food poisoning. The taste left a lot to be desired, but it was good enough to help Dallion keep his strength.

Close to a week since the start of the sea journey, Dallion finally approached land. The shardfly was the first to notice, catching a glimpse half a day before Dallion could. By evening, everyone could get a good look at the coastline. The sign made Dallion feel insignificant.

The land was filled with rust and cracklings. It wasnt just packs of beasts roaming between crimson vegetation, entire cities were visible. These were not mere villages, either. Stone walls rose, shielding massive castles, forges releasing black smoke into the air, as well as scores of ordinary everyday buildings. As far as Dallion could see, there were three distinct cities on the coast, some larger than others.

Dallion looked. On a hill, a considerable distance behind the largest of the cities, he could see there was an entire area covered in grass and trees. That was the only patch of green in the blackness. From this distance Dallion couldnt be sure, but it seemed like the patch formed a circle if so, there was no doubt what was in the middle of it.

Like in any other items, the cracklings overall goal was to gain enough strength to defeat the guardian, even if that would result in the destruction of the realm itself. Considering the time passed, they probably had been at it for thousands of years, and despite that, the guardians had held strong, to the point that the cracklings had become scared of them.

Gleam, any chance we can get there? Dallion pointed at the green area.

That will be pushing it, the shardling replied. Maybe if we go between the cities, but even then, I cant guarantee. The cracklings appear much smarter inland. If they rely on more than instincts youll be caught.

We all have to take risks.

Your choice. Why do you want to get there anyway? The guardian must be pretty strong to hold out against such a horde. There's no chance you'll defeat him.

I don't want to defeat him. I just want to have a word.

And you think he'll listen? The shardfly laughed.

Yeah. I have a feeling he will.

By morning Lux had navigated the boat to a relatively calm spot between two cities. Walking to the hill was going to be longer from there, but the chances of attracting attention were smaller, according to the shardfly. The soil was hard and crumbly, causing Dallion to leave nearly perfect footprint impressions as he walked. Clearly, the realm was in pretty bad shape even with the guardian still alive. It was a miracle that the sword hadn't snapped in two. That was probably why March had made a point to clear all nasties before dealing with the guardians. If she hadn't the first part of the realm would have probably gotten as bad as things were here. It was ironic that the parts of the realm beneath a veil of illusion had ended up worse off.

So, you're certain this is the Moons doing?

Them, or the dryads that worship them. The result is the same. The Moons can do whatever they want. Rules don't apply to them.

As Dallion continued, he saw a number of tracks remaining on the ground. A large part belonged to beasts; some were clearly humanoid—probably gremlin, based on his past experience with cracklings. One set of tracks, though, clearly was that of a wagon wheel. That indicated that the cracklings had developed to the point to transport goods, although Dallion couldn't determine the design of the wagon, nor did he have any idea what it was used for. From what he knew, cracklings exploited the realm for what they needed, thus growing in number and strength. Could it be that Nil was wrong and they actually started turning on each other once there were no more resources to share? It was a distinct possibility, even if it had never happened before.

How much worse can it get?

Very.

Better for the realm, not the cracklings. And I don't want to be caught in the middle when both sides fight.

Suddenly, a loud noise came a short distance away. A cluster of rust trees fell to the ground, releasing several fox-like creatures. No sooner had these appeared, when a pair of dyads appeared out of nowhere. Both seemed far younger than any dryad Dallion had seen so far, as if they were

teenagers. Despite that, their skills were lethal. Their movements were so fast that from Dallions perspective, it seemed as if they were standing still while the rusties around them popped out of existence.

The sound of horns filled the air, starting from the nearest crackling city, then spreading to the next. Thats why I told you to hurry, Gleam grumbled.

But its nowhere close to evening!

Look at the sky.

Strictly speaking, Dallion was correct. It was mid-afternoon, hours before sunset. And still, one moon was visible in the sky, as if to rival the sun the Green Moon.

Instinct took over, making Dallion split into five instances. He knew well enough that fighting here was pointless, but even so, he wanted to have escape options ready.

A flock of cracklings filled the sky. Like crows they flocked, flying towards the dryads. That didnt seem to bother them in the least. Fighting individually, the duo continued destroying trees with such ease it looked as if they were toppling card towers.

Dallion thought back, trying to remember any achievements for perception. Sadly, he couldnt remember any. Even if he could, though, it was unlikely that there were any that would help him in the current situation.

The gates of one of the crackling cities opened, releasing a host of gremlin knights. These werent the scruffy creatures Dallion had encountered before, they were significantly larger, clad in full plate armor. A genuine crackling army poured in the direction of the intruders, and Dallion instantly understood what the shardfly had feared.

Were going back, Dallion turned around. No matter who won this encounter, they would prove stronger than Dallion could handle. He had found a way to the remaining temples and gotten to see first-hand what the situation was there. The best thing to do now was to flee and

Stay. A dryad appeared in front of him. Like the fighting duo, this one was young, wearing simple linen clothes. Off the battlefield he would seem more at home as a bard or scribes apprentice. Here, he was the biggest threat there was. The guardian wants to talk to you.

Youre an echo, Dallion noted.

And youre from another world, the dryad replied. You can fly to the temple, if you want. The guardian already knows you can do that.

I prefer to look at the battle a bit, Dallion lied, adding confidence to his words. How did you see through my illusion?

There used to be shardflies in this realm, the echo replied, reaching out towards Gleam. The familiar fluttered half a foot away. Not anymore. The dryad lowered his hand. Its not safe for you here. Were bound to lose soon.

Then Ill stay until its safe.

The battle continued. The dryads actions had managed to create a patch of fertile land among the decay. Cleared of rust vegetation, it almost looked like a picnic garden. As the crackling troops

arrived, though, that quickly changed. A new battle began, this one far fiercer than before. Initially, the echoes had the advantage, but as the gremlin army stacked up, the tides began to turn. After losing a few members, the crackling squads merged together increasing tenfold. With speed rivaling that of the dryads, these new armored soldiers continued their attacks. With each hit, their size shrank, but that didnt seem to matter, since a constant wave of reinforcements quickly restored them back to what they were before. At one point, one of the soldiers managed to pierce a dryad by piercing through a comrade and striking the echo from its blind-spot. One hit proved to be enough. With as little as a poof, the echo vanished, leaving the other alone.

You should fly now, the dryad next to Dallion said.

Dont you have reinforcements?

No, just the three of us.

How do you expect to defeat several cities with just three echoes?

We didnt come here to defeat armies, came the reply. We came for you. This should be a good enough distraction for you to reach the temple. Dont waste it. It would be tedious to send a second batch just for this.

Chapter 328: Temporary Alliance

It took minutes for the armies of cracklings to deal with the remaining echoes. Quantity proved to be more vital than quality. Looking from above, it was like a scorpion taken down by a swarm of ants. As Lux carried Dallion towards the area under the temples influence, more horns sounded. The pitch was noticeably higher, potentially indicating the victorious resolution of the situation. However, the victory was relative. For two echoes to have managed to create so much damage, the guardian probably had the power to destroy entire crackling cities.

Upon passing over the border between the two domains, Dallion asked the firebird to put him on the ground. After a week of travelling through crackling infested waters, he wanted to enjoy some nature. Also, walking gave him time to consider what to do.

Just trying to keep you from getting yourself into even more trouble, dear boy. A task that is monumental and often ends in failure.

After walking a while, Dallion noticed that no new echoes had appeared. That was somewhat alarming. He would have thought that, if nothing else, the guardian would have a force ready to greet the crackling army should it decide to attack.

Soon enough, the temple became visible. For the most part, it was similar to the previous ones, although the roof seemed noticeably wider.

This was unexpected. If anything, the shardfly was more eager to be in open spaces than Lux.

Dallion wanted to remind her that the armadil shield was a dryad, when he remembered that Gleam had kept her distance from him as well. She had no problem with the echoes of Dallions realm, she enjoyed being with the other familiars, as well as the nymph. The dryad, though, was a different matter entirely.

Okay. Ill call you if I need any help.

The shardfly doesnt like me for some reason, a young voice said. Once again, a dryad had appeared a few steps away from Dallion, but this time he could tell it wasnt an echo.

WORLD GUARDIAN - DUZHD

Species: RAIN DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Stats: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Attack**
- **Guard**
- **Acrobatics**
- **Entangle**
- **Rain Daggers**
- **Rain Whip**

Weak Spots: joints

The skills were more advanced than the third guardian, and also linked to rain. So far, it would seem that each guardian had a specific theme. This one was associated with rain, suggesting that it had ranged and area-based attacks.

She tends to be like that at times, Dallion said diplomatically. Thanks for meeting me in person.

Thats the least I can do after all this time stuck here. Thats the price of longevity. There was a time when I used to complain that there were too many people bothering me all the time. Now, Im pretty much left alone.

Arent there any locals?

There are a few scattered about, but not in my domain. And the few there are cant understand me, unlike you. A genuine smile appeared on the guardians face. When Luna told me about you, I thought he was kidding. Glad that wasnt the case. Quite sneaky of you to fly over him. I guess he didnt see that one coming.

Technically, it didnt matter much. In order for the swords destiny to be fulfilled, the guardians of all temples had to be defeated. Changing the order by which that was done could be interesting, but it wouldnt help in the least.

Where do you prefer we talk? Here or inside? Duzhd asked.

Wont they hear us here? Dallion looked back at the crackling territories.

Not unless I want them to. I still control this domain. That includes what sounds come and go.

I prefer here, then. Dallion decided.

I want you to help me destroy a city, the guardian went straight to the point.

The request was shocking as it was sudden. Destroying a whole city was a difficult task in the best of circumstances. March herself had needed years to de-crack a third of the realm. For Dallion to do the same here, hed probably need decades, not to mention significant help.

Cant you use an army of echoes to do that? They seemed to be pretty strong.

They have their limitations, as do I. If I could, Id have gotten rid of that disgusting muck. Sadly, this patch of green is all I can manage. Do you see the border between black and green? Thats the end of my domain. Every decade the cracklings mount an all-out charge. They lose, of course, but each attack my domain gets smaller. One day theyll reach the temple itself. If you help me destroy a city, that day will be delayed by quite a while.

Clearly, the guardian was overestimating his combat abilities. For the time being, that was a good thing it had allowed Dallion to have this conversation. However, the moment it was revealed that Dallion wasnt as strong as Duzhd expected, things could drastically change.

I know youre not strong enough to fight your way in. However, you have a shardfly familiar which could let you sneak into the city. There, all you need to do is find the source and destroy it. I can take care of the rest.

Now things made more sense. The guardian was perfectly aware of Dallions capabilities. That and the fact that they could actually lead a conversation was the main reason the offer was made. Of course, it didnt make things easier. Sneaking into a crackling city, even if Gleam managed to cast a good enough illusion, was no easy feat.

In return Ill offer you a perpetual surrender.

Dallions eyes widened. Up to now, he didnt think that was possible. Unless he was misunderstanding things, that meant that one guardian would be defeated no matter how many times he entered the realm. That could prove quite useful in the future, if nothing else, it was a way to make March be inclined to add him to future expeditions.

Youre surprised? Roots emerged from the ground creating a seat. As the dryad sat the seat continued growing, turning into a small throne. Guardians can do whatever they want within their domain. Unless the guardian in whose domain they are says otherwise.

Consider this carefully, dear boy. If you agree, you'll be bound by that promise. Not only that, but you'll have to make sure that the guild doesn't give the sword to our backers. There are too many things out of your control.

How much time do I have? Dallion asked.

In terms of true time, centuries at least, likely millennia. In terms of real time a few weeks at most.

A few weeks?

That wasn't long at all.

Decay never rests. I'm the one at risk the most. Close enough to the sea to increase the rate at which cracklings improve, and too far to be protected by it. I have no illusions that even this might be a lost cause, but if I fall, so does the realm.

Desperation appeared beneath the dryad's calm exterior. When Dallion had gone inland, he had done so in the hopes he could have a conversation with the dryad. Now it turned out that he was the one being asked a favor. An hour ago, he wouldn't have dreamed of getting such an offer.

Dallion's heart ached. The link to the Green Moon demanded that he accept it. The guardian must have known that in order to make the offer. However, that didn't mean that Dallion couldn't ask for more in return.

If I succeed, I want to know more about this realm, he said. As much as you can share.

Are you sure? A new emotion formed in the guardian. However, it wasn't surprise. Rather, it was regret. Words spoken can't be unheard.

I'll risk it. Dallion was already sure that something involving the Moons had to have happened here. All he had to do was destroy a crackling city and he would learn what. Maybe he would even get a glimpse at the weapon that could destroy deities; and if it was that powerful, it had to work on chainlings as well.

If that's what you want. The guardian shrugged. Anything else?

Dallion considered. He was somewhat tempted to ask for something more just for the sake of it. In the end he decided it was better not to.

Nothing but advice, he said. Do I need to make a vow?

No need. You only get things once you help. The guardian jumped off the throne. Instantly the roots disappeared back beneath the ground.

I'll need some help.

You're going now?

SPLIT SECOND DECISION

(Mind +2)

Deciding on the moment could be beneficial, but be careful that your iron conviction doesn't turn into a lack of emotion.

The achievement was unexpected, though highly appreciated. Despite what Hannah had said earlier in this real-world morning, more stats meant more stats. A higher mind allowed Dallion to split into more instances, create more echoes, as well as to see more awakened markers faster.

You're more reckless than you look. The dryad sounded amused. Let's get to it.

Normally, Dallion would rush with a quickly made plan composed at the last moment. This time, though, he spent a while discussing the plan with the dryad on one hand, and Nil on the other. The initial plan was surprisingly straightforward. The guardian was going to create a diversion with his echoes, while Dallion was going to take advantage of the situation and, illusioned into a crackling, enter the city just as the crackling troops left to face the intrusion. Regardless of how advanced the beings became, they remained creatures of instinct. Having a sudden threat would have them react, hopefully without paying attention to anything else.

Once in the city, Dallion was to find the source flame that held all the cracklings there together. Since the city was massive, it was likely that the flame was in a large forge somewhere within the main castle. Reaching it, Dallion was to use every power at his disposal—mostly his harpsisword—to extinguish the flame, then use Lux to make his escape. As a precaution, the guardian was going to send another wave of echoes, just in case. Afterwards, there was nothing but watch and wait. Considering that all cracklings of the city originated from the flame, from then on, the guardian could slowly and methodically expand its domain, or at the very least cause the city to fall in ruin. That still left several more in the surrounding areas, but, as Duzhd had said, that was going to grant the temple more time. It was even possible that March led several more expeditions to clear the area of cracklings and other corrosives soon after the festival was over.

Once set up, Dallion took one final look at the city. It looked calm, despite the buildings being made of hardened tar. All that remained now was to wait for evening, when the Moon's influence would increase.

That's untypically philosophical of you.

At the end of the day, it's all I could do. That and help you get through this. Just remember one thing. If things get hopeless, leave the realm as quickly as possible. There's always a chance you have time for another go later as long as you don't suffer any permanent status effects.

What's the worst that could happen?

You can end up becoming a chainling

Chapter 329: Crackling Infiltration

Seven moons filled the night sky. Dallion was eager to put the plan in motion, but the guardian urged him to wait a few hours more until the Green Moon was in its apex—the time most beneficial for dryad echoes. During that time, there was nothing left for Dallion to wait and practice forging. In general, it was a bad idea to reveal skills to others, but crafting skills didn't have a direct effect on standard fighting skills. Also, the promise between Dallion and Duzhd ensured that the guardian would share no skills with the rest of his group. Given that the loss of this temple would threaten the entire realm, no complaints from the other guardians were expected. If anything, Dallion assumed they would be keeping an eye on the whole situation, eager to see the outcome. If things went well, there was a chance that others surrendered as well.

Another dagger was hammered into being, then unsummoned like the ten before it. There was no doubt that Dallion had gotten the hang of creating them, and still his forging skill hadn't increased by a single point. That, of course, was normal. Crafting skills increased based on the masterpiece principle only when the crafter forged an item far better than anything he'd created so far would the skill increase. That meant that it would take thirty-eight outstanding items in order for Dallion to reach his current level cap. It also explained why crafters were treated so differently from other awakened.

Right. The echo has been weeping with joy, you know. Not that he'll admit it.

An annoyed cough resounded in Dallion's realm.

It'll be time to go soon. Better get ready.

The dryad union was a huge place, far bigger than the current human empire. You don't expect me to know everyone, do you?

All the more reason to get to know him.

Nah, I dislike child prodigies

, the armadil shield replied.

It's time. An echo approached Dallion.

Sure. Dallion unsummoned the dagger half-done. The anvil and hammer disappeared along with it. Let's go.

It was a short walk to the edge of the guardians domain. While walking Dallion tried to get Gleam to emerge, but the shardfly stubbornly refused to do so. As she had been saying all along, she was only going to emerge once Dallion left the dryads land and not a moment earlier.

Dallion could hardly feel a thing, but based on the dryad echo's reaction that the effect was working. After about a minute of flying around him, the shardfly disappeared back into his realm once more.

Knight? Fancy. Thanks.

The mental image was enough to make Dallion crack a smile. Maybe he'd have her try that on some other occasion. For the moment, though, it was time to get serious.

Lets start. Dallion stepped onto crackling land. The top layer of the soil crumbled beneath his foot, creating cracks in the ground. Clearly, the shardfly's illusion was so real that the environment also reacted to it. Thinking about it, that was outright scary. If she were of a higher level, there was no telling how powerful her illusions could be.

Once he got used to walking, Dallion broke out into a jog, then a full run. It still felt slightly weird. He could almost feel the weirdness of being a crackling as he made his way towards the city walls in the distance. Several minutes later, the sound of horns filled the air the guardian had started its echo attack.

Multiple city gates opened, releasing a torrent of armored gremlins. This time the squads merged into larger knights the moment they went into the open, rushing to meet the invading dryad army. A terrifying thought went through Dallion's mind.

What happens if a crackling tries to merge with me?

he asked.

Thanks for nothing.

Flocks of birds filled the air, assembling in the sky above each city. The cracklings were clearly going all out, creating their own air forces. Moments later, it became obvious why. A new entity had appeared in the air, or rather an old one the vine whale attacking from the side of the sea.

Armies clashed in both land and sky. While larger in size, the giant gremlin knights were quickly drilled by roots shooting up from the ground. Behind them, dryad echoes rushed forward like blades of a meat grinder, slashing everything in their path. Dallion would have loved to be able to carefully observe their movements and hopefully learn them for his next fight. His priority was different,

though. Relying on his athletic skills, he kept on running towards the open gates, taking a slightly roundabout path.

The crackling squads kept on emerging in greater and greater numbers. If the first gremlin knights were composed of fifty individual cracklings, the following were of at least a hundred, possibly more. Tens of thousands of soldiers from this city alone had gone onto the battlefield. On the other side, the echo army was nothing to be scoffed at either. The guardian had released several dozen echoes around sixty from what Dallion could determine but they proved enough to hold off the first waves, and even push further into crackling territory. This was probably what the armadil shield had meant when he had compared the guardian to a child prodigy. Huge skill was required to create that many echoes, not to mention still use long distance root attacks. It was somewhat curious that no additional creatures were used. Dallion could only assume that those required non-corrupt land in order to survive.

It was only by the time that Dallion got close to the city walls that the flow of armies had gone down to a trickle. Potentially, that was a good thing it meant that most of the city would be empty.

Its possible. Cracklings dont have civilians. Besides, theres no point in anyone remaining in a city since the threat is quite obvious.

Id have thought theyre better planners.

For all you know, they might be, dear boy. Theres simply not much we know about cracklings in advanced stages of development. All our information comes from corrupted ancient artefacts. It might well be that were observing only the exceptions.

The city gate was twenty feet wide and twice that in height. The architecture seemed medieval. There was nothing remotely impressive about it other than the material it was made of. Holding his breath, Dallion slowly moved on.

Theres no pause between gremlins

, Gleam said.

Charging along the markers, Dallion leapt up. Within seconds a sequence was complete, then a second, granting Dallion the ability to bounce off air. He did, propelling himself further up. Soon enough, he found himself on the top of the wall. Unlike human castles, there were no guards present such were never planned. Cracklings never had the need to protect themselves from enemies sneaking in. Most often they were the attackers; if they had grown to the point of forming a city, that meant that the decay had crept in deep within the item. This was all the better for Dallion, who simply continued along the wall for a better spot to jump in.

The inside of the city was both similar to a standard human settlement and not. The streets and buildings were positioned as one would expect. Everything else, on the other hand, was like a bad copy and paste. Looking closely, there were only three types of buildings within the city: forges,

barracks, and crude homes. Shops, statues, even entertainment structures seemed to be alien. Even the inner castle seemed to be like a fortified neighborhood than anything else.

Finding a good spot, he leapt along the roofs of buildings, making his way towards the city center. Below, gremlins continued to trickle along the streets in far smaller numbers rushing to forges and emerging in full armor.

As much as that made sense, it didn't feel right. There was something more, but Dallion couldn't put his finger on it.

Large blocks of hunger emerged through the city, taking up entire buildings. The gremlins also had their individual emotions, but those paled in comparison to the point of insignificance. Scariest of all, a large ball of devouring personified pulsed in the middle of the inner castle, making Dallion's skin creep even from this distance. That was what he had come to destroy. How exactly was he supposed to do it, though? The flame was clearly too large for Dallion or any of his familiars to handle. Even if he reached it without attracting any attention which was looking more and more likely at this point what was he going to do afterwards?

Any chance that you can get it from the sea?

The lack of response gave Dallion his answer. He was going to have to use something else to extinguish the flame. At the end of the day, though, it remained a physical presence. As long as one could do physical damage, it could wound it. The trick was wounding it enough.

Suddenly, the ground shook. Miles from the city, all the gremlin knights had merged into one giant entity, only to be knocked down by the whale minion which had crashed into it. Things had quickly entered into the endgame, which didn't give Dallion much time.

Chapter 330: The Spark Inside

A cluster of roots burst from the ground, piercing through the giant gremlin knight. The damage alone was enough to kill hundreds of cracklings. However, in the grand scheme of things, that was insignificant. Barely had the damage been done that the knight split into two, each attacking a different dryad echo. One of the attacks failed, the other succeeded, leaving only a total of seventeen remaining on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, Dallion kept running towards the key forge. He was fully aware he had minutes to get it all done. Even now, the guardian was at his limit, doing everything possible to grant Dallion more time. Even the vine whale was having difficulties against the flock of enemies.

The streets were much narrowed there, allowing no more than three people to walk side by side. Even that was wasteful, considering that there were no gremlins or habitable buildings to be seen. Everything walls, towers, streets, and buildings included were nothing more than a giant decorative shell made for the flames vanity. Like the cracklings that emerged from it, the source of the decay also seemed to improve, gaining the overall thoughts and emotions of the tribe. It seemed that just as the cracklings worked to forge armor capable of providing protection and a touch of vanity, so did the flame, using the city itself.

You're running in circles.

That was what Dallion feared. He had hoped he was wrong. The fact that he was right meant that the fire forge had no entrances leading into it. Even the windows turned out to be fake.

Horns filled the air. Dallion instinctively looked up. There was no telling where the sound came from, but it was close. There were probably some gremlins within watchtowers after all. That wasn't his major concern, however. The sound of horns indicated that the threat had ended. The dryad echoes leading the attack had been wiped out, leaving the cracklings forces to return.

Harp, can a line-strike cut through this?

Dallion asked anyway.

That was to be expected. The guardian had the strength to perform such attacks. If the city walls weren't strong enough to withstand the effects, there wouldn't be the need for him to ask Dallion for help. So, walls were a bust as well, and tunneling—considering that was even possible—was going to take far longer than Dallion had. Ultimately, there was one option left however Dallion didn't like it.

Chills ran down Dallion's spine. The option he had thought of had been a simple theoretical exercise, half done in jest. Dallion was smart enough to know the dangers involved, as well as the consequences should he fail. If things went poorly, it wasn't just the tournament he would lose.

Despite the words of encouragement, the voice was mocking Dallion. He could feel it. He would never get a better chance than this. No matter how many times he managed to sneak into the central castle of the city, he'd face the same problem. Maybe if he were ten levels higher, or even just five, things might be different, but even then, there was no guarantee of success, just better odds.

For several seconds Dallion remained in the middle of the street, unable to take a step.

Dallion didn't reply. He was still thinking. The only option of success was going to put him at a far greater risk than he had even been so far. However, if what the voice said was true, maybe it would be worth it; not so much because of what the guardian had offered, but the possibility of learning an attack surpassing anything Dallion had seen so far.

Combining his athletic and acrobatic skills, Dallion jumped between the walls of two nearby buildings, landing on the top. From there, getting to the roof of the main forge was easy.

I know.

Reaching the chimney, Dallion ran up. There was only one way to reach the black flamea flaw that vanity had allowed it to create. Every flame, even a crackling flame, needed air to burn. However, the reason to create giant chimneys was onepure unadulterated vanity.

Sorry, Nil, Dallion whispered as he reached the top of the tunnel. Its something I need to do. He jumped in.

The black smoke seemed to welcome him as he fell in. It was like swimming through water diluted with air. The illusion surrounding Dallion shattered. Dallion could see the surprise of the flamesurprise that something unknown had appeared, but also eager to consume it. Tendrils shot up, wrapping themselves round Dallion to form a black cocoon. There was no pain, only darkness and an unending hunger to devour everything in existence. In a way, it was similar to the experience the Star had subjected Dallion, but it was also different, less organized.

Lux, surround me

, Dallion thought.

The firebird instantly did so. A layer of flames surrounded Dallion, separating him from the darkness around him. Dallion could feel the opposites collide: a flame that decayed everything it came into contact with versus a flame that could only heal and never damage. This was all the buffer that was needed.

Time to show your worth, Vermillion, Dallion said. Personal awakening!

Dallion expected for the ring to link him to his personal realm. He knew that linking his realm directly was beyond dangerous, risking the spill of cracklings within. Thats why he had resorted to the Vermillion ring. However, things didnt go the way he imagined they would.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

A green rectangle appeared in front of him. Just to make sure, Dallion looked around. His music skills told him that he was still in the crackling flame, as was Lux. However, he could no longer hear any of them, as if the link between Dallion and his realm had been severed.

I want to learn how to slice through cracklings, Dallion said. No! he quickly corrected himself. I want to learn how to slice through decay.

That was the key. He was risking too much to be content with merely learning how to deal with cracklings. Ultimately, he wanted to be able to face the chainlings and the Star as well. Realistically, he knew that there was little chance he would be granted Moon-like powers, but a step in the right direction was something he knew he could achieve. After all, he had managed to do it once before, even if it was partially. Back when the Star had used its power to cocoon Dallion in darkness, it was through a clever combination of Noxs claws and the harpsiswords music attack that he had managed to break free, ripping through the darkness. However, that was only part of his success. There had been another wave of power that had made it all possible, and that wave had come from Dallion himself.

WHY DO YOU THINK ITS SOMETHING YOU CAN HAVE?

You gave it to me already. This time I want it permanently. I know its within my realm somewhere. Im not sure whether its linked to leveling up or its just hidden somewhere, but I know I have it. Ive used it once before.

There was no immediate response. By all accounts, it seemed that there was yet another power above the Moons, or at the very least parallel to them. It was said that the Moons were omnipotent and set all the rules, and yet it was never claimed that they were the ones that sent the rectangles. That was weird, considering they were linked both to stats and races.

YOU WANT TOO MUCH

I dont want all of it now, Dallion said. Just enough to start learning, and it must be strong enough to defeat the crackling flame.

CHOOSE ONE

So thats how it was going to be? The fact that Dallion received the offer meant that it was likely to be granted. Still, he didnt see the reason for the reluctance. Defeating the embodiment of entropy had to be a good thing for any realm, the real world included.

If I chose to learn, will you help me kill off the flame, or will you let me end up being consumed by it? Dallion asked.

CHOOSE ONE

A second green rectangle appeared in front of the first. Clearly, Dallion wasnt going to be given any more hints. If that was the case, he had just the response.

I leave you to decide, he said.

Both green rectangles disappeared. Was that the correct choice? Dallion had no way of knowing. Even so, it was better than any of the two alternatives. Back on Earth, Dallions grandfather used to say that nothing happened by accident. The same was true hereall major events had something triggering them. While Dallion believed it was his actions, and the support from friends, guardians, and familiars that had helped him get to where he was, he also couldnt deny that there had been a few instances in which something else had granted him abilities he shouldnt have had. The voice was one such example and so far, it hadnt been wrong.

THERES A SPARK INSIDE YOU

A green rectangle appeared. Suddenly, everything went white.