

## Leveling up 631

### Chapter 631: Deals of the Past

As the sun set, complete calm fell upon the village. Unlike towns and cities, nighttime was the point at which everything pretty much stopped. Only a handful of guards were still awake, keeping an eye out for creatures or provincial messengers. The villagers had no illusions that they couldn't stop any advancing army, especially one coming from abroad. Whispers of war and tensions between Countess Priscord and the Archduke had made many quite tense. Despite saying, and often believing, that nothing interesting happened in the middle of nowhere, there were some who still remembered the wars of succession forty years ago. The situation had been similar back then, causing many small towns and villages to be completely cut off from the rest of the province. There were no merchants, no travelers, even monks from the Order rarely made any visits.

Sitting in front of his house, Havoc looked at the night stars, sipping a cup of boiled alcohol. One could say it was an acquired taste that an outcast was forced to get used to.

I knew you'd come back, the large man said. It was just a matter of time.

A figure appeared a few steps away. A faint trail of dust in the air indicated that he had run to the spot faster than the common eye could see.

Didn't think you'd be so open about it. Even after dark, people can hear.

Even if they see me, they'll soon forget, Dallion said.

Are the guards alright?

I didn't fight them. They let me in.

The truth was that Dallion had used his music skills to let down their guards enough so he could invade their realms and place a limiting echo there. The echoes would only remain until he got far enough from the village, after which they would destroy themselves. Until then, though, they would limit all the people's memories of Dallion. Even now, they had become convinced that an animal had made its way to the village gate, then walked away without even entering. By tomorrow, they would have forgotten even that.

Will you let me finish this? Havoc asked, holding his drink.

Dallion nodded.

The large man shook his head with a quiet laugh, then gulped down what was left and placed the cup on the ground.

Let's go. He stood up and entered the house. Dallion followed.

Who really de-leveled you?

The Order are the only ones who could. Didn't I tell you already?

That was before I figured it out. Now we can have a real conversation. It wasn't just the Academy that sent you. The countess was involved as well, and so was the Star. Dallion said the word slowly, making sure that Havoc understood the meaning behind his reasoning. You were to capture the aetherbird and bring it to the Dallion paused. The countess, I believe.

Havoc remained silent.

Its my guess she initially wanted to use it to become a mage. Being crafty, she knew that the other partners in the deal would be against it. The Academy needed the skill gem so they could study and potentially recreate it. The Star, on his part, only wanted to make sure that the aetherbird remained imprisoned. Thats what happens if you keep it in its gem, right?

Ill take your word for it.

I might be talking crap. Dallion made his way to the nearest chair and sat down. Maybe the deal was nothing like this, but the players were the same. Something on the way messed up. You had a change of heart.

Havoc made his way to the nearby shelf and took a large bottle. The strong stench of alcohol filled the room as he removed the cork.

Id say it was Eurys mentor. Ive no idea whether he shared it with the rest of you, or decided on the spur of the moment. Bottom line, he got the skill gem and the rest of you let him have it. Suggesting he failed was a nice touch.

Did I do that?

You might as well have. After using the information and the devices you got, he probably gave you a feather or two to buy your silence, then had someone go explain the failure to the countess. I think that was you.

Why not just go himself?

A few days ago, I thought he had. Not anymore, though. When I tried to do the same, the countess snuffed me out. She must have some artifact that senses magic.

Havoc turned pale. Almost dropping the bottle, he stepped back against the wall, terrified of what Dallion had just told him. The fear was emanating from him to the point that it was more noticeable than the smell of alcohol.

No, the large man whispered. You cant have it

Is that so strange? Your friend succeeded, why shouldnt I? Dallion leaned back in his chair. Or was he supposed to fail?

A brief burst of regret told him that had indeed been the case.

I wont kill you, Havoc. Not unless you give me a pretext to. Its thanks to you I managed to surprise that first hunt. After this, my debt is paid.

Splitting, Dallion drew his harpsisword, slashing the air currents Havoc had surrounded himself with. None of those instances became reality, but the warning was clear: Dallion wouldnt have any problems facing Havoc should it come to a fight. What was more, Havoc knew it as well.

What did the Star promise you? Dallion asked.

I What makes you think that?

You're the only one of the group who's alive. The Star told me he hunted down and killed off the rest. It didn't feel like a lie. You were easy to find, which means he never intended to kill you.

If you know that, you have your answer.

All the rest would have made the same offer, yet they still died. You knew something they didn't. What was it? Was it the location of the gem?

Relief emanated from Havoc. That wasn't the answer.

How to find it? Dallion narrowed his eyes.

It was that he had it in the first place! Havoc shouted. He let it slip. I pretended not to know, but I knew. When he vanished for a while after the mission, I knew he had gone off to hide it. I never asked him, didn't go searching for it, I didn't even talk about it, but I still knew. When the Star came to me, I was delevelled. What can a level three do against the Crippled? I had to tell him.

Probably he was right. There was nothing to be gained from keeping quiet. It would be impossible for the Star to find the gem by that information alone, so the Star never tried. Having the aetherbird effectively banished from the world was almost as good as holding it captive. If faced with a similar choice, Dallion had no idea what he'd do. It was easy to claim he'd resist at any cost, but he suspected it wouldn't be true.

Did he visit you after I was here? Dallion slid a finger along the table, then looked at it, as if checking for dust.

I only saw him once.

Why did you think I'll return?

Because you'd have figured it out. Shaking, Havoc took a gulp from his bottle. The alcohol seemed to do little to calm his nerves. I messed up when I told you that we gave a handful of feathers to the mages. Anything less than one is impossible. I thought you'd come back to ask me that. I didn't think you'd actually succeed in he looked around, In capturing it.

Were you told how to do it?

Oh, we were. The mages were very specific. The only way to capture the phoenix was to invade its realm. We were even given the devices to do so. The problems started when we entered the realm. It wasn't the first time we were sent to fight mages, but fighting that we failed. One of us even died.

That's how he did it, Dallion said to himself. He made use of the aetherbirds afterimage to trick everyone into thinking they had failed. Clever. However, that suggested that he was given some additional piece of equipment. Dallion's level was close to that of the hunters and he had only managed to achieve victory thanks to the Star, also taking part in the fight.

It was later that he slipped up, Havoc continued. Said it was a mistake to ever complete that mission. He should have said accepted, instead.

You came to the conclusion just because of that?

No. It was him asking about it the next morning that gave me the idea. He asked if I remembered anything from our conversation. When I told him I was drunk and didnt remember much, he was relieved.

Lucky you.

There was probably more to the story, but Dallion wasnt interested. If Eury were here, things would be different. There was no telling how shed react learning Havoc had brought to the death of her mentor.

Where did he hide it? Havoc asked.

In the realm of an unawakened child.

I dont understand

Were not friends, Havoc. I dont owe you a thing. Im here to learn the Stars location.

All remaining blood was drained from the large mans face. If he looked pale before, now hed become outright sickly.

I told you, I only saw him once. Im not lying.

I know youre not. In fact, Ive been using my music skills to make sure that you wouldnt. I know that someone like you would move mountains to figure out where to stay away from. That was the reason you wanted me to break your limits so you could get as far from here as possible. I know the Star isnt in the fallen south, so where is he?

Droplets of sweat covered the mans face. Within him, an invisible battle was raging. If he were to provide the information and Dallion failed, the Star would come back and Havoc would rejoin the rest of his team. However, it was beyond a mid-level awakened to go against the emotions Dallion had been infusing him with at every word. The guilt within Havoc had grown so much that he wanted to let it all out.

East, he finally said. Thats where the cultists keep going.

The cultists go everywhere. Why are you

There are no cities to the east. If they were simply hiding there, the Order would have sent a few armies and wiped them out, but each time they did, the armies were annihilated.

*Is that true, Nil?*

*Youre asking highly theoretical questions. Its possible, although Id venture the Star is in the fallen South. What better place to reminisce about the past?*

*Nil*

*Yes, I suppose its possible. The Academy has been told not to venture there. To be honest, Im surprised the enclave you went to was allowed to exist at all.*

*So, thats it.*

*There are hundreds of places mages are discouraged from going. The east is one of them, the south is another.*

Thats not enough to be sure. He could be in the west.

There had been small instances of the poison plague on the west, far from the rest of the civilized world. It was just as possible that the rogue mage to have gone there to test his creation.

The Star warned me not to go there.

That came as a slight shock. Dallion remained calm for a few moments, then slowly took a few steps towards Havoc.

When he told me hed spare my life, he warned me never to go east.

That changed things. The east was a pretty big concept. Whole provinces of the empire stretched there, places Dallion hadnt even visited. However, for the Star to give the warning, it had to be a place that Havoc was able to realistically reach.

Anything else that slipped your mind?

Thats it.

Dallion stared at the man for a while longer, then went to the door.

Well never meet again, Havoc. Just in case youre wondering, when I face the Star, Ill tell him you showed me where to find him. Keep that in mind in case you think of somehow warning him. Win or lose, the Star doesnt like being betrayed. You, of all people, should know that.

Youve changed. Havoc whispered as Dallion opened the door. You havent just become stronger, youve become heartless as well.

Everyone in the wilderness becomes heartless.

Not like you.

For a moment, the prophecy of the hunter dwarf went through Dallions mind. What if it really was him whod bring the end of the world; not through helping the Star of the phoenix, but because of what hed become? In order to defeat a monster, he himself had turned into one. The big question was, would he be able to turn back?

## Chapter 632: The Price of Leveling

Do you disapprove of what Im doing, Harp? Dallion asked, looking at the horizon.

Despite this being his realm, he couldnt remove the storm clouds that had gathered. They didnt thunder or rain, just stood there like grim reminders just above the remnants of Gleams bridge.

If I dont do it, theres no one who will, Dallion continued.

The nymph kept playing her water harp. The melody was beautiful and full of calm, but Dallion couldnt enjoy its effectshe could see them float through the air, bouncing off of him. That was one of the downsides of his sudden boost: knowing how to use music to achieve his goals made him reluctant to allow the skill to be used on him.

Will there be any going back after this? If I succeed, I mean. I know theres going back if I fail.

Dallion wondered why he said that. For a moment, he had the feeling that things might get worse if he survived.

The Moons havent been talking to me lately. I see them all the time now, staying in the sky day and night, even there. He pointed at the clouds. When it comes down to it, will they approve?

Thats not for me to say, the melody changed, forming words. I dont know the Moons, but I know you. Youll get through this.

But things wont get back to normal.

Change is inevitable.

Dallion knew that the nymph meant well, but her response still felt hollow. There was nothing she could do for him right now. His hope was that when it came to the actual fight, she would. Even wounded, the Star was more than a threat he could handle alone.

This really is a bad idea, dear boy, Nils familiar voice came from behind. The old echo had taken the pains to come all the way from his library.

What is?

Ariel told me what youre thinking. Leveling up now is a needless risk. Itll make you vulnerable in the immediate future.

Itll make me stronger for the fight with the Star.

Thats where youre wrong! Nil snapped. Assuming the general somehow comes through, which I still have doubts about, his artifact will match the Stars level with yours. Following that logically, the stronger you become, the stronger he will as well. Even worse, youll give him a chance to use abilities he lacked in your previous fight.

One level wont change the outcome all that much.

In that case, why go through it?

Because passing the trial will help me! Dallion shouted.

All the sounds in his realm vanished. The wind stopped, as did the waves and the movement of the clouds. Never before had Dallion yelled at the inhabitants of his realm with this level of anger. He wanted to apologize to the old man, to let him know he valued his advice and all the training hed given him since Dallion was level six. At the same time, he couldn't afford to. Any distractions risked making him weaker, and right now, unwanted advice was a distraction.

Lux, Dallion said. Take me to the nearest door.

Blue flames surrounded Dallion, lifting him in the air, then thrusting him towards another part of the island. If there was any response on their side, Dallion didnt hear it. For a few seconds, he felt like going back and talking it out, but that feeling soon faded away.

The trial entrance the firebird brought Dallion to was in the sea itself, located on the side of a dark rock. Dallion was certain he had attempted the trial before, although last time the door hadnt been this rusty. Even so, a trial was a trial lacking the strength to pass one was the same as lacking the strength to pass all.

Nox, are you well enough for this?

As long as its not in water, the crackling replied. I hate water.

I hate water too! Lux said in a far too joyous fashion. He was right, though. Firebirds and water didnt mix, at least not unless Lux got a serious level boost.

Without further delay, Dallion pulled the door open and floated through.

**Youre in the halls of destiny.**

**Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!**

The blue rectangle appeared immediately. That was normal. Seeing a second door less than five steps awaynot so much. Judging from past experience that occurred when Dallion was faced with a logical challenge. The issue with that was that there shouldnt be any more such challenges. In the last few months Dallion had attempted all the remaining challenges: all of them were physical, requiring him to defeat one or more enemies, among other things, in order to complete the trial. Furthermore, the corridors leading to them had always been long, occasionally filled with traps. Being presented with something new meant that the trials had changed.

Anything you know about this, Nil? Dallion asked.

The door was entirely crafted of white wood. The handle was delicate, as if belonging to royalty.

Im facing the countess, arent I? Dallion smiled. He could see the logic. What was more, he was pleased that it happened. This way he got to experience something he couldnt in the real world. Fighting the countess was the same as fighting the Star, yet awakening trials always presented a means to victory.

Dripping the handle tightly, Dallion opened the door and walked in.

A large white room welcomed him. Everything was incandescent white, making him feel as if he were standing in infinity.

Yes, dear boy, I know everything about this challenge, Nil said, though not in the fashion the echo usually did. This time, the echo was facing him, standing in the room itself. In fact, its an extremely simple challenge. Its all in the execution, as they say.

I didnt think Id have to face you. Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

There are two doors, Nil continued. The one you came through and the one behind me. In order to complete the trial, you need to pass through the one behind me. Needless to say, Ill do everything to stop you.

Concentrating, Dallion combined his music skill with layer vision. As far as he could tell, there was nothing unusual in the old echos words.

At any point, you can choose to give up by walking out through the door you came in.

Thats it? Dallion asked. Seems too simple.

As I told you, it would be. Theres just one catchdestroying me would remove me from your realm forever.

Yeah, right. Apparently, it was one of the psychological trials. It had been a while since Dallion had one of those. The goal was to test Dallions resolve.

This time Im quite serious. Destroy me and youll get what you wanted a quick level up with no consequences. You wont even feel hungry once youre done. I wont attack you or defend myself. The only thing Ill do is physically prevent you from passing from the door. And just in case youre wondering youre not fast enough to run past.

Something felt off. Dallion found himself hesitating.

Theres no such trial.

Oh, but there is. Youve always asked me whether Im a mage, well now you can be certain of it. I modified the trial just a bit. You can say I bypassed it for the low price of an echos existence. Destroy me and the level is yours. Go back and youll never have this option again. Of course, the one-day restriction will still apply.

Youre telling me that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity?

Not your lifetime, Nil corrected. Its all a matter of priorities and determination. Or a cost benefit analysis. Since youre so readily ignoring my advice on important matters, maybe its time you continued on your own. I wont stop you. If you think you prefer that I keep guiding you, as much as Im allowed, walk back. Either way, Ill have no hard feelings.

It had to be a trick. Surely the trial was just messing with Dallions head, yet in the most unexpected fashion. The trial with Jiroh had also offered him a way out of this world and back to Earth. To this day Dallion could never be sure whether that was real or not. The stakes here were a lot smaller or were they?

Would it help if I made a Moon vow? Nil asked.

Instead of an answer, Dallion split into instances, then used his athletic skills to try and run past the echo. In each case, Nil blocked his path. He wasnt lying about that, it seemed.

Go ahead, Dallion said.

I vow by the Purple Moon that everything I told you is the truth and that I havent omitted anything of significance relating to this matter. Happy?

Dallions reaction was to ask how he could be sure the vow was real. There was no way it wouldnt be. Even the awakening trials followed the rules of the Moons, and breaking a Moon vow resulted in immediate punishment.

Youre really willing to vanish in order to make a point?

Sometimes thats the only way, dear boy. As I said, I wont have hard feelings either way. I just want to be sure youre devoted to the choice you make one way or the other. Put it simply, if youre willing to kill in order to achieve your goals, youd better accept that now. If not, at least be aware of your limitations and stop building castles onto air.

You disapprove of my methods.



I disapprove of a great many things, the same as you. Why do you think people are terrified of nobles? Its not so much because of their power. The key is that everyone knows they arent afraid to use it. In the grand scope of things, mages are the arrogant ones. We can see things others cant, so our actions often seem illogical. We deal with numbers. When looking at a page, its easy to do away with the lives of people. Doing it in person thats a whole different matter. Im not capable of that. Nobles, though, have no problem. You see, theyve done it at least before in a trial.

All of them?

Looking back, Dallion couldnt picture Lady Marigold as a stone-cold killer. Then again, she had lived through the wars of succession, which suggested that she had seen a lot of bloodshed first hand. Nobles were too powerful weapons to remain unused, and the only thing that could stop a noble was a mage or another noble.

Most. Dont ask me if thats a good thing. I dont know the answer. There are arguments either way. Some say strength without conviction is no strength at all. Others disagree. Whats important now is for you to make a choice.

Dallion looked at the door across him.

If I quit, does that mean I wont get such a challenge later on?

Theres no way for me to know that. I just know you wont get this challenge.

Dallion unsummoned the sword.

This never was a trial, he hissed. You know I dont have a choice. If youre really destroyed, Ive no way of knowing anything that your original is told. Ill never get the artifact from the general.

Oh? I had forgotten, Nil said in mock surprise. Im confident hell find a way. As for information on the Stars location, youve figured that out already, havent you? Thats why the trial is about conviction. Are you convinced you have what it takes to continue on your own, or will you endure my help?

Isnt this breaking the vow? Dallion clenched his fists.

Not in the least, and clearly the Moons agree with me. You were perfectly aware of the consequences when I gave you the option. Facing the Star alone is already going against the odds. Would this be any different?

Dallion took a few steps forward, stopping right in front of the echo. The old man didnt look particularly fit, and yet he was the first and oldest mentor Dallion had had.

You never made things easy, Dallion told himself.

He didnt want this to happen. He had already sacrificed Gleam not long ago. Dallion knew fully well that the shardfly might perish, yet he hadnt stopped her. Even in his naivete, he knew it was too much to rely on luck, just as he shouldnt rely on this being a mere mind game.

One level for Nils life. It wasnt a lot, but given the difficulty of the current trials, it wasnt trivial, either.

Bringing back an echo is a lot more difficult than a guardian. Aether didnt miss an opportunity to remind Dallion of himself. Its not impossible, though it might be easier to just ask the original to create a new echo.

*It wont be Nil.*

*Just like the echoes you created in combat werent you. You didnt have trouble sacrificing them, did you? Also, if you use the gem, you wont have to go through this trial in the first place. Ill give you all the power you need to defeat the Star. Ill vow to it. All you need is to say the word.*

Chapter 633: A Talk with a Coin

*Someones approaching.*

*Someones approaching.*

Dozens of trees whispered. Most of the time, it was local hunters and villagers going about their daily business. Occasionally, though, there would be a person wearing blocker items. Unfortunately for them, there were ways plants could tell what was wrong even if they werent able to see them.

Dallion drew his harpsisword. He didnt like the concentration of powers in the area. Other than the new villages, both the Order and the Academy had established a presence. The temple site at which Dallion had been attacked was all but complete and guarded by a regiment of battle clerics. The mage village was considerably further away and keeping to itself from what Dallion could determine. Unfortunately, there was reliable evidence of cultists in the area. The signs were there as long as one knew how to look. The Star cults had mastered the ability to hide in plain sight. There were even rumors they had a presence within the Order itself. The claim was vehemently denied, but Dallion had seen more than a bit of suspicious activity when it came to clerics. Thanks to the aetherbird, the hidden trails had been made clear; good thing its hatred for the Star surpassed everything else.

Ive heard no new news from Nerosal, Nil said.

Despite Dallions desire to gain another level, he had failed to go through with it. He still felt bad about it. The worst part was that he was expressing doubt that hed made the wrong choice. In the past, this wouldnt have even joked about sacrificing someone close to boost his level.

They arent using the road, Dallion whispered. To a degree, that excluded the countess army. Soldiers were organized, relying on numbers to take out an enemy. Thats why they were rarely sent to hunt down individuals. Hunters and mercenaries got paid for that.

*Do you think its the gorgons?*

Maybe.

The duo had proven they could be good. They wouldnt be so clumsy as to repeat previous mistakes. Also, he suspected that the Archduke would have other issues. That is, unless he had found out that Dallion had obtained the spellcraft skill gem. The Star had an interest in stirring the pot until he fully healed, and so did the aetherbird.

The plant whispers increased. The intrudersthree of them, as far as the trees could tellwere stealthily approaching, heading in the direction of the Orders temple. They were running along branches, remaining hidden from animals, though not from the trees themselves.

Lux, go for it, Dallion ordered.

The dartblade flew up on its own along with a single bolt. After ten seconds of being directed by Dallion, Lux fired the bolt. It split the air, flying through leaves and branches. A split second later, Dallion felt combat splitting.

Got you! He thought.

The people were skilled enough to hear the sound of the bolt being fired. In similar circumstances, it was normal to use a few dead-end instances in order to pinpoint the attacker. Seizing on this Dallion forced the split the way he wanted it, choosing the instances in which they fell off the tree to become reality. Confusion rang from each of the trio like alarm bells. Even so, they were skilled enough not to let such a mishap bring them to their death. Two of them drew weapons, sticking them in the bark of the massive trees so as to slow their descent. One optimistically tried to combat split again. This time there was no mercy. Dallion darted forward, forcing the most appropriate instance for him. The harpsissword cut through a quarter of a tree stump causing the tree grunt in pain then sliced through the person.

There was a moment of concern, during which Dallion considered what might happen if this turned out to be a cleric. Fortunately, it wasn't. The emanation of void that Dallion felt once the harpsissword severed the person's flesh made it clear that he had made the right move.

Cultists, Dallion spat the word, as he leapt off the tree in a different direction, leaving the body to drop to the ground. He was going to deal with it later. The remaining two were a more immediate threat.

Spotting him, the other cultists changed their strategy. One took Dallion head on, while the other fled, potentially in an attempt to circle round and attack from behind.

Two simultaneous point attacks flew at each other. Dallion's proved to be stronger and also combined with a spark attack. The shock was so great it made the attacker freeze up mid-flight. The cloak and part of the clothes had been torn off revealing the face of the cultist. She had the appearance of a middle-aged woman, the kind that one didn't even notice in a city. In all likelihood at one point she probably was that, before the Star had convinced her to join his cult.

The last of the group wasn't so easy to finish off. Aware that he couldn't win in a direct confrontation, he focused on getting as far away as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, it was already too late. Branches snapped beneath his feet, while a cloud of insects filled the area, attacking him mercilessly.

Caught completely off guard, the cultist made a desperate attempt to escape the situation by combat splitting. That proved to be his final mistake. Once again, Dallion forced the most desired outcome, coming in for the lethal blow. Vibrating, the harpsissword sliced through the man's armor, dealing a lethal wound. It was child's play for Dallion to finish him off from here, but he didn't. Instead, he grabbed the man, landing on a thick branch.

Where's the Star? he asked, killing his words with kindness and empathy. I don't need you, just the Star.

I the man hesitated. Dallion could almost see what was going through his mind. If he dared share the Stars secret, he would likely die. Then again, if he didnt, it was certain he would.

The wounds deep, but I can still fix it. I have a healing companion.

The mans eyes widened in hope. His lips moved in an attempt to form words, but no sooner had he done so than black spikes emerged from his body, effectively killing him on the spot.

*That was uncalled for, dear boy,*

Nil said with concern. *Theres no way you could have saved him. Lux would only have made things worse.*

He didnt know that, Dallion replied. Lux, check the two. If theyre alive, finish them off.

The dartblade flew through the forest, as it was told. Meanwhile Dallion had a chat with the item guardians of the dead cultist. It was alarming to see that the Star had taken the lessons of before to heart. The clothes and most of the other items were completely guardianless. However, there were a few trinkets that had remained forgotten. In this case, a pouch of coins. Money was one of the items people often forgot about since in their mind they didnt consider it a proper item. The truth was that money tended to survive more than almost anything else, and its guardians were extremely gossipy. After spending a few minutes in useless conversations, Dallion finally hit the jackpot: a silver coin that the cultist had carried with him since childhoodhis lucky silver coin.

Didnt think hed die like this, the coin guardian said. Though its not like he was alive since joining.

Youre jaded, Dallion noted.

*Kid, Ive been with him for over thirty years. Ive seen all sorts of crap. I was with him pretty much everywhere, including when he went to brothels. Thats how they got him: not food or riches, but with the promise that all the brothels would be his.*

Any promise that would get you in?

*And power, of course. Thats the real temptation: the power to become a noble even without being awakened. I tried to tell him several times, but he never listened. Id drop out of his pouch, roll into corners, once I even let myself get seen by a pickpocket just to distract him from his thoughts. Didnt work.*

Tell me how to find the Star and Ill make sure its worth it.

*Kid, dont waste your breath. Ive heard enough about you to know what youre capable of. Five different cults are talking about it. Youve caused a mighty stir. Some say youll conquer the world, some that youll join the Star. Lately, theres even talk that youll replace the Star and lead the cults to the great future they were promised ages ago.*

Should I be flattered?

*Your choice. Thing is, Ive no idea how to get there. I know the shrine is somewhere around here. There were trees all around, but not real trees.*

It would have been too easy if they were real trees. The first thing Dallion had done was to ask among the trees of the eastern forests whether they were aware of the Stars presence, or any strange villages. Leaves had rustled throughout vast areas of the forest as the trees whispered to one another, but the answer was the same. They had felt similar people come and go, but none knew of a town or village that didnt belong there.

Tell me something.

Its made of stone and has buildings, the coin guardian replied. And it was entirely covered in void. I cant stand the place. No idea how some of the others could. Probably theyd seen nothing else. Ive been in beggar pits livelier than that place. Theres a shrine, or maybe a temple. My owner wasnt allowed to approach beyond the first steps. Only those who have done something significant can go further, the actual smart types. The brainless rabble is just to do the risky jobs.

That made sense. Smart ones, like the countess, wouldnt be allowed to be enslaved by the void. Theyd prefer to be partners at most. That suggested that it wasnt going to be a simple matter of facing the Star; Dallion would have to fight his way to him, often facing enemies with the strength of nobles. This wasnt something he had planned for.

Now, do you see why I needed the extra level? Dallions tone was as cold as ice.

It would have made no difference. Nil stood his ground. Besides, theres no guarantee the Star actually hides in a sect temple. Its like saying that the Moons live in the Orders citadels.

Is the Star there? Dallion asked the silver coin.

*Not all the time, but often enough. He likes to give orders in person. Its a good thing he cant talk to items.*

If the Star spent most of his time there it would explain why most of his activity was related to the area, the southern part of the Wetie province, in particular. It was close enough to the fallen south without being there. The Star could easily hop there to think of the past, or he could get back to increasing his influence in Nerosal. There was no telling how long his plans had been in motion decades at least, probably more. It also explained why the city guards were so bad at finding cultists in Nerosal. As long as the deal with the countess was in effect, the Star could do pretty much whatever he liked. Given he was a patient creature, it wouldnt come as a surprise if the Star waited until the next generation of Priscords took the title, before continuing further north. Nerosal was merely the first step.

Thanks, coin. Ill improve you and drop you off on the path. With you better luck with the next person that finds you.

*Thanks. Thats kind of you. If its not a merchant, Ill just end up seeing the same story.*

Unlike silver, gold always makes it to a merchant sooner or later.

Dallion entered the coins realm and improved it a dozen times until it became gold. Sadly, none of his own skills were boosted in the process. He had already reached the limit of the levels he could improve.

Someones approaching, the trees whispered again.

Chapter 634: An Unexpected Face

Lux, stay close, Dallion ordered.

Having someone come so soon after another group meant one of two things. Either the new person was chasing them, or using them as bait to see Dallion make his move. Either way, that suggested he was going to be a bigger threat than the trio combined.

Disrupt him, Dallion told the trees, as he burst into instances, all heading in the general direction of the new opponent. The person must have sent that, for he too performed a combat split.

Concentrating, Dallion went through all possible instances, determining which to make reality. Sadly, in none of them did his enemy suffer any negative consequences. As far as he could tell, none of them seemed any different at all.

Stacking, Dallion thought. That was unexpected. At least his opponent knew how to fight.

Splitting again, Dallion performed a combination of line and point attacks. Other than devastating the immediate area of the forest, none caused any harm to the enemy. What they did was allow Dallion to determine the others exact location.

For a split second the enemy was within view among the falling trees of an instance. From this distance he seemed on the skinny side, dressed in standard traveling clothes and not wielding a weapon. One would almost think that this was just a random hunter who ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time; at least if it wasn't for the blocking and defocus items he was wearing. If nothing else, no hunter would wear defocus in the wilderness.

*Lux, target him.*

The dartblade flew up in the air with a bolt already loaded. Meanwhile, Dallion tapped his harpsisword on the side of his leg. Not too far away the approaching sounds of buzzing insects and approaching branches became more and more audible.

Normally, those would be enough to put anyone at a disadvantage, though unlike the previous cultist, this one was apparently prepared for both. There was no telling whether the insects had any effect, but the trees were definitely proving unable to hinder him in the slightest.

Using his layer vision, Dallion waited for the precise moment, then did a point attack aiming for the others legs. The wave of destruction swept through the forest, taking out massive tree branches. Just as it was about to reach its target, though, the man twisted as if splitting in two. The attack swept cleanly through one, only to show that it had hit an afterimage.

Ruby, slice him, Dallion whispered.

The shardfly sprung to life, detaching itself from Dallion's left shoulder. Spreading its wings, it let out a small tornado of slashes. Leaves, twigs, and branches filled the air. When they drew near to the enemy, he drew two large curve knives, deflecting them or with minimal effort.

In his mind, Dallion could almost see red rectangles pop up with the ATTACK NEGATED message. This had to be one of the non-brainless cultists the coin guardian had told him about. Thinking about it, facing one now was a good stroke of luck. This way he had an idea what to expect before reaching the Stars temple.

So, you've boosted your reaction trait, Dallion said to himself, performing a series of attacks so fast that it seemed he was simultaneously attacking with three swords.

Two of the horizontal attacks were skillfully dodged, while the third was blocked with both blades. In the past this would have been good, but now it wasn't good enough. The intensity of the harpsiswords' vibrations increased, tossing one of the knives into the air. Dallion was just about to proceed with a multi-piercing attack, when his opponent briskly pulled back.

Stop! The man pulled off a ring from his finger, causing his nondescript face to come into focus revealing

Spike? Uncertain what to do, Dallion split into instances, counting his attack in all but one case. The result was always the same: Spike managed to evade a mortal blow, though not without suffering some serious injuries. Unwilling to let that happen, Dallion chose the one instance in which no blood was shed.

You trying to kill me? The ex-guildmate asked. They told me you've changed, but wow. You're really gone wild. A grin appeared on his face. I fully approve. Just not here, okay? The guys will never put this to rest if I ended up dying after volunteering to play courier for you.

Courier? Dallion somewhat lowered his blade.

I haven't heard anything of the sort, Nil said within Dallion's realm. Everyone's still been lying low after your spectacular punishment.

Hannah sent you?

Nah, March put me up to this. More like Vend guilted me. All of them are under watch. Some huge crap went down when you ran off. Vends been hiding with some old chums in the Mirror Pool. March was arrested and kept in some cell somewhere. Some say she's in the countess's dungeons. I think that she's in one of the guard forts.

Dallion expected as much. It was unexpected that Vend would go to the Mirror Pool, though. Then again, it was one of the best places to hide, considering what was to come. The countess had probably used Dallion as an excuse to fully consolidate her power prior to directly challenging the Archduke.

Your funeral was touching, by the way, Spike went on. It had crowd speeches and all.

My funeral?

Naturally, you were killed by a group of assassins for hire. Spike laughed as he said it. It was an insult that the countess couldn't ignore, and so soon after you caught the phoenix, too. A messenger was sent to the emperor in protest.

*Why am I learning about this now, Nil?*

*You really wanted to learn all the useless gossip? The versions change every day. In one version, you were working with assassins in their attempt to kill the countess. Spike is the least reliable person to get your information from. Hes probably got half the stories mixed in one. For one thing, it wasn't a real funeral. You were missing.*

That made a bit more sense. This way, the countess left her options open no matter what might happen.

*As for March, it is believed shes locked up, but that also isn't confirmed. The only true thing that Spike has said is that Vend went into hiding with the Mirror Pool.*

Seems like some people never change, Dallion sighed.

*Vend?*

*No, Spike*

Dallion looked at the man. Knowing him, Spike probably enjoyed the fight and only quit upon seeing the level difference. On a scary note, while Dallion was at least ten levels higher, the crazy Icepicker was no joke. If he didn't have the limitations a non-awakened had, he would be outright scary.

What did you bring? Dallion went directly to business.

Here you go. Spike tossed him a small parcel wrapped in cloth. With the general's compliments. No idea what's inside and I don't want to know. That guy is bad news.

Hes useful. Dallion unwrapped the parcel. The item looked identical to the one he had used when capturing the aetherbird. Hopefully, it was going to function in the same way. If not, Dallion could hope that the general would be next on the Stars list for helping him in the past. Anything else? He tucked the artifact in his belt.

Eurys been asking about you. Spikes tone changed. She didn't believe the stories about you dying and all, but she knows youre in trouble. Relations between Nerosal and Linatol are bad right now. It doesn't look like shell be allowed to visit anytime soon.

Tell her Im fine. Dallion looked away.

Yeah, right.

I disarmed you, didn't I? Dallions tone was as cold as his glance. For several seconds he and Spike stared at one another, after which Spike shrugged.

Its your life. Its rich coming from me, but being able to kick someones ass isnt the same as being fine. Youre a wreck, you just don't know it yet.

Youre wrong, Dallion thought. Im fully aware.



How did you find me? A spark of suspicion flared up in Dallions mind. He hadnt told anyone where hed go. He himself didnt know hed be east until a day ago.

About that The Star cults have a way of tracking you. Dont ask me how. I dont understand much of that crap. The general told me who to follow, and they led me right to you, just as he said they would.

That wasnt supposed to happen. Dallion had triple checked. There werent any spy echoes within his items. Hed gone through great pains to explore every inch of their realms and found nothing. Spike had to be lying, and yet to have found him in the eastern forests so easily had to be more than a coincidence.

Thats why he told me to loan you this. The man tossed a ring to Dallion.

Disfocus? Dallion wondered.

Apparently not only. He said that itll help you and you better be appreciative. Really, how can you stand that guy?

Could you find a ring like this?

No

Theres your answer.

Silence followed, only interrupted by the rustling of the leaves. The fight over, Ruby flew down, landing on Dallions shoulder again. Uncertain what to do, Lux moved the dartblade through the air before floating back down.

So, what now? Spike broke the silence. Off to fight the Star?

Someone has to. Dallion grabbed hold of the dartblade and attached it to the back of his belt.

Good luck. Have fun. The man turned around. Want me to bring back a message?

Dallion shook his head. A few seconds later, Spike was gone, rushing north through the forest. Dallion remained vigilant for a few more moments. Only when the trees confirmed that there wasnt anyone in the vicinity did he sheath his harpsisword.

That could have gone a bit better, Nil said.

Things could always have gone a bit better. They could also have gone a lot worse. He split on the disfocus ring. He didnt feel any change. Hopefully, the effects would be apparent to others.

Once that was done, Dallion leapt back to the ground. He still had three dead cultist bodies to deal with.

Building an open fire in the forest was a bad idea in more ways than one. For a high level awakened, however, the dangers had a tendency quickly to fade away. There was no danger of the nearby plants of lighting up. Even without instances, Dallion was fast enough to prevent the fire from spreading just by using his blade. It was almost like making a pot out of clay, waving about the blade fast enough and in the right fashion kept the fire in a cone that rise up without touching anything unintended.

The stench of burning flesh was abundant, reminding Dallion of some of his awakening trials. This time, they were real flesh and blood corpses being devoured by flames.

Did you get any memory fragments from them? Nil asked.

No, Dallion replied, thankful to the Moons that he hadn't. I can't control when they happen.

*I'd strongly suggest you learn. If you survive this, it will be a skill that would considerably benefit you.*

If I succeed, the world will be different. No one has ever defeated the Star. The words echoed in Dallion's mind. Only now was it starting to sink in that many had tried, all of them stronger with better weapons and equipment. And still the Star had remained. Even when the Blue Moon had destroyed the past age, the Star hadn't perished. Then again, the Star had never been wounded as far as Dallion could tell.

It's never too late, Aether said.

You never quit, do you?

*I have all the time in existence, both past and future. Why should I stop?*

I won't release you.

*That's what you say now, and I believe it. When you face the Star, though, but might not have a choice.*

If you could have killed the Star, you would have done it ages ago.

*You're right. I can't. But you can. I don't want to kill the Star. I want to help you do it.*

Chapter 635: Infiltrating the Darkness

Finding the cult's temple was easier than one expected. After Dallion had put on the ring from the general, the cultists in the area of the forests had stopped targeting him, moving to the southeast instead. It wasn't a straight line. The cultists would stop, waiting till they gathered in small groups, then move on.

The closer Dallion got to the temple, the more helpful the aetherbird became. The creature helped Dallion follow the slight traces of void lingering behind the cultists' groups. It seemed that they were less careful when outside of the cities. Either that, or Aether was extremely good at picking up what no one else could.

He's far too eager for you to get there, Nil whispered. You know what that means.

*He needs me more than I need him.*

*It's all a matter of degrees. He's a Moon's familiar. He can survive pretty much anything. Not that anyone would dare go that far.*

*If something happens to me in the temple before I set him free, the Star will have him to do as he pleases.*

*I still say youre taking a huge risk.*

For half a day, Dallion kept on tracking the trail. The interesting thing was that the trees, plants, and animals proved incapable of detecting the cultists at one point. Dallion couldnt get a valid explanation from the aetherbird, but from what he could make out, it had to do with the amount of void matter when the cultists got together. Apparently, in large enough quantities, the substance had the power to become invisible to all but magic, and other voidlings.

When night came, all cultist activity stopped. Unlike what Dallion was used to on Earth, it was the night that monsters feared. In darkness, the power of the Moons was unimpeded by the suns. If Aether could be believed, that helped them see better. Nil, same as Dallion, was skeptical about the matter.

Which way? Dallion whispered. South?

Why do you keep asking me? the aetherbird chirped in amused fashion.

Youre already helping me, so just go all the way. You know where the Star is.

*I knew where he was a few years ago. Hes clearly not there, now.*

The temples location hasnt changed.

*This is where youre wrong. The temple might not have changed, but its location has. Dont you even know how the wilderness and areas work?*

Dallion had no idea. He knew the basics that every awakened was aware of: settlements created a protective domain around them, keeping them safe from wilderness influences. The stronger the area guardian, the larger the area, the more influence could be exerted within. That turned cities into fortresses aware of any unhidden awakened within them. Depending on the owner and the guardian, they were able to instantly invade the realm of anyone who set foot there. However, Dallion doubted this was what the aetherbird had in mind when asking the question.

The wilderness is a sea, Aether continued. Settlements are chunks of ice on the surface. With enough strength, one can pull them down.

The Moons wont allow it.

*It all depends on the circumstances. Besides, the Star never intended to destroy Nerosal. He wanted to have it and move it.*

Not too long ago, Dallion believed there was little that could surprise him. Once again, he had been proven wrong. What annoyed him more was that the explanation was something he could have figured out on his own if he didnt stick to old pre-conceptions.

Nerosal hadnt just been a show of strength, it was supposed to be the Stars new city; not the Nerosal of today, but the ruins buried beneath. Once the city had been swallowed up by the wilderness, the Star could have moved it anywhere he wished in anticipation of the aetherbirds return. The world swords were likely only a small stepping stone in the grand scope of things.

Why not just take the buildings in the fallen south?

*You think hes stupid? If he could have, he would. The temple is all he could move about and do so frequently.*

That explained why it was so difficult to find.

Cant he just change provinces?

The Stars not omnipotent. The aetherbird laughed. With the wound I gave him, he cant achieve anything spectacular. Hes probably crawling like a grasshopper, trying to move away from you and other dangers. Thanks to the ring you got, things will probably calm down.

What do you know about it?

*Enough to know that the star cant see you. Thats why itll be stupid for him to shift locations, especially in his state. At this point, all he can do is hope you dont find him before he recovers. That and that you wont be able to pass through his defenses.*

There was clearly a lot more that Aether wasnt saying. Dallion was no different, even if he had a lot fewer secrets to share. When it came down to the final battle with the Star it was going to follow Earth rules, and that included elements that Dallion had learned in high-school things he never thought would have any practical application.

The tracking continued the next morning. It was very much like aether had said: more and more groups were gathering, some of them dressed in the fashion of the far north. As all the ones before, they had as few item guardians as possible. Always the same thing would happen: they would gather, form a group, then seem to vanish in the forest. Several times, Dallion was in a position to attack a whole group and several times he didnt. Brute force wasnt the answer to this problem, it was patience. Around noon, he was finally rewarded.

One cultist had been careless enough to bring a stolen dagger with him. The weapon guardian wasnt at all pleased, screaming his head off for anyone who could hear; and Dallion did have the ability to do so.

Combining three skills, he sprinted along the tree branches, aiming towards the single cultist. Just to make things more certain, he convinced the dagger to fall out to the ground.

The cultist bent down to pick it up, and never rose up again. One single hit with the Nox dagger was enough to crack his head, granting him a quick, painless death.

You could have gone about it in a more elegant fashion, Nil commented. He could have cried out.

He didnt. Dallion went through his belongings.

Other than the knife, there was nothing of value. The man had simply been responding to the call to get back to the temple. This presented a limited opportunity, and Dallion quickly took it. Switching clothes, Dallion then left all non-combat items, including his armadil shield, hiding them within the hollow of a tree. It was a risky move, though less risky than being spotted.

Thread cutter and dartblade too, Nil reminded.

This wasn't something Dallion agreed with.

*It'll be risky enough smuggling a harp's sword in. The dartblade is a dead giveaway.*

Theoretically, he would still be able to summon them while in the awakening realms since the items were linked. It was getting to that point that worried Dallion. Fighting without a shield was bad enough. Having to go without Lux was beyond reckless.

I'm relying on you getting to me, Lux. Dallion put him on the branch of the tree.

Got it, boss! The firebird chirped.

Ruby, you'll have to hide as well. Don't go out until I say so.

Sure, the shardfly replied.

Three weapons and his skills against potentially hundreds. Dallion would be surprised if there were over a thousand present, though given the roots of the Star, anything was possible. Right now, his greatest weapons were going to have to be stealth and cunning, both of which had to be achieved without relying on music skills. For all intents and purposes, Dallion had to become a cultist, one with a completely different set of abilities than his own. It would have been a lot easier if Gleam were here. She would be able to use some of her illusion magic, to make things go smoother. Sadly, that wasn't an option.

Done, Dallion adjusted his dark beige cloak and dashed forward.

Keep going for a few miles, Aether said. I'll tell you where to stop.

Don't trust me. I'll get there on my own?

*Your groups waiting for you. If you're seen moving about in circles, they'll know something is wrong.*

How are you sure they're waiting for me?

*The system the cults have established is quite smart, but that's only because most of their cultists are stupid. Groups are composed of eight members, all of which have similar void concentrations.*

Will I get in trouble?

*The void threads of the clothes you took, combined with your crackling, should be enough to fool them. No one in their right mind would try to infiltrate the sect.*

Everything still involved a lot of guesswork, but it was better than the alternative. After a few more seconds, the aetherbird told Dallion to stop and turn to his right. Soon after, he reached the spot he was supposed to. Five cultists were already there, waiting. A few glanced Dallion's way upon arriving, the rest didn't even do that, waiting still as columns.

Looking at the faces, they were common everyday people that wouldn't be noticed in a crowd. One, similar to Dallion, was wearing a defocus ring and, judging by the position of his head, was looking back.

After about five minutes of silence, the seventh member of the group arrived.

We need to go, she said. The intonation of her voice suggested that she had authority.

Were still seven, the person with disfocus said.

Two groups were killed off. Were going as we are.

Not time to see how you do it, Dallion said to himself.

The members of the group gathered together. Dallion did the same. Then, without warning, smoke threads of void matter emerged from all of them. Dallions output was a lot less than the rest, coming only from his clothes. Thankfully, it didnt seem that anyone noticed. A sphere of smoke quickly formed around the group, after which the world suddenly faded away. One flash and the entire forest was gone, replaced by a barren rocky desert. Another, and they were in a sea of blackness, similar to what a person turning into a chainling would be.

The sea of the void, Dallion thought.

The aetherbird hadnt been using metaphors when describing it. Black murky water was in all directions, though every now and again there were other bubblesbubbles full with eight people each all flying at high speed towards a common point.

Now it was clear why no one was able to track the cultists after a specific point. This was their world, a domain that at the same time wasnt a domain, just void in various forms.

Fascinating, Nil gasped. To think Id see this. Thereve been theoretical studies, of course. Scholars have argued upon the concept for centuries, but to see it

All it takes is to join a Star cult, Dallion replied in cynical fashion.

*Sorry to disappoint you, dear boy, but it doesnt work like that. Mages cannot be affected by the void, not while they are alive in any event.*

That was news.

Thats why mages are more inclined to enter deals with him, Dallion added. Meddling with all those cursed artifacts

*Also why we have to be so careful when we do? We can still be killed, but worse, if were not careful, we can carry the void without noticing two items and people who are less fortunate. As you promptly found out during your fight against the phoenix, the spark has the same effect on us as it does on the void. We cannot cleanse ourselves from void, not in the fashion the Order does. Rather, we have to meticulously examine every inch of our own beings and everything we carry. Unless we are a Moons familiar naturally. You see, magic has its limits. We just dont talk about it.*

## Chapter 636: The Star's Temple

When the coin guardian had said that the Star had a temple, Dallion expected it to be a much smaller version of the pyramid he had seen in the fallen south. That wasnt remotely the case. For one thing the temple was more a temple complex containing two dozen buildings. Each building was large enough to hold at least a hundred people. The interesting part was that the buildings were extremely modern, futuristic even: rectangles with sharp edges and multiple floors, made exclusively of steel and black glass. All that was missing were a few neon lights and one would think this to be a cyberpunk fantasy come true. And in the middle of all that stood the temple itself an inverted triangular pyramid positioned on the top of a mound of stairs. It took someone with a lot of power to construct something of the sort in this world, and no architectural taste whatsoever.

Two massive chainlings stood guard in front of the Stars pyramid, each larger than the buildings themselves. In many ways, they reminded Dallion of the one hed hunted years ago, only a lot bigger.

Get to your buildings, the leader of Dallions group ordered. Enjoy the space while it lasts.

Dallion paused, uncertain where to go. Within moments, he found that he wasnt the only one. While the ordinary cultists hurried to the nearest building, the leader of the group and the other member with disfocus remained put.

Cant stand the trash, the one with disfocus said. Cant decide worth crap on their own, but still expect to get close to the steps.

Theyre necessary, the leader said.

For now, Dallion added, doing his best to maintain his cover. First time Ive seen so many get called.

It was a big risk being so straightforward, although everything considered it was better than the alternatives. Being assertive would let the others drop their guard a bit, and in the event he was found out, getting away from the edge of the complex was far easier than from within it.

Thats because they havent. The leader slid on her own disfocus ring. The lines of her face lost focus, as if someone were looking at an image on the surface of a rippling lake. Something big is going down. Rumor is that the Star got hurt bad. Its possible hell appoint a proxy.

A proxy? the other disfocused asked. That explains the chainlings. Whore the candidates?

Its just a rumor. Might be to get our marching orders.

Or purged, Dallion added. He had no idea what made him say that, but it somehow felt right.

Arent you an optimist, the leader said. Possibly she was making an attempt to appear dismissive, but her body had tensed up just enough for Dallion to notice. Either way, well find out soon enough. See you in the temple. She strode off. A few moments later Dallion and the other cultists did as well.

As they walked, more groups appeared. The vast majority were without disfocus, though now and again, Dallion would spot someone who was. Based on the general behavior, he was starting to get an idea of the local hierarchy. From what he could tell, the cultists were divided into three groups. There were the fodder which were little more than chainlings in the making the elite, and what could only be described as the clerics. At present, Dallion had only glimpsed a few of them, but they were memorable, with their clothes made entirely of ever-shifting void matter. Unlike the rest, they freely went up and down the stairs leading to the temple, suggesting they were closer to the Star than anyone else.

Maybe taking down the Star wont be as easy as you thought, Nil said. There seem to be a bit more cultists than expected.

You think? If there were a hundred, Dallion felt confident enough to take them on, but looking around, he wouldnt be able to do much, even with the element of surprise on his side.

The first thing Dallion would have to deal with were the chainlings. At his present level, the creatures weren't going to be a terribly big threat. The void matter, though, was going to provide the Star with a tremendous advantage. The clerics were next on the list, not to mention he had no idea whether the pyramid or the buildings were created of the same material or not. Just because they appeared to be made of class didn't mean a thing.

There were a total of twenty-four buildings surrounding the pyramid. Four were placed almost in immediate vicinity, with the rest spread further out. Suspecting that the ones closest were reserved for the clerics, Dallion made his way to the second row.

When he got there, it turned out that he had been mistaken. Fortunately for him, the defocus ring he was wearing made everyone straighten up, ending all chatter. Clearly, they saw Dallion as a superior.

What the hell did you give me, general? Dallion wondered.

Suddenly, the darkness rose from all sides of the temple complex, plunging it into the void. When it trickled away moments later, Dallion found that the background had completely changed. Now in addition to the massive trees, there were a couple of mountains as well.

Where are we? Dallion asked within his realm.

East, Aether replied first. Further east.

*How far east?*

*Not too much, but enough to get a breather from the Order. I must have hurt him quite a lot. The clerics aren't usually this aggressive.*

From what Dallion had seen, that wasn't the case. War clerics had been sighted roaming the province and beyond even before the start of the poison plague. At the time, Dallion had wondered what they were up to. Was it possible they were preparing to move against the Star himself? As organizations went, they were the only one that had remained active since the previous era.

I'll never get used to that, one of the cultists whispered.

You. Dallion pointed at the unfortunate man. Anything you wish to say?

No the man trembled. It's just that there hasn't been such a guardian since

Get back to your building. Dallion cut him short. All of you.

The group rushed to follow the order. Several passing by cultists gave Dallion a strange glance, but said nothing.

Not wishing to tempt fate, Dallion turned around and made his way to the innermost row of buildings. Those were a lot emptier. Choosing an entrance at random, Dallion went inside. The floors were made entirely of void matter. The corridor and even the doors resembled those of an office building. All that was lacking were the electronics. Apparently, none of the cultists were otherworlders.



The room itself had no furniture whatsoever. Based on how adept the Star was in manipulating void matter, it was probably the responsibility of the elite cultists to create their own furniture using the floor itself.

Any idea where I am, Lux? Dallion asked.

Sorry, boss, the firebird chirped sadly. No idea since you vanished.

I know where you are, Aether quickly said.

*Will you tell him?*

*Why not? You cant win against the star with just him. Hell help to deal with the small fries.*

So, confident, Dallion whispered.

Who is? a distorted voice asked.

Every fiber in Dallions body screamed for him to draw his harpsisword and attack the source of the voice. It was through sheer force of will that he kept himself from doing so, turning around instead. A cultist cleric was standing at the rooms threshold, the void matter covering him like a tunic.

It doesnt matter, Dallion said, making himself sound as arrogant as possible. Is it true that a proxy will be chosen?

Is that why you came into my room? The cultist stepped inside. No, it isnt true. The Star has a proclamation to make. Youll find out when the rest do.

Does that mean that you know already?

The question made the cultist step in. There was no hesitation, just overwhelming power.

So, thats a top cultist, Dallion thought. There was no telling what level he was, but fighting him wouldnt be a walk in the park, especially here.

Spikes shot up from the floor, stopping an inch from Dallions face.

Dont piss me off, newbie. You might be a big shot out there, but here youre just another puppet.

A chill ran down Dallions spine.

Hes no idea who you are. Dont worry, Aether said. Only the Star knows everyone. He probably thinks youre a nobles relation. They usually hide their faces.

If I were another puppet, you wouldnt talk to me this way. Dallion took a step forward. The spikes adjusted so as not to touch his skin. Nice room, by the way. Lacks character, but has everything else.

At every step, Dallion was prepared to get into a fight. Fortunately, no such thing happened. The moment Dallion stepped out of the room, the void matter from the floor rose up, blocking out the doorway entirely. And just in case there was any doubt, more spikes emerged from the dark surface.

That served as a perfect excuse for Dallion to get out of the building and explore the temple complex grounds.

For hours, more groups would appear. Watching them made Dallion think of cracklings slowly amassing until there were enough of them to cause an entire item to shatter. Something big was in the words, though there was no telling what. According to the aetherbird, it was all a lie to get as many cultists here to protect the Star from future attacks. Nil, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the Star might make an attempt on Linatol itself. If the countess really was involved, having the capital of her enemy suddenly vanish was all she needed to claim the title of Archduke. On the other hand, if the Star was about to betray her, he might try and go for Nerosal instead. Either way, one thing was clear: Dallion's initial plan to sneak to the Star wouldn't work.

For the four hours he had been here, only clerics had entered and left the inverted pyramid. No one else was allowed to approach the stairs, let alone the temple itself.

You can always leave things to me, Aether reminded. As soon as you release me, I'll scorch the Star and his temple to the ground. We're away from the inhabited world, so no one will suffer, only those who deserve it. Think about it.

The offers were getting harder to ignore. The way things were going, maybe it was better to just go for it and hope for the worst. It was the simplest solution, and there was no guarantee that the outcome would be as bad as the prophecy said. That was the bad thing about prophecies, there was always too much room for interpretation.

*Lux, how fast can you get here?*

*In a flash, boss! Do you want me to go?*

Not yet. Dallion made his way towards the edge of the complex. I need to take care of something first. Just be ready to attack directly. There are two chainlings. I want you to kill one of them.

*Absolutely, boss!*

Dallion glanced over his shoulder. He could easily do a point attack and kill the other chainling. With some effort, he could also aim at the pyramid behind. Even if the structure was undoubtedly reinforced, a spark-infused point attack was going to purge off some void matter, making it vulnerable for subsequent attacks.

What do you think, Harp? Dallion tapped the weapon hidden beneath his clothes. Ready to do all out?

A faint melody in Dallion's realm suggested the nymph was.

*Good. Just wait a bit longer.*

This isn't a realm, dear boy, Nil interrupted. I don't doubt your recklessness, but echoes won't work here. You'll be alone against hundreds, maybe thousands.

What makes you think I'll be alone? Dallion allowed himself a slight smile.

Chapter 637: Start of the Storm

For someone who was trying to remain hidden, the Stars security was incredibly lax. Dallion was able to go about the complex as much as he wished and, other than the incident with the cleric, no one asked him a single question. A few all with disfocus itemseven tried to score some brownie points. Apparently, hiding ones identity was a sign of importance. As much as it made Dallions job easier, it was also scary. The notion that people from noble families were Star cultists wasnt particularly surprising, but given the rules of awakening, Dallion had hoped that there wouldnt be as many of them. It was a miracle how provinces werent in a constant state of civil war. The emperor had to be quite powerful and rule everything with an iron fist in a velvet glove.

In theory, there wasnt supposed to be a border between the complex and the rest of the wilderness. Going towards the edge, though, Dallion was able to see the subtle signs of the bubble surrounding the area. It was unusualneither an area domain, nor void, but something in-between. More importantly, it appeared to be quite breachable. Ruby had helped Dallion confirm that by flying several miles into the forest and back without issue. In the process, the shardfly had met up with Lux, as well as conducted a number of other errands. That left Dallion waiting for the right time to act.

Youre risking it, Aether said. He could switch the location at any point.

He could, Dallion said. But he wont.

From the chatter, Dallion had learned that the shifts happened no more than once per day, always remaining in the same overall area. That tended to benefit cultists in the Wetie province since they could get there in a matter of days. The rest had been coming from all over the empire for weeks, probably ever since Dallions last fight with the Star. Everything made it clear that despite his power, considerable limitations were placed on the Star, otherwise hed just be able to move his stronghold to whichever province he liked, whenever he liked.

Everything needs to be perfect for this to work.

Only I need to be perfect, the aietherbird chirped. And I am.

Dallion glanced up. No Moons were visible in the sky even if he was certain they were there. They had already said that they wouldnt help, but even so, they were constantly watching.

Hey, a distorted voice said not too far from Dallion. What are you doing here?

Dallion turned around. As expected, the voice belonged to a cleric. The dark matter surrounding him had shifted into a cloak, a t-shirt, and a pair of jeans. Funny how the top cultists were trying to mimic the Star without even knowing the origin of these clothes.

Just providing a spectacle, Dallion replied.

Spectacle? The cleric took a step closer.

At this precise moment, Dallion reacted, drawing his harpsisword faster than the eye could see. The blade of the weapon was already vibrating and full of spark as it split the air. The cleric didnt react. That was one of the huge weaknesses for people perceived to have overwhelming powerthey were slow to react to surprise attacks. Being always the one infiltrating, the cultists couldnt imagine that anyone would infiltrate them. The cleric didnt even have time to display signs of surprise as the spark infused blade sliced his head off. Only then did the void react, letting out a scream as part of it was devoured by the attacks light.

Lux, now! Dallion ordered, as he focused on one of the massive chainlings by the temple and did a series of spark point attacks.

Destruction swept through the complex, drilling the massive entity full of holes. Fractions of a second later, an arrow enveloped in blue flames struck the head of the second chainling.

Screams that no human could produce filled the air, bringing hundreds of low-level cultists to their knees. One of the chainlings exploded in a pop of void matter, the point attacks continuing on and bouncing off the inverted pyramid. Unfortunately, the other chainling wasn't as affected. Despite the wound it had received from Lux's attack, the creature was very much alive.

Should have known, Dallion thought as he tossed the harpsisword to his left hand and did four more spark infused point attacks. He was hoping he wouldn't have to use as many before his fight against the Star. His initial plan was to kill off the chainlings quickly and efficiently. He had accomplished half of that.

Dazed by Lux's initial attack, the second chainling had proved no challenge. Dallion's greatest fear was that it would start jumping around, making it difficult to deal with. Thankfully, that wasn't the case, and as an added bonus, a cleric was also killed. With that, it was time for the main event.

Now, Dallion whispered, tearing off his cultist cloak.

Swarms of birds of all types emerged from the surrounding forest, all descending onto the complex. Dallion had spent the last few hours using his zoology, herbalism, scholar, and music skills to gather the creatures, preparing for this attack. With more time, he could have done way better, but this was just as impressive.

Now it was clear why empath's had been so feared in the dryad army. With enough skill, they could devastate an entire area, not only the target of the attack, but everything around it as well. There was no telling how long it would take for the animal population to repopulate what had gone. In Dallion's case, probably not too long, for he had only drawn everything in a thirty-mile radius.

It was astonishing how many creatures could be found in that area of forest. From insects to alpha predators, as long as one knew where to look, they could amass an army. The benefit of having the zoology skill was that one didn't have to look, and if they were strong enough, they could talk to them.

The first few seconds were utter chaos. Birds attacked swooped down, attacking the already confused cultists. Waves of animals soon joined in, charging from behind Dallion like a living wave. All of them avoided Dallion himself, staying six feet away at all times. The cultists weren't as lucky. The ones nearest to the edges of the complex were trampled before putting any resistance. After that, however, the chaos subsided.

Dozens of cultists burst, transforming into chainling cubs. They weren't anything close to the real thing, but strong enough to deal with a bunch of animals. Black spikes and tendrils skewered many of the creatures, sometimes at the cost of the cultists' own lives, but soon enough, they had gained the upper hand. The vicious attack had been reduced to nothing but noise.

Here we go, Dallion whispered, darting forward.

It would be half a minute at most before the attacking attack waves were thinned to the point that they were done with. During that time, though, he could fight pretty much unimpeded.

Bursting into instances, Dallion rushed to the nearest group of cultists. There was an attempt to force a specific instance, but it was weak and unrefined. It was obvious that a noble wannabe was making an effort to turn the tide, though to no effect.

Almost dancing his way through the battlefield, Dallion put down cultists like they were grass. Thanks to the spark in most cases one strike was enough to end them. At each kill, Dallion would combat split again and continue. Similar to his fights in the awakened realms, Dallion focused on the weaker enemies first. They were a lot faster to kill and reduced the overall mass. There always was the danger of the Star making an appearance and draining all of their void matter, putting Dallion at a severe disadvantage.

While Dallion was fighting his way towards the temple, Lux has also joined in, darting with the flaming arrow through any enemy he could, only moving from the temple outwards. His kill rate was significantly less, but unlike Dallion, he had the added benefit of becoming stronger after each success.

*Tide is turning,*

Aether said.

Not yet, Dallion sliced through another cultist.

The animals and birds had been decimated, but the insects were still in large enough numbers to remain a distraction.

Grabbing the hilt of his weapon with both hands, Dallion spun in place, releasing a line attack all around him. Destruction went in all directions, cutting through anything and anyone that couldn't defend himself. Hundreds of cultists were sliced in two, along with a large number of animals. The thread of destruction didn't end there, spreading into the forest. Massive trees fell like matchsticks until the attack completely lost its strength. The buildings, on the other hand, remained intact.

For a moment, glimpses of the metal skeleton within them became visible, before the void matter moved to fill the cuts. All of them, without exception, were made of sky steel alloy, impervious to line attacks.

Just as Dallion was contemplating whether to do another line attack, the complex shifted. The trees surrounding it vanished, replaced by rocky nothingness.

Nil, where are we? Dallion kept on splitting, looking around with each instance.

It was obvious that this was a mountain, but not one Dallion recognized. Thanks to his scholar skills he had memorized all landmarks in the empire and surrounding countries all the way to the west ocean. Matching scribbles on paper to actual geography was never easy, but Dallion was certain this wasn't a part of the world he knew about.

I have no idea, dear boy, the old echo replied. My guess would be a mountain.

Were east, Aether said. Further east, beyond the forest. I guess the Star doesnt want to risk you having allies. Dumb move since Im still here.

It sounded like the Star to isolate Dallion, removing any possible advantage. At the same time, he still hadnt made an appearance. This had never happened in the past. If anything, Arthurows had a flair for the dramatic, taking every opportunity to show how superior he was.

*Are you sure the Star is here?*

No doubt about it, the aetherbird chirped back.

Bolts of void matter rained in on Dallion from all directions. There were a tenth of the cultists left standing in the complex, nearly all of them with disfocus items. From here on, the real fight began.

Shield! Dallion said instinctively as he leapt for cover.

All but three of his instances ended up shredded by the bolts. The remaining ones managed to escape safely, though not unharmed. Dallions right arm had started bleeding again. Soon, the pain he was doing his best to ignore would flare up even more.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion looked out from behind his cover. The entire complex was full of animal and human corpses, at times stacking up to knee height. The stench of death had yet to form, though soon it would. There was a time when Dallion would have vomited at the sight of all this. Now, his only complaint was that they werent letting him get a good look at his surviving enemies.

Lux, tell me whats going on! Dallion ordered.

*Its difficult to say, boss. They keep merging with the buildings, so Ive no idea where they are.*

*Damn. Get out of there!*

Are you sure, boss? the firebird chirped. I can help!

*Find out where this is! Ill need that later on.*

Right, boss! The arrow shot up into the sky, disappearing from view.

Dallion reached beneath his clothes. The artifact that the general had given him was still there, as was his Nox dagger. Just as he was about to make a move, a new volley of void matter artillery flew in his direction. This time, the projectiles were larger, falling from an angle. His enemies were learning.

Any advice, Harp? he asked as he split into three dozen instances, all scattering in different directions.

Yes, the nymph guardian replied. Blank your mind.

Chapter 638: Thinning the Flock

A total of thirty-five cultists remained after the massacre. Nine of them had left the scene, willing to risk the Stars displeasure. The remaining twenty-six, split into two groups. The clerics gathered around the inverted pyramid, creating a defensive ring. That was the logical part. Dallion assumed

that if the Star was hurt enough, he'd aim to wear down any opponent before making an appearance himself.

The second group were the ambitious ones. Just like nobles who felt they deserved more, they charged at Dallion in as flashy fashion as possible. It was obvious they were showing off to gain the Star's favor, probably thinking this would earn them the equivalent of a promotion within the ranks of the cult. If he had to deal with only a few of them things would have been perfect. Dealing with a dozen and a half, was a different matter.

Their coordination is rather good, Nil commented while the cultists landed attacks on Dallion.

A third were attacking while the remaining ones reacted to Dallion's attempts to counterattack. Even with instances, Dallion was finding it difficult to keep up. There didn't seem to be any clear-cut pattern, or firm roles. Sometimes a person would keep attacking for seconds, others they'd revert to defense after a single blow. Furthermore, they were smart enough not to use any combat splitting of their own.

Evading a double piercing attack, Dallion jumped back, then did another circular line attack.

Five cultists grouped together, negating the attack by simultaneously striking the thread of destruction with vertical strikes. As for the rest, they managed to evade what was left without receiving any damage. The only ones that suffered were the corpses that were scattered away like leaves.

One of the more eager cultists took advantage of the situation to immediately go on a counterattack. Creating a second blade of void matter, he dashed at Dallion, spinning like a top.

The first slash was forcefully parried, causing both Dallion and the attacker to move a step back. The second was a lot more aggressive, aiming for Dallion's neck. This time, though, Dallion didn't use his harpsword. Relying on his superior speed and reflexes, he drew the Nox dagger then combat split and threw it right in the cultist's torso. In most of the instances, the dagger was deflected. In two, though, it hit its target. Naturally, those two were the ones that mattered.

Falling to the ground, the cultist grasped his chest, as Nox spread through his body, tearing flesh and bone.

That's one, Dallion thought. It was very likely the kill had earned the crackling a level, but there was no time to celebrate. The rest of the cultists jumped in, preventing Dallion from retrieving the weapon.

A trio attacked with high slashes aiming for Dallion's head, while two more did a series of piercing strikes in an attempt to pin his legs to the ground. The attacks were flawless, but as any pampered noble, they made one unforgivable mistake: some of them were using their own weapons, instead of such made of void.

*Slip and cut him!*

Dallion ordered, instilling thoughts of anger and rebellion into the item guardians. All of them were loyal to their masters, but even loyalty could be measured by a number, and Dallions music skills were highly developed.

Amid the attack, one of the blades slipped. It lasted only a fraction of a second, but enough to create a gap in the attack large enough for Dallion to complete a full guard sequence. The moment he did, all enemy actions slowed down.

Splendid, dear boy, Nil said. I was thinking you forgot how to use your guard skills adequately.

Just because I havent used something in a while doesnt mean Ive forgotten. Dallion continued through the cats cradle of attacks, succeeding in creating a second sequence. It had been a while since hed used that efficiently in battle, making him rusty. There was nothing like the threat of death to make him become inventive again, just like old times, as Nil would probably say.

The old echo had frequently said that for nobles, each battle is like a game of chess. It wasnt just the current action, but the series of ones that followed. Not too long ago, Dallion believed to have mastered that skill, but he was deluding himself. The only thing was able to do was to predict the moves in some of his one-to-one battles. He had never strategized against multiple opponents at once, not to the level he needed to. His present opponents were the opposite: they had the training to do so, but not the skills.

As the attackers speed kept decreasing, Dallion slowly moved in the direction to body with his dagger. Several of the cultists moved to block his path, aware of what his priorities might be. Tendrils emerged from one, making their way towards him like dripping jelly.

Dallion was annoyed that he couldnt retrieve his weapon, yet he also acknowledged that it also prevented a large part of his enemies from focusing on him. If they were so eager to guard the dagger, he might as well let them.

From the cultists perspective, Dallion suddenly appeared, piercing one of them with his blade. The single strike quickly turned into a multi-strike. One cultist died instantly. Two more received enough injuries to make them unable to fight adequately. Unfortunately, they werent the only ones. Losing his time slow advantage, Dallion became a target, earning himself a stab in the left leg. Instances helped him select a reality in which the cut was shallow, but it was still there and painful.

The instinct for self-reservation urged Dallion to respond with another line attack. His long-term fear kept him from doing so. He had already gone beyond his self-imposed quote. Any more now would put him at risk later.

Two cultists leapt over their partners in front, continuing with the attack. This time, none of them let Dallion complete a full guard sequence.

Making a forward somersault, Dallion did a vertical slash aiming to split another enemy in two. Two blades of void matter blocked his strike.

Ruby, Dallion ordered.



The shardfly flapped its wings from Dallions shoulder, sending a series of razor-sharp cuts through the air. Normally, they would be slow enough to be avoided without issue, but from a few inches distance they were merciless, killing one person and fatally injuring a second.

Two? Dallion thought as he completed his somersault. Gleam would have been proud.

Ruby shut his wings again, returning to being a clump of blackness on Dallions shoulder.

Desperate to keep Dallion from retrieving Nox, one of the cultists dragged the dagger, pulling it out from his dead colleagues body. That proved to be a deadly mistake. Since leveling up, the cracklings ability to cut wasnt limited just to the blade. A spiderweb of cracks covered the cultists hand, eating through the void matter and then the rest of his hand.

Youre thinking too much, Harp told Dallion. Let yourself go on sound and instinct.

As much as Dallion wanted to, he felt he wasnt ready to stop relying on his senses. As several times before, he knew the nymph to be right, just as he knew that now wasnt the moment to experiment.

Soon, he whispered, splitting into instances. This time half a dozen of them got through the enemies layer of defense, grabbing the Nox dagger and finishing off the unfortunate cultist with a horizontal slash through the waist.

Seven, Dallion told himself. He was almost half-way through. So far, things were going better than expected. His injuries, although painful, remained minor considering the alternatives. There was one source of concern, though. While the attacking group of cultists was losing morale and initiative fast, the clerics still hadnt joined in. If even half of them had done so, Dallion would have been presented with a difficult dilemma: risk dying on the spot or release the aetherbird.

I can end it all here, you know, Aether nudged, aware of Dallions thoughts. Cultists, buildings, and everything else. Youll never have a chance like this. Its possible that no one else in history would.

No.

*Theres no shame. You put up a good fight. You killed over a thousand of them, but your stamina wont last forever, unlike mine. I can let you finish off the annoying ones, but youll be in no state to face the Star. Something to think about.*

Two more cultists broke off from the main group, making a quick escape. All that were left, closed ranks, but even so remained at a disadvantage. Dallion could almost feel the fear within them. There were eighteen when the encounter started. Now they were down to half that.

Things would have been so much easier if Gleam were here. Controlling an indestructible whip blade always attracted attention. Her ability to create illusions also would have come in handy.

I dont want you, Dallion said, filling his words with fear. I want the Star. So, its your choice. Try to impress him, or run away.

Even with disfocus, Dallion could see the cultists glance at each other. A split second later, he dashed at them, holding a weapon in each hand.

Not very sporting, Nil grumbled. You should have at least given them a chance to run away.

Dallion didnt respond. It wasnt about giving them a chance, but about creating another distraction. Void matter emerged from the several of the cultists, creating a black shield in front of them. The harpsisword cut through without pause.

Eight, Dallion said as he spun around, continuing the attack with the Nox dagger. Nine.

A sharp bout of pain shot through Dallions leg again. He ignored it, throwing the Nox dagger at the nearest target.

Ten.

Everything seemed a lot easier all of a sudden. Dallion almost felt he could achieve everything. As a hunter, he knew this feeling well enough: the adrenalin rush that made creatures overconfident and if they werent careful dead. Yet, there was something more to it. It was almost as if something was holding the cultists back.

Moving in a semi-trance, Dallion reduced the six remaining to five, then three. In one of his instances, he even rushed towards the clerics to see how theyd react. The moment he did, all eight of them exploded like water balloons. All void matter was trained from them, flowing into the inverted pyramid. Moments later, only bones were left in their place.

The sight was sobering, reminding Dallion just who he was facing. The aetherbird and the merciless state he had entered had made him considerably more powerful than before. The Star, though, was far stronger, choosing to destroy entities more powerful than any Dallion had faced, just to make a point.

Youve really come to kill me? Arthurows voice boomed from the pyramid itself. Cute. And youve brought my prize with you.

The few remaining cultists tried to flee the complex, but the moment they moved was pierced by a series of spears that shot out from every building surface nearby. Around fifty spears even flew in Dallions direction, but they were easily blocked or evaded.

Youre really starting to annoy me, you know, the Star continued. I could have used the gathering. They wouldnt have survived, of course, but I could have used the void I gave them. You squandered that, and for nothing. Youll still not be able to kill me, even with the skill gem youre hiding inside your realm.

Dallions heart skipped a beat. If the Star knew about the skill gem, what else did he know?

Lets test that. Theres only the two of us now. Im at the top of the temple. Come face me. I promise I wont try to escape. Ill even make a Moon vow if you want.

Calmly, Dallion went to a dead cultist and pulled out his Nox dagger from it.

Dont bother. Dallion turned around. Im coming either way. He made his way to the pyramids entrance and stepped inside.

#### Chapter 639: Pyramid of Void

The inside of the pyramid was made of void. Dallion found himself in a room ten by ten feet large, with nothing except a single ladder leading up. The moment he took a step away from the entrance, the doorway sealed up with void matter.

Dont worry about that, Aether said. Ill take care of the basic annoyances.

*Why so supportive? Dont you want me to release you?*

*Yep. You need to be alive to do that.*

As Dallion walked to the ladder, the void moved away from his feet, creating a patch of uncorrupted floor. Just like the other buildings, the pyramid was made of sky steel. Tons of the material must have been used to create the entire complex enough to make anyone rich.

Never thought youd have the guts to come here, Arthurows voice echoed throughout the room. Dallion could almost see it resonate in every void surface. After everything youve been through, do you really think you can take me?

I got here, didnt I? Dallion thought. Interestingly enough, there was no answer.

He cant hear you, the aetherbird said in glee.

I made it this far, Dallion said, maintaining six instances at all times.

Didnt it feel a bit too easy? Oops, sorry. I wasnt supposed to say that.

The last statement made Dallion pause. It wasnt because of what the Star had said, but because he could tell he was lying. In itself, that wasnt a surprise. As long as the Stars lips moved he was lying, but this time, Dallion could feel the lie. It was right there in Arthurows voice, along with a hint of fear. He was trying his best to mask it beneath the sensation of void, but despite all his efforts, it still bled through into the open. Was this another trick, or Dallion really stood a chance?

Youve already staked out lives on that, Gen said in Dallions realm. Dont mess it up now.

Why dont you come down here? Dallion asked, adding overconfidence to his words.

Still trying to use your music skills on me? The Star laughed. Thats amusing.

More amusing than this place? Dallion persisted. Do you want me to go through a maze of traps and enemies till I reach you?

Normally, yes. Thats how people get ahead in my cult. Only the skilled deserve to get higher.

Charming.

The Moons do the same. I dont hear you complain about them. Only those able to defeat their own demons are allowed to move on to the next level. Hows that any different?

The Moons laws dont let the higher levels do what they want.

Sure, they dont. Can you return to Nerosal? The moment you get close, Countess Priscord will have you skewered on a pike and thrown in the river.

That much was true. While instances of open violence werent too common, nobility had a lot of tools at their disposal to achieve the same effect. Using area guardians to place echoes within the inhabitants of their domains, rely on political power to ruin peoples lives in moments, erasing peoples memories and banishing them into the wilderness even hiring lower level mercenaries just to kill their enemies without being subject to the Moons restrictions. Where there was a system, there was a way to circumvent it, all that was needed was time and practice.

At least Im honest about it. Everyone in the cult knows that the weak obey the strong. If you dont like it, just become strong.

And the chainlings growing within them? Dallion went to the ladder. The void that covered it trickled up and down, revealing sun gold.

Theyre still better than what they had before. This way they had a chance of making something of themselves, or die trying.

One of Dallions instances climbed the ladder. Three seconds in, he split again and had another one continue off from where he started. Large distances were the best counter to splitting, especially with void matter all around.

A few feet from reaching the top, the ceiling opened up, creating a hole in the blackness that allowed Dallion to get to the second floor. Things would have been a lot easier if Lux had been here right now, or better if this were an awakened realm. Instead of relying on floors and ladders, Dallion would have just floated up.

You can still do that, Aether said, knowing his thoughts. I can teach you how to fly.

Ignoring the creature, Dallion leapt up with one of his instances. His foot never managed to touch the floor. Inches away, the blackness retreated, letting the instance drop through. Dallion didnt wait to see what would follow, instantly switching to an instance of him still on the ladder.

Ooops, the Star said. Sorry about that. Old habits. Only people wanting a promotion usually visit me and they should know better.

Tell that to the clerics who you drained in front, Dallion thought.

Several more instances went up. At first, Dallion was left with the impression that the holes were randomly placed. The second floor, unlike the first, was in effect an actual maze with block-like corridors and walled off sections. No doubt this was the Stars wicked sense of humoreverything was a trial that could lead to a quick death. It had been the same in the large buried pyramid in the fallen south. Only those with guts, or arrogance, were given a chance to gain more power. Out of them, only the ones with brains and skills were allowed to do so or so it seemed. As Dallion found out, it was all a lie. There were no holes in the floor. The entire floor was a hole, through which rebars of sky steel crisscrossing through the void matter. It was all up to the Star who fell through a hole and who didnt. In Dallions case, the sky steel bars were the only solid surface he could use. No matter where he moved, the void matter pulled away like tar. On the positive side, that meant he wasnt restricted by the walls, either.

How many floors must I go up? Dallion asked.

I thought you'd have learned by now. Eight, it's always eight.

Eight floors. Considering that only a select few cultists were allowed to reach the outside stairs of the complex, probably just a handful were able to get an audience with the Star himself.

Stay calm, Nox, Dallion thought.

The crackling had started to fret, running circles in its domain of Dallion's realm. Even being level eight wasn't enough to suppress the call of the void coming from all directions.

Focus on me, Dallion added.

That managed to do the trick. Black tendrils continued to point in all directions, emerging from the creature's body, but the running had ceased.

Tapping the tip of his harpsword in his leg, Dallion then filled it with spark and slashed through a nearby wall. A large cut formed, quickly vanishing like a splash in a pond.

Any reason we're not fighting? Dallion asked. Why have me climb all the way up?

Because I can make you do it? You're the one who came to face me. When I went to you in the awakening dagger, I was the one who fought my way through the levels.

The comment made Dallion freeze for a moment.

This is an item?

Now you're catching on. Clapping echoed throughout the entire floor. Losing that butterfly made you quite a bit stronger, but that's nothing compared to what you could become. Just give me the skill stone and I'll ignore our little misunderstanding.

So many eras and you have to rely on someone like me to give you what you want?

What can I say? Times have been hard.

Dallion kept on walking. None of his instances suffered any surprise attacks. However, with each step, the entire maze structure of the floor changed. Back on Earth, the concept was known as a living labyrinth, with people moving the separators between sections. The changes weren't enough to stop Dallion from progressing, but they blocked his view, preventing him from seeing the ladder to the next floor.

I'll give you Nerosal, the Star offered.

Bargaining already? Dallion thought.

Don't get full of yourself, Nil snapped. You're not at the Star yet. You don't even know how badly he's hurt. It's not impossible that his wound has fully healed.

*If he was strong enough to break me, won't he have done so? I ventured into his territory, so the Moons won't*

*There are more rules and restrictions that you know. You just dont see them because of your limitations.*

*I thought otherworlders didnt have any.*

*The Star has the power to distort matter, merge realms, and even swallow entire cities, plunging them into the void. Anything you can imagine, he can do. The only reason he doesnt is the web of restrictions placed on him by the Moons. And hes not the only one.*

All the walls around Dallion flew in his direction without warning. Instinctively, his instances scattered in all directions. Unlike before, the walls didnt vanish upon nearing him, crushing half of his instances on the spot.

You know what, I changed my mind, the Star said.

Void matter fell from the ceiling in blocks, splashing like chunks of melted wax. Puddles formed, which in turn transformed into large dog-like cutlings.

Dallions grip round the sword tightened. He had no issue dealing with cutlings, which meant that there had to be something more to it.

Maybe you should play around a bit, the Star continued.

The ceiling of the third floor fell down. The creatures that formed from it were twice larger, taking on the appearance of pumas. Rods of sky silver were everywhere, like a giant wireframe indicating where walls and floors were supposed to be. To no surprise, there was no ladder in sight.

Crackling crows emerged from all walls up to the fifth floor, filling the space, flying about like black smoke.

Holding his breath, Dallion spun around.

Spark, he whispered, doing a three-sixty line attack.

A strike with the strength to slice mountains went through cracklings and cutlings all round stopping the moment it hit against the sky steel frame.

Damn it! This was the trap! When forged properly, the seven metals could become stronger than wood and stone. The pyramid was at the same time a cage and an arena. Star spawn could effortlessly go through the frame, since the creatures were nothing more than hardened liquid. Dallion, in contrast, was solid and had to fight within these limitations.

Point attacks would still be efficient, although a lot of them would be required to kill out everyone gathered. And even after he did, there were three more floors left.

Combining athletics and acrobatics, Dallion jumped onto the floor frame of the floor above, drawing the Nox dagger with his left hand as he did so. It was all going to be melee from here on, at least for him. The cracklings could easily launch ranged attacks unbothered by the frames. On the other hand, there were other abilities they didnt have.

Dallions speed increased, causing afterimages to remain anytime he paused for more than half a second. His harpsisword almost glowed as it sliced through creature after creature. The common cracklings were far too slow to evade the attacks, getting purged out by the harpsisword or

consumed by the Nox dagger. The larger ones were the issue, especially the cutlings. Over twenty of Dallions instances would regularly receive serious wounds just by touching the creatures. Twice he was in a situation where even combat splitting wasnt able to save him from receiving a wound.

Hes copying me, Dallion thought. The crows and the animals, theyre just like the attack I did outside.

This would be the point at which Nil would jump in and explain that the world didnt revolve around Dallion, and the likelihood of the Star copying him was about the same as saying that the Moons did so. Surprisingly, the old echo did no such thing.

Nil? Dallion asked while performing a multi-piercing attack on a puma cutling. The creature attempted to leap back out of reach, but the spark had killed it before it could do so.

*I think youre right, dear boy. The Star is copying you and hes just as reckless about it as you were.*

#### Chapter 640: Liquid Puppet

Fighting the Star spawn was like fighting water in a cage. Even the weak cracklings quickly adapted to Dallions style of fighting, making full use of the environment as they did so. While technically winning, Dallion had to constantly catch up, hunting the creatures one by one, avoiding the attacks of the rest as he did so. Skill bonuses ceased to matter. Whenever he was close to completing a sequence, the creatures would find a way to interrupt.

Theyre too smart for cracklings, Dallion said.

*Thats because theyre more than that, dear boy. Like cracklings within realms, they gain skills through time and experience. In the real world, time is not enough, but they can make up for it by using the experience of all the cultists they were part of.*

It was a scary notion to imagine, and something the Star would gladly do. It wasnt enough that he was taking the minds of his cultists, gradually making them into puppets, but he was copying their skills as well.

What were you back on Earth? Dallion asked.

Curious? The Stars laughter echoed throughout the pyramid. Even back then, I was special.

The answer confused Dallion somewhat. From experience, he knew that those who claimed to be special usually werent. Swinging along a sky steel rod, he slashed at one of the larger attacking creatures. The harpsisword cut into the monsters body, stopping suddenly after a few inches. Despite its sharpness, it could not cut through the rebars.

A cutling leapt forward. They were the most annoying of all. They knew that they couldnt win in a fight against Dallion, so they didnt even try to, only aiming to wound him with their death. It was a desperate move and one that worked surprisingly much. Combat splitting managed to limit the severity of the wounds, but even it had its limits and without Lux nearby Dallion couldnt rely on the wounds closing mid battle.

I just need to fight through, he told himself. Even if he reached the Star at a tenth of his health, he still could win.

Another floor of void matter poured from the veiling. That made six floors gone. That meant that the Star was somewhere on the remaining two.

Watching you is fun, the Star laughed. Its almost like watching the WWE. Its so one-sided that it looks completely fake.

Come down and make it more interesting. Dallion added as much arrogance in his words as the music skill would allow. The wounds, even if superficial, made him look rather pitiful. With luck, he seemed pitiful enough for the Star to join in the fight just so to gloat.

Not a bad idea.

All the Star spawn creatures abruptly leaped back, simultaneously moving away from Dallion.

Dallion held his breath. This was the moment of truth. All he had to do was grab hold of the Star and activate the generals artifact.

Half of Dallions instances focused at the ceiling, looking for the spot his enemy would drop down from.

No such thing happened. Instead, all the creatures systematically merged with one another, creating one giant creature. Entirely black, it had the features of a lion with a large scorpion tail.

My own, manticore, the Star announced. Have fun, Dal.

Without waiting, the creature charged at Dallion, passing through the sky steel rods as if they werent there.

Damn it! Dallion gritted his teeth, doing a point attack combined with spark. The wave of destructive power hit the monster in the chest, then drilled right through it. No doubt it had caused some damage, though clearly it wasnt nearly enough to make the creature stop.

A giant paw swiped at Dallion, destroying twenty of his instances. The remaining retreated towards the pyramids outer walls. Since the start of the fight, those had been the only parts of the temple that had remained intact. There was no telling what material they were made of it wasnt metal or void matter but it was able to withstand any type of attack so far.

Choosing one instance to become reality, Dallion split again. A split second later, the manticores tail pierced through the spot he used to be.

I must admit thats not a creature Ive seen before, Nil said, deep in thought.

*Of course you wouldnt.*

Neither Nil, nor his original had ever been on Earth. They had no idea how creative the artists there could be. There were pictures of thousands of fantasy monsters, each as dangerous as the next, and the Star had the power to bring them to life using void matter.

Yet, even while fighting against such odds, Dallion felt something wasnt quite right. The Star had the power to create all sorts of modern weapons. Even with restrictions placed on him, he had easily



created a shotgun in the phoenixs realm. Surely, he could do the same here, but for some reason hadnt.

Watch out! Nil shouted.

Half of the manticores mane had extended, targeting Dallion like deadly black needles. Evading them wouldnt have been difficult, but in the heat of the moment Dallion had acted as if he were still wearing the armadil shield. Twisting his body sideways, he took a position with his left arm towards the monster. Had the shield been there, the hardened strands of void would have bounced off. Since it wasnt then continued onwards, piercing through his flesh.

Pain greater than Dallion had felt in a long time surged through his body, almost making him vomit. If it hadnt been for the high level of his mind and body traits, he would have fainted on the spot.

Stupid mistake, a deep said in his head.

It had been a while since the last time hed heard it. So far, it only came out when Dallion was in a difficult situation, just as now.

Dallion pulled back, cutting the strands with his harpsisword. A new burst of adrenaline filled his veins, while his heart pounded so fast it was hurting his chest. Screams and laughter filled his ears. The smell of blood and sweat filled his nostrils, and then all sensations vanished. It was as if Dallion was torn out of his own body and forced to look upon the scene while time had stopped still.

You really messed up this time, the voice said. Just when you were so close.

*Aether?*

Dallion asked.

You can use him, of course, the voice said. The phoenix will definitely help you. Theres every prospect youll find the fight, maybe even get rid of the Star for a while. Is that what you want, though?

*I dont have a choice.*

*You always have a choice, a real choice. Messing up both our arms wasnt smart, but its not the end of the fight. You can still beat the kitty cat if you want to. After that, the Star will be all thats left.*

All this seemed so familiar. Too familiar, even.

Are you my deus ex machina? Dallion asked.

Wouldnt that be nice? The voice laughed. All you have to do is focus. Therell be no hidden wisdom, no secret powers, no deals. Victory is within your grasp. All you have to do is take it.

*Did you show up just to tell me that?*

It needs telling. The voice moved to Dallions left ear. Also, who says Ive shown up just now?

Dallion tried to pull away, but he found that he couldn't move his body. The only thing he could do was look around, even if he wasn't certain how, since his eyes weren't moving either.

The creature knows all your tricks, but can still be surprised, the voice continued. You're making the same mistake the Star is you're thinking of its form, while you should be focusing on its nature.

*Whats that even supposed to mean? Some zen proverb?*

*Dont worry, you'll figure it out. Im sure of it.*

Reality stormed back in, as time went on with a vengeance. Dallion kept retreating, blindly leaping back while spitting into instances. His irregular actions confused the manticore. Unsure in which direction to attack, the monster leapt in Dallion's general direction, only to have its prey evade it by hop-sprinting along the metal reds.

The nature of the creature, Dallion said to himself. What did the voice want to tell him? The creature was Star-spawn, a de facto chainling. The only reason it hadn't taken Dallion's arm was because he had purged all the tendrils out of existence upon cutting them with a spark attack. But so what?

Think! Think! Think! Dallion whispered, using his music skill to increase his focus.

Chainligns had no shape. They could take on any appearance they wished. The Star had forced it to take on the form of a manticore, but that didn't make it one. It could change its shape again at any point or even have cracklings leap out from its surface and attack on their own. The only reason it hadn't done so was probably because of the Star's orders. Or maybe that wasn't the case? What if it simply couldn't, because unlike the cracklings in the awakening realms, it wasn't composed of a multitude of creatures, but was just one or even not a creature at all?

You're a puppet, aren't you? Dallion thought. That's why you're copying me and reacting to my tactics.

Are you alright, dear boy? Nil asked in a confused voice.

There never was a creature! Dallion continued triumphantly. Not a single one. I've been fighting brainless void matter, controlled by the Star in the same way I use Lux to fly in the awakening realms. All this time, I've been fighting a puppet! A puppet made of water!

*You're jumping to a lot of conclusions. But even if you're right, how does that*

Before the echo could finish, Dallion struck the nearest sky steel rod as strong as he could. The vibration of the harpsisword was conveyed, causing the entire construct to do the same.

A roar of pain and agony filled the temple as the manticore pulled back its right paw, only to have it get sliced off by the very same elements that had given it such an advantage earlier. It too had realized precisely what Dallion was doing.

Hurts, doesn't it? Dallion asked. Now we're even.

The manticore growled, though keeping its distance. Both of them had experienced severe pain moments ago, and thanks to Dallion's realization both of them were at a stalemate. Neither could approach the other without risking additional wounds. If Dallion were to attempt to approach, the creature would attack him with its void needles again. However, if the manticore tried to advance, Dallion would use the rebars themselves to inflict damage. Being made of sky steel alloy made them indestructible, but also able to convey the spark for a short distance thanks to Dallion's music skills.

I bet you didn't see this coming? Dallion shouted. You've trapped both of us here and once I'm done with your puppet, I'll deal with you.

You're wounded. You won't last five minutes like that. The anger in the Star's voice was palpable. All I need to do is wait. You're the one that needs to push forward.

Did you just say that you'll lose in a one-to-one fight? Dallion struck another rebar. This time the spark became visible, moving along it like a faint glow, before fading out.

So, the distance it could travel is five feet, Dallion thought.

It wasn't a lot, but enough for him to win. All he had to do was determine how to approach. Chipping away at the manticore's health was a good approach, but not in the present situation. If there was one thing that the Star was right about, it was that Dallion didn't have an infinite amount of time. With the amount of wounds that he had, he'd be incapable of fighting in half an hour, maybe less. In order to see this through, he had to destroy the chainling in a third of that time.