

Leveling up 271

Chapter 271: In the Mirror

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

A forest surrounded Dallion. In several ways, it was similar to the one in his last visit, however, there were a few subtle and not-so-subtle differences. For starters, all the tigerpines were gone. Dallion could sense a few creatures in the vegetation, but they did their best to keep away from him, likely aware of the level difference. Another difference was that the trees themselves had changed into a weird hybrid of pine trees with maple leaves. Back on Earth the combination would have been unthinkable, here Dallion didnt even blink, finding it just mildly amusing.

No fighting this time, Nox, he said as he made his way to the arena of the first level guardian.

The guardian chamber, as before, was a large meadow next to a large rock that held the gate to the level below. For a moment, Dallion wondered what the connection between a forest and a mirror could be, but decided not to ask questions.

I think Ive no problem with the slow department, Dallion replied. In his view, he was already wasting too much time, being on the verge of procrastinating. If he had a bit more discipline, instead of slacking away, he might well have been level twenty-five by now, or at the very least maxed out his skill level. Instead, he had turned into the average, middle of the road slacker who was constantly rushing at the last moment to achieve the minimal requirements for the next challenge life in this world presented him.

That is precisely part of the problem. The reason youre so slow is because youre trying to go so fast. Its something you need to work on.

Dallion didnt say a thing, but he knew that already. Sadly, he also knew that he couldnt do anything against it. It was wasteful for others to tell him to slow down, but the only thing that did was to make him procrastinate even more.

Nox, you didnt defeat the guardian again, did you? Dallion gave the Nox dagger an annoyed look.

A distant meow assured Dallion that no such thing had happened, but considering Nox was behaving more and more like a cat with each level up, he still had some doubts. Thankfully, it turned out to be the truth. There was a rustling sound. A patch of grass several steps away grew at an alarming rate, exploding into a hedge. Before Dallions very eyes, the hedge twisted into a shape, creating a creature he had encountered before.

Bladicorn, Dallion whispered.

LEVEL 1 GUARDIAN

Species: Bladeicorn

Class: Earth

Statistics: 100 HP

Skills:

- **Entangle**
- **Rain of Blades**
- **Charge**

Weak spots: Hooves

Seeing Dallion, the creature snorted, then stomped the ground with its front hooves. It was the closest thing to an actual unicorn Dallion had seen, created entirely of blades of grass. The last time Dallion had faced a creature of this nature was in one of Nerosals awakening shrines. Back then Dallion wasn't even a double digit awakened, though he still remembered the creature fearing him for some reason.

Hey, there. Dallion took a step forward, extending his hand. There's no need to fight.

At his current level, if the creature were to charge at him, Dallion could easily leap in the air, and avoid the attack even without the use of instances.

I just want to fulfill the mirror's destiny.

The bladicorn snorted, taking a step back. Dallion could see the doubt in it, but also hope pulsing in its head.

It'll be alright. Dallion took another step forward, putting as much empathy as he could through the use of his music skill. Remember the last time I was here? I cleaned the place. I'm not here to fight. I'm just here to help someone.

That caused the bladicorn to stop in place. Turning its ears forward, it waited. For a moment Dallion thought it would talk as some guardians had, but alas, there was only silence.

You don't even need to surrender. We could call it a draw.

Dallion knew that wasn't entirely correct, though little more beyond that. Either way, it was a good idea to be a bit more convincing. For a moment, he concentrated as hard as possible, then he split in two.

The unicorn stepped back. Most likely, the process seemed just as freaky to it as it did to Dallion. Even Nil could be heard to chuckle from within Dallion's realm.

Easy, Dallion's echo said, moving slowly towards the bladicorn. I'm not going to hurt you.

Nils gasp could be heard throughout Dallions entire realm. Offering a guardian a draw was controversial enough. Creating an echo just to spend time with one was beyond comprehension.

You dont have to surrender. Dallion ignored Nil. As I said"

Combat ended

The Bladicorn has accepted a draw

What do you mean?

Having an awakened go through all the trouble to create an echo just to spend time with a guardian that by definition should be killed so that the awakened could continue to the next level? I dont know, that sounds pretty unique to me.

Surely someone must have tried something similar,

Dallion dismissed the notion.

Not that I can tell. At least I wasnt able to find anything in the library. Ill look again.

That cant be right. Ive been hearing that children do this all the time.

Moments later, the gate to the lower level opened. Dallion turned towards the bladicorn. The guardian had allowed Dallions echo to approach close enough to pat it on the side, as if the creature were one big horse. The more surprising, and slightly annoying, element was that the echo seemed to do this much more naturally than Dallion. Clearly, echoes were created with some knowledge of the world that Dallion lacked.

No, I mean the gate shouldnt have opened. The guardians death is a requirement.

Ive seen exceptions.

Exceptions exist, but theyre supposed to remain exceptions. The last time you were here, Nox had to defeat the guardian so you could continue. The requirement must be the same.

The silver lake was already rippling when Dallion entered the second level of the mirror. Approaching the edge, Dallion crouched and reached to touch the surface. The area beneath his hand hardened, like a circle of ice on water. That was different from last time, though it no longer frightened Dallion. With a smile, he straightened up and walked forward. Spots of the lake hardened forming platforms of support beneath his feet, before melting away.

Soon enough, the guardian emerged from the lake, her wings shining like the surface she emerged from.

Dallion held his breath. Looking at her was like looking at a fractal painting. Back on earth there probably would be an arts professor giving all sorts of explanations relating to the golden ratio, the Fibonacci spiral, and a lot of other terms Dallion had never heard, all to explain why the combination of lines and colors seemed to incorporate beauty itself. However, Dallion wasn't focusing on that, he was looking at the light beneath the pattern, which had only become clearer now that he was a seer.

You came back, the guardian said, somewhat surprised.

I made a promise. Dallion smiled. I also bought you.

You did? The butterfly descended, stopping a few feet from the lake's surface. Just me?

For now. I paid to book the other items, but I didn't have enough money for them, yet.

You're unusual.

I've been told that before. In fact, he had all too often.

And now you want to level up the mirror?

No. The answer caused blotches of confusion to appear throughout her wings. Even the way emotions appeared on the guardian were different—not the usual clumps of sound and color, they had the appearance of thin lines that followed a pattern. I came because I want you as a familiar.

Hearing that, the Spectral Shardfly quickly flew higher, well beyond reach.

I've heard that before, she said bitterly.

I suppose you have. As I said, I can see you, and I know you don't belong here.

You don't you only guess. There are a lot of things you can't know.

And you can't tell me before I learn it myself, Dallion repeated out of habit.

I can tell you.

This time it was Dallion's turn to be surprised. This was an answer he didn't expect. From everything he has seen so far, the Moon's laws were absolute. Even the Star couldn't go against them, and somehow she could tell him things beyond her level?

If I choose to, the guardian added. I've seen that you're different, but the one who caught me was also different. She didn't make promises, she didn't even talk, always doing things that made me curious, and when I got close to ask her, she captured me.

Nil, know anything about that?

Tell me about it, Dallion said.

So, you can capture someone else?

Dallion remained silent.

I was captured for my wings, the shardfly said after a while. The mirror, the lake you so much admire, exists only because of me. The people that made it wanted a perfect reflection, so they sent out hunters to capture me and put me in the items realm. My freedom, my whole existence, was taken and locked out of this world only so that someone could buy a cheap trinket that would reflect just a bit better.

Dallion felt the vines round his heart tighten. He could see the agony build up in the guardian. When he had come here to free her, he knew that the people at the Drum had treated the item and guardians inside, respectively poorly, but he hadn't expected this.

You're from an imprisoned species, he whispered.

No. Just one of the creatures in the wilderness. I lived in a beautiful and terrifying place, until I was snatched out of my reality and put here.

What if I take you out of this prison?

Faint laughter filled the air, causing the light in around the butterfly to reflect.

The only way to set me free is to break the item, the guardian fluttered closer. Forget that. Complete the favor I asked. That will be enough. She flew further away again. In a few weeks, you'll forget all about this conversation. That's the fate of those like you. Other things will appear demanding your attention and you'll give it, just as you did for me.

I know a way. Dallion didn't give up. I think I do. You won't be able to return to the real world directly, but you'll see it. He clenched his fists. I want you to become my familiar.

For a second, the butterfly froze. It was as if someone had paused reality as far as she was concerned; her wings remained perfectly still, and yet she didn't fall or even change her position in the air. Specks of hope appeared throughout her body, building up in the edge of her wings.

Taking this as a good sign, Dallion continued.

I need to defeat you without fighting, Dallion said. It was just a theory, but that was the common element between Lux and Nox. I need to make you fade away from this realm. When I level up you will return.

You don't sound too sure.

You're asking a lot of me.

When I said I see you, I also saw your pain. Youve been hoping that one of the challengers breaks the mirror during the gauntlet; that only then will you find some rest. Dallion paused. I dont know what happened to you before, but I am offering to take away the pain. I wont go on with it if you dont want to. I wont even level up the mirror, if you tell me not to.

The shadflys wings moved, though not to fly. Two by two they folded in on each other, changing the shape of the guardian like a living origami. Streams of silver trickled down, as if squeezed out of the creature, and with every drop the lake became more and more plain. Other parts of the guardians body kept on folding on itself, halving in size. The sharpness, so typical of the species, slowly disappeared, replaced by warm softness. In the end, an entirely new butterfly fluttered in the air a bundle of emotions with seven wings each glowing with the color of the Moons. Free of its burdens, it circled Dallion twice, then landed on Dallions open hand.

Want me to continue? he asked. Warmth spread down his hand down his elbow, along with the sensation of a spring dust of wind, and autumn drizzle.

The shardflys emotions replied for it, asking that he continue. Finally, after millennia, it didnt feel alone and wanted to keep the sensation.

Itll be fine. As gently as he could, Dallion passed a finger over the creature, as if stroking it.

The guardians emotions flared up. It felt happy for once, glad that someone else had offered to share his warmth with it. Every stroke had the effect of an eraser over a pencil picture, removing part of the creature away.

It took over a minute for the Spectral Shardfly to disappear completely. Once it did, the familiar rectangle appeared, letting Dallion know he could continue to the final level.

A gate of silver emerged from the lake, revealing a staircase downwards. However, Dallion wasnt in the mood to continue.

He looked at his empty hand, then at the sky. The sun was still shining, its way bouncing off the surface of the lake, but the light seemed faded. Without the shardfly, it was almost as if there was no light at all.

Chapter 272: Obsidian Dragon

Dallion couldnt stop thinking of the shardflys last moments. It was easy to wave the sensation away as a momentary low. After all, he had felt the same when Nox and Lux had originally faded out of existence. This should be no different and yet the intensity of sadness was multitudes stronger. Maybe it was because the guardian could speak, unlike Dallions previous familiars. That sounded like a logical reason, though as much as he tried to rationalize it away, Dallion felt that there was something more to that.

No idea, Dallion said. Probably a copy of the real world in some aspects but you know that. He paused for a moment. You know everything that goes on in my mind.

Yeah, and you needed a distraction. Itll be fine. She was happy. Remember the echoes of the dagger? They were happy when you fulfilled its destiny.

Yeah all I need to do is defeat the last guardian

From what Dallion had seen so far, the task wasnt going to be difficult. His skills had given him a significant advantage. Now it was clear why guilds divided jobs based on performance. Not only was it a waste to use a high-level awakened on item leveling, but it was probably a terribly unfulfilling job. Even elites who had been doing the same job for years, wanted to feel at least a partial challenge. Thats why the higher levels were focused on area and sphere item jobs, while the rest were pretty much packrats.

The third level of the mirror was once again very different from the ones before. If the first was a forest, representing the wood of the handle, and the second a lake being the mirror itself, the third had absolutely nothing to do with either. A desert of black sand stretched to the horizon while a pale red moon shone above.

Centors moon, Dallion said.

That would be hilarious if it were the case, also very creepy. Last time Dallion didnt have to venture so far. After coming to an arrangement with the spectral shardfly, she had instantly dealt with the cracklings throughout her level, letting Dallion get the credit for it.

There was no metal to be seen, and no creatures. That was good, though it made him slightly anxious. The last time he had been in a desert, the guardian he had fought had been

COMBAT INITIATED

A giant green marker appeared on the sand below Dallion. Without wasting a moment, Dallion dashed back, and right on time. A creature the size of a tower thrust up, filling the air with black sand. Despite Dallions best efforts, a few specks managed to get into his left eye.

Damn it!

Focusing, he fought the urge to scratch his eye. With his hands covered in sand, that was only going to make things worse. It would have been nice if he had some water, but there was none anywhere to be seen. Next time, Dallion was going to have the foresight to carry some from his own realm, especially for the expedition. That wasnt his only problem at the moment, though.

LEVEL 3 GUARDIAN

Species: DRAGON

Class: OBSIDIAN

Skills:

- **Sandstorm**

- **Wing slice**

- **Sand shield**

Weak Spots: EYES

There could be no doubt now. In order to level up the hand mirror, Dallion was going to have to defeat another dragon.

Lucky me, Dallion summoned his dartbow. Lux, lift me up and keep me away for a while.

The firebird emerged on Dallions back and pulled him up, making it appear as if hed sprouted wings.

In theory, the battle had to be easy. Last time Dallion had fought a low-level dragon, he had defeated it in a matter of seconds. All it had taken were a few aimed shots at its eyes. The whole thing had been over so fast that Dallion had felt bad about the guardian. Having sand in the eye changed a lot. As Dallion found out, not only was aiming impossible, but he also wasnt capable of using combat splitting. Clearly, he had a lot to get used to when it came to combat conditions.

Seeing that his foe was in a weakened state, the obsidian dragon thrust towards him, leaving a trail of back sand in its wake. Thankfully, Lux didnt hesitate, moving away at speeds only he was capable of.

Dallion felt his entire inertia throughout his entire body as he was movedalmost instantlyfrom one point of the sky to another.

Not so fast!

Dallion thought. Dealing with the speed was also unpleasant. His eyes were already tearing, hopefully taking care of any specks stuck to them. The annoying scratchy feeling was still there, though.

Move, move, get out of my eye, Dallion hummed, using his music skills to reduce the irritation. Thankfully, it worked. He still felt as if he had something stuck there, but at least now he could see well enough. Lux, turn me around, but keep flying away from the dragon.

What could possibly go wrong? Dallion asked. Were in a wide-open space! Theres nothing we could crash into if we wanted.

Raising his dartbow, Dallion aimed at the dragon. It had been quite a while since he had taken advantage of the ranged attack marker. Most of the guardians he had fought lately were either weak enough so he could defeat them with normal means, or so tough that ranged weapons hardly helped at all. Seeing the attack ray and dot made Dallion feel somewhat nostalgic. In terms of real time, it had been less than half a year, but in terms of true time, it felt like a memory from his youth when he was just a rookie awakened.

The dragon was similar to the sand dragon he had fought before, but also different. Half as large, this one seemed to constantly release a train of obsidian sand behind, sparkling in the crystal moon like embers. Two crimson eyes making for great targetsshone on its large head, glaring at Dallion as the guardian tried to reduce the distance between them.

Darude, Dallion whispered and squeezed the dartbows trigger.

A bolt split the air, then a second, then a third. Things were exactly like during his previous battle until the dragon reacted.

Unlike the sand dragon from the Dherma temple, this one didnt bother trying to evade. Instead, a cloud of sand suddenly emerged, in front of its head, trapping the bolts inside so that the rest of the creature could fly through, like a train through a cloud of smoke.

Lux, take me to the side!

Once Dallion was parallel to the dragon, he split into three instances, shooting at the dragons head from the side. To his great disappointment, once again, none of the bolts hit their target. The guardian created an entire sheet of dust on the side, shielding it from any attacks. Obviously, a dartbow wasnt going to be enough against this enemy.

Well played, Dallion said, adding a lot of weight to his words thanks to his music skill. Guess its close combat for you.

The dartbow disappeared from Dallions hand, replaced by the harpsisword.

Any chance for a draw?

The echo paused, waiting for Dallion to finish the sentence.

I get it, Dallion said. I need to use something else.

There was a time when aerial combat alone was all it took to defeat a slightly stronger enemy. Against a capable flyer, though, Dallion had a lot of catching up to do. Concentrating, he split into three instances, all of which headed towards the dragon in slightly different fashion. It was only now that Dallion saw the wisdom in Vends teaching. The elite had insisted that Dallion should be able to control his familiars reliably in all instances. At the time, that seemed a useless and impossible task. If only Dallion had known

Each combat splitting was the equivalent of fine tuning, reducing the lag between his orders and the firebirds execution. Sadly, that proved not to be enough.

The moment Dallion went near, the obsidian dragon sprouted wings of obsidian dust and slashed through the air with them. One of Dallions instances was severed in two, receiving a terminal wound. The remaining two managed to block the attack thanks to the quick reaction of the armadil shield, which expanded so as to stop the layer of sharp dust.

Normally, Dallion would have quickly moved out of danger, allowing himself a few moments before he could take another go. This time, he only had one instance of him do it, while three more twisted in the air, combining his acrobatic skills with Luxs flight. Using the Nox dagger, he slashed at the wing.

A dark line appeared along the layer of dust. Cracks extended in all directions, created the start of an opening. Thanks to his new sight, Dallion was able to see the crack for the first time it wasnt just a series of cracks, rather it resembled a portal to another world shimmering away.

The fascination only lasted a second, as Dallion twisted again in the air, thrusting his harpsisword so as to pierce the dragons eye.

As expected, a protective layer formed inches from the target, no larger than a saucer. This time, though, the defense was not enough. The strings of the harprisword vibrated, the melody linking with the new object. The protective tile froze in reality only to have the rest of the weapon smash through it like a chisel through an eggshell, budding itself deep in the dragons eye.

FATAL STRIKE!

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

A roar pierced the air. Wounded, the dragon dove down, a violent sandstorm forming around it.

Shield! Dallion shouted.

The piece of equipment extended further, surrounding him completely before it was caught in the cone of the sandstorm.

Were in the air, Nil! Dallion snapped back. You never taught me any patterns for the air!

Oh. Well, an omission I will be certain to correct once this is over.

The shield ball was swung violently, causing Dallions body to slam against the inside of it.

Lux, keep me steady! he shouted.

Never in a million years would he have thought to use a firebird as a makeshift gyroscope, but here he was. At the end of the day, if it did the job, who was Dallion to complain?

Thats great. But before that, I still need to actually defeat the guardian. Hes still got one eye, remember?

Not to worry, dear boy. I have complete faith in your abilities. Defeating such a guardian should be a walk in the park.

As he said that, the sound of sand brushing against the outside of the shield abruptly stopped. Moments later, Dallion felt his stomach rising like it did when we went down a rollercoaster.

Crap!

Chapter 273: Missing Achievement

Shield, open a crack! Dallion shouted as the shield sphere flew down towards the sand.

It wasnt the fact that they were falling that worried him. Rather, it was the things that followed. At present, the shield and Luxs help inside were enough to absorb the force of any fall. However, neither would be able to deal with what followed. Should the obsidian dragon decide to bury Dallion beneath the sands, there was nothing he could do except surrender.

The armadil shield opened up slightly

Lux, carry the shield, Dallion ordered. Keep us above the sand!

The firebird chirped, then flew out of the protective cocoon, causing Dallion to drop against the inside of the shield. A second later, the ball sprouted wings, slowing its descent to the ground, then reversing it.

A loud roar sounded outside, followed by a crash that knocked Dallion to the other side of the interior of the ball.

Also, avoid any attacks, Lux! he shouted. A series of seesaw movements suggested that the firebird had once again understood his order literally, driving like a maniac in an action movie. Clearly, this was no way to fight, but Dallion didnt want to fight. This was a time to think about his next moves.

He only needed one more good hit. Now that the dragon was aware of the capabilities of the harpsisword, though, getting near it wasnt going to be as easy. Dallion could easily order Lux to guide his weapon through the air, like an intelligent homing missile, but that wasnt the approach he wanted to take. While there was every chance that such a strategy would earn him a quick victory, it was going to harm him in the long run. The way things were going, he would have to face chainlings and other creatures in the near future, possibly even other dragons within items.

At present, either approach would work. Earning a quick victory, even if with your unorthodox methods, wouldnt stunt your development. Doing it the proper way, though, would definitely give you experience for the next flying creature you face. In the end, its all up to you.

What?

Echoes, like during the trial against me. Remember how Aspian attacked with an army of clones? Why not do the same? They might not be as good as you, but theyre pretty close, and you can easily make four, or even five.

Five echoes against an obsidian dragon. None of them would be able to fly or have a real Nox dagger, but Gen was rightthey would be skilled enough to confuse the enemy and even do some imaginative attacks on their own. That was one of the huge advantages of echoeswhile they had all the memories and thoughts of their original, they also created their own.

Lux, get me above the dragon! Dallion said. Shield, when we get there I want you to return to normal.

No one said a thing, suggesting that either Dallion was on the right track, or everyone was just curious to see what he would come up with.

There was a loud pop outside, accompanied by a thrust. A second later, the shield returned to its standard shape, leaving Dallion in the air, twenty feet above the dragons head.

Without hesitation, Dallion concentrated. Four identical echoes jumped out of him, each heading in one of the cardinal directions. In that fraction of a second, Dallion saw each of them summoning their weaponsdartbows, swords, even a harp in one instance. While their weapons appeared to be like those Dallion used, he knew them to be simple versions linked to the skill. However, the dragon didnt.

A cloud of obsidian sand emerged above the dragon, protecting him like a shield.

Nox, rip it! Dallion shouted. Lux, grab me!

One of the five Dallions gained wings, as the crackling emerged. Paws extended forward, the cub sliced through the protective layer, like a cat clawing down a silk curtain. All of Dallions echoes turned and twisted, holding their shields in front. Dallion didnt, plunging through the opening Nix had created.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

A red rectangle emerged, as parts of obsidian scarred Dallions cheeks as he passed. The pain was very much real, but he ignored it.

A new layer of black sand emerged, rising like a wall.

Darude slash! he shouted.

The term wasn't something anyone would have recognized, but the harpsisword did. As Dallion did an arc attack, a slicing line of destruction was released, cutting through not only the protective layer, but part of the dragon's wing as well.

Dallion didn't stop, though, making a second slash, then a third.

Red rectangles filled the air, indicating a series of minor hits that had been done as a result. The number alone was impressive, even if they barely reduced the guardian's life total. Weighing in pain, the obsidian dragon let its guard down for a split second, instinctively turning its head in Dallion's direction to breathe a sandstorm.

Thrust! Dallion shouted.

This was the moment. Propelled by the firebird, he flew forward like a dart towards the bull's eye. His mind's eye could see the tip of the weapon reach the remaining red eye of the dragon, and after a fraction of a second prediction became reality.

FATAL STRIKE!

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

The much cherished red rectangle appeared.

Clever, the dragon muttered in a deep voice, as one would expect coming from a dragon, before bursting into a cloud of particles that disappeared in the air.

The moon vanished, replaced by a bright sun, marking the first day in the sphere item. Dallion had succeeded.

MIRROR Level 3 has been cleared.

You have fulfilled the MIRROR's destiny.

Your attack skills have increased to 45.

That wasn't the skill Dallion wanted to increase, but he couldn't argue that was the one he had used the most.

Lux, land me gently, Dallion said. Meanwhile, three of his surviving echoes landed on the ground with a thump and a roll.

Firm sand beneath his feet, Dallion continued staring at the clear sky, waiting. Several seconds passed, then several more. And as they did, fear wormed its way into his being under the form of a dull stomach ache.

Feeling the tendrils of mild panic, Dallion looked about in the hopes he had missed something.

It's not there, one of his echoes said. It didn't sound all too happy, either.

That's how Nox had become his familiar, and Lux as well. Dallion had followed the exact same steps. The result had to be the same.

There was a lot that Dallion wanted to say. What was the point in being a favored by the Moons if he couldn't save a single creature? He had felt a connection with the guardian, he was so certain that once the item was cleared that an achievement would appear.

In his mind, he imagined the moons looking at him with disapproval. Had he become too arrogant? It was said that this world ran by their rules, but he didn't know what the rule was, rather, he had assumed he'd have the power to help her. Whose fault was it then? Was it the Moons or his own? Right now, Dallion didn't want to hear the answer.

It was a good plan, one of his echoes said, going closer to him. All of it, not just the dragon.

Don't forget that she felt joy for a moment, another said.

Besides, things aren't what you think in the awakened world. There's a lot you don't know. All I can say is that it's not as bleak as you fear.

Yeah, right. Dallion tried to smile. He half suspected that the echo was just saying that to alleviate his fears. Even so, the notion that the shardfly could be out there in another realm, made him feel somewhat better.

One by one, Dallion's echoes poofed out of existence. He, however, remained for over ten minutes, still looking at the sky, as if hoping that against the odds a rectangle would appear. It didn't.

I don't feel like leveling up right now, Dallion said.

I wasn't talking about that. You need good food and rest, not to mention all the other trivialities of the day. I know how you feel, but you still have to earn your place at the tournament. The Star is still plotting something, remember?

How could I forget

Also, I would strongly recommend you convince that despicable character to give you the dryad shield. Linking him to your realm would be far more beneficial than leveling up.

That was true. Being able to talk with the armadil shield through thought would undoubtedly make battles a lot easier, not to mention having another guardian protecting Dallion's realm.

Give me a minute, Dallion said.

When the minute was over, the realm of the mirror disappeared, returning Dallion to the guildhall. He was back in the lobby, less than a minute after the meeting with March. The rest of the team had already left. Even Estezol was off, checking paperwork.

The more I delay the more difficult it'll become, Dallion replied, and left the guildhall.

The crowds were starting to pick up, making going through the streets even more difficult. Given what had just happened in the mirror, though, Dallion didnt care much, slowly making his way towards the generals club.

Dallion just kept on walking, paying little attention. Time and distance had become insignificant. Next thing he knew, he was at the all too familiar building in the generals neighborhood. The crowds surrounding the building were non-existent, possibly because there were a number of guards placed in front, making sure that there was a comfortable cushion of space around the building. One look was enough to tell that the guards were privately hired. Their uniforms had nothing in common with those of the city guards. Also, Dallion could tell that they were of a higher level.

More than youd think. The nobles dont need protection, but the wealthy dont want to risk anything to hurt them. Anyone with a bit of money hired outside help. The common shop and innkeepers rely on the city guard.

Dallion nodded. Raising his head high, he made his way towards the entrance. He half expected the guards to try and stop him, but they didnt move an inch, observing the people behind him instead.

Before he could reach the entrance, the door swung open. The female fury that assisted the general stood at the threshold.

Good morning, sir, she said with a slight bow. Im extremely glad to see you. This way please, the general has been expecting you.

Expecting me? Dallion arched a brow.

He didnt like the sound of that. It was exactly like what had happened during the game of Dallions trialthe general was flexing his resources, trying to intimidate Dallion before the discussions could even begin. However, Dallion wasnt the same person from a few levels ago.

Of course, the fury replied. Hes waiting for you in his usual room. Would you like some refreshments before you go join him?

No, no thanks. I doubt Ill be staying that long.

Chapter 274: Altering the Deal

Exquisite, the general said as he examined the bolt. Didnt think Ill see one of these. How did you get it?

Does it matter? Dallion smirked. He wanted to add a bit of arrogance to his voice to let the general know he wasnt a pushover, though not too much to make him hostile.

Only if it helps me get more, the man replied without blinking an eye. It was said that these were used during the copyette wars ages ago. Large quantities were kept after the race was banished into the realms. There were times in which people used them to hunt monsters in the wild, or even common animals. Now there are probably a dozen left in the entire empire.

The general placed the arrow on his desk. As usual, his two fury bodyguards were a few steps away. It was just like in Dallions trial the furies could well be treated as an extension of the man.

I assume youve come to ask for a deal?

The bolts for the shield, Dallion said.

Three for the price of one. Quite the offer. However, I believe we already have an arrangement concerning the shield.

Yes, but weve made changes before. Dallion narrowed his eyes, smile widening. You made changes. Theres no reason why we cant work something out.

No, no reason at all. The general smiled back. Dallion might have passed his trial, but the man clearly had years of haggling experience, if not more. The shield means so much to you that youd offer all your slime bolts just for it?

Who says thats all of them? I have more.

There was a moment of silence. For the first time, it seemed like the general had lost his sense of overconfidence. It only lasted for a split second, but Dallion managed to catch it thanks to his music skills. It also helped that Dallion was telling the truth he had left one of his bolts back at the inn in part for such an eventuality.

Id heard that youve been going about the city hunting for a copyette, the general changed the topic. At first, I thought you were aiming to attract attention, but now I see youre quite serious. Personally, Im curious what you had to do to get such exquisite items, however I know better than to ask.

But?

Money isnt an issue. And at the moment, neither is exploring. As you correctly pointed out, with the number of artifacts pouring into the city, every awakened and their dog are into the item exploration business. Once the festival is over, and the number of artifacts returns to its previous level, interest will drop significantly. That means that in a matter of weeks there will be awakened begging to explore artifacts at reduced prices, no questions asked. However, theres the matter of the other part of our deal.

Here it was the heart of the matter. Dallion was almost surprised that the general had come to it so fast; he expected a lot more dancing round the bush. That was supposed to be a good thing, but with Dallions experience he couldnt help but feel somewhat suspicious.

One artifact of my choice, the general went on.

And what exactly is your choice?

I havent made up my mind.

All the better, because you can pretty much exchange a bolt for anything. From what I know, there are even people whod give a house in this neighborhood for one. At least.

The face of one of the furies twitched. Clearly, the general wasn't used to having people haggle with him in this fashion, not commoners, at least. Dallion could sense the indignation coming from the bodyguards, though not from the general himself. The man remained calm as always, even slightly amused. One thing was clear, though he wanted to own the bolts. For once, the Star had done Dallion a favor by giving them to him.

Quite likely. If I refuse the deal, we can very well become neighbors. Is that what you're threatening me with? he laughed. There is no denying that the armadil is rare, though not that rare. I suppose I can easily get another if I exchange a bolt for it.

Three bolts the general mused, sliding a finger along the one he had on his desk. In exchange for the shield.

That's one more than our deal, Dallion reminded. The condition is that we do it now. Accept or refuse I'll be leaving in a few minutes. Either way, I'll leave something behind.

Oh?

If this is not enough to claim the shield, nothing will be. So, I'll just return it to you and void our arrangement.

That's not the way it works. There was a sharp edge to the general's words. According to our arrangement, you keep the shield and I get what I'm owed.

That's one option. Or I can ask the city overseer to make a judgement call. After my recent encounter with her, I learned that she has the authority to settle certain ownership disputes, especially when it comes to awakened matters.

Strictly speaking the overseer was more involved in making sure that the myriad of room, house, and larger area domains didn't come into conflict with one another and didn't cause chaos in the larger city domain. However, that could easily also be interpreted for items as well. After all, they still had their realms and were part of the city.

A glint of pure hatred appeared in the general's eye as he stared at Dallion. It was obvious he didn't like anyone getting the upper hand, even if the deal was highly beneficial to him. With people such as this it wasn't a matter of what they gained, it was also the power they had. Being forced even into a good deal was an admission that part of that power was lost. Furthermore, if this deal was concluded, Dallion would be off the hook for good.

Playing the overseer card already, I see. The general quickly regained his composure. I suppose it was inevitable. You've changed quite a lot since you passed your third gate. When Art brought you here, you were a lost idiot begging to be taken advantage of. Now, you've become a player. Just a friendly word of advice don't overestimate your value just because you're on the field. Players have a lot of resources they don't bother to tap in for pawns, unless those pawns become overly irritating.

There was a knock at the door. Moments later it opened and a fury servant entered with a tray of beverages. All of them were in small glasses, suggesting that they were expensive.

Before the servant could take a step forward, the general raised his hand.

We wont be needing that, he said in a firm voice.

Without question, the fury bowed, then quickly left, closing the door behind her.

Three bolts for the armadil shield, the general said yet again. Im inclined to agree to that, provided you do one other small favor. Not to worry, its nothing dangerous or time consuming. Since youre a seer now, I want you to tell me which items of my collection are special. The man leaned back. Everything.

Even the sand? Dallion asked.

Ever since he had arrived he had seen that there was something off about the golden sandpit. Not the entire pit, but there was clearly something that wasnt quite right. It was difficult to tell whether some of the grains had hidden treasures in their realms, or maybe the gold itself was taken from a different world. The latter made Dallion quite curious. If there was a way to get items from Earth, did it mean that there was a mobile phone out there somewhere?

The sand? The general looked in its direction. Theres something special there?

Looks that way. Parts of the gold specks have the look. Most dont.

Thats a pity, the general let out a sigh. If only Id known you a few years ago. I had been assured that the items I used to grind down were of no value. Apparently, at least in the case of one of them, that was not the case. Oh well. You win some, you lose some. Anything else?

Slowly, Dallion went to the center of the room. There were dozens, possibly hundreds, of items on display here. The number seemed to grow with each visit. For the most part, the items were normalthat was to say, they were only extremely rare, high-level relics made of magical materials. Among them, though, there were a few that could be considered even more special.

The crossbow, Dallion pointed up at the item. That sword. Those two. Those two shields he turned to the other side of the room. The gauntlet of that suit of armor, that mask and your desk.

Youre sure it isnt the bolt? the general asked.

Definitely the desk. Just to be sure, Dallion gave the room another quick glance, as well as all the people inside. The furies definitely seemed to be of this world. Thats it as far as I can tell.

Interesting. The general snapped his fingers.

One of his bodyguards quickly flew across the room to gather the items Dallion had described. That too was a clear demonstration of force. At least he was spared the sight of the guardian collecting all the grains of sand that had a special shimmer. Most likely the only reason the general hadnt ordered it was because without Dallion there was no way of making the distinction.

The remaining two bolts, if you please? the general reached forward.

Could it be this simple? Dallion looked at the opened hand. He had expected some sudden twist or trick. While true that the general was a pragmatist, he seemed to have given up way too fast. Or did Dallion really have all the cards this time?

Slowly, he took the dartbow from his holster boot and removed all the bolts there. Once done, he handed them to the general.

Excellent. The bolts were placed on the desk. The armadil is yours. I vow in the name of the Moons our transaction to be complete. You dont owe me a thing, and neither do I.

Dallion nodded.

Of course, that doesnt mean we have to end our business relations, the general quickly added. As youve seen there are quite a lot of special items. You might want to assist in revealing their secrets?

Theres nothing youll gain, Dallion said. While the deal sounded appealing, he had learned never to accept good deals from the general. If theres a treasure, the person who finds it gets to keep it. And it cant be transferred to anyone else.

I am quite aware. The general went to the far side of the room and took a rather large dagger from its display section. Larger than a knife, but shorter than a short sword, the item was made entirely of sky silver, decorated with an assortment of gems. People chase success all their lives. Often, they dream of a day that theyd succeed in anything. However, the burden of those who are good at success is boredom. I have no reason to collect all these things. Ill never use any of them in battle. Most can only be used to the fullest by awakened. The reason I do it is because it keeps the boredom at bay. You say that Ill gain nothing from the items in question. That isnt true. I have an artifact that lets me enter awakened realms, provided someone takes me there. Naturally, Ill be little more than an echo there, but I get to see and experience everything. So, heres the deal. You take me in each of these items, keep me alive to the treasure, and then get to keep it. In turn, I get to see the adventure.

Thats it?

Of course, theres no telling whats guarding the hidden realm. As I said, the artifact ensures that I dont get hurt. You, on the other hand, will have to suffer any permanent effects that are dealt to you. Like your current bleeding wound.

Dallion gritted his teeth.

You dont have to tell me now. Think it over. Just dont take too long. Youre not the only seer in the city, especially during the festival.

Chapter 275: Shield Link

The suggestion didnt even make Dallion smile. Quietly, he continued along the smaller, less crowded streets towards the Gremlins Timepiece. Nil continued making comments now and again, his words had become little more than background buzzing very annoying buzzing at that.

I know youre more sensitive than most, but this is no reason to behave like this, dear boy. Being down is nice now and again, but if you react like this to every loss, you wont have a bright future. At best, youll have a very unhappy existence, which could lead you to quitting.

Its not the same and you know it. Personally, I dont think youve experienced a personal loss. True, youve failed a few challenges every now and then, and each time that impacted you to your core. I can accept its part of life, but you need to grow up!

The exchange hurt, not just psychologically, but it physically hurt Dallion enough to make him stop mid step. It was gone after only a second, but lasted enough to serve as a reminder of the promise to the Green Moon. Unlike the general, the Moons liked to keep all that owed them favors on a tight leash.

If you dont get this under control, itll soon become unbearable.

Annoyed, Dallion slipped the block ring onto his finger. All links to his gear instantly vanished. The echo of pain, however, remained. That was to be expected items werent supposed to work on deities.

Walking faster, Dallion made his way to the inn in complete internal silence. At moments such as this, he could appreciate Euryales philosophy of having as few echoes and linked items as possible.

Hey, Dal, Jiroh greeted him the moment he entered. A quick heads up. Weve got guests now, so dont do anything crazy until you reach your room.

Dallions immediate reaction was to look at the staircase, as if hoping to catch a glimpse of the people whod rented a room. He had been so wrapped up with the mornings events that he had completely forgotten that the main purpose of an inneven this onewas to offer rooms to people and not just serve food.

Theyre awakened, the fury added, suggesting in a subtle way that he should be mindful of his conversations as well.

Good to know. Wheres Hannah?

Out arguing prices again. The festival is a crazy time, not to mention that Gloria and Veil have made a lot of the local competitors mad. Wont be the first time theyve done nasty tricks. Thats why Hannah always stocks up on food.

That made sense.

You look down. What happened? Problems with Eury?

The question startled Dallion just enough to get beyond the unspecified feeling of unease that he had since the leveling up of the mirror. Initially, he felt the urge to flat out deny, quickly followed by slight fear of whether Jiroh knew something he didnt. After all, she had known Eury far longer, and it was possible that the gorgon had discussed him frequently. Actually, it was quite likely she had done so.

Not that I know, Dallion said, focusing on his music skills. Do you know something I dont?

Just a guess on my part. Its obvious something is eating you.

Its nothing serious, Dallion replied, still somewhat suspicious. Some things happened and never mind. He looked around the room again. So, we have awakened guests. Anything interesting about them?

Typical tourists, Jiroh said. All human, if thats what youre asking.

It wasnt, but it was a good thing to know.

Theyve paid till the end of the festival, although its not rare for guests to leave earlier.

High level?

Double digits, she replied. Barely. The expensive places get the higher ones. We have a few regulars who like Aspans cooking, but they havent shown up yet. Probably will be here just before the countess arrives.

That brought a series of mixed feelings. On the one hand, Dallion was looking forward to the countess arrival. As someone who had only seen portraits of her, he was understandably curious. At the same time, he was fed up with hearing the topic discussed everywhere he went. Inadvertently, this made him think about his grandfather. At the time, the old man had joined the counts army in the war for succession. From what Dallion had seen in the memory of the former village chief, his grandfather had earned a noble title as a result. Since the countess had invited the Luors to the Nerosal festival, she knew exactly where they came from, as well as their history. The bigger question was how much she knew about Dallions past.

According to the rules of the tournament festival, the ultimate victor was going to receive a prize from the countess herself. If Dallion managed to make it that far there was a chance he received some information about his grandfather. Either that, or suffer the same punishment.

I think Ill go get some rest, Dallion said.

Be down by lunch. Crowd will be hell today. Well need all hands on deck.

That bad?

Pure blonds, Juroh said with a sigh. Were the only inn in the city that has them. People from outside will be curious. And even if they arent, everyone needs to eat.

Sure, Ill be there. How did you manage to get everything done before I got here?

Practice. Also, Eury used to help out in the past.

Right. See you at lunch, then.

Dallion went straight to his room. Despite Nils insistence, he didnt feel hungry. The best he thought of doing was taking a nice long nap in his realm that way he could sleep for more than two hours. Also, there were a few other things he needed to do.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The familiar room emerged around him. The walls remained fairly bare, although at least there were a few framed items displaying the various specific skills he had mastered. The attack wall had the most of things, of course two swords, two daggers, a dartbow, and a small statue of himself indicating unarmed combat. The athletics wall was next, depicting three skills, in unique fashion: climbing, swimming, and throwing. According to Nil, there were a lot more that Dallion was

supposed to master, even if Dallion didnt see much point for the moment. The acrobatics, guard, and music walls had two items each, as did the forging wall, despite it being the only skills at which Dallion still had yet to make any progress. That annoyed him slightly. As much as he wanted to progress in that area, there hadnt been any real need or urgency so far.

Shield, Dallion said. I can link you to my realm now. You okay with that?

There was no answer.

Shield?

A doorway appeared in one of the walls. Through it, the floor of the shields tower was visible. For some reason, it was only now that Dallion realized how much more sophisticated the harpriswords realm was. Of everything he had seen so far, that was the only place that came with its own tower. All other items were closed environments, regardless of their actual size.

Shield, you here? Dallion stepped in the new addition to his awakening realm.

Indeed, the dryad guardian was standing by the staircase that led to the upper levels. No smile was visible on his face.

I thought thered be more of a reaction, Dallion said. Whats wrong? Youve kept saying you wanted more than being kept in a room full of relics. Was I wrong?

You were very much right, the dryad said. There was a warmth in his voice that Dallion hadnt felt so far, but also a bit of sadness. I just never expected it to happen.

Ive watched the generals dealings for a long time. Its rare that he loses an argument. Its even rarer that he lets anything go.

You think it was too easy? Dallion asked.

Things only go easy, if the general has something in mind. Normally the prize you gave him wouldnt be enough, but And here Im rambling again. Finally, the guardian smiled. I guess I just never thought this day would happen and now that it has it feels unreal.

I know what you mean, Dallion whispered.

Now I get to see the inside of another realm something which I never expected to be able to do.

Despite the stoic disconnected front, the dryad was putting on, Dallion could see dozens of emotions bubbling in his very being. It was like taking a can of soda tucked at the back of the fridge for decades, then shaking it up. There was joy, sadness, a sense of freedom, along with the fear of losing it again, and so many other nuances that Dallion couldnt keep track of them all.

Okay, now thats done, whats your plan? The emotions vanished like unattended popcorn on campus. Dont expect me to do wild things each time you get in trouble. The thing against Vermilion was a one off.

Really? That sounded too much like a game.

Well, no, but I really prefer not to do such stuff again. Its quite painful.

I didnt know

Hey, its not your choice. Its ours. Remember that. When you level up more, youll get to use a few new tricks that would help with that. Until then, well have to use our abilities to compensate and that deals pain, also makes us weaker.

The harpsisword had stepped in three times so far without complaining once. To think that each time she had to go through such limitations was alarming in itself, but why hadnt she told Dallion?

Do you think Im ready for my next leveling? Dallion asked.

No, not yet, the dryad replied. Dont quote me, but I think it would be better to get a taste of world exploration before leveling up.

Not the suggestion Dallion expected to hear.

What do you know that I dont?

Lots, the dryad smiled. All I can say is its better to be versatile and not make decisions before experiencing something for the first time. Also, dont level up any more skills.

One day Ill get you and Harp to tell me everything.

When you reach the level, well be glad to. For the moment take Nils advice. Sleep, eat, chill, spend a night with Eury, for tomorrow you enter a new world. You might be in there for a while.

Chapter 276: World of the Aura Sword

The day passed in the wink of the eye. The chaos of lunch and dinner, the time spent training in between, even the massive rearrangement of Dallions realm seemed to have gone in a flash. There was no telling whether he had spent a day or a week in true time, doing everything he wanted to do, all with the goal of getting his mind off things that were and that would be. There was but one regret he hadnt managed to see Euryale that night. The gorgons workshop was empty, with nothing but a note telling Dallion that she had been called by the city guard to assist in something.

Dallion was slightly hurt that no details were mentioned, but considering he did the same when making his deals with the mirror pool and what not, he decided he wasnt the right person to judge.

Hannah was up as Dallion left for the guild. Since the copyette incident, the two didnt exchange much more than hellos and goobyes. Dallion knew she had no ill will towards him, and everything considered he couldnt be too upset at her either, but needed some more time for relations to return to normal. As for the Aspan, things were a lot more complicated.

Suit yourself. An exploration isnt like a day of improving items. You dont have limits on using your skills.

I know, Nil, I know.

There were considerably more people at the guild when Dallion got there. Most of them, as it turned out, were new candidates coming from the nearby towns and villages in an attempt to join the guild. Estezol had explained that the festival also brought in flocks of merchant kids and wandering awakened who wanted to join a guildany guild. Nine times out of ten, the people didnt have what it took, but even so, tests had to be conducted, which was a real nightmare considering everything else going on. Now, Dallion understood why everyone kept referring to the festival since he had arrived here. The festival was the equivalent of months of work packed into a single week. No wonder Nil hated it so much.

Squeezing through the crowd, Dallion made his way to the staircase, then up and to the fourth floor, when the rest of the exploration party had started to gather.

Hey, Vend greeted Dallion. Glad you made it on time.

Yeah, the morning was slow, Dallion said. So, this is it? Despite his attempts, Dallion couldnt hide his anxiousness. He could have sworn it was under control this morning, but now, moments before the event, it was back in full force. Do we split into groups?

Not for this. Strength in numbers. Dont worry, though, youll be pretty much a packrat. And healer.

Dallion arched a brow.

Everyone in the city knows about your firebird. Youll be in the front line, ready to fix people up if they get wounded.

Shouldnt I be in the back lines? Dallion wondered.

What good will you be there? The people in front are the ones wholl get hurt. Crafters are behind. Dont worry, youll learn fast when you see it.

The only person youre hurting is yourself. I dont particularly care what you read and what you dont. However, you would have been much better prepared if you had done as I suggested.

Giving the kid a hard time already? a female voice asked behind Dallion. Looks like mentoring someone has gotten to your head.

Turning around, Dallion saw the crafter who hed met during the rescue guild job. Since then, he had learned quite a bit of things about her, namely that she was an acting captain for the Icepickers crafters, as well as Janna and Kallans mother.

Congrats on passing the third gate, the woman turned to Dallion. Sorry I couldn't make it to your celebration, but had this to deal with. Kids say hi, by the way. Both are envious that you got to take part in this before them.

Thanks, Dillion said in a somewhat stiff fashion. I'm sure they'll get their chance.

Yeah no. The woman's expression changed. I'm not letting them anywhere near a world item.

That dangerous? Dallion asked.

Kid, if it wasn't dangerous, there wouldn't be so much fuss. We'd have done it already and forgotten all about the stupid sword. It's taken years to get it to the state it's now. Quite a few people quit over that.

That sounded harsh, but Dallion could see it. Based on the state of the decay on the sword, it was nearly certain that the cracklings had created quite a few settlements, potentially even towns. If they were to clear all that, it would take quite a bit of fighting and ingenuity.

At least we won't have to deal with this mess, Vend looked down the staircase.

It couldn't have been that bad, Dallion smirked. You got me.

I also got the Star.

There was an uncomfortable silence. No one felt like continuing the conversation, spending the time checking their gear, instead. After another few minutes March arrived, and to Dallion's great surprise, she wasn't alone.

Everyone here? the captain asked, giving the group a quick glance. Good, she said before anyone could answer. Before we go, there's been a small change. I've arranged a hunter to accompany us on this mission.

Euryale has worked with us in the past and most of you know her, so there shouldn't be any issue.

Great, Vend said beneath his breath.

Are we expecting wilderness creatures? someone asked.

After last time, anything is possible. That's why we're taking a hunter along. The decision comes from the guild master himself.

That quickly put an end to all further questions. Dallion, however, felt more than a bit uncomfortable with the situation. It was no longer a secret that he and the gorgon had hooked up, not to mention that due to a slip of the tongue, quite a lot of people were under the impression that the two were engaged.

On the other hand, having her along was certainly going to be beneficial for the group. A gorgon hunter, and forger at that, was rare to come by.

Several of Eurys snakes moved in Dallion's direction, as if they were waving.

Check your gear, March ordered. Agnii, you got everything you needed?

Right here, the other captain said, revealing a large collection of chains and bracelets on her left hand. Should be enough until we start making things on our own.

March nodded, then waited for the rest of the group to finish with the final check. There was no need for Dallion to go through that he had been checking his gear multiple times ever since he had left the inn, even before. Still, he felt compelled to do so, if only to show March that he was being serious.

Once everyone was done, March led the way to the room with the door. Unlike before, the moment the party entered the room, the door was closed and barred shut. Without invitation, Vend stepped to the sword hanging from the ceiling and grabbed the blade with his left hand while extending his left back. Several people grabbed hold to it, doing the same. Dallion also followed suit. In a number of seconds, the entire chain was complete.

May the blessings of the Moons be with us, March said.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

Reality changed, taking everyone into the realm of the sword. The weapon hanging from the ceiling was gone, along with the walls of the small room. Instead, the group found itself in a large, elaborate temple. Large statues of white and green marble rose everywhere human figures dressed in armor depicting the seven Moons. The common five were easily recognizable, although the last two had their faces and arms destroyed.

Three large altars were visible further down the room, surrounded by columns and bowls of fire. The walls were made entirely of mosaics, depicting hunting scenes of nature fields, seas, deserts, forests, mountains, and clouds with castles on them.

You are in the WORLD of AURA SWORD

Unseal all Temples to fulfil the WORLDS destiny.

Everyone gather round, Agnii shouted. Looking at her, Dallion saw that she was surrounded by a pile of backpacks which definitely wasn't present back in the guildhall. Get your backpacks. That's your food and water for the next two days, so keep it safe!

Food and water? That was a first. Dallion was familiar with the explanations, but now he wanted to take a sip and bite just to see the difference.

Like a well-oiled machine, the members of the party passed by the crafter, each picking up a backpack and continuing down the temple hall. When it was Dallion's turn, he found that the backpack was far heavier than he initially expected. His body stat allowed him to pick it up without problem, but some effort was involved.

All set? March asked.

All set, the other captain replied.

Good. Group outside.

Dallion looked about, confused what to do, when Vend tapped him on the shoulder and gestured forward. After half a minute walking, the group reached a large wooden double door.

Get ready, Vend whispered.

For what? Dallion was barely able to ask when two of the party members opened both sides of the door, revealing the landscape outside.

If there were any doubts why this would be called a world item, they were now gone. The temple, as it turned out, was on the top of a mountain, providing a vista throughout the land. The valley below shifted from a plain with sparse vegetation to a forest, then to a plain again.

Sword Tip mountain, Vend said. This is where we start. The next point is all the way through the forests, along the trail to the stone obelisk.

Dallion could only nod as he left the temple. The air was sweet, though chilly, as one would expect when on a mountain. Remnants of what once must have been a road began at the door, quickly giving way to rocks as they reached the cliff.

The world has ten levels, Vend explained. Each has a temple with a guardian that opens the way to the next level. The levels are worlds within themselves, but also part of a whole.

Like portals?

No, its physical. Its closer to sphere items. There are tunnels that lead to other parts of the realm, only we dont have staircasesnot anymore, at leastbut just tunnels leading down. Theres one thing to keep in mind, Vend pointed in the distance.

Initially, Dallion didnt see it. After a few moments, the point of interest was obvious. Vend was pointing at a flock of birds, possibly crows, flying just as calmly as they would if they were in the real world.

A short distance away, Marsh was having a hushed conversation with Euryale. Whatever they were discussing, the two made sure to whisper softly enough so that no other awakened could hear. Once they finished, the gorgon went ahead, down the mountain, while March turned to the rest of the group.

Well do some hunting when we get down there. Our immediate goal is food, materials, and water for the next leg of the way. Stay together, help out as much as you could. Once Agnii is happy, we move on to the next temple. One thing to remember. Therere no cracklings or stinkers in this area, but the animals are still here. If you come across anything you dont know or cant handle, dont do anything rash.

What is out there? Dallion whispered to Vend. Bears?

Bears would be fine. We could use them for fur. This place is its own world and like any world it has its creatures of the wilderness.

Chapter 277: Provisions

A distinct smell of lavender filled the air. The source remained elusive until the group made their way down and reached the start of the forest. It was then obvious that the trees themselves released the smell, which became even more apparent when the first campfire was built.

According to March, the group was scheduled to remain a week in the forest itself, hunting and getting water and firewood. Dallion asked about stones and rocks, only to be told that would take place during a later part of their trip.

Eury was separate most of the time, scouting ahead in her full hunter gear. The armor design was completely unlike anything Dallion had seen, although he could imagine it coming from her. Even so, his music skills let him know that a lot of the people were nervous when she was nearby.

As evening approached, all members of the party gathered at the campfire. Most of them were out hunting, with little success by the looks of it. The rest including Dallion had been in charge of chopping and collecting wood. It was a boring, though interesting experience. For one thing, Dallion wasn't used to being perfumed by a tree each time the axe hit it.

What do you think of the first day? Euryale asked, sitting down next to Dallion at the fire.

Not what I expected, he replied cautiously. In truth, he wanted to ask what she was doing with the group, but knew that doing so would likely create more questions than answers. As Nil liked to say, there was plenty of time to investigate later. For the moment, he had to focus on the goal at hand.

It's exactly what I expected, Eury said, her snakes constantly moving about. The creatures are not that much, but they're smart enough to hide. Whatever predators there are, they'll appear after dark. And judging by the new animals in the forest, I'd say this is their turf.

Dallion looked around.

You won't catch them like that, the gorgon laughed. They'll avoid this place. Fire isn't something they've seen in a while. Since the last expedition, at least.

Across the fire, relatively secluded from everyone else, Vend was explaining something to March. Dallion couldn't make out the words, but the emotions told him that neither of them were particularly pleased.

He's explaining that they won't meet the food quota, Eury said, seeing what her boyfriend was looking at. The wood won't be a problem, but meat might be. He's proposing that they search for alternatives. March is against it, of course. She's never trusted plants in the realms.

You can hear them? Dallion sounded impressed.

No, I told her the same thing a few hours ago, and if I know Vend he also sees the danger. There was a slight pause. Well, not real danger. Rather he knows we won't be ready in two days.

So, Vend is her number two?

You can call him that. March saved him. She saved him from jail. This time, Eury's voice was low enough so that no one but people in her immediate vicinity could hear. He used to be a thief and pickpocket before joining the guild. A lot of natural awakened are in this world. However, he tried to snatch something from a noble.

There was a slight pause, enough for Dallion to give the man another glance. This wasn't the first time he heard this, but he still found it difficult to believe that Vend was a street pickpocket as a child.

Commoners can't steal from nobles, unless the nobles let them. Vend used his splitting to take a brooch from a city noble, who in turn let him do it. A few hours later, the overseer.

Why? Dallion asked.

While it might be fun for the noble, the overseer doesn't like to create precedents. An act against an active noble of Nerosal was the same as declaring war. The mirror pool was informed of the event and was told in no unclear terms what would happen, should they have any dealings with the boy. Poor boy didn't have a chance. He was delivered to the city guard by the mirror pool the very same day.

And March saved him?

Not quite. March wasn't here back then. A secret the size of a pea appeared in the gorgon's head, clearly visible for Dallion to see. She visited him later and convinced the overseer to release him to the guild. Since March was an imperial soldier in the past, the overseer agreed.

Being an imperial soldier definitely had its advantages. Lately, though, Dallion had started realizing what came with the title. It wasn't just something a person could buy, it meant that the March had the skills of a minor noble, but had chosen to roam about the wilderness fighting monsters or armies of neighboring countries for the sake of the empire.

Vend has been loyal ever since, Eury said, just as March shook her head at Vend. The man remained still for a few moments, then walked away. There you go. She's probably told him that they need to get the supplies and do it in two days. Now he's trying to figure out how to share the news with the rest of the group.

You seem to know a lot about the guild

A hunter knows a lot of things about a lot of things. The gorgon smiled. Also, I had dealings with the guild in the past, a bit like Jiroh.

You never told me.

Maybe one day I will. Planting a kiss on Dallion's cheek, the gorgon then stood up and moved away from the fire.

For some reason she didn't like Vend too much. Looking at Vend, Dallion could only see that his mentor was too worried about something else to notice.

Listen up, Vend said. We'll be making some changes tomorrow. We're on track for gathering the wood we need, but not the food. He looked at the dozen of small animals that had been caught—small things that appeared to be a cross between a sheep and a hare. That's why tomorrow, everyone but Dal and Agnii will be hunting. That includes the gorgon.

The silence was full, only broken by the crackling of the fire.

And I don't want to hear that time is irrelevant here. We're here to do something, so let's do it properly.

Are all meat types acceptable? Euryale asked with a smirk. Its night, so there should be a bear or two out there. I can scout about and try to catch something.

That works.

Hearing the answer, a few more people stood up, only to be given warning glares from Vend.

Keep in mind that we wont be carrying anyone during the day. If youre out in the night, you better catch something. If not, youll be joining the morning hunting groups.

Some of the people sat down, though others didnt. Interestingly enough, March was one of the people who left.

Three people take first watch. Vend stepped away from the fire. Two shifts.

Finishing off his evening ration, Dallion curled up near the fire for some sleep. Before he did, he looked at the sky. As the sun completely vanished, the Moons emerged. All seven of them were there, looking at the ground, careful judging all that happened. The blue moon shone brightest, but the green moon was also brighter than Dallion remembered it to be. In the past, it had been little more than a pale circle in comparison, though no more.

Sorry, Dallion yawned. Not used to sleeping in the open.

Better get used to it, the woman said. Itll be a while before you see a bed.

The first thing Dallion did was to find a good spot in the forest to do his business. It felt strangely weird, as if Dallion had gone to a rural camp. Washing his hands with what little water he had, he then got to chopping wood. Considering he was one of the two people to do that, this was turning out to be a long day.

Using an axe turned out to be quite different from what Dallion imagined. Thankfully, since this was an awakened realm, there were combat markers to help with that. Dallion had already memorized the order of the markers from the previous day, but he still followed them, more to train his reactions than anything else. Also, he made a point to split into at least five instances. From what Nil had said, doing so helped improve his control and stamina.

Around lunch some of the guild members started showing up. Vends speech must have been quite inspirational, because they had caught a lot more animals. Unfortunately, that meant that Agnii had to focus on skinning and food prepping, while the chopping remained all Dallions.

By evening, Dallion could barely lift the axe. Not since his first few levels had he reached a state in which his stamina wasn't enough. Facing a forest of trees clearly proved more challenging than any guardian.

The firebird had instantly appeared, doing its best to make him feel better. Alas, pain wasn't considered a wound. After a few minutes, Dallion had no choice but to send the bird away and suffer in silence.

Exhaustion prevented Dallion from staying awake for Eurys return. Way before the sun had set, he was out, sleeping ten feet from the campfire spot. When he next woke up, it was mid-morning.

Crap! Dallion jumped to his feet. Strangely enough, all the pain in his arms and body had vanished.

Wonderful, isn't it? Agnii asked, pouring herself a mug of steaming wine a short distance away. You always feel fresh the next day, no matter what you do. I wish it could be like that in the real world. She downed her cup in one gulp. Would have made things a heck of a lot better.

Right, Dallion nodded with a guilty smile. I'll get to chopping.

Best thing to do. You have a bit of catching up to do, but I feel you'll manage. Just one thing. Pay more attention to chopping up the firewood. Quantity is important, but so is quality.

Clearly, she had noticed that Dallion was focusing on getting things done faster than getting them done right. With that one remark, the work continued.

Focusing more on chopping and less on making instances, Dallion managed to cut up another five trees before the guild members returned. All of them were carrying a wide variety of animals: sheep-rabbits and bears mostly, but also a few birds, as well as a fish or two. All of them were skinned and sliced up by Agnii who did it with such speed that Dallion thought he was watching a cartoon.

When afternoon arrived, so did Eury. The gorgon, from what Dallion had heard, had managed to catch two large bears, which had helped with the provisions quite a bit. Seeing Dallion's suffering, she had also helped with the lumber gathering. One by one, so did the rest of the party.

By the time March appeared, both wood and provisions were gathered in large enough quantities. Even so, Vend remained concerned.

Do we have what we need? March asked.

We have enough, Agnii replied. We could have used a bit more food, but we have more furs than expected. By noon we can

It'll do, March cut her short. Everyone, eat if you have to, shit if you need to, then prep up. We're heading through the forest.

We'll be heading through the forest all the way to Tear Town. After we rest, there we're heading straight for the Edge Temple. Eury, you'll be our eyes on this.

Gotcha. The gorgon nodded.

Dal, you and your firebird will be upfront with me, March continued. If anything unexpected happens, Ill need you to react quickly.

Yes, maam! Dallion said. This was starting to sound serious.

Chapter 278: Sanctuary Prison

There were no unexpected encounters as the party moved through the forest, although at several points Dallion heard sounds of creatures in the distance. Out of habit, he asked Nil what they could be of, but the old echo hadnt the slightest idea. It was the Shield who suggested that they be dealing with a jackalear. A bear with antlers, the creature was supposed to be an apex predator that lived in such environments. Territorial and highly intelligent, the creature only appeared when threatened or certain to win. Until then, it would only follow from a distance, waiting for its chance.

Whether the creature really existed in this realm, or the shield was trying to scare Dallion with its usual strange humor, remained unclear. The group never saw an instance of it while walking, that was for sure. What they did come across were the remains of a small settlement at the edge of the forest. Initially, Dallion thought that to be human, but after a better look at the buildings, he could only come to one conclusionthe place had been occupied by gremlins crackling gremlins.

A crackling village? he asked the person in front of him.

Aha, Emelle replied. She was roughly Dallions age in real time, though as true years were concerned, she could well be decades older. Quite average with the exception of her braided hazel hair, she had a very on the job attitude regarding everything else as a restriction. According to Nil, she was good at her job, but so was everyone else in the group.

Why havent the remains vanished?

They used world materials, the woman replied with a sigh. Here cracklings might poof, but the things they leave behind stay forever. Animals arent interested, and there isnt anyone else to loot.

So, theres nothing valuable?

Go, check. Anything you find is yours.

Definitely not much of a talker. Dallion decided it was best not to push his luck, although there was one thing he wanted to find out.

When was it destroyed?

No idea. Must have been one of the first expeditions. I heard that the place was crawling with cracklings back then. Rusties and stinkies as well. Well probably get more of that later on, so enjoy the calm if it lasts.

Thanks.

Dallion walked on. It was largely how he suspected, although, if the place was crawling with critters, how come they had only built a small village. Back when he had cleared the Stone Garden, it had taken the cracklings there a decade or so to reach the same level of development. The sword was supposed to be thousands of years old, at least. For something that old, and abandoned, the cracklings were supposed to have erected cities at the very least.

Ah, but this isnt the middle of nowhere. Its the start of the realm, the contact point between realities. It was certain that it must have been a point of vital importance. Unless?

The echo waited for Dallion to continue. Initially, Dallion couldnt see his point. It was true that if this was a connection point, it would be the same as a major port city. There would be hundreds of buildings, warehouses to store goods, large roads to aid transport, and a ton of forts to protect said goods. Instead, the temple was placed on the most hostile spot there was, far from anything else with no easy access. It was almost as if

A prison realm or a realm in which people went to escape Dallion wasnt sure which was worse. The only way to find out was to go deeper in the hopes of finding clues.

Here? Its difficult to say. I guess its possible. Were talking about things in the realm of possibility only. World items are extremely rare and not explored. We cant make any conclusions based on sphere items alone.

But is it possible? Realistically, I mean.

I would say yes, dear boy. It is possible, though not too probable. Theres a greater chance that we find something that lets us know what happened. And a treasure, of course. Theres always a treasure and when theres a treasure, theres always someone looking.

It has been my experience that something this old might be able to hurt even Stars. Do you know why the two moons hid themselves?

No, you never told me. On more than one occasion.

The Order consider this anathema, but there are stories that during the copyettes attempt to take over the world the Star presented them with a way to kill a Moon.

Well, maybe hurt. Mistakes are possible when translating texts that old. The important thing is that they were given something that actually managed to wound a moon.

Dallion didnt reply. Wounding a deity was possible according to a lot of myths he remembered skimming through on Earth. But to be in a position to actually do it, considering the Moons power in this world. This must have been the equivalent of the atom bomb.

Theres some argument about that, but academics believe it to have been the Green Moon. Some speculate it might be the Purple, but I have my doubts.

Why?

There still are people born with magic. Its rare, but it happens. Meanwhile, to my knowledge there hasnt been anyone born with the stat of the Green Moon.

The Green moon That was quite the coincidence. Not only was it the Moon who had approached Dallion but also one of the Moons that shone brightest in this realm. If there really was something here, that could hurt a Moon, it made Sense that a Moon that had been hurt by it wanted to keep it hidden. It also made sense that a Star would want to get it.

After the forest, the party went through a series of plains. The entire time there were barely any animals visible. In contrast, insects were quite abundantants, butterflies, grasshoppers, other bugs that were abundant back on Earth, though not so much in this real world.

The walking continued until the midafternoon, when in the distance the shape of a town became visible. It seemed to be a human townmedieval architecture, large stone walls protecting the houses within. The closer that Dallion got, though, the more he got the impression that the town was something recently built on the ruins of something far older. He wanted to ask Vend or Eury about it, but March had sent the gorgon to scout out the area ahead, while Vend was too close to the captain. The only remaining option was Agnii.

Did you build that? Dallion approached her, adding a note of joy in his words. With the level of his music skills, he had the option to make her want to share, but everything considered he wanted to be as subtle on this as possible.

Not me. Its been like this since the first expedition, the woman replied. Well, the first expedition that reached it. It took a lot of fighting to get close.

The locals did it?

Thats the belief. When things got tough, some must have gathered here and fortified the city with what they could. Statues, columns, anything that could easily be turned into a wall. It probably held off the cracklings and other monsters for a while. Maybe even generations. With time, though, everything changes.

Maybe they left? Dallion suggested. A fortified waypoint before the last stretch out of here.

Good one. Agnii smiled. Yes, its possible, but unlikely. If people were on the run, they wouldn't have bothered building ten smithies and five armories.

Another hour later and the group reached the city. It was impressively old, with thick walls, rising four meters up. The door was the only thing new, created, it seemed, from iron made not more than a few decades back.

Now that is mine, Angii said. As I told you, it was tough at first.

The inside of the town was both familiar and strange. The infrastructure was exactly what one would expect of a town with its streets, small and large buildings, town squares, and whatnot. The only things missing were shops and wells. If this was a real town, the people had somehow learned not to eat or drink anything.

We'll rest here till evening, March announced. I'll be on shift. Everyone else, get some sleep. We continue at dark.

What's with the moving after dark? Dallion whispered to Agnii.

That's March's thing. She thinks it's safer if we walk at night.

But why? Aren't there more monsters then?

Well, yes, but the Moons are out during the night and she's a believer. Thinks that we'll come to less harm when they watch over us.

Maybe for some. Dallion still wasn't sure how he felt knowing that the Green Moon was keeping an eye on him. In fact, he wasn't sure he would be capable of fighting if the need arose. Cracklings and other such nastiness was one thing, however, if it came to helping take down a guardian there was a high chance that Dallion would be reminded of the Moons' help.

A campfire was set at the largest town square. Unlike the forests, a few more conversations were held—people talking about things back home: the festival, the guild standings, and the arrival of the countess. One of the greatest points of speculation was who the arriving imperial would be. None of the names that were floated meant anything to Dallion, but he listened nonetheless. At one point, Vend approached.

Hey, the elite whispered. How are you holding up?

I'm fine. People don't have to ask me every hour. Dallion was getting slightly annoyed with this. He could tell there was no malice, but even so, it was getting old. Where's Eury?

March has her scout ahead. She is a scout, after all. There was a hint of falsehood there.

Right.

The best thing for you right now is to get some rest. We'll be facing the first guardian tomorrow. It might be rough.

Anything more you can share? Or do you have to be vague and cryptic?

Guardians are stronger here. It's like fighting an area guardian along with a wave of blockers. The first ones March and a few more could take care of, but the rest will be a full party effort. You'll be extremely needed, then. You're the only person who has the ability to heal, and also there was a pause. You have no limitations.

Limitations?

Not everyone can affect guardians. All of us here have kept our stats on equal levels more or less in order to be able to handle anything out there. You don't have to. You might be weak now, but you've proven you can learn. In a few years you'll be able to handle yourself like everyone else. A few more after that and you'll be as good as any elite. If you keep leveling up the way you do, you'll surpass me and possibly one day even March herself. However, in order to do that you must be safe now.

Im a future investment, Dallion said. Thats why everyone is so careful with everything I do.

Thats part of it, yes. Vend nodded. He was still keeping something from Dallion.

Okay, Ill be careful. One question, though. Why do they call this place the town of tears?

During the third expedition, we found a message in one of the buildings, Vend whispered. It was carved into one of the walls, so March had it destroyed. The message said that this was the final spot before danger and that only the tears of those sentenced to die remained. At this point weve no idea if it referred to people trying to get out of the artifact or further in. However, a lot of people died here, possibly even before the town was rebuilt. Thats why this is the town of tears.

Chapter 279: Guardian Minions

As hard as Dallion tried, he was unable to sleep. The first hour passed with him turning around beneath a blanket in the hopes that hed get tired enough. When that didnt work, he just gave up on the whole thing and decided to walk about the town. Nil was strongly opposed, of course, explaining that this was no way to be ready for an actual fight. Only the armadil was supporting, cracking a few jokes in typical fashion.

Other than the material the town was made of, there was nothing particularly strange about it. The buildings were simple mix of Roman and medieval architecture. At one point, they must have been standard homes for people, if a little tight on space, but later they were remodified into military structures. No matter where he ventured, Dallion was unable to find anything of significance nothing but bare walls and dirt remained. And while he was curious to find the building with the ominous message, there didnt seem to be one.

Dallion would have preferred to have seen it. However, hed have to make do with Vends story. Several hours later, Eury returned to the town. Not long after, the party was ordered to pack up and get ready for the trip.

It had taken them three days to reach the Town of Tears. According to Vend, it was another day or so to reach the temple of the level guardian. On the way, Dallion couldnt help but notice that there were less and less animal sounds. The presence of beasts that had been frequent before, especially at night, had diminished until they had disappeared completely. Only the insects remained, filling the grass and air. There was one other major difference gradually a road emerged and the further they went, the better its condition got.

Ten temples, ten guardians four of them had already been defeated, six remained. It was going to be quite the steep learning curve. Dallion was going to do his best to observe and catch the patterns, so that

COMBAT INITIATED

The moment the red rectangle emerged, everyone dropped everything they were carrying and drew their weapons. Dallion barely had enough time to do the same, when three bearlike creatures emerged.

GUARDIAN MINION

Species: Jackalear

Class: Minion

Statistics: 100%

Skills:

- Charge
- Devour
- Space Tear

Weak Spots: none

The Firebird emerged instantly, granting him wings. Without hesitation, Dallion summoned his shield and harpsisword. Everyone else was already ahead of him.

Elites and monsters clashed. Dallion watched a heavily built man pierce one of the monsters with his spear. To his surprise, that only caused a minor wound. Guardian minions were definitely a lot stronger than ordinary creatures he'd encountered.

Leaving the spear in, the man summoned a second one, sticking it into the enemy. Before he could do the same with a third, the jackalear swiped at him, ripping whole tiles of his armor off. There was no blood, just a series of red rectangles in the awakened realms they might well have been the same.

Meanwhile, the beasts kept on coming. It was as if they ripped reality itself, teleporting a few steps from the party without approaching. Initially there had been only a few, but now they outnumbered the party two to one, and more kept on appearing.

Stay down! Eury shouted, while punching a jackalear in the stomach at lightning speed. Red rectangles stacked one after the other in the dozens. Don't stand out!

Dallion hesitated, wondering whether the bears could jump high enough to reach him. That proved to be a mistake. Reality tore a few feet away in front of him, revealing the antlers of a giant creature charging towards him.

Dallion swallowed. If he hadn't linked the armadil shield, there was no telling how much damage the attack would have dealt. A fatal wound at least, maybe even a one hit kill? That definitely would have been embarrassing.

Now I see why you're a companion shield

, Dallion thought.

Is there anything bad in ensuring my owner does the best he could? Stress never helped anyone in battle.

Moments later, the shield contracted again, returning to its original state. Lux instantly took over, thrusting Dallion up and forward.

Keep me closer to the ground, Dallion said. And get me near the battle.

That wasn't a bad idea. Dallion conveyed the order.

Red rectangles filled the area like fireworks, appearing and disappearing all too fast for Dallion to follow. From what he could see, a number of party members had lost between fifteen and thirty percent life. However, there were those that hadn't received a scratch. Euryale was one of those, as was Vend, and, of course, March. The armored captain remained at the front of the group, casually walking forward as if nothing was happening. Groups of creatures would emerge around her in threes and fours only to be slashed to pieces with such speed that Dallion couldn't even follow. With his current perception, all he could do was see single strokes, however the rectangles stacked about her enemies were always half a dozen at least.

Right now, Dallion didn't see that as a bad thing. On the contrary, he was glad there was someone on the team that could cut through the enemies like snow.

It took Lux several seconds to get Dallion half a dozen feet from March. Upon reaching a relatively safe spot, the firebird let him to the ground, though still remaining on him, gradually healing him in the process.

Slowly Dallion stepped closer, both shield and harpsisword at the ready. He knew that he had to make a better impression so he played another chord to sync with the jackalears, then played melodies of slowness.

Don't waste your music on minions, March said. Whatever they see, the guardian knows. Also, they aren't worth it.

Yes, maam, Dallion instantly stopped. That was something he should have figured on his own. Worse, it was something he knew he had read that when facing a group of enemies, it was better to keep a few of his skills secret so that he would have an ace for when things became really dangerous.

Are you hurt? the captain asked.

Not anymore, Dallion quickly replied, fighting his desire to step away from the creatures as they appeared in the vicinity of March. Lux took care of that. Want me to heal anyone?

Later. The first two arent difficult. Watch, learn, and dont get hit too much.

It soon turned out that standing next to March was the safest place to be. As much as she attracted minions, she dispatched them just as fast as they appeared. Meanwhile, Dallion could remain safe and observe. This reminded him of the time he had joined the hunt. Back then, he too was tasked to train during the first part of the journey with the goal of becoming strong enough to act as support for the fight against the chaining.

Everyone had their own styles of combat. Eury preferred close combat in which she would pummel enemies using her spiked gauntlets. Vend, on the other hand, had a more elegant slashing style. Thanks to his training, Dallion was able to see the dozens of instances that Vend deployed, always slashing the creature from its blind spot. Of the other people some stuck to one weapon, others summoned multiple in rapid succession. The only thing everyone had in common was that none of them were using ranged weapons, even those that carried such.

On a few occasions Dallion wondered whether he should join in, but the quick actions of the party members made him decide against it by getting some personal experience in combat, he was likely to cause more chaos to the group as a whole. Dallions experience in the house cleaning job came to mind. There, the lieutenant had let him know when to take part in things and when not to. There was no reason why this should be any different.

The fight continued for over five minutes until suddenly, the minions just stopped appearing. It was as if someone had seen there was no point and flicked a switch, stopping the attack.

Wait for it, March ordered.

Everyone remained in place, ready to engage in battle again. Seconds passed. Then, without explanation, March unsummoned her sword.

The rest of the party soon followed, picking up their backpacks and non-combat equipment.

Check for losses, Agnii said loudly. If its major, I want to know.

Dal, March approached Dallion. Nows a good time to help out with the healing.

The order was understood. Not waiting for another word, Dallion told Lux to start taking care of things, while he went to get his own backpack.

A total of nine people had suffered various amounts of damage. Most of them were pretty much alright, but didnt argue against getting back to a hundred percent. The only ones who were really hurt were those that had ended up in a bad tactical position at the start of the attack. Even so, they had done a lot better than Dallion had seen anyone do in a fight.

Thats part of it, so are your familiars, but the real reason is that their stats are not that far off. I know that five levels might seem a lot, but it really isnt. It all depends on what the focus is.

Im all over the place.

Your reaction is a bit low, but otherwise youre in pretty good shape. Also, focusing on perception is a good choice. In order to react to something, you need to be able to see it first.

Any other advice you can give?

Nope. I can just comment on things youve already done. And just to show you Im not sparing your feelings, I think it was a huge mistake not learning forging when you had the chance.

I started learning the basics.

I know. But you also could have asked others for help, or even paid. There is such a thing as paid awakened tutors, even in this age. It would have cost you a lot, but it would have been worth it. Now youre left with basics when you could have used some of that skill.

Dallion felt a dull pain in his stomach. The shield was right. He had no excuse not to learn forging. He had made up a lot of excuses, but they were all made up. If he had shown half as much interest in learning to forge than capturing the copyette, hed have been level twenty by now, possibly more.

A few minutes later, the party was on the move once more.

Chapter 280: The Petrified Guardian

Four more ambush attacks occurred on the way to the temple, each one weaker than the last. Initially, Dallion took that as a sign that the guardian was weakening, but as Euryale explained, it was the oppositethe guardian felt there was nothing else it could learn, so had stopped wasting time.

Soon enough, the structure of the temple was visible. It was quite different from the temple they had entered from. The building was roughly the same size, but its roof wasnt triangular, but rather square.

March stopped. Moments later, so did everyone else. For several seconds Dallion stood still, wondering what was about to happen, when markers appeared. It wasnt just one or two as he was

used to, there were hundreds of them of all various shapes and colors defense, attack, acrobatics, and whatnot. This wasn't the first time that Dallion had experienced party linking, but never before had he seen so many at once. The experience almost made him lose balance.

Pile everything in one spot, March said. Agnii and all that remain guard. Vends the left flank leader. Eurys the right. Dals with me.

Is it a good idea to leave a hunter in charge? Vend asked. Despite his calm exterior, it was obvious he wasn't happy with the arrangement.

On this one, yes, March replied. It seemed that she didn't even look back, but looking closely, Dallion had managed to see it split into two instances, one of which turned around and whispered something to Vend.

That was definitely high-level stuff using combat splitting for communication.

I'll need one more, Angii said in a calm fashion. Even two. The stuff is no use if it gets kicked about too much.

Four stay with Agnii, March ordered. Gear up.

Weapons, shields, and pieces of armor appeared. When Dallion summoned his harp sword, March shook her head.

You won't be fighting, she said just loud enough so he could hear. You'll be telling your firebird who to heal.

Dallion felt a bitter taste in his mouth. A healer! He had been delegated to the party healer. While he knew the importance of the role, everyone playing MMOs did, he was of the firm belief that was a job better done by someone else. Healers didn't receive any glory or praise, all they got was a lot of yells and grudges from tanks and berserkers who charged head on in the hopes that the healers would keep them alive no matter what.

Lux isn't that fast, Dallion quickly said. I meant he's fast getting from place to place, but his healing"

You'll do fine. March cut him short. When the guardian appears, remain where you are. Others will keep you safe.

Ready crossbows! Vend shouted behind.

That sounded logical. Dallion would have been all over this, if the online games he played had such a concept. There it was more about moving about to limit the enemy's movement. Affecting it with shooting didn't exist due to coding limitations within the game. The realms were different, combining the best of virtual and real. In the future, Dallion was going to keep that in mind.

Go, March said the word. The moment she did, half of the group dashed forward. All of them were fast, some faster than Dallion could follow. Like a swarm of killer bees, then rushed past March towards the temple. At first, Dallion thought they were going to breach the temple. However, it soon turned out that they didnt have to.

About a hundred feet from the building, the ground burst, revealing the form of the first world guardian.

WORLD GUARDIAN - KAMEN

Species: PETRIFIED DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Stats: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Attack**
- **Guard**
- **Athletics**
- **Entangle**

Weak Spots: joints

It had been a while since Dallion had fought a Dryad. Other than the shield, he had rarely seen one lately. In fact, other than the shield, he had mostly seen dryads on his way to Nerosal. Back then, he thought they were just common guardians, similar to slimes. Now, he knew better.

The three party members with crossbows went into position first, shooting an array of bolts at what seemed to be an empty space. Explosions followed, filling the air with dust, and an alarmingly large number of red rectangles. Before the dust could clear, Dallion saw themminions, dozens of them. Appearing out of nowhere, the jackalears surrounded the guardian, as if in an attempt to protect him. Side by side, they looked like monsters protecting a child, however, Dallion knew far too well that size could be deceiving. The guardian probably knew it as well, for it smiled.

Staring right in Dallions direction, it made a gesture for him to approach.

Yes, dear boy, it most definitely is.

Hes challenging me?

This was beyond belief. Had the Green Moons boon had such an effect on him? It was difficult to believe. More than that, it was impossible to believebeing singled out like that. Back on Earth, Dallion would have said that this was what legends were made of. However, Dallion had also grown enough to know that he had no chance of winning against an opponent like that. Even so, he was willing to try, even if it cost him

Fourteen party members continued forward, only to be met by two dozen of the dryads minions. The markers went berserk. Dallions mind wasnt of the level to follow them all, so he saw sporadic clusters appear and disappear, as if he were playing a high-spec game on a low performance computer. Red rectangles were everywhere, making it difficult to follow what was going on.

Can you cope? March asked, her eyes still on the guardian.

Ill try to, Dallion replied.

The answer seemed to be good enough for the captain, since she nodded. However, Dallion also knew that if he were to do his job well, hed need more than he was currently offering. Focusing, he created five more instances of himself, each following a different part of the battle. The information was overwhelming, making what little markers there were disappear completely. Dallion didnt need them, though. All he needed was to pay attention to the red rectangles.

The awakened with the crossbows kept shooting, concentrating their fire on different parts of the combat zone. None of them targeted the guardian directly, focusing on its minions. The dryad, though, had no plans of being cooperative.

A line of cracks appeared on the ground, moving from the guardian towards March. Before it could reach her, the captain leapt forward. Drawing her sword, she hit the ground with so much force that a crater emerged. Rock, dirt, and root parts filled the air.

This was definitely going to be more difficult than Dallion thought. As Vend had said during the Stone Garden job, guardians had the tendency to learn and react to their attackers. The party had gone through this guardian Moons know how many times. It was all too natural that it would pick up a few new tricks.

A new wave of jackalear minions appeared in the sky, falling onto the battlefield like bombs. Dallion could see through his music skills that the party had been caught by surprise, and this caused to react, moving to second gear. Attacks that Dallion hadn't seen in any of the scrolls in the ring library played out in front of him, as the party members pushed away their attackers. In most cases, they didn't get a single wound. In others, though

The new target had lost a quarter health in a single hit. Also, that target happened to be Eury.

Every fiber in Dallion's body wanted him to rush towards the gorgon in an attempt to help. One of his instances actually did, though it didn't survive more than a few dozen feet. Two minions charged him from both sides, squishing him like a bug with no effort. This was the point at which March joined the fight.

There were no instances in her fight, no echoes, just her walking forward in a calm and collected fashion. The petrified dryad did the complete opposite, launching several more roots in her direction. This time they didn't go beneath the ground, darting forward like spears at March's chest. All of them were cut up into slivers before they could touch the captain.

There were so many things wrong in that Dallion didn't know where to start. Still, he asked the obvious question.

What's her type?

She's someone who only respects strength. She's only interested in those she's running towards and, no offense, you have a long way to go until you reach her level.

With one of his instances, Dallion saw another party member's health drop to twenty percent. There was a moment of hesitation should Dallion let Eury get healed to full or tell Lux to help out the one with the least health. At twenty percent there was a good chance that another strong hit would knock the person out of the item. Then again, if he messed up so early in the expedition, Dallion wouldn't be helping anyone.

The decision proved to be the right one. Almost at the same instant, the general attacks from the guardian suddenly stopped. Set on his undefeated foe, the dryad ran forward. There was a single instant in which Dallion couldn't see neither the dryad nor March. A blink of the eye later, Dallion witnessed the most impressive clash of powers he had ever seen.

There was no soundwave, no blast or internal power to push everyone surrounding them back. And yet everyone who was an awakened could watch in awe as blows were exchanged.

The speed at which march and the dryad were fighting was such that Dallion felt like he was watching keyframes of an animation. One moment they were in one position, the next things were completely different.

When will I be able to do that?

In a way. However, the most important thing is to survive long enough to fulfill your potential. After all, you must be strong enough to fulfill your own destiny.