

## Leveling up 311

### Chapter 311: Unexpected Challenger

The first applicants started arriving in the late morning. Unlike those sponsored by the guilds, the preliminary candidates all had jobs which they had to attend to, especially during the festival. According to tournament rules, a candidate needed to wait half an hour between battles. For that reason, Dallion and Gola flipped a coin to determine who would fight first. Dallion won.

The battle was by far less intense than the first one. The challenger a professional tavern awoken didn't seem all too keen on moving on to the next round. If Dallion had to guess, she had either gone as a bet or a means to test herself. It was clear that she had skills. The moment the fight started, she instantly dashed at Dallion, daggers in each hand. For some reason, a lot of the younger awoken preferred to fight with two weapons than a main weapon and a shield. There was no way of telling whether that was some new fashion trend, but it made things considerably easier for Dallion.

Avoiding the first series attacks with his guard skills, Dallion resorted to occasional counterattacks, slowly but reliably chipping away at his opponents life. In truth, he was mimicking what he remembered from Golas attacks, integrating them in his own fighting style. Normally, that would be considered a bad idea, but with opponents at this level, it wasn't an issue.

It barely took Dallion a few minutes to bring his opponent to ten percent health. At that point, pretty much everyone in the realm knew that the fight was over. The woman attempted one final attack, charging with a combination of acrobatic, athletic, and attack skills. The charge itself was successful, resulting in Dallion sustaining a total of twenty damage, however, that was after he had dealt enough damage to his opponent to end her effort.

No speech was given by lady Marigold, and even Constanza seemed utterly bored by the fight.

Dallions second victory was achieved, after which, the waiting continued. According to Nils calculations, all five victories were all he needed to ensure a spot. The old echo had gone over his calculations several times, but Dallion still wasn't convinced. In his mind the only certain policy was to win all his fights so as to avoid miscalculations.

Seven minutes later, two more of the participants appeared. Dallion took on what looked like a rookie mercenary, while Gola faced a mother of three, who had even brought her children to the event. Given the time it took for the battle to take place or rather the non-existence of real-life time this shouldn't have had any effect up or down on the outcome of the battle, but it definitely wasn't something Dallion would have done.

Dallions own fight ended up being on the somewhat difficult side. The mercenary clearly knew his stuff, choosing to fight with an axe and a shield. What was more, he proved capable of fighting at a close and distance range. Often, he would throw his axe at Dallion, then charge at him, holding a newly summoned weapon.

The mercenary tended to rely on arc attacks, following a double swing and slash pattern. The only issue was that neither his speed nor his strength were all there. Even without combat splitting, Dallion had no issue determining the attacks, evading them before they occurred.

After a dozen exchanges, the mercenaries strategy changed. Without warning, he split into four instances, attacking Dallion on all sides. This was precisely what Dallion was waiting for. Splitting into five instances, he blocked four of the attacks, while engaging in a counterattack with the fifth.

## **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt Damage is increased by 500%**

A red rectangle appeared, instantly making the mercenary go on the defensive. However, it was already too late. Overwhelming him with instances, Dallion continued with his attack, finishing his opponent with two direct strikes of his harpsisword.

*Its faster. Better not waste strength on weaker enemies. I want to have a few reserves for the strong ones.*

*Youre actually starting to learn. Just be sure not to mistake which is which.*

Moments later, Dallion was back in the real world. There, he witnessed the first surprise of the day.

Guess its back to waiting, Dallion said to Gola across the room. He was about to say more, when he felt the unmistakable sense of disappointment coming from the sanitation worker.

*I know, but Just look at her. Shes far too motherly to*

*There are two captains in our very own guild that reached that position while being with children. Whats more, their children joined the guild as well.*

Is anything wrong? the woman turned to Dallion all of a sudden.

No, I was just expecting Gola to win, Dallion replied. The moment he did, he felt that it might have been better if he had used some splitting before making such a statement.

He was close. The woman smiled, then took a wooden dagger from her belt and gave it to her oldest child. Very close, but luck was on my side, it seemed.

Dallions music skills told him that was a lie. Based on the emotions of the people involved it must have been an utter defeat.

Im Celia, by the way.

Err, right. Dal.

We all know who you are, the girl Dallion had fought earlier said. Our very own local celebrity. I mean, being friends with the blondes, how could you not be?

Again, that comment that made Dallion mentally sigh. That made him even more determined to win the tournament. At least then he'd stop being described in such fashion.

Nirsa, the tavern-awakened said.

The remaining two also introduced themselves, although Dallion's attention kept to be focused on the mother. She was definitely a double-digit, but Dallion wasn't certain whether she was a seer or not. This wasn't supposed to happen. There were quite a few bits of jewelry that suggested blocking items of some sort.

*How is she winning then?*

*Better stats, better attack patterns, more experience. Who knows? Looking at her, though, I'd say she is the favorite to score the most wins.*

*What makes you think that?*

*I thought I told you. Out of everyone here, she's the only one with common weapons.*

*She could be hiding the good ones till we start the fight. Gola did.*

*Dal, if there was anything out of the ordinary*

His world trailed off. Dallion was about to ask the shield to continue, when he understood the message. If there were any weapons of importance, the shield wouldn't be able to tell him, just as he hadn't warned him of the others' special weapons. Gola had his linked and hidden away, summoning them in battle as a surprise. The mercenary and Nirsa had daggers hidden among their clothes, similar to Dallion's holster boots. In all of these cases, the shield guardian hadn't warned Dallion because the Moons had placed some restriction upon him. When it came to Celia there were no such qualms.

Don't be so tense, Ceila said, moving closer to Dallion. There are several spots. And you're already ahead three. That gives you very good odds.

You're stronger than you seem.

Of course, I am, the woman whispered. But so are you.

The next half hour passed in tense silence, disturbed only by Celia's children. Everyone knew who they would be facing next, and most of the participants already felt worried. A few of them already knew that they wouldn't make it to the tournament proper, but they had no intention of quitting outright.

Twenty minutes in, several more candidates arrived. A few matches were held with them, but both Dallion and Celia declined, preferring to wait until their face off. Both knew that the other was the most dangerous person in the group and no one wanted to delay the clash. Finally, the time came. Both went to one of the combat spheres in the room and placed their hands on it.

## **ITEM AWAKENING**

The all too familiar realm emerged around them, along with the five echoes that had been observing every fight until now. Boredom had filled Constanza almost entirely, yet she soldiered on,

determined to make it till the end. Upon seeing Celia, though, her attitude changed. Several sparks of interest emerged.

Good luck, Celia said. There wasnt a single grain in dishonesty in her as she did. You may start, Thanks. It was tempting for Dallion to attempt to dull her skills with a bit of music, but he managed to resist. There would be time for music skills on the arena.

Summoning his armadil shield and harpsisword, Dallion went forward. He didnt dash, or even run, rather he calmly walked towards his opponent, leaving her to make the first response.

Five steps in green markers appeared all around him. Without any obvious danger present, a person would have paused to consider the situation before reaction. Dallion knew from experience that if he were to do so, it would be already too late. Instead, he leapt to the side, following the advice of the markers. No sooner had he done so, when the woman suddenly appeared a step away, slashing at the spot he was moments ago with a curved sharp knife.

This wasnt a difference of stats. The attack had been slower than Dallion expectedpossibly done by someone with a body stat in the upper teens. The initial approach, however, had been flawless and very similar to something he had seen a few times before.

Reflexes proved faster than reason. Without even thinking, Dallion summoned a dartbow, shooting a bolt directly at the womans torso. The bolt changed course, almost bouncing off Celias skin, then flying off in a completely different direction.

Fury, Dallion said. At this point, there was no doubt left.

Semi, the woman replied, before disappearing again. The blink of the eye later, she was twenty feet away. You arent surprised?

Ive seen furies in action. Not to mention that one had tried to kill him in the past. Due to a complicated turn of events, she had ended up dead, killed by an unknown entity who seemed to be targeting the mirror pool.

Good. Well, Im nothing like them. Celia was keeping her distance. I only have a few of the gifts they do.

Im guessing its enough.

It was unclear whether music worked against furies, but one thing was for certainranged attacks certainly didnt. In fact, it wasnt obvious whether normal attacks worked either. Dallion had seen Jiroh use air to deflect sword attacks at times. Alas, for his opponent, there was one weapon that ignored air completely; Dallion summoned his Nox dagger.

Going for the big guns directly? the woman asked.

Do I have a choice?

A short distance away, Dallion could overhear a conversation between lady marigold and her great niece.

Pay close attention, the old noble said. There's a lot that won't meet the eye. Try to catch it all.

Do you think I'll ever fight her?

If she participates next year, you'll most certainly face her. Or Dallion. These two are the brightest recent year stars of the tournament. You must be ready for them. Remember, you must learn how to defeat them, not just withstand their attacks.

No sooner had Lady Marigold said that than both opponents rushed at each other at full speed.

## Chapter 312: Strategic Thinking

It was like lightning. Celia's movements were on the verge of Dallion's perception level. He would get a notion of what the woman was about to do, then it would follow almost simultaneously. In a matter of seconds, Dallion had already been wounded several times, reducing his health to eighty percent. The only way to cope was by using as much combat splitting as he could muster.

Thankfully, his opponent wasn't anywhere as good in that area.

Based on her actions so far, Dallion assumed she could handle two or three instances, but not more. That was a relief. At least he knew he could defend against her.

You've fought furies before? the woman asked as she paused her attacks. Being the constant attacker, she could afford as much. The unnerving part was that she was doing it in an annoyingly wholesome sort of way. There was no malice, no hidden motives, just casual conversation between people on the street.

A few times, Dallion replied. There was no need to clarify the results of those fights. I didn't know there were he paused, uncertain what word to use.

Mongrels? Celia asked with a laugh. Were rare. Some say were the best in both worlds. Not that my mother approves of anything said in the city. According to her, I'm wasting my life away, instead of"

Dallion grasped his chance. Taking advantage of the fact that she was talking, he rushed forward as fast as his body would take him. Splitting into five instances, he attacked the woman from both flanks, above and head on. To his major disappointment, all attacks were evaded. It seemed that despite her lack of splitting potential, his opponent didn't have any blind spots.

The attack failed, Dallion quickly retreated a dozen feet away.

You're quite good. Celia smiled. Much better than Gola. I thought he would be the one to beat. Guess I'm mistaken.

You know each other?

Oh, he's well known in the tournament circles. Even the officials have heard of him.

The echo was a hundred percent correct the wannabe tournament wasn't supposed to be glamorous by any stretch of the imagination. By definition, the applicants were those who were considered too

weak or unorthodox to receive an official invitation. That was what the rounds were for to weed out the complete weaklings from those with potential. However, all those applying saw it differently. Dallion had fought with a handful so far, but thanks to his music skills, he had a feeling he knew them. For some, this was a means to challenge themselves, for others it was a tournament in itself the chance to prove their worth to the world. In a way, it was like the original idea of the Olympics back on Earth a competition in which everyone could participate, not only the professionals with decades of training.

Who would have expected for someone like you to appear this year. Now it was Celia's turn to attack without warning.

The attack was executed flawlessly. If it wasn't for the emotional change a split second before her charge, Dallion might have been in some serious trouble. Having music skills really was cheating, and not in the way he originally thought. Being able to manipulate enemies, freeze them, and even affect their condition was all good and well, but the real advantage of the skill was allowing Dallion to know what someone's intentions were.

Splitting into four instances, Dallion leapt away from his current spot, performing a defensive circular slash as he did. In two of the cases, he succeeded in avoiding a hit. In the other two, things didn't turn out so well.

Why isn't he fighting seriously? Constanza was heard asking.

Because he's smart, Lady Marigold replied. Both of them are. Only fools attack without having a plan of action.

Dallion cringed, thinking back to the days in which he would just blindly charge at enemies, relying on his, at the time, incredible level of reflexes. Thank the Moons he was lucky to awaken in a small village. If he had made the same mistakes in a place like Nerosal things would have gone down much different.

So far, the only thing he could do against Celia was split and retreat. Ranged attacks proved useless; even at point blank range, the woman was able to change the trajectory of a bolt. Close range weapons weren't much of an improvement. Harp had offered to navigate through the layers of air currents which remained invisible to Dallion, much to his annoyance. However, that too required that Dallion be close enough to perform the attack, and that was something Celia had no intention of allowing.

Avoiding her attacks, Dallion played a chord on the harpsisword. His initial goal was just to sync with his target. That was quickly achieved. Three chords were enough to link to her focus and determination. Then the manipulation began.

Initially, Dallion attempted to use the tried-and-true method by inflicting weight, sluggishness, and dizziness to the woman. At first, it seemed that Dallions plan was successful. Celinass attacks slowed to the point that he managed to evade her normally, and even land a few successful counterattacks. Half a minute in, though, the string markers connecting the harpsisword to its target suddenly snapped.

Good attempt, the woman said in her usual cheer. Its no secret that youre using music, so I came prepared.

Youve seen nothing yet, Dallion replied with a forced laugh. The truth was that he didnt want to show the tight spot she had put him in. However, hearing his own words gave him an interesting idea. While it was true that he would have difficulty affecting her with his music skills, the same was not true for anything elsemore specifically, the ground.

Changing his target, Dallion played a few quick chords in sequence. This was the first time he had attempted to affect an entire area. As the markers suggested, the process was different from affecting a person or object. Being part of the realm itself, the ground was too vast for Dallion to affect outright. A series of giant blue circle markers emerged, illustrating the permissible target area. The epicenter was marked in deep blue, becoming paler further away it went. The greatest issue was that, unlike standard music attacks, there was no targeted synching. The area most affected was always the one around Dallion. That meant that whatever he did would affect him as well.

The result was surprisingly fast. One moment everything seemed normal, the next Dallion and Celia sank to their ankles in the ground as if it had suddenly transformed into pudding cream.

Wha? Celia tried to speed out of the quicksand pit, but that only made her lose balance. For a moment it seemed as if she would fall in, granting Dallion the victory by defeat. However, her body froze a few inches from the ground. Having the ability to manipulate had its advantages as well.

## **STRATEGIC THINKING**

**(Mind +2)**

**Seeing the big picture and thinking out of the box work well together. Just be prepared for the consequences.**

**You have a stat improved beyond its level cap. The bonus will remain inactive until you pass the next gate.**

That was a surprising achievement. Dallion would have very much preferred if his reactions were boosted, instead of his mind. At least, he wasn't going to lose anything unlike what had happened to his skills recently.

Without losing a moment, Dallion summoned his dartbow and shot at his opponent. Even at a disadvantage, Celia managed to react fast enough, causing the blow to miss her by several inches.

That's really something, she said. I don't need to see you to defend against bolts, though.

I see.

So, it's a draw?

There are no draws, Lady Marigold said loudly. The old woman seemed to be enjoying herself. If the fight can't continue this'll be considered a double loss, since neither of you can win.

I guess that's it, then? Celia asked. Unless you want to get back to our previous way of fighting.

How about neither? Dallion played a chord. His goal was to soften the ground, as before. However, this time, he targeted a far smaller area. With him as the epicenter of the effect, he had the power to free himself, while keeping Celia stuck. That way he could calmly approach and defeat her with his harpsisword. It wasn't going to be a fair victory, but still a victory nonetheless.

The ground around Dallion's feet became soft once more. This time the pit was the size of a small muddy puddle, allowing Dallion to just step out. The moment he did, though, the ground started shaking.

*Damn it!*

Dallion already knew he had messed up. It was an understandable mistake, which was possibly why Nil hadn't warned him about it. Realmslike everything elsewhere beings. When Dallion had targeted the ground, he had also targeted the guardian of the realm.

In Dallion's mind, time froze. Reciting the names of the seven Moons, he tried to concentrate on the possible outcomes. He could defeat Celia, then try to come with an agreement with the guardian. The amount of disdain visible throughout the ground indicated that option to be highly unlikely. Dallion could also attempt to take the guardian on his own. That also seemed less than optimal, and would require that Dallion reveal all his cards; and even then, it was uncertain whether he'd succeed.



Temporary peace, Dallion said, offering a hand.

You think? The woman grabbed his hand, getting out of the mud. What did you do?

Got the realm annoyed at us, Dallion replied. Very, very annoyed.

## **TRAINING SPHERE GUARDIAN**

**Species: Metalin**

**Class: Iron**

**Statistics: 100% HP**

**Skills: ???**

**Weak spots: ???**

Chapter 313: Metalin

Since his arrival, Dallion had seen many guardians. After a few mishaps in Nerosal, he had made a point to read more about them in the ring library. The information had proved useful, though not as much as one would expect. In general, most awakened got to see most of the common guardians after a few months of item improving. All the rest described in the scrolls were like exotic creatures and curiosities that Dallion skimmed through, more out of interest than anything else. It was a good thing he had, since the guardian he was facing now was nothing like anything else he had encountered. According to the brief mention in the scroll, the metalins were one of the few artificially created guardians of the age.

If the writing in the scrolls was to be believed, the first metalin was created by emperor Tamin the second. The design was later improved by the mage Academy, who had sunk vast amounts of time and resources in the research, all with the goal of turning the metalins into viable familiars. The fact that nothing else was written on the topic suggested that the mages most likely had failed. Even so, there were more than enough nobles who wanted to have items with the new toys. Apparently, that desire wasn't unique for the imperial capital.

You don't see this every day, Celia said. Fought one before?

No, Dallion replied. Technically, he had seen one, though. Back when he had fought the village elder of Dharma, there was a similar entity placed in his realm. At the time, Dallion thought it to be an echo. Now he knew better.

Why is it just standing there?

It's evaluating us, Dallion replied.

The only way to describe the guardian was like a cross between a suit of armor and a shapeshifter. Pieces of metal created the various armor segments composing the entity, and each of them had the ability to change form. Restrictions of unknown nature kept the guardian from freely shapeshifting, however, it had the ability to change the functionality of every piece it was composed of.

Before Dallion and Celia's very eyes, one of the metal's hands morphed into gauntlet swords.

Move! Dallion shouted, splitting into instances and not a moment too soon. Three of the instances were skewered as the massive guardian rushed forward, far faster than one might expect.

It was mostly luck that Dallion's last instance remained unharmed. Celia was no better. Her speed provided an advantage, though not enough to remain completely unscathed. The tip of the blade sliced through left shoulder, causing more damage than Dallion had managed to inflict so far.

Unsure whether that was a subtle criticism, or actual good advice, Dallion let go of his dartbow, then summoned the Nox dagger. His perception and mind attributes were high enough to allow targeting markers to cover all areas where the armor components connected.

Lady Marigold, go somewhere safe! he shouted and dashed forward.

Splitting into seven instances, Dallion targeted the ankle of the metalin. To his surprise, none of the instances were blocked. In every single case, he reached the metal being without issue and managed to jab it with the Nox dagger.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt has increased by 50%**

Initially, Dallion found the success to be suspiciously easy. Splitting into five new instances, he performed several more strikes, culminating in a multi attack. Once done, he leaped back. At that point, things got into perspective. The total amount of health he had managed to reduce with that series of attacks was less than five percent. Meanwhile, Celia was doing everything in her power to avoid the metalin's strikes.

That sounded very much like an automaton. A possible way to proceed was to let Celia continue to act as bait, while Dallion slowly gnawed at the guardian's foot to the point that

The upper part of the metalin's torso violently turned around. Targeting Dallion as its enemy, the creature performed a vertical slice aiming at chopping the target in two.

Both shield and harpsisword self-summoned, blocking the attack faster than Dallion could react. However, their intervention came at a cost. Instead of one red rectangle, there were two.

### **MEDIUM DAMAGE**

**HARPSISWORDS health has been decreased by 10%**

### **MEDIUM DAMAGE**

**ADMADIL SHIELDS health has been decreased by 10%**

Blue flames surrounded the harpsisword. Meanwhile, Celia had a go at the guardian, throwing three knives in the crack of the armors neck.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Damage dealt has increased by 50%**

This time the health the guardian lost was double what Dallion had caused.

*So, all I have to do is create a big enough crack for the magic to trickle out?*

*Magic isnt like water*

Dallion, however, was no longer listening. Magic might not be the same as water, but it was very likely to be similar to electricity. Dallion had never poked around generators, but even he knew how to short circuit one. There were two problems with that: one, how was he going to get close enough to perform such an attack, and twowhat would the consequences be.

Celia, retreat! Dallion split into four instances, each moving back. It cant chase after both of us at the same time.

His former opponent did as instructed. In the blink of the eye, she was nowhere near the guardian. This caused a lot of confusion, just as Dallion thought it would. The metalin looked around, measuring the distance to Celia, then turned around and looked at Dallion. Somewhere deep in its mind, there was a calculation going, determining who to attack.

This one was very different from the entity Dallion had seen in Aspions realm. The one at the time didnt have any problems determining its course of action. More than that, it was sapient, capable of leading a proper conversation. At present, Dallion had no idea what had occurred with it. In theory, the echo should have ceased to exist when the former village chiefs awakening powers were sealed. Considering that realms could be unsealed, though, there was a chance that it had remained locked within the walls of Aspions realm.

*The same thing that would happen when you defeat any guardian. Metalins arent anomalies, dear boy. They are just guardians that were artificially constructed. The same rules apply.*

That was good, at least it meant the realm wouldnt crumble as a result. All that Dallion had to do now was

He caught a glimpse of motion next to him. Instinctively, Dallion swung in that direction. His sword was blocked by a clink by a large dagger held with both hands. The person holding it was Celia.

Easy there, she said, a tense smile on her face. Id say the fight is over, dont you think?

It isnt. Dallion glanced at the echoes.

The three committee members had moved much closer to Lady marigold, but kept on observing the fight. Dallion could see fear within them, the size of watermelons. Even Constanza felt a bit nervous. Lady marigold, on the other hand, was calm as could be, looking forward to what would happen. Seeing Dallion look at her, the old woman smiled.

They want to see us get through this, he replied. There still must be a winner. Only difference is that now theres another participant.

Me, you, and an item guardian, Celia mused. This year the festival is full of surprises. She glanced at the guardian, then back at Dallion. Any plans?

Just one, Dallion replied. Get close enough to stick a sword in its helmet.

In that case"

Before Celia could finish, the guardian dashed forward again. Its left hand morphed into a crossbow, showing a volley of arrows in their general area.

The armadil shield expanded to the size of his torso as Dallion. Bolts splintered into slivers, scarreting throughout the entire area around Dallion with exploding strength. Even protected by the shield, Dallion was barely able to withstand the attack, which pushed him back half a dozen feet. Thankfully, the shield hadnt received any additional damage.

Meanwhile, Ceia changed the trajectory of the bolt fragments so as to avoid her. Most of them were scattered anywhere in the vicinity. A small percentage were redirected straight at the guardian, hitting its chest and even pushing it a step back. Unfortunately, not a single rectangle appeared. Whatever the armor was made of, it was impenetrable. Even the Nox had failed to cause any damage, which suggested that the sphere must have been an artefact at one point.

Attack its neck, Dallion shouted. He already knew that Celie was capable of that much. If his order managed to confuse the guardian for a moment, all the better.

The woman didnt need telling twice, disappearing before Dallion could finish his sentence. That left him the main target of the metalin. Normally, Dallion would charge forward and try to take off its

head with a leap and circular slash attack. With his current stats, the combination was no longer risky, what was more, combat splitting ensured that he'd get at least a few instances to hit the mark. This time, though, Dallion hesitated. He wasn't the only one who could use combat splitting. Just because the metalin hadn't didn't mean it couldn't.

Planning was always better than reckless actions; determination was always more effective than constant second guessing. The border between the two was the difference between success and failure. Not too many knew where that lay, but those that did were on the path to greatness. Now was time for Dallion to see if he was among them.

The layer of blue flames shifted from the harpsisword to the shield. This was it! Dallion wasn't going to get a better chance than this.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt has increased by 50%**

A red rectangle appeared above the metalin's head. Celia must have hit her mark again. Unlike before, the guardian didn't flinch. Blades emerged from its entire body flying out like arrows.

*Damn it!*

## **MAJOR WOUND!**

### **Your health has been decreased by 50%**

The hit left Dallion at less than ten percent health. The outcomes of the other two instances were even worse. There wasn't going to be another attack after this one. Win or lose, Dallion had no alternative but to finish what he had started.

Red, white, and green markers filled the air, showing him how to twist and turn mid air, using the shield to deflect the flying blades. They also showed him the position he had to reach to perform the strike.

Focusing on what mental strength he had, Dallion split into two instances. Both reached the head of the metalin. Both kicked the helmet with a circular kick, then thrust the harpsisword in the opening between the helmet and the breastplate. And both got pierced by a blade from the guardian's armor. However, only one instance lost all its health before the harpsisword began to vibrate.

## **Chapter 314: Prelim Victor**

Red rectangles stacked up as the harpsisword's blade vibrated within the guardian. The first few, after the critical hit, were minor, inflicting next to no damage. With each second, though, the amount doubled. The metalin's massive body shook. All spikes melted off, as the armor pieces made a desperate attempt to fill in any open cracks. The entire guardian suddenly compressed, shrinking by a quarter.

Splitting into several instances, Dallion spun and twisted so as not to fall or be caught by any of the changing armor elements. All that mattered was that he did not let go of the harpsisword.

A sphere formed around Dallion just in time to prevent the guardian from plucking him off. Loud thuds sounded as the metalin's hands struck the metal.

Without warning, a surge of energy went through the harpsisword like an electric current, sending him flying off the guardian. The shield completed the sphere, providing a protective shell for Dallion. Moments later, the sphere hit the ground, rolled a dozen feet, then settled.

There was momentary pain, the discomfort lasted much longer. Waiting for it to fade away was no option.

The shield contracted, returning to its normal state. Immediately, Dallion jumped to his feet. There were no new rectangles around him, which would have been good, if his health wasn't so low already.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion recited the names of the seven Moons, then rushed at the metalin. At this point the metalin had completely welded every opening, effectively transforming itself into a statue. However, the harpsisword was still sticking out of its neck.

I can't hurt it anymore, Celia appeared next to Dallion. There's nothing to aim at.

What about its eyes?

There are no eyes. It's one solid chunk of metal now.

Combining his music and forging skills, Dallion took a closer look. The entire surface was almost monotonous. Now and again, there were a few hairline cracks where the armor parts connected far too small for anything to enter. Even the Nox Dagger would have trouble dealing any damage. Dallion could, of course, attempt to carve his way in which he attempted in a few instances, with no results. Even in its present state, the metalin was perfectly capable of piercing anything that got too close. The only thing it didn't seem to be able to do was take out the harpsisword; the single time Dallion saw it attempt to grab the hilt caused a spark to flash between the two, along with a massive health reduction.

A truly magnificent weapon, Lady Marigold said. Initially, Dallion thought that she was merely amused by the situation, but there was something more to it. Several grains of envy and fear appeared near her head before fading away. However, the fight isn't over.

*Then let's not deny her the spectacle.*

*You never know before you try.*

Celia, Ill need a hand, Dallion said. Technically, they were still opponents, but both were aware that while the metalin was left standing, none of them was going to be considered the winner of this round.

I dont see what I can do that you havent done already, the semi-fury replied. Your weapon is already dealing enough damage. Why dont we wait it out?

Lets not.

There was no point saying it out loud, but Dallion knew that the effect of the harpsisword wasnt enough. The attack had confused the guardian into losing close to eighty percent of its life. Although that, though, Dallions advantage would be over. The shapeshifting quality of the metal not only had welded shut all the guardians weak spots, but it was also preventing Harp from vibrating. Already, the damage dealt was starting to diminish. When the damage was completely negated, both Dallion and Celia would lose. The trick was to do something before that, before the entity could come up with a new attack pattern.

I need you to get me close, Dallion said. Left side.

Thats difficult.

Ive seen plenty of furies. I know you can do it. Just one time. I want you to bring me close, then move away. Ill take care of the rest. If all goes well, well continue our fight. If not youll have one less opponent.

*Maybe. But thats the only offer shed consider.*

When do you want it? Celia asked.

Dallion summoned his Nox Dagger.

Now.

No sooner had he said it that he felt his stomach turn. The speed was greater than he had experienced before. It was only thanks to his high body level that he kept himself from vomiting. The metal guardian was in front of him, just as Dallion had asked.

It wasnt difficult to find a small line at what was supposed to be the shoulder blade equivalent. Splitting into instances, Dallion struck the spot. The tip of the blade edged through. While still incapable of damaging indestructible armor, the blade managed to wiggle between the parts, as only a crack would.

The dagger sunk to the hilt as if it were cutting butter. A new red rectangle emerged, but that wasnt what Dallion was aiming for. Without wasting time, he summoned the most unlikely of his linked items the ringchord.

Originally, he had linked the musical instrument to be able to practice a bit before bed. So far, he had only had a few sessions. Gen had shown a far greater interest than him. In this case, the metal cords of the ringchord were going to help him short circuit an artificially constructed guardian. Looping one side of the cord round the blade of the Nox dagger just beneath the hilt. Dallion then used his acrobatic skills to jump up and toss the other side of the ringchord round the harpsichord.

A flash of magic followed, passing between both weapons like an electric arc.

Dozens of red rectangles stacked in the air at incredible speed, each dealing a minor strike. Before Dallion could even read what was written on them, they had vanished, along with the metalin.

**TRAINING SPHERE level has increased!**

**The TRAINING SPHERE has been improved to CAST IRON.**

Naturally, there were no skill increases. All of Dallion's combat skills had reached their cap. However, he was granted something else instead.

**INANIMATE VICTORY**

**(+2 Body)**

**Defeating artificial guardians never is easy. A lot of brawn is needed, though in future it's better to use some brain to avoid such fights altogether.**

He was almost convinced that one of the Moons was adding a personal touch to the achievement text.

There was no time to waste, however. While Dallion had dealt with the greatest obstacle, the fight still hadn't concluded. Still in the air, Dallion summoned his harpsichord and played a chord. The ground beneath liquified. Twisting mid-air, Dallion glanced about in search of his opponent. Unfortunately, she was far closer than he had expected.

Sorry, Celia whispered, her face inches from his, as her knife dealt the final blow depriving Dallion of what health he had remaining. The next thing he knew, he was back in the arena room.

Who won? Gola asked.

Dallion didn't respond immediately. His mind still insisted that he had won since he had defeated the metalin. After a while, he had to accept reality.

She did, Dallion replied, trying not to sound too bitter.

It was close, the semi-fury replied. Too close.

Yeah, Dallion laughed.



*Victories are not victories before the fact, dear boy. Still, you did well. Two achievements and a lot of valuable lessons are nothing to scoff at. The important thing is not to forget those lessons. As I said before, once the tournament officially starts, you'll be facing a far more experienced opponent. If you can't handle a fury and a metalin, better give up and save yourself the humiliation.*

As annoyed as Dallion was, he knew the echo to be right. Looking at things objectively, he had achieved quite a lot during this fight more than he had hoped for. Defeat tasted bitter, especially since it was in his grasp. However, this was the fastest way to get stronger. In a way, it was similar to leveling up, only without the stat increases.

I'll be sure to get ready for round two, Celia said with a smile as her children swarmed her.

Dallion nodded with a polite smile, then in an empty corner of the room to spend the half hour of rest required before he could start his next fight.

When Dallion had arrived at the arena, he hadn't expected there would be anyone who would give him such a hard time. In his head, he thought he'd defeat them easily and was already imagining his fight against Mord. The experience had quietly taught him a lesson in humility. Two people out of half a dozen had proved to be tough challengers; one of them had even snatched the victory. In retrospect Dallion felt as if he'd completed a flawless run on a single player game, only to be creamed in multiplayer.

*Remind me to start going there more often.*

The rest of the day passed in the expected fashion. All remaining applicants appeared, each fighting against everyone else. By evening, all the fights had ended. Dallion had lost a single fight, and Celia none. Gola was a close third with only three losses in total.

No one was surprised when the free tournament participants were announced. In some cases, the difference in skill level was obvious, although one had to admit that everyone who had made it this far was quite capable.

The briefest of ceremonies was held a semi-awake member of the tournament committee rushed in, made the announcement, then rushed out, but not before telling all the participants that they had to leave the arena so the final preparations could take place. Celia, Dallion, and Gola were given official tournament rings and told to check on the echoes inside daily.

There were no further explanations, no feast, and definitely no further information. Even the official participants list remained a mystery to Dallion. According to Gola, the fastest way to get it was to go to the nearest city guard fort and ask for it there. The city guard always had the list because they needed to make sure to keep an eye on the participants. The prospect of one of them missing was outright terrifying to all the organizers involved. At the end of the day, no one wanted to embarrass the countess at her own festival.

### *Chapter 315: Future Challenge*

Drink this after you finish, Aspan placed a mug of jade liquid on the kitchen table.

With the crowd in the inn, this was the only place left for Dallion to eat. After a brief but tense conversation with Hannah, she had allowed him to use the kitchen provided he didn't distract Aspan from his work rather than allow him to eat in the guest rooms. Ultimately, that had turned out quite well. For one thing, it was impossible to distract Aspan. The copyette filled the kitchen with copies of himself, each helping in the cooking. That explained how the cook could prepare so many meals so fast, and also why it was forbidden to enter the kitchen. The only person who used to do so was Hannah. Even Jiroh was strongly discouraged from entering, taking the food at the door whenever possible.

And this time rest for half an hour after eating. No realm training, no music practice, just rest, the cook added. One of his copies had taken a seat at the table as well, drinking a small cup of alcohol while Dallion ate.

Dallion nodded, focusing on his food. It was remarkable how much an awakened required. However, it was all the more remarkable how much food the city had. Despite the many awakened in the city, there was never a lack of food or drink in any inn, stall, or tavern. According to Nil, that was the chief responsibility of the non-awakened, along with the city's domain ruler. The principle was simple: the Lord Mayor and a few other of the city nobles ensured that the domain had the best conditions for production, and the people provided the manual labor.

The greatest difference from earth was that here, cities were the major producers of food. Farms, villages, even smaller towns simply weren't able to compete. By that logic, the imperial capital had to be the greatest source of food in the empire. Thinking about it, that also determined the places with the largest military forces. The only way to maintain a large force was to have a large source of food.

I heard you did well at the preliminary tournament, Aspan said.

Yeah. Could have gone better, but"

It's a mistake, the copyette interrupted. The more attention you attract, the more difficult it's going to become.

I need to attract attention to get things done. Right now, I'm a nobody.

You're a nobody that has already caught the attention of several guild captains, the city overseer, not to mention all sorts of questionable elements, even a Star.

You forgot the nobles.

Questionable elements, Aspan repeated, then downed his cup in one go. You're young, it's normal to act recklessly. All of us go through the same. Just try not to get yourself killed before you learn how to fix your mistakes.

This wasn't the first time someone had given Dallion advice, but this one was different, full of millennia experience and regret. The copyette knew that nothing he said would change Dallion's mind to the point that of giving up on what he was doing. All that Aspan could do was say the words, knowing he would be ignored.

Why did you try to conquer the world? Dallion asked at last.

That's a topic best left alone.

Because the Moons dont allow it?

Because youre easily influenced and might try to do the same. Right now, youre weak. Without restrictions, I could kill you the moment you walk through the inn door and no one would even suspect it had happened. Youll get stronger, though. In a few years, youll be on a first name basis with the lower nobility. A few years after that, you might even find yourself in the Imperial capital. And there you might get ideas.

Not a chance, Dallion laughed. The suggestion made him think of his grandfather. He too had found the city small, and that had somehow gotten him in trouble.

All of us say that, most dont mean it. Aspan had a copy of himself pour him a second glass of alcohol. A lot of otherworlders have passed through here throughout the years. Most move to the capital, searching for a way back or a high enough position matching their skills.

Is Nerosal that special?

Nerosal is a cluster of huts in the mud. The city that was before it was special. Why do you think I came back here?

Tradition? Dallion couldnt help himself.

This was my imperial capital.

The words made Dallion almost drop his fork. All the nearby ruins that, the artifacts that had started flooding the city were because an ancient capital was located in the area? That meant that at some point in the past, this wasnt a border county, but the center of an empire.

Ten times the size, one third the inhabitants, Aspan went on. I, like you, had done through countless challenges to get here, thinking it would take me home. It didnt.

Thats why you came back.

After millennia in a realm, this was the only place I felt a connection to. The people are gone, the buildings are scattered and buried all over the place, but the domain is still here.

It was a good reason as any. If presented with the same situation, Dallion would probably have done the same. Here, Aspan was home while hiding in the kitchen of an inn on the edge of human civilization. According to the maps Dallion had consulted, there was nothing out south, at least in this epoch.

How much do you remember of your past? Dallion asked.

The copy of Aspan sitting across of him, stopped drinking, then stared right into Dallions eyes.

Everything, he whispered. One of the drawbacks of the higher levelsyou cant forget a thing. Even with magic. A ball of regret formed in the copyettes chest, then quickly faded away.

How much will the Moons let you share?

That was the right question. The copyette smiled, then had another copy of himself fill up his glass. The amount of alcohol he was consuming seemed impressive, but according to what Dallion had read about copyettes, it took barrels of the stuff to affect them. For slimes, drinking alcohol was little more than water.

It all depends on your level. What do you want to ask?

The expedition I was on Dallion started.

Still thinking about that? Things happen, realms behave differently.

I know, but an entire realm submerged is a bit too much. Wars, I can imagine, but why would the Moons sink two thirds of a world that worshipped them?

You are asking the wrong person. Aspan gulped down the glass, then stood up. Only clerics can help you there. Not that they will. Clerics dont like sharing information with the unenlightened. Youll have a better chance of dealing with the nobles or the mirror pools.

An interesting thought, although right now neither would be willing to talk with him. The festival made both groups highly inaccessible. There was one other option, but Dallion had no intention of going there, no matter how desperate he was.

Well, it doesnt matter much, he lied. There wont be any more expeditions.

That might be for the better. Another Aspan copy put a small bowl in front of him. At first glance, it was filled with nothing but berries. However, it soon became obvious that what looked like berries were drops of syrup, boiled until they gained the consistency of gelatin. Dont do anything flashy at the arena. Attention always tends to attract the wrong sort of people.

So, theres a right sort?

The cook just laughed.

Gulping down the mug of liquid was more refreshing than Dallion expected. Somehow, Aspan had managed to trap energy in a drink. Back on Earth he could easily make a food empire. Then again, back on Earth, Aspan could probably build any empire.

After he finished his dinner, Dallion went back to his room as discretely as possible. Both the talk and the meal had energized him to the point that he wanted to rush into the realms and level up an item. However, he had to wait.

Thirty minutes they felt like days. After a few minutes laying in bed, he already had no idea what to do. He got up, cleaned the room, look outside at the city preparing for the night. His thoughts quickly swayed towards Euryale. With her hunting and his work at the guild, it sometimes felt they were having a long-distance relationship while less than a mile apart.

*Not yet, but that will be a start. After all, I have three familiars now.*

You never said that. Dallion felt concerned, not so much about himself, but about the shield. It had been quite a while since he had been wounded in the battle against the last island snake. All this time Dallion believed the shield to have been recovered. Apparently, that wasn't the case.

That was two guardians who were against it. An obvious split was forming. Lux and Nox tended to side with Dallion when it came to exploring things, while the guardians and Nil tended to be on the cautious side. The echoes remained neutral, or silent, at least.

They were right, of course. Dallion had grown past the point of blindly listening to advice. He took everything they said seriously, but ultimately, the decision was his. The question remained what to do. Last time he had faced such an enemy, he could well have died if it wasn't for the actions of his shield. Should he go through the same again?

*The sale of an item is the same as an agreement between the previous and future owners of the item. Ownership is transferred, although there are cases in which guardians rebel against the choice.*

*Im not talking about buying. What about finding an item after the owners death? Does the item remain loyal to the one who found it or the original owner?*

*It depends on the item and owner. If an item is lost, its pretty much a given that it doesnt share a lot of loyalty with the previous owner. Otherwise, it wouldnt get lost so easily. In the case youre describing*

Dallion checked his pouch. It was still whole, and the ring was inside. Everything considered that was as good a sign he could hope to get as any.

There might be. But it'll be painful. Still want to find out?

*Definitely.*

Chapter 316: Vermillion's Test

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

The instant Dallion entered the realm, his firebird familiar grabbed his shoulders, lifting him in the air. The reaction was quite sudden. Dallion didn't even remember setting foot on the ground, being propelled in the sky instead.

*Thanks, Lux.*

It seemed that the little firebird was growing up as well. After the expedition, Lux had become far more proactive, doing things to help rather than earn praise. Even Nox let out a meow of vague recognition.

Down below, in an endless sea, the chain of seven islands remained calm. Looking at them, no one would suspect that they belonged to a giant vicious creature. Unlike the last Vermillion, these were different: they seemed a lot more saturated and full of life. That, however, only made Dallion feel somewhat nervous. If the previous guardian had been worn out with time, this one was brand new.

This brings back memories, Gleam said. The butterfly had appeared on her own, fluttering a short distance from Dallion. This one's a lot smaller than what I remember. Prettier, though. That's what they do when they capture us, make us pretty.

You've seen such guardians before? Dallion asked, surprised.

They weren't always guardians. They used to live in the coastal areas. Some of them even tolerated people living on them. Shows how well that turned out.

Despite her beautiful appearance, the shardfly remained quite cynical. Being rescued from the mirror had taken off the edge, but there was still a long way to go. With luck, the other echoes and familiars would make her feel at home in Dallion's realm.

Can you defeat him?

Probably. Not as familiar, though. You've given me a second chance at life, but that also means I have to start from scratch. I can cover you with illusion dust, but that's it.

It was the same with all familiars Dallion had captured, with the exception of Nox. They were much more impressive in the wild. On the positive side, that meant they had the chance to become so again, as long as Dallion figured out how to reliably level them up.

*Wait for a bit. The Vermillion will react soon enough.*

And so, Dallion waited and waited and waited. Minutes passed, but the islands stubbornly remained the same. On several points Dallion was tempted to shoot a bolt down at one of them, just in the hopes of getting the creature to react. Even Gleam suggested poking the Vermillion to get it to react. However, no such steps were undertaken. Knowing that he was about to ask a favor, Dallion didn't want to start at the wrong foot. Finally, the island snake reacted.

Giant ripples filled the sea. One of the islands rose, revealing the head of the creature, and rose up into the sky. This was the moment of truth. Every instinct told Dallion to move away. However, if he were to follow the shields advice, he had to move closer.

Darude, Dallion whispered. Get me down, Lux.

The firebird did as ordered, slowly letting Dallion descend until reaching the level of the Vermillions head.

Hello, young one, the creature said.

Hi. There was no good way to respond to such a monstrosity. The last one had attacked without provocation. This one, though, seemed very different. There was curiosity in him, as large as a mouse. I want to talk to you.

Ive never seen your kind before.

Thats related to what I want to talk to you about, Dallion went on. I want to become your owner.

My owner? the Vermillion snorted a torrent of air at Dallion. Youre amusing, young one. Youre so small, weak, insignificant. And yet you want to become the master of me?

Not the master, just the owner. Dont forget, I created you.

The guardian hesitated. The curiosity turned to mild anger, along with a sense of duty.

You created the ring, not me, the snake snapped back. I was there long before you existed, before the world you found me in existed. You cant claim to have created me!

I know and thats why I want you to become the guardian of the ring I created, Dallion added a lot of flattery in his words. I wish for you to guard it for me.

The isle snake considered the proposal. As the armadil had told Dallion, there were certain things that the creature was certain to react to. Vermillions were natural guards, so when hearing the offer, they would find it difficult to resist, as long as they thought it would be worthwhile.

What will you have me guard?

The most precious thing I have, Dallion replied without hesitation. My personal realm.

Thats a bit excessive, Gleam remarked. Are you sure about this? Hes just a Vermillion youve never met before.

The most precious thing indeed, the island snake completely ignored the shardfly. But it still isnt enough to convince me. Words are cheap, even when you put music in them.

I like your attitude, young one. And so, Ill give you a chance. Fight me with everything you have. If you win within an hour, Ill become your guardian. Youll still not be my master.

That was as good as Dallion could hope to get. Defeating the vermillion under such circumstances wasn't the same as leveling up the item, but it was the only thing he would get. Besides, having such a creature protect his realm was a much-needed upgrade.

When do we start? Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

The island snake just laughed, then, against all expectations, darted down into the sea. A loud splash sent waves hundreds of feet into the air, almost reaching Dallion. However, no attack followed. The guardian was letting Dallion have the first move. That was one of the differences between talking to a vermillion and trying to improve the item through force. The other was that Dallion wouldn't be locked in the ring should he lose.

Gleam, can you freeze water? Dallion asked, looking at what he believed to be the snake's submerged head.

No, the shardfly replied.

Can you make it seem as if it's frozen?

Sure. Why would you want to do that?

You'll see. Dallion smiled. There, he pointed.

The familiar didn't hesitate, fluttering down, then over the water's surface. As she passed, layers of crystal formed indistinguishable from the real thing. Once the entire area was covered, Dallion approached.

I see you, he smiled, looking down. Do I need to chase you down there or you're willing to fight me here?

On that note, it was a good idea to get a water-faring familiar at some point. The Green Moon had warned him not to rely on familiars in the future, but even so Dallion couldn't stop thinking of the advantages one would provide. If he were able to fly and swim, there was virtually no realm he wouldn't have an advantage. Then again, maybe he could focus on learning more individual skills.

Beneath the surface, the Vermillion moved. The creature was smart enough to know that it was spotted, and too proud to resist such a provocation. Without hesitation, it thrust up towards Dallion. The last time that happened, it was the shield that had saved him from serious consequences. Now the shield was going to save him again, although in a completely different fashion.



Contact occurred exactly as Dallion expected. Even with the armadil shield extended in front of him, the force was enough to make Dallion feel as if he'd hit a truck head on. The firebird pulled him back in an effort to reduce the impact.

Periodically splitting in three instances every second, Dallion found the perfect moment to order the shield to contract, then hit the island cliff with all his might. The strike was strong enough to shatter a rock in two, but no rectangle emerged. There was no other way it could be hurting an island required more than a standard attack.

*I'll have to get ready at some point.*

*It's not now.*

That was harsh, but Dallion couldn't deny that his skills were still lacking. He had learned a lot compared to his time in the village, but not enough to perform the really powerful attacks. At least not yet.

*You're still not ready.*

*Please, Harp. I need to get ready at some point. What better place to practice this than here?*

Both familiar and owner knew that was pushing it. The reason why Dallion hadn't asked this in advance was because he knew that she wouldn't agree to it. However, when threatened, she had no choice.

The weapon moved on its own, performing a horizontal strike. As it did, a line seemed to appear in the air, moving further away. Watching it was fascinating. It cut through rock and soil, slicing the entire island in two, then continuing on.

## **MINOR STRIKE**

A red rectangle emerged.

Losing its momentum, the island fell down, sinking beneath the sea. As it did, the next segment took over, changing into a head before Dallion's very eyes.

You've done well, young one, the Vermillion said. But all your strength is borrowed. I want you to face me.

It didnt take a genius to know that such a battle would end in failure. Without Lux, Dallion wouldnt be able to remain in the air. Vermillion probably knew that as well, so why did he make the request? If neither strength nor music were able to bring him victory, then what could? Dallion thought about it, then summoned a large metal ingot.

*Catching me later would be helpful.*

Though even that wasnt essential. The important thing was to determine whether the method worked. The only time Dallion had used anything similar was during his first encounter with a chainling. Back then, a cleric of the Seven Moons had helped propel a dartbow bolt using magic. Now, Dallion had Lux for that. If the expedition had taught him anything, it was that he was starting to become complacent with the rules of this world. While he did, he wouldnt be able to make real progress.

Suddenly, his body felt heavier. In contrast, the chunk of metal he was holding darted out of his hands and at the new island. Moments later, the ingot impacted the island with the strength of a meteor. A large explosion blew out half the vegetation on the island, forming a smoldering crater.

## Chapter 317: The Key

Fireball was probably the best-known spell on Earth. Even those unfamiliar with roleplaying games had heard of it in one context or another. In the imagination of people, it ranged from a jokey puff of fire that could barely light a candle to a giant star of heated plasma that had the strength to vaporize mountains. In the awakened realms, it was the latter.

Three more chunks of molten metal smashed into an island of the Vermillion, all having the same devastating effects. As significant as the destruction seemed to be, though, it didnt have a huge impact on the Vermillions snake. Fighting an island archipelago wasnt as easy as one might think, which further made Dallion aware of his shields true power. It would be quite a while before he could upgrade any of his gear.

Once the last salvo of heated metal hit its target, Lux quickly zipped back to catch Dallion before he fell into the sea. The attack method was far from efficient, but with a single firebird that was all Dallion could achievehe could have aerial maneuverability or direct chunks of molten metal at his enemy, but not both. Dallion had asked Gleam whether she could serve as his wings, at which point the shardfly had just laughed. Judging by the emotions that appeared within her, she was both unwilling and currently incapable of such a feat.

However, Dallion saw a much greater issue presented. He had effectively been capable of having firearms the moment Lux had become his familiar. Even without forging knowledge he could well have had the firebird propel pebbles at enemies. Instead, the only great discovery Dallion had made was combining his two familiars to create the homing Nox dagger. That made for a lot of wasted

opportunities. Most likely they wouldn't have helped him in his personal leveling up, but it would have against everything else. It seemed that the same memories that had helped him cope with the uniqueness of the world were what were keeping him back from using his full Earth potential.

With what could only be described as a roar, the island snake submerged with a splash, leaving Dallion alone in the open. It was catching on to his tactics rather quickly, though it was yet to resort to poison.

*Gleam, can you create a few illusions of me?*

It won't do any good, the shardfly said, annoyed. Something that size won't be fooled.

*I just need something to distract him. Please?*

The familiar sighed audibly, then fluttered off to do as she was asked. Given her age, Dallion suspected she would act like the big sister in his realm. Unfortunately for him, he didn't know how right he'd turn out.

Trails of glitter followed the shardfly as she flew through the air. Some of them changed into identical copies of Dallion, complete with Lux's wings. One couldn't help but admire the creature's power and beauty. Such magnificence with the power to glamour everything in existence. Like a chameleon only a thousand times better, and someone in a forgotten era had hunted her down to put her in a hand mirror to make people's reflections seem a bit prettier.

Dallion summoned another ingot. Before he could have Lux propel it down at the sea, a volley of rocks shot up from beneath the water, aimed in his general direction. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who could learn new tricks.

Shield! Dallion split into seven instances. Most of them avoided the attack, the rest managed to block them with minimum damage. However, that turned out to be only the beginning. More rocks shot up. Some went through the fake Dallions dispersing the dust that created them.

It was a difficult situation, but Lux managed to fly through the rocks into a part of the sky that was clear from threats.

*A few.*

If Vermillion was going to act like a submarine, Dallion's only options since he didn't have the forging skills or knowledge to create depth charges was to force him to get out. And realistically, there were only a few ways to do that.

In general, that was normal when awakened overstressed themselves in the realms. The first few times Dallion tried to do anything, even simple mending, he had felt utterly exhausted. Apparently,

the harpsisword believed that the difference in level was so great that even with her doing the actual action, Dallion would be severely affected. Despite that, he needed to continue this fight.

Once again, the sword moved on its own, slicing air and sea beneath it. Two giant waves formed as the watery surface was split in two like pieces of jelly.

This was what nobles were capable of? Nothing so far had prepared him for this. Everything he'd seen, even the brief memory vision of Aspians past was nothing. When Dallion had returned from the expedition, he thought he knew where he stood in terms of strength and ability.

Before Dallion could understand what the mysterious voice was getting at, the Vermillion emerged from the crack in the sea. Like a mountain, islands emerged one after the other. This time, the head opened its massive mouth. Rows of teeth, larger than buildings, shined in the hundreds.

Well done, young one, Vermillions voice boomed. Its always nice to see someone so enthusiastic. You're like a chick who tries to fly by running really fast.

You did what you promised, and so will I. The island snake moved slightly back. It will be a shame if I don't protect a seedling about to sprout. I will call you owner and will be linked to your realm.

Th-thank you, Dallion managed to say. After what had happened, he didn't expect the guardian to agree. At the same time, he was experiencing a bit of buyer's remorse, wondering how everyone else would react to the news. Following the laws of realm creation, the serpent was going to border Harp's tower.

It was difficult to determine how upset she was, if at all. Knowing the nymph, even if she were, she wasn't going to say a word about it. Taking a deep breath, Dallion connected the ring to the rest of his realm. The sea extended into an ocean with a string of islands in it. They were positioned so as to just be visible from the top of the nymph's tower without disturbing her cove.

An interesting realm you have, the Vermillion said. Very unique, very empty

Empty?

Awakened used to be filled with dozens of echoes. You only have two.

Wow, he didnt even count the boy as a full echo. When one was the size of an entire archipelago, the mistake was understandable.

Im just getting started, Dallion said.

Being selective is good, Gleam fluttered. It was clear she wasnt taking any crap from anyone. You should be lucky that a kid like you is even allowed here.

To Dallions surprise the Vermillion didnt say a thing. If anything, he was somewhat on guard. Clearly, he wasnt the only monster Dallion had invited in his realm. Good thing that they were on his side.

I hope you make yourself at home, Dallion said in an attempt to smooth things out. I promise to level up enough to upgrade you first chance I get.

Why? There was a sudden wave of aggression as clusters of anger and a sense of betrayal formed throughout all of the islands.

Isnt that a good thing? Dallion asked. I thought that guardians"

Hes young, the dryad said from down below. With the realms connected, he had the freedom of appearing in his dryad form. Currently, he was standing on the waters surface, looking up. He thinks that all guardians want to get leveled up.

That seemed to calm the creature down to the point that the clusters faded away.

Vermillions are protectors, the dryad went on. They protect things.

That much I know, Dallion smirked.

They also lose connection to the item once its fulfilled its destiny. As happens with every sphere item. That you should also know. The dryad smiled.

Vermillion, can you change the ring into a key? Dallion asked.

The key is always a key, young one. I can only make it possible for the key to open things.

So, you mean that when its a ring it cant do anything?

Theres a lot that you dont know. My role is not to guard anything hidden in the realm, its to make sure that only my owners can open doors through realms.

*Nil, know anything about this?*

*A bit. There are a select number of items that can be taken out of a realm. Of course, youll need a Moons boon for that.*

*Hold on! You mean I can use this key both in the realms as well as the real world?*

*Its possible*

If what they were saying was true, Dallion had just found a skeleton key that could unlock realms. No wonder that the Star was after it. With something like that, he could enter any realm not that he had problems in that department as well as allow anything to move between realms. In effect, this was a way to free imprisoned creatures. That was why the previous Vermillion was so adamant that it was too late. In its mind, Dallion was after the key to free the copyette.

Come to think of it, the ring had managed to exit a world item and end up in the real world. However, that wasn't a one off. It could go back inside and unlock things that weren't meant to be.

What exactly can the key open? Dallion asked.

Any keyhole between realms.

So, I can let all my guardians loose in the real world?

As long as their realms have keyholes, yes. None of yours do.

Dallion was definitely going to have a chat with Aspan on the matter.

There were more than one key capable of that. One was in the possession of the Order of the Seven Moons, a second was with Dallion. Someone possibly the Star was doing everything in their power to collect them to free someone. Or maybe Dallion had it all wrong? It was possible that the Star wanted to free himself and escape this world and go into another. If the keys could open locks between realities, they could even open a path to Earth or any of the seven worlds.

The question was whether the Star was the only one searching for them, or were there others involved like the unknown mage, for example

#### Chapter 318: Rising Star

The pain came instantly, streaking the moment Dallion returned to the real world. Every muscle in his body felt as if it were on fire. The last time he had felt anything remotely similar was after a day of learning how to use his guard skills back in Dherma village. Dallion could barely push all his items on the floor before passing out from exhaustion. When he next came to, it was well into the night. The pain, though, was still there.

Argh! Dallion said as he tried unsuccessfully to sit up from his bed. All the leveling up and experience seemed to have melted away.

Much obliged, shield, Dallion said through his teeth. Talking helped him deal with the pain better than thinking.

*Thats what Im here for. Shes upset with you, you know. Not enough to have the talk with you, but pretty close. Thats why Im helping out.*

You're doing a great job

*You know, if you want the pain to go away, there are two things you can do.*

Dallion suddenly went perfectly still, waiting to hear the words of wisdom the dryad had to offer.

*Enter a realm. The pain wont reach you there.*

While that was a nice trick, it didnt offer any practical advice. Time didnt pass in the real world and the moment Dallion left the realm, the pain would return as well.

*The other is just to ignore it and proceed as if it isnt there.*

Just that? Sounds simple.

*Yes, it does.*

What was supposed to be simple, however, took Dallion ten minutes to partially achieve. At first, he would stop at every shot of pain even the slightest movement caused. Then, he would stop at every two, then five. In the end, he managed to get up from the bed and reach the door without as much as a flinch.

It was at that point that he directed his attention back to the area around the bed. The new ring was nowhere to be seen. Most likely Dallion must have pushed it to the ground while passing out. The problem was that to find it he had to bend, and bending was excruciating. One thing it taught him, though, was to listen to Harps advice in the future.

The ring turned out not to be a ring. Instead, it had already transformed into a key. It was difficult to see how something so small could have such a powerful effect in the world.

There was a sudden knock on the door. Immediately, the key transformed back into a ring; now that the Vermillion was part of Dallions realm, it was aware of most things he was as well.

Yes? Dallion stood up. The sudden movement brought tears to his eyes. Just a minute. He went to the door and opened it.

Outside, with an extremely somber expression, stood Hannah. One look was enough to tell Dallion that he had done something he shouldnt have. His mind raced through the possible crimes. He hadnt eaten in his room, nor had Eury come visiting since the innkeeper had made a point of it.

Finally awake, eh? The woman crossed her arms. I thought youd spend the entire week sleeping.

Well, I"

And you havent been helping out at the inn lately, have you? Already it was clear where this conversation was going. Now, Im a reasonable woman. When you got your stomach twisted with that expedition, I let you recover. I even had Jiroh and Aspan bring you food to the room something that is strictly forbidden in this inn under normal circumstances. Youre no longer feeling sick, are you?

In reality, Dallion wasnt feeling at all well right now. However, that wasnt what Hannah meant, and there was no way he would share what had really happened. For better or worse, he wasnt given a chance to respond one way or the other.

Given all that, do you know what I learned? Hannah gave him a vicious glare.

Err, why dont you come in? Dallion asked. Despite the anger in the innkeepers voice, he couldnt feel any emotions within her. Theres no need for you to stand in the corridor and"

You dont want the rest of the inn to hear? Well, I think they should! Do you hear that, everyone? Hannah turned around, shouting down. Her voice was loud enough to reach the first floor, at the very least. This here is Dallion Darude, an awakened I picked up from the street and employed him as the inns awakened.

That wasnt exactly how it had happened. It was Dallion who had chosen the inn, and walked inside asking for a job.

And do you know how hes repaid me for this favor?

The silence was tangible. Even people who were only here for the festival and had no idea who Dallion was or his relation to Hannah were holding their breath, eager to hear the answer.

Ill tell you how! Hannah took a deep breath. He made it through the preliminary rounds of the arena tournament!

Thats right! In a few days, youll see him fight at the arena! Well done, Dal! The innkeeper grabbed him by the hand. Come, let the people get a better look at you.

Of all the scenarios that had gone through Dallions head, this was one he had expected the least. Too dumbfounded to even react, he let himself be dragged downstairs by Hannah, to the cheers of the crowd. People Dallion had never seen were going over themselves to buy him drinks or give him a tap on the back. The experience was reminiscent of the first days when he started working at the Gremlins Timepiece. Back then, he was the new awakened of the area, so people gathered to see him. Looking back, it was a good thing that Dallion went to Nerosal when he did. During the days of the festival, no one would have even noticed. Looking at the crowd, there were more awakened than normal people, the majority were tourists.

The celebration continued well into the early hours of the morning. At that time, the people who stayed at the inn retired to their rooms, while the rest left for the places they were staying. Interestingly enough, Dallion didnt see any sign of the Luors. Only Jiroh was there serving the mass of people, though with her skills that proved to be no problem at all.



Not bad, Hanna told Dallion once the place was empty. Ill consider this compensation for your lack of work the last few days. You better keep it up.

Yeah, yeah. Ill do my best to win.

The woman laughed. That alone got Dallion a bit alarmed for his chances.

You dont think Ill win? he asked.

Not a chance, Hannah replied without hesitation. Well, maybe you have a chance, but it isnt large. Im not only talking about skills here. You dont have experience. Not to mention youve never fought in front of a crowd.

Does it matter?

Thats why you dont have a chance.

But"

Help Jiroh cleanup and go get some rest. Knowing you, youll probably try to level up to compensate again. You boys never learn, Hannah disappeared into the kitchen.

That was rather harsh. Dallion didnt see why fighting in front of a crowd should be any different from fighting in a realm. The expedition had a crowd. Not to mention that he had played sports in front of crowds during high school. Granted, it had only happened twice, before he was kicked out of the team. Apparently, puzzles were more his thing. Since there was no point in arguing, he went to do as asked and helped the fury tidy up the place. In the process, he even mended a few tablesthat was something he hadnt done in a long time.

How are things with Eury? the fury asked as they cleaned.

Great, Dallion replied, instantly regretting it. In his experience, when someone replied to such a question with great things usually were tense to say the least. I miss not seeing her, but with the festival going on, I understand.

She tends to focus on work more than she should. Dont think less of her for it.

I wont. I mean I dont he sighed. I guess Ive been a bit too focused on work as well.

I heard. Id say congrats, but everyone else already did it.

The joke made Dallion smile. Jiroh still had it. Somehow, she managed to make people smile in almost any circumstances.

Have you ever thought of going back? Dallion asked all of a sudden. There was a whiff of surprise coming from the fury. I mean, if you had the means.

Theres no going back, Jiroh whispered. Whatever the reason, this is all we have. All that think otherwise are deluding themselves.

Harsh words from someone that seemed to have lost faith. On the other hand, Aspan remained in this world as well. Certainly he had access to Vermillion tears and still remained in this realm. Or was that the case?

What if there was a way? Dallion pressed on. Would you go back?

No, the fury replied after a moments thought. Probably not. I value my memories here too much, not only the ones Ive made after arriving, but those before.

That was the trickthe real reason Dallion hadnt considered finding a way back to Earth. In truth, he hadnt given the matter any thought.

They moved on to small talk as they finished cleaning the room, preparing it for the next day. Done, Jiroh went back to her room to get some sleep. Dallion, though, decided hed enjoy a walk outside.

All seven moons shone bright in the night sky, making Dallion want to climb onto a roof and just look at them. The city had several places built specifically for that purpose, though most of them were further away than Dallion was willing to go. Besides, he preferred to walk and think.

*What do you mean?*

*Thinking about things.*

*Seems like a waste of time. I just do what I want to.*

*Im not like that. I tend to think a lot.*

*Yeah. Maybe its not such a bad thing. Its what made you free me. Just dont overdo it, okay?*

Dallion was just about to respond, when the sound of slow clapping reached him, coming from nearby. Turning briskly in that direction, he saw three figures standing silently in the street. Two of them were furies. The third was someone who Dallion hoped he would never have to deal with again.

Congratulations, the general said. I came the moment I heard. In fact, I was going to buy you a drink, but the inn was too full for my taste. Too common as well.

In his mind, Dallion clenched his fists.

Thanks, he replied with a smile. After all the deals he had so far, he knew that the best course of action was to keep his cool. You didnt have to come all this way just for that.

Oh, not to worry. A glint sparked in the generals eyes. I didnt. I came to you with a proposal. Or rather, with two. Im sure youd like to hear me out.

Chapter 319: New Deal

Please dont cause a scene, the general said with a note of annoyance. This isnt a realm, and I really dont want to ruin the chances of a rising star of the arena.

The threat had already been issued. The sad thing was that there wasnt much Dallion could do. After fighting a semi-fury it was obvious he was no match against one, let alone two. And even if the city guard managed to arrive on time, the general was still going to slime his way out of the mess, leaving Dallion to dry.

What do you want? Dallion asked.

Always so hostile. Did you consider that maybe Ive come here to help you?

No, Dallion said straight up, causing the general to smile in response.

In that case, did you consider that I'd come to help myself?

In that Dallion had no doubt. It felt like the guild trials all over again. The general was no doubt going to offer a weapon or piece of gear with significant capabilities in exchange for the clearing of an item, or two, or ten. The fact that he had come with his guards meant that he wouldn't be thrilled at getting no as an answer.

Arriving at the arena is quite the feat, the general went on after a while. Most new faces don't make it. In fact, the odds of you reaching the arena proper on your first attempt are quite low. Passing the third gate has fudged the numbers somewhat, but still there are more people betting against than in favor.

You want me to throw the match, Dallion whispered.

Throw the match? Why would I do that? I'm not born on a farm? he smirked, deliberately aiming the insult at Dallion's past. Jokes were on him, though, since Dallion was born in a city just as he was born in a village. I want you to win.

That wasn't something Dallion expected. For one thing, it was next to impossible to guarantee. Dallion wasn't a favorite by any means, but maybe that was precisely what the general was counting on.

When you set foot in the arena, everything will change. The odds against you will be dozens to one, possibly a hundred, depending on who you get to face. And if you somehow manage to emerge victorious, the odds against you would double. This will continue all the way until the top eight are selected. At that point, the actual calculations will begin and your odds will return to single-digits.

Dallion waited for the catch. He could tell this was only part of the prelude. Soon, the real topic of conversation would emerge.

Statistically, there hasn't been a contestant that made it to the top eight in the last decade. Even before that, the cases were rare. While only third graders take part, the fights become quite spectacular near the end. There even are rumors that the countess sometimes has a mage be at the event so that the fighters can go all out.

*There have been cases, unfortunately*

Which is why I have brought this. The general snapped his fingers. One of his fury guards took a large wooden box off his shoulder and opened it.

Inside there was a weapon, but it was a weapon that Dallion had only seen in computer games. The hilt of the sword was placed in the center. From it, a blade composed of sharp triangular pieces spiraled outwards. All the pieces were made of sky silver and linked together through a single wire of moon gold. Dallion had skimmed through several scrolls of weapons in his ring library; at the time, that was one of the few things that he found interesting, although even that interest waned

after glancing through a few hundred weapons. Once Dallion improved his forging skills, that would have to change. For the moment, he continued focusing on the potential gift the general was offering. The fact that he had no memory seeing such a weapon meant that it wasn't being commonly forged.

*True, but don't get your hopes up. Like the trial daggers, chances are that it won't provide anything too special.*

This is called a blade whip, the general said with his usual flair. It's quite expensive for a collector's item. Useless as a weapon, though.

The reason for that is that it takes a lot of skill to handle it. In most cases, people swing it around as a rope doing nothing. Sometimes they even cut themselves up in the process. It's not a pretty sight. The man paused for a moment. I have three of those. This particular one was given to me to make up the value difference in another exchange. Normally, I'd flat out refuse, but considering I want to remain in good relations with the person in question, I had no choice.

Dallion could tell all that to be a lie. Most likely the general had demanded the item just for the sake of it, then was about to throw it on one shelf or another.

Given how much you've improved, I think you'd be able to learn it, eventually. And that brings me to my offer. The smile on the general's face widened. I'm willing to loan you this item free of charge for your fights at the arena. Reach the top eight and you get to keep it.

That seemed untypically generous, which meant that there was something else in play.

What's the catch? Dallion asked.

No, catch. Rather, a condition. You're to clear the item here and now. Consider it a goodwill down payment. Following that, it's yours. Provided you don't lose till the top eight.

There were many ways to make a deal seem beneficial while it wasn't. In effect, the general was offering that Dallion improve an artifact for free. Considering the nature of the weapon, it had to be at least a three-level item, possibly more. Since as the general himself had said the chances of Dallion reaching the top eight were incredibly small, that meant that he would be forced to return the weapon. The only difference was that the weapon would now be cleared, which would increase its value manifold. The proper thing was to refuse the deal outright. However, Dallion remained hesitant. His forging and music skills let him see the real value of the weapon; it was a masterpiece forged to perfection. Not only weren't there any flaws, but the design was made in such fashion so that the pieces could assemble in a perfect blade with no cracks provided one knew how to do that. There was more, though. One of the blade fragments was shimmering, indicating that there was something hidden within it. The general probably knew that and was using it to bait Dallion into accepting his offer.

I cant clear it right now, Dallion replied. How about tomorrow?

The box was instantly closed.

Sorry. The general remained smiling, but several frown lines had appeared on his forehead. Its either now or not at all. Time isnt a luxury I have, and neither do you.

Dallion took a step back, taking a defensive stance.

You barely made the cut, the general went on. Even if you gain three levels until your first fight, the chances of you succeeding in your current state are pitiful. Your dartbow and armadil shield are useless in the real world, and you wont be allowed to use music either.

Thinking about it, that made sense. The music skill allowed Dallion to manipulate the entire crowd. There was no way the city guard would allow that it would be too easy to cause a riot, if one was so inclined, and put the life of the countess at risk. Even worse, that was a certain way to ruin the festival.

What does that leave you? A pair of cheap knives? Even if your guild gives you some second-rate hand-me-down it wont compare to what Im offering.

You only want me to clear it for free.

Of course I do. The general laughed. Let me ask you this, though. Are you convinced of your strength or not? Youre setting out to make a name for yourself at the tournament. If you really believe that you should be able to clear an item.

It was obvious that the general was betting on Dallions vanity. However, despite the odds, he succeeded. Dallion was too impressed by the item to refuse, not to mention he had one more thing to consider if he obtained the whip blade, he could also make it Gleams home.

Alright, but Id need something more, Dallion said to Nils bitter regret.

Bargaining? Please. The general made a hand motion. What else do you want in order to accept my gift?

Information. There are a few things I want to know, but cannot ask. I want some answer from you on the matter.

Afraid to ask? The general mused, stroking his chin with a finger. And why do you believe Id have such knowledge? If its something you cannot ask, it must be questionable.

You deal with questionable all the time. And to my knowledge, the things Im going to ask arent illegal.

Youve definitely intrigued me. What is it you want to know?

Not here. I just want you to vow youll tell me all you know when I ask.

And thats all?

Thats all.

There was a long moment of silence. Both Dallion and the general reevaluated their options. Neither side wanted to lose out. Dallion knew that there was a lot the general wasnt telling him,

however he also knew that the general had no way of knowing what information he would ask for. Being bound by a Moon vow wasn't something to be done on a whim.

*There's a chance I find something good in there. Besides, I need the practice.*

*You haven't recovered from your last adventure. Going into a realm so soon after is a bad idea, not to mention harmful. Lux isn't a cure-all. There are things he cannot do.*

*I know.*

Very well. Information relating to a single topic, the general said at last. And just as much as I can easily obtain.

Define easily, Dallion was quick to add.

Something that doesn't put me at risk and won't ruin me financially. Is that good enough?

There was a lot of wiggle room, but even so, Dallion believed he'd be able to get some basics on the matter. Also, knowing the general, he'd be interested as well, if he wasn't already. After all, anyone dealing with secrets was certain to want to know more about the Moons.

It's enough. Dallion nodded.

In that case

The fury guard opened the box again. The weapon shined in the light of the moons. Dallion took a few steps forward and moved his hand towards the hilt. An inch away, he stopped. Was it too late to call it quits? There was no guarantee the weapon would provide him an advantage in the arena. One thing it was going to do was attract attention, and for the moment that was exactly what Dallion needed the most. That and a few more levels.

It won't bite. The general laughed.

I'm sure it will. Dallion grabbed the hilt.

## **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

### **Chapter 320: Of Space and Darkness**

The realm of the item was a closed system, as was expected. Polished steel corridors continued forward into darkness. That meant that no one had cleared even a single level of the sword. According to the initial rectangle, the item had seven levels a bit more than Dallion was used to, though not by far. In that aspect, it was a huge relief that the item was a sphere item having to fight special metal guardians was more than Dallion could handle, even with his current gear.

The firebird poofed in, increasing in size to the point that all of Dallion's surroundings were clearly visible. The area starting was flawless. Even with his forging skills, Dallion couldn't find a single crack or flaw.

Not bad. Gleam appeared. The shardfly reflected a lot of Lux's light, making it seem her wings glowed blue. Flawless and reflective. It'll do fine.

You know that I still have to win this before it becomes yours, Dallion said. Not to mention that he had to win several arena fights.

Shouldnt be a problem for you, the familiar said dismissively as it landed on the wall. I like this place. Lots of open space and air. Its almost like being out there.

Open space? Dallion asked. You sure were looking at the same thing?

Theres lots of air, Gleam sounded amused. You just cant see it yet. Thats the problem with youyour perception is really low.

Eury would like her, Dallion thought. For a moment, he almost considered giving the weapon to her as a gift. There was no doubt the gorgon could use the weapon, but that was going to create all sorts of complications; mostly he wasnt sure how Eury would feel about the idea of her spying on her all the time. With a familiar linked to the item, Gleam would be aware of everything that happened in the weapons surroundings. That raised an interesting questionbefore Dallion had obtained the armadil shield, had the general been able to spy on him as well? The weasel claimed not to be an awakened, but it wouldnt be the first thing he had lied about.

Well then, lets find out. Dallion summoned his armadil shield and walked down the corridor.

After less than a minute, Dallion found what the shardfly had known all alonga vast open space with a bridge of gold passing through.

*That would be difficult to say, dear boy, considering I have personally seen only one other weapon of this nature. Of course, thats not my area of expertise.*

Whats out there? Dallion asked, looking at the darkness beyond the bridge.

Space, the shardfly replied.

*Nil?*

*It depends on what you link the artifact to, dear boy. At the moment, theres nothing out there. Not even light.*

The realization made Dallions head spin. As a child, he had wondered what it would be like to stare at infinity. At the moment, he was doing just that and still his mind rejected it. The closest link he could make was with the International Space Stationa series of interconnected chambers floating through the endlessness of space. Of course, there were no stars here, not to mention that the ISS didnt have golden bridges connecting the various modules.

Stay close, Dallion said. Both of you. I dont want anything to happen.

So far, Dallion hadnt spotted any blocker creatures within the realm. That in itself was peculiar, though not outright strange. Even so, Dallion didnt want to risk it.

Walking across the bridge was a surreal experience. With the level uncleared, the tunnel he had come from soon disappeared. Dallion ended up walking on a stretch of bridge connecting nothing to nothing. It was when he reached the other side, after a few minutes, that he let out a sigh of relief.

Gleam, can you sense any guardians? Dallion asked in the doorway of the new section.

You're at the first one, the shardfly replied. It's a blade spider, if you're curious.

At first glance, that was good. Blade spiders were relatively easy to deal with as far as guardians were concerned. In fact, one of the very first guardians Dallion had faced was an ivory blade spider. Back then, his mother had given him her hairpin so that he could gain valuable experience as an awakened. It seemed like an eternity ago Dallion had barely become a level one, and his mother had all her power sealed. However, facing such a guardian here seemed far too easy.

Are you sure? Dallion asked.

It's obvious, Gleam replied, almost in scorn. Walk in and you'll see.

Anything special about it? Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

I can only tell you what it is, not what it does.

In that case, time to find out. Nox, be ready to pop out.

The second section of the blade whip was virtually the same as the first—straight walls, sharp angles, and a floor that was as polished as a fine mirror. Suspiciously, there was no sign of the guardian.

Feel free to warn me if the guardian attacks, Dallion said.

The shardfly fluttered about ignoring him. At one point she stopped, flapping on the same spot five feet in the air.

Anything? Dallion asked. Similar to before, there was no response. This time, though, there was more to it; the familiar appeared to have been frozen in a loop of reality. The emotions she had were blank, the flapping pattern was identical following a two-second loop, not to mention she wasn't able to register or respond to anything.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Immediately Dallion split into instances. It was a good thing too, for before the defence markers could even appear, the blade spider leapt from the walls, piercing two of his instances full of holes. At no time did Dallion see the moment at which the guardian emerged. Its camouflage was perfect to the degree that it was a seamless part of the perfectly smooth wall. Only when it attacked did its true shape emerge.

Six hits in rapid succession proved enough to deplete the health of Dallion's instances. Even the ones that got away suffered a few hits, reducing their health to three quarters.

The crackling appeared, leaping directly onto the guardian while the armadil shield extended, providing as much cover as it could. Nox's claws, otherwise merciless, this time failed even to scar the surface of the spider, sliding off it as if it were made of oil.



I noticed, Dallion hissed, playing a chord. Fighting an indestructible enemy was a first. To make it worse, the guardians speed was considerable. Lux, wings!

The firebird merged with Dallion, lifting him into the air. Sadly, that did little to affect the blade spiders capabilities. Leaping along the invisible threads, the guardian attacked once again.

Nox, cut the threads! Dallion thought as he played a chord of weight directed at the guardian. A seven-instance split was necessary for Dallion to evade another serious attack. Finishing a few more cords, he managed to establish a link. The effect of the melody took hold, pulling the spider down. At first, little happened.

Slightly confused by the sudden weight of its body, the guardian paused. Nox took advantage to leap and claw the thread that held Gleam in a time loop.

A loud snap filled the air, more like a stick breaking than a thread being cut. Finding herself free, the shardfly flashed through the air, far faster than Dallion had ever seen her go. All his perception was needed for him to observe as she flew through several dozen threads, slicing each one as she passed. The trap she had been caught in had infuriated her quite a bitDallion was able to see the anger glowing bright throughout her entire body.

It took less than a blink of the eye for all the threads keeping the spider aloft to be sliced. The guardian, still experiencing the effects of the weight melody, fell down to the ground.

**MINOR CRASH!**

**Damage dealt is increased by 10%**

**SHOCKED!**

**The BLADE SPIDER will be unable to move for 5 seconds.**

Finally, a red rectangle appeared. As Dallion suspected, invulnerability wasnt the same as immortality. Music clearly was able to affect the creature, just as gravity was.

*Lux, put me down and smash it in the ceiling!*

With a chirp the firebird flew down. After it released Dallion, a few feet from the ground, it attached to the stunned guardian, then thrust up.

**MEDIUM CRASH!**

**Damage dealt is increased by 50%**

**SHOCKED!**

**The BLADE SPIDER will be unable to move for 5 seconds.**

A split second later, a loud bashing sound filled the air, making the entire space tremble. The firebird had smashed the blade spider into the ground, and already was on its way up towards the ceiling once more.

Red rectangle after red rectangle appeared, increasing in severity with each smash.

Gleam, Nox, keep cutting the threads! Dallion didnt want to leave anything to chance. He even continued playing the harpsisword to further increase the guardians weight. Mere moments later, the first blue rectangle since the fight emerged.

**WHIP BLADE Level 1 has been cleared!**

**Continue to fulfill the WHIP BLADEs destiny.**

The guardian evaporated in a cloud of pixelated dust, leaving a very confused Lux flying towards the floor. Along with the guardian, all threads were gone as well. The best part, though, was that the level one part of the realm finally lit up.

You can stop now, Dallion said, unsummoning the harpsisword. You won.

The firebird zoomed to Dallions shoulder, followed closely by Nox, who landed at his owners feet. Both werent terribly pleased with the way the battle had gone, even if they had ended up winning. Several seconds later, the shardfly arrived as well. Unlike the rest, she didnt aim to impress anyone, fluttering casually to Dallion.

Ill need some healing, Lux, Dallion said.

That was unexpected, Gleam said.

That it was invincible?

That it was able to freeze me, the shardfly said with a note of annoyance. It shouldnt be able to do that.

Well, if it was too easy it wouldnt have been challenging, Dallion said, only later realizing how stupid he sounded. Thankfully, no one pointed it out.

*Nil, any idea what happened there? I thought guardians werent capable of magic.*

*Even a blade spider?*

*Well strictly speaking, a blade spider isnt capable of magic, but moon gold has rather particular qualities. Im now aware of that particular ability, but*

The echo didnt reply straight away. There was a long moment of silence. Three rectangles gradually appeared, informing Dallion that lux had restored fifteen percent of his health.

One down, six to go, Dallion said loudly. You guys think you can follow the same strategy with the next ones?

You cant see magic? Dallion asked.

I cant see this magic. Not until you do. Use those fancy skills of yours and everything will be fine.