

Leveling up 331

Chapter 331: A Sword's Past

You're not making sense, Nil.

You did something that you weren't supposed to be able to do, dear boy. And because of that, I can't tell you what it is until you pass the next gate.

It took several seconds for the explanation to seep in. When it did, a sense of euphoria flooded through Dallion. There was no telling what the gains were until he went back into his realm, but there certainly was something, and it was higher than his current level allowed. So, the power that was had decided to grant him knowledge of the skill after all.

The sound of horns filled the air a reminder that the gremlins outside were on their way to the city. Not only that, but the few that had remained were now aware of Dallion's presence. Even with the source of cracklings gone, the armies already in existence were still there.

The layer of blue flames that surrounded Dallion moved to his back, creating the familiar wings of fire. Moments later, Lux propelled him up the chimney into the open. There was no trace of the dryad echoes, as Dallion expected. The vine whale was also missing, suggesting that it had either been defeated or recalled by its guardian.

To the temple,

No sooner had he said that when he regretted it. To the observers, Dallion poofed out of existence only to reappear near the temple. The sudden acceleration and deceleration, however, wreaked havoc on Dallion, making him want to puke. Thankfully, he was better used to it than before and he managed without any shameful displays.

You like overdoing things a lot, don't you? Gleam appeared next to Dallion while the firebird slowly lowered him to the ground.

Dallion wanted to say that he didn't, but reality had a different view on things. Looking back, he had done a lot of reckless things, mostly out of ignorance. A few of them were quite dangerous. As much as Dallion claimed that he wouldn't do them again, the truth was that, in all likelihood, he would. He could feel a hidden urge driving him forward, urging him to get better to achieve more. He wanted to acquire as many levels as possible just for the sake of it. Even his desire to win the festival tournament was initially born out of a desire to prove himself.

Sometimes, Dallion managed to say.

Once he felt a bit better, Dallion looked at the crackling city. The black walls were still there, as was everything inside. The only difference was that the main column of smoke was gone.

Admiring your work? The dryad guardian appeared a few steps from Dallion.

I was just thinking it would have been more dramatic if the whole thing had crumbled.

It's an empty shell, so you can say that it already has.

Wont the other cities fill it back up?

They cant. At least not immediately. With the heart gone, I can reclaim the land bit by bit. That would give the cracklings a few headaches. In time, theyll probably fill it up, but having more time is always good. Who knows, maybe March will figure out a way through the veil as well. It wont be as easy for her, but I have faith. Itll be an amusing fight.

Rivalry mixed with enthusiasm and awe appeared through the dryads body. Despite its soft voice and child-like appearance, it remained a guardian who was set on facing a challenge, not to mention a bloodthirsty one at that.

Has anyone defeated all world guardians? Dallion asked.

A few, a long time ago. Back then, humans couldn't reach the second temple. Now they are the dominant force that remains. Who knows? Maybe youll make it where others couldnt.

A red rectangle appeared above the guardian, but vanished too fast for Dallion to read what was on it. What he managed to catch was the word permanent. The guardian itself didnt seem overly concerned, even if clusters of annoyance emerged within him.

DUZHD has offered perpetual surrender. Do you accept?

A new rectangle popped up in front of Dallion. He had done his part and now the guardian was keeping to his end of the bargain. There was no point in hesitating. Dallion pressed yes.

You have kept your promise towards DUZHD.

The WORLD GUARDIAN has granted you a future boon.

That was surprising, although Dallion was secretly hoping for another achievement.

Now then, what do you want to know? the dryad asked. I dont know much about the world outside, and Im restricted by the Moons about what I can tell you inside.

What happened to this realm?

Going a bit wide there. The guardian laughed. I expect the usual. The realm was created for all who didnt want to participate in the war. A true sanctuary or prison, depending on who you talk about it. Hundreds of thousands entered in the hopes of safety and died here. The end.

Dallion could feel the deathly chill in each of the words. He felt as if he was facing his own inevitable doom. Sharp pain pierced his heart, forcing Dallion to grab hold of his chest.

How? he asked.

The usual way. Duzhd looked him straight in the eyes. Time. At first, everyone focused on creating a world that would mirror the good parts of the outside they thought they had lost. But even a perfect copy isnt enough to stop the yearning. Being placed in here wasnt the same as entering it through awakening powers. For the people here, it was like living in a world, and that included growing old and dying.

Even for the awakened?

Nearly none of those who entered were awakened to begin with. Those that were only got to be stronger.

Right, Dallion thought. One couldn't enter a realm while inside a realm. The only exception was domain linking.

Think of it as banishment. It was only through external will that the people inside could return to the real world. A small group of us were offered to serve as guardians of this new world, and we accepted. Trust me, the alternative was worse.

Large balls of shame emerged, reducing the guardians' other emotions.

After a few generations, differences between the domains emerged. Cities became independent, then turned into kingdoms. In a thousand years, empires were born, fighting against one another for dominance and ideals. Some were even set on finding a way to escape the realm. The main problem was that there was nowhere left to go.

The dryad walked to Dallion and reached towards the shardfly. Dallion expected Gleam to disappear back into his realm, as she usually did. Untypically, she remained.

No one in his realm answered.

With the end of the war, the entire dryad race was banished. We could only be guardians in other realms. And even if those in this realm weren't subjected to this punishment, all those who had the knowledge how to get them out were gone, locked away somewhere else.

And yet, there remained a way. Vermillion's tears. The item had already granted one banished being its freedom. Surely it could do so again. For some reason, the ring on Dallion's hand felt heavy. If he had appeared earlier, could he have had the power to free the inhabitants of an entire world? What if he still had the power to do so? Maybe he could free the guardian here and now, or better yet, the guardians of his harpsisword and armadil shield.

Differences became resentment. At first, we could handle things adequately, though even we had our restrictions. We could defend our domains, but anything beyond that was out of reach. When cracklings began appearing, it was clear that the realm wouldn't last long.

Thousands of years of history told in mere moments. Dallion had no idea about the exact details, he didn't know the names of the rulers that rose and fell, their succession, nor the causes for the conflicts that ensued. However, he could see the big picture all too well. It was obvious that there was a lot that the guardian omitted. The cities were in too good a condition for the people to have died out. The overall gist, though, was true. Dallion couldn't see any deception within the guardian. Besides, there was little point in him lying about it.

What about the Eighth Moon? Dallion asked.

All the dryad's emotions vanished.

Why interested in that?

There were murals in the temples. They had eight moons, and yet there are only seven in the sky.

Yes. The guardian's smile vanished. There are only seven in the sky. The carvings you saw in the temple are of a different time, when people hoped of a Moon of Salvation.

It usually takes a few thousand years for myths to take hold. The people knew of the seven moons in the sky, but they also knew of another place theyd come from. So, an Eighth Moon was invented to explain that discrepancy.

Clearly, the guardian was sticking to that story. Since music skills werent always reliable, Dallion was going to have to stop his inquiries here.

Whats beyond here? he asked instead.

More of the same. Barren lands with crackling cities going on for miles, followed by wilderness. Here and there you might come across small tribes of nomads and scavengers, like the Minotaurs you saw, but thats it. There are no dryad survivors. Of course, youre free to go on if you dont believe me. Just keep in mind that my protection doesnt extend beyond my domain. A lot of us are curious about you, but not enough to let you pass. And flying through crackling territory might be trickier than you think.

That sounded somewhat like a threat. Either that or a warning. In any event, Dallion felt risking it would be pressing his luck too hard. He had already done things that were beyond reckless. As tempting as it was, going further towards the hilt of the sword would make things worse. Under normal circumstances, he couldnt even defeat the first guardian, let alone the fifth.

Is there anything hidden within this realm?

Who knows? The dryad shrugged. There always are things hidden. The real question is whether you can get them.

And can I?

No. The guardian shook his head. But Im sure youll try.

The conversation ended there. After resting a bit, Dallion entered the temple. Since the guardian had surrendered, he didnt provide any resistance. The goal, as in the previous temples, was to learn more about the Eighth Moon. Unfortunately, the murals werent much help. The scene was similar to the ones before, with the only significant difference was something that seemed like a hierarchy. The Awakening Moon, was first, of course, followed by the Green and Purple Moons, then the remaining four. The Eighth Moon was positioned beneath them all, almost like the odd one out. Dallion, of course, used some ingots to copy the images and returned them to his realm. That done, he left the Sword altogether.

The first thing that greeted him in the real world was the sensation of weight. Relying on Lux to carry him for so long, Dallion had gotten used to being a quarter lighter. Several moments passed while he readjusted to the new reality.

Splitting into instances, Dallion made sure that he could leave the room unseen. Before doing so, he took a good look at the sword hanging from the ceiling. Rust and decay continued to cover large parts of the blade. As far as he could tell, no changes could be seen. Even so, he knew that his actions had helped prolong the existence of a realm. When he got stronger, he was going to return and explore further either as part of an expedition or not.

Chapter 332: Pre-Tournament Shivers

No one noticed Dallion as he sneaked his way down the staircase back to the training room in the basement. As far as anyone was concerned, he had only left the guild hall for a bite. The only thing that could link him to the sword was the new wave of hunger that was going through him wanting food so soon after having lunch was a sure tell that he'd done something suspicious.

Training continued as before. Dallion spent the next hour reading, after which he lost patience and entered into his awakening realm to practice a few basic attacks with the whip blade. Upon arriving, he noticed that something was different the items along his skill walls had been rearranged.

Finally here, Nil greeted him, somewhat more aggressively than Dallion expected. The only times the echo had been so direct were at the very beginning, when his opinion of Dallion was quite poor. You have some explaining to do, and I'm not talking about the ludicrous deal you made with the guardian.

It wasn't that bad, Dallion mumbled beneath his breath.

There was a moment during which you blocked everyone from your realm. After that you got something you're not supposed to have.

Oh? Dallion perked up. What?

That's what you ask? There are reasons for the Moons rules. Ignoring them always does more harm than good. Are you aware that there was a time during which otherworlders were imprisoned on sight? Not the best period of history, but you can understand the reasons. When someone is not bound by the rules, it's inevitable that they don't follow them.

There was no joking around. The echo was deadly serious. Dallion could see the fear and anger within him. It was more than just a scare of what had happened, it was a deep fear that the next time Dallion went and did something he wasn't supposed to, the consequences would be far more serious and not only for him alone.

Dallion had many ways to respond to this. He could ignore Nil, he could come up with some justification why he had to do what he had to do. He could even use his music skills to try and change the echo's mind on the topic. However, doing so was only going to prove his point. While Dallion didn't appreciate the tone, he knew deep down that Nil was right.

I'm sorry, Dallion said, even if he still believed his actions to be correct. I'll try not to repeat that.

Had his grandfather thought the same thing when he had created a chainling during the war? Clearly, it had given him a huge advantage. It was even possible for that to have been the reason for his side to have won the war. Was it the right thing to do, however? That was a very murky subject and one Dallion didn't want to get into for the moment.

So, what did I do?

With a sigh, the old echo turned around and headed towards the corridor. A single gesture was made, telling Dallion to follow. The two went past the achievements room to one marked DANGER. Dallion found that to be a nice touch, even if somewhat ominous.

Gen was already there, looking at the only item in the entire room a silver frame with a single spark inside. Never before had Dallion seen a captured spark, but it was impossible to mistake it for

anything else. It was like watching minuscule lightning perpetually moving about, bouncing off the frame.

Mesmerizing, isnt it? Gen asked. Been staring at it for hours.

I can see why.

Almost had to drag the kid out too.

Why? Did he cause problems?

No, Nil replied. At least not directly. July is quite good with familiars to the point that they prefer to hang around him more than anything else. However, thats not very healthy for Nox.

Not healthy for Nox? Dallion wondered.

All I can say is that the spark affects Nox in negative ways. Once you pass the next gate, youll learn how as well as how to control it. Until then, it is better that as few familiars as possible enter this room.

So, that was the catch. When Dallion had made his request, he wanted to be granted an ability to help him face chainlings. It had been granted, but as any ability, it didnt differentiate between friend and foe. On the one hand, that was goodit proved how potent the spark was. On the other, Dallion was going to be very careful how he used it. Other than the obvious danger to his familiar, there was also the likelihood that it could harm the citys overseer, and that was not good by any stretch of the imagination.

You still need to learn how to use it, Nil continued. I have no idea how youll manage that, since no one can provide you with any explanations. Markers only appear for things youre supposed to know.

In that case Ill have to learn the old-fashioned way. Dallion smiled. Ill even combine it with my weapon practice.

Dear boy those who juggle two sets of balls end up dropping all.

Only if they dont have the skills to handle both, Dallion smirked. Isnt that what the Moons tell us?

Quite the harsh way of ending a conversation, but Dallion felt he needed some peace of mind. Nil got the message, for he didnt make any further remarks, leaving the room so Dallion could train. After a while, Gen left as well, though not before a giving Dallion approving tap on the shoulder. With the room to himself the training began.

Getting the hang of whip blading proved both difficult and amusing. Combining both close and ranged combat markers, it allowed Dallion to hit any target, be it a foot to a hundred away, as well as anything in-between. The main difficulty was control, which, thanks to Dallions recent reflex boost, was better handled than expected, though not quite as well as needed.

The ability to extend and contract the blade alone took hours for Dallion to learn to a comfortable level. At one point Gleam joined in. Unaffected by the spark on the wall, the familiar decided to help out by creating illusions for Dallion to target. Ideally, he was supposed to use echoes for

that Harp had brought up the possibility on multiple occasions however, Dallion didn't like the notion of destroying entities he had created solely for that purpose. Deep down he still thought of echoes as separate entities and making them only so he could kill them went a step too far.

After a full day of training, Dallion returned to the real world once more. His hunger had grown to the point that he had no choice but to go out and get more food. This time, he chose something closer to the guildhall and at a much more reasonable price, even if he had to wait an hour to get in line. Following that, the training continued.

The following day, everything repeated with the exception of the expedition. A day away from the festival start, Dallion focused all his energy on learning how to use the new weapon better. Forging and learning about the spark took a backstage, mostly because none were important for the immediate future.

The tense situation at the inn subsided, though not by much. There remained a noticeable distance between Dallion and the innkeeper. His chats with the Luors and even Jiroh were brief, though mostly due to him constantly rushing to the guildhall where he preferred to do his training. There didn't seem to be any sign of Eury. Dallion had gone through her workshop twice while breaking for food, and both times the place was closed and locked. The second time, he even slipped a note under the door, just to make sure everything was alright.

While training in his realm, there was one more thing that Dallion noticed his mystery stat had increased by one. This time he knew the cause guardian boons. That suggested that he had received his first faction point back in Dherma village, when facing the Colossus in Glorias ring. More important, that left only two points until the stat was hopefully revealed. The question was whether it was worthwhile to do so at this stage. With the festival approaching, Dallion had a mind to level up at least once before his first fight. In the end, he decided that reaction was the better choice.

The leveling trial was remarkably simple compared to the recent ones. Not that it was easy, it just didn't require anything more than defeating some echoes. However, in this case, some ranged in the hundreds. Initially, Dallion thought that it was a matter of endurance, but soon he realized that the trial was to teach him the importance of resource management. While that was a skill Dallion as any Earth gamer was supposed to have acquired naturally during his gaming life, it turned out that he was quite wasteful when it came to actual combat. All that talk from Nil and Vend about needless actions now became quite apparent. With numbers so large, and no magical means to restore stamina, Dallion had to maximize efficiency. Even the option of having his familiars do all the work was gone if the enemies were three or four, it would have worked. Against hundreds, though, it was more efficient to use the abilities of the familiars rather than let them at the enemies.

Come evening, Dallion was utterly exhausted, yet also anxious. This felt like cramming before an important exam. And for better or worse, Dallion considered it to be very important. Winning his first victory was the same as creating a good first impression. It was going to take seven days of victories for Dallion to reach the top eight. However, the tournament wasn't the only thing he was anxious about, it was the festival itself. Tomorrow morning would mark the arrival of Countess Priscord along with all the festivities that this entailed. Already it was known there would be fireworks, but Dallion remained clueless as to what else was planned and everyone who knew him refused to spoil the surprise.

You'll do fine

Honestly, you dont have anything to worry about. Maybe a while back there would have been a reason for concern, but Mord isnt as strong as youd think. Most awakened arent. They rely on skills that cant be used outside the realms.

Dallion chose not to mention that he, too, relied mostly on skills that could only be used in the realms. He knew that the echo had good intentions. It also helped that he had found a way to utilize the skills of Nox and Lux in the real world. The Nox Dagger had the power to crack anything destructible, and Lux had the ability to heal light wounds as long as Dallion pressed the kaleidervisto against the wounded area.

You have the reflexes to handle her now. Besides, it is highly unlikely youll face her. The organizers usually tend to keep the wildcards separate for as long as possible theres a greater spectacle that way.

And if she isnt the only one?

Dear boy, if theres another fury or someone considerably stronger, youll lose. Thats the way of things. Keep in mind one thing, though. The strongest people are those watching. Make a good show to attract their interest and the rest wont matter. Victory relies on luck and skill. Youve been lucky so far and youve improved your skills considerably. The only thing you can now do is fight like you mean it.

Wise advice. It also put Dallions mind somewhat at ease. There remained one big question, though.

Most probably. Does it matter, though?

It does to me.

Dallion wanted her there, regardless if he won or lost. Not having seen the gorgon in several days made him miss her more than ever. Also, he couldnt shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Chapter 333: Day of the Festival

The day of the Nerosal Festival came with thunder and bright lights. The first salvo of fireworks filled the sky at the crack of dawn, filling the still dark sky with light of all colors. These were not the fireworks that Dallion had occasionally seen be released during the week leading up to this day, they were on a whole new level. Back on Earth, even the best firework displays created a little more than pattern combinations in the sky. Here, it was like watching someone paint pictures in the sky with light and glitter. It started with small symbolscrowns, swords, chalices then quickly moved to horses, dragons, griffons, finally culminating in a crudely animated scene. Had Dallion seen this on a PC screen, he would have laughed. Seeing it stretch across the entire sky, however, filled him with awe.

Finally, after half an hour, Dallion managed to pull away from the sight and start getting dressed. This was an important day for him the day he'd see the countess for the very first time and, more importantly, the day that she would see him. While it was unrealistic to have any expectations, there was a chance that someone would whisper a word or two about him in the countess ear. After all, Dallion was a first-time wildcard, and if nothing else, that would be an amusing topic of conversation for a minute or two during the tournament.

Thanks, Shield, Dallion muttered. For the first time in quite a while, he spent dressing himself in front of the mirror. It was as if he were preparing for a very important interview. As his father back on Earth used to say, good appearance doesn't seal a deal, but it certainly ruins it.

In this case, the clothes were not alone. There was one more thing that Dallion needed to do before heading for the streets to witness the countess arrival level up. Before that, though, Dallion grabbed his gear and sneaked into the kitchen.

Morning, Dal, Aspan greeted him. Several copies of him were already busy cooking the morning's meals. Foods almost ready.

Thanks. Dallion took his usual seat at the table.

First time seeing the festival, right? A new copy of the copyette emerged sitting across Dallion. A sight to remember, I've been told.

Dallion could feel a slight note of envy. Come to think of it, all the time Aspan had been in the city, not once had he seen the actual festival. This was one of the most dangerous times of the year for him, and going outside was out of the question, unless he wanted to be hunted down and killed, or banished into an awakened realm once more.

I'll try to describe it to you, Dallion said.

Don't bother. At this point, that'll only ruin the experience. I've been imagining what it could be like for so long that seeing the real thing will be a let-down.

Right. Dallion smiled.

A large plate filled with fried vegetables was placed in front of Dallion. Shortly after, a mug of lemonade and a freshly baked loaf were added.

Tell me if you want anything else, the cook said.

Thanks. Dallion nodded, then entered his awakened realm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The usual room appeared in front of him. This time, it was completely empty. That was somewhat unusual. Dallion looked around.

Shes really competitive, isnt she?

Maybe after I level up.

Dallion made his way into the corridor. Since this was his domain, he had a choice where to place the entrance to the next awakening trial. As always, Dallion chose it to be nearby. The moment he thought about it, the new door was there. On the outside, it looked identical to every door in existence. However, Dallion could feel it wasn't. Taking a deep breath, he opened it and stepped inside.

Greetings, dear boy, Nil greeted him. Or rather, this wasn't Nil, but an identical echo of him. The old guild captain was sitting at a small table in the middle of a smaller, though very impressive, library. Shelves of thick tomes covered the walls and a fireplace was burning brightly not too far away.

A new addition to the library? Dallion asked.

You seem to think so. And I must say it's better stocked than the one you already have. Well, at least it has the appearance to be.

Looking at the book titles, it contained every topic for which Nil didn't have an answer. When Dallion took a tome and opened it, however, the pages were blank.

One day, I'm sure you'll fill this room with tomes of knowledge of your own. For the moment, though, there's the small matter of your leveling up trial.

So, what will it be? Dallion returned the book and went to the table. You're not going to have me take a written test, right?

Would you prefer that we fought? the echo grumbled. You've never seen Adzorg's skills, so there's no telling what I might be capable of.

Images of room transformation filled Dallion's mind. The only thing he knew about the Adzorg was that he had created all the training artefacts at the guild. That and that Hannah seemed to consider him extremely important. Originally, it was the old man who was supposed to perform Dallion's initial guild test, but March had stepped in and deprived him of that possibility.

It's a test, though not a written one, the trial echo said. All you have to do is one simple thing: redistribute your stat points.

Hardly could anything be said to cause such confusion. Redistribute his points? Dallion had asked on several occasions whether that was possible, and each time he was told a resounding no. Now, suddenly, he learned that wasn't exactly the case.

Permanently or just for the test? Dallion asked.

It'll hardly be a trial if I gave you the answer. The echo smiled. Let's say it's permanent. That way even if I'm lying, you won't lose a thing.

The logic was flawless, and that's what put Dallion on guard even more.

So, all I have to do is redistribute my points? Can I keep them as they are?

Of course. Just confirm that's the case and leave the room. Of course, once you confirm there's no turning back.

What do you mean?

This is a once in a life-time opportunity to resolve past regrets and create new ones. If you have any goals in mind, now is the time to change things so as to achieve them.

There was still a lot of doubt in Dallion's mind. Just as he was about to ask a further question, five towers of chip tokens appeared on the table in front of him, each with its own color.

These are all the levels you currently have, the echo explained. You can move as many as you want. The moment you stand up from the table, though, the changes are final.

In a way, it reminded Dallion of the trial he'd had with the general's echo. Back then, he used skills and stats as gambling tokens. Here, things were seemingly simpler, but also far more difficult.

Any limitations I should know about?

Only one, dear boy. The echo tapped on the stack of grey chips. When it comes to your mystery stat, twenty chips equal one.

So, if I place forty chips there, I'll only get two?

You get the idea. Of course, you can remove all the chips and sack them elsewhere up to your level cap, of course. Right now, that would be forty.

That was something worth considering. The unknown stat had increased solely through achievements and boons received from guardians. What was the stat, though? By definition, it had to be something rare on par with magic, but simply having it didn't obligatorily mean that Dallion would be able to use it. The cleric he'd met during his first chainling hunt had a magic stat but lacked the knowledge to perform complex spells. There was no guarantee that the mystery stat would be immediately usable. Then again, there was no guarantee it wouldn't be.

What's the mystery stat? Dallion asked.

You'll find out once you're done.

Don't I get a hint or something?

The echo shook his head. Whatever decision Dallion had to make, he wasn't getting any help.

All I can do is discuss the advantages of specific builds based on your skills and immediate needs, of course. For one thing, you're already pretty evenly split. Chasing after achievements, even if I think they'll bite you in the ass later on, got you to a point at which you're almost at twenty overall. A lot of people would be envious of this. You can easily just accept things as are and end the trial.

Can I end the trial without a decision? Dallion asked.

The question made the echo raise both eyebrows in surprise.

I suppose you could. Why would you, though? You can't increase any stat without leveling up, so even if you postpone your decision sooner or later, you'll be back here again.

Itll give me time to think.

You think thats the issue here? Not having time to think? Dear boy, youre an awakened. You have nothing but time. If you wanted, you could spend an eternity here and time in the real world still wouldnt have passed. Your issue is not time, its fear.

Fear of what? Its not like I have to fight anything. I dont even lose anything.

The words were hollow. Despite what he was saying, Dallion was aware of the issue the very reason he had to go through this trial was his reluctance to choose. Without a doubt he had to deal with a lot of issues, some he believed to have been crippling, but so far, he had only been dealing with the obvious. All the issues he had had stemmed from past experiences, and while he didnt rationalize them, the effects were obvious. Now that they had been dealt with, other, more subtle flaws remained. Never before did Dallion suspect that he feared change until now.

If you dont fear the trial, why not just stand up and leave? Youll get one point to assign to increase any stat you like. Thats one short of revealing the mysterious stat, but other than that, youll be fine.

Dallion didnt move.

Or you can redistribute everything for the arena tournament, the echo suggested.

Remove everything from the mystery stat and put the chips on body and reaction. Your perception is already good, and combat splitting isnt as efficient in real life as in the realms. Of course, if you do thatll make future leveling ups a bit more challenging, but at least youll have a new weapon to rely on.

Or you can go the opposite way and put everything on mind. You already have enough points to hit the level cap. Forty points on mind would be ideal for the next time you enter the aura sword realm. Youll be able to create twenty instances, possibly become as good as Vend, maybe even better? Youll lose the whip blade, but youll have a chance to clear the aura sword, and who knows, maybe itll choose you as its next owner?

Dallion looked at the chips on the table, then at the echo. This trial was going to be more difficult than he thought.

Chapter 334: Advancement Decisions

Simple choices were always the most difficult. Dallion had all the information he was going to get. There was a single partial unknown, and yet he felt unable to make a choice.

So far, the echo had suggested three options. The problem was that each of the options made sense. If Dallion had double the amount of chips, hed just increase everything. Pretty much thats how he did things so far, but that wouldnt solve the problem.

Fear of missing out Back on Earth, Dallion had read many blogs on how powerful the concept was. Everywhere from game design to cryptocurrencies and the stock exchange, people were talking about it. Here, it was more than a concept. Whatever choice Dallion made, he was going to lose something. He was also going to win as well, but his mind refused to see that. It was funny how when given the chance to shape his own destiny, he wanted to look to others for advice. Should he become like Veil and focus on nothing but attack? Or should he become more focused and perceptive, like Gloria? Jiroh and Eury were too powered up to compare to them, but even so, he could choose them as role models.

You can also decide to gamble it all on the mystery stat, the echo said after a while. It won't even be a large risk. All you have to do is move two chips from somewhere and you'll finally know what has been hidden all this time. Maybe it'll be worth it?

Dallion reached for the stack of blue chips representing his mind, but found that he didn't want to do that either. The issue there wasn't what he was going to lose—two points on mind wasn't such a big deal considering it was his highest stat. However, what if the new stat came with its own consequences? There was every chance the sensations would be so overwhelming that Dallion would require days, maybe more to cope with the change. Doing that before his first tournament battle was risky, to say the least.

There really aren't that many choices, the echo sighed. Not reasonable ones, at least. You can reach the cap of any skill, if you wanted, even perception. That will help you with your forging, not to mention you'll finally be able to use armor as a weapon. All those layers of markers that your gorgon girlfriend kept telling you about? With a perception of forty, you'll be able to see them without issue.

That was true. With such a high level of perception, maybe he'd be able to start forging sky silver, possibly even make a blade whip of his own. He had the material—the ingot for his becoming a seer, plus the chain from Eury was enough material to create the weapon. At the very least Dallion would get some training in the process, which in turn would increase his forging skill. Was that the right decision to make?

If I move something, can I move it back? Dallion asked.

As long as you don't stand up from the table, you can move it as many times as you like. And, of course, the moment you openly give up, everything will go back to the way it was.

That was a relief. At least Dallion had the option to retain the status quo.

What about echoes?

Echoes? the fake Nil frowned.

If I create echoes while remaining at the table, will they have the stats I tested with? And if so, will they retain them?

There were a lot of ifs, but Dallion's hope was this to be a detail the trial had overlooked. If he could test the skills on echoes, it would be all the easier to determine which combination was better.

Very clever, dear boy. I must admit, no one has even come up with that idea. Sure. You can use echoes to help you decide. You still have to make the decision, though. That's the difficult part of the trial.

The first echo Dallion created was the combat splitter: forty points on mind, zero on the mystery stat and twenty on everything else. Well, technically there were nineteen on body, but given that the level would allow him a further increase, the end result would be twenty as well. The moment it came into being, the echo immediately split into two dozen instances. That was more than Dallion had ever seen. Unless someone was specifically aiming to break the splitting mid-way, there was little they could do against that number of attack attempts.

Moving the chips around, Dallion then created three more echoes maxing each of the four attributes. This way he could see who'd win in a direct fight before playing around with fine tuning. Lastly, he created an echo with the mystery stat at twenty. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary,

although he didnt expect it to be. Rather, what Dallion wanted was to see at what disadvantage he would be compared to everyone else.

Remember, no killing, guys, Dallion said to his echoes. Just a test of skills.

All of them replied with an identical smirk. Shortly after, the fight began and, to Dallions astonishment, quickly ended. In several seconds instances flashed all around, performing more attacks, blocks, and counterattacks than Dallion could follow. Contrary to his expectations, the body-maxed echo was the first to fall. While it had the strength and speed, its reaction time was slow, and all attacks were countered by the remaining four. Even the mystery echo was batter; it, at least, knew that it was no match so avoided combat, leaving the rest to deal with each other.

The second to fall was the reaction echo, though that was more due to a strategic decision by the other three. While initially it managed to handle itself well against dozens of instances, finally it succumbed.

Only three remained. The mystical echo surrendered on its own, joining the other losing echoes in the rooms corner. The final dual remained: perception versus mind. In the blink of the eye, mind had won. While the perception echo was able to make use of its armor for both defense and attack, it was no match against minds combat splitting.

A decisive victory, fake Nil said. However, thats only in the awakened realms. As I said, combat splitting isnt as efficient in the real world unless you are Vend, and youre not.

Testing continued for a while longer. After the basic builds, Dallion played around a bit, creating six more echoes. Soon enough, the quiet test room was like a wild party gathering in which various echoes fought one another solo or in groups. And amid all this, a very annoyed fake Nil sighed.

Do you really need to continue with this? he asked. You should have an idea what you want. Unless youre going to make an echo for every single point difference.

Dallion had considered it, but also had considered that it wasnt going to help him. The sad part was that after all the echo testing, he was less certain of what to do than when he had sat down. Part of him was ready to pick something at random and just get it over with, but dozens of voices screamed in his mind that he might seriously mess things up if he did and there was no going back.

Again, you can just decide to keep things as they are. You wont lose a thing.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Dallion said.

Youre definitely not venturing. The echo narrowed its eyes.

If I give up, do I have to wait a day before I can level up again?

Its a trial. Just because theres no fighting fake Nil looked at the other echoes in the room. There wasnt supposed to be any fighting, he corrected himself, doesnt mean that the standard consequences dont apply. Give up and its considered a failure. How you can fail something so simple really is beyond me. Then again, if it were that simple, it wouldnt be a trial.

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dallion grumbled.

The echo was right, though. This was supposed to be easy. However, the more Dallion thought about it, the more confusing it became. It was like being invited to the worlds greatest buffet and being told to choose just one dish. That was the problem with optionsometimes too many were

worse than no option at all. At least then, Dallion could grumble about unfairness and continue onwards. This wasn't even a crossroads of destiny; this was an endless plain of possibilities that would determine his future. It was like splitting into an infinite number of instances but having a split second to decide which one to

All echoes in the room stopped what they were doing. The fighting, discussions, even casual chatter subsided as they all had instantly become aware of the realization Dallion had reached. Moments later all the echoes, with the exception of fake Nil, were gone.

It never was about the stats, was it? Dallion smiled. The real Nil had often told him that every trial was a puzzle and only after understanding the real question could one hope to give the correct answer. It's about handling instances. It's about handling combat options.

Very good, dear boy. So far, you've been limited by your stats. Anyone could handle five instances. Most could manage up to ten. Afterwards, things get tricky. And it's not only combat splitting. Being able to see marker layers makes people focus too much on details and forgetting the overall point. A lot stumble at this point. Then again, a lot stumble at every point from here on.

Can I really reassign my stats? Dallion asked.

You can always find out. The echo smiled. What's the harm in trying, right?

No, thanks. Dallion stood up. I'm fine with the way things are.

You have broken through your twenty-third barrier.

Choose the focus you value the most.

The blue rectangle appeared, along with the usual five choices. This time, Dallion chose the mystery skill without hesitation. There was nothing wrong with going for more options. The trick was not to lose oneself in them.

Ill get to it. Dont worry.

Sure, you will. In any event, congrats. Everyones still watching fireworks, so itll be a while before they congrats you too.

The realm around Dallion vanished as he returned to the inns kitchen. The plate of food was still in front of him, which was more than welcome at this point. While the trial was supposed to be

overcoming a mental block, Dallion had spent a lot of energy creating echoes, so he was just as hungry as if he'd fought an item guardian.

Things went well? Aspan asked.

Dallion paused, mouth full of food.

I didn't almost conquer the world by not being able to notice things. You attempted an awakening, and judging by your healthy appetite, you were successful.

Yep, Dallion said. Passed another one.

Good, though don't do it before important events. Adrenalin and euphoria are dangerous drugs. You'll have problems dealing with them during your next level ups.

This was the first time that the copyette had offered advice in this fashion. Up to now, Aspan had only done so at Dallion's request, or when things had gotten dire like an adult telling a toddler not to put its hand in the fire. Now, it seemed that the copyette was starting to acknowledge Dallion for what he was, and that meant that soon others would as well.

Chapter 335: Grand Opening

Cheers filled the air, marking the countess procession throughout the city. Dallion could pretty much determine the path she was taking. It would have been better if he could actually see her, but for that, he'd have to wait a bit longer. At breakfast he had checked the tournament ring, only to find out that he was required at the arena immediately. Once there, he was quickly approached by someone and taken to one of the preliminary waiting rooms. There, as it was explained, Dallion was supposed to wait until five minutes before the countess's arrival, when everyone was supposed to gather at the arena grounds. Everything was perfectly organized. Dallion would be impressed if it wasn't for the amount of fear that he could feel coming from everyone.

It's strange the first time, Gola whispered. He too was here, along with all the thirty wildcards that had made it to the official preliminary round. Unlike before, he was dressed in a weird combination of blues and grays, wearing a tunic with the city's emblem on it. Be sure to look at the countess when she arrives.

It's not forbidden? Dallion asked. Normally, he would have thought that it would be forbidden to look nobility in the eyes.

Not with domain rulers. They like to see more about people they are dealing with.

That was interesting to know, if not slightly ominous.

Discussing strategies? Celia joined in. She was so different that Dallion almost didn't recognize her. Gone were her children and the mom-vibe. Instead, she was wearing something akin to a Roman robe.

Just talking about etiquette, Gola replied.

Nice change of clothes, Dallion said.

Requirements, the woman sighed. Since I have fury blood, I have to look the part. I'm surprised that they didn't ask you to have a more country bumpkin feel.

Country bumpkin feel? Dallion blinked.

All part of the spectacle.

Yes and no. The guild doesn't have one except during the time of the festival. The city determines the color combinations of every guild that takes part. Naturally, the more influence the guild has, the better the permitted outfit. The big five get to wear lots of metal, while everyone else. Well, you get the idea.

The door of the waiting room swung open and a very worried organizing assistant rushed in.

Everyone ready? she said, out of breath. Quickly, you need to get out on the arena, she added almost in the same breath. Remember, the back left.

Back left that sounded like the spot of least importance. It could be no other way, but hearing it made Dallion somewhat annoyed. After all, he had earned his way here through combat and he felt that should be taken into account.

Checking he had all his gear on him, Dallion followed the rest of the group. For this fight, he was equipped with two swords, a dagger, and his shield. Initially, Dallion wanted to bring the dartbow and training stiletto as well, but Aspan had advised against it. The fight was in the real world, so weapons he only carried would only be a hindrance.

The group walked through a series of hallways and corridors until they finally walked out onto the arena grounds. Seeing the amount of people already gathered was enough to make Dallion's breath stop. Back on Earth he had seen full stadiums many times. There was no comparison. It wasn't that the people here were more, rather there was an air of anticipation, joy, and eagerness that overwhelmed him. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could feel as if he were part of an unparalleled event, a one in a lifetime occasion.

Over twenty rows of fifty more than a thousand people assembled, each in their place, ready for the magical moment. People of all sorts of life from the poorest to Nerosal nobility were in the stands, separated in sections. City guards were visible throughout, positioned in the common section in groups, keeping an eye on things. It was reassuring that they were taking the chainling threat seriously, even if they hadn't made any public announcements.

Suddenly something caught Dallion's attention. Near the nobles section, he caught a glimpse of the overseer. The woman was dressed in black as usual, discussing something with a few lieutenants. That wasn't the main focus of Dallion's attention, though. One of the others near the overseer was Euryale. From this distance, it was impossible even to attempt lip reading, but it was pretty certain that these dealings had to do with the gorgons business in the last few days.

Keep your eye on the balcony, Gola whispered behind Dallion. That's where she'll appear after the trumpets.

Trumpets?

Dallion hardly managed to ask when a chorus of sounds filled the air. Instantly, everyone at the arena straightened up in almost perfect unison. Being awakened, they had no problem in hearing or reaction. The trumpets continued for another ten seconds before abruptly stopping. There was not a peep from the entire crowd. Tens of thousands of people held their breath, waiting for the moment the county's ruler made her appearance and she did.

Dressed in a simple but elegant attire with threads of pure diamond the countess emerged on her balcony. She looked much younger than Dallion had imagined barely in her mid-twenties with short raven black hair, bronze skin, and emerald eyes. An air of dominance emanated from her, giving no doubt who was in control. It was as if the city itself acknowledged her power, and likely in many ways, it did. According to the principles of domain control, the county's guardian must have been subjugated by her, which meant Nerosal's city guardian was as well.

That she is. Now what you were expecting, dear boy?

I didn't think she'd be so young.

She isn't, she only appears to be. Unless I'm mistaken, she's half a century old. Remember, the appearance is merely the embodiment of one's realm. With enough skills and effort, one can maintain a realm's appearance and, through it, their own.

For a moment, the countess' glance fell on Dallion. It was only in passing, but Dallion felt special, as if he was noticed by someone important. In his mind, there was no question that was due to a skill, or effect of the domain. In his heart, however, he felt honored to have been given as much attention as he was.

Hello, people of Nerosal, and all you who've arrived from within the empire, the countess said. Her voice was soft, but loud and crisp enough to be heard by all in the vast space. Today marks the start of the Nerosal Festival. Two glorious weeks during which the skills and prosperity of the city will be displayed. There were times during which this was a simple event. Now, people through the entire province and beyond arrive to witness it.

Cheers erupted. In all the fantasy movies Dallion had watched, this was usually the time at which the noble would raise a hand to restore silence. The countess did nothing of the sort; she didn't have to. An instant before her lips started moving again, the cheers had ended.

Today marks the start of the festival with the grand tournament, the noble continued. A thousand and forty-eight awakened challengers will fight for the right to be called champion. And to witness this spectacle, we have been honored by a member of the Imperial family come just for the occasion. I will leave it to him to make the official announcement.

There was a new set of cheers as the dignitary in question joined the countess on the balcony. Dallion froze. It wasn't the noble that had caused that reaction; the member of the imperial family was a boy barely the age of Falkner dressed in an intricate clothing of a material Dallion hadn't seen

before. It was the person behind him that was the point of concern the last time Dallion had seen him, the man had warned him to give up on meddling with anything relating to the Star.

Hes the one that tried to make me fail at the Drum.

Are you sure?

Dallion didnt respond. The best course of action now was not to attract more attention than normal. The past him would have rushed to challenge the mage head on. Now he knew he had no hope of winning or even achieving anything. From the little he knew of magic, it was just as efficient in the real world as it was in the realmsthat was one of its particularities, very much like the tears of Vermillion.

People of Nerosal, the imperial said. Unlike the countess, he was forcing his voice, an indication that he was new at this. The time has come to start the tournament of skill. Let the fighting begin!

A new wave of cheers followed, though with a slight delay. Pleased with his performance, the imperial went to his seat, followed by the mage who remained standing nearby as an adviser would.

Bring the walls! someone shouted. Fighters, go back to the arena hall!

As he moved out, Dallion had the good insight to check his tournament ring. It was a good thing he did, too. The echo inside was quick to explain what was expected, faster and more efficient than anyone in the real world would. All participants were assigned a spot in the grid of arenas that was being currently assembled. Dallion was to fight in lot forty-three. The space was limited to ten square feet, making ranged weapons less efficient. That meant that Dallions new weapon wouldnt be as useful as he had hoped. Even so, it gave Dallion the element of surprise.

Just be sure to focus on the fight, dear boy. No one, let alone a mage, would try anything during the festival. Such a breach of etiquette would not only make the countess lose face, it would also embarrass a member of the imperial family, and thats an offence punishable by death.

That was somewhat of a relief. At least Dallion wasnt going to get harmed in public. The moment he left the arena, though, things could well be different.

As I said, dont worry about it. Youll have a tough enough time against your first opponent. Remember, this wont be a joke. All the opponents youve faced so far will pale in comparison to your next battle.

Ill be facing someone stronger than March?

I know. Dont worry. Ill be calm and collected, as I should be.

It took around a quarter of an hour for the arena grounds to be prepped for the fight. The moment they were, all the challengers were sent out to their respective grid spots. When it came Dallions turn to go to his, he found that his opponent was already there waiting.

Here at last, Mord said. There was no smile on the mans face. Even without his music skills, Dallion could tell that the man wasnt going to give him any slack. Ready?

Dallion strapped his armadil shield to his left arm, then drew the blade whip. In its current state, it looked no different from a very impressive sword of sky silver.

New sword? Mord inquired.

Something I picked up recently, Dallion replied in casual fashion. Do you have any new tricks up your sleeve?

Nope. Mord smiled. You just never got to see what I can really do last time.

Chapter 336: Fighting Mord

A clap from the countess marked the first round of fights. The moment the sound emerged, all one thousand and twenty-four contestants charged into action. That was the reason why so much care had gone into the selection process. If the opponents were too mismatched, the fight would end in less than a second, making its entertainment value negligible to say the least. That was still a possibility, thus the many simultaneous fights. It was an interesting and effective self-regulating process. The more skilled the players were, the more skilled opponents they faced, making the battle last longer.

Dallions opponent was just as could be expected. At the sound of the clap, he rushed forward, attacking with two swords. The pattern followed was one of the standard attack-acrobatic combinations, allowing him to gain a bonus by the time he reached his adversary. Normally, Dallion could counter this approach by a jump and a dartbow shot directly down. However, that was only for within the awakened realms. Here, Dallion didnt have a dartbow or the ability to summon it freely in his hand. What he still had was his combat splitting.

Concentrating, Dallion split into the instances, doing two leap counterattacks and a block. The time-length of each instance was far shorter than what he was used to, though even so, he managed to find the best solution.

Both of Dallions attacks were countered, in one case, slicing through Dallions shirt and causing a rather large wound. That was a moment of clarity. Flashbacks emerged, bringing Dallion back to the time he was wounded by the fury known as Cloud near the awakening shrine. Fear and adrenaline swept through Dallion, reminding him just how mortal he was. It was highly unlikely that the organizers would allow for fatalities during the festivalpeople enjoyed watching fights, not others slay each other. However, there was still the inborn sense of self-preservation that kicked in.

Not this time, Dallion thought, choosing the second counterattack instance. Blades clashed as he went above Mord, landing behind him. That didn't prevent the Flameforger from turning around in a circular motion to continue the attack.

After all the reading and practicing the echo had made him go in the early days and his experiences in the realms, Dallion had become pretty good at identifying sequence patterns. The issue was that almost exclusively the patterns were created by awakened that were on his side. Even when facing more competent adversaries, it was rare that Dallion broke a sequence, since it was more efficient to complete a sequence of his own, or do an unexpected attack combining skills and familiars. If he was going to advance up the ranks, he was going to have to learn that skill, just as he was going to have to improve his split breaking.

Mord turned around with a low sweep, then took a step forward aggressively. Dallion's reaction was to attack to stop him from advancing. That was the wrong decision. Mord's goal wasn't to attack, but to complete a second sequence, which he did. Dallion watched as his opponent's speed became faster and faster.

Panic seeped in. Dallion focused on his attacks in an attempt to make up for the other's speed.

Dallion grit his teeth. All the training and preparation seemed to have gone to waste. It was infuriating how easily Mord could counter anything Dallion did and take advantage of it to his benefit; just like playing go every move had multiple purposes, and dealing with one only reinforced the others, making the entire battle more difficult.

Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea

, Dallion recited the names of the Seven Moons.

A soothing effect passed over Dallion, allowing him to start thinking again. Immediately he split into three instances, and not a moment too soon. In two of the instances, Mord slammed Dallion in the stomach with the side of his sword, in another he did a spin kick, knocking Dallion to the ground. Both of the instances resulted in Dallion's unequivocal failure and elimination. In the third one, however, Dallion used his guard skills to counter with the armadil shield.

While the shield didn't have the power to extend vastly in real life, it adjusted just enough segments to catch the edge of the blade like a monkey wrench. Confusion emanated from Mord, it was only a single vibration among a sea of confidence, but enough for Dallion to sense.

Memories of their first duel came back to him. Back then, Mord was drunk, overconfident, and stopped by Fire Sky before he could get serious. Even so, he hadn't won. If that was possible once, it could happen again.

Sorry about this, Dallion said, then unleashed the whip blade.

There was a loud click. All segments of the blade detached, separating from one another as Dallion swung the weapon around him.

Mord was quick to react. His guard sequence was broken, negating any speed advantage and his sword stuck, the only available option was to let it go and do a back somersault.

People in the ground pointed in Dallion's spot on the grid, witnessing the full effect of the whip blade. Several nobles did as well. Even one imperial guest leaned forward.

People use whip blades here? he asked.

This is a backwater city surrounded by buried sites of ruins, your master, the mage behind him said. People are bound to find an exotic weapon or two. Even mercenaries.

Do you think he knows how to use it?

I would highly discourage gambling on the matter, young master. It's rarely about the weapon. It all depends on the person wielding it.

Dallion spun the whip blade around him several more times, each causing Mord to retreat further towards the wooden wall of the grid. This was nothing but a desperate plot to gain time to think. Thankfully, his opponent couldn't risk it.

The shield segments shifted again, letting Mord's weapon drop to the ground. The time had come for Dallion to make a choice, and he did, dashing forward at his opponent. Midway there, he jumped up, combining athletic and acrobatic skills, then waved the whip blade wildly so as to create a cone of devastation below him. Dust rose into the air as the edges of the many indestructible fragments scraped along the ground.

Feeling the pressure of the real world, Dallion split into two instances. He knew that Mord would counterattack that's what Dallion had set up with this fashion of attack he only didn't know how.

You're still making the same mistakes

, Nil sighed.

All you're doing is providing him a way to complete more guard sequences.

Hardly had the echo said that, than Mord emerged. However, he didn't go for a ranged attack. Instead, the man had gone for the air, jumping right through the eye of the hurricane of blades. That wasn't the alarming part Dallion had expected that to an extent. What Dallion couldn't have foreseen was that his enemy had also hidden away a pair of combat gauntlets of sky silver.

Reaching out, Mord grabbed the whip blade, right above the guard. The sound of screeching filled the air as two sets of indestructible gear ground against one another. There were no sparks, no metal fragments, but in his mind, Dallion could almost see how this was going to continue. He was presented with two basic options: either let go of the weapon and let Mord pretty much use it, or

hold on and be at a disadvantage at the inevitable melee exchange that was to follow. Given his options, Dallion decided to hold on.

Clever, Mord said as he pulled the whip blade. His weight was enough to make Dallion fly towards him, which was instantly met by a barrage of kicks. The thick boots being the best response Dallion had to his opponents armored fists, he planned to make use of them. Unfortunately, that proved not to be enough.

A short race took place with both sides, trying to complete their guard sequence faster. It was Mord who won and took the opportunity to hit Dallion in the knee.

White hot pain spread from Dallions knee to the rest of his leg. Nothing appeared to be broken, but the pain had caused the necessary distraction to pull Dallion down to the ground.

With a large thump, Dallion crashed like a sack of potatoes. In his mind, he could almost see red awakened rectangles appearing, telling him how much damage he had sustained and what the consequences were. Even without them, though, he had a pretty good idea how things stood. With the pain in his knee and the sudden slam-down movement had become all the more difficult.

Mord didnt stop there. Like a piranha tasted blood, he twisted his body mid-air, following a series of motions that would get him to land directly on Dallion with a punch on the back.

Dallions combat splitting allowed him to evade the first strike which drove the gauntlet halfway in the ground though not the second. Even after blocking with the shield, Dallion felt the air knocked out of him, and that was not all. The successful hit somehow had allowed Mord to start a multi attack pummeling Dallion with dozens of additional hits. While not as strong as the previous, they were enough to keep him pinned to the ground.

That much was true. Dallion attempted to combat split again, but the few instances that he managed to achieve failed to escape the rain of punches. Several hit his right shoulder, shooting torrents of pain down his arm. In this situation, it was almost impossible to keep holding the whip blade, let alone do anything else.

Dallion clenched his teeth. He had started this fight wanting to achieve this victory using only his own abilities, however, it was clear that wouldnt be possible. While the gap between him and Mord had narrowed, it was still very much there. Trying to breach it in his current state was more than he could achieve at the moment. However, there was one more trick Dallion had at his disposal.

The firebird kicked in, or rather the kaleidervisto he had hidden in his holster boots started to glow, making the healing effect available in the real world. Starting from his foot, the soothing warmth spread throughout the rest of Dallions body. While the pain didnt entirely subside, Dallion felt it take the edge off, at least to the point he could force his arm to move again, and he did, doing the closest thing to a whip lash he could perform with his weapon. It wasnt much, but it managed to break Mords concentration, and more importantly his attack.

A slight reprieve followed just enough to allow Dallion to slip his left arm out of the shields straps and draw his Nox dagger. Rising up, Dallion then did a single attack. It was a gamble. Mord had every chance to evade the strike, but he chose to meet with his armor head on, while punching

Dallion in the jaw. Once again Dallion was propelled through the air into the wooden separator, marking the boundaries of his fighting space. The pain was intense, but Dallion could only smile.

You fell for it, he whispered.

The tip of the Nox dagger had barely scratched the others armor, but already cracks were moving up like a growing spiderweb. More importantly, Dallion noticed a drop of blood trickle from within that suggested a similar process was happening beneath. The wound was far from fatal, but it would continue to grow for a while creating an increasing scar.

Chapter 337: Unexpected Revelation

Ten minutes after the start of the tournament, three quarters of the fights were already over. When it came to awakened battles, time was viewed differently. Even after being requested to be as slow as possible, a battle reached its natural end in about ten minutes. Some of the veterans knew better, deliberately extending the fights longer, but even they didnt go past fifteen-twenty minutes. Back on Earth, no one would allow any form of entertainment to last for such a short amount of time. Here, though, the common people were used to the intensity of the experience, remaining on the edge of their seats for a very intense half hour, while the awakened had the perception to enjoy the whole thing blow by blow.

According to the event organizers, once the first round of fighting concluded, the Lord Mayor was going to congratulate the winners, after which the grid would be readjusted and three rounds of exhibition battles would commence. All that had lost the round would face one another every two hours for the crowds amusement, and in between the various opera and theatre troupes would perform for the chance of getting noticed.

Meanwhile, the battle between Mord and Dallion continued. The intensity of the fight had exhausted both of them, which only made them go at it more. With each minute, Mords advantage shrank until it was no more.

You found a way, didnt you? The Flameforger smiled, as he twisted through the air, evading the whip blade as it slashed through the air.

The attacks would have allowed him to complete a few guards, and acrobatic sequences, if Dallion didnt make a point to interrupt them as often as possible. An intricate game of living chess was taking place in which each of the contestants engaged in pre-set sequences that could be changed freely depending on the others reaction. Yet despite the help Dallion was getting from his familiar, he was still lacking in the weapons and techniques compartment. If Dallion had brought a lot of exotic weapons to the fight, Mord had twice as many, all of them of sky silver, and most of them indestructible. It didnt help that Dallions dagger was kicked out of his hand at one point, making him having to rely on more conventional things.

Several times during the fight, he felt the harpsiswords eagerness to join in, but he dared not draw her out not yet, at least.

Youre a good rival. But youve still green. Without warning, Mord split into two instances. Dallion saw them clearly, but there was nothing he could do: he didnt have the mental fortitude to respond with instances of his own, not the reflexes to break the splitting as it occurred. Thus, he did the only remaining option: take the hit in such a way so as to limit the damage taken.

Based on the pain received, it was questionable whether he had succeeded. Leaping away from his opponent, Dallion reassembled the whip blade. The action made his opponent pause. Being tired as he was, he had to evaluate every attack far more precisely than before. That gave Dallion time to compose a plan.

Not at this stage. Letting him form a viable plan is more dangerous than gaining a bit of strength. I'd strongly suggest finishing it in one go.

That was pretty much the same conclusion Dallion had come to. Leaning against the separator, he placed the heel of his right boot on the wooden surface.

The echo just laughed.

Dear boy, do you think you're the only one receiving advice? I wouldn't be surprised if he has a ring with Sky Fire giving him during the fight. Some have more than one echo advisor. Rest assured, the only way you'd be disqualified would be if you lose.

That was enough for Dallion to know. With a brisk action, he drew the harpsisword with his left hand. The presence of the armadil shield made it difficult, though not impossible. In a way that worked to Dallion's advantage, someone of Mord's level had no doubt attempted fighting in this fashion at some point in his past, so he knew just how uncomfortable it had to be. Dallion felt a faint air of sympathy coming from his opponent just before Mord dashed at him.

A bright flame burst through Dallion's boot, giving him a tremendous boost forward. Any normal flame would have burned his entire leg off, but a healing flame only damaged part of his boot. Of course, given that Eury was observing the fight, there might be additional pain afterwards.

The sudden boost in speed caught Mord completely by surprise, making him reflectively attempt to shield himself. And that was when Dallion performed a vertical chop with the armadil sword. And that was not all. Letting go of the whip blade, he played a chord, making the weapon vibrate with weight.

Darude, Dallion whispered as a strike, with the weight of a sledgehammer, crashed upon Mord's block. The shock alone drove his boots a quarter of an inch into the ground. That was only the beginning as the harpsisword vibrated, Mord's entire body was filled with weight. Unnoticeable at first, the force became greater and greater with every instant.

Dallion had no mind of leaving anything to chance. Fastening his grip round the hilt, he played another chord, adding exhaustion to the mix.

All chatter from the noble section of the stands abruptly stopped. All eyes were on Dallion's fight. Not only was it one of the few dozen remaining, any awakened above average skill could recognize

exactly what skill he was using. Music itself was considered rare. Music that raised above ten, let alone twenty, was viewed almost exclusively as a nobles skill.

Hidden conversations ensued, as nobles inquired about Dallion and his skill from the many echoes serving them in their awakened realms. All in all, the only person not enamored by the performance was the mage. His eyes narrowed as it was starting to look as if Dallion would win his fight.

Whos that? The imperial guest turned to the countess.

A wildcard from the Icepicker guild, the woman replied, conveying the information that her subservient echoes gave. And a seer. Quite the rising star. It seems that the citys overseer has already shown interest in him, as have a few others. Ill give you an echo with all the information on him, if you like.

Hardly necessary, your grace, the mage interrupted. His status as a member of the Academy gave him that right, even if he had to tread lightly. The young master is perfectly capable of obtaining the information on his own. Above all, let us first see whether he reaches the next round. The encounter hasnt ended yet, and theres still a lot that"

Youre wrong. Countess Priscord leaned back in her seat, eyes closed. The fight is already over.

More chords were played, adding weight, confusion, exhaustion, and sleep. Dallion himself was starting to have trouble holding the weapon.

One look into Mords eyes made it clear that he wasnt willing to give up. Dallion felt him split several times in three instances each. Thankfully, none of them ended up being successful, since no changes occurred. Then, finally, Mords strength abandoned him. Pressing on, the harpsisword pushed him facedown in the ground. Dallion felt the thud shake the ground for a split second. Just to be on the safe side, though, he played another chord and placed the harpsisword on the back of his opponent.

Dallion ignored the echo, remaining on guard as if expecting Mord to pull out some surprise and suddenly jump up to snatch the victory from him. After a minute, however, the sound of trumpets indicated that the round was over.

Cheers filled the air. People celebrated the first event of the tournament. Some were happy that the fighters they had bet on managed to win the round. The general was probably among them as well, watching the fight from some section of the arena, and taking whatever artifacts Dallion had procured for him through his victory.

Challengers, the Lord Mayors voice echoed above all the noise, making it clear that he was the owner of the citys domain. The first day is off to a good start. Over a thousand of you came here in the hope to be named champion, and now half of you are one step closer to achieving that. As for

the rest, the Moons were not on your side today. Learn from your mistakes, train hard, and next year they might be.

Roars of cheer erupted, deafening everything out.

Quite a few promising candidates, the countess said. It seemed that she was addressing the imperial, but in truth her words were meant for the mage close to him.

You do this every year? the guest asked, clearly enjoying himself.

Indeed, it has a rustic charm to it. The mage wasn't overly impressed. You should have your Imperial uncle take you to see one of the Academy's tournaments, young master. I am confident you'll find the performance far more sophisticated and satisfying.

The Academy tournament is for those who want to admire what they cannot have. The countess was having none of that attitude. But since you are here, maybe you can give us all a taste? I'm sure that we'll all agree that if the participants are healed faster, they'll provide a far more interesting experience in the battles to come.

The power play was made. There was no way the mage could refuse, especially since it was him that breached the subject. It was somewhat ironic that his attempts to belittle the festival had forced him to make it even grander. With an over-amplified sigh, the old man reached out and started moving his hands through the air. Invisible lines and patterns were drawn, stacking up layer after layer, until in the end a bright pattern emerged.

All noise stopped. Even the fighters who were still conscious turned around to witness the work of a mage. Having one cast in public was rare enough. To have a master mass cast was nothing short of extraordinary.

In the blink of the eye, the pattern grew twice in size, then twice more. In a matter of seconds, it filled the entire sky. And once it did, it moved down to the ground of the arena, like a giant coin of aether.

Dallion felt a pleasant lightness surround his body. In a way, it was similar to Lux's healing flame, but also very different. If the firebird felt like being rubbed with alcohol, this felt like being wrapped in warm velvet. All pain and fatigue were drained away, along with any wound. Dallion watched as the visible scars and bruises on Mord's body disappeared into the air like burning wax.

Done its job, the purple pattern faded away a few seconds later.

Dear boy, compared to you all mages are incredibly strong. The only thing that protects you from them is the law of the Moons. Be mindful, though. The moment you pass your next barrier, the Moons won't protect you anymore.

Before Dallion could say more, two green rectangles appeared in front of Dallion.

CROSS REALM MASTERY!

(+1 ???)

Youve fully grasped the ability to have your familiars affect the real world and be affected by it. You asked for this, so better not complain!

EMPATHY ATTRIBUTE GRANTED!

The power of the GREEN MOON now flows through you, allowing you to hear and converse with guardians at will.

Chapter 338: Gains and Losses

The shock hadnt come right away. Too many unusual things had occurred after Dallions first battle for him to react adequately. Chief among them were the rectangles appearing in the real world. That was absolutely not supposed to happen. To make it even more ominous, to Dallions alarmor relief depending on the point of view no one else had seen them, not even his echoes or familiars. As far as they were concerned, the only difference was a new stat and achievement appearing within the rooms of his realm. The unusualness didnt end there.

As Nil had pointed out, getting an achievement while in the real world was unheard of. Even when establishing new domains, one had to enter them to be made aware of their existence, as well as the peculiar set of rules that came with them. Dallion didnt have the courage to share that this wasnt the first time he had seen rectangles in the real world, instead moving the conversation on the next abnormal elementthe new attribute itself.

The name sounded cheesy, almost comical. What it allowed Dallion to do, though, was far from it. Up to this point, he had often wondered how come he was able to converse with guardians on occasions, while others couldnt. The reason was the inkling of the empathy stat he had. Even having a fraction was enough for awakened creatures and guardians to treat him differently, especially dryads. That was how the armadil shield had become aware of his presence in the first place, as well as the reason it had reached out to Dallion. This also explained the Green Moons interest. Now that the stat was fully developed, the veil had been lifted allowing Dallion to read about it in the ring library scrolls, as well as have proper conversations with Nil and his other echoes about itas the limitations had been lifted from him, they were lifted from them as well.

All that, however, paled in comparison to the actual effects that the new stat provided. From the moment the rectangle had appeared in front of Dallion in the middle of the arena, he had gained the ability to talk to any item and area guardian, and all of them could talk back.

Thanks, Dalion said, lying on the bed, eyes closed. He was extremely thankful that he had been cleaning his room regularly for the past few weeks. If he had been negligent in that regard, there was no telling what could have occurred. Items getting misplaced was one of the possibilities. In any event, Dallion would have gotten an earful.

Easy for you to say. You dont get objects talking to you every step you make.

Thats most likely the initial burst. Itll pass once you get used to the stat, and the world gets used to you.

That didnt sound too reassuring.

You really dont know how to look on the positive side even when you win, do you?

Dallion was just about to comment on how absurd he found the idea, when it suddenly hit him. The way things were, he actually did have the power to get information from items about their owners. As he had seen, people even awakened didnt treat items too well, especially those they werent linked with. But even in the cases when there was a strong bond between a person and their item guardians, he also had quite advanced music skills; and from what he had seen, there was no reason music wouldnt affect guardians the same way it affected people.

It was a difficult question. On the one hand, the items realm was considered a world. However, it was also clearly a realm, making it less likely that the items within would be treated as actual items. Also, as it turned out, Dallions new ability didnt extend to cracklings. Nox and Lux continued to converse using their standard means, only being understood thanks to the link Dallion had established with them. Normal crackling remained unintelligible.

There was a certain logic to that. Of course, it meant that Dallion had to sneak back into the realm on his own. Even if the guardians were willing to let him pass their domains unharmed, they werent going to hesitate attacking an expedition, especially if it was set on leveling up the realm.

Everything considered, Dallion decided to visit the guild during the night. As a regular guild member, he had the right to do so. Before that, he had to rest a bit.

Sleep came fast. The mornings leveling up combined with the arena fight had exhausted him to the extreme. As he dozed off, Dallion wondered how Mord was doing. His self-proclaimed rival didnt seem particularly happy to have lost. Dallion had sensed enough anger and disappointment to sink a ship, and yet the guy had managed to keep it inside. Dallion pitied the rest of the Flameforgers opponents.

When Dallion opened his eyes again, he was woken up by a knock on the door.

The response made Dallion almost jump from his bed. He wasn't used to having objects reply to his rhetorical questions. As Nil had said, Dallion was going to have to relearn now to talk using his new skills. Up to now, it was hardly a problem only the small number of inhabitants in his realm replied to his thoughts. With the new skill at his disposal, that had changed. From now on, he had to develop two ways of mental thought: one for communication with guardians and one for his own personal thoughts. Either that, or he was going to start relying on blocker rings a lot more.

Straightening his clothes as best he could, Dallion opened the door. Upon seeing Eury, he expected a kiss, or at least a hug, but got neither.

Hi, the gorgon walked in.

Hi, Dallion said, trying best to hide his disappointment. Long stroll after work? he put on a fake smile.

Nope, I actually came to see you. Eury made her way through the room. Especially the remains of your boots. She picked the right one up. The damage was extensive. Then again, considering what Dallion had pulled off, it was a miracle that the entire boot hadn't burst to shreds.

I saw you at the arena, Dallion approached the topic.

I know. The gorgon replied as a third of the snakes on her head examined the boot, the rest focusing on the room and Dallion.

You were with the overseer.

And you were reckless as usual. While Dallion could hear the note of concern and anger in her voice, his music skills didn't let him catch any additional emotions. She had to be wearing a blocker. If you want to use that trick again, I'll need to make you a new pair. And that won't happen until after the festival.

I won't be using it again. Dallion moved closer to her. It was just this once.

Good. Eury put the boot back on the ground. I'll take this and fix it up for tomorrow.

That's it?

Pretty much. There was a long, awkward pause. Look, I know what you mean, but right now isn't the best time. I have things I need to focus on. You know how it is.

Dallion didn't, but he had seen enough excuses in high school to know where this was going. Part of him could already feel the pain, while another refused to accept it, hoping that he was misinterpreting things.

That's not actually why I'm here, though, she said. Your new sword. Where did you get it from?

An acquaintance gave it to me, Dallion replied. It's on loan until I drop out of the tournament, he lied. It took me a few days to get used to it. I passed by your workshop to tell you about it, but you weren't there.

You must have caught me at a moment while I was out.

If there was a moment at which Dallion had questions for an item guardian, that was now. Unfortunately for him, the blocking item Euryale was using prevented him from doing so.

Things will be different once the festival is over. So, Ill fix this for you and have it ready for tomorrows fight. Will you be using Lux then?

Only if I have to.

Try to keep it down. The overseer doesnt like the flash much.

There were a dozen things Dallion should have said. Questions about what had happened between them, things he wanted to discuss, even laughs to have. However, he felt that none of that would work if he tried. The thought of splitting and having a conversation with her came to mind. At least that way hed get the important answer. Possibly it would have worked, but it wasnt something he wanted to try.

Ill do my best. Anything else? Dallion asked with an icy note.

No, thats it.

See you before the fight tomorrow, then. Dallion took a step to the side, leaving a clear path to the door.

There was no doubt in his mind that the gorgon got the hint. The snakes on her head moved about, slightly more agitated than usual, then returned to their standard semi-motionless state. Holding the damaged holster boot, Eury took a step towards the door.

Youre still keeping it, she said, a cluster of snakes, turning to the stone orchid. It looks better than before.

Im doing my best, Dallion said, unsure how to react.

I know. The gorgon smiled, then left the room. For close to a minute Dallion stood there, trying to figure out what just had happened. This was definitely not a conversation he wanted to have, especially now.

Even after all the flaws he had dealt with while leveling up, there remained things he still had difficulty coping with. This was one of them, especially since Dallion honestly thought that there was more than chemistry between him and Eury.

No advice from you, shield?

Chapter 339: Sneaking into a World

The only people visible in the streets in the early hours of the morning were guards. However, these were not city guards, but the countless personal troops making sure nothing harmed her including city guards. Dallion didnt need to know the politics of this world to tell that the two groups didnt like each other. Keeping that in mind, Dallion made sure to keep his distance on his way to the Icepicker guild hall.

This was the first time Dallion had gone into the building this late. From what he had heard, there always was someone at the guildhall to keep an eye on the guilds item stash. Nil had kept on

insisting that Dallion wait for a few more hours, so that at least he'd be able to come up with some valid excuse of being there, but was quickly ignored. As much as Dallion hated to admit it, the talk with Euryale had a profound effect making him want to do reckless things just so for the sake of them. Dallion had already decided to enter the sword before she had passed by, but now he had thrown all caution to the wind.

Dal? Spike emerged, surprised just as much as Dallion himself. Why are you here?

Restless night, Dallion kept as close to the truth as he could. Thought I'd do something before my fight tomorrow.

Right, right. Good one trashing the scrapforger. That'll be something to drink about, Spike laughed. At least it'll shut them for a while. Pity the other four didn't get hit.

What are you doing here? Dallion quickly changed the topic of conversation. I thought you'd be out celebrating.

I wish. Spike sighed. I'm not allowed to party during the festival. City's orders. That's why I'm stuck with guard duty. Thought you were a thief for a moment.

One can always hope, Spike laughed. Come in. He ushered Dallion into the guild. People don't usually combat split when entering their own guild, you know.

I didn't want to be seen, Dallion replied. Was hoping to spend some time alone.

I can understand that. Well, don't worry about it. Imagine I'm not even here. I'll be playing cards with Vend on the second floor, anyway.

Cool. Dallion smiled, but beneath that calm exterior he was screaming.

Of all the things that could happen. Having Spike here was bad enough. Having Vend that would cause serious problems. Now Dallion knew how Spike came to the entrance so fast. Vend must have sensed the splitting and Spike had the speed to go down from the first floor before Dallion could open the door. There was no doubt about it, both of their abilities remained terrifying, although Dallion was starting to see chinks in their armor.

Come up if you feel bored, Spike offered as he turned around.

Isn't it risky gambling against Vend?

Definitely. Spike grinned. That's the best part.

Why not?

Theres no way you can sneak past Vend. The boy will hear you no matter what you try.

The normal reaction would be for Dallion to agree and spend an utterly boring time practicing his whip blade skills. However, in his current state, Dallion decided to do what he was good at think out of the box. If he couldnt go up the standard way, he could make use of his new abilities to find an alternative.

At first Dallion went down to the basement and took a training item, as normal. He chose the room closest to the staircase, but never went into the item. Instead, he waited for a second, then went back up.

Spike, he shouted, making his way up to the second floor. Spike?

One of the doors opened. However, it wasnt Spike who was standing there it was Vend.

Vend, Dallion said.

Hey, Dal, the elite said. Congratulations on the fight. You did well.

Thanks. Havent seen you since the expedition. What have you been up to?

This and that.

The answers were suspiciously evasive. For some reason, Dallion felt conflict within Vend. His teacher was both glad to see him, but also preferred that he didnt. If Dallion had any plans to share his discovery in the swords realm, they were now seriously in doubt. There was a spark of hope telling Dallion that Vend would understand, but it was quickly swept away.

Any news on the sword expedition?

No. March is discussing it with the guild master, but I doubt anything will come to it. Having most of the realm flooded messed up things a lot and not only in the guild.

Dallion paused. He could tell two things: that Vend couldnt hear the voice, and that it was coming from the right side of his belt, just where a dagger was hanging.

Item rivalry. To be expected, also a sign of things to come. So far, the vast majority of items were silent around Dallion, but that was going to change soon enough. The moment they started hearing his thoughts, and seeing others having conversations with him, more were going to join in. At the moment, though, this was very much to Dallions advantage. As Nil had said, the best way to learn things about a person was from their items.

Splitting into three instances, Dallion was about to continue his conversation with Vends training dagger, when suddenly all his instances faded away.

Never do that, Vend said. If you have something to say, just say it directly.

Cold chills went through Dallion. Being caught on the spot with such ease was bad enough. Being caught by Vend was more than that. He was one of the people he wanted to remain in good relations with, and this stupid mistake had made it all the more difficult. Today just wasnt Dallions day. First it was Eury, and how he was having issues with Vend. Could things get any worse? Most likely, yes, though that wasnt a goal to try and achieve.

What if theres a way to reach the fourth temple? Dallion asked.

The question had the desired effect. Vends anger faded away, then was replaced by a lot of curiosity and an inkling of hope.

Will things get better then?

They might. What exactly do you have in mind?

This was itthe crossroads Dallion had found himself in real life. On the one hand, he could tell Vend everything. He would ask that Vend vow not to tell anyone until after a few days, and let him know of the illusion that was the ocean, as well as the deal he had made with the fourth guardian. That would earn Dallion some favor, and potentially make him a permanent member of the expeditions. Of course, it would also make finding whatever the Star was looking or all the more difficult.

On the other hand, Dallion could just as easily say enough so as to get Vends suspicions off him, then secretly make his way to the sword and do another solo expedition. The risks were greater, but so was finding his prize.

I think that"

Vend, Spike shouted from below. Weve got a problem.

That was impressive, to say the least; Dallion hadnt even noticed Spike pass by and somehow the elite had managed to reach the first floor. By the calm expression on Vends face, that seemed normal.

There are a bunch of guards at the entrance.

Ill be right with you, Vend shouted back, his eyes still fixed on Dallion. Well finish this once Im done. He passed by Dallion. Stay here. I dont want you downstairs until I see whats going on.

Sure thing. Dallion nodded. He never expected to get such a break. Not only were both Vend and Spike out of the way, but Vend himself had told him to remain on the upper floors. From her it was only a few seconds to the fourth floor and back if Dallion used his awakened skills. The moment he heard the door open downstairs, he did just that.

Rushing up as fast as his body level allowed him to, Dallion made his way to the fourth floor and directly to the room with the sword. He didnt bother creating instances of checking for other guards. Instead, he ran to the middle of the room and grabbed the tip of the blade.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

The room disappeared, replaced by the inside of the starting temple. Only once there, Dallion allowed himself a sigh of relief. His heart was pumping like crazy.

You prefer I told him?

No. I would have preferred that you had cooled off before making any rash decision whatsoever.

I need answers, Nil. Therere too many mysteries surrounding the Star and the Moons. Since no one can tell me anything, I need to find the answers by myself.

The Moons and the Stars have been shrouded in mystery for millennia! The truth is that we know very little about our world. Entire swaths of history have been removed from existence. Civilizations have risen and fallen with merely a hint as to why. Three of the seven races have been permanently banished into the awakened realms, and no one has an inkling how or even why. Yes, they tried to conquer the world, but why do so when they were already at their peak? And why did each resort to taking advice from the Star when they were at the height of their glory? There are so many questions that people cant list, let alone answer, and you think that by going on an expedition in a world item or getting yourself noticed by the higher nobility will help you understand all that?

Dallion remained silent. This was the first time he had heard Nil reveal as much as he did. There was much more to the man than Dallion thought. He wasnt just an old gambler who had come to the guild because he couldnt find a job anywhere else. He must have been someone quite skilled, possibly important in his youth, not to mention extremely knowledgeable.

And if you fail? What then?

Then, Ill know that Ive been wrong about a whole lot of things.

Chapter 340: Solo Expedition

Events in the real world weighed heavily on Dallion. Somehow, several things had managed to pile up, increasing his psychological pain exponentially. The core issue was, of course, Euryale. At first, Dallion had no idea why things had ended up this way. A few days ago which corresponded to months true time everything had been perfectly fine. He and Eury were in this very realm, exploring the world as part of Marchs expedition. Since then, things had changed tremendously and not in a good way.

At first, Dallion felt a sense of betrayal, then he started wondering whether he hadn't done something wrong. Strictly speaking, he had done several things he shouldn't have had to, but none of them related to Eury. Or maybe that was the reason? Maybe he should have gotten her involved?

Easy for you to say

I know. That's why I'm sharing my wisdom with you.

The remark made Dallion smile.

Reaching Lastport took close to an hour. Dallion wasn't in the mood for the accelerated flight of last time, so asked Lux to get him there at a reasonable speed. The firebird did just that.

Upon arriving at the abandoned city, however, something unexpected was waiting for them. The vine whale that belonged to the third guardian floated a mile above the edge of the sea. When it spotted Dallion, the creature moved down from its location, approaching as much as it could to the ground without causing any damage to the nearby buildings.

For now.

Precisely. That's all the more reason not to get on the guardians' bad side just yet. Remember, you're not here to level up the item, just to explore.

Dallion would have laughed if things weren't so serious. He wished he was strong enough to try and take them all on and level up the item. Right now, that seemed absurd. Although maybe a friendly spar wouldn't be such a bad idea.

Gleam, Dallion said. Unlike the other familiars, the shardfly preferred to have their conversations be verbalized. Can you work your magic?

Can't you do it yourself? the shardfly appeared above his left shoulder. Dallion could tell that she was surprised at his limitations rather than being resentful. It's easy. I'll teach you.

I'm not a mage. I still need your help.

Sure. There was a hint of disappointment in her voice. I just hope you have a boat ready. I'm not spending my time covering you with glitter every two minutes because you want to fly through swarms of cracklings.

The truth was that Dallion had completely forgotten, and Gleam knew that perfectly well. In his euphoria after the victory against the crackling core smoke, he hadn't bothered with trifling details such as taking the boat back to its original spot near Lastport.

For that reason, now Dallion had to find another means of transport. Looking at the piers, there were a few vessels, although for the most part, they were larger ships. Potentially, one of them could have a safety boat for Dallion to use.

As Dallion set off to check, the vine whale followed him, floating directly above.

What do you want? Dallion asked loud enough so that the creature could hear.

I was told to help you, the whale replied. Its voice was deep and melodic, as one might expect when looking at it. Though you can just fly there if you wish. There aren't any flocks until the other side.

Yeah, right. Dallion smirked. The last time he was here, both the sea and the air were full of crackling creations. There was no reason it should be different this time.

I can fly you to the shore near the next temple, if you want, the whale offered. But if you have things under control, Ill just watch and escort you.

Ill keep that in mind.

Apparently, having a full stat meant that Dallion could also talk to minions within a realm, possibly any creatures as well. Even so, Dallion wasnt willing to have the whale carry him anywhere, especially with what he had Lux do to the minion during their battle. With a sigh, he went along the piers, searching for an adequate vessel to transport him through.

After a short while, the first flock of cracklings appeared. It was a small flock, far smaller than what Dallion had encountered before, but enough to make him wary. Seeing the whale, they cracklings merged together, forming a massive flying creature. It was three times smaller than the minion, which was why it didnt engage in a fight, but rather turned around flapping away.

There are a lot less of them, Dallion noted. Did anyone enter the realm after me?

Youve been the only one in the last few years, the whale replied.

The coastline remained the same as Dallion had seen it a day ago. Everything else, though, had changed. No longer was the land a large decaying mass of black, but it had a thin green patch winding its way between stretches of black soil up to the very sea. The city that Dallion had defamed was completely gone. From this distance, not a single brick was visible.

How many clashes were there while I was gone? Dallion asked.

Hundreds, the whale replied. I took part in a few of the big ones.

Images of the whale flying into the city filled Dallions head. Considering that the source of the crackling city was gone, none of its damage could be repaired. The same could be said for the armies no matter how numerous they couldnt be replenished. It would have been easy for the guardian to have sent wave after wave of echoes to grind down the enemy into non-existence.

The remaining two cities, in contrast, hadnt remained idle, doubling in size and reclaiming part of what the world had gained. In a matter of real-life weeks, theyd probably occupy the entire coast again and pose a similar threat as the city that had been destroyed unless Marchs expeditions didnt resume by then.

This is as far as I can go, the whale said as it reached the landmass. Good luck.

I thought you could fly anywhere.

I can, the minion replied laconically, then turned around and slowly started its way back to the third temple.

Typical. Gleam fluttered next to Dallion. Whales. Always so sensitive.

Sensitive? I didnt catch any emotions in it.

Thats because they constantly negate them with music of their own. You need to be really skilled to catch the emotions of a vine whale. Thats why they were constantly hunted.

Only now did Dallion realize that he had encountered a creature with natural music skills. If the minion ever went all out it would be devastating for armies. No wonder that the species was hunted, it was the perfect guard minion. If anything, Dallion wondered why there werent more in the realm. He could only assume that they were rare to begin with and only decreased in number during the following hunts.

Before Lux could take Dallion to the ground, a dryad echo had emerged.

Welcome back, the echo said once Dallion landed. Good to see you back. Its been a while.

Not for me, Dallion said. Its only been a day.

Lucky you. The echo smirked. I take it you want to go further towards the hilt? Youll need to rest a bit. Ive already spoken with the others and theres uncertainty as to how to proceed. Most are fine with letting you stroll about, but a few would like for you to prove yourself upon entering their domains.

Like how I helped you?

How should I know? The dryad echo shrugged. It depends on the guardian. Youll have to find out. I doubt itll be anything major, though. Probably just a chat or some trivial task. Boredom changes a person. A few millennia ago, Id have never asked for help from your kind.

I feel honored. Dallion drenched his words in sarcasm. Do I get any hints?

No hints. These are the rules of the realm. It wasnt meant to be a tourist attraction. Those who were sent here knew where they were supposed to go, and those who werent supposed to be here.

That wasnt good.

I guess I cant ask questions about the past either?

Oh, you can ask anything you want. I dont have to answer.

The usual setup. Still, it was something that Dallion could work with. After being forced into so many deals with the general, he had started getting a sense of information trading. In this case, there was nothing he could offer; instead, he was collecting. That gave him a certain advantage.

Were any treasures kept here? Dallion asked.

This is a world realm, of course there would be treasures kept here, the echo laughed. Treasures crafted locally, treasures from the outside. Take your pick. Of course, most of them are lost now. Cracklings and all.

Anything that might interest the Star.

The question was expected to cause a reaction. The dryad stopped for a moment, then continued walking, as if nothing had happened. Dallion was able to see, however, concern and fear form within him.

Is that why youre coming here? You think the Star hid something?

Hurt a deity? The only things that could hurt a deity are other deities. Even the Star cant win in a direct fight.

Which is why he tricks others to fight in his stead. Look, I really dont have time for the whole routine. Dallion added a sense of urgency in his voice, along with a pinch of compassion. It would be next to impossible to affect a guardian with his level of music skills, but an echo maybe hed get lucky. After all, there was nothing else he could do. The Star went through a lot of trouble to enter this realm. I want to know why.

Youll have to ask him. Theres a lot of stuff he might be after. They say there were members of the royal family banished here. Maybe they brought something that others couldnt achieve. Rulers have powers others can only dream about. If theres anything valuable, itll be near their lodgings.

Which are where, exactly?

The palace at the hilt of the world. Maybe youll find what youre looking for there?

Dallion could only hope. He had no illusion that the trip to the palace would be long and dangerous, not to mention that there was no telling what sort of monsters hed meet on his way there. Aside from cracklings and guardians, this world had its own flora and fauna, not to mention local species such as the minotaurs. Getting through all this would be a challenge, even with Luxs help.

Are there any cities between here and the palace? Dallion asked.

A few. Are you thinking of stopping through them?

As long as they arent crackling.

They arent, the dryad echo said cautiously. But they also arent what youd expect. Sure you want to go?

Yes, Dallion said firmly.