

Leveling up 351

Chapter 351: Seeing Layers

Vines shot out of the whales body, piercing cracklings by the dozens. The flock had attempted to merge together, but seeing that their overall size was still insignificant compared to the whale itself, then burst back into individual members and scattered in all directions.

Dallion kept his guard up, but for the most part, he didnt do a thing. As Vend had taught him, he maintained a few instances ready in case of emergency, but most of his thoughts dwelled on Vihrogon. The armadil shield had maintained his dryad appearance for the last half hour, but despite that hadnt said a word.

Will you be fine fighting the white dryad? Dallion asked in his attempt to break the ice. Want me to help?

Better not. Youll only get hurt.

Strangely enough, that didnt sound like an insult, but rather a fear.

Will you be able to handle her, though?

Itll be the same as fighting myself. Ultimately, thats why she was created back at the time.

Shes created? Dallion was both impressed and confused. The white dryad didnt seem like an echo. She had more health than one, that was for sure. Who created her?

I did. The dryad smiled. Shes my memory given form.

Arriving at the city, the vine whale descended until it was a few feet higher than the highest building. From this distance Dallion was able to see some of the creatures passing through. This wasnt his goal, thoughall he needed was to get close to the wooden structure that contained the hidden realm.

Once there, he jumped off. As he did, Lux emerged and quickly merged with his owner, giving Dallion wings. The armadil shield followed. Vines burst out from him instead of wings, cushioning his fall as he landed on the road in front of the library. The skills were just as terrifying as when it was used by opponents Dallion had seen in the past. For one, he was glad not being the one who had to face it.

Good luck, the vine whale said, slowly turning around. I hope to see you once its over.

You will, the armadil shield replied.

I guess I attract weirdness.

Or vice versa. Remember, the aura sword was full of dryads from another world. Its far more likely that they attracted you and Eury to it, possibly even the Star himself. From a very cosmic point of view, maybe thats one of the reasons why otherworlders feel drawn to Nerosal.

Thats a bit of a stretch.

If it were this sword alone, maybe. But our good friend said that he wasnt the only one who dumped this particular sword in the ruins nearby. There might be dozens other world swords hidden in the area, maybe even hundreds. Something to keep in mind.

Hundreds of swords some of them could even have survivors inside. They wouldnt be the dryads that originally were banished inside, of course, but some of their descendants could still be alive today. And, as Dallion had seen, there was a greater chance for an otherworlder to emerge in bloodlines of the same nature. Maybe when this was all over, hed ask Jiron and Eury if they had come across any other swords of this sort.

When the fight starts, dont intervene, Vihrogon said, as the two entered the wooden building.

If thats what you want.

Youd be helping me that way. I wont be able to protect you, and at our speed Im not sure youd be able to protect yourself.

What about Lux? Can he help you?

I appreciate the gesture, but no. I have to win this the right way.

The birch dryad was waiting for them when they arrived in the hidden realm. Seeing the armadil shield in his new form, clusters of eagerness and longing formed within her.

You remembered, she said. Im glad.

None of us can run away from our past. Vihrogon made a sign to Dallion to stay back. The boy will be here just as an observer. He wont meddle in the fight.

I know. Hes chosen the way of the empath. Seems like he also knows what he is now.

He barely has a clue, but he will. With my help. Vihrogon drew his wooden rapier, then summoned a second one. Two swordson the surface, it seemed he had focused his development on attack, just like Veil had. However, that wasnt entirely the case. When the white rectangle appeared above him, Dallion could see ten skills. Four of them were the basic physical ones, but there also was carving, art, and four more dryad skills similar to those he had seen the guardians of this world have.

Better move to a corner. The birch dryad summoned her weaponsa wooden rapier and a sickle.

Id like to watch the fight, Dallion said.

If you wish. Just dont move a lot. There will be no combat splitting in this fight. Things might become dangerous for you.

If I run from a battle that my gear initiates, how can I expect to fight my own? Ill take care of myself.

A faint smile appeared on Vihrogons face. Then, a split-second later, the fight began. There was no red rectangle to mark the start, instead both dryads disappeared in a blur of motion, clashing together in the middle of the room.

Dallion followed the advice. Most of the actions remained too fast for him to see, but there were some that became clear as day. It was the clashes that remained clearest of all that moment when the two faced off, each simultaneously blocking and being blocked by their opponent. Interestingly enough, the rapiers weren't the weapon predominantly used. Rather, they were like a precision instrument, which was only utilized at key points of the battle, to take advantage of an opening. Most of the time it was vines that struck against each other. They twisted, entangling each other, sometimes transforming into shields to block torrents of sharpened roots, or they would spread along the floor and walls, aiming to strike from the others blind spot.

In his mind, Dallion tried to imagine how he'd react to any of these attacks. As hard as it was to admit, in the vast majority he'd resort to the help of Lux or the armadil shield. However, there were a few occasional instances in which he thought he could evade the attack on his own, then strike back.

The birch dryad slashed with her sickle at Vihrogon, following up with a multi-piercing attack with her rapier, while also directing two clusters of roots up from both walls at her opponent. Vihrogon didn't flinch, choosing to take the hit of her roots, but also engage in dual multi-attack of his own. Rapier negated rapier; the second one, however, managed to pierce through her defenses slightly faster than the white dryad could form a shield in front of her. Red rectangles emerged on both sides. From what Dallion could see, both had suffered a series of moderate wounds. More interesting, however, both had ended up poisoned as a result of the attacks.

That's because it's usually frowned upon, dear boy. And by frowned upon, I mean that the Moons don't approve of poison skills being used against double digits. In the wilderness, however, everything goes. Even Gleam uses poison all the time.

She does?

What are illusions, but poisoning of the senses? Every aspect of you could be poisoned. It's not just health. You could be made slower, paralyzed, blinded, and whatnot. All of those are a sort of poison, and like everything else, they have their antidote or could be evaded altogether.

Both dryads broke up, retreating to their parts of the room. Moments later, they charged forward again. Torrents of vines burst from the white dryad only to be met by as many roots coming from the armadil shield. A massive explosion of force followed, as leaves and root fragments filled the air like shrapnel.

The sight was awe-inspiring, but also terrifying. To have armies of dryads capable of such destruction, roam the world was enough to freeze the blood of every living being. They were the third and at present last trace to try and conquer everything. Given their strength, they could have. The humans couldn't have been a threat. The copyettes and nymphs had already been banished, which left the furies and the dwarves. Dallion had yet to see a dwarf, but he could imagine the furies withstand the dryad advancement. That must have been a conflict that shattered imagination.

At first, nothing happened. The dryads became more and more blurry as they picked up speed in their fight. Pain started to build up in Dallion's temples, like two coins slowly heating up. Ten seconds in, his entire head pounded at every heartbeat. Another five, and the coins had become scorching nails drilling into his skull. The pain reached Dallion's tolerance threshold and went beyond. Clenching his fists, he stubbornly kept on concentrating as he stared forward. Then, suddenly, there was like a pop in his ears. The blurs gained form.

The birch dryad was flying through the air, spinning like a top as she sliced the cluster of roots that Vihrogon had launched her way. Less than a quarter of her health remained, though that didn't make her any less dangerous.

Meanwhile, the armadil shield was using both rapiers to pierce the hundreds of leaves that were flying towards him like daggers. So many had stacked up that they covered half of his weapons, making them look like skewers. At one point, Vihrogon stopped and swung both rapiers in the direction of his opponent, launching all the gathered leaves at her. More red rectangles emerged.

Before Dallion could see more, events became blurry once again. The pain had proven stronger than his will, breaking his concentration and leaving him with a scorching headache the likes of which he hadn't felt since his guild selection trial.

And that's a good thing, though not if you bring yourself to such a state. There will be other times. You'll only get stronger from here on.

The echo kept on going on jumping between praise and criticism. Dallion undoubtedly deserved both, but for once the echo had missed the point. For the first time, Dallion had broken through his barrier without breaking through his barrier. Similar to combat splitting, he had finally achieved what Euryale had tried to teach him all those months ago: the ability to distinguish between layers. The process remained extremely painful and only lasted several seconds at best, but it was a start. From here all Dallion had to do was develop it further and then he'd be able not only to see the actions of those much faster than him but also use his armor effectively as a weapon, and most important of all, he'd be able to tackle sky silver forging.

Chapter 352: Hidden Skill Gems

The lower the dryads' health got, the more destructive the fight became. Shelves were turned to splinters, walls had changed into a source through which to launch vine and root attacks. Dallion had to summon his starting buckler to ensure a degree of protection, but even then, it always wasn't enough.

Duck! Vihrogon shouted, his words coming instants after hed caught a root fragment that had flown off towards Dallions head.

The rescue was followed by a fierce attack from the birch dryad, who was clinging to existence at two percent of her health. Vihrogon had been at eleven, though that quickly fell to five.

Ask her to surrender, Dallion shouted. He could tell that at this point any attack would finish the white dryad off. That was a foregone conclusion. However, the path of the Green Moon urged him to ask for a bloodless resolution to the conflict.

The slacker of a companion shield had once been a merciless combat veteran? Weirder things were possible, but Dallion still couldnt imagine it. Rather, he couldnt have five minutes ago. The scene before his eyes had made him seriously reevaluate his understanding of the world and everyone in it. This was a place in which the strong appeared weak and the weak did everything possible to appear strong. It was a familiar principle, one that Nil and so many others had kept on repeatinghide your strengths and abilities. Vihrogon had done all that for thousands of years and more, he had completely changed his personality to the point that even those who knew he was a threat didnt feel particularly threatened. The countess was the samesmiling and acting like a brainless snob, even if she could potentially crush anyone within her domain like a bug.

Roots shot up from the ground like spears. Instinctively, Dallion did an acrobatic twist, directing his kick towards the ground while going into an arm stand. Everyone else in the room was impaled and thrust up to the ceiling.

A series of red rectangles appeared. The white dryads health was completely depleted; Vihrogons remained at two percent.

Well played, the birch dryad said, smiling for the first time since the battle.

I knew youd go for it, the armadil shield remained. Now return to me.

The entire body of the birch dryad transformed into light, which then broke up into thousands of luminescent grains, all flowing towards the victor of the battle.

Carefully, Dallion twisted back to his feet, careful not to get any more wounds. At this stage, Luxs regeneration abilities were limited, to say the least. Somehow Dallion was going to have to find out how to level up his familiar if he were to make use of him in combat.

While waiting, Dallion noticed something odd about the roots they weren't one entity, but rather two twirled one around the other. One set of roots had traces of fury still present within them, while the other only had sadness.

I knew you'd notice, Vihrogon said. Moments later, all roots and vines sunk back into the walls and floor. The damage that seemed devastating seconds ago was slowly morphed out of existence, as the room regained its previous state. Next time you'd have to be faster.

You copied her attack, Dallion said.

I copied my attack, the dryad said. I knew that she would use this as a last resort. A fight that ends in a draw is a battle that ends in a loss.

That doesn't sound very empathic

That's because it isn't. I followed the path of the Warriors. Why do you think I was locked up in a metal realm? I still can't decide whether it was Centor's blessing or his humor that I ended up in such an item. In the end it worked out quite well.

Despite the lack of wounds or tears, Dallion could see that the guardian's health remained low. Before he even said the word, Lux jumped from him onto Vihrogon, enveloping him in healing flames. The dryad didn't thank him, of course, but didn't protest either.

That memory you left, what was it about? Dallion asked.

It was more than a memory. It was also the viciousness I had in battle.

Now that you have it back, does that mean you're stronger?

Oh, very. Vihrogon's wooden rapiers disappeared. But don't worry. The days of the dryad empire are over. We're nothing but an imprisoned race now, like all those before us. The only thing I could do now is protect you as a shield, and give you adequate advice, even if despite all my efforts you remain as romantic as a brick in winter.

Clearly, his humor hadn't disappeared, and possibly his mellowed-out nature either. That was a good sign.

I know where the crown is, and also exactly the prize it contains.

Dallion waited.

The two-crown contains skill gems of two forgotten skills: Herbalism and Zoology. They were as rare among dryads back then, as music is among humans now. There were those who had some understanding of them, but adepts were exceptional, and almost always chosen of Felygn.

The revelation was a lot more anticlimactic than Dallion would have liked it to be. In effect, the remaining hidden skills had turned out to be knowledge of flora and fauna. True, they could be considered useful, and definitely were linked to the Green Moon, but were they that powerful? There had to be something more.

And I guess now that you've told me, I'll be able to read more about them in the scrolls in the library ring, Dallion tried to sound a bit more enthusiastic.

I can tell you what they do. Herbalism is"

The study of plants, Dallion interrupted. Yeah, I know.

The study of potions, the dryad continued, ignoring Dallion completely. Every noble has a book illustrating the various plants and animals. If that's all that those skills would be, they'd be useless. The skill allows you to know the properties of plants and lets you combine them to create pretty much any potion you'd want. Poison your enemies, or restore your health, bring bad dreams, or fertility. It's all up to you. And when I say potions, I'm generalizing. It could be powders, ointments, even clothes that trigger their effects when getting wet.

Dallion winced. Unless he was mistaken, that was how Hercules was described to have died after putting on a poisoned cloak. Would the knowledge of herbology allow him to do that as well?

What about Zoology? Dallion asked. It's more than knowing animals, I take it?

Its complete knowledge of animal habits, behavior, attack patterns, anatomy, which parts to skin, which parts to eat. Vihrogon waved his hand. Among other things, it's a way to find weak spots, detect illnesses and so on. Oh, and don't forget that all races are considered animals as well.

That sounded much more like it. This was another phenomenal skill as well. With Dallion's knowledge from Earth, his potential upon learning those skills would be limitless. It was like learning anatomy, medicine, and biochemistry in one and a whole lot more. With this knowledge, he could cure an entire city of all ailments.

But that's not what's most special about the two-crown.

It's the combination, right? Dallion asked. Acquiring both skills would be like it'll be like becoming a god.

Close, but no. The greatest advantage is that they are gems, which means anyone can learn them, even those who shouldn't.

What do you mean?

The gems were made by dryad royalty. Back when the plan was put in motion there was no way of knowing how many dryads in the swords would have the empathy attribute, if any. The means of escape had to be made in such a way so that anyone could use them.

I thought the Vermillions were the keys.

They were the keys to the cage, but the key to escape were skills that could be used against any enemy or even the Star itself.

Fighting against the Star wasn't a phrase that could be said lightly. Given the amount of power the entity had at its disposal, it would take more than armies to even stand a chance. However, now that the dryad had explained the final details, the plan was more or less clear. While the dryad race had complied by banishing their most troublesome individuals from the Star's point of view, they had also created a reserve army which was supposed to appear at the nick of time with the tools to fight any enemy, even the Star. Maybe it was no coincidence that there was a Moon Cleric among its guardians.

And that's where lies the danger, Vihrogon continued. The gems allow anyone to obtain the power, even the Star.

I thought the Star already knew all skills.

The only skills the Star knows are its own. It can tempt, convince, corrupt, change, but that's it. If he obtains this pair of skills, he'll be able to unleash a plague throughout the world and his own army of monsters to come with it. It'll make the wilderness look like a flower orchard.

In that case I need to get them first, Dallion said, firmly. Where's the crown?

Where you'd expect in the royal library at the hilt. You were going there anyway. The only difference is that now I know how to reach the vault chamber that contains the crown.

That sounds easier than it's supposed to be. What's the catch?

The catch is that the royal library is housed in the final temple of the realm. In order to get there, you'll need the guardians' permission, or the means to defeat him.

That didn't sound encouraging in the least. Given the strength of the guardians so far, it was unthinkable that Dallion would be able to defeat the final one. And that was providing that he even was allowed to reach it. Helping out the guardian of the fourth temple, had pretty much granted Dallion a free ride to the fifth temple, but beyond that nothing was known.

Sensing Dallion's hesitation, Vihrogon reverted to his shield form.

That's why I told you that you aren't ready, he said. You'll need to up both your skills and your gear, if you're to stand a chance. And not to alarm you, but there isn't too much time left. With the festival going on, the sword is unguarded. If you can get here, so can the Star.

Are you saying that I need to quit?

For the time being, yes. There's no point going further. Instead, you should focus on training and preparation. Ideally, it would have been better if you had passed the next gate, but there's no time for that. You must do what you can in the time that you have.

After everything Dallion had learned in the last few days, returning to the festival sounded mundane. He felt that he had to focus on claiming the two skills and stopping whatever the Star had planned for the countess. The only thing winning at the arena would achieve was earning him the whip blade, which was looking less and less a proper reward now that he had learned the ability to see marker layers. With that and his whip blade blueprint, he could pretty much make his own weapon at any time.

So, it's back to the tournament

Think of it this way: if you can't reach the top eight at such a tournament, you definitely won't make it here.

Chapter 353: Pushing It

Leaving the sword's realm wasn't immediate. Following Nils' advice, Dallion spent half a day in a room, picturing the real world at the exact moment he had left. Only after that did he exit the realm. The shock was noticeably less, although Dallion still required a few seconds of adjustment. That done, he quickly left the room and returned to the basement for his training. However, how could one train after learning so much?

For hours Dallion remained sitting in the empty room, staring at the training item without the will to go inside. Now and again, he'd stand up and pace around before sitting back down.

After spending hours both in the realm and in the real world procrastinating, Dallion finally got a sarcastic nudge from Nil, putting things back in perspective. With the next arena fight hours away, it was best to take Eurys advice and increase his level once more. Before that, though, there was something else Dallion wanted to try out.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Things were considerably livelier once Dallion returned to his realm. The starting room was full of echoes and familiars. To no surprise, the dryad wasnt there.

Wheres Vihrogon? Dallion asked.

Hes locked himself in his domain, contemplating the past, Gleam fluttered. Now you see why I dislike dryads? They think its their role to tame the wilderness. At least everyone else knows better.

You know I might become a hunter one day? Dallion asked, more in jest than anything else.

Youre different. For one thing youre a dope now.

Hearing her use the word was unusual, to say the least. Clearly, Dallions personality was starting to affect the shardfly.

The Green path? Seriously? Itll be amusing seeing a hunter with that.

Youre saying its impossible?

Not impossible. Ive seen empath hunters, and theyre the scariest of the bunch. Its rare, though. Most of them are just assistants, carrying stuff, cooking, cleaning

That sounded remarkably like being a packrat. Of course, being a packrat for hunters was very different from carrying items in awakened realms. Given Dallions promise to the Green Moon, at some point he was going to find out exactly what it was like the hard way.

After a bit more chit chat, Dallion went to his forging room. There he summoned his sky silver hammer and an ingot of the same material. It was time to see whether hed be able to forge his first special metal item.

Just as he was about to start, Nil walked into the room. The old echo remained silent, but it was clear that he didnt want to miss witnessing Dallions progress. As the closest thing to Dallions mentor, he had every right.

Hundreds of markers appeared on the ingot of sky silver as it lay on the anvil. At first, they were as incomprehensible as always. Through sheer stubbornness, Dallion had managed to decipher the first forty or so. This time, he wasnt going to resort to trial and error. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated on the markers.

At first, little changed. Some of the markers became slightly clearer, although still merged with the rest. Pressure appeared in Dallions temples and continued growing. At the point of pain, the markers finally started moving. It was as if Dallion was zooming in on them. Bit by bit, layers became visible, moving further and further apart. After what felt like minutes, Dallion was able to see all the distinct steps the markers illustrated. It was all jumbled, but at least it was all there. Half an hour later, the instructions were clear enough for him to start working.

Handling the material itself turned out to be no different than any other metal. As long as Dallion managed to strike with the correct amount of force at the correct angle, part of the ingot folded in the desired fashion. An endless series of folds and turns followed as Dallion went on to create the most intricately complicated origami hed seen in his life. Over a dozen times he messed up, though thankfully using combat splitting had become second nature to him, so no permanent damage had been done. However, the pain in his eyes and head kept growing.

Three quarters in, Dallion had to recite the names of the Moons non-stop, only to ignore the pain. Drops of sweat trickled from his forehead. The closer he got to completing the dagger, the more it was looking like he wouldnt make it.

By the time Dallion was down to three markers, he felt as if hed faint. The whole room was twisting and turning. The light was becoming dimmer and dimmer, nearly breaking his concentration. At this point, Dallion no longer had the mental energy to maintain his splitting instances. If he messed up now, there was no way to undo things.

Two markers. Dallion was just one step away from success. His stomach started rebelling, wanting to eject all its contents on the anvil, possibly putting an end to this torture.

One marker!

Holding his breath, Dallion performed the final strike. This was the point at which his senses deserted him. Dim turned to dark, as all sensation disappeared. The next thing Dallion knew, he was sitting on a throne of wood in a vast garden.

Where am I?

Dallion looked up. A ceiling of leaves and branches covered a large part of the sky, only leaving a giant Green Moon to be seen.

You didnt ask about the Eighth Moon, a voice next to Dallion said.

Looking to his right, Dallion saw that a new throne had emerged, one even larger than his own. As expected, the throne was occupied by none other than the Green Moon in his standard divine appearance of a ranger.

The Moon Cleric isnt subject to limitations, so he would have told you.

It must have skipped my mind, Dallion replied honestly. Will you be okay if I ask him next time?

Not really.

Then I wont. For some reason, Dallion felt unusually agreeable.

You will, the Green Moon sighed. Thats why Ill tell you. There is no Eighth Moon. Its a metaphor for something else.

What?

That you'll have to find out on your own. If you're ever able to. The cleric in the sword couldn't. In fact, no awakened ever has. Do you think you'll be the first?

Dallion wanted to respond with maybe, but his mouth refused to utter the word. Just as he was about to try again, the branches above him moved aside. The floor melted down, transforming into the peak of a mountain. All seven Moons spun around, each taking the form of a sphere. Some felt so close that Dallion reached out to try and touch them.

They're watching you, you know, the Green Moon whispered. But you're mine.

What about the Star? Dallion asked. Was he a Moon?

Reality froze. The Moons started pulsing, some slowly, others rapidly to the point that it seemed they were flickering.

The Star was never a Moon, a new voice said firmly. The Star is a skill.

As Dallion watched in amazement, cracks emerged on all of the Moons. Small at first, they quickly grew to the point that shards started crumbling off the spheres.

You've come a long way, Dallion, but so had your grandfather, the voice continued. From here on, each step forward might see you stumble and fall. You'll need to be careful.

A sudden wave of fear swept through Dallion, allowing him to partially snap out of the dream. He was still there, but now conscious of the fact.

What can you tell me about my grandfather? Dallion shouted, standing up from his throne.

Everything and nothing, the voice replied. He created Star spawn to win a war, but that wasn't what earned him his punishment. He was betrayed, as were all his companions, for a single sin.

Eight beams of light focused on Dallion, each coming from the quickly disintegrating Moons. Within the light a medallion emerged shaped like a perfect hex. Using his forging skills, Dallion could tell it was made of pure sky silver. There were seven holes on it: one in the center and one at each of the six edges.

This will protect you. From here on it's up to you to see it completed.

Dallion took the emblem from the air. It felt pleasantly warm.

What is it? he asked.

It's an emblem. Keep it safe.

What am I supposed to?"

The scene disappeared. The next thing that Dallion was able to see was the floor of his forge floating in front of his face.

Finally awake, Nils familiar voice said, drenched with disapproval. Dallion tried to look up in the direction of the voice, but found that he couldnt even do that. A moment later, his entire body moved upright, turning in the direction of the echo.

Lux? Dallion asked. Now that his senses were slowly returning, he could feel the firebirds flame around him, just as he could sense the familiars concern.

Do you know the last thing a person must do before heading off to level up, dear boy? Nil crossed his arms. Not faint over an anvil while swinging a hammer. Granted, this is an awakened realm, but magic metals could occasionally cause permanent effects. In your case, you could have smashed your hand, which would have impeded your grip in the real world. Good thing that you failed even at that.

My hand? Dallion asked. Right! Before all this weird dream scene happened, he had been forging a dagger. Lux turn me towards the anvil.

The firebird complied. The anvil was where Dallion remembered it to be. The sky silver hammer lay a few feet away on the ground. Most likely Dallion had fainted due to pain and exhaustion caused by his attempt to complete the forging process. The lack of items suggested that he had failed. At the same time, Dallion felt that his forging skills had improved.

Looking for this? Nil raised a hex-shaped emblem. That last hit of yours really was something. Ive never seen an entire dagger flattened with a single blow. Still, the Moons must have been on your side, for you managed to actually create something despite your mess-up.

Lucky me, Dallion muttered. So, the dream hadnt been a dream, but rather a vision of sorts, or better yet a dream realm in the domain of the Moons. Similar to the tales of Greek and Roman deities back on earth, they seemed to enjoy messing in the lives of mortals, as long as the mortals had something interesting to offer.

Whatever the case, you wont be having this until you get some proper rest, the echo hid the emblem behind his back. And by proper, I mean youll spend a few days here resting and sleeping. No leveling, forging, or training. The only thing youre allowed to do is resting and reading.

And if I refuse? Dallion asked. Im weak now, but I should be alright in an hour or two.

Oh, you can refuse at any point, dear boy. However, let me ask you this: who wins if you enter the arena half-asleep? Or better yet, how far are you willing to go to become weaker? As things stand now, youve only peeked at things to come, and youll continue only peeking for quite a few levels yet. As reckless as you are, even you know you need guidance from time to time. You can always choose to reject it, but can you afford to?

Chapter 354: Swarm of Distraction

One week of rest turned out to be painfully slow. Half of the first day Dallion was so anxious that he felt he could jump out of his skin. Laying in the recently created bedroom in his realm, he spent thinking of past events over and over until he tired himself to sleep. The next few days were spent between chunks of sleep and feeling drowsy. It was as if someone had removed all the hidden pressure and anxiety that Dallion had kept within in the background, showing him exactly how exhausted he really was. Then, finally, came boredom.

Minutes stretched to days, hours became years. Several times Dallion tried to leave the room, only to find Nil standing outside, looking at him in a disappointed fashion. Dallion knew full well that a single punch and the echo would cease to exist; maybe precisely for that reason, he returned to his week or resting. Sleep became the only way of passing time. However, the more Dallion tried to resort to it, the more difficult it became. Any attempts at exercising to exhaust himself were quickly discovered and stopped immediately. Gen and July were at fault for that. The two echoes had decided to betray Dallion by siding with Nil.

Never did Dallion think that he'd be begging to read, but given the degree of boredom he was subjected to, he would prefer even going through the collection of historical poems that Nil kept in the ring library.

Meditation was attempted multiple times, to no avail. For some reason, the moment Dallion tried to stop thinking, his head burst with ideas and questions, restarting the anxiety boredom cycle anew. Finally, on the last day, acceptance seeped in. It wasn't that Dallion had mastered the art of calm and self-reflection, but rather he had grown accustomed to his predicament. Undoubtedly, this wasn't the best way to deal with such a situation, but it helped him last until Nil arrived, marking the end of his rest and relaxation period.

Well, dear boy? The echo smiled. Do you feel relaxed and brimming with energy?

One of those, at least, Dallion grumbled. How long have I been here?

A week to the day.

And not a moment has passed in the real world, Nil continued. With that you can proceed to leveling up, if that is what you wish. Before that, though, a quick test. The echo tossed Dallion a scroll. Read that.

Curious, Dallion unrolled the scroll. Nothing but a single poem was contained inside a sonnet, to be precise. Reading through it was as alien as Dallion remembered from literature class back on Earth. Even so, given Nil's insistence, he attempted to make sense of things.

It's a love poem, Dallion stated the obvious. Judging by the imagery described, it must have been written centuries ago.

I wrote it last year, the echo said, putting an end to Dallion's bullshit. Try to read it using your new ability.

Dallion looked at the scroll again. Had Nil just given him a secret cipher or sorts? Concentrating, he focused on the letters. Soon enough some of them seemed to float above the rest. Dallion's first reaction was to try and form a message. When that failed, he concentrated more. Three layers emerged, then four, but still none of the messages made sense. No matter how Dallion rearranged the letters of each layer in his head, it only created gibberish.

I see the layers, Dallion said, closing his eyes. The pressure in his temples was instantly relieved. But I cant read the actual message. What does it say?

Just to try harder. The echo laughed. Go ahead and level up. Or dont. The point is dont forget to sleep regularly in the real world as well as the realms. You dont have the mental strength to keep going on for weeks. Maybe when you pass the next gate you will, but until then

I got it. Dallion opened his eyes. Thanks.

While mixed feelings remained as to the necessity of spending a whole week resting in the awakened realm, Dallion had to admit that using his new ability was considerably less painful. It was looking like Dallion was going to have to add this to his daily exercises physical exercises in the real world, mental in the realms. If he were going to progress, hed have to prepare a schedule and follow it.

Entering the corridor, Dallion headed to one of the trial doors. However, this time he didnt open it. A thought crossed his mind, making him turn around and head for Harps domain. There was no question that it had become the best part of his realm by far. The inhabitants of the realm that could move their domains here had done so, while the rest simply had moved here themselves. In the distance, the islands of Vermillion were visible, adding a pleasant backdrop to the view.

Slacking with taste, eh? Gen asked. The echo was wearing clothes that would be suitable for a Robinson Crusoe scene. The outfit was complete with a straw hat and a large tome in his hand.

Wont Nil freak out that youre taking his precious tomes outside the library?

He used to. Now he doesnt bother to remind me how bad sand and water are for the paper. Lux is partially to thank. Hes saved a few books already. Also, the old man is just happy that someone actually reads. You should try it sometime. Itll make him happy.

Once things calm down a bit, Dallion lied. Even he had accepted that given a choice, he would do anything else but this. Hows Harp been?"

"Fine, though a bit sad. Im not sure why, but she doesnt want to discuss it.

You dont have to level up, you know. Even if you pass it, it might end up exhausting you before the fight.

Thats a risk Ill have to take. Its not just about the tournament anymore. Even if the tournament remained a large part of it. Its the only way I can get strong enough.

Dont rush to a fight too fast, Gen said.

Dallion snorted.

At least consider it.

Yeah, yeah Dallion went back to the darkness of his normal realm. This time, he entered the trial door without hesitation. The usual blue rectangle appeared, informing him of the trial, though this time there was no corridor. Dallion immediately found himself in an endless desert. Large clusters of red stones were visible throughout, lime mountain chunks in the sand.

A faint buzzing sound filled the air.

Wings of blue flame emerged from Dallion's back, taking him to the sky. As far as Dallion could tell, there was no clear threat in the area. That meant this was one of those trials in which he had to find his enemies and defeat them. Normally, it was an easy task, but he hated it most of all.

Nil, any advice?

Isn't there always?

Think of it as an opportunity. While it's easy to complete the trial, there's a hidden prize available as well. Naturally, claiming it is far more difficult, and could potentially cause you to fail the whole trial.

A prize? You mean like in the paradox cubes?

Close, though not exactly. There are different requirements for revealing the prize. All I can say is to focus on what you've learned up till now, and also use your skills sparingly.

In the past such advice would come as vague, but Dallion had grown to decipher the intent between the phrases. A thought crossed his mind that was crazy enough to work.

Wow, what a dump. Gleam emerged next to Dallion. What's your plan for this one?

Closing his eyes, Dallion focused on the sounds in the distance. If seeing layers was linked to perception, there was no reason that it would only affect his sight. This was a good way to test the theory out.

It didn't take long for Dallion to feel the results. Soon enough, he was able to pinpoint the source of the sound, or rather the sources. There were thousands of them, gathered in clusters a long distance away. Two things were instantly clear, however: all sources were in front of him, and they were moving his way.

Dallion opened his eyes, focusing on the horizon. Black clouds were starting to become visible, but they weren't of rain or dust. Rather, they were made entirely of insects.

The I told you so was unmistakable in the echo's tone. He had continuously cautioned Dallion against going achievement hunting, viewing it as a perilous shortcut, or even worse an addiction.

They arent. However, they have a nasty sting, each of which distracts you from the rest.

What do you mean?

When one stings you, it directs all your attention on it, making you ignore anything else. And this will continue until youve dealt with the issue.

How come youre telling me all this?

Im telling you because thats nothing more than another distraction, dear boy.

No sooner had Nil said that than Dallion felt a sharp sting in his neck. Immediately, he twisted, striking the annoying insect that had stung him. However, the attacker wasnt alone. Dozens of black wasp-like entities had surrounded him.

How did they get so close? Dallion asked as he summoned his harpsword and performed a series of slash attacks around him.

Interesting approach. The echo enemy of this trial hadnt made an actual appearance, but acted as a distraction within Dallions mind just like a limiting echo.

The firebird attempted to pull Dallion away from the swarm, but no matter how fast he flew, insects continued to surround him, their numbers unchanged no matter how many Dallion smashed to bits.

Dallion gritted his teeth. This was something he should have predicted. Just as the echo had said, the swarm became five times larger in the blink of the eye. A thick cloud was surrounding Dallion, dozens of insects attacking him every second. At each sting, Dallions attention was drawn to the attack, often before he could strike the previous insect that had stung him.

The armadil shield extended around him, creating a protective sphere that protected him from the insect attacks. However, even it wasnt able to get rid of the constant noise of them hitting the metal surface, like raindrops falling on tin.

None I can see. Theyre just bugs.

That didnt make any sense. Every instinct told Dallion that there was more to it.
said.

Theres something I need to check.

The orders were followed instantly. In several seconds, the sphere of metal hit the sand with a loud thump. As it did, some of the shields segments moved apart, allowing Dallion to see directly above him.

among them.

Chapter 355: Silver Bug

For every thousand of black bugs, there was one red. Unlike the black, the red bugs rarely attacked, but when they did, they inflicted a minor wound, decreasing Dallions health by five percent. Finding a red bug among the swarm was difficult, killing oneten times so. The difference was that once killed, the red bugs didnt seem to respawn. Instead, a red damage rectangle appeared, indicating the damage dealt to the entire swarm.

get a bit more difficult in a few seconds.

That wasnt what Dallion wanted to hear. Already the number of black bugs blotted out most of the sun making him feel like trapped in a black cloud. That was another thing he had to focus onkilling enough black bugs so as to get a momentary crack of light.

ignore them completely.

Another series of stings made Dallion turn around and perform a series of slashes, temporarily thinning the swarm in the area. He had to focus on what was important, namely the red and silver bugs. From what he could gather the goal was to kill all red bugs in order to pass the trial. The silver bugif the fake Nil was to be believedwas a bonus was a potential prize that Dallion would receive. Ideally, it could range from an achievement to an item blueprint. A while back, the echo had said that it was in theory possible for Dallion to learn a skill in such fashion, but he strongly doubted that.

The familiar flashed in a bright blue light and started making her way away from Dallion. Without any prodding, Lux moved to follow her. All in all, Dallion was pleased with the degree to which the firebird had learned to anticipate his orders. The same couldnt be said about the shardfly, who remained free-willed to the extreme. It was good that she was guiding the way to Dallions prize, although he would have preferred if she had joined in the actual fight. He had seen first-hand how destructive a shardflys wings could be first hand. Instead, using them, though, Gleam had cast an illusion over herself, making the swarm believe she was one of them.

Dallion extended his whip blade, spinning it around like a whip. That had proved to be the most effective method of creating a path. Not that he managed to kill any of the bugsdistractions, it seemed, could only be hit if targetedbut it allowed Dallion to move them about so as to see better forward.

The swarm thickened around Dallion. Concentrating, he was able to spot another red bug in the blackness. One measured slash with the blade whip and the swarm was dealt another wound.

Between three and five bugs. Fighting them would be easy. What mattered now was for Dallion to kill the silver bug as quickly as possible.

Soon enough, the creature became visible. It was like a grain of sugar in a pile of coffee grinds. Focusing all his attention to it, Dallion was able to see exactly where it stood in relation to the rest of the swarm. Red markers appeared, indicating the fashion in which he had to attack with his weapon. Holding his breath, Dallion lashed at his target. The whip blade spun and twisted, its tip flying towards the insect along a wide arc. Then, just before hitting it, the insect reverted to a normal bug.

Gleam, was that an illusion?

Then where is it?

On cue, another bug changed color, obtaining a silver shine. This was clearly the catch. Completing the trial was annoying enough, but doable once Dallion grasped the basic principles. Getting the prize, though, required vast amounts of skill. Thinking about it, it seemed that the trial had two parts: the minimal requirement to pass and the real one. If he wanted Dallion could end the trial even now, but that would be a shortcut, and shortcuts were like poison for ones development.

Once again, Dallion attacked the silver bug, only to witness the same result. So far, the logic held. His hypothesis was that perception would be the key to solve this puzzle. In order to proceed forward, it was alright to notice things and react to them. However, if he were to substantially improve, he had to learn how to anticipate things before they happened, and do so without the help of combat splitting or familiars.

For a moment, the distractions seemed to disappear. The majority of the swarm became transparent like air. The red bugs were fully visible now there were three of them, covered with a faint coat of copper. As for the silver one, Dallion was able to feel faint traces of silver somewhere in the vicinity and yet he couldnt see it.

Dallion focused further. Slowly the sensation gained form. However, it wasnt a single entity. Rather, it was a trail moving from one bug to another. At times it would stop and remain still, but Dallion was still able to see the tail behind it as well as the nose directing it forward to the next target.

Yes, Dallion said, as he swung his blade whip. The weapon moved along the length of the silver trail, slashing several insects as it did. Once the final one was dead, a blue rectangle appeared. But not at the expense of everything else.

CRESCENT BLADEBOW BLUEPRINT

A weapon of precision and elegance. One of the few weapons equally useful at close and ranged combat. With the proper ammunition, it can even wound creatures that appear invincible.

Not the reward Dallion was expected, but something that could prove useful. Still, there were a few more bugs to take care of before he could call the trial completed.

Maintaining his concentration, Dallion turned around, waving the whip blade as he did. The sky silver fragments danced through the air, slicing through its targets one by one. Finally, with the death of the last red bug, the rest of the swarm disappeared.

You have broken through your barrier

Your level has increased to 25

Choose the focus that will serve you best

Level twenty-five. Everything considered, it wasn't much, but for Dallion's purposes it was good, steady progress. That means he had already advanced five levels into being a seer.

After some thought, Dallion decided not to increase his empathy. It was challenging enough to talk with items a few steps away to risk hearing them across the city. The best solution for the immediate future was to get his body to twenty, then work on his reaction. Slow and steady was the way he wanted to go, at least until a better option came up.

Pretty good, Gleam said, landing on Dallion's shoulder. You have a desert now. It was difficult to say whether she was being sarcastic or genuinely pleased.

Another thing that was impossible until Dallion passed the gate. Since it wasn't of consequence, he stopped concentrating on it, summoning the bladebows blueprint instead.

The weapon seemed just as he had imagined it similar to the ones he had seen Gloria use, although it had a few of its own quirks. Most notably, the blade that extended beneath the trigger mechanism was curved very much like a crescent moon.

A Moon's boon?

That was right Dallion had received a boon from Centor. He hadn't imagined this would be what he'd receive. Compared to what the Green Moon had offered, this boon seemed outright insignificant. Then again, this was undoubtedly a complex weapon a good first step, and something that Dallion could eventually create. Looking at the marker instructions, however, it was going to take quite a lot of practice before he tried to tackle it. Even an iron bladebow had more markers than Dallion had even seen.

After leaving the new room, Dallion spent a while resting. The trial wasn't as difficult as most, but it had exhausted him. The good news was that he was slowly getting used to using his new vision. Once that was over with, Dallion returned back to the real world again.

Several hours remained till daybreak. The same had held true over a week ago.

Dallion stretched. All in all, this had ended up being quite a productive night.

When the time came, Dallion returned the training item to its shelf, left the Icepicker guildhall and went to the arena. With a quarter of the original participants left, the attitude of the organizers had changed completely. The further they progressed, the closer they got to local celebrity status. The third round was the first in which people started paying attention.

Leaning against the wall in one of the arenas waiting rooms, Dallion looked around. He had no idea who he was going to face, although he knew that it wasn't going to be anyone he knew. Celia had dropped off in the previous round, and there was a policy of members of the same guild not to face each other until the top eight.

Hey, kid, a mountain of a man said. Nice tricks so far. Will you show any more?

Dallion looked up. The man was a hull head taller than him, with muscles as a bodybuilder. Two things became instantly clear: the man was an awakened blacksmith, also a member of the Flameforge guild.

Are you my next opponent? Dallion asked, remaining calm.

Who knows? The man shrugged.

Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that to be the case. Given that Dallion had humiliated the guild by defeating Mord in the first round, it wasn't out of the question that some of the organizers had been incentivized to let him face someone else from the Flameforge guild.

Chapter 356: All-out Attacker

The tournament, rather the festival itself, was a clear indication of the hostilities between guilds and individuals. This was one of the few times that part of the city's restrictions were lifted, allowing people to act on emotions they kept in check for the rest of the year. The city guard, the overseer, the domain guardian controlled by the Lord Mayor himself, ensured the calm that Nerosal enjoyed. Apparently, all that was a forced calm, and the festival played a far greater role than Dallion had thought so far. It didn't only serve to pick up the mood, it also served as a pressure valve. Unfortunately, Dallion appeared to be caught in the crossfire between guilds.

The person who was going to face him didn't have anything against Dallion per se he barely knew him. However, it was enough that Dallion was part of the Icepicker guild. Having him humiliate Mord was also a significant factor. As a result, the sight was going to be more difficult than expected, and with a mage around, the Flameforger could be as brutal as he wished.

That was easy for him to say. The echo wasn't about to face a goliath the size of a mountain. Normally, in the world of awakened, size and muscles weren't a deciding factor when it came to strength. The almost supernatural abilities allowed people to use stats to achieve far more than training could. However, as Vend had told Dallion, physical exercises helped a lot. His opponent

being strong didnt just mean he had spent a lot of time exercising every day, it meant he had spent just as much time fighting in the realms.

The stands of the arena were packed more than ever. Those who, for some reason, had missed the previous two days had joined in there now, eager to see the real fights. In a way, Dallion could understand them. Having the combat grid four times as large provided a much better view, not to mention that there were far less people to pay attention to.

Not too far from the nobility sections of the arena, Dallion noticed the general. The man looked as smug as always, constantly accompanied by his two fury bodyguards. He seemed rather popular, for he was chatting with a lesser noble. Upon seeing Dallion, the general smiled, then raised a glass of wine in his direction.

That your patron? Dallions opponent asked.

Something like that, Dallion whispered. He really didnt want to think of the general as a patron, although that was a valid description for the moment.

Im sorry for him. The large man grunted and drew his sword.

Unlike what Dallion would have expected, his adversary had chosen a pretty basic setup: a sword and a shield. Examining them with his music and forging vision had revealed nothing unusual. What was more, Dallion had even had a brief conversation with the items while in the waiting room, to little avail. Both the shield and sword were veterans and, as such, were both laconic and loyal to their owner.

Once all the fighters were in place, a silence filled the arena. As before, all heads turned in the direction of the countess. The noble smiled, leaned back, then flicked her fingers. Chaos followed.

Two hundred and fifty-six fighters split into instances and charged forward. Dallion was one of them.

Given the size of his opponent, Dallion had resorted to a strategy of evading and counterattacks. That turned out to be easier said than done. The mountain of flesh turned out to be quite nimble on his feet. Considerably faster than Dallion, he engaged in a multi-attack that halved Dallions health in three out of five instances. In the remaining two, Dallion managed to leap back out of danger, though just barely. The attack didnt stop there. The man used the initiative to do a series of piercing strikes, ending with a shield thrust.

Dallion concentrated. The opponents actions slowed down to a crawl. For a second Dallion was able to see the intent of his opponent, and that wasnt allhe could sense several metal weapons hidden among the mans clothes: daggers, disks, and a large bracelet wrapped around his left biceps.

In a fight against a guardian Dallion would always either take the initiative, or use his guarding skills until he got an advantage. In this case, he decided on another approach.

Dallion knew that the attack would be deflected. The whole point was for him to see exactly how it was going to be handled, and he wasn't disappointed. In the four instances he had split into, the blade almost reached its target before the enemy reacted. Not once did the large opponent resort to echoes of his own, instead his body twisted twice as fast as his previous instances. In two cases, he grabbed Dallion's arm, breaking it on the spot. In another, he hit Dallion in the thumb with the hilt of his sword, before letting him go and snatching Dallion's own harpsword. Finally, in the last instance, he slammed the shield into Dallion, throwing him back.

In each of the cases, there was pain. However, Dallion had gotten exactly what he wanted, or sort of. By the looks of it, this seemed to be a battle of strength and tactics. Even so, Dallion remained somewhat skeptical.

Letting himself be disarmed, Dallion lifted his left foot. After the events in the last two rounds, he had moved the kaleidervisto from that boot to the other. His action prompted an immediate reaction. Armed with the harpsword, the large man swung at Dallion's left calf with the clear intent of chopping it off. However, when the sword made contact, nothing happened.

For Dallion it was as if a blunt block of Styrofoam had hit his leg. For a moment, surprise appeared on his opponent's face.

While slightly dazed, the man remained skilled enough to react, blocking the attack with his shield. A moment later, he split into three instances, each jumping back to safety. Two daggers were now visible in his hand, electric sparks jumping from one blade to the other.

If you ever survive to reach fifty, you'll become a force to be reckoned with. However, the way you're going, that's a pretty big if! How can I drill this in your mind? You're not immortal, you're not invincible! You're barely taken your first step along the path of power.

I know, Nil, I know. However, I need to take risks to continue forward.

Was that it? Dallion asked, adding anger in his words. After all that talk, I thought you'll prove more of a challenge. All you've done so far was try to disarm me and get kicked in the head in the process.

It wont work, the man replied. I know about your music skills.

And still, Dallion could clearly sense the anger within the man. After all, there was more to a taunt than music skills, and as much as his opponent was trying to hide it, that anger was leaking out. On the surface, the man might well be stronger than Dallion, but he had so many flaws disrupting him, that he felt like a much easier opponent than Elvira, or even Mord. Was it possible that Dallion had grown so much in just two days?

The crowd around was going wild. A few of the fights had finished with an overwhelming victory for one side. For the most part, though, the pairings were evenly matched. Taking advantage of the increased space, the participants engaged in long and short ranged attacks. Acrobatic attacks were more the norm than the exception.

At this stage of the tournament, the betting had become more brazen. Now that bookmakers had seen enough to make adequate predictions, they were moving about the stands offering odds. The city guard didnt bother to stop them, if anything, they were probably annoyed that they couldnt bet as well. Only the area around the overseer remained out of bounds.

Youre worse than Mord, Dallion laughed as he clashed against his opponent.

The two had kept exchanging blows for over ten minutes now. There was nothing particularly flashy in the way both fought. To Dallions surprise, the Flameforger had turned out to be quite straightforward, relying on brute force attacks combined with counterattacks. The combination seemed strange when said out loud, but considering he had limiting guard skills, it made sense. All he could do was attack and counter the counter.

As the fight dragged on, Dallion was incredibly pleased he had improved his body after his last level up. If he hadnt, he would probably be out of breath at this point. The really annoying part was that as a pure attacker, the Flameforger hadnt invested in anything else. Being allowed to participate in the tournament he had to be less than level forty. Given a few achievements, that meant his body was at least that much as well. By all accounts, perception seemed to be his greatest weakness, but with his speed was far too great for Dallion to take advantage.

In what way?

They wound them directly. If your guardians werent as strong as they were, they would have been dead already. Thats why I told you it should be easy for you to handle him. His method of fighting doesnt focus on his enemies, but their weapons. Once they have crumbled to pieces, he has the advantage.

Chapter 357: Clear Victory

That was a normal aspect of the all-out attackers, it seemed. Back in Dherma, Veil used to torture items, breaking and repairing them just for fun. At the time, Dallion strongly disliked the practice, and that was before he had become an empath. Knowing that there were people who deliberately destroyed items filled him with so much rage that for a moment Dallion wanted to kill his opponent.

The harpsisword remained on the ground along with the Flameforgers initial weapon. The intensity of the fight so far had prevented either from claiming them. That was a good thing, since it also prevented Dallions opponent from attempting to attack the weapon.

Suddenly attack markers emerged, showing Dallion the optimal attack to hit his target.

This wasnt supposed to happen. However, in his rage, Dallion didnt even find it odd. Grasping the opportunity, he swung the whip blade. The metal fragments spun in the air, following the suggested trajectory. Dallions opponent tried to parry with his daggers. That turned out to be a mistake. Not only was the weapon indestructible, but no guardian had claimed it for its home. Droplets of blood filled the air as the whip blade sliced through the mans skin, then went on to tear the unprotected part of his clothes and cut into his stomach.

Dallion pulled back his weapon, ready for another attack. As he performed it, though, his weapon stopped mid-air. A green light covered his opponent, causing all his wounds to fade away within moments.

Youve won, a female voice said softly. Turning around, Dallion saw the countess looking at him. There was an amused smile on his face, even if her glance was as hard as diamond. Dallion felt a tremendous amount of pressure, as if his body had become five times as heavy.

Why?

Its no longer about that. If you dont bow, youll make the countess look bad, and shell never forgive that.

Dallion went through the options in his head. As much as he fantasized resisting the pressure and punishing the Flameforger, he knew he couldnt take on a noble, far less one powerful enough to rule a county.

Fighting his rage, Dallion bowed in the nobles direction. The gesture was acknowledged, for moments later the weight upon his body was lifted. Not only that, but the whip blade fragments fell on the floor with a cling. Another round had ended and while Dallion had won, he didnt feel any satisfaction from the fact.

Taking his sword, Dallion left the grid without a word, returning back to the arena. Still in shock from his loss, his opponent didnt say a word, and that was better. Dallion didnt know how he would have reacted if the man had provoked him further.

Right now, Dallion didnt care about that. Brushing aside the praise he received from organizers as he made his way through the corridors of the arena, emerging on the street. For quite a while, he continued to mindlessly wander about the city, his mind fixated on the last attack he could have made. It was only in the midafternoon, once his hunger had become unbearable, that Dallion slowly went back to thinking straight.

The drawback of a path. That was to be expected. There was no external requirement, no rectangles forcing Dallion to do anything, no Moon shouting at him. Instead, there was a deep feeling inside, guiding him. It was different from a limiting echo, different from a flaw rather, it was a principle that guided him. Dallion had always had an inclination to end things with a draw of the others surrender. This had transformed into feeling unexplained rage at people who deliberately hurt and killed items. The scary part was that it made him want to do the same to those people.

The fights at the arena continued, but the majority of the attention was focused on Dallion. Not only had he ended the encounter early, but he had made it necessary that the organizers get involved. Or was it the organizers? Their powers didnt extend to that level.

As he made his way out of the grid, Dallion glanced in the direction of the countess. She seemed at ease, looking at the rest of the fights. Not too far away, the lord Mayor seemed to be doing the same. Neither were paying particular attention to Dallion, though with their level of perception they didnt have to their peripheral vision was so developed that they could simultaneously see the entire field of the arena as well as most of the stands. The mage, and the imperial, in contrast, were staring straight at him.

No. The mage had already set his sights on you before the tournament. If anything, his hands are tied. Despite all his pomp, he couldnt afford to do anything that would displease his young master.

That was perfect. Dallion was approaching the point to use his newly found influence. Naturally, he had to be careful about it he didnt want to insult the countess in the process.

That depends. Hes not in control of anything, so he might be your level or less. Thats not the point. Harming a member of the imperial house is the same as harming the emperor himself, and the emperor doesnt like when others dont know their place. Wars have started for less.

The notion was sobering, quickly dispelling any thoughts of Dallion, measuring his skill against the countess guest. More than likely, he was some distant cousin of little significance, but as Nil said, that didnt matter.

The empire killed Jirohs parents?

Its a bit more complicated. I dont know the details, but from what Hannah told me, that seems likely. Despite their individual strength, the furies were never a united front. Part of that was due to all other countries uniting against them every chance they got since the fall of the dryads. With them being the strongest remaining race, it was feared they might be the next to have a go at world domination. Nonsense if you ask me, but enough people believed it. Since then, the furies are little more than mercenary kingdoms, selling their services to the highest bidder.

That explained why the general had so many of them as bodyguards. Of all his problems, the lack of money wasnt one.

Dallion was given a fruit basket on his way out of the arena. From what he understood, the practice was that after each round from now on, all victors would be given a token gift in recognition of their skills. The higher the round, the more valuable the gift.

Cautiously, Dallion took a bite. It was every bit what Nil had described. The closest it could be compared to was a seedless watermelon. The taste, however, was closer to that of a pineapple without the stinging aftertaste.

How come Ive never seen any for sale here?

Imports of fresh food are expensive and the Archduke wouldnt allow any other county in his lands to grow any.

The streets were still full of people, though significantly less than before the start of the festival. It seemed that for the most part, they had gathered at the arena and other places of interest. There was a noticeable presence of city guards. While the countless personal troops still were around the arena, there were guards at every intersection. From a strategic point of view, they were placed in such a way so as to quickly notice and stop any disturbance. More notably, this wasnt something that had happened the previous days. Dallion tried to think back whether he had seen anything of the sort. It was difficult to be sure, but his intuition told him that this was a very development.

Somewhat on edge, Dallion opened the door and went inside. To his relief, there were quite a lot of customers here, although for the most part they were regulars.

Hey, Dal! one of them shouted. Been a while since you served. I hear youre off showing off at the arena nowadays.

Yeah, something like it. Dallion smiled. It was almost difficult to imagine that the first few months upon arriving here, he had served everyone in this room with a smile. Back then, he was the hot new thing of the neighborhood, having people rush to have him repair or improve an item.

Well, best of luck. To be honest, though I wish this whole festival thing to be done with. Its fun every now and again, but not all the time. There are crowds everywhere. You and the awakened are busy taking part in various events. Most of the improvement shops are closed

I know. Just hang in there.

Dallion was curious what event the Luors had gone to. Being sort of nobility and invited by the countess, he would have expected them to spend their time close to the elite. In theory, it was possible for Gloria to be involved with her troupe, but considering her level of awakening, that seemed less likely. For one thing, she didnt seem like someone whod be content with remaining a background performer.

Strangely enough, there was no sign of Hannah. Normally she would be there at the bar, cleaning glasses and grumbling, but today that wasnt the case. In fact, there wasnt anyone from staff present.

Dallion went up to his room. He was just about to toss his gear on the bed when he saw someone was already there. To make matters worse, Dallion had seen the person before when he had faced the first Vermillion.

Congrats on your third round, Dal, a man covered in tattoos said. Lets have a chat.

Chapter 358: Deadman Talking

I thought you were dead, Dallion said.

He couldnt remember the mans name, but knew that he was high up in the mirror pool organization or at least had been. From what Dallion had last heard, the tattoo had been killed under mysterious circumstances not too long after Dallion had cleared the Vermillian ring. The fact that he was here posed a lot of questions, almost as many as the fact that he had managed to enter the room unnoticed.

I thought you knew Bellal better than that, the man cracked a smile. Or did you believe in notions such as honor among thieves?

Dallion knew better than to believe that, however, he also knew how leadership changes worked. Creating a power vacuum in an organization wasnt something that was done for fun. Splitting into four instances, Dallion tried drawing his sword, leaving one in which he remained as he was. All the attacks were abruptly stopped, with the man breaking Dallions arm.

But youre right. I was supposed to have died, but you dont climb that high up in the pool without taking some precautions.

Does that mean Clouds alive as well?

The tattooed man shook his head.

I see. Dallion closed the door and stepped closer. He couldnt read a single emotion coming from the man. Clearly, he had a blocker ring with him. How?

Thats what you want to ask? The man arched his brow. Im a bit disappointed.

Thats what I want to know before listening to you further. Dallion held his ground. The only reason youre here is to ask me for a favor. And before I even consider it, I want to know how you managed to survive.

An instant of hesitation flashed over the mans face. For someone to have allowed it to become visible, he had to be desperate.

Doubles, he said at last. Youve seen artifacts that mask ones face, right? I happened to come across one that was defective. Instead of distorting its owners face, it copied it. No wonder that the merchant who had it wanted to get rid of it. However, he didnt see the rings potential. Normally, the ring would switch to the face of the person wearing it. However, once I linked the ring to my realm"

The person carrying it got to have your face, Dallion finished the sentence.

Indeed. The man looked at his left hand. Each finger, with the exception of the thumb, had one between two and three rings on it. A pity that I had to part with it. Dead people dont wander off digging up their corpses for jewelry. Now that you know, can I proceed?

Dallion gritted his teeth. It was obvious that in a direct fight, hed lose. However, there had to be something that only he could achieve, otherwise the man wouldnt have risked coming here. Reciting the names of the Seven Moons, Dallion nodded.

I want to get out of the city, the man said.

Thats all?

You make it sound as if its easy, the man sighed. With the festival going on, there are three kinds of guards roaming the city. Not to mention that the mirror pool still has its eyes open. They might not dare do business as usual, but that doesnt mean theyre not active.

Why come to me, then? You know the overseers watching me, so its not"

The Overseer will have other concerns soon, the tattooed interrupted. All I need you to do is walk me out of the front gate. Do that and were even.

Even? Dallion asked. I dont owe you a thing. In fact, it was the pool that had to make up for all the things they had pulled.

Oh, how careless of me. I did you a favor by keeping your pure-blond friends alive. Help me get out of Nerosal and theyll remain that way.

Instinct was faster than thought. Dallion had already drawn his harpsisword and performed a slash towards his enemy. The blade never made contact, freezing in the air inches from the mans neck. The strange thing was that it wasnt the man who had made the weapon stop, but the nymph guardian.

Good instincts, the tattooed said, looking at the tip of the blade. Youve grown a bit since we last did business. He pushed the blade gently away with his hand. Even if you manage to defeat me, that wont help you. The girl has been poisoned. Ive given her brother enough antidote for a while, but thats a temporary measure. Ill only give the cure once Im out of the city. Of course, if Im caught or trapped in here, youll get nothing.

A dead mans grip. Dallion had seen it used in movies and comics a lot, but never thought hed witness it in real life. It was just the sort of thing the mirror pool to do. Dallion wouldnt be surprised

if they had resorted to blackmailing people through this scheme. If they hadn't, it was only the city nobles that prevented it.

Do we have a deal?

Dallion pulled back his weapon.

Let me sweeten the deal. Help me, and I'll tell you something quite interesting regarding that ring you leveled up. Who knows, maybe it'll prove useful for you going forward?

What do you want me to do?

I told you. All you need to"

I can't smuggle you through. The moment I'm seen with you, I'll be in as much trouble as you are. You won't make it anywhere near the gate.

The man laughed.

It's always funny when you try making excuses. You already know exactly how you'll get me out there, but are trying to weasel your way out. Probably think that I don't know what's been happening with you.

Dallion remained silent. In truth, he hadn't given the matter too much thought, more concerned with what was going on with the Luors. Thinking about it logically, he couldn't come up with any realistic ways for it to work, not in the real world, at least. If this were a realm, or if Dallion had the means to place a person in a realm for longer than a split second, maybe there was a way to smuggle him out.

It was impossible. There was no realistic way Dallion could manage to get the man through the city unnoticed unless.

I know about the shardfly, the man said out loud, shattering any illusions Dallion had that he had been mistaken. I was heavily involved with the Drum. Before this unfortunate event, Bellal used to work for me.

No, Dallion said. It can't be done.

Oh, but it can. All you need to do is put in a little bit of effort.

In order to affect the real world, I need an item to make her the guardian of and I don't have one right now.

What about that? the man pointed at the whip blade. That's empty, if I'm not mistaken.

Dallion clenched his fists. It's not mine.

Right, it belongs to the general. The man smirked. Just on loan for the tournament? Sounds like something he'd do. Of course, you can always make another deal with him. The general is good at that. I'm sure he'll let you keep your sword under certain conditions. The bottom line is, who do you want to lose? Your childhood friends, or your familiar? Keep in mind that there isn't a deal in this world that will let you have the pure-blonds back, if they happen to die.

No matter how he looked at it, Dallion was in a bad situation. He could try and overpower the man, relying on Jiroh jumping in to help. From Dallion's experience in Grey Harbor, he'd most likely be dead before Jiroh managed to reach him. If he refused to help, Veil and Gloria would end up dead,

but if he agreed to help, there was a real chance that he might lose Gleam. At the very least, he'd have to enter another arrangement with the general.

I'll be with you the next few fights. That should be enough for an easy win. Also, I'll enjoy hunting down that creep once he's in the wilderness.

You know him?

Yes. As he said, he used to be involved with the Drum. It's a lot more than that. He's the one who bought me along with so many other items.

Alright, Dallion hissed. I'll help you leave the city, but if"

I knew I could rely on you. The tattooed man stood up from the bed. As he did, his face suddenly morphed out of existence. He was already using a defocus item to make himself unrecognizable. Meet me in one hour at the Broken Chestnut near the gate. You'll be able to recognize me.

Isn't it reckless walking about in public? Dallion asked.

Worried about me? the man snorted.

If something happens to you, my friends die.

Yes. Remember that. The man went to the window and opened it. No one pays attention to a pool member unless they're doing something they shouldn't. Not during lunch in any event. Besides, you're not the only one who owes me favors.

Without another word, the man jumped out onto the roof and rushed out of sight. For several seconds Dallion remained there, still and speechless, trying to come to terms with what had just happened. Five minutes ago, he felt on his way to the top of the world. Now he felt back in the gutter, pushed there by someone who'd only caused him misery.

Slowly, Dallion put his gear in its place, then sat on the bed and took off his holster boots. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and counted to ten. While he counted, he isolated and discarded all his thoughts and fears. Upon opening his eyes again, nothing was left other than pragmatic determination.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The awakening room appeared. Both of Dallion's echoes were there. Walking past them without a word, Dallion went to Harp's domain. The weather was perfect, as usual, but it didn't bring Dallion any joy.

As he stood, looking at the islands in the distance, the shardfly fluttered in, landing on his left shoulder.

Where do you want it? Dallion asked.

I want it to go all the way from your realm to the last of the islands, Gleam replied.

Sure. Anything else?

Thats enough for now. We can change the details once youre strong enough.

Sure.

Dallion nodded and linked the sword to his realm. Part of him hoped that hed receive a red rectangle warning him that he didnt, he was missing some vital requirement. No such thing occurred. Instead, an endless bridge emerged, connecting the main mountain of Dallions realm to the Vermillion islands. Bridges of gold stretched between silver pylons, continuing further than the eye could see. Next came the painful element.

Gleam, youre the guardian of this place, Dallion said, each word making his heart ache. Take care of your new home.

The moment he finished, the bridge changed, becoming a sight to behold. The silver and gold it was composed of disappeared, replaced by semi-transparent crystals that shifted color as they went. Dallion knew all that to be an illusion, but he couldnt but feel impressed.

Itll take a few tries to adequately match this place. I dont want the nymph to be upset. I might also move the pylons a bit. Just for aesthetic purposes.

Its fine, Dallion smiled. Have as much fun as you want.

The shardfly fluttered off his shoulder.

Oh, and Gleam? Ill keep on fighting for you. No matter what happens, I wont let the general have you!

Chapter 359: Practical Illusion

Much was unknown about the effects of familiars in the real world. The resources in the ring library were scarce, to say the least. From what Nil had shared, the only known cases of having them materialize in the real world were thanks to magic; thus, a mage with a familiar could, with enough skill and effort, have a familiar manifest in the real world for a limited amount of time. In theory, the Order of the Seven Moons could do so as well though other means, but they seldom resorted to that. The closest to an exception had been the third guardian of the aura sword realm, although it remained uncertain whether the Order had existed that far back.

Since giving Nox a realm of his own, Dallion had a few ideas how things worked. For starters, it was clear that the item in question shared some of the familiars abilities: the Nox dagger could create cracks on anything it touched, just as the kaleidervisto could light up with healing flames. When it came to Gleam's blade, Dallion was entering new territory. This was the first case in which the effects of the skill were supposed to last beyond the contact. Given that the tattooed man hadnt given him any choice, now was the time to find out.

The whip blade transformed into an axe.

Dallion slid his finger along the edge of the axe. It felt quite sharp. In fact, Dallion distinctly felt the sensation of cutting himself. Upon pulling his finger away, however, he saw that there was no blood there, not even a scar.

Aware how Hannah would react if he left blade marks on her floor, Dallion struck the armadil shield with his axe. The moment the axe touched the shield, the illusion was shattered, revealing the whip blade in all its glory. These had to be the limits of an illusion: attempting to perform something impossible.

Make it into a coin. Dallion touched the shield with the tip of his blade.

After he blinked, the shield had completely disappeared. Instead, there was a small golden coin directly beneath the tip of the blade.

Slowly, Dallion moved the sword away. The coin remained there. The moment he attempted to pick it up, though, the illusion was shattered. That was both good and bad: it means that Dallion would be able to transform a person's face into something else. However, the moment anyone tried to touch that person's face, the illusion would be shattered, revealing the face's true nature.

In my current form, I'm not sure. Before I was captured, I could maintain an illusion for days, possibly weeks.

Guess it's time to find out.

There were still forty minutes until the meeting time. Given that it might take five minutes for Dallion to reach the meeting place, say ten with the expected crowds during lunch, Dallion had half an hour for tests.

Turn it into a person from the crowd

, Dallion said as he slid the tip of the whip blade along the mirror in the room.

As expected, the object transformed into a person. Dallion didn't remember seeing him, but the man looked realistic enough, staring blankly forward. Gleam had added quite a lot of minor details to make the illusion realistic: the man was breathing, blinking, and occasionally turning about as if looking at something particular. There was no doubt about it, the shardfly's ability was extraordinary. No wonder she had survived in the wilderness for so long. The question was whether this new illusion would be able to last long enough for the escape to take place. If the mirror could maintain being human for half an hour, or even half that, all was going to be fine.

One of the rings that the tattooed man had been wearing had made him invisible to all guardians, making the mirror wonder the reason for the sudden change. Dallion, of course, had no intention of explaining things. The fewer guardians that knew about the visit, the better.

It took ten minutes for the illusion to shatter. It started with small things: the wrinkles on the face disappeared, the hair became more monotonous, then expressions became cyclic, then suddenly the entire person disappeared as the mirror regained its normal form.

Ten minutes was less than Dallion wanted, but hopefully enough for someone to reach the gate and pass through.

Do I need to state the obvious, dear boy? Besides, its not like you have a choice in the matter. If someone is willing to go as far as using your friends as pawns, theyll be ready to go further.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion left the room. He had left the armadil shield behind, just as he had only taken those weapons that had familiar guardians. Even if the tattooed man wasnt suspicious, leaving the city while geared up to that extent was bound to attract attention.

Dallion arrived at the meeting spot ten minutes early. Initially, he had wanted to scout the place. Instead, he had found it empty. The Broken Chestnut, as it turned out, was a repair shop. Being so close to the gate gave the mirror pool a perfect excuse to scout the items of unsuspected visitors under the pretext of repairing them. Dallion wouldnt be surprised if some of the more notable items ended up being snatched by pickpockets and making their way to Grey Harbor.

Trying to appear as casual as possible, Dallion opened the door and stepped in. No sooner had he done so when a person stepped out from the inner room.

Veil? Dallion asked, surprised.

Hey, Dal, the blond replied. Dallion could feel the shame and anger burning inside him. Sorry about this.

Where is he?

Hell be here. I can guarantee that much. The rat wants to leave the city really bad.

Dallion nodded. How did this happen?

He jumped Gloria last night. There wasnt a thing we could do, his level is four times ours at least.

I certainly hope so. The man emerged from the back room. Initially, his face was blurred, though soon enough it reverted to its familiar features. Ready to do this?

Dallion drew his sword. Moving closer, he moved the tip of the weapon towards the mans face.

Careful, the man said. Slip now and you wont get your cure.

Dallion considered it. It would be so easy for him to shove the sword through the others neck. At this distance, and with enough combat instances, there was every chance that the attack succeeded. However, that wouldnt help one bit in the grand scheme of things.

The tip of the blade touched the mans forehead, then carefully slid it down his face, shirt, all the way to his left boot. As it did, the transformation took place. The mans features changed radically, changing his build, height, and skin tone. A few moments later, a well-off tourist in his twenties stood in the room.

There. Dallion stepped back.

The man looked at himself.

Not a woman? he asked.

That increases the risk of the illusion being broken. The closer you are to your original self, the better.

Not my first choice, but beggars cant be choosers. Come on, lets go out back.

A wagon with two horses was waiting for them out in the street. Careful not to touch anything, the man had Veil close and lock the shop, then hide the key near the entrance.

The drill is simple, the man said. Ive been hired by Veil to bring materials to his village. You two are with me to see me off. Once were done, you go back in and we all live to see another day.

Sounds too simple. Dallion crossed his arms.

Sounds plausible. Veil has been doing that before, so no one will suspect. All you have to do is not blow it.

Veil clenched his fists. There was only one winner in this arrangement, and it wasnt him. Still, there was nothing he or Dallion could do. The two waited for the man to settle in the wagon, after which Dallion took the reins of the horse.

From then on, the slow walk to the city gate began. There were about several thousand feet to the city limits. Ironically, due to the festival, this part of town had become much less congested than most. With events taking place, most of the people were heading further in than leaving. Of course, that didnt mean that there werent guards walking about the streets.

Just relax, Dallion said, seeing Veil glance at a patrolling pair. Everythings fine.

Never thought theres be a day when you were the calm one, the other whispered.

Ive always been calm and collected, Dallion lied to ease the tension. Think of it as another deal that will make the people back home happy.

Yeah. Another deal

Each step seemed to last forever. It had taken a minute for the group to half the distance to the city gate. It felt like hours. Everyones impulse was to dash forward, consequences be damned, but they held that desire in check.

I wasnt strong enough, Veil whispered all of a sudden. I couldnt achieve what you did.

Hey, if its any consolation, I couldnt have won either. Some fights are just too"

Im not talking about a fight, Veil interrupted. Im never mind.

The guards gave them a passing glance as the wagon passed by. One even greeted Veil casually. Apparently, the tattooed man wasnt exaggerating when he said that Veil had been buying materials for the village a lot since arriving in Nerosal. Dallion half expected one of the guards on duty to recognize him from the arena fights, but for better or worse, they didnt. Half a minute later, the wagon was outside.

Move to this side, the tattooed man said to Dallion as he stopped the wagon.

Whats wrong?

I want to make sure you keep your part of the bargain.

Were already outside.

The city walls, not the domain itself. Why do you think I brought you along? Even with the festival going on, the Mayor follows who enters and leaves his zone of influence. The only thing that would keep me hidden is the presence of an otherworlder.

Dallion froze. This was the first time he was addressed as such openly. It was expected that the mirror pool would have that information, but Veil for certain didnt. Now that he knew, would things between him and Dallion remain the same?

Grab my hand, the man said. For the sake of the barrier Ill be considered your property.

There was a long moment of hesitation.

Come on. Youve already come this far.

The note of fear in the mans voice was apparent. It seemed that it wasnt the gate or the guards that terrified him, but the barrier itself. Dallion could easily end it all now by refusing to do this simple request. In the end, he did, though. Holding the others hand, they went on for another fifty feet, until suddenly an unexpected weight was removed from him. It was like coming out of water for the first time to realize how freer ones actions were in air.

Thanks. The man pulled back his hand. The illusion broken, the tattoos emerged on his skin. Theres a backpack of green leather back there, he said to Veil. There are five vials of liquid inside. Youll need one each. Keep the rest just in case, or sell it. I dont care.

Thats it? Dallion asked.

Never cross a chosen of the Moons, the man said. Those that do dont tend to live for long. Ive kept part of my deal and now its time for the rest. He glanced briefly at the city walls, as if to make sure no one was chasing after him. Theres a Star cult in the city. Normally the pool deals with one or two of them, but this time theyre in the city by the dozens.

I know that already, Dallion said. They were the ones behind the artifact exploration deaths.

The overseer seems to believe that, but shes wrong. The cult arent the ones causing it. In fact, at least not directly. It might be said that theyve suffered just as much. The truth is, they are searching for something and have been so for months.

For what?

Artifacts. The more exotic, the better. The ring was of particular importance. Or should I say rings.

Dallions eyes widened.

Thats right, there are several of them. A lot of people died trying to clear them. Now that they have them, theyll release the copyette at the height of the festival and unleash it on the countess.

That was clearly not going to happen. Dallion knew full well who the copyette was, and the Vermillion tears had nothing to do with his release. Whatever reason they had for using the rings was just as bad, if not worse.

The cult was the cause of the flood of artifacts that has filled the city. Or at least they were. Before my unfortunate demise, they let us know that they werent interested in buying or exploring anymore. Whatever they were searching for, they clearly found it.

And they decided to kill off all the loose ends.

No, its not they who tried to kill me. The Order did.

This came as a shock. Dallion knew what the Order represented and had a vague idea of their philosophy. However, he hadnt imagined them as aggressive as that, not within the city limits at the very least.

They got involved? But there was one of their own among the killed.

Who says that cultists cant infiltrate the Order? Its all a matter of time. If the cleric had been more careful, shed have been able to survive a few more weeks. I guess they learned about the rest of the participants from her, so they took out the entire circle.

Except me

Youre fine. Your stupid attempts to find the copyette saved your life. That and the fact that youre the chosen of a Moon. The Order tends to leave those alone as much as they can. The only person who they havent been able to track down is the seller.

The man without a face, Dallion said.

Or woman. Even I dont know their identity. All I know was that they were referenced by the general and had the goods.

With that, our dealings are concluded, the man said. If you want my advice, get out of the city fast. Ive no idea what the cultists are planning, but it spooked the prince of the pool enough to flee. Even if I didnt have the Order chasing after me, Id probably have left as well.

Chapter 360: Unfinished Business

Feeling any better? Dallion asked as he and Veil made their way back to the inn.

Cant tell yet, the blond replied. It had been a few minutes since hed taken the cure. So far, the only thing that was for certain was that it didnt contain poison. As for everything else, it would be at last half a day to tell whether the symptoms subsided or not.

Maybe I wasnt his only way out.

Possibly. Personally, Id recommend keeping them safe. Its possible that he bought them from someone, and if one could buy such poison, so could anyone else. Having a cure would be a good precaution to have.

This really pisses me off. Veil said. Rage was ringing through his entire body. If there were a means to convert it to strength, the blond would be unstoppable. Sadly, that was wishful thinking. Determination helped clear the focus, but raw rage only dulled the senses.

Dont think about that. We have the cure, thats what counts. Wheres Gloria?

In our room. She tried to take him on. I came too late.

Dallion felt his heart skip a beat.

Is she alright?

Shes alive. Veil looked away. She wont be going to any public events anytime soon. Dont tell Hannah. We promised we wont bring any trouble to her inn and He didnt finish. If I was stronger, this wouldnt have happened. Beaten up by a crafter!

As Dallion had experienced first-hand, all skills had a tendency of becoming dangerous when combined in combat. The tattooed man might well have started as a carpenter or crafter, but now his carving skills made him a fierce opponent, one far stronger than Dallion could take on at his current level. There was no telling how important he was in the mirror pool, but he gave off the vibes of middle management, relying on dozens of trinkets to remain alive. There were far more powerful awakened out there and sooner or later it was inevitable that they got involved in Dallions life as well.

Ill keep it between us, Dallion promised. Wheres Hannah? I didnt see her in the inn.

She went off with Jiroh somewhere. She wont be back till this evening.

That gave Dallion some time, but it was weird that shed leave her inn unattended. Normally she was all about profit, and yet she was turning down money like crazy. Most likely she had left Veil in charge, which explained how the tattooed man had made it in the inn undetected.

Upon returning to the inn, Dallion and Veil were greeted by an unexpected surprise. Not only was Hannah there, but she was pissed off, as always. One look at both of them was enough to convey all her thoughts and curses in very vocal fashion.

Hannah. Veil tensed up. I didnt think youll be back until"

Take care of the customers, the woman said in a calm tone that foretold huge future pain. Id like to have a few words with Dal.

The blond turned towards his friend.

Its fine, Dallion whispered. You take care of stuff. Ill be with you in a bit.

Despite everything, Dallion wasnt worried, or at least not worried about being yelled at. Unlike everyone else, there was one thing he could clearly see the barely visible glow surrounding the innkeepers body. That glow was an indication that the woman was from another world, and as Dallion knew perfectly well she wasnt.

Following Hannahs cue, Dallion went into the kitchen. The moment he did, Hannah dissolved into nothing behind him.

I thought you didnt copy people anymore, Dallion addressed one of the many Aspans in the kitchen.

We have an arrangement. Every now and again, Hannah must go somewhere, and I back her up. Its risky, especially during the festival, but thats the risk both of us must pay.

Whats so risky to merit this?

The copyette just smiled.

Its a good thing that she wasnt, or shed have kicked you and the Luors out on the spot. The last thing she wants is to attract attention to the inn, and youre having mirror pool members walk in the place as if they own it.

He wasnt part of the mirror pool. They think hes dead.

Oh, so youre having deceased mirror pool members walk in. Do you think that makes it better?

Dallion didnt reply.

Id like to believe you didnt have anything to do with this, but given your history and tendency to poke the unknown, I find it difficult to believe. And if I dont believe it, how do you think youll be able to convince Hannah?

It wasnt my fault this time, Dallion said. Hearing himself, he felt as if he were five years old, caught stealing cooking from the kitchen. Not directly. Theres a Star cult in Nerosal that is planning to do something using Vermillion keys. The Order of the Seven Moons is hunting them down. The guy that was here, he just wanted to leave the city before it all went down.

All Aspans stopped what they were doing and looked in Dallions direction.

Tell me everything, one of them said.

The next ten minutes passed in explanations. Feeling almost relieved to have someone to share it with, Dallion told the copyette everything relating to his relations with the mirror pool, the cults, and secret expeditions hed been undertaking. The only thing he skipped was his relations with the Green Moon that wasnt relevant to the situation, and even if it were, there were secrets that werent meant for anyone.

Aspan listened to every word intently, then let all of his copies but one get back to work. It was clear that he didnt approve of Dallions actions, but he didnt fault him, either. As someone who had come from another world, he knew perfectly well how easy it was to go down one rabbit hole or another. He too had gone through the same ages ago.

Do you think theyre searching for others like you? Dallion asked once he had done explaining the situation.

No.

The dryads, then? The shield told me that there are a lot of world swords in the area. If he can get any"

It isnt dryads or nymphs either. No race that has been banished by the Star will be useful to him. We were all promised the world at one time or another and ended up like this. Do you think anyone would believe any other promise made by the Star?

It sounded rather unlikely.

What is he searching for then?

Chainlings, Aspan said. Im not talking about the insignificant wretches that hide in the city. I mean, the real deal that roam in the wilderness between settlement domains. The Moons' promise keeps them from entering a domain, but if the Star has enough Vermillion keys, he could bypass the domain barrier.

So, it always went back to that. The creatures that were dread personified. It had taken a small army to hunt down one significantly wounded. If several were to enter the city during a festival, it would be carnage.

Well, it was fun while it lasted, the copyette sighed all of a sudden. Id say take the advice and leave the city as quickly as possible.

Just like that? You arent going to fight them?

Im supposed to be banished. The Moons tolerate me because Ive been keeping a low profile. If Im to use any significant power, Id be thrown back into the realms. And thats if I survive the fight. The Star gave you some pretty nasty arrows to finish me off, whos to say he doesnt have more? Not to mention that there isnt a person alive wholl hesitate to kill me off.

Dallion felt like punching something. If only a few months ago hed know what he knew now. Maybe then things would have been different. Although, by the sound of it, the Star had been planning this for quite some time. Everything hed done, from building up the black market for artifacts to infiltrating the Icepicker guild, had been for this purpose. Now that everything was in place, it didnt seem like there was anything that could be done or wasnt there?

What about the skill stones? Dallion asked. Arthurows was too eager to get his hands on those.

Something that caught his fancy.

What if it isnt? What if thats the key to bringing him down?

One of the Aspans in the kitchen looked Dallion straight in the eyes.

Youre really set on doing this, arent you? the copyette asked.

If the Star has everything, he needs to summon the chainlings, why hasnt he done so? Theres still something he needs. If I get it first, maybe I can stop this?

Doubtful. But hey, its your life. Better go help your friends. Ive been keeping you here long enough.

Theres no way you can help?

Believe me, I'd like to, but it's all futile. I've seen enough losing battles to know when it's not worth it. I wish you all the luck, though. Maybe the Moons will help you survive this one. Who knows?

That marked the end of the conversation. Dallion remained half a minute longer, hoping that the copyette would change his mind, or at least share some words of wisdom. No such thing occurred. Apparently, if Dallion was to try and stop the Star he was going to do so on his own.

Whispering a thanks, Dallion left the kitchen. Veil was nowhere to be seen.

Anyone know where the blond one went?

Dallion asked.

The scene was pretty much as he imagined it. Veil was sitting on the floor next to the bed of his sister. Judging by the empty vial, he had probably already given her the cure. Although that didn't make her appear any less miserable. Scars and gashes covered her body. Her opponent hadn't been playing around, although considering the difference in levels, there was no reason for him to have gone this far.

I have something that will help. Dallion reached into his left boot and took out the kaleidervisto. Might take a while, though.

What's that? Veil asked, moving slightly to the side.

Lux's home. Dallion moved to the bed and placed the object on Gloria's forehead. It lets him heal in the real world as well.

Blue flames spread along Gloria's face. Slowly, the closest wounds diminished, as if they were paint dissolving in water.

So, you have a healing artefact, Veil noted. And in the real world.

It takes a while, but yeah, it's pretty useful. There was a long moment of silence. When she gets better, both of you are going to the awakening shrine. You can't delay leveling up any longer. I have the money, so it won't be an issue.

I can't, Veil whispered.

What?

I said, I can't! Veil shouted. Neither of us can! Why do you think we came to Nerosal in the first place?!

Anger and shame resonated throughout the entire room, but that wasn't all. Dallion could sense an emotion burring beneath Thema's secret, along with a force guarding that secret. The vibrations of the force felt peculiarly familiar—the powers of a Moon.

You completed your trial, didn't you? Dallion said. You just decided to step through the gate.

There was no response.

Why?

Ever since we were children, grandfather kept telling us to fear the cities. That wasn't all he told us. Every awakened of the family, no matter how untalented, was warned never to have anything to do

with the Moons. He insisted that they would curse us. At the time, I thought it to be part of his crazy ramblings, but when the choice was presented to me, the fear returned.

Keep the kaleidervisto on her until shes fully healed, Dallion stood up. Ill be back for it later.

Where are you going? Veil asked.

I need to take care of something. Dallion left the room. Sadly, once again, the only ones he could rely on were the echoes, guardians, and familiars he had gathered along the way.