

Leveling up 361

Chapter 361: Locked but Open

Yes, that is an option. Youve become a lot more calculating lately, dear boy. Its almost commendable.

Well, I got tired of being taken advantage of.

Quite so. However, just be sure not to turn into the sort of person that takes advantage of others.

A roar filled the air, making the end of another tournament event. Normally, this would give the spectators a breather to go about the city before the next series of fights. That meant that for the next hour or so, the streets would be packed with people. Dallion didnt mind that. His goal was to get to the Icepicker Guildhall before then. Given that it was day, Spike would be replaced by a new set of guards, likely someone that Dallion vaguely knew. The important part was that none of them would find it suspicious he was visiting so often. Also, after today, there would be no reason for him to go there anymore. At least not until everything was settled.

Dallion turned to his right, expecting to see a fan of his exploits, but instead found that the one addressing him was an iron shop sign.

There was genuine surprise and joy in his voice. Looking closely, Dallion could see that the alloy it was made of was rather unusual, suggesting that the sign wasnt local but rather was brought here. The year beneath established suggested that the shop was over three centuries old, but Dallion had a feeling the guardian was older.

The request was unusual enough that it made Dallion stop. The shop in question was clearly a repair shop, though now closed for the festival. Dallion had passed by it dozens of times, but had never actually noticed it. Having the power to mend things on his own, the only thing he was interested in was good food and gear. Definitely not repair shops.

Nah, Im fine. Theres no need to depress the people here. Just getting free from a few cracks will do.

A moment later and the sign was as good as new. The experience brought a sense of nostalgia back to Dallion. It had been a while since he had actively repaired items. Going through the item maze and adjusting the damaged elements felt refreshingly simple. Once this was over, maybe hed do more of that just repair an item or two for the fun of it.

Its a bad habit I have. How come youre the only one able to recognize me?

The wisdom of age. I might not look it, but I was a very popular shield back in my day.

Normally, this was the point at which the armadil shield would add in a snarky comment of his own. For some reason, he remained silent.

If you ever want to chat dont hesitate to come visit! I know lots of interesting stories.

Any other day, Dallion would have gladly accepted the offer. Not today, though. Blocking the noise from his mind, he walked on to the guildhall and went inside.

The place remained pretty empty, despite the door being unlocked. Even so, Dallion could sense the distinct aroma of chicken soup. After a few more moments, Dallion even had a good idea who the soup's owner could be.

Estezol? Dallion said loudly, his voice echoing through the empty lobby.

Within moments, one of the doors opened, revealing the short bearded man. A large white napkin round his throat indicated that he was indeed having a snack, as did the increased aroma of food coming from the room behind him.

Dal? Estezol blinked. What are you doing here? After winning today's round at the arena, I'd have thought you'd be resting or partying.

I had such plans, but things fell through, Dallion admitted. I just wanted to go somewhere quiet.

Right. And there's no place as quiet as a guildhall during festival time, Estezol laughed. Well, maybe some of the shops. Care to join me, by the way? I picked up a few things here and there. There's more than enough to share. No additional cost.

Maybe later. I didn't think you'd be keeping an eye on the guildhall.

Usually Spike does, but even he has to sleep, so the rest of us take turns keeping an eye on things. I get every third morning.

Good to know. Any of the captains here?

The guild master was in for a while, but he left. As for the others, Estezol shrugged. Most are involved in the festival, or hiding. Remember, there's the second week to look forward to.

The second week. In the past, Dallion considered it as a friendly test of strength between guilds. After experiencing the tournament first hand, he knew it was quite serious. There were more than ranking positions at stake. The strong would gain a lot, acquiring new deals and backers, while the weak would have to make do with the scraps and lose part of the new positions they had.

Although Estezol didn't single anyone out, Dallion suspected that captain Adzorg wasn't part of the most. If Nil was any indication, the old geezer had probably hidden somewhere with enough food and alcohol to last a month, patiently waiting for the event to be done with.

Anyone in the basement? Dallion asked as casually as he could muster.

Not particularly. A few elites came and went, but for the most part, no one wants to bother. You'll have plenty of quiet to think and relax.

Yeah.

Nothing like a cool mind before a fight, eh? Estezol shoved Dallion with his elbow. We don't want you to end your winning streak.

No worries. I plan to reach the top eight, Dallion lied. If what the tattooed man had told him was right, there wouldn't be a top eight event, maybe not even a top sixteen.

Dallion strode off to the staircase, however, instead of going down, he went directly up. There was no point in worrying about creating an alibi. All he needed to do was take one last long trip. This time, like before, he was going to accept all the help he got.

Sometimes things need to be rushed.

I agree, but theres a right and wrong way of doing things, and Im not sure your current way is the right one. Even if you level up ten times, youll still be no match for any guardian in that realm.

I dont have to do it alone. Vihrogon will be there to help.

Upon reaching the floor, Dallion went directly for the room with the aura sword. Barely was he a step away from it, when suddenly he felt someone combat split.

Why are you here, Dal? Vends voice came behind him.

You know why. Dallion decided to go for broke. Turning around, he looked the elite in the eyes.

Going on a solo expedition? Vend came closer. I thought I had taught you better than this.

I thought you said thered be no more expeditions.

Thats not your decision to make.

I think it should be.

Oh? Dallion felt a sense of pride amid a sea of disappointment. Was it that Vend saw his younger self in him?

Just because youve won three rounds against low-level seers, you think youll be able to survive the sword realm? Or do you just want to wander about as a tourist?

I can survive.

Dallion clenched his fists. He didnt feel insulted in the least, but needed to inflict a slight amount of pain to decrease the chances of being found out. The worst part of all was not knowing what had happened during Vends combat splitting. The elite had chosen to approach Dallion with a question. However, it was just as possible for him to have asked half a dozen other questions just to see how Dallion would react. Dallion himself would have done so had the roles been reversed.

Youre back to being reckless. Reminds me of your guilds trial. You were so determined to clear all five levels of the dagger that you refused to take the win when offered. Remind me, what happened afterwards?

Even so, Vend was right. At the time, Dallion was just starting to figure out how to use his music skill. Thanks to it and his tactical skills, he had managed to lead his team through the first three levels of the trail dagger. Officially, that was all it took to become a permanent guild member. However, Dallion had stubbornly asked to go on even when everyone else had left the exam. As a result, he had failed at the very start of the fourth level. That created an absurd situation in which the person who had carried everyone to victory had himself failed and was forced to retake the trial a month later.

Its different this time. I dont have anything to prove.

Really? Vend crossed his arms. In that case, go ahead.

Dallion hesitated.

Dont worry, its not a trick. Ill take full responsibility and come up with an excuse in front of March.

Dallion still didnt budge. This had to be a trick. Vend wasnt one to be swayed by sentimental reasons. And yet, there didnt seem to be any deceit within him. As far as Dallion could tell, the elite was a hundred percent sincere.

If you lack the conviction to open the door, what does that say about you? Vend asked.

Instantly, Dallion grabbed the handle and pressed it down. The door didnt open. Confused, he pushed further while attempting to push then pull the door. Neither worked.

Do you really think wed leave a world item unprotected for anyone to snatch? Vend asked. I just wanted to see whether youre a complete idiot and, sadly, you surpassed my expectations.

The door has been locked the entire time? Dallion asked.

Ever since our last expedition. Only March has the key. But since youre so determined about it, Ill make sure you have a nice long talk with her once the festival is over. Itll all be in your hands then. Who knows, maybe youll manage to convince her to let you in alone? Ive seen stranger things happen.

Locked since Marchs last expedition? That was impossible. There was no indication that Vend was lying, but Dallion distinctly remembered entering the time many times. He even had the dryad scroll to prove it. Something strange was going on here, and he didnt have a clue what it was.

Chapter 362: Icepicker Emergency Meeting

The time spent with Vend turned out longer than expected. After discovering that the door to the sword room was locked, Dallion had engaged in a training session in one of the items in the basement. In some aspects the training was no different from any Dallion had had before, however, there was one major exceptionthe training gloves were off.

From the get go Vend split into several dozen instances, attacking Dallion in any way possible at full speed. Under such conditions, neither Dallions new weapons nor his familiars were able to provide an adequate challenge. No matter how much of the space around him Dallion covered, Vend always managed to find a weakness to exploit.

All the times Dallion tried to disrupt Vends splitting, his teacher split again.

Dallion threw the armadil shield at the elite, then ordered it to envelop him. The cocoon sphere formed in an instant, only to capture one of the Vends instances. Dallion then quickly unleashed his whip blade, attacking with wide strikes. Each attack sliced through three instances of his opponent, at least, though not enough to land a real hit.

Youve gotten better, Vend said. You guess the pattern of my splitting.

The elite leapt up then, halving the distance to Dallion, threw one of his daggers. The weapon extended like a chain passing above Dallions shoulder. At that precise moment, Vend pulled it back.

MODERATE WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 10%

A third chain gripped Dallion by the leg. At this point, he was already having difficulty remaining in the air.

Blue flames propelled Dallion forward. The next thing he knew he was in the guilds basement, Vend sitting across from him at the training table.

What happened? Dallion looked around confused, getting re-accustomed to the reality shift.

You were predictable. Vend sighed. Just because you cant see my actions doesnt mean I cant see yours. I got a dagger ready before you hit me. You can say that you skewered yourself in your attempt to knock me down. If its any consolation, you reduced my health by twenty percent.

That sounded outright insulting. Even Nil had the decency to remain silent and not rub salt in the wound. There was no way to deny it Vend remained too strong.

Apart from that, you didnt do bad. The basics are there. Just avoid any stupid mistakes and you should be good for the next round.

Yeah I couldnt hit you even once. Dallion grumbled.

Thats the point. One hit is all it takes.

Dallion wasnt sure whether that was deep or overdramatic. There was no way to be sure, but from what he had seen, Vend relied mostly on speed rather than strength. It was quite likely that each hit could be his last in terms of combat not that he would get killed or thrown out of the realm, but that it would limit his capacity to the point that he wouldnt be able to keep up.

Where was the sword found? Dallion asked.

The guild bought it. I thought Id told you already.

Anything else?

Why are you so interested in the sword? Vend asked. You wont be able to keep it. Once its cleared, it goes back to the guild backers.

Dallion wondered if that included everything inside. For the moment Dallion decided not to inquire, just in case the answer was yes.

A lot of money is tied up in this.

Being from Earth, Dallion knew exactly what this was code for. No one messed with those that paid the bills. The world item was a source of income, or an investment, and as such, was restricted to only a handful of people. That made it even more peculiar how Dallion had managed to go inside. One possibility was that it had to do with his relation with the Green Moon. Would that be enough to cause a door to unlock on its own, though?

I guess I dont get to know who the backer interested in the sword is?

Vend shook his head. The concern coming from him suggested that it was someone important. Given the astronomical cost of such an item, it had to be a noble at least, possibly a major one at that. That could cause serious complications. So far, Dallion had assumed that he could simply go back in there and get the hidden skills. The difficult part was supposed to be convincing the final

guardian to let him get the twi-crown, and the skills that came with it. Instead, Dallion couldnt even enter the room.

What are you up to? Vend asked.

I cant tell you. Not yet, at least.

At least youre honest about it. Either way, its better that you forget it. The guild master will decide how to proceed and March will choose who will go on any future expeditions. Clear?

Clear, Dallion uttered beneath his breath.

Good. So, want any more training, or are you done for the day?

Theres one more thing. Dallion recited the names of the seven Moons. He would have very much preferred to have obtained the skills gems before this part of the conversation, but given the danger to the city, he didnt see any other option. I want to see the guild master. He held his breath for a few moments. I know what the Star is planning, and its linked to the sword.

Before Dallion could say a word on the topic, Vend gave him a warning sign to remain quiet, then took him to one of the meeting rooms on the second floor and left him inside. From there, a series of echo conversations followed, resulting in the guilds senior staff arriving to the guild house within the hour.

March was the first to appear, of course. Her faade was the same as usual when she entered the room, but thanks to his music skill, Dallion could tell she was bitterly disappointed. Apparently, she and Vend had had a long conversation via echoes and he had taken the brunt of her anger. Several more captains soon joined in, most arriving fresh from the arena. Any other day, they would be congratulating Dallion for his remarkable fights and achievements. After what he had shared, all he could feel was disapproval, and that was without him mentioning his sword expeditions. If anyone from the guild learned about that, things would get really complicated.

Alright, the vice guild master entered the room. Lets get on with this mess. Chesteon is dealing with something and wont be able to join us. Are we waiting on anyone else?

Nitiello has gone missing again, March said, referring to captain Adzorg.

Hell have to skip this one, then.

The vice master looked at Dallion. He was a rather squirrely man, wearing a set of clothes that made him look like a medieval squire. According to Nil, the man was equivalent to a lesser noble in strength. The only reason that he didnt hold the title was because of certain altercations hed had with the Archdukes family, resulting in him losing his noble status.

So, you are the great hero, the vice master began. The rising star of Nerosal and the first wildcard to make it to the fourth round of the tournament.

The more compliments were stacked the more Dallion braced for the pain that would follow.

For someone with your skills, how can you be so stupid? the vice master snapped. You say youve had several dealings with the mirror pool.

Not by my own accord, sir, Dallion managed to say.

During one of those instances you helped awakened a Vermillion Tears ring with the power to take things in and out of realms. Also, according to you, several members of the mirror pool that were with you during that event are now dead, including a cleric of the Order of the Seven Moons. Is that right so far?

I've informed the overseer

Also, and this is my favorite part, you claim to have been visited by a member of the mirror pool you believed dead, and helped him flee the city. In the process he shared with you that there's a Star cult that plans to summon a chainling during the festival and claim the countess's life.

Dallion remained silent. Said out loud that sounded pretty bad.

And now, not only to inform the countess of this danger but also for us to continue with the sword expeditions, because you suspect that the Star might be looking for something in there and it would be better for us to find it first. Do you hear yourself?

Punishment is the last thing on my mind right now.

Dear boy, if you get punished now, you won't be able to achieve anything. The only exception is to tell them about the skill gems.

It was easy to confuse Dallion's hesitation for greed, but he had a much more pragmatic reason. The guild had given him a lot since he'd come to Nerosal and not only financially. It could be said they were among his closest friends in this world, and still Dallion wasn't sure he could trust them, not at least. Arthuro's had managed to join quite easily. There was no telling if there wasn't a cultist hiding among the ranks.

Did he say anything else? The vice master asked.

Just that I should leave the city.

March, what do you think?

The part about the cult is right. They've been pouring in the last few months. Overseers keeping it under control for now. I don't think the target is the countess, however.

The cult won't harm a member of the imperial family, another captain said. Hell annihilate them if they did.

We didn't have such problems last year, or the year before. This appears to be the result of careful planning. There are too many coincidences for it not to be. I still don't see the connection with the sword. We searched that place from top to bottom and didn't find anything of interest.

What if it's in the sunken temples? Dallion asked, trying to guide the conversation in that direction. Won't it be better to resume expeditions to be on the safe side?

A sharp glance from the vice master told him that he wasn't supposed to talk unless spoken to.

There will be no further expeditions, the man said. The sword will be locked and sealed until we get instructions on what to do with it. Meanwhile, I'll inform the Lord Mayor. Hell handle things from there. Dallion, you'll continue as if nothing has happened. Tomorrow you'll be at the arena and fight your fight. There will be no snooping around, no trying to sneak into the sword, no hunting

copyettes or chainlings in public. I dont want to hear a peep concerning you during the end of the festival. Am I making myself clear?

Understood, sir.

Good. Now, get out of here.

Chapter 363: Whispers of a Star

There were days in which nothing could go wrongluck smiled on a person, all the good choices were made, all the gambles turned out worthwhile, not even fate itself could do anything to sour the mood. For Dallion, this wasnt; one of those days. Looking back, there were signs that it was going to be a tough day since morning. For starters, he had lost his cool during the fight, resulting in the match being stopped. At the time Dallion hadnt thought anything of it, but for everyone watchingthe nobles especiallyhis reckless side had shown through. Following that was the visit from the tattooed man, the whole issue of helping him escapewhich had all but forced Dallion into another deal with the general, should he want to keep Gleam. Later, when Dallion had tried to claim the skill gems, it turned out that he no longer had access to the sword room. The only positive thing was that the Icepicker guild had believed him. They werent in the least pleased, but they had definitely believed him. However, that didnt make Dallion feel any better.

I supposed youll suggest that I leave the city as well?

Theres no point in me saying anything, dear boy. I dont have the strength to drag you out of the city. Besides, now that you know the threat, leaving might be as dangerous as staying if you dont have enough conviction.

In what sense?

The realm is a representation of an object. Its a representation of us all. Your achievements and victories help you shape that realm, but so do your flaws and regrets. By leveling up, you deal with those flaws, growing along with your realm. However, it works in the opposite way as well.

You never said that before.

Dallion had. His mother in Dherma had gone through a lot after the village chief had sealed her awakened powers. Even with all the support and the help of Dallions awakened grandfather, she had crumbled inside. The only reason she hadnt withered completely away was pure will and Dallions father. If either hadnt been there, neither would have Dallion.

What about you? Would you leave the city?

Ah. Well, Id do the same as my original would, and that is to stay.

Hannah was back at the inn by the time Dallion returned. To his relief, he saw that Glorias condition had improved. She, along with her brother, was busy working the lunch shift, as usual along with Jiroh. Despite that, the place remained half empty.

Dallion waved to Gloria in an attempt to get her attention. Seeing him, the blonde smiled faintly, though it was obvious that the smile was forced. A bundle of complex contradictory emotions formed within her. There was gratitude, shame, fear, pain, sadness, and half a dozen more emotions

of various intensity. Just as Dallion was about to approach her and ask, Falkner appeared from the staircase.

Hel, Dal, the boy said.

Falkner?

This was a surprise. Given the festival, Dallion expected Falkner to be among the other nobles at the arena or the Lord Mayors palace. He was definitely dressed for it, wearing clothes created of gem threads that probably cost more than the entire inn itself.

What are you doing here? Dallion asked out of habit.

Glo needed some help, so she asked me over.

Clearly, the two were becoming more than friends. As far as Dallion knew, they weren't a couple or even dating, but the fact that he was the one who was called spoke volumes.

I see. A sense of awkwardness filled the air. If it's anything serious, let me know. I'll go get some rest.

You do that. You must be ready for the tournament, after all. There was more disdain in Falkner's words than Dallion expected. Oh, and you can have this. Falkner took out a kaleidervisto from his belt and shoved it into Dallion's hands. Can't forget this, can you? How else are you going to cheat during the fights? He shoved Dallion as he walked by.

Just great

, Dallion thought.

As if he didn't have enough problems already. Now Falkner had gotten the impression that Dallion had abandoned Gloria in her time of need. Actually, that was pretty much what had happened. Dallion could have stayed an hour while she was getting better. Given how close they had been, that was the least he could have done. Instead, he had slapped the kaleidervisto on her forehead and gone off without a word.

In hindsight, that was a terrible thought. People weren't items that could get better thanks to a magic item. They needed someone to talk to. Gloria needed someone other than her brother to be there, and since Dallion wasn't she had called Falkner.

That is one of the common misconceptions, dear boy. The path of the empath lets you understand and talk to guardians, it doesn't change your character. Sometimes you just focus on so much that you end up being nowhere at all.

You can say that again. Maybe I need to

Dallion, Hannah said in a sharp tone, even for her. I need to have a word with you. She opened the door of the kitchen, inviting him to go inside.

Whenever Hannah was slightly pissed off, she would either yell a lot or use sarcasm as sharp as a sword. Whenever things were really bad, though, she would be calm and collected.

Sit, the innkeeper said, then went across the kitchen and took a large mug of sapphire liquid and two glasses. Even from this distance, Dallion could smell the alcohol.

Hannah poured two glasses, then drained hers in one gulp. Immediately after, she refilled the glass and repeated the process.

Hes gone, isnt he? Dallion asked.

Yep. Hannah finished a third glass. For the first time since I found him. The place wont be the same without him. Heck, Im not sure there will be a place without him. He worked for ten at no pay, not to mention that he actually knew a thing or two about cooking. Everyone before him was utter crap. Maybe theyll get a local to pass by. But no awakened would set foot in this place.

Dallion went to the table and took a sip. The drink felt warm and tasted of lemons and strawberries. Leave it to Aspan to make a mysterious drink that felt exactly like home.

He left this for you. Hannah slammed appeared to be a transparent glass dagger on the table. Said it might be useful for the fight to come. The design was strange, as if someone had taken a standard dagger and flattened it like a pancake. It seemed quite suitable for a slime weapon, though, capable of slicing as well as blunt attacks.

I didnt know he had a weapon.

He claimed it was made specially for him by his imperial forge, Hannah cracked a laugh. Knowing him, it was probably a lie. It meant a great deal to him, though.

Sadness filled the woman to the brim, so strong that Dallion felt as if he were drowning in it.

Will you be leaving? he forced himself to ask.

Thats the reasonable thing to do. Assassinations are messy things. Even if they dont succeed, they make life miserable for years. And if there really is a plan to unleash a wild chainling in the city, then things will be messy indeed. Just the thought that someone put an imperial in danger would be enough to get the army here. Ive seen cities razed for less. The innkeeper tilted her empty glass, but didnt refill it. Ive arranged to get the kids to safety. Not that they wouldnt have managed on their own.

Falkner, Dallion whispered.

A slight shove in the right direction was needed. Hell discreetly leave the city tonight and take them along.

And the rest of the nobles will follow soon after.

Most dont suspect, and those that do prefer to stay. Call it boredom, political maneuvering, or petty stubbornness. Some are even looking forward to it. Seeing a wild chainling is rare and the rewards from killing it are significant. That said, what about you?

I have a plan, but it just became more complicated. Theres something I need to do in the guildhall, and Im not the guilds favorite person right now.

You never knew when to stop. Thats always been the problem with otherworldersyou always go too far.

Any chance you can help?

Ill try to get in touch with captain Adzorg, but thats about it. Id suggest having a chat with the overseer, but I suspect she already knows.

Do you think its possible? Dallion asked. Do you think the Star can be stopped?

Who knows? Hannah shrugged. The Star is bound by the rules of the land. If he wasnt, he wouldnt have bothered gathering cultists and artifacts. Even if he has the Vermillion keys, he needs people to use them.

That was true. With the entire city guard, and now all the countless troops, working to find and stop the cultists from summoning the chainling, it was quite possible that the Stars plan could fail. Add to them the mirror pool and the large guilds, and there was every chance that the thing was over before it started. Yet, for some reason, Dallion didnt feel at all reassured.

One thing he had learned about the Star was that since he couldnt achieve his plans directly, he manipulated others to do it for him. Everything was put in place, waiting for the precise moment to spring into action.

Just like an awakening trial, Dallion said.

How hadnt he seen it up till now? The Star claimed to be from Earth, which meant his thinking would also be similar. The whole city represented one giant puzzle in which the Star had scattered his pieces in such fashion, so as to achieve his goal. Dallion knew what the goal was, he also knew the nature of some of the pieces. Now, all he needed to know was where these pieces were placed and there were ways to achieve that. It wouldnt be something Dallion would enjoy doing, but it was the only course of action.

What is? Hannah asked.

The Stars plan. Hes still missing a few pieces to solve his puzzle. If I learn what the puzzle is before that, I can stop him.

Hundreds of others are probably saying the same.

Yes, but how many of them are from another world?

One at least, Hannah said, referring to Euryale, no doubt. That might be an advantage, but dont rely on it too much. If the Star was easy to catch, the Order would have done so already.

True, but I wont be focusing on the Star. Instead, Ill focus on those hes tasked to get the chainlings for him. There might be no way to find the location of the Star, but everything else has to go through normal channels. And when it comes to illegal activities, there are only so many places one could turn to.

Have someone in mind already, do you? The left corner of Hannahs mouth curved up in a smile.

Yes. Unfortunately, I do.

Chapter 364: Alliance of Convenience

Jewels the size of oranges were slowly crushed into a fine powder. Trickling down, the powder was then caught by dozens of fine needles made of moon gold and transformed into glittering threads.

Gem loom, the general standing next to the large device that occupied half the room in the place of the gold sand garden. Dallion couldnt imagine how much effort and money it must have taken to have all that gold dust carefully gathered and moved off to some other room that the general owned and probably never visited. Latest generation. It can practically make thread of any jewel. Except for diamonds, of course.

Quite the device. The general slid his fingers along the side of the massive machine. And I have you to thank for it. The head of a rather large merchant organization bet that you'd fail in the first round. Needless to say that he was wrong. And a good thing too. You can't buy this device with money outside of the imperial capital.

Glad to be of help, Dallion said, keeping his cool. You'll be starting a clothing business, then?

Moons, no. The general laughed. It's just something nice to have. To be honest, I can't even make an outfit for myself with this alone. Gem tailors are so difficult to find. It's not even about the money. Most of them won't be caught dead in a place such as this, although every now and again there are a few that fall out of favor. Who knows? Maybe one day I'll be lucky enough to have them come my way.

Spoken just like a true spider waiting for his next prey. Looking back, Dallion felt outright embarrassed that he thought that he could beat the general in his own game. Just because Dallion was awakened didn't give him the decades of education and experience the other had. The time that Dallion got him to renegotiate his last deal was probably the first time anyone had argued with the general, catching him by surprise. Against competent opponents, the man was likely to take no chances.

I was quite surprised to hear that you wanted to see me. The general went back to the desk in his room. As usual, three furies were in the room as well, one never leaving the general's side. I assume your sudden visit has something to do with the whip blade?

In a way. Dallion swallowed his judgement. As much as he preferred to be dealing with someone else, right now the mirror pool was even less trustworthy. I've come for a new deal.

Ah, so you felt the rush of negotiating, the general rubbed his hands, then made a sign to one of his bodyguards. Instantly, the fury left the room. That's usually how it happens. A single spark is enough to light the fire. It's a pity that more people don't appreciate this art. Ask someone what they think of negotiating and they'll point at marketplace haggling. No, the real art is knowing what you want, its precise cost, and how much you are willing to give to get it. It's more than math, it's more than psychology, and more than using your voice to change my mind. Normally, I would admire such tricks, but you're beyond those games, aren't we?

Dallion had no choice but to nod. Moments later, the door opened. The fury had returned with a rather large tray of refreshments, including three bowls of what appeared to be nuts. The tray was glass containers carefully placed on the desk on coasters of cork so as not to harm the surface of the desk along with two glasses for Dallion and the general.

I can't say I'm surprised. Reaching the top eight is a difficult feat, even for you. I expect you want to reduce the number of rounds by half?

Something like that, Dallion said cautiously. Initially, he was going to ask that he buy the whip sword straight out. However, given that the general was about to offer a better alternative, it was better to wait and see.

Oh? Please, share your thoughts.

There are three things I wish to request.

Three?

And all of them are different in nature. I suspect the price will be quite high, which is why I want you to swear by the Moons, that nothing I'm about to say will be shared by you, your bodyguards, or any other item and echo in this room.

The general stared at Dallion, then started clapping.

Well done. You've learned quite a lot since last time. It will be fun playing with you. Very well, I'm agreeing to a sphere of silence during our negotiations. As long as you won't harm me in any way during the negotiations, we'll enter an item of your choice.

Here will be fine.

As you wish. The general shrugged, then put on a large golden ring on his middle finger.

There's no need for that, Dallion attempted to wave the precaution away.

Quite noble of you, but I'm afraid I insist. Since this is a negotiation, it's to be between us. It's less fun having echoes whisper advice in your ear all the time.

That was sneaky, but expected. There was no way that the general would allow anyone to have an advantage during negotiations. Reluctantly, Dallion took out the blocking ring and put it on.

Now, what exactly do you want? It must have been difficult for you coming here, given your strong opinions of our previous deals.

You're better than the alternatives.

Dallion kept his smile on. Just for the sake of it, he split into five instances, each continuing the conversation in different fashion. All the potential responses were identical. Apparently, the ring that the general had put on, didn't just hide him from the eyes and ears of guardians.

I want to keep the sword upon winning the next round, Dallion said. You've already made a comfortable profit. At this point I doubt that there are many who'd wager against you.

You'd be surprised. The more people lose, the more they think they'll get lucky. Even experienced people believe in the concept of universal luck. That's part of the thrill. True, we're betting difficult to find valuables, but it's the thrill that is important. Win or lose, the thrill remains. So, no. You'll win, your whip blade the moment you reach the top eight.

And there's nothing I could do to change your mind?

Well, if you were to lose the weapon, I'm sure something will come to mind, but why be so negative? Who knows? You might win yet.

Dallion considered asking for a special clause in case of a draw. However, that would be tipping his hand early. Besides, that was just the warmup. This small verbal spar had shown him that the general wasn't willing to be charitable, so Dallion had to adjust his approach based on that.

Let's move on, then. Dallion took an empty glass from his side of the desk.

Immediately, one of the glass containers rose in the air and filled the glass halfway. That was clearly an intimidation attempt, and it would have worked a few weeks ago. Given the stakes, however, Dallion found it rather amusing.

There's a Star cult in the city. Dallion went straight for the throat. The general didn't budge a muscle.

For someone with the generals connections, it wouldnt be difficult to come by the information many of the city guard officers knew. However, taking it so calmly and intently meant that he knew something that the city guard didnt and was waiting to hear the full extent of Dallions knowledge on the matter.

It seems they have been here for months, collecting artefacts, searching for something.

Dealing with cultists isnt worth the risk. The general took his own glass from the desk. As with Dallions, it was immediately filled to the brim. The Moons dont like it when the Star is involved, regardless of the consequences. He took a sip.

You had dealings with the Star himself and you seem to be doing well.

Ah, I see your point. The general put the half full glass in front of him. I suppose that its possible. Quite possible even. A lot of artifacts passed through me. Some of them were rather unsanitary.

Thats what Ive come to ask about. You know where, when, and how the artifacts were moved. If I follow them, Ill be able to find the cult.

And thats a good thing? The general arched a brow. Most people do everything in their power to stay away from Star cultists, even when they have a substantial amount to gain. Trust me, Ive considered the option once or twice. Its just not worth it.

They are planning on unleashing a wild chainling within the city.

I see the news hasnt reached you yet. Should we consider this a freebie?

How generous of you. The general leaned forward on his desk.

They have found a number of Vermillions Tears. I assume you know what the artifacts do?

Of course. I even had one in my possession, but had to let it go for another item. Looking at things, maybe it was a mistake to do so.

Dallion was tempted to agree just to rub it in, but decided it would be better if he remained detached. He had come here asking favors, after all.

Im here to ask for information, and assistance, that will help me track down the cultists in question.

Is that all? the generals words were dripping with sarcasm. Nothing major, then.

If Nil were still able to talk to Dallion, hed no doubt explain in great detail what sort of blunder hed made. It was foolish that he wouldnt make a few mistakesneither of his lives were familiar with the goings on in the world. The former chief of Dallions village had gone to great lengths to ensure that. Seeing how complicated things were, Dallion was starting to see part of the appeal.

I know this isnt the game you wanted, but I dont have the time. Dallion decided to go for the direct approach. The closer he kept to the truth the better. I could have gone to the overseer, but theres no telling whether that wouldnt accelerate things. Stopping the destruction of the city is in both of our interests. Knowing you, you already have a price in mind, so either tell me what it is or stop wasting my time!

Dallion held his breath. This had come out far more forceful than he had imagined, almost as if it was someone else talking. Could it be that he had uncovered a new flaw? Or was this the result of him having dealt with one? Either way, his outburst had the desired effect,

You'll owe me an artifact of my choosing, the general said at last. Not a random trinket, but something specific I have my sights on.

Done.

There was a long moment of silence. Both stared each other in the eyes, as if waiting for a sigh from the Moons to confirm the arrangement. Finally, the general took another sip of his cup.

The cult doesn't have a base of operations, the man said. Not even a meeting item. It's far too risky. Instead, they are constantly in motion. All it takes is for them to be in sight of one another to exchange information. The overseer is the only one who can catch them in the act.

What about the kaleidervistos?

Useless. Sure, you might be able to spot one or two, but that only works once. You saw what happened when you uncovered one. Found any since then?

One.

Probably a new member. Now that they know about you, they'll make sure to be in a different part of the city. That's what makes them difficult to catch. You can spend day and night running through the city and the only thing you'll know is where they aren't.

I figured as much, Dallion lied. He had no idea how star cultists operated. Even so, his plan never relied on tracking them in the first place. The artifacts. They'll need to use the Vermillion keys for this to work. If we can track those down"

It'll take an empath to manage that, the general shook his head. Regardless of the nature of the items, they were acquired legally, so there will be no screaming from their guardians.

Dallion bit his tongue. He was this close to sharing that he was an empath, before realizing that it wouldn't do him any good, not at his current level of empathy. With his range of talking to guardians, he didn't have the time to go search the entire city or to improve his stat. He was so close, and yet so far away.

However, there is a way. A smile formed on the general's face. I might have a way of tracking down the item that was briefly in my possession. Just that one, mind you. Would that be enough?

It'll have to be. Euphoria filled Dallion. Given their haste we can hope that they don't have spares.

I'll have someone see to it. Anything else?

One last thing. I'll need something that will help me break into a guild undetected

Chapter 365: Whisper from the Past

Three artifacts from the wilderness that was the deal Dallion had been forced to make with the general. The only concession Dallion had managed to get was that the original deal regarding the whip blade remained in force if Dallion managed to reach the top eight, or if he was still in the tournament when it was suspended, he would keep it for free. Also, the general had agreed to give

up any monthly rent until Dallion found him the items in question. Considering the mans nature, the news must have shaken him up quite a bit.

The Gremlins Timepiece remained packed by the time Dallion went back. Even so, it felt empty. The Luors were gone, leaving Jiroh to take care of serving the food that Aspan had prepared before his departure. Hannah was taking everything remarkably well, even if it was looking like this was going to be the last night that the inn would serve food. For all intents and purposes, from here on it was only going to be a place for people to rest and have a drink.

Dallion didnt respond. He knew that the shield was right, but preferred not to think about it for the moment. It wasnt that Dallion blamed Eury for the change in their relationship. Rather, it was his reluctance to say goodbye.

There wont be any regrets. Good night.

Sleep came quickly. If there were any dreams, Dallion didnt remember them. The closest to a dream was him being woken up by a chorus of guardians singing together. The chorus was surprisingly chaoticapparently new guardians were musical. It was a good thing too, for there was less than an hour remaining until his fight at the arena.

Slightly panicked, Dallion washed up, then quickly got dressed and prepped his gear. On his way out, he passed by the kitchen out of habit. Unfortunately, the room was like a desert. With Aspan gone, so was breakfast. The only edible things were a few sacks of apples which, although first grade, were nowhere as good as a ready meal. Even so, Dallion grabbed a few, leaving several silvers on the kitchen table.

Dallion wasnt thrilled with the idea, although he did venture into his personal realm to level up. The trial felt remarkably easy compared to what Dallion was expecting. It turned out to be yet another paradox cube in which he had to fight several advanced echoes of himself throughout an ever-changing environment. His reaction was the focus of the trial this time, which proved to be more than enough to advance Dallion to level twenty-six. Dallion spent the point advancing his empathy statthe greater the range at which he could converse with items, the better the odds of him finding the Vermillion artefact later on.

The hidden prize turned out to be of minor significancea crescent sword blueprint, which, while far superior to a standard weapon, couldnt compare to the gear Dallion had in his possession. Half a day had been spent searching for the hidden area, leading to a massive disappointment. Secretly, Dallion hoped he would find an achievement, possibly even one that brought his empathy to nine. Instead, he was forced to leave his realm pretty much empty handed, and head straight to the arena.

With Dallion waking up late, the streets were so full that it was better to use building rooftops to reach the building. Normally, the city guard would frown on this, but since many of them had seen Dallion fight at the arena, they let it go with a nod and a smile. Upon arriving at the arena, the atmosphere changed. In the previous rounds, Dallion was quickly rushed to the massive waiting halls by an organizer's assistant. There he was approached by a well-dressed woman who wore the emblem of the Lord mayors household.

Good morning, sir. The woman bowed. Reaching the level of semi-celebrity status, Dallion was given a taste of things to come, probably to make him more eager to fight. Please follow me. Ill lead you to your waiting room.

I have my own personal waiting room?

Not yet, sir. You'll be sharing one with three other contestants. However, if you manage to reach the next round, you will.

With sixty-four participants remaining, it was expected there would be some benefits before the fight itself. Having only four people in the waiting room was far better than what Dallion had experienced before.

Hardly an issue, Nil. I have something special planned.

The waiting room was already full by the time Dallion got there. Unlike him, his competitors were all wearing full plate armor. Seeing the fine craftsmanship and materials used, Dallion felt relieved he hadn't brought his own creations. Normally, he would have, but Nil had managed to make him reconsider.

Fresh blood for the grinder, one of the people greeted Dallion. He was about the same height, though much broader, equipped with two pairs of swords, all sheathed on his back. Had Dallion seen a drawing of the man, or even a picture he would have laughed how unrealistic the whole thing was. Seeing him in person, though, made it obvious that the man knew exactly what he was doing.

The other two participants weren't any less intimidating. The single woman in the room could be described as a version of March whose entire body was covered up with armor. If she ended up Dallion's opponent, it was going to be one difficult fight. Thankfully, most of her armor wasn't indestructible, although it would still take several strikes with the Nox dagger to make it crack.

The last man was rather rounder closer to Falkner's age, and with a family emblem to match. However, that wasn't the greatest difference; his skin and hair were dark brown. Ever since arriving in this world, Dallion had seen a handful of people of different complexions. The first was Dame Vesuvia, who had led the chainling hunt. The second was Jiroh, who was a thunder fury. Finally, the last was Falkner.

Nobles from the northern part of the province come down here a lot to learn. As I said, a lot of disgraced nobles are sent here. And most often the reason for being disgraced isn't the lack of skills, but the lack of political flexibility. Many believed that the most important thing in life was to achieve the pinnacle of skill and knowledge, and didn't bother to participate in the political games of the families.

If the city survives past the festival, maybe you'll find out.

Falkner was also a noble coming from the north. His father was the Lord Mayor of the city of Arlera, which by all accounts was considered of much higher standing than Nerosal.

Don't be tense, the woman in the room told Dallion. It makes for poor entertainment. The crowds won't like it if a fight finishes too fast.

I didn't know there was a minimum time limit, Dallion replied, trying to make himself appear as arrogant as possible.

There isn't. A vicious smile appeared on the woman's face. It comes naturally.

Looking at her Dallion felt the same way he had when joining March's expedition for the first time. The other people in the room were experienced, awakened who had gotten where they were after

centuries of constant training. They werent from another world, so they didnt rely on any shortcuts, nor were they chosen by a Moon. In short, they could be described as sheer monsters.

Whats your level? the woman asked.

Twenties, Dallion replied vaguely.

So, we have a twenter in the group. The man whod addressed Dallion first snorted. Lucky us. Do you know what they do to twenters moving on? They chew them up and spit them out like a ball of wax.

Cant wait to see who the lucky one will be, the woman laughed. One in three. I like those odds.

Youre from Dherma, the noble said, speaking for the first time. Dallion could feel a thread of eagerness and joy coming from him. It wasnt as strong as to say that he wanted to meet Dallion, but rather rang with the pleasant surprise of meeting a former classmate at the mall years later. The only problem was that Dallion hadnt met him in his life.

Yes, Dallion replied, taking a neutral stance.

My old babysitter told me about you. She said you were reckless, but with potential. As always, she was right.

Excuse me, a well-dressed man walked into the room. The event is about to start. Please make sure you are adequately prepared.

Cant look bad for the crowd, the woman said as she put on her helmet. What are the pairings?

Vanessa Kies of the Triple Moon guild versus Plement Ineu of Incandescent, the assistant said. And Baronet Itella Lanitol versus Dallion Darude.

It was always a possibility that Dallion would face a young and rising noble. Having it happen today, though, wasnt his first choice.

Dont think about it too much. Its not as uncommon as you might think. Nobles are bored people. When they are not rising up the ranks, they like to gossip. Someone probably mentioned it to someone at some event, and it inevitably reached him.

The explanation was plausible, but Dallion felt uneasy. There was something in the way that the noble that had spoken to him that felt off. Taking a moment, Dallion went through the realms of all his clothes, fixing what there was to fix. It wasnt a lot of work, especially with Luxs help, but it remained annoying.

Vanessa and Plement first, the organizer said.

Dallion went in line, standing next to the noble.

If only it were that simple. The weapons Dallions opponent had equipped were unlike anything he had seen before. A pair of maces hung from his belt, each head of which resembled an origami. Back on Earth, one would call it an interesting fashion statement. Here, Dallion felt anxious. Neither Nil nor Gen were able to give any details on the weapon, which was weird by itself. Normally, theyd at least be able to compare it to something else.

Your old babysitter, Dallion whispered. How much did she say about me?

Hardly anything, the noble replied. Just that you had no limitations and were liked by the Green Moon.

Droplets of sweat formed on Dallions forehead. That was too specific. He could accept the fact that the news of his lack of limitations had spread. He could even accept that someone had let it slip that he was from another world. However, no one in the real world was supposed to know his link to the green Moon.

Why does she think so? Dallion asked.

Because she belongs to the Order of the Seven Moons. Also, she saw you face off against a chainling back when you were a semi.

Chapter 366: Making Enemies

Dame Vesuvia was Itellas babysitter? When Dallion had seen her for the first time, back in his village, he was in awe of her power. Among the soldiers, even the Cleric of the Order, she had the presence of a goddess sent by the Archduke to destroy the monsters of the world. The power level between her and Dallion had been so vast that she couldnt even compliment him directly. And now, Dallion was about to face someone of the family under which she had been employed. The thought sent chills down Dallions spine, but also filled him with eagerness and determination. This was an opportunity to see how much he had improved.

While correct, that was an excuse and everyone knew it. Dallion was clueless regarding the others skills. Attempting to get information from the nobles weapons and gear ended in failure. The most he was able to learn was through a brief conversation with the temporary walls of the arena battle grid. If the guardian in question was to be believed, Itella had a strong sense of the base four skills and nothing more. The shape and nature of his weapons indicated that he didnt know carving which was a relief though gave no indication as for the other skills. Combat splitting was a given one didnt reach this stage of the competition without it. Special items were also a certainty, although Dallion wasnt able to sense anything hidden.

The countess marked the start of the round. Immediately fighters dashed forward, clashing against one another as hundreds of instances exploded throughout the arena floor. Dallion and Itella, however, didnt budge.

Two swords and two daggers, the noble said. There was no music in his voice, suggesting he was merely engaging in banter.

One dagger, Dallion corrected. On his part, he put as much reluctance in his words as he could, using his music skill. The other is a gift I keep along.

Some gift. Crystal weapons are rare in the best of circumstances.

The sound of envy resonated through Itellas body. It was clear that he thought the gift was unworthy of someone such as Dallion. However, this was more than a class difference. Dallion had the feeling that his opponents disappointment stemmed from the fact that Dallion didnt know the items worth.

It was a parting gift. A steady dose of fatigue was added to Dallions words. And still, there was no reaction on the part of his opponent. Could it be that Itella was wearing some protection item, or was he humoring Dallion? Either way, Dallion decided not to let the opportunity go to waste. So, Dame Vesuvian was your baby sitter? I cant imagine her in the role.

It was a long time ago. The noble took hold of both of his maces.

This was Dallions cue to draw his whip blade as well.

Ive just one question, Dallion said, this time using his music skill to direct a dose of precision on himself. Youre familiar with the way I fight. Why give me such an opportunity? A taunt of overconfidence was subtly added to the mix.

Because its to my advantage.

The words might have been true, but uttering them was definitely a mistake. Dallion was able to sense a momentary regret in his opponent.

Dallion smiled. If that was the game Itella and his echoes were playing, it was time to force them to tip their hand.

If its to both our advantage, Ill keep on doing it. Dallion outright sang, adding speed and endurance, targeted towards himself. He suspected that his opponent wouldnt allow this to continue for long, and he was very much right.

On the instant, Itella burst into a dozen instances and dashed forward.

Dallion quickly followed suit. Maintaining that number of instances felt somewhat uncomfortable, but with his mind at twenty-five, he was able to maintain them without issue. However, just as he was about to choose the most favorable instance as reality, an invisible force pulled him away, sticking him to a less favorable one.

How did that happen?

Ive no idea, Im afraid. Youll have to ask Vend. Hes the expert. Clearly, hes not the only one who knows a few tricks.

Itella burst into another set of instances, each following up on his attack. Only this time, Dallion seized the moment, extending his whip blade and lashing at the noble just as the combat splitting took place. The attack itself was deflected with ease, but in the process, it cut off all of the other instances, making them fade away.

There was a moments pause. Itella was visibly confused by the outcome. It seemed that Vends trick was new to them as well. It was as if they had just found that they were at a stalemate and were now discussing how to proceed further.

Seems we both have surprises, Dallion said. Pity they negate each other.

What Dallion chose not to add was that instance breaking was rather difficult and required extreme precision. Even after all the practice, getting the moment occurred at best two out of three times. Instance pullingfor lack of a better termappeared much less forgiving. For one thing, it took place in a relatively risk-free period, when everything was already done and failing would cause no harm whatsoever.

Instead of a response, the noble burst into eighteen instances, two-thirds of them charging forward. Dallion expected such a reaction, which was why he was already focusing on the moment. The whip blade slashed through the air, hitting Itella on the side and once again causing his instances to fade away.

Internally Dallion let out a sigh of relief. That was a bit too close for comfort. Once again, Itella paused, reassessing the situation.

I've been waiting for this, the shardfly replied.

Dallion rushed forward, pulling back the elements of the whip blade. When he was five feet away, he performed a piercing attack, extending the weapon once more. The speed at which the tip of the blade moved was far faster than it had been before. Thanks to his stats, the noble managed to twist and leap aside just before the weapon reached him. However, the attack didn't end there. Controlled by the shardfly, the segments of the blade turned on their own, matching his actions. It seemed inevitable that they would hit him in the middle of the breastplate. Before that could happen, however, the maces Itella was holding transformed as well.

Unfolding like an origami, the weapons shifted from being maces to axes with heads large enough to block the attack. The force pushed the noble a few steps back, but even so, no real damage was done.

Choosing not to risk splitting into instances, Itella continued the fight, relying exclusively on his weapons abilities. There was no doubt that he had done a lot of training, since his skills matched the fighting style to the letter. The ease with which he transformed the shape of the maces into something that suited him was admirable. It was as if he were doing calligraphy, but with weapons. If Gleam wasn't controlling Dallion's weapon, Dallion would have already lost.

Feeling confident, Dallion drew his Nox dagger. Holding it was quite uncomfortable with the armadil shield strapped to his hand, but thanks to the Vihrogon he could be confident that neither would slide off. Waiting for the precise moment Dallion attacked. The goal wasn't to wound his opponent, but rather to damage his weapon just enough to negate its shapeshifting ability. And to Dallion's surprise, he succeeded.

Itella moved his left weapon in front of him, having its head unfold to the size of a buckler. To everyone's surprise, the dagger's blade passed through, piercing it like a nail going through a sheet of metal foil. A scream only Dallion could hear filled the air—the pain of a guardian that had just been wounded.

The noble was just as surprised, if not more. His immediate reaction was to leap back a dozen feet, shielding the damaged weapon from additional harm. For a moment Dallion felt utter terror resonating through him.

The whip blade fragments pulled back, forming a solid blade once more. Several seconds passed in silence, both opponents looking at each other. Dallion could feel the hesitation emanating from the other. He wanted to continue the fight. Even after the slight mishap with the weapon, he had the skills and the weapon to achieve victory. However, the reluctance and fear were greater—not fear of Dallion, but something else.

You have this round, the noble said and turned around.

Half of the arena went silent. The spectators weren't pleased to be denied a spectacle, but didn't want to boo a noble of such importance either. Waves of confusion filled the air, followed by whispers and theories about what had happened.

Congratulations, dear boy. You've won your fourth battle.

I can't say that I'm sure. Very likely it might come down to a trivial matter such as damaging a valuable heirloom. Not that I understand how Nox did that. He can be quite the handful at times, but even so, I doubt he should have affected a magical weapon in such fashion. I guess we'll never know.

While winning in this fashion felt like cheating, it was still a victory. Also, from what Dallion could tell, Itella's weapon was only damaged. Even if in pain, the guardian was still alive.

Want me to mend your weapon? Dallion asked. I'll be glad to.

The noble glared at him over his shoulder, then kept walking.

Chapter 367: The Final Expedition

And thank you very much for your performance, the organizer said with a bow after she had handed Dallion a large ingot of sea iron, along with the usual basket of water fruit. May the Moons bring you victory in tomorrow's round.

Thanks. Dallion forced a smile.

Winning in such fashion didn't feel satisfying at all, not to mention his thoughts were still lingering on the state of the guardian he had wounded. Getting a noble upset, even if it wasn't through any real fault of his own, was understandable. Having hurt a guardian in the process made his heart ache. It was as if the vine wrapped around it had tightened and grown thorns.

The joke was silly to the extreme, and yet it managed to get a mental chuckle from Dallion. Rather than the humor itself, it was the dryads intonation that had pulled it off. Dallion envied how calm and carefree the guardian remained, even after everything he had been through. If Dallion was subjected to the same experience, there's no telling what he would have turned into.

Sea iron was said to be the least valuable of the seven special metals, which ironically led to it almost never being used for weapons and armor. The people who could afford it, always had a tendency to prefer more durable materials such as sun gold, sky steel, or sky silver. Sea iron was rather used as a construction material sometimes for buildings, but more often for device components. It was a chilling coincidence that Dallion had a pocket watch mostly of the same metal among his belongings.

Equipped with his rewards of the day, Dallion left the arena and headed straight for the Icepicker guildhall. No one recognized him as he walked along the streets; most of the crowds familiar with him would remain at the arena, waiting for the follow-up fights. This gave Dallion the perfect opportunity to sneak into the sword realm.

Dallion gobbled down the water fruits with no regard to taste. The experience was refreshing, but he didn't particularly enjoy it. Within his realm, he could hear July sigh. If one could say that the echoes in Dallion's real were equivalent to personality traits, July was the one who liked to enjoy calm and the finer things in life—mostly sunsets and dawns in Harp's domain, along with Dallion's familiars and guardians.

I need to get through this,

Strictly speaking, this was a lie. There were alternatives that Dallion had chosen to ignore. Even so, he was committed to his path. He had warned his guild and through them, the countess and the overseer, along with the entire city guard. No doubt they were doing everything in their power to ensure the survival of Nerosal. Even so, Dallion feared it might not be enough. Worse, he was almost certain that cultists had infiltrated their ranks. If a follower of the Star had managed to enter the Order of the Seven Moons, they could pretty much be anywhere, even among the nobility. That was a chilling thought, and it terrified him. It was like the hunt for the copyette all over again.

Once all the water fruit was eaten, Dallion placed the basket on the street and kept on walking. The occasional item would shout out a greeting or two as he did. Apparently, the sign had spread the word a little too well.

Casually, Dallion took out the kaleidervisto and examined his items. There were no echoes in the device the general had given him and none in the prize ingot. The crowd around him was a different matter. A quick glance revealed more echoes than people, which was impressive in itself. Thankfully, there weren't any chainlings in sight.

Good luck, dear boy. Whatever happens, may it be for the best.

With that, Dallion put on the blocker ring. Silence reigned once more, but a different sort of silence. Dallion could still hear the noises of the street, the chatter of people, the stall owners, yelling to attract customers to their stands. However, there was a deep mental silence that he missed. Taking his breath, Dallion then put on a second ring, given to him by the general. In addition to blocking any and all links to his realm, this made him completely invisible to echoes and guardians. From their perspective, he would be nothing more than air.

Reaching the door of the guild, Dallion paused for a few seconds. Half of him was pulling him back from stepping through the threshold, while another was urging him to do so as quickly as possible. This was the place that had accepted him after he had come to Nerosal. This was where he had received help, good advice, money he had made more than a few friends here, not to mention learned all he knew about awakening. They had treated him like family, and now he was betraying them, and a day after disappointing them in such a spectacular fashion.

Nil would probably have said something along the lines that everything in life was a choice, but sometimes the good choice was only one.

Dallion focused. There were a number of sounds that echoed throughout the building, although most of them came from outside. The rest seemed to come from the basement. Apparently, guild management didn't think that Dallion would do something reckless so soon after being warned not to.

On the verge of running, Dallion went up the stairs. On the way, he gripped the device that the general had given him. As he did, it seemed to get warmer. From what the general said, that was normal. The device which Dallion kept calling a pocket watch was supposed to create guardian instances. Back on Earth, that would have been classified somewhere in the field of theoretical quantum physics. From what Dallion understood, thanks to it, he would be able to trigger an alternative state of a certain condition. Said in brief, he would be able to unlock a locked door.

However, he wouldn't do so by tampering with the lock, but rather create an instance in which the door wasn't locked in the first place. The device was quite rare and, as one would expect, incredibly expensive. There was only one catch it would only work once, and Dallion had to be sure not to tamper with the door before triggering it. Doing so would lock the instance into reality, rendering the use of the device useless.

There wasn't a soul all the way to the room of the sword. Holding his breath, Dallion activated the device, winding it until there was a loud click. Once done, he counted to five and pressed the handle.

The door opened without issue, as if it had never been locked. Normally, this would have been a time of astonishment, but right now Dallion was low on time. Rushing forward, he grabbed the side of the blade with his bare hand.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

The room around him disappeared, replaced by the starting temple of the realm. The major difference was that this time Dallion felt a deep chill as the heat was drawn out of his body. Thankfully, moments later, all his three familiars emerged, and Lux instantly proceeded to wrap him in a layer of warmth.

I don't believe it, Gleam said, fluttering above Dallion's shoulder. You risked everything for this?

Just a minor setback, Dallion thought. In truth, if they hadn't emerged as soon as they had, this would have been to a very poor start. I didn't think it would be winter.

Maybe you should have asked.

That much was true. Dallion made a note to think further ahead in future. He was also extremely thankful to his echoes who undoubtedly told the familiars to emerge as soon as they did. Strictly speaking, that was always part of the original plan the blocker rings had cut off all links between Dallion and his realm. However, his echoes were still able to know his thoughts.

Mrrow. Nox leaped directly onto Dallion's shoulder. Gone were the times when he would claw his way up like a little kitten. The effect, though, was the same.

I didn't know you hated cold, buddy. Dallion petted the crackling on the head.

He's just spoiled, Gleam grumbled. That's what happens when you pamper him.

Nox's ears flicked a few times, although the familiar chose not to react.

So, what's the plan? the shardfly asked. We wait for the whale to show up, or we fly on our own? Mind you, I'm not sure what sailing in this weather would be like. I'm used to the cold, but I don't think you are.

We'll wait for the whale. Dallion glanced at the armadil shield. He, too, was supposed to join in his original form, but for some reason he hadn't done so. Not that it was a big issue, Dallion could have one of the familiars go back to his realm and fetch him at any point. The dryads' reluctance, however, was somewhat concerning. Let's see what it's like out there.

The outside seemed even colder than the inside of the temple. Dallion wasn't able to feel a thing, thankfully, but just witnessing the strength of the blizzard made him shiver. It was outright savage.

He doubted that any living creature would dare remain in the open, even cracklings, if Nox was any indication.

Is it like this in the wilderness? Dallion asked Gleam.

Sometimes. Sometimes its worse, sometimes its better. It all depends. Mind you, I havent been in the wilderness in a while, so things might have changed.

Will this affect your illusions?

If the wind keeps being this strong, it might.

So, dust had its limitations as well. Not the way Dallion pictured illusions working, but he could understand it.

Will you be able to mask the whale?

Not a chance. Even if the weather was perfect, Id only be able to cover a small portion of him. Help me advance a few levels and I might, but until you do, this is what you get.

Its fine, Gleam. Its more than Ill need.

Standing at the temples entrance, Dallion waited. Soon enough the vine whale appeared. The blizzard made the creature next to impossible to spot, though not the emotions within it. Brightest of all was annoyance, glowing deep blue. The minion didnt appreciate being asked to do chores below the cloud cover.

Lux, get us up there, Dallion ordered.

The firebird thrust him up, causing snow to bombard Dallions face and body with such ferocity that red rectangles appeared. The damage was minimal, although it made Dallion move the armadil shield in front of his face. Sensing he had done something wrong, Lux slowed down.

Its fine, Lux, Dallion shouted, his words almost inaudible due to the howl of the wind. You can heal me later. For now, just get us on the vine whale.

You really are soft, Gleam said, quite amused. Now I see why they like you so much.

I fail to see the logic. Dallion moved the shield nearer to his face in an effort to prevent drains of flying ice from trickling in from the side.

For someone this soft to set out to do this, you must have considerable conviction and determination. That counts for a lot. Im glad I decided to risk it on you.

Thanks, Gleam! Dallion could only hope that once this was over, others would feel the same way.

Chapter 368: City of Minotaurs

The winds much fiercer above the clouds, though, thankfully, the snow was gone. The vine whale had used its vines to make a shelter for Dallion and his familiars. Between that and Luxs flames, Dallion was completely shielded from the elements. However, the concerns remained. In order to get the crown, Dallion was going to have to convince the strongest guardian in the realm to let him take it.

You wont be able to convince him, Vihrogon said. The armadil shield had shifted to his dryad form and wasnt happy about it. The crown has a much greater significance than the gems. He wont just give it away.

You didnt think so last time, Dallion said. Gems for two of the hidden skills that could be used by anyone. Isnt that as big as it gets?

Theres more to the world than skills. The dryad sighed. Back when I was young and still in the real world, I was nothing special. Well, thats not exactly true. I was awakened, which was a rarity, but I didnt have any real ambitions. Life was nothing but one big party for me and everyone I know. A few thought I could become a Moon Cleric, though most didnt bother. It was one of those things, they said: a society that had reached its peak was bound to decline for a while before it could move on again.

Vihrogon looked to the side. As he did, the vines shifted to form an opening from which the sky could be seen.

Then, the winds of change appeared. In a few years, they engulfed the entire empire. I too was swept in and joined a notion that I had seen as ludicrous before. Do you know what the twi-crown represents? the dryad asked.

Dallion shook his head.

Absolute power. The legend goes that long before, when the dryads were still weak in the aftermath of the previous great war. Pretty much we were the last big power standing in a time of massive power vacuum. The only reason was that we werent considered a threat, unlike the other races. Same with the humans, incidentally. Our military skill was quite lacking. That was why the first crown was created a gift from a master craftsman, and an otherworld if the stories were to be believed. Its point was to grant one of our rulers the skills to lead us, and the world, forward in the troubling years ahead. Since then, it became a symbol of royalty and achievement. For one to have a twi-crown meant that the person was chosen as a dread leader capable of determining their fate.

There was a pause.

I never wanted the twi-crown, the dryad continued. Even when I believed in dryad run future, I knew I was not the one to lead it.

So, you followed it?

I followed it. The dryad nodded then turned around, staring Dallion straight in the eye. Just as I followed the person wearing it.

Theres no one left to follow here. You heard the third guardian this place has been empty for centuries, at least.

The twi-crown was meant for a dryad. The guardian will do anything in its power to keep it from falling into anyone elses hands.

What about the help I did in this realm? Wont that count for anything?

He might not attack you when he learns youre searching for the crown. However, in no circumstances will he let you have it.

What about you? Dallion asked.

That was the next big unknown. If the shield had been set to follow the one who wore the crown once, he might do so again. This was a different crown in a different realm, but the principle remained the same. If the crown was so important, it was left to ensure that the person who claimed it had the skills and authority to lead the banished against the Star in an attempt to restore the dryad race. Even after being banished, Vihrogon probably felt the same way. The question was which was stronger: his loyalty as a guardian or his loyalty to his former race.

I'll protect you, that's my task now, the dryad replied. But that's as far as I go. If you fight him, you'll have to do it yourself. You'll need to prove you're worth following.

It took close to an hour for the whale to pass over the main mountain of the world. Once it did, the weather started to change somewhat. The cold was still there, along with the snow, but the winds weren't as vicious by far. By the time they went over the valley, would could almost call it a perfect winter day. That was, until the minion crashed through the layer of illusion. Air cracked like glass, breaking up into fragments only to reassemble again once the creature had flown through. Warm currents swept through. It was as if the whale had left a blizzard to enter a volcano, and there was smoke black smoke that formed clouds but swarms of crackling insects as far as the eye could see.

I thought we got rid of them? Dallion said. What happened?

You helped, the whale replied. The fourth guardian took over the coast, pushing the cracklings into the sky. It's not easy to get rid of them, but it's not that difficult to move them around. Once you destroyed the linchpin.

That's a good thing, then?

No, but it's different.

What does that mean? Dallion asked. Unsurprisingly, Nil didn't answer. That was the greatest drawback of wearing a blocking ring. It also exposed how much Dallion relied on the beings in his realm. Unlike the past, though, he had picked up enough to know what was going on.

Will it be easier getting to the last temple?

I'll try to get you as close as I could. Afterwards, it's all you.

Good enough. What about the clouds?

That's the easy part.

Flying straight forward, the minion went through the clouds of cracklings like a needle through cotton. None of the insects even bothered attacking, moving out of the way if they could. Dallion could tell that Gleam itched to take out a few of them. For some reason, the shardfly seemed quite aggressive this time around. It was possible that the shardfly didn't want to share the sky with anyone else, although Dallion felt there was more to it. Simply put everyone was tense as part of Dallion they knew the importance of what was to come, and were expressing it in different fashion.

Nothing serious happened as the whale reached the coast. There were a lot more patches of green, letting it travel on quite easily. As he ventured further, though, the attacks began. An insignificant nuisance at first, they gradually grew to the point that not only the land whale had to get involved, shooting vines around as if it were shedding fur.

Don't fight them, Dallion ordered his shardfly.

Why not? It'll be much faster if

I don't want anyone seeing what you can do.

I can take care of that. They won't even know.

I can't take the chance, Gleam. Not now.

Dallion could feel the familiars' rage. Her wings moved so fast that they appeared still. Then, reluctantly, she perched on his shoulder. There was going to be a time for her to fight, but this wasn't it. Still, there was one thing that she was right about: the whale wasn't going to get them to the city fast. Barely had they passed half the distance to the hilt, and already the resistance was significant. Any further and the whale wouldn't make it.

Lux, I'll have to count on you, Dallion said, standing up from his seat of vines. Shield.

I know the drill, Vihrogon said, reverting to his shield state, then extended a cocoon around Dallion. On cue, Lux surrounded the metal sphere and lifted it up.

The vine shelter unraveled, releasing the sphere into the open. Then, moments later, it shot forward. Within minutes Dallion was able to traverse a distance which had taken him hours. It wasn't comfortable in the least. It took every ounce of strength he had, even with his increased body level. Not to mention that the landing was more of an impact than a landing. Red rectangles stacked in front of his face, indicating a health decrease of two-thirds. The good news, however, was that he had arrived.

Thanks, Dallion muttered. The metal cocoon disappeared as the shield went back to its dryad form. Likewise, Lux leapt onto Dallion again, starting the gradual healing process.

Don't mention it, the dryad said. This is where the hard part begins. You still need to make it through the city and into the temple.

Why is the temple in the city, anyway? Dallion stood up. He was feeling quite wobbly.

Because that provided the best protection the realm has. If someone can get the two-crown from here, they deserve to keep it.

Nox, do you sense any cracklings about?

The crackling yawned, indicating that everything was fine. In itself that was a relief. It meant that Dallion didn't have to fear in the immediate future. Or wasn't there? Surrounding him were fields and forests; and while that was a clear indication that the area wasn't corrupted, it also meant that it probably had its share of animals, including predators. Given how realms worked, they were more likely going to be far fiercer than anything he'd faced at the beginning.

Dallion drew his harpsisword. The first few chords were of curiosity. The next for calm and fear. After all, the best way to win a battle was not to start it in the first place. The curiosity was meant to make creatures approach so Dallion got a good sense of what he'd be facing, while the other emotions made them leave without engaging.

Nothing but hares and sparrows came into sight. That was quite promising, suggesting that there were no larger creatures in the area. At the same time, it seemed rather unusual.

Any chance you remember anything of this realm? Dallion asked. This area, specifically?

Not much.

Not even what sort of creatures are nearby?

Its not creatures you have to worry about. Its the guardian. It has the power to keep animals away from you. There has to be a reason. And there arent too many of those.

The two most likely reasons for the guardian to keep Dallion safe were to talk to him or to challenge him. With Dallion being an empath now, both were just as valid.

Which way to the city? Dallion asked.

There, Vihrogon pointed at the forest. Should take a few hours at most. Keep your eyes open, though.

Always do. Everyone, dont do anything unless were in real danger. He went towards the forest.

The walk turned out to be much shorter than expected. Not only didnt Dallion come across anything scarier than a beehive, but he also barely had entered the forest when a clearing became visible. The moment he reached it, Dallion was able to see the city walls. As with the other city, they too were made entirely of wood. The difference was that unlike all previous cities, this seemed inhabited, and not by scavenger groups passing through. Even from this distance Dallion could hear the rhubarb of people talking, feel the smells of burning food and cooked food, see the emotions of hundreds of entities beyond the walls.

I thought the dryads had died out, Dallion noted.

They have.

Then what are these? Minotaurs?

Within moments, he found that to be the case. However, these minotaurs were very different from the ones hed seen before. They were wearing far more sophisticated clothes and weapons. One could easily mistake them for the citys inhabitants. Now, all of a sudden, the lack of animals in the nearby area made a lot more sense. Simultaneously, new questions were raised.

Why has the guardian let them live here? Dallion asked.

Cities are like glassesnever pleasing when theyre empty. It seems that someone wanted to have some company.

Clearly. Well, lets hope theres room for one more.

Chapter 369: The Dawn Dryad

There many things of wonder that Dallion had seen since arriving in the world. A city of minotaurs was definitely the most outlandish and magical that he had seen by far. The creatures were nothing like the minotaurs nomads that were caught during the first expedition. They were for lack of a better word civilized. Everything from clothes to tools, stalls and buildings were specifically crafted to suit the physiology of the species and nothing else.

Minotaur children ran around, curious to get a closer look at Dallion. It was just like each time a travelling merchant arrived in Dherma village. Back then, merchants and the occasional monk from the Order were the only contact with the outside world. Dallion remembered well the feelings of

curiosity and excitement he felt in every such instance, before the limiting echo faded the memories away. The same emotions were glowing in everyone around.

They dont get many outsiders here, do they? Dallion whispered as he walked on.

Not humans, the dryad replied.

In contrast to Dallion, Vihrogon was treated as something quite average. Even Nox received a lot more attention, which he was more than happy to ignore while pretending to snooze on Dallions shoulder.

Youve the first of your kind that has come here.

That much was clear, as was the fact that Dallion was expected. It didnt go unnoticed that no one tried to block his path, not to mention that there werent any guards. The only weapons and armor gear Dallion could see were better equipped for hunting than anything else.

No guards? Dallion turned to Vihrogon.

Apparently they arent needed, the dryad replied. Theres nothing that could invade this place.

Is that speculation, or have you been reading the dryad scrolls a bit?

Observation. If this is the only functioning settlement and the land around it isnt corrupted by cracklings, there wouldn't be anyone strong enough to attack. At worst, the guardian would send a few echoes to deal with the nuisance and call it a day.

That made sense. Thinking back, Dallion remembered that the hilt of the sword was in pretty good condition compared to the blade. This part of the realm was built to last. That was why it had been so important for Dallion to help out protecting the vulnerable area in the middle. A sword ceases to be a blade when snapped in two, no matter the condition of the hilt. Possibly that was the reason Dallion was treated so well here.

Several stall sellers offered to share a treat with Dallion, but he chose to refuse; he could smell the contents just by passing by and they werent something that would agree with him. The dryad had no such qualms, sampling pretty much everything offered.

You really like that? Dallion asked.

Its food. The first Ive had in a long time.

What about all the stuff in your tower?

Tricks of the mind. Just like you cant fill you belly by eating things in a common item, neither can I. A world item makes me experience the sensation of eating same as I did before being banished.

Given the smells, Dallion wasnt sure that was a good thing.

How many do you think there are? Dallion asked as they moved on.

About a million, Vihrogon said between bites. Maybe more. Enough to two-thirds of a city.

Why two-thirds?

Because the guardian wouldnt allow anyone to go beyond the central ring.

The city was divided in three rings and seven districts, similar to depictions of Atlantis Dallion had seen back on Earth. The outer ring was composed of four districts. Since long lost their purpose, they were now one vast residential and working area. Shops of all kinds were in between, along inns, taverns, and the occasional forge. Again, one thing was distinctly missing the lack of barracks, guard towers, or anything of the sort. Even with a lack of enemies, there was no reason why the buildings should have been destroyed, and yet they were.

The second ring had two districts. According to Vihrogon, one of them was reserved for scholars, and the other for orchards. Given that in both cases the buildings were made of solid wood, Dallion had no idea what he was going through, especially with minotaurs living there, just like in the outer ring.

The central ring was the place that Dallion had to reach. By the looks of it was something like a royal district and had definitely kept its look. Structures rose twice or even three times taller than any other, shaming the surrounding buildings with their majesty. Wooden statues and reliefs covered the building walls, creating whole scenes. There were armies led by powerful leaders, Moon Clerics praying to a single moon, and many other things that Dallion knew nothing about.

Dallions first thought was to get Lux to fly him around the entire ring so he could get a glimpse of the big picture. However, even that wouldnt have been enough. The decorations continued along the walls of the individual buildings, continuing further in.

Itll take you days to see everything, a new voice said. A dryad had appeared several steps ahead. His clothes were simple, very much like the ones that Dallion used to have when he was back in his village.

Youre an echo, Dallion said.

You can distinguish between them clearly now. The dryad tilted his head. And not just because of the rectangles. You can actually see the difference.

For a moment, there was something different, as if the dryad was a reflection cut out from a mirror and stuck into reality. It only lasted for a few seconds. No sooner had the dryad made the comment, when the differences disappeared.

Dont worry, youll get better with practice. The dryad turned around and walked along the street into the central ring. Come on, hes waiting.

Dallion glanced at Vihrogon.

Your familiars and guardians are welcome as well, the echo said without looking back. Even the crackling.

He wont try anything, the armadil shield said calmly.

How can you be sure?

Because hell lose.

The deeper they went into the center of the city, the more Dallion felt something was wrong. This wasnt coming from his own feelings, however, but from everything around him. There was a deep sadness and regret in the buildings themselves that last grain of hope one had despite knowing it

wasnt to be trusted. Dallion had seen a lot of devastation and decay caused by cracklings within the realms, but nothing compared to this.

This place was at war, he said. Wasnt it?

Nearly every part of this realm has been at war for thousands of years, the echo replied, deliberately avoiding the actual question. The materials were chosen specifically to delay the appearance of cracklings, but after so much time, its inevitable that the pests appear.

Nox cracked an eye open, still on Dallions shoulder. He didnt appreciate the tone, but knew better than to react.

Theres shrapnel of emotions all over this district. Dallion looked around, examining the nearby buildings. You covered up the damage, but you couldnt get rid of the fragments that drilled into the wood. Thats why no one lives here. Its not that they dont want to, its because they cant.

The echo stopped. Dallion saw a cluster of sadness form within him, then quickly wither away. The memory of the event undoubtedly caused strong feelings. Even so, the echo was skilled in suppressing them. That suggested that the actual guardian was even stronger.

A precision strike, Vihrogon noted. They didnt want to destroy the city, just cripple its leadership. One could call it civilized.

There was nothing civilized, or merciful, the echo said beneath its breath. On either side. The future of a race buried, an entire realm destroyed, and all because of an argument so petty that its beyond belief. That was the reason the whole realm fell into ruin. Not some scheme of the Star, not some grand and important conflict, just rivalry to earn the title first among equals.

That was the reason for the war?

Probably one of them, Vihrogon said. He seemed annoyingly carefree, considering the situation. There always are dozens of reasons and dozens of pretexts. This is the one that hurt him the most. Thats who hes

Quite brave for a sword marshal to set foot in his own prison, the echo interrupted. There were times when that would have ended badly. The hatred towards them and the star were one of the main forces that united the nobles of the different cities all those years. Had you arrived while any of them were still around The second echo looked at Dallion. Its this way to the temple.

It was unusual to see the armadil shield hated so much. In the current age, he was the most chill of all the guardians Dallion had seen. Clearly, the local guardian thought differently.

The feelings of sadness intensified, growing to dread. Dallion was forced to recite the names of the Moons non-stop in his mind in order to counter the effects. Walking became utter torture. The streets became smaller and windier, closer to a maze than roads. Dallion felt his ears were about to pop. Then, suddenly, all surrounding emotions disappeared.

Its just round the corner, the echo replied, then vanished as well.

Dallion hesitated. If this was a show of force, it had succeeded in impressing him. If there was to be a fight for the twi-crown, it was going to be fierce. Regardless of what the armadil shield claimed, trying to convince the guardian to just hand over the gem stone was looking like the better option.

Gleam? Dallion whispered.

Still here. The shardfly had wrapped herself in illusion ever since they had approached the city. To everyone else, she appeared like an earring on Dallions right ear.

Ill need you soon.

I bet. This ones strong.

Strong as the one who caught you?

Maybe. Your dryad is strong as well, so it should be okay.

The road had become a twisting alley barely wide enough for a single person. After turning the corner, though, Dallion suddenly found himself in a wide-open space. It was as if someone had made a clearing among the buildings and placed the stone temple within it.

This was the final temple. Slightly larger than the previous ones, its roof was shaped similar to a cross, or a crude hilt.

The palace was supposed to be there, Vihrogon said. The guardian just demolished and moved the temple here, visible above ground.

Maybe he didnt have any choice.

Everyone has a choice, a soft voice said, echoing throughout the air. Sometimes theres just one good option. In this case, cutting down the palace was a slow and painful process, but one that was necessary. It was the target of the bolts of emotion, and sadly, the citys rulers and defenders failed to do anything about it. By the time I could react, the damage was done. I couldnt even help in the counterattack, because that would be attacking another guardian, so I had to watch.

Nox leapt off Dallion's shoulder. Even he sensed a fight at hand.

Uncertainty made Dallion put his right hand on the hilt of his harpsisword. A belief that he could talk his way out of this kept him from pulling it out.

The doors of the temple opened wide, revealing the actual guardian. He was a lot different from his echo. Dressed in ebony plate armor, the dryad looked more like an army officer than anything else. A wooden rapier was in his hand.

WORLD GUARDIAN - IZGREV

Species: DAWN DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Stats: 100% HP

Skills:

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

- Carving
- Root Burst
- Leaf shield

Weak Spots: joints

So youre here to claim the twi-crown? the dryad asked.

Is it obvious? Dallion asked, adding calm in his words.

Theres no other reason for anyone to enter the world. Its not fit for living, but its ideal for looting.

I just want the gems. Im not here to claim to be a ruler or someone to lead.

The gems make the crown, the guardian said. And the crown can only be given to someone considered worthy. So, the dryad drew his rapier. Will you take this opportunity to show if youre worthy?

Chapter 370: Echo Combat

COMBAT INITIATED

Just as the armadil shield had suspected, there was nothing that Dallion could say to convince the final sword guardian to surrender the crown. Logic, pleading, even music had hit a brick wall. There was no changing Izgrevs mind on the matter. The only way forward was to win.

In an instant, both Izgrev and Vihrogon charged forward, bursting into echoes as they did. It was no longer one person fighting another, but rather two squads clashing.

Dallion concentrated, focusing on each individual dryad. The speed of their attack made it difficult, though no longer impossible. It was like watching layers of a battle. Each side had a specific plan in mind, working in perfect unison like a single organism.

The echo had often talked about a single awakened acting like an army. At the time, Dallion thought it to be a metaphor, but now he saw that it was the real thing. In order to create so many echoes, each of the dryads had to have their mind in the fifties, at least, not to mention decades of training. Advanced strategies were involved. Dallion was able to recognize several attack and defense patterns, though there were many more he was completely unaware of. Every second, several echoes completed their combat sequence, using the benefits of the skill to the benefit of the entire squad. Everything was planned to the last detail.

Do they look equally matched? Dallion asked.

No, Gleam replied. Your dryad is stronger, but hes restricted to his current level.

In that case, lets help him win my battle for me, Dallion drew his harpsisword. Gleam, be my shield.

The shardfly returned to her normal form, then started flying around Dallion at tremendous speed, creating a belt of flying razors around him. Her speed wasnt much greater than that of the echoes fighting, but it was enough to make anyone nearby cautious. Blue flames burst around Dallion. Lux had done his best to keep them hidden until now, hiding under Dallions clothes. Now that the fight had begun, the firebird extended its wings from the Dallions back granting him the ability to fly once more.

Nox, can you split? Dallion asked.

The crackling yawned demonstratively, as if the question was an insult to his abilities, then lazily burst into four cublings the same number as his level. Each of the new cublings looked at Nox in a slightly different fashion. It wasn't much, but Lux was impressed beyond belief, to the point that Dallion could feel eagerness pulsing through the firebirds very being. It was clear that Dallion would have to find a way to level up his other familiars as well, and the sooner the better.

Okay Dallion played a few chords of the harp, each infusing him and his familiars with the sensation of speed and freedom. Lets join in.

It was quite the loss that Nil couldn't take part in the fight. The old echo would have no doubt been able to provide quite a lot of invaluable advice. Thankfully, a lot of the teaching had remained, telling Dallion how to best act. Since he had no chance of winning against an opponent of such a level, he would do the next best thing: locate the echo that was key to Izgrevs tactic and kill it. While a single echo could easily be replaced, taking out the right one could cause the entire squad tactic to crumble, allowing the armadil shield to push on to victory.

Focus, Dallion thought. Pain was starting to creep in, pressing against Dallions temples. Ignoring it, Dallion looked closer at the battle taking place. The first thing he was able to see was the full set of motions of every echo. That done, he pulled back, trying to see them as a group. It didn't take long for a specific pattern to emerge. The pattern was very different from the guild raids or battles that Dallion had participated in back on Earth. The principle, however, was the same. The strategy of both sides was clear: the temple guardian was on the attack, aiming to defeat the armadil shield, who in turn focused on standing his ground.

That one, Dallion whispered, then rushed forward at one of the echoes on the periphery of the combat action.

At first glance, the target seemed irrelevant, just an echo with no specific role. However, if Dallion had read the situation correctly, that was the lynchpin of the entire attack. While not involved directly with anything crucial, the position of the echo kept two of Vihrogons own in check, causing them to fight at a fraction of their efficiency. If Dallion could eliminate the link, a domino effect would follow, giving his armadil shield an overwhelming advantage.

Summoning his dartbolt, Dallion shot a bolt in the general direction of the echo, then let go of the weapon, summoning his harpsisword once more. The echo in question evaded the bolt without issue, starting moving so as to complete a guard skill sequence. That was precisely what Dallion was counting on. After spending so much time using guard himself, he knew most of the patterns by heart. Seeing the one his target used, he quickly stepped to intercept.

The harpsisword split the air along a diagonal arc. While fast, the attack was by no means a threat for the dryad echo who simply evaded it without even bothering to parry. In doing so, though, he allowed Dallion to stop closer.

Gleam! Dallion ordered.

The butterfly darter forward, like a star of twisting razors. This propted the guardian to react. Roots burst from the ground, forming a wall between the shardfly and the targeted echo. Several of them were instantly cut through as Gleam continued forward, but for every layer her wings sliced, two more appeared.

Lux! Dallion shouted while he jumped off the ground and right on time to avoid a new set of roots that emerged beneath him. That was too close for comfort. Apparently, dryads thought alike: when facing one not of their race, they couldn't help but use roots and vines.

And just as one set of vines emerged, so did a second, tangling into them. Pretty much whatever the temple guardian could do, Vihrogon could as well.

Nox, it's you! Dallion shouted. Lux take me close.

The crackling was the first to act. All four copies of it leapt through and on the roots like a cat would. Vines shot out of the roots, shooting at Nox, but the cat avoided them by a series of merges and splits. It was like water running through a room.

Under normal circumstances, the attack would have a marginal chance of success at best. Taken in isolation, none of Dallion's actions were able to do any damage whatsoever. However, when in combination, they were just enough to get the echo off balance. Having to deal with Dallion and Vihrogons echoes simultaneously was a straining process, ripe for Dallion to take advantage.

Using his acrobatic skills to swirl in the air, Dallion made a series of piercing strikes at the dryad.

A shield of leaves appeared on the echo's arm just in time to block the strikes, although Dallion's momentum forced it to take a step back. Taking advantage, Nox leapt, fangs bared, at the dryad's side. The presence of a crackling caused a sudden surge of animosity between the guardian and all his echoes. Without mercy, the echo near Nox turned around, slashing at the cracklings with a rapier. Two of Nox's copies were instantly sliced out of existence along with red rectangles indicating that the familiars' health had been reduced by fifty percent. One of the other Noxes, though, managed to claw at the weapon. Two claws were enough to snap it in two.

Confusion turned to concern. The dryad echo reached out to summon another weapon, and that proved to be a mistake. The shardfly, which had been all but forgotten until now in the illusionary guise of a root fragment, emerged inches from the echo's chest, then thrust forward. The moment her razor-sharp wings sliced through the echo's clothes, it disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Nox, get out of here! Dallion ordered. Deep inside, he was overjoyed. He had managed to defeat an echo of the final guardian. Some would call the task unimpressive, trivial even, but for Dallion, it meant a lot. It wasn't just that he had managed to defeat a far more skilled opponent, the real reason was because that single echo was going to turn the tide of the fight in his favor.

Already Vihrogons echoes changed tactic, shifting to an attack pattern. No longer flanked by the enemy, two of the shields echoes on the periphery focused all of their attention on other opponents.

As Dallion had predicted, the temple guardians attackers started falling one by one. Each echo that fell made it more difficult for those that remained. Within seconds, the ratio shifted in Dallion's favor. By all accounts a victory was imminent. It was then that the temple guardian changed strategy. A thicket of roots and vines emerged from the ground, all aimed at Dallion.

Lux! Dallion shouted.

The firebird thrust Dallion up, barely faster than the vines. Several leaves shot off, flying towards Dallion like daggers. Immediately he split into instances, though even that failed to avoid all hits.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 20%

Damn it! Dallion said beneath his breath. He was hoping he would be able to get through this without getting any wounds. Still, the important thing now was not to get any more.

I cant keep this up, Gleam said, slicing up vines that came dangerously close to Dallion.

This was Dallions cue to summon a standard shield. Moments later, a second set of roots burst from the ground Vihrogon had done the necessary to protect his owner yet again. Sadly, it was at this point that the pain in Dallions head exceeded his ability to withstand it. No longer capable of following events in the area, Dallion closed his eyes. From here on he could only rely on his guardians and familiars.

More and more sounds could be heard below Dallion. The details were difficult to make out, but he could tell that the fight was intensifying. Hopefully, that meant that Vihrogon was winning, otherwise it was going to be a very short expedition.

Hey! Glitters voice almost drilled Dallions left ear. Dont fall asleep!

Dallion cracked an eye open.

Look at the temple!

What about the temple? Dallion looked down. Lux had raised him far above the city to the point that he could see everything up to the gate. At this point, the danger of being reached by a root was fairly minimal, even if the temple guardian continued to throw leaves in his direction. Thankfully, Vihrogon and Gleam were enough to counter them before they hit their target.

Ignoring the last phase of the fight, Dallion looked at what the shardfly was saying. At first, he didnt see anything in particular the temple was just another building, only made of stone. Moments later, however, he saw it: a giant carving on the roof itself, made in such a way that only the Moons or someone with the ability to fly would see.

The carving was a large depiction of the sky, focusing on the Moons themselves. However, instead of the Seven Moons, there were eight. Even more curious, judging by the size of the various satellites, the eighth Moon that was in the center, surrounded by all the rest.