

Leveling up 511

Chapter 511: Rivalry of Cities

The guild experience left an emotional sting even well after Dallion had left the building. Initially, it was the notion of being so close to the skill gem, though gradually it shifted to general concern whether he'll be able to acquire new skills at all. Nil tried his best to explain that skill acquisition was a rare event, and that Dallion had managed to acquire more than the average initiate awakened. That didn't help particularly much.

In an attempt to get his mind off things, Dallion spent the rest of the day walking about Nerosal like a tourist.

The Arena building had already been covered in flags and decorations, making it numbingly mind-blowing. While visitors from other cities were impressed by the opulence, the locals could see it for what it was: a tacky display of individually exquisite elements that didn't go well together. No doubt the tournament had already started with contestants holding battles for the free spots. Thinking back, Dallion wondered whether he should go inside to check if he would see any familiar faces. Officially, Lady Marigold was still responsible for the event, although given the current climate, maybe a few changes had occurred there as well. In the end, Dallion decided to leave it for another day. The Arena also reminded him of his second fight against the Star.

By evening, Dallion had seen most of the tourist spots there were. He had chatted with a few dozen complete strangers, and three times as many items and area guardians, and all but forgotten about the disappointment in the aura sword. Incidentally, he had also come across Mord from the Flameforge guild. The meeting was a stark reminder of the advantages otherworlders had when it came to leveling up. There was a time when Mord could have easily defeated Dallion. That had changed with them being virtually equal during the last Festival tournament. Back then, either could have won the battle. Dallion just had the good fortune of having a few better weapons and familiars. Now, the difference was shocking. While the Flameforger had improved quite a bit, it was clear at first glance that he hadn't passed the fourth gate. The conversation was short and from what it seemed sweet, but it made Dallion think about something he had never had to consider in the past: the limit of his abilities.

Ever since he had passed the gate, the trials had been exceedingly difficult. Also, since he reached level sixty, he hadn't been able to level up. In itself, that wasn't a big issue. It hadn't been that long since he had last improved. In the past there had been months during which he had barely leveled up once. However, unlike the previous times, the issue wasn't his reluctance to enter his awakened realm, but rather the inadequacy of his skill.

Maybe you should go back home, dear boy, Nil advised. Or go forge some exotic weapon. That will be certain to increase your skill.

Some other day, Dallion said. There was the option to go home. Spending time with Eury usually managed to make him feel better. After some thought, though, Dallion decided to spend a few more hours without thinking of responsibilities.

Passing by one of the approved stalls Dallion bought a bottle of cider. The prices were surprisingly affordable considering what a big deal safe food was. Taking a gulp while combat splitting in order to make his way through the crowd faster, Dallion went to the performers plaza. The place brought

back some interesting memories, although even it had changed a bit along with the city. Gone was the rough atmosphere of wannabes, not replaced by a slightly more sophisticated class of performers. Every musician and acrobat Dallion could see was a double-digit awakened, doing their absolute best to display their skill. The cutthroat element, however, was gone. It was almost as if there was a coordinated effort to illustrate the beauty of the city, above anything else.

Seems the countess has been busy, Dallion thought.

Just putting up an appearance for the festival, Nil grumbled. She knows better than to mess with things that work. Even the safe food is smoke and mirrors.

In what sense?

Its just there to reassure the visitors that everything is pristine. The outer wall was a wise move. That makes sense, as do the guards along it. Nerosal hasnt had any issue with its food, but steps were taken to ensure that things remain that way. However, that isnt enough to convince any visitor. The first question theyll ask upon coming here is which food is safe? Claiming that there havent been any poisoned would only increase their suspicions, making them wonder when the citys luck will run out. However, if there are large signs everywhere declaring that the food on sale is safe. Well, then theres nothing to worry about.

Never knew you were so good in customer relations, Nil.

Dear boy, I was the one who transformed all training items in such a way that incompetent hotheads rushed to them to train, the old echo said with pride.

Im not sure that worked on me.

Oh? Remind me, whats that thing thats been on your finger for over a year now?

Dallion looked at the library ring. Upon realizing he was both annoyed and impressed. After all, no one ever said that a training item had to be a battle arena.

Enjoying the festival, Dal? a female voice said next to Dallion.

Dallion turned around, only to see the overseer a step away. She didnt have any escort or even a weapon. As far as anyone in the crowd was concerned, she was merely another visitor come to admire one of the notable areas of the city. The black veiled clothes that covered her body were overshadowed by dozens of far more elaborate costumes in the vicinity alone.

Yes. Dallions voice trembled for a single moment. In a few moments, his initial surprise vanished. Although she was the overseer, she also was a close friend of his grandfather or had been back when the old man had set off for Nerosal.

A bit tamer than usual, the woman went on, moving next to Dallion. But given everything going on, tame is nice. What do you think?

Its crowded. Dallion picked a safe response.

Not for me. Then again, youve been a hunter for a while now. Any plans on changing your emblem for something more substantial?

Soon enough. I heard you leveled up.

The countess saw to it personally. She managed to convince the Archduke that it was necessary to build a protective wall around the city domain. He listened to her arguments, agreed to the demands, then leveled up the provincial capital as well.

Nice to see that they have an understanding.

They dont. He doesnt have the will to outright refuse, especially at a time like this, but cant be seen to appear weak, either.

The change in topic wasnt even subtle. Furthermore, it was accompanied by a barely visible dark veil that extended from the overseer, surrounding the both of them. Judging by the crowds reactions, as far as everyone else was concerned, Dallion and the overseer had just ceased to exist.

Why are you telling me this? Dallion asked.

One of the advantages of being the overseer is that I constantly hear things, even such things that are kept hidden. I know where youll be going, and I can assume it wont be on a vacation.

On the surface Dallion remained calm, but deep inside he was quite disturbed. If the overseer knew what he was doing, that meant Countess Priscord knew as well. And given the rivalry between her and the Archduke, being in between wasnt a good place to be at.

It was a good decision to become a hunter, the overseer continued. Every side needs mercenaries. Just try not to stand out too much.

Im just an apprentice hunter.

Even if people dont know all your skills, you arent unnoticeable. Youre lucky everyone has bigger problems to focus on, or they would have been on you like a swarm of locusts.

Are you saying I should get into politics?

No. You dont know how to play the game and dont have the time to learn. Keep your mouth shut, eyes open, and be ready to react at any moment.

Was that what my grandfather did? Dallion found the warning outright patronizing. No sooner had he spoken the words, he felt regret. This wasnt something to tell an overseer, especially one that he knew had taken the time to give him what she considered good advice.

Dallion half expected for there to be immediate consequences. In his mind, he imagined him being pulled into the ground, surrounded by a shroud of darkness, or anything else a semi-chaining guardian could do. Thankfully, no such thing happened.

No, he didnt. And look at him now.

The phrase felt like a dagger in the gut. It wasnt intended as a warning, although it might well have been. As much as Dallion wanted to say that hed keep his guard up, he knew that wouldnt matter. Since they were going to deal with the Archdukes household, it was inevitable that the awakened there were going to be a higher level, or at the very least, have better equipment.

I wont stand out. Dallion said.

That'll be a first, the overseer replied. Keep close to Eury. Even nobles don't mess with a full hunter unless they have to.

Dallion nodded. Any other advice?

Nothing I'm allowed to say.

Typical, Dallion thought.

Can I ask something, then?

The overseer waited.

Is there a way to defeat the Star?

You're thinking of challenging him?

No, but I want to be prepared. He's tried to kill me before.

The only way to defeat the Star is not to engage. If you do, you'll lose.

And if he attacks?

He won't. The Star can't take the first step. As strong as he is, the Moons keep him in check.

That wasn't what the Moons had told Dallion. Although, maybe it was another of the loopholes that they had mentioned before. The Moon had told Dallion that they would no longer protect him from the Star, should Dallion venture in the Star's domain. However, that wasn't the same as allowing the Star to attack. Or was it?

And if it comes to a fight?

There was no reply.

I managed to defeat him once.

Your fight in the training dagger? That wasn't a victory. You just survived and only because the dagger brought down the Star's level to match your own.

That's it! Is there a way to do the same in the real world?

Try to keep to whatever your mission is, Dal, the overseer said. A moment later, she was gone. The crowd of people re-emerged around Dallion, along with the thousands of sounds in the plaza.

Nil, Dallion thought as he looked around, splitting into a dozen of instances. Any idea where she went?

Where who went? the echo asked.

We didn't see her, Gen replied. Unlike Nil, he was able to read Dallion's thoughts, although he, too, seemed to have missed the conversation. You were just gone for a minute. I thought you had put on a blocker.

I didn't Dallion reached for the chain around his neck. The blocker ring was still there. Several seconds passed with him, considering what to do. Then, finally,

he turned around, making his way through the crowd in the opposite direction from before.

What happened, dear boy?

I had a short talk with the overseer, Dallion said. There was no point in going into details. If the Overseer wanted to do so, she wouldnt have bothered blocking the link to Dallions realm.

Two warnings had been given: one about the Archduke, and one about the Star. More importantly, the overseer had also told him a potential way to face the Star.

Chapter 512: Former Champion

Time flew by faster than Dallion expected it. With the crowds reaching ludicrous size during the buildup, it proved better to remain indoors and only go out in the early hours of the morning. Unfortunately, that didnt seem to help much. While most of the people were asleep, their items werent, and with Dallions empathy level, it was enough for him to walk along a street for all visiting guardians to notice and try to exchange a few words. The first few times, Dallion decided to humor them, hoping to learn a bit more of the events in the world. Sadly, he quickly found that to be a mistake. The people who had the means and security to travel through the wilderness in times of plague and near war were almost exclusively rich enough not to know anything other than the events of their own town.

There were a few swords who had recently changed hands and knew something about the wilderness, but even their information didnt show the big picture. In the end, Dallion had chosen to spend his time with Eury, when she wasnt working, or focus on hedgerel training. The gorgon had invited him to join her to the Arena several times, but Dallion had flatly refused. After the warning from the overseer, he didnt want to be anywhere near the countess, or any other nobles for that matter. And there was the matter of the general.

Dallion strongly suspected that if anyone could find an item to limit the Star, he would have it. Getting the man to give it was a different matter altogether. Dallion still owed him a favor. If he asked for help, hed become burdened with one more. Sadly, there didnt seem to be any way around it.

Day after day, Dallion went secretly to see the general on the side of the Arena, and each time he was nowhere to be found. The fury servants greeted Dallion with identical apologies each time, offering to convey a message. Each time Dallion refused, knowing full well that word would still reach the general.

On the sixth day, when the top eight contestants of the tournament were decided, a fury came to Eurys workshop with an invitation to Dallion. Unfortunately, that wasnt the invitation he was hoping for. Apparently, as the previous tournament champion his presence had been requested by Countess Priscord herself. In theory, refusal was an option, but Dallion knew well enough not to do so. Thus, he found himself accompanying the fury not only to the Arena, but to the noble section of the stands, half a dozen rows beneath the countess box along with the rest non-awakened VIPs. Funnily enough, Euryale was also there, not too far away, standing by the overseer.

The moment he saw her, Dallion waved. The gorgon, however, didnt wave back.

Troubles in paradise? a familiar voice asked. Dallion didnt even have to turn around to know that the general had made his way to the row behind him. Just pulling your leg. Im sure theres nothing to worry about. Gorgons do tend to get consumed in their work. Did I mention that I had a gorgon nanny at one point?

Dallion remained silent. After a few seconds he noticed, none of the people in immediate vicinity were paying any attention. Even more, they were emitting a presence of sub-servitude, as if they had been bound by some curse to the generals will. Some of the faces started looking familiar. Dallion remembered, seeing them in the corridor near the generals room. To the public, the general liked to introduce them as associates, but everyone knew what they really werepeople caught in the mans web with little hope of ever escaping.

General, Dallion whispered curtly.

Kilina told me that youve been searching for me, the general continued. As you could see Ive been here the entire time.

There was something I wanted to discuss.

Of course there was. However, were in the midst of the tournament now. It's bad form to talk business here.

The man adjusted the collar of his overly expensive shirt. If Dallion were to guess, the fabric had to be a combination of gem threads, spun together so as to let off different colors as light hit it. That, combined with a coat of purple leather and a multitude of rings made of sky silver, made sure that there wasnt anyone in that part of the arena to outshine the general.

Tell me, who do you think will win? the general asked.

Dallion looked at the fighters. At this stage, only the best of the best remained. All of them were combat splitting, and attacking with such intensity that one would say that they were in the wilderness hunting monsters.

Difficult to say, Dallion admitted. Most of the pairings seemed to be evenly matched. The last one, though, seemed to be slightly tilted towards a tall dark-skinned woman. On closer examination, Dallion noticed the apprentice hunters emblem incorporated on her arm bracelet. That one, he said, glancing from the woman to the general and back.

The mercenary hunter. The general placed his finger on his lips. An interesting choice. The odds dont favor her. If you had been here the last few days, youd have seen her almost lose during the previous rounds.

Shes still fighting. Her opponents arent.

Good point. Kilina, Ill make a side bet on her. Nothing big, but something noticeable. Make it happen.

There was no sign of the generals personal fury, but Dallion expected her to be well within earshot.

Any particular reason why youre so confident? the man asked.

Arent you supposed to ask that before making a bet?

Wheres the fun in that? the general laughed. Besides, I trust your judgment, Dal. Shouldnt I?

Shes more capable than he is, and still, she prefers not be flashy in battle. Her opponent is all too focused on impressing the crowd. Hes got talent, but no real experience, so hes wasting actions. In a few minutes, hell start to slow down and thats when shell strike.

Interesting. And youre not basing that only because she happens to be a hunter?

Dallion didnt reply, focusing on the fight instead. Things happened exactly as he expected them to. The hunter apprentice remained on the defensive for the next five minutes. Her opponent, in contrast, attacked every opportunity he got. Dallion could see the dozens of instances he burst into, each attacking in a unique fashion. No matter now how he tried, though, all of the attacks were deflected time after time. A casual observer would have said that the woman was on her last legs. However, Dallion knew that not to be the case. All the blocks and evasions were meticulously calculated to exhaust her opponent to a point at which shed be able to take advantage.

Two minutes later, precisely as Dallion had predicted, something seemed to snap. The hunters opponent miscalculated, going too deep with a series of strike attacks. It seemed like a minor mistake only one of eight instances were out of place, and yet somehow that ended up being the instance that became reality. The elite froze for a second just enough time for his brain to register that this wasnt planned, and enough to have the hunter follow up with a series of pummeling punches. Three quarters of them were evaded, but the final quarter wasnt, pushing him back.

Barely had she done so, the hunter then proceeded to split into five instances, each drawing a dagger at almost point-blank range and throwing it at him. Once more, the fighter attempted to use instances to escape, but failed to do so at all. One of his failures was pulled into reality, causing the dagger to wound him in the shoulder.

Things only went downhill from there. Each time the man would split, more and more instances failed to achieve a positive outcome. At one point, it even became unnecessary for the woman to even pull the instance she wanted. Her attacks, slowly and methodically chipped away at her opponents defenses, until it became obvious to all that he had no coming back.

Another few minutes later, the man himself acknowledged it, publicly surrendering and putting an end to the fight.

Would you look at that, the general said, his voice clearly heard among the boos and cheers of the crowd. I wouldnt have believed it. Quite the sneaky thing, that one. Maybe Ill have a chat with her once the tournament is over.

Does that mean I won the bet?

Did we make a bet? The general smirked. Dont worry, Im just playing with you. You did help me with this one, and so youll be rewarded. Several people in Dallions row stood up, allowing him to pass by them. Come along. I dont want to catch the crowd.

It took Dallion seconds to dash to the nearest arena exit using his awakening skills. When he got there, he noticed that the general had already arrived, a large fury bodyguard at his side.

The general gave the fury a quick glance. For a moment Dallion thought he saw the air surrounding them ripple.

Here. The general handed Dallion a large black bracelet. its not that I dont trust you, but I prefer not to tempt fate when doing business. After the events last year, security has become quite tight and I wouldnt want anyone to come to the wrong conclusions.

There was a lot Dallion could say on the matter. However, he preferred to quietly comply. He was the one asking for a favor, after all.

Do you have an artifact that limits someones level? Dallion asked straight out.

Huh? The general made an expression as if he had just choked.

Never before had Dallion seen the man shocked to such an extent. The generals expression was almost worth it.

Do you want to get us banished? The man looked about in all directions.

No.

Then youre simply an idiot, the general snapped. Thats not something you should even joke about. The Order has eyes everywhere, from the Imperial Capital to the smallest piece of crap village. And they wouldnt like anyone stepping into their matters.

Limit temporarily, Dallion clarified. Like the training daggers.

Upon hearing that the generals expression softened. He was no longer as fidgety as before, straightening the sleeves of his vest, as if nothing of importance had occurred.

It would be a good idea to increase your vocabulary and linguistics skills, he said. Misspeaking like that could well get you in a lot of trouble. The man cleared his throat. So, you want an artifact to help you level up? Youre aware that such trinkets wont help you increase your level beyond where you are now.

Thats not what Im aiming for. I want to make sure that the person I potentially fight has the same limitations I do.

Intriguing. The wicked smile returned to the generals face. Thats definitely a new one. Do you have any particular person in mind?

Yes, Dallion replied.

Well, thats your business. The general shrugged after several seconds of silence. To be honest, I havent heard of anything similar existing. Ill ask about, of course. Itll definitely be an exotic find. More than likely something Ill like to add to my collection. I assume youll need it before you set off for Linatol?

Dallion didnt budge a muscle. Deep inside, he knew that it was pointless to pretend. The general had learned about his mission, as he usually did. It was starting to seem that people were incapable of keeping secrets in this world.

Not to worry, Ill do my best. The general tapped Dallion on the shoulder with measured disgust, then quickly pulled his hand away. In return, Id be thankful if you do me a small favor while there.

I might be a bit out of my league.

Nonsense. The man waved his hand. Its nothing involving fighting. All you have to do is take part in a certain auction and procure a specific item. Ill provide the funds. All you have to do is make sure no one outbids you. Doesnt sound difficult, does it?

Depends on the funds.

Oh, dont worry. No one will outbid you. As long as you dont lose them on the way.

Chapter 513: With His Compliments

Are you alright? Euryale asked.

Huh? Dallion snapped out of it. He had heard the question, just as he had heard everything else the gorgon had said in the last ten minutes, but his mind was still elsewhere.

The meeting with the general had gone somewhat better than expected. Dallion didnt owe anything else, but at the same time he hadnt gained anything either. With luck, maybe he would before they set off, but in exchange, he had agreed to the generals demands.

Yeah, sorry, Dallion quickly added. Ive just been thinking about a few things.

Youve been like that a lot lately. Eury let out a slight sigh.

Its because of the plague, Dallion replied. That wasnt exactly a lie, but it wasnt the whole truth either. I think theres a chance that the Star is behind it. He paused for a moment. I think I might have to face him.

Dont be stupid, there was a sudden hardness in the gorgons voice.

I dont want to, but I think that I wont have a choice. I feel like hes luring me to him. This whole thing about the plague, the sword Maybe itll end up that the two are connected, but I gear that I might be walking into a trap.

All this time and youre reckless as even. Eury crossed her arms, her snakes moving about constantly.

Its not like Im controlling this, he raised his tone slightly. Im not the one rushing after the Star to prove something.

Thats a lie. If youre so worried the Star is behind it, dont go.

What?

Refuse the mission and stay here.

It doesnt work like that. I promised that Id help out. Besides, I owe Hannah a lot, and

See? Thats exactly what I meant. You keep claiming that you have no choice to hide that youve already made it, and the choice is to keep pushing forward.

I thought that was a good thing. Or did you change your mind? I was always like this, Dallion thought. No, I was a lot more reckless in the past! This time Im just dealing with the reality of it all.

Youve become obsessed with chasing demons. If its not one, its another. The chainlings, the copyette, the cultists Even if the Star is gone, youll find something to chase after.

Thats Dallion paused. He wanted to say that it wasnt true, that he was just doing his best to live a normal life as a hunter. However, even he himself realized it wasnt true. Maybe he was obsessed with the Star, or was the Star obsessed with him?

The best way to defeat the Star is not to fight him,

Dallion remembered the advice given. Maybe it wasnt a bad idea to listen to it?

Ill go to bed, he said. Itll be a long day tomorrow.

The night was long and sleepless. The only consolation Dallion had was that Eury had joined him not long after. He would have preferred if she wasnt wearing a blocker ring, so he could sense what her emotions were. Even so, knowing she was still there meant a lot.

I dont need to face the Star, Dallion kept repeating as he lay, eyes closed. I dont need to enter the sword. March will know what to do. All I have to do is be there, and also get the item I promised Hannah. Everything else is noise.

By morning Dallion had hardly gotten any sleep, but felt somewhat better. For one thing, he had convinced himself not to bite off more than he could chew. A slight nagging feeling still remained, poking him from the back of his mind, but on the whole, he was determined just to fulfill his task for once and not recklessly get involved with powers obviously stronger than himself.

Euryale had already gone by the time Dallion opened his eyes. He had hoped to apologize for last night. It would have made things better. Finding a ready breakfast on the workbench in the neighboring room suggested that the gorgon felt bad about the matter as well.

You still should apologize, the armadil shield said. Guilt on both sides doesnt mean the issue is forgotten.

I will.

You should. And the first chance you get. If you dont, youll regret it. Trust me on this. Ive seen it too many times.

Youre being dramatic again. It was just a thing in the moment. It wasnt even a fight.

The shield didnt have anything to add. Dallion waited for a while, just to make sure, then washed, had his breakfast, got dressed, and went straight to the Arena. The stands were outright packed. There were only four contenders now. Two of them were to continue to the final match, when the countess herself would award the tournament prize to the winner. Watching it was somewhat interesting, in the same way middle-school baseball practice compared to the world championship. Dallion could admire the execution, he could even be impressed by one or another attack, but on the whole, it seemed so unbelievably slow that he wished there were a way to fast forward the event.

A few dozen levels provide a totally different perspective, dont they? Nil asked. Now you understand why nobles dont like watching this longer than they have to.

Yeah.

The festival wasn't created for the nobles' amusement, but to increase their influence and quash any thoughts of discontent. Not all cities had them, but given the success of Countess Priscord, it was worth investing in.

By the time the winners were determined, Dallion couldn't wait to get back to Eury's workshop and make another leveling up attempt. The try ended in abrupt failure yet again, although Dallion did improve a considerable number of items, letting him hit the eighty level cap on guard and athletic skills, as well as up his music skills to sixty-seven. The effort left him quite exhausted, causing him to snooze off almost immediately after. Next thing he knew, morning had started yet again.

Crap! Dallion jumped up from his bed. While it was good that he had finally managed to catch up on sleep, now was the worst possible time to do so. Hectic, he ran in the neighboring room, when he suddenly noticed that it wasn't empty. Euryale was there, dressed in full traveler's gear, as was March.

Nice of you to wake up, the captain said. Five more minutes and we were considering leaving without you.

I slept an entire day? Dallion blinked in disbelief.

Just half, Eury said with a stone-faced expression. The final fight will start in a few hours.

Okay. Dallion wasn't sure what was going on. I thought that he stopped. Nevermind. I'll go get dressed.

Each and every one of Dallion's items shared their opinion on what was going on, as Dallion prepped his backpack. The building guardian, too, turned out to be rather gossipy. Since Euryale still had her blocker ring on, Dallion only got to learn half of the conversation that had taken place while he slept.

For some reason, there seemed to be a change of plans. Instead of leaving at the end of the festival, which was slightly over a week away, it had been decided to go now, during the final of the tournament. Supposedly, both the overseer and the Iceforge guild had given their permissions. All that was left was for the trio to make their way out of the city.

I'll have to take the hedgerels, Dallion said as he finished packing up. And Ruby.

March looked at Eury, then back at Dallion.

Fine, but be quick.

Right. Where's the basket? he turned to Eury.

On the roof along with the other cages, the gorgon replied. I'll get it.

No, I got it. Dallion rushed out.

It wasn't standard practice to keep some of the hunting equipment on the roof of the building, but since the building guardians and both inhabitants had the skills and perception to notice if anyone was trying to sneak up there, it was a good place as any.

The metal basket was as in a good state as any. Dallion checked it out, did a quick mend-repair for good measure, then leapt back down, heading with it on the second floor. The moment he opened the door, all hedgerels gathered in front of it, expecting their obligatory treats.

Not yet. Dallion placed the basket on the floor. Come along, hop inside.

The creatures looked at one another.

We'll find you a new home.

Several hesitated, though all the rest eagerly leapt inside. Despite the food, which had been difficult to find in the wilderness, they didn't enjoy being locked in a small room. Now that hunger was a memory of the past, they were looking forward to wide open spaces.

And behave during the trip, okay? Dallion placed the top of the basket and secured it. The hedgerels complied. Ruby, where are you?

Nothing happened.

Ruby.

A patch near the corner of the ceiling changed color. The shardfly opened its wings, then fluttered down to Dallion. It was surprisingly slow for some reason, as if he lacked energy.

Time to go into the wilderness, Dallion urged.

That appeared to do the trick. Ruby flew two circles round him, then landed on top of the metal basket. Several seconds later, Dallion was outside again.

March and Eury were already there. Adjusting her gear, the gorgon handed Dallion his backpack. It took a bit of effort to arrange everything he was carrying more annoyance than hardship. Once everyone was ready, the trip to the city gate began.

With the tournament finals about to start, the majority of the crowds had gathered at the Arena, leaving the streets half empty.

Anything I should know? Dallion asked, regaining his composure. One thing he didn't like even after all his leveling up were last-minute changes, especially when they were accompanied by a rush.

Fights have broken out on the northeast part of the empire, March said.

That's the reason we're leaving early?

No. The guildmaster let me know that there has been a development in Linatol. There's no telling how long the sword will be there, so the more time we lost, the less our chances of getting it. It's not ideal, but we don't have a choice on the matter. We'll get more details when we get there.

Anything you can add, Nil? Dallion asked.

Afraid not, dear boy. Seems my original is a bit testy on the topic. For the master to ruin the guild's chances in the following group competition, things must have been quite serious. Personally, I've never seen it happen in the past and the guild has seen a bit of turmoil.

Great

As the group neared the city gate, Dallion noticed that Fire Sky was waiting there. She was dressed in full armor almost identical to Marchs. Having both of them in full gear made it quite apparent that they were former imperial legionaries. Whatever had cast them out to Nerosal must have been severe enough to cause their fall from a rather prestigious position.

March, Fire greeted the woman. Dallion and Eury werent even given a glance.

Fire. March stopped a few feet away from her. Youre not joining. The guild master decided.

He can dance on his hilt for all I care, Fire Sky said with a slight smile. With the things out there, youll need the extra help. And he cant tell me where to go.

Till the county border.

Yes, maam. Fire almost stood to attention, stopping the action mid-way. Some of the boys are already outside. We thought you might say that.

Always so eager.

Just doing my job.

Dal, Eury, well be having an escort part of the way, March said. That okay with you? The question was directed towards the Gorgon.

Are you sure theres nothing else I need to know? Dallion asked. The conversation so far didnt build any confidence.

You didnt tell him? Fire raised her eyebrows. The poison plague has changed.

In what way? Its moved onto people and animals? Dallion hadnt heard of any plant-based diseases affecting humans, but given the nature of this world, everything was possible.

No, but it no longer affects Star-spawn. Theres a much higher chance of running across them now. Theres even talk of

Thats enough, March said in a sharp tone. As I said, nothing has affected the province yet. We just need to be a bit more cautious. Lets go.

March went on. Eury followed, giving Fire Sky a slight nod as she passed. Just as Dallion was about to move himself, the Flameforger captain stepped in front of him.

Here, she whispered, putting a small pouch in Dallions hands so that Euryale couldnt see. The general sends his compliments.

Chapter 514: Trip to the Capital

The group went through the wilderness, stopping for one hour every six. There was a certain military feeling to it that made Dallion feel like a mercenary that had joined an elite squad. It was very different from Dame Vesuvias group he had joined years ago. Back then, the only person above level forty was the dame. Here everyone was. Not only that, but it was obvious at first glance that everyone had trained in a similar fashion. What was more, Dallion had the distinct impression that most of them, if not all, knew each other from before. He already knew that all of them were imperial legionaries, but it was starting to look as if they had been from the same unit. In some cases, the age difference was substantial, though when it came to awakened that wasnt a deciding factor.

A few days were enough for the ex-legionaries to start with military jokes, and more cursing than Dallion was used to coming from them. March remained distant as usual, giving a warning now and again, which made the jokes cease momentarily. Eury kept a short distance away from the rest. Naturally, Dallion had joined her.

You okay? he asked.

Nice that you care. Something in her voice suggested that he had messed up somewhere. I dont like imperials.

Dallion paused. A few years ago, hed directly focus on the subject of the group. Now he knew better.

Whats wrong? he whispered. I should have refused the mission, shouldnt I?

Its not the mission, the gorgon whispered back. Its everything else. Youve been taking things for granted. The moment you earned your emblem, you started focusing on other things.

Is that what this was about? Dallion wondered. Its true he had become slightly more focused on other things, but that was for them in the long run. Or, at least, he had been telling himself that. Going south was to keep his promise to a Moon. As for the creatures he kept bringing to the workshop, it was better than killing them outright. Although, it was also true that he had spent a considerable amount of time feeding and training themtime he could have spent with Eury. The gorgon had never complained, but that wasnt her nature. That was one thing that Dallion had picked up early ongorgons only spoke up when things were really bad, or they were considerably annoyed.

Sorry, he whispered. Once this is over, Ill

Eury raised her hand, gesturing for him to stop.

This isnt the time to have this talk, she whispered back. Thats why Ill make it easy for you. Youve time until we get back to Nerosal to make a decision: me or your recklessness.

Thats not fair, he began.

Probably, but its not working.

So, Ive become like Vend now? he asked.

Vend could spend a day without splitting. Every conversation we had in private was a series of a dozen conversations happening at the same time. If I wasnt able to see all instances, maybe it would have been tolerable, but after a while it was clear I couldnt go on.

Dallion winced. He could agree with her on that aspect. As beneficial as it was for other things, building a relationship on combat splitting sounded like cheating in both senses of the word. Maybe that was why Vend remained single. Then again, Dallion knew next to nothing about the personal life of his mentor.

Once this is over, let me know what youve decided, the gorgon said. Until then, we focus on the mission. She stood up. Ill go scout the area. She dashed into the distance, disappearing from view.

Well done, the armadil said in a disappointed tone of voice.

Not now, Vihrogon

I've only been warning you about this for a decade. Neglect things and they tend to neglect you back.

She's still important to me, Dallion countered.

Dal, you can't fake importance. No matter what you say, no matter what you believe, even if you keep something backstage, it isn't important. At the end of the day importance is nothing more than a tower made of tiles. You're free to arrange the bricks however you wish, but there's no way to claim that those on the bottom are, in fact, on the top.

The conversation ended there. Half an hour later, the group was back on the road.

No creatures attacked them for the next few days. Dallion was starting to think that Fire Sky and the rest had only joined to ensure the protection of the general's funds. The pouch he was given didn't contain coins, but rather small cubes made of crystal or some glass-like material. They had the shape of small dice with rounded edges, but Dallion suspected they were a bit more. He had asked Nil for details, only to be told that they were crystal magic. Apparently, one way to cheat one's traits was to make items granting equivalent abilities. From what he understood, the cubes were one-time use of the spellcraft skill. In theory, if one had a large enough supply of them, they could mimic an actual mage. In practice, even Dallion could see they were quite useless. However, that didn't stop nobles from wanting them to impress friends and rivals in flashy displays at parties. Depending on the quality, each of the cubes could fetch about a thousand gold coins a considerable amount, even for noble standards.

Upon reaching the invisible boundary between counties, Fire Sky and her group parted ways with the rest. Goodbyes were said, jokes made, after which only March, Eury, and Dallion continued forward. Dallion hoped that would improve things between the gorgon and himself, and when their conversations were a lot more pleasant, even without his music skills, he could sense that little had changed.

It took five days to cross the second county, finally arriving in the lands proper of the Archduke. Normally, a province held about a dozen or more counties, but Wetie, being a border province of little import, held a bit less. The instant Dallion set foot into the new domain, he felt the air temperature fall by a few degrees he knew from personal experience that the Archduke preferred a slight chill.

There. Eury pointed to the distance.

It took Dallion a few moments to notice it, but when he did, chills ran down his spine. Several miles away, among the sparse vegetation of the wilderness, there was a dark patch of misshaped plants. Rows of thorny weeds intertwined with one another, creating what looked suspiciously like rolls of barbed wire. There could be no doubt as to the nature of these abominations the poison plague had entered Lanitol province and in force.

Looks different, Dallion noted. I didn't think the Archduke would let it get this far.

Its difficult to get rid of, March noted. No awakened would dare get close out of fear of being poisoned, and the non-awakened dont have the strength to do anything much.

I thought you had to ingest it for anything to happen.

Would you risk destroying it? March looked at him. Splitting doesnt help you with that.

Dallion conceded the point. It was one thing talking theories from far away. Up close, he didnt want to have anything to do with it.

What about spores? Dallion asked in his domain.

All I can say is keep an eye out, dear boy, Nil replied. Other than that, put your faith in the Seven. If its really created by the Star, they wont allow it to invade you of its own volition.

Wouldnt breathing it in be considered my own volition?

The echo didnt answer. That was the thing about theologythe rules were blurred and only a member of the Order could interpret them adequately.

We better keep our distance, Dallion said. Wouldnt want to breathe in any of that.

Good point. March nodded. Were picking up the pace. The faster we get to the capital, the better.

That didnt seem sound advice, but Dallion didnt want to argue, especially since he didnt have any alternative suggestions in mind, short of a closed air system. Thankfully, there didnt seem to be any other plague patches on the way. Either they hadnt reached the city, or the Archduke had found the means to remove them somehow.

With Fire Sky and the rest gone, the trio resumed the usual hour per day rest schedule, with sleeping taking place in the awakened realms. Conversations also increased, though not by much. March wasnt talkative by nature, and Eury wasnt overly inclined. That left Dallion to make the attempts to start a topic of discussion, and occasionally sing a song or two. His music skills and experience as an inn bard had come in handy, even if he had to whisper all his singing so as not to attract too much attention. Not that it matteredMarchs emblem made every wilderness creature aware of her presence.

Ill catch up in a few minutes, Dallion said, as he moved away from the rest of the group. That was code for him having to relieve himself. While people in the wildernessespecially hunterswerent the squeamish type, no one made a point waiting for people while doing their biological function. Choosing an even spot a short distance away, Dallion took out a small shovel from his backpack and dug a small hole. He was just about to squat, when he suddenly sensed a strong emotion of curiosity nearby.

Whatre doing? A familiar voice asked.

Dallion briskly turned around and looked up. It would have been much easier to split into instances, but that would also have attracted the attention of March and Eury.

An emerald shardfly fluttered a few dozen feet in the air above him. The only issue was that Dallion didnt think it was a shardfly.

What do you know? Gleam said, a smirk in her voice. Its your dragonlet apprentice.

Dark? Dallion whispered, looking around. What are you doing here? If they see you

As if! the creature said with a lot more spunk that it had in the past. Dallion could clearly see Felygns influence there. You didnt even come close! If I hadnt said anything, youd be as clueless as a doorknob!

As a doorknob? Dallion asked.

Its something Felygn keeps saying. He told me you know what it means.

Of course he would, Dallion said to himself.

So, what are you doing?

Nothing now, thanks to you. Dallion replied. He could hold it in for a while longer.

From what he could see, the dragonlets illusion ability was just as strong in the real world as it had been in the dragons awakening realm. It also seemed that its anger had vanished. Given that it hadnt even been that long since theyd parted ways, that was a good thing. It also showed how quickly dragon teenagers changed their mind.

Why are you here? Dallion asked.

Felygn said youre supposed to train me, so train me.

I said Ill train you when Im alone. Not to mention Im in the middle of something here. What if someone sees you?

Theyll just think Im another shardfly. Besides, you promised!

The last was more a plea than anything else. Apparently, having a whole new world still wasnt enough to keep the dragonlets boredom away. In a way, that was understandable. The creature was away from his family with no one to interact with other than the Green Moon, whoin Dallions experiencealso tended to lose interest quickly. It was normal Dark would go to the one person whos shown interesthis teacher.

Also, Felygn said that if you keep me hidden in your realm, no one will be able to spot me.

So, that was the plan? On the one hand, Dallion didnt appreciate someone else inviting beings to his personal realm. On the other, having a dragonlet had its benefits. Not against the Star, sadly. As much as Dark showed potential, he was far from reaching the might of his father.

Come on! I promise not to damage your realm, the dragonlet said. Or harm anyone in it.

It almost sounded as if someone was feeding it lines. At this point, Dallion wasnt sure how to respond. The way he saw it, there were two possibilities; either the Green Moon had grown tired of the creature and wanted to dump it in Dallions realm, or this was a subtle way of helping him.

Onda, July, will you be able to handle him? Dallion asked.

No problem! Onda said, a bit too eagerly for Dallions taste. Thankfully, July also seemed to be of the opinion that thing would be fine.

Okay. Dallion slid the Vermillion ring on and opened his palm. The emerald shardfly landed on it and melted into his hand. Moments later, Ruby landed there as well. Unfortunately, nothing happened. Sorry, Ruby, Dallion smiled. It only works on magic creatures. Maybe when I level up more.

A wave of disappointment emanated from the shardfly as it fluttered back to his shoulder.

Dallion side. This was a fine mess hed gotten himself into. Hopefully, it wasnt going to affect the mission in a negative way.

As I said, the armadil shield said. You cant fake importance.

Chapter 515: Into Linatol

Having Dark in Dallions awakening realm turned out to be less chaotic than he feared. Now he finally understood what Nil must have gone through in the early days when Nox was young and overly active. Both creatures had the potential of massive destruction, and power to boot. Thankfully, the dragonlet preferred the company of beings his mental age and didnt get involved in too much else. Also, Harp made sure to keep both the dragonlet and Onda in line. For some reason, the pair seemed to outright fear her and were sure to be at their best behavior when they were around. Just in case, Dallion had July tag along as a preventative measure.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the group kept on approaching the capital. Dallion was outright surprised that they hadnt come across any standard or hunting patrol yet. Given the state of the world, hed think that any travelers would be instantly checked out. After a while, he saw the reason why that wasnt necessary.

Get ready, March said as they walked. Were close to a bastion. Theyll have questions for us.

Is that like Archdukes guard towers? Dallion asked.

No, March replied without looking back. Its not the Archdukes.

Bastions, as Nil explained, were imperial property. A mix between a small town, a fort, and a seven-story tower. Their goal was to protect the realm from any and all threats. Each province had between two and four of them, all at the Archdukes disposal, should he need assistance. In truth, everyone knew that they were meant to serve as a reminder of what would happen if any of the provinces decided not to respect the emperors authority.

After an hour of walking, Dallion got a glimpse of his first bastion. In normal circumstances, the structure would have seemed quite impressive. It was definitely bigger than anything in Nerosal or any of the other towns or cities Dallion had been to. However, it was no match to the monstrosities hed seen in the fallen south. Initially, the thought was amusing. Dallion joked about it to Nil, saying that theyve nothing but a miniature copy of the real towers. However, as he got near, the amusement was replaced by concern. Size aside, the towers were an exact replica of what he had seen in the land of the Star-touched.

No tricks, no music, March said.

I've been here before, Eury said, annoyed to be spoken to as a child. And Dals been in the wilderness enough to know better.

Lets hope so.

They walked directly towards the bastion. As they approached, three squads of twenty people each emerged from the towers entrance. All of them were imperial soldiers, likely heading on patrol. Two of the squads set off in different directions, while the third remained in front of the tower.

Come along, the sergeant of the third squad said, aware that his words would be heard by march and the rest.

Here we go again, Dallion thought. Lately, all this checking was getting on his nerves.

Upon coming ten feet from the squad, Dallion reached out to any item that would listen. March had told him not to use any magic, but there was nothing about him obtaining from their items. The majority of the new guardians didn't respond. Their items were newly forged, and they had a strong bond with their current owners as well as a deep sense of duty. The heirlooms were a lot more civil, though still tight-lipped. Dallion got the usual comments that it's been a while since they'd met and an empath. A few even attempted to recruit him to the imperial guard, assuring him that one or other family would treat his candidacy seriously should he reach out to them. It was only the bastion guardian itself that told Dallion not to worry, in a voice that had seen it all.

Heading towards the capital, ma'am? the man asked in formal fashion.

Guild business. March took out a red seal of hardened wax and threw it at the sergeant. Were invited.

The imperial grabbed hold of the seal. A few moments later, he tossed it back. Dallion could tell that he had ventured into the realm of the item to hear a detailed account of their circumstances. It was an elegant method, although Dallion wondered how one was sure that the echo in question belonged to the person it claimed to be. Most probably, there was some additional layer of security that dealt with that.

Have a pleasant journey, ma'am, the man said. It's all safe from here on.

Thank you, sergeant. Blessings of the Seven, March said, then continued on her way, Eury and Dallion behind her.

He seems to like her a lot, Dallion said in his realm.

Imperials stick to each other in Wetie, Nil said. As far as most are concerned, she's still a legionary.

There's no ex-imperial and all that. What if the imperial in question was a traitor?

Dear boy, traitors never fall from grace. They die in the position they hold.

For some reason, that made Dallion think of his grandfather. All this time he had been convinced that the old man had done some unspeakable evil that had seen him de-levelled and banished to the Dherma village. The assumption was that he had broken a major taboo by creating a chainling.

However, if Nil were to be believed, the action had to have been sanctioned. Also, why had Aspion been punished? Whatever the reason, it couldnt have been for backing the wrong side.

We wasted a day by coming through, Eury said. We could have gone directly.

When politics are involved, we need to enter the proper way. Now, the right people are expecting us.

The wrong people as well, the gorgon countered.

Yes, and they wont dare try anything until we arrive.

Dal, anything on your end?

They seemed pleasant enough, he replied, which was his way of saying that he hadnt discovered anything by talking to the items. I think we should be fine.

The gorgons snakes moved about, indicating they werent the ones she was worried about.

Roughly an hour later, the city of Linatol was finally in view. Dallion had heard quite a few descriptions of the city itself. Until now, he imagined it to be a superior version of Nerosal: large, taller, likely with buildings made of materials that people only used in jewelry. He couldnt have been more wrong. The city was indeed taller, larger, and more organized than Nerosal could ever be, but that was only part of it. Three massive platforms were placed one atop the other, the middle one so large that it could easily hold Countess Pricords capital. Flawless buildings of Roman-style architecture formed organized districts surrounded by picturesque forests, plains, and rivers that trickled down from one platform to another, giving a new meaning to the phrase oasis in the wilderness.

The hanging gardens of Babylon, Dallion thought. At least, they would have been if someone had heavily invested for a few hundred years to get them to the state of what he was looking at now. This looks nothing like all of the descriptions.

Archdukes prerogative, Nil sighed. While normal cities do everything in their power to flaunt their opulence. The major capitals use their domain powers to obscure theirs. Only people whove already seen the capital get to remember it. Everyone else will see, or imagine, a vastly watered-down version. They call it the surprise factor.

I can see why.

What do you think? Eury asked.

There were so many things that Dallion could have said and none of them would do the sigh justice. Possibly that was why, his subconscious went with the least significant aspect of the city.

It has no walls, he said, still unable to look away.

The comment put a sympathetic smile on the gorgons face. Youll never change.

Theres no need of walls if youre strong enough, March said. Unlike the other two, she wasnt particularly pleased at the sight. Dallion could feel regret emanating from her with the intensity of a church bell.

Whats that round it? Dallion asked, noticing a semi-transparent membrane surrounding the city like a bubble.

Something new, March replied. Were invited, so its not our concern. Remember, were guests there, which means we must act as such.

The warning was clear: they werent to cause any trouble and be careful in the way they addressed the locals, awakened or not.

Will you be alright? Dallion whispered to Eury.

Ive been here, she replied calmly. Well be fine. Just keep your pouch safe and dont split unless you really have to.

The closer they got to the city, the more defined the trade road leading in became. At one point dirt turned into pavement, leading the way to a large wall-less arch. Normally, that would have posed questions, but Dallion knew better than anyone that the wilderness disliked order. Making a paved road between cities would have cost more than was economically reasonable and add minimal benefits.

A dozen city guards, all of them dark-skinned, dressed in golden-purple uniforms stood at the archway. It was tempting to assume that they too were only for show, but Dallion could tell that they were double digits, possibly in the thirties.

March Icepicker? one of the guards shouted.

The woman stopped, turning towards him. Even as a guest, she had her pride.

Welcome to Linatol, maam, the guard quickly said. If youd wait here, youll be escorted into the city.

Thank you, March said in an icy tone. Anything we should be aware of?

You ll need the first mayors permission to bring that inside, the man said, pointing at Dallions shoulder. Creatures from the wilderness have to be registered in order to be able to enter.

Ruby let out a deep sigh, although it was only audible to Dallion.

Ill be fine, little guy, Dallion reassured him. Ill try to find a way around this.

I see. March gave Dallion a glance. Will that be difficult to get?

I cannot say, maam. Youll have to ask your escort.

Whats that? Dallion pointed at the membrane extending from the archway above the city. Normally, it was considered rude to point, but he had found that as a hunter, it was expected for him to be rough round the edges. Being a polite and proper hunter tended to confuse people way too much.

Thats the barrier that protects the city from the plague. No food, seed, or person affected can pass through.

I didnt know that the Academy had a presence here, Dallion said.

The Academy has a presence in all major capitals of the empire, Nil replied. Usually just low-level mages. None of them have the skill to pull this off. The Archduke must have hired someone to keep the city safe until the plague is over.

Another powerful mage That didnt bode well. Dallion was going to have to be extra careful. His only hope was that the mage wasnt any of the ones hed met before. If not, things would become a lot more complicated.

It took ten minutes for the groups escort to arrive. Given the size of the city, that in itself was quite a feat, suggesting that the mission was considered rather important. Dallion expected a small squad of richly dressed servants to appear and lead them to the place they were supposed to go. To his astonishment, it turned out to be a pair of horseback riders.

Both riders were nobles, their levels way beyond forty. One of them, though, was someone Dallion knew from before.

Dame Vesuvia? he asked, breaking all etiquette. To everyones surprise, the woman smiled in return.

I see that a few dozen levels havent been enough to polish your manners, she said. Its been a while, Dal. Im glad that you managed to make it this far. She glanced at one of the guards. Well take it from here.

Of course, dame. The man stood to attention. Theres only the matter of the shardfly belonging

Theyve been invited by the Archdukes household. Pets and items included. Her tone hardened, indicating she didnt appreciate being contradicted.

Yes, dame! By the Seven, have a pleasant stay in Linatol.

Chapter 516: Old Memories

Thats Dame Vesuvia? Nil asked in an almost mocking voice. Shes somewhat less impressive than you described her to be.

On some level Dallion agreed, and yet he still should shake the old image he had of her. Back then, she had been over ten times his level, possibly the closest thing to absolute power. She was someone who had defeated a chainling virtually on her own. Looking back now, he could reason that the creature had been wounded, and also she wasnt alone, but accompanied by a squad of veteran soldiers and quite a few awakened volunteers. In his current state, Dallion could tackle such a chainling without an issue, even if he preferred to avoid it.

I was a lot weaker, then, he said, reluctantly.

I heard you won last years tournament, the dame said in casual fashion.

Hearing her address him, Dallion straightened up. It didnt seem so long ago that she had to use someone else to send a compliment.

Im not the boy I was, Dallion told himself. Even so, it was difficult to get out of the habit.

I didnt reach the finals, he said.

No one did. Someone in the Archdukes family told me all about it. The dame was savvy enough not to refer to the near destruction of the city. He actually made a point to come to me to complain about it.

Complain about the tournament?

Complain about you nearly destroying a valuable heirloom.

Itella? Dallion didnt expect to meet the former contender again. A moment later, he wished he hadnt.

The name made it clear that Itella was part of the Archdukes family hopefully not a direct relation. Given that their fight hadnt ended in the best of terms, Dallion could only hope that they wouldnt cross paths. However, after hearing Vesuvias comments, that seemed less than likely.

Ill gladly repair the weapon, along with my profound apologies, he added.

Thats already done. Its not what youre here for.

Dallion swallowed. Less than ten minutes in the city and he already felt he was in trouble. He gave a sideways glance to Eury. The gorgon didnt seem bothered one bit. A cluster of her snakes moved about, saying that he shouldnt be either.

The dame led the group down the main road of the lowest city level. The streets were objectively far more crowded than those of Nerosal, but far more organized, making everything seem a lot more relaxed. Naturally, it helped that the people moved aside as the dame approached.

Shops, inns, and taverns were everywhere, along with a seemingly endless number of stalls. Everyone was selling everything from food to clothes, to furniture and devices that Dallion hadnt seen. If it could be said that Nerosal was at a late medieval level of technology, this Linatol had reached the renaissance, at the very least.

Gear shops? Dallion asked, looking at a sign that had a picture of a simple mechanism on its board.

Things are a bit more advanced than Nerosal here, Dame Vesuvia said with a hint of pride. Dont buy much, though. Its just for show.

Dallion nodded. Given a chance, he was going to have a look around. After a while of walking, he noticed a pattern: while the shops were a lot, there didnt seem to be a single guild hall in sight. Forts or public buildings were also absent, leading him to the conclusion that the ground level was created exclusively for visitors and those of lesser status. It was no accident that the vast majority of people he had seen were non-awakened.

Where are your awakening shrines? he decided to be subtle about it. Id like to go say my thanks as soon as Im able to.

The question made Dame Vesuvia look over her shoulder. He could feel concern emanating from her and her partner.

There are a few shrines on the first platform, she said. Her voice was polite, but Dallion could tell through his music skill that she didnt really want him venturing there. Quite possibly she didnt wish to let him venture anywhere. Youll have a chance to go there at some point.

Thank you.

I take it that our patron wants to see us? March interrupted, putting the conversation back on track.

Thats not for me to say, lieutenant.

It was just a slight inflection of the voice, but Dallion got the impression that the two knew each other, possibly even before Marchs fall. As Nil would say, thats a past best not spoken. Even so, Dallion remained curious.

Soon enough, the group reached one of the pillars that held the platforms above. To no surprise, it was made of indestructible bricks and had no guardian of its own. Dallion was half tempted to enter the realm just to look around.

A large opening led to the inside of the pillar, where platforms rose up one after the other.

An elevator? Dallion thought. After all this time, hed seen an elevator? Not even the Stars towers had any of those. The locals didnt seem in the least disturbed, getting on at regular intervals. Similar to the people on the street, then cleared out the moment Dame Vesuvia and her group got near.

Its quite solid, Vesuvia said both as a boast and reassurance. The main thing is not to split.

I wont. Dallion said, earning him a few glances.

Boarding the platform was a very different experience from the lifts on Earth. Unlike the standard modern elevators, this one only went one direction and never stopped. Platforms constantly rose, ten feet apart, allowing people to freely walk in, often with a little jump. Dallion didnt want to think how goods were transported in these conditions. Probably the inhabitants of the city had gotten used to the timing, making it a sort of second nature.

The speed was slow, encouraging conversations. However, since neither March nor dame Vesivua had started one, Dallion had no intention of being the groups chatterbox. Mosaics made of light crystals provided light on the walls, depicting scenes of the citys past, almost like a movie of sorts. Looking closely, Dallion was able to make out that the Linatol had been established early on in the empires history, quickly turning into an important center. It seemed that one of the old emperors had built it himself in an effort to expand to the south.

All the provincial capitals are clustered close to the imperial province, Nil said. Attempts were made to move some of them further towards the center, but none succeeded.

Long-lasting traditions? Dallion asked.

Rather, the emperor likes to have his powerful subjects close at hand, less anyone gets some ideas. Thats why even during the Wars of Succession in Wetie province, no one dared build an alternative capital. Inner squabbles are one thing that the emperor often overlooks. Disturbing anything of his that gets a quick response.

I get what youre saying.

The first floor came and went, and as it did, a new part of the city's history came into view. From what Dallion could tell, it involved a lot of construction, or excavations, causing it to significantly grow. Just as the good part started, it was time to get off. They were only being escorted to the second platform, after all.

You'll be staying on the first platform, Dame Vesuvia said as she nudged her horse forward. Before that, you're to receive instructions here. I strongly advise you to get back down when done.

We know the drill, March said.

And it's my duty to make sure you don't forget it.

The second platform was a lot different from the ground. The buildings were far larger and more sophisticated. The Roman style of building went well with the materials, which Dallion could only assume had been originally taken from the Nerosal ruins back in the day. The result a city of imposing, indestructible, guardian-less buildings or at least those located on the second platform. Meadows, lakes, and lush forests were visible in-between districts, all lit by lanterns with light crystals.

For the most part, the buildings seemed residential, many with their own crest of arms, though Dallion did manage to catch sight of an awakening shrine, as well as several structures he couldn't identify.

The streets were fairly full, though nowhere as much as on the ground. More interestingly, they seemed to treat Dame Vesuvia as an equal, moving aside more of politeness than obligation.

Lesser nobility? Dallion asked, recognizing the hallmarks of authority he had seen in the Nerosal noble sector.

Along with some awakening temples, a few major shrines, and one of two trade organizations,

the echo added. The really important people are at the top. Make no illusions, you'll not see that place. Not until you pass the next gate.

The mansion Dallion was taken to was bigger than most, though not the largest Dallion had seen on the platform. It was of note that neither the dame nor the noble that accompanied her went inside. The moment they knocked on the door, a servant dressed in a sophisticated suit of onyx thread, took the trio in, closing the door behind them.

This way, please, he said with open disdain, as someone forced to have a deal with people below his statue. The mistress doesn't wish to prologue this, so the moment you're meeting with her is over, you're to leave the estate and go to the first platform. Loggings have been arranged.

The butler had a blocker item, making it impossible for Dallion to determine anything about him. Based on the weapons he had hidden on his person, he was a high level, matching Dallion, at least.

This isn't my first time here, March said.

I didn't assume it was, ma'am. The servant didn't skip a beat, implying that his warning was addressed to the other two.

I'd forgotten how much fun it was being treated as riff-raff, Dallion thought.

They entered what appeared to be a large study. Shelves of books covered the walls, each made of leather-bound crystal. Exotic plants were everywhere, along with furniture made of magical wood. A tall platinum blond in an expensive black suit was standing close to a table, a glass of some alcoholic drink in his hand. He didn't seem to pay the group any attention, looking, instead, out of the window. Assisted by a pair of maids, a woman in her forties sat on a couch of fine velvet, a book of crystal in her hands. As much as Dallion tried, he couldn't see any distinguishing features from her. In fact, he wasn't even able to describe what she looked like.

The hired help, madam. The servant announced. Lady March and associates.

Thank you, the woman said, handing the crystal to one of her maids. That will be all.

Of course, madam. The man quickly left the room.

The first sword is almost cleared, ma'am, March was the first to break the following silence. A few more months and the item will be ready to have its destiny fulfilled.

A bit behind, but to be expected. The noble didn't sound overly pleased, though not too disappointed either. That's for another time, though. How much were you told?

The guild master only mentioned that a third sword has been found and that it might be related to the spreading plague. There was a slight pause. I was to assemble a trusted team and get further instructions here. March paused again, giving the blond a quick glance. I was not aware the overseer would be involved.

He's here as a friend, the noble replied dismissively. So, you weren't told a thing? Seems some people can't kick the habit of being useless.

The guild master didn't want to overstep his bounds, March said firmly.

The noble let out a partial snort that only someone with practice could muster. It was delicate enough so as not to appear rude, but conveyed every bit of disapproval one could think of.

A fallen imperial lieutenant, a gorgon hunter, and a boy that caused the mess in Nerosal. That's what that person had sent, and you're telling me he doesn't want to overstep his bounds? If it were up to me, I'd never have him set foot in this city again.

We're here because of our skills, ma'am, not our past. If you find us inadequate, we'll be on our way back.

Insolent as always. The noble snapped her fingers. Instantly, both her maids disappeared. So fast that Dallion could barely keep up, they rushed in both parts of the hall, then dashed back towards the group from behind. Both Dallion and Eury reached for their weapons. Only March remained still.

Don't, Nil said, as Dallion was about to split into instances.

Dallion had only a split second to decide. Taking a chance, he decided to go with the old echo's advice.

The maids finished their actions. When they did, a pair of medium-sized benches were placed just behind March's group.

Sit, the noble ordered. It's time to get the details.

Chapter 517: Change of Expectations

Before Nerosal rose to the dump it is today, a large number of items of interest were taken from its ruins, the noble began.

Like most of the building material for your city, Dallion thought.

The practice continued for centuries. Sphere items were discovered, as well as artifacts of greater significance, including the swords that you were entrusted with. The treasures were naturally kept safe and secret in this very city. In the name of the emperor, of course. Some were examined by the Linatol family itself, others lent to the Academy. There was order until the unfortunate incident forty years ago.

It took Dallion a great deal of effort to remain outwardly calm. Only someone used to extreme privilege could describe a series of civil wars that had torn the province apart as an unfortunate incident. The awakened casualties alone went into the thousands, say nothing of the common people. Small towns and villages changed hands so often that they could no longer remember which side they originally supported, or were burned down only to hinder the logistic and resupply potential of one faction or another. The fort Dallion had seen his grandfather storming Aspions memories had long ceased to exist, deconstructed by the winning side in the conflict.

A number of items went missing back then, the woman hissed. Treasures, gathered knowledge, artifacts that had been amassed for centuries. Most were sold or given in exchange for support. A few of them ended up being stolen. She paused, turning her head slightly in the direction of one of her maids.

The servant disappeared, re-emerging moments later, holding a tray with a crystal glass of amber liquid. The noble took a sip, then placed it back on the tray.

The Abacca World Sword was among the things that disappeared, she continued.

Abacca? Dallion wondered. That was a strange name.

It was a present from the Archdukes grandmother to his wife, the noble said. And contained a whole world inside it. Not the desolate mess of the other swords. Unlike them, Abacca was well kept, and even believed to have a number of functioning wonders, as well as the means to create them.

That wasn't what we were told, March interrupted.

What did you think you'd be told? The noble scoffed. That an extremely valuable treasure was stolen from the Archdukes treasury by traitors during a stupid civil war? I don't remember you imperials giving a crap back then. What was the phrase? No interference in internal provincial affairs unless they threatened the empire? You can see how that turned out.

You seem quite convinced that the sword is the source of the plague, ma'am. March stood her ground. We were told in quite vague terms that we were to explore a sword world item and its potential links to the poison plague and the Crippled Star. If that is not the case, why are we here?

Dallion expected the noble to explode in a burst of rage and shout them out of her mansion.

Instinctively, he glanced in the direction of the overseer. The man appeared amused by the entire

situation, observing events with a mocking smile. Even the expressionless maids didn't display any hints of hostility.

The archduke has been searching for the sword and several other notable treasures ever since their disappearance, the noble said, after taking another sip of her drink. Vast amounts of money were thrown to find what was lost. Every now and again, rumors would reemerge relating to the sword, but each time a hunter team would get there, it would have disappeared once more. There even was a mage hired to track the item down at one point. The man was insufferably arrogant, but he did manage to find a pattern in the sword's movement. The short of it is, that the item was in the possession of someone who was very intent on not relinquishing it. A small fortune was paid to the mage to find both sword and current owners and bring them here. To no surprise, he failed, disappearing without a trace.

Now that's surprising, Nil said.

It won't be the first time a mage has been defeated, Dallion noted.

It would be for a mage hired by the Archduke. Don't get me wrong, mages fail all the time. However, they really are defeated. If there's one thing they excel at above everything else, it's self-preservation. For a mage, hired by an Archduke no less, to disappear, he must have been killed.

A replacement was immediately hired. She kept on following the sword's movements, though flatly refused any attempts to reclaim the treasure. It was largely thanks to her that we noticed that there was a correlation between the locations of the sword and the plague itself.

Naturally, you informed the emperor, March interjected.

That is for the Archduke to say. What I can tell you is that before the previous mage disappeared, the sword was sensed in the vicinity of Linatol. If I'm not mistaken, that occurred not much after that whole incident in Nerosal, a year ago. Since then, it has returned here half a dozen times. Three months ago, it completely stopped moving.

Intrigued, Dallion leaned forward. If what the noble was saying was true, that meant that someone had shown interest in the sword roughly at the same time the Star had set his sights on the one kept in the Icepicker guildhall. Could that have been the reason that a mage had been sent to participate in the Nerosal festival? The man had told Dallion that there were plans for the city, plans that Dallion was not to interfere with.

Two swords, two different parties chasing them for their own reasons? That sounded more than a bit suspicious.

Nil, do you think the Academy might be interested in the swords?

Not impossible, but rather unlikely. As fascinating as world items are, there are far better ways of obtaining them than outright stealing. The Academy prides itself in subtlety and backroom deals. Then again, they wouldn't openly go against an Archduke, either. It all depends on his plans with the weapons.

The reason you are here the real reason is to retrieve the sword, determine whether there's a connection between it and the poison plague, and if not bring it here. The comble concluded.

And the person keeping it? March asked. If he managed to defeat a mage, it might take a bit more than us to take him down.

That's of lesser importance, the woman waved a hand dismissively. You're hired to find and check out the sword. The Archdukes arranged for the mage he hired to give you more specifics on the location in two days. Spend today and tomorrow resting. I'd like you to be at your best. Hopefully, you don't let us down.

The woman finished her drink, then reached to her right. Immediately, a maid placed a book-shaped crystal in her open hand.

You'll be taken to your lodgings, she said. Do not take advantage of our generosity.

I think I'll escort them, if that's the same with you, the overseer spoke. His voice seemed unnaturally young, as if he'd just come out of puberty.

If it amuses you. The noble didn't even give him a glance, looking at her book.

With that, the discussion was over. The debriefing was nothing like what Dallion had expected. Since he'd become a hunter, he'd seen all sorts of briefings. Some used it as a means to haggle for the price of his services. Others used it as a means of amusement, spending days asking about his past exploits. Here, he still wasn't sure exactly what had happened. The information he'd received was adequate a lot more than he thought he'd be given and still he was left with more questions than when he came in. By the sound of it, the invisible noble was under the impression that the sword itself was responsible for the plague. Dallion tended to be of a similar opinion. Sadly, he was also convinced that a few things were kept from the explanation. Given how eager the Archdukes family was to retrieve the item, it was likely it had been a weapon to begin with and had later fallen into the wrong hands.

You'll have to forgive the old girl, the overseer said as he led the group out of the mansion. There are a few things on her mind. If she didn't have a high opinion of your skills, she'd never have seen you in person.

His accent was strange, complementing his unusual voice. Back on earth, Dallion would have described it as mixing elements of Australian and Scottish. Here, it suggested that he had come from further north.

One thing that she forgot to mention. You're invited to the Archdukes weekly ball tomorrow night. You're expected to attend. Proper attire will be prepared for you.

Mercenaries aren't usually invited, Euryale said, her snakes moving about slightly.

True, but things change. The plague has made things rather boring. Nobles don't leave the safety of the city as frequently as they used to. Any excuse to break the monotony is more than welcome, especially when the people concerned are otherworlders. Just keep in mind that you're invited, not guests.

In other worlds, they were told to know their place. Suddenly, the invitation became a lot less special.

Dame Vesuvia was still waiting outside when the group got out. Seeing the overseer, though, she knew that she had effectively been relieved. Wishing them a pleasant night, she mounted her horse and rode to another part of the platform, suggesting that she lived here. As for everyone else, they were led to a relatively small inn located on the first platform. Despite the impressive exterior, the place was a lot less comfortable than Hannahs inn.

Each of the trio was given their own, albeit small, personal room to leave their belongings, then invited to have dinner in the main room. The food was nice, though nothing special, even if the innkeeper and his staff did everything possible to make them as comfortable as possible. With the decreased number of travelers, every customer was valued.

Dallion tried to engage in a bit of small talk with the furniture present, but didnt learn overly much. The story was pretty much as he expected it to be: new visitors and a lot of oversight.

After close to an hour, once the group had finished their meals, they had the ability to relax and exchange their thoughts. Of course, the meeting wasnt done in the open.

ITEM AWAKENING

The inside of the inn changed, transformed into a rather stern room of white metal. Since it looked nothing like most of Euryales items Dallion had been in, he could only assume they were in something belonging to March.

Thoughts? the woman asked.

Were not the first to be sent, the gorgon replied almost instantly. We might be a last resort, but Id rather bet that were the cannon fodder.

Seems like, Dallion agreed. I think they knew more about the link between the sword and the plague that theyre letting on. Once this conversation was over, he planned to visit Vihrogon to get some more insight on the matter. I wouldnt be surprised if they know exactly whos behind it.

Thats not our concern, March said firmly. Were only here to deal with the Sword and not get killed in the process.

Going against something that killed a mage doesnt fill me with confidence.

You assume he was killed.

Dallion arched his brows in a confused expression.

They only said that he failed and disappeared. He could have quit, or maybe the Archduke killed him himself. Still, youll need to be prepared for the worst. If any of you need to level up or improve some skills, do it now. Tomorrow will be too late.

I was thinking of exploring part of the city with Dal in the morning, Euryale said. We might learn a bit more.

March gave the gorgon a look reserved for alcoholics who claimed they wanted to visit a pub just to hear the latest news.

Dont get in any trouble.

Reality shifted, bringing Dallion back to the inn.

Chapter 518: Trial Assistance

What do you think? Dallion asked as he looked about the room with his kaleidervisto.

Strictly speaking, the three of them were given their separate rooms, but as tended to be the usual practice, he and Eury had shared one. March hadn't been opposed and since the inn didn't have any other guests, it was the comfortable thing to do.

There didn't seem to be any echoes lingering, but just to be sure, Dallion had a brief chat with the furniture guardians.

Think we're being set up? he put the artifact away.

I'm not sure. The overseer shouldn't have been there. Eury sounded concerned.

That much was certain. His presence wasn't an accident. Dallion had a suspicion that he was the reason for it. News of him being friends with potential future overseers had probably spread fast in the proper circles. Overseers would certainly be aware; it was also possible that they were aware of his relation to the Nerosal overseer.

Get some sleep. We'll be heading out early tomorrow.

To do the task? Dallion asked, referring to the request given to him by Hannah.

That too. There's something else we need to do before that.

That wasn't much of an explanation. Given that she had been to the city before and Dallion hadn't, he decided to leave it at that for now. Maybe some rest was a good idea. Before that, though, there was something he intended to do as well.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

It was night when Dallion appeared in his realm, although with the intensity the Green Moon was shining, it might as well have been day.

To his relief, the realm seemed intact. The only major difference from last time he had noticed was the new design of Onda's tower. A rather large steampunk nest had been placed on top. At present, the nest was empty, but Dallion had a pretty good idea who it had been built for.

Heya, Dal! an unfamiliar voice said.

Instinctively, Dallion burst into instances, in several of which he had summoned weapons. The person who addressed him was in his late teens, dressed in traveling clothes of green leather. He didn't appear to have any weapons, in fact, the only remarkable things were that he had dark green hair and also that he was an illusion.

Dark, Dallion sighed, letting all but one of his instances fade away. Who gave you that bright idea?

No one did, the dragonlet said defensively, suggesting that it had probably come from Onda. I wanted to be like everyone else. Cool skills, by the way. You really know a lot of stuff!

That's why it's generally not a good idea to reveal your skills to kids, Nil said. They tend to talk a lot.

Dallion knew the risks of inviting Dark in his realm, however, he also knew of the benefits. Level sixty had proven to be a wall he couldn't breach, which was why he might as well try going through

with some help. It had been an eternity since he had tried to complete a challenge assisted. Now was his chance to brush up on his skills.

What do you think of the realm? Dallion asked.

Its tiny, but really cool!

Cool, eh? Youve definitely been spending too much time with Onda, Dallion thought. Fancy doing a trial?

A blob of curiosity emerged in the dragonlets forehead.

Itll be tough, but nothing for you to worry about, Dallion began.

Its cool. Onda appeared out of nowhere. I go on trials with him all the time, the hammer guardian boasted. The last ones been really tough.

Eagerness appeared throughout his body like clusters of grapes. It was obvious that he was already won for the cause.

Lets go, then. Dallion walked by, making his way to the central area of his realm.

Weapons appeared on Dallion as he walked. Just like last time, he was going to make use of everything at his advantage. Lux appeared, enveloping Dallion in a layer of flame, then lifting him up and forward in the direction of the trial start. Seeing that, Dark also dropped his illusion, shifting back to his usual dragonlet state.

What are we fighting? he asked while making loops round Dallion.

Ive no idea. It changes each time depending on the gear I have.

Why not take all the gear?

Thats what I do.

Confusion emerged through the dragonlets chest, along with the reluctance of admitting he hadnt understood the answer. Internally, Dallion smiled. However, even he had to admit that this was the most difficult trial by far. The only one that came close was facing the Sand Dragon back when he wasnt even a full awakened. He had spent so many times trying to defeat the creature without success, only to shoot it down in a matter of seconds once he had acquired his dartbow. At present, Dallion strongly hoped the situation would be similar.

The entrance seemed innocent enough: a small mausoleum type structure with a passage of stairs leading down into darkness. The moment Dallion went beyond the first step, the usual rectangle appeared.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

Thats how you level up? Dark asked, switching into a shardfly. Its different.

What about you?

Dad just creates something for me to fight and I fight it.

The description sounded alarmingly similar to the process of an awakening shrine. That told Dallion two things: one that the dragonlet wasn't even a double digit, which was scary considering its current abilities; and two magic creatures had the ability to create natural awakening shrines.

Suddenly, a scary thought crossed his mind. What if awakening shrines were, in fact, magic creatures, or at the very least made of them? It was well known that they were relics of the past that, while still functional, couldn't be reproduced. Also, it was a fact that there were a lot fewer magical creatures that there had been millennia ago. According to Nil, the only place that potentially held the secrets of the awakening shrines was the Order of the Seven Moons.

It's different for me, Dallion said, evasively, knowing that the rules prevented him from telling the dragonlet what awaited him further down the awakening path. All you have to focus on are the opponents. Also, don't get caught in any traps.

The stairs went on for a considerable distance, ending in a round stone wall shaped like a disk. Reaching it, Dallion took a deep breath. The last time he had attempted the trial, he had used the whip blade, the one before that his harp sword. Maybe this time, he'd attempt using both. As the trial with Veil had proved, there were benefits to only attacking. Still, he did place the armadillo shield on his back.

Here goes. Dallion pushed the side of the door. The disk spun open, letting him enter.

The chamber of the trial was a vast underground network of caves, roots, and streams. However, the goal wasn't to find a target. Everything was for Dallion's benefit.

COMBAT INITIATED

A red rectangle appeared. Moments later, clusters of raw light crystals lit up, filling the caves with light.

Careful, Dallion whispered. Sometimes they tend to be fast.

Sure, but what are they? The dragonlet remained in its shardfly form.

Enemies, Dallion replied. No sooner had he done so than the sound of flapping wings came from several side tunnels of the cave network.

Bats? he wondered, extending the whip blade. One of the first trials he had attempted to pass the trial he had fought against bats. Their coordination was so strong that they were able to merge and break up so efficiently that line attacks didn't touch them. As Nil had made a point to point out, this battle wasn't about brute strength, but finesse. After so many failed attempts, Dallion was of the opinion it was about both.

Having Lux fly him to the center of his current cavern, Dallion split into two dozen instances. Dark did the same.

Don't push yourself, Dallion said with one of his instances. I'm not the one you're competing with.

A few seconds later, the shardfly instances were reduced to ten.

The flapping became louder. Eager to test the new creatures out, Dallion did a line attack in the direction of the cave from where the flapping noise was loudest. The thread of destruction flew forward, slicing roots, rock, and part of the cave itself.

No red rectangles emerged. That was good; it meant that the enemies, whatever they were, didn't have the ability to negate his attack. All that was left now was to

A sword of dragonlets emerged from the cave tunnel, followed moments later by more from the next.

Dallion immediately instructed Lux to get him closer to the walls, bursting into another set of instances.

I knew this would happen, Dallion thought bitterly. Since the challenge adjusted to him, it was logical that it would react to Dark's presence. Of course, Dallion didn't expect it to be done in such an obvious fashion.

Releasing the whip blade, Dallion played a chord in an attempt to link to the dragonlets. In three of his thirty-six instances, the strands managed to create a connection. Dallion was just about to select an instance to make reality when everything shifted. Suddenly he found himself closer to the center of the chamber.

What the?!

Several dragonlets crashed together in a ball of scales and claws. From the corner of his eyes, Dallion saw Dark defeat two opponents, deducing them to yellow smoke.

What do you think? Dark asked, beaming with pride as he flew towards the next enemy.

Did you just pull me to your instance? Dallion shouted. His attempts to capture several of the dragonlets with music were now gone. Knowing the capability of the creatures, they had probably seen the instance as well, so would be prepared in the future. Don't just fight on your own! This isn't a solo battle!

A bit ironic coming from you, dear boy, Nil said.

Not now, Nil! Dallion hissed as he performed a cross slash with both swords. The attack managed to cut through the thick skin of a nearby creature, though not before it managed to slash his thigh with its wing.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

Dallion winced. With Lux around, the damage wasn't an issue, but allowing himself to get hurt was. The lack of coordination had made him lose his concentration even more than expected. Come to think of it, it had been a while since he had fought with someone else. Ever since he'd gone solo hunting, he didn't have to coordinate with anyone. Even his guardians followed his instructions to the letter.

Is that the point of the trial, Nil? Dallion flew back to the walls of the cave, trying to limit the points from which he could be attacked. Coordinated fighting?

Its a bit too early to worry about that, dear boy. The goal of this trial is quite obvious: do not get overwhelmed.

That was easier said than done. Two more dragonlets darted in Dallion's direction, each splitting into eight instances. For the moment, the number wasn't alarming, but it was going to go. The more the creatures got comfortable with their surroundings, the more they'd start using their skills.

Another major split took place, pulling Dallion into an instance he didn't want to go. Apparently, his ally had something in mind. Seeing that he wouldn't come to any harm, Dallion let him.

I told you not to pull me to your reality! he shouted.

Predictably, Dark immediately split once more, doing exactly that. Then again.

Dallion felt himself jumping from one spot to another. Tired of the experience, he stopped combat splitting, leaving Dark to have his fun. The only silver lining was that the swarm of yellow dragonlets was just as confused as he was. There was hardly anything more annoying than a well thought out plan getting messed up by someone who had no idea what he was doing. Ten seconds later, it happened again.

This isn't going to work, Dallion thought.

Chapter 519: Combined Bonus

Two line strikes flew against each other. Neither was strong enough to cancel the other out, leaving them to cross through without affecting their destructiveness. Both walls of the cave chamber exploded. In one case, though, a yellow dragonlet exploded with them. Facing it, Dark pulled reality so as to avoid the strike towards him, causing everything with instances to shift slightly to a position they hadn't chosen.

Dallion gritted his teeth. His ally was too frivolous with forced splitting. On the surface, it seemed that he had an advantage over the enemies. After all, four yellow dragonlets had been killed so far, without inflicting a single wound. However, that was a false impression. The dragon swarm remained largely unaffected, constantly increasing in size. Dallion, too, had made that mistake the first few times, believing that his initial successes were an indication of how well he was doing. All this was just the preparation phase. The real fight was yet to begin.

Forcing the nearby creatures to keep their distance with a series of strikes and arc slashes, Dallion then played another chord. The emotions he had to link two were a lot more complicated than before, constantly shifting. Even so, his music skills were high enough to allow him to achieve the desired effect. No sooner had he done so than he felt reality shifting.

Not this time, Dallion thought, pulling the desired reality into one of his own instances. When it happened, Dark was beyond surprised. As someone used to combat splitting unopposed to this point, he still couldn't accept that there were others who could do to him what he constantly did to everyone else.

Hey! Dark shouted. Why do that?

I told you not to reality split when you feel like it.

But I was about to kill one more!

That would leave only a few hundred left. This is supposed to be a coordinated fight. When I asked you to help me, I didnt mean letting you face them until they get you.

A loud snarl suggested that the green dragonlet didnt share Dallions assessment of the situation. Thankfully, in his mind Dallion still remained his teacher, so no further combat splitting followed.

Good, Dallion thought. Move close to the walls and get here, Dallion said, while still playing on his harpsisword.

The order was only half obeyed. Dark glided towards Dallion, but did so right across the empty space, clipping an enemy wing or two as he did. As he neared, Gleam spun wildly, creating a cats cradle of strikes behind him, dissuading any pursuers.

You dont have to solo split! Dallion shouted. Just dont pull everything without warning.

The instruction was lost on Dark, a ball of bitterness forming within his head.

Was I that bad when you were trying to instruct me? Dallion asked.

Do you expect an honest answer, dear boy? The echo replied.

How the heck did you put up with me?

Linking close to a dozen dragonlets with his harpsisword, Dallion then infused the chords with weight and slowness right before doing a line attack. As expected, each of the affected dragons split into instances, attempting to escape. Alas, for them, they were unable. The line sliced through all of their instances, causing them to poof out of existence.

Not terrible, Dark muttered, his very being glowing in awe.

Youre really bad at hiding your emotions,

Dallion thought.

Focus on the ones near me, Dallion said, starting a new series of chords. Youll protect us from the ones close by. Ill deal with the rest. Gleam will help you out as needed.

I can take care of them on my own! the dragonles grumbled.

Red and green markers filled the air. Judging by their shape, all of them belonged to Dark. Seeing them reminded Dallion that, in addition to the standard benefits of fighting together, being in a party also allowed the members to see each others markers. Also, it provided opportunities for them to combine skills.

Concentrating, Dallion quickly tried to remember what skills hed seen the Dragonlet use and how they could be combined with his own for maximum effect. Before he had a chance, though, the enemies pulled back, merging into one giant creature in the middle of the chamber.

Here we go! Dallion shouted as he changed the grip of his weapon. There was no longer any point in using musicwhatever connections he had established snapped the moment the merging occurred.

A massive yellow dragon roared, then glared at Dallion and Dark. Yellow sparks flickered all over its massive wings.

Crap! Dallion shouted. Look out! he burst into fifty instances.

Giant wings flapped, releasing a storm of lightning bolts at the opposing wall. Like a dozen crossbows, they slammed into the stone, erasing dozens of instances in the process.

CRITICAL WOUND

DARKs health has been decreased by 20%

STUNNED

For the next 10 seconds, Darks actions will be impaired.

Not pleased with the results, Dallion chose a better instance of events, pulling the dragonlets reality there. That caused some minor confusion in the mind of the creature, but at least it had avoided getting stunned.

What you do that for? Dark asked. I couldve taken the hit.

The damage, yes, not the stun. Ten seconds stunned is the same as being thrown out of the fight.

Once the trial was over, Dallion was definitely going to dedicate some time to teach Dark some of the basics. The old dragon had been quite strict in his training, but clearly not too good at explaining. The dragonlet had clear gaps in his training, making him extremely well in some areas and terrible in others.

Dont use Dallion began.

Mid way, the dragonlet did a line attack aimed to slice the yellow dragon in two. To Darks joy, it did. Unfortunately, it wasnt the attack that caused the monster to separate, but the creature itself. For the briefest of moments two dragons formed, letting the line attack pass between them, after which they merged together once more.

line attacks Dallion finished his sentence.

The whip blade darted towards the dragons head. Being indestructible, Gleam didnt have anything to worry about; she could run interference and keep the monster focused on her and not on Dallion or Dark.

For good measure, Dallion also summoned his hammer and threw it at the dragon.

Change of tactics, he shouted. Follow the wall till you get to his other side. Well attack him from front and back.

Whos front? Dark asked, flapping his wings violently.

Me. Ill be the focus of his attention. You keep out of sight and look for openings to take advantage of.

As if to mock him, the yellow dragon performed another attack; or rather, two simultaneous attacks. Lightning bolts darted towards both Dallion and Dark. Thankfully, this time, both managed to make use of their instances adequately, resulting in no damage.

New guard markers appeared close to Dark. In contrast, Dallion himself had started moving before such could emerge.

Take advantage of your markers! he shouted. All you need is a few full sequences to slow him down enough for an attack.

Really? Absolute astonishment rang in the dragonlets words.

Dallion froze. That question gave him a very bad feeling.

Dont you know anything about combat markers?

They help you pick the best defense?

You got to be kidding! Dallion thought. Speechlessness wasnt enough to describe what he felt right now. All this time, he had assumed that the dragonlet was aware of skill bonuses. In fact, he was certain that it had attempted to use multi attacks to deal damage when fighting Dallion back in the realm of its father. However, Dallion had never considered that it might not know anything about guard bonuses. The bonus was so obvious that he considered that anyone with guard skills would quickly figure it out. Then again, the dragonlets had always been encouraged to attack, not continually evade attacks.

Matching a sequence of markers slows down the enemy! Dallion shouted. Ill show you!

He waited till his own guard markers appeared. When the next attack occurred, instead of using markers, Dallion danced through the sequence, with Luxs help, resulting in a time freeze. Just to be on the safe side, he went on stacking up several more full sequences.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape combat, smash the window

Dont move! Dallion shouted.

There was no reason for the rectangle to have appeared. He hadnt completed enough sequences to trigger the escape, and yet here it was. His first thought was that it could be an illusion. Looking at the yellow dragon, though, showed that it wasnt. The massive creature remained frozen midair completely motionless, waiting for Dallion to return time to normal.

So, you get to end the fight? the dragonlet asked a fair distance away. Looking at him, Dallion saw that there was another green rectangle there as well.

What did you do? Dallion asked.

Nothing! Dark quickly replied.

Dark

I tried to do what you did, it said with a hint of guilt in its voice. It wasnt difficult, so I thought, why not?

Now it was Dallions turn to be surprised. The dragonlets actions had just shown that actions could combine to build up the skill bonuses. Not only that, but the bonuses had an effect on the entire party. Had Dallion known that earlier, his guilt trials would have been a lot easier.

Nil, how long have you known about this? Dallion asked.

What do you expect me to say?

A hint would have been useful.

You told me yourself that you joined forces in a party to break through your second barrier. That was all the hints you needed. Since then, have you taken advantage of the fact?

Dallion clearly hadn't.

Did you resort to using any skill bonus? Nil continued. Now and again, sure. When you're in a pinch, you try everything to claw your way to victory, then forget it moments after.

I've been using guard and attack skills quite often!

Lies! You've only used attack skill bonuses regularly and even then, you've done so almost exclusively in the realms. That's why you've hit a wall. Battles of this caliber weren't meant to be passed through brute force of ingenuity alone. A lot of calculation goes into them as well. Just because you haven't seen signs of that doesn't mean your enemies haven't resorted to it.

There was no denying it. Thinking back, during the attempts to pass this trial, Dallion had lost because his enemies had become tremendously fast, killing him off with a single blow. In reality, they probably had merely taken advantage of the guard skill bonuses, freezing time for him. Since it was done in a subtle fashion, he hadn't even noticed.

And that's far from all! It's outright sad seeing you mock the dragonlet about not knowing how to use guard skill bonuses, while you're no better.

I've used all the bonuses I know, Nil.

Did you bother learning what bonuses all skills provide?

Dallion had no answer.

If all you'll focus on is guard, music, and attack, you would have been better off not learning any other skills. At least then, you'd have been able to use the benefits Veils echo displayed.

So, this was the purpose of the trial? Dallion shook his head. To learn how to use skill bonuses.

No, dear boy. The purpose of the trial is to determine whether you have the strength to move forward to more difficult challenges. Using skill bonuses was something you should have focused on months ago. The echo's tone brought memories of the first few months after Dallion had received the ring. Back then, shouting and sarcasm accompanied every training session. You should never have reached this level. I mean, you should have come across that problem long ago and done something about it. However, your out-of-the-box thinking surprised even me. That's the problem of being too good: you've become so good at completing trials using alternative means that it never occurred to you there might be something missing along the way.

Chapter 520: Dragon Friend

Dallion remained still for several seconds, cursing his own complacency.

I've been too long in this world, he said to himself.

All this time he had been so focused on obtaining new skills than he hadn't even wondered what bonuses they provided. That wasn't something written in the skill scrolls he'd read in the library, and yet he was fully aware. Since his first three skills had bonus capabilities, all the rest should have had as well. Strange why Euryale hadn't told him about that. Then again, it wasn't like Dallion had asked.

Acrobatics, Athletics, Forging, Zoology all the skills he had obtained, provided massive advantages in many areas and he hadn't bothered to find out what. Even the limiting echo that Aslion had placed in his mind back in Dherma had taken advantage of skill bonuses, causing quills to appear out of free air and attack him. Dallion had achieved the same on a few occasions by combining scholarly and attack skills. However, he had only gone so far.

Dark, new plan, Dallion shouted. When I say we both simultaneously charge at from both sides and do a combined attack. Keep a few instances as a safeguard, but keep on attacking until you can do a multi attack.

That sounds dumb, the dragonlet complained.

Most solutions are dumb, Dallion said. If we do it simultaneously, we should be able to do the multi attack right after. When things get dangerous, we pull back and repeat the guard sequence thing. Remember, the point isn't to kill all the dragonlets, just as many as we can. We have all the time in the world for this.

I still say it's stupid.

On three. Dallion fastened his grip round the hilt of his harpsisword. One. Two. Three!

Both Dallion and dragonlet charged at the dragon simultaneously. With the time freeze still in effect, the creature didn't have the option to move, let alone defend itself, until the first strike was hit.

MINOR HIT

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

Red rectangles emerged, stacking one over the other. Caught unprepared, the massive dragon attempted to move back, but that only increased the amount of wounds it received. Both attackers followed, continuing with the fierce multi attack. It was only after several seconds that the yellow dragon was able to react. The margo form burst into hundreds of dragonlets. Those under threat split into a dozen instances each as they attempted to escape. The rest, in contrast, swarmed in the direction of Dallion and Dark.

Guard! Dallion shouted.

Fighting the urge to combat split and retreat, he waited for the green markers to appear in the air, then followed them. Dallion's body turned and twisted as he followed the three-dimensional sequence. It was like dancing in the air. Tails, jaws, and wings slashed about, eager to tear off chunks of Dallion's flesh. After a dozen unsuccessful attempts, the creatures' actions slowed down, making the task of evading them even easier. Moments after that, a new green rectangle appeared.

This is how you win fights? the dragonlet asked a fair distance away. Its

Borning? Dallion suggested.

Unfair.

The comment made Dallion smile. It sounded so innocent, while coming from a creature that had been granted so many special powers from birth. From a practical perspective, the dragonlet was a flying bag of magic, allowing it to do things impossible for many others. Come to think of it, the vast majority of this world probably thought the same of Dallion. He too was from another world with knowledge that far exceeded theirs, not to mention he had nearly no limitations imposed.

As long as the Moons allow it, its fair, Dallion said. You need to take advantage of everything in order to survive and get ahead. The trick is what to do after using these advantages. That even sounded somewhat deep. For now, lets focus on the fight. No splitting and no taking needless risks.

Dark let out a distinct grumble. Dallion could hope that the creature would be pragmatic enough to follow the plan.

On three, Dallion said. One. Two. Three!

He spun around and did a line attack. As he did, he saw another line of destruction approaching from the opposite sideDark had done a similar attack of his own. By the time the yellow dragonlets could move again, dozens had already perished, reduced to puffs of smoke. Many more attempted to escape their fate without success.

Its so easy,

Dallion thought. There was no doubt that the number of enemies had increased vastly since he had attempted the trial on his own. Despite that, using skill bonuses and a friend made the fight unrecognizable to the point that he felt as if he was bullying the trial opponents. In a way, it was just like with action-adventure video games: the first enemies could be defeated using nothing but basic attacks. However, the further players progressed, the more they had to make use of the items and skills of their characters to achieve victory.

Grains of chaos appeared throughout the yellow dragonlets. After two times they were smart enough to figure out what was going on, just as they didnt have any means of countering.

Flying away from the danger zones, the creatures merged into clusters of larger creatures, which then went on to form a quite largertthough nowhere as large as beforedragon.

You can surrender, Dallion said loudly. Even if you fill the cave with lightning bolts, well keep freezing time and attacking you. Theres nothing you can do about it.

One would never know whether it was a mistake saying that. For several seconds, the dragon kept staring at Dallion with his giant eyes the size of small houses. Then it did something that Dallion couldnt have expected: imploded on its own accord. Dallion felt as if he was being sucked in by a vacuum.

Shield! he shouted.

Both the armadil shield and Lux spring into action. One propelled Dallion as far away from the dragons last location, while the other extended, forming a protecting sphere around its owner. A

blast wave followed, propelling the sphere like a bullet projectile. The force was so great that Dallion was able to feel every second of the acceleration, as well as the abrupt stop.

FATAL WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 75%

FATAL WOUND!

Darks health has been decreased by 75%

Damn it! Dallion managed to say, despite the pulsing pain that went through every part of his body. He knew from Nil that magic creatures were a force to be reckoned with. Now he had a first hand experience. If it wasn't for the shield, the trial would have already ended in failure. Even now, the damage received was significant enough to keep him from effectively fighting any new groups of enemies, should they appear?

Vihrogon, are you alright?

I've been through worse. A shield gets to experience a lot after a few hundred years of duels.

The guardians humor seemed intact, which was a hopeful sign.

Lux, heal him first, Dallion ordered. Once you're done, jump back onto me.

Flames moved from Dallion to the inside of the metal sphere, as the firebird did as it was asked.

You have broken through your sixty-first barrier

Your level has increased to 61

Choose the trait that will serve you best

A sense of euphoria went through Dallion. It was as if a curse had been lifted, allowing him to enter new territory.

DRAGON FRIEND

(+5 Empathy)

Few are able or willing to team up with a dragon. Well played, but keep in mind that dragons are like cats: there's no telling what they are thinking.

The achievement made Dallion chuckle. That was a unique way of describing a dragonlet, even if absolutely accurate. Five empathy was quite an impressive achievement, bringing his overall trait to thirty.

After some consideration, Dallion increased his body trait to thirty-nine. Given what was to come, that seemed like the best option. With enough physical strength and stamina, he could well focus on maxing out his skills while gaining a few achievements in the process.

That was pretty lame. Dark flew up to Dallion. It wasn't even a real fight.

We won, Dallion said. How often have you won a battle against your father?

The comparison was false, but it made the dragonlet think a bit. In terms of size and skill, the trial enemies couldnt compare to the old dragon, although they were no dragonlet either. An internal conflict brewed in front of Dallions very eyes. In the end, the blue blob that was acceptance gained dominance.

Im sure the next opponent will be tougher. Dallion patted Dark on the head.

The dragonlet pulled away almost instantly.

Seems like he considers you a parent figure of sorts, Nil said, amused.

Yeah, right.

If theres one thing Ive consistently seen after decades of observing people at trials and important events, its that they are utterly ashamed of being seen to be congratulated by their parents.

Dallion didnt exactly agree with that, but he had to admit that having a dragon as a party member was a huge benefit. The question was, would that be enough when facing the Star?

Lets go, he said, making his way to the tunnel they entered.

With a snort, the dragonlet followed.

Whats your level? Dallion asked.

Its high enough. The reply left no doubt that Dark had a way to go until he too could level up through trials. Normally, that would be an issue, but in the present circumstances, Dallion had the perfect solution.

Nil, theres a citadel of the order here, right?

That would be the case, yes. It wont help you much, though. The Moons dont care if you try to talk to them from a shrine or a temple.

Thats not what I had in mind. Im thinking of having Dark level up so he can pass the second gate.

What?!

Dallion could almost picture the old echo choking from shock in his library.

But You cant level up a dragon at a citadel!

Why not? All thats needed is an awakening altar, right?

Well, technically yes but a dragon? Thats just not done!

As an initiate, Im free to enter without waiting, right? And one theres nothing stopping me from entering the trial. Of course, I wont be participating, but just observing like Falkner did.

I know that your words individually make sense, but putting them all together doesnt, Nil grumbled. Ill give you that you can smuggle the dragonlet in the citadel. However, how do you plan on having it enter the realm of the altar? If you use the Vermillion ring to reveal him, there will be more than a few questions

I thought you said youve become used to my thinking outside of the box, Dallion mentally laughed. I dont need him to emerge in the real world. Once Im in the realm of the altar, Ill just open a link to my realm and have Dark cross over. Theres nothing that can harm me in an awakening realm, so theres nothing for me to fear. Besides, who would go against two chosen of Felygn?

Well, I hmmm.

The logic was ironclad. In theory, there was nothing stopping Dallion from executing the plan. What was more, it seemed to be simple enough to do without any major risks. At worst, that would end up being a wasted trip. No one was going to get hurt, including Dallion, and no one was going to be none the wiser.

Are you sure about this, dear boy? Youll be asking him to go through half a dozen levels, at least.

Im sure Dark can handle it. Hes a lot stronger than I was. And dont forget, Ill be there to keep an eye if anything goes wrong.

Well, I suppose it could work. However, youll need to prep him for that. Even with all his raw energy, I think hes not fully ready.

Dont worry. I have the perfect person for the job.

Dark, you think youre ready to take on stronger opponents? Dallion asked as they emerged back above ground.

As long as theyre stronger than this. The dragonlet sounded quite confident in its abilities.

Great.

Dallion drew his harpsisword and threw it forward. The weapon transformed into the shape of the nymph, a stern expression on her face.

Meet your new trainer. Harp will make sure you get enough training.