

Leveling up 521

Chapter 521: Hunter's Den

The night lasted for close to a week. Dallion spent days improving items to increase his skills. The targets of his actions were the sheets, pillows, and blankets. The goal was to get his music skill to eighty. The moment he reached seventy-three, though, Eury grumbled at him to get some sleep. Since Dallion had failed to obtain any new skill combo achievements, he decided to do so, entering a weird series of dreams in which food was the main focus. Leveling up without eating wasn't the best of ideas, even if his current body level allowed him to handle it.

At four o'clock in the morning, it was time to get up again. Dallion's experience as a hunter allowed him to wake up before the gorgon's hand reached his shoulder. However, as he saw, despite that, he hadn't felt her waking up and slipping out of bed in the first place. Clearly, he had room for improvement.

It's time, Eury whispered.

Dallion nodded, then stretched, and left the bed.

How many levels did you gain? she asked as he went to the water bowl to wash his face.

Just one. I upped my music a bit. A few more days and I'll hit the eighty cap.

Don't rush things. We've got time before we get to the sword.

You think there'll be more twists to this mission? he glanced over his shoulder.

I'm not sure. March seems to think so.

Did she say anything?

She didn't have to. She let us go out to the city on our own.

Ten minutes later, Dallion had gone through the inn's restroom which was a lot more sophisticated than anything he'd seen in Nerosal or anywhere else for that matter. If he didn't have his memories of Earth-style bathrooms, he'd almost consider it a luxury. The room even came with running water, allowing him to wash up in the same room before leaving. Refreshed, dressed, and geared up, he joined Eury, who was waiting for him in the inn's main room.

Hide him somewhere. She pointed at Ruby, who had just landed on Dallion's left shoulder.

The shardfly sighed.

Sorry, buddy. Dallion gently took the creature by the wings. You know that people aren't always glad to see you out and about.

The creature was placed in the backpack, near the dryad bowl. At least that way Dallion knew that Ruby would have someone to chat with.

Anything else? he asked, trying to sound as accepting as possible.

No. Let's go.

The streets were unusually full for that time of night or early morning, depending on the point of view. Having all the inns, guilds and taverns clustered in one place created for heavy nightlife. The

noise levels were remarkably low, though. Knowing that every word could be heard by the entire block tended to make people whisper a lot more, especially awakened.

Eury navigated through the streets and sections of the platform with the certainty of a local. What Dallion found more interesting was that no one was particularly taken aback by her being a gorgon. Back before he had become an official apprentice hunter, he had seen people view her with curiosity, fear, dislike, or all three mixed in one. Here, she seemed to be considered normal, which meant there had to be a sizable gorgon population within the city.

After going on through over a dozen streets and a few wooded sections, the two found themselves in front of a rather majestic building. Even in a city as magnificent as Lanitol, it stood out from its surroundings. For one thing, it was alone, located in the middle of an urban forest. Decorative columns of gray marble blended with walls and archways rising up to a statue covered dome, three stories high. Large circular windows were all over the upper floors, tinted almost black.

Were here, Eury said, making her way to the large wooden door.

As Dallion approached, he sensed something he hadn't since arriving in the city: the building had an area guardian.

Nice to see some variety, the buildings said with the tone of an old veteran. Judging by the slight accent, Dallion could tell that it was a copyette. I can't remember the last time I saw someone with empathy.

Dallion stiffened.

No need to be worried. Nothing bad will happen to you. You're among your own.

This is a hunters guild? Dallion asked, glancing at Eury.

There's no hunting guild, the gorgon replied, opening the door. It's just a place we gather. This one is more permanent than others.

The description reminded Dallion of Jiroh's old inn, currently run and owned by her sister. Things in her city continued to be tense, now more than ever with the poison plague going on. Sadly, with tensions between the empire and its neighbors increasing, Dallion hadn't had a chance to see her. He had used the services of the Nerosal furies to send letters, but none of them had been answered. The only thing he knew for certain was that she had been alive as of two months ago.

Come, I need to introduce you to someone.

The inside of the building was composed of a single vast open space. Weapon racks, shelves of scrolls, and furniture mixed in one, giving it a very mediaeval look. Sets of stairs went along the walls, leading to a ring on the second floor, containing a series of small rooms, likely sleeping quarters judging by the cots.

Haven't seen you in a while, a fury in an outfit of green leather said across the hall.

Half a dozen people of various races turned around, giving Eury a glance. Furies were the most prominent, followed by dwarves, and lastly, humans. However, there was also another gorgon present. He was much taller than Euryale, spending his time reading several scrolls at once.

I thought you said you'd never come back here. The fury who had spoken before disappeared, appearing a step away from Eury. The wrinkles around his eyes suggested that he had to be well in his fifties.

Learn one, catch one, teach one, Eury replied calmly. That's the principle, isn't it?

That's it. The fury moved from Eury to Dallion. Then, without warning, he reached towards Dallion's neck.

Instinctively, Dallion burst into a dozen of instances. Before they could fully materialize, however, the fury grabbed his shoulder, causing them to fade away.

Testy, he said. Dallion felt a strand of air grab the chain round his neck, revealing his hunter's emblem. The same that you got, he said, clearly addressing Eury. You must like this one a lot to give him that.

He's good, Eury said. And yes, I like him a lot.

Do you have a name?

Dal, Dallion replied.

We seem to have a celebrity, a female dwarf snorted. The hero of Nerosal has come all this way to see us.

And anotherworlder too. The fury took a step back, releasing Dallion's emblem. Must have been quite a feat. You'll get a rank bump for sure. Maybe even two. Is that why you came? I didn't think little Eury was interested in such things.

Bringing a hero helps, a gruff-looking man laughed.

There's no such thing as heroes, a sharp female voice came from the ring on the second floor.

Dallion looked up. A woman stood there, hands on the metal railing. She was in her thirties, dark-skinned and muscular built. A sleeveless vest of reinforcing silk emphasized her muscles along with a rather large series of intricate tattoos.

Must have taken a lot to get your back here, little girl, the woman said. When your mentor died, you said you'd never set foot in this place. What changed your mind?

I've come to register a friend, Eury replied, the snakes on her head moving about.

This was the first time Dallion had seen the gorgon so nervous. It was almost like she had turned into an apprentice walking into a hall of masters. If she held them in such reverence, that could only mean that their skills had to be incredible.

What skill is everyone? Dallion asked.

Between thirty and seventy, the building guardian replied. Most of the old dogs had reached their limit, but what they couldn't achieve through levels, they accomplish through experience.

Thirty?

You're not the only apprentice there is. As for our very own Vela, she's three levels away from nobility. A pity she's reached her peak as well.

According to Nil, level eighty was the level at which nobility was granted, regardless of anything else. That suggested that the woman had to be at seventy-seven. Quite an impressive level, no doubt, but it also begged the question. With so much talent here, why did the archduke hire March and her group to begin with?

This is who you've brought to register? Vela asked. He's got some skills. Do you think he's ready, though?

He isn't. But he will be. I want him to decide when to take the trial on his own.

Do you feel ready, boy?

I'm getting there, Dallion replied. Now's not the time, though.

A faint smile appeared on the woman's face. Dallion expected her to do something provocative, like throw a dagger at him, or leap down and charge in a mock attack. Instead, she calmly went to the stairs and walked down to the lower level. Half a dozen small weapons forged of sun gold were attached to her belt, none of them weapons Dallion could identify.

He's done a few jobs, Eury was quick to say. Mostly small things, but he can handle himself.

You've given him your old emblem, so I'll trust your judgment. That's not the reason you've come here. There's something you want badly enough to return here. The woman closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them back again. Part has to do with him, but part doesn't. Are you two sleeping together?

There was no answer.

That explains a few things, though not everything.

What do you want me to say? Eury clenched her fist. I don't have to explain myself to you or anyone else here! I'm not little Eury anymore!

Kid, until you can handle the really big hunts, you'll always be little Eury. Vela's expression became stern. So, tell us. What exactly are you here?

I need your help with something, the gorgon said at last. But I'll only tell you and Lithospasia.

Vela's eyes narrowed.

Litho, come over here.

The male gorgon a short distance away rolled up the scrolls on the table before him, then stood up. It was difficult to tell what his emotions were; his expression was as expressionless as a marble mask, and similar to everyone else in the building, he was wearing a blocker item.

Are those the guild leaders? Dallion asked the area guardian.

Hunters don't have guilds. Not officially. Vela is the prime hunter of the city and Litho is her second. You can say they are the strongest hunters in the province. Last time Eury was here was to become a full hunter. There was a lot of sympathy for her because of the death of her mentor. A few thought

it was premature to have her hold the test, but she did. After it was over, she left and hasn't been back here since. Until now, that is.

Whats so unusual about that?

Vela offered to become Eurys new mentor. You can guess the rest.

Eury refused. Dallion sighed mentally.

Not only that, she said that she'd never set foot here. There was a bit of a scandal. Egos were bruised. Many found Eurys reaction an insult, especially since they hadn't been made the same offer. The guardian paused for a few moments. If she had accepted, with her skills, she could have become prime hunter eventually, but turned it all down.

Chapter 522: Past and Future Master

Half or Eurys snake had turned towards Vela, staring right at her, almost as if she were ready to engage in a fight. The intensity was obvious to everyone else in the hall. Hunters stopped what they were doing and stood up, forming a round circle around the two. Even the male gorgon took a few steps back, leaving this play out. It was a matter that could only be settled between the two.

Lux, Dallion thought. When I tell you, fly to Eury and start healing. Gleam, you get ready too.

Okay! The firebird chirped in response.

Gleam, on the other hand, remained silent. There was a contest of wills going on between Euryale and her could-have-been mentor. It wasn't measured in blows or even instances, however Dallion could feel invisible blows being exchanged.

Is that a skill? Dallion asked.

That's difficult to say, dear boy, the old echo replied. Hunters definitely have the ability to intimidate others through a sort of invisible presence, but

It's a mind trait ability, Vihrogon interrupted. They're fighting in their minds.

I've never heard of that. Dallion fought hard not to blink with surprise.

That's ludicrous! Nil grumbled. I happen to be quite familiar with the characteristics of the mind trait, and I have never

It allowed a person to convey what is happening in their thoughts to the outside. The armadil shield continued. Presence of fear, intimidation, dominance, support. Some refer to it colloquially as an aura, but it's not that. It's just the effects of a person allowing sensations leak out of their belief in the real world. It's generally been forgotten for a while. Most people use a semblance of it instinctively, but it's an ability.

Droplets of sweat formed on the gorgons forehead. More and more snakes turned to stare at Vela until at one point almost everyone on her head was looking in that direction. However, it wasn't enough. Anyone could sense it, clear as day. After a few more moments, some of the hunters stopped observing the scene and returned to what they were doing before.

It's over, Vihrogon said. Eurys pride is forcing her to go through the motions, but she knows she's lost.

Are you able to use that skill? Dallion asked.

Not anymore. Being banished imposes certain limits. Maybe I could pull it off with a lot of effort, but that's not my role anymore. Harp could.

Dallion could that being the case. However, why hadn't Harp offered to teach him so far?

Eury clenched her fists harder. The pressure she was subjected to was a lot more than she could handle. Vela, on her part, didn't seem in the least tired. If anything, she appeared rather amused.

You've improved a bit, the woman said, taking a step forward. Maybe more than a bit. But even you can't achieve in years what it has taken others decades.

Dallion attempted to take a step forward, but the moment he did, a hand slammed onto his shoulder.

No, the fury hunter whispered. It's not your place.

Not to mention you'd only embarrass yourself, Nil said, helpfully. Elite hunters are a scary sort. Even the Academy has hired them on occasions.

I offered you help when your teacher died, Vela said. You ran off without accepting it. Now, you're back here, asking for it. Did you think everything would be forgotten?

Euryales snakes were trembling as she attempted to stand her ground.

I know what happened on Nerosal. I know what happened to Ji. Neither of those things is enough to make up for what you've done. She took another step forward.

The pressure in the air increased to the point that even Dallion felt it like an avalanche crashing on him. His fight or flight instinct was triggered, along with the realization that he wouldn't stand a chance in a fight. Voices in the back of his mind called out for him to run off, to flee this place and never look back. The only thing stopping him was the fact that his muscles refused to do even that. Red was creeping in everything Dallion could see, as if blood had been splashed on his eyes. His throat felt tight, as if someone was choking him. Then, suddenly, the tension disappeared.

Dallion gasped for air. Several steps away, the snakes on Eurys head went back to normal, returning to their usual positions. Even so, the gorgon was looking down at the floor in a sign of defeat.

Still Vela put her hand on Eurys shoulder your skills are undeniable. And now, you've trained an apprentice. The prime hunter looked at Dallion. Another otherworlder? And one with empathy at that.

A shock of surprise ran through Dallion's body.

Don't be so surprised, Vela said before he could ask the obvious question. You aren't the only one who could talk to guardians. Hawk has been the guardian of this home ever since it was first built.

Back in his day, he used to be a hunter as well. Now he keeps an eye on things and lets us know when something curious happens. She pointed at one of the walls. There, pinned to the stone, was what Dallion had first mistaken to be a painting. Looking at it carefully, he could see that it was, in fact, a thin layer of dusk beneath a glass frame. The word Empath was written there in large letters.

Sorry about that, the guardian said. Part of the process. Dont worry, we keep our secrets.

Dallion nodded, but this was a reminder that his secret might as well be considered out. Several people in Nerosal knew about it, and now here. In half a year, everyone interested would likely be able to find out.

I wouldnt have come here if it wasnt important, Eury whispered. I need your help.

Vela nodded.

AREA AWAKENING

The surroundings didnt seem to change. It was the hunters who had disappeared. At present, only Eury, Dallion, Vela and the male gorgon were in the room. Moments later, a someone new appeared. He looked like a grizzled human ranger in weathered leather clothes, but Dallion could tell he was a copyette.

You are in the world of HAWK.

Defeat the guardian to change HAWKs its destiny.

So. Vela went directly to the point. Why exactly are you here?

Nothing I tell you must leave this realm, Eury said.

I vow by the Moons to keep the secret, the woman said. She was shortly followed by the male gorgon. Well?

Im here as part of a group for hire.

Marchs team, Vela nodded. I know. Word spreads quickly when an ex-legionary sets foot here, especially someone like her. What were you hired to do?

Were told to find an item that could have caused the poison plague.

Several of Lithospasias snakes stirred.

Thats quite the task. Vela nodded. Sounds like the assignment is coming from the Archduke. Only he would have the will to go after something like this.

I want to know if anyone else was hired to take part in this.

There was a long moment of silence. Vela remained motionless for five full seconds, after which she went to the nearest chair and sat down.

I understand now. Smart move coming here. Stupid, but smart.

Dallion winced. He didnt like suck paradoxical statements, but even he could tell that the comment was more than an attempt at a joke.

No ones hired at present, the copyette said. But that hasnt always been the case. Two separate mages from the academy were specifically hired to find the item. Or rather, the person with the item. One of them serves as the citys mage even now, maintaining the magic barrier. Sloppy work, but it gets the job done, I guess.

Vela audibly sighed.

As for hunters, none were approached, Hawk went on. In fact, we were specifically told not to get involved in the matter or we might outstay our welcome in the city.

I wasnt aware of that, the male gorgon said.

It was a private conversation between the overseer and I. The copyette smiled. Nothing that had concerned you, since no such offers had been made. Now that little Eury opened the topic, I thought it might be worth a mention.

The overseer had warned against anyone following up on this? Dallion wondered. That didnt make much sense. Actually, maybe it made a lot of sense. If the sword was indeed the source of the plague, the Archduke wouldnt risk anyone but him getting it.

The question is Eury began.

Why hire us for something that mages had failed at? Dallion quickly finished for her. He wasnt certain what she as about to ask, but didnt want it let known that the Icepicker guild, and they in particular, had already explored the realms of two swords.

The interruption didnt pass unnoticed. Neither Eury nor Vela seemed particularly pleased about it.

March is strong, Vela said slowly. But not that strong. And youre still just children. If it were something serious, the Archduke would have gone himself. It wouldnt be the first time. There are only two reasons I can think of why hed send you. The first is if he suspects a trap and wants to use you to spring it.

Cannon fodder, Dallion thought.

The second The woman cracked her fingers. Theres some requirement only you could fulfil. If I had to guess, it would be because the both of you are otherworlders, but it might be something different. It definitely doesnt have anything to do with you being hunters. Theres enough local talent for that, and since its the Archduke, were talking about money isnt the issue.

What then? Eury asked.

Were you told anything specific about your task? Anything you can share?

A bit of history, a bit of threats, but nothing that stood out. The item is in the wilderness, somewhere in the vicinity of the city. Were to go in a few days to claim it.

Why not immediately?

I dont know.

Hmm. The woman tilted her head to the side, cracking her neck. As usual, you've put me in a difficult position. If what you're saying is true, if you mess up, you'll die and the plague might become worse. However, if I openly assist you, I'll make the city my enemy.

I was hoping you'd have some advice.

There's nothing I can say that you haven't considered already. The only thing her words trailed off. A smile formed on her face. That's it, isn't it? It's not often that you're sneaky, but when you are, you really go for it.

I don't get it, the male gorgon said.

She's come for the gear. Vela clarified. The weapons and armor I promised would be hers if she became my protégé. That would definitely give you an edge no matter what you're facing. It might even help you take down a mage.

Help me and once this is over, I'll do what you asked.

What? Dallion almost said out loud. This went beyond unexpected. He knew that as a hunter, one always had to take every advantage given, but this went beyond that. Could it be that he had just been dumped? If Eury were to become this woman's apprentice, she'd certainly need to abandon her home and workshop in Nerosal and move here, leaving Dallion behind. Or maybe there was more to it.

Thinking back, Dallion had definitely noticed changes in her ever since Jiroh had left this world. They were subtle, mostly insignificant, but had slowly been piling up. This mission wasn't the reason for her request, it was an excuse. Everything had been building up to her leaving for months. The worst of it was that Dallion had noticed, but thought that giving her some space would settle things. In truth, he had done the exact thing that had pushed her to make her decision. That's why she had asked him to make his. It wasn't about the pets or about his attitude. Eury had asked him to choose between her and Nerosal.

Chapter 523: A Choice Remade

It was strange watching someone else make adjustments to Eury's armor. Seeing the skill involved, it was obvious why. As it turned out, all of the elite hunters were masters in forging along with arts and carving. Between these three skills, one had everything necessary to make any item, clothes included.

While observing, Dallion attempted to learn some of their methods. Unfortunately, his scholar skills were too low to help with that, and there were no markers visible in the real world.

You didn't say you're thinking of moving here, Dallion whispered to Eury.

It's not the time, she whispered back. The subtle movements of her snakes suggested that she didn't approve of the question rather than the timing.

Kid, one of the dwarves shouted to Dallion. Ever worked sun gold?

No particularly, Dallion replied, stepping further away from Euryale. I've mostly done stuff from sky silver and sky steel.

Try sun gold when you get better. The skies are stronger, but only sun metals ave a link wind skills. Comes with the name. The hunter grinned as he kept molding pieces of armor with his bare hands.

Given that the suns were considered being linked to the skill groups, that made sense. Back when he had first learned about them, Dallion thought that the link was a more poetic metaphor. Apparently, that wasnt the case. The adjectives coming with the metals werent just for show.

Wiping off the sweat from his forehead, the dwarf put on his gloves, then took the scale armor shirt, holding it in front of him. After a thorough inspection, he tossed it to Eury.

Check it, he said.

Without an ounce of modesty, Euryale put it on. In Dallions view, it suited her well. However, he seemed to be in the minority. Several hunters pointed out spots that needed obvious fixing. With a grumble, the dwarf went to Eury, then removed his gloves and corrected the mistakes with his fingers.

Seeing that, Dallion understood why dwarf smiths were so valued in this world. They could shape metal the same way people could shape clay without the need of furnaces or hammers. Done, the dwarf took a few steps back, looking critically at the creation.

Should be good enough, the dwarf said. If there are any issues, come back ere and well fix it for ye.

The gorgon nodded.

Heres the rest. Vela approached, carrying what could be described as a wooden chest with a metal chain that served as a strap. You might have to clean them a bit. They havent been used in a while.

Ill manage.

The prime hunter shook her head.

As for you, she glanced at Dallion. Hunt bigger prey. A lot bigger prey. Until you solo a wild chainling, theres no point in having your trial. Youll only get hurt.

Yes, maam, Dallion said. How exactly am I to register?

You were registered the moment you set foot here. What do you think Hawk does?

To be honest, Dallion wasnt at all sure what the copyette did. As the guardian of the den, he provided shelter, but it seemed he did a lot more. It wouldnt be a surprise if it turned out that he was the de facto leader of the Linatol hunters.

Good hunting. And show March how things are done, Vela added to the cheers of the hall.

One last thing, Dallion said. Wheres the Night Auction?

Silence filled the room. All eyes focused on Dallion as if he had just stepped in a puddle of crap.

You want to enter the Night Auction? Surprise mixed with mockery in the womans voice.

Cant I?

Not unless youre a noble or invited by one. If you want to buy trinkets, try your luck with the Day Auction. Anyone can enter there, as long as theres enough coin.

I was told that hunters were allowed, Dallion persisted.

Famous hunters, Vela clarified. At least famous enough to have one of the nobles attending to invite you in. The event is solely for nobility. Everyone else is a guest. Even the overseer cant go if not invited.

Ill worry about that. I just want to know where it will be held.

Cocky. The woman smirked, then glanced over her shoulder at Lithospasia. Its obvious why little Eury got him. The auction takes place somewhere on the third platform. Getting to the platform itself is difficult. Still interested?

Dallion nodded.

The auction is a status thing. It doesnt have a specific location. One of the high nobles decided to organize it and lets the selected participants know. Thats why the only way to get invited is by a noble.

Damn it! Dallion thought. This wasnt the answer he was hoping for. The only other solution was to seek out the local mirror pool and ask them. Unfortunately, based on his former experience, such deals usually came with a lot of strings attached.

Riff raff like us arent given details. What exactly are you looking for? There are other ways to find treasures.

Thank you, Dallion said. Well be on our way.

When Dallion went outside, a few hours had passed. Part of the sky had turned a paler blue, indicating that morning was near.

We should get the thing Hannah wanted, Eury said once both of them were outside.

Yeah, Dallion said with a lot more enthusiasm than he actually felt.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion counted to ten, then took the ring Adzorg had given him from his pouch and put it on. There was nothing but a few echoes inside. Both looked like a younger version of Nil, and both remained perpetually silent. Dallion had tried talking to them when he had entered the rings realm back in Nerosal. By the sound of it, things werent different now.

First platform, northern side, Nil said.

Thats a bit vague, Dallion grumbled. Any address? Or at least a name or description?

Just head towards that area, dear boy. The people in question are aware of your presence. Theyll contact you.

Nil says we must get to the north side of the platform, Dallion told Eury. Theyll get in touch with us. You dont know how I might enter the Night Auction by any chance?

Other than impressing a notable noble at the event, you'll be going, not a clue.

Thanks, Nil. That was really helpful.

Provided with no other choice, the pair started walking.

As the sun peeked beneath the horizon, people started filling the streets. There weren't many anywhere near the crowds Nerosal was used to, but enough to make it clear that Dallion and Eury had to be discreet.

Bells chimed throughout the city, letting everyone know it was seven o'clock. Apparently, the Order of the Seven Moons had quite a strong presence in the city, and made sure that everyone was aware of the Hour of Prayer. In typical for this world fashion, the duty to pray didn't fall on the masses, but the nobles and other powerful awakened. However, since everyone wanted to mimic the strong and powerful, lesser awakened, and even ordinary people tended to respect it.

I still haven't made up my mind, Eury said all of a sudden. With her blocker ring on, Dallion couldn't be sure whether she was telling the truth.

Dallion wanted to say something snidey, to tell her in a passively aggressive manner. What would be the point, though?

Just a swarm of distractions, he told himself. It only stings, but cannot hurt me.

It's fine. We'll need the equipment. You're not the only one gearing up. You didn't tell me you came here to train. You said that you and Jiroh had a mentor who

Who was from here? I told you that hunters stay in big cities. Nerosal wasn't a big city. Our group was small and remained together only because of Jiroh. My mentor came from here. All of us came here as well: once to be registered as apprentices and once to go through our full hunters trial. Some of us even came a few times more.

The explanation made Dallion feel a bit better.

How strong are they?

Strong enough for the Archduke to not trust them with the sword.

District after district, the two kept walking. Every now and again Dallion would check with Nil, but the instructions remained the same until they approached. When Dallion nearly reached the wall marking the end of the platform, someone finally did.

Flowers for the girlfriend? an old lady asked Dallion all of a sudden.

She could easily pass as one of the locals trying to make a few coins from unsuspecting visitors. However, thanks to his music skills, Dallion could easily sense the lack of any greed or deceit. Instead, there was determination and cold, calculated mercantile-ness.

What makes you think she's my girlfriend? Dallion asked casually.

Your rings. The smile remained on the old woman's face, but anyone with enough perception could see that it had become forced.

Here we go. Do you have more flowers to offer? These don't seem the right match.

Of course. This way.

The woman continued along a narrow street by the platform wall, then turned into a small alley where a sewer entrance was visible. The moment he saw it, Dallion knew what would be expected of them one of the things that awakened despised smelly areas.

Give the rungs, then get back to your inn, the woman whispered.

Not before the item, Dallion countered.

It doesnt work that way. We werent able to bring the item into the city. Youll get it once youre outside.

Then Im not giving the rings.

Listen, the rings are only used for negotiating, the woman said. Your side puts an echo. Our side puts an echo and they discuss the deal. Payment happens later.

So much for everything being arranged in advance, Dallion grumbled.

Nothing is perfect, dear boy. A lot of things were ironed out. Only a few minor points remain, thus the echo communications. Dont worry, they wont pull a fast one. Reputation means a lot in this sort of business and you only get to betray someone once.

Dallion took off the ring and handed it to the woman.

Good, she said. And now you, my dear? She turned towards Euryale.

The gorgon slowly reached into one of her own pouches, then took out a ring and tossed it to the woman.

Try to trick us and youll be the next statue that will be going on auction, the gorgon said in a polite, but firm tone.

Almost instantly Dallion felt fear emanating from the old woman. As someone who had been petrified once, he could empathize.

Well be in touch.

The woman rushed out of the alley, leaving the two behind.

Was that how it was supposed to happen? Eury asked.

According to Nil, yes. At least we wont have to worry about that until we finish with the rest of the mission. He looked at the sky. You better go back. March is probably already getting annoyed.

Youre not coming?

Theres something I need to finish as well.

Alright. Just one question. Why were you interested in the auction?

That was the risk of being so insistent in the hunters den. It was too much to hope that Eury would have missed that.

Its a favor for someone. It wont affect our work.

There's no way going to a noble-only auction wouldn't affect our work.

The same way going to a hunter's den would? Dallion tried not to snap. I must do this. It's not like I have a choice. Just as I need to visit the temple. Both will help us if we face a mage, or something stronger.

Eury shook her head.

You have so many secrets. Even after all the time together.

So do you. Internally, Dallion felt like ice was growing in his stomach. One thing that he had realized, though, was that this whole conversation was just an excuse. Both of them had already made their decision. Now they were simply going through the motions.

Chapter 524: Centivine

Welcome, initiate, the curate greeted Dallion with a slight bow. This way, if you please.

The queue of people wanting to enter the temple was enormous, circling the massive building twice. However, thanks to his awakening rank, Dallion was considered the equivalent to a cleric.

To say that the temple was different from the shrine in Nerosal was a massive understatement. The building referred to as a cathedral was larger than a noble's palace. Every brick, statue, or decoration was flawless, polished to perfection to the point that boards had to be built since there was no way of pinning them to the walls themselves.

The curate's polite girl in her late teens escorted him through thick carpeted corridors to a massive oval chamber which had mosaics of the seven Moons ten feet high. Six of the seven representations were clearly visible, composed of a humanoid representation of the Moon in question with the actual satellite in the background. The last Dallion couldn't make out. Apparently, the Purple Moon of magic remained hidden to him even here.

I shall leave you to your prayers, the curate said, then briskly turned around to leave.

Hold on, Dallion said.

Not expecting this, the girl paused, then turned around, fear emanating from her very being.

Yes, initiate?

I'd like to go to an altar.

An awakening altar, initiate? There was a slight tremble in her voice.

Is there any other kind?

No, initiate. It's just one such as yourself cannot improve through an awakening altar.

I know. I still want to enter it. You have a level twenty altar, right?

Yes, initiate, but you cannot improve through an awakening altar.

That already showed that there would be problems. Dallion could understand that what he was asking seemed illogical, but still found her reluctance strange. It was like watching a computer game NPC be asked something that wasn't in the game's options.

Am I not allowed to go to an altar? Dallion asked, arching a brow.

You can, initiate. Its just that

Please dont say it.

You cannot improve through an awakening altar.

I dont want to improve. I just want to

Ill take it from here, a dry voice said to the side of Dallion. It was slightly concerning that Dallion hadnt noticed the person approach. You can return to your duties.

Yes, cleric. The curate bowed in relief, then rushed off before anyone could change their minds.

That was slightly awkward. Hopefully now Dallion was going to get his request fulfilled. Just in case, it was better to come up with a more plausible explanation than Ive come to upgrade my dragon.

Look. Dallion turned towards the cleric. The thing is he abruptly stopped. The person standing in front of him was a standard cleric, roughly his age, dressed in a simple cyan hooded tunic. The most noticeable feature of him was that the man was an albino. Cleric? Dallion asked.

Its been a while, Dal, the other said with a faint smile. Or should I say, initiate?

The man was the first cleric Dallion had seen way back when he had been recruited for the hunt of the chainling. At the time, everyone had considered the albino cold, grumpy, and not to be trifled with. He had created a poor first impression by stating that Dallion was so low level that he would never amount to anything, but later had taken part in Dallions hairbrained scheme to annoy the chainling. He was also the first person Dallion had met to be gifted the magic trait. Unfortunately, fate, or the Moons, had played a cruel joke on him by not granting him the actual skill to perform magic. Thus, the man had denied the ability of becoming a mage, having his name erased from existence and replaced by the common descriptor Cleric.

Level sixty-one. The albino nodded, impressed. And nine skills. Youve definitely surpassed me.

Can you see my familiars as well?

Clerics smile widened for a moment, suggesting that was a distinct possibility.

You said you wanted to go to an altar. Why?

Theres something I need to do, Dallion replied evasively. To be honest, he was expecting to spend a lot more catching up. Clearly, the albinos character hadnt changed one bit in all this time. Still, it was good seeing him. I didnt know it wasnt allowed.

Its not. Its just unusual enough to have the younger ones ask questions. He looked at the nearest mosaic. Can you see all of them?

No. Just six. If its just unusual, it means I can go, right?

It depends. I can take you to any of the level five altars without issue. Possible to a ten as well. The twenty, however. He shook his head. That one is reserved to nobles and the order itself.

And anyone with deep pockets, Dallion said to himself. Sadly, while he was carrying a fortune, it didnt belong to him. His own funds were rather low at the moment.

Can an exception be made?

The bishop has the power to do so. However, hes away on business with the Archduke.

And his deputy? Can he make it happen?

I am his deputy, Cleric said.

The revelation sounded stranger than Dallion expected it to be. Logically, it was obvious that the albino had the skills and experience to perform such duties. He had magic, after all, and despite his young appearance, he was at least a thousand years old in true time.

But I need a reason. I still have him to answer to, and having an initiate use the level twenty altar isnt something that would pass unnoticed.

For a moment Dallion considered sharing the real reason. Doing so, however, would give away his greatest advantage. This could well be the home of the Moons, but as Dallion knew from experience, the Star found ways to worm itself even into clerics.

I need to fulfill a task in the service of Felygn, he said. While strictly speaking that wasnt a lie, Dallion felt uncomfortable. Technically, training the dragonlet was something he had promised the Green Moon, since the deity had put Dark in his care. Of course, that was just one interpretation of the facts.

Cleric crossed his arms.

Youve come up with some crazy idea again, havent you? the albino whispered. Just like that time.

Dallion remained silent. Concentrating on his music skills, he tried to focus on the cleric in the hopes hed sense some of his emotions. Alas, there was nothing there, almost as if the man didnt exist.

Dont be surprised, dear boy, Nil said. Those lacking skills often learn new ways of using their traits. Its not as efficient, but that doesnt make it less powerful.

Alright, Cleric said at last. This way, initiate.

Three cages of sky steel surrounded the altar. As he approached, Dallion was able to feel a presence of something else within the metal. Given that dwarves could pull normal metal bars apart like melted cheese, there had to be some additional countermeasures to keep the altar from being stolen. A pair of armed battle clerics were at each cage door. Receiving a nod from the albino, they proceeded to let Dallion in.

Nice security system, Dallion thought. While the guards were mere seers, Dallion could feel Moon energy emanating from them.

Here you are. Cleric stopped a step from the innermost threshold. Just dont make a mess.

Hey, its me. Dallion winked, making his way to the altar.

Unlike the ones hed seen before, this one was visibly different. The cyan hexagonal prism in the center was three times as large as each of the rest.

Get ready, Dark.

Dallion placed his hand upon it.

SHRINE AWAKENING

A green rectangle appeared, replacing Dallions surroundings with a large stone plaza surrounded by columns.

You are in a medium awakening shrine.

Complete the trial to improve your destiny.

So far, so good. Out of curiosity, Dallion made his way to one of the columns. Two archways appeared on either side of the columns. Both of them were completely sealed.

I guess I really cant level up, Dallion said, then did a personal awakening, linking the altars awakening realm to his.

A flight of stairs emerged, making its way to the ground. The connection was by no means elegant, but it did the job. Dallion could feel the presence of his echoes and familiars. A few seconds later, July emerged, walking up from the stairs along with Dark in human form. Judging by the way the dragonlet was pouting, the training had probably gone poorly. Or well, depending on the point of view.

Had fun training? Dallion asked casually.

Mind your own business! Dark grumbled beneath his breath. I bet you cant beat her.

I never tried, Dallion laughed. The whole point was to train, not defeat her. Harp, what happened?

Nothing much, the harpsisword guardian replied, using her usual means of communication. Hes just upset that there was so much he didnt know. Also, I told him that he cant compare to you.

That would explain the hostility. Thanks, Harp. I owe you.

Whats this place? Dark asked, still pouting.

Its where youll level up.

Sparks of interest emerged within the dragonlets chest, then quickly grew to the size of melons.

More than once, Dallion added. Id like you to try to make it to level twenty. If youre strong enough. If not, just make it as far as you can. Although, he strongly hoped that the dragonlet would be able to pull it off. There was no telling when and if Dallion would get access to another level twenty altar again.

Pfft. That all? Dark puffed up his chest, which looked almost cartoonish in human form. I can keep going till I reach a hundred.

Each trial is a one-on-one fight against a guardian, Dallion continued, ignoring the boast. I won't be able to help you during the fight, but will be here to watch and give you advice between battles.

That's easy! The dragonlet shifted to its normal form. Instantly, arches appeared between the twenty columns around the arena. Sixteen of them were sealed off, indicating Dark's level.

Dallion let out a sigh of relief internally. Four fights wasn't that bad. He was worried that the number might be twice as large. Besides, these were altar fights. They were a lot easier than what came later.

You need to walk through the archway to start a fight, Dallion explained. Look at the numbers of the open ones and go through the lowest one.

Why? the dragonlet asked, reverting back to human form. For all the advantage its dragon form provided, passing through normal sized archways wasn't one.

You'll get more experience that way.

Moving closer to the columns, Dark followed the forming wall until an open archway emerged. There, he hesitated. Slowly, he took another few steps to the side, causing a neighboring archway to emerge.

You're fighting them in sequence, Dallion said, fully aware of what the dragonlet was thinking. If you complete a higher one, you'll shut off the previous one.

Fine! Dark frowned, then stomped his way towards the archway marked XVII.

The moment the dragonlet passed through the archway, a new area emerged from there on, covering the simple empty plains. This was the first time Dallion had witnessed this happen to someone else. Palm trees shot up from the ground, creating a thick forest, as reed-filled bog covered the ground.

Shrine trial 17 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

A blue rectangle appeared in the distance, a few steps away from Dark. The dragonlet took the changes in stride, flying up in the air, though he still didn't change form.

Thinking back, Dallion realized this would be the first time he'd seen a shrine guardian above level ten. That was a good chance to potentially see what creatures he might face, both in the real world and the awakening realms. Moments later, he had his wish. A series of vines and large bamboo-like shells shot up from the bog, a dozen feet from Dark.

SHRINE GUARDIAN 17

Species: CENTIVINE

Class: SWAMP

Health: 100%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- **VINESTORM (Species Unique)**
- **SHIELD COLLAPSE (Species Unique)**
- **ENTANGLE (Species Unique)**
- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**
- **ATHLETIC**

Weakness: UNDERBELLY

Chapter 525: Trial 18

A cone of air blasted from the dragonlets mouth, uprooting trees in its path. Before it was able to strike its target, the trial guardian contracted. The torrent of force hit the hardened bamboo shell, pushing the massive creature back. However, no red rectangles emerged.

Thats a bit stronger than the ones I faced, Dallion said, observing from the safety of the arena. Still easy to defeat, though.

Focusing, he was easily able to see the weak spots markers all over it. At present, if Dallion were going to fight a thing of that level, hed probably just send Gleam to deal with it and hardly bother himself. In theory, the dragonlet should have been able to do the same. However, here was where the lack of experience reared its ugly head. Most of Darks combat in the past was done with the assistance of others. Even when fighting among his siblings, there was always an element of uncertain allies. In one-to-one battles against a determined enemy, Dark didnt have the opportunity to wait for the best moment to attack, and it showed.

After several unsuccessful attacks, a grain of doubt appeared within Darks body. Instead of going all out, he hesitated, choosing to glide around the centivine, searching for a spot to go for. That was the precise moment at which the guardian launched its attack. Dozens of vines shot out from beneath the shelled segments, all aiming at the dragonlet.

Without hesitation, Dark split into a dozen of instances. Thanks, in part, to Dallions training, he was able to maintain them for several seconds. However, even that was a temporary measure. The longer the guardian failed to entangle its target, the more vines it shot out.

What do you think, Harp? Dallion asked. Think hell manage?

Probably, the harpsisword replied. It depends on the shock.

I thought youd have gotten him used to that.

I made him get used to pain and many times of attacks, but not defeat. While he was in the realm, he knew that losses didnt count. So, he never considered them a loss.

Losing here isnt a loss, either.

Thats only part true. Losing doesnt have the same consequences it would have in the real world. However, its not training. He wont get advice and a chance to make up for his mistakes. Its that lack of feedback that might make him freeze up.

Right. Dallion sighed. Gleam, better get ready. If things get too bad, you'll have to fly out and help him.

He wouldn't like that, July said, still sitting next to Dallion.

Probably not.

Dark breathed a few more torrents of air at the guardian. On one occasion, he even managed to rip through two dozen vines, however, that was only a reprieve. The roles had changed since the start of the battle. Now the dragonlet was on the defensive, and the longer he spent combat splitting, the worse things got.

Why isn't he using line attacks? July asked. I know he can.

That's a very good question. Dallion mused. He would have thought that was the first thing that Dark would have done. Dallion definitely would have.

The quickest path to success was always the best when it came to combat. Against a creature such as this, there was no need to use advanced tactics or strategy. The centivine didn't even have the ability to split. And yet, the dragonlet was genuinely struggling.

He's afraid that it might not work, Harp said. After his breath attack failed to do a thing, Dark is terrified that his line attack might prove useless as well.

He's afraid the attack might fail, so he's not using it at all? Dallion shook his head. What's he thinking?

Now you understand what I've been going through ever since we met, dear boy, Nil added in a smug tone of voice.

Despite his inner urge, Dallion found the strength not to respond. Even he had to admit that the echo was right.

A new wave of vines darted towards Dark. Twisting around, the dragonlet evaded them, then turned to increase the distance between it and the guardian. That proved to be a mistake. Hundreds of vines shot up from the bog, aiming for the dragonlet above. In his eagerness to face the guardian, Dark had apparently forgotten that, so far, he was only focusing on the part above water. There was another, far larger part, that had remained submerged, and now it too had taken part in the fight.

The dragonlet burst into instances, but it was too late. Multiple vines wrapped around it, binding the dragonlet's wings to its body. Soon, Dark's mouth was also closed shut, depriving him of any option of attack.

Gleam, Dallion said.

Not yet, Harp interrupted. Give him a bit more time.

When the rectangles start stacking up, it might be too late.

If you constantly rescue him when he's in trouble, he won't learn much.

You helped me out when I was in a hopeless situation.

Yes, but he's not in a hopeless situation yet.

Dark struggled as the vines pulled him down in an attempt to drag him into the swamp. Before they could manage, the dragonlet changed form, becoming a large shardfly. Pressing against the razor-sharp wings, the vines snapped, effectively slicing themselves up. Grasping the moment of freedom provided, Dark twisted around, slashing the few that were left and flew up.

The guardian didn't take that lying down, shooting several hundred vines at the shardfly. This time, though, Dark had a response as well. Flapping his wings, he let out a line attack. There was no telling whether he was aiming at the guardian, or simply wanted to prevent the vines reaching him. Whatever the case, the line sliced through the bog, continuing along the length of the centivine. Unlike before, the bamboo-shells proved no obstacle.

TERMINAL STRIKE!

DARKs damage is increased by 1000%

A red rectangle appeared, followed moments later by a green one indicating that the dragonlet had successfully leveled up. Internally, Dallion let out a sign of relief. That had been too close for his liking.

Good work! he shouted. Pick your prize and come here!

That was kinda cool, July said in his usual, quiet tone.

He should have done it from the start, Dallion whispered. Something told him that in the next battle that was exactly what the dragonlet would do. Now that Dark had discovered a foolproof way of fighting, he was going to rely on it until necessity forced him to think of something new exactly as Dallion had been doing.

Dont beat yourself up, dear boy. The vast majority of awakened act that way. Thats why thinking out of the box is so unusual. Compared to mostly everyone else, youre a virtuoso.

With the knowledge I have, I should be way better, Nil, Dallion thought.

Maybe, but that part of life. As much as you change the world, the world also changes you.

What is the best thing to choose? Dark asked. He had resumed his standard form, looking at Dallion for advice.

How the heck am I supposed to know? Dallion snapped. Im not a dragon! Ive no idea whats best.

Seriously? Judging by the intonation, the only reason the dragonlet didn't cross its arms was because it was physically unable to in its current form. Arent you supposed to be my mentor and such? Thats what Felygn said.

Look, I cant give you solutions. I can just guide you. Now I understand why everyone else is always so evasive. Theyre just as clueless as I am! It all depends on how you want to fight. Key things are that perception helps you target weak spots better and mind is good if you want to combat split or create echoes.

I can create echoes in combat? Dark sounded surprised.

Dallion did his best to remain calm. The reaction seemed scarily familiar.

What about empathy? the dragonlet went on. Should I increase that?

Not sure. You already have enough of that to be useful, so maybe dont bother for the moment.

Okay, Dark didnt sound too convinced. What about magic?

It took considerable effort for Dallion not to jump to his feet. He had completely overlooked this. He knew well that a dragon was a being of pure magic. He also knew that Dark was an awakened. However, he had never combined the two in his mind.

The realization made him look at the creature in an entirely different light. It was the same as realizing what the cute tiger cub one brought home would turn into a dozen years. Back when Dallion was back on Earth, he had watched several internet videos on the matter.

Pick magic, Dallion said.

Are you sure? It doesnt offer much.

Your breath attack must be magic. The more you increase the trait, the stronger I will become.

Okay.

Theres nothing to be afraid of, Harp reassured Dallion. Magic creatures progress slowly. It will be centuries before hes as strong as you.

Dallion nodded. He had seen firsthand the strength of two dragons. Then again, he had seen a mediocre madeif Nil was to be believed dispatch one of them.

Good thing Im on your good side, Dallion said to himself, looking at Dark.

Done with his selection, the dragonlet returned to the arena. Once he did, one more arch had been barred out.

That wasnt so difficult, Dark said preemptively. Shame ballooned in his chest, suggesting that he didnt agree with his own words.

Why didnt you use a line attack from the start? Dallion asked in a calm voice.

Would have been too easy. I wanted to see how good

First rule always go for easy. This isnt a competition anymore. All you need to do is win.

Dad told me that the strong play fairly. The dragonlet pouted.

You arent strong, Dallion said. You wont be for a while. Besides, if your father was so fair, he wouldnt have used illusions and other sneaky means to attack me.

Dark had nothing to say.

This isnt the same as fighting your siblings. Dallion moved closer, patting the creature on the neck. Ive told you this before. You can decide to kill your opponents or let them go. However, you only get to make that choice when you win. Otherwise, you put yourself at the mercy of the other side, and you cant guarantee what they would do.

Yeah. Right. Dark pulled away, then changed form as he made his way to the next open archway. Stupid small doors, he grumbled.

They werent made for dragons, Dallion shouted from behind. Remember. Start strong, but dont be a glass cannon.

Yeah, yeah Dark grumbled, then suddenly stopped. Whats a glass cannon?

Its Dallion paused. There was no good way for him to explain exactly what that meant. Starting with a bang and fizzling out soon after.

Ah. I get it, the dragonlet lied.

Shrine trial 18 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

What do you think itll be? Dallion asked.

Probably something stronger, Nil replied.

The centivine wasnt a creature that Id seen. As he thought about it, he had rarely seen any of the creature guardians in the real world. Nil had claimed that firebirds existed, and obviously dragons did, but most of the rest had been extinct for centuries.

It really doesnt matter, dear boy.

Beyond the archway, the environment changed again, this time transforming into an icy peak. Before the guardian could even appear, Dark spanned his wings, then flapped. A thread of force flew forward from him, slicing through the tip of the mountain as if it were made of cheese. Snow poured down all sides of the mountain as the peak tilted and slid down one side.

You had to tell him about the glass cannon. July shook his head.

No, Harp said. Theres a reason for it.

Dallion concentrated. His layer vision let him see through the layers of snowflakes in the air. After a while, he saw it.

Lux, he said. Better be ready as well. You might be more needed on this one.

Chapter 526: Return of the Colossus

One of the key things about magical creatures, Dallion had found out, was that they heavily relied on instinct. For the most part, they started strong, with the knowledge of their parents, then slowly progressed, obtaining new skills at an extremely slow rate. According to Nil, that was how natural enemies came to be: beings whose set of skills made them unbeatable.

Watching the fight between Dark and the eighteenth guardian, it became apparent that the dragonlet was at a serious disadvantage. If this were Dallion, he would have no problem defeating the creature, even without assistance. Sadly, that wasnt the case for Dark.

AVERAGE WOUND

DARKs health has been reduced by 10%

Red rectangles stacked on, as icicles pierced the dragonlets wing, bringing his health down by half. If it hadnt been for Lux's constant healing, Dark would have lost the fight minutes ago.

The Harpsisword had been against the action, but Dallion had decided that he preferred Dark to complete the trial rather than stop his progress here. Also, he could see the disappointment ballooning within the dragon. A lot of pride had been hurt when the firebird had surrounded him. Even so, there was no doubt that it was needed.

Ignoring the pain, Dark split into five instances, swooping through a blizzard wall right at the creature. Having to deal with a tiger that was effectively a snowstorm, the only effective way was to use his breath, but at an extremely close distance.

The guardian aptly named frostbighter was the first creature Dallion had a body of air. In many ways, it was the same as a firebird, only instead of fire, the elements it was based on were a combination of wind and ice. Any physical attacks, even line attacks, did no damage whatsoever. The only weak spot was the creatures eyes. However, Dark was too young to know that, so he used the only other method that had an effect: magic.

Opening his jaws, the dragonlet shattered the layer of ice that had gathered there and let out a blast of wind. The torrent pierced through, continuing on towards the snow-covered mountain. Thankfully, it had done its damage.

CRITICAL HIT

DARKs dealt damage is increased by 200%.

Hes doing well, Dallion said. You still think that I shouldnt have helped him?

Its your decision, Harp said, indicating that she still disagreed.

Hell learn from his mistakes. Im sure of it.

Maybe. Pride is the bane of a dragon, but he might still expect you to help out. The world wont be there to save him every time.

I know. But Id like it to be there to save him as often as it could.

Cones of wind filled the area of the battle. Both sides had decided to give it their all in one climactic explosion of raw power. Magic hit magic. Red rectangles appeared on both sides. When the blizzard settled down, there was only one creature left, along with a green rectangle.

Very good! Dallion shouted.

The words, however, had the opposite effect of what he was hoping. Cones appeared within Dark, like thorns growing inwards, making the dragon feel worse and worse to the point that blobs of pain also formed like clusters of small grapes.

Was the same for me the first time when I faced a firebird, Dallion added.

The comment appeared to smooth things slightly, causing the emotions to shrink a bit, though not disappear completely.

Ill win on my own next time, the dragonlet mumbled.

There was nothing special in the sentence, but it filled Dallion with a sense of pride and achievement. For one thing, the dragonlet hadn't complained, blamed its failure on other factors, or pouted that Lux had helped out. Despite having the attitude of a child, Dark was definitely smart. It was no accident that he was the best performer among the dragonlets.

You had a tough matchup. Take some time to learn from this. Lux won't be there to help you every time.

Next fight, I don't want him to help me.

Why? Lux asked, somewhat hurt. I'm helpful.

He needs to be able to grow on his own, Lux, Dallion said. Also, he needs to learn now to think on his feet. There'll be other times when he comes across creatures that counter his abilities. It's fine to get a bit of help now, but going on Dallion didn't finish the sentence.

You don't have to try, dear boy, Nil said. Becoming a mentor is a different experience. Remember Vend?

Inadvertently, Dallion smiled. Despite his considerable skills, Vend hadn't started out as a good mentor. The things he taught Dallion were useful and insightful, but there were more than a few times that he could have used a bit more talks and encouragement. In that regard, Nil was a lot better, even if the echo spent most of the time early on shouting and grumbling.

I'm not Vend, Dallion replied.

Two archways remained. Logically, they were supposed to be the most difficult of all. Everyone could see that Dark was no longer as enthusiastic and arrogant as before. At the same time, he definitely seemed more driven, wanting to prove something. Soon enough, the dragonlet's health was back at a hundred percent.

On cue, Lux flew off, perching on Dallion's head.

Ready? Dallion asked.

The dragonlet spread its wings, then nodded.

What trait did you pick last time?

Magic, Dark replied. Why?

Make use of it.

Shrine trial 19 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

What do you think it'll be? July asked.

Dallion was just about to reply when the echo nodded. That was one of the things that still took getting used to.

I think it'll be a dragon, Dallion said anyway, for everyone else's benefit. If it is, it'll be a quick fight.

It depends if he maintains his focus, Harp said. He's fast, but keeps forgetting to use his combat bonuses. Very much like you.

That hurt, reminding Dallion of his own shortcomings. His focus was on Dark now, but once the moment was over with, there would be far more dangerous things to deal with.

One thing at a time,

Dallion thought. There was enough time to worry about his own problems later.

The instant Dark went through the archway, the ground sunk down, forming a deep chasm. At first, Dallion thought that the guardian would be a cave creature. However, soon he found that it was the exact opposite.

SHRINE GUARDIAN 19

Species: GRAND COLOSSUS

Class: DRANITE

Health: 100%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- **QUAD ARM ATTACK (Species Unique)**
- **EARTH SHAKER (Species Unique)**
- **STONE CUTTER (Species Unique)**

Weakness: EARS

Crap! Dallion thought, as a guardian as large as a mountain emerged.

A long time ago, this was the creature he had to face in order to reach the first gate of awakening. Back then, it had taken a lot of ingenuity and a bit of trickery for Dallion to win. However, that wasn't what concerned him.

Nil, should a guardian be able to appear twice? Dallion asked.

No, not usually, dear boy. Why?

This is the same guardian I faced from my fifth trial at the shrine back home.

Interesting. Sometimes guardians vary between altars. There seem to be several accepted sequences, but there are variations.

I understand that, but why is a level five guardian appearing here?

To that, the echo had no answer. Looking at it, the power level seemed to match. Dark had started with a series of line attacks that had caused some minor damage to the colossus. In response, the guardian had attacked simultaneously with all four hands.

The dragonlet split into five instances, doing its best to evade the massive arms. Most of the time it succeeded, but occasionally there the massive hands of rock would brush against the edge of a wing, causing damage rectangles to appear.

Somethings not right, Dallion thought.

The more he observed the fight, the more he came to the conclusion that it wasnt a case of a level five guardian popping up in a level nineteen trial. Rather, it was the opposite. The guardian Dallion had fought all that time ago was way too strong to be there. It almost seemed like he wasnt supposed to have passed the trial.

Good one, Harp said, snapping Dallion back to the here and now.

The dragonlet had managed to circle round to the colossus head and release a blast of air in the guardians ear. The attack alone reduced the creatures health to a fifth, causing it to cry out in pain. In his mind, Dallion could already see Dark circling to the other side of the colossus head and performing it again for a swift victory.

Is everything alright, dear boy? Nil asked, noticing the change in Dallions behavior.

Its nothing, Dallion lied. Just thinking about our mission.

A seed of doubt had taken root in his mind, asking the obvious question: had there been someone trying to stop his progress early on? There was no other explanation why a level nineteen guardian would appear that early on. Unless Dallion wasnt the issue, but rather the shrine itself. Maybe there was a reason that it had been abandoned?

The air shook as the colossus slammed its hands together. The force pushed Dark back, causing him to miss his next attack. Getting its slight reprieve, the guardian reached out in an attempt to grab the dragonlet. Green markers emerged, surrounding Dark. With athletic elegance, he glided between the massive stone fingers, then did a hoop and flew back towards the head. A combination of line attacks and air breaths struck the guardian. On its own, each attack was weak, but together, they stacked up enough damage to cause the guardians head to crack, then crumble.

Not bad, Dallion said, but his heart wasnt in it.

Did you see that?! Dark shouted, flying about like a wild butterfly. With health to spare!

That wasnt exactly true the dragonlet was down to a quarter of his health. Still, he had regained his self-confidence and was back to boasting.

If I knew it was so weak, Id have taken it down with nothing but line attacks.

Sure, sure. Dallion forced a smile. Come here and get healed. Lux, you know what to do.

The firebird chirped, flew off his shoulder.

Hes got a way to go, but hell get there, Harp said. Ill see to it he gets a whole lot more training once you leave. Even so, I dont think hell be able to help you against the Star. Hes too weak and too predictable.

Cant you help him to learn? Dallion asked.

Not to that extent. And neither can you.

Maybe well get lucky. Maybe we wont have to face the Star

Deep in his mind, though, Dallion had gone back to thinking about the auction. There was a slight chance that the general would be able to find a magical item that would help Dallion level the playing field. Unfortunately, that was looking less and less likely. On the other hand, there was one other option: to buy something at the caution that would be beneficial for Dallion, instead.

According to the rumors, everyone who crossed the general paid a heavy price. Some were even said to have lost everything, reduced to beggars wandering the wilderness. If the items in the general's office were to be believed, even awakened had been forced to give away their nobility to settle their debts, and even then, remained in the man's pocket. There were only two things that the general yearned for: skills and power. Money was only the means to an end, and if that were the case, a deal could be reached, even if Dallion were to let him down.

Aware of what was going on in Dallion's mind, July looked at him.

That's dangerous, the echo whispered. And stupid. You haven't repaid your current debt to him.

True, but if I end up facing the Star, none of that will matter.

Chapter 527: The Mentor

Good to go? Dallion asked.

It had been a while since the dragonlet had defeated the last guardian. All of its health had been restored and there was nothing preventing it from proceeding to the final fight. And yet, it hadn't done so.

Dallion could see no fear or doubt within Dark. Nearly all of the emotions had faded away, replaced by a cold certainty. By no means could Dallion say that he'd had a lot of experience with the species even if it was more than many could claim but it was the first time he saw the change take place. It was as if a switch in the dragonlet's brain suddenly shifted, transforming it into a lethal predator.

Dark? Dallion asked again.

What happens after this? the creature asked.

I can't tell you. Dallion wanted to sigh. It was a good question, a very logical one, and yet he had been forbidden from answering. You'll know when you get there.

The dragonlet looked at him, then transformed into human form.

July? it turned to the echo.

He really can't tell you.

What the heck? Dallion thought. The dragonlet had only been in his realm for over a day and already it had conspired with several of the inhabitants against Dallion, even going so far as using his own echoes to share his thoughts.

So, what do you think I'll face this time? Dark looked at the last open archway.

No idea. I've never been in a level twenty altar before. And after this, I don't think I'll ever be allowed back in. It could be anything. It's supposed to be stronger than

anything so far, but as you've seen, that doesn't mean much. The frostbiter gave you a much harder time than the grand colossus.

What would be the most difficult creature for me to face?

Dallion mused. The dragonlet was asking a lot of really good questions all of a sudden. There was no firm rule to this. Going by his personal experience, it had to be something capable of negating all of Dark's advantages. It was logical to assume that a flying creature would do that, one capable of doing line attacks of its own.

A shardfly, he said after a few moments.

Seriously?

A high level shardfly. Have you ever fought Gleam in the realms?

She's strong. July nodded in agreement. Very strong. I don't think you can take her.

A high-leveled shardfly can fly. Use illusions better than you, use line attacks, and mess with your mind. At least that was what Gleam claimed amidst her constant complaints that Dallion wasn't leveling her up as much as the other familiars. I think that would be your most difficult matchup.

A shardfly, Dark repeated slowly. Cool. He walked through the archway.

Shrine trial 20 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

Everyone waited. However, nothing changed. The same barren plains continued to the horizon, not a creature in sight. For a moment, Dallion thought that the final guardian had indeed turned out to be a shardfly which was using its illusion skill to hide somewhere, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Soon enough, he saw that he was mistaken.

A ball of orange flame suddenly appeared out of nowhere, floating ten feet in the air.

Shifting to his standard form, Dark flew up to it. Without hesitation, he performed a line attack. The thread of destruction flew into the distance, slicing the ball in two. Hardly had it done it, when both halves merged back together.

Not a bad opponent, Harp said. Perfect to show us how far Dark has come.

A series of small flames covered the entire surface of the flaming ball, like a scalemail. At this point Dallion already knew what the creature wasn't a shardfly as he expected, but something else he was very familiar with.

SHRINE GUARDIAN 20

Species: FIREBIRD

Class: FIRE

Health: 100%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **FLAME BURST (Species Unique)**
- **ATTACK**
- **GUARD**

Weakness: EYES

Non-physical creatures presented a difficulty. Even if Dark had defeated one recently, he had done so while constantly having his health restored by Lux. Since this was the final battle, it had been decided that he wouldnt resort to any such help.

Dallion expected the dragonlet to evade his opponents long range attacks, while relying on magic breaths from a close distance. That turned out to be wrong. In the blink of the eye, the dragonlet changed shape once more, only this time mimicking the firebird he was facing.

Copyette tactics? Dallion mused.

Nope, Gleam replied, emerging on his shoulder. Hes using illusion. Its something I would have done if I were at a higher level. Its handy, but still relies on the illusion holding. Against fire, thats not always a given.

Whats the advantage, then?

Youll see.

Both firebirds flapped their wings, sending waves of fire at each other. Upon contact, the flames sent by the guardian swept through the illusion as if they were air. However, they failed to hit the dragonlet. Taking advantage of the flame cover, Dark swooped down, then thrust forward in the same fashion Lux liked to travel. Before the guardian could react, Dark was less than a foot away. Then he let out a chirp. A torrent of air came out of the illusionary firebirds beak, drilling a hole through the guardian.

FATAL HIT!**DARKs damage is increased by 500%**

He can combine both skills? Dallion scratched his chin.

No, thats one of the tricks when fighting with illusions. Just because you can make an object feel real doesnt mean your true self vanishes. Darks using the same breath attack he always has.

So he picked up on Luxs propulsion and combined it with his own attacks. In time, Dark will become one scary dragon.

In a very long time, Harp said.

The fight continued. Now that both sides were aware of each others abilities, the actual combat had become like watching two comets chase after each other. The moment one got into a good position or an attack, the other would thrust away, starting the whole process from scratch. Dark made several attempts to hit the firebird with his breath, but all of them missed. It seemed that the

guardian, too, had picked up on his approach and thrust away each time the dragonlet was about to open its mouth.

A minute turned into five, then ten. The tactical creativity of the creatures increased, but no new red rectangles emerged. Then, all of a sudden, Dark just stopped, remaining in a single spot.

Want to surrender? he asked, with measured caution.

Dallion leaned forward.

Nil, is that normal? He asked. Hed known guardians to offer surrender, or even lose fights on occasion, but he hadnt expected it from Dark.

He follows the Green Moon, same as you, the old echo said. Why would you expect him to be any different?

Youll lose in the end, Dark went on, staring the firebird in the eyes. I have more stamina.

Alright. The guardian closed his wings, turning into a ball of fire with a beak and eyes. Good fight. Dont hesitate so much next time.

Err, sure. Good fight, Dark said, feeling slightly awkward. Moments later, the firebird poofed out of existence.

With that, the fight was over. The respective rectangles appeared, allowing the dragonlet to choose its trait.

Here goes, Dallion whispered. This was the point at which the gate challenge would be made. However, as Dallion was looking, a wall appeared around the arena, rising up, so he couldnt see anything beyond.

Peeking is not a good thing, a familiar voice said.

Looking to his side, Dallion noticed that July had vanished and in his stead the dryad form of the Green Moon had appeared, sitting calmly on the ground.

Using a temple to level up a dragon. The Moon smirked. Youve gotten quite good at using loopholes.

I didnt know that hed be able to enter my realm, Dallion admitted. But it seemed like a good thing to try. Is that why you sent him to me?

I sent him because I thought you could help with his training. Clearly, I was right.

And you didnt think Id need his help in whats to come?

The Moon remained silent.

Whos making the offer? Is it the Red Moon again?

What does it matter? For all you know, it might be me. Just because Im here sitting with you doesnt mean Im not also there, giving him the choice. Youre not the only one who can make echoes, dont forget.

That was something Dallion hadn't considered. With the Moons being almost all powerful, having them create echoes seemed too trivial and mundane. Still, it was well possible.

Is there anything more you can tell me about the Star? Dallion tried his luck. There's a chance I might get an item that limits his level to mine, but I'm not sure I'll get it.

You seem to have made some important decisions already.

That's not an answer.

I thought that you'd know by now that you have to earn your answers. You've still a long way to go for that. Maybe at some point we can have a serious discussion, but until then, casual chats such as this would have to do.

Is there a way to stop the poison plague?

Starting with the random questions? The Moon laughed. Yes, there's a way. Maybe you'll find it. Maybe someone else will. The bottom line is that we can't intervene. I hope you understand that.

I see.

That sounded a bit like a warning. Dallion never relied on the Moons swooping down and helping him when in trouble, but this made it official. The deities were only here to observe, nothing more. Still, there was the gaping question why they chose not to intervene. It was clearly said everywhere that they were the protectors of the world and all of the remaining races. If the Star was causing so much chaos, it was their duty to make things right.

Jiroh sends her best, by the way, the Moon changed topic.

She's fine?

I can't tell you that. She just wanted her friends to know that she's alive, so here you go. It's up to you what to do with this. Personally, I wouldn't tell Eury. She's got a particular view of us, but as with anything else, it's your choice.

Is that why you came to visit?

Sometimes a visit is just a visit. You and Dark are the only two followers I have left in this world. It's normal that I pass by at moments of key importance.

According to all of Dallion's skills and senses, the Moon wasn't lying, but even so, he wasn't sure whether to trust him.

What do the Moons without any followers do?

Harsh. The Moon frowned. Or it would have been if it were the case. Everyone has their own following, even if some aren't as numerous as others.

Interesting. If Dallion and the dragonlet were Felygn's only followers, that suggested that a few years ago there were none. Could that be the reason Dallion had been pulled to this world to become a follower of the Green Moon?

You're overthinking things again, Felygn said. I know things are probably tough, but every now and again, take some time to enjoy the moment. If you don't, you'll never have the chance again.

Does that mean that before Dallion could finish, the Green Moon was gone. July was sitting in his position, giving Dallion a confused look. What happened? Dallion asked.

The usual? July shrugged. Dark passed his trials.

That wasnt what Dallion meant.

Yeah. He looked away. Everything was normal. Now all he had to find out was whether the dragonlet would choose to pass through the second gate or not.

DRAGON MENTOR

(+5 Empathy)

Youre the first person to become a dragons mentor in 500 years. Dont get cocky! The dragon can still chomp your head off.

I guess I know what Dark decided. Dallion smiled.

Chapter 528: Not Meant to Succeed

It took several seconds for Dallion to readjust to the real world once he left the realm of the shrine. The sensation was different from a normal return. Thanks to his experience and current level, he had learned to seamlessly go in and out of realms, but even so, there would be an occasional hiccup.

Youve improved, Cleric said. How long were you in there?

In the real world only a few moments had gone by. However, the albino wasnt merely an average cleric.

A few hours. Dallion decided there was no point in lying. A lot happened.

I can tell. Did you get to talk to your Moon?

Yes. Dallion stepped away from the altar. Thanks, I owe you one.

Ill be sure to remind you at some point. Come along, the altar is scheduled for use soon.

What do I do now? Dallion wondered as he followed Cleric through the cathedral corridors.

As far as he was concerned, everything was going well, better than well even. Dark had passed through the second gate, transforming from a dragonlet to a full dragon. In terms of strength and appearance, he seemed no different from how he had been a few hours ago. The only difference was that now he no longer needed external help to level up. This was an interesting detail that was missing from the magical bestiary tome Dallion had obtained.

There was a moment during which there were fears that Dark might become too full of himself, but a few words from Harp had quickly changed that; he might have become a full dragon, but the nymph remained a dragon slayer. Whatever future training she had in mind, it was certain to keep the creature in check and prevent him from causing any chaos in Dallions domain.

The achievement Dallion had received was quite nice, increasing his empathy trait to thirty-five. All that was supposed to make him overjoyed, but instead he felt hollow inside.

Meeting a Moon is always a life-changing experience, Cleric said, completely misinterpreting the situation. Dont think about it too much. Just let it pass on its own.

Dallion nodded.

Have you spoken to a Moon?

Just once, the albino replied with a slight sigh. Back when the Order accepted me as one of its own. Since then, Ive only been praying.

That sounded harsh, considering how much more devoted Cleric was. Dallion felt that he had stumbled on the Green Moon undeserved.

What did it tell you? Dallion asked.

That one day I might regain my name.

Ill keep my fingers crossed. You deserve that much. What exactly does one have to do to join the Order?

Youre thinking of joining? The albino gave Dallion a surprised look.

Despite its overall political strength, the Order of the Seven Stars was generally viewed as a last resort. Most of the people going there did it out of necessity rather than choice. The monasteries, in particular, were safe havens that allowed everyone a second chance in the service in the Moons. People often had their names erased, and along with them, their past history, not to mention that anyone caught trying to harm a member of the order, regardless of circumstances, would pay a heavy price.

Im just curious. My parents considered sending me to a monastery before I awakened, so I was wondering what that would be like.

All you have to do is devote your entire life to the Moons. Nothing more, nothing less.

Arent I doing it now?

No. Being an initiate means you live for yourself, but can be called upon by the Moons or the Order to help out in specific circumstances. Being a cleric means that everything you do is for the Moons and the Moons alone.

I dont think I can manage that.

I know. Its not for everyone.

Dallion was pretty sure that given a choice, the albino wouldnt have been here, either. Something quite traumatic must have happened in his life to seek shelter in the Order. Even without the skill for spells, awakened were valuable. Just having the magic trait would probably be enough to have him snatched by one guild or another. The Icepickers definitely would have recruited him; no doubt there were a lot in Linatol that would have done the same.

As much as Dallion wanted to ask more details on the topic, he felt it was better not to. A strong sense of defensiveness was emanating from Cleric, making it obvious this wasnt a topic he wanted to discuss.

Do you know anything about the Eighth Moon? The question slipped out of Dallion's lips, almost as if it were said by someone else.

The moment it was a voice both he and the albino froze. Bursting into instances, Dallion looked in both directions of the corridor they were walking along. Cleric did the same, only relying on his reflexes, instead of splitting.

Never say that in a temple, he whispered.

Sure. What got into me?

There is no Eighth Moon, the albino added. Make sure to remember that.

So, it really exists, Dallion thought.

Better listen to his advice and keep this to yourself, dear boy, Nil said. Even favored of the Moons are known to disappear.

You think the Order might try to kill me? Dallion felt a chill down his spine.

What about disappear is unclear? No one knows exactly what happens. The only thing for certain is that its best you dont find out.

The rest of the trip to the outside passed without a word. Upon reaching the exits some goodbyes were said, along with vague promises of meeting up again, after which Dallion set off to meet March and Eury at their inn. He had a vague memory of having an argument of sorts with the gorgon, but after so many things happening since then, no longer felt invested. To a certain degree, he found it better this way: at least they'd be able to focus on the mission. There would always be time to discuss matters later.

Walking through the districts, Dallion quickly noticed what a huge change the five levels of empathy had caused. Not only did he feel as if he could hear every guardian within the platform, but a sizable number of the guardians were able to feel his presence as well.

You really are a weird one, a new voice said. Didn't think there were any of you left.

Who are you? Dallion asked, glancing around.

He was on the edge of a city park, and the few buildings visible in the vicinity didn't feel like having guardians. It was always possible that the voice belonged to an item guardian, but somewhat it emanated a lot more authority.

Are you the area guardian of the forest?

Good guess, but wrong, the voice replied. Would it help if I told you that we've already met?

There were many things that the hint could lead to, but Dallion immediately had a good idea who he was addressing.

You're the overseer, he said.

And city guardian. I expect after what happened in Nerosal youd hardly be surprised. The information youve acquired isnt exactly general knowledge. Most awakened spend their entire lives never linking the two.

Dallion considered his next words carefully. The only reason an overseer could have to address him directly was to ask for something.

How may I be of service, overseer?

For the moment, just stay out of trouble. I expect you already know what.

Do I need your permission to contact the mirror pool?

Id advise against trying. The pool isnt what youre used to. In fact, this is one of things I wanted to specifically talk to you about. You and your team have done a good job keeping a blocker ring on at all times. As mercenaries, youre allowed to do so. However, Id appreciate it if you take them off while walking about. It only raises questions.

Ill be sure to pass it along.

I know you will. Youre an empath, after all. Soft laughter echoed in Dallions head. What do you think of the city so far?

Its definitely impressive, not that Ive had a chance to see much of it so far.

Thats the standard complaint. Either youre born here, or theres always more to see. Hopefully, youll get another chance sometime.

The conversation seemed harmless enough, but Dallion knew it wasnt. If this were any other guardian, hed chalk it down to boredom. Spending millennia locked in their items, nearly all of the banished races wanted to have a conversation with someone. Part of them even went feral in the process. However, when it came to overseers, that wasnt the case. For one thing, they were human before taking on the role, not to mention that even after their transformation, they got to walk among people, and converse with anyone they wished.

Is there anything more you can tell me about my mission?

Dallion asked.

Plenty. Most of it, youve already guessed. Youre not the first ones to be sent after the item owner, although you are a lot more special.

Did any of the previous ones die?

There wasnt an immediate answer. Dallion kept on walking for half a minute without response. By all accounts, it seemed that the conversation had ended when the overseer himself emerged from within the park. As usual, he was dressed in a black set of clothes. Half of his face was covered by a masque.

A very practical question, the overseer said. Arent you curious why you were chosen for the task? Especially with so much available talent in the city itself?

I prefer to know what happened to those before us.

Fair point. Some died, some failed, some vanished.

How many failed?

Not many. The mans lips cracked into a smile. All sorts were sent: hunters, former legionaries, mages

Anyone from the Order?

The Order was never approached. You can imagine why.

Dallion nodded. From what he has seen, the Order of the Seven Moons had a tendency to want all dangerous toys for itself. Sometimes there was a reason for that.

Any other questions? the overseer asked.

No. Dallion shook his head.

In that case, let me tell you something. Make use of it as you will. He took a step closer. You arent meant to reclaim the item, the man whispered. Just to try.

I knew it, Dallion thought. It wouldnt be the first time someone was using a mission as an excuse to get rid of potential competition. It was also entirely possible that the target was someone else in the group. March was the obvious choice, although as a hunter, Eury could also have stacked up enemies.

Id tell you to keep that to yourself, but at this point, it doesnt particularly matter. The overseer turned around, walking away. See you at the banquet, empath. Get some sleep until then.

A blink of the eye later, Dallion was alone again.

That sly old fox, Nil grumbled. He only choses to share information when he knows it wont change the outcome.

You think well fail?

I definitely hope not. Thats not the point, dear boy. Succeed or fail. Nothing of what he has said will help or hinder you. Thats why he did it. Youre still young, but sooner or later youll have to start paying attention to the games of politics. Sometimes the strength of a move is the move itself.

You know I have no idea what youre talking about, right? Dallion was starting to get slightly annoyed.

He was fully aware that there was something else at play. It wasnt bigger than the Star or the plague, but different; as if a group of people had integrated the end of the world into a personal game of their own that they refused to stop.

Ill never understand nobles, Dallion said.

Ideally, that would be a good thing. Unfortunately, there will come a time when youll have to. As the saying goes, all high-level awakened take part in the game. The difference is that some of them are merely pieces.

Chapter 529: Tailor's Visit

Euryale wasn't in the inn by the time Dallion got back. March didn't appear particularly pleased, but didn't comment on it. Twenty minutes were spent shifting between silence and small talk until finally the gorgon arrived.

Seeing all three of them together, the innkeeper took that as a sign to start serving lunch. Before that could happen, though, a two-hour meeting took place within the awakened realm of March's rapier. There was no telling from where the Icepicker captain had obtained her information especially considering that she was the only one that had remained in the inn yet, the information was frighteningly valid.

Based on what March had found out, there had been at least six teams that had attempted to find the aura sword in the last five years, not including the mages. Out of them, half had managed to get close to the item, though failed to obtain it. One team, apparently, had made the misjudgment to switch side mid-mission, resulting in their quick death. As for the remaining two teams: one had failed to find the trail and the other had a quick mid-way for unspecified reasons.

It came to little surprise to learn that none of the teams were from the city itself. In fact, the current trio were closer by far to the Archduke than anyone else. One thing was blatantly clear: political games were being played on a much higher level and the banquet everyone had been invited to was going to be just another arena. The best course of action was to not get involved. Sadly, that was no longer an option. By inviting them, someone had already put them on the board. March's advice was for everyone to keep a low profile as possible and create as few waves as possible. As sound as the advice was, it was going to cause considerable problems to Dallion. One way or another, he had to get an invitation to the night auction, which by definition meant asking a favor from one of the nobles.

March also shared that it was possible that one of the Archduke's retainers might have a brief talk with them regarding the mission. If so, Dallion and Eury were to be on their best behavior and try to follow high etiquette as much as possible.

The meeting was over, everyone returned to the real world, where lunch was in the process of being served.

Barely had they finished when the tailors sent by their employers arrived. The tailors consisted of half a dozen people, all of them double-digit awakened. Several chests of fabrics and decorations were also brought in, to make sure that the clothes created best suited the complexion of the person who would wear them.

Despite her long speech on not causing any waves, March flat out refused to wear any clothes other than her armor. The only thing she would agree to was some minor apparel adjustments. Dallion wasn't as lucky.

This won't take long, a man old enough to be Dallion's grandfather said. I already have a basic idea of what would look good on you. Occasionally, a bit more detail is required when dealing with light-skinned visitors, but in your case, I'd say things are pretty standard.

Thanks. I guess?

Think nothing of it, the man waves his hand, as if he was doing Dallion a favor. Lead the way to your room, if you please.

A far younger assistant followed behind, carrying a finely crafted wooden chest. One could assume he was an apprentice learning the craft. According to the chest guardian, the young one still had a lot to learn. The master tailor, on the other hand, was an expert in his field and had been creating clothes for the noble families of the city for the last twenty years.

I'll also need to see your weapons, the old man said as they made their way to Dallion's room. And protective gear, of course.

Am I allowed to take those? Dallion sounded surprised.

You're a hunter, the old man said with a sigh, as if he were addressing a country bumpkin. It is expected of you. Our only goal is to make you a bit less rough around the edges.

Thinking about it, that made sense. Besides, it wasn't like Dallion would be able to harm anyone at the event other than the servants.

I take it, you'll let me know which of the weapons are most suitable for the event? Dallion asked in his most sophisticated manner.

But of course. The old man nodded. Put the chest here, he told his assistant. And you, please stand by the window.

Dallion had a pretty good idea of what would follow from here. Living with a thread forger for over a year had made him pick up on the basics. Raising his arms, he went into a T-pose, expecting the tailors to get a sense of his measurements.

Once the door was closed, they got to work.

Please take a more relaxed stance, the old man said as he slowly circled Dallion. I don't think there will be any issues. Kalim, fetch me the crimson gold and the silver green. We've yet to decide which would be a better match. The tailor took a step back. I trust you still have the pouch the general entrusted you with?

Dallion stiffened. This, he didn't expect. Apparently, there was no telling how vast the general's network was. If he wanted to become a crime boss, he would have been terrifyingly good at it. The only reason he wasn't or so Dallion suspected was because the snob was too lazy to deal with a full-time job. It suited him much better to have a vast network of indebted associates to do his bidding whenever he called.

Yes. Its

Remain still for just a moment, please. The tailor interrupted. The general wished to let you know that the item he's interested in is called a demon eye.

Dallion tensed up.

No, that's nothing to be alarmed about. It's just the name of a rather rare pearl which changes colors depending on the time of day. It's said that only five of those exist, so the general would be extremely appreciative if you were to procure it tonight.

Easier said than done, Dallion thought.

Maybe the silver green. What do you think, Kalim? The tailor turned to his assistant.

Good choice, sir. Ill ready your tools.

And bring the item, if you will.

There was the distinct sound of a wooden box opening. Moments later, the assistant walked up to Dallion, holding a large metal broach. At first glance, there didnt seem to be anything special about it. However, Dallion could also see that it was made of a metal he wasnt familiar with.

Im told that youll know how to use this, the old tailor said. All that you have to do is press both sides of it against your skin. Kalim will leave it on your bed.

If nothing else, the general had at least kept his word. There was no guarantee that the device would work, of course, though Dallion couldnt detect any deception coming from either of the two tailors.

You can talk now, by the way. Ive already memorized your measurements.

Are you sure itll work? Dallion went straight to the point.

That the tailor took a small knife and started slicing the fabric with surgical precision is between you and the general. I am only here to believe the message and the item. Everything else is up to you.

Typical, Dallion thought.

Oh, and one other thing. The general regrets to inform you that he wasnt able to procure an invitation to the event. Youll have to do that on your own. Since this was an unforeseen event, hes agreed to let you keep what is left from your auction purchase to do whatever you wish.

How generous of him, Dallion grumbled.

If theres one thing Ive learned after all this time is that the general is never generous. My advice would be to take advantage of the situation as best you could. The old man placed the cloth cutouts on the bed, then took one of the needles in the box his assistant provided. You can start working on the buttons, he told Kalim. Stick to silver with a dull glow.

In three quarters of an hour, Dallions three-piece suit was ready, along with a shirt of shimmering blue fabric. Adjusting a few last-minute details, the tailors backed their things, then left, after instructing him to mend the suit just before entering the banquet, to get rid of all the wrinkles. The old man also suggested that during the vent itself, Dallion developed a habit of mending his clothes every few minutes to keep them as crisp as possible.

Once they were gone, Dallion closed and barred the door, then sat on the bed.

A tailor, he thought. The general managed to catch a tailor in his web.

Tailors are people like everyone else, dear boy, Nil said. Its not unusual that some of them have dealings with someone like him. Youd be surprised how easy it is to fall out of favor when dealing with a noble household, especially if ones whole goal is to get noticed.

The best way to win the game is not to play, Dallion said.

In theory, yes. In practice, the benefits are so great that most people decide that its worth taking the risk. You should know better than anyone that a third of all awakened are born in extremely poor families. Some are willing to do whatever it takes to climb as high as possible.

Just another day of life among the nobility, Dallion muttered. There was a reason why he had chosen to become a hunter. At least then he didnt have to play these stupid games. Hopefully, once this whole mess was over, he could go back to how things were before.

Four leather sheaths of various sizes were lying on the bed next to him. From the conversation, it was determined that the most useful weapons for the event were Dallions harpsisword, the whip blade, as well as two daggers. Dallionhadnt given any details, but he had already decided to take the Nox dagger and the thread cutter. The armadil shield, sadly, was going to have to remain behind.

As Dallion sat there, Ruby flew off his perching spot on an open beam of the room and landed on his shoulder.

You want to come along? Dallion asked.

The silence indicated that to be the case.

Of course you would. Just remember, no flying about unless I tell you. We have to appear as fancy as possible.

Ruby flicked his wings twice.

Yes, I know you were born fancy. Just no more art for a while, okay? Dallion gently tapped the body of the shardfly.

The rest of the afternoon Dallion spent improving whatever he could find in the room. Strictly speaking, there was no real point in doing so, but at least it calmed Dallions nerves a bit. Also, he finally got to reach the eighty level cap in music and acrobatics. That only left his crafting skills in need of development.

It was noticeable that Eury didnt even attempt to enter the room the entire day, despite most of her belongings being there. There was no way to tell whether that was due to her new outfit, or things between her and Dollion had gone past the point of no return. The sad truth was that Dallion felt relieved more than anything else. At least this way he wouldnt have to go through the awkwardness of staying silent in the room with her, wondering how to start a conversation.

Precisely one hour before sunset, Dame Vesuvia came to the inn, acting as the official escort of the group. As one of the lesser relations of the Archdukes extended family, she had the task of dealing with the more annoying matters of the city.

Chapter 530: Archduke's Banquet

It was said that all villages were the same, but cities could never be alike. Never was this made more obvious than when comparing Nerasol to Linatol. Architectural changes aside, the very nature of the city was completely different. Nerasol could be described as the city of second chancesa place on the frontier that grew to what it was because it had to. No one was guaranteed anything in that city other than the distant chance to gain everything. Linatol, in contrast, was entirely based on established values. This was the place that people who had already made a name for themselves went to in search of even greater rewards. There was no open hostility, yet no mercy either. Everyone and everything was measured from appearance to skills and behavior. Even itemsat least

those who had the ability to communicate with others compared themselves to each other, finding the appropriate slot in the city's unspoken hierarchy.

Even Dallion hadn't escaped that. There was a brief period during which he thought he'd be given a pass as a hired mercenary and first-time visitor. Now it became very clear how much he was mistaken. He never had any illusions of the invitation to the top platform being an honor. However, even he wasn't prepared for the feeling that came along with it. As Dame Vesuvia led them along wide roads of sparsely populated districts, he could feel being assessed. It wouldn't be surprising if a monetary value was also added to the assessment, as well.

There are three buildings of note on this level, the dame explained in a calm, measured tone. The Archduke's palace, the Academy's embassy, and the Imperial residency.

The Order doesn't have a temple here? Dallion asked.

It does, but it isn't of considerable note, Vesuvia replied without a clear explanation of what that meant.

Careful, dear boy, Nil warned. The whisper of words is enough to create a hurricane here.

Isn't it expected for hunter mercenaries to be rough and stupid? Dallion asked.

Don't overplay your hand. Right now, you're here as someone's piece. If you stand out too much, you'll either bring embarrassment to your player or envy. Neither will be to your benefit.

A flutter of crystal shardflies flew by as the group made their way to the palace. Dallion attempted to exchange a few words with them, but the creatures ignored him. Strangely enough, it was Ruby that was the target of their admiration. As a ruby-winged specimen, the little fellow exceeded their rank and was already treated as a superior. Dallion, though, wasn't even a noble.

A series of six statues greeted the group, positioned on both sides of the great stairway leading to the palace's entrance. All of them were ten feet high, carved out of fine marble with such detail, one would think that they would spring to life at any moment. Or, at least, five of them were. The sixth, located on the left side of the lowest section of the staircase, was half destroyed, leaving only enough of the legs to indicate that it had been there. For a city as meticulous as Linatol, it was clear that this was made to send a message.

A reminder of what happens to the losing side, March said before Dallion could ask. That's what's left of the noble that tried to claim the Archduke's title during the Wars of Succession and failed.

All the stress was put on the last word. The warning was clear: this was a place in which victors were admired and losers killed or cast out. Considering that, it made a lot of sense why some of the previous groups tasked with finding the world sword had quit. Giving up was a sigh of failure, but it was still far from the real thing.

Do you think anyone knows about my past? Dallion asked, thinking about the role his grandfather played in the war. It could be said that the old man had backed the winning side, although having him de-leveled and banished back to Nerosal suggested he had lost any semblance of support.

Most definitely, dear boy. However, discussing it would show weakness. Just be sure not to open the topic and you'll be fine. You have one huge thing going for you.

And what's that?

You're an otherworlder. All actions before your awakening are not your own, let alone those of your family. If someone insults you at such an event because of them, they would reveal how vulnerable they are.

That didn't make much sense, but Dallion took the echo's word for it.

Welcome to the archduke's palace, Dame Vesuvia said. From here on, you're to continue on your own.

You're not joining us inside? Dallion asked in sincere surprise.

The faintest of smiles appeared on the woman's face, quickly vanishing moments after.

I am just a dame, not one to be invited to such events. My role is only to bring you here and back. She stepped to the side. Of course, I'll be here for when you are to return to your inn.

After a momentary pause, March took the lead, ascending the stairs with the authority of one who had done so before. Dallion got the distinct impression that when she was an imperial lieutenant, such visits must have been common. Even Archdukes were subject to imperial rule. Now, though, she was just another mercenary in their service.

Two mid-level awakened stood at the massive door, dressed in red and gold uniforms. The moment March approached, they quickly opened both sides of the door, letting her enter without a word.

The entrance hallway was almost as big as the Combat Arenas lobby back in Nerosal. Breathtaking paintings, three times taller than Dallion and a lot wider, were placed on pure sky silver. The floor was made of a mosaic made of colored glass, then melted, giving it a perfect shine. Small scratches emerged every time March took a step, though they were quickly mended by the serving staff present.

Good evening. A tall, dark-skinned man dressed entirely in shades of yellow approached them. Would you please take all blocking items off? His tone was polite, but it was clear that this wasn't a request.

Reluctantly, Euryale did so.

Thank you. Follow me to the second hall, please.

Second hall? Dallion asked.

The main hall is reserved for the high nobility and their personal guests, Nil explained. Guests of lesser interest or importance go to a connecting hall adjacent to the main one. Everyone else is brought to the third hall. Usually, that would include guild masters, heads of trade organizations, people fallen out of favor, or unweakened who have achieved enough to be noticed.

Hearing the last category made Dallion think of the general. Despicable methods aside, one couldnt but admire what the man had achieved. As a local military officer, his grandfather had likely been an awakened of some import, though nowhere near the level of a noble. That hadnt stopped the general from using the resources at his disposal to rise to the point he was today, all the time not being an awakened.

You are only to address people from the main hall if and when addressed, the man in yellow continued. And under no circumstances enter the main hall unless the archduke himself invites you.

We know the etiquette, March said, a sharp edge in her words. As well as our place. Be sure you dont forget yours.

A wave of dread emanated from the man.

Thats another thing youll have to look out for while here, Nil said. People of lesser importance are likely to take liberties they normally wouldnt just for the chance of getting noticed by the Archduke, even if they too are likely to suffer as a result.

The servant led the trio to a large banquet hall already full of people. There were no introductions, no further instructions. Once they were there, the man just turned around and left, leaving them to their own devices.

What now? Dallion asked. Should we mingle?

Youre not nobles, March whispered back. Find a place to stand and remain there until they call for us.

You think they will?

Thats the whole reason were here. No one would invite us if we werent to be part of the spectacle in some way. The woman quickly scanned the room. Dont sit.

That was a rather disturbing thought, but Dallion could see it being true. Before he could ask anything more, March moved away, stopping at a table, where she took what appeared to be a glass of water and took a sip.

We better move further away from the door, Eury whispered.

Dallion nodded. As they walked, occasionally passing between groups of people, Dallion looked around. With this being such a large event, he was curious whether there would be any more otherworlders. The way the halls were connected prevented him from seeing most of the main hall, but even here, the people seemed pretty high level.

Suddenly, he felt someone approaching. His senses had become sharp enough to detect when someone was intentionally moving towards him, even in this crowd. Briskly, he turned around, expecting to see another servant wanting to target him. Instead, he saw someone else entirely.

Falkner? Dallion asked in disbelief.

Its been a while, Dal, the other replied.

Back when Dallion had joined the Icepicker guild, Falkner had been little more than a boya young noble whod gone to Nerosal with the explicit goal of learning from March. He and Dallion had been close, one might even call them friends. But that had later changed.

The person standing in front of Dallion looked nothing like the Falkner Dallion remembered. He had grown considerably in a year, turning into a young man. His refined clothes made it clear that he was a full noble, if not in level, then definitely in pedigree.

Congrats on becoming a hunter, Falkner said in a reserved fashion.

Thanks. Dallion wasnt sure what to say. He could congratulate the noble on passing the fourth gate, considering that Dallion was in his sixties, that could be misinterpreted as being condescending. I didnt expect to meet you here.

Oh?

I thought youd be in the main hall.

The suggestion made the young man smile. Apparently, there was still a grain of friendship remaining between him and Dallion.

Thats reserved for my parents when theyre here, he humble-bragged. Dallion was getting the distinct impression that Falkner was trying to impress, although he couldnt be sure whether the noble was trying to impress him or March. Or maybe both. I told you that hes the archdukes brother?

No, Im not sure you did. Does that mean Im welcome to visit your city sometime?

Sure, although it might not be the best time right now. With the poison plague and the border tensions, maybe wait for a few years.

Yeah, that sounds like good advice. Dallion nodded. He knew that it was a lie, of course. City rulers had the power to make any exceptions they wanted. While it was true that Falkner wasnt his father, he could also have phrased it in a very different fashion. So, how have you been? I havent heard anything since you left the guild.

I havent left it officially, Falkner corrected. But its true, I havent had time to deal with it, or anything else, for that matter.

Monster issues?

No. Falkner semi-laughed, shaking his head. I promise to drop your name to my father if we ever have any wilderness issues. Rather, Ive been focusing full time on the preparation for my wedding.

Wedding? Dallion blinked. As far as he knew, nobles only married for political reasons after a long engagement period. Rumors and gossip would circulate for years before the event, especially when the child of a city-lord was concerned. Well, congratulations. He fought the urge to tap Falkner on the shoulder. Whos the lucky bride?

Who do you think? a familiar female voice asked a few steps away.

Turning around, Dallion saw none other than his friend and childhood crush Gloria standing there in a dress that made her look like a high noble herself.

This is rather unexpected, Nil said. Dallion had to agree.

