

Leveling up 531

Chapter 531: Old Favors and New

Wearing a white platinum dress that would make all of Dallions earnings as a hunter seem like pocket change, Gloria came up to him, a radiant smile on her face. Dallion could see that she had increased her awakened level significantly since last he'd seen her, now reaching the mid-forties, if not higher. Given how ambitious she'd always been, it wouldn't be out of the question for her to have reached a higher level than Falkner.

You look well, the woman said. Her outfit and platinum blond hair made her stand out in the crowd, as if she were a negative in a colored photo. No doubt the effect had specifically been created by a skilled tailor in the service of Falkners family. That would suggest that his father had approved of the union.

You look better, Dallion said. Guilt made him discreetly glance about in search of Eury. For better or worse, the gorgon had joined March and was discussing something. Her back was turned to Dallion, but he knew well that didn't prevent Eury from seeing him. How's home?

Quite well. A lot has changed since you last visited. We're a town now.

A town? I thought the Archduke didn't allow settlement advancement.

He doesn't, Falkner said. I had my father petition, so it was approved.

That certainly was a way to get things moving. Dallion wondered whether that meant that Gloria had agreed to be the next overseer. It was a dark and chilling thought, but after his experience in the fallen south, Dallion feared that might very much be the case.

Veil is in charge of it now. He's a bit annoyed he didn't get to be here to see you, but he has enough work to deal with back home.

I bet. Dallion nodded.

VeilGlorias bother was even more ambitious and competitive. It would be no wonder if he had passed the fourth gate as well. Then again, it was also likely that he, as his sister, had hit the development wall. For the most part, people reached their limits around level twenty. Star-touched, inadvertently did better. Maybe that was one of the gifts they had received from the Star, making them as valuable as otherworlders and a lot more reliable.

Congrats on your engagement, Dallion said, finally acknowledging the fact. Surprised not to hear about it earlier.

We kept it discreet. Falkner stepped in. Dallion could feel that even now, he was protective of Gloria. That seemed sweet, also making Dallion slightly envious, especially after what was going on with him and Eury. Apparently, even in this world, the universe had a wicked sense of humor. It'll be a small event with a big announcement. I'll talk to my father to invite you, of course.

I'll do my best to be there.

What brings you here? Gloria asked Dallion. There was a lot of rhubarb when you came to the city, but that's about it. Even Falkner wasn't able to find out anything.

Dallion could almost feel all ears on him. On the surface, no one in the hall had skipped a beat, continuing the conversations theyd been having until now. However, Dallion felt curiosity oozing from everyone, almost overwhelming him.

Powerful, isnt it? Nil asked. Thats why music is considered such a valuable skill, especially at the higher levels.

Im here with March, Dallion replied, making it a point to not give any details. He had been warned about this, but even if he hadnt, he knew better than blabbering out sensitive information. Thats all I can say.

Clearly versed in how the game was played, Falkner nodded. Gloria, on the other hand, apart from having a good, if limited in comparison, understanding of politics, had the determination to match.

Since were all here, a small favor, if you dont mind? She pulled off a ring from her finger. To Dallions delight, it was the same ring that he had improved for her during his awakening acknowledgement back in Dherma. The simplicity of the piece of jewelry and the cheapness of the material, compared to the engagement ring beside it, clearly showed that she had kept it for sentimental reasons.

Dont get any ideas, the armadil shield said. People have gotten into trouble for less.

What do you mean? Dallion asked.

Shes engaged to nobility now. Getting involved will only cause trouble. Eras might change, but romance and intrigue remain the same.

Are you serious? Dallion laughed in his mind. Theres nothing going on. Were just friends.

The dryad guardian didnt reply.

Can you improve it a bit more? Gloria asked.

Sure. Dallion smiled. What do you want it to be? Gold? More?

Silver will be fine.

Dallion reached for the ring. The moment he touched it, the familiar green rectangle appeared.

ITEM AWAKENING

That was weird. For one thing, he wasnt the one who had initiated the realm entry. For another, Dallion wasnt the only person there. Gloria and Falkner were as well. Faint bubbles of surprise formed within Falkners body. Unlike him, the predominant emotion visible in Gloria was determination.

Its better to talk here, the woman said. Far less of a crowd.

If it were anyone else, Dallion would have been highly suspicious of the whole thing. Being pulled into a realm just like that wasnt regarded as good awakened etiquette. However, since it was Gloria, he didnt seem to mind.

Why are you really here? she pressed on.

I really cant tell you, Dallion replied with a slight sigh. Its related to work. Thats all I can say at this point. Its not related to you, if thats what youre worried about.

Why did he add to that for? Of course, it wasnt related to her. There was no reason anyone should think otherwise. The last time Dallion had visited his home village currently town he had pretty much cut all ties with the place and the people in it.

Trouble always seems to follow you. If something crazy is going on here, Id like to know before it happens.

Fair point. Lets say that the city wont be affected in any way. Or at least, Dallion hoped so. Good enough?

Itll have to do. It was obvious that Gloria wasnt overly pleased with the answer, but she was willing to accept it.

Since were here, theres a favor Id like to ask as well. This wasnt what Dallion had planned, but one of the things about being a hunter was to take advantage of every sudden opportunity. Id like an invite to the Night Auction.

Surprise and concern ballooned in Falkner. It was also interesting to see clusters of curiosity fill Glorias head and arms. It seemed like this was something she was unaware of.

Whats the Night Auction? She turned to her future husband.

Its he began, but the word quickly trailed off. Its impossible, he turned to Dallion. Not at such a short notice.

Impossible for someone who managed to get permission for settlement improvement? Dallion pressed. I think youre selling yourself short.

That was my father. Hes not here now.

Whats the Night Auction? Gloria asked again.

Its a special auction action, Dallion said. Very exclusive. You need to be of major importance to get there. Or to be invited by someone who was.

Thats not even close. Falkner suppressed a sigh. Its an auction organized by Archdukes at which the rarest things in the world are bought and sold. Things that otherwise cant be bought. It takes a fortune even to buy the trivial items. I dont know how you even know about it.

Im a hunter, after all. You seem to know about it quite a bit as well.

Have you been to one? Gloria asked.

My father took me a few times when I was a child. I remember I was amazed at the things there. Looking at them was almost as exciting as buying the thing. Why do you want to go, anyway? You cant possibly have the funds to get anything. Can you?

Thats for me to worry about. Can you get me an invite?

No. A large blob of quilt emerged in the young nobles chest.

Thank you, music skills, Dallion thought. You can, cant you?

Its not that simple. If youd asked me a month ago, maybe I could have managed something. Right now he waved a hand.

What are you hiding?

Falkner didnt respond.

Fal, Gloria said gently. Can you get an invitation to the auction?

I can only invite one other, Falkner said at last. Apparently, this was one aspect he hadnt changed since Dallion the Icepicker guildhe had difficulty standing up to those who were close to him. I planned on inviting you and buying something you liked, he turned to the blonde.

So, you have the invite?

Falkner nodded.

Let Dallion be your guest. Ill get other chances to go see it. Besides, she placed her hand on his cheek. This way you get to surprise me.

Well played, Dallion thought. Looking with terrified fascination at how she handled him. If he didnt know better, hed almost say she was using music skills. In truth, she was just very good at convincing people when she wanted it. After all, she had also managed to get Dallion to help her level up back in Dherma when she needed it.

Conflict raged within Falkner for several seconds. Dallion could see emotions flaring up, clashing, then being consumed. For a moment, there was no telling which side would win. In the end, the young man folded.

Alright, he whispered. Ill talk to my uncle. The auction will start at midnight, during the banquet. Ill come get you.

Gloria gave Dallion a glance saying you owe me one, then kissed Falkner on the cheek.

Where will it be? Dallion asked.

Right here, in the palace. Its always here. With so many valuables, theres no place better.

That made sense. Only someone mad would attack an Archduke in their own home.

Thanks, Falkner. If you ever need a creature caught or something from the wilderness, let me know. You get one for free.

Ill remember that. Falkner forced a smile half-way. It was obvious that he had other plans for the evening.

Well, now thats all this is settled, I think we should get back to the banquet, Gloria changed the topic. Of course, after you do what you promised. She looked at Dallion. I expect the silver to be flawless.

With both Gloria and her fianc leaving, Dallion was left to improve the ring. Doing so brought a certain feeling of nostalgia. The colossus that was the guardian of the ring was the first one Dallion had fought. At the time, he was a mere level one with a single guard skill. Now, he had the skills and power to defeat the guardian in one strike.

Of course, that wasnt the course he chose. Entering the guardians chamber, Dallion decided to spend a while having a nice conversation with the entity. Interestingly enough, it turned out that the language wasnt one hed known before. Learning it was easy, of course, and earned him another point in scholar skills.

The conversation between him and the guardian was exactly as one would expect two distant friends catching up after a chance meeting centuries after the last. The topic of conversation varied, with the two main focuses being Gloria and Dallion. Strangely enough, the colossus still had a mixed opinion on Falkner. She acknowledged his strength and feelings for Gloria, but still wasnt a hundred percent certain he was a good match.

Once the topics were exhausted, Dallion offered the guardian to surrender. While it was clear that the fight would be extremely one-sided, she refused. It was a matter of principle above everything else. As a result, Dallion proceeded to defeat her a dozen times, until the material of the ring was improved to silver. And just for the sake of it, he used nothing but his original guard buckler to do so. Near the end, the colossus even managed to get a few hits. Of course, at his current level, Dallions overall health decreased by no more than ten percent in total.

Improving an item so many times at once is never a good idea, Nil grumbled.

Shes fine, Dallion replied. Shes strong enough to handle it.

Possibly, but thats not the point. Moving too fast often has a tendency of taking you back. Keep that in mind.

I always do, Dallion said, and returned to the real world.

Chapter 532: Banquet Duel

The banquet seemed to drag for hours. Never before had Dallion witnessed such a combination of luxury and boredom. The first ten minutes were exceptional, spent in looking at everything and everyone. Everything was new and magnificent. Once that time had passed, Dallion noticed that all events tended to repeat each other as if in an invisible loop. The conversations, the way people approached each other, even the manner in which they ate. After a while, the only thing he could do was join March and Eury far away from everyone else.

The food, too, was far from what he expected. While undoubtedly exotic, and rather tasty, it was served in such small quantities, that in order to have enough for one meal, Dallion would have to grab an entire tray a huge faux pas, as Nil had made sure to explain.

Several hours in, the only question in Dallions head was, why were they invited here at all? None of the servants approached them with instructions about what to do, and as for the Archduke and the other members of his family present. They had remained seated on their throne-like chairs at the head of the main hall, a short distance from the rest, having other nobles approach them. One person of particular interest was the current mage that was protecting the city. To Dallions relief, she didnt

turn out to be Katka. Rather, she was a lot older in her late forties, at the very least dressed in a green variation of the robe Katka had worn when attacking Jiroh and the rest in the cloud citadel.

Naturally, Dallion asked Nil how strong that made her only to receive the answer that it depended on the field. While weaker than Katka in pure combat potential, the current made was far superior when it came to protection spells, suggesting that she would be far more difficult to defeat in a fight.

The overseer had also been invited. No one was sure where and how he had arrived, but he was impossible to miss moving about in his black clothes and platinum blonde hair. Interestingly enough, he spent a significant time with Gloria, discussing matters that Dallion couldn't overhear. It seemed that the saying that blondes stuck together was true.

As March took another glass of water, Dallion felt like asking how much longer they'd have to be at the event. He was on the verge of doing so when someone called his name.

Dallion Darude! a voice sounded through the halls, putting an end to all other conversations. I think we have unfinished business.

Having something of the sort that wasn't good in any circumstances. Having it happen in the Archduke's palace was significantly worse, especially when it became clear who had issued the challenge.

Itella, Dallion thought.

The young noble seemed a lot more muscular since the last time Dallion had seen him, not to mention far higher in level. If Dallion had to guess, he put him somewhere in the fifties. Wearing the weirdest example of luxurious combat wear, Itella clearly had planned his challenge to be part of the event. The worst part was that it obviously was with the approval of the Archduke himself. It hardly was a coincidence that all the people in the mail hall had moved to the walls, leaving a vast open space in the middle.

I challenge you to a duel! Itella pointed to Dallion.

Damn it! What do I do? he whispered so that only March and Eury could hear.

Amuse him, March said.

Try not to lose, Eury added.

Some more practical advice would have been better, but since no one was eager to give it, Dallion made his way towards the main hall. Upon reaching the invisible line that separated the two halls, he stopped despite the challenge; he hadn't been formally invited to enter the area.

Come, come. The Archduke waved Dallion in.

There was no emotion Dallion could sense. It was as if the man was wearing a blocking item. His face had a relaxed expression that conveyed absolutely nothing. The only thing that emanated from the man was a sense of pure power.

My youngest seems to have become obsessed with you ever since his loss in Nerosal, the Archduke said, stressing the words son and loss. This was meant as a double warning: Dallion was not to harm Itella, and also Itella was not to expect he could win this.

Was this why I was invited here? Dallion wondered.

It definitely seemed like a very noble-like thing to do, creating an amusing spectacle, as well as putting an uppity child in its place. The only issue was that Dallion didnt at all appreciate being mixed up in this.

Do you prefer weapons or hand to hand? Dallion asked his opponent.

Weapons, Itella replied, nodding at one of the servants.

The man disappeared for a moment, then returned with the exotic-looking axes Dallion had seen during the arena fights. Each of the weapons had the ability to change form freely by bending and holding, however its owner wished. The only thing it couldnt do was tear and merge.

Sorry about the wound, Dallion said to the item. Ill try not to hurt you this time.

Its part of the job, Itellas weapon guardian replied. By the specific intonation, Dallion gathered that it was a nymph. I wont apologize if I cut you up.

Without warning, Itella burst into instances. Dallion could see twenty of them, all charging at him, weapon in hand. In each instance, the weapon had a completely different shape.

Grabbing the harpsisword on his back, Dallion burst into three dozen instances of his own. It was at that point that his opponent attempted to force the worst possible outcome on Dallion. Some point in the past that would have worked. Now, though, Dallion knew everything about combat splitting, so he imposed his own version of outcomes. Both wills clashed, each striving for a specific outcome. Not used to anyone opposing his combat forcing, Itella didnt have any real strength to support his change. In contrast, Dallion had learned the skill while fighting dragonlets, so he pressed on with full force. Reality seemed to snap. One moment, everyone in the hall saw dozens of potential outcomes; the next only one remained in which the Archdukes son was on the floor.

Knowing his place, Dallion didnt continue with an attack, but took several steps back. The thought of letting out a sarcastic insult crossed his mind, but he decided against it. There was no need to further worsen the situation by humiliating a powerful opponent.

You can start now, the Archduke said, making the insult himself.

Whispers filled the hall. They, too, were pre-calculated. The nobles making them were fully aware they would be clearly heard in a room of awakened. Of course, that was the point. Interestingly enough, Dallion also heard a number of guardiansmostly dryadscomment on the first move of the fight as well. By the sound of it, all of them were members of imprisoned races who had seen quite a bit of combat in their time. Without exception, they criticized Itellas poor performance. At the same time, the vast majority werent impressed with Dallions performance, either.

No combat splitting, the Archduke added, giving a clear advantage to his son. No familiars or independent weapons, he added, aware of the whip blades capabilities. Were here to witness a display of skills.

That didnt make full sense. Being able to control familiars was also a skill. The only reason it was forbidden was because Itella didnt have it.

Ruby, go to Eury, Dallion said, loud enough to be heard. There was a bit of spite in his motivation, though for the most part it was to illustrate he was following the Archdukes order. What about music skills, your grace? he asked.

If there was a political power move on Dallions part, that was it. Personally, he didnt care if the skill was allowed or not. His real goal was to make it clear that he had those skills. A new round of whispers followed. The fact that they were half as many suggested that at least a number of nobles were taking him seriously.

No music, either. The archdukes lips curved into a faint smile for the first time since the start of the banquet. Let my son at least have a chance of winning.

Anger and shame emanated from Itella. Both he and Dallion were aware of who was favored to win, and to a noble with an ego that wasnt pleasing.

Do I lose? Dallion asked. Ive technically won twice already.

When it comes to politics, relying on other people's advice is a sure way to fail, Nil replied. That said, Id advise against it. As much as youve improved, youre not at the level to fake a loss. And even if you were, many here would still think you had and feel insulted by your action.

Was hoping youd say that, Dallion smiled, then charged forward.

Itellas reaction was immediate. With a reaction speed exceeding Dallions, he leapt up, making a roll spin in the air, while his weapons unfolded and folded again into the shape of large sickles.

Fully aware that in a fight of this caliber, one weapon against two was a certain path to defeat, Dallion drew his whip blade.

Dont get involved in this, Gleam, he said.

Yeah, yeah, the familiar grumbled. Have your fun.

Blades clashed, then kept clashing dozens of times in the course of a few seconds. Both opponents were able to perform multiple series of attacks, both attacking and blocking each other. The tempo slowly increased, up to the moment when both pulled back. This was the evaluation phase in which the opponents measured out each others skills, looking for flaws or weaknesses. Several things became immediately clear to all observing. Itella was slightly superior when it came to overall speed and reaction, while Dallions perception and mind traits were much better. With splitting banned, though, there was no way to take advantage of the mind trait.

The styles of fighting were also considerably different. Itella fought like a sheltered awakened would, relying on cleanness of form and strategy. There was a time when Dallion did so as well, but

after spending so much time in the wilderness, where efficiency was everything, looking at it was like watching ballet. In contrast, Dallion did everything possible to conserve as much energy as possible and focus on short, quick movements.

A few seconds later, Itella dashed forward, initiating the next round of attacks. The sound of metal striking metal was everywhere.

Hes got a bit to learn, Harp said.

At first, Dallion thought she was talking to him. However, he was mistaken.

Hes getting there, one of the ax guardians replied. Hes got the skills and some of the training, but is overly confident. Thats why his father organized all this. Your owner has terrible form, though.

Hes a late bloomer, the harpsisword replied.

Never before had Dallion seen weapons discussing the skill of their owners in combat. Harp would often tell him where he did right and wrong, but that was only in training or after a battle. Having it happen in a fight felt outright strange, making Dallion feel as if Itella and himself were little more than weapon appendages.

Leaping back, Dallion thrust his whip blade forward. Used to wilderness battles, he was about to do a point attack. Itellas weapons must have too, for no sooner had he started the action that they unwrapped, changing from their current state into two wide parts of metal that interlocked in a massive shield.

Stop! Nil shouted in Dallions realm.

Suddenly aware of what he was doing, Dallion held back from finishing the action. His arm strained as the power built up didnt get to be released, causing his muscles to become unresponsive.

The whip blade stopped, slightly trembling, but did nothing more.

Damn it! Dallion cursed in his mind. That was too close.

Chapter 533: Noble Spectacle

The silence in the hall increased until all that could be heard was Dallions breath. In his mind, we went through what could have been, imagining his attack puncturing the Archdukes son, or at the very least throwing him back into the wall, along with several more nobles.

Slowly, all heads turned in the direction of the Archduke, waiting for his decision on the matter. As a supreme ruler of the province, second only to the Emperor, he could do anything he wished, including punishing Dallion for the intent. Thankfully, he appeared rather amused instead.

Yes, good call, he said, looking at Dallion. There might be a few who cant deal with point and line attacks. Dont use those in the fight.

Itellas makeshift shield broke apart as the weapons changed to their previous form. There was not a scratch on him, but it didnt take one with music skills to see the fear emanating from the young noble. Up to this point, it was unlikely his life had ever been threatened, making him treat it as a game. No doubt he had suffered the effects of similar attacks dozens of times within the awakened

realms any awakened who'd passed the third gate had. In the real world, the consequences were a lot more dire, though.

It would be a shame if the duel stopped here, the Archduke said. Things were just getting interesting. Show us what you have in store.

Dallion nodded. He didn't have the luxury to refuse, even if his left arm remained in considerable pain. He was still able to move it, and even do attacks, though blocking strong attacks was going to prove an issue. Taking a deep breath, he changed his stance, shifting sideways with the right side towards his opponent.

The Archduke's son was a different matter, though. The hesitation was clear. Had he not been put on the spot, it was entirely possible that he just ended it here, most likely grumbling how barbaric hunters were. His father's reaction changed everything.

Thank you for that, one of Itella's weapons said unironically. It's a needed first step in making him see what life is like beyond the realms. The boy never went to war, unlike his father. Some fear will do him good.

Seconds dragged on. None of the opponents wanted to make the first move, though for various reasons. In the end, it became clear that it was up to Dallion again. Despite his current state, he had obtained the momentum, so had no choice to lose it.

This is a good learning experience for you, too, Harp said. Now you have to work for your win.

The comment made Dallion crack a smile. Only Harp could say such a thing.

Darude, he whispered, and charged forward.

The harp's sword did a diagonal slash aiming at Itella's shoulder. Still slightly taken aback, the noble parried it with his right arm. That proved to be a mistake. The force of Dallion's attack moved the noble's arm to the left, placing it in front of the other and effectively making any counterattack impossible. The mistake was so amateurish that for a split-second Dallion considered it to be a trap. In order to test it out, he attacked again with his left arm.

There was no way such a weak attack could cause any harm, but even so, Itella blocked it with his right arm again, making his situation even worse.

He's lost it, Nil said. Best find a way to put him out of his misery. The longer you prolong this, the more it'll look like bullying.

He wasn't like this during our last fight

Wasn't he? That also ended in a similar fashion. Back then, the only consequences were a weapon getting hurt. Not to mention that there was a mage present.

There's a mage present here, as well.

True, but one working for his father.

There didnt seem to be any good choices. If Dallion defeated Itella in a humiliating fashion, relations between them were going to get even worse. On the other hand, if he didnt, he risked earning the ire of more nobles, including the Archdukes father.

Having fractions of a second to make a decision, Dallion chose the go for a victory. Itella was a noble in name only, while the Archduke and a vast part of the elites were in practice.

All hesitation vanished. Dallion twisted, attacking his opponent with the whip blade again. Maybe Itella sensed that something was right, for he hesitated, but blocked with his right arm, anyway. The weapons had clearly seen the mistake of their owner, for they unfolded, aiming to protect as much of his torso as possible. That too was a mistake, for Dallion didnt go for a slash with his harpsisword. Building on the momentum of his action, he combined athletic and acrobatic skills to do a turn with a low sweep. The back of his left leg slammed into Itellas ankle, catching him completely unprepared. The nobles increased body trait wasnt able to withstand the force, giving in and causing him to topple over.

Got you, Dallion thought.

Showing no signs of mercy, he proceeded to perform a multi attack, aiming for the gaps left unprotected by his opponents weapons. Before the tip of the blade could get anywhere near, Dallion felt the sword be yanked out of his grip.

That will do, the Archduke said, holding Dallions harpsisword. At a snap of his fingers, a series of servants rushed to the scene, helping his son up and discretely stopping any notion of protest before it happened.

Hate, shame, and resentment oozed from the young noble. Dallions only hope was that it wasnt targeted entirely towards him.

An interesting weapon, the Archduke said, focusing his attention on it, as if the duel had never taken place. Three centuries old, at least. An Evanizer, I believe. Or one of his apprentices. How exactly did you get it?

I bought it, your grace, Dallion replied, taking a few steps back. By chance.

Must have been quite the stroke of luck. Most would find the weapon useless, but for one skilled in music he didnt finish the sentence, throwing the weapons straight at Dallions chest.

Dallion wanted to say that his fast reaction was the reason he remained unharmed, but it was clearly obvious that Harp was to thank. The harpsisword guardian had tilted the tip slightly mid-flight, causing the blade to move away from its intended target point, sliding off his armor instead. Had she not, or had Dallion been slightly slower, this would have caused a serious wound.

The weapon seems to think highly of you. The Archduke leaned back. Thats the first sign that youre doing things properly.

Polite laughter filled the room. For some reason, the scene reminded Dallion of his experience in Aspions mansion back in Dherma. Back then, the village chief maliciously wanted to prevent him from becoming an awakened to maintain his power. Here, the Archduke was using Dallion to send a warning to his own family. The really terrifying aspect of the whole thing was that, with the exception of Itella, there didnt seem to be a note of maliciousness in the entire hall. No one was

remotely concerned what would happen to Dallion one way or the other. They were just enjoying a spectacle.

So thats what nobles are, Dallion thought. They could be nice, understanding, caring even, but at the end of the day, they were the strongest beings in the world, and they were fully aware of it. The reason Nerosal was different was because all the nobles there already had been taken down a peg or ten.

Interesting person Evanizer, the Archduke continued, casually. A bit of a loner. Some historians claim he could have challenged the emperor himself, but preferred to spend all of his days making weapons. He even loved his wife and children less than his craft. Of course, he was an otherworlder. Just like you.

Dallion remained silent.

What do you think of my son? The archduke continued the game.

Hes sheltered, Dallion replied. With his knowledge and training, he should have been able to take me easily.

The response caused a slight stir.

Youre saying that I should make him a hunter?

I wouldnt presume, your grace.

Hmm, maybe not a hunter. Maybe I should have just sent him to train a bit under March, like my brother did. He gave Falkner a glance. Even through two halls, everyone could see Falkner tense up. With everything going on, maybe hell have a chance to experience it first hand.

A single gesture let Dallion know that he had overstayed his welcome in the main hall. With a bow, he quickly moved to his proper place. Shortly after, a servant approached, handing him a small pouch. The servant didnt debase himself to explain what that was for, but it was pretty clear the Archduke had found the performance amusing.

Could have been worse, Nil said as Dallion made his way to March and Eury. At least you got something out of it. Just dont open it. Hunters are expected to be mercantile, but checking the amount here would mean youre challenging the archdukes generosity.

Quickly, Dallion put the pouch away.

Could have been better, March said, critical as always. You gave him too much slack.

How many noticed? Dallion whispered the obvious question.

Most of the nobles, Eury replied. You shouldnt be worried. They didnt seem to mind.

Thats the issue with the children of nobles, March went on, not even bothering to lower her voice. Theyre spoiled into thinking they have the strength to be something they arent. Get something to eat. Youll need food for your arm to heal.

Almost on cue, larger portions of food were brought to the hall. As much as the food was good, Dallion couldn't enjoy it. He could feel everyone's glances at him, as if he were an exotic pet of sorts. As a hunter this was good; it was very likely he'd get a lot more paying clients in the future. As a person, the banquet wasn't something he was prepared for. It was just like a venous trap: alluring, shiny, slowly closing around him to the point he could only suffocate and surrender to his fate. The strong would have no problem surviving, while the weak were destined to perish. As Nil and Harp had often warned him, Dallion was in a precarious situation right now. Acknowledged as a potential threat, though not a full noble, he was going to be the target of attacks more and more. After all, the best way to eliminate the competition was before it could reach the stage at which it was acknowledged to be competition.

The conversations returned to their dull pre-duel state. Nothing spoken was of particular interest or significance. All the talk was about settlements, cities, and noble domains and the daily problems they had running them. The topic of the poison plague was not mentioned once, nor were the Star cults that Dallion knew to be increasing in the province.

Lady March. A servant approached with a slight bow. Your presence has been requested. Please, follow me.

Alone? the woman asked.

With your team, of course.

Except for him, a new voice said. The city overseer had appeared without warning, in typical fashion. He's needed elsewhere.

The servant gave the overseer a quick glance. As far as the palace hierarchy went, the overseer was nothing more than a guest, even if he ran the entire city. At the same time, even a senior servant didn't have the authority to go against his requests without the support of a noble. Since there was none nearby, all that he could do was turn to March again.

Quite good company you're keeping, the overseer noted as Dallion's teammates left the hall, following the servant. Little Eury was quite the prodigy. Then again, most otherworlders are.

You knew her? Dallion gave him a surprised look.

I know everyone who's been to the city. I just choose not to talk to most. Come along, it's time to escort you to the Night Auction. A piece of advice: don't spend all your funds on the first item. Most first timers make that mistake.

Chapter 534: The Night Auction

Dal, Falkner said with a brief nod as the overseer brought Dallion to an antechamber further in the palace.

There were no guards present, just a small room full of expensive chairs and exotic plants. The overseer didn't set foot in the room; he didn't have the right to walking away without a word, instead.

Ready? the noble asked.

Sure. After everything that had happened, Dallion wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. With a bit of luck, he might even manage to hear the instructions given to the rest of his team.

Falkner made his way to a door made entirely of jade at the far side of the room and knocked. The door swung open, taking both into a large corridor.

Good evening, a tall fury greeted them. Unlike all the previous furies Dallon had seen, this one had crimson red hair and clothes. Welcome to the Night Auction.

Hes with me, Falkner said.

Thank you, Master Arlera. I have been informed. And welcome Mister Darude. Since this will be your first auction, its my duty to explain the rules. A tray of sky silver with two bracelets on it floated up to Dallon. Youre to wear this at all times during the auction.

Blocker items? Dallon asked as he took one of them. The craftsmanship was exquisite, although it felt more like a shackle than anything else.

Think of them as a means to ensure that the event is kept civil, the fury replied. As a guest, during the auction, it is recommended that you keep all talking to a minimum, especially if not invited. You are free, of course, to consult with Master Falkner, since hes the one who vouched for you on this occasion.

Understood.

Once the auction starts, you are to remain at your seat until the end. Then, you are only permitted to approach the master of ceremony should you have bought an item. If not, you are to leave as quickly as possible, though without creating a stir. I trust all this is clear?

Ill try to remember all that. Dallon added a note of sarcasm to his voice. It didnt pass unnoticed, for the fury smiled in return.

Wonderful. And finally, the bidding itself. Normally, the auction observes the ensnare principle, which is to say that all funds pledged are not returned, but become property of the auction. However, as a first timer, you are exempt.

Only a noble could think of such a rule. Its only existence was to turn the event into a competition for people for whom money was no object.

What about the bidding process? Dallon asked.

A very good question. All prices are in gold coins. Of course, since carrying such amounts could be bothersome, I will collect all the funds you wish to participate with and give you auction tokens instead. Once the event is over, you will reclaim the corresponding amount of funds upon receiving the tokens. The fury paused for a few moments.

Getting the hint, Dallon took out the pouch he had received from the Archduke and poured it onto the tray in front of him. A dozen sun gold coins tell on the smooth surface. It didnt look like much, but they were the equivalent of close to five-hundred pieces of gold.

Aware that this was a pitiful amount, Dallon quickly took the pouch given to him by the general and emptied its contents as well.

Spellcraft cubes? The fury nodded his head, impressed. You must have quite a generous sponsor.

Something like that. How many tokens will that get me?

A fair amount.

After quickly counting the cubes, the fury used his skills to float several stacks of marble tiles on the tray. The design was early, similar to casino chips. If it wasn't for the material, Dallion would have sworn he had just entered Las Vegas.

Here we are. Fifty-four thousand four hundred and eighty. Would you require a container?

Thank you. Dallion nodded. There was no way that pile would fit in any of his pouches.

A wooden crimson box floated up to Dallion.

When bidding, discretion is greatly valued. The fury used air currents to place all tokens into the container. Just a personal recommendation. He handed the box to Dallion. I wish you a pleasant auction.

Thanks. Just one question.

The crimson fury leaned forward, expectantly.

What is your name?

My name? It's hardly something for you to trouble yourself about. I appreciate the gesture, though. You are every bit what they say you are. Please. He gestured for Dallion to continue down the corridor.

Given no other alternative, Dallion did just that.

It's not a good look to ask servants for their names, Falkner whispered, as he walked beside him. Even for a hunter.

I'll keep that in mind.

The auction room itself was a semi-circular dome divided into twelve sections. The front four were mostly empty, likely reserved for certain families of import. The one behind were virtually packed. Dallion followed Falkner to the second row of the leftmost back section. Clearly, even the son of a city lord wasn't considered important enough for anything better.

How long does this usually take? Dallion whispered, leaning towards Falkner.

Depends on the items in question. Sometimes it's about an hour, sometimes more.

That was too long. There was no way Dallion could get out in time to hear about the mission. The only thing left now was to have faith in March and Eury and enjoy the auction itself.

For the next five minutes, participants entered the room. When the last seat in the upper sections was full, a curtain was pulled over the entrance. Two rather impressive guards, both of them nobles, went up to both sides of the central podium, where they remained. The light crystals on the walls and ceiling dimmed to the point that only the podium itself remained lit up.

As the talking came to an end, a gorgon emerged in the far end of the room and took her place behind the podium.

Good evening, dear participants, and welcome to the Night Auction, the gorgon announced. My name is Eos and I'll be your master of ceremony for this session. Just to let you know, we have a

number of rather exquisite finds for you tonight, so do now spend all your money on the early items. That said, let us begin.

A circle of light emerged on the floor in front of the podium. Within moments, a large pedestal rose up from it.

Magic? Dallion asked in a whisper.

All masters of ceremony are mages, Falkner whispered back.

Floating slowly through the air, a rather crude-looking dagger made its way onto the pedestal. Looking at it, Dallion could clearly see the shimmering of several hidden domains within it.

We'll start with the Fulcrum Dagger. Found in the ruins near Gelenea in the Aseen province, this item is said to have the greatest number of sealed off domains to date. While not particularly useful as a weapon, it has remained completely explored. Maybe there is nothing left to explore, or maybe clearing it would reveal blueprints lost throughout the ages. Only you would find out, provided you're adventurous enough to gamble on it. The gorgon's snakes stretched out, looking in every direction. Starting price is five thousand.

Five thousand gold coins? Dallion thought. As a hunter and item explorer, he knew there was no way the item was worth that much. Unless there was a skill gem hidden inside, the actual cost was a few dozen golds at most.

We have five thousand, the gorgon said. Do we have five and a half?

The number started rising. Dallion looked about, hoping to find the people bidding on the dagger. However, that proved impossible. The combination of dim lights and his seat location prevented him from seeing any movements such an honor was reserved for the people in the front sections.

The item was sold for close to nine thousand gold coins. No sooner had the bidding ended than a new round began. This time, there was a shield for sale. While seemingly not special, it was said to have belonged to the copyettes during their peak. Bidding started at seven thousand, quickly reaching double the amount.

More and more items were displayed, each more expensive than the last. Time seemed to obtain different properties. By the time the ninth item was up, less than ten minutes had passed, yet Dallion felt he had been there for hours. On one occasion, he was tempted to bid on a rather interesting looking lyre-shield. Thankfully, his better judgment kept him from doing so. It wasn't something that was going to help him against the Star, nor was it what the general requested.

The third demon eye, the gorgon announced. One of a set of five, this gem went missing two decades ago, along with a number of other items, during the Mage Academy's Firestone incident. Recovered a month ago, the item is now available for sale. I cannot comment on the potential properties of the item, but its rarity will definitely make it a conversation starter. Initial bidding price is twelve thousand.

Dallion felt adrenalin being pumped into his veins. This was the item the general wanted to get. Assuming the price doubled, as was the practice up to now, Dallion would be able to get another something for himself as well.

Straightening up, he made a discreet sign with his hand.

We have twelve thousand, the gorgon announced. Do we have thirteen?

Dallion waited. For several seconds, it seemed that no one had interest until someone made the offer.

We have thirteen. Is anyone willing to give me fourteen?

Damn it! Dallion cursed. In his mind, there was no doubt that someone had bid out of boredom. However, now that the action had started, others would join in just for the thrill of it. Trying to maintain his cool, he raised a finger.

Fourteen, the gorgon said. Is anyone willing to offer more?

Dallion braced. If anything was going to happen, it would be now.

Fourteen going once. Fourteen going twice.

Please, please, please stay quiet, Dallion thought.

Sold for thirteen thousand. One of the gorgons snakes stared directly at Dallion and blinked, indicating that he was the winner.

Dallion let out a sigh of relief. At least that was done. Now he didnt have the threat of the general hanging over him anymore.

Why did you buy that? Falkner whispered. Its worthless.

It came from the Academy, Dallion replied, keeping the real reason secret. Its bound to have a few surprises.

Okay. Falkner gave him a mocking smirk. Just a waste of money. Theres nothing you can do with it.

With that, the warm-up portion of the auction has come to an end, the gorgon announced. After a minute, the main event will begin. Just in case, Id like to say that tonight well have two special items for sale. The parties willing to auction them off have insisted that the items be kept secret until the main event is over, so if you really want to obtain them, better bid wisely.

Chatter filled the room. Dallion expected that most of the conversations to be speculations regarding the special items, but instead, everyone seemed to be discussing the prospects of the upcoming war. That made sense. As the empires strongest awakened, they would likely be sent to the front lines if things got serious. On the other hand, there were plenty of lesser awakened willing to take any risk in order to advance further. Dallions grandfather was a prime example of this, though at the time, the war was nothing but an internal matter.

Do you know what the items of the main event will be? Dallion asked.

Some, Falkner replied. Its difficult to get the entire list.

So, theres something specific in mind you wish to buy?

A few things. Depends on how the bidding goes.

Well, let me know, and Ill help you with what I can.

Dal, no offense, but you cant afford whats to come.

Maybe, but I might tip the balance in your favor.

Chapter 535: Phoenix Feather

Well start the main portion of the Night Auction with The gorgon paused, allowing a two-part sword to float in.

Dallions heart skipped a beat. Could that be a world item? If he wasnt wearing the blocking bracelet, he would be in a position to ask. As things stood, though, he had to guess, same as everyone else.

The Wetie Blade, the gorgon finished. The weapon of choice of the first Archduke of the province, the weapon was lost in the wilderness during the Archdukes unfortunate demise. Let me assure everyone that the authenticity of the item has been guaranteed and beyond doubt. Considered exceptionally powerful at the time, the Wetie Blade is officially recognized as a conduit weapon, allowing magic channeling, provided its owner has the magic trait. Bidding starts at twenty-five thousand.

So, thats what the main part of the auction meant. The items were a whole different level. If up to now, the things on auction were novelties and decorations, this had practical appliances. The shape resembled the weapon Dame Vesuvia had when fighting the chainling. From what Dallion could remember, her blade was surrounded by several layers of air, making it capable of slicing through anything without any danger of getting corroded or corrupted.

We have twenty-five thousand. Does anyone want to offer thirty?

Bids increased by five thousand at a time, exceeding Dallions funds in seconds. Falkner wasnt kidding when he said he couldnt afford anything from here on. Watching how things were going, he regretted not buying some of the earlier items. Then again, they wouldnt have offered him much.

The next item, ironically, was a kaleidervisto. The initial price started a lot lower than the blade, but quickly ramped up to forty thousand. No sooner had that been sold than Falkner leaned forward. Anyone could tell that was the item he was looking forward to.

Okay, lets see what you find so important, Dallion thought.

Next, we have something rather exquisite, the gorgon said. The necklace of the Second Empress.

A golden necklace made its way to the pedestal. Unlike all previous items, however, this one didnt float, but fluttered of its own accord.

Dallion blinked. There was no mistake that the item in question wasnt an object, but an actual creature.

One of the only two known flutterblades in existence, Eos announced. It was said to have been found in the wilderness by the second empress herself and in gratitude became her familiar. After the empresses passed away, the flutterblade was passed on to from mother to daughter and so on for generations.

Theyre selling creatures?

Dallion tried to concentrate on the creature, but the cursed bracelet prevented to use his empathy or music skills. If he was in the front rows, there was a chance that he would be able to speak with the creature, or at the very least hear it. At present, though, the distance was too large.

That's what you're going to buy? he whispered to Falkner.

The tradition was unfortunately broken a few months ago, when the familiar's previous owner passed away without having any female heirs, Eos continued. The imperial family, thus, decided to part with the item. Needless to say, that apart from being exceedingly beautiful, the necklace can also serve as a protector and companion to all that have it, as long as they are female. For those unaware, flutterblades have the ability to slice through all common materials, and a few not-so-common ones, as if they were made of silk. And yes, that includes people as well. So, if you obtain it, best be sure you don't mistreat it. Rumor is that the flutterblade will slice the head off anyone she finds unworthy.

As if to prove the point, the creature flapped its wings twice, slicing off a small prism of the pedestal.

And, as you can see, it has a cutting sense of humor and the ability to understand three languages.

Polite laughter followed throughout the room.

Initial bidding starts at fifty thousand.

Immediately, Falkner raised two fingers. The price was beyond anything Dallion could afford. Personally, he didn't think he had the means even to assist.

Sixty thousand, the gorgon said. Seventy. Eighty.

The gorgon sounded like someone counting up to a thousand. For ten seconds, the numbers increased without any indication they would stop. It was only in the three hundreds that people slowed down to the point that the gorgon began asking for offers. Given that all offers were lost, that meant that the auction would pocket a tidy sum.

Three hundred and forty thousand, Eos said. Will anyone do better?

For hundred thousand, Falkner said out loud.

Everyone turned to look in his direction. This was a clear power play indicating that he was willing to continue to the end. It was also a warning to others not to claim his item. Being the son of a noble and not the noble himself, that didn't convert a direct threat. Even so, people were calculating in their mind whether they wanted to risk bad relations with the Arlerla family.

We have four hundred thousand. The gorgon acknowledged the offer. Four hundred thousand going once. Four hundred thousand going twice.

Dallion looked around. There were several women among the participants, even more that would be willing to buy the item to give to one. However, it turned out that none of them were willing to enter a direct confrontation. Either that, or they were saving their money for something better later. With this amount of money spent on the necklace, it was pretty certain that Falkner wouldn't be able to participate in anything further.

Sold to Falkner Arlerla.

The flutterblade waited for a few seconds, then flew off the pedestal, making its way to Falkner. There, the creature hesitated, fluttering in the air, five inches from his face.

He didnt buy me for himself, I hope? the flutterblade asked in a ringing female voice.

The question almost made Dallion jump up from his seat. For one thing, he expected the bracelet to limit his understanding of creatures. But beyond that, he didnt expect it to address him so casually, especially since there was no way it could know that he had the skill to understand it.

No, Dallion whispered, just as a test.

Falkner gave him a weird look.

Good. The flutterblade flew on, landing on Falkners shoulder. Instinctively, the young noble reached to take the necklace off, but Dallion was quick to grab his hand.

Dont, he whispered. Leave Gloria to do that.

A few tense moments followed. Falkner still wasnt sure what was going on, however, knowing of Dallions reputation with creatures, he decided to go along with the suggestion. His hand relaxed. Then as Dallion let him go he moved it away from the flutterblade.

Meanwhile, the next item was already on display. Missing the introduction, Dallion only made out that it was an epaulet of some renowned Imperial General from the past. The item theme so far seemed to revolve around items of historical significance that were also powerful in their own right. Some, of course, were far more impressive than others. The epaulet had to be the latter, since it was sold for half a million gold coins. The following two items did even better, each going for over six hundred thousand. It was at that point that Dallion noticed that less and less people were taking part in the bidding.

Finally, we have the final open item of the auction, the gorgon announced. A large tome floated to the now chipped pedestal. The second volume of the Gregorius Chronicles. They are said to include a large collection of the arch-mages early works, including his philosophical musings on the perfect society. While a rather valuable collectible item, only those with a magic trait will be able to read its contents. Bidding starts at ten thousand gold.

Ten thousand? That was rather low. Possibly it was due to the fact that for the majority of people, the tome would be nothing more than a rather large and extremely expensive blank diary.

We have ten thousand. Twenty-thousand. Thirty thousand.

The price jumped up again. Even useless magic books remained magic books. When the price reached six figures, the bidding finally stopped.

This concludes the open part of the Night Auction, Eos said. In one minute, we'll proceed to the special items. Once again, the current owners of the items have requested that the items be kept secret until the start of bidding. As such, the prices might vary.

Maybe Ill have a chance, Dallion thought. The amount he had was pitiful in comparison to everyone else, but if the item was linked to a prerequisite than no one else had the empathy trait, for example there still was a chance that he might be able to buy it.

The light crystals got even dimmer to the point that the only thing visible was the pedestal and the gorgon on the podium behind it. A large bird-cage covered in sun gold cloth.

Finally, we begin the highlight of the auction, the gorgon said. The first item isnt something that youre likely to buy for yourself, but it would make for more than a perfect gift, especially to a close friend or family member.

The cage cover was pulled off. There was a cage pretty much as Dallion expected. Secured in it was nothing less than a single blue gema skill gem. The sight was enough to cause a few nobles to gasp in surprise.

You are not mistaken. What is offered is nothing less than a wild skill gem with the ability to grant scholar skills to anyone with a desire to obtain them. As all wild skill gems, this one is hereditary, ensuring that an entire family line would take advantage of its benefits. Some might even say that its a good investment, even if you dont have anyone in mind to give it to. After all, who is to say what will happen in five years? Or even ten?

The whispers increased.

Starting bid is five hundred thousand.

I thought it was forbidden to sell skill gems, Dallion whispered.

The Imperial Family is allowed to, Falkner said. As is the Academy.

That made even less sense. Neither of the two were in need of money. They had more than enough, not to mention they could make gold themselves.

The price quickly jumped, moving past a million. No one hid their desire to obtain the item. There was no telling when another would appear, so no one wanted to lose that chance. The price kept on rising to two million, then three. One by one, bidders dropped off in groups. Finally, only one remained.

Sold for three million and two hundred thousand.

The number was so high that Dallion didnt even find it real. He honestly had no idea what he could buy with such an amount. It was no longer a matter of money, but a display of power.

And now, with that done, we come to our conclusion and the crowning event of the auction. A single marble box floated in, no larger than the one Dallion was given for his chips. I present you the box opened, revealing a single knife-like item made entirely of purple light a phoenix feather.

Thats not supposed to exist, Dallion gasped.

At least, that was what Nil had told him. According to the echo, there was no such thing as phoenixes in this world. Not only that, but Dallion hadnt found any reference of similar creatures in any scroll or tome he had read, even the bestiary hed received. And yet, something claimed to be a feather of such a creature was glowing before his very eyes.

Found in the northern wilderness by a group of hunters and brought here in secret. It is the only known item to guarantee awakening. Sent down to the world every few centuries by the Purple Moon himself, such feathers are jealously guarded by the Order of the Seven Moons. The one and only time it was used was at the death of the fourth emperor, when his one and only hair was about to ascend the throne, unawakened.

Dallion let out a mental sigh of relief. So, the old echo hadn't lied to him after all. The weather, it turned out, was sent by a deity. The name, though, was most peculiar.

Have you seen one of these before? Dallion whispered, unable to take his eyes off the feather. The allure was so great that, for a moment, he considered whether he could obtain it through force. Not that he needed it; he was already awakened. However, he just had a burning desire to own it for the sake of owning it.

You're joking, right? Falkner said, no less mesmerized. You don't get to see something like that in a single life-time. This is incredibly fortunate. And to think that the special items weren't even originally announced. Someone must have included them in the last few hours.

The coincidence was so remarkable that Dallion had no doubt that it wasn't random. Two once-in-a-lifetime sales taking place on the very same day he got to take part in the Night Auction defined any odds. Someone had deliberately put them for him to see. The question was why.

Chapter 536: Mission Start

I'd like all this in cubes. Dallion placed the container with what was left of the chips on the sky silver platter.

Naturally, the crimson fury replied, barely looking at him. I hope you enjoyed the experience.

Dallion didn't reply. Instead, he took off his bracelet and placed it on the side of the tray. Beside him, the golden flutterblade flicked its wings, moving from Falkner's shoulder onto the hilt of Dallion's whip blade.

Now that you've seen the items offered at the Night Auction, should you find anything of the same caliber, you're more than welcome to have it sold here, the fury continued while using air strands to move away the tray. The commission is thirty percent, but you can get a far better price than selling it to a client directly. Just something to consider.

The offer was tempting. Maybe one day Dallion was going to take advantage. From the moment he just stood, patiently waiting for his aether cubes.

Nil, I thought you told me there was no such thing as a phoenix in this world, Dallion said.

Did I? The echo feigned ignorance. Maybe I misunderstood you. Or maybe you have. I see you got the general's gift, as well as the empress's necklace. I didn't think I'd see it change owners. The family that held it is rather protective of their possessions, even when they can't use them.

Here you are. The crimson fury pulled the pouch through the corridor, then calmly emptied its contents into the air itself. If you'd like to, count it.

I trust you, Dallion lied. He didn't trust any noble, let alone someone here.

In that case, our business is concluded. The fury returned the cubes to the pouch, then left it hanging there for Dallion to claim. Enjoy the rest of the night, and I hope to see you again.

On cue, the flutterblade moved away from Dallion, though didnt return to Falkners shoulder. The noble was wise enough not to inquire.

Shardflies, the golden creature said in disgust. At least you have the decency to have a spectral one.

She needed help, Dallion said firmly.

Many need help. Few deserve it, the flutterblade snapped back. And still, you look so much like her. Better stay out of trouble.

What? Dallion asked, but the flutterblade had already returned to Falkners shoulder, where it had frozen up. Looking at now, one might say that the noble was carrying a necklace on his shoulder. That wasnt an illusion, but near perfect mimicry, as well as an indication that it had done talking.

With this were done? Falkner asked.

Yes. I owe you one.

No, you dont.

Are you sure? Dallion glanced at him. Nobles usually saved all favors owed until they really needed to use them.

My father says theres a chance you become a noble, Falkner replied. Should that happen, it would be good to remember who your friends were.

Clever, Nil outright laughed. He cant be seen talking to you, so hes using his son as a proxy. Not the best deal, though you could do a lot worse.

You want me to say Ill keep it in mind?

You dont have to. Thats why it isnt a debt or a favor. No matter what you do, they helped you on their own accord in their time of need. Dont show equal courtesy when you are a noble, and youll be viewed as someone who cant be trusted.

And if I dont become a noble?

Then you wont have anything to offer.

Dallion considered the answers. He really hated the games of nobles. They were similar to the logical puzzles that always ended up having the most illogical solution.

A servant was waiting for Dallion the moment he and Falkner emerged from the auction area of the palace. Without introduction or delay, he let it be known that the rest of Dallions group had left, and he would be escorted to join them. As much as Dallion wanted to see Glorias reaction to the flutterblade, and vice versa, he knew fully well the intent behind the servants messagehe was being

kicked out. The nobles had had their fun and conveyed the necessary instructions to March. At this point, there's no longer any point in Dallion remaining.

Taking his goodby with Falkner, Dallion then followed the servant to the main entrance of the palace where Dame Vesuvian was waiting. She, too, wasn't having a terribly good time, though she managed to hide it better.

You took a while, she said, as they were walking towards the descender leading to the lower platforms.

Im fine, Dallion replied to the unspoken question. Ran across someone I hadn't seen in a while.

I heard what you did to Itella. You outright humiliated him. Seems you've grown a lot more since the arena battle that people expected.

That's kind of you.

Those aren't my words. The odds of you winning were three to seven. I heard that you managed to win three times in a row before the fight was over.

That was highly exaggerated, but Dallion didn't argue. For once, it felt nice listening to his praise. By tomorrow, the whole thing was likely going to be forgotten, but until then he was the Hero of Nerosal, who had defeated the Archduke's son three times in the same duel.

You'll be heading out of the city tomorrow morning at daybreak, the dame changed the topic without warning. I was just told an hour ago. Everything's arranged. I'll escort you and the rest to the west gate and forbidden entry until the Archduke himself says otherwise.

All to be expected. So, their mission was going to start exactly as the mysterious noble lady had said it would. Hopefully, the information March was provided was going to be of some actual use.

It'll be fine. Im not the confused boy I was back when you first saw me.

That's right. You're a lot cockier now. And cocky people tend to die faster.

Im not alone this time. We'll be fine. All part of being a mercenary.

Do you know why mercenaries are hired for difficult jobs? Dame Vesuvia asks. No one mourns the loss of a mercenary, even other mercenaries.

The conversation gradually tones down, until both were left with their thoughts. Dallion had only spent a day in the provincial capital, but it already had felt like a lifetime. And as the saying went, sooner or later, all things came to an end. Everything that could have been done in Linatol had been done. Now it was time for the real work to begin.

As much as Dallion was anxious about what might happen, he was also pleased. Finally, he was returning to his element, where the rules were clear.

By the time Dallion returned to his room in the inn, Euryale had already gone to sleep. Making as little noise as possible, he got out of the ridiculous banquet clothes he was wearing and slid in the bed next to her. If the actions caused the gorgon to wake up, she didn't show it. The only creature who stirred was Ruby, fluttering from the corner to the room to just above Dallion's face.

Go to sleep, Ruby, Dallion said. We'll be heading out in the morning.

The shardfly flew along a pattern eight a few times, then went back to its previous spot.

Crazy kid, Dallion smiled, then closed his eyes.

The next he opened them, Euryale was already getting up.

Hey, Dallion said with a yawn and a stretch. How are things?

Nice to see you still alive. The gorgon smiles as she put on her new armor. Fine. And on your end?

Could have gone better. I got what I needed at the auction. Not sure if itll help us out. What about your meeting?

We were given a few details and a warning. Mostly a warning not to mess with the sword. They were very clear that we werent to enter the realm unless as a last resort. Not sure what exactly that meant. Basically, we listen to whatever March says.

Okay. That wasnt much help. An idea where were going?

Some village half a day away in the wilderness. Never heard it before, neither had March. We start there. The gorgons snakes stirred. The noble in charge of us is the Archdukes sister. March left an echo of hers, so that the people here know whats going. She also took one along. There was a slight pause. The Icepicker guild master was also at the meeting. Hes the guarantor that everything will go as planned.

Wasnt that to be expected? Dallion downplayed the significance of what had just been said.

He wasnt supposed to be here. Not at the banquet, in any event.

If theres anything you can add, Nil, now would be the time, Dallion said.

You give me too much credit, dear boy. I dont know everything going on. If theres anything relevant, Ill be sure to let you know.

Only when it suits you, though.

By the crack of dawn, all three members of the group had gathered in the main hall of the inn. Quietly, they had their last breakfast, did a final check of their luggage and provisions and left for the final time.

Their faithful shadow Dame Vesuviawas outside, waiting. A few greetings were exchanged, after which it was off to the west gate of the city.

No attachments, Dalliont told himself. That was one of the key rules of a hunter before heading out on a mission. More often than not, he had followed the principle. Not this time, though. His mind kept wandering, thinking of the people hed met on the last day: old acquaintances, new people who wanted to help and others not so much. Back on Earth, it was said that a persons life flashed before their eyes during traumatic and life-threatening events. For Dallion, that was taking place now. It wasnt as extreme as described in literature and movies, just a series of flashbacks starting from the day he woke up in Dherma and

continuing to the banquet itself. Over a millennium had passed between those two points and yet Dallion felt it wasn't long at all.

I should have earned more achievements in the realms, he said all of a sudden.

Everyone looked at him.

Might have been easier, then.

You'll have your chance, Eury said, placing her hand on his shoulder. However, even she didn't dare say that he'd have all the time in the world once they finished the mission.

There were times in a hunter's life when they were aware that there was a greater chance than not that some of their party might not be coming back. This was one of those times. From here on out, nothing was known.

Do you think I should have done more, Nil? Dallion asked. Maybe try another level up?

Have you learned anything new since last time? the old echo answered with a question.

Dallion didn't respond.

At this stage, a point or two won't make a substantial difference. You have the trinket from the general. Keep that handy, have your mind clear, and focus on the moment.

What about you, Harp? Any words of advice?

I won't let you get hurt, the harpsisword responded. The certainty of her words made Dallion relax a bit. He had her, at least. No, he had everyone in his realm. Whatever he might face in the real world or not, they were there to support him.

The gate approached slowly. It was more an arch than a gate, marking the spot in which a road entered the city. With each step, Dallion felt his heart beat louder. By the time they reached the end of the city, it sounded like a drum, deafening any other noise around. Even the conversations had become nothing but blurred sounds in the distance. He could no longer tell what anyone was saying, reacting based on their expressions and the emotions emanating from them.

The moment Dallion took one step beyond the arch, the thumping disappeared. His heart had grown completely calm.

Chapter 537: Cutling Remains

Four Moons remained in the sky as the sun came up. Even in the bright light, none lost their glow, observing the world like hawks on a mountain peak. Interestingly enough, it was the Moons of Awakening and Perception that weren't present. There was a time when this would be seen as a bad omen, especially for hunters. Even after all this time, however, Dallion hadn't quite accepted the local superstitions, possibly because he still held to the ones from Earth. Either way, he felt a dull ache in his stomach, as if he'd eaten shardflies for breakfast.

There's every chance the person carrying the sword will be expecting us, March said, as if last night hadn't occurred. If anyone spots something remotely strange, we attack. Understood, Dal?

Dallion didnt respond right away.

Dal? March repeated.

Got it, he said, snapping to reality. Got it.

Were you trying to level up?

No. It was the truth. Considering how often hed resorted to such action before an important battle, it was unsure whether March would believe him. I was just thinking about something. Do you think hell be alone?

Impossible to say. All we know is the location of the sword. The mage was very clear about it.

That sounded suspiciously convenient. The mage claimed she could see the location of the sword, yet couldnt tell how many people were there? Either magic was a lot less straightforward than logic suggested, or the mage was lying. Given that Nil refused to provide a straight answer, it could well be either.

Eury will keep an eye out for trouble. You focus on sensing emotions. Ill be ready to react.

They passed by another imperial watch tower. The imperial soldiers performed a quick check before letting the group continue on their way. From there on, it was just walking through the wilderness with brief breaks for water.

Soon it became obvious that whoever had said that the village was half a day away had lied. Evening slowly approached, and there still wasnt any trace of any settlement. One thing that became immediately noticeable, though, was the changes in vegetation. The further the group went, the more patches of distorted plants they came across. It was agreed that none would eat or drink anything until the mission was over, one way or another.

Around sunset, Euryale spotted the first sign of concern: the remains of a large corpse in the middle of a meadow of wild wheat that was so deformed it looked as if it had gone through a microwave.

Its a cutling, the gorgon said as they approached it. Its been dead for a few months, at least.

Dallion looked around. There was no sign of the grass being harmed. And yet that was impossible. Unless it specifically wanted to conceal itself, a cutling would slice every blade of grass on contact.

Maybe the plants surrounded it after it had died? Dallion suggested. The plants are all around it.

See if you can cut them, Eury said.

Ruby, Dallion said to the shardfly fluttering next to him. Just wind. Dont touch them directly.

The creature went a short distance away, then flapped its wings violently several times. Slashes were released from the tips of its wings, slicing through the plant stalks like a blade through twigs.

Guess that proves it, the gorgon said. Body was first, plants came after.

It doesnt explain what killed it. March drew her rapier. A cutling this size isnt an easy target.

Its not that tough either. Even I can handle one of those now. Dallion concentrated, focusing on the remains. I cant sense any residual emotions. It could have gotten poisoned. Cutlings are also awakened creatures of sorts. Maybe it had ingested a few spores somehow. They killed it, then went on to grow in the surrounding area until this was formed.

Is there anything you know that grows in void?

The answer was supposed to be obvious a resounding no, proving that Dallion was mistaken. However, after all his experiences so far, the apprentice hunter was no longer sure. He had witnessed items guardians be corrupted, changing into large octopus-like creatures. He had seen furniture created entirely of semi-sentient void. Why shouldn't plants be able to grow in it as well? If that were the case, all their conclusions so far had been completely wrong.

Nox.

Dallion took out the crackling dagger. *Do you feel any of them?*

Difficult to say, the puma yawned within his realm. There might be something faint.

What about now? Dallion took a step forward, approaching the knife to the ground.

Doesn't help. There's a faint sense everywhere.

Dal, what's the matter? Eury asked.

Slowly, Dallion stood up, then looked around again.

The plants aren't growing despite the cutting, they are growing because of it. They are spreading it. They are the cracks infesting the world.

The thought seemed too large to contemplate. Even now, Dallion's mind rejected it. That was outright impossible. Having plants become affected by the void that leaked through was normal. That wasn't the issue. Having the entire world not notice that was terrifying. Certainly, someone somewhere would have found out about this and spread the news. The Order, the Academy, even someone in the service of the archduke himself should have noticed. Since none of them had, no one considered the possibility valid.

The circle of denial reinforcement, Dallion thought.

That's one of the first things that was checked, March said, calmly.

It would explain why awakened are mostly affected, especially nobles. They are no longer under the Moon's protection.

Corruption wouldn't poison them.

No, it wouldn't. Not unless that was what the Star wanted. Dallion was just about to share his thoughts, when a red rectangle appeared in the real world itself.

COMBAT INITIATED

Watch out! Dallion shouted. He had no idea whether anyone else had seen the rectangle, and at this point, he didn't care. His only concern was to avoid the vertical line attack that flew by, determined to slice him in half.

Eury instantly jumped into action, snakes looking in all directions. Only March remained as she was, completely unphased by the attack.

Where did it come from? Dallion asked. Ruby, stay close. Gleam, look about.

I cant see anyone, the gorgon replied. It just appeared out of nowhere.

Dallion swallowed. If it wasnt for the rectangle, he would have lost a limb at the very least.

Move apart, March ordered. Whatever is attacking is us using ranged attacks. As long as we were clustered together, we were easy targets.

I know that! Im not a newbie anymore! Dallion wanted to shout back.

Barely had he made three steps, when another line attack followed, this one horizontal. All three party members jumped into the air. Instinctively, Dallion burst into instances. It was a good thing too, for two more line attacks followed. Both were aimed to take advantage of the fact that the people were in the air, and thus unable to evade the threat of destruction. However, that was a mistake only a sheltered would make. Thanks to his combat splitting, Dallion easily chose a reality in which the attacks missed him; Euryale simply twisted mid jump gracefully passing between the two line attacks; as for March she did was block both attacks with her rapier. The threads of the line attacks broke in two each continuing on either side of the woman.

Hes using illusions, Gleam shouted. The execution is sloppy, but hes fast enough to constantly replace them, so I cant tell where he is exactly.

Illusions! Dallion shouted. Hes somewhere

The force of a point attack ploughed through the field coming from March. The Icepicker captain wasted no time in doing a counterattack against the invisible enemy. Unfortunately, there was no indication that she had hit the target.

The attacks are coming from a single person, she said. There still might be more, so watch out.

Is anyone out there? Dallion asked, addressing any items in the area.

An empath? a surprised guardian responded.

Got you! Dallion thought.

He still didnt know exactly where the enemy was, but he knew that he was there.

Didnt know there were more than one.

The comment, however, sent chills down Dallions spine. A second empath? So, someone had managed to claim another skill gem after all. The bigger question was who that person was. It didnt feel like the Starthe Star wouldnt need to hide. But then, who was it?

Who are you? Dallion asked. Whos your owner?

Flames emerged on the ground. Starting from the cutling corpse, they twisted and winded through the plants, forming strange runes and symbols. There was something mesmerizing about them, almost as if

A line attack cut through the grass, extinguishing the symbols as it did.

Close your eyes! Eury shouted.

Dallion burst into instances again. In some of them, he closed his eyes. In all of them, he grabbed the kaleidervisto. Black symbols appeared in the sky, draining all colors from the immediate area.

What the heck?

Dallion wondered and instructively did a point attack through the symbols. The blast of force passed through, though nothing changed.

Guardian, whats going on? Dallion asked.

There was no response.

Guardian!

Everyone stood ready for the next surprise attack, but none occurred. To be on the same side, Dallion kept on making dozens of instances, having them dash in all directions constantly, in a final attempt to locate the culprit. The effort proved unsuccessful.

Several minutes later, colors slowly returned to the scene.

Stay where you are, March said, remaining about fifty feet from both Eury and Dallion. They might return.

I didnt see anything, Eury said, her face-eyes closed once more. What do you think it was?

It was human, Dallion replied. It had a guardian. There was a moment of hesitation. Sharing that the person was another empath was quite important in order for the rest to know what they were facing. At the same time, he still had to keep the secret. In the end, Dallion decided to risk it. It was also an empath.

An empath? a cluster of snakes turned Dallions direction. Are you sure?

Im sure.

The ground had become a battlefield, utterly destroyed by fire, line and point attacks. The cutling remains were all but gone, as was half of the poison plant patch.

I fear I have a bit of bad news, dear boy, Nil said.

Its a mage, March said before the echo could tell Dallion. Apparently, even in such circumstances, the woman was faster. A rogue, by the looks of it. We were lucky that he ran off.

Whats a mage doing here? Do you think someone else sent him after the sword?

Its possible. Nobles make it their business to learn secrets that others keep hidden. Gaining the sword would definitely grant a lot of power to a family or even a single individual.

The whip blade descended from the sky, making its way into Dallions sheath.

At least that means were on the right track, Dallion tried to find a silver lining in the situation.

Possibly. March didnt sound certain. Well have to be more careful going forward. He attacked us directly. Hell do so again.

Ive just one thing to add, dear boy. March might be correct about the danger, but shes wrong about your adversary. The thing you thought wasnt a mage. It was an echo of one.

Echo in the real world? Dallion asked. Wasnt that impossible?

Youve seen the Moons do it.

Youre telling me that Im facing someone as strong as the Moons?

Of course not, Nil grumbled, as if being mocked. Im just saying that its possible. And if its possible, magic has a way to achieve it. More likely than not, what you encountered is a scout echo. It did what its original would have done, with the limited amount of skills it had, then ran off to warn the person. Now the real mage will be prepared, and trust me, the next fight wont be limited to simple parlor tricks.

Chapter 538: The Rogue

The destruction of the mages echo caused a few additional changes. As it soon turned out, the goal of mage might not have been to scout or attack mercenaries sent to capture him, but to hide things altogether.

Soon enough, the village that they had been searching for appeared in the distance in the direction they had come from. That was the greatest issue of illusions in this worldthey werent merely tricks of the light. With enough power and skill, they changed reality itself. The only difference was that when the source of the illusion had done, things reverted back to normal.

Eury was the one to spot it, letting the rest of the group know the instant she did.

At that point a decision had to be made: go back and check out the village, or continue on following the escaped echo. In the end March decided to go back. If an illusion had been cast over the entire village, there had to be a good reason for it.

You didnt sense anything, Gleam? Dallion asked as they approached the walls of the village.

We didnt walk through it, the shardfly replied.

I know, but you usually are pretty good at catching these things.

Well, today wasnt my day. Maybe if you get me to level up some more, Ill do better.

Dallion ignored her. Having a mage that was capable of that was more than a bit concerning. Actually, having to face any sort of mage was concerning. The interesting thing was that the more Dallion leveled up and got an understanding of the world, the more he feared them. Back when he was level twenty, he didnt view mages as a particularly big deal. Now, even with Eury and March with him, he felt as unprepared, as if facing a force of nature.

Anyone you know who could do this sort of thing, Nil? Dallion asked.

A number of mages, actually, the echo replied. The scope of the illusion is somewhat impressive, but not as much as you might think.

So, in short, it could be anyone.

Theres always the chance that its the work of someone undiscovered. Its rare, but it happens every few decades or so. Usually, the Order takes care of them.

The notion was ominous as it was efficient. It was normal for the Order of the Seven Moons to make sure there wasnt anything causing too much disruptions in the world. Usually that meant wilderness beasts roaming about, but there were other things as well. It was natural for unhinged mages to fall into that category, although given the proximity of a citadel, Dallion was unsure why they hadnt done anything about the mage earlier.

A few dozen feet from the village walls, Eury stopped, raising her hand.

I cant hear anything, she said.

Dallion concentrated on his senses. Try as he might he couldnt hear any signs of activity nearby. Not only were there no human voices, but no animal noises either. It was as if the entire settlement was shrouded in a cone of silence.

Dal, check it out, March ordered.

Instantly, Dallion split into fifty instances, the vast majority of which rushed towards the wall. With the level of his mind trait, he was easily able to leap inside. He expected for some of his instances to fall into a trap, or to come across the remains of a massacre. Instead, he found absolutely nothing. It was as if every single living creature within the village walls had vanished.

For several minutes, Dallion kept sending instances to check out as much of the village as possible. At one point, he simply stopped. There was nothing more he could learn.

Its empty, he said. There might be something in the central houses. I can check them out, if you want. Dallion turned to March.

No. We go in together. The woman drew her rapier.

Is that a good move? Eury asked.

Probably not. But if theres anything hidden, thats the only way to draw it out.

Acting as live bait, Dallion thought. It wouldnt be the first time, although he didnt expect all of them would have to do it. Constantly keeping twenty instances in existence, he slowly moved forward.

The village gate was closed and barred shut. After checking that it was safe to open with a few instances, Dallion proceeded to do so. There was a total of about thirty buildings, grouped together in one cluster. Everything on the outside were common houses with the massive structure in the middle potentially belonging to the village chief. There seemed to be a single tavern, two forges, a windmill, and a granary, all of which were completely empty. The group went through all of them one by one, then moved to the less important houses. In ten minutes, every structure had been thoroughly checked, and still there wasnt a single clue as to what had happened.

More ominously, there didnt seem to be a single guardian present, either. Dallion expected a city to have large parts of his structures without guardians, but not a simple village. What was more, there was no reason for items to be silent as well. Checking a few items, he quickly found that the realm was still functioning, often not even damaged; the only thing lacking were guardians.

Gleam, can you feel anything? Dallion asked.

Everything is real, if thats what you mean.

This place shouldnt exist, Dallion said out loud. Nothing he knew could eliminate guardians without destroying the item itself. At the same time, wasnt that what artefacts were? They too only had guardians up to the point that the items destiny was fulfilled.

Magic can do that, Nil explained.

Somehow get rid of all guardians? Now?

Maybe one day youll find out. Until then youll have to trust me.

What else can I expect?

I cant say, dear boy. There are still things youre not meant to know until you know them.

It had been a while since Dallion had gotten that excuse and he still didnt like it.

Dal, what did you find? March asked.

Someone had removed all the guardians. Have you heard anything of the sort happen?

Once. A long time ago. Regret and fear emanated from her. It only lasted a moment, but enough for Dallion to catch the emotion. Back when I was a guard at the Mage Academy.

Before she could add anything more one of the nearby buildings crumbled to piecesnot chunks, but perfectly sliced cubes. It was almost as if the whole structure wasnt real, but some voxel created three-dimensional model.

Three of Dallions instances were killed straight off. Two more structures nearby broke down soon after.

Gleam, find whos doing this! Dallion ordered.

The whip blade darted into the air, expanding to its limit.

Meanwhile, Eury also leapt onto one of the the remaining buildings, only to have it start breaking up the moment her foot made contact. Fortunately, her reaction trait allowed her to jump off onto the next before it came crashing down.

Whats going on? Dallion kept splitting non-stop, his instances barely able to keep up with the collapsing village.

Found him! Gleam said.

The whip blade swung around, gathering inertia and struck the air ten feet away. There it stopped, as if slamming into an invisible barrier. The difference was that a crack had formed within the air itselfa crack revealing a fragment of black cloth behind it.

Gleam swung again, attempting to hit the mysterious target from the other side, but before she could manage a wave of force threw her back onto the ground.

Gleam! Dallion shouted.

A split second later, March suddenly vanished, then reappeared in the air right in front of the crack. Dallion was able to see her perform a single attack; and yet that proved to be enough to peel away the illusion that was shielding their attacker. Fragments of reality fell down like leaves, revealing a person wearing a set of black clouds embroidered with black. Dallion's forging skill told him that wasn't just gold, it was sun gold.

Pulled back down by gravity, March landed on solid ground. Her opponent, though, remained in the air. Now that he was in plain view, Dallion could clearly see the shimmering around him; the person was an otherworlder as well.

They sent you, after all, the man in black said.

Twesi. There was a coldness in March's voice that Dallion hadn't heard before. I thought you had been rogued.

Rogued, erased, and made to serve some idiot Archduke in the hellhole of the south. I'm glad that you remember, though. Didn't think you'd try.

While they were talking, Eury dashed along one of the few standing buildings then jumped through the air right at the person. Half a foot from him, the gorgon performed a series of attacks; dozens as far as Dallion could see. Yet each strike and kick stopped inches from hitting its target, as if there was an invisible barrier of air that prevented any damage to pass through.

Seeing that her attacks were useless, Eury spun around and used the mage's protective barrier to propel herself away from him.

Interesting method. Useless, though. Match should tell you that such things don't work on me.

You know him? Dallion asked.

I used to, she said. He's known as rogue mage Twesi. We both worked at the Academy. I'm surprised that anyone decided to hire him for whatever reason.

Correction, I only worked at the Academy, the man said. You were just an outside guard, paid to walk around in your ever so polished armor. It's ironic that the thing you loved the most is now your prison. Did she tell you that she was the one responsible for the near destruction of the Academy? That's why she was sent to this shitpit. But because of her family she got off easily missing only her name. I got half my spells restricted.

You were responsible for the incident.

I was the one inside! That didn't make me responsible. Not that anyone cared. The mage floated lower. In effect I should thank you. If you hadn't started the turn of events, I never would have achieved what I did.

And what did you achieve exactly?

What do you think? When the Academy cast me out, what did they think would happen? That I'd take it lying down? Well, you were wrong, all of you. I joined the other side, and now I'm free to set the rules, not just to follow them.

The mage pulled off the black scarf round his neck, revealing a necklace with a rather large green gem. It didn't take Dallion long to realize its exact nature; the gem was a skill gem, related to the empathy trait.

You created the plague? Dallion asked, shocked by the prospect.

The Star told me you were bright. The mage smirked. Even asked me to make you a final offer to join us.

You're a fool. March didn't seem one bit impressed. Always were, always will be. All you do is run from master to master, fighting for the scraps. I didn't think that even you'd be so dumb to serve the Crippled.

March. The mage shook his head. Obedient little soldier. Always so focused on what others were saying that never got time to think for herself. You think I serve the Star? We're partners, equals. In some areas I'm ever far better. Why do you think he gave me this? The man tapped the gem. Because of my looks? Back on Earth I was a bloody biochemist! The Star is just someone with a bit more years in this world. Even without him I'd have created the plague.

The village around Dallion continued to collapse. Giving Eury a side glance, he made a sign to be ready for a combined attack. No doubt the mage was using some sort of protective spell, but even that wouldn't be able to stop all the force directed at him.

Did our favorite Archduke even tell you why he's been so obsessed on finding the sword?

Three, Dallion made a sign.

The sword you're so eager to find is a plague sword. Originally it was meant to kill plants, livestock, and people with a simple slash.

Two.

He sent me after the sword as well, the mage continued. In my case he just wanted to get rid of me, meet an accident, let's say.

But you did. March noted.

One

I did, and then everything within the sword became mine, including the means to make a far better plague, focusing mostly on the people who were supposed to be immune: the awakened.

Now!

Dallion split into instances and leapt up at the mage. Eury follows a split second later. Both combined their attacks, aiming for their opponents chest. The barrier emerged again, but didn't stop them, shattering before their combined strength.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

Everything around them changed

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape smash the window

The green rectangle kept on glowing, yet no matter how hard Dallion tried, he couldn't break it. After a few more times, he gave up and took a step back. The rectangle vanished, reporting the flow of time to normal.

Nothing, he said. Can't leave this way either.

Euryale removed her combat gauntlets. It was an understatement to say that things hadn't gone well. Attacking the rogue mage not only had ended in failure, but had also gotten them effectively imprisoned in an awakened realm without the possibility of escape. In the real-world Dallion and Eury were probably inches away from their target. However, it would be quite long before they could continue the attack, if they were unlucky. Based on what Nil had said, people started going crazy after the first century.

Maybe we need to fight a local guardian, Dallion suggested.

As far as he could tell, they were in the realm of the aura sword. The landscape was somewhat similar, even if a lot more picturesque than any of the two swords he'd seen before. Deep blue skies, with the occasional puffy white cloud, continued as far as the eye could see, along with lush plains, dense forests, pristine lakes, and majestic snow-covered mountains. The only major difference was that there didn't seem to be a temple anywhere near, but rather a single stone circle.

I doubt it. Anyone in your realm have any advice?

Nils uncertain. Vihrogons keeping quiet, and everyone else doesn't have a clue. Dallion sighed. How well do you think March knew him?

Fairly well, by the looks of it. They must have been involved in quite the mess up, have fallen from grace and have their names erased.

Isn't that normal? Half the awakened in Nerosal are nameless.

It's different. For an imperial lieutenant and a mage to go through this, it has to have been pretty serious. Not anyone makes it to such positions. Skills and abilities are not enough. They've had to have had serious connections. The imperial legion isn't a place you can just apply for. Even heroes of Linatol couldn't have been rejected.

Sounds like you speak from experience.

I do. Someone I knew applied to become a common legionary. I've seen him defeat monsters I couldn't handle even now, and still he was rejected. The emperor wants skill, but above all, he wants loyalty. Those who are strong but not loyal are dangerous. Eury walked next to Dallion. As for a mage to be cast out, the mess up must have been of epic proportions. Mages are considered nobility since birth. The trait is so rare that the Academy welcomes anyone in their ranks, even from countries at war with the empire. I don't even know what must have happened to get him cast out as well.

That was very much true. Dallion had seen firsthand how the bodyguard of a member of the imperial family failed at his job and didn't suffer any consequences. In fact, he knew only of one other mage who had been banished, one who made a big deal about keeping his abilities secret.

Adzorg also was cast out of the Academy, Dallion said. Maybe he can tell us more?

You're joking, right? When has Adzorg spoken about his past? Also, March joined the guild a lot later.

Where was she before she joined, though?

Can the Vermillion ring get me out of here? Dallion asked.

Not normally, no. You'll have to find an appropriate spot which lets you do it. Very much like what the Star did when he tried to destroy Nerosol. A temple would do.

Should be simple, then.

Deep down Dallion didn't believe that one bit. The rogue mage had used this to trap in this world, while there was so many other things he could have tried. That suggested that he had made sure to cover his bases. Chances were he didn't know about the Vermillion ring, but even so, getting out hardly was going to be a walk in the park.

Think I can link my realm to this? Dallion asked.

I doubt it. The same principle applies. You can try, if you want.

Dallion went back into the stone circle and put on the ring. Nothing happened. He could tell that the island serpent was trying to establish a connection between the two realms, but could quite manage, as if there was an indestructible membrane preventing it. After a while, it stopped trying, leaving the two realms separate. When that didn't work, he attempted to initiate an invasion. That, too, failed.

Linking out also doesn't work here, Dallion said, rejoining Eury. They were going to find a proper temple.

Climbing down from the hill to the plains was easy. Dallion could sense a number of animals—mostly small critters, keeping to themselves. The moment they sensed the approaching visitors, they quickly ran off or hid. By the way they reacted, predators in the world were present, though not overly abundant.

Do you think he was lying? Dallion asked. When he said that, the plague had come from here.

I don't think so. You can't tell with mages, but there was too much glee in his voice not to be true.

Where is it then? This place is better than any realm I've been to. I can't see a single crackling or any other nasty. It's like paradise.

There aren't any cities, either, Eury noted. Maybe it takes time, and the rogue had changed it to become faster?

The thought wasn't at all pleasant, making Dallion wonder what would happen to them. In theory, they weren't supposed to die in the realm, merely have their powers sealed. When it came to mages

and artifacts, though, anything was possible. The only solution was to get out of here as fast as possible and not find out.

Lux, Dallion said as they walked. Normally, the firebird would have emerged by now, wrapping him in blue flames and lifting him into the air. That didnt happen. Lux?

Sorry, boss, I cant get to you.

Dallion attempted to summon a weapon. His hand remained empty. The only weapons on him were his harpsisword and, fortunately enough, the thread splitterboth of which had been in contact with his skin before his forceful entry into the realm.

I should have taken the dartbow, Dallion said to himself.

Can you summon any weapons? he asked.

No, and I cant unsummon them either. Were stuck with what we have.

Good thing you got that armor, then. It was meant to be a lighthearted hoke, but didnt end up feeling like one. I guess Ill have to be careful not to get petrified, he added after a while. There wont be any curing that here.

No cure and no healing. The gorgon nodded.

Combat splitting was an option, but that too had to be used with care. Stamina was also a limited resource, and there was no telling what the local food was like.

A cool breeze swept through the tall grass as Dallion and Eury made their way to the large lake in the distance. With the temples gone, there was nothing to let them know which was the right direction. The assumption was to go along the path of the sun and hope that the layout of the realm was similar to the other two swords.

Around noon, the pair did some hunting. Eury had a clear advantage, although Dallion also managed to catch a few local specimens and gain a few skills in the process. He also spent some time learning the language of the local fauna. Sadly, that didnt lead to any useful information; the creatures definitely werent gossipy.

Dont worry too much, Eury said, while eating the roasted leg of something that they had named a badger-rabbit. It wont do any good if you do.

Im not worrying. Im just thinking that I miss seagulls.

Seagulls? Several more of her snakes turned his way.

Seagulls always know whats going on. And theyre easily bribable. He looked at the distance. The moonless sky made it impossible to see much of what was going on. The lack of fires suggested that there wasnt any trace of civilization, at least until the other side of the mountain. Do you think well find anyone? Or theyre all gone?

People dont just vanish. Cracklings would have taken their place if the realm was in decline.

Not unless the sword is indestructible. If its destiny is fulfilled, it wouldnt have any guardians either. Just one eternal prison for us to stay in.

Although they could repopulate it. Dallion had addressed the topic on a few occasions. Eury had admitted it was possible, though not without its difficulties. Gorgons didnt procreate easily with other species, although with both Eury and Dallion being otherworlders, they had fewer restrictions.

A lot of time has passed since the realm was created. Maybe they gradually died out and the vegetation covered everything. If its the original version of the poison plague, that would explain it.

It might. Someone made the stone circle near the start, though. And the vegetation hadnt reclaimed it.

Maybe. Dallion looked at the sky. You rest. Ill watch for the night.

Dont use too many instances.

I know. Dallion smiled. Itll be just a few.

Sadly, he lied. The few were a few dozen, and he had them walk about the area all night as well as investigate the lake. In part, Dallion was hoping that there would end up being something hidden beneath the waters surface, or maybe even that the lake itself was nothing more than a giant illusion, like during his first sword expedition. The only thing he achieved, however, was to get a large number of his instances wet.

Come morning, the group continued on their way. Since there wasnt anything suitable to make a raft with, they went along the lake until they reached the forest at the foot of the mountain. As expected, there was a greater number of carnivores present. Some of them were foolish enough to attack, only to be defeated without anyone breaking a sweat. If there were still inhabitants in this world, animals werent used to them roaming about.

Climbing the mountain was done in phases. As much as Dallion was in a hurry, it was clear that nighttime travel was uselessly difficult. Both took turns sleeping with the other, keeping watch until on the fourth day since their banishment they reached the crossing point. That was the moment of truth that was going to show whether there were survivors in the realm or not. The sight wasnt what either of them was prepared for.

Now we know why the Archduke wants it back, Eury said. And why he doesnt trust anyone.

You think it has always been like that? The mage could have changed things.

Do you really think so?

Dallion had no answer. Beyond the mountain, there was a single city visible. Rather, it wasnt a city, but a cluster of towers built next to each other, like a honeycomb of stone. The thing was that Dallion had seen those types of towers before back when he had ventured south. Even from this distance, there was little doubt that the city they were looking at was composed of Star worshipers, as evident by the large star-shaped objects that glowed on the top of each tower.

Theres no way we get to go through there without attracting attention, Dallion said. If Gleam was here, wed hide beneath an illusion.

It wouldnt have been enough. Theyd have seen through it.

We avoid the city, then? Gorgons and humans arent supposed to exist in this realm.

That works to our advantage. Just as we had no idea whats going on here, the locals wont know anything about the real world.

The mage might have told them enough.

Theyll still be guessing. And while the fight goes on in the real world, the mage wont ne able to get here to contradict us.

Dallion recited the names of the Seven Moons. They were about to enter a dryad city worshipping the Star.

Chapter 540: Towers of the Non-Awakened

A double wall surrounded the cluster of towers. Moving closer, it became clear that the walls werent there just to prevent people from getting into the city, but also kept them from getting out. Even from a distance, it could be seen that there were no doors on the base of the towers themselves. If such had even existed, they had been long bricked up. The only means for getting things in or out were through a system of ropes and pulleys.

Think well end up there? Dallion asked as he and Eury made their way towards the city entrance.

They had made a point of not hiding, which ensured that they would be spotted almost the moment they came down the mountain. All that was part of the plan, but it made Dallion feel uneasy.

Depends on how strong they are.

COMBAT INITIATED

Guess well find out, Dallion thought, and split into twenty instances.

Roots shot up from the ground in an attempt to grab the pair. Gripping his harpsisword, Dallion did a series of circular slashes with several instances, while Eury evaded all attacks her way.

From the corner of his eye, Dallion saw dryads approaching, yet they werent armed with common wooden sickles, nor any other weapon typical for the world. The objects they were armed with looked mechanical, more like long boxes than actual weapons, with multiple openings to the side. Seeing them made Dallion think of his fight with the Stars echo, and especially the projectile weapon she had.

Watch out! he shouted, chopping another cluster of roots, attempting to grab him.

No sooner had he done so, when several miniature rockets emerged from the dryads weapons, releasing trails of smoke.

Euryales reaction was to throw two knives at the approaching projectiles. An explosion followed, tearing out trees from their roots.

All but one of Dallions instances vanished, as he lost focus. Even after growing up on Earth, he still couldnt get used to the idea of explosives in this world. It was a good thing that the dryads werent armed with bullets, but having them shoot rockets wasnt much better.

Leaping back, Dallion spun the harpsisword in his hand and played a chord in an attempt to ensnare his enemies with sound. The attempts succeeded, prompting him to continue playing, but mere seconds later, another explosion followed, snapping the sound tendrils.

So much for standard use of music, Dallion thought as he leaped back.

Ill deal with them! Euryale shouted. You keep back!

You dont have to tell me twice! Dallion made another attempt at focusing his music skills on a target, only this time, the target was himself. Having a bit of speed and courage was a plus in a fight such as this.

Suddenly, an idea popped into Dallions mind one of those reckless ideas that had been absent lately. Gripping his harpsword, he split into instances, all rushing forward instead. By the time he got closer to the wall, half a dozen dryad statues were already visible. Eury was holding her own. Precisely for that reason, Dallion ran in the opposite direction along the wall. Four more dryads emerged, launching their explosive projectiles at him. This time, though, Dallion was ready for them. The chords he played weren't targeting the people, but the rockets themselves. For a brief second, the projectiles froze in the air.

Music and attack, Dallion thought.

Targets emerged on all the rockets, as if waiting to be hit. When that happened, Dallion changed the intensity of his chords. His fingers briefly went numb, as the new sounds that emerged, sliced their targets in two. To Dallions fortune, no blast followed. This clearly confused the dryads, though not enough to stop shooting.

I've caught the pattern, he thought with a smile.

Leaping to the side, he repeated the process. The rockets got much closer to him this time, though still failed to explode.

TWENTY-TWENTY SHARPSHOOTER

(+2 Perception, +2 Reaction)

The more the combinations, the more the rewards. Just be mindful that it'll become more difficult after each one.

A blue rectangle emerged, only to be wiped away. Dallion didn't need distractions right now. The speed of his playing increased, managing to catch a rocket before it fully emerged from its weapon. A subsequent explosion followed, blasting the dryad holding it to dust. At that point, Dallion knew that he wasn't facing an army of enemies, but rather a single individual.

They're echoes, he shouted.

That changed things significantly, and in more ways than one. While a person could have as many echoes as the mind trait allowed, the same could not be said for equipment. The fact that each echo had its own destructive weapon suggested that the dryads were trained in echo combat; in turn, that suggested that the number of city defenders had to be extremely low. No one would boost their numbers in such fashion unless given no other choice.

There's no point in going on, Dallion added, a desire of surrender in his words. We know your tricks. It's only downhill from here.

From experience, he knew that there was a one in five chance that an opponent would respond. Fortunately, this turned out to be one of those cases. The few echoes standing in front looked at each other, then leapt above the city wall.

Eury. Dallion split into six instances, three of which went towards where he'd last seen the gorgon.

There were well over a dozen statues where she was. On closer inspection, all of them were of an identical dryad. The moment Dallion put his hand on one, it crumbled to pieces.

Is that normal? Dallion asked.

Although they are nothing, echoes still are a representation of something, dear boy, Nil replied. Think of them as skin when you get dirt on it, you can peel it off, but it's still there.

The explanation didn't make particular sense.

Why did you come? someone asked from the city. The words were clear, but they were speaking dryad.

We entered the realm from the real world, Dallion replied. We just wanted to rest a bit in the city before moving on.

There was no response. Unfortunately, there was no rectangle marking the end of the fight, either. At most, one could say they had entered a tense ceasefire.

We're not here to fight. Dallion continued. How can we convince you that

While he was talking, Euryale leaped on top of the wall. Not the approach Dallion had in mind, but since she was already there, he joined her up as well.

The inside of the city was packed with one-story buildings. Streets twisted and winded, making it feel more like a maze than an actual city. A dozen dryads all of them armed, although some had swords in addition to their rocket shooters stood in the space of a small plaza, looking at the invaders. Most of them seemed terribly young, even by dryad standards.

Blobs of trepidation and uncertainty were visible all throughout their bodies. Dallion had no idea when the rogue mage had visited last, but it had to have been quite a while ago.

Who's in charge? Dallion asked in dryad.

The dryads looked at each other.

You're awakened from the outside, one of them said.

Yes, yes, we are.

Is the war over? Another took a step forward. Did the Star win?

Dallion felt bad. Thanks to his music skills, he knew how he was supposed to respond. This was the news that they were hoping for, likely for generations.

Almost, he lied. The Star failed to conquer a city, but has taken a lot of land.

There was visible relief.

What's happening? Eury whispered.

I told them that the Star is winning, Dallion whispered back. Are you the only ones here? Where's the rest of the people?

The question surprised everyone. Giving each other glances, they were unsure whether this was a test of sorts, or the real world had changed.

In the towers, the oldest of the group said. The wooden armor he was wearing was a potential indicator of rank. They aren't awakened.

You imprison your non-awakened? Dallion didn't like the sound of that.

That's the only way for them to survive. Every plant you've come across is poisonous for them. All beings that come in contact with a plant will get ill and die within a week. That's the price of the curse.

That sounded something the Star would do at the same time. It also didn't Dallion wouldn't be surprised if some awakened noble had come up with the idea. From purely the perspective of strength, there was nothing a non-awakened could do better than an awakened. Maybe someone had decided that it would be better to have nothing but awakened, or maybe the Star had started the curse all that time ago, in order to fasten the destruction of the sword world societies. Either way, this was the result: a handful of awakened who were doing their best to catch and provide food to Moons know how many people condemned to spend their entire life in the towers, lest they die of the plague.

The rogue page must have seen the potential and reversed the effects of the plague so as to affect those it was supposed to protect. One could call it poetic justice. Maybe this had been the mages' attention to punish those he considered responsible for this creation. Or maybe it was just something he was using for personal vengeance? The only thing Dallion knew for certain was that the Star had a way of exploiting people's weaknesses.

It's ironic that the source of the plague is the one place you're most protected from it, Nil said.

Did you know about this, Nil?

No, I didn't. However, this wouldn't be the first time something of the sort has happened. Not to this level, but you've seen the metalins? They are a fairly recent creation.

They're nothing like this

Depends on the point of view. They are a means to seal an awakened on a whim. Some consider that the same as death. In quite a few instances, it actually is. Remember, it takes a lot more strength to go on after losing something you're always had.

Dallion didn't fully agree, but he saw the echo's point of view.

Have you come to help? a dryad asked.

No, we're just passing through then heading on north.

No one goes north.

Why, what's up there? Dallion felt hopeful. If it was a taboo area, there was a chance that a guardian was keeping it.

No one has for generations. The scrolls say that there was a time when the worthy went there for the chance to receive the headless crown. That was before the plague. No one is worthy now. And even if they were needed here to take care of the non-awakened.

That had to be the two-crown. With luck, it was going to have its gems intact. If so, this whole banishment wouldn't be a complete waste of time.

We aren't from this realm, Dallion said. We're on a pilgrimage to the temple where the crown is kept. We only intended to pass through here to get some food and rest before we go on. Do you have any?

Balloons of hesitation formed within the dyads.

Food no, one responded. But you can have some rest, provided you don't approach the towers.

That would be great.

What's happening? Eury whispered.

They've agreed to let us rest here before we continue. They won't give us food, though. The only condition is that we don't get near the towers.

Why?

The original plague isn't what we thought. It was used to kill off the non-awakened, while the rest were unaffected. The towers might well be all that's left of the non-awakened dryads of the realm.

You believed them? The gorgons' snakes stirred.

They didn't seem to be lying. Why? Worried about something?

They're far too calm. We have the strength to finish them off right now, and they don't seem to care.

What do you expect them to do? Dallion wondered. I don't see anyone higher than a thirty.

There's nothing they could do, but they should still be afraid. It's as if they believe there's something protecting them. The gorgons' snakes stirred. They are convinced of it.

If there was, wouldn't it have made its move by now?

No. I'll try to separate us first, then take us one by one. It's what I would have done when faced with two powerful invaders.

Dallion nodded. As much as he wanted to think of this place as an idyllic paradise gone wrong, he feared that Eury might be right.