

## Leveling up 551

### Chapter 551: Gassil's Story

Sudden acceleration grabbed Dallion as he found himself in the real world. A hint of surprise emerged on the mages face. Although only a moment had passed for him, he seemed aware that his spell had failed. Panic flashed in his eyes.

You arent prepared for this, Dallion thought, flying by. The sudden increase in perception let him see a lot of things he would have otherwise missed. And that was not all. The instant the mage dropped his guard, Dallions empathic connection triggered.

### MEMORY FRAGMENT

#### Mage Academy Research Cloister, 17 years ago

This is a stupid idea, Katka said. As the youngest of the group, she never missed an opportunity to make her thoughts known.

Gassil knew her type all too well. Back on Earth, she probably was someone important, quite possibly with power. It was obvious in every action she took, in every glance, even every syllable of every word she spoke. It had probably come to a shock to her to appear in this world, starting from scratch. Only, she hadnt started from scratch. Similar to Gassil, she had been born with the rare trait of magic, as well as the skill to use it. That made her countless times luckier than the local inhabitants. Not that she felt that way.

No, seriously! Katka crossed her arms. What do we care? Even if it succeeds, so what? Hell just get to make his own world item. I dont see why we must risk

Its not about him making an item, Alien said.

Gassil liked him even less. Only a loser would name himself like that, but the old man had. According to the rumors, he had been a professional gamer, which granted him a vast advantage compared to everyone else. The way things were going, he could become head of the Academy. He had the condescending behavior to fit right in.

Its about what he might get out, the old man continued. The emperor has made it clear: the device is too dangerous unsupervised. So, it falls upon us to provide supervision.

By us, us you mean everyone else, Gassil thought.

It wouldnt be the first time that Alien used his position to avoid doing anything. It didnt help that he was chummy with the emperor, as he liked to remind everyone else. However, if the emperor really gave the order, there was nothing to be done about it. As much as everyone wanted to pretend that they were powerful, compared to the emperor, they werent. Magic provided enough tricks to bypass a lot of the awakening process, but when compared to a real awakened, it wouldnt be enough. Even the annoying archdukes were stronger than mages.

Who gets the short straw? Gassil asked.

There were eight of them, though five in effect. Two were off exploring the edges of the land, and Alien didnt count. That meant that Gassil had a twenty percent chance to get stuck with this. Not the best odds.

We dont, the old man said. The emperor asked that you do it.

You must be kidding! Gassil hissed.

Youre closest to the archmage, Alien continued.

Thats precisely why Ill be the first to be suspected. I was his apprentice for half a year, ages ago, and now I suddenly ask to join the project? Hes not as stupid as you are.

Oh, he knows, but hell be willing to tolerate you. Or do you think Katka would be a better choice?

Who knows? He hasnt seen her, so maybe hell go by looks.

Of course, it was obvious that wouldnt work. Every otherworlder would be suspicions, it didnt matter if the archmage knew about them or not. It wouldnt be a surprise if an agreement between the emperor and the archmage had already been made and Gassil was already found to be the acceptable spy. Weirder arrangements had taken place in the imperial capital. After all, it was such an arrangement that had allowed Gassil and all the rest to remain alive and able to do as they wished. The only catch was that they had to follow imperial requests, just as the one now.

Its been decided, Alien said. Well pass by now and again. Not too often, though. Theres no point in getting the archmage agitated.

Dont. If I come across anything funky, Ill find a way to send a message to you.

As you wish.

I still think its stupid, Katka said.

Stupid or not, everyone was aware that theyd go along with it, anyway. Gassil stood up, straightened his robe and left the room. The entrance disappeared behind him, shifting into a wall. Normally, hed be annoyed that the others were talking behind his back, but right now, he had bigger problems.

The warm breeze swept by, carrying the smell of sea and summer. Neither of which was true. In actuality, the courtyard was barely larger than a town square, however, magic had stretched it up to the horizon in all directions. A multitude of small buildings were about, clustered in one group. Among them were the residences of the high-level mages. Recently Alien had added his building to the mix. If all went well, Gassil was likely to be allowed to have one as well in a few decades. Faster if this mission brought the results, the emperor hoped. That was probably the reason why he hadnt protested too much after being selected; while he would have preferred not to get involved, the rewards of obedience were plentiful.

Hel, Gas. A cloud creature formed next to him as he walked. How did it go?

You could have joined and found out, the mage replied.

And listen to all the usual nonsense? the creature laughed.

You should have come. There wasnt much bullshit and I could have used some support.

Maybe next time. So, what happened?

Im to join the project, Gassil whispered. Emperors orders.

Wow. The old man really went all out to get rid of you.

I doubt that. Didnt feel like him. I think the emperors afraid.

Maybe theres a reason for that. The archmages been gathering too many powerful artifacts in one place. Thats enough to make anyone nervous.

Hes not the only one.

Maybe, but he is the archmage.

There was that. It was no secret that mages didnt like to share, even within their own minute factions. Everyone had something hidden away for personal use and research. Alien himself had an entire underground of artefacts beneath his mansion, including a world item. The archmage, though, was one of three mages who had taken a completely different approach. Instead of hiding anything he could get his hands on, he had declared it Academy property and created a research lab to analyze the properties of the artifacts there. In theory, everyone was granted access. Of course, that was unless in cases of extremely delicate research which happened almost always. One could almost say that the archmage was hiding his research in plain sight, only he wasnt even hiding it. Of course, the description of his activity was so vague, that it failed to convey any adequate information.

Whats the theory? the cloud figure asked.

No ones sure, but Alien suspects the archmage might try to pull an army.

Out of a world item? That would be daring. I almost want to let him try just to see what will happen.

You always liked chaos.

Artists are supposed to have no limitations.

The comment made Gassil smile. The mage who controlled the dream creature was said to be the oldest one of the bunch when it came to this world. Not even Alien could be certain of her real name, but she preferred to refer to herself as Leoraa play on words between a constellation and a deity, she liked to say. Supposedly, she had been a popular graffiti artist back on Earth, or so she claimed.

I think the old fears something more, Gassil whispered. He didnt say it, but I dont think hed be that upset about a pinch of dryads.

Oh? Know something we dont?

The archmage might be crazy enough to try and drag out item guardians.

The cloud creature froze, then condensed into a small white sparrow.

That was anticlimactic, the bird said. We can already do that. So, what if he restores the process?

Youre missing the point. What if he finds a way to pierce the banishment barrier? All it takes is one portal to have all the old eras to flood the present one. Mages with millions of years experience, all of them stronger than any of us.

I wouldn't go that far, but I see your point. If the old goat does that, humanity will once again fall to the bottom of the food chain. I guess the emperor won't be too happy.

No, he wouldn't, Gassil thought.

While it was said that the emperor was the strongest awakened alive, that wasn't the case when it came to the past. There were at least three others who had tried to conquer the world, each of which could give him a run for his money at the very least. From what remained in the history tomes, the magic of the copyette emperor was unparalleled, the dryad overlord had the power to turn plants and animals against his enemies, and as for the nymph empress she could slice the capital in two with one strike of her sword.

Thanks for the gossip, Gas. It gives me something to think about.

Any chance you'll be showing up at the academy anytime soon? the mage asked.

No. I found something interesting here and want to see how it develops. Do you miss me?

That was a trick question. There was a time, a decade ago, when Gassil would have said yes. Now he knew better. Leora had the uncanny ability to make everyone she talked to feel special. That's why she preferred one-on-one talks. There was no telling how the ability functioned. It definitely wasn't a spell, and it didn't seem to be magic, but even now, after experiencing betrayal half a dozen times, Gassil felt that he owed her.

No, he lied. I don't miss you. I just want you to be more involved in things.

Liar, the sparrow laughed.

I'm tired of following Alien around as if he's the man with the plan.

You're not following him because of that. He's the mouthpiece of the emperor, and that one has a plan, trust me.

If you say so.

All this time Gassil hadn't seen the man once. He had seen the glowing suit of armor that passed for the emperor, but unlike most, he knew that to be a fake—nothing but an aether automaton constructed to take the role during important events. Of the group, it was said that only Alien and Leora had seen him in person.

Take care of yourself, Gas. It'll be a pity if you mess up.

Is that a threat, or are you being nice to me? With you, I can never tell.

You know I don't make threats. And unlike you, I'll miss you if you're gone.

Without another word, the sparrow lost form, becoming a cloud of vapor that dissolved in the air. Gassil knew that Leora wouldn't physically be of any help, but he had hoped that she'd provide at least some sort of useful information. For one thing, she'd known the archmage long before he'd reached his current position.

Guess I'm all alone on this one, the mage thought.

Has it been any different? The echo in his realm asked. It had been given to him the day he had entered the academy—metal in said to come with the personality

and knowledge of the current archmage. Every mage was required to receive the echo and place it in their awakening realm. However, in-between the nagging, it provided some actually good advice. The only person you can rely on is always yourself.

*You seem to be taking this well. Excited at the prospect of entering the real world? If the archmage succeeds in his project, thats what could happen.*

*And what will I do there? Besides, maybe its a good idea to actually find out what the real goal of the project is before you jump to conclusions?*

Find the real goal. Gassil nodded.

When it came to the archmage, not even the emperor could be certain what was going on.

Chapter 552: Gassil's Story - Archmage Invitation

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Archmage Laboratory Archive, 17 years ago**

It was every apprentice mages dream to be admitted to the archmages archive. It combined the best elements of a vault and a research facility. It was said that throughout the centuries a lot of vast discoveries had originated there. It was no secret that the goal of each new archmage was to make a discovery of epic proportions, thus ensuring his legacy for generations to come. Rumors were that the metalin echoesthe greatest discovery of modern times, and the only one that came close to matching those of previous eraswas made there.

As he made his way to the large structure, the only thing that Gassil felt was a sense of anxiety. Unlike Katka and Alien he didnt like attention, preferring to enjoy the view from the background. Maybe that was why he didnt have an important standing in the organization, despite objectively being the most intelligent of the group. If it ever came to IQ comparison he would win outright, however, in this world IQ was replaced by traits and the only thing that affected those was awakening level.

A patrol of imperial guards passed by in their shiny armor. Each of them had been specially selected by the emperor and approved by the Academys council. It was said that many of them had the level to be nobles, but had relinquished the right in exchange for an army career. Gassil didnt particularly like them, though he didnt have any issues, either.

A moment of your time, mage, a young officer said. Gassil hadnt seen her before. She appeared young, probably recently arrived, although one could never take things for granted when it came to mages or nobles. The woman might well be the age of Gassils grandmother and would still look as if she were in her twenties.

Yes Gassil glanced at her insignia lieutenant?

The archives doesnt accept visitors at this time, the woman said. Ill have to ask you to

Im expected. He did his best not to sigh. It was always the same thing with the soldiers. Everyone knew that they were over glorified babysitters, which was the reason they used every opportunity to display their authority in petty ways. Mage Gassil Light. Im one of the assistants approved by the council.

My captain tells me that there aren't to be any new assistants this week, the lieutenant replied.

Your captain isn't the archmage.

This was annoying. Gassil had the power to kill her in a dozen ways, and here he was having to explain himself. It reminded him of his university job, where incompetent bureaucrats wielded more power than those who actually did the work.

Can you please send someone to ask him, Gassil added, trying to keep his composure.

I have already sent a guard to check. Please wait until he does.

Thank goodness for echo rings, Gassil thought. In this world, they were almost as good as cell phones. Probably spied a bit less, too.

Out of habit he used, he moved his fingers to do a quick check of the echoes in the area. The lieutenant had items containing over a hundred, which was understandable, considering her rank. Most of them were other imperial soldiers, although there were a few mages as well. There didn't seem to be any family echoes. From what Gassil had heard, those were removed the moment someone joined the imperial army to avoid conflicts of interest. Personally, he stood as far away from the stuff as possible, all otherworlders did. That's why their meetings had to take place the old fashion way.

My apologies, mage. The archmage is indeed expecting you.

Told you. Gassil took a step forward only to have the lieutenant place her hand on his shoulder.

I am to escort you to the archmages study., she said in a firm voice. Please, follow me.

Gassil nodded. He knew that he was already at a rocky start. It was natural for the archmage to suspect something, as he had warned Alien he would. The goat hadn't become the head of the Academy by being naive or sloppy. Unlike most of the high-ranking mages, he didn't even bother pretending he was.

The building itself was more mundane than anything the Academy controlled. Like all research and archive facilities, there were no spells linked to it, so as not to affect the focus of experiments. The imperial officer led Gassil along a narrow marble corridor, her metal boots echoing with each step. Paintings of former mage prodigies decorated the walls, some of them former archmages. There was a time when Gassil dreamt of seeing his portrait there as well. Now, he had higher aspirations.

Is this your first time in the archives? the lieutenant asked, probably aiming to make pleasant conversation.

No. I've worked here a few times, as well as in other archive buildings.

That is commendable. You must be highly valued.

Given that I'm probably the only biochemist this world has seen, yes, I'm very valued, Gassil thought. His knowledge helped him when it came to spell research, although it didn't give him a combat advantage most of the others had. That was the main issue in this world even after everything combat effectiveness remained key. That's why Alien was the one conveying the orders. It was also the reason Katka might get to outrank Gassil in a few years.

I guess I am, the mage replied curtly.

Officially, the archmage's study was located on the opposite side of the entrance. Those who had the privilege of working in the facility before knew that in fact there were several studies. The one towards which Gassil was being taken now was only the administrative one, where external visitors were met. That meant that he still wasn't part of the team.

An imposing door of white marble marked the entrance of the study. The lieutenant went up to it, knocked, then after not hearing anything, opened the door and stood aside. She wasn't allowed to enter mage quarters, only walk outside and along the external corridors.

Finally, Gassil stepped by and walked inside.

Similar to the research cloister, the room was far bigger on the inside than in reality. The current archmage had a thing about ancient cities, so he reconstructed what was believed to be a copy of a metropolis.

Ah, Gassil, he said, sitting at a mahogany desk with a perfect view of the city. Even among mages, his taste was known to be rather extravagant. It's been a while. Glad to see you're still eager to do research.

Always glad to be appreciated, teacher. Gassil walked to the nearest chair and took a seat.

It had been a while since he had seen the archmage. The most notable change was the size of his former teacher's belly. While most high mages tended to lose weight due to intense research, the archmage had all but ballooned.

I hear you want to join my latest research project, the old man said, his massive beard covering the lower part of his face and half his chest like a fox's tail. Why the sudden change?

It's been suggested that I'm the best person to provide oversight. Gassil decided to go with the truth. When it came to powerful mages it saved time. Of course, only a fool would share the entire truth. Since you were my teacher at one point, it was believed that

that I'd be more accepting of the fact, the archmage finished for him. Yes, I know as much. However, why you? I have other students. Many of which I still teach even now. It's not like you were my protégé at any point.

It was considered that an otherworlder might be more perceptive. This was the first lie. It was subtle, and contained large elements of the truth, but that wasn't the real reason.

The answer made the archmage turn so as to fully face Gassil. No doubt he was using one spell of another to try and figure out more. Of course, that would be useless. Everyone from the otherworlder group had taken precautions so not anyone, be it the emperor himself, could peek into their realms.

Is the emperor concerned? the old man probed.

I'm sure he is. Rumors are that you're building a device that could take anything out of an awakening realm, as well as we put something in.

Is that what this is about? The archmage snorted. The emperor thinks I'm plotting a coup and will imprison him and everyone else in a thimble? Mind you, it won't be a bad idea if everyone in the

imperial capital gets banished in one. Maybe then the Academy might finally get some actual work done.

Maybe its talk like that thats gotten people concerned, teacher. Gassil felt relieved. In his arrogance, the archmage had given him a way out and Gassil took it. If its not me, itll be someone else. Or maybe theres already someone else and Im just sent here, so you dont suspect it.

Hah! There are already three spies on the project. All of them are idiots who cant tell the difference between the tail and the head of a cloud fox! Im not worried about them.

Does that mean youre worried about me?

You? Dear boy, youre competent. I give you that, but youll never amount to something great. Sure, in a few decades theyll push you up the Academy ranks. Maybe in the twilight of your life youll even be given an advisory seat on the council. Youre no threat to me. Im trying to figure out the motives of those that are.

Heavy is the crown.

Heavier is the chair. The only reason why I even bothered to claim it was because its the only way to do actually important work. Itll be no different for the one who comes after me, but one thing I guarantee is that the person wont be you.

I never thought that it would.

The archmage cracked a smile. The two understood each other perfectly. Gassil suspected that he still wasnt in the clear, but at least he wasnt seen as a significant threat. That was probably the whole point in sending him: just dangerous enough to attract attention, but not enough to raise further suspicion. It would be just like the archmage to welcome him to the project precisely for that, as if only to show to the people behind the scenes how confident he was in his abilities. One of the problems of holding the position was that there were too many people gunning for him. The emperor and the Order were the obvious threats, but there were a lot less significant ones, such as half the Academy council and all the high-mages wanting to replace him.

Am I in? Gassil asked.

Oh, youre in. Go ahead and give your reports to whoever you report. I dont care. The important thing is that I be left to my work.

Ill be sure to pass that along.

Please do. And tell them that I will not tolerate any sabotage. If they go for that, they better be sure its a war they will win.

The warning sent a chill down Gassils spine. It had been ages since the archmage had used any combat magic whatsoever, but it was said that he was quite capable in the field. At the very least, he was powerful enough to capture dragons and then release them. An all out war against him would split the Academy and might well disrupt the balance of power within the empire itself.

Ill make sure of it. Anything else?

No, thats all. The archmage turned around to admire the view of the ancient city. If theres anything you need, better go get it now. What little tile you have for leisure activities, once you join, will be spent here. In short, get ready for a few grueling years of work.



Of course, archmage. I look forward to it.

Chapter 553: Gassil's Story - Accidental Discovery

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Archmage Laboratory Archive, 17 years ago**

In terms of Earth standards, a fraction of the Academy artifacts were obtained through legal means. Most were bought from hunters which were little more than sanctioned relic hunters and grave robbers. Another significant part was given by noble families, prosperous guilds, and trade organizations as a means of subtle bribing with the aim of earning favor. Every now and again, though, a mage would venture into the wilderness to obtain his own artifact. It was said that in his youth the archmage had that practice. Lately, though, that task was given to his valued disciples, including his star pupil: high-mage Valerian.

I see you decided to crawl back, Valerian said as Vassil adjusted to his quarters.

The room was as small as he remembered it, with nothing but a small desk next to a single bed. There were no chairs, of course. The archmage didn't believe in chairs. In his view, mages had to be fit enough to stand while thinking, or smart enough to have reality do it for them.

It wasn't by choice. I really don't have the time for you now.

Everyone knows it isn't. Aliens holding your leash, as usual.

Just because we otherworlders don't mean we do everything together, Gassil lied. And it's not like you have a faction to back you up.

Difference is, Valerian stepped closer. That I am in charge of my group.

There it was, the hallmark of arrogance. There was no denying that Valerian had skills. It was very likely that he'd become the next Academy archmage. However, what he had in magic knowledge he lacked in everything else.

The master said you start by joining the catalogs. Do a good job and after a week you get to stay.

I thought I was to be part of the research.

That is part of the research, Valerian smirked.

He was twice as older than Gassil, yet was obsessed with maintaining a youthful appearance that he used both magic and awakened powers to appear to be in his early twenties. In a way that wasn't a bad approach. Most people outside the Academy thought he was merely an apprentice and didn't hide as much when discussing things. Right now, though, Gassil really wanted to give him a slap on the back of the head.

Whatever you say, Valerian. Let me just finish arranging my stuff and I'll get at it.

The first week passed in going through artifacts that had already been catalogs and doing it again. While it was vindictive on Valedrian's part, Gassil knew that he wouldn't be put on the project just like that. When the week was over, though, and he was simply asked to continue, he started to get deeply annoyed.

So much for your grand plan, Alien, the mage grumbled to himself as he took the next item from the rack. It was a sphere item, of course, and just as useless as all the rest. There was no doubt that the archmage had no intention of using them in his research. More than likely they were going to be given out to lesser mages or loaned to noble families in exchange for minor favors or swapped with other items. The worst of it was that the moment Gassil finished, a new crate would come in.

Gifts from Archduke Jio, an apprentice entered, carrying the new batch. There are more in the next room.

Leave them by the door, Gassil waved his hand in desperation. At least there was a chance that some of the artifacts were interesting. As far as things went, Jio province had the best. Not the usual copyette crap that the archmage was obsessed with.

The apprentice did as he was asked.

I'll take care of the rest, Gassil said. Just mark the crate for me.

Yes, mage. The apprentice nodded, then left the room.

With a stretch, Gassil stood up, then went to check on the new batch. The trinkets were piled up one on top of the other, indicating that no one considered them particularly valuable. Dragging them to the large desk, the mage prepared a new scroll, then started taking them out, one after the other. Nothing caught his attention at first, but then he saw it faint shimmering coming from the bottom of the crate. Having passed the third gate, Gassil considered that to be a sign that one of the items had a hidden realm within it. That was always nice. If it was particularly interesting, he might keep it for himself. After reaching the item in question, however, his opinion changed. The item turned out not to be just another weird relic, but something exceedingly modern a wheel train center wheel. The only time he had seen anything of the sort was in old wristwatches. Being somewhat of a hobbyist back on Earth, Gassil had disassembled and reassembled quite a few. Despite the huge size, there was no doubt that this was part of a watch mechanism. Yet, it wasn't supposed to be here.

Looking at the inexplicable item, Gassil instantly knew one thing: he could either pocket it and try to get to the bottom of its origins, or use it as a means to get closer to the archmage's research. Naturally, he chose the latter.

Snatching the item, he went to the neighboring room to check the other artifacts, just in case. The moment he did so, he found that the archmage was already there, waiting.

You seem in rather good spirits, the fat man said. Anything to share?

Gassil hesitated. Normal procedure was to instantly go to one of the higher mages and inform him of the finding. On a technical level, Gassil hadn't done that, choosing to enter another room instead.

There's something I think you should see, archmage. Gassil handed over the artifact.

An interesting gear. The fat man pulled it out of Gassil's hand with a flick of his fingers. We don't get many of those.

With all due respect, sir. You don't get any of those. Gassil took his chance. It was a risk, but with the lack of progress so far, he might have to worry about more than just Alien. It's from my world.

The archmages expression didnt change. The old man looked at the artifact he was holding, then at Gassil.

Are you sure about that?

Its one thing I cant mistake. Thats an item that doesnt belong here. Ive no idea what its for, but its definitely from my world.

Thats rather fascinating. It seems you have your uses after all.

Archmage? Gassil didnt like the sound of that.

Youre intelligent enough to know that this never came to you by chance. I had it delivered to you. What you probably dont know, though, is that it wasnt made in your world. In fact, I made it myself, following certain exotic methods.

Gassil narrowed his eyes.

Even magic cannot move an item from one world to another, he said. Thats for the Moons alone.

So confident, are you? Magic is the key to finding loopholes. Whats one more? In this case, though, youre half right. I didnt use magic to take something from your world. After all, where would I start? What I used it for, though, was to have it travel there, and then return.

You mean Gassil stared at the gear. All of a sudden it had acquired a new quality.

Quite so. And it wasnt the first one I did, either. All the artifacts that you cataloged were sent to realms and worlds beyond ours. Apparently, that is the first successful case.

You used me as a detection device.

You should be honored. Finally, youre part of the project. Thats what you wanted, isnt it? Now that I know that both you and my method function as expected, Ive no reason to keep testing you. Youll move to the inner sanctum this very night.

Somehow, that felt like a bittersweet victory. Finally, he was going to find out whether all the rumors about the project were real. At the same time, he felt used. When it came to mages it was always a game of using others while being used in return, but there were certain lines that Gassil didnt like crossed. Earth was one of them.

If the archmage had found a way to send something to Earth and back, that opened a lot of possibilities. For one thing, there was no telling how this world might change if it was introduced to a mobile phone. According to the stories, one of the old emperors had introduced the concept of rockets and that was enough to create an uproar. However, one minor detail remained.

What about the Moons? Gassil asked.

What about them? the archmage arched a brow.

Only they have the power to take things between worlds. Doing so, even with magic, would be breaking a rule.

Ah. Well, fortunately for you, its not something youll have to worry about. Im the one whos doing the experiments. Youre only there to tell me if Im on the right track. Even if theres punishment it wont fall on you. Who knows, maybe youll even get something out of it.

If you fail there might be nothing left.

Dear boy, if it was so easy to destroy a world, dont you think someone would have done it already?

Im not worried about destroying the world. Im worried about getting the human race banished.

In that case, well become guardians together. Now, either move your things to the inner sanctum, or get lost. I dont have time for indecision.

Ultimately, Gassil accepted the order. There was no option not to. He gathered his things, and carefully observed by the captain of the archives guard, made his way to the heart of the structure. There, a really fascinating thing happened.

There were a total of five people who had access to that part of the building, and after seeing what was there, Gassil had a good idea why. A large part of the artifacts were devices that he hadnt seen or read about, created by banished races at the height of their development. However, that wasnt the most shocking. The rest of the artifacts were creations of the Star. The markedly Earthly designs stuck out like a sore thumb. Since his awakening, Gassil had seen only two such artifacts, both quickly taken by representatives of the Order of the Seven Moons. Officially, there was no law requiring mages to relinquish such findings to the Order, it was just expected. The Archmage, clearly had a different opinion on the matter. Not only that, but he was experimenting with them in order to create his crowning achievement; and now Gassil was part of that.

What do you think? The old man asked. Is it everything you expected?

Not even close, Gassil replied. How many people know about this?

Five people in the building, two more out of it. If we succeed, however, the entire world will know.

Now that Im here, will you tell me what exactly youre doing?

So you can report to your masters? You might be useful, but not that useful. Youve heard the rumors; youve seen all this. Make your own conclusions. Meanwhile, we have work to do.

Sneaky old man, Gassil thought.

There was no way he could report anything to Alien now. And even if he did, Alien wouldnt dare stop the operation. The archmage had made sure to let it slip that two associates on the outside were also familiar with his activities. If all this were to be forcefully stopped, there was the danger that those associates would continue with the research outside of the Academy.

You just wait, Gassil said to himself. Sooner or later, youll slip up. When you do, Ill be there to point the blame and say I told you so.

Until then, however, he planned on being as useful as possible. And if there was an opportunity to hop to Earth for a few days, there were some things hed love to introduce to this world.

Chapter 554: Gassil's Story - Apocalypse Door

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

**Archmage Laboratory Archive, 17 years ago**

Threads of vapor streamed beneath the window. Slowly, they wound together forming a small cloud, which then floated to the head of Gassil's bed. Even in the darkness, he could see the shimmeressence that only one from another world could leave.

He's close to starting it, the mage whispered. Maybe a few weeks, maybe sooner.

You've made promises like this before, the cloud whispered back. The old man isn't pleased with you.

I'm not the one who's delaying things.

It had been two months past the time when the supposed device would go into operation. Rumors had already spread far beyond the Academy, making their way not only to the imperial capital, but most of the other big cities as well. In elite circles everyone was talking about the grand device the mages were constructing, with more than a few sending a fair number of bribes to be the ones to witness it. In typical fashion, the archmage kept on overpromising without actually delivering anything. That only increased the speculation regarding the object with theories ranging from the secret of realm creation to a new type of Vermillion ring. What no one outside the inner sanctum knew was that the device was based entirely on Star technology. The artifacts the archmage gathered, combined with the ones he himself created were linked to designs of the Crippled Star.

Do you think it'll work? the cloud asked.

I'm not sure. I've only seen the parts. He keeps the principles to himself, and there haven't been any trial runs as far as I can tell. Some of the others are scared that the Moons will smite the archives because of what we're doing, he added with a mocking laugh.

Good. Make sure that they do.

Gassil suddenly felt chills all over his body.

Say again. He sat up in his bed.

We're asking you to sabotage the experiment. There's no telling what archmage is up to and no one wants to risk it.

You're asking me to sabotage his work? That'll start a war.

The war's already begun. Alien has convinced the right people. All we need is a pretext to get the archmage out of here. Those close to him will either wall in line or will run off like rats from a sinking ship. Just do your part.

Easy for you to say, Gassil thought. He was the one who'd get in trouble while the rest of them were safely outside. If the archmage, or anyone else for that matter, suspected, this might end up being a very painful experience. For the rest of the world, nothing would change, but Gassil might well end up being imprisoned in an item for millennia. By the time he was out, he might have forgotten his own name or even how to communicate with other people.

We'll take care of you, the cloud said. Trust me on that.

The others told me you're the last person to trust, he muttered.

In that case, dont. If you think youll be better off doing nothing, just sit there and wait for someone else to execute the plan.

That was one of the few alternatives that sounded even worse. In such a development, he risked the same punishment, only without having anyone claiming to have his back. It wasnt a situation Gassil would have liked to get in, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

I should never have agreed to this mission. Ill do it this week, he whispered.  
Keep everyone off me until then.

Of course, the cloud said. Anything you need on my end?

Is there anything you could offer?

Just my moral support. Oh, and just so you know. There will be a bit more smuggling than usual from tomorrow, so stay clean. The cloud disappeared into nothing.

Now Gassil knew that things were serious. A smuggling smokescreen wasnt difficult to organize, but it too took effort. Wheels were in motion again, and he had to act fast so as not to get stuck in the middle of things.

*Sorry, old teacher. Better you than me.*

The next morning, everything continued as usual. Gassil would go to the archmages workshop, along with the rest of the assistance, and carefully inspect the elements that had been constructed. On average, out of five pieces that were sent to another world, one would come back. Out of those, about a third were what the archmage deemed useful.

The old goat was smart enough to send a few fake components along with the rest, but thanks to Gassils Earth knowledge, he had a rough idea of what was being constructed: an overly complicated clockwork device. Part of him was curious what it would achieve once completed, but that part was quickly ignored when it came to his self-preservation. Just as the archmage constructed his device, he too was building one of his own something made by combining a few other artifacts in the facility. The design was such that none of the locals would be able to see the danger, but anyone with a biochemical degree on Earth would be able to foretell the results. After all, the goal wasnt to destroy the building, but just to create an excuse for further action and incapacitating all the mages there would do that nicely.

Is anything wrong, dear boy? the archmage asked. Youve been somewhat distracted lately.

Just unsure about this, Gassil replied. Star schematics not sure what to expect.

Worried about the Order? I didnt think you were one of the faithful.

Not the order. The thing youre making. What if something unintended creeps in?

Chainlings? They too follow rules like the rest of us. As I told you, magic is the means to create loopholes. The devices the Star created are objects, nothing more. They wont spontaneously turn evil. Its all about how one uses them.

Gassil nodded, but he had his doubts. More importantly, though, the conversation was an indication that he was getting sloppy. The archmage was starting to suspect something. Maybe he ruled out

sabotage, but there was no telling how long that would last. Ready or not, Gassil was going to have to put his plan in motion that very night.

It felt like eternity for night to fall, and even longer for the work to end. The archmage had the habit of working for the early hours in the morning. The only reason mages didnt rest in the realms was that such sleep didnt restore mana.

For an hour, Gassil remained in his room. Then he stood up and went to the door. After casting a quick spell to enhance his perception, he slipped on a blocking ring and went outside. Instead of going to the workshop, however, the mage left the inner sanctum, returning to the general area. No guards were present in that part of the building. Only the captain of the guard was allowed to enter. Magic statues took care of the rest, but their goal was to keep people from entering the sanctum, not the other way around; and once Gassil released the gas creating artifacts, it wouldnt matter anymorehe was going to be long gone, and the Academy was going to deal with the rest.

You wanted results? The mage said to himself as he attached a Vermillion ring to a cup-like artifact. In itself, the device was harmless. However, its realm was filled with massive hurricane strength winds. At one point, this probably had been a torture chamber. Attaching another artifact to the other side of the vermillion ring ensured that all the wind dispersed knockout pollen throughout the building and the surrounding area. All mages and imperial guards were going to be knocked out for hours; all who didnt have a counter for the effect.

*Here goes.*

Gassil cast an air isolation spell around himself. He was just about to attack the final artifact when the ground trembled. The mage remained perfectly still, wondering if his mind was playing tricks on him. Moments later, the ground trembled again, then it shook. Layers of bright light emerged, passing through walls, shelves, and objects as if they didnt exist. It was like standing within a whirlpool of light or a wormhole.

You really did it. Gassil dropped the artifacts to the ground. Of all the times the archmage would start the device, it had to be now. And, by the looks of it, it did exactly what everyone feared it wouldbreak the boundaries between realms. You crazy old idiot! You really made it happen!

As a scientist, Gassil admired the achievement, even if he knew fully well this might bring to his death. There was no place anyone could hide now. As he stood, he could see guardians emerging from their artifacts: beasts, dryads, copyettes, even nymphs. His fingers moved on their own, composing a series of complicated spells to shield himself as much as possible. Before he could finish, everything went black.

Isnt it ironic, the last thought passed through the mages mind. If they hadnt sent him to investigate the project, the archmage never would have succeeded. Gassils otherworldly eyes were necessary for the proper components to be found. Without them, the clockwork mechanism never would have worked. Alien thought he was so smart, but in the end, he had only

Get up. A kick in the stomach brought Gassil back to reality.

Waves of pain swept through his body, causing him to curl up. Several seconds later, his mind slowly started catching up to his situation. From what he could tell, he was on a floor a hard and very cold floor. People were shouting all around him; judging by the noise, most of them probably were imperial soldiers.

Gassil attempted to cast a spell to get rid of the pain, but he found that his fingers had been shackled together.

Not so fast, a familiar voice said. You're got some answering to do before you can cast spells.

Leora? Gassil looked up. There were several figures standing above him, but their faces were unrecognizable; they had cast defocus to hide their true features. What's going on?

You destroyed the archives, the voice continued. A very expensive decision that has resulted in the loss of a few lives. More importantly, though, a lot of valuable artifacts have gone missing, along with half the structure itself.

Me? Terror gripped Gassil. Even in his current state, he knew exactly what was going on. The group was framing him for whatever had gone down. It wasn't me, it was the archmage! he said quickly. He triggered the device. I saw it! I saw guardians be released from their artifacts. I was the one helping you!

Told you that's what he would say, another voice said. This one belonged to Valerian. The worms always try to point the finger even when the evidence is against them.

Thank you, Leora said. I'm sure you have more important things. Let us deal with this. After all, don't you have more important things to take care of now, archmage Valerian?

Gassil distinctly heard a snort, after which one of the figures above him walked away. So, this was what Leora had meant about Alien having made arrangements with the right people. Valerian was believed to be a staunch supporter of his mentor. However, even he was ready to sing another tune after he was offered the position of archmage. No doubt he would turn this around as a success and with the support of the otherworlder faction.

Leora. The mage tried to reach out to one of the figures. I'm still one of us. We all came from Earth. I did as you asked. You told me you'll take care of me.

Shhhh. The finger placed a finger on his lips. It'll be fine. The emperor understands you're not entirely to blame for the insanity of your old teacher. There won't be any banishment. Maybe you'll even get to keep your name.

But I the archmage

The old archmage isn't your concern any longer. And neither is anything else.

You can't do this to me! I'll tell the emperor about this! I'll tell him all about the things you and Alien plotted! If you don't help me, I'll

The woman laughed.

I truly hope so. The emperor has asked to have a one-on-one with you, and I'm sure he has a lot of questions.

Chapter 555: Screams of Grass



Ruby, Gleam! Dallion shouted as he landed back to the ground.

Both shardfly and whip blade darted at the mage. Before they could reach him, invisible barriers appeared, preventing them from passing the final ten inches. For all his faults, the mage was skilled, and fast.

He was the reason March got banished, Dallion thought. And likely not only her. According to the memory, that had been the greatest Academy disaster that the empire had seen. Mages and imperial guards by the dozens had been banished and had their names erased from existence. There was no telling how many of them had ended up in Nerosal. If Dallion had to guess, hed say about half the unluckier half. Nerosal was known as the city of second chances, but it wasnt the only one that accepted fallen. The other city was further north and considered closer to civilization.

Just as Dallion turned around, he saw March make her move. The woman hadnt made any serious moves so far, but now she seemed as if she were entering the fight. That wasnt all. Her style of fighting had also changed into something altogether different. It was as if the armor had broken up into fragments, held together by magic, allowing her to perform movements that were previously restricted.

Prison break, Nil said.

What? Dallion asked, confused.

*Even curses come with conditions. Being an imperial comes with certain benefits and obligations. If the emperor wanted her dead, shed have been killed years ago. Banishment is meant to serve two things: a reminder for people not to forget their place and a demonstration to others not to mess up. Fighting enemies of the empire is still very much desired. The moment the last shred of doubt is removed that someone is an enemy of the empire, the prison that is her armor, is broken, allowing March to do her duty. The catch is that it only works against enemies of the empire, not enemies of the guild, the county, or even the province.*

Quite the restrictive safeguard, and by the looks of it quite powerful to keep such skills in check. Everything Dallion had assumed March to be was quickly thrown out of the window. Even with her new perception he was barely able to keep track of her movements as she bombarded the rogue mage with hundreds of strikes per second. On his part, Gassil, also picked up his game, his hands and fingers moving at such speed that one would swear he had eight arms. Spells appeared only to be shattered by March.

In the span of two seconds, it was as if a fight of hours had taken place. Aware that she would only get in the way, Gleam moved away from the fight, forcibly pulling Ruby away with her. Eury, on the other hand, had different ideas, leaping back up into action. Her own armor no longer had the abilities it had in the sword realm, but it still seemed to enhance her movements, making her speed approach that of the other two.

Dont even think about it, Nil said. You dont have the speed to take part in such a fight.

I dont have to be there to join in, Dallion said, combining layer vision with his scholar skills. In his mind he could see the path and speed of all attacks, like vectors flying through the air. Prolet, make things interesting.

It was the simplest of commands, causing the smallest of actions. All the sword did was to shift slightly and in so doing cause Gassil to scratch the tip of one finger along the blade. Under normal circumstances such a wound wouldnt even register, let alone influence the battle. But as the saying went, even the wings of a butterfly had the ability to cause hurricanes further away.

The mere fact that the mage had wounded himself was enough to decrease his concentration by as little as a fraction. Earthly habits abandoned millennia ago took control, making him glance in the direction of the wound, eager to determine the source. That created a rather small blind spot in the mans defenses. The weakness was immediately exploited by Eury, who attempted to punch at the mages neck. Gassils reaction speed prevented her from succeeding, but as he protected against the punch, an even greater crack in his defense formed.

I need more mind, Dallion thought. That, or a higher level of scholarly skills. At the moment, he could see everything that was going on, but not what would happen in the future. Once again, he felt the same way as he did during the days he first learned about awakened markers. No matter how good he was at reacting at the moment, he could never become a grandmaster, for he couldnt defeat his opponents strategy.

There was no doubt about it. He had a lot more to learn both in terms of traits, skills, and actual experience. In a normal one-to-one battle, he wasnt strong enough to defeat a noble or a mage. However, he wasnt all that far off, either. Also, he was friends with a dragon.

Dark, burst into instances and attack him! Dallion shouted.

You sure? the dragon asked. I thought you were mad when I did combat splitting without telling anyone.

*Precisely!*

The request was confusing enough for Dark to go on with it. Splitting into three dozen instances, the dragon flapped its wings, then released a torrent of air in the direction of the mage. Each instance earned a different reaction, most of them poor, but that wasnt the point. Dallion himself burst into sixty instances and charged. In all of them, he did the same thing: take out the kaleidervisto and aim it at the mages chest.

Full speed, Lux, he said, then used his will to force the instance he wanted.

The dragons instances did nothing at all. Slow and easily avoidable, Gassil didnt even have to use magic to deal with them. However, due to his distracted state, he didnt even see Dallions wave coming. Out of all of the instances, one was chosen the one in which Lux managed to tear off the skill gem from the mage.

Felygn, Dallion whispered. If Ive any favors owed, Im using them now.

A scream of pain and agony filled the air, as the gem was separated from the Gassil. Based on the emotion, Dallion felt that it wasn't the pain that caused the yell, but the acknowledgement of defeat. The mage thought the Star had given him everything the world owed him. Instead, he had lost everything he thought he'd gained. First the sword, then the skill gem, and soon after that, he'd also lose his life.

Dallion was about to tell Lux and Gleam to reclaim the gem for him, but before he did, the crystal darted straight at him, smacking him in the forehead.

### **HERBOLOGY skills learned**

A green rectangle flashed before his eyes for a moment, before disappearing again.

What the? Dallion grabbed his forehead, but the only thing there was a slight bump. There was no sign of the crystal, as if it had never existed or rather, as if it had been consumed.

Hungry, a voice echoed in the background. Hungry!

Even with the fight continuing, Dallion felt the urge to turn around. He knew that he was hearing a new entity, however, it wasn't a guardian.

*Hungry!*

Concentrating on his layer vision, Dallion found the source of the voice. A single blade of grass, among the rest, was screaming for food. Unlike those around him, it had been changed. It didn't gain sustenance from the ground, but was seeking to drain it from the only source available: awakened beings.

Hungry! another voice joined in. Starving!

There was another blade of grass a fair distance away. And it wasn't the only one. The two voices soon became a dozen, then a hundred. Thousands of plants were screaming for food all around, the sole purpose of their existence to sap energy from awakened. The mage had done a good job to change the nature of the flora he had found in the sword, changing its target. Naturally, magic was the only means to shield oneself from the effects. That would guarantee that in time the only people remaining in the world would be mages and non-awakened. That is, unless the mage changed the nature of the plants once again.

Hungry! Hungry! Hungry! a chorus of voices shouted from everywhere.

Stop! Dallion covered his ears, the wave of sound stronger than he had expected.

Pain pulsed in his temples as if someone was trying to drill into his head with a spoon. It was just like each other time he had tried to use a new skill. This time, the skill had affected him. That was the risk of knowing so much already.

Breathe, Nil told Dallion. Don't think about the noises. Don't try to block them out.

*I can't!*

Dallion struggled to remain on his feet. Sensing something, the whip blade moved towards him, extending to form a protective circle around him.

Just like the trial with the distractions, the echo said. Ignore them. Let the voices and emotions pass through. They sting, but they cant harm you.

The screams increased, growing louder and louder, until finally, they were gone; and along with them, everything else disappeared as well. Almost everything

You couldnt resist, could you? A Green Moon appeared in the darkness. You had to ask for another favor without having to. Just like last time.

Dallion had no strength to respond, laying in the nothingness, listening.

You didnt need the skill gem to stop the plague, although since this is the way you chose, so youll have to carry the burden. Just dont complain later.

Complain? Dallion wondered. He wasnt even sure what he was to complain about. Other than the crushing voices, that was.

Youll need a lot of practice to develop your Herbology skill. Plants are everywhere in the wilderness. They dont hide, like animals. Gassil was smarthe knew he couldnt handle all the voices, so he never consumed the gem. He just used magic to make use of its powers.

*What about the Star?*

Get some rest, Dal, the Moon said, glowing brighter. You almost earned it.

There was no telling whether Dallion got any rest or not. For a moment later, he opened his eyes, feeling just as exhausted as if hed been on a marathon. The voices were gone, although he felt a significant hunger, as if he had leveled up half a dozen times without eating.

Dal? Eury approached him. Take this. She handed him a waterskin.

Water was the last thing Dallion wanted, but he took a few sips nonetheless. Seeing the gorgon in a relaxed state, he could assume that they had won the fight, although there didnt seem to be any sign of march.

Wheres he tried to sit up, only to find that he lacked the strength to do so.

March? Eury helped him up. Nearby. She wanted to have a word with the mage.

I have some questions too, Dallion managed to say. However, Eury shook her head.

No questions, she said. It was clear what she meant. Officially, Gassil was to have died during the fight. What about the sword? Dallion asked. What about the plague?

Well return the sword as promised. If the real team doesnt show up by tomorrow, well head back to the city to return it. It belongs to the Linatols. After that Well, well see what happens. As for the plague. She paused. That wasnt our mission. Well tell what we found out if asked, but nothing more.

Right.

Darks gone, by the way.

Dallion froze up.

Dont worry. It was his decision. He said that he must practice what he learned. March didnt ask any questions so that means she wont mention it.

Unless asked. Dallion sighed.

Even so, she doesnt have a lot to say. She just saw it appear, take part in the fight, and vanish. She moved closer. I wont say anything about him, even if asked.

#### Chapter 556: Gift to a Gorgon

The day waiting turned into two, then three. Dallion did not complain, for it gave him a chance to rest and heal thanks to Lux. Getting used to his new ability was somewhat more difficult, but thanks to enough guidance from Nil and Vihrogon, he learned to ignore the talk of the plants most of the time. The greatest mental obstacle was getting used to living in a world in which everything from food to firewood to objects spoke back. It definitely gave a whole new perspective on the world. Everything taken or destroyed had to be gone for a reason, and nothing had to be wasted. Following the path of the empath had become all the more difficult. No doubt this was what the Green Moon had meant during its brief conversation with Dallion.

Several times Dallion considered attempting to use the time to level up, but Nil was against it. In his words, going through a trial until he had a proper grasp of things would only make things worse and more difficult in the long run. It didnt take much for Dallion to agree.

I guess they arent coming, Dallion said during the third night.

Guess not, March replied, remaining close to the fire in her suit of armor. Since the end of the fight, the aura sword hadnt left her side, almost as if she were afraid that someone would appear and try to steal it. Dallion could understand her; as far as the world was concerned, the sword had the power to create a new plague. Only Dallion and Eury knew the truth, just as they knew they had become the new owners of the weapon. That was going to require some explaining.

Are we going to explore the sword? Dallion asked.

No need. Its flawless.

Theyve given us all the other swords.

The woman looked at him through the campfire flames.

Two swords, she corrected. The guild was entrusted with two swords, but neither of you are from the guild anymore. Whatever happens, its for the Archduke to decide.

Can we go in for a bit? Dallion asked.

Surprise emanated from both March and Eury. Thanks to his heightened perception, Dallion could all but see it.

You have the sword. We wont have any chance after you hand it in.

March glanced at the sword. There was no telling whether she suspected they had done something to the realm or not. Being who she was, it was likely they didnt find out.

In the blink of the eye, the sword was drawn, then tossed to Dallion. Out of habit, he burst into five instances, catching it with every single one of them.

Go for it, March replied. Just dont do anything youll regret.

A bit late for that, Dallion thought as he nodded. Given the alternative, though, it wasn't like he had much of a choice.

Eury? he looked at the gorgon.

Instantly understanding what he had in mind, the gorgon went up to him and placed her hand on his cheek. That was all Dallion needed.

### **WORLD ITEM AWAKENING**

The wilderness gave way to the magnificence that was the world of the sword. It was still morning there, one full of calm and warmth, and for the first time in a while absolute quiet.

I could get used to this, Dallion thought.

Some would call that a sad thing, Nil said. You're aware that guardians and echoes spend their entire existence trying to escape their realm?

*That's the difference, Nil. Now that I can get out of here anytime, I like it.*

It hadn't changed too much, Eury said, looking in all directions. This part of it hasn't changed at all.

It's changed. Dallion smiled. He could feel the presence of hundreds of creatures, from insects to small rodents, and even a few predators. Almost none of them were awakened. And it'll be a lot more different further on. You gave them a sea, remember?

It'll take us a while to get there. Darks no longer with us.

We don't need Dark. Dallion knelt, placing the palm of his hand on the ground. When we left, we put one sole guardian in charge. And as owners, we get to call him.

Barely had Dallion said that, when a series of trees sprouted around them. Trunks shot up to the sky forming columns that spread branches, creating the ceiling of a temple. In a matter of seconds, Dallion and Eury were no longer standing on a field of grass, but in the halls of a structure, one with a large altar and several doorways to other areas. Most remarkable of all two wooden sculptures were also present; one had Dallion's appearance, while the other was a copy of Euryale.

Flashy, the gorgon remarked.

I try to accommodate, a new voice said.

Looking at the altar, a dryad was standing. However, it wasn't the guardian himself, but rather an echo.

I thought you might return. That's why I set up for such an eventuality.

The cities are doing well, I take it? Dallion stood up.

City. There's only one big city now surrounding where my original temple used to be. I didn't want any reminders of the Star, so the tower cities were knocked down half a century after you left.

Time sure flies, Dallion thought.

*You'll get used to it, dear boy. One day, you'll be able to tell exactly how much time has passed in a realm compared to the real world.*

*But not now.*

*Patience is a virtue. Besides, at your current level, you wont be able to understand a thing.*

I hope you havent made us the new deities of the realm. Euryale went to the statue depicting her. As she reached out to touch it, the wooden form changed, shrinking back to a small tree.

Theres been enough of that for a while. The Star, The Moons, mage emissaries the dryad waved his hand. For the moment, its best that they didnt worry about such things. In a few more generations, Ill tell them about the Moons. Hopefully, things dont get messed up this time.

That was something Dallion could agree on. Personally, he thought that the world had a good chance, at least much better than the other world items. With luck, maybe itll flourish in a few centuries. Maybe the dryads would even be able to escape their own prison. After all, if Dallion had managed, maybe one day they would as well.

But thats not what youve come for, the echo said.

No. Im here for the promise. Im here for the twi-crown.

That was part of the original promise made. However, events hadnt allowed it to take place. When the guardian had been defeated and regained his form, he had cast out Dallion and Eury, freeing them from the realm. During its transforming state, the guardian didnt have the ability to offer the second prize, however, now he did.

A pedestal emerged from the center of the room. Branches twisted, unweaving as if they were unwrapping a gift, until the wooden crown was revealed. It was identical to the ones Dallion had seen in the other words. Much to his surprise, though, this one still had a large gem on it.

There you go, the dryad said. The twi-crown. Normally, Id kill you for thinking of wearing it, but given the lack of candidates.

Whats that? Euryale asked.

Dallion remained silent, eyes glued to the skill gem. He already had both skills already. Taking the gem was only going to grant him a single trait and skill increase. Even so, he considered the option.

No, he told himself. Its worse than an achievement.

Thats the crown left by the emperor, the echo replied. Each sword has one. Its supposed to act as a symbol, making the one whod lead the banished back to the real world. Of course, the goal was for that to happen after winning the war. The dryad paused for a few moments. Regret emerged on the left side of his head like a deep blue sphere, before fading away again. In more practical terms, the crown came with two skill gems in areas that dryads would be adept in. Zoology and herbalism. A leader, even one whos forgotten everything, would be able to achieve a lot if he gained those skills.

Which one is it? Dallion asked.

The gem? Zoology. Herbalism was used to create the plague.

That made sense. The plague had been created with the blessing of the guardians. A terrible plan in retrospect, but it required a gem. The following rulers must have had the self-discipline not to request the second gem. Either that, or the guardians hadnt allowed it. One thing didnt make sense,

though: where had the Star taken the gem he had given to Gassil? If not this sword, it meant that the Star had it from somewhere else.

Can I have it? Dallion asked. He saw disappointment emerge within the echo, but also understanding. As much as the guardian didnt want to part with the gem, he had lost the battle, so both the crown and skill gem were no longer his.

You already have the skill, the dryad said.

I do. But Eury doesnt.

Is that a smart move, dear boy? Nil asked. Gifts are a good way to start a conversation, but theyre unlikely to keep someone close for long, especially someone like her.

Its a skill a hunter should have, Dallion said, replying both to Nil and the question that Eury hadnt asked. Itll be helpful.

Youve learned too much to be reckless, the gorgon said.

Im not. Things might change when we get back to Linatol, but youve earned this. The Archduke isnt interested in the crown. He doesnt even know it exists. Besides, this way youll also have the protection of a Moon, Dallion wanted to add.

There were a handful of awakened with the empathy trait left in the world. It was natural for the green Moon to look after them, even those whod earned the blessing through unusual means.

Giving the gem felt like a parting gift, but it also felt right. The gorgon had taught him a great deal in many areas. Now it was his turn to return the gesture in part.

Ill take some getting used to, he told her. But its worth it. Trust me.

Eury could have made the obvious joke that this was a ploy for her to take care of the creatures that Dallion brought home, but she didnt. Things had developed a lot past that point.

Thank you. Ill remember this. There wasnt a hint of hesitation. When it came to such things, she was quite pragmatic, as was the rest of her race.

The gorgon walked up to the gem and pressed on it with her finger. There was no glow or flash of light. The gem just disappeared from the crown leaving another empty space. Eurys snakes straightened to the extreme, then returned to their usual state. The skill acquisition had been a shock, although she seemed to be handling it better than Dallion.

She wont be able to increase the trail level by much, Nil said. You are aware of that?

Itll be enough, Dallion replied.

Do you want the crown as well? the dryad asked as Euryale stepped back.



The crown's fine where it is, Dallion replied. Maybe someone from your city will reach the point to wear it?

Doubtful. If that happens, though, you'll be the first to know.

Right. Just one more thing. Can you keep our achievement a secret? Technically, we weren't allowed to take control of the sword or do any changes.

The dryad's expression darkened.

I take it someone won't be happy that the plague is gone? he asked.

I'm not sure, but it's a possibility. Dallion could almost hear March saying that heads have rolled for less. Can you do it?

I'll do my best. Other than you two and the mage, only three people have been in the realm, most of them ages ago. As far as they're concerned, it'll be no different this time.

Thanks. Dallion nodded. Hopefully, it was going to be enough.

#### Chapter 557: Commitment

After the recent encounter, the trip to Linadol was long, but uneventful. There were times at which Dallion almost hoped that something would appear and attack, but the few wilderness creatures that he sensed were quick to move as far away as possible.

The new skill had changed Euryale, as Dallion knew it would. The gorgon kept her blocking ring on, but every now and again some of her snakes would twitch for no reason. If Dallion were to guess, he'd say she was going through personal awakenings while walking, possibly even attempting a trial or two.

Half a day from the city, a merchant party passed by. It was quite small—a single wagon, escorted by two mercenaries of mid-level awakening. When they were near, one of them tossed Dallion a small wooden bag. Inside was a parcel wrapped in cloth and a piece of parchment that read For Adzorg. That marked one more promise coming to an end. Thinking about it, things had turned out rather well. Dallion had fulfilled both the requests and had gotten something in return, including the item that was supposed to provide a level playing field against the Star. Hopefully, it was going to be a while before he'd have to use it. The encounter with the mage had told him, if nothing less, that he was far too weak to take on the Star alone.

Something I should know about? March asked, as Dallion placed the bag in his backpack.

No, he replied. Nothing of concern.

Alright. When we get to Linatol leave me to do the talking. Don't say anything unless asked directly. And try not to lie.

That was new. Usually, the best advice was never to lie to a noble. Having March hint that Dallion could, if needed, suggested that she either had a high opinion of his abilities, or that she was willing to cover it up. Given what she had done to the rogue mage, that was understandable.

What about the poison plague? Dallion asked. Thanks to his new skill, and the explanation of events within the sword, Dallion had a basic idea of what had been done to the plants.

What about it?

What do we do with the places that are already infected?

Thats a problem for the Archduke and the Academy. Were just mercenaries and weve done our job.

Somehow that didnt sit well with Dallion. According to March, the mage had sworn that there was no way to create more matches without the skill gem and the sword. Even with their ability to spread rapidly in the world, they required awakened to survive for more than a week. Gassil had been experimenting with finding a workaround, using Starspawn to nourish the current crops. The sudden burst in the plague was mostly due to sound strategic planning on his part than anything else. With the awakened aware of the danger, and a large number of wilderness creatures already killed or fled, the plague plants were going to wither in a matter of years, or even sooner. However, Dallion found a few years to be far too long.

Do you need me there? he asked all of a sudden.

March didnt respond.

Youre the one who they really trust. You and Eury. Ive created too many waves right now. I dont need to be there.

Are you sure about this? Many spend their entire lives striving to earn an Archdukes favor. Youre this close to achieving that, but you wont if you arent there to claim it. There might not be other opportunities.

There will. That was more a concern than a hope. Dallion was no longer naive to think that the nobility would leave him alone. He had meddled in too many things, not to mention his level steadily approached the eighty-level point. When that happened, he was going to officially become both a rival and a threat.

Eury, March said loudly. What do you think?

It might be a good idea, the gorgon said, keeping a professional front.

Thats the thing about gorgons, the armadil shield said. You never know what theyre really thinking unless they tell you.

The focus is the sword, so it wont matter much. The fight with the Archdukes son would be enough to explain him staying away. Nobles can be petty.

Are you really sure, Dal? March shifted her attention again.

I think its for the best. Someone needs to start taking care of the poison plants. And Ive a few debts to pay off back in Nerosal.

Alright. The woman nodded. Go back. Ill keep the secret regarding the sword, the fight, and the gem. You do your best not to stick out.

Dallion couldnt help but chuckle. He was going to try, but even he doubted hed succeed.

Ill go ahead, March said. Catch up when youre done, she told Eury, then continued towards the city.

For over a minute, Eury and Dallion remained still. To a degree, Dallion was grateful that it took so long for March to get out of earshot. He knew what he was about to say, just as he knew it was the right decision. His only concern was what Eury would think.

Im staying in Linatol, the gorgon said. Not only because of my promise.

I see. Is it because of me?

No. I have some things I need to deal with. Its not because of you or Jiroh. I just need to keep going along my path. But you probably know that.

Dallion nodded.

You can stay with me. Once you give the package to captain Adzorg and repay your dept to the general you can join me in the hunters den.

You can come back to Nerosal with me, he said. Youll get to chat with the animals I bring back?

The joke was bad, but it still made Eury laugh. Even as he said it, Dallion knew what her answer would be. Their relationship was like a roller-coaster ever since theyd first met. There were several ups and downs, but both of them had soldiered on. The irony was that now, when they had cleared everything on an emotional level, they were aware that theyd have to spend a while apart. Both of them had their paths to follow and while they were intertwined, each thread had to take a different route in the short term.

A long time ago, you asked me the significance of the stone orchid, Euryale said. It has a few uses. With a lot of effort and a bit of magic, you can turn it into a familiar. Someone probably tried doing that at Nerosal, then threw it away. However, thats not what we use it for. Both here and in my world, the orchid represents an engagement ring, but not one humans are used to. Engagements are a two way street for us. The one who accepts it, takes on the obligation to tend for it until it hatches into a familiar. When you gave it to me, I wasnt fully willing to commit. I am now. She placed her hand on Dallions cheek. Im giving you the orchid and everything else I have in Nerosal. If you have the will and commitment, give me the familiar that comes from it. If you lose the desire, just give me the orchid as it is, so I can give it to someone else.

As with everything else he knew about gorgons, this too was intricate in its simplicity. Their society was very much different from that of any other race Dallion knew. One thing he knew, though, was that commitment was a huge deal.

You can count on it, he said. And when its ready, Ill bring it to you. Now he had proposed as well.

Nice, Ruby said from Dallions shoulder. Both he and Eury heard it, but only Dallion could understand. The gorgon must have had a good idea, though, for she pulled back her hand.

Combine art with your other skills, she said. Thread forging is good. Thread fighting is better.

I will, Dallion let out a laugh. Even in moments such as these, Eury remained the strict trainer. What will you do? Climb up the hunter hierarchy?

Not only. Theres something I need to finish. I tried running away once. Now that Im stronger, Ill give it a proper go.

Good luck. Whatever it is, good luck.

Looking at her one last time, Dallion turned around and walked away. She didnt wish him the same. Sometimes he wondered if she believed in luck.

Smooth, Vihrogon said. You could have convinced her to come with you. If you had used your music skills, shed be walking with you to Nerosal.

They wouldnt have worked on her, Dallion said.

*Probably not, but would have given her an excuse.*

*That just shows that you dont know her at all.*

For once, Dallion felt that the armadil shields advice was wrong. Maybe that was the problem being companion armoreverything was considered an art, but there never could be a final commitment.

Are you really going to remove the plague? The shield asked.

Yes.

*In that case, start slow. Just because you know whats going on doesnt mean it isnt dangerous. The plague was deadly for a reason.*

That was true, and to be honest, Dallion would have preferred a chance to talk to Gassil before March had dealt with him. Biochemistry aside, he wanted to know more about the group of otherworld mages. According to the rogues memories, there had been eight of them seventeen years ago. Now, the number could have increased. The larger question was, what were they playing? On the surface it appeared to be normal Academy intrigue, however, Dallion had a feeling there was more to it. Alien had specifically made his way to Nerosal for no apparent reason. Any mage could have been sent to protect the member from the imperial enemy, and after seeing how mages thought in practice, there was no doubt in Dallions mind that the death was anything but an unfortunate accident. Alien could have saved his charge at any time, but he hadnt. More interestingly, he was one of the few people who hadnt been punished as a result of the Nerosal catastrophe.

Nil, Dallion began, I know youve no intention of telling me, but therell come a point when Ill have that conversation about your past.

Im sure you will, dear boy, the echo didnt sound surprised. However, even if I were inclined, I wouldn't be able to tell you all that much. Youll have to have that talk with my original.

*I know.*

Dallion had seen recently seen mages and high-level awakened create echoes who considered themselves separate entities. If Adzorg was who Dallion suspected he was, that would be a simple issue for him to do exactly that.

*Hes the archmage, isnt he?*

*The archmage isnt the only mage banished from the Academy, dear boy. That too is a matter that youll have to discuss with my original in person.*

*What would you advise me?*

*Putting me on the spot? Youve become sneaky. Sadly, in this case I wont be much of a help. Talking with the captain would be the logical thing to do. However, he might not wish to see you.*

*Hell have to, if he wants to get what I brought for him.*

*Once again, youre wrong. He might have wanted it, but it was Hannah who made the request. Thus, shell be the one accepting it.*

Dallion laughed.

*If my original is the person who you suspect him to be, hed have taken precautions against something as simple. Of course, you could always insist on not handing over the item in question and force a conversation. Would that be the right way to go, though?*

Probably not, Dallion replied.

There were other things of vital importance he had to deal with right now. Having Adzorg on his side was more important than uncovering the past. However, the moment was approaching when the mage wasnt going to be able to avoid him anymore. The bigger question was how the real Adzorg would react. Whatever the case, Dallion was going to become stronger, no matter what.

Chapter 558: True Hunter

The ground exploded in a mountain of rocks and dirt, injuring seven of Dallions instances. All the rest scattered away from the point of impact, shield in front.

Gleam, at it! Dallion ordered as he summoned his dartblade.

Using that might be a bit optimistic on your part, dear boy, Nil said. Id suggest sticking to your harpsisword.

Dont worry, Nil. Dallion burst into a new set of instances. Im sure Harp will understand.

Copper colored lines filled the air, each was a vector indicating the speed and direction of every stone particle flying about. An ordinary person would see nothing but an impenetrable field of threads, but for Dallion they were nothing more than an intricate game of cats cradle. All he had to do was to perform the right actions at the right moments in time.

Athletics, acrobatics, and arts, he thought as his swarm of instances charged forward.

Guard, half his instances whispered.

Four types of markers emerged. Slower than the person they were supposed to help, they followed Dallion like a trail of color. Similar to a ballerina, he turned and twisted, dancing his way through the maze of lines. The ones he couldnt evade he blocked with his armadil shield, and each time he did, the flying pieces of rock became slower and slower until they froze altogether.

So far so good, Dallion thought. It had taken him months to make his seamlessly combine dancing and combatclearly a theater performer he was not. Thankfully, he didnt have to be. All that mattered was the win.

Gleam? Dallion looked around, gripping his weapon.

Hold on! The shardfly shouted. Lately she had become testier than usual, despite having leveled up a level. Its not among the debris.

*It has to be somewhere.*

A dozen instances of Dallion looked down. Almost instantly, another part of the ground broke open, destroying three instances. The action was so fast that Dallion felt momentary pain as his instances were killed.

You really are a pain, he thought. Even after all the training and preparation, his opponent was sneakier than expected. Somehow, it had managed to maintain its mobility, despite the time freeze bonus Dallions guard skills should have provided.

A formless mass of blackness oozed out of the ground. Dozens of eyes and teeth emerged as it took form, transforming into a clawed bull-like creature. The presence of the creature alone sent a wave of doubt through Dallion. The creatures presence alone was enough to petrify him. Many times it had, going all the way back to the first time he left his native village. At the time, the chainling seemed an almost indestructible creature, capable of consuming and twisting everything it touched, capable of casting crude, but powerful spells, not to mention shred any person close. A squad of awakened soldiers, led by a noble from the capital, and a cleric from the Order of the Seven Moons were needed to destroy the chainling, despite it being seriously wounded. Later found that the noble was merely a hereditary noble, the clerica cursed albino, and the soldiers had barely done beyond the third awakening gate. His fear of the chainling, however, had remained.

Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea, Dallion whispered, reciting the names of the Seven Moons.

The fear was bristly swept away, allowing him to attack.

Lux! he shouted, initiating an arc slash attack with the edge of his dartblade. Blue flames surrounded the weapon, emitting a cool glow.

### **MINOR STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 10%**

The blade ripped through the black silhouette. However, as it did, black tendrils shot out from the rest of the chainling, piercing through Dallions right arm, leg and shoulder.

### **AVERAGE WOUND**

**Your heals has been reduced by 10%**

Four red rectangles appeared shortly after, reducing Dallions total health to half. The damage was only inflicted to one of the many instances, but Dallion decided to go on with it. Despite the apparently serious damage, he still had the advantage.

The blue flame grew, spreading from his weapon to the rest of his body. A new set of rectangles appeared, restoring Dallions health in increments of five percent.

Dallion swing the blade back, attempting a second attack. The chaingling saw that and pulled away. However, in doing so, it had left a small but vital opening: a spot that Dallion could see to be impossible to cover in the next second. It was then that he pulled the trigger of the dartblade.

Spark, he whispered.

A bold, seemingly created entirely of bright blue light, shot out, striking its target. The sound of screams combined with the tearing of metal filled the air. Cracks of light covered the black silhouette. Chunks of darkness crumbled off, like cubes of night, evaporating in the air.

## **TERMINAL HIT**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

A new red rectangle appeared. Time returned to normal. All the dust and stone debris flew on, eventually settling to the ground. Nothing but Dallion and the agonizing chainling remained.

Enough with the theatrics. A dark-skinned woman emerged several steps from Dallion. She was athletic and muscular, with a simple leather vest. Even so, Dallion knew that she could defeat him easily without breaking a sweat. Hawk, get rid of it.

The agonizing chainling quickly remained silent, melting away. Shortly after, a new blob seeped up from the ground, this time taking Dallions appearance.

You still rely too much on your trinkets, Vela said. Half your actions are predictable. Some of them are outright sloppy. Still, you managed to pull it off. She turned towards the second Dallion. Anything to add?

No, nothing to add, the being said in a far deeper voice. Its always a treat to face empaths. Maybe you should fail him a few times just for the sake of it?

The woman smirked. Tempting.

Id have healed my wounds just as fast in the real world, Dallion said. Even if there was one in a thousand chance that Vela failed him, he wasnt willing to just stand by. Not ending it would have put me at greater risk.

Maybe, maybe not. Either way, youre good enough to risk your life on your own. Without warning, she disappeared.

Dallion stared at the empty spot where Vela had been several seconds more. It was difficult to say whether hed impressed her or not. The woman was masterful in hiding her emotions to the extent that even Dallions music skills werent able to see beneath her surface. Clearly, she wasnt the leader of the provinces hunters for nothing.

Just so you know, she went easy on you. The other Dallion shifted appearance, morphing into the woman. Ive seen her have hunters retake the trial for less.

Did I make any mistakes? Dallion asked.

The creature smirked. In the real world, it was a large building, home to all the hunters in the region. In this realm, though, the guardian maintained its true form and abilities those of a copyette. Ages ago, the race had attempted to take over the world, but for some unknown reason had failed,

ending up becoming banished as a result. Now, the only way they kept on existing was in the form of item and area guardians.

Did I? Dallion repeated.

I could have cut off your arm, the copyette said, tapping Dallion several times on the shoulder. If I'd done that, you wouldn't be able to heal or even shoot.

If you had, I'd have chosen another instance.

True. But you wouldn't have won. The copyette winked. I didn't say you lost. I just said that Vela would have had you go through the fight again. Anyway, get out of here and enjoy your victory.

The copyette's encouragement wasn't the best. Then again, hunters weren't the type that spent time encouraging others. In their line of work, only one thing mattered: was one strong enough to survive or not. Apparently, Vela had deemed that Dallion was.

A moment later, the vast open realm was gone and Dallion was back in the real world, the large hall of the hunters den around him. Vela was standing a step away, her hand on his shoulder. Several more hunters were there as well, fixing their armor, eating, or even snoozing.

How did it go? a female dwarf asked, looking up from her stone anvil.

Good enough. Vela moved her hand away. Go ahead and make his emblem. You'll have to bless it yourself. She turned to Dallion.

He nodded.

Get some food, get some rest, then you can go through the request scrolls. There's been some nasties out north. Pays not that good, but it's enough to cut your teeth as a hunter.

Normally, Dallion would be pleased. High level requests were almost always made by nobles or large trade organizations, earning tens or even hundreds more than the standard tasks Dallion was dealing with. It wasn't uncommon for an established hunter to live well on three or four hunts per year. Dallion's goal, though, wasn't that, at least not right away. His profile was already much higher than he would have liked and even after spending three months being as quiet as possible, there were quite a few nobles keeping an eye on him.

Maybe next time, he said. I've already got something going on.

Suit yourself. Vela walked off without a shrug. Just remember, you're registered now. If someone requests you personally, you have to go.

Dallion frowned. That was the price of becoming a full hunter; it earned him a lot of privileges in every town and city in the real world, but he couldn't refuse direct requests, especially from the Tamin Empire.

Hey, don't worry about it, the female dwarf said. No one has made a personal request in years. You're more likely to fight a dragon.

Yeah. Dallion forced a smile. In the last year he had fought a dragon twice, more if dragonlets were to be counted. Where's Eury? I'd like to return my apprentice emblem.

Off to the west. A big creature was sighted there, so she's off to kill it and increase her rank.



Euryale was a gorgon who also was Dallions fianc. They had become engaged three months ago. Sadly, each of them had a different path to follow. Eury had gone to the hunters den in Linatol, while Dallion had returned to Nerosal. Since then theyd kept a long distance relationship through letters, but had never seen each other. Dallion had sent her a ring with an echo of hi, once, only to get it back a week later with an explanation that Eury didnt like echoes. Strictly speaking, he was hoping to see her during his hunters test; she had promised to be there. Sadly, she was also very eager to increase her rank for some reason.

I can give it to er if you like? The dwarf offered.

Thanks.

The fashion in which dwarves forged metal was very different from any other race. For one, they were the only ones granted the natural ability to shape metal with their bare hands. Instead of using tongs and a hammer, the dwarf put an ingot of sun gold on the stone anvil, rolled it to a cone, then gently flattened it to a thin sheet with her hands. After that was done, the dwarf gently folded the sheet like an origami. Her fingers moved so fast that they were one large blur. Several seconds later, the dwarf stopped, the emblem laying in the middle of the anvil.

Thats unusual, Dallion said.

A thornflower, the dwarf explained. Very much like you. Beautiful to observe, but old it too tightly and it makes you bleed.

Looks like itll make me bleed just wearing it.

Nonsense, the dwarf laughed. No emblem hurts its owner. Once you bless it, youll be a full hunter.

Carefully, Dallion picked it up. On closer examination, it really looked like a bloomed rose only with every petal being a thorn.

Thornflower, he thought. Maybe he was that. Quite a lot of people close to him had gotten hurt. However, so had many who had underestimated him.

A thin layer of green light surrounded the emblem. The Moonthe Green Moon in particularhad acknowledged Dallions blessing, filling the emblem with divine power. From this moment on, he was a full hunter.

## Chapter 559: Old New Home

Going back to Nerosal was also an experience. After the rogue mage was dealt with, the poison plague was no longer viewed as the threat it had been before. However, the walls and patrols remained. There the empire wasnt at war, but Dallion had heard it be said that skirmishes were a daily occurrence up north. The south, thankfully, had been spared for the moment and even standard caravan activity had picked up.

Hello, old birch, Dallion said as he leaned on the stump of a rather large tree several miles from Nerosal. Too twisted for lumber, too bare for wood, the tree had remained there undisturbed for centuries, at least if one was to believe it. Anything interesting happen today?

What am I? I daffodil? The tree grumbled. Awakened keep coming and going, same as always.

That was one of the things about plants, as Dallion had soon found out. Unlike animals, they were extremely self-centered. In part, that was due to the reason that most plants didn't have a way of seeing anything other than light. The rest was entirely due to their nature. However, Dallion had also learned that they reacted to more than just sunlight. Awakened seemed to emanate some sort of energy as well, as did mages. The latter were the ones Dallion was particularly worried about. Using his position as apprentice hunter, he had done a few inquiries, only to learn that more and more Academy outposts were spreading throughout the world beyond the borders of the empire. No one was sure what the reason or their activities in the area were, but the mages were always extremely protective, even more than usual.

That's what you get for being close to a city, Dallion laughed, patting the rough bark of the tree. Want some water? I have enough to spare.

*Keep your water! I've survived eight droughts and three floods! I don't need your water!*

That was an open lie. For one thing, Dallion knew for a fact that there hadn't been any floods in the area in the last three centuries. It was possible that the tree was talking about flash storms that had a habit of happening, but even that was rare with all the furies in the city.

Whatever you say. Dallion took out a wineskin from his backpack and poured it into the roots of the tree. Of all the plants, he knew this was the only one who had a distinct preference of wine. See you again in a few weeks.

The tree replied nothing, returning to its daily run basking routine. Sometimes Dallion wished he could do the same.

Nearing the gate of the outer wall, Dallion flashed his new hunter's emblem. The guards made a few comments, congratulating Dallion upon earning the title, then let him pass without questions. With a smile and a nod, Dallion then proceeded to the inner gate.

The entire space between the two gates was filled with farmland. Here and there, small clusters of houses had started to appear. The countess had declared that the land remain focused on food production in case there was another instance of poison plants. Dallion, though, knew that the real reason was her stocking up reserves for the upcoming war. According to the general and a few minor nobles in the city Dallion had contact with, conflict was inevitable.

Halfway to the city gates, a female figure dressed entirely in black sat on a small stone chair, patiently waiting. As Dallion neared, it stood up.

Overseer, Dallion said with a nod.

Hello, Dal. I see congratulations are in order.

Was there any doubt?

A lot. Not all hunters make it on the first time. Jiroh had to go three times.

And Eury? Dallion couldn't help but asked.

The overseer didn't reply immediately, walking alongside Dallion, instead.

Eury was a loss to the city as well, she said after a while. And she made it on her first, from what she told me.

Right. So, what brings you here? Do you have a job for me already?

Lady Marigold has died, the woman went straight to the point. Regrettably, you're not invited to the ceremony. Even so, her granddaughter asked me to let you know.

The news was sad, though it didn't shake Dallion to a large degree. Lady Marigold was one of the new nobles who would talk to him on a regular basis, mostly discussions about his past, the village he'd come from, and his first days in Nerosal. Dallion suspected that she knew the truth about his grandfather, it was possible that she had even been present at his delevelling. Despite that, the old woman had never confirmed it.

Give her my condolences, Dallion said. However, that's just an excuse. What's the real reason?

The countess has aspirations, the overseer whispered in a fashion that only Dallion would hear. She has successfully managed to turn around her failure at the festival two years ago and now is the second most powerful person in the province.

Definitely a spectacular achievement, but as Dallion knew that Countess Priscord wasn't one to be content with being number two. Her real ambition was to become an Archduke, and there were only two ways for that to happen. One was to earn enough favor from the emperor to the point that a new province was appointed. The second was to challenge and defeat the existing archduke of a province, causing a title-swap. In the second half of the empire's existence, the second way was mostly used. The emperor was against splintering, just as he was against internal conflict. Only succession disputes were tolerated, though after what had happened forty years ago, it was unlikely that the emperor would be willing to allow another civil war in his lands.

There are no indications right now, but at some point, you'll be called to take sides, the overseer continued. When that happens, you better have an answer ready.

That was a polite way of saying that Dallion would be asked whether he was for or against her. Neutrality wasn't an option, or at least not as long as he remained in the province.

Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Any news on the Star?

Cultists, you mean? They haven't done anything major, but they're still here.

That wasn't what Dallion had asked, but he nodded nonetheless.

That would mean that she knows something, but is afraid to share it with you due to your recklessness, Nil said.

Thanks for the obvious, Nil, Dallion replied. He was fully aware of what that meant, just as he was aware that it suggested the Star's activity being close somewhere where Dallion could realistically reach. Even with him reaching level sixty-seven and boosting his stats and skills considerably, he was no match for an unrestricted Star. To feel somewhat confident, he'd have to get to level seventy at a bare minimum, preferably eighty. However, leveling had become exceedingly difficult. No wonder that at this point, it took people years to advance even a single level. With most of his bad habits and fears dealt with,

the only thing left was to break through his own limits, and that was difficult regardless of the skills and gear Dallion possessed.

The overseer accompanied Dallion to the main gate. The guards there didnt even bother asking questions, quickly moving aside so that both could pass. Once on the main streets, the woman wished Dallion the best, then disappeared in the blink of an eye. Even a perception trait of forty-four wasnt enough to see her move away.

If overseers were weak, ear boy, they wouldnt be chosen to be the guardians of cities, Nil said.

True, Dallion agreed. However, that also meant that the nobles were even stronger in order to be able to subdue them.

It was a short trip from the city gate to the inn Dallion was staying at. After Euryale had left the city, she had offered that he keep her workshop. Initially, Dallion tried, but he found owning the place more burdensome than it was worth. Hed rarely spend time there, and being alone, he couldnt keep creatures from the wilderness in it either. As a result, he had gone back to the one place hed an established relationship with: the Gremlins Timepiece.

Back already? Hannah the innkeeper asked the moment he walked in. On the surface, she was always grumpy about something, even if the regulars knew that she was mostly harsh towards people she was in good relations with. Did they fail you straight up?

I didnt fail. Dallion revealed the chain round his neck. I just was that good.

Good, my ass! Remember the mess up you did with the captains package?

Dallion sighed. Hannah had no intention of ever letting him forget that. Back when he had set off to investigate the matter of the Archdukes missing world sword, he had also agreed to bring back an item of Adzorg from the Icebreaker guild. The negotiations were handled through echo rings and everything was set. Unfortunately, after a rather overbearing fight, Dallion had completely to check the authenticity of the item, merely taking the box it was held in. As a result, he had to go a second time, and sort things right. The only setback was a month's delay, but Hannah had kept ridiculing him on the matter ever since.

Also, since you clearly dont have any work right now, Im expecting you to do some work for the dinner crowd, the innkeeper said.

Having an awakened of Dallions level, let alone a hunter, work as an inn awakened was absurd. However, it was a request he couldnt effuse. Hannah had taken him in when hed first arrived in the city, and even now had agreed to keep a room at his disposal for whenever he was in the city. Having to mend a few glasses and possibly play a tune or two was hardly a bother.

Just have Aspan have something ready for me before the crowd gets here. Dallion went towards the stairs. Ill get some rest and be right down.

Im not your servant, Dal! Hannah yelled, to the amusement of the few people in the tavern section of the inn. And better not be late.

One of these days, dear boy, shell have enough and kick your ass in front of everyone, Nil said.

*You think I went too far?*

*Definitely.*

Ill keep that in mind, Dallion said.

The room was largely unchanged since the last time Dallion lived here. The only difference was that there were a lot more things now. In addition to everything he had gathered, Dallion had also taken this and that from Eurys workshop, before selling off the rest. He has offered to have it all sent to the gorgon, but his fianc was adamant in her letters that she had already taken everything she wanted.

In a way, Dallion was a bit sad about that. There were a few item guardians in the place hed spent a while chatting. Then again, there were just as many chatty items in his room even now.

Hello, all, Dallion said, as he removed his gear, placing it in the established section of the room.

A chorus of greetings welcomed him. Lately, even the potted plants had developed the habit. Stretching, Dallion passed by the shelf with the stone orchid and looked at it using his music skills. The plant remained very much a piece of rock, although there were signs it had spouted somewhat. It was still a long way from hatching, of course. Apparently, occasional music and singing could only do so much.

A marathon, not a sprint, Dallion told himself.

After some consideration, he took his harpsisword again and played a short ballad. The orchid was said to develop in the fashion of the stimuli provided, so Dallion had chosen to combine music, empathy, and attack when singing to it. Knowing Eurys nature, that was something shed approve of. The only drawback was that even if he gave it his all, the changes were negligible. The short five-minute melody left him utterly exhausted. Even so, he could sense pulsing from the plant.

Thats enough music for today, he said. Maybe Ill play some more tonight.

With that, he lay on the bed, sword still in hand. His original plan was to rest his eyes for a bit before getting a proper nap. However, sleep caught him by surprise, taking him into a dream of endless sky and clouds. The calm made Dallion feel at ease.

I wish I could fly everyday, he said to himself, moving his hand though the edge of the cloud. It felt soft and fluffy, almost like cotton.

Then why dont you? a voice said behind him.

Feeling no sense of urgency, Dallion glanced over his shoulder. A thundercloud was there, black and flickering among the endless whiteness. More interesting, though, there was a thunder fury standing in front.

Hello, Dal, she said. Her black skin contrasted with her paper white hair. Sorry for visiting you like this, but we have to talk.

Chapter 560: Jiroh's Request

Jiroh? Dallion took a step back in the air. I thought you left.

Nice to see you havent lost your rough edges even after all that leveling up. Im still in my world, but my Moon agreed to let me talk to you.

This is a dream? Dallion looked at his hand, trying to remember how he had gotten here. No matter how hard he tried, he always came to the same conclusion: he had always been there.

The clouds broke up, revealing a better view of the sky. As Dallion looked, it shifted from blue to black. Then, an orange moon appeared.

Its a dream, but our conversation is real. More importantly, youll remember it.

Logical thinking returned; it was as if a veil had fallen off Dallions mind, making him think outside of the dream once more. He was suddenly aware of him being asleep in his room. Most likely Jiroh was asleep as well in her world. A year ago, he had frequently visited temples, praying to the Moons to have a talk with her, but it had never been a good time.

How are things there? Dallion asked.

Things are getting better. The world is changing and Im part of the change. My Moon seems to find it amusing, so shes supporting me. Sometimes, she even shows me images from the awakened world.

Dallion didnt know whether to be hurt or grateful. He wasnt the only person who missed her. It would have been nice if the Moon had let her talk to Eury, Hannah, or her sister even. Then again, there was no way for him to know that it hadnt been happening.

Youve taken on my role, I see, Jiroh said.

Hardly. I became a hunter a week ago.

Im not talking about that. Im talking about the missions Hannahs been giving you. How many pieces have you found so far?

Pieces? Dallion wasnt sure what she meant. Hed found four items, but he wasnt aware they were pieces of something.

I found twenty-seven and missed four. A word of advice: dont get too stressed about messing up. The pieces have no end, so take it easy.

A marathon, not a sprint? Dallion asked.

Im glad you picked that up. The fury smiled. Thats not what I came to talk to you about. Im here for a favor.

What happened? Dallion instantly thought of his experiences in the world of furies. He had entered it purely by accident, and it had taken a lot for him to return back. It was an interesting place full of curiosities and cloud creatures living in vast cloud cities. However, as interesting as it was, it was also poisonous to him. Worlds did not tolerate beings that didnt belong, so they gradually coated intruders in thousands of layers of an orange substance, keeping them isolated from reality.

My sister is in trouble.

Was it the library organization?

No. Jiroh shook her head. My sister in the awakened world.

Di? The young fury was Jirohs local sister. Technically, her father had been a kind of furies, but that was long before his defeat. At present, the small fury had nothing but a hunters inn in a small town close to the provinces border. Last thing Dallion remembered was sneaking there to give her the cloud fox that belonged to Jirohs family. Shes fine, as far as I know. With the poison plague over, things are picking up and

Her town has been under siege for several weeks. The only reason the empire hasnt conquered it outright is because the Order has an army of battle clerics resupplying there. Attacking with them around would cause tensions everyone would like to avoid right now. However, my Moon wont be able to keep the clerics there for much longer.

Whats the Order doing there? the question slipped out. I mean, what do I have to do?

Just do what you do best. Find her and bring her to Nerosal. Thats all I ask.

The request was straightforward, but that didnt make it easy. Battle clerics with at the very least level forty. It wouldnt be out of the question for some of them to be close to Dallions level. Not to mention there was no telling what level the imperial troops were. If there was a noble wanting to make a name for themselves, things could become even more messy. Still, Dallion didnt need to confront any of them, just go in and out and smuggle a fury along.

Is there anything I need to know? he asked.

Ive told you all I know. Everything else youll have to figure out on your own.

This wasnt the talk Id expected us to have.

I know, Dal. Its only emergencies that keep us close.

It wasnt right, not in the least. But, if nothing else, he had gotten to see the fury again.

How much time has passed there? he asked.

I cant tell you that. Apparently, even in dreams, the Moons made sure that some things were to remain unknown. Try to save my sister. I wasnt much help when I was in that world, but she doesnt deserve what she got. You dont either, but youve grown enough to take care of yourself., She hasnt.

I will, he said. I promise.

Thanks, Dal. Ill owe you one.

Before Dallion could say another word, the dream had shattered. He was back in his room, lying on the bed, holding the hilt of the harpsisword in one hand. Glancing at the window, Dallion saw that the sun was setting. What had seemed to be a few moments in the dream had turned out to be a few hours. The most annoying thing about that was that Dallion had no idea whether he had spent most of the time before the dream dozing off, or time really massed differently relative to the real world.

I really should have studied more physics. He sat up.

Not to alarm you, dear boy, but I do believe youre a bit late, Nil said. Hannah wont be particularly pleased.

Dallion entered the realms of his clothes to quickly remove the wrinkles, then returned to the real world and rushed down, holding his harpsisword. Normally, he'd use his mandolin or even his ringchord. Not this time, though.

There you are, the innkeeper raised her voice upon seeing him. What's the excuse this time?

Normally, Dallion would come up with a witty response, then get to what he was supposed to be doing in this case, serving tables and mending cracked and damaged items. This time, he directly went to Hannah.

I need to talk to you, he whispered.

I'll wait, she said in a stern voice. Half the place is full.

Jiroh came to me in a dream, Dallion continued. It was Moon driven.

The innkeeper frowned. It was well known that no one would dare use the Moons as an excuse. All that had quickly found that the deities didn't appreciate the practice and were quick to devise an appropriate punishment.

Kitchen, Hannah said.

Not wasting any time, Dallion went straight there. Hannah followed moments later.

Aspan, she said. You'll have to take care of tonight.

Both of you? The cook looked at her with a slightly annoyed expression.

Both. The innkeeper nodded.

The cook put the pan away. A large blob emerged from his form, quickly changing shape into a direct copy of Hannah that stormed out of the kitchen. Moments later, the process repeated, only this time it was a Dallion that appeared. Instead of the harpsisword, he was holding a mandolin, however.

I prefer the classics, the second Dallion said, glancing at Dallion's weapon, then too left.

So, what's going on? the cook asked. Unknown to most of the world, he was, in fact, a living, breathing copyette. Once an emperor that attempted to conquer the world, he had managed to escape from the banishment, seeking refuge in the Gremlins Timepiece. To this day Dallion didn't know the real reason Hannah had agreed to keep him hidden, but she had. Since then he had been the resident cook, and occasionally a source of information about the past for Dallion.

Jiroh spoke to him in a dream, the innkeeper said.

She asked me to save her sister, Dallion quickly added.

Are you sure about this? the copyette asked. There are a lot of ways to make you believe it was her.

I saw the Orange Moon, Dallion said. Unless it was the Star, I don't think anyone else would dare use that in a trick.

There was a short silence.

The Star won't either. Aspan clarified. What exactly did she say?



Just that? Her sister is in trouble and I must get her.

You're keeping a few things out. Hannah frowned. It doesn't take an awakened to see that.

I'm telling you all that you should know. Anything more and you might get in trouble.

Ha. Look at the pup, thinking he's the big thing. Just because you got a rose emblem doesn't make you a bit shot. I'll decide what's safe for me to know and what not. So out with it! How is she in trouble?

She's in Halburn. Jiroh said that the town is about to be conquered by imperials. I'm to get her out of there before it happens.

Imperials this far south? Aspan glanced at Hannah, who seemed deep in thought. Wouldn't they let the Archduke handle something like that?

There've been troubles up north, the innkeeper muttered. The reason people talk about skirmishes is because the empire's armies haven't managed to score a win. If they had, we'd all know about it. It wouldn't be out of the question for a legion to have been sent here to get an easy win.

Nil, is March at the guild? Dallion asked. When it came to imperial matters, she was one to ask.

Vend and she have been invited to attend Lady Marigold's ceremony, the echo replied. It'll be considered in poor taste to go ask her now. Maybe in a few days?

Unfortunately, Dallion didn't have a few days.

I expect you'll want another week off? Hannah turned to Dallion.

More or less.

When are you thinking of going?

Right now. I'll catch some food on the way.

Even the hunters haven't knocked any sense into you, the innkeeper sighed. Grab some food from here. You won't be making your way there, starving. And send me a note when you get close to Nerosal. I'll see to it that no one sees you getting in.

You're mirror pool? Dallion thought for a moment. It wasn't out of the question. Inns were places that mirror pool enjoyed doing business at. Given that Dallion had seen several of them hanging nearby throughout the years suggested that it was possible. Not that he wanted to think of Hanna as part of the awakened underground.

I'll do my best, he said instead.

Do you have money?

Yeah, I have a good amount.

Take all of it. You might need to bribe a few people. Never bribe an imperial, though.

Seriously, Hannah, I have some idea of what Im doing, Dallion said, maintaining a smile. Ive been a hunter for a full year now.

Apprentice hunter, the innkeeper corrected. And Youre still just in your sixties. When was the last time you leveled up?

A few weeks ago, Dallion replied vaguely. Do you want me to level up now?

No. Youll end up starving and exhausted.

He can have a go now, Aspan interfered. Theres enough food, and I have a few tricks to get him moving. Think youre up for a level up, Dal?

As reluctant as Dallion was, he was aware that every level was a huge benefit. On paper, it was just one more point on a trait. In reality, though, it was experience in a new situation. With luck, it might even get to be something that would prepare him for what was to come.

Taking a deep breath, he fastened his grip round the harpsisword and entered his awakening realm.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**