

## Leveling up 591

### Chapter 591: Adult Wyverns

It took half an hour for Dallion to find the entrance to the ruins. The lack of wyverns in the immediate area made discovering it a bit more challenging. The infants that had served as direction markers so far had flown out days ago, leaving the strong ones safely below.

According to Eurys guardians, the really tough ones were still in the ruins, keeping the gorgon and her client trapped for over a week. Apparently, the counts son had stirred up the first batch of eggs, without exploring the rest of the ruins. It had turned out that in addition to the eggs and infants, the lair had a large number of fully grown wyverns as well. Half of them had amassed to protect the wyvern queen, while the rest had blocked off the corridor leading to the exit. Given with no choice, Eury had retreated to more defensible sections of the ruins further in. From there, she had made several attempts to find alternative routes to the surface. So far, all the corridors had ended up either collapsed or quickly blocked by wyverns determined to keep them from escaping.

With supplies depleted, Eury had decided to go for one all-out-attack in an attempt to break through the wyverns. The gauntlet guardians claimed that things were doing well, although they hadn't gone into details.

Have you fought wyverns? Dallion asked the Dark.

The dragon looked away.

Get smaller and stick close by, Dallion drew his harpsisword. And don't do any splitting. I'll be doing the splitting if needed.

Okay. Dark agreed suspiciously, easily. Want me to take human form? Or something else?

Human form is good. Dallion nodded. Also, don't do any magic. Just close melee attacks. We don't know where the others are.

The dragon's body glowed green for a moment, then took a humanoid form. He looked suspiciously like the mortal embodiment of the Green Moon, only much younger and with long hair. To no surprise, Dark didn't have any weapons with him. Even in this form, he remained a dragon and, as such, preferred to use hands to fight. Finding that stupid, Dallion gave him his hammer.

Bits of rope hung from the corner of the entrance. The flocks of infant wyverns must have cut them off while flying out. That the distance to the bottom of the opening seemed greater than the previous nests.

Here we go, Dallion thought, and jumped in.

Splitting into three dozen instances, he leapt from wall to wall as much as the ruins would allow. A few of the instances didn't make it, stepping on a loose piece of rock and falling helplessly to the ground.

At the bottom, Dallion split again and shot a few bolts of blue flames to get a basic layout of his surroundings. As a precaution, he was quick to disregard the instances that did the shooting; there was no point in letting the wyverns know he was here.

There were three corridors continuing in different directions into darkness. The larger one seemed like a covered Roman road, probably leading to the heart of the ruins. The other two were smaller

tunnels, large enough for two people to walk side by side. One of them was blocked with stone remains. The other went on for several hundred feet. Beyond that, Dallion wasn't able to see.

Dark floated to the ground several seconds later. Just because he had changed, his appearance hadn't removed his ability to fly. In this world, like in the realms, abilities were transferrable, at least as far as awakening powers went.

What now? the dragon whispered.

Logically, the smaller tunnel was safer. Wyverns were large creatures and small tunnels would make it difficult for them to fight. The wider tunnel was more direct, and given that Eury had been in the ruins for a week, time was more important than Dallion's safety.

Let's go. He went forward.

The whip blade went out on its own accord, extending in front of Dallion as it floated onwards. Gripping his harpsword, Dallion followed along with Dark.

What will happen when we come across wyverns? the dragon asked. Will you try to convince them to give up?

I don't speak wyvern, Dallion whispered back.

Can't you learn?

From infants? Seriously? Not to mention that Star-touched weren't known for their linguistic skills. The term functional zombie was more appropriate. That made them considerably more dangerous, though not very imaginative.

After a while, Dallion heard the unmistakable sound of scales sliding along stone. It was difficult to tell for certain, but it appeared that the creature making the sound was rather large and by the sound of it not alone.

Get ready, Dallion split into instances.

Im coming along the main corridor, Dallion told the gauntlet guardians. Where are you?

Further down, came the response. Eury has taken the fight to one of the main buildings.

Tell her that Im on my way, Dallion said. Ill be the distraction. That should give her a chance to punch through.

Just don't use any line or point attacks, the other gauntlet guardian said.

I didn't plan to. Holding the dartblade in his offhand, Dallion shot two bolts of light forward. The tunnel lights up. For the most part, it was full of dirt and debris, but near the end a black silhouette glinted. Light bounced off of hard scales of void, providing Dallion with his first glimpse of a full-grown wyvern.

To say the creature resembled a dragon was both correct and insulting. Entirely covered in scales, the creature had wings attached to a scrawny body of bones connecting a long neck to an even longer tail. While dragons could be scary at times, wyverns were grotesque, as if someone had stretched a dragon and dehydrated it until nothing but skin, scales, and bones remained.

Upon spotting Dallion, the creature paused, hissed, then dashed forward, keeping its wings closed.

Dallion's natural instinct was to do a point attack along the corridor. However, he was smart enough to know that doing so risked having the entire tunnel collapse on top of him.

Gleam. Leaving the dartblade in the air, Dallion played a chord on his harpsisword. They're all yours.

Nothing but void could be sensed within the wyvern, chilling Dallion to the bone. The strands of music bounced off like peas off stone.

Switching his grip again, Dallion split into a dozen instances. The wyvern attempted to do the same, but quickly had a reality imposed on it.

Gleam struck first, attacking the entire side of the creature. Indestructible metal hit thick scales, then bounced off, barely making a scratch. The wyvern didn't even bother to stop, continuing forward.

Don't let it through! Dallion drew the armadil shield from his back. A split second later, the creature struck.

Fighting full grown wyverns was very different from facing infants. Once a person went over the shock of seeing a cloud of hungry, carnivorous flying reptiles, killing them was no issue. Their scales were as soft and efficient as paper, and their bodies weren't capable of withstanding even minor injuries.

The current specimen was not only fast and capable of splitting, but its scales were as hard and solid as imperial armor. Even with his full strength, Dallion was barely able to cut off a few scales of the hand that struck his shield. A few steps away, Dark also joined in, aiming at the same spot with his fist. The strike managed to push the wyvern a step back, without doing any significant damage.

To make matters worse, several more wyverns were approaching from behind. Limited by the dimensions of the corridor, they couldn't charge straight out, but were ready to join in at a moment's notice.

The tactic was clear: the leading creature aimed to get on the other side of Dallion, potentially wounding him in the process, then turn around and attack from behind while the other two wyverns pressed on.

What's their weak spot? Dallion asked.

Usually the underbelly and the throat, Vihrogon replied, as sharp claws slammed into him. Haven't seen this breed before.

Go for the eyes! Dallion shouted. It was the only area he hoped the membrane was weak enough to let a blade pierce through.

A bolt wrapped in blue flames split the air right at the right eye of the front wyvern. Once again, the creature tries to split into instances to evade the attack. That proved to be fatal. In one of the six cases, the bolt pierced its eye membrane, burying itself deep in the creatures brain. Naturally, that was the instance Dallion forced to become reality.

A high-pitched scream tore the air. The monster staggered a few steps back, then fell on the ground, forming a lifeless pile.

Inspired by the success, both Dark and the whip blade charged forward. Dallion was quick to grab the dragon by the shoulder, pulling him back.

Whats wrong? Dark stared at him. We know how to kill them.

So do they. They wont make the same mistake twice.

If the wyverns were so easy to kill, Euryale wouldnt have spent so long trapped here, especially since she had the ability to transform creatures to stone. Moments later, Dallion's fears were confirmed. Gleam had tried using his approach to kill one more of the wyverns, but instead hit a scaled eyelid.

A long tail covered in sharp scales slashed across the empty space of the corridor, striking Dallion in the armadil shield. The attack was powerful enough to push him ten steps back, though thankfully, it didnt damage the shield itself.

*Euryale says youre an idiot,*

the left gauntlet said from a distance. *But also give her your thanks. The rows have thinned a bit.*

How many adults are left? Dallion asked.

*Difficult to say. Probably around a dozen. Maybe a few more.*

A dozen wyverns With the one Dallion had just killed, that left eleven. So much for the tried-and-true tactics. From here on, combat had to get creative.

Splitting into instances, Dallion combined his athletic and acrobatic skills to charge along the walls and ceiling. Sensing his approach, the wyvern struck the wall, erasing two of his instances. Stone fractured as Dallion kept running.

Five steps from the wyvern, Dallion leaped off, heading straight for its head. His left hand drew the Nox dagger, driving it right in its eyelid. A spider web of cracks formed, covering the entire scale. A strike with the harpsisword followed, slapping onto the hilt of the dagger, driving it in.

Spark, Dallion thought.

Two screams echoed simultaneously: one belonging to the wyvern, and the other to Nox. This was the reason Dallion avoided using spark in the real world. Lux seemed to handle it without issue, others not so much.

Quickly, Dallion pulled it back out, leaping backwards.

You okay, Nox? He asked, landing on the ground.

The crackling hissed, causing the dagger to tremble. Yes, it said, after a few seconds. Clearly, it didnt appreciate the experience. Once this was over, Dallion was going to have a few words with his familiar. Right now, he still had one wyvern to deal with.

I cant do anything against them, Gleam said, returning the whip blade to Dallion. Not at my current level.

You get stronger every time, Dark said, his voice words soaked with envy.

Guard up! Dallion said. We still have

Several screams echoed from the distance. In a fraction of a second, the wyvern facing Dallion was thrust forward. As terrifying as that was, it didnt compare to the realization of what had caused the creature to act this way. Scales flew off the monster, torn off by some far greater force.

Damn it! Dallion rushed to the side, pushing dark along with him, just in time to evade the blast of a point attack to fly past. Had his perception of reaction traits been any lower, he might have joined the wyverns on the ground. At the very least, Dark would have.

Whats that? Dark split into instances to take a look down the corridor. Wyverns have magic?

It wasnt magic, Dallion said. It was a point attack.

Wyverns have those?

No. The gauntlets had warned Dallion not to be so reckless underground, but there was one person neither they nor Euryale could order to do so: the noble paying for the entire thing.

Chapter 592: A Hasty Escape

Pain emerged in Dallions left elbow, quickly spreading to the rest of his arm. It seemed that he hadnt managed to fully evade the full extent of the point attack after all.

Lux, where are you? Dallion asked.

Sorry, boss, the firebird chirped. The hit threw me back to the entrance.

You alright? Dallion pushed through his own pain. Awakening helped with ignoring it, but even it couldnt remove it altogether.

*A bit dazed. Ill be with you in a bit, boss!*

A bit was more than Dallion could handle right now. Bursting into instances, he ventured back into the large corridor to get an idea what was coming from ahead. Due to his weakened state, the instances lasted slightly more than a second. Even so, in that time he was able to hear the faint sound of footsteps from down the corridor. Unfortunately, that wasnt all. Even fainter than the footsteps was the sound of clawing.

Careful. The whip blade flew by, its tip drilling into the wyvern on the ground. Screams and screeches filled the air. The creature Dallion believed to be dead twisted, slamming against the walls and floor in its attempt to get the weapon

out. Gleam, however, had no intention of letting such an opportunity pass. She kept on inching into the creature until it finally froze collapsing back on the ground, this time permanently.

Keep to the wall, Dallion told Dark. We might need you to get out of here.

Okay. The dragon grabbed the hammer with both hands.

You better listen to your own advice, dear boy, Nil said. You're in no condition to fight, even with Lux around.

*I know. I just need to make sure that*

Distant screeches mixed with the sound of destruction. Someone had done another point attack, only this time it had gone in the opposite direction.

Im here, boss! Lux said, as the dartblade flew up to Dallion.

Dallion grabbed hold. Relief spread up Dallions arm as the blue flames enveloped it. Even at Luxs current level, it would be a while before Dallions wound was fully healed, but at least the pain was a lot less.

Dal! Dallion heard Eurys voice from the distance. The light around his arm wasnt enough for him to see her, but she clearly had. Head for the exit!

The instructions were clear. Even two hunters werent enough to defeat the monsters in the ruins. All their efforts so far had only allowed them to create an opening for escape.

Dark! Dallion said, checking if all his gear was present. Lux and Gleam were of no concern: both of them could fly out on their own. Nox and harp, though, were an entirely different matter. The point attack had caused him to drop both. Soon the hammer also joined them on the ground, as the dragon shifted to his original form. It was somewhat smaller, though capable of flight.

How many can you carry? Dallion split into instances, searching for his weapons. The harpsisword was quick to find. The Lux dagger, though, wasnt as obvious. Being able to cut through stone, there was a chance it had stuck in the floor tiles somewhere.

Twos fine. Dark flapped his wings in anticipation.

How about three? Dallion kept on searching, looking for cracks in the stones that would provide any clues.

Dont think so.

Where are you, Lux? Dallion hissed.

Right in front of you, the crackling replied.

One of Dallions instances came upon a crack in the ground. Following it led to several more, leading to the hilt of the dagger sticking out.

Thanks, he grabbed it and put it away. Now all that was left was to get the hammer.

Wyvern! a new voice came from the corridor.

Crap! Dallion froze. In the rush, he had forgotten that Eurys client wouldnt be aware that he had a dragon on his side.

Dont attack! Dallion shouted, waving his flame-covered arm. Its on our side!

He could sense the doubt on the other side. Thankfully, no attack followed.

Is that Dark? Euryale asked. She was fully visible now, running towards Dallion, some hundred feet away.

Hell help us get out!

Within moments of finishing the sentence, Eury and her client were already there. The gorgon was wearing the set of armor she had gotten from the hunters den. It was covered with grime and blood. The person accompanying her was undoubtedly a noble. At a single glance, Dallion could tell that the clothes he was wearing, even ragged, were more expensive than everything he owned. The bad news was that this was a hereditary noble. His level appeared to be in the lower sixties, which made him a liability in the current situation. He would have no problem killing off wyvern hatchlings, or possibly even a full adultwhile relying on Eurys support. But against a full nest, he was certain to cause nothing but harm.

Climb onto him! Dallion shouted to the noble. Well grab the tail.

A grunt of disapproval came from Dark, drowned in the quickly approaching sounds of approaching creatures.

Are you planning on coming back here? he asked Eury.

Not right now, the gorgon replied, aware of what he was going for. On three. One. Two.

Both Eury and Dallion struck in the direction of the approaching wyverns. Two point attacks blasted forward, pushing back everything in their path. Normally, that would have been enough to kill a whole host of creatures. Given what Dallion had seen, he hoped the attacks would delay them for long enough.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion burst into instances, sprinting to the dragon. The noble had already found his way onto Darks back and was eagerly looking over his shoulder.

Give me that, Eury took the hammer from Dallion. Are you hurt?

A bit. He grabbed the tail with his entire right arm. You?

Eury did the same, choosing not to answer.

Go! Dallion shouted.

Flying on a dragon was a thrilling experience at the best of times. In this case, Dallion wasnt riding it, though. Rather, he was being pulled, holding on to the creatures tail for his life. Out of the hundred instances he split into, two-thirds fell off. Thankfully, it was the remaining ones that mattered.

Within moments Dark had covered the distance, which had taken minutes. With a twist, he pulled up, flying towards the sky.

There was no sign of the pursuing wyverns, but Eury did another two points attacks, just in case; after all the wyverns could fly as well.

Free from the confines of the corridor, Dark doubled his size to normal. However, that was the point at which Dallions grip began to slip. Even a hundred instances werent enough to keep him holding on, so he simply let go. Falling from a distance of fifty feet wasnt much of a deal, especially since he was still holding onto his dartblade.

Dark, land here, Eury said in a tone that wouldnt tolerate disobedience.

Left with little choice, the dragon did just that, swooping down and landing elegantly not too long after Dallion had reached the ground. Now, finally, everyone could relax.

Whats wrong? The gorgon walked up to Dallion.

Broken arm. Dallion replied, letting go of the dartblade for just long enough to slide his shield off. Once done he quickly grabbed it anew. Might take a while to heal. Who did the point attack?

Who do you think? Eury whispered, several of her snakes turning in the direction of the noble. Have any food?

A bit. Gleam, can you get my backpack?

Dallion had the foresight to leave it just next to the ruin's entrance. He had no intention of going there himself, though, even if no wyverns had emerged.

Anything else? Gleam didnt sound pleased.

Thanks, Gleam. Dallion lay on the ground. No sooner had he done so than Ruby fluttered to him, landing on his chest.

I see some things havent changed. Eury shook her head. Well have food in a bit, she shouted over her shoulder. Once were done eating, we head back to the city.

What about the hatcher? the noble asked. You were hired to capture it!

That was before you stirred up the whole nest. If you want to complain to a hunters den, be my guest. Youll never have any other job accepted.

In the light, Dallion was able to get a better look at the noble in question. He was young, more a teenager than an adult, with long hair and enough jewelry to buy a dozen towns. Despite the recent dirt and tears, it was obvious he hadnt done a days work in his life. For that matter, it didnt seem like he had done any fighting either. There was no better example of a sheltered, awakened Dallion could think of. If he had to guess, the noble had received the benefit of dozens of highly competent teachers, most of which were probably in his realm even now in the form of echoes. The only redeeming factor was that he was among the few who had gone past double digits. Possibly that was the reason he was receiving so much leniency from his father.

Well leave it for now, the noble said, his expression darkening. My father will give you what youre owed when you get back. He turned to Dallion. Hes not welcome.



News sure travels fast, Dallion smirked. Experience had taught him that in such instances, light sarcasm was the best policy. A hunter always had to stand his ground, though not be too insulting.

Its a Wetie mess and he doesnt want to get involved in it.

Thank you. The warning is appreciated.

Several clusters of snakes looked at Dallion while another focused on the noble. Eury could tell that something was going on, although unlike the noble, she was out of the loop.

Dark, drop him off near Kereel, she said. That wont be a problem, right?

Okay. The dragon didnt sound too enthusiastic about it. See you some other time, I guess.

Thanks, Dark.

Before the dragon set off, the group took advantage of what food Dallion had to restore their strength. Once Gleam brought the backpack, lunch was on. There wasnt much, but after a week of fighting in the ruins, it seemed like a feast. The noble ate the major part, of course. Even now, Eury kept on considering him a client. With her aspirations to rise within the hunter hierarchy, Dallion could understand.

Why are you here? Eury asked, using her zoology skill. Dallion was surprised he had never considered that it could be used on people as well. In his defense, until recently, there werent any other people with the skill.

*I came looking for you. Arent you pleased that I did?*

*I am, but that doesnt answer the question.*

This was it, the moment Dallion both dreaded and was counting on.

The countess hired me to go on a phoenix hunt, he said. I wasnt given the option to refuse.

The gorgon didnt respond.

*Youre not surprised?*

*You have a knack of getting into trouble. I just didnt think itd be this serious. Who else is involved?*

Everyone? Dallion wasnt sure how to answer this. A pair of gorgon mercenaries have been following me for a while, it seems. A band of cultists tried to take me when I went to the eastern forests. There might be others.

He chose not to mention the attack near the hunters den. That was too close to home. Knowing Eury, she would have tried to get to the bottom of that no matter who she hurt or who hurt her.

You really pick the worst timing. The gorgon sighed. Once I take the kid to his father, Ill talk to Vela and

*Velas already said that she wont allow anyone in the den to help me. Thats not why I came. I just want to know a few things about your mentor. He was the one who went on a phoenix hunt before and almost succeeded.*

## Chapter 593: Moment of a Lifetime

It didnt take long for the noble to fly off. The kid could barely hide his enthusiasm seeing a dragon in this day and age was an extraordinary event far greater than having a wyvern pet. However, he couldnt even realize the significance of what he had just seen. The count, his father, though had probably gotten a pretty good picture thanks to the exchanged echoes. That was probably one of the greatest advantages nobles had in the worldnobles had the practice of swapping echoes within their families and sometimes subordinates. This wasnt an item swap, as the practice with guilds and organizations; the echoes were directly placed in anothers realm to ensure information was spread at the speed of light.

There was a time when Dallion would have avoided letting others learn about the dragon and his relation to him. At present, he saw it as an advantage. The news would have gone out sooner or later. Though, this also sent a message to all parties following him, not to be too comfortable. With luck, a few of them might even choose to reconsider or demand higher pay from their clients.

Theres a small village not too far away, Dallion broke the silence. We can go there to have a proper meal.

Ill survive, Eury said. I can quit the den, she offered.

A reflective reaction on Dallions part was to say that it wouldnt be the first time. In truth, he knew that if she did, it would be the last time. Quite possibly she was going to lose her hunter emblem as well. The skilled always received more concessions than the rest, but there was a point after which even skill couldnt save someone. As Nil liked to joke, traitors only switch sides onceany more, and it became a habit that made everyone distrust them.

I know. And Ill be fine. He placed his arm around her shoulders. Ill know if anyone comes close. Im not the rookie I was when we met.

Youre not all that strong, either. If you keep annoying nobles, theyll come after you directly.

They wont. Not now.

They can wait. Decades are nothing to them. Trust me, I know. The emblem wont protect you for long. Soon youll hack to pick a side and itll have to be a good side.

Not the winning side?

The winning side doesnt always ensure a safe existence.

That stood to reason. Of course, Eury would know. From the few things he knew of the gorgons world, he was aware she was born in a family of considerable importance.

I just need to go ahead with the hunt.

You think finding the phoenix will save you from everyone aiming to get you? The nobles wont change their minds just because you found a shiny new toy.

I dont plan to change their minds. Dallion looked around. I plan on changing the mind of the phoenix,

he said through his zoology skill.

The idea was as crazy as they came, but at the same time it provided the best odds Dallion had. As it had been established, the aetherbird was indestructible. However, no one claimed that it couldn't be convinced to take a side. If Dallion's experience with the feather was anything to go by, the creature could be impressed.

Before that, know anything about a pair of mercenary gorgons? Dallion asked. They were out of province.

All gorgons are out of province. That's one of the reasons I went there. I'll look into it, but they sound like standard mercs. Awakened?

Yes, but from this world.

Should make things easier.

Dallion felt his mouth turn dry. The chit chat over, it was time for him to ask the question he really wanted to. He wasn't sure what he feared the most. That the conversation would stir up topics the gorgon wanted left alone, or that it would end up another dead end.

Did you know that your mentor went on a phoenix hunt? he went straight for it.

Everyone went on those. Eury leaned forward, twisting her right shoulder just enough to tell Dallion to remove his hand. They never found the bird. They wouldn't even find a feather. Not in that province. There was a rumor going on that the aetherbird disliked the south.

Why?

It was a rumor. The gorgons swirls twirled. The creature is impossible to come by anyway, so people came up with various explanations. No one really believed them. Back then, I didn't even think the creature existed. It was only when I learned how much one of those feathers was sold for that I became interested. I tried to convince Jiroh that we find one, but she wasn't interested.

You wanted to hunt a phoenix? Dallion nodded, impressed.

No, just the feather. There were a lot of merchants who wanted to sell me a feather map. She let out a slight chuckle. Some I actually bought. I was a bit more enthusiastic back then. It taught me a good lesson who to trust.

That was anticlimactic.

So, your mentor never went on a special mission? Dallion persisted. It probably was described as something else. Finding a dragon, chasing away chainlings, maybe even facing the Star? Something difficult enough to require a team.

He never talked about the really dangerous missions. Even back then, he knew me well enough to know I'd want to take part. There were a few groups he went out with on a semi-regular basis. Most of them moved out of the province even before his death.

That's it?

There were a few awakened he was close to in Nerosal. Some of them passed as pretty big shots. Eury tilted her head, trying to catch a distant memory. Some of them might still be in the city. Sorry, it's been a while, and that wasn't something I tried to remember.

Dallion nodded. Thanks to his music skills, he knew precisely how she felt.

I do remember one, though. He might be still alive, but hes definitely not in Nerosal anymore. He was banished from the city.

How do you get banished from Nerosal? Dallion asked. Initially, he feared that there might be a connection with his grandfather. After thinking it over, he doubted that would be the case. His grandfather had been in the city forty years ago, which was decades before Eury had arrived.

By messing with mages. Youve heard the stories about a bunch of mage apprentices making a mess in the city?

Difficult not to. One of the guilds got involved, causing the overseer to step in and settle things.

Thats the one. My mentors friend was the one who beat up a mage, if the rumors were to be believed. His name was erased, and he was banished to some less significant settlement. I remember that my teacher was upset about the whole thing.

Finally, a clue. That definitely sounded like someone whod be strong enough to go on a phoenix hunt. Finding him could be somewhat tricky. While people in Neorsal and beyond still talked about the deed, there was no way to associate the person to a name, since that name was erased. Still, it was a start, a very good start.

Think hes still alive? Eury asked.

I expect so. Anyone who could face a mage would have no trouble surviving in the wilderness. Whoever banished him probably thought so as well, or they would have killed him there and then.

You know it doesnt work that way. The lord mayor could have gotten rid of him not to antagonize the Academy.

Guess Ill have to ask the overseer. Dallion winked.

If hes alive, you wouldnt have trouble finding him. Hes very remarkable.

People change in a decade.

He was as big as a bear and had orange hair. Not someone youd mistake.

Hearing the description, Dallion froze. The gorgon was right. There was no way anyone would forget, just as Dallion couldnt. It had been years, but the image remained burned into his mind. Back when he took part in his first chaining hunt, there was another volunteer sharing the same features. The man referred to himself as Havoc. He was massive, with a large orange beard and orange hair. Since his awakening level was three, Dallion didnt think much of him. The stories he told were nice, and he was a lot more knowledgeable than everyone else, but Dallions attention was on the cleric from the Order and Dame Vesuviathe noble in charge of the party.

It had to be a coincidence. Or was it?

*Nil, is it common practice to delevel someone who has been banished?*

Dallion asked.

Common? No, but the person involved in that incident was, in fact, de-levelled, the echo replied. You think it might be someone you know?

Theres a chance. For now, Dallion preferred to leave it at that.

The Havoc he knew had been taken from one of the villages in Priscord county. Cleric and Vesuvia would know where from exactly, as probably would Nerosals overseer. Given that he wasnt sure it was the same person, he preferred to return to Nerosal to find out.

Are you sure youll be able to handle things on your own?

I told you. Dallion let out a forced laugh. I can always put an echo in one of your items, if youd like.

Dozens of snakes on the gorgons head recoiled at the suggestion. Pass.

The orchid is coming along nicely, Dallion changed the topic. Once this is over, Ill bring it to you.

Take your time. I can wait. Just dont get yourself killed.

Promise, Dallion replied. At some point, Eurya teacher might have said the same. Will you be taking on some other mission?

Probably. Depends if I dont have to redo this one. The count hasnt officially let me off the hook. Might be that I found out that I need to go back to the hive and capture the hatcher.

Sounds like something a count would do.

Youve become cynical. The gorgon shoved Dallion in the shoulder. Its a good attitude, but dont overdo it. I prefer some naivete in my fianc.

Only cynical when on a job. Good luck with the nest and the count.

Thanks.

The rest of the day passed with both of them resting. Neither were in a hurry to leave, wanting to spend a few more minutes with each other. After a few hours in the real world, they agreed to prolong the moment by entering Dallions realm. This wasnt the first time she visited, yet still vehemently disapproved. As far as the echo was concerned, anyone in the realm was to be considered a threat, even someone as close as a fiancée. Dallion promptly ignored him.

Weeks passed in the course of a single momentdays they could forget about the concerns in the real world and take a vacation from reality, as it were. Most of the time was spent talking as they walked about the island; somedoing other things.

At one point, Eury offered to help Dallion complete another of his trials. It was a tempting proposal, but he ultimately refused. There were some things he preferred to do on his ownlearning was one of them. As life had proved time and time again, shortcuts were only temporary. The gorgon likely agreed with his reasoning, for she didnt offer again.

After a month, once they had done everything they wanted, the obligations of the real world slowly wormed their way into the realm. While they could spend an eternity here in bliss, they knew this was not real. Eury had a count to deal with, and Dallion needed to go back to Nerosal to try and find information on the phoenix hunt. Also, he had Diroh to check up on.

This was one major secret he had kept from the gorgon. As much as she would have liked hearing that her friends sister was safe in Nerosal, Dallion didnt want to share anything about the ice properties of the fury just yet. At least, not until he was certain that Eurys teacher wasnt the cause of them.

Even in a simpler world, there always were a few complications.

Chapter 594: Choice of Sides

## **MAJOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 50%**

Another hit went through Dallions defenses, despite his instances, piercing his left shoulder. A few strikes ago the damage was low enough for Lux to compensate, though that had quickly changed. With every second the trial echo was improving, targeting multiple spots simultaneously. Dallion had faced an all-out attacker, focusing on the body trait. Compared to his current challenge, that seemed like kids play. Sadly, that wasnt the enemys greatest advantage.

Youre getting slow, trial-Gleam said, changing form. The spikepreviously one of the shardflys wingsthat had punctured his shoulder grew thorns extending in his body, causing additional pain. In the real world, Id have pierced your heart.

Dallion split into instances, attempting to break the illusion. However, for each instance he created, the shardfly created one as well. This is what fighting an equally powerful enemy felt like. In the past Dallion had faced stronger enemies with less skill, or vastly more skilled enemies that were defeated with one hit. There was always an option to focus on their weaknesses. Against the current state of Gleam, the only way to win was to outmatch her, and that proved impossible.

Spark! Dallion said, striking at his shoulder. His hope was that with Gleam being of the wilderness, hed be able to affect her as well.

Before he could manage, the shardfly had pulled out the crystal spike, reverting it back to a wing.

Youre still not there, she said, fluttering around. Best surrender.

Undoubtedly, she had a point. In his current condition, there was no way he could win. Everything learned so far, all the training, the skill scrolls, and the experience in the wilderness wasnt enough to succeed in this trial. When evenly matched against an enemy, he remained one step behind.

Not just yet. Dallion let go of his harpsisword. The weapon fell to the ground, then disappeared, as it was unsummoned. Is that what youre like when you reach your desired level?

Thats what you think I am.

But is it true?

What do you expect me to say? Im part of your trial.

But theres always a chance that theres something from the Moons as well.

In that case, no. When I reach my level, Im a lot stronger. Not as strong as a dragon, but enough to take on anything else we saw in the south.

That impressive, eh? Dallion smiled. I surrender.

**You failed to defeat your fears!**

**You wont be able to shape your destiny for another 24:00 hours.**

The blue rectangle appeared in front of him. The moment Dallion waved it away, he was back in the wilderness, half a weeks walk from Nerosal. A sensation of hunger went through him, though was quickly suppressed.

You shouldnt push yourself, dear boy, Nil said. Give it pause before you reach the city.

This was the third attempt at passing the trial and it still had ended in failure. Without question Dallion was improving he had managed to survive for a full two minutes this time. Even so, his progress seemed painfully slow. And there were ten other levels after this one.

How are the nobles I faced so weak? Dallion looked up at the sky. Three of the moons were shining bright with the rest visible as pale circles in the night. With the level difference, I shouldnt have had a chance.

The arrogance of the otherworlders, the echo laughed bitterly. Reminds me of someone I used to know a long time ago. He was so skilled in what he didnt he couldnt imagine that the others werent.

*I couldnt be this good on traits alone. All trials are the same. If an awakened has passed them that means they are strong enough to do so.*

*True, but also not. Dont get me wrong. In an official awakened duel, youd lose in a heartbeat. And Im not talking about technical disqualification. There are nobles who think so many moves ahead that all your knowledge would be considered pitiful. The problem is imagination. Hunters and awakened present something new. And as sheltered, when facing something new they dont know how to react. Tell me, the nobles youve faced, would you face them again?*

Dallion smiled. His victories could be described as flukes at worst and as extreme luck at best. As people learned more about his way of fighting, things were going to get more and more difficult. Maybe thats why the gorgon siblings had been sent to keep an eye on him. It was entirely possible that they had an echo on them, observing his actions. As usual, the only solution was to get better and fast.

Gleam, Lux, Dallion said, as he went to his backpack and took out a thick blanket. Keep watch. Ill get some sleep.

*You still need to eat, dear boy. Surviving on a rabbit alone isnt healthy with the amount of fighting youre doing.*

Ill be fine, Dallion said. Night, Nil.

His sleep was short and dreamless. Dallion hoped hed get another chance to talk with Jiroh about matters of concern: her sister, her hunter teacher, the phoenix hunt he had gotten himself involved in. That never happened, nor were there any new cryptic messages from the Green Moon.

The next thing Dallion knew, he was back in the wilderness, warm, but still hungry. A whip blade and a dartbow continued circling the area around him for a few moments longer, before floating to him. There definitely were advantages of having familiars. Ruby had also joined in. Lately, the shardfly was going through a complicated period. Dallion could feel conflicting emotions emanating from it. It was trying to act like the familiars, while it couldn't match their strength. Sadly, that didn't have any prospect of changing, though not through lack of trying. As powerful as ruby shardflies were, they weren't awakened.

Dallion finished the scraps of food he had left, then backed up and continued towards Nerosal. On the way, he asked whatever plants he happened to pass by about animals in the area. For the most part, he received information about small and practically inedible creatures. In the end, though, he was told about a burrow of wilderness rabbits. To non-awakened the creatures were as vicious as dogs. For a hunter, however, they were the perfect source of food.

Sensing Rubys urge, Dallion let the shardfly do the hunt. The effort was very much appreciated by the creature, which flew off as fast as its wings could hold him.

*You're risking starvation,*

Gleam said. *Looking at him, he reminds me of Lux in the early days.*

Aw, big sis! Lux let out a sad chirp. I was better than that.

*A bit. Just a bit.*

He still has to learn, Dallion said. Maybe one day I'll rely on him as I rely on you.

You really think so? Gleam mused. In that case, how about I join him?

*Gleam*

*Not now. I think he could use seeing me as a shardfly as opposed to imagining me all the time. Besides, it will give me a chance to spread my wings in the real world.*

*You're not spreading your wings.*

*The illusion works on me same as everyone else. I just need to focus a bit more.*

There was no way Dallion could say no. Gleam yearned for her old self, back before she was captured and made the guardian of a hand mirror. That was the reason she wanted to level up so badly—the greater her illusion abilities became, the more she could pretend to be what she was in the real world as well as in the realms.

Gleam, have you ever come across aetherbirds? He asked.

*No. I've seen firebirds, some dragons, but nothing like you're hunting now. Must be rare and powerful. Something that powerful won't ever let itself be caught unless it wanted to.*

And yet someone caught it, Dallion mused. Or came close.

*You've seen the feather. The creature is curious.*



The hunter didnt have the empathy trait. And if the aetherbird was that curious, why havent more hunters seen it? No, theres something else going on. Dallion looked at the distance. Go keep an eye on Ruby. Dont jump in to help unless you have to.

The whip blade slid out of its scabbard and transformed into a crystal shardfly that flew off. After a quarter of an hour, Gleam returned, letting Dallion know they had caught enough food. Naturally, she didnt bother bringing it. As far as she was concerned, Dallion could go and cook it where it lay. Ultimately, Dallion did just that. Using his zoology and art skills, he skinned and butchered the animals almost simultaneously. The shardflies had managed to kill a total of six, which would be considered a healthy amount.

Splitting into instances, Dallion made a small fire to cook the food on. This was enough to attract the attention of pretty much anything in miles. Yet, it wasnt an animal or even a creature of the wilderness that approached. Instead, it was a pair of people Dallion had met before.

Have enough to share? The first of the gorgons approached. Id offer to share some drink, but I doubt youd accept.

Youd poison your target? Dallion asked, making a sign to the gorgon to join him.

The other smiled, but didnt respond. He was joined by the other gorgon. Unlike his brother, the second gorgon maintained a serious expression. No emotions came from either of the two. Still, Dallion could hear several of their weapon guardians whisper threats in his direction. It was slightly unusual, suggesting that the weapons had been with the gorgons for quite some time.

Didnt expect youd leave the province, the first gorgon said, half of the snakes focusing on the meet at the fire. Glad to see you back.

I wasnt going to run, if thats your fear.

The younger gorgon stifled a snort.

Good to know. I was afraid that someone might have killed you. That would have ended our contract.

Touching. Dallion narrowed his eyes.

You were a bit sloppy in Linatol. Also, whoever was hired wasnt local. We couldnt find any of them. Not even a trace. Almost as if they vanished.

Maybe they had, Dallion looked at the gorgon. Or maybe it was you. He took one of the sticks of meat and took a bite. It had a deep, almost bitter aftertaste. What do you really want?

Weve been told to give you a message. The powers that be seem to think that you have a chance of finding the phoenix. If you do, it might be a better idea to change clients.

That was unexpected. Dallion knew that in the games of nobles everything went, but he didnt think that the Archduke would offer to flip him, of all people. Of course, there was no way to be sure who had hired them. With both of them having blocking items, it was difficult to tell whether they were lying or not, and even if they werent, there was no guarantee they hadnt in turn been lied to.

Youll have more protection than Countess Priscord and better opportunities, so to speak.

Hunters dont change sides.

Youre not used to this, so Ill help you out. Youll only get one chance to change sides. Once a rejection is made, its final and youll sink with your ship.

Only if my noble sinks.

Your noble doesnt care about you. Youre the sacrificial pawn. Our client gives you enough credit to consider it possible. Think about that.

And I must give you my answer now?

Nope. The gorgon stood up, moving away from the fire. You dont have to tell us anything. If you go back to Nerosal youd have chosen the countess. But if you go to Linatol, itll be clear youve decided to go against her. Pick one or the other, its all the same to us. We were just hired to convey the message.

A novel approach.

And if I pick neither?

Sooner or later youll have to pick a side. Until you enter any of those cities, youll be considered undecided. Just keep in mind, people have tried to kill you twice. Can you survive a third without protection?

Chapter 595: Hero Again

Welcome, hunter! The guards stood to attention as Dallion approached Nerosals main gate. The countess wishes to see you.

That was fast, Dallion thought.

The news of his mission had spread throughout the city. The Countess had made sure of that and now wanted to have a word with her hunter.

Do I have time to wash? Dallion asked.

The soldier didnt respond, but the emotions streaming from him suggested that was a bad idea. In the end, Dallion decided not to put him in a bad situation and agreed to be escorted to the palace immediately. With luck, his stinky state would help the meeting to remain short.

Ill need to talk to the overseer, he said as they walked. Will she be present at my meeting?

I dont know. The overseer has been focused on keeping the city safe.

Cultists? Dallion asked instinctively.

Drifters, the guard replied. One of the captains will explain it better. They knew more than I.

More likely, they were allowed to discuss more. With the province on the verge of another civil war, it was normal to expect security to be tightened. Having an opposing noble taken out in their own city was poor sport, but not doing it was worse. Both sides would be tempted. One might have even given in.

There were a lot fewer soldiers than usual at the palace, confirming Dallions suspicions. When threatened, some nobles would amass as much strength as they could to discourage any external

attacks. The really powerful nobles did the opposite: this way, theyd be sure only to kill those whod come with the goal of assassinating them.

The city guard dropped Dallion at the captain of the countess personal guard. He, in turn, led him to one of her private studies. Upon reaching the door, the man stepped aside, gesturing for Dallion to enter.

Do I need to leave my backpack? Dallion asked.

The captain shook his head.

Thanks. Dallion knocked, then immediately opened the door.

This wasnt the first time he had been to the castle, even after the reconstruction. The room wasnt one he had been to before. It was very stoic, made entirely of white marble with a single fireplace in the distance and a rather large cage. Looking at its composition through his forging skills, Dallion could see that an alloy of all seven magic metals was used to construct the cage, the floor of which was a slab made of aether crystal.

It cost me a fortune to obtain, the countess said, standing in front of the extremely large window. Her words bounced off the marble surfaces of the room, creating an echo. From an old acquaintance of yours.

The general, my lady? It didnt take a genius to guess who she was referring to.

Yes. As an added bonus, he agreed not to give you any tasks while youre working for me.

Im very thankful.

Whats your progress?

Ive found a trail.

The statement surprised the countess to the point that she let part of an emotion leak out of her for a moment. The mistake was quickly remedied as she regained her composure. One would almost say that she was wearing a blocker item.

Continue. The woman raised a finger above her shoulder, her back still turned to Dallion.

I would prefer not to say, my lady. People have set their sights on me.

Countess Priscord lowered her hand briskly.

I am aware.

I was made an offer to change sides.

The statement was enough to make the woman turn around. Her dress shifted color from dark green to bright purple.

By the Archduke? she asked directly.

It was suggested, but theres no telling whether thats true. The Star cults are after me. So was someone else in Linatol. Was that someone else acting on your orders, my lady?

Careful, Dal.

Dallion nodded. She still needed him, but not to the extent that she could press her luck. If she was going for the ruler of a province, she'd be willing to more than get in bad relations with the hunters.

No, it wasn't me. As long as you fly about, I don't have to do anything. The longer you flutter in front of everyone, the better it would be, but that doesn't mean I'll protect you outside my cities.

Yes, my lady. He bowed.

Anything else?

I tried to find out who gave the phoenix feather to be sold at the auction. I wasn't able to find out.

Of course you wouldn't. The night auctions have higher backing than you could imagine. They probably wouldn't tell me either, at least not yet.

If things change, could I request that you find out where the feather came from, countess?

You want to know that much? A corner of the noble's mouth curved up marking the start of a smile. Alright. If you play your part and survive up to the point I take the province, I'll do that for you.

Thank you, my lady.

Dallion started to bow, but a quick gesture on the countess's part told him that his presence was no longer required. Maybe the stench had gotten to her, after all. Quickly, he left the room, going to the corridor where the captain of the palace guard was waiting.

She admitted openly that she wants to take over as Archduke, Dallion said.

Why shouldn't she? Nil remarked. It's no secret. Besides, it's beneficial for her. The more the rumors spread the more the Archduke has to work to suppress it.

*I'll never get used to this nonsense*

The Gremlins Timepiece was full when Dallion got there. Having an awakened fury was definitely a draw, even if Di was much closer to Hannah's demeanor than her sisters.

Emotions of joy and eagerness emanated from her the moment Dallion stepped in. However, one wouldn't be able to tell it by looking at her. Both she and the innkeeper glanced at Dallion in a way suggesting that they were doing him a favor, then returned to their work.

Hey, Dieroh said. You took your time.

Aspen, make a special for the hunter! Hannah yelled in the direction of the kitchen. A second yell from the kitchen made it known that the cook had confirmed the request. You smell like sweat and rot.

I'm just here to drop off my things, then I'll get a bath.

Leave your stuff here, the innkeeper tapped on the counter. And go. Your food will be ready when you get back.

Whatever you say.

Dallion took off his backpack, then all his gear except for the Nox dagger. While he did, a glass of lime liquid floated in front of him.

For the road, Diroh said.

Thanks. I take it things have been smooth while I was gone?

I dont need a babysitter to keep me safe, the fury snapped.

Thats not what I meant. An icy edge was added to the words, making Diroh instinctively form a few protective air currents around her.

Dal, Hannah said sharply. Get a snack from the kitchen. You need it.

Dallion relaxed his expression, then calmly did as he was asked. The innkeeper joined him amid laughter and whispers that he was in trouble again. Anyone who was a regular remembered the days he worked as a bard and server at the inn, often to be grumbled at by the innkeeper. The difference was that this time, he wasnt the one in trouble.

Her magics been fine, Hannah said after she closed the door behind them. Though the noble you pissed off has been looking for her.

Hes here? Dallion asked.

Apparently, he made a deal with the countess. Loyalties are changing quickly as of late. Most of the nobles loyal to the former lord mayor have been sent to the other capital or given less demanding duties. Meanwhile, that prick has become the countess chamberlain. For the moment, he cant do much. The countess doesnt want any distractions, so she sent him to assist in overseeing her interests in the other capital as well, but hes free to return as often as he wants.

And youre sure hes after Di?

No, hes after you. The woman snorted. Right now, he cant touch you. Plus, I know a few people here and there. He cant do anything openly while youre in good favor with the countess, so dont mess things up. She poked him in the chest with a finger.

If only you knew how things really stood, Dallion sighed to himself. He wouldnt be surprised if the countess was using this for additional motivation, although she really didnt need to. For the moment, she held all the cards.

As Dallion contemplated what to do, a sandwich was shoved in his hands by Aspan. It looked deceptively simple, but Dallions heightened senses let him admire the bouquet of finely crafted flavors the same as if he had tasted it. Definitely different from the standard catch of the wilderness.

I heard what happened to you in Linatol. Hannah softened her tone. Glad that youre alright.

They only wanted to scare me, Dallion lied. Has anyone been asking about this?

They know better, Hannah grunted. Theres talk of more hunters joining in the action. Not in Wetie, though. Some might track you down in the wilderness.

I bet. Dallion took a bite of the sandwich. It was magnificent as he imagined it to be, making him drool while eating. Has any of you heard of Erokol? he asked, mouth half full. It must be some old city or something.

Erokol? The copyette asked. Are you sure?

Sounded like that. Do you know it?

I know of it. Its a legend. Supposedly, it existed in a past age.

Didnt you live in the oldest age there was?

No, Im lived in the last age before races got banished. There were plenty of ages before that. Well, I say plenty, but theres no way to know. The myth was that back before the races inhabited the world, there were cities of something before.

An eighth race? Dallion instantly asked.

Eighth, ninth, tenth Aspan waved his hand in a circle. No one knows. According to the legend, Erokol was one of those ancient and magnificent cities, supposedly where all the Moons and Suns lived. A place of immeasurable beauty and magnificent in which only deities lived. It was claimed that some major catastrophic event took place that shook the world, changing it forever. The Suns were cast out into the sky, leaving only the Moons to look over the world, creating their own race to populate it. Thats how the seven races were born.

That was interesting. The creation myths Dallion had read also involved the Moons, but all the elements of something existing before that were absent. Although, there were instances of suns being described as deities of skills. In the more modern versions, the term constellation was used not to be confused with the Crippled Star, which was always something evil and separate from the natural order.

Does it still exist?

If it existed, its ruins were completely destroyed before my time. Most of the scholars claimed it was an allegory of the perfect society made exclusively of powerful awakened. As someone who conquered a quarter of the world, I can tell you with some certainty that I never found any hint that it existed. He went to the oven and stirred one of the boiling pots. Where did you learn about that place? Did someone from the Academy mention it?

No, someone else. There was no way Dallion could tell them about his experience in the feather. It wasnt that he didnt trust them. Rather, he didnt trust the city. For the moment, mentioning the name of the city was enough. They told me that the phoenix used to live there.

From a theological perspective, they were right. As the Purple Moons familiar, the aetherbird probably did spend a lot of time there. Maybe its using some time distortion spell to open a portal to the distant past and visit it. Or maybe its just a realm that recreates the ancient city. With magic, a lot of things are possible. Its not a spell I know or use, even if I did. The Moons still havent forgiven me completely.

Got you. As interesting as that was, it didnt provide any help. As soon as he had washed, eaten, and gotten some rest, he was going to get back to his original plan finding Havoc.

Chapter 596: Herbs and Hunters

Being the countess hunter was a strange experience. In some ways it was like being the Hero of Nerosal all over again, only a lot better. People would instantly recognize Dallion, always being polite and offering him gifts and huge discounts. But just as everyone was doing their best to act this way, Dallion could sense the fear emanating from them. It was as if he had transformed into a noble. The most disturbing thing of all it wasn't only people who were scared of him, but area guardians as well. One could assume that the order had been whispered from the countess to the overseer and all the people of importance in the city: until he was in Nerosal, Dallion was to be protected.

Entering his usual bathhouse made all the other customers quickly leave. The owner suggested that no payment was needed, but Dallion still tossed him the coins as he usually did. There was a minor irony in the fact that the countess herself hadn't exactly paid anything so far. Hunter payment varied, with Dallion being one who accepted payment on delivery. Given the time and expenses that would go into the hunt, he should have asked for a bit of assistance beforehand. Since he was already on the hook, there was no reason not to before leaving.

Scrubbing off his sweat, Dallion rinsed, then went to get dressed. Normally, he'd spend half an hour relaxing in the warm bath itself. It was an excellent way to reduce stress, but it also blunted his focus.

See you, Dallion said to the owner as he left. He was about to add that he wouldn't be stopping by until the hunt was over, when he saw the unmistakable figure of the overseer waiting for him at the bathhouse entrance.

Upon exiting, he also noticed several city guards in the area as well. These weren't the typical guards. For one thing, they were furies, for another they were doing a pretty good job remaining hidden among the crowd.

Overseer, he greeted her. I was just about to see you.

I doubt it. The black veil covering the woman's face moved slightly. Let's talk on your way to Hannah's inn.

Dallion glanced about.

Here?

No one will hear a thing. That's why we have furies. The overseer began walking along the street. And I'll take care of the rest.

It's all part of the game, Nil said. Having you seen with the overseer means something is going on. Ensuring that nothing could be heard while you're seen causes the rumors to spread even faster. It's a good idea to start learning these things, dear boy. You're already acknowledged as a potential noble. Pretending you're a solo hunter won't be of any benefit now.

*Im not pretending.*

*Maybe so, but you'll never convince anyone else about it.*

Walking through the city felt like walking within an invisible bubble. Dallion could almost see the air currents surrounding him, ensuring that no noise made it to the people outside. As he and the

overseer walked along the streets, a dozen furies followed. A few were on the ground, blending in the crowd, while the rest moved along the rooftops of buildings, faster than the non-awakened eye could see.

I heard you left the province, the overseer said.

Does everyone know everything Im doing?

You know they do, and yet you act surprised when someone mentions it. Youre too much like your grandfather in that aspect.

Im nothing like him. I didnt set out to become a noble. I was just fine being a hunter until this happened.

He used to say the same. Sometimes he even believed it himself.

The comment stung like a branding iron. Even since he left his village, Dallion had done everything in his power not to turn out like his grandfather. The parallels were clear: both of them were otherworlders, eager to progress, and good at it. The old man was said to have been quite ambitious and a lot smarter than Dallion, helping him achieve in a few years what others couldnt in decades. A lot of the details remained unknown and Dallion had deliberately kept it that way, but every now and again hed end up in a situation when someone would make a comparison, though never openly providing details. Apparently, part of the mans curse was that few people in the know could share that information, or so they claimed.

Im following a lead, Dallion changed the subject. I might have a way to find the phoenix.

You arent the first to claim that.

I need a bit of help, he added in whisper, making sure that even the furies couldnt hear him.

Anything you tell me Ill have to share with the countess. You know that.

Can you give me a heads start? She told me she's not interested in me as long as I flutter about and make a lot of noise. Her words.

The overseer paused for a step, then kept on walking.

Ill delay it until asked, she replied.

Good enough.

Before that, Gloria asked me to give you a message.

What?

Gloria was one of the people Dallion had known the longest. She was the granddaughter of Dhermas village chief and the crush of this worlds Dallion even before he had awakened. The two had an interesting relationship, sometimes helping each other level up, other times not so much. After Dallions fight against the village chief, she and her brother had assumed the role. Since then, she had moved up in society quite a lot, becoming engaged to the son of a city noble.

Youve been uninvited to her wedding, the overseer said.



Dallions first reaction was anger mixed with betrayal. After everything she had done for her and her husband, the least he deserved was to be there. Moments later, it dawned on him. The reaction was a normal consequence of the shifting balance of power in the province. Gloria's father-in-law was the brother of Archduke Linatol. If he were to approve Dallion being present at the event, it would be an admission that she had taken Countess Priscords side.

How's she doing? Dallion asked.

Well enough. You and her brother are in the countess territory. The next time she tells you anything, it might not come from her. Keep that in mind.

It's not like you're giving me a choice. Anything else I should know?

No. What did you want to ask?

The mage incident. Dallion split into instances, aiming to have a multi-aspect conversation with her. The overseer's hand slammed onto his shoulder, causing all of his instances to fade away.

No need for that, she said calmly before taking her hand off. Just ask.

The Nerosal mage thirteen years ago. You were here, right?

I was. There's little more I can tell you that you don't already know. The Academy protects its own.

Dallion had serious doubts about that. The overseer probably knew plenty, but he let that slide for the moment.

I'm not interested in the mages, but the awakened who fought them. I learned that he was banished from Nerosal. What I need from you is to tell me where.

To Dallion's surprise, the overseer stopped. There was no reason for this to be a politically sensitive question. One of the points of name erasure was to ensure that no one outside of the person's immediate acquaintances knew anything about that person. As Nil had said once, it wasn't about the name itself; it was about everything surrounding it.

Are you sure? she asked. That's out of your depth.

The whole hunt is out of my depth. Dallion let out a careless smirk. It's the best lead I

The person was able to fight a mage without the assistance of magic. You've had your encounters, but you had forgotten skills and friends to help you. The man in question was alone against several, and he still ended up on top.

That was news. Dallion had heard various versions of the event. The most common was that one of the apprentice mages was too drunk and got into a fight with a highly skilled awakened. The versions agreed that it was the awakened that won, but only just. To have him fight several mages, even if all of them were drunk, was beyond impressive; it suggested that there was a method to the man's success. No wonder that he would be banished.

I'm only interested in the phoenix, Dallion assured the overseer.

Even with her face entirely covered, he had a sense that she didn't believe him.

I won't get involved with the Academy.

So much like your grandfather, the woman sighed. The man was banished to the village of Geheron. Its a weeks journey from Dherma to the west. I hear that things have improved slightly with Dherma becoming a town, but not by much. If hes alive, he should be there.

Dallions heart skipped a beat. This had gone much better than expected. Now he knew where to find Havoc. All he had to do was go there, and given that he had the countess blessing for anything involved in the hunt, hed receive all the support requested.

Thanks. He smiled.

Id suggest that you follow your other leads first before going there, but I know you wont listen.

Why? Do you think hes dead? Dallions joy quickly turned to fear.

Im not the guardian of the province. Its only certain that hes in the village, alive or dead. The curse keeps him from leaving it on his own.

Will I be able to Dallion began, but before he could finish, the overseer had vanished.

Dallion split into instances, looking in all directions. All he was able to see was the furies moving away from the scene. Shortly after, the noise of the city surrounded him again. Things were back to normal. Part of him wanted to head to the village right now. Despite all the precautions there was always the danger that one of the competing sides had managed to make out his destination. Hunger and caution made Dallion remain for a day longer.

After enjoying the feast Aspan had prepared for him, Dallion went to his room for some rest. His latest journey must have been a lot more tiresome than he expected, for when he woke up it was well in the afternoon.

You have food here, the door said.

So much for no food in the room.

A tray was left on the floor in the corridor, containing soup and sandwiches.

Who left it here? Dallion asked.

*The innkeeper.*

Hannah herself?

That was rather surprising. If anyone had broken the rules, he expected it to be Di. Dallion took the tray and put it on his bed.

What did she do when she left it? he asked, as he went to his backpack and took the dryad bowl from it.

She left, the door guardian replied, uncertain about the question.

Lux, look around for echoes, Dallion ordered. The dartblade rose up into the air. The kaleidervisto attached to it, lit up, leaving a beam of light on the wall against it.

Meanwhile, Dallion poured the soup from the claw bowl into his own.

Sleeping herbs, the dryad guardian said. Enough to know you out for an entire night.

That was a new turn of events.

Gleam, is this an illusion?

No, the shardfly sighed. Id have warned you.

Just some soup with a knockout potion. Dallion poured the soup back into its original container, then checked the sandwiches. They too had been soaked.

Hannah wouldnt have done this, Nil insisted.

Dallion didnt respond. As much as he wanted to believe the old echo, there wasnt anyone else who could have done it. Assassins would have used poison, the general wouldnt bother, and the mirror pool wouldnt dare go against the countess. With Dallion being openly recognized as her hunter, any action against him would result in serious repercussions.

Gleam, how long will an illusion of me last? Dallion wiped the wooden bowl with the bedcover.

*Not long. Probably an hour. Less if someone checks.*

*Do it. Make it look as if Im asleep. Then, make me invisible. Were leaving Nerosal.*

Chapter 597: Havoc

Damn blocker items. Dallion leaped out of his room onto the roof.

The constant background of voices was gone, making Dallion feel completely alone. Unlike Eury he never liked using blocker items. The experience had only gotten worse the more his empathy trait had increased. It was the same as being in a crowd, yet not seeing or hearing anyone around.

Moments after Dallion left, the windows swung back, closing behind him. He had already discussed the matter with the window guardian, convincing it to maintain the illusion he was still there. What was more, thanks to Gleam, a realistic version of him was still on the bed, supposedly sleeping. The hope was that by the time anyone found out that was just the food tray on which Gleam had cast an illusion, Dallion would be long out of the city.

Two shardflies fluttered close to Dallion as he leapt his way to the city walls. Any other day hed be concerned that the overseer or the countess would feel him leaving Nerosals domain. As things stood, though, neither of them would stop him.

Since the second wall had been established, the original fortifications were left largely unguarded. Leaping over them was no issue for anyone with a body trait over thirty. Beyond them extended the friends that were currently used for all of the citys needs. Orchards, crops, and livestock land was sectioned there, along with small clusters of houses belonging to those who tended them.

During the night and evening, the only awakened were a few patrols and the soldiers in the watchtowers placed in strategic spots in the area. Running through the fields as fast as he could, Dallion made his way towards the citys outer gates. Twenty feet from it he stopped, brushing away the illusion dust that Gleam had used to make him invisible.

Several small bursts of instances followed as several of the guards became aware of his presence. Having to face instances amused Dallion, especially since he had to deal with so few.

Its just me, he said. There was no point in raising his hands any calming effect could quickly be ruined by the two shardflies flapping around him.

The soldiers held onto their weapons. One of them a sergeant by the looks of it slowly approached, weapon still in its scabbard.

Gate will be closing in an hour, he said. Uncertainty streamed from him.

It was clear to all that no one at the gate had the skill or the authority to stop him, even if the whole thing seemed off.

That gives me an hour to leave. Dallion took a step forward. Doesnt it?

The threat was obvious. It wasnt something Dallion enjoyed doing, but he was out of time. It was common for guards to complain about the arrogance of hunters. Now he was just giving the guard what they expected. The rookies looked at each other, while the veterans stepped back, knowing what the procedure was in similar situations.

Open the gate, the sergeant grumbled. He was smart enough not to understand what was going on. Do you want it quiet?

No need. A few days start is enough. Just make sure you saw me leaving alone.

You are alone.

Dallion just nodded, then made his way towards the gate. The moment that was opened he dashed out, running as fast as he could. The incident, while faster than trying to climb the outer wall, was noticeable. One thing he hadnt counted on was all the guards' combat splitting upon seeing him. The countess had definitely sensed it, potentially along with most of the higher nobles.

Dallion ran south in the rough direction of his village. When Nerasol was far behind, he stopped to catch his breath. There didnt seem to be anyone in the immediate vicinity. Finding that good enough, Dallion slid off his blocker ring.

Sloppy to say the least, Nil grumbled. If you wanted to sneak out, you should have done so all the way, not stop at the city gates to have a chat with the guards.

They would have sent a patrol after me, Dallion replied. Spreading out his senses he focused for any talk or guardian presence. Other than a few bushes there didnt seem to be anything for miles.

You could have lost them, dear boy, the old echo said with a sigh.

Maybe. Dallion wasnt too convinced. Even back when Eury was still in the city, he had heard that some of the city guards were equipped with magic weapons. That was when artifacts were abundant and it was quite easy to find something

special both legally and illegally. If the countess was preparing for war, it was likely she had boosted her troops.

Well take the long route, Dallion said. Gleam, Ruby stay close, but keep an eye for anyone.

Why not you? Ruby asked. Compared to his usual silence, the shardfly had become quite talkative lately.

I wont be able to sense them. So far, two groups used blocking items or something similar. Everyone else would do the same.

The shardfly increased its rate of flapping, then fluttered away. Readjusting his backpack, Dallion broke into a dash once more. For the next few hours he continued running through the wilderness. The landscape steadily changed. Barrenness gave way to grass, then trees, as he neared his way to one of the towns south of Nerosal.

According to what the overseer had told him, Dherma had grown to the point that it had established connections with most villages in the area. It was pretty much a given that from there he could find a road to Havoc. Normally, that would make Dallion seriously consider passing through there to see some friends and family members and catch up on everything going on. Considering the circumstances, that was the last thing he wanted to do.

It was said that the rules of the Moons ensured that low level awakened wouldnt be harmed, especially as a means to get to anyone close to them. Dallions Earth side, however, strongly doubted that. And even if it were true, getting into a fight in Dherma could lead to a lot of collateral damage. On that note, it wasnt a good idea to spend long in any settlement.

The entire knight Dallion kept running, only pausing to take a drink from his flask. All rest was done in his personal realm, and eating was done on the way.

By morning he had passed a quarter of the distance to his goal. At that point he changed direction again, heading east. All the time he kept a keen eye on his surroundings, frequently asking plants and even animals if they felt anything out of the ordinary. Most of the wilderness creatures ignored him, and those who didnt asked more questions than provided answers.

Never certain whether someone was following him or not, Dallion pressed himself even more. Thanks to his current traits, his body was used to the torture, although stress was steadily building in. On the second day dull aches started to appear, reminding him that even an awakened body had limits. Any normal person would have paused for a bit, as Nil suggested, but Dallion just used Lux to dull the pain instead. It was only once the village was within sight that he switched to walking.

Gleam, make me look like a traveler, Dallion said. Then make you and Ruby look like birds.

You really know how to make us feel special, Gleam grumbled.

*Do you prefer ferrets?*

Or, I can use my standard real-world form. the shardfly transformed into a whip blade, which then slid into its scabbard. You dont have to overcomplicate everything.

Dallion shook his head. She was right. As for Ruby, this wouldnt be the first time he had been smuggled somewhere in Dallions backpack.

A few seconds later, a traveling merchant made his way to the village of Geheron. In many aspects, the place was what Dherma had been back when Aspion Luor was still village chief. The overall population must have shrunk quite a bit in the last few generations, for there were twice as many buildings as families. Most of the structures were in a poor state, hastily fixed using non-awakened means. If there were any awakened left in the village, they didnt appear to be doing much.

Hey! a large man shouted as Dallion approached the village gate. Whats your business?

Traveling merchant, Dallion smiled, revealing the travelers emblem his aunt had given him years ago.

Get lost. People dont have money for your junk.

So much for the subtle approach, Dallion thought.

Ive heard that there are opportunities to be had here, he said using his music skills to fill the words with enticement. All the merchants choose to go to Dherma, but I know that visiting the nearby villages directly would be to our benefit.

In other places, the conversation would be accompanied by a subtle bribe. Unfortunately, the smallest coin Dallion had was a silver, which was much more than anyone here would make in a year.

Are you awakened? he moved closer to the guard.

The man was quite muscular, if not tall. Upon hearing this, he puffed his chest, trying to appear impressive and utterly failing at it.

You think so, but no, he laughed. You dont want to see the awakened ones here, though. Youre far better off dealing with ordinary people.

I was certain that youd be an awakened guarding the entrance and all. What happened? Did the poison plague kill them off?

Nah, the man waved a hand. All of them left for Dherma. Even since that place leveled up to become a town nothing goods come from it. Everyone rushes there hoping for gold. I see them come back a few months later, all in tears.

The bouquet of lies and envy emanating from the man suggested that to be his personal experience. Most probably he had gone there hoping to awaken, only to find that he wasnt among the chosen. Given that he was in his late thirties chances of him ever awakening were slim to none, although everything was possible. Dallion himself had awakened on his fifth try, and at quite a late age. Then again, his consciousness had come from another world.

All of them left? Dallion asked.

Yeah, the man lied. Its just us commoners now.

What about your village chief? Certainly he

The old man has one foot in the grave. He cant fix his bed right and constantly calls for people like me to go and fix it.

Hmm. Maybe I have some time that would help with that problem, Dallion flashed a sly smile. Names Dal.

Ekino, the guard replied. I wouldnt go there if I was you. The chief doesnt like visitors when hes sleeping which is always. And even if you have something he likes, he wont pay for it. Hes stingy that way.

Leave that to me, Dallion tapped the man on the shoulder. Im a merchant, after all.

People rushed to see the mysterious stranger entering the village. It was rare that people came to visit, far less merchants. A few those with clean clothes made of cotton even brought a few copper coins hoping to afford something in his wares. Relying on his speed, Dallion picked up a few pebbles from the ground faster than they could notice and improved them by a few levels. This caused Nil to grumble about basic principles that had to be followed. Since these were to be used as cheap trinkets, though, he didnt argue too much.

Here you go, Dallion offered everyone a piece of smooth polished marble. Can you tell me where the chiefs house is?

All hands pointed further down the road to one of the two-story buildings. It didnt seem in any better condition than anything else. Apparently, Ekino hadnt exaggerated.

Thanks. Ill bring you some more gifts after

Dal? a loud voice boomed a short distance away.

It was so surprising that it made Dallion split into half a dozen instances to look around.

Wow, it really is you. The bearlike figure of a man said, from the entrance of a smaller building. His beard was gone, but the face and orange hair were exactly the same Dallion remembered.

Hey, Havoc. Dallion said, letting all but one of his instances fade away. Been a while.

## Chapter 598: Removing Restrictions

The inside of Havocs home was in stark contrast with its outside. Not only was everything mended to perfection, but the man had done quite a few improvements as well. If Dallion didnt know better, hed almost say that he was in a rather well-kept inn in some small town.

Here. The large man tossed him a glass flask with some clear liquid inside. I made it myself.

The strong smell of alcohol quickly told Dallion that it wasnt something he wanted to sample.

Thanks, but Ill need a clear head. He tossed it back.

Your loss. Havoc removed the cork, then took a strong gulp. The strong smell of alcohol filled the room like a cloud, making Dallion struggle not to be caught. I didnt think youd survive more than a year in the wilderness and look at you now. Drop the illusion, please. It hurts my eyes. I dont have the traits I used to.

Curiously, Dallion did so. There was no reason for him to feel afraid. The man was more than sixty awakening levels beneath him. In a fight, Havoc would lose in a matter of seconds. And yet, Dallion felt a subtle hint of danger coming from the giant.

Look at you. Havoc grinned before taking another swag. A full initiate with a rare magic skill.

Hunter, Dallion corrected.

Havoc whistled.

If I'd known you'd become one, I'd have given you better advice, chiefly never to become one.

Talking from experience? Dallion went to the window.

He could hear the children outside whispering about him. Some had even tried to peek through the window and see what was going on. Dallion, though, had entered the realm of the village and convinced the guardian to ensure him some privacy. As a result, several of the children had inexplicably tripped in their attempts to spy on the conversation and subsequently run off.

I thought I was doing you a favor. I guess now you know a lot more of the world. Besides, you turned out well enough. That's what counts.

Aren't you going to ask me who made me a hunter?

The large man shrugged, clearly not interested.

Euryale, Dallion said.

Little Eury made a hunter? Didn't see that coming. At the time, she was having trouble learning the ropes herself. He tossed the flask on the table. Despite the casual fashion in which he did so, the flask landed perfectly on its bottom without tipping over. I guess you made it all the way to Linatol, then?

Nerosal. Dallion turned around.

Nerosal Dallion could feel the pain emanating from Havoc as he said the word. That brings back memories. It used to be a nice city. Now, there's no telling what it's become.

The second capital of the province. Soon it might become the first.

The implications were clear. Havoc must have realized, for his smile faded.

I should have seen it. No one comes here by accident. Don't know why I thought it would be different for an otherworlder.

You knew? I thought you were delevelled.

Oh, I was. Havoc forced a crooked smile. Brought all the way down to a level three. Well, almost. The Order decided it would be funny if my perception trait was left as it was. I knew you were an otherworlder the moment we met. I can see items with hidden domains change hands, but I can't tell anyone about them unless they already know. I can mend anything there is, even gold; I can even improve items quite a bit, but only as long as I don't sell them or give them away. Heck, I can't even leave the domain of this village without the Archduke's permission.

Shivers ran down Dallion's spine. The restrictions placed on Havoc went way beyond a simple banishment. Thinking about it, they had many similarities with the curses placed on Dallion's



grandfather and the former village chief. They too had been delevelled and forbidden from leaving their village. Interestingly enough, both had kept their names.

What about a countess? Dallion asked. Can she let you leave?

Are you a countess? Havoc laughed. Even if you were, it wouldnt have worked. The Order was very thorough. Only an archduke or the emperor himself could grant me permission.

The Order imposed the restrictions?

Its always the Order. The nobles can get creative all they want, they can erase a name, they can even put an army of echoes in my awakening realm, but the Order has to let them do it. They are the only ones who can legally bypass the rules of the Moons.

And the Academy?

The man didnt respond.

It was the Academy that demanded you get this. Certainly they

I cant tell you unless you already know. And the way I see it, you dont know a thing.

That caused a number of problems.

What about your phoenix hunt? Dallion asked. I know you took part in one.

Thats why youre here? You want to go chasing after mirages?

The feathers I saw were quite real.

Feathers? Havoc grinned. You have been doing a lot. Whats next? Youll face the Crippled himself?

The question was posed in jest, but Dallion had to put in a lot of effort not to flinch. He already had faced the Star several times and what was more, he feared that he might face him again.

Well, youre out of luck. I cant talk about that either. Im surprised you managed to find out this much already. To learn anything more, you have to know how it all went down, and that defeats the purpose. Face it, youre against an iron rule.

What if theres a way around it?

Mages? Havoc frowned. No thanks.

No. What if I kill the echo restricting you?

Even Dallion was aware of the significance of what he had just said. Destroying echoes in someones realm was one thing. However, in this case it was more than possible that they wouldnt be dealing with a standard echo, but a metalin. Dallion didnt know much about the constructs other than they were one of the few significant advances of the current era. Nil remained evasive regarding their creation, though had hinted that they could be linked to the skills of the Star. Having seen one, Dallion was inclined to agree.

Thats impossible.

Impossible or never done before? Dallion asked, despite his own fears. The metalin he had seen in the realm of Aspion Luors realm seemed invincible. Of course, back then Dallions level was

laughable by current standards. He didnt have any of his weapons, his familiars, not any practical experience.

Are you sure, dear boy? Nil asked. Theres a reason that metalins are used to enforce restrictions.

If youre able to talk about it, youll tell me, right?

Seems youre just as reckless as before. Havoc stood up then rushed towards Dal. To a normal person, the action was fast and threatening. To Dallion, it was like having a kitten try and knock over an elephant. If you mess up in my realm, youll suffer the consequences as well, hunter emblem or not.

Thats the only way forward. Dallion smiled.

### **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality changed.

It had been so long that transformed his realm into an island that he had forgotten the cold unwelcomeness of the initial dark corridor.

### **YOU ARE LEVEL 3**

A blue rectangle glowed in the middle of a large room made entirely out of brass. Frames containing items covered several of the walls, each a skill that Havoc knew, or rather had known. Black spiky chains were wrapped around most of them. All in all, there were only five frames that were usable.

Grim, Dallion said, using his reaction trait to look around.

Hes not here, Havoc said. A concession that was given to me. I think it was because the cleric overseeing the curse was pleased with what I had done. The metalin wont enter my awakening room unless I meddle with my sealed skills.

Better than nothing, Dallion thought. Have any echoes of your own?

Echoes are a level five thing.

I meant from before.

No. Just an empty corridor.

Lux, Dallion said.

Blue flames surrounded him. Shortly after, Dallions shield, harpsisword, and dartblade appeared. There was no point in summoning his entire arsenal before seeing what his opponent was capable of.

Stay here. Dallion made his way to the single door of the room. Ill deal with the echo.

Itll take more than a single hit to take them down. Havoc sat on the floor. Good luck.

You really are easygoing, arent you?

Taking a deep breath, Dallion split into twelve instances and opened the door.

The corridor was well light, but empty. Chained doors extended on both sides leading into the distance. There werent that many of them, probably eight in all, though the corridor created the illusion that there was an infinite amount.

*Lux, feeling anything?*

No cracklings, the familiar purred. Is the thing well fight strong?

*Should be. Youll be the one to kill it, so be ready.*

Dallion burst into instances again. The moment one of them took a step further down the corridor, the torches on the walls turned red.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

Here we go. Dallion drew his harpsisword.

Several bolts flew towards him, aiming for his head in each instance. Thankfully, his reaction speed was fast enough to evade or deflect all but one of them. The disconcerting part was that only after the attack was over did the green guard markers emerged, letting him know how best to protect himself.

What the heck? Dallion rushed forward. If he wasnt able to defend himself adequately, his only option was to defend.

This isnt your realm, dear boy, Nil reminded. Youre nothing but a guest here. Thats why the markers follow the properties of the owner.

*He said that his perception was fine.*

*Even if true, his perception was a lot less than yours.*

A cluster of bolts emerged again, bouncing off the armadil shield. Curious, Dallion let one of them hit an instance of his. The familiar red rectangle appeared, indicating a minor hit. Unfortunately, it was instantly followed by another series of rectangles, appearing in front of all of Dallions other instances.

### **TRAIT REDUCTION**

**Your REACTION trait has been decreased by 1**

A trait reduction? Dallion had only seen them once when fighting a rather annoying creature in the wilderness. To be more precise, he had felt it rather than seeing it. The creature in question had the annoying ability to sap his perception, making the fight progressively more difficult with time. In this case, the metalin could cause similar afflictions by targeting his echoes.

Dont use point attacks! Nil shouted, just as Dallion was entering the stance for one. Youll be doing more damage to Havoc than to the metalin.

How much more? Dallion asked, avoiding another bolt. His enemy was within sight now, visible in the distance some fifty feet ahead. Apparently, Dallions range of view was also determined by Havocs traits.

*Enough to seal him for good. Also, try to not hit the walls too much.*

It felt as if he were fighting inside of a glass bottle. That explained why no one tried to remove the restrictions of a curse the battlefield itself was one giant restriction. Havoc must have had great confidence in Dallions capabilities to let him try this in the first place.

Upon reaching ten feet of the metalin, the construct changed tactics, sticking with both of his dartblade in a butterfly strike. It looked like a lifeless metal suit of armor. Its actions, on the other hand, were as flexible as Dallion could imagine.

Using his shield and harpsisword, Dallion blocked the attacks.

Gleam! He summoned the whip blade.

The weapon emerged on his side, sliding out and extending in a lightning piercing strike straight in the empty helmet. There was a loud clanking noise, accompanied by a spark, but no rectangle.

Taking advantage of the successful attack, Dallion proceeded with the attack bonus it provided, following up with a piercing multi attack. The tip of the harpsisword struck the metal breastplate of his opponent, pushing the construct several steps back.

## **SHOCK EFFECT**

**METALIN movement has been reduced by 10% for two minutes**

**METALIN attack effectiveness has been reduced by 50% for two minutes**

Chapter 599: Something Scary

Who are you? the metalin asked, its voice sounded unnaturally deep, as if talking through a tuba.

Whats it matter? Dallion asked, filling his voice with notions of confusion and recklessness. To no surprise, no connection was achieved. The tendrils of music bounced off the metalin as if it were made of nothing.

You arent permitted to remove the restrictions.

Dallions response was to burst into instances, then strike at different parts of his enemy. If the metalin engaged in combat splitting as one had to in such circumstances Dallion was going to force the outcome that was best for him.

No such thing happened. Even slowed down, the construct attempted to evade the attacks, yet without creating instances of its own. The movements were scarily precise, yet even they werent able to block all attacks.

Sparks filled the corridor as the harpsisword struck parts of the armor, vibrating at each hit. Alas, despite the pressure Dallion was putting on, he found that he was unable to deal any actual damage.

Harp, can you keep this up? Dallion doubled his effort, splitting in twenty instances each blow.

Maintain the pressure, the dryad replied.

*Im not doing any damage.*

Despite the number of hits the metalin didnt seem in the least bit phased. It kept retreating backwards, swinging its dartblades to both defend and attack. On a few occasions it even shot a bolt at one of Dallions instances. Naturally, Dallion was quick to drop that instance before it was hit; he had no intention of making the same mistake twice.

The bolt flew through the air, hitting a wall. The moment it did the entire corridor shook.

Told you not to hit anything, dear boy, Nil said, very much to Dallions annoyance. Better finish this quickly.

Stay the course, Harp insisted. You can manage, you only need to figure out how.

In his mind, Dallion paused. There was two choices he could make. Harp was the oldest guardian he had. She had saved him several times and given good advice dozens of times more. Before he had hooked up with Euryale, Dallion considered her a mother of sorts. And ever since he had become a hunter, he had asked for her advice less and less. In a way, it almost felt like he was moving out of his parents house to be with his fiance.

The effect wont last forever, Nil urged.

Letting go of his dartblade, Dallion then summoned the Nox dagger. That had the power to slice through the armor for certain.

Dal, Harp said. Trust me.

Seconds remained before the metalin regained his full speed. Dallion had a split second to make a choice, and he did. The harpsisword struck the constructs shoulder, bringing it off balance. Dallion followed up with a second attack right in the breastplate.

## **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Damage dealt is increased by 500%**

The dagger shattered through the metalins breastplate. The construct froze. Its empty helmet looked down at the spot of the hole, as if refusing to believe what had happened.

Not wasting a moment, Dallion struck again in the base of the metalins neck. Another red rectangle briefly appeared, before being replaced by a blue one.

## **SOMETHING SCARY**

**(+1 Body, +1 Reaction, +1 Mind, +1 Perception))**

**Youve killed something new and scary that doesnt exist. Dont make it a habit, there wont be any rewards next time.**

For several seconds Dallion stood there, combat splitting as if expecting something to jump out from the end of the corridor. The metalin had been tough, although nowhere near some of the

opponents he had fought. The way it fought reminded Dallion of the Stars echo he had faced in the fallen south. The achievement rewards were also similar.

You could have succeeded, Harp said. The sound vibrations she used to speak couldnt convey whether she was disappointed, but Dallion had the feeling she was.

*Sorry, Harp.*

It was the right call, Nil countered. Your goal isnt to improve, its removing Havocs restrictions.

*He could have done both.*

Gleam, keep watch, Dallion whispered, then split into three instances and turned around with one. No sooner had he done so than Havoc was in front of him.

Nice. The large man took a step to the wall and pulled the bolt out of it. Didnt think youd manage. Now we have a chance.

So, youll tell me what happened.

What happened? Havoc arched his brows. You need to remove the restrictions.

Silence followed. Both men looked at each other in awkward silence, after which Havoc burst laughing.

You thought this was it? If that was it, it wouldnt be a problem removing a curse. Take a look at the doors.

Chains were still visible making it impossible for any door to be opened. Whatever Dallion had done it clearly wasnt enough.

What about the thing I killed? he asked.

It protects the corridor. With it still here I couldnt get out of my awakening room. Havoc waved the bolt he was holding like a magic wand. Time to see the rest of the realm. He continued forward.

Maintaining a healthy number of instances, Dallion followed. The torch flames changed color back to yellow, allowing everyone to see much better. Soon, they reached a large double door with intricate motifs carved on it.

Your training room? Dallion asked.

Yes. I used to spend half a week every day in here. Helps keep in shape. After the curse I had to use my awakening room, or item realms. Its not the same though. How much do you train?

This was a trick question, mostly because Dallion hadnt used the training area of his realm for a very long time. Back in the day when he was still exploring the realm he had found it quite cool, and even spent a while training basic defense stances under Nils supervision. At present, he wasnt even sure where the training area was.

Will there be anything in there? Dallion asked instead, still gripping both his weapons.

Lets find out. Havoc slammed both sides of the door with his fists, making it swing open in front of them.

A large combat arena lit up. The first thing that Dallion saw was the series of wooden training tools that would perfectly fit a martial arts temple. All of them were massive and seen considerable use. Surrounding the arena were a number of statues of creatures that stood against the walls, along with dozens of portraits. Each represented a different creature caught in a rather aggressive pose.

Things I helped catch, Havoc explained vaguely. Theres a story behind every one of them. Of course, I cant share any until were done.

There were a series of wolves, a bladicorn, several birds, and a whole lot of creatures Dallion couldnt identify.

Havent seen any of those. Dallion pointed at the statue of a two-headed serpent.

Some of them arent local. Thats from the north.

Dallion made his way around the side of the arena, looking at the paintings. It didnt take long for to find what he was hoping for: the depiction of a phoenix. Two wings stretched in an attempt to fill the whole lower half of the frame as they surrounded a far smaller slender body. To anyone with artistic skill it would appear that the artist had added a touch of The Avant-Garde to the otherwise realistic style. Having seen an echo of the actual creature, as well as its ability to shift, Dallion knew it to be the real thing.

Therell be time for that later, Havoc said.

Yes, Dallion said to himself. Later.

Wheres the door? he asked.

Right there. The large man pointed to an empty section of the wall. I tried busting it. Didnt work.

Dallion looked. No outline was visible.

Are you sure? He walked in the direction. I dont see anything.

Its there.

Nox, your turn, Dallion said.

The crackling leapt from the dagger onto the combat arena. With a snarl it leapt in the direction Havoc was pointing and started sniffing the wall.

Two companions? Havoc remarked. Not bad.

Its here, Nox purred. Its very thin.

Moving closer, he saw what the familiar was saying. Without a doubt, there was an outline of a doorway. As thick as the width of a piece of paper, a line made its way seven feet up starting from the floor, then three feet across, before falling back down. If it hadnt been for the crackling, Dallion wouldnt have even noticed it.

Whats your usual level? Dallion slid the fingers of his left arm along the line.

I cant tell you.

Whatever it was, you'll get it back when I create the opening. No idea if your skill will be back, though.

Traits will be enough or a start. After that we can fight together. Just like back during the chaining hunt.

That didn't fill Dallion with confidence. Havoc had done precious little that battle, even if his advice had been spot on. It was looking like this might be a repeat of the situation. Hopefully, this time he wasn't going to get wounded so easily.

The crackling split into four versions of himself. Two of them jumped up, sticking their claws then slid down, slicing it like a curtain. Meanwhile, the other two took turns leaping and slashing at the wall so as to create the horizontal connection.

That's strangely adorable, Havoc said. How did you get a crackling as your familiar?

Long story. Dallion tightened his grip round the harpsisword. What do you think is out there?

Don't know. Maybe when I get my level back up, I'll have an idea. I can't link to anything at level three, not even most of my realm.

A loud hissing sound filled the room, as the carved out a section of the wall poured down to the floor like sand. An archway had appeared, leading to what appeared to be a mountain range.

What's that? Dallion glanced at Havoc.

What can I say? I was born in a mountain village. I like mountains.

Any change in level?

This was the moment of truth. Dallion had unsealed the powers of a few people so far. In those cases the people weren't cursed, so no changes were expected. There was no guarantee that Havoc would get his level restored, but it would be a huge advantage if he did.

Nothing I can feel. The man shrugged.

Not good, Dallion thought. Nox, look around for other doors.

The four cracklings snarled, annoyed, then split up running off along both sides of the area. As they did, Dallion approached the arc to get a better look at what was outside. Based on what Havoc had said, the realm was supposed to be a mountain. In a way that was good it allowed him to use line attacks again.

I can use line attacks, right? Dallion asked just to be on the same side.

Yes, although I wouldn't recommend it, the echo replied. Rely on Nox, he's your winning ticket in the situation. Just be quick. Metalins are fast learners.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

Crap! Shield! Dallion yelled, raising the armadil shield in front of him.

The shield extended just in time to block over a dozen projectiles. The sound was different from the bolts the previous metalin had used. That didn't make them any less deadly.



Havoc, get back in the corridor!

A pair of daggers flew over Dallions head, just above the end of the armadil shield.

Wheres the fun in that? The large man grinned.

Found another opening, Nox said. Want me to open it?

The second sealed doorway was to the side of the arena, right behind the painting of a moon wolf. An interesting place for an exit. If Dallion had to guess, it had to be a link to one of Havocs items. When the man had been delevelled, he had also lost the ability to link to items. That suggested that unsealing the link would allow the man to summon a better weapon.

Unseal it, but be careful. He burst into a hundred instances.

It was time to check the outside of the realm.

Chapter 600: Hidden Quarter

Dozens of buildings were scattered throughout the mountain peak, carved into the cliff itself. The architecture style reminded of Linatol, only with a few more Roman elements. Half of them were open, with walls of air stretching between thick columns of granite. The perfect weather in the realm made it more convenient, allowing a person to take advantage of a breathtaking view of peaks, skies, and clouds. If Dallion didnt know better, hed say that this realm was created by a fury. So much air and little land would give a huge advantage to anyone with the ability to fly. Fortunately, thanks to Lux, Dallion had that ability. Unfortunately, so did all of his enemies.

Dozens of bladerers filled the sky, looking at him with their soulless, empty helmets. Each was a suit of armor with wings made of swords, and not an ounce of mercy. Dallion had faced one in the past. It was from it that he had seen the effects of a line attack for the first time.

There had been a moment of dread the first moment he had seen it within Havocs realm. However, his harpsisword had vibrated, calming him down through her use of music skills.

The metalin was just the first line of defense, Dallion thought, maintaining a hundred instances.

They are used for underground areas, Nil explained. Bladerers are for open spaces.

*And youre telling all this now?*

*Of course. Youve already seen them, so Im free to clarify matters.*

The rules of the Moons held true. Once all this was over, Dallion planned to tell Felygn exactly what he thought about the rules of this world.

Dont mind them, Havoc said a few steps behind. Focus on the buildings.

I told you to stay inside, Dallion hissed.

He is inside. The man grinned. Im just an echo. When you killed the metalin our level jumped up to five. When you broke the seal into the realm, you got us to ten.

One of the bladerers flapped its wings, launching a cluster of blades in the echos direction. Echo-Havoc tried to leap to the side and evade them, but his speed was not enough. Becoming an instant pincushion, he disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving the blades to drop to the ground.

They dont play around. Havocs voice came from the opening in the mountain behind Dallion. The good news is that they consider you strong, or theyd have attacked.

Whats the bad news?

When theyre convinced youre alone, theyll swarm you. Until then, theyll only protect the important parts.

You seem to know a lot.

Do you think delevelleds just accept losing their levels? Why do you think Im forbidden to leave the village?

That made sense. Given how tightly important information was managed in this world, it was impressive that the man had learned as much as he had. Looking around, it became apparent that the bladeres had positioned themselves in relation to certain temples. Going by analogies, each temple had to be the result of a completed awakening trial. The ones surrounded in chains had to be the ones restricted.

All of Dallions instances flew off in all directions. The bladerers quickly followed, launching blades in multiple directions. It was as if they were able to see all of Dallions instances, but they themselves werent able to use combat splitting.

Shield, expand! Dallion ordered, moving his left arm behind his back while simultaneously deflecting all frontal attacks with his harpsisword. Gleam, cover my flanks!

Youre acting recklessly again. The whip blade extended like a spiral around him.

Focusing, Dallion then did three line attacks and a point attack in immediate succession. Lines of destruction flew forward, targeting a small, chained temple. There was no telling what the structure would grant Havoc once destroyed, but that wasnt the point. All Dallion wanted to see was the bladeres method of defense.

The response didnt delay. Half a dozen line attacks line attacks flew in Dallions direction.

**ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by BLADERER**

**Attack has no effect**

A red rectangle emerged as two of the line attacks collided. The rest missed each other, dealing devastation along the way. Rows of Dallions instances were swept away, and even those that werent were pushed back a considerable distance.

On the other side, red rectangles popped up, indicating the destruction of two bladerers.

Just two? Dallion thought, his arm partially numb from the experience. This was going to be a lot more difficult than he expected.

Dust filled the air, as several peaks were chopped off due to the attacks. The temple Dallion had aimed at was also affected. The chains had been completely shattered, as was most of the structure. The entire left part of the roof was gone, as if drilled by a cannon shot.

Thats still my realm! Havoc shouted, emerging from the arena chamber. Find the chained tower and destroy

Before he could finish, several blades flew through him, causing the large man to disappear in a new cloud of dust.

Another echo, Dallion thought. Thats not a bad idea.

All of Dallions instances faded away. Simultaneously, another two hims appeared. The only issue was that they didnt have Lux.

Hold on! Dallion thought as Lux propelled him forward.

The shield extended, creating a metal sphere that encapsulated all three Dallions within it. Just before it closed, the firebird moved off its owner and onto the outside.

Lux, find that tower! Dallion ordered.

*At once, boss!*

Metal blades hit the sphere with the consistency of rain. Too weak to pierce it, they bounced off, causing minimal damage. However, that didnt stop the bladerers from persisting.

Shield, how are you? Dallion asked.

*The line attacks are nasty. Even with Lux, Ill only be able to withstand ten of those at most.*

Lux, avoid all such

Before Dallion could finish, the sphere suddenly thrust up, the inertia pushing him and his clones to its floor. A second later, the same happened, only this time throwing all to the side.

Id forgotten how annoying this was, one of the echoes grumbled. Be careful not to poof any of us before you get where you need to.

Yeah. Next time create us when were near the target, okay? the other echo complained.

That was good advice. It was an oversight on his part due to not using echoes. Dallions natural reluctance combined with the real world hunting made him forget a lot of tricks he used to know before. That had made his awakening trials more challenging, although had given him clear advantages in real world battles.

The sphere changed direction, hit by an external force.

Thats one hit, Vihrogon said. Nine to go.

Lux, any progress on the tower? Dallion asked.

There are lots of towers, the firebird replied. All of them are in chains.

*Go to the tallest one!*

The sphere shook again as it was driven left, then up. The bladerers outside had stopped using bladed and focused on line attacks. Normally, that would mean that they were on the way to complete exhaustion, but since they were constructs, they could probably go on for quite a while.

Were there, boss! Lux said just before the sphere shook again.

Bring us to the ground! Dallion said. Shield, open up before

A strong crash resonated through the sphere, indicating that they were already on the ground.

Open up, Dallion said, bursting into instances.

The moment the shield contracted to his usual form, all three Dallions dashed in different directions. Each of them had a number of instances, as well as their own plan of action.

The tower that Lux had found was seven stories high, wrapped in barbed chains to the extent that nothing of the actual building was visible. Without any doubt, that had to be something important. If this were Dallions realm, he'd say that it held all of Havocs skills and traits. Maybe it was still the case. Havoc had been adamant that nothing in his awakening room was to be touched. Perhaps unchaining the buildings above ground would remove the skill restrictions as well? There was only one way to find out.

Evading the bladerer attacks, Dallion launched two point attacks at the target. Both hit without issue. Chain fragments scattered about like shrapnel, yet the tower remained enclosed.

How many layers are there? Dallion asked, launching as he performed two more line attacks.

The mass of chains burst into several spots. Sadly, the rest of the chains quickly moved, filling up the holes that had been created.

Nox, I'll have to rely on you again, buddy. Dallion kept on running towards the tower.

Three bladerers blocked his path, each targeting a cluster of Dallions instances. No sooner had they done so, when the whip blade flew down from the sky, entangling the left of the three constructs.

Dont say I never save your life, Gleam said in an amused voice.

When did I say that? Dallion smiled as he continued forward. His left hand reached into the air, grabbing the hilt of the Nox dagger that formed between his fingers. Boost me, Lux!

Time seemed to stop, while all of Dallions surroundings moved at a neck breaking pace. Bladerers changed direction, launching streams of blades towards the tower, but they were already too late. The home in their defense created by Gleam had allowed Dallion to reach the base of the tower, at which point there was nothing they could do.

Here goes, Dallion whispered, and struck the mass of chains with the dagger.

A spiderweb of cracks formed around the point of impact. Then another, and another. Like ripples in a pond, zones of cracks appeared one over the other, causing the chains to shatter as the dagger kept sinking deeper and deeper.

Ten layers were punctured before Dallions very eyes. A second later the number had doubled, then tripled. Dallions entire arm had sunk into the increasing hole until finally, he saw the color of stone beneath all the chains.

## **UNRESTRICTED SUCCESS**

**(+5 Mind)**

**Removing restrictions is in accordance with the Moons rules, but just because you can doesnt mean you should. Next time make sure you know what youre releasing.**

The chains burst from within, filling the air like burning confetti. Finally, Dallion was able to see the true shape of the tower. Even at seven stories high, it was far from imposing, looking a lot more like a fancy watchtower than anything else. Even so, there was no denying the difference it had brought to the realm, covering it with a layer of brightness.

Know anything that would return color to a realm? Dallion asked.

Five bladerers had gathered in the area, surrounding Dallion on all sides. The vast majority of them had ignored the echoes he had created, focusing solely on him.

Dallion spun around doing several line attacks at his enemies.

## **ATTACK NEGATED**

**Your attack has been sliced in two by BLADERER**

**Attack has no effect**

Of course you would, Dallion said beneath his breath.

*Shield, youre good for five more?*

Barely, Vihrogon replied. Itll be painful, but manageable. Ill need a long rest after that.

*Okay, then*

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind appeared, slicing through one of the bladerers. Red rectangles emerged, proving its destruction. It didnt end there. The winds increased in strength scattering the remaining constructs into the sea of clouds below the peaks.

You really are something, Havoc said.

The emotions of joy and eagerness emanating from him made Dallion know that this wasnt an echo, but the real deal. What was more, the man was flying very much like Dallion and the bladerers were.

Youre a fury? Dallion could barely believe it.

Quarter. The man grinned. I was lucky to get the gift. How do you think I was able to stand up to a bunch of wizards otherwise?

That made a bit of sense, but Dallion strongly doubted it was enough. Right now that wasn't important, though. There was still a lot of work to be done before all the restrictions were gone.