

Leveling up 261

Chapter 261: Scarred

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

The blades forming the protectors wing shattered like glass, causing the creature to lose altitude. This was by no means a victory. Although wounded, the bladeler hadnt lost its ability to fly. Blades from the other wing shifted, quickly reforming what was missing.

Lux, to the left! Dallion shouted, fully aware of what was about to follow.

Moments after, another line split the air. It was only thanks to Dallions splitting that he managed to plunge low enough to avoid the giant slice. None of his other instances were as fortunate, sending a shiver down his spine.

On the ground, a short distance away, the crackling emerged from the dagger. Grabbing the weapon with its mouth, it then ran in the general direction of Dallion.

Knives and swords kept flying through the air, flowing towards Dallion like pouring out of a firehose. At this rate, Dallion was forced to split into five instances, only to cope. However, with every second, his headache grew more and more.

For every narrow escape, Dallion had to evade twice more. The protector was actively adapting to his tactics. Even at a distance, the lag between the orders given to the firebird and Luxs reaction was starting to become noticeable. What was more, the bladeler was successfully keeping his distance from Nox. Somehow he was able to sense the location of the crackling, even if he didnt bother attacking.

With flight and music being useless against such an enemy, there wasnt much he could do with the current approach. On the other hand, there was one thing he hadnt done so far. It was going to be quite risky, but it wasnt like Dallion had many alternatives.

Shield! Dallion shouted, holding it in front of him.

The shield extended, though not as wide as before. Apparently, it had received quite a bit of damage.

Just a bit longer, buddy. Dallion summoned the harpsisword.

Lux, pick up Harp and drive her in its chest! And, Harp, do that sound thing you do to deal continuous damage when in there.

There was a brief chord of disapproval. While enjoying a battle, the harpsisword didn't appreciate the attitude. No doubt in her view the proper way to strike an enemy was by being held by a person, not directed by a firebird. Sooner or later Dallion was going to have to learn to handle a sword adequately, which at present the harpsisword didn't think he was.

Without the firebird, gravity snatched Dallion back down. Normally, the landing would have caused him to crack a bone, or at the very least, to get hurt. With his current body level, he barely felt a thing. Meanwhile, the harpsisword thrust through the air, hitting the protector in the chest.

A sense of victory went through Dallion, followed almost immediately by a sense of fear. This was way too easy and if there was one thing he had learned from facing high level opponents, it was that they always had an ace in their sleeves.

For several moments, it was as if nothing had happened. The bladeler remained floating in the sky, the harpsisword sticking from him. However, there was no indication that he was hit, as if the weapon had done no damage. Then, suddenly, the protector's wings exploded in a rain of blades.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

WINGS SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its wings.

The shield expanded further on his own, shielding as much of Dallion as it could from the attack. Unfortunately, that turned out not to be enough.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 10%

PERMANENT EFFECT - BLEEDING

You have been scarred by the attack. The scar will continue bleeding in the real world until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

One of the blades sliced through Dallion's armor like butter, causing a slight nick on his skin.

Damn it! Dallion shouted.

This was the last thing he wanted to happen. Now there would be consequences, even if he managed to win the battle. The gamer in him whispered that it would have been better if he would have just left and risked losing the Moons' approval for a while. The pragmatist, though, was adamant that he had made the right choice. After all, now the advantage was on his side again.

Lift me up, Lux,

he thought.

Within moments the firebird appeared next to him, quickly landing on his shoulder, then lifting Dallion in the air. In contrast, the protector had crashed to the ground completely wingless. The lack

of wings made him look far less threatening than before. Combined with the damage received, the bladeler looked more like a humanoid of light wearing a set of light armor. If this were a picture, one would even describe the being as beautiful. After having fought it for so long, Dallion had no illusions, though.

As much as Dallion begrudged the comment, there was no denying that Nil and Harp were right. Facing low level opponents had made him complacent. If he wanted to progress, he was going to train more, and not only against the guardian of the stiletto. For the moment, though, it was safe to say that he had won.

Theres no point in continuing, Dallion shouted, fifty feet from the protector. I have the treasure and youve lost your wings. Lets just call it a draw, alright?

Come to think of it, Dallion had no idea what happened to a protector once defeated. Guardians improved, but the protector was no guardianit didnt control the realm; it was merely there to protect what it was tasked to.

Its just as you suspect, dear boy. They cease to exist. Think of them as more complicated echoes. Well, technically, no one has managed to provide absolute proof. All we know is that once defeated, they disappear, never to appear again. Personally, I think they are permanently destroyed.

This wasnt the answer Dallion wanted to hear.

Ive no reason to kill you, Dallion said. Let's just stop. I have what I came for, I just"

You have too much empathy, the bladeler said all of a sudden. Its voice was clear, slightly high pitched. Win or lose youll face a lot of pain.

In that case, I prefer to win, Dallion said. Id still like to settle this with a draw, though. Theres no reason for us to fight. And its not like you have a chance. You have no wings now.

Neither do you.

An attack immediately followed, splitting air, stone, and wood as it continued towards the horizon. Dallion had Lux thrust up. No sooner had the firebird done so, when another line attack followed, and another. Even at this point, the threat remained very real. The protector kept on with its attacks, forcing Dallion to block or evade.

Im offering you a draw, Dallion said. I wont for much longer. If you keep this up, Ill have to kill you and you wont be coming back.

We must do what we must. The reply came.

It wont end well for you. Dallion could already foresee what would happen.

As expected, the protector didnt, launching another of his attacks.

Do it, Nox, Dallion sighed.

On cue, the crackling leapt at the bladelier, claws first. A loud screeching sound filled the air like Styrofoam on glass.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

Blade parts fell on the stone path, as Noxs claws dug into their target. There was no scream or flinch. The protector tried to look over his shoulder to see his attacker, but before he could, the light within him disappeared. Left without anything to hold them, the remaining armor parts fell on the floor, reverting to their original shape.

NOX IS LEVEL 3

Dallion didnt respond. For several seconds, he remained in the air, waiting. Once half a minute had passed, and it was clear that the protector was no more, Dallion had Lux land him on the spot.

You really mustnt be so harsh on yourself, dear boy. Not everyone will accept your offers. After all, you made it. Its not your fault that protectors cant respond adequately.

That didnt make Dallion feel much better. Having Nox leap onto his shoulder, though, did have a soothing effect. Visibly, there didnt seem to be any change in the cracklings appearance. But Dallion could sense the cub had grown stronger. And still he had ho idea why that had happened.

Dallion looked at his leg. There was no indication of a wound. Even so, he let the firebird perform its healing magic. Close to a minute later, he was at full health again, but even so, the victory felt hollow.

Yeah. I just didnt expect this, Dallion lied. For some unclear reason, he felt as if he could have prevented the protectors destruction. For the moment, though, he had to put all that behind him.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion recited the names of the Moons and then returned to the real world. Estezol was there. From the mans perspective, he had just given him the ring as a gift. Now that Dallion had gotten what he wanted from it, he didnt need it anymore. However, he didnt have it in him to refuse.

Thanks, Estezol, he said, mustering a smile. Ill remember this.

Dont worry about it. Just, if you happen to have any more awakened friends, bring them here first, okay?

I promise, Dallion laughed. Ill be going now. Take care.

It probably was obvious to Estezol that Dallion had spent a while in an awakened realm. Regardless, the short man just waved briefly before rushing back into the guild. Dallion waited until he was gone, then looked around to get his bearings. Once he did, he too set off for Hannah's inn.

How are you holding up, shield? he whispered while walking.

Honestly, I've been better. You really know how to challenge your gear. First Vermilion and now this? You're lucky the bladelers weren't particularly well trained. Also, you should listen to Nil on this one. Protectors never back off, even when they lose the thing they are sent to protect.

So, there's no other way of stopping them?

There might be, but not one you could pull off. Seriously, bladelers are little more than a stack of blades given sentience. Feeling bad for them is the same as feeling bad for an ingot you use to make something of. At the end of the day, they are just a lock, and unless you have the key, you must break them.

In that case, I'll learn how to make keys, Dallion whispered. He had no idea why he'd said that. From a logical point of view, he agreed with everything the shield had said, but still something was making him feel sad something he could have sworn wasn't there a few days ago.

Chapter 262: Sudden Celebration Plans

Just this? Hannah asked, looking at a small parcel on the table.

It was difficult to make out details from the door, though one thing was for certain the cloth that was wrapped round the parcel was weathered and torn in many places. Someone with keen hunting skills would even say that it might have been taken from the jaws of a wolf or other monster.

That's all I found, Jiroh replied. She didn't sound pleased about it either. I can try again, but"

Not this close to the festival, the innkeeper interrupted. The best is"

There would have undoubtedly been more, but this was the point at which Dallion entered the inn. As an awakened, he had managed to catch a few phrases of the conversation. Upon seeing him, Hannah quickly grabbed the parcel and tucked it away. Meanwhile, Jiroh turned around and offered a smile while also making sure to stand in front of whatever she had brought.

Hey, the fury said. You're smiling for once. Been to get some armor?

Huh?" Dallion blinked. He didn't see any reason why he should get armor. Moments later, his mind clicked. This was Jiroh's way of asking whether he had been with Eury recently. Oh, no. Just coming from the guild. He quickly replied.

This new train of thought had caught him completely off guard. Given the annoyed look Hannah had given him, she no doubt knew what Jiroh had in mind better than Dallion himself. Maybe it was better to avoid the topic altogether. Then again, he couldn't openly talk about hunting the copyette either.

For one thing, Hannah was here. For another, she hadn't appreciated Dallion's remarks, how he and Eury had to face off a chainling alone.

So, what are you two doing? Dallion approached innocently.

Its none of your business! Hannah snapped. Youre in enough trouble as it is. There are always two city guards during lunch and dinner time now, pretending to blend in with the crowd. Youre lucky that theyre useful with the festival nearing. Otherwise Id have kicked you out of here faster than a four-legged hopper.

There are guards outside? Dallion wondered. That was new. If it had been going on for a while he certainly hadnt noticed.

Theres been an incident. Jiroh breached the subject. With the mirror pool. Someone of importance was attacked.

Contrary to popular belief, I dont know everything that goes on in the city,

Why was Dallion began, but sensing anger buildup in Hannah, quickly stopped. Actually, Im thinking of organizing a feast.

This managed to catch both Hannah and Jiroh by surprise. Dallion didnt need his music skills to interpret their questioning looks.

Well, its about time I did one myself. So many things have happened to me so far, and for now its always been you whos marked the occasion. He gave Hannah a glance. Something good happened to me today, so I thought its high time I invite those close to me for a bite.

There was a long pause. If this were a cartoon, there would be crickets chirping around now. Dallion felt the doubt in him increase, flooding the entire room.

Ive saved up enough, Dallion said. Enough for ten-twenty people, in any event. I know itll have to be before the big shifts, but I think we can squeeze something in maybe breakfast?

A breakfast feast? Hannah gave him a look that all but accused him of crimes against the culinary world.

Yeah?

You expect me to believe that youve decided to have a feast here out of the blue? The innkeeper crossed her arms. You want to have it in the morning, and youre also willing to pay for it? What happened? Youre getting married?

Dallion felt his face burn. Objectively speaking, he brought this on himself. The suddenness with which he had made the announcement suggested something of that nature. Possibly, that was one more reason to get Hannah annoyed.

No, not yet. Its something else

The new silence indicated that Dallion wasnt going to get away with just that.

I got a new skill, he whispered.

Given what a big deal awakened skills were, he hoped that would be enough to serve as an excuse. And thankfully, it was. The attitude of Hannah and Jiroh changed completely.

Well done. Jiroh patted him on the shoulder. Anything good?

Dallion felt uncomfortable. At this point he had learned the significance of keeping his abilities secret, especially given his conviction that there was a copyette present. On the other hand, Athletics wasn't something that was particularly significant, not at its current level in any event.

I say go ahead with it

Dallion still hesitated.

If the copyette is thousands of years old, I doubt having athletics at one will surprise it to the point of defeat.

Athletics, he said. Just common athletics.

A skill is a skill. Hannah shrugged. There was nothing in her emotions that suggested she was overly interested. At the same time, she was taking this way too calmly for Dallion's taste. Don't expect a huge discount! You pay the cost and you don't rush Aspan. If he decides to make something fancy, that's on him.

I expected nothing less. Dallion squeezed as much enthusiasm as he could into his words. Even if Hannah was the copyette, she was way stingier than she was supposed to be. This small event was going to cost him quite a bit. While guild feasts were something common, paying for it personally proved to be quite a lot.

And I'm not letting Spike here! That kid almost wrecked the place twice!

I doubt he'll start a fight with only us around, Jiroh laughed.

I'm not taking any chances. Take it or leave it! You can pack some food and bring it to him at the guild, but he's not setting foot here!

The conversation quickly shifted to haggling and negotiations. Since Dallion had only come up with this a few moments ago, he had no idea of any details, using Hannah's questions as pointers.

To his surprise, the innkeeper had reluctantly agreed to allow Eury at the event mostly because of her secret suspicion that there would be a secret wedding announcement. Apart from that, the list of guests was short and very random. The Luors were to be there, of course, along with Vend and very much to Dallion's surprise, Captain Adzorg. That was the only person that Hannah had stressed that should be invited. Janna and Kallan were also approved, as were Bel, Estezol, and Falkner. A few other names were tossed about, but in the end Dallion didn't feel particularly inclined, so they were dropped.

When all was said and done, there were close to a dozen people to mark the event more than Dallion expected, considering how long he had been in the city. Compared to a college party, the number

was pitiful, however, considering that all of them could be called his friends, it was significant. It was a shame that there was a real possibility that one of them might end up being a copyette.

The discussions over, Dallion went to his room under the pretext of doing some training. The truth was that he needed to have a word with someone. Actually, with more than one person, but he intended to start with the guardian of the armadil shield.

ITEM AWAKENING

The shields domain appeared around Dallion. It looked considerably more run down than before. The walls were covered with cracks, despite the attempts to hide them, not to mention that the purple veins still hadn't completely disappeared.

You can at least pretend they aren't there, a familiar voice said.

Looking over his shoulder, Dallion saw the dryad. The guardian was wearing his casual leather attire, however this time there were quite a few bandages wrapped around him as well.

And I distinctly remember telling you that I'm companion armor. Having to fight protectors and sentinels is no different from what I had to do during the war.

Sorry. Dallion moved away from the wall. I didn't think I'd be so outmatched.

I know. The dryad placed a hand on Dallion's shoulder. It's normal to be reckless when young. There's no power able to stop the folly of youth, be it blade, or bear, or midnight star. Why don't we sit down?

Sure. Dallion quickly made his way to the nearest couch. For some reason, the dryad enjoyed making him uncomfortable. Everything considered, though, that was light punishment. I can get Lux to help if you want? He's good at healing, so"

I appreciate the intention, but I'll be fine. The dryad took a seat facing Dallion. I'm a dryad, we regenerate. It'll just take some time. The only way you could potentially help is to defeat me, but you're far from that level. Incidentally, I suppose that's the main reason you're here.

It isn't. Dallion replied, his words ringing with conviction. It's the second reason. The main thing was to see how you're doing.

I'm flattered, but you don't need to check on me every day.

In truth, Dallion hadn't visited the dryad all that much. He had spoken to him daily, that much was true; he had also offered to visit as well as help, but each time the guardian would respond in identical fashion, thanking him and asking that he be given some time alone.

This is a dangerous time for you, the dryad said. Awakened who get this far start to think they're invincible and become reckless. Most of the awakened deaths occur around this level. Single and double-digits know enough to stay away from trouble, nobles have the strength to deal with most things there are. Those in-between all I can say is that it's a good thing you're not going through puberty. It would have been a real nightmare otherwise. He laughed.

Dallion didn't. While he could see that the shield guardian was taking everything lightly, he knew that his warnings were serious. There was no doubt that Dallion was in the presence of an accomplished veteran. The dryad's youthful appearance and casual character had prevented him from seeing that until now, but no longer.

What do you think of my plan?

To find the copyette? For one thing, it isn't a plan. It's something you came up with a few minutes ago and adopted into a notion of a plan. Other than that, the idea is risky, not to mention there are quite a few details you haven't thought through. Getting some friends from the guild was a good idea, but with only one captain it will hardly work. My advice would be to try to get a few more heavy hitters. The siblings' parents, the elites you cleaned the house with, even March if you can manage.

Won't the copyette run if there are so many people?

You'd be extremely lucky if that happens. It'll also mean you've won. All it takes is one suspicion for the Overseer to spring into action, and possibly a noble or two as well. Lady Marigold, for one, is a lot stronger than people give her credit for.

Right.

That's not your biggest problem. The dryad ran his hand through his hair. Have you ever thought what will happen if the copyette doesn't run?

What? Dallion was on the edge of his seat.

That, I can't tell you. It's something you must figure out on your own.

Chapter 263: Invitations

I think it's a bad idea, Gen said. I know you don't really believe it.

That's why I'm doing this. Dallion took a deep breath. He didn't like what he was doing one bit, but it had to be done.

It had taken him most of the evening to come up with the device; a means to see whether someone was a copyette or not without arousing suspicion. It had also taken him twice as long to construct it, which is why he had done so in his awakened realm. Now, once he was pleased with the result, Dallion had only to build it. The catch was he had to do so without anyone knowing, and that included Euryale.

Technically, the chances of her being the copyette were close to none. He had used the kaleidervisto on her back in her workshop. However, back then, he was focusing on searching for echoes rather than paying attention to the color of her silhouette. The same could be said for Hannah. This time he had to be sure, and that meant checking everyone from another world, as well as everyone at the Gremlins Timepiece, and this time he was going to be careful.

Nil, how does it look? Dallion turned to the old echo.

Crude and shoddy. Nill approached and bent down to take a better look at the device. It was slightly larger than the box Eury had constructed, shaped like something between a vase and a bowl. Its bound to work. Are you sure about this, dear boy? There are risks involved, and I'm not only talking about what might happen during the breakfast party you're organizing.

I know. Dallion paused for a few moments, then linked his realm to the kaleidervisto.

Considering the artefact was pretty much a dungeon world, Dallion expected it to take the form of a trapdoor, or a celler or some kind. Instead, the complete opposite happened. In one of the empty rooms, a winding stairway emerged, going up through the ceiling. The steps led to an observatory, allowing Dallion to look at the rest of his realm. At present, there was nothing but a lot of mountains and a bit of sea, visible around where the harpsiswords tower had formed. That pretty much confirmed that all linked items were present in the realm in some weird way. Size was the only thing that remained elusive the library, the arena, as well as the forge were nowhere to be seen, hidden somewhere within the mountains.

Lux, Dallion said. Welcome to your new home. Youll be the light in the lighthouse.

The firebird popped into the air next to him with a happy chirp, then started flying all over the inside of the observatory, getting familiar with its new domain. Now, everything was set for the event. The only thing that remained was to invite the participants as well as buy a lot of mirrors.

Preparations finalized, Dallion went to sleep. The first thing he did next morning after letting Veil and Gloria know about the event was to go to the guild and start inviting people.

Estezol was more than happy to go, especially when he had heard who'd be cooking at the event. Even more, he had used his tricks to find and invite quite a lot of people on Dallions list not only Janna and Kallan, but also their parents, all of the elites that had been on Dallions sanitation job with the exception of Spike, as well as Adzorg. The only people who weren't invited were Grunt, who had politely refused, as well as March and Falkner, who couldn't be reached.

March, Dallion expected, but he was somewhat surprised about Falkner. Apparently, the boy had been scarce at the guild ever since he had passed his gate trial. More than likely his father had insisted on training with the echoes inside Falkners realm, instead of him wasting time being in a guild. With nobles one never knew.

You can try to ask him in person, Estezol said. Youll have to go to the nobles quarter, but given the importance of the event, I dont expect there'd be any issues.

Theyll let me go there just like that? Dallion asked, surprised.

But of course. The short man smiled. As long as its an awakened matter, nobles like to keep in the loop. Theres always the chance that in ten years you join their ranks. The nobility is very keen on getting acquainted with new players, and passing the third gate is something that definitely gets noticed.

There was something to look forward to Once Dallion dealt with his copyette problem, he'd have to take a crash course on history and politics. If everyone was keeping an eye on him, as Nil suggested, it would be good to know who everyone was.

Ill do that. Thanks.

Dont worry about it. Estezol smiled. So, tomorrow morning?

Yeah. Ill talk with Hannah to have everything ready at about nine.

Great! Dallion waved, then rushed out of the building.

At least hes full of enthusiasm.

Thats because he always likes to find an excuse to eat Aspans food. You see, Estezol is the guilds little glutton. Its not that he eats a lot, but he has a weakness for fine cuisine, as he would put it. Thats one of the reasons hes stuck with administrative duties.

Possibly. At this point, well never find out. One day he stopped improving or going on jobs. That was way before he came to the guild, mind you. And before you ask, that happened quite a while ago, much longer than the supposed date that the copyette escaped.

Although Dallion wanted to believe it, a sneaking suspicion remained. Maybe it was a good thing that he was going to be checked, after all.

Going to the nobles sector turned out to be far easier than Dallion imagined. Not a single guard made an effort to stop him as he went into the neighborhood. In fact, Dallion approached one of the city guards, asking for directions where to find Falkners house. One mention of the nobles name and that it concerned an awakened matter and he was quickly pointed in the direction. If anything, it was the butler at the house that seemed far more suspicious of him, asking questions, checking answers, though even he didnt look down on Dallion. For the first time since he was here, Dallion started seeing the significance of a persons level. Back when he was recruited for the chainling hunt, the Dame couldnt even speak with him directly, having the soldiers convey any compliments. Now, three gates later, Dallion was almost viewed as a potential noble. People remained reserved, but the disdain of before was gone.

It took minutes for Falkner to appear at the door. One look and Dallion could already tell that the boy had gone through a significant amount of training, potentially more than he himself had gone through.

Hey, Falkner said, slightly short on breath.

Hey, yourself. Dallion smiled. Working hard, I see?

Huh? Oh, just the daily routine. Im combining real and realm training for better effect.

Apparently, Vend hadnt come up with the method himself. If nobles were using it, that had a lot to say regarding its efficiency.

Cool. Which level are you at?

Twelve, Falkner replied. I need to go steady. No help until I get to the next gate.

Oh?

I know. Falkner looked to the side. Its a family thing. I must only rely on my own strength to deal with my flaws. I can get advice and training, but the trials must be passed by me alone.

Dallion could see that Falkner disapproved. Having entered double digit territory apparently had made him slightly rebellious, though with an echo of his father in his realm, that was difficult to achieve.

I heard you passed your third gate, Falkner continued. Congrats.

Suddenly Dallion caught a glimpse of an emotion he hadn't seen before. There was the standard grain of admiration, but there was also speck of jealousy. That was slightly alarming, especially since Dallion didn't have the skill to discern what sort of jealousy it was. If the boy was envious of Dallion passing the third gate so soon after he had passed the second, that was somewhat concerning. If, however, it was related to Gloria, then Dallion was in serious trouble. He knew from experience denying any romantic connection would only make things worse, confirming it in Falkner's mind.

News sure travels fast, Dallion laughed. Actually, that's why I'm here. I'm having a small celebration. Mostly people from the guild and a few others. I'd like you to come as well.

There was a long moment of silence. Falkner looked Dallion in the eyes, then away again.

Is that a good thing?

That, dear boy, is something that you'll eventually find out.

It's just a breakfast thing, Dallion added. The Luors will be there, of course. When we're done, we'll go directly to the guild to check on available jobs.

I won't be doing jobs until after the festival. Falkner's voice was sharper than Dallion had hoped.

Sure. I'd still like you to come. You're probably the first person from the guild I met.

The last sentence melted the jealousy and reluctance in Falkner away.

Okay, the boy said quietly. What time?

Tomorrow morning around nine. That okay for you?

Sure.

It'll just be a small thing. No need to come all dressed or such. I really don't know what the proper etiquette is, so there will be none. We'll just be there to have some food, some drink, and a lot of laughs. Just like a party.

A smile appeared on Falkner's face.

I'll be there. Sorry, but I must get back to training.

I know, I know. The echoes in our realms never sleep. Thanks, Falkner. See you tomorrow.

With a nod, Falkner closed the door. Dallion stood there for a few seconds longer. The conversation had gone better than he had expected, although it had brought a new problem to light. What if the copyette had already replaced a noble? Supposedly, the Overseer was making sure that didn't happen, but how much could she be trusted? She was a chainling or something similar after all. Even tamed, there was always doubt that she would close her eyes when someone of a similar nature was

concerned. Or maybe she had some link with the Star? The relations between deities were starting to get quite complicated, especially when they involved mortals.

Close enough to get a good view. Why? What do you have in mind?

If we dont find the copyette at the breakfast party

Ill do the same thing at the arena. What part of the crowd will that let me see?

A few dozen rows. The nobles certainly, but as for most people behind, Id say not. However, in order to do that, youll have to win your way to the actual round, and that means defeating some of the actually good contestants. Given that theres still time, I say you have a fifty-fifty chance at best.

Chapter 264: Best Laid Plans

Changing bandages wasnt something Dallion thought hed be doing. With all battles being in realms and his body increased to level twelve, getting any injury was rare. The only time he had gotten a reminder was during his bugging. Since then, though, he had taken steps to improve to the point to be able to take care of himself in the real world. Even working at Eurys shop, learning how to make ingots, proved wound free.

The permanent effect received from his last battle had served as a clear sign that Dallion was more vulnerable than he thought. From here on, it wasnt only real life he had to be worried about, but realm battles as well. As the dryad guardian had said, from here on things would only get more real.

Wrapping an alcohol soaked cloth round the scar caused Dallion to flinch for a moment. His body was able to deal with the pain, but his level of perception made it more detailed than he would have liked.

Right, Dallion smiled.

He was more worried about having to smell of booze everywhere he went. One of the things this world lacked, as Dallion discovered, was medical alcohol. Local healers had ointments that would do little good in his case not to mention the one Dallion had visited also suggested using standard drinking alcohol and awakened healers were a luxury only reserved for nobles, or people with extremely deep pockets like the general.

How long will this last?

A month didn't sound too bad, although at present it seemed like an eternity.

Dont worry, everyone close to you knows why you smell like that. Besides, the smells not coming from your breath. It wont affect your kissing.

Dallion had a few things to say, but he decided to keep them to himself. What was more important now was to get through with this. In less than ten minutes, his feast would begin an event that had been hastily made up and based on a lie. The worst of it was that Dallion no longer felt as certain of his reasoning as he had before.

There was no question that having three people from other worlds end up in the same inn was a highly unlikely coincidence. However, claiming that the copyette also belonged to a world of its own was somewhat of a stretch.

Its a bit too late for that

I suspected you might use that excuse. Well, good luck, dear boy. Lets hope for the best, whatever you think the best would end up being.

Taking one look at his reflection in the mirror, Dallion took his gear along with a rather large bowl of mirrors that held the kaleidervisto and left the room.

Finally! Veil said the moment Dallion cracked the door open. Was wondering whether you'd go through with this.

Not a chance, Dallion replied. You didn't bring a plus one?

Nah. Lets keep this small. There will be other occasions.

Sure. Save it all for your celebration, I guess.

Veil laughed, but Dallion could sense a note of sadness appearing in him. Right. Need any help with that?

No, I got it. Thanks. Anyone else showed up?

Only those who work here. Im surprised your girlfriend isnt here yet.

Eury isnt a morning person. Shell be here though. Especially since she was going to bring the box in which Dallion had said hed place the kaleidervisto. Well, lets get this started.

The feast was already set up when Dallion got down. Aspan had outdone himself yet again. Several tables had been gathered together, all piled up with more food than Dallion had paid for. Judging by the emotions coming from Hannah, while she didnt disapprove, she was did have some regrets concerning the costs.

Well, its about time, the innkeeper crossed her arms. I had half a mind to lock you in your room, but that would have made Aspan grumpy.

Well, I have both of you to thank for all this. Dallion put the makeshift bowl in the center of the table.

Whats that supposed to be? the innkeeper grumbled.

Its Lux, Dallion said. On cue, a blue flame appeared within the bowl. I thought he deserves to be part of the celebration, as do the rest of my guardians.

Huh. The woman frowned. Just make sure nothing funny happens. Ive already given you a huge discount. I dont want any mess before the lunch crowd.

Its strange that youre using your inn more like a tavern, Veil said. It was a normal question, though it caused both Hannah and Dallion to tense up. With the rooms and service you have, this place should be full non-stop. Why dont you?

If the place was crowded all the time, less people would come, Gloria appeared from the stairs. She was dressed in a new dazzling set of clothes a dark violet blouse made of velvet and a green and black dress. She definitely found the occasion to be a big deal. The last time Dallion had seen her in a dress was back in Dherma. Lately, she had opted for the more practical use of trousers.

Congratulations, Dal. She went to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. Youve really come a long way. To think I remember that time back in the village, when you couldnt get to level two.

Yep, he was a real loser back then. Vel smirked, taking a seat at the table. I remember I thought of beating him up, but decided not to since he was too pitiful.

Wheres Jiroh? Dallion looked around.

Out on an errand, Hannah replied. Shell be back in time, I hope.

That was slightly unusual. Dallions paranoia started kicking in. Jiroh was far more capable than she claimed, while initially maintaining that she wasnt an awakened. After Dallions talk with Euryale, he knew that not to be the case everyone from another world was an awakened. If so, why did the fury keep quiet about it? Furthermore, she was conveniently absent during Dallions ordeal with the Star. Try as he might, Dallion couldnt remember an instance of her and Arthurows actually seeing each other.

I sure hope she does. Dallion sat down and waited.

It didnt take long for the guests to start appearing. First, naturally, was Estezol. Cheerful as a child in a toyshop, he greeted everyone while gravitating towards the food. Dallion could almost see him salivate as he did. Apparently, Nil hadnt exaggerated when claiming that the short man was a glutton.

The Icepicker elites came next in small groups. As more of them came in, the conversation quickly switched from Dallion to the standard guild gossip. Some of the old guild rivalries were picking up, causing minor issues throughout the city. For the most part it was civilized people getting into

brawls in taverns or outside after dark however, there were a few instances of awakened using their powers.

Eury arrived not too long after. For some reason, her appearance was accompanied by a sudden lull from most people from the guild. Apparently, Hannah wasn't the only person who had issues with her. That was strange, since it hadn't come up in any of Dallion's conversations with the gorgon.

Wow, you certainly know how to make breakfast exceptional. The gorgon's snakes looked in all directions. Aspens really gone all out. Hey, guys. Been a while.

Hey. Vend nodded in the direction of the gorgon. It's normal since you don't visit the guild anymore. We could use some item check-ups.

Life has been busy lately. But I'll manage to find some time for you guys after the festival. She placed the box she was carrying in one of the few free spots on the table. A small gift.

I don't think its place is there, Hannah said in a surprisingly sharp tone. Put it in the corner.

So far, the innkeeper had taken the bait, but that didn't prove a thing. Dallion had gone through a lot of trouble to convince Eury to make a new container for the kaleidervisto, under the pretext that it would spot anything unnatural better. In theory Hannah wasn't supposed to know about this, or even be concerned. The fact that she was made Dallion think that his plan wasn't that insane after all.

Whatever you say, the gorgon replied. Dallion could feel her inner conflict along with the huge amount of restraint. It's Dals special day, after all. She went to the corner and placed the metal container there.

For the next few minutes, the mood was severely dampened. People stuck to polite trivia for a while. It was one of those instances that Dallion found himself using a bit of music skills to lighten the mood. Thankfully, it worked.

Adzorg was the next to arrive, along with Janna and Kallan.

Captain Adzorg. Hannah almost rushed to greet him. It's always a pleasure. Thank you so much for finding the time.

It's the least I could do, the old man replied. At least this way I get to avoid all the festival nonsense. I've no idea why everyone is making such a big fuss about it.

It's tradition, captain, Vend said from the table.

That doesn't make it good, dear boy. Anyway, the nonsense also means that the other captains won't be coming. You'll have to make do with me.

You are more than enough, sir. Hannah smiled. Please. She stepped to the side, inviting him further in.

Kind as ever. Don't mind if I do.

So, dear boy, how has life been treating you? Adzorg asked. To be honest I had my doubts when you first joined the guild. Lots of potential, but such a lack of basic knowledge. I wasn't sure you'll reach double digits.

I almost didn't, Dallion said. Thankfully your library helped a lot.

Ah, of course. I'm still trying to convince the guild to give them out to its members, but there's an unusual amount of reluctance. The captain glanced at Vend. Still, I'm hopeful you'll help change a few minds.

The conversation quickly changed to other topics. As the minutes passed, less and less food remained on the table. Dallion tried using his music skills a few more times to get his guests to eat slower, but that was increasingly difficult. More and more it was looking like Jiroh simply wouldn't arrive. Weird considering how close she had been to Dallion.

Just when it was looking like Dallion would have to execute his play without the fury, the door opened.

Sorry I'm late. Falkner stepped in. He was dressed in his common guild clothes. I wasn't sure I'd make it.

We're glad that you did, Gloria said, causing the boy to visibly blush. Come, take a seat.

Thanks, Falkner mumbled.

That would be a first, the innkeeper snorted, just as Dallion had hoped.

And sure enough, to prove her wrong, the cook emerged from his natural habitat. With a frown and grumble, he made the least number of steps possible, reaching the edge of the table. At this point, things were almost set.

Sorry for the delay. Without warning, Jiroh emerged, appearing in the room almost as if she had teleported there. Haggling took longer than I thought. She turned towards Dallion. This was quite the sudden event. It didn't give us any time to organize to get you a gift. Thankfully, with most being awakened a moment is long enough. So, here's what we collectively got you.

Before Dallion could say another word, she reached behind her back and drew something with a distinctly metallic glint.

The bowl in the center of the table flashed in a bright cyan light. Dozens of echoes including Dallions own emerged throughout the room for everyone to see. However, that was all there was to see there was no sign of the copyette. Everyone was clean.

Chapter 265: Consequences

Sorry, sorry, Dallion quickly apologized to everyone in the room. Its Luxs first time in the real world. Hes not used to it.

The explanation seemed good enough for most of the people according to Dallions music skills although there was one big exception. He could sense a mixture of anger and praise from the gorgon. If he were to make a guess, it was likely that she was simultaneously mad for not being in the loop again, while also pleased with the sneakiness of his plan. Several of her snakes turned in the direction of the box she had brought.

There was one other person who didnt seem at all surprised by what had happened. If anything, he continued sipping his drink, as if the event had never taken place. It took less than a second for everyone in the room to notice. Soon all eyes turned towards Adzorg.

When youve led the life, I have theres little that can surprise you, the old captain said as he poured something stronger than tea into his cup. Quite worthy of the celebration, dear boy.

And that is why familiars are a bad idea, Hannah said. With Adzorg nearby, she was far more agreeable than Dallion had ever seen her. Always causing problems.

I suppose it could be slightly embarrassing, revealing all echoes like that, although I must say Im glad youre putting the one I gave you to good use, Dallion.

A firebird in a kaleidervisto, Vend noted. Maybe we should make use of the idea for the guild?

Provided you can find any, Eury countered. There wont be any more hunts until the end of the festival. And its not like familiars are all that often. Most awakened cant catch any.

Most awakened arent elites, Vend sighed audibly.

As usual, using a bit of music skills helped a lot. While the mood was slightly down, everyone went back to their previous conversations. Some were interested in Lux who maintained the light within the bowl just bright enough for it to be seen others were talking about the festival. Jiroh was rather quiet, though. Similar to Eury, she had no echoes within her or any of her items, though just for a moment, Dallion had caught a glimpse of something with one of his instances. It wasnt a copyette, and it definitely wasnt a chainling, but it was something visible to his new sight.

You okay? Gloria asked Falkner.

If there was anyone who had taken the event poorly, it was him. Having a few echoes become visible was normal, even expected. Having several dozen, including his father and other members of his family, was awkward. No doubt he thought he had blown his chance with Gloria, the fact that she was being nice to him only made things worse.

Im fine, he mumbled, putting up a brave front. You?

Nope. Im envious. Ive no idea how that stone head managed to get a firebird. She gave Dallion a glance.

One day shell become outright scary

Shes always been able to, Dallion whispered low enough for only the shield to hear. But shes no noble. Just the granddaughter of a village chief.

One doesnt just become a noble. Nobles are made, and she was made into one ever since shes been born. She might not have the awakening level for it, but someone made sure to teach her most of the important tricks. Shes a noble, trust me. And that hair only makes that much more obvious.

After another ten minutes, the guests started to leave. Bel was firstshe had been called for her tournament fight and wanted to get some practice before heading there. The elites from the guild were next. Most of them didnt know Dallion that well, and after they had finished with some free food, went back to whatever they were doing.

Much to Dallions regret, Eury left soon after with the excuse that she had armor that needed fixing. Of course, she did tell Dallion in an awakening realmthrough a tap on the shoulderthat she would be waiting for him later that night at the workshop, and also that she was still a bit annoyed that he hadnt told her of his plan.

Once the gorgon was gone, all remaining guests decided to leave in a group. Gloria mentioned that she needed to check on a guild mission, which instantly got Falkner to accompany her. Veil, on the other hand, while not overly concerned, wasnt in the mood to let them go off on their own, so went along together with Janna and Kallan.

The only person who was reluctant to leave was Estezol. It was only after a stern glance from Agzorg, that the small man went along with a sigh. That left only Jiroh and Hannah remaining.

You actually managed to organize something that wasnt terrible, Hannah said. Im still taking extra for your little stunt. What you make today you get half!

Half? Dallion asked. Thanks to his music skill, he could sense she was testing him, although he didnt know the reason why.

You think its too much?

Well, yeah? I got exposed just as much as everyone else.

The innkeeper kept on staring at him for several seconds, then looked away.

Fine. You get as much as usual, but youll clean all this! And I mean the dishes too!

With Jiroh, right? Dallion turned to the fury for support.

Nope. Jiroh smiled. This is all you. Ill go enjoy a few hours off. She patted him on the back. Oh, and dont forget your gifts. We went through a lot of trouble to get all that for you, so dont lose it.

I promise.

The first thing he did was to take two gifts, along with his gear, to his room. The second to start the long and annoying process of moving all the dishes to the kitchen. By the looks of it, he was also going to have to give the floor a wash, not to mention the tables. Even the bowl with the kaleidervisto was a mess.

Given how flimsy the object was clay and mirrors, held together by force of will and the firebirds healing ability the normal thing was to discreetly throw it away. After all the effort, however, he didn't want to. At worst the item was a paperweight with sentimental value, at best he could use it as a stand for the kaleidervisto. Either way it was worth keeping.

Why not?

Because there's no telling how it would affect someone. And if you could use one type, then everyone should be able to use anything.

That made sense. It meant that Dallion would have to come up with a new plan. For the moment, though, there were dishes to be cleaned.

Without Jiroh or Hannah's help, it took Dallion five trips to get everything into the kitchen. With lunch approaching, Aspan had already started preparations for the crowd. Dallion could smell the aroma of the ingredients, not to mention all the spices the cook had at his disposal. Despite having just eaten, saliva formed in Dallion's mouth.

Moving close to some of the ingredients, Dallion put the kaleidervisto on the table and started washing the bowl. Every now and then, he couldn't help but glance at the cook, hoping that Aspan would give him a new sample. At such levels of distraction, it was no wonder that during one of Dallion's turns he knocked the kaleidervisto off the table.

Crap! Dallion said as the artefact hit the floor. Dallion's heart sunk as he expected the item to shatter to a hundred pieces. It was pure luck that the vase-like object bounced off the floor, then rolled away with as little as a scar. One thing that could be said about the people who had created the thing they made things much more durable than in modern times. The kaleidervisto continued rolling, making an annoying sound, until it reached the cook.

Aspan didn't flinch. With the professionalism of an annoyed chef, he bent down, picked up the item, and slammed it onto the table. It was all aimed to be a polite but stern reminder that the kitchen was his domain and while there and it was a bad idea to annoy him. There was just one problem the cook's hand had become transparent.

Aspan? Dallion let it slip. After the firebird flash, he had been convinced that no one in the inn was the copyette. Now he had not only found that he was mistaken, but the copyette was not Hannah or Jorih, as he initially suspected, but the cook.

Get out of here, now!

Nil said.

Dallion didn't pause to argue, instantly turning around and dashing to the door. Barely had he made a single step, when something wrapped around his neck.

ITEM AWAKENING

A green rectangle appeared. Followed by reality changing.

The PAN is level 17

You are in a large metal hall.

Defeat the guardian to change the PANs destiny!

A metal plain extended for as far as the eye could see. Dallion felt as if he was on an endless field of asphalt. However, thanks to his skills, he could see that everything around was metal.

There was one other being present in the realmthe copyette. No longer bound by the constraints of the real world, the form of the cook transformed. A military uniform of some sort emerged, as the figure got taller, losing all features of the cook. Soon, a six-foot-nine officer was standing a few steps away. He had taken a human appearance, combining young and old features. One thing was of special notethe copyette had chosen the hair to be platinum blond, just like that of the Luors.

I never thought it might be you, Dallion said. All this time I suspected it might be Hannah. She was helping way too much, and everyone seemed to be drawn to her for some unclear reason.

You can stop with the music attempts, the copyette said calmly. His voice was a lot hoarser than Dallion expected. It won't work on me.

You can counter it, Dallion continued. But that will also keep you from attacking.

The other didn't reply.

How long have you been pretending to be a cook?

Seven years, the copyette replied. And I have no intention of quitting.

That was probably the best option Dallion had. Since the Star had given him the bolts, Dallion had done the only thing he couldload the dartbow with them. The only tricky thing that remained was to get the weapon itself. In the real world, it remained in his holster boots. Given his stats, it was going to take a few seconds at most for Dallion to draw, but somehow he felt that wouldn't be enough.

You can't kill me in here, Dallion said, attempting not to appear scared.

I don't need to. I only need to make sure you can't tell anyone.

Chapter 266: Fighting a Cook

A copyette general Just looking at him was enough to show Dallion the difference between them. An air of confidence emanated from the copyette spanning millennia. Dallion could feel the weight

of his opponents battles pushing him into the ground like a steel press. The outcome of any fight between the two was predetermined. A few months ago, Dallion would have tried going all out, believing his ingenuity might earn him a win. He had done the same when going against the chainling doing so without much thought as well as against March. Now, he knew better.

The harpsword suddenly appeared without being summoned. She wasn't in Dallion's hand, but rather in her nymph form, holding the weapon he'd usually wield. That was an ability Dallion didn't know she had, but he was thankful for it.

The crackling leapt on the ground in front of him, acting like a guard dog. While its size remained small, the cub had grown in level considerably. No one had seen what its level three powers included. Soon they would have that chance.

You're not from this world, are you? Dallion asked, keeping up the music attack.

Finally, someone to get it right, the copyette replied, adding music to his words as well.

Dallion's perception level allowed him to see the soundwaves clash, rendering each other harmless.

That's the rule beyond the Moons control otherworlders attract each other. Back in my time, that was known. Now the Order has removed the knowledge from existence.

Has it added all the things about the Star as well? Dallion said, in turn countering the copyette's music attack. For some reason, his opponents music level didn't feel as impressive as he had feared. It was definitely enough to affect someone, possibly cripple a semi, but definitely didn't feel like being in the double digits.

Nope, that definitely happened, although no one will tell you the truth about it. She knows, the copyette addressed the nymph. A melody of sound came from her, surrounding the guardian like a shield. The same happened to her.

That was true. The state of mind was an important part to victory or defeat, doubly so in a place in which thoughts gained form. No doubt the copyette's appearance was sculpted specifically for that purpose.

You must feel really stupid that you let me find you, Dallion said with as much bravado as he could muster. All those years hiding in the kitchen and you reveal yourself just like that.

Habit, the copyette replied, not too concerned. I've always disliked people making a mess in my domain.

You made the kitchen into your domain?

Now whos being stupid?

Dallion felt like biting his tongue. Any domain within the city would instantly be noticed by the city lord and possibly the Overseer. There was no way the copyette would risk that, and it was for the better. Considering to what degree he had upgraded his cooking utensils, a kitchen realm would be full of challenging guardians on the enemys side.

You can avoid all this. The copyette took a step forward, causing Nox to hiss. I dont want to hurt you, Dal. I just cant let you know youve seen me. I knew you were from another world the moment you stepped in. All of us did. Weve been through the same.

I didnt try to conquer the world.

Give it time. Every race has made attempts. Now its humanitys turn.

There was a surprising note of sincerity in the copyettes voice. Still, that only meant he himself believed it.

Youll only lose a few minutes, the copyette went on. In your mind Ill have picked up the kaleidervisto and returned it to you.

Just like that?

Just like that. Aspan took another step forward. You cant win. You only have one of your guardians and one familiar the less useful one.

Noxs ears perked up as he let out an angry meow.

You might have a chance with two, but not one.

Dallion summoned his dartbow. On the surface, that was a poor move. The copyette, no doubt, could split into enough instances to render any ranged attacks useless. However, that wasnt what Dallion was going for. His aim was to get a bit of practice before returning to the real world.

I think Harp will do well enough, Dallion said. And so will Nox.

That would have been true if theyd have faced a blockhead warrior, but you seem to have forgotten your basics. The copyette reached forward. Markers appeared in the airthey were purple in color. My specialty wasnt combat, it was magic.

Fingers moved along the markers, creating a complex pattern in the air. Moments later, hundreds of ice spears emerged above the copyette, all darting towards Dallion.

COMBAT INITIATED

MEDIUM WOUND

NOXs health has been reduced by 10%

Dallion blinked, wondering whether the rectangle hadn't made a mistake. The copyette should have been the one that had been wounded. Moments later, the reason became apparent. The body lost all texture, reverting into slime that melted away to the ground. A short distance away, another instance of the copyette emerged.

It's the ground! Dallion shot a bolt directly beneath him. The bolt bounced off, like a pea off a pan. Thankfully, the copyette hadn't reached that section yet. However, Dallion noticed a faintly shimmering patch slide along towards him. Reloading his dartbow, he shot in the direction.

As expected the patch reacted, dispersing moments before the projectile could hit it.

Be careful, he's got copies all over the place. Dallion's seer powers helped him see some of the nearby spots, but that wasn't particularly helpful. This was how copyettes fought—they created slime clones of themselves and then blended them in the surroundings. Still, wounding one of those instances should have had some effect but according to the red rectangles, it hadn't.

Another spell was completed, this time causing a wave of water to appear from the ground, and furiously head towards Dallion. The moment he saw it, Dallion leapt up. His action was followed by a horizontal slash strike from the nymph.

The invisible line struck the water, slicing it in two and causing the top half to crumble on the lower in a large spontaneous splash. There was no time to celebrate, however. The copyette had already completed another spell, summoning a large serpent of fire next to him.

Any idea how I stop him?

At this point your only chance is with music.

I don't have my harp sword.

You still have your harp, dear boy. Use it.

Using a harp in battle it had been a while since Dallion had used it alone. As he had mastered new skills, he had resorted to using more and more unique combinations, pretty much ignoring the purely combat effects of music. It had become more of a support skill when talking with people, or at best as a booster when fighting guardians.

In Dallion's mind, time froze. The confidence of having four physical skills made him want to find some strange combination that had been tried before and surprise the copyette. So far, that was the way he had defeated the vast majority of his opponents. Resorting to music alone seemed so quaint.

Dallion smiled. Leave it to his echo to give him a kick in the ass while cheering him up. Unsummoning his buckler and dartbow, Dallion landed on the ground. Once he had, a lyre appeared in his hands. Blue markers appeared all over the copyette and its clones. It seemed that the emotions were not in a single body. While most were in the humanoid form the copyette used to cast spells, the spots on the ground had all the negative oneness, sadness, anger, regret. Now, it was time to add a few more.

Dallion played a chord. Two new sets of markers appeared, unlike anything that had happened before.

A new cluster of ice spears appeared as the copyette finished another spell. As before, they targeted Dallion, though this time they didn't follow a straight line. Even so, the nymph was fast and skilled enough to keep any from hitting their target. At that precise moment, Dallion continued with a second chord.

His fingers moved along the strings of the lyre at the exact moment as they were supposed to. The only difference was that this time he was doing it with the fingers of both hands. Sound linked to the copyette like invisible strands. For a moment it almost seemed like this would freeze the enemy, though before that could happen, the humanoid body of the copyette melted and another one emerged from the ground. Clearly, it wasn't going to allow itself to be affected as easily.

New magic markers appeared, forcing Dallion to increase the pace, playing two chords per second. He no longer bothered with small subtle changes of character, directly going for crippling doubt and confusion. However, each time a chord would play, the copyette would change shape. For a split second, that provided the nymph with enough time to go directly at the copyette's human form with a series of spins and slashes. The edge of the harpsword slashed through the slime, reverting it to its original form, and this time dealing a minor wound. In return, though, several blades sunk in her own body, causing twice as much damage. As much as Dallion didn't want to admit it, the copyette was more than a match for Harp, even with Nox's and his assistance. A new solution had to be found.

Can I use music to disrupt magic?

No. They are different skill groups and cannot affect each other. However, time is a common factor. It takes time for a spell to be completed, same as a chord. During that time, the copyette must have an actual form.

Interesting to know, but that wasn't what Dallion was going for. Still, it gave him an idea. For it to work, though, he was going to have to get closer to the copyette.

Chapter 267: Into the Frying Pan

Copyettes rose from the ground one after the other. The more Dallion persisted with his music skills, the more the copyette cloned itself, each copy casting spells to the point that the nymph alone wasn't able to fully shield him. The only option was for Dallion to combine his other existing skills and avoid attacks while also singing and playing his lyre. If the situation wasn't so deadly serious, Dallion would have cracked a joke about being a better theatre performer than Gloria.

There was sense in what the echo was saying. Even an item of this quality had a breaking point, and with Nox's claws, it was only a matter of time before it shattered. There was only one issue: destroying the realm also meant that the guardian in it would die as well.

This is no time to think about guardians! While admirable, taking this too far will only lead to No means no, Nil!

The thought caused Dallion pain, as if vines were tightening around his heart. When he had agreed to accept the Moon's boon, he had agreed to much more than he had bargained for. At present, killing a guardian wasn't only revolting, the mere consideration had a painful effect.

Several of the copyettes' forms finished their spells in unison, launching a wave of liquid ice at Dallion. The attack forced the nymph to make three slashes before she could cause the wave to collapse. Dallion himself had to leap back, while still attempting to somehow affect the copyette. Each clone that the creature made had a different sync frequency and set of emotions, making targeting difficult. And even when Dallion was able to create a tune that had an effect, the clone would melt into slime, rendering the effort wasted.

Still, something didn't feel quite right. All that power, and the copyette was only using basic spells. Dallion had seen first what a member of the species was capable of, and this battle was tame in comparison. If he wanted, Aspan could have had an army of clones attacking him with magic, weapons, even music manipulation. At such numbers, Dallion would have easily become overwhelmed.

I'm not in the mood, Nil.

Thats clear. And not in the mood for victory, either. I told you, your only chance is to destroy the realm. Anything else wont do.

Nil

Focus on the splitting

The notion made Dallion slightly curious, and since it wasnt going to distract him too much, he did what Nil asked.

Vend had explained that in extreme circumstances an awakened can create as many instances as was his mind level. By the same logic, focusing on the reality around him, Dallion could see just as many of anothers instances. Up till now, the copyette had used half a dozen of instances, switching between them and the clones.

A dull feeling appeared in his temples as if something was pressing against them. A wave of sudden pain swept through his entire body, like a whip. And then he saw the unthinkable. There werent only five instances in the realm there were hundreds of them engaged in bitter battles. Half were created by the copyette, while the rest were the doing of the nymph. Theoretical spells of different strength and nature flew about. Some destroyed instances of the nymph while others were easily avoided, and in turn followed by the slashing of their caster. Red rectangles filled the air, showing wounds and permanent effects and amidst all that was Dallion, located in a small bubble of emptiness, protected from all harm.

A new sensation emergedthe sensation of hopelessness when facing a force of nature one could do nothing against. Had he been alone the battle would already be over. Even now it wasnt certain he wouldnt lose. The nymph was a skilled warrior, but it was obvious she was no general. The copyettes actions were planned, specifically crafted to keep him a step forward, leaving her the option only to respond.

A second later, all the instances disappeared just as abruptly as they had appearedDallion had reached his limit, and if the splitting headache was any indication, he wasnt in any condition to try that again.

That is the real face of the battle. Thats why your only choice is to break the realm. Your music skills have improved, but they still are nothing but a distraction to help the harpsisword keep him at bay. Nox is the only solution.

Every logical thought told Dallion that the echo was right. Nothing short of leaving the realm would help him against the copyette. Breaking it seemed to be the only way. Or maybe there was another?

Nox, claw the ground! Dallion shouted as he dashed further away from the copyette. Several spells were cast in response, all of them blocked by the nymph.

The room was enormous, almost as large as an area. Even so, it had to have an end, or was that something that Aspan had changed?

Nil, when you modified the training items, where did you put the guardian?

Nil!

This was hardly the time for argumentssomething that the echo didnt seem to realize.

Its there where it always was supposed to be. You keep thinking of this as the outside of a room. Look at it from the opposite angle. All the space here is nothing but a canvas wrapped on the outside of a room. Size doesnt matter in the least.

Dallion tried to visualize it. The notion was weird enough that it took a few attempts, but he got it. If what Nil was saying was right, the arena chamber was just beyond the wall of the first structure that came in sight. The issue was that there werent any structures to be seen, not a single one.

It was just like a copyette to deal with trickery and illusions, but this time Dallion had a trick up his sleeve as well. Well, in effect, it was more like half a trick.

Without the hesitation the crackling clawed at the ground while the invisible battle of instances raged around him. Thin lines appeared on the black surface. A second claw made the lines into squares, then after two more, a fragment broke off. It was a small fragment, no larger than a fingernail, but enough to fulfil its purpose; the moment the piece separated from the floor, an arch appeared an arch leading to a maze.

Dallions heart tightened for a momenthe had knowingly harmed a realm, just so that he could enter its mending labyrinth. The pain was worth it, though. Ignoring the battle behind him, Dallion rushed in.

The moment he stepped through the archway, a thick layer of water covered the entrance behind him.

The maze was much larger than Dallion was used to. If Lux were here, going through it would be a snap. At present, though, Dallion had to figure things out on his own. Splitting helped to a degree, at least he was able to look behind corners before choosing a direction.

Every wrong turn increased the pressure, bringing with it fears that the copyette had somehow managed to sneak a clone through the nymphs defenses.

There was no telling how long it took Dallion to reach the guardians chamber. It felt like hours, though it could have been minutes just the same. Whatever the case, the hard part was over.

GUARDIAN

Species: Colossus

Class: Iron

Statistics: 100 HP

Skills

- **Tuning fork**
- **Shield**
- **Shatter strike**

Weak spots: Shoulder blades

It had been a while since Dallion had faced a colossus. This one was true to its name, taking the shape of a ten-foot iron statue. Its features were bulkier than round, though Dallion knew not to underestimate an enemy. Any guardian at this level and material was bound to be strong.

I don't want to fight you, Dallion said, using as much music skill as he could. In fact, I've come to surrender to you.

The guardian tilted his head. Black brows moved down in a frown, as the being tried to figure out what was going on.

I guess there aren't many that come with that request, are there? Dallion asked, pushing the guardian even more to accept his proposal.

After a long pause, the guardian shook its head.

Does that mean you agree with me, or you won't let me surrender?

A massive clenched fist quickly answered that question.

You better be prepared, dear boy. You'll have a second to draw your weapon and shoot. If you take too long, the copyette will come to its senses and you'll have a continuation of the fight in the kitchen, and we both know that you wouldn't have a chance there.

And you should work on the way you encourage people.

The massive iron statue took a few steps forward, looked at Dallion, then unceremoniously slammed its hand to crush him. In the final instants, Dallion considered using his guard skills to evade the blow, then follow the guard sequence to the point he could self-eject from the battle. That, however, would have been dishonest. He had promised he'd come to surrender and fighting back would, in effect, be breaking that promise.

You have impressed the PAN Guardian with your behavior!

The Colossus has granted you a future boon.

A green rectangle emerged, a split second before Dallion was thrown back into the kitchen of the Gremlin Timepiece. Dallion was standing in the room, in the process of moving back, while Aspan had grabbed him with one hand, the other holding a panthe item in which the encounter had been.

Now was the time to act. Dallion had one shot at this. If he failed, this whole encounter would vanish from his mind.

The kitchen was instantly flooded with bright cyan light. Confused by the return to reality and the flash, Aspan let go of Dallion, stumbling a step back. This proved all the time Dallion needed. Removing the boot in a second, he grabbed the dartbow and sent a bolt straight in the copyettes leg. There was a loud popping sound, as Aspans leg inflated like a balloon, then burst, causing the creature to collapse to the floor. Dallion didnt pause, quickly reloading the weapon and shooting a second bolt. The projectile was aimed at the copyettes chest, but Aspan moved his hand in front of him, shielding himself from a lethal blow. In the process, the copyettes arm burst offit wasnt going to be able to use the same tactic to save itself again.

Dallion reloaded the weapon again. Half gone, the copyette looked up at him, a distinct note of sadness in the glance. Neither asking nor expecting mercy, Aspan lay there, expecting the inevitable.

It was nice while it lasted, the cook said, forcing a faint smile.

No, she said in a firm voice. I think its time we had a talk.

Chapter 268: The Field Marshal's Request

The lunch crowd was gathering, but neither Dallion nor Aspan were doing anything about it. While customers were cheering to the served by Jiroh and the Luors, the rest of the inns staff were isolated in Hannahs rather spartan room.

Dallion sat silently in a small wooden chair, while Hannah was pinning the loose sleeve and trouser of Aspan. The copyette had to be transported to her room in a rather large jug to avoid questions, after which he had reverted to his humanoid form minus the arm and leg.

You doing okay? the innkeeper asked the copyette.

Give it a day, Aspan replied. Ill miss dinner, but itll be fine afterwards.

The woman nodded, patting the copyette on the shoulder, then moving to the window.

I feared you might succeed, the innkeeper said, looking out of the window. Most of the things you do seem impossible, laughable even, but I always knew you might succeed. You have that quality about you. Call it luck, call it a gift, but you have it, and its not only because youre from another world.

That came as a slight surprise. A few days ago, Dallion would have been astonished. Now, after seeing that Hannah had been sheltering a copyette for years, he only felt mild surprise.

In a way, I expected this to happen. Ever since you stepped in the inn, I knew you'd be trouble, just like all the other worlders that did before you. So. Hannah turned around, looking at Dallion. The question is what do we do now?

What are the options? Dallion felt his throat dry. He already knew how difficult it would be to face the copyette in battle, but also had seen that Hannah had some skills of her own. Fighting either of them would result in Dallion losing.

Just two, the woman replied. I keep you locked up for a few days until Aspan gets well enough to flee the city, after which you go to the Overseer and I suffer the consequences. Alternatively, you don't tell her and things return to normal with you knowing the truth if you wish, that is. Aspan can have you forget everything relating to him, if that would burden you.

Chills ran down Dallion's spine. The fact that someone could remove memories made him feel uneasy. Knowing that there were people with the power to remove names or information was bad enough, seeing that they could remove his memories, brought a more personalized fear to the mix.

You're not going to kill me?

Kill a favored by the Moons? Hannah snorted. I'd rather take my chances with the Overseer. At least then I might only spend a few hundred years in a prison item.

Why? Dallion asked. As much as he tried, none of his music skills managed to catch any emotions from the innkeeper. It was different from the void that he felt when dealing with chainlings, almost as if Hannah had a blocking item on. Why protect him? The copyettes trying to take over the world.

Is he?

The question made Dallion pause.

One of your huge flaws is that you jump to conclusions far too easily. That's something leveling won't help. You have great insight at times, but are also so naive. It doesn't take music or magic to manipulate you, just a gentle shove in a particular direction and you do the rest of the work on your own.

Aspan smirked at the phrase.

You were right to suspect that something in the inn is attracting people from other worlds. However, it wasn't Aspan. He was just a victim to its effect. I am the real reason.

You're from Earth? Dallion blinked.

No. The innkeeper allowed herself a slight smile. I'm from here, although I know more about the worlds than most. I've met quite a few people from your Earth, but I'm just a local as you would put it. I'm certain that you're already wondering about my past, trying to organize your thoughts in some logical fashion, and coming to all the wrong conclusions. As for Aspan, you're part right. He did manage to escape his prison, and there are a lot of powerful entities looking for him, the Star included, but it's not because he wants to take over the world.

Im just a cook, the copyette sighed. Thats what I was before I awakened here. One moment I was splicing algae, the next I found myself in an awakening temple in the slimes capital. Back then, they were one of the three powers to be reckoned with.

The story sounded awkwardly similar. Excluding the fact that Dallion had woken up in a small village in the middle of nowhere, the circumstances could even be called virtually identical. Strictly speaking, Dallion also came from minor nobilityhis great grandfather had been village chief.

Like you, I never asked to be here, but since I was, I progressed forward, Aspan continued. Everything came so easy. In a few months I achieved what it had taken others years. I had no limitations to the point that I could level any stat I chose. I was even blessed with magic. Back then, it wasnt nearly as rare as it is today, but still only one in ten were born with it. For someone to obtain it later in life I was treated as a genius.

Just like Dallions grandfather He had awakened with a rare skill that had propelled him into a command position in the army before his fall.

You really were a general? Dallion couldnt help himself from asking.

Field marshal. The copyette smiled. I had achieved pretty much everything there was.

Because of the Star?

Regret and bitterness filled Aspan, all too apparent thanks to Dallions music skills. The copyette didnt reply, but he didnt have to. The Star had offered him a deal back thenjust as it had made one to Dallionand he had accepted.

Why does he want you dead?

I have no idea. Ive kept away from him ever since I escaped.

I kept him, Hannah corrected. He was the first person to come to the inn after I had fixed it up. Ive kept him here ever since.

So thats why you never leave the kitchen.

A minor inconvenience. Aspan nodded. Its not like Im missing much. I get to learn everything going on in the city from the people who drop off the food.

Did you kill the members of the mirror pool? Dallion shifted the subject. If there was one question that would determine his choice, this was it.

I had nothing to do with the pool or Vermillion, the copyette replied. I havent left the inn since I got here. Hannah made sure of that.

But Vermilion said"

I escaped seven years ago. That was it. I definitely havent had any contact with the Star in the last few millennia.

Dallion could sense the truth resonate in Aspan, but that only confused him further. So far, he had been convinced that the Star was somehow linked to the copyette. Arthurows had said as much when he had given him the slime bolts. Even beyond that, there was no denying that someone was killing off people who knew about the copyette. At present, Dallion could well be the final survivor of the small group and the hidden person. If it wasn't the copyette killing them off, who was? Also, what was the connection with the mage who had warned Dallion at Belaals Drum? So many questions remained.

There's a lot I can say about the Star that could help you, the copyette said. But I'm not allowed. I am still bound by the Moons laws. As long as I remain in the inn, I remain hidden from them, but if I do something to attract too much attention, I'll be revealed. Talking about things that have been tabooed is one of those things.

More than likely that was also the reason Aspan couldn't kill Dallion during the fight. Of course, Dallion would have preferred knowing that the copyette simply didn't want to harm him.

I've spoken with deities, but am still in the dark

, Dallion thought. Maybe things would change when he had completed the Green Moons request, though at this point he doubted it. At most he'd be allowed to see a bit more than before, and even those in the know weren't able to help him.

On that note, Harp had also been keeping a considerable number of secrets. So far, Dallion hadn't thought about it, because the harpsisword guardian had always helped and supported him, getting him out of several sticky situations, but she too had seen events beyond anything described in the history books.

So, that's my choice, Dallion said. What about all echoes and guardians? I'm not the only one who's seen what happened.

All that are linked to you won't go against your will, the copyette explained. I can take care of the rest. Remove their memories, I mean.

Remove their memories For once, Dallion was pleased he hadn't taken the armadil shield with him. At least this was something that the dryad would be spared. Providing I agree to that, what about the rest who are searching for you? The Star wants you dead.

I've been hiding from him for a while. That won't be a concern. And it's not like he'll go anywhere near the inn.

And the rest? Someone is killing off the people who know of the Vermilion ring. Plus, there's a mage hunting for you as well. It doesn't look like either of them will stop.

They won't, Hannah said. But they aren't reckless in nature, either. They'll keep watching you as you hunt the copyette. If you agree to this, you'll have to continue with your futile search same as before.

Only now it was obvious how futile the process would be. Still, it was going to let Dallion spend more time with Eury, even if it meant he had to lie to her.

You never wanted to take over the world? Dallion leaned forward.

Not in a very long time, Aspan laughed. Its one of those things. If you fail once you lose the taste. Also, I know better than to trust the Star. I can tell you one thing, though. He has planned something for the city. I dont know what, but hes been far too interested in such an insignificant city.

How long do I have to decide? Dallion asked.

Hannah looked at the copyette, then back at Dallion. She wasnt pleased by his answer.

Till tomorrow. By then Aspan will be well enough to leave, should it come to that.

Why are you so sure you can trust me?

A favored of the Moons cant break a promise, Aspan said. If you do, youre no longer favored. I was a favored once. Then I wasnt. The one thing I can say about it was that it wasnt a fun change.

Dallion stood up. He could easily delay everything till later. There were many reasons to tell the Overseer. After all, the copyette was imprisoned for a reason. It was very possible that he had caused the entire species to be locked away in the awakened realms. However, if Dallion was to go through with this, Hannah would also get punished, say what one might about her, she was the person who had shown him the most kindness ever since he had gotten in this world.

Ill keep your secret, Dallion said. But Ill want something in return. He looked straight into Aspans eyes. Youll help me to figure out what the Star has planned and stop him, if possible. I know theres a lot you cant talk about until I learn it myself, but anything else, youll help. And that goes for you too. Dallion turned to Hannah. That sound good?

The innkeeper laughed.

Dal, if we dont figure out what the Star has planned, it will hardly matter. Whenever that creature decides to play in the world, empires fall. If he has something specifically planned for Nerosal, then everyone is in danger.

Chapter 269: Return to the Drum

You came just for this? The fury asked, sitting across Dallion. I had higher hopes, since you passed through the gate.

Does it matter? As long as I can pay, I can have anything. Thats what you told me during the last visit.

A fool and his money are quickly parted. The fury tilted her head to the side, then made a sign to one of the waiters. The man nodded and quickly rushed to the staircase. Maybe I can convince you to go through another gauntlet? Your victory last time caused quite the commotion. People have been pouring here for days to match your success. It goes without saying that all of them failed.

Dallion didnt say a word. He knew all too well that the game was rigged. Most likely, a few changes had been made after his victory to ensure that similar mistakes dont happen again. Anyone trying to pass the gauntlet now did nothing but lose a lot of time, while making Belaal a lot of money.

Itll only take a few minutes, and this time I guarantee youll keep part of your winnings, the fury continued.

I dont think Belaal will approve.

Belaals not here right now. I have full discretion until he returns.

A week ago, Dallion would have agreed without hesitation. It wasnt about the moneythat would be lost. It was about testing himself, matching his skills to any tricks the mirror pool had to offer. Unfortunately, it was only relevant for items. If Dallion was to become strong enough to reach his next level, he had to face real enemies and stronger ones at that.

Maybe some other time. Dallion looked away.

Suit yourself. The fury shrugged.

The waiter returned with a medium-sized wooden box which he placed at Dallions table. The fury took it, then slowly removed the lid. A stylish hand mirror was inside.

Sphere items have become quite pricey lately, she said. Are you sure you have enough to buy it?

Dallion took a pouch from his belt and shook it.

Seems that you do. Why do you want the mirror?

Is that part of the price?

No, just curious. The fury returned the mirror in the box and pushed it towards Dallion.

The mirror was in perfect conditionthere were no flaws, cracks, or even scratches anywhere on its surface. There didnt seem to be anything special about it, just an ordinary mirror made of a unique metal alloy. To anyone this would be nothing more than a low-grade sphere item brought in from the wilderness, but Dallion knew it to be so much more.

Leaving his pouch on the table, Dallion picked up the mirror and examined it.

You havent leveled it up? he asked.

No point wasting talent and resources on something so mundane. It would have stayed with the junk for a few months, then we would have made it part of the gauntlet in some way.

Dallion felt chills run all over his body at the mention of that. He tried to hide it as best he could, but he could tell that the fury had noticed.

You disapprove? she asked, in a moment of genuine curiosity.

I doubt it matters here. Dallion put the item away. Is the amount enough?

Sentimental value, the fury said as she opened the pouch. Thats what people call something cheap that they wish was expensive. This was one of the items you had to mend during the gauntlet, so you probably feel some connection. Not that it bothers me. I could sell all the items you completed, if you wish.

And how much will that cost me?

More than you have right now, but Im patient. As long as long as we have an understanding.

Dallion hesitated. If Nil werent blocked right now, hed probably warn against doing something rash, especially since the fury counted on that. It was obvious that she was taking advantage of the situation, just as it was obvious that Dallion couldnt refuse.

Psychologically defeated, he took out a second pouch from under his vest and tossed it on the table. To his surprise, the fury didnt gloat or mock him. Calmly, she closed the first pouch, then took both of them and tossed them on an empty tray that one of the waiters was carrying. Both of them landed perfectly, as if they had been put there by an invisible hand.

Anything else I could help you with? Information, perhaps?

I cant afford anything else, Dallion said with a semi-smile. You know that.

Consider this a bonus for making such a large advance purchase.

That was quite generous of the fury, or it would have been if she hadnt taken fifty gold coins for the pleasure.

Did you find out anything about the mage? Dallion whispered.

Despite several attempts, Dallion hadnt managed to find anything on the subject. From the looks of it, the old man had only come to warn him not to meddle with the affairs of the Star or the copyette and had used some very convincing magic in the process. Since then, no one had seen or heard him, as if he had never existed.

Nothing for the moment. The only thing certain is that hes no longer in the city. Does that help?

No. Dallion stood up. No, it doesnt.

Pity. In that case, let me give you some advice. Settle your debts quickly. Youve joined the river of rising stars and people have started to take notice. The brighter your shine, the more your debt will increase. Keep it in mind.

No names were mentioned, but Dallion knew exactly what she meant. It seemed that the general that had loaned Dallion the armadil shield was well known in every circle of the city. It wouldnt be surprising if he turned out to be the leader of the mirror pooljust the sort of person a Star would have dealings with.

Thanks. Ill be back when I have enough to buy off more of the items. Dallion left the table.

Theres no reason to wait that long, the fury said behind him. Come back anytime you wish to relax. The Drum has a wide variety of services.

Gripping the mirror tightly, Dallion made his way out of the Drum. It was way past midnight, but that didnt stop groups of clients coming in. Apparently, business was booming thanks to the festival. The city was already filled with tourists, and the event was still days away. In part, Dallion understood why Adzorg hated it so much. The grand event had turned into an otherwise bustling city to a packed circus. Interestingly enough, crime was on the decrease. The mirror pool, the pickpockets, and all other crime elements knew that the nobles didnt want to lose face in front of the outside world, so if anything were to mess with their perfect event, there would be dire consequences. Only external elements dared to try their luck and they were quickly picked out by city guards before any damage could happen.

Done? Eury approached Dallion. She had been waiting outside Belaals Drum for a while. Unwilling to let him have further dealings with the mirror pool, she had shuffled her schedule to be close to him during his search for the copyette. It was all a lie, of course, but as much as Dallion wanted to tell her that the creature had already been found, he knew he couldnt.

They dont know a thing, he replied. Still, I got what I wanted.

Good. Its a bad idea coming here.

Nothing will happen so close to the festival, Dallion tried to sound reassuring. As they say, its just business.

Its always business until someone gets hurt. Then it becomes personal or too late. The gorgons snakes moved about on her head. Lets get out of here.

The two made their way out of Gray Harbor and into the city. Once they passed through the city gate, the difference became obvious. Touches and lanterns illuminated every street, leading to the plazas and city squares that had more lights than New York on New Year. Even Euryales neighborhood had pretty much transformed into a semi-tourist trap, with people from other towns and cities going to buy items that they couldnt find in their own locations.

Dont they ever sleep? the gorgon sighed at the sight of people even at this late hour.

Probably just going about. Isnt it like this every year?

Thereve never been so many problems going on at once. Artifact infections, cults, chainlings, even a copyette If I were the countess, Id just cancel the event, but thats not an option here. In this world, appearance is everything.

I thought level was.

Levels help create a better perception. Lets just get inside.

Eurys workshop was filled with items. Most were equipment pieces she had to repair. Roughly a third belonged to her hunter group, while the rest were urgent cases for people who wanted to look their best for the festival. There were a lot of them, but as the gorgon said, money was no issue, so she was happy to do a bit more work and earn half her funds for the coming year.

There also were a small number of items for her to investigate, given by the city guard. When Dallion had initially learned about that, he had panicked slightly, immediately offering to join her during the exploration. The gorgon had laughed. That was normalher skills and level remained superior to his at this point.

After barring the door, Eury went to her room to change. The fact that she couldnt swim in the nearby lake and was forced to rely on bucket water made her slightly grumpy, but that was understandable.

I wont be searching tomorrow, Dallion said while Euryale was undressing. There are too many people. Besides, with March back, the expedition is about to start.

Its about time.

Yeah, I know. She and Vend have been all secretive about something. It might have to do with the Star.

Vends always been secretive. With his past its normal.

His past?

He used to be a thief and pickpocket. He didnt tell you?

No. That was sort of a shock, although Dallion could see it. Vends gift with combat splitting helped him get out of all sorts of troubleideal for picking locks, keeping a lookout, or snatching a purse. It definitely explained why the elite didnt talk about his past.

Theres also a chance I get called for the tournament fight, Dallion continued with the idle conversation.

It had been a while since he had been called to participate. The last time was two days ago, when he had easily defeated his opponent without resorting to familiars or music skills. Being level twenty made a lot of the fights pointless. It also helped him to be favored and not subject to a level cap as far as skills went. Spending a lot of time improving items, Dallion had brought his athletic skills to level thirty-nine, one less than acrobatics and guard; attack was at forty-four and music was two short of fifty. Alas, forging remained at one, mostly because keeping up the illusion that he was searching for the copyette didnt leave any time for Eury to continue with his training.

Itll be against real candidates this time.

Youll do fine. Some of them are still double digits.

Yeah

That was true, but Dallions rival from the Flameforge guild was a bit more skilled. If Dallion was to make any headway, hed have to rack some levels, something he still failed to achieve.

Youre staying here tonight, right? Eury asked. It sounded more like a statement than a question.

Definitely. Dallion grinned.

What are you waiting for, then? The hint was clear.

Just thinking about things Dallion replied. Then slowly started removing his gear. I think Ill try to level up again.

Have you ever considered that the reason youre failing at it is that youre too wound up? Eury half emerged from the bedroom. As one might expect, she didnt have any clothes on. Fighting against the world only works if you relax a bit now and then.

Is that advice for the trial? Dallion laughed.

The gorgons snakes stirred.

If I had something close by, Id throw it at you right now. Just forget about the world for one moment. Can you do that?

Dallion considered it. If he tried to level up now, it would hardly matter, since in terms of the real world, only a moment would pass. Then again, he could just as easily try the following morning.

Youre right. He said, only partially convinced. Ill be right there.

The fantasy world had indeed become much scarier than when he had appeared here from Earth. He was no longer in a small village in the middle of nowhere. Now he was in a large city that was

targeted by what could only be described as a deity of evil. Living day to day wouldnt cut it anymore. He had to learn what was really going on fast and get stronger in the process. However, that still didnt mean he couldnt have some fun now and again.

Chapter 270: March's Mission

Whats your world like? Eury asked as they lay in the bed at the first rays of dawn.

This was the first time Dallion had been asked. It wasnt a question he expected ever hearing, making him think back to so many things he took for granted. Back then, he had spent a large part of his life imagining fantasy worlds that didnt exist, playing games online to create the illusion of being there. Now he was here a world in which people could do the impossible.

Its different, he said at last. Theres no magic. Not like this anyway. Dallion moved closer to Eury. Technology is a lot more advanced, and we He stopped. How could one describe the internet? Was it like a fake awakened realm in which nothing happened? Its difficult to explain.

I understand. My world is also more advanced, but in a way its not.

That wasnt much of a description, but Dallion had an idea what she meant.

There was a lot more space. All the big cities were in mountains, and she stopped, her words trailing off as if shed remembered something.

And? Dallion turned his head sideways.

Ill tell you some other time. The gorgon smiled, then got out of bed.

Hey, you cant just stop there, Dallion said in mock anger.

Too bad. Eury went to the bathroom to get washed. Ill tell you one thing I miss. Proper waterworks. Washing in lakes, wells, and buckets is interesting in a rustic sort of way, but something I could do without.

What are your plans for today? Dallion asked. One of the good things about having a gorgon for a girlfriend was that he didnt have to raise his voice for her to hear.

I need to catch up with work. Why?

Just curious. Ill be heading to the guild. There might be something regarding my new job. Okay if I pass by later tonight?

Better not. Lots of work. Do your stuff and Ill pick you up from the inn when Im done.

Hush, Dallion whispered.

Whats that? Euryale asked from the bathroom.

The shields trying to be funny again, Dallion replied.

Hes a dryad, what do you expect?

Right. Well, Ill be going now. Ill have a bite at the guild, he said, more out of habit than anything else. For her many positives, Eury despised cooking to the point that she had transformed the cooking area into a furnace.

Sure, Eury replied.

Youre in form today, Dallion said as he left the workshop. Any reason?

Does getting fully healed count?

That was a low blow, considering that the wounds the shields guardian had earned were for saving Dallion.

Im just messing with you. Its just that festivals bring good memories. As long as there was a festival, it meant there would be no fighting until it was over. Competitions maybe, but no actual fighting.

I think I know what you mean, Dallion smiled.

Some of the streets were already crowded, even if it was rather early. Even the guildhall, which was a fair distance from any city gates, was more difficult to reach than normal. Dallion made sure to have his guilds emblem visiblea deterrent against pickpockets. On a few occasions he was tempted to get some freshly baked snacks from a street stall, but the lack of money quickly convinced him to wait until he reached the guild.

The old echo didnt particularly like Dallion wearing his blocking ring, especially when going to establishments of questionable reputation. Lately, though, he seemed particularly grumpy.

You think Ill finally go on the mission?

Its possible, although Id say its highly unlikely. Youre in no condition to go on an expedition, not the way you are.

Ill level up when I get there.

I know youll try, dear boy. But your persistence to rely on brute strength is delaying your progress.

Weve been through this. I havent seen any indication its a puzzle, so it must be a test of skill.

I know, Nil, I know.

The walk to the Icepicker guild took longer than Dallion was used to, and involved a bit of shoving at times. Finally, he reached the building. Signs and banners covered the guildhall, created especially for the occasion, trying to stand out from the hundreds of other buildings that did the same. From what Nil had said, the theme and color were chosen each year by the guild master himself in accordance with the taste of the guilds sponsors. Personally, Dallion had his doubts especially since there wasnt any product placement or ad to be seen. Still, it was nice seeing the building freshened up.

Unlike the streets, the inside of the guild was far emptier than it usually was. Jobs were few so close to the festival. The only exceptions were emergency sanitation jobs that required a large group of elites to go and repair streets, buildings, or, on occasion, entire neighborhoods.

Hello, Dal! a short bearded man waved. Sorry for calling you here during the festival.

Morning, Estezol. Dallion smiled. Alone today?

Just helping out a bit. Most people want to have a bit of fun and I cant blame them. Its not like I have anything else to do. There'll be plenty of time to enjoy the show once it starts.

I guess. Vend around?

Yep, hes waiting for you in the sword room with March and the rest. You better hurry up. Almost everyones there already.

Ill be right up. Dallion went directly for the stairs. His leveling up would have to wait a bit longer.

The Sword room was on the fourth floor. Dallion had been there only once before, when March had told him about the expedition. Only a few weeks had passed since then, though in true time years had gone by.

Technically, Dallion still was, but he understood the point. Walking up several flights of stairs, he made his way to the room in question. Just as he was about to knock, the door opened on its own.

Hey, Dal, Vend said at the door. Come in.

There were a dozen people in the room, all standing along the walls a few steps from the entrance. On the opposite side of the room stood Marchone of the guilds captains dressed in her trademark full armor suit. An old sword hung from the ceiling the item that held within it an entire ancient world.

Were waiting for two more, Vend whispered as he pulled Dallion to a spot in the corner.

Dallion nodded. Looking at the people present, he could recognize a few, though he wasnt particularly close to any of them. Most of them were elites or veterans, or both, with a smattering of new faces such as Dallion. To Dallions surprise, there was no sign of Spike or any of the other elites he had worked with in the past.

It was obvious by the state of their gear, that these were the equivalent of the company A-team. If there was an equivalent to special guild forces, these people were it. Virtually everyone had weapons and items of sky silver, not to mention that some of the weapons were completely unfamiliar to Dallion. However, that wasnt the most interesting thing in the room. Now that the Moons had granted Dallion special sight, he could see one thing that he hadnt before the sword in the room was glistening with otherworldly light.

Everyones finally arrived, March said.

On cue, Vend went to the door again and opened it. As expected, two guild members entered.

As you probably know, starting tomorrow, well continue with the next expedition. Normally, Id have delayed this till after the festival. However, Ive recently come across some information that requires that we move faster. Ive already discussed this with the guild master and hes agreed with my logic.

Dallion looked around. Other than him, no one appeared surprised, keeping their eyes on the captain.

Due to the sensitive nature of this information, the details will only be discussed once were inside the sword. The only thing I can say at this point is that theres a slight chance that the world is not fully abandoned.

Stillness filled the room. Everyone was fully aware of the significance of that statement. Given Dallions recent experience, his first thought was whether they wouldnt come across another copyette, or maybe more, locked up within the world as punishment.

The expedition will be every morning at nine, March continued. Well gather here, do our job, then head to the festival as if nothing has happened. Since this is a full world item, well have to hunt and cook while were inside.

That life in there is like life out here. Your wounds will bleed, you can satisfy your hunger if you hunt and eat whatever the world offers. The only difference is that it remains a realm, so the markers will still be visible.

Each day well go on one expedition. On the way, well try to mend as much as we can. The goal of repairing the sword up to the hilt remains. Questions.

How long will the expeditions be? a large woman with a crossbow asked.

Months, March replied. Weeks if were lucky.

Will there be simultaneous awakenings? someone else asked.

No. itll be just us. We go in, finish our business and get out.

Will we level up the sword? Dallion asked. Everyone turned his direction.

That felt awkward, even if Dallion wasnt sure why he had created such a reaction. Were rookies forbidden from asking questions? Or was the question so stupid that the answer was obvious.

We might, the captain said. Our main priority is to explore and mend, but if we get the opportunity, who knows.

Dallion nodded. He didnt feel particularly better, but at least she had responded to his question.

Bottom line, there will be a lot of tough weeks ahead, so get some rest, have some fun, do what you have to do, so that tomorrow youre ready to give it your all. Remember, once inside, nothing in the real world counts! The tournament, the guild challenges, the festival itself is irrelevant. Is that clear?

Everyone nodded.

May the Moons bless us in our journey.