

Leveling up 281

Chapter 281: Ten Temples, Eight Moons

MINOR WOUND

Another rectangle appeared above the guardian. This was the seventh one so far and, by all accounts, it looked like March was winning. The rest of the party had finished mopping up the remaining minions and were now standing by ready to provide support to the captain if needed.

Dallion, of course, was still busy redirecting Lux from person to person to restore their health. Fortunately, there had been no deaths and with the exception of five cases, none of the party members had lost more than half their health. Euryale was one of those exceptions, very much unlike Vend, who had remained at a hundred percent the entire time.

You've grown rusty, the elite whispered to the gorgon, loud enough to be heard by all. All that work with the overseer has dulled your skills.

I just don't stay in the back lines as much as before, Euryale replied, moving closer to Dallion.

The stone dryad spun in the air, creating three instances of itself, each of which attacked March with the pair of scimitars he was holding. March easily matched the instances, blocking each with ease, before proceeding with a counterattack as she attempted to pierce the dryad's chest. So far, she had merely lost thirty percent of her health. The saddest part was that Dallion still was incapable of seeing the majority of the exchange. Reaching twenty, he never considered his level of perception low that was until this battle. Now, he felt more determined than ever to reach fifty. Of course, that also made him think what else he would gain if he increased his other attributes to fifty. Leveling up never was easy, and neither was allocating the gains.

They'll be done in a few minutes, Euryale said.

You've been here before? Dallion asked, surprised.

No. The gorgon laughed. I can tell both of them are getting tired. There are a lot more mistakes now.

That made sense. Dallion had started to see much more of the fight than at the beginning.

That must be insane they've been at it for several minutes already.

Two more red rectangles appeared above each of the opponents, each a minor wound.

Why do they only deal minor wounds? Dallion asked.

Why waste effort on more? When you're that good you try to win with the least amount of effort. There's no telling who's watching. The good skills are kept for the unknowns.

It's just like the area job, Dallion whispered. Vend told me that a large part of area combat is scouting and learning the enemy's pattern.

Pretty much. Its different on this one, though. Here, losses are expensive. When you lose, you need to start from the beginning, and it looks like the guardians are pretty good at remembering things.

MINOR WOUND

Both March and the dryad remained perfectly still. The captains sword had successfully managed to pierce the chest of her opponent. While not flashy, this had been the final blow of the battle. The guardian knew it. It looked down at the hand holding the sword that defeated it, then back at Marchs face.

Till next time, it whispered before dissolving into nothing.

KAMEN has been defeated!

Continue on to fulfill the AURA SWORDS destiny.

Apparently so, dear boy. This is one mystery that we have yet to find an answer to.

Do you think its linked to the third gate?

Unlikely. Youve been hearing guardians long before that. Probably one of your unique awakening talents. There have been cases of people acquiring weird talents upon awakening and a few negatives. I know of one case where the awakened was incapable of repairing items.

What do you mean?

His mere presence caused the mending labyrinth to break to pieces.

Ouch. That must have been nasty.

Any losses? March asked, sheathing her sword.

Initially, Dallion thought she was referring to the party, but judging by everyones reaction, it turned out not to be the case.

Were all good, Agnii replied. There were a few scares, but nothing major. Were good to go.

Get everything in the temple. Well rest there until everyones fully healed, then we move on. Dal. She turned to him. How long before that happens?

Err In turn Dallion glanced at Lux. Id say an hour at most.

March frowned.

Lux has never had to heal so many at once. I dont want to overload him.

Okay. Lets get in there.

The moment the first person entered the hall of the temple, the entire roof changed color. No longer a dull temple of stone, it glowed with a faint white light, almost as if it were wrapped in a thin layer of plastic.

Our confirmation, a party member nearby told Dallion. When we defeat a guardian, the temple roof lights up. Dont be too impressed, it gets brighter further on.

Thanks, Dallion replied. What happens when we pass all ten?

Who knows? The other laughed. One day well find out. Not this time, though. The goal is to reach the fifth one.

The food rations were bland but nutritious. Just as Dallion had started eating, March took Eury, Vend, and Agnii further in the temple without explanation. Given their importance, Dallion assumed it was part of the planning process. Even so, he would have liked to know what was going on. Looking around, it didnt seem like anyone cared much. Most had already lain on the ground, taking advantage of the pause to get some sleep. Clearly, they were all veterans who had been through this before.

And there arent any references in your library?

From what he could make out so far, the world likely followed the shape of the overall sword, which meant there would be an invisible line linking the first temple with the last. Of course, that line could be the size of Earths equator. The distance from the starting point to the first temple was relatively short a few days of walking though there were no guarantees the distance would remain the same. At this point, Dallion really regretted not taking a better look at the horizon beyond the temple.

Time passed slowly. After about fifteen minutes Lux returned to Dallion, chirping that his work was done; everyone in the party was now back to full health. After another five minutes, Eury appeared once more.

Hey, she said, making her way to Dallion.

Hey. Done with your secret meeting? he asked.

Just a lot of boring talk about logistics. Im to set out in an hour to start scouting. Youll be here for half a day longer.

Half a day?

March doesnt like travelling in daylight. Not starting the journey, at least. The gorgon shrugged. Thats why I couldnt stay in a guildtoo many rules that dont make sense, and none of them invented by me.

That was the best description of why people didnt work in large organizations, if there ever was one. Gorgons seemed to love to be able to do what they wished, at least this particular gorgon.

Want to explore the temple? Eury asked.

Dallion hesitated.

Its fine. March has agreed to it.

Dallion couldnt sense any lie in that, not that it would have mattered.

Sure, he stood up, Lux still on his shoulder. Lets go.

The basic temple layout was different from the starting one. While the main hall and altars were virtually identical, this one had multiple side sections connecting to doorways. Some were living sections, some were tunnels leading to what one would expect in a temple: cooking area, prayer hall, washing area. Some, though, were outright weird.

One corridor in particular seemed to be a description of some story in pictures chiseled along the walls. From what Dallion could make out it was a story of a Moon, or heroic character, bringing prosperity to a crowd of people. One thing of note was that the people werent human, instead they were dryads.

What did you do back home? the gorgon asked as the two walked along the corridor, Lux shedding light on their surroundings. Home home.

Err Dallion thought about it. Nothing, he said after a while. Absolutely nothing.

Several more of Euryales snakes turned in his direction.

I mean, I went to a place to study, but yeah. Thats about it. All my life, Ive been doing pretty much nothing. Just learning and enjoying myself.

Described in this fashion, it sounded like a really lazy, almost pointless existence. Here, Dallion had several jobs, not to mention he had dealings with organizations hed be terrified of back home. He had gone through hundreds of battles, a few of them in the real world, a hunt that in a way equaled being drafted into the army, and now was on an expedition to find out what had happened to a lost civilization. The kicker was that for the most part that wasnt even considered terribly special for this world. Well, maybe the world item was a bit out there, but everything else was normal.

What about you? Dallion asked. Youre an heiress to the throne? he laughed.

Its been centuries since nobility was considered special, Eury replied, making Dallion feel a ball of ice form in his stomach. Not like here. The only difference between a noble and an ordinary person is a few letters in front of the name.

You really are? Dallions voice sounded slightly higher.

Its not a big deal, the gorgon laughed. Seriously. I live in a cheap peak that I had to share with a few dozen others. Its barely bigger than the workshop I have here. The only difference is that I get more sky back home.

The only pain is that my mother thought I should take on the family business. Thats what happens when your sisters cant be bothered, and my brothers arent taken seriously. You can pretty much say that I was the only viable candidate.

That sounds rough? Dallion still hadn't gone over the fact that Eury was actual nobility. Not that it should have mattered. For some reason, it did, though. Had he learned she was a noble here, he would have been impressed, but little more. Being noble in her world, though, created images from fantasy novels in his mind.

Caged, she replied. Here, the cage is gone.

Dallion's throat felt dry. He had no idea what the gorgon had gone through in her world, but he could see the emotions inside her thanks to his music skills. While there was something she missed, she was also glad about something.

What do you think this means? Eury changed the subject, looking at the wall.

Something about praising the Moon, probably, Dallion replied. There were a few scribbles in a language that he wasn't familiar with, but the shield had refused to translate them.

Not that. The gorgon pointed to the upper part of the wall, where a series of moons were seen in the sky. If everyone is so adamant that there are seven moons, why are there eight carved up there?

Chapter 282: Remains

The eighth Moon. This wasn't the first time Dallion had heard about it, but definitely the first and only time he had seen it carved or drawn anywhere. According to Nil, there were still arguments if the Moon even existed. Some academics insisted that it was a metaphor, others said that it was a representation of the Star, others still speculated that it was one of many Moons that remained hidden, watching over the world.

The dryad refused to say anything about the Moon, of course, as did Harp. As for everyone else, they had no idea.

There are seven more depictions of it, Euryale said. She had spent a while examining the corridor and had found that the moon was present in a few more scenes. Sadly, there was nothing that gave any idea of its significance. Neither the symbols, nor the carvings provided any additional information.

Five siblings, Dallion said, trying to lighten the mood slightly. You must have had a fun childhood.

Six, the gorgon corrected. And no, not much. Half were sheltered, the others didn't believe in consequences.

Any idea what color it is? Dallion glances at the wall again.

Colorless. Which probably means crystal. She paused for a moment. Or anything.

It's said that the color of the star is black.

At this point you know as much as I. A secret the size of an orange appeared in the gorgons chest. She was lying, and in the sort of way when Dallion lied when dealing with something, he didnt want others to get involved.

Nothing happened. That was expected, if somewhat disappointing. Deep inside, Dallion was hoping that one of the Moons would emerge and reveal some long-lost secret. However, nothing of the sort happened.

Have you seen anything of the sort? Dallion probed the water.

A few times. The size of the secret diminished, though it didnt disappear altogether. It was present in a few of the finds in the wilderness. Condition was worse than here, but pretty much the same thing. Then again, Ive seen a lot more that had six Moons, or seven.

Six, seven, eight. Thinking about it, Dallion wanted more than ever to join Eury, Jiroh, and the rest of the hunters on an expedition in the wilderness. However, for some reason, he didnt feel it was the right time to ask. We should continue the forging lessons, he said instead. Ive already made ingots of everything I could think of.

Once the festivals done. The gorgon slid her fingers along Dallions cheek. I promise.

That didnt feel too convincing, but Dallion nodded. It wasnt like he had all this free time, either.

Ill be heading back. Its time I head out scouting.

Sure. Dallion wanted to stay a bit longer and examine the walls a bit more, but that was something he could get back to when she was gone. What lies ahead?

According to March, nothing interesting. Steppes, animals, hills and rivers the usual. It should be safe till the next temple, but she wants to be sure.

I can have Lux travel with you, Dallion offered. The bird chirped. He likes wide open spaces.

Youre sweet, but no. Hes better close to you, as is the other one. Besides, Ill be fine. The role of the scout isnt to fight, its just to get a feeling of whats going on in this case tell March what she already knows.

Steppes, hills, and valleys? Dallion repeated.

Pretty much. A few rivers. Possible settlement remains.

Euryale put both hands on Dallions shoulders, then pulled him closer for a kiss. Dallion wasnt sure if this had become her way of answering difficult questions, but wasnt going to complain about it, definitely not with the perception level he had. Even so, it felt like it ended too soon. After everything, even when working, Euryale continued to be both a flirt and a tease.

Almost all of the party members were asleep as Dallion and Eury returned to the main temple hall. Vend, wasnt.

Took you a while, Vend said, giving both of them a stern glance. Anything I should know?

Nope. The gorgon smiled in the sort of way a tiger smiled before ripping off somethings head.

Better go. March wont be happy if youre late.

Im sure youll know. Eury crossed her arms. Any other orders from the flawless?

Dont fight unless you have to.

Right.

Euryale turned around and left. A few seconds later, Vend too walked away. He didnt even attempt to say anything to Dallion. That was for the better, especially after what Dallion was thinking of doing.

Thats the general idea. Temples were made to worship and communicate with the Moons. Breaking them tends to send the wrong message.

Even in this place?

I see your point.

Normally, Dallion would consider that an insult, but his mind had already started plotting. There were a few things he wanted to do. All of them ranged from reckless to extremely dangerous. However, he also had a good feeling about it.

There was little doubt that breaking and stealing something from a temple would get him in trouble. However, he didnt need to steal anything. Instead, he could do what thieves did in all the action movies back on Earthmake a mold.

Rushing back to the corridor, Dallion found the eight instances of the carvings, then summoned a few ingots of gold. Once he had them, he had Lux warm them enough to be a bit more malleable and pressed them against the sections of the eight moons. In a matter of minutes, the result was unsummoned, returning to Dallions own realm, where Gen was to take over.

Get Harp to make a copy out of ice and then do stuff.

You can get Shield to help as well. And maybe Nil too. The old mans probably itching to expand his knowledge on something not in the library.

I heard that, dear boy. And actually, its not the worst of your ideas. However, one thing to keep in mind. Now that youve started this game, please see it through.

Evening came, and with it so did March. Those who managed to get enough rest got up, putting on their backpacks, ready for the trip to come. Vend made one final check, then on Marchs order, the party continued.

The first part of the trip was fairly calm. Dallion had feared that with the guardian gone, all the predators would fill the area previously occupied by the jackalears. However, that turned out not to be the case. On the contrary. A lot of the smaller creatures had become more noticeable, including birds.

Despite the calm and flat terrain, Dallion couldn't help but feel slightly nervous knowing that the moons were watching him. The scary part came from knowing that sometime in the past, the same moons had watched over a world of dryads, only to have that world fall into decay and abandonment.

No one stopped to rest, reminding Dallion of the marches during the chainling hunt. At the time, he had been taught how to sleep in the realms of his clothes so as not to waste time in the real world. Now he had the stamina and endurance to keep walking for two days straight without food or rest.

No break for food? Dallion asked Vend. As being one of the fortunate few designated to be in front, he didn't have a lot of options with whom to talk. March was out of the question, Eury wasn't here, and everyone he knew well was further behind.

There will be food in the morning, Vend replied. That's when we'll rest.

Is there a point in resting during the day? Even with the Moons and a high perception level, it's easier during the day.

There are fewer distractions in the dark.

What do you mean?

Vend didn't reply right away, as if waiting for a go ahead from March. When the captain didn't say anything for several seconds, he finally continued.

Ruins. Think of this world as a

Sword, Dallion smirked as he interrupted.

Sword. Vend nodded, not too pleased. The heart is somewhere around the hilt. That's where the capital and the major cities should be. The further away we get from there, the more backwater the settlements. The town of tears must have been a military outpost to warn against an invasion coming from the starting temple. That is before it took on a later role.

Why is seeing cities a bad thing? I thought our goal was to find out what happened here?

Yes and no. Our main goal is to mend the world and fulfil its destiny. That was a lie. Dallion could see it clearly. We must get to the area that needs cleaning and clean it from any cracklings and other nasties. There's no point in being reminded of what's happened to this place until then.

Won't the knowledge help?

Maybe it will, but that's not for you to decide. Your only job is to help, grow, and don't die early on.

That was another lie. Through his emotions, Vend had pretty much told Dallion that he had a part to play further on. The question was what that part was. It definitely had to do with him being from another world. Come to think of it, there was a large chance that Euryale was also here for the same purpose. Having a hunter was no doubt a positive, but more and more it was looking like that wasn't the only reason for March's decision.

Theres no denying what she is, though.

True, but you have it backwards. The reason shes invited is because shes that good. Shes that good because, like you, she doesnt have limitations.

You dont like Eury much, do you? Dallion asked.

The expedition could have done without her, Vend sounded annoyed. Pick up the pace. We need to reach the hills before dawn.

When dawn came, the hills were still a significant distance away. The ruins that Vend had spoken of werent. At first glance, there was nothing special about them. Most of them were mere statues of now unidentified shapes, sticking out of the ground. Sometimes there was what could have been a building nearby, sometimes there wasnt even that.

As the hills got nearer, so did the number of ruins, and this time they werent a single structure out in the wilderness. Here, they were entire settlements.

An eerie feeling of déjà vu shook Dallion. The closer he got to the villages, the more they reminded him of Dherma. When the village he'd been born in had fallen upon hard times, it had gone through the same process. First, some of the outer buildings were abandoned and left to slowly crumble. If there had been any awakened at this point, they must have focused on the more important buildings further in, or had taken the opportunity to leave the settlement altogether and move to a better environment. Maybe they had gone further in, towards the capital of this world, or had been the first to try and escape it. The end result remained the same.

Has anyone tried to rebuild these? Dallion asked, looking at the distance.

Only the Town of Tears, Vend replied. The rest were too far gone.

Do things change further on?

Definitely, but not in the way you think.

Chapter 283: Statue with a Note

After a long rest and another night of walking, Dallion saw firsthand the importance of stocking up on food early on. The supplies that seemed endless while being carried had already halved and the lack of critters in the steps meant there was no chance of getting more.

There was no sign of Eury at present, but it seemed that things were going well enough for March to ease up with the discipline a bit. Small talk became more frequent. Topics were mostly related to things in the real world, but now and again, something relating to the exploration crept in. Apparently, the first guardian fight had been more difficult than before, forcing people to rely on more than basic attacks. There was even speculation that the next guardian could have improved just as much.

Another matter of discontent was Euryale. It wasnt so much that people hated her, or she wasnt pulling her own weight. Rather, several of the guild members were annoyed that she refused to use echoes, making her by far less efficient as a scout. The previous scouts, from what Dallion heard, used to place echoes of themselves in a few common items, thus keeping everyone in the party

informed of anything going on. Euryale, in contrast, preferred to rely on face-to-face conversations, as one generally would in the real world.

The following day, a few groups were set out to try and get food. What they brought back was laughable mostly birds and fish in such small quantities that they wouldn't feed more than five people in total. March didn't seem in the least concerned, spending her down time reading a scroll. Dallion attempted to see what was in it, out of curiosity, but all he saw were a series of unknown symbols.

Not with a single glance. Otherwise, I probably could. To save you the trouble, however, I can tell you exactly what she's reading.

Dallion leaned forward out of habit.

That was something, but Dallion remained curious.

You should be resting, Vend said suddenly, almost making Dallion jump from his spot. Things will get dangerous pretty soon.

I can handle myself, Dallion said to compensate for being startled.

One day, though not yet. There was no smile on Vends face. Just get more rest. He turned around to walk away.

Vend, Dallion said while the other was still close. There haven't been any minions so far. Does that mean anything?

There was a moments pause, after which Vend turned around, nodding to himself as he did.

You're paying attention. That's always good. We're still in the area of the previous temple. It takes a few days to reach it, and a few days to leave its sphere of influence. After that we'll go through a sort of wilderness of this world. Nothing to be scared about we've already cleaned these parts. It's only after we cross the hills that we'll get tested.

You mean we'll be attacked by minions.

Not only. As you've seen, there's no food. We'll spend a while in the hills trying to get what we could. The guardian knows that and probably already has done everything in its power to keep us hungry. The hungrier we are, the easier it would be for it to take us out. Usually about five people drop off around this part of the journey. Make sure you're not one of them.

Strategic thinking. Guardians hadn't done anything of the sort in the past, at least not that Dallion had noticed. Given that they spent their existences in small arenas in realms which didn't have any viable

food, they didnt have to. The only thing that would happen if awakened remained in a realm for too long was for them to experience hunger. Apparently, that wasnt always the case. A world realm also linked strength and fatigue to that hunger, and while no one was going to die from starvation, they wouldnt be in peak condition.

A bit early in the morning for philosophical discussions, dont you find, dear boy? The Order will erase your name for asking that. To be honest, though, at this point no one knows.

Thats true, but someone tried to defeat a Moon at one point.

Im certain its been tried many times, but none have succeeded. The mention in history is the closest thing we have to an almost successful attempt, and even that account is highly questionable. You know how myths get exaggerated.

That was an interesting turn of events. What if that was the Stars goal all along? If there really were a Moon weapon hidden in this world, he could defeat the moons and either replace them, or make them subservient to him.

Which is?

When the two Moons turned away from the world, the ability to use magic and other gifts disappeared. What do you think will happen if one of the more vital parameters vanish from existence?

That was a good point.

But let us say that they remain, only considering you as their master. How do you challenge a moon? History speaks of emperors who had the strength and wisdom to conquer the world, but even they didnt go against the Moons. Note, that some of them were of the same period in which the world items were created. If they really had the means to destroy a Moon, why not just do it?

There was no way to answer that question. Maybe it was a bit early to start plotting ways to enter the divine realm, if there was such a thing.

Wise decision.

Sleep came and went, after which the party was back on the move. The steppes vanished, replaced by hilly terrain. The hills brought rivers, small forested areas, and even more abandoned villages. On occasion Agnii had a few people go and get some materials from such a village stone and lumber, mostly. Dallion had asked several times to be added to the group. But March had refused. His goal was to be close to the party, in case Lux was needed.

On the third day, sections of paved roads became common, as did the presence of animals; the time of provisions was over. Hunting parties were set out, gathering food. Some were cooked and eaten on the spot, while some Agnii used to make provisions for later.

One other thing that the party came across were statues statues with a note beneath them.

Seems well be facing something new. Vend skimmed through the note he had taken from under the petrified hoof of what appeared to be a minotaur. She says theres more. No minions, though.

It didnt take a genius for everyone to realize who was the she he was referring to.

March took the note from Vend and started reading.

She says its stronger than it looks, Vent went on. Some of the other party members had also approached, examining the creatures clothes and gear.

In Dallions mind, this was very much what a minotaur was supposed to look: Mace, dual swords, and a light leather outfit of Roman design. Interestingly enough, the creature also had a pouch. All that suggested that it was sapient and likely intelligent as the other races.

Its worldspawn, the captain said, rolling up the note. Must have come from beyond the fourth temple.

I warned you that would happen, Agnii said, arms crossed. Remove the stinkies and it gets much easier for anything bottled up to escape.

I doubt its a threat.

Not for the moment, but it creates a vacuum further down. Whatever pushed these out has gained a stronghold and will be all the more difficult to defeat. For all we know, centuries could have passed between expeditions.

Im aware of that. Thats why were pushing on. Ill make sure we reach the seventh temple by the end of the festival.

The crafter captain didnt say a word, but it was obvious she didnt agree with March.

Are these another imprisoned race? Dallion asked. Maybe theyre the ones who build the villages?

No, Vend replied almost instantly. Theyre from here, but most likely nomads, semi-savage too. He pointed at the petrified armor. Light armor, weapons, but few clothes, and above allno shoes.

They could have been a scouting party, Dallion said out of stubbornness, even if he knew he had lost.

Unlikely.

I can try to unpetrify him so we find out, Dallion offered. Several people stared at him. If Lux can heal, maybe he can heal that as well? Of course, itll mean that youll have to capture him afterwards.

Thats Vend began, but was quickly interrupted.

Do it, March ordered.

Are you sure about this? Agnii asked. Weve no idea how strong it is.

Ill take care of that. All you need to do is form a circle around it and keep it from escaping.

Your call, the crafter shrugged. Meanwhile, the rest of the party had already started to gather around.

The firebird appeared with a chirp and spread its wings. The familiar seemed to enjoy the attention he had been getting lately, possibly a bit too much.

Slowly flapping its way to the statue, in a semi-successful attempt to appear majestic, Lux then landed on the minotaurs head and began his thing. Blue flames enveloped the creatures entire body.

At this point, I havent the foggiest, but it will be interesting to see. Keep in mind that even if you dont succeed, youd have demonstrated that the condition cannot be cured. Not in this fashion, at least.

There had to be a way. By the logic of the world, once a creature was dead, it poofed out of existence. For the statue to still be here, it meant that the creature had to be still alive in some form. What form, now that was a question Dallion didnt want to dwell on.

Ten seconds passed, then thirty, then fifty. The entire party stood around the statue, ready to react at the slightest excuse. However, nothing was happening.

Lux, can you feel anything?

The firebird chirped loudly, indicating it did. If that were the case, though, why couldnt Dallion sense anything?

According to his skills and senses there was nothing there. He didnt feel the void, like when looking at a chainling, nor was there the extreme calm normally associated with objects. For all intents and purposes, it was as if there was nothing but air in front of him.

PETRIFICATION EFFECT REDUCED BY 25%

A red rectangle suddenly appeared.

Chapter 284: The Minotaur

No magic or scientific explanation existed for the innate abilities of the races. They werent magic, nor otherwise associated with the Moons, they werent something that had been developed after generations of research, they were something that just was.

Seeing the statues texture change slowly reverting to living tissue gave a deep sensation of mystique. During the process Dallion had gone through a huge discussion with Nil about the benefits certain races had, coming to the conclusion that humans were the weakest of all. On the surface, there was no denying it. All races, with the exception of humans, had control of nature in some fashion. Out of these, gorgons and copyettes seemed more overpowered than anything else.

Dallion was by no means surprised that the gorgons were the first race to be attacked when the copyettes tried to take over the world. According to the old echo, this was a stroke of luck, since he believed that if gorgons had attempted to conquer the world, theyd have been far more successful.

PETRIFICATION EFFECT REDUCED BY 25%

PETRIFICATION NO LONGER IN EFFECT

The party members tensed. Even Dallion summoned his armadil shield, expecting a short but intense fight. March, however, just took a step forward and slammed the minotaur on the head with her gauntlet.

DIZZINESS

MUNITAUR will remain unconscious for twenty seconds.

Dallion blinked. It wasnt that the fight was anticlimactic; he was by far impressed how March had managed to achieve what she did. Was this a special that came at higher attack levels? If so, it was definitely worth having. Using such skill would pretty much remove the need to kill enemies.

Tie him up, March ordered as she took the creatures weapons.

The weapons didnt prove to be anything special, so they were thrown to the ground. The pouch, though, turned out to be of considerable interest. It was Vend who opened the pouch, using five instances to do so. Initially, Dallion was amused by the fact, but soon enough he saw the wisdom in such a decisionthere was no guarantee that the contents of the pouch wouldnt be harmful, or at the very least disgusting.

Sky silver, Vend said, revealing a few chunks of the metal. They look like natural nuggets. He moved it closer to get a better look. Maybe not so natural. Theyre too pure to be ore, but definitely werent created by it. Probably remnants of a weapon or piece of armor. No idea what could have rendered it in such a state.

One thing to keep in mind.

Theyre also currency, Dallion added.

Suspicion and curiosity flared up in everyone around, including March herself. Only Agnii seemed to be chill about his statement.

Theyre using it as currency, Dallion continued. Thats why its in a pouch. And if its currency, that means some sort of trade is going on.

Trade in a world realm? one of the party members smirked. That will be interesting.

Several people laughed. Being able to unsummon something you just sold would cause problems when it came to trade.

Only for those outside the realm, Agnii corrected. For those born or banished here, itll be the same as when we handle things in the real world. The only difference is that they dont have realms to enter in.

Does that mean there are survivors further in? someone asked.

Thats what were here to find out, March said.

There were no further questions as the minotaur was tied up. Looking at its white rectangle, there was nothing special about the creature; it seemed to be like any standard blocking creature, with few skills and an obvious weak spot.

The blue flames jumped off the minotaur, illuminating the immediate area. The creature narrowed its eyes, adjusting to the light. Fear emanated within it, filling its entire body.

Speak, March said with an icy softness.

There was no response. The minotaur snorted, checking out the strength of the rope he was tied up with. That didn't discourage March. Instead, she said something else in a language entirely unintelligible to Dallion. This time, the creature reacted in a more appropriate fashion. Its ears turned forward while the rest of it froze still.

Do you really want to get into an argument about skill naming practices, or would you rather I translate what they're talking about?

Given the choice there was one possible answer, and as much as Dallion wanted to go with the former just to annoy the echo, he decided that learning more about this realm took priority.

The conversation could be described in a series of short phrases between captive and captor. For the most part, it was March talking with the minotaur giving short answers for the most part. Initially, the conversation started as one might expect: March asked whether it was alone, the size of its group, and whether they had set up camp nearby. The answers were short and not particularly helpful. For the most part, the creature remained terrified of Euryalethe first and only gorgon it had seen. When it learned that March was Euryales superior, its attitude changed completely.

If it could be believed, the creature was from a nomad group of about a hundred or so that had started the journey tipwards a few generations ago. Apparently, Agni's fears had been founded. The destruction of cracklings in the tip of the sword had been noticed to the point that a number of local creatures, animals and sapient beings alike, had headed in there to take advantage. The minotaur in question usually moved about between the third temple and the great sea.

When asked about the chunks of sky silver, the minotaur gave no good explanation. Initially, it claimed them to be for decoration. When pressed on the topic by March, it had changed its story, explaining they were meant for barter. All the while, though, Dallion wasn't able to determine whether it was lying or not. It seemed that his music skills weren't omnipotent; he had to be familiar with a language to determine whether the person was lying.

The interrogation continued focusing on the layout of the land up to the sea. A deal was struck. March had assured the minotaur that it would be set free, provided it helped her chart a map

of the areas beyond. At first, the creature was reluctant, but given it had little choice, it accepted the terms.

Unfortunately for Dallion, he was not invited for the next part. March requested that he lend her Lux for a while, then moved away from the main camp, leaving him and the rest of the party behind.

Most of the party didnt seem to mind, but that didnt sit well with Dallion, and from what could sense using his music skill, it wasnt particularly appreciated by Vend either.

Itll be fine, Vend said, despite himself. The info combined with Eurys scouting will give us a pretty good idea what lies ahead. Until this sea, that is.

By the sound of it, there must be more than one, Dallion could only say.

Who knows? Distances are different in realms. If it werent for the creatures, wed probably be able to travel from one part of the world to the other in less than a month.

Cool.

Yeah. Things will start to get interesting pretty soon. In the meantime, lets continue where we left off.

Huh?

Your training. Vend narrowed his eyes. Youll need a lot more if youre to make it further ahead.

Quite a surprising move that came at the worst possible time. Somehow, Dallion suspected that was the point.

Sure, he said. Whats the focus on this time? More combat splitting?

Split breaking, Vend replied. Guardians can split more than you here, so youll need to have a way to counter that to some degree. Lets go somewhere quiet.

Dallion didnt want to argue that they were in a spot that was quite quiet with March away, the rest of the party had gone to do their own thing, mostly resting. With a nod, he followed Vend a short distance away from camp. The further they got, the more Dallion suspected that the conversation they were going to have had nothing to do with training.

The light of several moons shone on the grass. Interestingly enough, the dominant color was that of the Green Moon. Finally, Vend reached a spot he deemed acceptable.

Alright. The elite stopped. lets go for it.

Whats your split number? Vend asked, looking Dallion straight in the eye.

About five, Dallion lied. In reality, he was comfortable with seven. A bit more now and again.

At some point, youll need to get in the double digits. Until then, heres a trick when facing more skilled enemies. Try attacking.

Whats the point? You can split five times more than me.

Ill only split once.

The suggestion intrigued Dallion. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated, then split into five instances of himself. Each of the attacks used a different combination of skills: an acrobatic jump followed by a dartbow shot, a direct dash and thrust, a spin and arc slash, a zig-zag attack approach, and a leap combined with a dagger throw. However, before the attacks managed to achieve a thing, Vend threw a small pebble at Dallions head. Dallions concentration collapsed instantly. All he could do was watch his instances fade away, never having been performed.

What was that? Dallion asked, unsure what had just happened. He was certain he had managed to split, at the same time he hadnt. It was as if Vend had somehow gone back in time and undone all of Dallions combat splitting. Im sure I"

Want to try again? Vend asked.

Dallion nodded. This time he knew what Vend was about to do, so he delayed the actions of his instances slightly. By the time the last instance started, the first was moments away from striking Vend in the chest with the armadil shield. Just then, all instances collapsed once more, and Dallion found himself a step away with a sharp pain on the forehead.

Another go? Vend asked, tossing a few pebbles in his hand.

Dallion rubbed his forehead. If this was the way Vend wanted it, he was going to think out of the box. Splitting in two instances, he intended to say both yes and no to see the difference. Before his mouth could open in any, another pebble had hit him in the forehead again.

Damn it! Dallion hissed. How are you doing it?!

It feels like your instances are going back in time, right? Vend asked. As if Im rewinding them somehow. Im not. Thats just a trick of the mind. He stepped closer. The only thing Im doing is interrupting you at the precise moment of the split.

You can do that?

Its the same as splitting after a split. The only difference is timing. Since youve already started, there isnt much you can do. The result is me breaking your split every time.

Thats

Its tricky to achieve, though. Your timing has to be spot on. And theres never a guarantee, but once you succeed it makes all the difference. For one thing, itll level the playing field, for another itll confuse your opponent long enough for you to counterattack.

Youve never mentioned this before.

I know. Youre the second person Ive shown it to outside of battle. I know it wont be easy, but youll need to master it. The sooner the better. And above all, keep it secret.

How did you learn it?

Luck. Vend shrugged. Chance. It just happened. From here on it all depends on you. He turned around and started walking away.

Wait. Dallion caught up to him. Wont we be training more tonight?

You will. I need to be there when March has a map ready.

How am I supposed to train on my own?

You can make echoes now. Use them. Just don't let anyone see you.

Chapter 285: Fragments of Emotion

The minotaur was released by morning. Dallion didn't learn any details on the matter. March had simply told the group to get a bit more rest, then everyone packed up and continued on. There had also been a silent disagreement between the two captains. For most people, the event was invisible, but music skills had their advantages, making almost identical discontent resonate in both. Whatever the argument had been about, it was safe to say that March and Agnii had opposite opinions. Another thing for certain was that Agnii had lost.

Walking through the hilly area almost felt as if Dallion was in the real world. So far, he had seen his fair share of realms, but all of them felt distinctly smaller than the real world. Even with all magic and the tricks of illusion that went into creating them, one soon got to know what was real and what wasn't. It was as if a part of the real world was taken, cleaned from everything else, and encapsulated in its own sterile bubble. Area realms usually didn't have insects or animals, and a very limited variety of plants. There were no ecosystems there; the realms didn't require them. In this realm, all the small details were there. It was very subtle, one had to pay attention to it, but following Nils' instructions, Dallion had spent a while digging up the ground and he had found worms.

The group continued walking through morning, then, after a quick break for food, went on into the afternoon. This was the first time March had ordered non-stop walking for a full day. There were a few more statues along the way, mostly new and ferocious animals with a few minotaurs. Dallion had asked to have Lux unpetrified them, and to his surprise, March had allowed it.

Each time it was the same: the minotaur was surrounded, unpetrified, rendered unconscious, then bound, so that March could have a brief conversation with it. There were no secret meetings like before, but on two of the three occasions new information had been added to the map.

There didn't seem to be new information from Eury. Whatever her task, she was focusing on it a hundred percent. That made Dallion feel a bit down. He was hoping to be able to spend more time with her. Apparently, she wasn't joking when she said she'd seen him at the new temple and not before.

Sunset came and went, but the party kept moving. This was unusual. Whispers started circulating among the party, wondering why the sudden sense of urgency. By the sound of it, this part of the journey was pretty much uneventful, something like a blind spot between two temples.

No need to worry, Ezra, one of the veterans, told Dallion. He was probably the oldest person in the group when it came to true time. Dallion had seen him around the Icepicker guild. From what he knew, the man was a pure explorer, and little more. Change is the only constant when it comes to expeditions.

Right. Dallion nodded.

You seem to be doing pretty well. Quite lucky you got Vend to teach you. He's usually a lone wolf, but kids got skills. Just keep in mind he isn't the patient type.

I know what you mean.

Youve no idea who I am, do you? the man asked.

Umm, Ive seen you about"

I was one of the lost.

The information was too sudden for Dallion to react. He remembered the rescue mission. At the time that was the greatest amount of money he had received from a single mission. Also, that was the time he had fought against a chainling directly. The monster was young, barely formed, but it revealed how easy it was to create a chainling, if someone was invested.

You helped rescue us, Ezra continued.

I helped, yes.

You found the chainling, the man whispered as he passed by. Come, I want to show you something.

Nil, anything I should know about this one?

Nothing particular. As I said, these are Marchs team, they dont bother with other guild jobs for the most part.

You dont bother with common guild activities either.

Theres a huge difference. I make sure that the members of the guild are well prepared for any potential threat. Creating and modifying training realms is extremely difficult and highly specialized, requiring a lot of skill and experience, not to mention vast amounts of theoretical knowledge. Going on realm expeditions is the same as being a huntervaluable, though not as rare.

Unfortunately, theres more to running a guild than looking at the competencies of the people in it. While Im the logical choice to become one of the vices, there are other factors as well.

Im sure there are.

So far, Dallion hadnt been in a position to meet the guild master or any of the vices. He had managed to get a glimpse a few times, but despite everything he had done for the guildincluding the Star incidenthe hadnt gone beyond Estezol from an administrative point of view. Given the size of the guild even if it wasnt considered one of the large onesthat was to be expected. However, the more skilled Dallion became, the more he felt he ought to have such a meeting.

Upon reaching the top of the hill, Ezra stopped.

Come along, he said, waving to Dallion.

Semi-smile on face, Dallion rushed up until he reached the top. Mountain tops had become visible in the distance, but that wasnt what the man wanted to show him.

Down there. Ezra pointed.

When Dallion looked, he instantly became speechless. The hill offered a view of the plains that went on. The second temple was visible roughly halfway between the hill and the mountains in the

distance. Up to there, over a dozen settlements were scattered through the plains and valleys or rather, they had been settlements at one time. Now, they weren't even ruins, merely outlines of towns.

What happened? Dallion asked.

From what he could estimate, the settlements were the same size as the Town of Tears, maybe even larger. Not a single building remained. Everything was reduced to a giant spot of scorched rubble.

That's the big question, Ezra replied. This place was full of rust and cracklings during the fourth expedition. Even the guardian didn't dare send minions out here. It took us several expeditions just to gain a foothold. The cracklings had built a few villages of their own. It wasn't until we cleared those that we saw what lay beneath.

Dallion swallowed. There was no way this was done by cracklings. From what he knew, there were only two things that could cause such distinct markings: divine smiting or modern military equipment, specifically bombers.

According to Agnii, some of the towns are older than others. That suggests that at some point, this was considered a resource rich area. Maybe that caused some inter-city wars, but

As he kept on looking, imagining the potential devastation, another thought passed through Dallion's mind. Back during his chainling hunt, the cleric had been shocked and impressed that he knew how to make rockets. What if that wasn't just an expression, but some form of the technology existed in the world? After all, Dallion wasn't the first person to arrive from Earth. If someone with magic skills had put their mind to it, they might well have created just that a weapon capable of devastating destruction.

Suddenly an even more chilling possibility came to mind: who was to say that humans were the only ones coming from a technologically advanced world? The copyettes could have as well, or the furies, or any of the other races. A scary thought.

Does anything happen when we cross that? Dallion asked.

We might get attacked by minions. Ezra shrugged. Maybe not so much with all these minotaurs.

Why did you bring me here?

The last time someone approached Dallion to thank him for something in the past, it turned out to be a Star. Paranoia started acting up, making Dallion wonder whether the Star wasn't making a second attempt to get him out of the expedition.

Take a while, enjoy the view. We won't be doing anything else for a while.

Oh? Dallion took a step back.

We'll rest here for a while before going on. March doesn't like the place much, so we won't be doing any stops there either.

Right. Dallion couldn't blame her. He didn't like the sight either.

Get back to camp when you've had enough, Ezra said, and to Dallion's surprise, turned around and left. That was highly suspicious behavior.

The cub meowed negatively. If there was any danger, it wasn't due to cracklings. That should have relieved Dallion somewhat, but it didn't. There were too many new pieces of information coming too fast. He felt as if the world was closing down on him, as if

Dallion clenched his fists.

As if something is making me act this way, he whispered to himself.

The pressure of focusing on such a large area created the sensation of tension in his temples. Soon enough the tension was gone, and Dallion saw what he suspected: apart from the ruins, scattered throughout the plain, were invisible beacons of emotions, flooding the area with vibrations of curiosity and despair.

The firebird spread its wings, but didn't dare lift Dallion. It too was fearful.

Because this time I'm prepared.

Dallion summoned his harpsisowrd and played a chord. The sound was quickly crushed by the sea of waves coming from below. However, that didn't make Dallion quit. On the contrary, it made him concentrate even harder. His fingers slid along the strings once more, attempting to match the opposite frequency. It wasn't easy; there wasn't just one sound he was trying to negate, there were several mixed in an annoying bouquet. Each time he thought he was close, he'd notice a new element causing his attempts to collapse.

Several minutes passed, but ultimately Dallion proved to be successful. The sounds from his harpsisowrd managed to temporarily create a bubble of silence around him. Following the blue music markers, Dallion played the chord again, duplicating the effect.

Thanks to Lux, Dallion swooped down along the side of the hill, heading towards the nearest set of ruins. All the time he played the harpsisowrd, not allowing the depression of the area to take hold of him.

Me? Nothing. There's something that Lux will do for me, though. Actually, there are several things.

Moving closer, Dallion directed Lux to one of the beacons of emotion. From what he could see with his music skills, the point of origin was a few feet underground. As tempting as it was for Dallion to stop playing and dig it out, he knew that wouldn't end well. Instead, he had his familiar dig to the spot in question.

It took quite a while for the cub to dig through the layers of dirt. While Nox had the power to create cracks in virtually any material, digging wasn't his strong suit. Looking at him reminded Dallion of his childhood dare to eat a bowl of rice with a straw a pointless exercise that only proved how gullible he was.

The crackling turned its head, glaring at Dallion with deep annoyance, but did as it was asked. Soon enough, the prize of his effort emerged. Among the loose dirt, a metallic piece let out a glint of light. Seeing it, Nox paused, then gently rolled it backward with a paw.

Leaping off his back, the firebird lifted the metal fragment. It was small, cylindrical, vibrating in full strength now that it had been unearthed. Dallion had to play his harpsisword twice as fast to ensure that no one in the immediate vicinity would be affected.

Chapter 286: Plains of Despair

What is it, Dal? March asked. The way she did so made him think of a principal who knew he was expecting bad news. The peculiar thing was that according to Dallion's music skill the captain was calm as could be.

It's about the plains of despair, Dallion said. There's a way we can get through them without being affected.

The plains of despair? March asked. While the name was ideal for a fantasy world, it had never been used. As far as she, or everyone, else was concerned, this was just a stretch of land.

The pains beyond the hills, Dallion quickly specified. The place that's filled with ruins. I know what happened there and why it affects everyone who passes through. You see, there are

I know about the effects, Dal, March interrupted. And what causes them. I'm not surprised that you found out so fast, though. Your music skills must have improved a lot lately.

Dallion felt as if he had just found out that he had a winning lottery ticket that had expired a day ago. He had spent close to an hour going through the conversation with March in his mind, planning how to convince her, even going so far as bringing the bolt fragment with him, only to see that she was already fully aware.

Don't look so surprised. Many things are hidden in the wilderness, screaming metal fragments are just one of them.

Screaming metal The name was both catchy and terrifying.

I thought you knew that I used to be an imperial soldier before joining the guild. One of my tasks was to roam the wilderness, making sure that things in the empire remained calm.

The entire Lakah border is filled with them, March continued.

Is that why you wanted me to join? Dallion asked. Because I can counter the effects with my music?

Most of the people are used to it. Its only rough the first few times. Everyone in the party has been on a dozen expeditions with the exception of you.

And Eury, Dallion added.

A flash of surprise flared up beneath Marchs shoulder.

Shes a hunter, shes seen it all before, the captain replied. Anything else?

Dallion shook his head.

Get some food. Youll need it.

There was nothing else to say. With a nod, Dallion walked away. The conversation hadnt gone at all the way he imagined it. He had been so pumped when he discovered the fragment, expecting a lengthy discussion and to be honest a few compliments from March for saving the party. Instead, he had made a fool out of himself.

Fresh meat was roasting at the campfire. Dallion cut off a small piece, but he didnt feel hungry. The sight of past destruction kept worrying him, and he wasnt able to tell whether that was due to the lingering effects of the valley itself, or he feared something else on a subconscious level.

Theres someone who can destroy a whole city?!

The copyette cook for one. Of course, if he does that, hell have his powers sealed and deleveled by the Moons, and probably be banished into a thimble. Still, he has the power.

You know thats not helpful, right? I thought you were supposed to encourage and help me?

I am relaxed. I just prefer to be informed.

Ten minutes later, the party was on the move again. Every trace of the camp was removed, leaving no trace that anyone had been there. March was in front, as usual, with Dallion close behind. As they reached the top of the hill overlooking the plains of despair, Dallion looked back to get a glimpse of Ezra. The man was calmly walking on, carrying a double backpack. Seeing Dallion, he smiled. Dallion, though, couldn't smile back. Instead, he turned around and summoned his harpsisword.

You won't need that, March said. Better get used to the sensation, so it doesn't cause trouble later.

Dallion didn't like the idea in the least. There was logic in March's words, but even so, he couldn't make himself blindly agree.

If it gets to you, just recite the names of the Moons. That always helps.

It was clear she didn't want him to use music. Dallion's internal struggle continued for close to a minute, after which he unsummoned the weapon. There was always the option to summon it later, if he really needed to.

The feeling was like walking through scars of war. Gritting his teeth, Dallion kept walking, trying to keep up with March. However, the more he walked, the more he sensed that he was reacting differently than anyone else. Glancing behind, he could see the scattered fragments affect the others; grains of depression appeared throughout their bodies in response to the emitted emotions, disappearing moments after. In the case of Dallion, not only did the effects remain, but at one point, he also started visualizing them. Echoes of the past flashed every time he blinked, making him feel as if he were on a battlefield. He could hear the screams, the pain, the desperation surrounding him, as destruction followed. The closest thing he had felt like this was during the awakening trial against his grandfather.

Panic crept in, screaming at Dallion to summon his harpsisword.

No, Dallion whispered out loud. Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea.

Momentary calm swept through him like a summer breeze, but even that wasn't able to fully clear away the accumulating pain and fear. The dark feelings were only kept at bay for a moment before returning with a vengeance.

It had been a while since Dallion had heard that voice. He fully agreed with what it was saying; he had to summon the harpsisword. Even if he didn't play a tune, knowing she was there would help him.

Dont be stubborn. Just do it. You know she'll never let you down. You've only been here a few minutes. You'll never make it through an entire day.

The minutes felt like hours. This had to be another effect of the fragments, they were messing with his sense of time, making him

Dont drift, March said, her commanding voice loosening the hold the sound fragments had on him. Keep reciting the names.

Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea, he whispered, almost spitting each word out. Astreza, Berannah, Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea.

Each time he started a sequence, he felt the pain and pressure move away. Every time he finished the same darkness came back. The only way to keep fighting it was to keep repeating the names, like a chant. Soon enough he was muttering them non-stop, pausing only to take a breath. His feet became heavier and heavier.

The firebird emerged on Dallion's shoulder on its own accord. Its warmth was barely felt by Dallion, who kept pushing on step after step. A few steps later, everything went black.

No! Dallion jumped to his feet. Bright yellow light blinded him for a moment, however, it wasn't coming from the sun.

Once Dallion's eyes adjusted, he found that he was sitting at a table in a library to be exact. Shelves of books were everywhere around, ranging on topic from architecture to world religions.

That was slightly confusing. The library clearly wasn't the ring Adzorg had given him; the book covers were too modern for that, but it seemed familiar nonetheless.

So, you decided to go on vacation, the deity flipped a page. Not what I would have done, but you do you. Going to new places is always fun. Enjoying the sights so far?

Err, Dallion uttered, unsure what to say.

Pity you didn't get to see it at its height. Thousands were willing to pay vast amounts of sun platinum just to get a glimpse. Some abandoned all their earthly possessions to stay.

Where am I? Dallion asked at last.

Don't you recognize your university? Felgyn glanced around. Campus library. Not as well stocked as some other colleges, though I guess it could have been worse. At least there's no mould going about.

Shivers ran down Dallion's spine. Having mould always was a nuisance, especially since he didn't have the weapons to fight it right now.

You ended up here because you aren't capable of handling what's out there. Normally I limit my face time with people, but you are my favorite, so I decided to do you a favor.

Im in the sword, Dallion said, memories of moments ago returning to him. Walking through plains of despair.

Right now, youre carried through them. Good name, though. Thats the problem with the locals; they tend to be a bit unimaginative. Dont worry, youll be fine in a few hours. Youll be the butt of jokes for a while, but youll be fine.

Jokes were the least of Dallions worries at the moment.

At that rate, though, itll be months before youre done with the expedition of yours. So much time and youre barely at the second temple. A complete waste of time.

Dallion couldnt understand why it was a waste of time. As far as everyone else was concerned, less than a moment would have passed between the start and the end of the expedition. Or maybe that wasnt true for everyone? Since the Moons were everywhere, realms included, time for them had to be cumulative, which meant that a month was a month, regardless if it was real time or not.

Still, Im willing to indulge you getting sidetracked for now. The Green Moon closed the book. Ive even decided to answer some of your questions.

Why?

Because it will help pass the time, and also hopefully keep you from getting sidetracked in the future.

That didnt sound encouraging, especially since March had said there would be daily expeditions until the end of the festival, possibly after.

I promised Ill find what you asked, Dallion said. I dont know how still, but"

I know that youll try. Do you think Id have favored you if I didnt? The Moon smirked. Only those who show promise receive boons. Those who show devotion only have less bad things happen to them.

That sounded pretty much like the way the world workedthe strong became nobles, while the rest became protected. For the moon to be interested in Dallion, he had to have the ability to do something worth the Moons favor.

What you witnessed in the fields was the result of a few hundred years of war, Felygn said. Some had spilled into the world realm from outside, but for the most part, it was due to internal conflicts. The reasons dont matter much. In some cases, they were just, in others they were justified, and sometimes not at all. The weapons used were normal weapons, more powerful than most today, but still normal weapons. We didnt have anything to do with it, and neither did the Star.

Is that why he tried to stop me from joining the expedition? Because he wanted to find a way to kill you?

The Moon laughed.

Is that what you think?

You were wounded, Dallion said. I think thats a lie.

Thats interesting. Pushing the book to the side, the Moon put his elbows on the table and leaned forward.

I think someone tried to kill a Moon once, and they succeeded. Droplets of sweat had appeared on Dallions forehead. But it wasnt you, they killed the eighth Moon instead.

The smile disappeared from the Moons face.

I think thats why the Star is so interested in the sword world. I think he wants to kill another Moon.

And I think you need some rest.

Once again, everything went black.

Chapter 287: Second Battle

Back on Earth, waking up was considered a mixed bag. Some people enjoyed it, others dreaded it. To the awakened, waking up was more a blessing than not, allowing them to start their long day of realm battlers and item repair. For those from both worlds, waking up was complicated, especially when there were two awakenings in immediate succession.

Opening his eyes, Dallion was no longer in the university library. The cool fresh air told him that he was in the open, the glowing green moon above indicated that he was still in the realm of the sword. That was sort of goodat least it meant he wasnt ejected out into the real world.

Hey, a soft voice said. Euryales face emerged above Dallion. Normally hed be able to say what she was thinking, but his head hurt too much for him to focus on using music skills. How are you?

Dallion tried to sit up, but his head felt as heavy as lead.

Easy. Euryale gently pushed him back down. Wait a bit longer.

What happened? Dallion closed his eyes. The pain became far more tolerable.

You walked right into the ground, the gorgon replied. The image made Dallion chuckle mentally. From what I was told, one moment you were talking next to March, the next, you were a plank on the ground.

The plains. Did we cross them?

A few hours ago. You scared me, Euryale added in a whisper. No ones reacted like this to a pain field before. Usually its the oppositepeople cant get away soon enough.

I felt something different Mentioning anything about the voice or the following dream was a bad idea. Not that Dallion couldnt trust Eury, rather he couldnt trust everyone else listening in; and since everyone was a mid-level awakened, they were listening in. I felt weight.

Thats rare. Ive only seen that in one place in the wilderness, the gorgon said. Maybe Ive just become used to it by now. The important thing is that youre okay.

Never had something right sounded so wrong. While thankful that he was alright, Dallion couldnt help but feel responsible. Not so much that he had delayed the expeditionnewbies were bound to make mistakeshe felt guilty about not having done anything to help the inhabitants of the destroyed towns.

Dallion knew that perfectly well, but it didnt make him feel any better.

Whats the matter? Euryale asked.

Still a bit dizzy, Dallion lied. Are we far from the temple?

Not much. About a quarter of an hour away.

Forcing himself to sit up, Dallion looked around. There was a campfire burning nearby, but no people.

Wheres everyone?

At camp. March is expecting a minion attack, so she had me carry you further away. Its safer this way. The minions here are worse than before, and youll be needed for support, so.

Minotaurs?

Blade-wolves. Dallion hadnt seen such creatures before, but he had a good enough imagination to suspect they were every bit as dangerous as they sounded. Only heard of them before.

Dear boy, how about this: if I know something as obvious, Ill tell you immediately. Does that sound alright?

Are they rare? Dallion ignored the echo.

Theyre non-existent in this province. There used to be a lot of them, but they were hunted out of existence for their skills and fangs decades ago. Back in the day, hunters used to make a living by hunting them alone. Now we only get to hear stories.

Can you give me a description?

The gorgon looked at Dallion for a long while, then shook her head.

Its a large wolf with massive jaws covered in thin blades.

This, Dallion didnt expect. The mental image was terrifying.

I thought the fangs would be Never mind.

The fangs are naturally sharp, and also the only part of the blade-wolf that can be taken into a realm. You can guess how much thats worth.

Dallion definitely could imagine. A pity that the process only worked one way or did it? A thought sparked in his mind.

Eury, can you collect special materials in this realm? he asked.

So you can take them outside? The gorgon frowned, the snakes moving about. Itll be fun if one could. All these rare materials here just going to waste, eh? There was a hint of disapproval in her voice.

Of course, it would be like that, otherwise people would have unlimited resources. Minions appeared each time an awakened entered the realm, so someone skilled enough to chip off a fang before killing a creature could easily retrieve it. Combined with the sky silver that was clearly abundant as well, one could become very rich very fast.

I dont want to take anything out, I want to use them to make something.

This piqued Eurys interest.

Even if you make something, itll remain here. She got an idea where Dallion was going.

Yes, but Ill still be able to use it.

The gathering part is easy. I can even get a few fangs if youd like. Forging, not so much. You cant use any of the tools unless you link, and linking isnt a good idea. Youll have to find a forge here or make one yourself.

Make a forge. Dallion stood up. He was still a bit wobbly, but that didnt matter. Lets get back to camp.

The party was already preparing to head for the temple by the time Dallion and Eury got there. From what was visible there had already been some fighting had taken placeonly a few of the people remained at a hundred percent health.

Since there was no danger for anyone, it was better to get more people at full health faster. The firebird appeared and instantly swooped to its nearest target. Seeing it, several people waved at Dallion, acknowledging his help. Vend wasnt among them.

He should be resting, the elite said as he approached. We wont be taking the temple until morning.

Thats not what March told me, Eury countered. Maybe you should check.

I dont need to check what I was told five minutes ago.

Im fine, Dallion said, adding some calm in his words. The use of music skills caused him to have a slight headache, but that was a price he was willing to accept. I just wasnt used to the"

You should be resting, Vend interrupted. For a moment Dallion managed to see a flash of instances. It only happened for a moment, but it was enough for him to wonder what other things his teacher had said to him.

I know. I just wanted to get my mind off things, Dallion was quick to say. This helps me.

Vend gave him a suspicious look, but in the end he didnt protest. Having the closest thing to a healer was too much of a benefit to be ignored.

Everyone spent the next half hour patiently waiting for Lux to heal all the wounded. When every last persons health was restored, March gave the order to move out.

Why dont we wait till morning? Dallion whispered to Eury. Wont we have an advantage, then?

I guess not. March has been through this before, so she knows what shes doing.

Thats nice, but maybe she should tell us as well?

Dallion thought.

Why not?

Because you'll be facing a dryad.

Dallion felt like biting his tongue. He had seen at the temple that the world was primarily filled with dryads. It was a logical step to think that its guardians were such as well, although that did raise some questions. Chiefly, were they the ones who had killed the Eighth Moon?

Thanks.

It also means you shouldn't rely too much on me. I'll be able to do what I usually do, but I might be a bit slower this time. At least till mid-morning.

I'll keep it in mind.

In the distance, the third temple became visible. It was nearly identical to the one the party had just been to. The only difference was that the road leading to it seemed much better kept, also, there was a large stone wall surrounding it. At first, Dallion thought that the wall was built to protect the temple from attack, but after getting a better look at the way it was constructed, he could only come to one conclusion it was made to keep whatever was in the temple inside.

Dal, March said. Come beside me.

Giving Eury a glance, Dallion did as he was told.

You'll remain on the wall for this one. I want you to focus your healing on me. You only shift to someone else if they're close to death.

Okay Dallion felt a bit uneasy. Will you be tackling the guardian alone?

Hopefully not, but depends on how many wolves it sucks on us.

You think the guardian will go easy on you?

No, it all depends how many of its wolves are left. The last expedition there were no minotaurs, so we could tell exactly how many we killed. This time we faced very few. Hopefully, the minotaurs did some damage.

How many usually?"

COMBAT INITIATED

Suddenly rows of blade-wolves appeared, leaping down from the sky like deadly raindrops. They looked nothing what Dallion imagined they would. Wolf was a very generous description one could give only if drunk while squinting. While having the general body shape of the animal, these creatures were bald and elongated, their entire bodies covered in thin razor-like blades of bone. As they growled Dallion caught a glimpse of their teeth; they didn't appear anything special, but knowing they were a special material was enough for him to acknowledge their value. Even so, the thought that Eury would kick a few fangs off just for him made Dallion feel slightly sick.

The crossbow carriers quickly shot at the descending creatures with such ferocity that the sky appeared to explode. Red rectangles were everywhere, though sadly only stacked in twos and threes.

Follow me, March said, then instantly drew her sword in a single arc slash.

Does everyone know about this attack?

Dallion thought as the line of destruction propelled forward, cutting through clouds of dust and razor-wolves alike.

Now. March rushed forward at a speed Dallion could barely see.

Knowing what to do, the firebird propelled him after the captain, matching her speed. In the blink of the eye March had reached the temple wall, proceeding to slice an entrance as she continued on. Raising the shield in front of his face, Dallion followed closely behind. A few feet beyond the wall, though, he suddenly stopped.

No sooner had he said so, when the entire patch of ground within the wall cracked up like a shattered mirror. Dirt erupted revealing the second guardian of the world.

WORLD GUARDIAN - OREH

Species: SHIELDED DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Stats: 100% HP

Skills:

- Attack
- Guard
- Acrobatics
- Entangle
- Full Shield

Weak Spots: joints

Chapter 288: Expedition Temps

The second guardian was always more difficult than the first. According to Nil, this had to do with the realms destiny. Apparently, the closer a guardian was to that, the more skills the guardian had, and in the case of banished races the more of their abilities they were allowed to use. Dallion still struggled with the overall logic, but even if it weren't for the skills, he could see why the later guardians were always stronger: they had a much better idea of the invaders capabilities and avoided making previous mistakes. That was likely why March wanted to get this done in as few expeditions as possible the greater the number of attempts, the more prepared the guardians became.

The shielded dryad didn't bother wasting minions to probe the party, instead it had used them to create a perimeter, while it took on March one on one; and unlike before, the captain's attacks weren't as lethal.

Another cluster of roots shot out from the ground aimed at March. With a series of consecutive slashes, the woman chopped up the roots, then circled around using her guard skills. Her speed was so great that Dallion could only follow the markers that appeared after her actions.

This was the first time Dallion had seen her rely on skill bonuses. Even while jumping in the air, she followed a pattern, building up her advantage, until suddenly she disappeared, only to emerge a few feet from the guardian. The attack was so fast that Dallion couldn't even see it. Unfortunately, the dryad proved to be faster, cocooning itself in a sphere of wood.

If people knew what you're capable of, they'd be rushing to buy dryad gear.

All of the imprisoned races have skills, and people are rushing to buy high level gear.

Attempting to pierce the guardians shield with a multi-attack, March then leapt back to a safe distance. Meanwhile, the battle between the pack of wolves and the rest of the party continued. The corridor that March had formed quickly was filled by blade-wolves, preventing anyone from following. Even Euryale was still unable to fight her way through.

Given the difference in skills, the guardian minions were certain to lose, even with their number advantage. That was not their purpose, though. Their real goal was to keep March and Dallion isolated and also take down as many party members as they could.

Following the captain's instructions, Dallion kept an eye on the party's health, as much as he could from this distance. He was only supposed to switch Lux's priorities if someone's health condition was critical. So far, despite the battle going on for several minutes, it was looking more like a slow grind on the part of both sides.

You've improved since last time, the dryad said, cracking its cocoon shield open. By now Dallion was already aware that March couldn't understand it. The guardian probably knew it as well, but it kept talking. But so have I.

The dryad leapt back, then up in the air, spinning as it did. Roots and vines shot out of its hands and feet, flying in all directions, but that wasn't all; wooden bucklers seemed to be attached to them as well.

Look out! Dallion shouted.

His warning had little effect both March and the dryad moved faster than his lips could. By the time he had finished, several of the shields had extended in an attempt to imprison the woman within them. Thankfully, the attempt had failed. Instead, March had pierced the dryad's arm, inflicting a moderate wound the first that had been dealt in the battle so far. In contrast, March had suffered several minor hits, all taken care of by Lux.

At present, yes, but it's a good learning experience for when you attempt your next level up.

Another clash followed. The guardian had summoned a pair of wooden sickles, using them to deflect March's multi-attack. Seeing that she wouldn't achieve anything this way, the captain unsummoned her sword, calling for two bladebows instead.

Dallion blinked. He had always found this type of weapon uniquely fascinating, but this paled in comparison to the surprise of seeing that the make was identical to the weapons Gloria had. While it was possible that both March and Aspian had bought them from someone in Nerosalthe general, potentially there was the option that they were imperial military issue. The latter begged the question was Aspian part of the military at some point?

The exchange of blows continued with each opponent attacking and deflecting simultaneously. For over half a minute, no one could make any progress. Both had the speed and skill to stop any attack, yet neither had enough to pierce through the other's defense. Suddenly, there was a loud bang. The dryad's left arm was torn off in a small explosion, along with a stack of red rectangles.

Before Dallion could even get a glimpse of them, the rectangles vanished, replaced by the standard blue one.

OREH has been defeated!

Continue on to fulfill the AURA SWORDS destiny.

And just like that, the guardian and all its minions were gone. A faint light covered the temple roof, marking the official end of the battle. There should have been rejoicing, cheers, instead the relevant emotion that Dallion was able to see within March was of bitter disappointment.

With a chirp, the firebird poof off of March and to Euryale who was still quite a distance away. Strictly speaking, there were several other party members that had suffered less damage than her, but the familiar knew its owner too well to make another choice.

That was quite the battle, Dallion said, rushing towards March. So thats how you use a dartbow?

The moment he asked, the captain unsummoned her weapons.

Get Vend to set up camp inside the temple, she said in a cold voice. Tell him to hurry. It might rain.

Then, without any further explanations, March walked away. Dallion had seen this type of response enough on Earth to know that something hadnt gone according to plan.

Is that a bad thing? She still won and there were no losses among the party.

This reminded Dallion of his trial against the general. Back at the time, he thought that it was nothing more than a way to teach him haggling. In fact, it was much more; the skills were aimed to teach him not to be reckless with the information he showed in battle. In each battle he was to bid with his skills. The ones he used he couldnt use in future because they were no longer a surprise. In the fight just now, March had resorted to using an ace. At the moment, it didnt mean a huge deal, she likely had a lot of other secret moves up her sleeve, but this was only the beginning. Two temples were cleared, eight remained, six of which were completely unknown. Not to mention that it was going to take at least five more explorations for the party to reach the end. That meant the party would have to face roughly thirty more guardians in total.

That was the reason the expedition was taking so long. All this time, March had been systematically removing rust, decay, and cracks while also learning the guardians capabilities. Thinking about it, that was also the reason Eury was invited. As an experienced scout, she knew what her main goal wasnot so much to explore the area, but to learn as many of the abilities of the locals so that the rest of the party was prepared. The reason she used her skills freely was because this would likely be her only expedition. It didnt matter how much the guardians learned about her, since March wasnt going to use her moving forward.

It takes a lot of planning and preparation to clear a large sphere item. Months, sometimes years. If it were any easier, no one would hire guilds to do it, and we certainly wouldn't have gotten our hands on a world item. There's even a distinct possibility that we might never fulfil the sword's destiny. Don't worry, though, the guild has plenty of high-level sphere items. The one you've already seen still needs clearing. We're at level seventeen of twenty, so it's very likely you'll see that destiny fulfilled.

The echo kept on talking, but Dallion's mind was elsewhere. He felt a sudden void inside, draining all the joy. The realization that he was only invited to act as a changeable filter hurt a lot. That was the reason they had pushed him so hard to prepare and develop skills. Even before he had obtained the firebird as a familiar, March had seen his potential and wanted him for the expedition. That was the entire reason for the new Icepicker selection trials—a test to determine and prepare temps so that the item could be fully fulfilled.

That's why you have a problem with March, isn't it? You don't approve of the way she uses people.

There's that, though not only. The way she does things tends to be focused more on getting results, which isn't to say she doesn't value people. She just sees them more as

Tools?

I was about to say soldiers. You must remember that's a notion drilled into the members of the imperial army during decades of training. Everyone is just a cog in a large machine. Good commanders are those who can make best use of those cogs. Also, as much as I dislike saying this, you have to look at the bigger picture. True, you won't be able to be involved with this expedition for long, but it's not like you'll be kicked out from March's team. Take Ezra, for example. He's only just returned here after spending years on other expeditions.

That was true. There would be other expeditions in other items. Dallion was going to see lots of interesting things and face new enemies. Still, it wasn't going to be the same. The guild only had one world item.

Chapter 289: Star Fears

Exploring the temple was a good way to get Dallion's mind off things. Sadly, the success was only partial. Each unexpected element that was found in the tunnels and isolated chambers only reminded him that maybe this was the last time he'd see them. The only hope was as Nil had theorized that Dallion might be invited for the final run in a few months time. The thought only further fueled his regret.

What's wrong? Eury asked.

Just a bit tired. The plains and then the fight it took a lot out of me.

Hmm the gorgon replied. If her face eyes were open, she probably would have been frowning now. Even without music skills, her perception was high enough to tell that Dallion was lying.

I learned that I might only last for a few expeditions, Dallion admitted.

Who told you that?

Does it matter? When I was invited, I thought that I'll be here until the item's destiny was fulfilled. Now I learn that I'm here for just a few rounds.

And that's a bad thing?

There was genuine surprise in Euryale's voice. That was the usual practice in the world. There was no indication that it would be any different. Even with Sphere items, it wasn't always guaranteed that the awakened team that took the item would be the one to clear it. Dallion himself had to finish a lot of started items. It was the result that mattered. No one in the guild, or outside of it, had a list of the items they fulfilled. And yet, he had come with that assumption.

I don't know, Dallion said. I just thought I want to see what's in the end of the world. Don't you?

I'm a hunter. Eury shrugged. I get to do missions that bring money and that's it. There was a time I kept searching for a way to get back to my world, but that's gone. There's no point.

Interestingly enough, that was something that Dallion hadn't considered. Other than a few instances early on, he hadn't seriously considered going back. Even finding others that came from Earth was no longer a priority. There were too many things he wanted to do in this world possibly too many for him to handle before even considering returning.

Does it really matter that much? The gorgon placed her hand on Dallion's shoulder. I can talk to March about it. Maybe she'll

If that's the way you want it, but really, I can ask. At worst, she can say no.

The gorgons optimistic attitude made Dallion smile. That was one of the things he liked about her, she was always direct and not afraid to go after what she wanted. After all, she had gone after him pretty much the moment she saw him.

Anyway, lets get back to this before March shouts that we need to get moving again. Dallion turned towards the carving on the wall. This one was quite similar to the past in the sense that it had eight Moons, but there was something different about it.

If this were a game, the carving would tell the next part of the story of some event. Alas, that was nowhere near the case. The pictures focused mostly on dryads and them praising the Moons. However, there was one thing of particular interest: a size comparison of the eight Moons. According to it, the blue Moon was by far the largest. With the exception of the Red Moon, all the rest were half its size. As for the eighth Moon, it was even smaller, half the size of an average Moon. The Green Moon, interestingly enough, appeared to be the third largest.

Blue, Red, and Green, Dallion said out loud.

Mostly Blue and Red, Eury laughed. Never thought that was the case looking up.

Dallion had noticed that as well. If this was the actual size of the Moons, it means that some liked to be closer to the world than others. Maybe that had to do with their influence over the world?

Know anything about there being a war between the Moons? Dallion asked casually. The moment he did, he noticed a streak of fear emerge within the gorgon.

Never ask that in the open, she whispered. The Order doesnt like such talk.

What are they going to do? Dallions rebel nature ticked in. Kill me?

They dont have to. They have the power to seal your abilities, cap your level, or even erase your name.

Dallions confidence suddenly vanished. Those were some pretty serious powers. So far, he had always thought of the Order as a large and mostly annoying organization that liked to spread their beliefs and make a lot of money by letting people level up at their shrines. Back during his time in Dherma village, the monks of the Order were always benevolent, passing by every now and again. Sometimes they would tell stories, sometimes they would leave a thing or two behind. Dallions own aunt had urged his family to put Dallion in the monastery at the time. As it turned out, that had been the only way to escape the former village chiefs rule, and the limiting echoes that he placed within the minds of people. However, that didnt guarantee the Order was good.

Do you think they might know? Dallion whispered.

Im certain, but its not something theyd tell anyone outside of the Order. Several clusters of the gorgons snakes moved about. Keep this to yourself for now.

Dallion nodded.

Shield, did the Order exist back in your day?

Probably not.

Using the established method, Dallion made a mold of the carving, then unsummoned it back to Gen to take care of the rest. According to his words, the echo had done a pretty good job. At some point Dallion was going to check.

The exploration done, Eury and Dallion returned to the main hall of the temple, only to be grumbled at by Vend. This was starting to become somewhat annoying, especially since the elite didn't seem to act like this on other occasions, possibly with the exception of his interactions with Estezol.

Dallion was told, as usual, to get some rest to be in form for the next part of the expedition, while Eury was urged to see March on some unspecified matter. There was a slight exchange of words, but ultimately the gorgon replied; she was nothing but a hire after all. As for Dallion, he went to sleep, hoping for another interaction with the Green Moon. Sadly, this time, there was no such thing. When Dallion woke up, he was given his backpack, now filled with new food rations courtesy of the recent hunts, and told to keep up. The expedition went on.

With forests, hills, and plains behind them, it was now time to head for the mountains. From what Dallion had learned, this was the great mountain that divided the world. During the first expeditions, the entire area was filled with packs of cracks, requiring that March and her party spend months dealing with them, until the last trace was destroyed. From a world point of view, this was good; it improved the condition of the sword itself, while making travel far easier. However, Agnii remained of the opinion that it had been a mistake. As far as artifacts were concerned, she was vehemently opposed to messing up realm ecosystems, believing that it would create more complications in the long run. The minotaur tribes appeared to be proof of that.

On the way to the mountains, there were several instances during which the party came across small minotaur groups. Thanks to the prisoners March had released, all of them knew better than to tackle the expedition party. What was more, they were even willing to trade and exchange information.

Apparently, the guardian beyond the mountain had stopped releasing minions in the last few years, making it possible for the tribes to travel from the great sea further tipwards. The reason for the change remained unknown, though it was believed to be the result of the cracklings vanishing from the area. Personally, Dallion expected there to be more to that. From everything he had seen, guardians didn't just stop guarding, even when the odds were clearly against them. His greatest fear was that the Star might have had something to do with that.

That is a question only you could answer, dear boy. Personally, I think that any danger, no matter how unlikely to happen, should be shared, especially with the expedition leader. Given your recent experience in the plains, though, I fear that might cause the warning to be further ignored.

That sounded stupid, but Dallion feared it to be the case as well. One thing about people never changed regardless of world; the information remained only as good as the messenger that brought it.

What if it's too late by then?

Well, all you have to do is make sure you have that conversation before the point of no return.

Frankly, it doesnt matter. I can tell you anything you want and it still wont make a difference. You seem to think that just because the person youre talking to is an echo or guardian, they are more truthful. Thats never the case. I hope to have proved my sincerity, but its never good policy to take anything for granted. And to a large degree you believe me, otherwise youd have linked every cup, dish, and knife to your realm already. Youd be surprised at the amount of people that do, some for sentimental reasons.

So, youre saying that I must follow my gut?

The closer the party got to the foot of the mountain, the more Dallion felt the weight of his lack of decision. It wasnt that he was worried what March might thinkhe had already dealt with that flaw of his several levels back. Rather, he wasnt sure which course of action would bring the best result. It didnt help that the area was filled with animals, making the captain focus on hunting and food gathering. Finally, when the party reached the mountain itself, Dallion decided he couldnt delay any longer.

Why arent there any settlements here? Dallion asked, choosing to take the roundabout approach. Id thought theres be mining villages or something.

Other side of the mountain, March replied. The guardian must have preferred it this way.

The guardian, Dallion repeated. This was perfect. Why do you think he stopped protecting the area lately?

Stopped? March looked over her shoulder, somewhat surprised by the question.

I mean, from what you said the minotaurs"

I know what they said. The captain didnt let him finish. And that goes only as far as they were concerned. Ive had to fight the guardian three times. The first time I lost. If it thought something was a threat, it would have acted appropriately.

An unexpected sliver of emotion appeared in March. In general, this was quite rare.

The guardian doesnt consider them a threat, so it lets them pass. The moment they start causing problems, things will change.

The reaction was unexpected, making Dallion doubt his Star theory. Maybe there was no need for him to get involved in this? It was easy to take that as an excuse and end the conversation here. Dallion, however, didnt.

I think the Star might be involved, he whispered. This caused March to stop in place, then slowly turn around, inviting him to continue. Or a chainling. I know I dont have the experience of most of the party, but all the times Ive seen guardians behave differently was because the Star was involved in one way or another.

Are you suggesting that the guardian might have been destroyed?

Im not sure, Dallion admitted. But do you know another reason for the change? The Stars already messed with two guild artifacts so far, why cant it do the same with this one?

There was a brief moment of silence.

Lets keep going. March turned around. If theres Star spawn waiting for us in the next temple, I dont want to keep it waiting.

Chapter 290: Echo Practice

Slowly, the party climbed up the side of the mountain, heading towards the third temple. Animal life was abundant despite the decreasing amount of vegetation. It was no mystery that the entire area was under the guardians protection, and had been for a long time. There were no remains visible, not even a paved road. It was almost as if the guardian had turned his part of the world into a nature reserve.

There were several mountain paths leading up, but March had ordered they be ignored. Instead, the party climbed directly up along steep cliffs if needed. A while back, Dallion would have found the task impossible. His newly obtained athletic skills, however, had made the experience not only easy, but enjoyable. Markers indicated all hand and footholds along the way, and splitting ensured there would be no accidents. The truly impressive part, though, was that every member of the party was at least as capable, moving along like ants on a wall.

Euryale, once again, was not present. March had sent her to scout on and wait for the rest at the temple itself. The logic escaped Dallion, but after his previous conversation with March, he preferred to keep a lower profile. It didnt help that he couldnt use Lux to fly. Even without reminding, he knew that he had to keep as many of his abilities secret.

A yawny meow suggested that the crackling wasnt too upset.

Thanks for ruining the mood, Nil.

I wasnt aware that you were doing anything intellectually taxing. Also, to provide a word of warning.

That sounded ominous. It wasnt often that the echo provided warnings, so when he did, Dallion made a point to listen.

Its pretty certain that March will defeat the next guardian. Shes done so in the past, so thats a given. Possibly youll lose two or three people in the process, but thats not something to be worried about. The issue is what follows.

One doesnt need to have taken part to know what March is up to. We have guild meetings on the matter.

Suddenly, all this sounded much more corporate.

Isnt that a good thing?

There are mixed opinions on the matter. The point is that so far, youve been avoided since you arent considered much of a fighter. The guardians are aware of your level, so theyve been treating you like a packrat. When they realize youre the party healer, things will change. At that point, youll become the primary target.

That hardly came as a surprise. Dallion had spent far too much time playing MMOs back on Earth to not be aware of that fact. Depending on the circumstances, healers were the first targets to go for, which was the reason why the tanks formed a shield around them, providing protection.

This was a factor he hadnt considered. In a world based on strength, awakened with the ability to heal was considered strong by default. Even the cleric Dallion had seen who, despite having the magic attribute, didnt have any magic skills was way stronger than Dallion was now. A healing mage was, at the very least, as strong as March. In contrast, Dallion was the weakest link. The moment the guardians realized that things were quickly going to change, and there was little the expedition party could do about it; they werent used to having healers, let alone protect them.

Always glad to offer advice, dear boy. Just make sure you stay safe for as long as possible.

The climbing continued mercilessly. After roughly seven hours, Agnii used her skill to create a small cave on the face of the cliff so the party could eat and rest a bit. Dallion watched with fascination as she molded the rock face to her liking. There was a reason she was the guilds crafter, and it showed. According to Nil, that was an alternative use of the carving ability, though if that were the case, it definitely wasnt one Dallion was familiar with. When he asked Agnii about it, the woman just smiled and told him that in time he'll learn more about it.

As a campfire was made, Dallion began to appreciate the value of the wood in his backpack. The temperatures had dropped sharply the further up the party went, making the need for warmth even more essential. Expeditions, as it probably was obvious, were not so much about individual or even group strength. Battles, while important, were secondary. Planning and preparation were the key, as well as resource management.

We go on until sunset, March said as people gathered round the small fire. After that well rest till morning. The goal is to reach the first peak in a day.

Is that where the temple is? Dallion whispered to Vend.

The elite just made a sign for Dallion to remain silent.

If all goes well, Eury will be waiting for us there with info on what follows, March continued. It should be calmer than last time, though with the recent changes, nothing is guaranteed. Be on your guard. She gave Dallion a glance. Dal will remain with the main group during the guardian battle. Ill handle that alone.

Dallion felt the inner need to say something on the matter, but Vend placed his hand on Dallions shoulder, suggesting it wasnt a good idea.

Agnii will be in the rear. Protect her at all costs.

That said, the captain went to the cave opening, then continued her climb to the top. Any person would have thought that to be quite the peculiar behavior, but for those who knew her this was something quite common. Within moments, the silence was broken by the usual gossip and trivial discussions.

She never removes it, Vend said.

Huh? Dallion blinked.

She never removes her armor in a realm, even when swimming. Dont ask me why, its just something she does.

Okay, Dallion said, uncertain where this was going.

Rumor is she had a nasty experience in the wilderness back when she was in the army. From then shes always with her armor.

Why are you telling me this?

Because I thought you should know. Also, because all of us have our secrets.

Vend took a piece of dried meat and offered it to Dallion. Normally Dallion would refuse, but this time, he took it without question. The meat was far too chewy, although the flavor was rich.

Have you been practicing your split breaking? the elite asked.

No, not much. Theres never enough time.

Make time. Youll need the skill sooner than you think. The more you delay, the greater the chance that youre thrown out of the realm mid expedition. I cant protect you here, and neither can anyone else. He looked at the nearby fire. Neither March, nor Eury.

I know. Ill get to it tonight when we rest.

Vend nodded.

No ones crossed the sea so far, he went on. No ones even tried. We dont know what will happen there or how the water will affect us. Are you fine with that?

I can swim, if thats what you mean.

Its not that. Its possible that theres screaming metal floating in the sea. Will you be okay with that?

The experience was still fresh in Dallions mind. A few grains of pain emerged within him, quickly dissolving into nothingness again.

Ill be fine, Dallion put on a brave face. And Ill be ready with the breaking when I need to be.

Good. Now eat.

The meal felt more like a snack. Once over, the party gathered their things and returned to scaling the mountain. Now that his load was lighter, and Dallion had eaten a bit, it seemed easier than before. In a few hours, though, he changed his mind.

By the time the party entered their next cave, Dallion felt utterly exhausted. The promise he had made of training his split breaking seemed unachievable. The only thing he could think of was collapsing on the hard floor and getting some sleep. It was only hours later that he was woken up by the notion of hunger.

Chirp? Lux asked. The firebird had made sure to wrap Dallion with its flames during its owners nap.

Thanks, Lux, Dallion muttered, stretching. He didnt feel fully refreshed, but at least it was much better than before the nap. Anything interesting happen while I was asleep? He looked around.

Almost everyone in the cave was sleeping. Only three people remained awake, acting as guards. Seeing Dallion, one of them waved, though didnt invite him over.

Dallion stood up. This was the perfect time for him to get some training done. The notion of creating an echo of himself in public felt embarrassing to the point that it was almost painful. And that was precisely why Dallion decided to get on with it.

Another Dallion emerged from the first, ending up standing a foot away, facing him. Immediately Dallion looked around, fearing negative reactions. The few people who were awake didnt even pay attention.

Itll be fine, his echo smiled. Ill further away from the fire if thatll make you feel better.

Thanks, Dallion muttered.

Nils right, though, the echo walked towards the cave entrance. You need to chill out more. Spend some more time with us, maybe even drag Gen out in the open to have a laugh and"

COMBAT INITIATED

No sooner had the red rectangle appeared than a root shot through, piercing the echo through the chest. Dallion watched in disbelief as the other him, poofed out of existence, victim to an attack. Time seemed to freeze as his mind struggled to accept it.

Fighting was common in the realms, it was actually expected, but this was the first time that Dallion had witnessed a sneak attack targeting him. While he hadn't suffered a wound, the notion made him feel particularly vulnerable.

Guardian attack! someone shouted in the cave.

Next, Dallion felt someone grab him by the arm and pull him back as the trio of party guards formed a row of shields in front of him. Other members also jumped up, moving faster than Dallion had seen them do so far.

Bolts split the air, targeting the invading root. Before they could hit it, though, it had pulled back, disappearing outside.

Whats the damage? Vend asked, appearing next to Dallion all of a sudden.

Im fine, Dallion managed to reply, his heart beating like the wings of a hummingbird. They just got my echo.

Instances of people flashed for a moment, as several of them checked what was the state of things outside.

Nothing, one of them said. Its gone.

What does that mean? Dallion asked. Are we up for an attack?

No, Vent sighed. This wasn't an attack. You were the one being targeted. And now the guardians know what your true strength really is.