

Leveling up 301

Chapter 301: Rest and Recovery

Returning to normal was a gradual process. Unlike Dallions previous experience, a simple nap wasnt enough to get him fully functional. The sensation was rather like recovering from a coldit required a lot of rest, relaxation, and liquids. The staff of the inn took turns checking in on him. For the most part, it was Veil and Jiroh, though. Aspan was needed in the kitchen full time and Gloria spent the afternoons doing theatre training. Apparently, she had reached the level at which she had been invited to join the opening act of a day performance. This was undoubtedly a big thing for her, even if it was clear it wouldnt last. In less than a week, the countess would arrive, marking the start of the festival. A few weeks after that, Gloria and her brother were to return to Dherma.

The first two days Dallion spent most of his time in bed. During the third, he was feeling well enough to walk about and even return to playing music during lunch and dinner hours in the inn, very much to Hannahs satisfaction.

The thought of leveling up or having a long talk with Aspan regarding the sword world crossed Dallions mind, but he reconsidered once every guardian and echo in his realm disapproved of the idea. All in all, the recovery went quite well, although he would have preferred if Euryale had visited. From what Dallion learned from Nil, both Eury and March had been called to the overseer regarding an unknown matter, after which they had been scarce. If Dallion was to venture a guess, it was probably related to awakened death cases as well as the ongoing copyette hunt. After all, Dallion hadnt shared the secret with anyone, which means that as far as the city was concerned, there still was a dangerous copyette general on the loose.

On a slightly ominous note, the tournament bureaucrats had gotten wind of Dallions condition pretty fast and went through the trouble to send a messenger the very next day, wishing him the best and informing him not to worry about a thing. Faced with the prospect of Dallion losing his first match by default, a few rules had been bent and his match had been rescheduled to a few days later; being the favorite of the free tournament had its advantages. The trick was not to rely on that. There were creatures and people far more skilled and experienced than him, and if Dallion were to earn his place at the arena, he couldnt rest on his laurels.

On the fourth day after the expedition, Dallion felt back to normal. The fatigue had gone completely, and he was absolutely certain that he was in the real world. Even so, several peopleamong which Hannah and Estezolthought it wiser if he spent the day walking about the city, rather than getting back to his usual chores. Given that Dallion had been slacking on his copyette search lately, Dallion decided to hold off any awakening activity for a day.

The first place Dallion went after leaving the inn was to Eurys workshop. It was barely a surprise to find it locked and empty again. This time there was no note left inside, only piles of weapons and gear waiting to be repaired and modified in time for the festival. Leaving a note that he missed Eury, Dallion then left, locking the place behind him.

Next on the list were two of the three most crowded areas of the city: Performers Plaza, and the Tournament Arena. The plaza had changed considerably since the last time Dallion had been here. The crowds were still present, abundant on the ground as well as on the lines above, but there was a clear change in activities. Gone were the standard music and acrobat wannabes, now replaced

entirely by professionals. As far as Dallion could tell, all performers were upper tier double digits, at least. Seers were also present in large numbers, doing feats that would put Gloria to shame.

That means Gloria must be here somewhere.

As much as he looked, though, Dallion was unable to see the blonde. What he did see, though, was that all of the top tier performers were relying heavily on combat splitting. And it wasn't just a matter of them using it not to fall; such instances were non-existent rather, they were aiming to get the greatest reaction from the crowd. Quite cutthroat, come to think of it. The entire plaza was in fact a battlefield, only it wasn't weapons that people were using, it was skills and music. It didn't take long for Dallion to catch quite a few tunes attracting attention. The skill was by no means impressive, but it did the job, making people in the vicinity look in the performers' direction.

Nil, you've already given me a hundred reasons why you dislike the festival. I think I got the general idea.

One cannot stress the fact enough.

And you're telling me to relax and have a good time

Dal? a voice said a short distance above him.

Dallion looked up to see none other than Hegel, the goth acrobat that had challenged Gloria to the equivalent of a dance off. She looked somewhat different from how Dallion remembered her. The woman's entire outfit was long and wavy, made entirely of copper thread. Just looking at her made Dallion wince, remembering how uncomfortable he had felt when wearing silver fabrics. Despite that, a heartwarming smile remained on Hegel's face, making it seem that she enjoyed performing in such conditions. Using his music skills, Dallion could sense that was true; the joy was very real but so also was the extreme pressure that accompanied it.

It's been a while. What are you doing here?

Dallion opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, he was shoved by another person in the crowd. That was one of the major problems while walking in the plaza; the moment someone stopped, they inadvertently got pushed by the people moving.

Come up. The woman waved to Dallion.

There was no point in refusing. With a single acrobatic jump, Dallion landed on the rope next to Hegel, and to the ovation of a few people, to his great surprise. Apparently, some thought this to be part of the act.

You've learned a new set of skills, Hegel said, impressed.

And so have you, by the looks of it. Congrats on passing the second gate.

Yeah, thanks. It was a bit of a risk, but I finally pulled it off.

And right on time for the festival. Is Gloria about? I'd have thought she'd be here to popularize her troop.

She's at the lord mayor's palace.

Wow. Dallion managed only to say. He didn't expect such a turn of events. That's pretty impressive.

The square, Hegel clarified. Not at the palace itself. Nobles are more impressed by the heir than any tricks any of us could do.

There was a clear jab in her words, but also a degree of sadness.

Oh? Dallion subtly pressed on, using a touch of music in his voice.

She's I mean Hegel's voice changed into a whisper. As any awakened, she was aware what affect gossip could cause, especially since it could be heard from far away. She's been struggling to keep up. She puts in the effort and has the will, but there's only so much you can achieve as a single digit.

Yeah Dallion sighed. For some reason, the Luors insisted on remaining at the current level even if they had amassed more than enough funds to pay for their exam. Dallion had long stopped asking the question, but his concerns remained. Now he saw he wasn't the only one. It's been a busy period. They have a lot on their plate right now, he lied.

Even so, they can't keep this up. Granted, the festival isn't the best time for leveling up, but Hegel sighed. Sorry, don't know why I said that.

It's okay. Dallion, in contrast, knew full well he was the cause. That was the scary effect of music; he had finally learned how to use it subtly to nudge people in the direction he wanted. Combine that with combat splitting and it could become a scary tool. Thinking about it, it would be horrifying if politicians had that power or maybe they already did? In this world, nobles were the equivalent, and their powers were the whole reason that got to such a position. So, what have you been up to? Don't tell me you're dancing in front of nobles.

In copper? Hegel laughed. Just merchant representatives. Call it the second best. It's a long-term audition. Once the festival is over, I might get invited to a troupe.

Good luck.

What about you? Did you learn to play that ring chord? My grandfather keeps asking me every week.

You should come by the shop sometime. My grandpa will be thrilled.

Im only stating a fact. Its a fact of lifethe higher your level, the more people will be attracted to you.

Thats a horrifying thought. You cant just equate people to numbers. What about character and personality and

Yeah, right. Id have noticed that.

Music skills arent the answer to everything, or do you think that shes just combat splitting to avoid falling off the rope?

Dallion didnt reply. He had seen Hegel split a number of times, although he hadnt gone through to check the instances she had ignored. Part of him felt flattered by the prospect, although another, far smaller part, felt guilty.

Sure, he replied. The moment the festivals over.

I must focus on my tournament fights right now.

Youll be in the arena fights? Hegel asked, far more impressed than Dallion would have liked her to be. Thats a big deal.

Preliminaries, Dallion quickly added. Its still not sure Ill make it to the tournament proper. Dallion added a healthy degree of disinterest in his voice as he spoke.

Ah. The enthusiasm faded slightly.

I was supposed to check on that now, but decided to pass by the plaza before that. He continued with his music skill. Catch up with you later?

Sure. Ill be here all week, Hegel replied, her interest returned to standard levels.

As much as he was relieved, Dallion also felt that he was starting to rely on his music skills too much. From what he had learned, that was never a good sign. In lifehere as well as back on Earthwhen someone relied on a single thing too much, things tended to go bad.

Ill see you soon then. Good luck with the audition.

Hegel nodded, then jumped further up, getting back to her acrobatic act. The performance was quite good, though nothing Dallion couldnt achieve and surpass with his present skills. Spending a few more moments thinking about the situation, Dallion then took out the kaleidervisto and looked about the crowd. He had to at least pretend that he was looking.

Thousands of echoes came into view as Dallion scanned through the crowd, so many that they were virtually invisible. Almost everyone had close to half a dozen echoes within their realm. Exceptions were few and far between.

Nothing out of the ordinary occurred as Dallion examined the crowd with the kaleidervisto. That was good. However, Dallions seer vision let him see something else: several familiars hiding among the echoes.

Chapter 302: The Arena

The atmosphere was very different when Dallion went to visit the festival committee. The giant line of tournament applicants was gone, as were any people that werent supposed to be there. Instead, there were dozens of people running frantically about, seeing to final details. Among the standard bureaucratsome of which Dallion had gotten to know by namethere was a large number of temps as well as, to Dallions surprise, a noble. She was little more than a childa girl of twelve at most, wearing a dress of emerald threads. However, even at that age, she was fully awakened. Not only that, but she was a double digit.

Isnt she a bit young to be responsible for all this?

Skill knows no age. And its up to the noble family to develop their children. Some take it slow, like Falkner, others rush things like theres no tomorrow. My personal advice, keep your distance. Shes a bit testy. Children tend to be that way when under pressure.

Pressure despite the girls calm voice and relaxed exterior, she was brewing with it. It was so loud that it almost blocked out the sound of any other emotion in the vicinity.

Mister Darude? someone asked. One of the bureaucrats had recognized him, and quickly rushed to check the situation. It wasnt necessary for you to come so soon. We have arranged for"

Oh, its alright. Dallion smiled, adding some joy and eagerness to his words. I just wanted to come and check out the arena. With luck, Ill be standing there soon enough.

Yes. The bureaucrat laughed politely. Thats our great hope. Of everyone in the free tournament, youre the only remaining seer. It would be heartbreaking if you dont make it to the starting round.

The only remaining? Dallion didnt like the sound of that.

Well, you see, since we werent certain of your condition some of the final slots have been filled out. Naturally, we were informed of your situation, so an exception was made.

Wow, thanks!

In itself, there was nothing strange about that. All the guilds had an interest in seeing more of their members at the arena, potentially even getting the top spot. What was unusual, though, was the effect the request had had on the committee. No common person was capable of exerting so much pressure on an entire institution that was reserved for nobles.

Oh, you are very welcome, the man quickly said, sweat covering his forehead. Things are a bit chaotic right now. Nothing like final touches a few days before the big event.

You said it. Any chance I can see the arena grounds?

A deep silence followed as the man froze in place, uncertain how to react to such a request. Dallion hadn't guessed wrong that someone important had asked for the changes. The committee, of course, didn't know to what degree Dallion was close to the noble in question. With the third gate passed, Dallion was starting to tread into noble territory, which meant that more people were starting to keep an eye on him nobles and servants alike.

No worries if you can't let me, Dallion said, adding more emotions in his favor. I know I'm just a participant.

Oh, please. The man was becoming more and more tense. You are by no means such. I just have to" I'll take him, Constanza said from across the hall.

An ordinary onlooker would have seen that as a calm, even charming exchange. However, they wouldn't have been witness to the split skirmish that had taken place. The girl had split into four instances, each of which had addressed Dallion in a different fashion: shouting, sarcasm, intimidation, and cold agreement. In turn, Dallion had countered by creating an equal number of instances, making a point to let her know he could see the splitting in all but the one he preferred. What was more, he had also used music skills during each.

Of course, my lady, the bureaucrat stepped away, only too glad to have been given an out of the entire situation.

Knowing he had won the invisible fight, Dallion decided it was better to act defeated, less he antagonize the noble unnecessarily. With a slight bow, he approached the girl.

Impressive skills, he whispered. In this world, skill was what was most valued, and admitting that was treated as the best form of flattery. I didnt have any until a year ago.

The childlike nature of the girl shone through for a moment, causing her to bite her lip. There was little doubt that her realm was filled with tutors and relatives commenting on every part of her life. However, if they were anything like Nil, more than a few of them would agree that using splitting needlessly wasnt a good decision.

Youre Dallion, the girl said.

Im flattered that you know me.

My grandma said you have pure-blond friends.

Dallion wanted to cry. He had achieved so many things, and still for the nobles he remained nothing but the guy who has pure-blond friends. Clearly, the world was telling him that he had to step up his game. Maybe doing well in the tournament was one way to achieve that.

Yes, I do. Do you want me to ask them over?

There was a moment of hesitation.

No, the girl replied. Whatever discussion had gone between her and her echoes, it was over and a course of action was determined. Ill get to meet them when the countess arrives.

Im sure you will.

The young noble went along the hall without warning, expecting Dallion to follow, which he did. People rushed about, placing decorations on the wall. For the most part, the issue was with the banners. Everyone from massive imperial nobles, to individual organizations had to be present and in the correct order. Back on Earth this would have passed as sponsors, here things werent so clear cut. Thankfully, that wasnt a matter that Dallion had to deal with.

After walking through a few halls and massive corridors, Dallion arrived to the main viewing balcony of the arena.

A cross between a stadium and an opera building, the arena was impressive, though not as large as Dallion imagined. There were still a lot of people working on the field itself, sectioning it off into segments.

Theyre constructing the battle grid, Constanza said. Each day of the preliminaries, walls between sections will be destroyed until the entire field is empty.

The way the girl behaved gave Dallion the impression that this was a major improvement. He'd thought it to be obvious, but apparently sports and festivities were something only the rich and

cultured enjoyed. Theatre and operas seemed far more common. Dallions village had neither, although once Veil and Gloria returned, it was possible that they built something similar, given Dhermas increase in status.

Interesting, Dallion said. What is the arena used for the rest of the time?

The girl stared at him, as if he hadnt wiped his nose.

The arena is only used for the festival, she said after a while. The rest of the time its kept clean and in good condition.

Ah, I see.

I am a country kid, Nil.

Of course, if any of them knew that Dallion had lived in cities, that would make anything this world offered seem like clusters of villages.

The fireworks will be held there, the girl pointed. Unsurprisingly, the people in the VIP section would get the best view. Is there anything you wish to know?

Where will the countess be? Dallion couldnt help himself.

Above us. Only she and the lord Mayor are allowed to enter there.

Precisely! Thats why I hate it. I know more than one should, so I couldnt even imagine having fun at it. Its bad enough that the guild master has threatened to add me to the guild section of the event.

I guess youll need to take one for the team.

And you? Dallion turned to the girl.

Constanza hesitated. This was a question she hadnt expected. Even so, only after a few moments, a collected certainty filled her, resonating loudly.

Im not allowed at the arena before I pass the third gate. It is the wish of my father that the first time I set foot in the arena is as part of the tournament. Until then Im only to help with preparations.

Memories of Dherma flashed in Dallions mind. The former village chief had also planned out the entire life of his entire family in similar fashion. Not only that, he had pretty much planned out the life of the village itself: no one was to venture to the cities, Gloria was to be married off to the son of a neighboring chief, all awakened were either going to be part of the Luor family or have their powers sealed. At the time Dallion had thought this to be due to Aspions character. However, what if he had learned it from somewhere? Unlike the village, the nobles here were all smiles, but they hadnt lost their powers.

So that means you wont be watching me fight. Dallion changed the topic to add a bit of joy in the conversation. He was careful, however, not to make use of his music skills.

I watch the fighting styles, the girl said, her voice ringing with pride. My instructors make echoes that copy the fight. That way I learn everything I need and I practice fighting them.

Is that possible, Nil?

Its rather useless, though it is possible. More often, people just pay to have the winner create an echo of himself. Its much more practical.

Maybe people dont want to give echoes about?

Alas, such people still exist. If you reach the quarter-finals, youll get requests as well.

Can I take a better look? Dallion took out his kaleidervisto. It was unlikely the girl knew what the artifact was, but no doubt the echoes in her realm did.

Yes, she said with a ring of curiosity. As long as you dont look at me.

Fair enough. Dallion put the device to his eye. Do you want me to let you have a look as well? he asked as he inspected the arena.

For the most part, he was interested in finding whether there were scattered echoes throughout the field. As he could see, the organizers were quite meticulous. None of the workers were awakened, and they didnt have any objects with echoes on them either.

I want to, Constanza replied.

Dallion was just about to hand her the artifact, when he caught a glimpse of something a black silhouette among the workers. Instinctively, Dallion removed the kaleidervisto, expecting an attack. There was nothing of the sort. The people were getting along with their work, working about nothing but deadlines. A second later, Dallion looked back through the artifact at the area he had seen the silhouette. Everything seemed in order.

Can I see? the girl asked.

Sure, Dallion replied, handing her the kaleidervisto.

With childlike amazement, the young noble looked about, as if she were an explorer on an adventure. Dallion could feel the joy emanating from her. Unfortunately, it had completely vanished, replaced by concern. Unless he was very much mistaken, he had managed to find another chainling in human form. Two within a city this size in such a short amount of time was alarming. To have one snoop about the arena that was going to house the countys ruler and a member of the imperial family was more than a bit alarming.

Chapter 303: Free Advice

Standing in front of the overseers house sent shivers down Dallions spine. It wasnt caused by fear or concern the reason Dallion had come here was considered important enough it was his body reacting to what Nil described as a spiritual draft.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion knocked on the door. Barely had he done so than it opened, revealing a captain of the city guard inside.

I want to see the overseer, Dallion said.

Are you sure? The surprise emanating from the man was palpable. It seemed that people rarely came to visit on their own accord.

Im sure. Theres something she needs to hear.

There were a few more moments of hesitation on the captains part, but ultimately, he moved aside.

Thanks, Dallion walked in. The inside of the house was barren as before, accompanied by an icy chill. Last time Dallions lack of perception prevented him from noticing; now it felt as if thousands of icy claws were clawing his skin in a constant attempt to claim all the warmth he had.

Do you have a blocker on?

Dallion showed his blocker ring.

You know the way, the captain said, moving back to the single seat in the room. It couldnt have been easy for him. Even if taking shifts, staying here for any amount of time was more than uncomfortable.

With a nod, Dallion went up the stairs to the overseers room. Seeing her skills in action, he knew that she was aware of his presence. Even so, he chose to knock on the door. After a few minutes of silence, he opened it and walked inside.

I didnt think Id be seeing you this soon, the overseers voice sounded the moment Dallion walked inside.

The room was dark, with a single grain of light moving about a short distance away. Looking closely, Dallion saw the light source to be a firefly in a jar placed on the table. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Dallion was able to see more of the table itself, as well as part of the silhouette of the overseer sitting by it.

Please, the woman gestured for him to join her at the table.

Dallion did so.

Is the light adequate for your perception level?

I think so.

Thats good. One of the drawbacks I have is that I dont react well to light, especially moonlight. But I expect you know that already.

That was the closest thing to a trick question Dallion had heard in his life. At this point, the best course of action was not to respond.

Im aware of your small adventure. The guilds keep me informed of anything that could be of interest. Normally I would pay more attention, but my resources are stretched thin right now. Youll have to excuse me for taking your girlfriend away for a few weeks.

My adventure? Dallion asked.

Your expedition. The overseer leaned forward. To be honest, Im glad that the world turned out to be flooded. Nasty things tend to escape from world items. The copyette youre hunting is a good example. Any news on that topic, by the way?

Straight to the point. It was inevitable that she would ask, but that was something Dallion had prepared for.

Im following leads, he said. Thats actually why Im here. I saw something when I went to check out the arena today. The temptation of splitting into instances was unbearable, and yet Dallion managed to overcome it. I saw another chainling.

No reaction followed. For several seconds Dallion kept on staring at the overseer, wondering what she would do. In his mind, he expected her to call the captain and have all available city guards secure the place of the sighting. However, she did nothing of the sort, making Dallion doubt that she had even heard him.

It was among the workers at the arena, Dallion continued. At the very same place the countess would spend most of her time after the start of the festival.

Thank you for telling me of her graces plans. I must have forgotten that. The words were thick with sarcasm. Anything else?

Isnt this enough? Dallion didnt know what else to say. Two chainlings in the city. Chances of that happening are he stopped short of saying a number.

Five, the overseer corrected. There have been five sightings, excluding the one that attacked you. And Im only talking about since then. I would say that its commendable that you came here directly after finding out, and above all that you didnt tell anyone else, but that is the extent of what you could do.

Huh?

Dont get me wrong, your progress is mildly impressive. For someone to pass the third gate so soon after awakening is an achievement, but then again, otherworlders are special in that regard. The problem is that apart from that theres nothing you could actually do.

The statement made Dallion want to stand up and shout at her, but despite his internal anger, he also knew that she was right. In a direct battle against a chainling, there was no question that he would lose. Here, in the real world, he didnt have Lux and Nox to rely on. The likely reason the chainling had ignored him was because it could risk attracting attention to itself, especially with a noble nearby.

I cant just ignore it. Dallion clenched his fist under the table.

I feared you might say that. You seem to have dealt with some of your major flaws. However, thats not enough. The thing is, you know this already. The firefly in the jar started flying in the shape of the figure eight. Thats why you came here and didnt try to take it yourself. You feel strength at your fingertips, but are aware its not yours to wield yet. However, since you came all this way, let me give you a piece of advice. Train and win.

Dallion blinked. That wasnt an answer he was expecting.

As things are now, youre too weak to win a fight, and too insignificant to ask for help. Sure, you can get Eury and possibly Jiroh to help you out, but they cant be everywhere, especially when they have matters of their own. You need to become noticed and not just like the rising star rookie. The fastest way to achieve that is to do well at the festival tournament.

If a camera crew jumped out of the shadows right now, telling Dallion hed been punked he wouldnt have been surprised in the least. He was talking about a threat that could plunge the county into

chaos, possibly the entire province, and the overseers advice was to win at a tournament? In light of the recent sighting, Dallion was even considering dropping out altogether.

I didnt know you were a fan, Dallion couldnt stop himself from saying.

Im not, but the people that matter are. The tournament is one of the highlights of the festival. The people who matter are watching. The provincial nobles, the Order, even members of the Imperial family, and the Academy. Winning there wont make you the strongest by a long shot, but for the next few weeks, itll get you noticed. Im sure you know enough about politics to tell where this is going.

Now, finally, it clicked. The winners of the tournament were the equivalent of local celebrities. The fame lasted less than a month, but during that month, everyone who was anyone would want to be seen with the arena champion. As Nil had said, there would be offers for echoes, invitations to events. Even back on Earth, the sweat of gladiator champions was considered to be a potent aphrodisiac and sold at exorbitant prices. If Dallion wanted to get reliable help, he had to play the game.

Politics, the overseer said sharply. In the end, its all about politics. None of us can escape that, although many try.

I see. Dallion stood up. Thank you for the advice. If I see anything else, do you want me to let you know?

I always appreciate visits. If you come, I wont send you away.

Thanks. That was something to have in mind. And thanks for the advice.

I know youll do your best. At the end of the day thats all we can do. Just try not to get pulled in too deep.

For the faintest of moments, Dallion felt a note of sorrow in the overseer. There was weight to it, indicating she was talking from experience. Was it that her ambition was the reason she had ended up becoming what she was? Overseers werent born, but made. However, there were no details on how exactly that happened.

With a final nod, Dallion left the room. Light embraced him the moment he opened the door, making him realize only now how cold was constantly emanating from the overseer.

Had a nice chat? the captain asked, looking up from reading a scroll.

Nice enough.

Better than what most get. You know the way out.

Yeah. Thanks.

Dallion went back to the street. Once there, he removed his blocker ring.

She told me to get noticed at the tournament.

That means her hands are tied. Probably the Lord Mayor doesnt want to give the impression he cant keep his city under control. Hes always been the type to want to save face, but I didnt think hed go that far.

Arent you cheerful today

Does that mean that all tournament participants will be weak?

I see your point.

Winning wouldnt be considered a victory. Even if Dallion got noticed to the point that he got the support he needed, the chainlings would have seen the extent of his skills. The only option was not to give them time to take advantage of that.

Id rather you take it easy another day, but yes, I think youll be fine. No attempts today, though! You might think youve fully recovered, but you havent.

Yeah, yeah

The truth was that Dallion didnt only want to level up. He had set his aims much higher. Soon enough, he was going to try and level up the ring he had found in the sword world. Only that way would he be ready to face real dangers. The last time, it was the armadil shield that had helped him in a hopeless situation. This time, he was going to find a way to take the victory on his own, and that means focusing his efforts in two areas: leveling up and forging. All he needed was to get an understanding of basic iron forging and earn his hammer. After that, he could level up on his own. Euryale had made it clear that she wasnt going to teach him anything until the end of the festival, but as the overseer has said, it was all about getting noticed. As long as Dallion did that he had some leverage.

Nil, I need to have a word with the Flameforge captain you so much hate. How do I find her?

She made me an offer a while back. Im wondering if shes inclined to help me in another matter as well.

Chapter 304: Forging Plans

Finding Fire Sky turned out to be more difficult than it seemed. Initially, Nil had refused flat out. Then, when he had seen that Dallion was serious on the matter, he had reluctantly agreed, but under the condition that Dallion wouldn't change guilds. Since Dallion had no such intention, the promise was easily made. It was at that point that the hunt began.

Initially, Dallion went to the Flameforge guildhall. There, a polite woman Estezols equivalent had explained that Fire Sky was unavailable and firmly refused providing any additional information on the subject.

It was by pure chance that Mord had stumbled on the whole thing. Dallions future rival was busy training for the tournament, so he happened to spend a lot of time at his guild which had a proper training section, rather than a series of training items in the basement.

On his part, Mord was uncertain where his captain was at this time, but since Fire Sky liked to have echoes of her subordinates at all times, he attempted to use that to let her know. Furthermore, he used his position within the guild to gain access to the emergency contact ring Fire Sky had left, to have a chat with her echo as well. The conversation was long, even if it only lasted a second in the real world. In the end, all that Mord was able to provide as assistance was the name and location of the tavern the captain was having her lunch the Squid Head.

The tavern in question was on the other side of the city and by the time Dallion reached it, she had already gone. Thankfully, since she was a regular, the service staff had heard her going for a walk near the citys orchid lake, as she usually did.

Nil had insisted and rightfully so that finding any person among a crowd of hundreds was next to impossible. Dallion, however, persisted and went there nonetheless. Only after arriving there did he see the extreme difficulty of the task at hand.

The lake, usually a calm and serene place, was filled to the brim with people to the point that city guards were needed to handle the situation. No one in their right mind would come here for a relaxing stroll, and even if they had, there were too many people to check all of them out.

Im not quitting, Nil.

Dear boy, you know my thoughts on the matter, but even putting those aside, there is no way to find her among this crush of bodies. That is assuming she is even here. Sky was always the impulsive type, changing what shes doing halfway through at a whim.

To his relief, there were no new instances in chainlings. Also, after less than a minute, he found precisely what he was looking for a large cluster of echoes among which, on further inspection, was Mord.

Sorry, this is a private section of the lake, one of the guards said as Dallion approached. Please move along.

Its fine, Fire Sky said as she continued to stare at the lake. Hes a guest.

That seemed to do the trick, for the guard quickly stepped back, silently watching as Dallion walked past.

Thanks, Dallion sat on the grass next to the captain. I wasnt sure youd have some time for me.

Thats a lie, the woman said calmly. After coming to my guild and getting Mord, use the emergency ring to ask for directions. You wouldnt have taken no for an answer. I just decided to see the degree of your dedication. So, now that youre here, what is it you want? Have you decided on my offer?

Not yet. Ive come with a different offer in mind. Now was the time to put into practice what he had learned during his leveling up. And also, a question.

Offer and a question, Fire Sky mused. Please, continue.

Id like to learn how to forge a dagger of iron, Dallion said. Enough to earn my hammer. In return Ill owe you a favor.

Will you join my guild? she asked directly.

Another favor, Dallion quickly clarified. And I also wont throw my fight during the tournament.

So, its a conditional favor. Why come to me, though? Your guild has more than enough crafters that could help you with that.

I need it to be done discreetly.

This is a dangerous game youre playing, dear boy.

And I need it done by tonight.

Learning to forge takes a bit longer than that. Even if youre a natural born talent, it would take at least a week to get a sense of things. There are vast differences between the real world and the realms. Here things arent as easy.

I know. Thats why I only need to know how to forge in the realms. I have someone to teach me in the real world.

Fire sky turned to the side. It was obvious that Dallion was planning something, and she was curious to see what.

You want to be able to forge in the realms only?

For now.

And for that youll owe me a conditional favor.

Or two. Now was the time of haggling. Dallion had no illusions that what he thought he could do, the captain could do better. Not only did she have more experience, she was in a position where she had to manage arguments of subordinates every day. The point wasn't to trick her, it was to get something that he needed while offering something he could afford.

And your question?

What is the practical value of a healing artifact?

The question took Fire Sky somewhat aback. Such items were valuable without a doubt. A handful of people in the whole of Nerosal had them. Having anything that would heal people within the realms was valuable since it massively decreased the time and effort needed to fulfil the destiny of an item. At this point, everyone knew about Dallion's healing firebird, but if he had somehow managed to obtain a healing artefact as well, that would attract a lot of attention. Better still, if he had learned of a way to create one needless to say that it was understandable why he needed discretion as far as forging was concerned.

Depends on the speed and reliability, but everything capable of increasing health is valuable. Are you considering making healing items within the realms?

No, Dallion said with a smile. Not the realms. The real world.

The woman's expression froze. Faster than the eye could see, she grabbed hold of Dallion's hand.

ITEM AWAKENING

Reality shifted into a marble dais within an endlessness of frozen flames.

The RING is level 17

You are in a large marble room.

Defeat the guardian to change the RINGs destiny.

It took several moments for Dallion to adjust to the change. It was rare for him to be forcefully brought into a realm. This was unlike most he had seen.

Flame sapphire, Fire Sky said, seeing Dallion's reaction. Generally useless, but incredibly expensive.

Dallion nodded. I can see the appeal.

They also have one extremely valuable quality they act as a blocker. That means none of my echoes will be able to listen to our conversation. Or yours.

Apparently, there were more magical items that he was aware of, and not only artifacts from a bygone age. Magic was still being constructed in the world, just not here. It seemed that the armadillo shield was right Nerosal was a backwater city.

I'll ask directly. Do you have an artifact that can heal in real life? Because if you do

To an expert. Before I say anything more, I want you to vow to the Seven Moons that you won't share anything I'm about to tell you regarding that. Of course, that's not related to my favor.

You've changed a lot since last time I saw you. The woman said, fear and awe appearing throughout her. No longer the innocent lost boy who would always get in trouble.

Id like to think that Im still the same.

If Nil was here, he would probably have made a snarky comment about Dallion maturing, although not fast enough for the echo. Maybe it had to do with the stakes suddenly rising? If Dallion had remained in his village, he would never have learned of the complexities of the world, and by all indications, they wouldnt have affected him. Or maybe he was driven here for some reason, like his grandfather before him.

I vow by the Seven Moons that I wont share the things I learn, Fire Sky said. Also, I will teach you forging myself.

Youre a forger?

All captains in the guild are. So? The item.

Its not a magical item. Rather, its an item Ive placed a healing familiar in.

Clusters of doubt appeared through the woman.

Im serious, Dallion quickly said. My firebird is within an item and though it can affect the real world.

Strictly speaking that was a lie. Dallion hadnt healed anything using Lux. It was the Nox dagger he was referring to, although he had planned on using Lux to try and get well enough to attempt a leveling up later that night.

You turned a sphere item into a home for your familiar? Fire Sky sounded impressed.

Yes, but hes subject to limitations. I want to be able to forge an item of my choosing to maximize his potential.

Creating an item for a familiar. You are aware that no such attempts have been made.

None that you know of.

Dallion, if someone has succeeded, all the crafters in the world would be aware. If anything, the top ones would be competing for the right to build familiar homes. Unlike you, nearly all familiar owners are nobles. Doing something for them doesnt only bring money, it also brings prestige.

Does that mean we have a deal? You teach me the basics and Ill use them to create a healing item at some point.

The woman considered her options. Dallion could see suspicions forming within her. She knew that wasnt his entire plan, but at the same time couldnt just ignore what he had said. Frankly, Dallion couldnt either. Once he went through the preliminary rounds, he would be fighting in the arena itself. Having a healing item would be very beneficial at that moment, and that was just the beginning. If he was to face more chainlings, a healing item was the absolute minimum he required to have a chance of victory.

We have a deal. The woman snapped her fingers. A large and intricately decorated anvil appeared in the center of the dais, along with several hammers. Lets begin.

Forging of all the skills Dallion had seen, this was the only one that seemed extremely simple, while being exceedingly difficult. Looking back, even music skills were more straightforward.

When Fire Sky shaped an item using her hammer, it was like watching someone fold a napkin or arrange a ten-piece puzzle. The woman's teaching method was completely different from that of Euryale. If anything, Dallion could see Nils' influence. There was a lot more theory, everything was divided into small steps.

The first step was to visualize the design. That was simple enough, and Fire Sky even shared a basic short sword design with Dallion so he could learn the principle.

Next was the merging phase, as it was called. During it, the design of the final product was combined with the material, creating an ingot with markers sticking from it like pins on a corkboard. Euryale had referred to this entire process as fake, since it didn't require any practical knowledge of metals or smithing. Up to a degree, the result reminded Dallion of his attempts to make something out of sky silver. The difference was that instead of hundreds of markers and indications, there were only dozens.

After that, things became complicated. As much as Dallion tried to follow the markers' instructions, he always seemed to end up getting it wrong. Either the angle of the hammer would be slightly off, or the strength would be inadequate. In a way, this was opposite to the music skill. Their timing and precision were everything. With forging, perception and strength gauging were far more important. The closest thing Dallion could compare the experience with was solving a puzzle that was composed of mini-games. While each individual hit mattered, forging allowed all mistakes to be fixed, as long as an overall plan was kept.

The first few swords Dallion attempted to make were such disasters that Fire Sky deemed it more useful for him to restart from scratch. The following ones were comical, to put it mildly. These were followed by the deformed examples of vaguely sword-shaped blades.

It was only after seventy attempts that the long-awaited rectangle appeared.

You have successfully created a SHORT SWORD made of IRON.

You are now able to summon SHORT SWORDS made of IRON at will.

Your Forging skills have increased to 2.

Chapter 305: Brute Forcing a Level

Dallion lay on the floor, eyes closed, hoping his headache would subside. That seemed to be the common element as far as non-combat skills were involved. It also proved that learning to forge was far more difficult than he had imagined. There never was any illusion it would be easy; the days spent trying to figure out how to forge sky silver had taught Dallion that much. Thankfully, after an intense session with Fire Sky, he had finally got the hang of the basics.

Three items that was what he was capable of forging at this stage: short swords, daggers, and simple bucklers. However, none of those achievements had increased the skills level. As Fire Sky had explained, the point was because he had earned his second hammer. From there on, he would have to forge actual items in the real world to improve. However, that was all part of the plan.

Want to keep going? Fire Sky asked.

No, I'm good, Dallion replied. Talking made his eyes and temples hurt. I have what I need.

Let's hope so. You still owe me two favors.

And I plan to keep my promise.

Im sure. In that case, lets get back to the real world. Theres a lot I need to do, and I can no longer use the excuse that Im trying to recruit you.

Give me just a bit. Dallion sat up, eyes still closed.

The headaches and the eye pain will continue for a few days, maybe longer. Thats what happens when you try to rush things through. If you had spent an hour per day, you wouldnt have had to go through this.

No doubt that was true. The only thing stopping Dallion from progressing on the forging front was his girlfriend. Conflicting schedules and large concerns on both sides had reduced the number of training sessions they had to one. Now, he couldnt afford to wait any longer.

Can I ask you something? Dallion said. What happened between you and Adzorg?

The woman didnt answer right away, choosing to wait a few seconds until Dallions curiosity forced him to crack an eye open.

What have you heard? she asked in turn.

Nothing. Thats why Im curious.

Maybe thats something you should ask him. All I can say is that I wasnt the only one whos been recruiting from other guilds.

There was a clear implication that only caused Dallion to have more questions. Whatever had occurred hadnt been amicable on either side. Although, it seemed that Adzord was holding the grudge longer.

Ready, Dallion said, eyes closed once more.

The pleasant silence surrounding him suddenly disappeared, replaced by the voices of hundreds. The unpleasant wave of daily smells also hit him in the nose, stronger than he remembered them being.

Feeling alright? Fire Sky asked.

Dallion opened his eyes. The dull pain in his eyes was still there, along with an unpleasant stinging. The last time Dallion had experienced that was after playing non-stop for thirty hours straight. A lot of energy drinks had been involved as well.

Yeah. Slowly Dallion stood up. His balance was slightly offa lingering effect of the recent expedition that Nil would give him an earful, no doubt. Thanks. I owe you.

Dont worry. Ill be sure to collect.

A few minutes later, the Flameforge captain had left, disappearing into the crowd.

I can hope so, even if its difficult to believe. Apparently, Gen was left with the impression that youd entered a realm. The newly acquired skills seem to confirm that. And yet, your echo doesnt seem to remember such an event taking place.

I got some training, Nil. Thats all. Well talk more when I get home.

Nil made no effort to inquire more on the matter. He was usually upset when Dallion used blocking items. However, on this occasion he seemed far more annoyed than usual. It was a good thing that nothing of interest happened on the way back to the inn.

The place was completely packed, making Dallion have to wait to get to his room. At this point, pretty much everyone who wanted to come to the Nerosal had already done so, causing all inns and taverns to be filled to the brim. The room situation was so bad that Hannah has asked the Luors to temporarily share a room with Jiroh. Dallion suspected that the only reason he hadn't suffered the same fate was due to the Aspan incident, and the innkeepers desire to keep a lid on it.

A tray of food was placed nearby with no explanation of where it had come from.

The fury was still taking care of him like an older sister taking care of a sickly little brother. Soon, that was going to change.

Slowly, Dallion stood up from his bed. The headache had nearly disappeared, although his right eye still felt painfully itchy. Two of the seven Moons were visible outside the window, glowing in the night sky. The rest hadn't appeared yet for some reason, but that wasn't overly surprising in this world, the Moons tended to be quite temperamental.

Stretching a few times, Dallion then went to the stone orchid and whistled a brief tune. The plant-thing reacted as it always did, by remaining silent and motionless.

One of these days you'll answer, Dallion whispered.

More or less, although I'd advise against it

, the echo replied.

Dallion tended to agree. He himself felt he wasn't at a hundred percent, but it wasn't like he had much of a choice. Tomorrow he was going to resume his tournament fights, and after that, face real challengers.

Reminiscing about the past and musing about the future, Dallion placed the harpsisword, the armadil shield, and all his other weapons on the bed. Then, making sure he hadn't forgotten anything, he lay down on it, making sure that his skin was in contact with every item.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The starting room formed around him, along with the standard blue rectangle informing him of his level. If all went well, today the number would increase by one.

I thought you might try something of the sort, Nil said. The echo was standing there in person, arms crossed in an unmistakable stance of disapproval. You'll try to level up even if you don't know the solution to your challenge.

True. I've no idea what I'm supposed to do, but I like to think that the expedition has given me a sense of perspective. At the end of the day, what's the worst that can happen? I still have a few days before the real fights begin. Until the festival tournament is officially open, I don't have a thing to worry about.

That's precisely what worries me.

Ignoring the echo completely, Dallion went into the corridor and then through the door that marked the next trial room. Last few times he was here, an echo of Falkner had cut him to shreds. Now it was time for Dallion to show how much he had learned.

You are in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your destiny.

A blue rectangle welcomed him beyond the door. Dallion waved it away. No sooner had he done so, than the echo in the shape of Falkner appeared in front of him.

Hi, Falkner, Dallion said. Been a while.

The echo nodded in greeting.

A bit quiet today, Dallion said, pressuring his opponent to give up with his voice.

Music doesn't work on me, the echo said with a sigh.

Maybe that was the case in the past, but why not try to be sure. Dallion smiled. So, what do you think? Do I have what it takes to defeat you this time?

Maybe. Maybe not. But even if you succeed, this isn't the end of the trial. I'm just the beginning.

Or so you claim. Dallion summoned his harpsisword.

No offer for a draw? Falkner asked, surprised.

I know you won't accept it. Clearly that's not the solution to the puzzle.

Interesting. Falkner summoned his usual two swords as well. You think you've found the solution?

Nope, haven't got the slightest clue. Thing is I plan on using brute strength on this one. After all, it's not important how I defeat you. The only important thing is that I do so.

COMBAT INITIATED

The firebird had matured quite a bit during the sword world expedition. Almost in perfect sync with its owner, the creature spread its wings while merging with Dallions back, then propelled him forward.

The speed was impressive, but even so, Falkner managed to evade the attack by combat splitting into four instances. In three of the cases, Dallion had successfully landed a strike in the echos chest. In the remaining instance, though, the outcome was different, and that is the outcome Falkner chose.

The twin swords blocked the harpsisword, after which the echo split into three instances, commencing his counterattack. Normally, Dallion would counter by creating three instances of his own. However, this time he decided to do something new and punched Falkner in the chest almost on the very instant the echo split.

Astonishment leaked through the emotionless cocoon surrounding Falkner. That wasnt the main thing, though. The attack had done far more than catch the echo unprepared, it had achieved what Vend had taught Dallion during the expedition. Before Dallions very eyes, the instances created by the echo crumbled, leaving him with one single option. Alas that option was easily predicted and met with the corresponding level of force.

Critical strike!

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

A red rectangle appeared as Dallion struck Falkner in the chin with the hilt of the harpsisword, and just to make it more painful, Dallion played a chord while doing so, aimed at giving his enemy blurry vision.

Falkner was far from defeated, however. Despite suffering some setbacks, he quickly regained composure. Leaping above Dallion, Falkner summoned a bladegun and fired two bolts at Dallion.

MEDIUM WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 50%

Still not perfect, Falkner said as he attempted to split into three instances again.

Once again, before the echo could succeed, Dallion kicked him on the side of the head with his foot. This was the first time he had performed a martial attack by combining acrobatics and attack.

Critical strike!

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

I dont need to be perfect, just better than you, Dallion replied.

Where did you learn that? Falkner asked.

Just a little something Id been thinking about. Didnt get to test it until today.

I meant breaking by combat splitting.

Oh, that. Dallion laughed. Vend taught me. A pity he isnt here now to see my progress and potentially give a few pointers.

That doesn't change a thing. You still haven't figured out the nature of the trial. Until you do, even brute force won't be able to give you what you need.

Maybe, maybe not. Either way, it will be fun finding out what I have to do in order to defeat you.

Chapter 306: An Echo's Failure

The firebird flew down just in the nick of time, avoiding the destructive slash that sliced three walls of the room. This was a practical example of why such attacks weren't to be used indoors, however in the case of Falkner that worked to his advantage. As it turned out, the realm was also connected to Dallion, and while defeating him in such fashion would require utterly destroying the room, each slash was painful and came with the standard five percent health decrease.

How come you know attacks I don't? Dallion shouted, shooting a bolt in his enemy's direction. Aren't we supposed to have the same skills?

It's not how it works, Falkner replied calmly, then performed another line strike. That too was easily evaded, though further decreased Dallion's health. Thankfully, Lux was there to compensate. Your realm is based on your imagination. You've seen the attack used

So, everyone I have met will potentially be able to use it as well, Dallion finished the sentence.

That didn't sound good at all. Thank the Moons that March and her party had kept most of their really powerful attacks in reserve. For once, it was a good thing that Dallion didn't have the perception needed to see most of the fight between March and the sword guardians. Fights would have been a lot more difficult otherwise.

Splitting into five instances, Dallion ordered Lux to thrust him forward along different approach paths. Falkner made an attempt to block each of the attacks with his own instances, but he was only able to create five, leaving him vulnerable.

FATAL STRIKE!

Dealt damage is increased by 500%

Dallion didn't stop with that, summoning the Nox dagger with which he proceeded to do a series of strikes all over Falkner's torso. Red rectangles stacked up, each dealing the expected amount of damage. However, as Dallion just realized, that proved to be useless.

According to Dallion's calculations, Falkner should have received more than enough damage to have been defeated three times over. Instead, he kept on fighting. There was no indication of his health value or skills, nothing suggesting he was more than an echo. If so, the way to defeat him wasn't through combat alone. Actually, it was starting to look like combat was never the answer.

If there was a type of level that Dallion really hated it was that type. In most cases, these were pre-scripted events that triggered a cut-scene or an explanation of a new mechanic. There was a period back on Earth that several of the big games had resorted to for reasons unknown. The backlash had quickly made them reconsider, but the experience had remained in Dallion's memories.

If there had to be an answer to the puzzle, what could that answer be? It wasn't a peaceful resolution, it wasn't combat skill. What was it then?

How about you give me a hint? Dallion asked as he used the armadil shield to deflect the bolt aimed at him.

I've already given you plenty of things, even if I wasn't supposed to. Falkner rushed in Dallion's direction. Upon reaching the wall the boy leapt on and continued running upwards. A series of free slashes were performed, all aimed at Lux's wings. Two of them missed. The third somehow didn't, even if Dallion was certain he had evaded the attack.

A damage rectangle emerged, indicating that the firebird was at ninety percent health.

Who heals the healer? Falkner asked, dropping back to the floor.

The firebird obeyed. Using the bonus of his attack skills, Dallion performed a multi-strike attack, landing over a dozen hits all over Falkner. The echo didn't even bother defending itself, letting the red rectangles stack up, as if knowing that it wasn't in any danger. In the previous attempts, Dallion thought that it was his lack of skills that had brought about his failure. Now, he could see that it was the approach that was at fault.

Finishing the attack, Dallion quickly leapt out of Falkner's reach. A line attack followed.

At least pretend it takes some effort, Dallion shouted. March couldn't do as many as you are.

Maybe you'll have a chance to find out one day, the echo shouted back. If you ever level up.

Now you're just being mean.

Am I? Falkner asked, stopping his attacks. Unsummoning his weapons, he looked straight at Dallion, his face a mixture of determination and sadness. You know you weren't supposed to pass the gate. It was only through the Moon's help that you did. If it wasn't for the boon, you'd still be stuck in the lower double digits, trying to figure out how to defeat me.

Lower double digits? That was a hint it suggested that Dallion was supposed to be able to pass the trial five levels earlier. Considering the number of skills, he was familiar at that level, they weren't the answer either.

Was reading double digits a gift as well? Dallion asked, frantically trying to find a solution. Skills and stats weren't the focus of this trial. It had to be his strength of will.

You'd have gotten there, eventually. You have what it takes, but you don't have what it takes to pass through me.

And I'm sure that if I had you wouldn't lie about it.

Falkner smiled, admitting to a degree that nothing could be taken at face value.

That hardly made any sense either. If nothing else, Dallion should have succeeded after the first battle, if that was the case. It had to be something just as simple, something so obvious that he would kick himself in the ass for not seeing earlier. It was the same with all trials to some degree. The first paradox cube would have been completed a lot easier if he had simply used echoes, which he was reluctant to do at the time. The barriers were a result of Dallion not addressing the problem at hand, but trying to cheat his way around it just as he was doing now. Strength and skill weren't a necessity, they were a tool. Being strong made certain things possible on occasion, things that would otherwise be unachievable but they weren't the solution. If, right now, Dallion had the option to start over from the day he awakened in this world, he would have done things quite differently. It's possible that some of the outcomes would be different, it was even likely that he wouldn't have even met some of the people and guardians he had come to think of as friends. It was naivete that had made him buy the harp's sword from a random stranger, who had later disappeared without a trace. It was Dallion's involvement with the Star that had earned him the armadillo shield, as well as Lux.

Back on Earth, Dallion's father used to say that success was a refusal to make failure permanent. The man would often mention that the greatest harm someone could do was not allow others to fail. At the time, Dallion thought of that as a rubbish statement, not to mention hypocritical. His parents didn't forget to slip in that they would be disappointed if he didn't apply to a few good colleges or failing that, colleges in general.

If I'm supposed to experience failure, I've done so already, Dallion said. I failed my first guild trial and"

Next you'll say you failed at failing. Falkner sighed. That's why you're not ready to go on. You've no idea what the trial is, so you'll never correct your flaw. Swords reemerged in his hands.

I can't win, Dallion whispered.

Two sword line attacks sliced through him, each dealing a fatal wound. Dallion looked at the rectangles that appeared, mocking him. One didnt have to be a math genius to tell that losing a hundred and fifty percent of his health total was a bad thing. Normally this was the point at which Dallion would receive the shaming message, before being sent back to the starting room of his realm. To Dallions surprise, that didnt happen.

Weird, isnt it? Falkner asked.

Huh? Dallion looked down at his chest. There didnt seem to be any pain, just as there didnt seem to be any connection between the top and bottom half of Dallions torso.

Sorry about this. Its the way it has to be.

Dallion just smiled. Despite the weirdness he had figured out the question of the trial. It was simple, so simple that it almost seemed laughable. The fact that he hadnt been sent away only confirmed it.

Its fine. I know what to do now.

At least one of us does, a bitter smile appeared on the echos face.

The response made Dallion arch a brow.

Its all in your mind, remember? Youre thinking that Falkners infatuation with Gloria will cause him a lot of pain and complications in life. And I think youre right. This isnt a battle I could win.

Theres nothing wrong in getting help, Dallion reached out, placing his hand on the echos shoulder. You helped me once. I owe you.

Sadness appeared throughout Falkners body. The boy struggled to keep the tears in his eyes, but succeeded only half way.

I hate when this happens. This is supposed to be your trial. Im not even Falkner, just a fake echo that attempts to mimic him.

Maybe, but youre here now, Dallion replied. You deserve some help as well.

Falkner looked down.

You dont have to go, Dallion went on. You can remain here. Moons know I dont have nearly enough people in my realm. Maybe youll be able to help Gen finally get something done.

Hope sparked in Falkners chest, no larger than a grain of sand. Soon, though, a cloud of doubt emerged, smothering it.

You havent completed the trial, Falkner stepped back. Take care of yourself first. If you dont, you wont be able to help others, not really. Youll only end up hurting them more.

As Dallion started to answer, the room around him vanished, replaced by the initial realm chamber. Nil was there, sitting on a wooden chair he had brought from the ring library, as was Gen. What wasnt there, though, was the rectangle restricting Dallion from attempting to level up.

How did it go? Nil asked.

Quite insightful. Dallion looked down again. He was whole again, just as he expected to be. Give me a moment, Ill be right back.

At a hurried pace he went into the corridor, stopping at the door of his latest challenge. Moment ago he had lost a battle in that room. It was tempting to just open it and try again, this time relying on his music skills, but Dallion knew better. Ignoring the door, he took a few steps aside. A new door emerged on the wall in front of him.

Lux, Dallion said. Rest up. You got hurt pretty bad on this one.

Throughout Dallions realm, the firebird chirped in response.

Dont worry, its all part of growing up, Dallion smiled, then opened the door.

Youve broken through your twentieth barrier.

Your level has increased to 21.

Enter and choose the focus that will serve you best.

Chapter 307: Gleam and July

The room was considerably larger than one would have thought. In truth, it wasnt a room, but rather an entire world with a door in one end. Meadows continued up to the horizon where three snow capped mountains rose up under a large, green moon. A path led from the door to the only wooden table in the surroundings.

Two people sat at the table. Dallion knew neither of them to be human. One was a child who looked like Dallion had when he was a teen, at least on Earth. The other was wearing an outfit of green leather that was a mix between a set of rangers clothes and a hunters attire. His face was that of a seasoned warrior complete with slight stubble and as Dallion had come to expect green hair.

Finally breached the wall, the Moon said in terms of greeting. And still keeping your word. Thats always a good quality.

Dallion remained a step from the entrance, uncertain of what exactly to do. This wasnt his first conversation with the Green Moon, although it seemed to be the first official one. After some hesitation, Dallion went to the table. As he approached, the boy stood up, offering him a seat.

Thanks, Dallion said.

The boy didnt say a word, though gratitude the size of oranges formed within him.

Falkner? Dallion asked.

Was this his second echo? Dallion didnt imagine this was the form he would take. To be honest, he expected to have another copy of himself. All the copies he created in the awakened world were identical copies of him. Gen and now this one were very different entities in their own right, just with Dallions skills and memories as a basis.

Thats what happens when you offer a trial guardian to stay, the Moon said. They become what they want to be a mixture of memories, hopes, and fears. Now, then, lets get down to business.

Business? Dallion didnt like the sound of that. I thought I didnt have a time limit to find

Not your promise. I dont have an issue with that. However, as they say on Earth: business is business. The Moon leaned forward. It was unclear whether his intent was to be threatening, but it definitely was. You got quite upset when you werent able to make a new familiar. Even went as far as arguing with your echoes about it.

Mentally Dallion swallowed. It was true he had been quite upset on the matter, not to mention vocal about it if one could call vocal arguments that had taken place in his own head. By the tone, he could tell that wasn't a good thing. As it seemed, a lot of things were allowed in this world, but going against deities, even if they were claimed to be benevolent, wasn't one of them.

Normally, I wouldn't bother, but since I don't have as many favored as the others, I tend to keep an eye on you.

Dallion nodded.

On the one hand, it's good that you're showing empathy towards guardians. It's also good that you've done all in your power to keep your promises. However, you seem to want everything to go your way. So, I'm prepared to offer you a one-time compromise.

Yes, I can do that, the Green Moon said with a sigh. And I'm fully aware of the irony letting you have your way after a trial that taught you that there will be times that you won't get it. However, this is the one and only time. After this if you want any more favors, you'll have to ask boons, and for that you'll need to fulfill the promise you've already made. And no, you won't get a tab. So until you find what I asked, I don't want to hear you begging about this or that, no matter how important.

Even if it involves your life?

This was a sore subject. The last thing immortal deities wanted to be reminded of was their potential mortality. There was every chance that the question would anger Felygn, but it was something worth asking.

No matter how important, the Moon repeated with a frown. That is why I'm going to give you a choice.

The echo boy looked at Dallion, then at the Moon. No fear could be felt coming from, rather a deep curiosity directed at his creator.

I have the power to help you keep your promise, the Moon went on. You'll have your third familiar and would stop annoying me and yourself about the loss.

That sounded too good to be true. Dallion felt joy fill his entire body, but even so, in the back of his mind, he knew that a but was coming. Nothing was free in this world or any other, especially when dealing with Moons.

For that to happen, you'll have to give up something. A trade of equal value, if you prefer. Or who knows, maybe a trade of greater value? There was no smile on the Moon's face. The topic was deadly serious.

Thoughts went through Dallion's mind. What could one ask? A life for a life? It couldn't be any of the other familiars, since the Moon had already said that he would have three. Would it be the destruction of an echo? A guardian? Given that the power of the Moon was limitless, Dallion could even lose less tangible things, like the friendship of his friends, or even his relationship with Euryale. Potentially, he could even lose his name and all mention of him.

The price is your favored status.

My favored status? Dallion definitely wasn't expecting that. He knew that it was a big deal a lot of people had told him so, but so far no one was clear exactly what it offered. From what Dallion had seen, it had removed his skill level cap, but was that all?

People have risked their lives hundreds of times for the chance to achieve it. Some were even driven to fanaticism. You got it partially due to luck. As I said, there aren't many who'd talk to me, so I tend to be more generous than the rest.

Do I get to know the significance of that before I make the choice?

If you didn't, I wouldn't be bothering with this talk. The Moon leaned back. Even so, Dallion saw a smile on his face. By all accounts, the question was a good thing to ask. Being a favored allows you to increase your skills regardless of stats.

Dallion waited, then waited some more.

That's it?

You still don't get it, do you? The Moon shook his head. The ability to increase a skill to a hundred regardless of your stats is not too impressive for you? A semi-awakened could have the ability to handle a sword better than a domain-ruling noble.

But he'll still need the stats to

Take yourself, for an example. If you just walk out this door without a new familiar, you can achieve the pinnacle of attack skills in three days, and all by improving useless items. Three days to become one of the greatest sword fighters in the city. A month and all your skills could be at that level, forging included.

The Moon wasn't using music to attempt to influence Dallion's decision, he didn't have to. The possibility of achieving so much in so little time was mindboggling. That would allow him to progress much faster than he believed possible. It might not always help him level up, as he had seen, but it wasn't going to hinder him in any circumstances. Five skills at level a hundred but he would have to give up on the shardfly.

Ever since you learned about the races in this world, you've been wondering what makes humans special, the Moon suddenly changed the subject. Furies can control wind and clouds, dryads have a way with plants, nymphs are masters of water he started enumerating. Slimes can take any form they choose, gorgons can see everywhere and turn creatures to stone, and dwarves can shape stone and metal with bare hands. What about humans, though? Your race too was given a boon, and it's not your ability to think and make complex devices. Humans are allowed to ignore some of the restrictions of leveling. You can choose any stat and skill freely without penalty. Also, your level cap is set to the next gate you are to pass, not the current one.

Now things became a lot clearer. That explained why humanity had become the dominant species in this world, at least for the moment. The average person was weak, with no special talents. However, when it came to awakened, they could progress a lot faster than any of the other races. Not only were they more versatile, but they had the skills of someone twice their level. All it took was for a critical mass of awakened to appear and the only thing that could stop humans were others like them.

Lie is a harsh word, the Moon said, indicating that he could still hear Dallions thoughts. Going back to the business at hand, this is what you have to give up. If up till now you havent been improving items out of a childish lack of knowledge, now you are fully aware of what you must give up.

Do it, Dallion said without hesitation.

Now it was the Moons turn to be surprised. Dallion tried not to smile openly. There was a certain degree of satisfaction knowing that this could be the first time it had happened in centuries, if not more.

Arent you going to think about it?

I could, but itll only confuse me more. Maybe he should have taken advantage of his status more, but that was immaterial. The important thing was that he was given a second chance to help a guardian. If youre giving me the option, Ill take it.

Youre sure? Youll lose all skill levels beyond the cap.

This was a new twist. The effort wasnt that much, but knowing that hed lose them didnt feel nice. With this Dallions attack, guard, acrobatic, and athletic skills would be brought down to forty.

It doesnt matter.

There was a moment of silence, after which the Moon laughed.

Youre really different. Offworlders will never cease to amaze me. You remind me of someone centuries ago. He also was unusual. The deity stood up. A green glow covered him, flickering up into the sky. Within moments, he had completely disappeared, shifting to the large green moon above.

The moment he disappeared, four rectangles appeared in front of Dallionthe choice he had to make for leveling up. Considering that half the stats had hit the cap, Dallion decided to go start focusing on his reactions, adding a point there.

COMPANION - SPECTRAL SHARDFLY

You have gained a level 1 companion.

Wrapped in the beauty of illusion, the spectral shardfly has the ability to glamour objects and people to make them look as the shardfly wishes. Its crystal wings are sharper and harder than common shardflies, allowing it to cut through thick hide and armor.

The duration of the glamor effect depends on the overall size of the object and the shardflys level.

Upon seeing this, the discomfort caused by losing all his skill levels beyond forty instantly vanished. A ball of shimmering light formed in front of his face. Upon taking it, the sphere took form, transforming into a crystal cocoon.

Can I see? the young echo asked.

Dallion lowered his hand. As he did, the cocoon cracked. The thin transparent wrapper crumbled to fragments almost instantly as a crystal butterfly emerged. Four pairs of crystal wings straightened up, hardening before Dallions very eyes.

Mirror? Dallion asked.

You kept your promise, the familiar replied, her voice young, almost squeaky.

This is what we look like when we were young. I guess I have a lot of growing up to do again. I'll need your help to achieve that.

I'll be more than happy to help. As soon as I figure out how that works.

That seems to be your thing always charging in without a plan. But even so, you get things done, and you care. Thank you, Dallion. I'll do my best to help you grow as well.

That's all I can ask for.

Beside Dallion, the young echo was looking at the guardian in unparalleled fascination. Apparently, Dallion's seer ability wasn't shared among echoes, otherwise he would have known the shardfly's true nature, not only the creature Dallion had faced in the mirror.

Have you picked a name? Dallion asked. Either of you?

Both echo and familiar remained silent.

Then I'll pick some for you. Gleam, he said to the shardfly. And July. Dallion moved his hand next to that of the echo, allowing the familiar to walk onto it. Now, let's go and find you a place to stay within this realm.

Chapter 308: The Challenger from Sanitation

Morning came early and when it did, it found that Dallion was already awake. The young man was feeling better on a lot of levels. Most of the pain in his head and eyes was gone, along with the aftereffects of the world expedition. And there was more after completing the trial that had prevented him from progressing for so long, Dallion felt a sense of freedom he hadn't experienced for a while.

That was one other thing that he needed to get used to. The shardfly was the first minion that actually talked to Dallion and chose to do so far more than the echoes or guardians. Getting freed from the mirror and the mirror pools constant game, the creature was eager to make up for the millennia lost time. It was little wonder that she had spent a tremendous amount of time talking to the armadil shield. The dryad guardian had gone through pretty much the same while under the service of the general, so the two had a lot in common, not to mention that they were old enough to reminisce about the old days.

The real surprise was July. The echo's character was as different from Gen, as Gen was from Dallion. If Gen was the sort of person to see to it that the realm was adequately maintained and the new rooms were adapted in the best possible way, July was the sort to wander about without any clear purpose. Every now and then he would assist, though most of the time he would spend in the nymphs part of the realm, admiring the sea. More and more often the shardfly would be with him. There seemed to be some connection between the two, possibly because they had joined Dallion's realm at virtually the same moment.

There was no denying that. Dallion still had difficulty getting used to the idea that Nox was spending most of his time sleeping. When Dallion had come to Nerosol, the cub was a bundle of energy, always eager to stretch its paws and claw anything in sight. In a way, he was what Lux was now. Had a few levels made him mature so much? Or maybe he had grown up as any other cat would.

What are your plans for the day?

First, Ill finish my exercises, then play a song to the stone orchid, then have breakfast, and finally go to fight a few preliminary rounds at the arena.

Sounds like a busy day.

Its the festival.

Alright, Ill keep fluttering about. Youll let me know if you need my help with anything.

Age clearly carried its weight. If Nox and Lux acted like little brothers, especially Lux, Gleam was more like the older annoyed sister that liked to be informed of what was going on.

As with everything else, getting new inhabitants in his realm was something that he was going to have to get used to. Also, he was going to have to start searching for an artifact to make it Gleams home.

The morning exercises done, Dallion proceeded to level up his training stiletto. The guardian had become considerably more difficult, though after the expedition, defeating him felt like a cinch. It also helped Dallion reach the cap of his final non-forging skill. From here on, the only thing he could improve was forging, although that was going to take a while.

Washing as much as he could with the water he was provided, Dallion then got dressed and went to have breakfast. Despite the early hour, there was a significant number of people already there. The guests that had come for the festival were largely ordinary people, though with deep pockets. The few awakened that Dallion knew to have rented rooms were either sleeping or off to get an early start.

With a friendly greeting, Dallion passed by the kitchen to grab whatever food Aspan had prepared in this case, a few sandwiches and then was off to the arena.

The echo of the committee member who had given him the ring mentioned that it would be hours before Dallions match was ready, but Dallion ignored that. For the moment, he just wanted to get to the room of the preliminary fight before the city was filled with crowds again. It didn't help that all shopkeepers and stall merchants were getting more and more creative with their advertising methods. Banners, discounts, bards, even awakened for those who could afford it were everywhere in an attempt to attract more customers.

You shouldnt be out this early, a voice said a few steps from Dallion.

This time, Dallion managed to catch a glimpse of the man as he appeared. It was a member of the city guard, of course. The uniform and insignia identified him as a sergeant, though Dallion had the feeling he was a lot more powerful than that. There was a certain confidence emanating from him.

Oh, its you, the guard said. You shouldnt be out this early either.

Im on my way to the arena, Dallion replied. I prefer to go before the crowds.

Its your life, the sergeant said. Id stick to crowds for the moment, though. Theres less chance of a mess.

Ill keep that in mind, Dallion replied.

The guard smirked, both amused and annoyed by his response.

The tournament doesnt make you ready for squat, kid. It takes a hunt to know what youre really against.

Ive been on a hunt, Dallion replied.

No, you havent. And hope that you dont. He looked around. Keep an eye open, and if you spot something, run.

Dallion didnt see any need to antagonize the person further, so he nodded, then continued on his way. Hopefully, the situation wasnt as bad as the man suggested. Otherwise, the overseer, even the entire city, had a huge issue on its hands.

Thankfully, there were no incidents on the way to the arena. The inside of the place seemed in much better condition than a day ago. That didnt stop people from working round the clock to get every minor detail right. At present florists were everywhere, arranging flowers that Dallion hadnt even seen in vases that cost more than he had earned since his arrival here. According to Nil, the plants were brought from the nearby wilderness specifically for the occasion. They would last a few days at most, but during those few days they would impress everyoneother nobles mostlywho walked through.

With a mental shrug, Dallion went to the only committee member present. It wasnt someone Dallion had seen before, but there was no mistaking the expression of a bureaucrat at six in the morning.

Hey, Dallion said with a smile and a bit of music charm in his voice. Im Dallion Darude, here for my preliminary fight.

Ah. The womans expression quickly changed. Weve been expecting you, although youre a bit early.

I thought Id come before the crowd.

Good thinking. Its a mess getting from place to place with all the people walking aimlessly about. Itll all be sorted out once the festival begins. Things are much more organized then.

That sounded both impressive and horrifying.

Want something to eat while you wait? the committee member asked.

No, Im fine. I just want to get through my fights and make it to the official rounds.

I dont doubt that. Actually, if youre fine with changing the battle order, there is another challenger whos here. Hes also aiming for a spot, so you two can face off.

Oh?

There was someone else this early? That showed dedication or boredom. Either way, it sounded like a strong opponent. Normally, the better strategy was to get into rhythm slowly with weaker opponents before jumping into the deep. Given the circumstances, though, Dallion didnt see a reason not to have a tough battle early on.

Gola Harken, the woman said, probably after consulting an echo on the matter. Hes a local and tournament hopeful. In fact, some consider him to be almost as good as you.

I dont know whether to be scared or honored, Dallion laughed.

He has quite a lot of experience, even if he isnt a seer yet. Thats why his odds are slightly worse than yours.

Im sure itll make for an interesting battle. When do we get started?

I need to get permission for the change, so probably ten-fifteen minutes in total. Ill have someone take you to the training room in the meantime, the woman waved to the closest person, who seemed remotely free. Take Mister Darude to training room green, she ordered the unfortunate soul. And bring more refreshments there!

Before Dallion could say a word, he was politely dragged away so the rest of the people present could get along with their work.

The training room turned out much smaller and less impressive than the name implied. It was just like a locker room without the lockers. Four tables were presentone in each corner. One of them had a bowl of fruit and a jug of water.

Wow

, Dallion thought. He had expected a bit more luxury, considering the importance of the event.

Also present in the room was a man in his mid-thirties, dressed in a simple set of beige cotton clothes with no distinguishing features. Looking at the mans messy hair and unshaven face, Dallion would never take him to an awakened.

First time? the man asked, seeing Dallions reaction. It was at that point that Dallion realized that he was staring.

Err, yes. Dallion snapped out of it. Big event.

Yep, it always is. Everyone who manages to set foot in the arena is special. Those who reach the end, theyre even considered heroes.

Managed to get that far?

No. Usually I end up around here. Only stepped in the arena once before. Wasnt a pretty sight. Lasted less than a minute. If I make it this time, Ill aim to last at least two.

I thought the guilds did that.

One, we are paid. And two, in a city this size, theres always something in need of repair. All in all, there are about a hundred sanitation workers. Most of them dont bother with the festival, but since there is no law against participating in the tournament, some decide to take their chance. After all, its not like theyll lose anything if they fail.

Icepicker? the man asked.

Err, yes. Im Dallion Darude, here to try and step on the arena as well.

Ah, so youre Darude. The man lightened up. Was wondering about you. Youve been the talk of the prelim tournament. Late bloomer and a seer. Definitely not many of those. Youre pretty much guaranteed a spot. And if I beat you, so am I.

The determination in his voice was difficult to miss.

You think hes dangerous?

Dear boy, hes a sanitation worker almost twice your age, whos only allowed freedom once per year during this festival. Do you think hell forgo that opportunity just because hes facing you?

Chapter 309: Pauper's Final

It took over an hour for the tournament fight to get approved. Dallion found it beyond annoying that in a world with instant communications, arguably even faster than those on Earth, it took so long for something simple. Strictly speaking, everything that was necessary was for someone on the tournament committee to create an echo in an item and then have the contestants go at it. However, when nobles were concerned, nothing was as simple. No one dared do anything that would displease powerful interests, so soon to opening day. Instead, the unfortunate person in question had gone through several people, each more important than the last, until finally someone from the Lord Mayors household had given the green light.

Finally, after a lot of excuses and half a dozen plates of fruit the preliminary tournament began. One thing that became obvious was that it was very different from all the ones Dallion had participated in until now. In the past, the first were almost casual: both participants would enter in the tournament item, have a quick battle under the keen eye of a selected echo, then return to the real world and have the result noted. At present, the echoes were five, two of which everyone knew well.

Ah, Gola, so reliable of you to have another go, the echo of Lady Marigold said. Youve become a feature of the festival. A few more years and people will gather just to see your preliminary.

You honor me, my lady. The man bowed to the echo.

And a charmer, as usual. Its a pity that youll have to go against this pup. Hes done a lot in a short amount of time. It wont be easy for you.

The good things in life are always worth the effort. You told me that, my lady.

Yes, I did, didnt I? the noble mused for a few moments. It was during your first official appearance. It caused quite a stir, at the time. Even the countess noted how unusual your case was.

The praise didnt bode well for Dallion. All illusions he had that facing a double digit would be a walk in the park were quickly put to rest. He had only met Lady Marigold once, but he had come to the conclusion that she was extremely good at determining someones worth. The fact that she had said the fight wont be easy for Gola suggested that she favored him against Dallion.

Standing close to the old noble was another echo that of Constanza. The girl was already treated as a potential noble, given tasks to learn the ropes of ruling the city one day. The remaining three echoes were those of committee members. They stood a respectable distance away, focusing more on the battle to come.

Are you feeling up to it, Dallion? lady Marigold asked. This is a big occasion. While the fight cannot be compared to the arena experience, it is considered the final of the preliminaries. The fact that you got here is no small feat, not that I had any doubt that you would.

Thank you, my lady. Dallion bowed as well.

Just one request, if I may, the nobles voice hardened. You are allowed to use any skills and weapons at your disposal, but I would greatly appreciate it if you didnt use any familiars.

There it was the first unofficially official restriction. Dallion knew that, he even had imposed the restriction on himself; after all, there would be no familiars in the real world, so there was no point in acquiring a false sense of security. Even so, hearing it from the noble suggested something more at play.

Of course, Lady Marigold.

Constanza took a step forward, standing in front of her great aunt. If she were to take her rightful place among the ruling class, she would be required to fight and defeat people of Dallions current skill and pretty soon.

Ready when you are, the old noble said.

Applicants, take your places, one of the other echoes said.

Good luck, Dallion whispered before going to the indicated section of the field. His opponent did the same.

All sound vanished from the realm. Each fighter focused on one thing alone their opponent.

Begin!

Both opponents summoned their weapons. Dallion went with the armadil shield and harpsisword. His opponent immediately split into three instances: two charged forward with a spear, while the third had summoned a bow and fired an arrow at Dallion.

Good to know.

Dallion split into three instances as well, countering each of the attacks. The arrow was easily deflected with the armadil shield, while in the case of the spear attacks, Dallion charged forward to meet his opponent.

A series of attacks and counter-attacks followed. While not flashy, Gola was methodical in his approach, not to mention very precise. Every action had a dual purpose to inflict maximum damage, but also to determine Dallion's abilities. In other circumstances, Dallion would have loved to have him as a sparring partner, or even a teacher. Now, though, winning was the only option.

Instances clashed with instances for over a minute. Guard, attack, and acrobatic skills were constantly used in combination and in sequence. Each encounter became more and more elaborate, up to the point that half of the fight took place in the air. Then, almost in perfect unison, both opponents pulled back.

They're only using three? the echo of Constanza said to her great aunt.

People preserve their strength during scouting, the old woman said. Her tone was warm, but Dallion could see drains of disapproval appear within her. You were taught all this.

This was the first time Dallion heard the term used in such fashion. As far as nobles were concerned, scouting wasn't just used for areas and items, it was used for people as well. That's what the Red Moon had meant when he had offered Dallion to pass through the second gate: awakened and analyzed each other a lot more now. Every action, every move, was judged so as to give a clear picture of an opponent's current state and future potential. The same had happened during the expedition.

And now that the scouting has ended, the real fight will begin, Lady Marigold added.

Gola unsummoned his spear, replacing it with a halberd. A new set of armor covered his body. Now he actually looked like a fighter, possibly even a hunter. Gone were the simple clothes and the semi-meek attitude. Dallion could see determination, excitement, and battle-thirst appear throughout the man's body. It wasn't only a desire for financial freedom that had led Gola to participate in every tournament all those years, the man enjoyed fighting, and this was one of the few legal ways to do it.

Ready? Gola asked.

Dallion didnt answer immediately. There were several courses of action he could take. While Lady Marigold had forbidden the use of familiars, she hadnt said anything about music. Even after his recent level decrease, he could decrease the effectiveness of his opponent by a quarter, if not more. Should he do it, though? It would greatly increase his chances, if not ensuring victory outright. But wasnt that just another shortcut?

Not till recently, but it is now.

Ready, Dallion replied. He wasnt going to use music after all.

There was an instant of stillness, as if a field had absorbed any potential of movement, then suddenly released it ten-fold. Gola dashed forward, the halberd head slashing through the air, like calligraphy strokes.

A month ago, he would have lost for certain. Even now, his reaction was severely lacking. However, his other stats and gear made up for it.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

First blood had been spilled, and Dallion had lost. Normally, he wouldnt even worry about that a minor wound would be healed in about ten seconds. Without Lux, though, even minor wounds meant that Dallion was nineteen hits from defeat.

Twisting to the side along the defense markers his guard skill provided, Dallion managed to evade several more attacks. However, before he could complete the sequence, his opponent changed stance, performing a new type of strike.

It had been quite a while before anyone had focused on that. Usually, the enemies that Dallion had faced were so strong that they preferred to focus on their own superior attacks with the goal of stacking up bonuses faster. Gola was a disruptor he knew the difference in strengths, so he focused on breaking the flow of his enemy. However, in doing so, he also left himself open. It wasnt a big risk the weakness wasnt apparent or even easily noticeable. However, Dallions perception let him to take advantage.

Letting go of his harp sword, Dallion summoned a dartbow and attempted to strike his opponent in the face. The attack was blocked, of course, but it also gave Dallion the possibility to press the trigger. A bolt made its way between the armor pieces, penetrating Golas body in the weak spot beneath his right armpit.

CRITICAL SHOT

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

The single shot had halved Golas health total, but the man had no intention of giving up, managing to land two more strokes before leaping back.

Dallion immediately followed, summoning his Nox dagger. Now that he had the advantage, it would be best if he made full use of it performing a rapid series of strikes. Golas reaction speed was fast enough to guard against most of them, but that wasnt Dallions point. For every strike that was blocked, cracks emerged on his opponents halberd. Using his music and forging skills, Dallion saw in real time how the weapon got weaker and weaker, until at one point, it broke in two.

That was not all. The moment of confusion allowed Dallion to land two more hits, further increasing his lead. Gola was left with less than twenty percent, which meant that any good hit from the Nox dagger would earn Dallion victory. Before he could achieve that hit, though, Dallion felt a sharp kick in the stomach. The pain was momentary, but it threw him back close to a dozen feet, dealing a surprisingly high amount of damage, as well as allowing his opponent to get a break.

Then its a good thing that it happened now.

Nice weapon, Gola said, summoning a spear with a gleaming white tip. Where did you buy it?

I made it myself, Dallion replied. For all intents and purposes that was true. The dagger was pretty useless, before he had given the domain to Nox. What about yours?

A gift from the city for five years of sanitation work.

In the past, Dallion wouldnt have been impressed in the least. Considering sanitation work included fighting cracklings and other nastiesat times possibly thousands of them merged into one giant monsterhe couldnt but feel in awe of the others dedication. For that amount of work, a halberd was the least the city could give.

True time? Dallion asked.

Real time, Gola replied. I stopped counting true time long ago.

Chapter 310: Built on Ruins

To this day, Dallion had seen only a few magic weapons in this world. Most notable, and first, was the dual sword of Dame Vesuvia she had used to kill the chainling with. More impressive than the dartbowa weapon that at the time he had also viewed as ridiculously overpoweredthe blade had the power to slice a creature believed to be unstoppable.

Somehow Gola had also been granted such a weapon. The magic material was considerably lessaccording to Dallions forging skills, only a small area of the tip was coated by it. However, its potential for destruction surpassed that of Dallions Nox dagger. While the crackling blade was

capable of creating deep cracks in virtually anything, Golas spear unless Dallion was wrong had the strength to slice straight through armor.

Dallion unsummoned it. At this point, the shield would only limit his movements.

How was one to evade an ever-piercing weapon while having low reaction skills? That was the problem Dallion was facing. He could rely on instincts, and there was a good chance he would succeed. But given his opponent's experience, it was likely Gola had other things up his sleeve.

Using his athletic skill to throw the buckler at his opponent as a shield, Dallion then jumped up over him, targeting Golas neck with the Nox dagger. The action surprised Gola slightly, causing him to leap to the side in order to avoid the flying shield. That much was expected. Dallion also expected him to try and block the dagger, but in doing so, he believed it would create an opportunity.

The moment the two weapons made contact, a flash of light engulfed everything. It wasn't only the weapons or even the combat field that was affected, but the entire realm. Dozens of questions popped in Dallion's mind, likely everyone else was asking just as many. However, this was not the time to get distracted. Taking advantage of the welcome diversion, Dallion summoned the harp sword and proceeded to perform a falling vertical chop. His opponent saw it and did the only thing that he could in the circumstance twist the spear so as to meet the incoming attack.

MINOR STRIKE

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

The red rectangles appeared almost in unison, letting Dallion know the outcome. The damage he had received was massive, lowering his health to dangerous levels. However, that didn't make him stop. Before the rectangles had disappeared, Dallion summoned his dartbow and shot a bolt at his enemy.

A new rectangle stacked along the other two, but it no longer mattered. Gola had disappeared, ejected from the realm.

Still, you did well for a beginner. Keep in mind that all your battles will be like this from here on. Skills and stats are vital, but thats not all you need to win a battle.

Well done. Lady Marigold clapped. This could truly be called a final. Dallion could see she was lying, but he bowed nonetheless. Im a bit surprised. I was almost certain youd lose. In most cases, raw talent gives way to dedication and experience. Clearly, its not always the case. A pity, though. Do you have anything to add, Constanza? the noble put her hands on the childs shoulders.

The fight was short, Constanza replied. It should have lasted longer.

These are the preliminaries, dear. The fights here are short. The contestants dont have the health and stamina to last long.

The childs disappointment was apparent, as were the large blotches of boredom appearing throughout her.

In any event, congratulations, Dal. Youre one step closer to the starting spot. A few more victories and youre in. Hopefully Gola will manage to make the cut as well. I really admire that boys dedication.

Thank you, Lady Marigold.

The realms reality crumbled, taking Dallion back to the waiting room. From the point of view of an observer, no time had passed since he and Gola had taken hold of the tournament sphere. Both former opponents pulled their hands back.

Staying in the room with the person he had defeated felt somewhat awkward for Dallion. In the past, both applicants would leave after the end of the fight and never see each other again. This time, the finalists were to patiently wait until the rest of the participants arrived, and leave only after a formal decision was made. At the very least, that meant that Dallion would spend the next few hours with Gola.

Precisely. Perfect for breaking the ice.

Shield, you really should have become a stand-up comedian.

There was no way Dallion was going to use that as an opener. However, the shield was right. Spending the next few hours in silence wasnt a realistic option.

You almost got me there, Dallion decided to go right for the throat. If it wasnt for my first hit, youd have won.

Almost didnt help anyone achieve anything, Gola replied. But youre right. I didnt think youd be this good. Rookies usually lose it near the end.

Why didnt you use your weapon from the start? I doubt Id have won against that.

I didnt want to use it at all. By tomorrow, a dozen people will know about it. The day after that half the tournament. Same thing goes for you. Everything youve shown so far is common knowledge.

The implication was clear. Dallion didnt want to voice it, but if he understood correctly, Gola had just accused the tournament committee of leaking info on fighters to other contestants.

Yeah, Im used to that, Dallion said. Ill have to make up for it by becoming more creative on the battlefield.

Over five hundred participants start the tournament. Every next day, half of them leave. You think youre the only one whos creative on the battlefield? Maybe youre lucky the first round, but not twice.

The truth was that Dallion was planning on leveling up at the end of each day. Initially, it seemed that would give him an advantage. After the battle he had just gone through, he was forced to admit he had to reevaluate his plans. Leveling up a few levels wasnt going to cut it.

Unofficially, Dallion had learned that higher-level awakened were discouraged from taking part. Watching seers match their skills was entertaining for the nobles. Watching someone of superior skill would feel too much like an open challenge. Level twenty-five seemed to be the median. However, that didnt account for personal experience. If a sanitation worker had managed to nearly defeat Dallion, what would happen if he had to face an actual mercenary or a war veteran?

That weapon you used, Gola said all of a sudden. What was it exactly?

Sorry, I cant tell you that just yet. I can tell you a lot of other things, though. As long as they dont have anything to do with fighting.

The offer was made two hours of idle chatter, while waiting for the next fight to start. Given that Gola didnt have much in terms of entertainment, an agreement was struck. And so, a normal conversation started.

As it turned out, Gola was a fifth-generation citizen. His great grandparents had come to the city as laborers back when the city was expanding so fast that even non-awakened workers were welcome. All this had taken place long before the Inheritance Wars. However, as it turned out, people who were welcomed one day could easily become hated the next. The war that had wrecked the entire province had left deep scars. All those who hadnt backed the right person had faced serious consequences, creating a domino effect. Adding to that the turbulent years that followed, and it was no wonder that a large regiment of city sanitation workers had formed. The best way to describe them was prisoners doing community service for life. Technically, they got paid and were allowed to bear arms, train, and do most of the things a free citizen could. The two things they werent allowed to do were: leave the city or have an area domain of their own.

Some time ago, Golas father had joined the tournament in an attempt to break the chain. It remained unclear whether he had succeeded, but Gola had ended up doing the exact same thing, mostly due to his own mess ups. Since then, he too had become a constant participant, although lately he was doing it for the thrill and not so much to change his life.

In turn, Dallion shared his own story, omitting certain things. There was a lot said about Dherma, including the Luorswith whom Gola was familiar.

Youve been here your whole life, right? Dallion asked.

Difficult not to.

Do you know anything involving mages in the city? I heard a few things, but its impossible to distinguish myth from reality.

If you mean the incident, its nothing special. Mage apprentices came to have a fun time, they caused trouble, so someone from a Flameforge was punished. Nothing so special about that.

Flameforge? Are you sure? Dallion had heard a somewhat different story.

People tend to talk more in front of sanitation workers, especially since often were the ones called to clean the mess. The guilds are cool and all, but some things are better dealt with in-house, if you know what I mean.

Dallion could only nod.

Everything was quickly covered up. The countess didnt want any problems, and neither did the Academy. Thats why everything was neatly covered up and explained away. To be honest, its better this way.

Im not sure about that. Secrets have a tendency of causing problems in the long run.

Well, if thats the case, the entire empire is done for, Gola said with a shrug. Every town has its secrets, especially Nerosal.

Like what?

Take your pick. This is the place that nobles get sent to die. If anyone in the province or even the empire messes up, they have their name erased and are then sent here to not be seen. Ive heard there are other cities like this in other provinces, but I wouldnt be surprised if this were the only one.

Thats dark. Why exactly here, though? I didnt notice anything special.

Never wondered why so many artifacts are found here? And the number is growing by the month. Nerosal wasnt the name some local nobles gave to this place, although they like to think they have. The name existed long before anyone settled here, as did the ruins it was built on.

Ruins?

Why do you think the nobles houses are the way they are? They are chunks of whats left of the original city, and also the means to keep the nobles busy. Where there are ruins, there also are creatures. The Lord Mayors domain provides protection, but not beyond it. Ever noticed how many hunters live here?

No, Dallon lied. I never noticed that.